

GAY RITES: INTERACTION RITUALS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
SEXUAL REALITY IN THE PHILADELPHIA GAYBORHOOD

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If you're reading this, and bless you if you are, you have to understand that this dissertation was written over many years while blasting pop music, sometimes obsessively. To paraphrase Carly Rae: "Boy problems? I've got worse problems." I listened to other genres that I heard in gay spaces, too; disco, house, techno, R&B, opera, show tunes, and songs from the Great American Songbook all have a part to play in the

egregious number of hours I've logged on Spotify. These genres recall powerful memories of joy and friendship (and occasionally research stress). In particular, though, Lady Gaga, Mariah Carey, Taylor Swift, Carly Rae Jepsen, Ariana Grande, Janet Jackson, Rihanna, Beyoncé, Robyn and Kesha (do we see a pattern?) continually restocked my emotional energy with the will to keep going.

## ABSTRACT

### GAY RITES: INTERACTION RITUALS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL REALITY IN THE PHILADELPHIA GAYBORHOOD

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In an era of increased cultural and political acceptance of homosexuality, scholars and laymen alike have investigated whether and how gay spaces, such as bars and neighborhoods, will persist. This dissertation takes an interactionist approach to these questions by interrogating how people actively construct the sexual reality of gay public space—as spaces rooted in sexual identity and as spaces of sexual interaction. I draw on approximately 400 hours of participant observation in gay bars and nightclubs in and around Philadelphia’s Gayborhood neighborhood, as well as countless informal interviews in the bars and 30 supplemental in-depth interviews. My theoretical approach is informed by a Durkheimian tradition that privileges interaction rituals as the bases for macro constructs such as culture, identity, and social stratification. I find that while diverse revelers patronize bars, restaurants, and nightclubs in a slice of Center City Philadelphia where there are rainbow street signs, rainbow flags, and a rainbow crosswalk, these symbols alone do not foster a gay definition of urban space. Collectively, these groups of people re-accomplish the sexual reality of the Gayborhood as gay public space to varying degrees through interaction rituals of socializing, drinking, dancing, holding hands, kissing, singing, and more. Gay rituals do not necessarily need to be enacted by gay people to generate positive emotions and feelings that restock gay symbols with excitement and cultural resonance. I also find that gay bars and nightclubs offer multiple, potentially competing realities. This precarity can exacerbate inequalities

in the Gayborhood, such as categorical exclusions rooted in heteronormativity as well as poor mental health outcomes of gay club-goers. Broadly, I argue that the constructs of “gayborhoods” and “gay bars” are ideal contexts to identify and explain the interactional mechanisms through which we conceive of and manage the “sexual” in our social worlds.

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## PREFACE

*May 2020*

After several weeks in lockdown, both glued to and disassociated from the never-ending news cycle on the global COVID-19 pandemic, I craved fried chicken. Some restaurants were open—carry-out only. I asked my boyfriend, the only person I had seen in weeks, to come with me. He was hesitant. Let's use the cloth facemasks your aunt in Michigan sent us, I suggested.

Outside, plywood covered store windows while rainbow flags fluttered in the breeze. It wasn't just the gay bars, of course—the whole neighborhood was quiet, empty. But seeing the gay bars shuttered felt like a prophecy fulfilled. These windows were fought for and hard won. Only a decade ago, the windows at Woody's were blacked out to protect those inside from discrimination and stigmatization. Following a renovation, queer people began to openly spill out of the bar and onto a slice of 13<sup>th</sup> Street—queer space taking up public space. It was also *my* decade of experiencing, and later studying, gay public culture.

I am both a product and commentator of Philadelphia gay space at a specific slice of time. In 2010, I started college far away from urban gay enclaves in upstate New York and first experienced collective gay sociality in sweaty basements, cramped apartments, and on a private on-campus Facebook group called "The Gay Mafia." By 2011, I cautiously arrived in Philadelphia's Gayborhood on Wednesday and Friday nights for 18+ nights and started going out routinely my senior year after too many snafus with fake IDs. Once in graduate school, this project started in Dave Grazian's ethnography course. I wanted to observe those 18+ nights that proved formative for my own identity—gay bars as a kind of queer pedagogical space. Of course, the 18+ nights at Woody's and iCandy stopped hosting these nights mere weeks before I began the project following citations for underaged drinking.

“Leaving the field” is notoriously difficult for the urban ethnographer; social life never stops unfolding. I will continue to keep tabs on what’s happening in and around the Gayborhood, but my project’s focus on situated, nocturnal interactions seems to finally have a beginning and an end.

We go to Wishbone, a fried chicken spot a few doors down from Woody’s on 13<sup>th</sup> Street. I feel a wave of nostalgia when I walk in. Not nostalgic in the sense that the restaurant is an old-time, “authentic” part of the neighborhood’s fabric. On the contrary, Wishbone was founded in 2013 and is part of an upscaling trend in fast food. When the Gayborhood’s bars were open, the take-out restaurant was a late-night institution in its own right, alongside “Gay Pizza” across the street. The line out the door. The faces of boys you saw in darkened clubs clarified under bright lights. Sometimes we spent over an hour in line after 2am for chicken, biscuits, and mac & cheese to stave off a hangover. It was an alternative to paying a \$20 cover fee to dance at Voyeur after hours, and a way to bide time to find a hookup on Grindr. For some, particularly queer youth of color, dancing in Wishbone before 2am was its own form of clubbing. Today, the restaurant is empty. They have a “survival kit” dinner special, complete with a roll of toilet paper. We order two.

Like many small businesses, the fate of the bars hangs in the balance. Will they be able to open again to recoup costs? Will people patronize the bars if they reopen? How does a global pandemic affect research in the Gayborhood and beyond? What good does an ethnography of gay public spaces pre-pandemic do in a post-COVID world? I spent two years engaged in ethnography, on and off for five years, in and around the neighborhood’s bars and nightclubs. Cynically, I imagine that the pandemic renders my work obsolete—or worse, esoteric— and thus removed from pressing social problems. The pandemic seems to have accelerated the inevitable shift any ethnography undergoes

from contemporary commentary to historical artifact. A friend hypothesized that the pandemic would make this project *more* important, more prescient. More precious? This project captures a particular moment in gay politics and collective identity in America—e.g. before and after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling, before and after the Pulse nightclub massacre—through the lens of people experiencing, making sense of, and continually accomplishing gay nightlife.

### *June 2021*

On Friday June 11, 2021, fifteen months after Philadelphia went into lockdown and enforced a mask mandate, City Hall lifted these measures. At least for now, the Gayborhood is back in full swing—bars can stay open until 2am again, patrons don't need to wear masks. Some spaces that couldn't reopen until now, like The Bike Stop's sexy basement bathed in red light and house music, is back. Tavern on Camac's campy piano bar is back. Both spaces are filled to the brim with people tonight. When I arrive in the Gayborhood, Tavern is boisterous with men and women singing along to "Maybe This Time" around 8pm. The Bike Stop became crowded around midnight, as men took off their shirts, amiably socializing and caressing one another for the first time in over a year.

The past year has been a testament to the Gayborhood's vitality. By June 2020, gay patrons were socializing outdoors on Camac Street as U-Bar and Bar X opened for takeout drink service. Save for Pride and OutFest, queer sociality had never been so publicly enacted in the neighborhood. Drag queens in Philly, and across the country, innovated by taking their shows online. Following the success of a similar event in Chicago, Philly's nightlife performer community put together the Philadelphia Black Queer & Burlesque Community Town Hall on Facebook Live in June to discuss issues of

racial discrimination and sexual harassment to create actionable steps toward equitable change in the nightlife industry. The event was attended by over 600 people, and the meeting, still available to view online, has received nearly 30,000 views.

The bar scene changed, but it mostly stayed the same. The short-lived queer women's bar in the Gayborhood, Toasted Walnut, sadly closed during this year (it had opened during my fieldwork). Two gay bars opened: Level Up, the only "100% Black owned LGBTQIA+ bar" in the neighborhood, and Cockatoo. Concerned community members put together a successful fundraiser to "Save the Bike Stop" in January, raising thousands of dollars (I excitedly won a free month of Zoom workout classes). Tabu and Level Up hosts a diverse array of drag and burlesque performance every night of the week, with queer people of color and trans and nonbinary performers featured more centrally in the scene than ever.

Gay public spaces across the country—the ones that remain—are closing or under threat of closure. Rather than focus too much on this, which has received a lot of scholarly and popular attention, what if we reframe? AIDS was supposed to kill the gay bar. The queer turn was supposed to kill the gay bar. Same goes for gay marriage. And the Internet. And apps like Grindr. And now COVID. Isn't it incredible, then, that these spaces persist? How do they do it?

Gay public spaces do not persist simply because of rainbow flags or commemorative markers. Calling a space "gay" helps, but even that appellation is tenuous. These queer symbols must be continually recharged with collective meaning, or they fall flat (Collins 2004; Durkheim 1995). On a large scale, Pride parades around the world help to restock queer symbols with emotional energy, while the ubiquitous and superficial adoption of LGBTQ imagery by major corporations during Pride month seems to both dilute these symbols and also creates a community boundary that "the"

queer community can rally around. On a smaller, everyday scale, people continually replenish queer community symbols through gay interaction rituals. It is the collective work of bar patrons and club-goers that constructs the sexual reality of gay public space.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Please do send your novel on... However, I must caution you, love: Those things may be amusing to us, but who, after all, wants to read about sissies?... Even if people accept fags out of kindness, they don’t want to know WHAT THEY DO... Your novel might serve as a historical purpose—if only because the young queens nowadays are utterly indistinguishable from straight boys. The twenty-year-olds are completely calm about being gay, they do not consider themselves doomed... So I think your task is nearly impossible, but send it on.”

— Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978)

### **Glitter and Be (Ephemerally) Gay**

It’s around 11pm on a Saturday night at Tavern on Camac, the Gayborhood’s gay piano bar. The crowd is boisterous and unfocused; there are countless interactions happening at once, which makes it nearly impossible to hear the piano from across the room. The bar sounds like any other. Many people are not even trying to stick around on the first floor; a long line to enter the upstairs dancefloor weaves down the stairs in the back toward the front entrance. These patrons are particularly not interested in the showtunes being performed live. A number of folks have formed a line against the back wall as they wait for their turn to perform a song with the pianist, and hopefully, to become *a star* for three minutes. A white woman in her late 20s gets up to the mic. She is still wearing her black peacoat, and she holds onto her mixed drink in one hand. I am sitting at a table just behind the front-row table built around the piano. She speak-sings:

*And here I am, my heart breaking*

*Forced to glitter, forced to be gay*

Then, she starts to sing operatically:

*Glitter and be gay*

*That's the part I play*

These opening lines alone could be the bar's thesis statement<sup>1</sup>. She's singing Cunégonde's famous aria "Glitter and Be Gay" from Leonard Bernstein's operetta *Candide*, and she's not imitating an opera singer, she is an opera singer. A coloratura soprano, she is here with a small crew of fellow singers—gay and straight, men and women—who study opera performance in Philadelphia.

As she sings the first verse, her performance goes largely unnoticed; the bar remains noisy as patrons continue going about their nocturnal rituals. The patrons sitting at the piano, however, have already ceased chatting and are listening intently. With her one free hand, she playfully emotes, raising her arm and putting her hand against her forehead as she sings, "Alas, for me..." A comedic, over-the-top sigh<sup>2</sup>. The gay patron sitting in front of me mimics her hand gestures, swaying his body back and forth.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, musicologist Matthew Jones (2016) analyzes "Glitter and Be Gay" as a "campy form of resistance," writing: "In *Candide*, the aria provides Cunégonde with an opportunity to explore and express her feelings about a decidedly un-camp situation. A prisoner of a Sultan and a Marquis, she has been raped repeatedly by the two men and, believing *Candide* dead, she feels trapped and forlorn. However, Voltaire's satirical text undermines the seriousness of her situation, and Bernstein amplifies this aspect of Cunégonde's dilemma by filling his score with camp idioms perfectly tuned to the pitch of queer ears but nonetheless recognizable as standard musical comedy fare to others" (424)

<sup>2</sup> In this performance, the opera singer is "doing diva." David Halperin (2012) usefully describes the "diva" and her role in gay culture: "Divas may be cartoon women, but they are not without a certain power and authority of their own... Instead of contesting or subverting conventional femininity, they acquire power through an exaggerated, excessive, hyperbolic, over-the-top performance of it... Divas disclose a form of power that gay men can claim as their own... If only the teased and bullied child, when cornered on the playground, or if only the abused lover, when betrayed and mistreated by his boyfriend, could manage to summon and to channel the righteous, triumphant fury, the fierceness, and glamour of [divas such as Joan Crawford], he might find within himself the courage, the strength, and the conviction to bash back" (253). By singing the aria as if she were on a real stage, she provides the bar an ephemeral moment of basking in an *actual* opera diva's presence. However, she also gestures to the absurdity—the camp—of doing so by continually smiling and winking. She telegraphs that she knows she is also playing pretend; she is at a gay piano bar in a peacoat, not warmed up, with a drink in her hand.



However, as her voice soars higher with each ascending phrase, the bar's noise starts to soften. Some people are still talking, but many have stopped and oriented themselves towards the performance in the corner of the bar.

*Until my maiden hand was gaiiiiiiiined*

*By some 'Grand Duke'—or other*

She turns coyly to one side and winks as she sings “or other.” Patrons laugh and cheer. The man in front of me slaps the table in lieu of clapping. She continues singing, and patrons across the bar, now keyed into it, audibly engage with the performance.

*Ah, 'twas not to be*

“Oh my god, oh my god,” I hear a gay patron exclaim.

*Harsh necessity brought me to this gilded cage*

“I want to suck your dick!” a man shouts, without any campy effect, which makes it feel like heckling. His comment notably receives no approving cheers or claps.

*Born to higher things*

*Here I drop my wings*

*Ah!*

This “Ah!” is a piercing, elongated note that ends in a sighing melisma that takes the air out of the room. As she hits the note, someone gasps abruptly in a kind of mimicry—“Ah!” Someone else cries out, “Ohhhhhh my god!” before the note ends. The song picks up in speed, and after this note the bar is abuzz with people talking about the performance with those around them, which makes it harder to hear her for two lines, before this fast-paced section:

*And yet, of course, I rather like to revel—*

“Here we go!” someone shouts, in the know.

*Ah ha!*

*I have no strong objection to champagne, ah ha!*

A patron slaps the table approvingly. Someone throws a wad of cash, landing in a thump, on top of the piano by the upside black top hat that serves as a tip jar. She raises her arm above her head as she gleefully sings:

*My wardrobe is expensive as the devil, ah ha!*

Two patrons sitting at the piano raise their hand above their head too, mimicking her movements. As she throws her hand down to sing, “Perhaps it is ignoble to complain!” the two men drop their arms and extend them towards her as if honoring her. They continue to mimic her up and down arm movements as the music takes a turn:

*Enough, enough! [She sings, pausing.]*

*Of being basely tearful*

*I’ll show my noble stuff*

“Woot!” “Yeah!”

*By being bright and cheerful!*

“Yaas!”

*Ha ha ha haaaa! [Another long piercing note.]*

“YES!” “Ohhhh yeah!”

People cheer, and woot as she holds the last note. Patrons are intensely focused and energized, and that energy is rowdy. The pianist intercepts here before the melisma into a melodic line of ‘ha ha ha’s to try and intervene. “Alright Tavern listen up, listen up,” he says into the mic. “Hold one sec,” he says to her, turning briefly to his right to look up at her. “Before we go on—” The crowd roars, objecting. It’s a sound I’ve really only heard when the opposing team just scored a touchdown at a sport’s bar. They want her to continue to sing. “Before we go on,” he repeats again. The negative cheer modulates into an adoring applause, clearly directed at the singer. People have their arms stretched out

towards her. “You’re incredible!” “How do you do that!?” “Ohhh my god!” I hear people say in all the noise. She smiles and bows her head. “Tavern!” the pianist says again, louder. He can’t wrangle in the crowd. “Hold on!” The singer stretches out her arm and holds it above the pianist’s head, and loudly goes, “Shhhhhhhh! Hear the man out!” The pianist continues, “Listen, there is a lot of that”—“that” being a lot of noise and chatter. She is visibly not offended; she smiles and cups her hands to her mouth as she laughs. The pianist continues, “Stop speaking over her and clapping all the time. It’s going to keep going on, listen til the end of the song and hold your claps because this is a very special performance. Thank you so much!” “Yeah!” someone shouts, immediately contradicting the pianist’s goal to quiet the crowd and lower the emotional energy. She resumes singing, reaching the highest note thus far in the song:

*Ha ha ha haaaa!*

The bar is completely silent. Multiple patrons throw their arms in the air, one gestures to the heavens. As she continues singing, light chatter resumes: *Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha...* The bar’s attention is fickle—apparently only having the ability to come to a halt for one climax in a song—and the patrons start milling around again and interacting as she continues the aria.

*Observe how bravely I conceal the dreadful, dreadful shame I feel...*

As she reaches the final climax<sup>3</sup> (a *stretto*, which means that the vocal part is increasingly faster and higher) where Cunégonde tries to make herself happy by laughing off her shame and abuse, patrons start to pay attention again.

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<sup>3</sup> The passage parodies an operatic “mad scene” where—typically a soprano—enacts insanity while showing off their vocal technique, range, and flexibility. Mad scenes tend to include difficult fioratura and melismatic passages, and the climax of “Glitter and Be Gay” includes vocal jumps between the staccato “ha’s” that are not aligned with the accompaniment. An opera singer described the climax to me as “a challenging rhythmic section that is a nightmare to rehearse,” which makes the impromptu nature of the soprano’s performance at the piano bar all the more

*Ha ha ha ha!!*

“Bring it home, bitch!!” a gay patron hollers.

*Haaaaaaa!*

The final section of the aria has several long “ha” notes that all sound like the final note. After one particular “ha,” several patrons understandably start to clap and cheer. The soprano comically stops singing and says, “Sh!” into the mic, smiles, and resumes her note. She brings the entire bar to its feet as the pianist finishes the postlude. She holds up her drink in a moment of celebration, and then gulps the rest of it, eliciting another round of applause.

The bar feels euphoric and distinctly gay in this moment, though not in a directly sexual way. What’s *gay* about this situation? How do we know? What is it about an opera singer performing “Glitter and Be Gay” in a small piano bar that generates a kind of gay solidarity in the space? It’s not necessarily the song. If you watch *Candide* at the opera, or even the *Candide in Concert* (2005) special with Patti LuPone and Kristen Chenoweth online, the show might tickle gay sensibilities, but it is not defined by gayness. And, I argue, it’s not necessarily the space either. While Tavern is advertised as a gay bar, that does not mean that everything about the bar is experienced as gay. Indeed, I encountered straight patrons at the bar who thought it was a karaoke bar (and who were thoroughly enjoying it as such), which gay patrons scoffed at.

In much the same way that queer people leverage non-sexual public spaces for distinctly queer ends, such as cruising in department store bathrooms, gay bars can be leveraged for non-gay sociality too. While gay interaction rituals do not need to be enacted exclusively by gay people, they do need to be routinely enacted and reinvigorated

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striking. One of the most famous mad scenes in opera—from Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835)—has been subject to queer interpretation and adoration (Koestenbaum 2009:225).

with symbolic significance and positive emotional energy. The opera singer's impromptu rendition of "Glitter and Be Gay" was a particularly successful interaction ritual, or "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership (Collins 2004:7). While the bar patrons' attention ebbed and flowed throughout the song—and I will elaborate on the social significance of this interactional dynamic in Chapter 5—she brought the bar to an ephemeral state of collective effervescence. The more time I spent observing in gay bars, the less I felt that I, as a sociologist, could take the definition of the situation of a gay bar at face value. I found that the social reality of gay bars as gay space must be continually accomplished, and that this social reality is both vulnerable to failure and malleable. This is not an ethnography of how a gayborhood fades; it is about how the definition of the (sexual) situation and the social experience of (sexual) reality is interactionally negotiated.

### **The Social Construction of Reality**

What does it mean to say that a gay bar has a "social reality"? Numerous sociological traditions and thinkers have addressed how we make sense of our social situations, from ethnomethodologists such as Harold Garfinkel to Erving Goffman in his text *Frame Analysis* (1974). In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann state that while we tend to experience social reality objectively, we actively construct this reality: "The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these" (19-20).

Émile Durkheim (1995), one of the fathers of sociology, privileged sociality and embodied practice over metaphysical and divine beliefs in explaining the construction of society. He argued that social reality is concretized through the active doings of groups of people. Through social rituals, people come together and generate meaning and solidarity around symbols. Analyzing secondary materials of Australian Aboriginal tribes' religious rituals, Durkheim argued that sociality is anterior to knowledge, running counter to philosophical debates at the time regarding the origin of Kant's categories of understanding (e.g. time, space, number, cause, substance, personality). He wrote, "Men owe to religion not only the content of their knowledge, in significant part, but also the form in which that knowledge is elaborated" (8). He critiqued both metaphysical and individualist explanations of knowledge to arrive at a social explanation: these categories are "collective representations," generated through heady religious rituals that take on the feeling that they are external to the individual (15).

By coming together and stirring up intense emotions as a collective, he explains: "It is not difficult to imagine that a man in such a state of exaltation should no longer know himself. Feeling possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does, he naturally feels he is no longer himself" (220). Furthermore, the feelings of social solidarity generated through religious rituals transferred to a clan's emblem (such as a plant or animal), which imbued these emblems with social significance that helped keep the group together. He summarizes:

"Like any other society, the clan can only live in and by means of the individual consciousness of which it is made. Thus, insofar as religious force is conceived of as embodied in the totemic emblem, it seems to be external to individuals and endowed with a kind of transcendence; and yet, from another standpoint, and

like the clan it symbolizes, *it can be made real only within and by them*" (223)  
(emphasis added)

In the case of the Gayborhood, the institutionalization of a Center City district as "The Gayborhood" is itself a social process that works to create an objective reality; rainbow flags, street signs, and street crossings further fashion these blocks as a gay reality, signaling "the presence of a distinct way of life" (Ghaziani 2014a:384). However, the social reality of gay public space must be made real within and by actual people conducting that distinct way of life. Historically and today, nightlife spaces are key institutions where gay rituals are enacted and gay solidarity is fostered and maintained.

### **Sexual Reality**

Gay public spaces foster, quite explicitly, *sexual realities* wherein patrons actively grapple with sexual identities and sexual situations. Consider, for instance, how the Black trans drag queen Miss Lisa Lisa warms up her mixed-orientation crowds at the start of her longstanding drag show at the dive bar Bob & Barbara's<sup>4</sup>:

*"Now how many straight women are in the house tonight?"*

A chorus of women voices cheer. Miss Lisa host quips that she saw all the straight women envying her beauty and fashion.

*"How many lesbians are in the house tonight?"*

An even louder roar of cheering. "I saw all of y'all staring at my breasts!" The audience laughs.

*"How many gay men are in the house tonight?"*

Men in the audience cheer. She jokes about how gay men are bumping into straight guys and acting like it was just an innocent accident (they meant to)

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<sup>4</sup> To read more about the city's longest running drag show:  
[https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/music/20150505\\_EVERYONE\\_LOVES\\_A\\_QUEEN\\_The\\_drag\\_scene\\_at\\_Bob\\_and\\_Barbara\\_s\\_is\\_about\\_more\\_than\\_pageantry\\_An\\_attitude\\_of\\_respect\\_equality\\_and\\_appreciation\\_brings\\_an\\_audience\\_from\\_all\\_walks\\_of\\_life.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/music/20150505_EVERYONE_LOVES_A_QUEEN_The_drag_scene_at_Bob_and_Barbara_s_is_about_more_than_pageantry_An_attitude_of_respect_equality_and_appreciation_brings_an_audience_from_all_walks_of_life.html)

*“How many het-er-o-sexual men are in the house tonight?”*

A larger chorus of men shout. “This isn’t Home Depot, you know,” she jokes.

*“How many people are just freaks who wanna have a good time tonight?”*

The audience cheers and claps, and the show continues.

In a heteronormative world where heterosexuality is often take-for-granted, how often are people consciously called upon by their sexual orientation? The gay bar is a fruitful context to examine dynamics around sexuality that are difficult to observe elsewhere.

When I began presenting on emerging findings from this fieldwork, a common question I received was: *How do you know who is gay or straight?*<sup>5</sup> As an ethnographer, I was categorizing people and interactions by race, class, gender, and sexual identity to make sense of how people come together and divide in diverse urban spaces. Whole, complex people become reified as “gay men” or “straight women.” I expected these questions given my focus on observing behavior in public. Issues around the politics of representation are a common critique of ethnography, and ethnographers must be accountable for how they reconstruct the social world in their texts. Furthermore, the “us” versus “them” focus of my work necessarily begged the question of who’s on which side. I was struck, however, by the particular interest from audience members in the “real” sexual identities of Gayborhood revelers, while patrons’ observed races and genders remained unproblematic. If I couldn’t ask strangers I observed about their sexual orientation, I certainly wasn’t asking them about their gender, race, or class either. Questions around identifying sexual identities are not only important methodologically; they also underscore epistemological issues around how people recognize and manage sexuality in everyday life. Is sexual identity observable or

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<sup>5</sup> I elaborate on this question in Chapter 2.



knowable without talking to someone about it? Furthermore, how do we know when “something sexual is happening here” in interaction?

Taking the tools from Durkheim and later theorists, I grapple with the construction of *sexual* reality in this dissertation. “Sexual reality” can encompass multiple meanings. First, situations can be defined by sexual identity categories. Feminist and queer scholars have long argued that most situations are implicitly defined as heterosexual (e.g. Rich 1980). The interaction order of public space is raced, classed, gendered, *and* heteronormative. For example, assumed heterosexuality undergirds gendered harassment such as catcalling. In the Gayborhood, situations tend to be explicitly defined by a gay identity or, more capaciously, by a not straight identity. In a contemporary moment where people’s gay identities are variably important to them (e.g. Brekhus 2003), fostering a gay reality can be fraught when not predicated on stigma and strong group boundaries.

Second, situations can be defined by sexual desire, attraction, or behavior. While queer theory reminds us that the sexual is always social, people tend to bracket off sexual situations from the social. The sexual can be seen as a pollutant to ordinary, everyday life. For instance, in *Behavior in Public Places*, Erving Goffman (1963a) theorized an interaction order where sexual subtext lurks behind every glance, ready to embarrass, discredit, or exploit people. So much so, in fact, that Goffman credits homosexual men’s cruising practices with spoiling casual contact between heterosexual men, writing; “When he is innocently approached by a member of his own sex he may not be sure of the innocence” (142). Here, Goffman alludes to more general dynamics of social reality, which sexual situations can fruitfully reveal, such as how reality can vary in precarity. Some realities are precarious in that a counterdefinition of the situation can easily take hold, and individuals must consciously work to maintain a particular reality. For

example, sociologist Joan Emerson (1970) uses the case of gynecological exams to analyze how doctors and patients manage a particularly unstable situation. She finds that to maintain the reality that “this is a gynecological exam,” doctors must toggle between a medical definition of the situation *and* counterdefinitions of the situation to humanize the intimate encounter. As I describe in Chapters 3 and 4, managing interactions in the bars could prove fraught because of the multiple definitions of the situation that gay bars foster.

In the following section, I situate my broader theoretical framework within the sociological literature on sexuality and space. Then, I situate the dissertation substantively in an interdisciplinary literature on gay space. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my methods and data from the Gayborhood.

### **Conceptualizing Sexuality and the City**

Sexuality, broadly defined as erotic desires and attractions, sexual behaviors, sexual identities, sexual cultures and sexual institutions, organizes conceptions of the self in modern society (Foucault 1990) and is an important axis of social inequality in differentiating groups and individuals by status, competence, and morality (Hill Collins 2000; Rubin 1984). It is not surprising, then, that cities are segregated and stratified by sexuality, just as they are by race and class.

Sexuality is infused into the organization of cities in several ways. Sexuality is most visibly enacted in public spaces such as bars, clubs, bathrooms, parks, and red-light districts, which have effects on sexual subjectivities. Sociologists have long linked patterns of sexualized interactions in recreational spaces, from taxi-dance halls in the 1920s to contemporary urban nightlife venues and college parties, to sexual and social inequality within and across these contexts. Furthermore, historians have shown how

gay and straight sexual identities were constituted through nocturnal interactions in public (Chauncey 1994; Heap 2003). In the 1970s, social scientists turned their gaze to post-World War II spatial formations of sexuality—urban areas with a large concentration of gay inhabitants and institutions (e.g. Levine 1998)—which they characterized as “gay ghettos,” and more recently, “gayborhoods” (Hess and Bitterman 2021).

Beyond highly visible public and nonnormative urban sex cultures, queer theory calls our attention to how *all* urban spaces are sexual. For example, queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) argue that urban communities are inherently sexualized as heterosexual because contemporary sexuality is predominately conceived of as something private that occurs most normally in the institution of the family. They write, “Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction” (554). In this way, urban communities and neighborhoods not “marked” by a public sexual culture are still constituted through conceptions of sex.

In sociology, two theoretical perspectives on sexuality provide different insights into how sexuality is organized in the city at the local level: sex markets (Laumann et al. 2004) and sexual fields (Green 2008b). Interpreting sexuality as a diffused, a multi-leveled social structure has allowed sociologists to study how sexuality is spatially organized and constrained within the city by institutions, cultures, and social networks (Ghaziani 2014; Laumann et al. 2004) as well as how performances of sexuality on the ground produce urban sexual cultures and reconstitute urban space (Delany 1999; Green 2014). While sex markets and sexual fields perspectives capture how sexuality is organized geographically from both structural and interactional angles, both privilege sexuality as competitive and hierarchical given their focus on partner-seeking. Sexual

spaces, however, can be organized not only through structures of desire, but also collective identity, friendship, and activism.

In this dissertation, I offer a micro-sociological framework of sexual spaces as aggregated and overlapping interaction rituals (Collins 2004), which I argue can account for how “sexual reality” is constructed and actively accomplished through cultural processes such as framing, boundary work, and identity work. In the following sections, I briefly review sociological perspectives on sexuality, interaction, and the city before turning to interaction ritual theory (Collins 2004).

**Sex Markets.** Using quantitative and qualitative data from four distinct communities in Chicago—(1) an affluent, mostly white gay neighborhood, (2) a black, lower-to-middle class area, (3) a Mexican American, lower-to-middle class area, and (4) a predominately Puerto Rican area—Laumann et al. (2004) demonstrate that individuals’ sexual attitudes, behaviors, patterns for meeting partners, patterns of relationship formation, etc. are shaped not only by gender, race, and sexual orientation, but also differ powerfully by community and institutional factors. For instance, they find that the presence of bars and clubs catering to gay and straight singles in the predominately gay neighborhood facilitates short-term sexual partnering in a way that is much more difficult in other neighborhoods without these direct sexual marketplaces. The authors theorize that the organization of sexuality—operationalized as sexual practices and relationships—in cities is best understood through the metaphor of sexual markets. They define sex markets as “the general social/relational structure in which the search for a sex partner takes place” (8) and are primarily bound by sexual orientation and race (14). However, rather than giving primacy to erotic properties “inherent” in raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies [e.g. white gay men seem to privilege anonymous sex because of masculinity norms (Levine 1998)], sex markets are conceived of as localized constructs

shaped by exogenous and endogenous cultural and structural forces: “[social] networks, local sexual meaning systems, institutional legitimators of particular sexual identities and sex practices, and the designation of space for sexual activity shape how individuals construct and maintain different types of sex markets and organize different types of sexual relationships” (8).

Thus, sex markets are *social structures* that are inherently place specific; they arise through actors being embedded in particular social networks and ecological contexts. The authors argue that sex markets are concretized through local brokers, which are “networks or organizations that act as coordinators for individuals within the same sex market or as liaisons between different sex markets” (17). The most explicit type of local broker for sex markets are sexual marketplaces, or specific sites where individuals go to seek sexual connection. Thus, the city and its variegated organization has as much to do with actors’ sexual behaviors as those actors’ sexual desires.

While this theoretical approach to sexuality addresses both micro and macro forces, sex markets are constructed in a top-down manner. This is clear in how the authors discuss the main structural/cultural forces that constrain sex markets: (1) social networks, which constrain actors by socially embedding them into particular interpersonal contexts, (2) the physical spaces an individual has easy or regular access to (“...mate selection occurs within geographically bounded area... and is limited by that area’s demographics, social networks, cultural understandings, and institutions” (20), (3) the sexual culture of a place, or “the set of scripts that inform and guide sexual behaviors, preferences, and identities within a given market” (22), and (4) local institutions such as the family, schools, health-services organizations, and the law that help shape what constitutes “appropriate” sexual behavior in a sex market.

Laumann et al. (2004) are fundamentally interested in understanding how structural forces constrain individual actors' sexual behaviors and relationships (355), which aligns with theory and research on sexuality that links the spatial expressions of sexuality and localized sexual cultures to macro forces such as the market economy and politics. Theoretically, Foucault (1990) similarly writes on how institutions such as religion, the law, and medicine, being shaped and transformed by industrialization, produced modern sexuality and its supposed repression from the public sphere through an "incitement to discourse." He writes, "...bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society... did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it" (69). For instance, the medicalization of sexual behaviors and the criminalization of others "was the very production of sexuality" (105). Sexuality, then, is a historical construct constrained by institutional and economic structures. Although Laumann et al. (2004) argue that Foucault's conception of sexuality is overly reliant on institutional forces and that institutions are often decoupled from sexuality on the ground, their ontological positioning regarding how social structure affects sexual expression and identity remain fairly aligned.

While a sex markets approach to sexuality argues that local sexual cultures influence sexual practices and that localized sites of sexuality consist of individuals, identities, and practices that are differentially valued, the sex markets perspective cannot effectively explain how localized urban sex cultures form through everyday interaction, how these cultures are negotiated on the ground by actors implicated in them, or why particular sex cultures erotically value what they do and why people are drawn to some sex cultures more than others. For instance, Berlant and Warner (1998) in their essay on public sexuality pose a series of questions following a provocative vignette of the authors

watching a man force feed another man in a “performance of erotic vomiting” (564) in a gay leather bar in New York City: “Word has gone around that the boy is straight. We want to know: What does that mean in this context? How did you discover that this is what you want to do?... How did you come to do it in a leather bar?” (565). Undergirding these questions are issues related to how sexuality and desire is spatially organized in urban spaces. Interactional approaches to collective sexual life, such as sexual field theory (Hennen 2014), can better explain these micro questions while still attending to social structure.

**Sexual Fields.** Sociologist Adam Isaiah Green (2014) argues that collective sexual life is the domain of social life including interactions in on-and offline spaces that facilitate intimate partnership, whether that be for dating, sex, or otherwise. For Green, collective sexual life is organized around sexual fields. Sexual field theory integrates Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital with Goffman’s social psychology to assert that local sites of sexual sociality, such as bars, websites, bathhouses, and college parties, have internal structures of desire, rules, and stratification systems that distribute erotic or sexual capital unevenly across individuals who have an erotic stake in that field. The particularized sexual fields organize individual and collective behaviors and sexual subjectivities within them (Green 2008; 2011; 2014). In this fluid and contextual formulation of sexually charged spaces, actors are conceptualized as players of a field with particular interactional rules, status orders, and privileged sexual themes and practices. Social factors such as race, age, class, gender presentation, sexual identity, valued sexual practices, etc. all influence a field’s structure of desire, which determines who has more status and power than others in a sexual field.

A sexual field’s structure of desire is a collective evaluation of what is erotically desirable in a given sexual field. Some individuals are more desirable according to the

internal logic of particular fields than others. In this way, the structure of desire conveys a sexual status order and shapes how individuals experience, interact in, and see themselves vis-à-vis others in a field. Who is considered “sexy” in one space versus another varies by race, class, gendered presentations, sexual orientation, etc. Furthermore, the structure of desire of a space determines the “rules of the game”—interactional norms regarding who approaches whom, how someone expresses sexual interest, etc.—for players in that sexual field. In this way, urban spaces (as well as offline ones) serve as institutional anchors of desire and sexuality for individuals with potential romantic/sexual interest as they orient themselves toward one another in the same space. While some urban spaces take on a culturally understood sexual character outside of who or what actually occurs inside of them—for instance, a designated leather bar signifies a particular structure of desire filled with gay men who participate in a particular subculture—sexual fields are continually constructed through repeated, face-to-face interactions. Sexual fields are dynamic and dependent on the desires of the present participants at any given time. Thus, the framework pushes scholars to consider the contextual dynamics of *each* sexual field in time and space for understanding how individuals experience collective forms of sexuality in urban space. Furthermore, while Green acknowledges that sexuality, particularly as it is spatially organized in urban space, maps onto other dimensions of social life such as race and class segregation that Laumann et al. (2004) highlight, “a sexual field is not a mere analogue of the social order” (Green 2014: 38). Individuals’ social locations by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. do not determine sexual fields. Green writes, “[D]esire and desirability are oriented and shaped by processes that are internal to the field itself... collective social life is based, not on individual desire, but on the aggregation of desires and attitudes. This fact means that desire and desirability arise, in part, as a function of *ecological*



factors that are independent of any given historical or cultural context” (38). The spatial organization of sexuality and desires needs to be accounted for at a more localized level than even the community or neighborhood level and is not reducible to other social forces.

**Micro-Sociological Framework of Sexual Space.** Informed by sexual field theory when I entered Gayborhood bars to conduct fieldwork, I expected to conceptualize revelers’ experiences through the lenses of sexual hierarchy and competition. I found, however, that this interactional framework could not fully account for club-goers’ diverse desires and rationales for going out or their experiences while out. As I describe in the Chapter 4, a sexual fields perspective is one possible *frame* for constructing and experiencing a sexual reality while in gay nightlife. In this way, I argue for a broader micro-sociological framework of sexuality, interaction, and the city that centers on “what people do, say, and think in the actual flow of momentary experience” (Collins 1981:984).

My theoretical approach is informed by a Durkheimian tradition in micro-sociology that privileges anthropological rituals as the bases for macro constructs such as culture, identity, and social stratification, as well as a distinct but overlapping micro-interactionist tradition that is concerned with the construction of social experience (Collins 1994). I draw most explicitly from Collins’ theory of interaction ritual chains (2014) and Goffman’s interaction order (1983) to conceptualize sexual spaces as ephemeral, actively accomplished realities wherein sexual boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated.

Collins (2004) describes an interaction ritual as a face-to-face social interaction “in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other’s bodily micro-rhythms and emotions” (47). He argues that rituals are “key

mechanisms... in processes of conflict and domination” (41), and theorizes that the emotions generated in interaction rituals are an important mechanism for establishing group membership and boundaries. Emotions guide individuals’ present and future actions, with whom they feel social solidarity, and with whom they do not. Individuals seek out interactions that build up their stock of positive emotional energy, such as happiness, comfort, and confidence, which persist across situations. Positive interactions build group solidarity. Individuals avoid interactions that become symbolically stocked with negative emotions. Negative interactions do not build group solidarity among participants. Put together, positive/negative emotions generated in interactions help demarcate the boundaries individuals construct and maintain between groups.

By considering face-to-face interactions in gay spaces, from encounters at the bar to dancing, as micro-level interaction rituals, it is also possible to articulate more precisely the ephemeral nature of gay space that critics of straight patrons nod towards and that literature on gay spaces suggests. This is because gay space, like any other public space, is a meso-level “mesh of IR chains, connected both laterally and in the flow of time” (Collins 2004:250). Gay space, then, may fluctuate in strength or “gayness” across time and situations based on the interactions of its patrons (c.f. Chauncey 1994; Humphreys 1975). Aligned with scholars studying urban nightlife that highlight the ways in which spaces are socially constructed to fit a particular mood, vibe, or theme (Grazian 2003, 2008; Orne 2017; Rivera 2010), I argue that gay space is a collectively accomplished mesh of “gay” interaction rituals. Gay bars are a product of certain types of individuals engaging in certain types of activities and rituals at a certain time in brick-and-mortar space, which prior ethnographic work on gay spaces also suggests. Describing homosexual clone culture in 1970s New York, Levine (1998) illustrates how the interaction rituals of gay clones, such as “posing” in a masculine manner with

friends, using party drugs, dancing to disco music, gossiping about men with their “sisters,” and cruising for sex through “boy watching,” produced extremely particularized and fleeting erotic gay spaces called circuit parties. In an effort to maintain the right “mesh,” circuit parties restricted entry to masculine and muscular men. As one of Levine’s informants explained, “[Effeminate men are] visual pollutants...disrupting the erotic beauty of a room full of hot men.” (51). I consider “gay” interaction rituals to broadly include the many ways in which gay men socialize together: gossiping with friends, adopting “camp” through speech and in gait (cf. Chauncey 1994), gazing and making eye contact with other patrons, and dancing with friends and with strangers. Aggregated together, these interactions produce particular types of gay space infused with particular moods depending on the ritual participants and content of those rituals.

### **The State and Future of Gay Public Space**

Substantively, this dissertation is situated in interdisciplinary debates regarding the state and future of gay public space. Scholars and laymen alike have interrogated the current state and future of gay identity and gay community. In *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, sociologist Amin Ghaziani (2014) evaluates and problematizes the dominant narrative that gay neighborhoods are disappearing from our urban landscapes. According to Ghaziani, demographic, cultural, and technological factors are contributing to change in gay neighborhoods: aging gays may not go out as frequently as they did when they were younger and/or aging gays may not want to live around loud and noisy gay nightlife districts, the rise of gay and lesbian families with children, the popularity of the internet, and the “new gay teenager.” Through my fieldwork, I gained ethnographic leverage to expand upon how younger generations and the popularity of the internet—particularly social media and the ubiquity of gay mobile dating and hookup

applications—are shaping gay spaces and gay subjectivities on the ground. Below, I briefly review these two trends.

The “new gay teenager,” a term coined by developmental psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams, describes how gay teens who are growing up in a society where homosexuality is now more accepted are “coming out earlier, many of them identify equally with their gay and straight friends, and sexuality is just one part of their self-identity—and sometimes a small one” (Ghaziani 2014:115). Unlike earlier cohorts of gays who were “moral refugees who built their gayborhoods as safe spaces,” young gay folks today may not need the insular safety that gay ghettos of the 20th century provided. They may not want them. As Ghaziani writes, “If the young will inherit the future, then the fate of gayborhoods lies in part in their hands as they decide in later years whether to live and socialize in them.” Thus, there is a lot at stake in how young club-goers experience urban gay nightlife and whether they decide to continue to frequent and invest in these spaces.

The experiences of young gay club-goers who try to have fun in the Gayborhood suggests that public gay life remains alluring for gay youth coming of age today in the city, and their ability to have fun is replete with challenges. The challenges my informants faced were particularly striking because one could argue that my observations are biased towards more privileged youth who have the means to get into these bars and those who have an affinity to gay culture because I did not systematically study youth who have *never* gone out in the Gayborhood. I argue this is a strength rather than a weakness of my data. We might expect that college educated men who are interested in being around other gay people will have a fairly uncomplicated time assimilating into gay social scenes and networks. This, however, is not what I found. Whether gay youth socialize in Gayborhoods is more complex than a binary variable. Some gay youths are not interested in partaking in gay social life and opt out. Others go

out to try it out, and whether they have a positive or negative experience shapes whether they go out again. Many I spoke to went out regularly in search of a good time, in search of friends, in search of sex and love, and though they felt that they rarely had fun, they still went anyway.

A dominant theme of my fieldwork centers around another trigger of gayborhood change: the popularity of mobile dating and hookup applications. In popular media, these apps are often a culprit for explaining why gay bars close. Ghaziani's (2014) informants expressed that the affordances provided by the internet decouple community from geography, making gay bars and gay neighborhoods unnecessary for finding sex, love, and friendship. One of his gay man informants neatly summarized this trend, which has been developing since the 1990s, and how it relates to men's "need for" a physical gayborhood:

"I think people socialize differently now with the advent of, at first, chat rooms, and then dating sites, and then mobile apps like Grindr, where you can see who's gay around you and ostensibly sleep with them. People are interacting differently and are coming together differently. That wasn't an option ten years ago. You had to go to a gay neighborhood and go to a gay bar to meet people and to socialize, and that's just not true anymore." (124)

Mobile apps like Grindr can become virtual gay bars, and I find in my fieldwork that Grindr is not so much supplanting physical gay space but rather complicating the social reality of these spaces. New media is creating new ways of experiencing physical space and carving out novel ways that we relate to one another that have ramifications for face-to-face interaction. While new media research in sociology and related fields suggests that social media changes our relationships and modes of being in physical space, there is a dearth of ethnographic research that is able to show this.

A consistent finding in urban sexualities research is that non-heterosexual identities, cultures, and spatial expressions are far more *plural* and *variable* than is typically conceived. Gay identities are variably important for self-identifying gay people's senses of selves (Brekhus 2003), with some rejecting sexual identities that fall within the hetero-homo binary entirely (Savin-Williams 2005) and others newly identifying as non-heterosexual on surveys (Bridges and Moore 2018). Scholars and laymen alike have pondered the current state and future of gay identity and gay community. Demographers and cultural sociologists have shown that straight residents are moving into historically "gay ghettos" and gay residents are moving out of them and becoming more geographically diffused in the city.

Recently, there have been several analytic frames proposed to capture diverse spatial expressions of sexuality in cities and beyond, including cultural archipelagos (Ghaziani 2019a), planetary systems (Doan 2019), and constellations (Gieseeking 2020). Drawing on the distinct geographies of lesbians, trans people, same-sex families with children, and queer people of color, Ghaziani (2019) proposes "cultural archipelagos" as a metaphor of interconnected islands to capture the plurality of sexual geographies and "shows us one way to resist flattening the city into an artificial binary between *the* gayborhood versus all other undifferentiated and presumably 'straight spaces'" (6). In response to Ghaziani in a symposium on queer urbanisms in *City & Community*, Petra Doan (2019) argued that "perhaps the metaphor of islands is too limited" (34) by fixing queer geographies in place. To account for change and movement of both queer people and queer spaces, Doan offers the metaphor of a planetary system to capture "LGBTQ residents and residential areas spinning and circling iconic queer spaces" (34). Doan's response evokes a broader tension in urban sexualities research between capturing the

plurality of sexual geographies while also accounting for the fleeting and ephemeral nature of many queer spaces.

Queer geographer Jack Giesecking (2020) explicitly accounts for ephemerality by conceptualizing “lesbian-queer spaces” in particular as constellations: “Lesbian-queer places are scattered across [New York City] in comparison to the businesses and residences idealized in the LGBTQ neighborhood. Their places are often fleeting, as they appear and collapse much more quickly due to rising rents and political shifts” (942). They define stars as “a space that holds meaning for lesbians queers, a spatiotemporal iteration of dyke life” (946). These queer spaces form through a range of social rituals: “Participants produce their stars with others (first kiss, hot one-night stand, tragic breakup, activist zap, friendship, popular bar, proposal, drag queen bingo at the LGBT Center, chat room) or on their own (reading, listening to music, a realization of one’s sexuality, crying over a tragic breakup, first-time binding, masturbation, reading LGBTQ history in a library or a bookstore or on Wikipedia)... Stars are how dykes find their way when the sociophysical landscape fails them” (946-947).

In tandem with the above research trends, scholars across disciplines have argued that researchers have focused their analyses on iconic gay neighborhoods—and their typically white, affluent, gay male denizens—at the expense of queer geographies beyond the urban core that may be less visible or institutionalized (Brown–Saracino 2019; Halberstam n.d.). These critiques, while warranted, may also further reify normative understandings of urban areas marked as gay. Gay and queer spaces—whether they are institutionalized spaces like bars, ephemeral spaces like “tearooms” (Humphreys 1975) or public parks, or somewhere in between like “queer pop-ups” (Stillwagon and Ghaziani)—come and go. How, when, and why gay spaces come and go vary.

For instance, time and scale matter. Let's consider a comparatively macro spatial construct of queerness: gay neighborhoods or "gayborhoods." Both advocates and critics of gayborhoods portray these commercial and/or residential zones, typically found in the urban core of large cities, as enduring static configurations of nonheteronormative sexuality. However, gay neighborhoods have always been sites of contested terrain; their boundaries and epicenters shift over time. As Ghaziani (2014) illustrates, the dynamic nature of gay neighborhoods is sometimes lost in popular and scholarly debates around the future of these spaces. Philadelphia is no exception.

While Philadelphia's Gayborhood carries symbolic weight and signals a distinct way of life to queer people and thrill seekers, the Gayborhood is a relatively recent political, cultural, and geographical construction. The Gayborhood's official boundaries, marked by rainbow street signs, suggest rather than accurately reflect where (some) queer people in Center City socialize today<sup>6</sup>. The Gayborhood's designation as a cultural heritage site suggests that the Gayborhood was once, if not today, *the* site for gay life in Philadelphia.

History reveals that this is also a reductive rendering of queer life in the city. Drawing on oral histories with gay and lesbian Philadelphians and a range of legal, media, and organization documents, historian Marc Stein (2004) mapped extensive gay and lesbian geographies between 1945 and 1974 in Center City (in and beyond the Gayborhood), West Philadelphia, and Mount Airy (23). These geographies overlapped and diverged by race and class and were also differentiated by where gays and lesbians lived versus where they socialized. In Center City, gay bars and restaurants in today's

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<sup>6</sup> The Gayborhood was first called "The Gayborhood" in 1995 when, according to archivist Bob Skiba of the William Way LGBT Center, "David Warner playfully paraphrased the Mister Rogers children's song and declared, 'It's a beautiful day in the Gayborhood!'" at that year's Outfest celebration (2014). In 2007, the city installed thirty-six rainbow street signs to commemorate the area bounded by Broad and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets and Walnut and Pine Streets for its history as an LGBT area.



Gayborhood were centered around what was referred to as the “Locust Strip,” surrounded by non-gay commercial spaces. Furthermore, the “Locust Strip” was white, and male dominated. Stein writes: “The majority of predominantly Euro-American sites in Center City clustered between Market and South and especially around 13<sup>th</sup> and Locust (in southeastern Center City). Here, on or near the ‘Locust Strip,’ lesbian and gay establishments shared a neighborhood with prominent hotels, theaters, music halls, and restaurants, as well as gambling dens, striptease joints, massage parlors, and prostitute bars. In contrast, about half of the predominantly African American sites in Center City were located further to the south (on or near South Street, a long-time African American entertainment strip) or further to the north (on or near Market Street)” (56-57). Furthermore, there were bars and cruising spots popular among gay men and women in Center City several blocks west in Rittenhouse Square in the 1950s and 1960s, though we don’t think of Rittenhouse as a gay neighborhood today. These gay and lesbian geographies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century suggest that while there was a “cultural archipelago” of gay sociality in what is today’s Gayborhood, the area’s gay frame was limited (e.g., the “Locust Strip”) and it was not the only cluster of gay bars in Center City let alone the city writ large.

This historical research underscores the need to analyze gay bars and gayborhoods as dynamic and unstable, despite their visibility and institutionalization. In the case of the Gayborhood today, several bars closed during my fieldwork, several bars opened, and several bars opened and closed between 2015 and 2020. People’s conceptions of gay bars *as* gay change, too. Most notably, the reputation of Woody’s shifted from a gay bar to a “straight gay bar” in the eyes of many people I spoke to while out. Though Woody’s remains, ostensibly, a gay bar, it is not experienced or framed this way by some gay patrons today. Furthermore, the Gayborhood, though a recent top-

down framing, is already contested by local business organizations that are trying to frame the commercial area as “Midtown Village.” On Google Maps, one can search and find either “The Gayborhood” or “Midtown Village.” Social reality is in the eye of the beholder.

### **A Study of Gay Rituals**

This dissertation contributes to a burgeoning interdisciplinary field concerning sexuality and space, what some now call “gayborhood studies” (Bitterman and Hess 2021), by attending to “what people do, say, and think in the actual flow of momentary experience” (Collins 1981:984) in these spaces. While research on gay spaces often centers in “great cities” such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City with multiple gay neighborhoods (Stone 2018), Philadelphia only has one neighborhood with a concentration of gay institutions. The city is also not among the top 25 large cities with the highest concentrations of same-sex couples (8.08 same-sex couples per 1,000 households) (Gates and Cooke 2011a, 2011b). That said, Philadelphia became the second American city to officially recognize one of its neighborhoods as gay when Mayor John Street dedicated 36 rainbow street signs between Chestnut and Pine Sts. and 11<sup>th</sup> and Broad Streets in Center City (Ghaziani 2014b; Skiba 2014). The Gayborhood is the officially recognized gay neighborhood, as well as the cultural center of public gay life, in Philadelphia. Culturally, the neighborhood is home to anchor institutions such as an LGBT community center, health and social service organizations serving LGBT populations, the oldest gay bookstore in the country, as well as numerous gay bars, clubs, and a gay bathhouse. Commemoration events such as Philly Pride and OutFest in honor of National Coming Out Day also take place in and around the streets of the

neighborhood. Rainbow stickers and flags adorn storefronts and apartment building signs.

Like other gay neighborhoods around the country, the Gayborhood has undergone development that is both upscaling and “straightening” the district’s gay character. Within the Gayborhood’s demarcated boundaries, there are competing definitions of these city blocks’ cultures. Alongside the rainbow bands on the street signs, the 13<sup>th</sup> Street corridor within the Gayborhood is promoted as a business district called “Midtown Village” due to its concentration of trendy restaurants and bars that are not explicitly marked as gay. Featured in a 2013 *New York Times* photo series, the outlet portrayed Midtown Village, stripped of its gay enclave roots, as reviving force for the area: “Just 10 years ago, decayed and home to the city’s red light district, South 13th Street was a waste of central Philadelphia real estate. These days, however, check-cashing joints and adult bookshops have been replaced by ‘reservations a must’ restaurants and high-end gelato shops...” Club-goers walking north on 13<sup>th</sup> Street from Locust to Walnut Streets on a weekend night encounter sidewalks filled with racially and class-diverse queer individuals waiting in line for “gay pizza” or the nightclub Voyeur and the sounds of pop music blaring out of Woody’s, and then after crossing Walnut Street the sidewalks become filled with the sounds and smells of predominately white patrons having cocktails and groups of college students and young professionals frequenting non-gay bars such as Brü or Graffiti Bar. Walking along 13<sup>th</sup> Street north of Walnut Street does not “feel” gay in the same way it does south of Walnut.

For this project, I spent hundreds of hours engaging in participant observation in gay bars and nightclubs, which comprise the bulk of the data that I analyze in the empirical chapters. I primarily draw on approximately 400 hours of focused observation,

as well as informal interviews in the bars and 30 supplemental in-depth interviews, across the four chapters.

I frequented every gay bar in the Gayborhood (around ten bars at any given time): Woody's, iCandy (closed in 2017), Tavern on Camac, The Bike Stop, Toasted Walnut (2016-2021), Tabu (relocated to iCandy's building and expanded), U-Bar (formerly Uncle's), Voyeur Nightclub, Knock, Boxer's PHL (closed in 2020), Level Up Bar and Lounge (opened in 2020), and Cockatoo (opened in 2020). The names of the bars have not been changed since the focus of this study is on the social interactions of club-goers in predominantly free, non-exclusive, and publicly visible bars, and not on the bars' management or workers. This attends to a recent call among ethnographers to not use pseudonyms for their research sites in order to improve qualitative data transparency and allow for the potential for revisits by future scholars (Jerolmack and Murphy 2017). I also attended gay pop-up events throughout the city—from happy hour mixers to queer techno raves—in Rittenhouse, Old City, Bella Vista, Passyunk Square, Point Breeze, Northern Liberties, Fishtown, East Kensington, Fairmount, and West Philly. I heard about pop-up events through Facebook, Instagram, and word of mouth. Some events recurred monthly, such as Holy Trinity at the Dolphin Tavern dive bar on Broad Street (the holy trinity being Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj), while others, such as queer warehouse parties, advertised themselves on private Instagram accounts that one only found out about through word of mouth.

I joined club-goers as they made their nightly rounds, or “the fruit loop” as some playfully called it, by moving through distinctive gay bars and the multiple spaces within them. These sexual “circuits” illuminated several overlapping “[territories] for mutual recognition, dyadic connection, friendship, relationship, and networks... possibilities for locating a social niche or a sense of being home” (Adam and Green 2014:142). These

circuits often converged; in 2015, many ended their circuit at Woody's or iCandy, arriving at midnight and staying until the lights turned on at 2am. As Woody's became a popular destination for heterosexual revelers, men's circuits shifted. By 2018, men's circuits often ended at the piano bar Tavern on Camac's upstairs dance floor. Sometimes these "go-alongs" began at house or campus parties (Kusenbach 2003).

I conducted fieldwork in two stages. In 2015, I went out on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. to observe how young gay men interact in gay public spaces. As a young, white gay man in his early twenties familiar with the Gayborhood but with few close gay friends in the city, I initially went out with gay acquaintances—some of whom I had known superficially for a couple of years—who were willing to include me in their evening rituals. Sometimes I followed groups of gay patrons throughout the night, from attending their pre-games—informal gatherings that occur at someone's apartment where friends get energized to go out (cf. Grazian, 2007)—to getting food after the bars closed. At the bars, I stood and conversed with gay men with mixed drinks in hand while we eyeballed the crowd, paid the \$5-10 cover fees to dance on separate dance floors, and moved from one bar to another as groups migrated throughout the night. I talked informally with both men and women. In the text, I denote when quotes are taken from formal, transcribed interviews versus informal interviews at the bars that I recorded in my field notes. While patrons did not seem guarded in my presence, these bars proved to be difficult sites for observation. The lighting was dim, especially on the dance floors where it was nearly pitch black. The music was loud. I usually could not hear what people said unless they spoke within a few feet of me. I jotted down notes on my smartphone while in the field, including verbatim dialogue, and wrote up full field notes once I got home each night.

In the first stage of fieldwork, I focused my observations primarily on Woody's and iCandy, the two largest gay bars in the Gayborhood at the time. Both bars were multi-storied and generally considered by club-goers to be "catch-all" gay bars that did not cater to particular subcultures. At the time, Woody's and iCandy were demographically mixed and unevenly segregated by race, class, and age, which provided fertile ground for examining intergroup interactions across gender and sexuality. I routinely observed gay men interact with women who they largely interpreted as straight. It was common for men to bring women friends to the bars. Bachelorette parties and other groups of women often went out to these bars, to the situational chagrin of gay patrons (Baldor 2018).

In 2018, I reentered the field following changes in the nightlife scene; iCandy had just closed and my informants no longer went to Woody's, which they referred to as a "straight gay bar" (Owens and Dent 2017). I observed in bars that catered to specific gay subcultures, such as Tavern on Camac, a gay piano bar that caters to a self-selecting intergenerational group of "showtunes queens," and the Bike Stop, a leather and biker bar (Hennen 2008) with an interest in whether and how these more distinctively gay spaces were maintaining their gay character. I went out four to five days a week, capturing both busy weekend nights and quieter weekday evenings. I informally interviewed gay and straight patrons while in the bars, and further observed interactions between gay men and women. Lastly, I observed in other gay bars and events such as "gay takeover" nights at straight bars, the Philly Pride festival in June, and the OutFest block party for National Coming Out Day in October, across both data collection stages.

To supplement ethnographic observations, I draw on 30 in-depth interviews with club-goers. Several months into the first stage of fieldwork, I interviewed young men I had interacted with in the bars about their experiences going out in the

Gayborhood. These semi-structured interviews typically lasted between an hour and 90 minutes. A portion of each interview consisted of interviewees walking me through different types of interactions. I asked several interviewees to refer another friend to be interviewed, which proved fruitful since I had encountered several referrals previously. I interviewed 16 young gay men, all but two of whom I had observed. Interviewees were part of several distinct social networks of friends who went out to the bars. Their ages ranged from 21 to 34, seven interviewees were non-Hispanic whites, and all but one had attained, or were in the process of attaining, a college degree. In the second stage of fieldwork, I interviewed 14 additional people who I had met while out, prioritizing the perspectives of nightlife performers and non-gay men. In this stage, I interviewed two trans patrons, four nonbinary or genderqueer patrons, four straight women, and four gay men. Four of the interviewees participate in the Gayborhood drag scene as performers. Their ages ranged from 21 to 39, and three identify as non-white. All names of club-goers in the text are pseudonyms.

My positionality in the field, like for all ethnographers, fundamentally shaped the ethnographic findings presented here. The extent to which I belonged in my field sites varied depending upon the bar. In general, I occupied a privileged position by race, class, age, and body type. I felt more like an outsider at some bars, particularly at the piano bar and the leather bar, because I was not culturally inculcated as either a “showtunes queen” or a leatherman. In both spaces, subcultural knowledge greatly facilitated the enjoyment of these spaces. I had to learn the rules of the game in these spaces in a more explicit way than I did at other gay bars. For example, I had to ask patrons about some of the songs that people sang as they performed them, and I had to learn how “underwear nights” at the Bike Stop worked through trial and error.

Visibly belonging in gay spaces posed both unique challenges and critical advantages as a fieldworker. On the one hand, men tended not to take my status as a researcher seriously when I approached them and said, “Hey, I’m a graduate student at Penn and I’m doing a project on gay nightlife...” Men sometimes laughed off my comment, dismissing it. One tall 27-year-old white gay management consultant stared down at me at a pre-game and sneered, “I’m impressed you said all of that with a straight face.” Others made jokes about how “convenient” it was that my research allowed me to hang out in gay bars and meet potential sexual partners. Some seemed to interpret my research pitch as a sexual advance, and it was palpable that in trying to talk to patrons as a researcher I was simultaneously being sexually rejected or accepted by them. This was especially the case when I went to the bars alone because it was more difficult to break off overly flirtatious conversations with patrons without leaving a particular bar all together. At times, I felt like I was activating sexual capital in order to talk to patrons as a researcher. Patrons I informally interviewed in the bars gave their verbal consent to talk to me as a researcher (and sometimes patrons did not give me their consent, and I did not write up our conversations in my field notes), but the multiple sexual realities in the bars sometimes muddled these interactions. While this was interpersonally stressful at times, these moments of embodied fieldwork greatly improved my ability to capture the perspectives and feelings of my informants as they moved through gay public space. Furthermore, my positionality facilitated access and insight into club-goers’ social worlds that were difficult to observe in the bars alone, such as links between gay people’s digital relationships and their offline interactions.

I collected and analyzed my data in an iterative fashion, oscillating between inductive and deductive modes of analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). While I entered the field with a broad interest in linking social interactions between club-goers to



broader theories of how groups interact in real-time in public spaces (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003), I adopted interaction ritual theory as a guiding framework towards the end of the first stage of data collection given the congruence between my emerging findings and Collins's theory. In both stages, I analyzed field notes inductively with open codes. I paid close attention to how different individuals and groups interacted in gay space both physically (such as mannerisms and comportment) and emotionally (such as facial expressions and tone of voice) and how they moved through the space through observations, and how they made sense of gay space and their place in it through informal conversations.

### **Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation comprises four empirical chapters that analyze nightlife interactions in the Gayborhood through distinct theoretical framings, as well as three ethnographic vignettes that supplement the chapters' analyses with descriptive nuance. In Chapter 2, I examine how gay club-goers demarcate who "belongs" in gay space and who does not. I argue that symbolic boundaries between sexual identities are fluid, and men's boundary work around belonging depended on interactions and emotions rather than sexual identity categories. Some club-goers—gay or straight—contribute to the overall gay feeling of gay space while others do not, and this can change moment to moment. A version of this chapter was previously published in *Ethnography* (2019).

In Chapter 3, I leverage the salience of gender and sexuality in gay spaces to analyze how heteronormativity is accomplished in public. I focus on a common way that young gay men overcame thwarted interaction: women. I analyze how women friends and strangers broker interaction between gay men in gay space as wing-women. I show how broker rituals are predicated on durable sexual beliefs around the inherent lack of

sexual tension between women and gay men, which I argue is an interactional mechanism that upholds heteronormativity across contexts.

In Chapter 4, I analyze interactional mechanisms that thwart gay club-goers' ability to initiate interaction with gay others in the bars. I argue that men's gender displays, the uncertain social reality in the bars, and the ubiquity of *acquainted strangers*—weak ties fostered online or through mobile apps but not offline—hinder the accomplishment of positive outcomes such as fostering community in the bars. The social organization of some sexual spaces exacerbates intragroup inequalities by rendering interaction difficult to initiate and sustain. We have to think about sexual spaces as they're actually experienced by people; these spaces offer several competing frames (competitive, communal, collapsed) for interaction. A version of this chapter was previously published in *Social Problems* (2020).

In Chapter 5, I analyze how Tavern on Camac, the gay piano bar, is interactionally accomplished each night as a distinctly gay “interaction mesh” through interactions between the pianists, the soloists, and other bar patrons. I argue that these interactions foster feelings of gay community as well as a gay sensibility that queer academics have puzzled and fixated over (e.g. Haplerin 2012).

What unites these chapters is a focus on the social construction of sexual reality—how situations and spaces are interpreted as rooted in sexuality, and how a sexual definition of the situation is fostered and negotiated. These are everyday processes that we all engage in, whether we explicitly think about it or not. We see these as social problems in contexts such as sexual harassment in the workplace and in public. The constructs of “gayborhoods” and “gay bars” are ideal contexts to identify and explain the interactional mechanisms through which we conceive of and manage the “sexual” in our social worlds. This is because, unlike other settings, club-goers actively grapple with

gender and sexuality in myriad ways. Due to heteronormativity's hold on most public spaces and institutional contexts, these sense-making processes are often implicit and taken for granted. I conclude the dissertation with further discussion of how lessons from the Gayborhood can be applied and explained far beyond its borders.

## CHAPTER 2: FLUCTUATING MEMBERSHIP BOUNDARIES

### Overview

How are boundaries between sexual identities constructed and maintained through interaction? I draw on ethnographic observation in Philadelphia gay bars popular among heterosexual patrons and supplemental interviews with young gay-identifying club-goers to illuminate how men make situational claims to gay space by drawing distinctions between who “belongs” in gay bars and who does not through interaction.

Conceptualizing gay space as a collectively accomplished “mesh” of particular interaction rituals (Collins 2004), I find that men activated membership boundaries when presumably straight women’s nightlife rituals were perceived to threaten the continued production of gay space by “straightening” it. Men did not enact boundaries when straight women energized men’s rituals with positive emotional energy (Collins 2004) and contributed to a bar’s collective “gay” feeling. Broadly, these findings suggest that the generation of shared emotions across groups in spaces with contested meaning or function helps determine the salience of boundaries.

## Introduction

The acceptability of straight patrons frequenting gay bars, for bachelorette parties or otherwise, is a contested issue in gay communities and gay media (Ghaziani 2014b; Moon 1995; Orne 2017). Furthermore, the mass shooting at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016—the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history at the time—has reinvigorated public interest in this issue. Some gay advocates call for gay-only social spaces, while others emphasize inclusivity and see bars and restaurants as suitable for anyone regardless of their sexual preference. Tensions around who “can” or “should” frequent gay spaces reflect how the distinctions gay individuals make to establish who is “like us” and who is not are contextual and variable (Moon 1995). Sexual identities are socially constructed across time, place, space, and even an individual’s life course (Brown-Saracino 2018; Gray 2009; Hutson 2010; Kazyak 2012; Rust 1993). The importance individuals place on their sexual preferences is more varied today than in the past (Brekhus 2003; Brown-Saracino 2011). Popular media and scholarship have suggested that we now live in a “post-gay” society, where sexual identities are of less importance to individuals and similarities between sexual identities are privileged over differences (Ghaziani 2011; Seidman 2002). The increased cultural acceptance of sexual minorities and the decreased centrality of sexual identity on conceptions of the self have contributed to changes in historically gay spaces. Demographically, heterosexuals are integrating into gay neighborhoods, and vice versa in part due to gentrification (Ghaziani 2014b). Despite these trends, gay spaces have continued—if uneven—physical and symbolic importance for sexual minorities (Garcia et al. 2015; Greene 2014).

While research on contemporary sexual identities helps to identify why there are debates regarding gay space today, this literature tends to focus on “the *properties* of boundaries such as permeability, salience, durability, and visibility,” (Lamont and

Molnar 2002:186) which cannot fully explain how tensions of belonging in gay spaces tend to be produced, sustained, and mitigated through interactions between groups and individuals across sexual identity categories. Indeed, the discourse surrounding the acceptability of straight patrons in gay spaces often has to do with how straight patrons interact with gay patrons and how these interactions shape the intangible feel of gay space. The salience of sexual identities for individuals, for example, is related to but distinct from how individuals actively negotiate and draw boundaries between their own and others' sexualities in different contexts. In this paper, I investigate why, in one moment, I routinely observed gay patrons in Philadelphia gay bars envelop perceived-straight women<sup>2</sup> into their nightlife rituals of drinking, chatting, and dancing, while in the next moment, those men claimed these women did not belong in the bar or made blanket statements about how straight people should not be at gay bars. In doing so, I attend to the boundary processes, or the "mechanisms associated with the activation, maintenance, transposition or the... dissolution of boundaries" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:187), that operate on-the-ground in gay spaces that attract a diverse range of patrons in a "post-gay" era.

I illuminate how gay patrons, in part, activated membership boundaries (by making a gay-identity-based claim to space) in rituals with straight women vis-à-vis the perceived effects straight women's rituals had on the feel of gay space. Certain collective rituals among straight patrons threatened the production of gay space (the *straightening* of gay space), and perhaps most troublingly to gay patrons, make visible that gay space is ephemeral and must be continually accomplished by the work of gay (and some straight) patrons. I use interaction ritual theory (Collins 2004), which privileges individuals'

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<sup>2</sup> Described in the methods section, my use of sexual identity labels are based on whom men in the gay bars situationally labeled as "gay" or "straight."

motivations for positive social interactions as informing, at the micro-level, group boundaries, to understand moments when boundaries between gay and straight patrons were overcome and men did not make sexual-identity-based claims to gay space. Men did not activate boundaries when women helped generate positive emotional energy (Collins 2004), or intensely shared emotions that Durkheim (1995) labeled collective effervescence, in gay space alongside men. Broadly, these findings contribute to a diverse literature on the construction and maintenance of symbolic boundaries (Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007) by suggesting that the generation of shared emotions across groups is a mechanism of boundary-making. Boundaries are either heightened or deemphasized between groups when members experience highly shared or divergent emotions in social interactions across contexts. This work has implications for scholars of sexualities, symbolic interaction, urban/community sociology, and social movements who are interested in how and when diverse groups come together (and when they do not) in public spaces with contested functions or meanings.

### **Symbolic Boundaries around Sexual Identity**

Debates regarding whether straight patrons should be allowed into gay bars stem, in part, from the contextual and increasingly varied nature of symbolic boundaries between sexual identities and what these boundaries mean to gay and straight people as they socialize in public spaces. Symbolic boundaries are the cognitive distinctions individuals make to differentiate between different types of people or social groups, demarcating who is “like us” and who is “different from us” (Lamont and Molnár 2002). On the ground, these issues are negotiated through boundary processes, as gay and straight individuals and groups interactionally engage in boundary work to establish and maintain boundaries in situated contexts (Pachucki et al. 2007). In this section, I outline

the historical and contemporary literature on the dynamic nature of sexual identity boundaries and how these boundaries intersect with the creation and maintenance of gay spaces.

Historians illuminate how sexual identity boundaries were created in urban public spaces. For example, Chauncey (1994) shows that pre-World War II New York had an active and visible gay subculture that was created in working-class saloons and cabarets (as well as restaurants, city streets, beaches, parks, and restrooms) alongside heterosexuals. Chauncey argues that an urban gay culture was able to develop in working-class public spaces due, in part, to the fact that symbolic boundaries between sexual identities in working-class communities were not yet concretized. In a social history of New York and Chicago nightlife, Heap (2009) argues that it was also partially through the practice of urban, middle-class white men and women “slumming” (or touring) drag balls, queer speakeasies, and cabarets in the 1920s that the contemporary hetero-/homosexuality dichotomy emerged as meaningful social categories. These scenes of inter-group sociality allowed for gay men and lesbians to establish communities in opposition to heterosexual slummers, as well as for slummers to acutely distinguish themselves from homosexual deviants. Leading up to and after the Stonewall riots in 1969, boundaries between heterosexuals and homosexuals in public spaces were bright given homosexuality’s illegality (Armstrong and Cragg 2006; Humphreys 1975). Gay bars were spaces where gays could express their sexuality semi-publicly, though bars were subject to police raids and bars consequently “[had] a brief life expectancy” (Achilles 1998:182). During this time, activists promoted a strong “us versus them” ideology around collective identity (Armstrong 2002). Since the 1990s, however, reducing boundaries between gay and straight has marked gay activism and gay identity in what some scholars and popular media have coined the “post-gay ” or “post-closet” era



(Dean 2014; Ghaziani, 2011; Seidman 2003). In this era, gay activism employs an inclusive discourse (“We’re just like you”) and has campaigned for rights such as same-sex marriage rather than for exclusionary causes like the need for public bathhouses and porn theaters (Delany 1999; Ghaziani 2011). Contemporary LGBT activist groups work to include heterosexual “allies” and more marginalized sexual identities in their organizations (Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno 2018).

Scholars also suggest that sexual identity boundaries are shifting as younger sexual minorities, having grown up in a generally more accepting climate toward homosexuality, view their sexuality as less important to their sense of selves compared to older gays and lesbians (Ghaziani 2011, 2014b; Savin-Williams 2009). Dean (2014) argues that these changes have also affected the boundary-work of heterosexuals, who no longer have to denounce or distance themselves from gay individuals, gay culture or spaces in order to maintain a heterosexual identity. Other research, however, shows that these trends are not uniform across sexual minority populations. Geographic region, gender, class, and race all shape how important sexual identity labels are for individuals (e.g. Brekhus 2003; Brown-Saracino 2018; Gray 2009; Kazyak 2011). For example, Pfeffer’s (2014) interview study of cis women with trans men partners highlights how an individual’s perceived sexual identity, especially for individuals at the margins of gender boundaries, continue to matter greatly for being perceived as members of queer (and non-queer) communities. Furthermore, survey research finds that the majority of non-straight adolescents continue to identify with sexual identity labels such as gay and lesbian (Russell, Clarke, and Clary 2009). Additionally, research on friendship patterns also problematizes claims that “post-gay” identities are predominant among sexual minorities. While gay men and straight women are often friends and cross-orientation

friendships among youth are increasing (Ueno and Gentile 2015), tensions still arise between these groups around the sincerity of these ties (Moon, 1995).

At the community level, the emergence of gay ghettos in cities helped to spur gay collective identity (Chauncey 1994; Levine 1998), and sexual identity boundaries continue to be negotiated in and through gay neighborhoods that are undergoing demographic and cultural change. As a case of gentrifying space experiencing membership conflicts (cf. Brown-Saracino 2016; Gans 1982), historic gay districts are experiencing tensions between LGBT and straight populations as these spaces become rebranded as trendy commercial areas (Ghaziani, 2014b; Orne, 2017). Efforts to keep a neighborhood culturally gay through commemoration rituals and institutional anchors are a highly visible mechanism to maintain sexual identity boundaries (Ghaziani, 2014a). At the individual level, Greene (2014) shows that gay individuals who do not live in the gay districts of DC and Chicago still see themselves as symbolic or “vicarious citizens” of these neighborhoods given their sexual identity, and work to protect these neighborhoods from changing in character. While the perceived need for segregated safe spaces among queer individuals may be waning (Ghaziani, 2014b; Brown-Saracino, 2011), sexual minorities still experience verbal harassment and physical violence in public spaces (Buttler 2014; Garcia et al. 2015; Huebner, Rebhook, and Kegeles 2004). Sexual identity boundaries continue to be beneficial for sexual minorities (Garcia et al. 2015; Hunter 2010). For example, in an ethnographic study of a black nightclub in Chicago, Hunter (2010) argues that the nightclub serves as an important space for black gay men to socialize and accrue social capital. This literature suggests that, while the symbolic boundaries around sexual identity are changing and in some ways blurring, these boundaries continue to be socially consequential and meaningful.

## **Intragroup versus Intergroup Boundaries**

This paper is primarily concerned with how gay men constructed, maintained, and de-emphasized sexual identity boundaries (intergroup boundaries) situationally in gay space. Gender, race, and class shaped these boundaries. Gay patrons also engaged in racialized and classed boundary work to make intra-group distinctions between themselves and other gay club-goers (intra-group boundaries). Intra-group boundaries created and maintained stratification systems among gay patrons along the lines of desirability and sociability while not necessarily probematizing the boundaries of the group itself (members of the LGBTQ community) (cf. Green 2008). This was especially clear when I asked men to compare Woody's and iCandy, which was more racially and economically diverse than Woody's. In an informal interview at Woody's, a young Persian gay club-goer described iCandy as "so ghetto," explaining he would not go there. One black patron expressed how "no one was interested in him" at Woody's while at iCandy he received more attention from men. Issues of racism in Gayborhood nightlife have received prominent attention in the local media (Owens 2015); after I conducted my fieldwork iCandy became embroiled in racial controversy, spawning boycotts of the club.

Boundaries around whom gay men desired or with whom they wanted to socialize did not preclude the group-bounded notion of *belonging*, or the "right" to be in gay space. I never heard in interviews or observations gay club-goers express that any members of the gay community by race, class, or gender did not belong in the bars. On the other hand, intergroup, or membership, boundaries took the strongly exclusionary tenor of who should and should not be in gay space. When probed in interviews and from observations, gay club-goers seemingly privileged sexual identity over gender in determining who belongs in gay space; the discourse was most broadly between "gay"

versus “straight” patrons without reference to gender. However, (racialized and classed) gender was the most visible fault line in interactions for scrutinizing membership boundaries because patrons’ genders tended to serve as proxies for sexual identities. I discuss these patterns in the following section on how patrons, and myself as a fieldworker, ascertained others’ sexual identities.

### **Who’s Straight?**

Throughout this paper, I refer to young, predominately white women who gay patrons perceived to be straight. It is probable that not all of the women I observed identify as straight. For the sake of understanding boundary processes in the bars, I describe these women as “perceived-straight” because women’s self-identified sexual identities rarely factored into whether gay patrons felt that a particular woman was intruding in gay space in the moment. Rather, men activated membership boundaries around women whom they “read” or interpreted as straight. Gay men often felt confident that they could discern who was gay and who was straight in the bar, utilizing sexual aesthetics (Bridges, 2014)—what many patrons called their “gaydar”—to code women and men as straight versus gay largely based on cultural stereotypes of looks and affect. For instance, after a gay patron told me he could “always spot the straight guys” at Woody’s, I asked how he could tell. He nodded toward a young white guy to my right who had a stern look on his face while waiting to get served at the bar. “You make eye contact with them and they’re like,” he stopped speaking and feigned disgust, turning his head downward and to the side, scrunching up his face. I immediately thought that this was not a great indicator of straightness; I had seen gay men scoff at other men’s glances many times in the bars. I then asked, “So can you tell which girls are straight?” He smiled and said, “All of them.” He shook his head playfully and continued, “I mean, you can just

tell... straight girls look like straight girls, like them--” he nodded toward two young white women wearing tight black cocktail dresses and high heels. Seemingly as an afterthought he added, “And lesbians, you know, look like lesbians.” This interaction illuminates two patterns of how gay men determined others’ sexual identities and exposes how broader discourse around whether straight patrons can or should frequent gay spaces is a strongly gendered one. First, men’s sexual identities were rarely questioned; men were generally considered gay until proven otherwise through interaction. Men were typically labeled as straight only when they engaged in visible heterosexual rituals like kissing women. This rendered straight men (as well as bisexual men) mostly unacknowledged and unproblematized in gay space. I rarely heard gay patrons complain about straight men in the bars. Second, while this patron suggested that all women in the bar were straight in jest, he exposed how men almost always assumed women were straight unless women presented as particularly masculine with cropped hair or baggy clothes, or if they were kissing or engaging in other intimate rituals with women. This contributes to the invisibility, misrecognition, and deprivileging of queer women in public spaces (Hutson, 2010; Pfeffer, 2014). Thus, women’s sexual identities were far more likely to be scrutinized than men’s, and women bore the brunt of men’s situational frustrations about the increasingly mixed-orientation crowds in these bars.

Race and class also shaped who was considered straight at the bar. Women had to be noticed by gay men to be labeled a sexual identity in the first place, and while I observed situations involving non-white women, these women drew less scrutiny from white (and non-white) gay patrons about their acceptability in these spaces. Indeed, the straight women who men described as coming into gay space and the perceived-straight women who men usually pointed out in the bars were young, white, and—from talking

informally to these women—often college or graduate students. This speaks to the unequal visibility of women in public spaces by race, as well as stereotypes concerning entitled class-privileged white women as pushy and domineering.

Given the contextual nature of men's assessments of sexual identities, as suggested in the field note above, I did not always agree with who men considered gay and straight in the bar. This is, in part, because I spent far more time observing particular individuals as they socialized in and moved through gay space than other patrons both within the context of one night as well as across months as a regular at these bars. Furthermore, when I informally interviewed patrons in the bars, most self-disclosed their sexual identity in our conversations. Sometimes I directly asked patrons depending on our rapport in the moment. However, I also had to infer patrons' sexual identities based on sexual aesthetics and their behaviors while in the bars (e.g. who they flirted with, who they kissed). Thus, I treat men's (as well as my own) assessments of others' sexual identities as necessarily partial and situational. This does not mean these assessments are meaningless; on the contrary, they are essential in understanding the inherently muddled process of how individuals draw symbolic lines between sexual identity categories *in situ* (cf. Pfeffer 2014).

### **Insider/Outsider Boundaries Must be Activated**

Reflective of broader demographic shifts in U.S. gay neighborhoods (Ghaziani, 2014b), gay patrons noticed and were ambivalent about the increased straight presence in the bars<sup>5</sup>. However, gay patrons only situationally problematized straight women as outsiders in gay space. Like the majority of interviewees, Mateo, a loquacious white 21-year-old, did not categorically oppose straight individuals going to gay bars. He even

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewees who had been going out to bars in the Gayborhood for several years felt that the number of straight patrons going to gay bars drastically increased in the last two or three years. However, these exact bars were presumably straightening earlier than this (e.g. Grazian 2008).

framed their presence positively; he understood why straight patrons, as fellow energy-seekers, were drawn to the intensity and excitement of gay bars: “It’s nice in a certain way... because being gay is much more accepted... So now I think there’s more and more straight people going to gay bars not because they are curious in any way, but because gay bars are just fucking better. Straight clubs are so fucking boring.” Related to the varied importance being gay has on gay men’s sense of selves today (Brekhus 2003), Mateo suggested that straight patrons do not have to contend with what attending a gay bar might mean for their own sexual identity. A gay bar can simply be more fun than its ‘straight’ counterparts. I found that this post-gay logic, however, does not play out on the ground because gay bars are collectively accomplished. Straight patrons could alter the “feel” of gay space depending on their numbers and the content of their nightlife rituals, which fundamentally affected gay men’s experiences and emotions in the bars.

Describing the last time he went out to the Gayborhood a week prior to the interview, Mateo exposed this tension between a post-gay theoretical stance toward gay space and his perceptions of the reality: “I was so shocked by the crowd because it turned pretty much into a straight club and there was like barely any gay people, or if they were there, they looked disoriented and out of place. It was really strange... All of these drunk white girls... It was like a really weird environment.” Gay men activated membership boundaries through specific types of situations with perceived-straight women that altered gay space’s feel and gay patrons’ place in it, often expressing that the straight crowd was “taking over,” and thereby straightening, the bars.

#### *When Men Activated Boundaries*

While men did not explicitly articulate how individuals should act in gay space, they established gay bars’ “membership expectations” in contradistinction to how

presumably straight women acted in them. In our formal interview, Manuel, a 31-year-old Latino patron, echoed many men I spoke to and observed as he cited various situations involving women patrons (whom he, along with many of my informants, referred to as “girls”) that perturbed him:

A lot of girls coming in are not really, um, being respectful. They’re kind of rude. They think that just because they’re there, they’ll get served, and they’re very pushy about things... They’re mostly drunk and they’re taking up the space... *I don’t want you in my space; I don’t want you around me...* [emphasis added]. They’re grabby. They wanna hug you, and they’re like, “Oh you’re so cute, why are they all so cute? Why do you act like this?”

The bodily routines of nightlife situations, such as how patrons waited in lines, populated a dance floor, or touched other patrons, became symbolic battlegrounds for who belonged in gay space.

### *Straightening Rituals*

Men activated boundaries between themselves and perceived-straight women who came to the bar in service of carrying out their own, non-gay rituals, or activities that men felt did not have to occur in a gay bar such as bachelorette parties or heterosexual displays of affection. For example, a gay male college student grimaced after passing a young man and woman kissing against a brick wall in Woody’s, and asked me, “Why would straight people come *here*?” These rituals usually did not include gay patrons and altered the look and feel of gay space by “straightening” the space’s meso-level mesh of interactions. In the eyes of gay patrons, these non-gay rituals gradually turned the bar into a heteronormative space or sexual field (c.f. Green 2008).

Women who participated in their own non-gay rituals were typically at the bar for bachelorette or birthday parties. Bachelorette parties in particular employed visibly



distinct symbols (sashes, matching outfits, crowns, Mardi Gras beads, plastic sunglasses, penis balloons, blow-up sex dolls) in their rituals and had a distinct mutual focus of attention (the bride-to-be, typically wearing a short veil). These rituals signaled to gay patrons that these women were visitors to gay space. In some instances, women in bachelorette parties substituted their own festive objects (such as cups and straws) for the bars' routine ones. A bachelorette party at iCandy brought their own plastic straws in the shape of penises, gingerly discarding the bar's plastic straws on the counter for the bartender to clean up. This visually heightened the social distance between themselves and other patrons. Other behaviors, like photo taking, effectively rendered women as tourists in gay space. While patrons—gay or straight—often took photos of themselves with their friends, on several occasions I observed women take photos of other patrons without their permission or knowledge. For example, one night at iCandy I observed a short white woman in front of me record a video on her iPhone of an older, gaunt black man in a red tracksuit as he danced by the bar. He did not seem to notice her recording him. She posted the short clip to her "Snap Story" on the mobile application Snapchat<sup>6</sup>.

Gay men seemed discouraged, withdrawn, or emotionally drained at the sight of straight rituals. One warm September night at Woody's, around 10pm, two young men, Kevin and Alex, were huddled together by the doors to the outdoor patio. I went over to them, their arms crossed and their drinks hovering by their mouths while surveying the patrons from afar. They were talking about the number of perceived-straight patrons in the bar. "There are so many *breeders*<sup>7</sup> here," Kevin said sardonically, looking out at the crowd. I mirrored his vantage point. The bar wasn't terribly crowded; there were a

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<sup>6</sup> Snapchat is a mobile phone application that allows users to send self-destructing photos and videos to other users. When someone posts to their "Story," all users on their contact list can see the content for 24 hours.

<sup>7</sup> Derogatory gay slang for 'heterosexuals.' Straight couples, unlike their gay counterparts, are more easily able to procreate (breed).

couple mixed gender groups with visible props (one group of perceived-straight men and women were wearing bright pink plastic sunglasses), a few perceived-gay men, and at least three women wearing short white veils in discrete clusters with their friends. “I have never seen so many straight people here in my life,” Alex sighed, taking a sip of his drink.

Even when young gay men tempered strong reactions toward straight women by employing a post-gay discourse of inclusion (c.f. Ghaziani 2011), the presence of straight rituals deflated gay men’s own rituals of dancing and socializing with other gay patrons. For example, on a busy night at Woody’s four women in a bachelorette party tried to squeeze past James (a 23-year-old white patron) and me, causing us to stop swaying to the music as we yielded space for them. Standing still and eyeing them as they walked toward the bathroom, he remarked: “There have been so many bachelorette parties lately.” I replied, “How do you feel about them being here?” He assumed a powerless posture by lifting his shoulders helplessly as if to say, “What can you do?”: “Eh,” he said. “It was awkward before we could get married and it was like, ‘Okay, you’re coming here and we can’t legally do that.’ But now... I don’t know. I guess we should be inclusive.”

In order to circumvent straight rituals, a number of men I spoke to and observed *excluded themselves* from certain gay spaces at certain times. T.J, an early 30s black patron, said that he rarely goes to Woody’s anymore because he feels “like a stranger in [his] own home.” Woody’s was typically half full before midnight, with many groups of women ranging from early 20s to middle aged and some men. After midnight, the bar’s demographics transitioned to being predominately gay men. I ran into Ethan, a mid-20s black gay man in a fitted blue tank top, outside of Woody’s alone around 12:15am who corroborated my observations that men were purposefully avoiding Woody’s until later in the night. When I asked him if he was meeting friends at the bar, he said, “They’re

gonna come around 1[a.m.], because Woody's is so full of chicks--of straight girls--before that. One is the new 12." By spatially excluding themselves from situations in which straight rituals visibly dominated gay space, men activated boundaries, conceding gay space to perceived-straight patrons.

### *Interactional Violations*

While gay men often reacted negatively to straight rituals because of how they impinged on the collective accomplishment of gay space, perceived-straight women who committed interactional violations threatened individual men's identities and status in gay bars. Women violated men's status in gay space and disrespected their sexual identity by touching gay patrons without their permission, by bumping into men drunkenly, and by talking to gay patrons in an objectifying manner (c.f. Moon 1995). It is important to note that most participants in these spaces were imbibing alcohol and, to varying degrees, intoxicated. This is not a story of drunken straight patrons versus sober gay ones. Based on my observations, perceived-straight women were not more or less intoxicated than other club-goers. However, gay men uniquely framed perceived-straight women's drunken behavior as disrespectful. Men also certainly faced penalties for drunken behavior; interviewees indicated that intoxicated men were a sexual "turn off." However, drunken behavior did not exclude gay men from belonging in the bars as it often did for women.

Men activated boundaries when they felt that women were slumming, voyeuristically touring, or going on "safari" (c.f. Orne 2017) in gay bars through interactions with them. A mid-20s Asian American patron at Woody's explained how straight women were particularly bothersome to him in the bars because of how they exoticize the space and its patrons: "I lived in L.A. for four years where I'd go to [a gay

bar in West Hollywood], and there'd be all these straight girls there being like,"--he inflected his tone into a high, nasally pitch and framed his face with his hands--"Oh my God! We're at [a gay bar]!' and they'd be dancing and making all the gays uncomfortable." Rather than participants in a collective, mixed-orientation nightlife ritual, men raised their voices as they described feeling like props for women's distinct rituals:

"I see them looking at us like we're in a fishbowl... We're not objects of affection. We're people!" [Manuel, 31 years old, interview]

"When a group of girls comes to a gay bar, they feel like they are going to experience this weird, kinky underground display of hot men and that's not really reality... I'm not an exhibit in a museum or an animal in a zoo!" [Cody, 25 years old, interview]

Men suggested that women who treated them like objects in gay space were not honoring their general rights in public space (such as having one's personal space respected) due to their sexual identity. Cody described being groped by a girl at Woody's: "...[A] couple months ago, there was four or five [girls] by the bar and I was trying to pass by a tight corner and she grabs my nuts and tries to give me a blow-pop [lollipop], [as if] those two things go together!" He explained that women regularly touched or commented on his body at the bars, which frustrated him: "I'll just be with my group of friends and two or three girls might come up and be like, 'Oh my God, you're so hot' or something really stupid and basic, and throw themselves on either me or my friend like I wanted that the whole time and that happens pretty frequently..." I observed this dynamic in the bar. While men generally refrained from touching strangers' arms, shoulders, backs, and genitals unless on the dark dance floor, I routinely saw women touching parts of men's

bodies as they passed. Through these interactions, women othered gay men, reducing them to an objectified sexual identity (Schwalbe et al. 2000).<sup>8</sup> Women groping men were disorientating breaches of conduct. One night in July, I was sardined with two friends between sweaty strangers on the dance floor at Woody's when a young woman next to me turned slightly and grabbed my genitals. I gasped, smacking her hand away forcefully by reflex. I stopped dancing and looked over at her, angry and embarrassed. She continued dancing with her friends. I left the dance floor entirely.

Violations did not have to be as intentional as groping; incidental interactions such as women bumping into men were also interpreted as disrespectful. When groups of men noticed or experienced violations, they often sharply focused their attention on these women as they bemoaned their presence in the bars, growing angrier and more annoyed as they discussed it. These were palpable moments of collective boundary activation. For example, I was standing with a group of white men in their mid-20s at Woody's' daylong block party during OutFest, when an intoxicated young perceived-straight woman bumped into Greg who lost his balance and nearly fell. He briefly looked over his shoulder at the woman and grimaced. He was perturbed, and she became the group's object of attention. They watched as she tried to entice men standing on the side of the block party to join her to dance. She pivoted slowly while holding out her hand to men who either ignored the gesture or shook their head side-to-side to convey, "No thanks." She grazed the top of one man's head whose back was to her with her hand. Greg and his friends started to grumble about how there were too many women at the

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that while I did not observe instances of men inappropriately touching women in the bars, others have (Akili 2012). Popular and scholarly discussions regarding gay men's sexism and inappropriate conduct towards women in non-gay and gay spaces dovetail with the gendered patterns of touching I observed by bringing attention to the ways in which sexuality (e.g. a mutually understood lack of sexual interest stemming from interactants' sexual identities) organizes how we interpret situations and conduct ourselves with others. I address this theoretical issue in greater detail in Chapter 3.

event. Then, as the DJ started to play the opening snare drum beat of Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)", Greg rolled his eyes and said, "I can't support this song because Woody's needs a girl cap, honestly." A few of the other men nodded their heads. Once the chorus came on, Greg and his friend jumped up and down, chanting with revised lyrics, "Who run the world?—Gays! Who run the world—Gays!" To symbolically reclaim the block party as a "gay" block party, Greg and his friend drew a strong, exclusionary boundary between gay men and virtually all other sexual identity groups. By interpreting "girls" as a metonym for "straight girls" and "gay" for "gay men," they rendered invisible the reality that queer women *and* straight men may also occupy gay space. This reflects the ways in which membership boundaries were activated along restrictive gender and sexual identity lines.

Men also activated boundaries in situations that threatened men's membership in the bar, sometimes quite literally. These situations typically involved women cutting men in lines, whether for the bathroom, the bar, or to gain entrance to the club. For example, I observed a particularly conflict-laden interaction when a young man immediately behind me in a long, standstill line at Woody's on Halloween night started to argue with three young women over whether they were cutting him in line. The bar was at capacity and could not legally allow patrons in without other patrons leaving. By trying to cut him in line, the women were trying to get into the bar before, or even at the expense of, his entry. The women laughed off his accusation, moving from his left to behind him in line. A few moments later, however, he raised his voice and said, "Don't put your fingers on me." The two guys I was with eyeballed each other but continued to face forward, while I rotated 90 degrees. The guy behind me looked up from his phone as he said this. He did not fully turn around or look directly at the girls. "I didn't put my fingers *in* you!" one of the girls exclaimed in response, presumably alluding to anal

penetration. In doing so, she brought the man's sexuality to the fore. He then said that one of them was clearly touching him and repeated that they need to stop. They continued to giggle and ignore him, which he responded to by rolling his eyes and growing visibly perturbed. Although the young man was standing in line alone, palpably angry, he evoked an imagined community to defend his claim to gay space by then yelling, "You aren't supposed to be in here! We don't want you in here." The girls responded by laughing, refusing to engage in the confrontation. Angrily, he said through his teeth, "*We* don't want you in here anyway [emphasis added]." He muttered this to himself again as he began to furiously tap his phone's screen. He did not interact with the girls after this. Both groups, after another half hour or so, got into Woody's.

#### *When Men Did Not Activate Boundaries*

Men did not always exclude perceived-straight women from belonging in gay space; boundaries fluctuated across situations. Interaction ritual theory's (Collins 2004) proposition that positive emotions generated in interactions creates situational solidarity among interactants helps to explain moments in the bars when patrons came together despite gender/sexuality differences. Sexual identity boundaries were overcome when women engaged in rituals alongside men to accomplish gay space. This was clear when women accompanied men out and contributed a great deal to having fun at the bar. All of my interviewees reported bringing female friends to gay bars. Some men said they liked Woody's in particular because it had a diverse crowd by sexual orientation. James remarked: "One thing I like about Woody's is that it's an easy place to take my non-gay friends. I don't like going out to gay places that exclude my straight friends because half my friends are straight." The ability to bring straight friends to the bar adds to James's enjoyment of the night. Furthermore, he rejected the notion that gay bars must consist

entirely of gay male participants to be a gay bar: “Sometimes there are gay bars, not so much in Philly but I’ve seen this... [where they] really just want guys, guys, guys, guys ‘cause it’s all about sex, sex, sex, sex, [and] not about who can contribute to the *net good time*. [emphasis added]” By privileging the “net good time,” which anyone can theoretically contribute to, over the bar’s demographics, he suggests that gay space as enjoyable/fun for gay people is more important than a space filled exclusively with gay men.

Straight patrons can contribute emotional energy to the space, a a meso-level mesh of many interaction rituals happening at once, in the spirit of “having a good time,” or achieving collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995)—“the net good time”—alongside gay patrons. This was evident in how interviewees highlighted how fun and energetic their female friends were. Men described these women as “really fun, super athletic, and gorgeous,” “a total extrovert,” and even “mean, so naturally all the gays love her.” Going out with them tended to produce a lot of laughter, and some interviewees suggested that going out with women friends was more fun than going out with gay friends. Viet, a 23-year-old Asian American patron, fondly described one of his straight women friends as “crazy” in contrast to his “quiet” gay friends: “Say you were going out with your gay friend who is really quiet, you know it’s going to be a quiet night and you’re not going to dance a lot, and if you go out with someone crazy... there’ll be lots of dancing and drinking.”

“Lots of dancing and drinking” among gay men and women friends often generated collective effervescence in gay space. I frequently observed men and women playfully grinding on each other in the bars, which gave the pair a visible rush of energy and excitement. One night I saw two such pairs nearly side-by-side who typified this type of interaction ritual on the dance floor at Woody’s. The women stood behind their guy



friends, holding onto their hips and thrusting their crotches forward. One of the guys gyrated his hips as his friend put her hand on his lower back and simulated pushing him to the ground forcefully. He bent forward all the way to the floor at his waist. He whipped his head back and forth as if he had long hair while he stood back up. Physical entrainment generated positive feelings as the woman opened her mouth widely and let out a cackle to the ceiling. The guy started laughing as well.

Women strangers could also help increase men's emotional energy in interaction. For example, around 11 pm one August night at Woody's I observed a young white gay guy and his two women friends begin to energetically play a game of limbo using one of the women's legs as the limbo stick. The makeshift game generated collective effervescence among the friends, with the triad laughing, clapping, and shouting "Yaaaaaas!" each time one ducked under their friend's leg. Other patrons near them took notice and gravitated towards them. The triad became the focus of attention for these patrons, who gathered in a half-circle around them. The two women started twerking<sup>9</sup> in synchronized motion, and the crowd cheered. Now dancing for a small audience, the triad generated a brief spike in emotional energy for those around them. A gay onlooker verbally affirmed the group's membership in the bar by shouting out, "You guys are awesome!" Positive emotional energy can be infectious, and in this instance bolstered a sense of solidarity between gay and straight patrons. By creating a brief and contained spectacle in the back of the bar, this friend group was able to add to other patrons' good time, and decrease the social distance among patrons.

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<sup>9</sup> A dancing style associated with hip-hop, where the dancer squats or bends over, and thrusts or shakes their butt. I frequently saw patrons, regardless of race or perceived sexual identity, twerking on the dance floors. I also frequently heard patrons use the phrase, "Yas" and other terms that originated in racial-minority queer spaces. While this paper largely concerns instances of perceived-straight patrons appropriating gay culture, space, and bodies, these patterns reflect another important issue regarding gay culture's appropriation of black and other racial-minority cultures.

In another situation, I observed a young, white perceived-straight woman on a half-empty dance floor at iCandy in February engage in an engrossing dancing ritual with Nic, a 25-year-old Latino patron. Their interaction ritual created collective effervescence among the dyad as well as for other patrons around them. Not only was this young woman enveloped into gay space for adding energy to men's rituals, she prevented a gay ritual from falling flat in the first place. That night, Nic, his friend Jason, and I were swaying on the dance floor by a long platform. The dance floor was sparsely populated with mellow and constrained looking patrons, its neon strobe lights and blaring dance music incongruent with the low-energy club-goers. As a site for an engrossing ritual and "letting go," the dance floor was failing. Men seemed self-conscious, hyperaware of their own bodies and those of others. Jason leaned into my ear and pointed at the mirrors lining the floor and said, "The mirror definitely adds another dimension. Like, what the fuck am I doing?" Across the floor, several triads of young men surveyed the crowd while stepping back and forth. Two young men and a young woman were dancing on the platform above us. Nic was lazily swaying his hips while leaning slightly against the platform when the woman moved behind him, shimmying her shoulders quickly to the beat of the music. She put her hands on Nic's shoulders; he turned around and looked up at her. She beamed down at him, and he smiled and laughed in response. He then turned back around and swayed his hips faster and faster until he was grinding against the platform, her hands still on his shoulders, and popping his butt up and down. The two guys she was with moved closer and started dancing on the platform. Jason began rolling his shoulders to the music's fast beat. Once a small mass of dancers, anchored by Nic and the woman, was established, others on the dance floor gravitated toward us and danced among themselves. Initiated by the emotional and physical efforts of this presumably straight female patron, the crowd was able to come

together and become rhythmically entrained despite the obstacles of the dance floor being half-empty and the low energy of the patrons. Aided by a dropping beat in a heavily remixed Rihanna song, the crowd achieved collective effervescence, throwing their hands to the ceiling and jumping up and down. Nic and the woman jumped in unison while she yelled, “Yeahhhh! Yeahhh!” They did not dance together for more than a few minutes, but they gregariously hugged before she walked away.

## **Conclusion**

Urban and cultural sociologists have documented that LGBT individuals are ambivalent about the changing demographics of gay spaces (Ghaziani 2014b; Greene 2014; Orne 2017). The findings I present here extend this literature through ethnographic observation by interrogating how gay and straight patrons navigate and interact in these contested spaces moment-to-moment. While gay patrons often brought women friends to gay bars and said in interviews that gay bars should accommodate all kinds of patrons, young gay men were unevenly inclusive of straight women patrons in Philadelphia’s most popular gay bars *in situ*. This tension between inclusion/exclusion is explained, in part, on the varying emotional effects perceived-straight women’s rituals and interactions had on men and gay space more broadly. By conceptualizing gay space as a meso-level mesh of concurrent rituals occurring in the same physical space (Collins 2004), I have illuminated how a gay bar’s “gayness” is sensitive to the composition and content of its patrons’ rituals. Men activated claims to gay space in situations when they perceived women to be threatening the “gayness” of the bar by straightening the bar’s demographics, rituals, and consequent tone of the space. As Orne (2017), in a vivid ethnographic account of Chicago’s Boystown neighborhood, writes, “[If] enough straight people are in attendance, even if they are the most queer friendly and have no interest in

going on safari... [t]he space begins to look like straight sexual fields, with *their* sexual rituals, more than a queer space” [emphasis in original] (28). Groups of women in the bar, such as bachelorette parties, were often de facto excluded because their non-gay rituals were too visually and spatially distinct from the nightlife rituals in which gay patrons engaged. Men also activated boundaries through interactions with perceived-straight women that violated their personal space, identity, and status in gay space. In contrast, some perceived-straight women buttressed the “gayness” of gay space by participating in or aiding men’s rituals of dancing and socializing by increasing individuals’ and groups’ positive emotional energy (Collins 2004). While women friends of gay men were often the ones engaging in individual men’s rituals in the bars, women strangers who energized (or even help to save, as I observed on the dance floor at iCandy) gay rituals were also situationally enveloped into gay space as well. Of course, there were many factors that went into whether men’s gay rituals succeeded or not beyond women’s behavior in the bars—how busy the bars were, the type of music the DJ was playing, the time of night, etc. However, men placed great symbolic weight on women’s presence (and as I discuss in the methods section, predominately young, white class-privileged women), often ignoring other factors when commenting on why gay space may have been “failing” (e.g. when gay space was disappointing, energy-draining, etc.), in that moment. This speaks to the highly gendered (as well as racialized and classed) nature of boundaries between sexual identity categories.

It is important to consider whether men categorically accepting one “type” of perceived-straight patron over another can better explain these findings. These women fell into two broad categories: women at the bar with gay (typically men) friends and women at the bar with straight (typically women) friends. Among the former, informal conversations I had with these women suggest that they were at the bars for their gay

friend's benefit, implying some commitment on their part to accomplishing gay space and men recognized this. Among the latter, women were usually at the bars to have a "girl's night out" and to escape the provocation of straight male patrons elsewhere (Grazian 2009; Orne 2017). These women may also have a desire to keep gay bars "gay" because a bar's "gayness" is what allows the space to be a perceived safe harbor for women against male sexual harassment. Additionally, these women may desire to "slum" in "authentic" gay spaces filled with gay patrons, akin to white patrons who seek out predominantly Black blues clubs (Grazian 2005, 2008; Heap 2009; Orne 2017). Despite interests that seemingly align with gay patrons, men saw these women as voyeuristic and agents of "straightening" gay space. These two categories of straight women patrons do not adequately explain men's boundary work because individual women did not necessarily look much different from one another in the often dark and cacophonous bars. Men emotionally reacted to the sight of the straight ritual itself: the group of women laughing and dancing in a circle, the ritual symbols like tiaras and sashes, etc. Similarly, straight women who came to the bar with gay friends could commit an interactional violation and it would not matter to the man she cut in the bar's line that she was there with gay men. In addition, men occasionally seemed embarrassed or apologetic by the drunken behavior of women friends they brought out. Boundary activation depended on how straight patrons *acted* in gay space and *altered the feel* of gay space, not their mere presence.

In conclusion, by parsing out the micro-dynamics of these gay club-goers' boundary work using interaction ritual theory (Collins 2004), this work has implications for scholars of sexualities studying the *boundary processes* that maintain or blur distinctions between sexual identities, which is conceptually different from the content of sexual identity categories or their interactional salience. While these concepts go hand-

in-hand in interactions, this work highlights that sexualities scholars should treat boundary processes as analytically distinct from the content or salience of categories. Additionally, future work should further investigate straight women's experiences and reasons for engaging in gay nightlife, as well as the experiences of straight, bisexual and other queer men in gay spaces.

## VIGNETTE 1: 'THAT'S HOW I FEEL ABOUT FRAT PARTIES'

Broad discourse around gay bars suggests that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals can feel a sense of belonging or home within the bars' walls. This sets up high expectations and can lead to a sense of disappointment for young club-goers as they set out and actually experience these spaces. Belonging is not categorically achieved; it is a process that club-goers actively negotiate as they make their nightly rounds. This is particularly pronounced for young adults new to the Gayborhood's social spaces and scenes.

In the following vignette, I went on a "go-along" with Paul, a 21-year-old Asian American college student, as we took his two 18-year-old friends out in the Gayborhood for the first time. A few aspects of the night surprised me. First, I was struck by Paul's ambivalence about going out at all, and his insistence that he needed to be drunk before he went out to even go out. Second, I noted several instances where Paul and his friends felt culturally different from the bars' music, aesthetics, and performances. Going out, whether for the first time or even the nth time, can be a deeply ambivalent experience.

### **Fieldnote, October 10, 2015**

I received a Facebook message from Paul a few days ago:

"Hey! I'm thinkin of goin to bars Friday night and would love to see you ☺ / Any chance you're free/down?"

I messaged back, "Hey yes! / Let's def go out Friday."

"Yesssss / I have a gaybie [gay baby: a young and/or recently out gay man] who's dying to go out / So intryna [I'm tryna] take him."

"Oh mhm mhm / Important business. A later-in-life [i.e. a senior] gaybie or?"

"No a frosh!!"

“Ohhh.”

“I wish it was a senior haha.”

“They have a fake I presume?”

“Yeah”

“Ok. We will do our best.”

“Ah I won’t wanna drag you out if they won’t get in! / My fake worked at all the bars so I’m assuming theirs will too?”

Later that night, I replied, “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

It’s my first time tagging along with Paul. We became friendly over the summer when I saw him out a few times, including at a pregame during Philly Pride weekend in June. Paul is a senior but works in residential life, so he lives in the heart of his campus in a dorm. We decided to pregame in his dorm room at 10pm. He has “old franzia and tequila in [his] room lol;” I take a city bus to Paul’s campus and wait for a few moments for him to fetch me at the locked entrance. I look at the names and hometowns of the students who live on his floor as I follow him to his room. At 22, I’ve never felt older. When he opens the door, a young white woman in a black romper and black leather shoes jumps up from her chair and introduces herself. Her name is Melissa. She is a freshman and best friend to Ryan, who is sitting on the futon and deep in concentration—he’s picking the next song to play from his iPhone (mostly rap songs). He gets up to shake my hand once I am fully inside and sipping a hard cider. Tall and wiry, Ryan is wearing a plain t-shirt and drawstring shorts that show a lot of thigh. He sips a Coors Light.

As we sit around drinking, Melissa and Ryan talk about fraternity parties and gossip from their friend group. I ask them about the gay social scene on their campus. Paul says, “My year, people were really active and interested in hanging out, but the



underclassmen aren't doing that." Ryan chimes in, "I don't know. I'm friends with one or two of the freshman gays, but they're mostly weird and sceney. One guy added me on Facebook and messaged me just because I'm gay, and I've never met him before in my life! Everyone acts very like, aloof. They think that if you talk to them, it means they're interested."

Paul declares that we need to head out. "I need to take another shot before we go," he says, reaching for the bottle of tequila. "I *can't* be sober at a gay bar." "Why?" I ask, still sitting on his extra-long twin. He pauses. "If I'm not drunk it's just like, why am I here? It's loud, and sweaty, and dirty—" Ryan interrupts him: "That's how I feel about frat parties." Melissa says, "You go, and you're in a gross basement with guys coming up to me every second being like"—she lowers her voice to mimic a fraternity brother—"Yo who do you know here? Who do you know here?"

Paul orders us a Lyft around 11pm. "Where should we take them first?" he asks me. "iCandy or Tavern?" I offer. We decide to start at Tavern, and the driver drops us off at Locust and Camac. As we walk down Camac, we deliberate how we are going to handle getting in and decide to sandwich the fake IDs between the real IDs. I go in first, then Ryan, then Melissa, then Paul. We all get in without an issue. We stand briefly in the vestibule area between the door to the first-floor piano bar, and the stairs leading up to the dance floor. One can usually see into the piano bar from the vestibule, but tonight patrons are pressed up against the glass walls.

"It's a piano bar," Paul explains to them unenthusiastically. "Let's go upstairs."

We ascend the steep stairs to a nearly empty dance floor and bar. The few patrons who are up here are white and appear to be in their late 20s and early 30s. A disco song blasts through the speakers. "This music is *bad*!" Paul exclaims. After we try to dance to the disco music for a few minutes, it becomes clear that Ryan and Melissa are losing their

attention span. Their dancing devolves into an uninspired one-two step. Ryan and Melissa tell Paul that they want to go to the bathroom, and we all decide to go together. The bathroom has three stalls and a big mirror. Ryan and Melissa want to take a group selfie in the mirror to document the evening. Grazian (2008) argues that partaking in urban nightlife can be a status symbol, and I imagine how this selfie will be used to regale their more provincial freshman friends about their adventures in the Gayborhood the next morning in a dining hall. As the four of us squeeze together for a photo in the mirror, a mid-20s white guy tries to enter the bathroom. “Do you want me to take a picture?” he asks, sneaking past me to enter a stall. “No, it’s okay!” Melissa says. We are still taking photos—in pursuit of one where we all have our eyes open, where there is no limb awkwardly protruding, where we neither smiling nor grimacing—when the guy comes out of the stall. He is wearing a floral t-shirt and Paul says, “I really like your shirt!” We learn that his name is Bill and he’s here with his boyfriend. We don’t see Bill again.

By the time we take a good photo, which is swiftly posted to Facebook and Instagram, the dance floor is empty. Knowing the general flow of people through the Gayborhood bars, I surmise that folks have fled to iCandy and Woody’s now that it’s past midnight. Paul is texting with a gay friend, another college student, who is coming out with his straight woman friend. Paul says that they’re almost here and we wait to meet them on Camac.

“Where’s iCandy again?” Paul asks me. iCandy is comically close, less than a block away. I lead them south on Camac. We make a left down an equally narrow street—ostensibly for the owners of the rowhomes on Spruce Street to access their double car garages—that doubles as outdoor queer space to socialize with a cigarette or after the bars close. We meet up with Paul’s friends outside iCandy. Now a group of six, we again

sandwich between the freshmen as we show our IDs to get inside. The main floor is much busier than Tavern, and we make our way to the bar where the well-drinks are enticingly \$2 cheaper. A “drink boy” wearing tight bright neon underwear briefs comes around with bright green jello shots in shot-sized paper cups, and a can of whipped cream. Ryan looks at Melissa and makes a judgmental, raised eyebrow face. Barring the occasional go-go dancer upstairs at Woody’s, iCandy is the only bar that projects circuit boy culture—the staff in skimpy underwear, in neon and mesh—that I only witnessed on the Showtime series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), which I only saw because I was in charge of my family’s Netflix account in high school and I would sneak the entire series through our queue.

Everyone except me buys the \$1 concoctions. Paul slurps it down, purses his lips, and asks to the group, “Was there even any alcohol in that?” The woman friend of Paul’s friend, whose name I quickly forgot—a nightlife hazard: identifying someone whom you briefly spoke to as ‘the friend of that person’s boyfriend’s friend’—gives Paul a knowing look. “I learned the hard way freshman year,” she says. “It may not seem like it, but there *definitely* is alcohol in this.” I find it ironic, though not entirely surprising, that a common thread between gay nightclubs and fraternity parties may be deceptively strong jello shots.

The rest of the night is spent chasing the best dance floor. We briefly deliberate on whether to pay the cover fee to dance upstairs, but that is collectively shot down when Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” comes on in the bar and Ryan says, “Oh *no*! You know it’s an old gay bar!” You can’t trust a dance floor of a bar that’s playing Michael Jackson hits, apparently. After we finish our drinks, Paul says we should go to Woody’s. It’s 12:30am. We walk the two blocks to 13<sup>th</sup> and Walnut. There is no line to get in but the bar itself is packed. Paul says we should pay to go upstairs. We wait in line for an employee to charge

our credit cards \$10 and slap a neon wristband on us—the wristband comes with discounted entry to the after-hours club Voyeur before 2am. Upstairs, the group seems to have more fun. They dance to remixes of recent Top 40 hits, and once a group of young women get off one of the dance floor's platforms, Paul swiftly jumps up—prime real estate for dancing with friends and people watching—and pulls us up to dance for the remainder of the night. A few minutes after 2am, the lights turn up and bouncers herd the remaining revelers, drenched in sweat, down a precariously steep flight of stairs for anyone who has imbibed more than a few drinks and onto the sidewalk where after-hours plans are made and Uber rides out of the Gayborhood are queued. The group decides to go back to campus.

I occasionally saw both Ryan and Melissa in the Gayborhood through their time in college; Melissa always with Ryan, and Ryan rarely without Melissa. I usually saw them at Woody's, and then as the years went by and Woody's became more of a tourist bar than a local bar and Tavern's dance floor became *the* dance floor with a revamped musical aesthetic (read: generic remixes of Top 40 songs and the occasional RuPaul song to coincide with *RuPaul's Drag Race's* height of popularity). Because we friended one another on Facebook that night, I occasionally saw updates from them but overall did not keep in touch. I never ran into them in the Gayborhood again.

## CHAPTER 3: BROKER RITUALS AND HETERONORMATIVITY

### Overview

How do interactions across gender and sexual identity categories construct heteronormativity? Despite heteronormativity's social psychological underpinnings, there has been more attention to the concept as a macro structure and a theory. Drawing on an ethnographic case of interactions between gay men and (presumed straight) women in Philadelphia gay bars, I explore how common broker interactions wherein women helped to facilitate and cool out social interaction between gay men construct normative gender and sexuality. First, gay men and women strangers enter interaction on the consensus that the situation is inherently nonsexual—and thus friendly and/or nonthreatening—based on interactants' assumed gender/sexual identities. Second, patrons activate gendered *sexual beliefs* around what it means to compliment and physically touch strangers based on interactants' gender and sexual identities to facilitate interaction. That is, patrons leverage and maintain this nonsexual reality through distinct forms of talk and physical touch that would be labeled as threatening in a heterosexual or homosexual interaction. Third, women perform both emotional and situational management on men's behalf to ensure a positive outcome from the broker interaction. I argue that these processes interactionally construct heteronormativity, which I operationalize as a set of interactional outcomes: (1) the essential nature of gender and sexual identity binaries; (2) the assumption that a hetero-/homosexual binary governs natural attractions between gender and sexual identity categories; (3) gender and sexual inequality.

## Introduction

A group of young gay men are talking about how women are particularly instrumental in helping them meet gay others at Woody's on a busy weekend night. A mid-20s, Persian American patron enthusiastically acts out how heterosexual women are *better* at picking up gay men than gay men themselves, underscoring the complexity of interactions at the nexus of gender and sexuality. "There's nothing like a straight girl introducing two gay guys," he says, laughing. "*Only* a straight girl can [go up to a gay stranger] like, 'Oh my God, you're so cute. Come meet my cute gay best friend!'" He speaks in a Valley Girl falsetto as he acts out the woman's part and waves his hands around as if bringing two bodies together. "'Oh my God, now make out!'" Taking the role of the imaginary gay stranger, he briefly jerks his head to the side in mock confusion. He then relaxes his neck and throws his hands up in the air in acquiescence. "'Oh, wait what? Okay!'" His friends holler and clap with positive approval. I was struck by how this patron's dramatic interpretation of these intergroup interactions affirmed normative understandings of gender and sexuality by evoking condescending gender/sexuality stereotypes about straight women and gay men, which his friends tacitly approved by cheering. Furthermore, he implied that there is a gendered and sexualized status expectation about women's ability to broker connections for gay men ("only" a "straight girl" can go up to gay male strangers in this way).

Rigid gender and sexuality categories, stereotypes, and status beliefs are all dimensions of what gender and sexuality scholars refer to as heteronormativity. Gender and sexuality scholars define heteronormativity as "the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon" (Kitzinger 2005:478). While sociologists argue that heteronormativity is a social structure that operates at multiple levels of analysis (Green 2002:521)—from

gendered sexual socialization (Gansen 2017), to everyday talk (Kitzinger 2005), to organizational cultures in schools (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009), and workplaces (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009)—conceptualizations of heteronormativity have yet to establish empirically the interactional mechanisms that produce it. Furthermore, few have directly brought to bear social psychological concepts and theories on the contemporary study of sexuality (Mize 2015). In the *Handbook of the Social Psychology of Inequality*, Schrock, Sumerau, and Ueno (2014) call for more social psychological research on sexuality: “Social psychologists can employ our well established and developing approaches to provide unique insights into how heteronormativity operates and is reproduced, which can contribute to more general sociological and public discourse” (616).

Through a grounded analysis of interactions between women and gay-identifying men in gay public spaces, this chapter identifies interactional mechanisms that construct heteronormativity in naturalistic settings. Intergroup interactions between gay men and predominately straight women are a particularly visible example of relationships at the nexus of gender and sexual identity, capturing the attention of popular culture and scholarship alike. Survey data shows that sexual minorities are more likely to have cross-gender friendships than heterosexuals (Ueno 2010). Some documented patterns of sociality between gay men and women are seen as emotionally and socially enriching, while other patterns are labeled as forms of sexual harassment that stem from casual misogyny when propagated by gay men and homophobia when propagated by women (Moon 1995; Muraco 2012).

In Philadelphia gay bars, young gay men expressed initiating interactions with gay others in the bars was fraught and they sometimes leaned on women as identity resources to help them learn the rules of the “game,” approach gay others, and cool out

unwanted interactions from men. I identify three instances through which bar patrons recognized and made meaningful socially constructed differences and hierarchies between gender/sexuality categories. First, gay men and women enter interaction on the automatic consensus that the situation is inherently nonsexual and thus friendly and/or nonthreatening based on interactants' assumed gender/sexual identities. Second, patrons activate gendered *sexual beliefs* around what it means to compliment and physically touch strangers based on interactants' gender and sexual identities to facilitate interaction. That is, patrons leverage and maintain this nonsexual reality through distinct forms of talk and physical touch that would be labeled as threatening in a heterosexual or homosexual interaction. Third, women perform both emotional and situational management on men's behalf to ensure a successful outcome from the broker interaction.

### **Operationalizing Heteronormativity**

Heteronormativity is a fruitful concept for social psychological inquiry because it calls attention to how gender and sexuality are co-constitutive social structures that shape individuals' selves, beliefs, interactions, and life chances (Mize 2015; Schrock et al. 2014). While greater attention has been paid to the regulatory power of institutions such as law, medicine, and the family in maintaining sexual inequality, sociological research suggests that social psychological mechanisms such as the activation of stereotypes and status beliefs produce heteronormativity through interaction in everyday life. Reviewing queer theorists' work primarily in the humanities, Valocchi (2005) argues that "heteronormativity means the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite... As a result, the dominance of heterosexuality often operates unconsciously or in ways that make it particularly



difficult to identify” (756). Martin (2009) notes that the concept “encompasses the many mundane, everyday ways in which heterosexuality is privileged over homosexuality, taken for granted, and seen as natural, ordinary, persistent, and without need of explanation” (191). While gender and sexuality research on heteronormativity tends to not be in direct conversation with social psychological literature (Schrock et al. 2014), social psychologists working in the expectation states and identity theory traditions have shown that social structures such as gender become naturalized, ordinary and persistent in everyday life through mechanisms such as categorization, beliefs and stereotypes, identity verification, and status processes (e.g. Burke, Stets, and Cerven 2007; Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

Current social psychological research that addresses heteronormativity tends to focus on socialization practices. Scholars have examined how gendered socialization naturalizes heterosexuality in childhood (Gansen 2017; Garner and Grazian 2016; Martin 2009). While socializing children into society’s dominant sex/sex category/sexuality system is critical for understanding how heteronormativity persists, socialization does not fully capture how it is constructed and recreated beyond childhood.

Social psychological theories of gender suggest that sexuality shapes gender stereotypes and beliefs. For instance, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) argue that hegemonic gender beliefs “most closely describe white, middle-class, *heterosexual* men and women, if anyone” (513) (emphasis added), which suggests that institutionalized heterosexuality or “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980) is an integral component of gender beliefs. Like gender, components of sexuality, such as sexual identity, are background frames that can be activated in relevant contexts (Ridgeway 2009). I operationalize heteronormativity as set of interactionally produced outcomes: (1) binary gender and

sexual identity categories; (2) the automatic assumption that a hetero-/homosexual binary governs natural attractions between gender and sexual identity categories; (3) gender and sexuality inequality.

**Gender and Sexuality Categorization.** The construction of heteronormativity involves the maintenance of naturalized, gender *and* sexuality categories or binaries. Schilt and Westbrook (2009) theorize that heteronormativity involves “the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is natural or acceptable” (441). Social psychologists are well equipped to analyze how gender and sexuality binaries are naturalized. A social psychological treatment of heteronormativity can expand on its conceptions of gender, which suggests that gender inequality relies on automatic sex categorization. As Ridgeway and Correll (2004) outline, “Sex categorization is the sociocognitive process by which we label another as male or female. As we sex categorize another, by implication, we sex categorize ourselves as either similar or different from that other” (514). Experimental research in psychology shows that individuals are able to deduce sexual orientation based on verbal and nonverbal cues with greater than chance accuracy (e.g. Rule 2017). Furthermore, sociologists have shown that individuals do not need to accurately categorize someone’s sexual orientation for sexual orientation categorization to be socially meaningful. For instance, the specter of being labeled gay shapes masculinities by policing men’s normative gender displays, behaviors, and attitudes (Pascoe 2005). Individuals use sexual aesthetics or “cultural and stylistic distinctions” such as “interests, material objects, styles of bodily comportment, language, opinions, clothing, and behaviors” (Bridges 2014:62) in order to interactionally label individuals as gay or straight.

**‘Natural’ Attractions as *Sexual Beliefs*.** As individuals are sex categorized into male or female, sexed bodies carry assumptions about their gender *and* their sexuality. Using ethnomethodological methods, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that identification markers of a person’s sex category (male/female) include behaviors, affects, and appearances, which constitute a person’s gender. These markers are socially agreed upon and constitute what Ridgeway and Correll (2004) label as gender beliefs or “the cultural rules or schemas for enacting gender” (511). These gender beliefs shape individuals’ feelings and interpretations about themselves, their interactants, and the general social situation. Embedded in cultural gender beliefs are assumptions about men and women’s natural sexual attractions or desires, which I define here as *sexual beliefs*. Sexual beliefs also encompass cultural rules for enacting gendered sexual identities. The concept of sexual beliefs aligns with anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s (1984) concept of a sexual system in which sexuality “is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others” (126). For Rubin, sexual identities, practices, and desires are hierarchical and fall either within or outside “The Charmed Circle” (109). Sexuality within the Charmed Circle is considered “good, normal, natural, blessed” and includes heterosexuality, marriage, and monogamy. Identities and practices outside the Charmed Circle are sanctioned as “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned” and include homosexuality, unmarried partnership, promiscuity, and non-procreative sex. “Good” and “bad” sexual identities and practices are arranged along a value hierarchy, but as Rubin notes, there is a “struggle where to draw the line” (110). This line shifts over time and by context, responding to institutional changes in law and cultural changes brought about by social movements. These shifting boundaries benefit some sexual identities and practices more than others.

As a dynamic social psychological concept, sexual beliefs may change over time. For example, gender scholars argue that heteronormativity relies on “the seemingly natural attraction between two types of bodies defined as opposites” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:443). While beliefs about essentialized heterosexuality and pathological homosexuality remain a consequential mechanism that perpetuates heteronormativity, I argue this is a sexual belief that may (or may not) be activated in interactions. In non-heterosexual spaces or in increasingly “post-gay” or “post-closet” contexts (Kampler and Connell 2018), alternative sexual beliefs may be activated and guide interaction.

**Gender and Sexual Inequality.** A central tenet of heteronormativity is the maintenance of gender and sexual inequality (e.g. Rich 1980; Rubin 1984). Sociologists have qualitatively and quantitatively shown how different gender/sexuality categories carry unequal power and status relative to one another (cf. Mize 2016; Mize and Manago 2018; Pfeffer 2014). As Schilt and Westbrook (2009) argue, “The hierarchal gender system that privileges masculinity also privileges heterosexuality... understanding the persistence of gender inequality necessitates an understanding of the relationality between heterosexuality and gender” (443). This insight extends social psychological literature on gender and status by considering how sexual identities, orientations, and expressions are hierarchically organized in concert with gender. Thus, men are afforded greater power and status than women along the social axis of gender, while heterosexuals carry greater power and status than non-heterosexuals. Considering gender and sexuality together, Mize and associates have found that men and women are differentially privileged or penalized by sexuality (Mize and Manago 2018a). These status differences uphold heteronormativity at a societal level.

### **Brokering at the Nexus of Gender and Sexuality**

On my first night of fieldwork in January 2015—an unusually quiet Wednesday night at Woody’s—I observed a young woman and a young man sit next to another mixed-gender dyad at the bar. After a few minutes, the young woman struck up conversation with the other dyad while her male friend remained mostly silent and fixated on his mixed drink. Later, as they paid their tab, the woman grabbed a cocktail napkin and began scribbling on it. As this happened, her friend walked towards the door. She slid the napkin towards the other young man, smiled, and left the bar. The two friends read the napkin and showed me what she wrote:

*Just in case you were interested*

*[phone number]*

*He’s shy ☺*

*[his first name]*

The two young men did not directly interact. Rather, they briefly spoke and exchanged glances mediated through their women friends. On busier weekend nights, I routinely observed interactions where women club-goers initiated and cooled out interactions between men. Paul (21, Asian American) felt that “there’s definitely a lot of straight women who wingman-it at the club.” When asked about interactions with women in the bars, Adam (28, white) said that he has “had girls approach me; they are with their gay friend as a wingman, ‘My friend thinks you are cute!’” James (23, white) said that he regularly encountered “the straight girl wingwoman” while out.

In contrast to heterosexual bars where men support one another as they try to meet women (cf. Grazian 2007), I rarely observed gay men acting as wingmen for one another nor did interviewees express that this was common. In a gay male sexual field, interactions between men were shaped by the bar’s sexual status order (Green 2011). Women patrons, however, held a unique structural position as outsiders to the gay male

sexual field occurring around them. Elaine, a 28-year-old Asian American woman, articulated this position in terms of safety:

“I feel very safe [at gay bars and gay parties]. No guys are gonna roofie me, or hit on me, or scream at me if I reject him or follow me to the bathroom. So there’s that kind of physical safety. There’s also emotional safety in terms of like, I don’t need to be worried about how I look, I don’t need to be looking around to see if I can flirt with some guy. My intention is purely to have fun. And that’s a kind of freedom.”

This position afforded them greater interactional latitude than men, a structural role Simmel (1950) described as “the stranger,” while Goffman (1967:15) observed that “[i]n all societies one can observe... the tendency for delicate transactions to be conducted by *go-betweens*,” which sociologists increasingly refer to as “brokers” (see review Stovel and Shaw 2012).

Women who brokered typically did so for a gay friend whom they accompanied out, whether intentionally by approaching gay strangers or unintentionally by being approached by men interested in their friend. Some young gay men, particularly men new to or uncomfortable in the gay scene, brought women to the bars not only as friends but also for their willingness to help mediate contact with gay others. As a newly out college student, James (23, white) purposefully took woman friends with him to the Gayborhood: “I needed someone to go out with, and I used to take like, the straight girl buffer to make sure I didn’t get preyed on... You have to be ready to have some defenses up sometimes when you’re around a lot of alcohol, especially if you’re not totally like, acclimated to the situation.” These women wanted to help their gay friends acclimate to gay space and meet gay others (cf. Muraco 2012). Viet (23, Asian American) expressed: “I feel like girls always have this impression of like, ‘Oh, I want to be the matchmaker.’ So, their goal for the night is to find me somebody.”

Other young gay patrons who went out with gay friends also enjoyed nights where their women friends came out because, as the patron acted out in the introduction, women helped gay men meet one another. Some men felt that they only met gay patrons when brokered by women. For example, while Paul reported that he rarely met gay others while out at the bars, “it helps if you have straight girls to buffer. They bring in people to dance with you, like, ‘Oh come, meet my friend, Paul—and we all dance together—*that’s the only way it’s worked successfully for me*” [emphasis added]. Daniel’s (28, Cuban American) eyes lit up during our interview when he started discussing his nights out with one straight woman friend in particular: “I love her to go with me because she just walks up and grabs people and brings them over and she’s really funny so she’s good to have... The one time I made out with someone on the second floor at Woody’s, she was like, ‘That guy [over there] is cute, he’s looking at you.’ And I was like, ‘I don’t know.’ And she’s like, ‘No, I’m going to get him’ and she got up and brought him over and we made out and swapped numbers.” He concluded: “Everyone wants *that* friend. She’s invaluable.”

The women I spoke to did not consciously go to gay spaces to help their friends meet people, but they wanted to help their friends if needed. For instance, Barbara, a 29-year-old white woman, expressed that she “adopts the goals” of her friends while out: “If I’m with a friend who either is looking to meet somebody or hope to run into somebody, I’ll be like, ‘I’ll be an accessory to that goal.’” Women enjoying helping their gay friends meet people, describing broker rituals with words like “exciting” and “exhilarating.” For example, Elaine expressed:

“I like being a wing-woman... What’s fun about wing-womaning, I think, is that it’s like mostly living vicariously through people. So like, I know that, I’m most likely not going to meet anyone at a gay party, so I would rather channel my

energy into either having a ball on the dance floor or into trying to make at least some kind of romantic connection happen for my friends. That feels fun for me.”

Women patrons also made distinctions between helping gay friends meet people at gay bars versus helping their women friends at straight bars. In particular, women expressed that it was safer to help their gay male friends meet strangers while out and that they trusted gay men more than straight men:

**Me:** Do you ever wing-woman for your straight friends, men or women?

**Rita** (23, Albanian American): Yes, but not as often... I’m more trusting of opportunities in a gay bar for my gay friends than a straight bar for my straight friends... Straight men are shady!

Elaine expressed that it felt “lower stakes” for both herself and her friends to broker for gay men:

“I think wing-womaning for my female friends *sucks* because there’s inherent competition, even when you’re not interested. I’ve had a lot of negative experiences where, even if you’re wing-womaning, you might get some drunk straight asshole who’s like, commenting about how you’re the third wheel or how they’re not interested in you and you’re like, ‘I know, I’m literally setting you guys up,’ but there’s always an element of cruelty from straight men.”

As Elaine suggests, how women perceived broker rituals depended upon not only gender and sexuality, but the broader cultural context of the space.

In the following sections, I show how women and gay men constructed heteronormativity through initiating, framing, sustaining and cooling out interactions between men.

### *Initiating Sexualized, Non-Sexual Interaction*

“When I’m at a straight bar, I don’t [interact with strangers] much. If there was a guy standing next to me, I wouldn’t start a conversation with them because I



wouldn't want to give them the wrong idea if I wasn't trying to give off that idea, you know what I mean? [In gay bars], I've actually had really good conversations with strangers... There's that extra level of guardedness towards men at a straight bar because he just wants to get in my pants... And when you're at a gay bar, people are there to genuinely dance and enjoy themselves. That's a whole different vibe that allows you to go in with your guard down" (Rita, interview)

As Rita suggests, interacting with strangers in bars and nightclubs can be fraught as individuals manage awkward or embarrassing exchanges, rejection, and harassment. Stranger interactions are typically framed as threatening when sexual intent is suggested or implied. How do people assume sexual intent? Whether individuals activate a sexual intent frame to interaction depends on the physical context and individuals' perceived gender and sexual orientations, which are linked. While psychological research suggests that people automatically perceive sexual orientation differences from minimal nonverbal cues (Rule 2017), context shapes sexual orientation categorization. In a straight context, people generally take heterosexuality for granted unless someone does not adequately "do" their gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). In a gay context, men are generally assumed to be gay, and feminine women are assumed to be straight. For example, Manuel (31, Latino) suggested that when he has approached women in non-gay bars, they do not perceive him to be gay and frame interaction as potentially threatening:

Going to a straight bar and you see a really attractive woman, I have done this many times and I'm like, "I just wanna say that you're really pretty." They look at you like, 'Who are you and why are you telling me this?' I'm like, "I'm *gay*, it doesn't *matter*; I'm not hitting on you!"

As a gay man, Manuel felt that he could approach a woman in a straight bar because it "doesn't matter." In the gay bar, men and women adopted Manuel's stance as patrons framed interacting with strangers across gender and sexual categories as unproblematic.

They did so by activating *sexual beliefs* about the gendered norms and expectations of cross-sexual orientation interactions. Patrons relied on the assumption that gay men and (straight) women are sexually incompatible to render interaction between these groups as harmless. Patrons leveraged sexual beliefs around what it means to receive a compliment, or a physical touch, based on the gender and sexual identities of the interactants to initiate interaction in a sexualized yet nonsexual manner. In other words, patrons flirted with one another.

**Compliments.** Men and women patrons complimented each other's bodies and clothes, which were interpreted as playful, harmless, or friendly overtures. Initiating interaction through compliments drew on gendered stereotypes that women and gay men are alike—they're both feminized gender/sexuality categories—with shared interests in fashion, beauty, and men. Opening remarks such as, "You're so cute," or "Hey beautiful," or "I love your hair" were effective social lubricants to initiate interaction between gay men and women. While a gay patron might ignore a gay stranger who approaches them at the bar and says, "Hey, I like your shirt" if they do not find him attractive (cf. Green 2011), men expressed that gay patrons did not immediately "cool out" the interaction when a woman complimented them on their shirt. This allowed for more prolonged interaction.

Both men and women leveraged sexual beliefs to broker interaction. Recounting a recent broker interaction at Woody's, Manuel said: "I went out with a girlfriend, and this guy approached her, and was like, 'Oh, you're really pretty,' and he was talking to her, and I was just kind of standing there. And then, she did introductions and it was an easier lead in to talk to him. Even if I wasn't interested, I noticed that it was easier to have a conversation starter, rather than, you and two guys and somebody comes up and

starts talking to you. He feels awkward, you feel awkward—like, what do you want from me?”

In some cases, men approached other gay men’s unsuspecting women friends. For example, James (23, white) explained that he brought women friends to help him navigate the bars in college but was frustrated with how men opened conversations with his friends to interact with him: “I learned that it’s not a foolproof system because gay guys make friends with your straight girl friends in order to try to get to you. To some people that’s like an icebreaker, being able to go up and compliment the straight girl and then use that as an avenue to get to the guy, and I was like (*groans*). Some of my friends weren’t quite hip to that.”

Sometimes men who strategically approached women evoked discourses that young straight men deploy when trying to pick up women (cf. Grazian 2007). For instance, one patron in his early 30s felt that while he relied less and less on women as an interactional “crutch” as he got older in gay bars, complimenting a guy-of-interest’s woman friend was a particularly effective way to talk to him: “At least with a girl... there’s always something you can compliment them on, and they love that. You see that girls love compliments.” In another example in the bar, I expressed to an informant—a white gay patron in his early 20s—that I wanted to go up to a woman who I had seen bringing gay men to her gay friend. “Do you want me to do the drunk bitch stumble?” he asked. “What’s the drunk bitch stumble?” I asked. He explained that the “drunk bitch stumble” is a way to start talking to someone in the bar without making it look intentional. You start walking by them and pretend to bump into them—maybe you’re a little drunk, or maybe someone just pushed you towards them. This gives you an in to initiate interaction, and you apologize to the person for bumping into them.

**Physical Touch.** Other intergroup interactions began through physical touch, typically on dance floors when patrons initiated intergroup dancing with strangers. In a context involving “compatible” gender and sexual identities, such as a man approaching a woman in a straight bar or when men approach one another in gay space, initiating an interaction through non-consensual touching would be interpreted as a sexual pick-up and subject to cooling out strategies that could discredit someone’s gender and sexual identity as incompetent or unattractive (cf. Grazian 2007; Ronen 2010; Snow et al. 1991). In contrast, I commonly observed women go up to a group of men and start to “grind” on a gay stranger (Ronen 2010). While not always interpreted as welcome, men did not frame dancing with, or being touched by, women strangers as sexually threatening. Gay patrons seemed more likely to entertain interaction initiated in this way with women than with other men.

For example, one evening on the first floor of iCandy, I observed a thirtysomething white woman approach a black gay patron and a white woman dancing face-to-face in a friendly manner (and not physically touching) to a remix of Whitney Houston’s “How Will I Know.” She approached them from behind and it was clear that they did not notice her co-presence. While the man danced side-to-side to the music, the woman stranger threw her arms around his neck from behind and swayed to the music with him. The man contorts his body to look at who is hugging him, and lightly shrugs his shoulders as he sees her. He smiles, playfully shakes her off him, and takes a step away from his friend to signal that this woman stranger may dance with them. The three of them dance in a circle as the Whitney song ends and Donna Summers’ “Hot Stuff” begins. She visibly loses enthusiasm for dancing with this pair and starts dancing as she backs away toward her friends.

Comparing men's reactions to women touching them, such as this gay patron's nonchalant reaction to the woman hugging him from behind while he danced, with men's reactions to other men touching them illuminates how gender and sexual identity shape how touch is interpreted. Half an hour after I observed the above interaction, I was standing by a pair of white gay friends in their mid-20s on the edge of the iCandy dance floor. A late-20s patron walked past us and grabbed one of the patron's biceps. He squeezed his bicep and said, "You look good." The patron who was touched grimaced and jerked his arm away. He did not say anything to the stranger, who quickly kept walking. "Ew, a drive by!" his friend exclaimed, imbuing this type of touch with negative meaning. While the two dancing friends humored the woman stranger touching and dancing with them, the two gay friends in this latter interaction swiftly cooled out the man who approached them.

Gay patrons usually did not interpret women touching them or dancing with them as threatening. Ethan reported: "I'm not one to go up to people and start a conversation unless it's a woman. So usually—[with] men—I don't talk to right off the bat... usually when I'm dancing and a straight woman sees me, they'll come up and automatically start dancing with me... that's how things start." Patrons leveraged these gendered and sexualized touching rules to initiate broker interactions. For instance, Viet felt that women strangers usually came up to him on the dance floor, which he said was effective because women were less "intimidating." Describing a typical interaction of this sort, he said: "I would be dancing and then she would come and dance with me. I'm less intimidated by girls so I would dance with them as well. If a guy came up and danced with me, I'd be like, 'Okay, is he my type or not' first. But with a girl, I'll just dance with them and then later, she tries to introduce you to her guy friend."

These interactions abided by the logic of a rigid “sex/gender/sexuality system” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:458) wherein men in gay bars were gay men whose desires and attractions were not and could not be directed at women. This assumption solidified a hetero-/homosexual binary and erased the possibility that men may identify as something other than gay or straight. These interactions also upheld the gender binary by concretizing women’s gender identities as not compatible with male homosexuality. Indeed, patrons rarely acknowledged the possible presence of greater sexual and gender diversity in the bars beyond gay men, straight women, and gay women, which could complicate gendered interactions.

### *Framing Interaction*

Patrons leveraged sexual beliefs when initiating broker interactions, which naturalized patrons’ gender and sexual categories and perpetuated gender and sexual stereotypes. Once interaction was initiated, patrons reproduced traditional unequal relations between men and women as women performed both situational and emotional work to sustain interaction on men’s behalf. In this section, I will discuss gendered situational management, which encompasses the active work that goes into framing a situation. Men often expressed that it was difficult to perceive whether interactions with gay others in the bars were sexual or platonic. As part of broker interactions, women worked to frame a situation as potentially sexual or friendly through talk and gestures. Sometimes, men welcomed situational work as this helped to lessen the cognitive stress of situations that men felt were fraught to navigate. Other times, men interpreted unwanted situation work as intrusive and objectifying.

**Facilitating Interaction by Framing Friendly and Sexual Situations.** In the following example at Woody’s, I illustrate how one woman facilitated interaction by

framing two different situations as either friendly or sexual for different bar patrons.

Krista was a white 26-year-old straight-identifying friend to Taylor, who brought a group of his women friends to Woody's for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. She quickly began interacting with gay strangers for her friend's benefit upon their arrival. I observed her introduce herself to a gay stranger, before bringing Taylor into the interaction:

I watch a young white guy step back and forth to the music by the front entrance with five women friends. They are dressed up. His dark brown hair is gelled back and he's wearing a black suit and tie. The women, predominately white, wear formal and cocktail attire. One friend, Krista, stands out—she has oversized tortoise shell glasses on, a short haircut, and is wearing a polka dot blouse. While most of the friends are facing inward, Krista is positioned so she can observe the bar crowd. A tall young man with bright red hair is standing just beyond the friend circle. She walks up to him. Smiling, she starts talking to him, and he does not seem to mind. She points to Taylor, and the patron looks at him and smiles. They continue talking for a few minutes before she coyly lowers her chin while lifting her pointer finger up to her face as if to indicate a shared secret and to say, "Hold on." She takes one big step to the side and yanks Taylor by the arm toward her. She positions Taylor to face her new acquaintance. The three of them start talking, and the redhead turns his attention more fully to Taylor, focusing his gaze on him. "He's my best friend!" she exclaims, sliding her hand from his back to his shoulder, leaning into him. She pats both of them on the back and nudges them closer, so they are almost touching. She smiles widely and walks away.

While I was not able to hear their conversation, Krista seemed to frame the encounter between Taylor and the gay patron as one of sexual intrigue through her body language and by strategically positioning their bodies, so they were nearly touching. By exiting the interaction at this juncture, Krista further indicated an intimate framing wherein the two men needed space to interact alone. These framings were suggestive, meant to facilitate interaction:

Taylor and the stranger both took one step backwards to converse from a less intimate distance. After a short while, the stranger starts to look to his right, his attention being gradually pulled elsewhere. It looks like one or both of them are cooling out the encounter, and soon they stop talking. Rather than physically moving, they both subtly shift their bodies until they are back-to-back, fully oriented to their respective friend groups.

After I observed this interaction, I hemmed and hawed—as a researcher, as a stranger, as a man—about approaching Krista. Flanked by a gay informant in his early 20s, I decided to walk up to her:

I tap her on the shoulder. “Hi!” I say, energetically, unconsciously elongating the vowel (“Hiieee!”). As I recorded this situation in my field notes later that night, I noted how I deployed a gay affect as a means of neutering the situation; I was—clearly, by my nasally vowels—a gay man trying to talk to a woman stranger in the bar. She turns around, and even though I’m a stranger coming up to her at a bar, her face lights up. “Hi!” she says. I ask how she’s doing, and the gay patron sidles up to me. “Oh, I *really* like your glasses,” he says. I chime in to say I agree, noting how they’re similar to mine. She has a soft, high voice. After we discuss the glasses brand Warby Parker and how “fabulous” yet inexpensive they are, I ask her what brings her and her friends to Woody’s tonight. She points to Taylor. “Him,” she says. “It’s his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday! Do you want to meet him?” she asks, linking arms with me. I say sure, but he moves farther away from us engrossed in an interaction with one of his friends, so we continue talking. I learn that her name is Krista. She’s 26 and lives in New York. Taylor is a childhood friend, and her younger sister is his best friend, so she came down to Philly for his birthday. “I don’t even know any of these girls,” she says. “I feel so old!” Our conversation turns to travel, and boyfriends. She asks us if we have boyfriends, and we both reply that we’re single. She seems excited by this information, and conspiratorially glances around at the clientele. “Do you want to make *new friends*?” she asks, emphasizing “new friends” with a verbal wink. She explains that she “loves meeting new people” and “introducing people to new people.” “Sure!” I say. She leads us a few feet away into a group of four young men, one of



whom is the stranger whom she had introduced to Taylor. “These guys want new friends!” she says to the group, pushing us into their circle. She hugs me, saying how nice it was to meet me, and retreats back to the larger group of Taylor’s friends.

Through our conversation, it became clear that Krista, in part, was brokering interaction for Taylor and others as a way to pass the time at a gay bar with a group of younger women she mostly did not know. After discussing fashion and boyfriends—or lack thereof—Krista shifted into being our broker without being asked to do so, first asking if we wanted to meet Taylor and then asking if we wanted to “make new friends.” While she intimated that “new friends” was a euphemism, Krista facilitated our entrée to a group of gay patrons who we would not have met otherwise by defining our addition to the group as friendly (“These guys want new friends!”). In doing so, it felt palpable that individuals in our combined group were not trying to negotiate alternative definitions and we talked with one another with ease for some time. Thus, while a friendly interaction frame could be later subverted by a gay patron, the initial frame provided an opening to sustained interaction between gay strangers.

**Forcing Interaction by Imposing a Sexual Frame.** Sometimes women patrons engaged in unwanted situation work for bar strangers. In these cases, men felt that women sought to force sexual interaction between gay others, either by ignoring men’s verbal cues or disregarding their physical autonomy and pushing or pulling men’s bodies. For example, Ethan described a situation at Woody’s when women strangers intervened in an ambiguous relationship he had with a gay friend. At first, he seemed to welcome their intervention by framing a friendly interaction between friends as a sexual or romantic frame:

“So, I was with [a guy I liked] and my two best friends. He and I were dancing, and this group of girls come up to us and are like, “You guys would make the

perfect couple” to him and I—this guy that I liked. And I’m like, “What? Thank you. I’m glad someone realizes it.” They came up to us and were super nice and just wanted to dance with us. They kept complimenting us.”

However, as they danced in a group, the women persisted in imposing a sexual frame onto Ethan and his crush by pulling each aside and talking about the other:

“Half the group of girls would take him, and half the group of girls would take me and they’re like, “Oh my gosh, you are so beautiful, you guys would be such a cute couple, you guys should date.” I was like, “I’m trying to make that happen but you guys are not helping!” And they I guess they were talking to him about the same stuff.”

Ethan felt that these women strangers hurt his chances of establishing a sexual or romantic relationship with his friend by calling too much attention to it and commandeering their time on the dancefloor together.

While Ethan was sexually interested in his friend, more frequently, men complained about encounters where women tried to broker unwanted contact for them. For example, Paul (21, Asian American) described a time when a woman stranger pushed a gay patron into him on the Woody’s dancefloor, creating an awkward encounter: “I was dancing with my friends here, and he and his friends were dancing over there, and this one girl in-between was like—oh my god—very clearly smiling at me, and was looking, making eye contact with the guy and looking over at me... and like motioning for him to come over to me... and all of a sudden she just pushed him and we started dancing. It was weird... [He] wasn’t my type, and I wasn’t his type, very clearly, so we just stopped.”

In addition to physically pushing or pulling gay men’s bodies, sometimes women who sought to impose a sexual frame did so by ignoring men’s verbal cues that were not interested. Sighing heavily, Cody (25, white) relayed how he tried to get housing advice from a woman at Woody’s who was a realtor, but could not because she only saw him as

someone she could introduce her gay friend to: “She kept trying—I was trying to have a legitimate conversation with this woman. [I said,] ‘My apartment is too goddamn expensive, I need to know what some more reasonable options are and I don’t really know Philly that well.’ She was just like, ‘Ohh my friend thinks you’re sooo cute....’ Like, no, listen! Fairmount, how is that? Is that a convenient location? I just gave up.” Cody was trying to interact with this woman patron as a renter interested in better understanding the local rental market. However, the woman was interacting with Cody strictly as a gay man who her friend thought was attractive.

### *Sustaining and Cooling Out Interaction*

Broker interactions reproduced unequal gender relations in interaction as women engaged in emotion and face work to initiate, sustain, and cool out interactions on men’s behalf. In the following extended example, I illustrate how a woman broker supported interaction between gay men that resulted in a positive outcome: a phone number exchange. By sustaining and saving the interaction from failing by providing us with additional lines, she was able to keep the encounter going so that her friend could evaluate the three of us and decide his next move:

I am standing between Mike (mid-20s, white) and Darren (mid-20s, Asian American), in a half circle in the patio area facing out to the rest of the bar. An Asian American male patron, mid-20s, walks out onto the patio and positions himself next to Mike. Following him is a mid-20s Asian American woman, who positions herself in front of our half-circle. She smiles brightly and says, “Hi! I’m Jane and this is Brian.” Brian says hi, smiling slightly. He looks apprehensive, his eyes wide and shifting from looking at one of us, to the ground, to the rest of the bar, and back to the group. He does not maintain eye contact with any of us for more than a second. Jane holds Mike’s gaze, as if compelling him into interaction. “I’m Mike,” he says, looking to me to continue the greetings ritual. I introduce myself and look to Darren, who has a quizzical expression on his face.

He introduces himself. A long second passes where the five of us just stand there, expectantly.

Jane initiated the encounter by introducing herself *and* Brian, before Brian offered his name. She worked to get us to cooperate by smiling and holding Mike's gaze. After we exchanged introductions, it was palpable that the three of us would not put in effort to sustain the encounter. This was potentially an embarrassing moment of failed face work, but she did not seem deterred. She persisted by offering us another line:

"We thought you guys looked cool, so we wanted to say hi!" The three of us laugh, but no one offers an articulate response to this overture. "Do you come here much? This is our first time here," she offers. Mike picks up this line and says that all three of us live in Philadelphia and come to the bars regularly. Through this exchange, the five of us exchange more introductory information. We learn that both Jane and Brian are first-year graduate students and are both new to the city. Darren asks Jane what she studies, and Jane responds, "I study operations stuff, and Brian studies more psychology stuff" at an area business school. I note that Jane seems to be Brian's representative by answering questions for him rather than giving him a turn to talk. Then, Jane turns her attention to Mike, asking him same question. He replies that he studies comparative literature. She looks at Brian and they share a laugh: "We were talking about what you might study, and I thought astrophysics." We all burst into laughter. Brian looks at Mike and says, "But then *I said* he probably studies something in the humanities."

At this conversational turn Jane moved closer to Darren and me as Mike oriented toward Brian to respond to his comment. This joint movement effectively cordoned off Brian and Mike from the group. They began to talk about living in Philadelphia, but their conversation quickly seemed to stagnate. Mike gave one-word answers to Brian's questions ("Yeah" or "Cool"). When it became clear that Mike was looking to cool out the interaction, Jane strategically facilitated.

Mike shifts his body back to the group and steps towards me. I take a step backward to envelop Mike and Brian back into the group. As they join the group again, Jane says, “Well, I think we should get back to the rest of our friends, but it was nice meeting you guys!”

Informal encounters often end with perfunctory phrases that imply or ensure future contact, such as “I’m sure I’ll see you around” or “What are you doing next Friday?”

Since Jane established that they were leaving the encounter, Brian took advantage of the moment’s social conventions by asking Mike for his phone number. This face-work prevented him from losing face because, in the event that Mike declined to give his number, he was going to walk away regardless of the outcome:

Brian steps toward Jane and then asks, “Can I get your number?” He takes his iPhone out of his pocket and looks at Mike. After a noticeable beat Mike agrees, taking Brian’s phone and typing his number into a new message. Brian texts him: “This is Brian / You are Mike” to remind them both of the encounter later. As we watch Brian and Jane walk back through the bar’s crowd, Darren says, “They were nice, but a little awkward. “I really liked Jane,” Mike says. Darren responds, “That was *a lot* of work for him just to get your number.”

As with other encounters of this kind, it was not entirely clear if Jane and Brian approached us in the spirit of making new friends or if it was a pickup attempt from the start, though Darren thought it was a premeditated pickup. By initiating the encounter and sustaining it by giving us several lines for conversation, Jane brokered a new connection for her friend. While Mike was not interested romantically in Brian (and according to Mike, Brian never made it clear whether he was romantically interested in Mike), Brian was able to secure his phone number and become acquaintances with multiple patrons through Jane’s face work. For instance, I saw Brian out at the bars a handful of times after this and we exchanged pleasantries when we ran into one another. As men discussed in the bars and in interviews, they wanted to feel socially accepted

while in a visibly gay role by being recognized and acknowledged by gay others. This included making friends or finding hookups, but it also included fostering the type of weak tie Brian and I formed through Jane's face-work where men felt comfortable smiling and nodding at, or waving to, gay others in the bars.

### *Violations to the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System*

Some intergroup interactions violated, rather than reproduced, heteronormativity. Patrons expressed discomfort or confusion in interactions that betrayed an understanding that gay men and women are sexually incompatible, which underscore how intergroup interactions between men and women prop up the dominant sex/gender/sexuality system. For instance, men seemed annoyed and exasperated in situations when women questioned their homosexuality at the bar. One patron at the bar rolled his eyes as we talked about how women interact with him in the bars. He said, "[For] a few girls, even though I told them I'm gay, it goes in one ear and out the other, and they're just like, really pushy." In our interview, Cody reported: "In the dance area [of Woody's], I'll just be with my group of gays and two or three girls come up and [say], 'Oh my god, you're so hot' or something really stupid and basic, and throw themselves on me or my friend like I wanted that the whole thing, and that happens pretty frequently." In this scenario, Cody is frustrated at women who do not respect his sexuality.

In other situations, patrons engaged in sexualized interaction that did not always align with the cultural rules of their gender/sexualities. For example, Mateo identifies as a gay man but his views on sexualized interactions blur the boundaries between gay and straight, telling me that he likes to make out with people while out at gay bars regardless of their gender: "When I'm drunk, I just really want to make out with everyone... I like

hugging people, I like touching people... but it's not a sexual thing. I wouldn't get a boner... [S]ome straight girls have found it really weird. They are straight, so for them it's something completely different than what it is for me." Mateo suggests that women may be confused when he touches, hugs, and kisses them in gay bars given his and their seemingly incompatible sexual/gender identities. Even in these moments that appear to trouble dominate gender and sexuality norms, Mateo reveals that he holds normative assumptions for how the women may interpret kissing him; he can be gay and kiss women without it being "a sexual thing" because of his sexual orientation, but for women, kissing him aligns with heterosexuality and thus the interaction is "completely different."

## **Conclusion**

As a concept, heteronormativity is typically treated as "a discourse or ideology that defines heterosexuality and traditional gendered presentations as culturally ideal and normal" (Schrock et al. 2014:628). However, the interactional processes that construct heteronormative discourse or ideology in everyday life are less clear. This research attends to the call for greater social psychological attention to "how heteronormativity operates and is reproduced" (Schrock et al. 2014:616).

I operationalize heteronormativity as an interactional accomplishment that produces (1) stable gender and sexual binaries (e.g. male/female; homo-/heterosexual), (2) the assumption that a hetero-/homosexual binary governs natural attractions between gender and sexual identity categories, and (3) gender and sexual inequality. I leverage the salience of both gender and sexual identity categories in common interactions between women and gay men in gay public space to identify three instances through which heteronormativity is produced in an explicitly non-heteronormative

setting. I argue that broker interactions are initiated, sustained, and cooled out by patrons activating both gender and sexual beliefs that render sexualized interaction between gay men and women unproblematic. First, to initiate intergroup interaction gay men and women activated *sexual beliefs* around what it means to receive a compliment, or physical touch, by a stranger in public to initiate interaction in a sexualized yet nonsexual manner. Specifically, patrons approached one another on the belief that gay men were sexually incompatible with women based on their gender/sexual categories. Thus, interaction between these groups was inherently innocuous in a sexual environment. Second, women engaged in situational management to help frame situations between gay others as either sexual or friendly. This was an important step to sustaining interaction between men and could produce both gender and sexual inequalities. On the one hand, women's work to frame situations mirrors other inequitable contexts wherein women frame instrumental interaction between men (cf. Hoang 2015; Mears 2020). On the other hand, gay men interpreted unwanted moments of situation work as objectifying. Third, women performed unequal amounts of emotion work to sustain and cool out interactions on men's behalf.

Broker rituals help men meet gay others and integrate both socially and sexually into the gay world. However, these rituals also reaffirm boundaries of identity and belonging that render both women and heterosexuality as "outsiders" to gay space. It is this outsider status that grants them interactional latitude in the bars. Men, on the other hand, are rendered as insiders who are subjected to the space's cultural rules and norms. Sexual beliefs about gay men's inherently nonsexual relationality with women—and vice versa—flattens potential complexities in situations through reaffirming stable, knowable gender and sexual identity categories.



## VIGNETTE 2: 'I WOULD HOOKUP WITH HIM AGAIN'

On any given night, gay club-goers run into friends, former friends, frenemies, current hookups, former hookups, almost hookups, ex-boyfriends, and co-workers on their nightly rounds. Furthermore, due to the ubiquitous use of social media and mobile applications like Grindr and Tinder, the distinctions between stranger, acquaintance, and familiar are blurred as men find themselves co-present with individuals whom they know from online but not in “real life.” These complex relationships shape young men’s going out experiences, but for an ethnographer these social ties are not always discernible based on how men interact with one another. Men routinely ignored these complex relationships. There is relational complexity to men’s fleeting interactions.

### **Fieldnote, July 18, 2015**

It’s a humid Saturday night and I meet Liam, a white, rising senior in college, at his summer sublet in Rittenhouse Square to do a “light pre-game” before we go out. Liam is involved in LGBT activism on his college campus, and he is in Philadelphia for a summer internship. We have a drink and Liam takes a few hits from his bong before we walk the few blocks to iCandy. We’re already sweating in our tank tops when we arrive. The bar is busy, and Liam comments on the diversity: “Wow like, there are even trans people here right now, which I never see.” We order drinks at the bar and park ourselves at an empty high-top table near the back of the bar where we can watch patrons. A young white guy and his woman friend pass us on their way to the bathroom. “Hey!” Liam exclaims, and the guy looks over at us. To look over at us requires only a small degree of head movement, and I suspect that the guy had already seen Liam and had decided to try to go past him unnoticed. He smiles and his eyes widen in recognition.

“Hey!” he says back.

“How’ve you been?” Liam asks.

“Good, you?”

“Good!”

“We’re gonna go to the bathroom,” the guy says, walking away.

Liam puts his hand on my forearm as if he needs a physical support to stay up.

“Oh my *god*,” he says. “That was the Drexel guy I hooked up with.”

Earlier at his apartment, Liam told me a story about how late on a weekday night—a week or two prior—he had been chatting with this guy on Grindr. They were both horny, and the other guy said that he would cuddle but he wasn’t interested in anal sex. Liam said that was fine with him. They were about a mile away from one another per Grindr. They agreed to meet in the middle first on the Chestnut Street bridge. Liam thought the guy was very cute, especially because he was wearing a “an artsy t-shirt” and black skinny jeans, despite it being a hot summer night. They walked back to Liam’s apartment, hung out on his bed for a while, smoked pot, and then started making out. As Liam told it, one thing led to another, and the guy ended up topping Liam without a condom. They “fucked bareback” because the guy told Liam that condoms make him soft and he couldn’t have sex with one. Liam was stressed out about this, and promised himself he was going to get tested as soon as he could. He reasoned, “I mean, he said he was negative, he goes to Drexel, like, I’m sure it’s fine.” He joked that it was ironic that he planned to become a physician and yet was “spreading my legs for condomless sex with strangers.”

“I would hookup with him again,” Liam says speculatively, as the guy and his friend walk away from our table.

The pair walks past us again and finds an open spot at the bar to order drinks. Once they order, to my slight surprise, they come back up to us. Liam introduces us.

“How do you guys know each other?” the guy’s woman friend asks.

They look at each other briefly and say in near unison, “Grindr!”

They laugh and, and his friend laughs along. “Oh, *Grindr*,” she says knowingly.

We engage in light conversation for a few minutes. I find out that he is 21 and she just turned 20. When each of us runs out of things to say, there is a beat and Liam’s hookup tells us that they are going to go upstairs to dance. “See ya later,” he says.

While they go upstairs and dance and Liam and I migrate to Woody’s, their conversation moves from in person to texting. They had exchanged phone numbers after their hookup the other night. Liam insists that he does not care about his run-in with the hookup, but it’s clear that the encounter has pulled his focus out of the moment and into his phone. They text periodically throughout the night, and I see Liam check his phone for messages more than once as we dance at Woody’s. When we part ways a few minutes after 2am, Liam says that he might hookup with the guy again tonight. I tell him to have fun. About a half hour later Liam texts me to report that the hookup bailed because he needed to accompany his friend home and was too tired. They didn’t end up hooking up again.

### **Fieldnote, January 20, 2019**

Steven, a 28-year-old white gay man, and I go out thinking it’ll be a relatively quiet Sunday night at Tavern on Camac given the frigid weather and the icy sidewalks. Au contraire, it’s a long weekend—MLK Day is tomorrow—and the piano bar is packed. The line to get upstairs weaves all the way through the first floor and we barely have to step into the bar to join the line. We get in line since there is no other place to stand anyway. The pianist croons Lady Gaga’s “I’ll Never Love Again” to a crowd that is half

singing along and half watching the (muted) NFL semifinals between the Patriots and the Chiefs.

It's the first time I've seen the TVs here turned to an NFL game, and Steven and I have no idea why. We start talking about... football... incoherently, and the short white woman in her early 30s standing in front of us in line turns around and saves us from ourselves and starts contextualizing the game and why it matters. The Eagles lost their seminal game, and "as a city we are rooting for the Chiefs" because the Patriots are our "archnemesis" right now, she tells us.

It's an odd juxtaposition in the bar. There is a large group of men and women around the piano, listening to the pianist play songs like "Let It Go" from *Frozen* ("because it's frozen out"), while the guys around the bar are hooked on the football game. When the Chiefs, in the last few seconds of the final quarter, tie with the Patriots, several folks cheer and howl. This doesn't seem to affect the folks around the piano much, who continue to sing along to the songs being performed.

We continue to chat with the woman in front of us throughout what turns into a 50-minute wait to get upstairs. She jokes that seeing the football game on at Tavern is "triggering" after leaving her house, where she and her friends were watching the game. "Where are my showtunes?" she asks in jest. We learn that she does not identify as straight, and she "desperately" does not want to seem affiliated with the two, presumably straight, young white women who are standing in front of her in line. They aren't fully paying attention to the movements of the line, which causes a group of gays in their 20s wearing Stonewall dodgeball t-shirts to audibly complain amongst themselves. They deliberate more than once about whether they can just skip the women in line. Eventually, these two women finish their drinks and leave the line entirely because of the long wait.

As we wait in line, two guys from the Stonewall group gossip about some of the men they see around the bar. “See that guy on the stairs?” one says to his friend. “I’ve talked to him on Grindr and he says he’s a top, but he’s totally a bottom.” “Which one?” his friend asks. “In the white shirt.” I try to catch Steven’s eye to see if he is also overhearing this, but his focus is on the piano. Later, as we walk down Camac Street, I mention this conversation and Steven says he saw him too and he knows who I’m talking about. Steven opens Grindr on his phone; the orange glow from the app opening briefly illuminates his face. He quickly pulls up the profile of the guy in the white shirt. He tells me that he used to hook up with him and his ex-boyfriend last year. “He is, in fact, a top.” He preferred to hook up with the ex-boyfriend because he was “vers[atile] and not as awkward.” In full gossip mode, he says that the guy who was standing in front of us in line has trouble getting an erection and would “use a vibrator on you until he got hard and finished super quickly.”

Steven “taps” his profile, which sends the guy a fire emoji from Steven. “I would hook up with him again,” he concludes.

## CHAPTER 4: ACQUAINTED STRANGERS AND THWARTED INTERACTION

### Overview

While some situations in sexual contexts facilitate interaction, others can make overtures difficult to negotiate. Furthermore, social media creates new challenges as individuals navigate sexualized spaces in an increasingly digital world. Drawing on fieldwork in Philadelphia gay bars and supplemental interviews with young gay club-goers, I find that men experience unexpected challenges that inhibit their ability to socialize with gay others and enact positive gay identities. I show how the social organization of particular bars, as well as the popularity of mobile dating applications, undermine the interactional accomplishment of positive outcomes such as identity affirmation and “having fun”: (1) Men’s embodied work to evade effeminacy constrain their facial expressions, comportment, and speech; (2) Gay bars’ multiple functions as sexual fields and community outposts render both social and sexual interaction difficult to initiate; (3) Patrons struggle over whether and how to interact with other mobile dating app users, a novel social tie I conceptualize as *acquainted strangers*, in the bars. I discuss how these mechanisms—managing stigma corporeally, negotiating discrepant frames, and navigating ambiguous social ties—may thwart interactional achievements while reproducing inequalities in contexts beyond the gay bar.

## Introduction

As I conducted fieldwork, I started referring to Adam, an affable white 28-year-old, as a bar regular in my fieldnotes. I frequently saw him out at the bars. He seemed wholly integrated into public gay life in the Gayborhood. I also occasionally went out with him and his friends, including several young gay men, a few straight women from work, and his sister who also lived in the area. His nightly rituals resembled those of many other young men. Standing in a circle, he and his friends took subtle breaks from conversation to gaze around the bar and check out the night's scene. He sometimes ordered that we "do a lap" through the crowds to better inspect who was at the bar that night. Depending on how busy the bar was, a single lap might take ten minutes or longer if someone in the group ran into someone else they knew. He was often drunk by the end of the night when the bars closed at 2am, and he hung out on 13<sup>th</sup> Street as he and his friends, alongside other groups of club-goers, negotiated whether the night was over or whether the group would roam to a restaurant to eat or to Voyeur, the late-night club in the Gayborhood. When I interviewed Adam, he expressed a common ambivalence about his experiences going out that seemed surprising for someone with gay friends and a weekly routine of going to gay bars:

I don't think going out is a particularly comfortable experience, ever. I don't go out to Woody's because I'm comfortable there. Not uncomfortable as in unsafe... I mean I don't feel like I'm myself... It's hard to let loose there. I won't go out if I don't feel like I look good enough. I'll be more self-conscious if I feel like my hair doesn't look the way I want it to or I'm not wearing something I feel hot in. I feel like you're kind of in the spotlight there...I feel like sometimes I can come off as a little less friendly. Like, I'll notice that I have more of a resting bitch face... no smile, more serious looking. Like a don't-fuck-with-me kinda look.

When talking to friends in the bars Adam smiled and giggled, but when he looked around at the crowd he grimaced. His eyes glazed over. I routinely observed men coolly observe other patrons while firmly planted in a circle of friends. Men made themselves unapproachable.

Mateo, a 21-year-old Swiss art student, expressed a similar ambivalence about his outings in the Gayborhood. Though he routinely frequented bars such as Woody's after he fostered a group of gay friends through an ex-boyfriend, he felt that his ability to feel he belonged at Woody's was limited. He felt judged for his identity expression:

I hate Woody's, actually... People are stiff, they don't let go and have fun, and then judge you for having fun, or look at you like you are not supposed to be [having fun]... I want to express myself and I feel really limited and just not in my place with all those people [at Woody's]... What I would like is feeling like I belong in a group<sup>7</sup>.

Why did club-goers who I repeatedly saw out, such as Adam and Mateo, feel that they were not able to express themselves in bars they regularly frequented?

On weekend nights, gay and straight club-goers from across Philadelphia and its suburbs travel into the city's Gayborhood to revel in multistoried gay bars. While gay men are choosing to reside outside of gay-concentrated urban districts (Ghaziani 2014b), and often meet partners through location-based mobile dating applications such as Grindr (Miles 2018), young gay revelers continue to place symbolic importance on the

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<sup>7</sup> Before Mateo graduated college, he fortuitously stumbled upon a USB stick on the sidewalk. When he returned to his dorm room, he plugged it into his laptop to find clues of its owner and found professional photos of drag queens. He was able to locate the owner of the USB stick: a photographer with ties to Philadelphia's drag scene. He contacted the photographer on social media and, as an artist himself, eventually became friends with the photographer, who introduced him to a subculture in and around the Gayborhood that requires social capital to find. Mateo expressed that he had fun with this social group and felt comfortable among them in ways that he did not when he went out to Woody's. Mateo's experience underscores how coming "into" a gay community is a process, rife with fits and starts.



public nature of gay bars (Greene 2014). In a national context where heterosexuals are willing to grant nonheterosexuals legal rights such as partnership benefits but are less willing to grant them informal privileges such as displaying same-sex intimacy in public (Doan, Loehr, and Miller 2014), gay bars provide space for sexual minorities to affirm positive gay identities and to interactionally generate “we-feeling”—the social experience of solidarity and belonging—around collective gay identity (Baldor 2019; Orne 2017; Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019; Vaisey 2007).

While young club-goers expressed that neither digital technologies nor non-gay spaces could supplant gay bars’ interactional benefits, I found through 175 hours of participation observation that men had trouble engaging in interaction with gay others in these spaces. I observed instances of not only failed interaction—common in sexual spaces replete with embarrassment and rejection (Berk 1977; Grazian 2007; Green 2011; Ronen 2010; Snow et al. 1991)—but also many moments of *thwarted interaction*. Club-goers stressed that it was difficult to initiate either sociable or sexual interaction with gay others let alone manage rejection following failed pick-up attempts. Furthermore, mobile dating apps tended to hinder rather than facilitate interaction; patrons lacked a cultural script for navigating face-to-face interaction with other app users. Men’s interactional difficulties soured not only their social experiences in gay spaces, but also their perceptions of themselves and their peers.

The accomplishment of social interaction is vulnerable to failure, from intentional breaches (Garfinkel 1967), spoiling (Goffman 1963b), framing errors (Goffman 1974), and interactional vandalism (Duneier and Molotch 1999). Despite these vulnerabilities, Goffman (1974) maintains that individuals are usually able to reach enough of a consensus on what is happening in a situation to maintain interaction. In this vein, ethnographers often document how positive outcomes and achievements are

interactionally accomplished. In the case of sexual sociality, sociologists have long shown how individuals and collectives accomplish salient identities and group memberships along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national identity through sexual interaction in sexual spaces (e.g. Cressey 1932; Farrer 2002; Grazian 2007; Hoang 2014). These interactional accomplishments occur in contexts where individuals manage face-threatening situations that carry a high risk of failure or rejection through both defensive and protective face-work (Berk 1977; Grazian 2007). While Goffman (1967:15) notes that avoidance is “the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face,” he moves on to analyze strategies used “once the person chances an encounter” (16). This inattention to variation in flat-out avoidance practices raises questions about when and why individuals choose to avoid entering interaction. Elsewhere, Goffman (1963b) elaborates on how stigmatization can strain interaction (cf. Berk 1977; Davis 1961). It is less clear, however, when and how stigma thwarts interaction as stigmatized individuals may choose to confront hostile interaction rather than avoid it (Orne 2013).

Through an interactionist analysis of situations that inhibit social interaction between gay others in gay bars, I highlight three mechanisms that *undermine* interactional achievements. First, managing stigma through the manipulation of one’s body can render individuals physically unable to engage in interaction. Second, negotiating multiple and competing interpretations or “frames” of reality engenders defensive face-saving behavior, as individuals try to avoid the embarrassing risk of “misframing” the situation (Goffman 1974:309). Third, encountering digital relationships—which I conceptualize as *acquainted strangers*—offline creates relational ambiguity that makes interaction difficult and socially risky to navigate.

This chapter makes several contributions. First, these findings contribute to understandings of how young sexual minorities experience gay “institutional anchors”

(Ghaziani 2014a), which have ramifications for their mental health and wellbeing (Russell and Fish 2016) and for the vibrancy of sexual expression in urban neighborhoods (Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019). Past work highlights how gay institutions tend to be exclusionary by categories of race, class, and gender (Barrett and Pollack 2005; Greene 2018; Valentine and Skelton 2003); this research examines exclusion processes at the situational level that both interact with and cut across patterns of categorical exclusion. Second, these findings contribute to research on sexual sociality more broadly. Sociologists tend to theorize sexual spaces like gay bars or college parties as competitive sexual fields with internal rules and structures of desire (Green 2011; Wade 2019). These findings underscore how participants may variably recognize and experience sexual spaces as sexual fields; sexual spaces can contain multiple meanings for the patrons who participate within them. These multiple meanings may collide and inhibit interaction. Third, while sociologists are increasingly attuned to how digital technologies may be disrupting sexual cultures rooted in physical space (e.g. Lundquist and Curington 2019), few studies have investigated how social media shapes sexual sociality in situ (see Rafalow and Adam 2017). This chapter contributes to new media and sociological research on “context collapse” (boyd 2010; Stuart 2019) by defining and beginning to describe the *relational* issues present in moments when performances and audiences are desegregated. I do so by bringing literature on urban space and relationships (Goffman 1963a; Lofland 1998) into the social media age. While gay bars provide a rich case for developing the concept, I discuss how acquainted strangers, as a type of digitally mediated social tie, are not exclusive to a particular context, population, or form of social media.

### *Going Out and “Having Fun” as Identity Work*

Going out is consequential social activity. Nonheterosexuals who adopt a collective gay identity, foster gay friendships and romantic partners, and participate in gay communities—fostering a positive gay identity—have better mental health outcomes than those who do not as community support mitigates stigmatization and discrimination (Herek and Garnets 2007; Russell and Fish 2016). Adopting a gay identity and participating in local gay institutions, however, are distinct processes (Leznoff and Westley 1956; Orne 2017; Stein 1999). The latter involves identity work, which is “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115). By socializing among other men in gay bars and engaging in interactions ranging from chatting and deploying camp (Barrett 2017:22) to sexualized interaction such as grinding, kissing, and going home with one another, young men interactionally work to accomplish positive gay identities (cf. Brekhus 2003; Connell 1992; Hunter 2010; Stein 1999). Furthermore, the social experience of “having fun” can produce moments of “collective effervescence” between club-goers that generates solidarity, a sense of belonging, and group cohesion (Collins 2004; Durkheim 1995).

Other research complicates these findings, arguing that coming “into” existing gay communities can be oppressive (Brown et al. 2014; Valentine and Skelton 2003; Weston 1995). Negotiating a positive gay identity may be a negative experience, and the literature highlights how club-goers who are not affluent, white gay men experience exclusion in gay bars (Barrett and Pollack 2005; Greene 2019; Hutson 2010). Literature on social belonging emphasizes that belonging encompasses not only “feeling at home” in a particular place or social group but also entails boundary politics to demarcate who belongs and who does not (Kuurne and Gómez 2019; Yuval-Davis 2011). Sexual field

theory underscores the latter point by conceptualizing gay bars as competitive fields of struggle wherein individuals jockey for sexual status based on collectively understood measures of physical attractiveness (Green 2008b). Indeed, gay men can experience not only minority stress outside of gay communities, but also from within them through “avoidance from others, social isolation, inhospitable and stigmatizing social conditions, and repeated rejection” (Green 2008a:448). I contribute to these debates by illuminating how gay patrons may experience gay space as both liberating and oppressive as they manage face in sexual contexts that are situationally communal, competitive, and—due to social media—collapsed.

#### *Face-Work in (Collapsed) Sexual Contexts*

This chapter analyzes an important yet overlooked stage in the unfolding of social interaction: when individuals decide to initiate, or be receptive to, “face engagements” with a co-present other (Goffman 1963a:89). Goffman (1963a) and other scholars of “interaction spaces and urban relationships” (Lofland 2003:949) identify several situational factors that affect whether and how people initiate interaction in public spaces, such as the physical context, individuals’ roles in the situation, and individuals’ relationships with one another.

Sexual spaces, such as bars and nightclubs, are interactionally fraught sites of sociality as individuals manage face-threatening situations (Berk 1977). Some past work suggests how face-work practices may inhibit interaction and interactional accomplishments in sexual spaces (Berk 1977). I build on these insights by showing how “asociality” is produced through collective practices in the social media age. Research on sexual sociality tends to analyze how sexual interaction is accomplished in spaces that foster a “clear frame” (Goffman 1974:338) of what is happening in the situation. In these

spaces, “strips” of activity such as mutual glances tend to be easy to interpret. For example, Weinberg and Williams (1975) argue that gay bathhouses “promote a known, shared, and organized reality” (126) of impersonal sexual intent, which helps men avoid awkward misunderstandings. In a similar vein, scholars often study dance floors where club-goers foster a shared reality that enables them to both initiate and cool out encounters (Ronen 2010; Snow, Robinson, and McCall 1991).

Goffman (1974:248) notes that various frames of social activity are intermeshed in everyday life, and misframed situations may lead to failed interaction, loss of face, and embarrassment. I argue that many sexual contexts promote multiple frames for understanding reality, and sometimes different spaces in the same bar offer clearer or more ambiguous frames. For instance, smiling at someone standing by a bar’s entrance may be a more ambiguous gesture than smiling at someone on a loud, dark dance floor. Furthermore, while multiple frames can coexist and maintain social activity, sometimes frames are discrepant and counteract one another. Gay bars are fruitful sites to examine how all sexual spaces foster multiple, and sometimes discrepant, frames of social activity. Patrons recognize gay bars not only as sexual fields but also (at least nominally) as “places of care” where sexual minorities can generate social capital and support (Brown et al. 2014:300; Hunter 2010). While a competitive sexual frame may curtail friendly interaction—though not always (Hennen 2014)—a communal frame promotes it. In the social media age, sexual spaces are also digitally mediated. Gay men who use dating apps and frequent gay bars are at risk of running into other app users and experiencing “context collapse,” which describes when “private and otherwise compromising pieces of information ‘leak out’ onto the public stage, desegregate audiences, and jeopardize desired performances” (Stuart 2019:5; see also boyd 2010). Blackwell et al. (2015) find that gay men anticipate context collapse by engaging in

several impression management strategies within Grindr, such as only sending face photos in private conversations so that other users cannot immediately know their identity, blocking other users who they suspect they know from other contexts, and maintaining congruity between how they portray themselves in their profile and how they use the app. This chapter builds on these findings by showing how dating app users manage moments of context collapse by avoiding interaction with other users, which I argue stems in part from how social media produces ambiguous relationships between users. Drawing on literature on urban space and relationships (e.g. Goffman 1963; Lofland 1998), I conceptualize this relationship as acquainted strangers.

### **Conceptualizing Acquainted Strangers**

Research on urban spaces and relationships highlights how different social contexts correspond with different kinds of relationships and interaction orders (Goffman 1963). Lofland (1998:10-11) theorizes urban life into three distinct social territories defined by the dominant relationships people foster within them: private (“ties of intimacy”), parochial (“a sense of commonality among acquaintances and strangers”), and public (“the world of strangers”). Normative interactional codes order each realm. For example, while people regard strangers with “civil inattention” in public realms (Goffman 1963a; Lofland 1998), interactional “neighboring” practices structure parochial realms (Kusenbach 2006). In practice, these social contexts variably overlap, resulting in social ties that may blur between strangers, acquaintances, and intimates (Lofland 1998).

Extending this literature into the social media age, I argue that the relationships individuals develop through digital technologies are best captured as a blurring of relational categories, which shapes how acquainted strangers regard one another in

physical space. An acquainted stranger is a *digitally mediated social tie that individuals foster through social media use*. While people may become online acquaintances through digital interaction, these relationships do not necessarily translate into offline acquaintanceships. I theorize that acquainted stranger relationships may vary by the *intimacy* and *duration* of digital interaction, and *reciprocity* of offline recognition. This variability will shape whether and how acquainted strangers navigate physical co-presence. For example, while men's digital interactions on Grindr tend to be sexual, the amount of intimate information shared varies (Licoppe, Rivière, and Morel 2016). The duration of digital interaction between two users also varies; some interactions terminate quickly while others persist over the course of days, months, or even years. In physical space, acquainted strangers may or may not reciprocally recognize one another as a digital acquaintance. In gay bars, feigning unrecognition is a common face-saving maneuver for ignoring an acquainted stranger. These factors potentially foster qualitatively different acquainted stranger relationships.

I posit that inherent in the acquainted stranger relationship is an uncomfortable gulf between being intimate or familiar with someone online and being strangers offline. Encountering acquainted strangers in public may provoke negative emotions such as embarrassment or discomfort for at least two reasons. First, as research on context collapse documents, interacting with acquainted strangers face-to-face can discredit one's face on- and offline because individuals' digital self-presentations may not align with their offline selves and vice versa (boyd 2010). Second, Goffman (1963a) argues that normative codes of conduct that govern interaction in public have moral components. Intentionally ignoring acquaintances, for example, is a "breach of civility" (Goffman 1963a:115-116) that can aggravate people's feelings of social disconnectedness in public (cf. Wesselmann, Cardoso, and Slater 2012). However, people generally lack clear



normative codes of conduct for interacting with acquainted strangers in physical contexts. Thus, individuals risk regarding an acquainted stranger with too much familiarity or too little.

### **Ethnography of a Negative Case**

Why did men go to bars to interact and generate shared meaning with gay others only to impede their ability to do so? Ethnographers typically analyze an observable pattern or social process in the field. Analyzing negative cases, or instances where the observed social process does not occur or fails to unfold, is important in generating theory about a social process (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As I grappled with why gay clubgoers found interaction to be so fraught to negotiate in the bars, I had to engage in *ethnography of a negative case*. When, how, and why does interaction fail to occur? Systematically observing what does not happen poses ethnographic challenges. In this chapter, I “coded-in-motion” (Tavory and Timmermans 2018:143) situations where men could have interacted—due to factors such as physical proximity, shared glances, or being acquaintances—but did not, as well as situations where interaction did occur. In the field, I began to ask questions about whom informants knew in the bars, which helped to uncover how digital space meshed with physical space. I also coded data concerning men’s feelings about themselves, other patrons, and the bars more generally to discern how they interpreted bar interactions and non-interactions. Later in analysis, I synthesized research on sexual sociality to identify how social practices in other spaces inhibited interaction. Through this process of triangulating my own data’s patterns and extant research, general processes emerged as both case-specific and generalizable factors that thwart interactional accomplishments in sexual spaces.

## **Mechanisms That Thwart Interactional Accomplishments**

Club-goers expressed that they went out to have fun or “let loose,” find hookups and dates, and/or meet new friends. A mid-20s patron said he wanted to meet new people at Woody’s, retorting, “Isn’t that why we go out?” Another expressed: “Whether you admit it to yourself, we go out because we are hoping to meet someone.” However, men often expressed they had trouble accomplishing these goals. Men complained that club-goers were “cliquey” and unfriendly. Daniel (Cuban American, 28) said: “I often get mad at myself because I’m just going out to have fun. But... is it really fun?” In the following sections, I describe three mechanisms that thwart the interactional accomplishment of positive outcomes such as “having fun:” (1) managing stigma corporeally, (2) negotiating discrepant frames, and (3) navigating ambiguous social ties.

### *Managing Stigma Corporeally*

Men discussed not wanting to appear effeminate (“fem”) or “too gay” in the bars. Being “too gay” could carry sexual and social costs to “fitting in” (Hutson 2010). Strategies to evade being “fem” constrained men’s facial expressions, speech, and bodily comportment, rendering men unapproachable.

Some men displayed a masculine front by appearing unfriendly. Paul (Asian American, 21) explained: “There are a lot of people who are very much macho... and a lot of people are really frigid—not frigid but like, *grrrr*—you know what I mean? Almost like acting too cool... I definitely try and butch myself out more, making sure I’m projecting a more masculine identity.” Similarly, Adam’s description of his own impression management as a “don’t-fuck-with-me kinda look” evokes cultural norms of masculine aggression and he suggested that this performance did not comfortably align with his self-image by commenting, “I don’t feel like I’m myself [at Woody’s].”

Men were also preoccupied with how their voices sounded. One patron with a deep voice said, “I was fortunate that I did not have a naturally high voice that gave me away in high school, like if I want to 100% pass [as straight], I can.” For men who worried their voices “sounded gay” (Gaudio 1994), approaching gay others to engage in conversation was stressful. Daniel described talking to gay others as “a big leap of faith:” “I’m so confident in so many ways at work... I’m not so confident to walk up and just start talking to someone [in gay bars]... it’s anxiety provoking.” When asked to describe a time he initiated interaction at Woody’s, he groaned and described a brief encounter where he initiated interaction with a man who he had never met in person but with whom he had developed rapport on Grindr. After approaching the man and saying hello, the man quickly cooled Daniel out by turning back to his friends. The failed interaction was “the shittiest [he] ever felt,” and he attributed the rejection to his voice: “I was like, ‘Oh my god... I don’t think my photo looks that different from me in person... maybe my voice, you hear me talk, maybe that was a turn-off...’” I asked him to explain why his voice would be a turn-off. He explained: “I just hate my voice. I *hate* my voice.” He labeled culturally effeminate aspects of his voice as ‘issues:’ “It sounds more feminine, there’s something in my intonation, a little bit of a lisp.” Several other interviewees described their voices as nasally and unattractive, exclaiming that they “hated” their voices.

Some men were hesitant about appearing undesirable while dancing, which is a gendered activity that could discredit a masculine identity (cf. Craig 2013). I often observed young men jumping up and down while “fist pumping” the air on the dance floor. Men felt that moving one’s hips and shoulders too aggressively was femininizing and engaging in dance styles that originated in gay spaces, such as voguing, were “too gay.” When I asked a 21-year-old patron why he was standing stiffly on the edge of the

dance floor at Woody's, he replied that he "didn't want to look stupid" and pointed to a group of men shaking their hips to the music. In one instance on the dance floor, James (white, 22) deflected unwanted attention by "dropping it fem:"

James begins "vogueing" in the middle of the dance floor, framing his face with flourished hands while shaking his hips wildly. He leans in and yells to me that a "creepy" guy was staring at him a few feet away: "I dropped it fem and he lost interest!" He laughs and continues bopping back and forth without the vogue moves.

James's maneuver suggests that effeminacy and "acting gay" is devalued in the gay bar such that feminizing one's performance can cool out unwanted interactions.

In pursuit of embodying gendered desirability, men constructed situations that inhibited social interaction. These gender performances intersected with race and class. While white patrons did not explicitly draw on their whiteness, some white men drew moral boundaries around overt displays of sexuality in the bars. For instance, I spoke to one white gay college student idling on the edge of the Woody's dance floor who looked on at the sweaty throngs of dancers with disdain. I asked if he was going to join the dancers and he said no, saying that the activity was not "classy." Furthermore, some white and class-privileged non-white patrons at Woody's made disparaging remarks about iCandy, which had a reputation for drawing a more diverse crowd along the lines of race, class, and gender presentation, by calling it "colorful" or "trashy." These remarks suggest that for race- and class-privileged patrons, public displays of sexuality are an issue of respectability (cf. Ahlm 2017).

Some non-white patrons commented on how race shaped their gendered presentations and how others perceived them. For instance, Paul felt that he needed to aggressively enact a masculine identity as an Asian American compared to his white friends, from "fist pumping" rather than shaking his hips on the dance floor to scowling.

In a different vein, Phil (black, 27) reported talking to more strangers and dancing unselfconsciously at Woody's compared to monthly black parties where he felt he might find a partner: "...I don't usually think there's anyone looking at or looking for me [at Woody's], so... I'm more outrageous when I go to Woody's and dancin' my ass off... I'm really sweaty [and] not conscious of what people think about me. Maybe I'm dancing more provocative, dancing on the pole... versus First Fridays where I'm like, kinda dancing but I'm a little bit of a wallflower because nobody wants to take home a ho... I try to keep it classy." Phil illuminates a general finding from this fieldwork that people self-police their behaviors more in sexual spaces where they are more invested in appearing desirable.

While these gendered face-work strategies limited social interaction, they were situational, and varied by context. At Woody's, I observed how patrons loosened their face-work during moments of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995). One night on the first floor, which has no dance floor and no expectation for dancing, the DJ put on Whitney Houston's 1987 hit "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." As the music played, I heard a wave of excited cheers and saw patrons singing along, filling the bar with an additional layer of sound. Men who were previously standing started playfully dancing. Some men made eye contact with others near them and sang the words at each other. A twentysomething white patron dancing next to me exclaimed, "Everyone's *masc* until—!" as he threw his arms up into the air in sync with the chorus modulating into a new key. At this moment, patrons jumped up and down and sang along so loudly that it was indiscernible from shouting. This patron suggested that men relaxing their gendered self-presentations facilitated this heady moment that quickly dissipated as the song faded and men stopped dancing and turned back to their friends.

### *Negotiating Discrepant Frames*

Bars such as Woody's fostered discrepant frames for interpreting social reality as both social and sexual spaces (Goffman 1974). Men worried about mistaking a friendly conversation for a pick-up and vice versa. This was sometimes further complicated when men employed camp in interactions, such as speaking in double-entendres and touching each other in both a friendly and sexual manner (cf. Orne 2017).

Establishing a shared definition of the situation took social finesse and could open both interactants to face threats. In sexualized environments, glances tend to signify sexual interest and tend to be withheld when an individual is not sexually interested (Green 2011). At Woody's, glances took on a multiplicity of meanings. Daniel wondered: "I just smile at people to be nice and I don't know if other people are doing that too... a look or smile [in the bar] implies that you are either into them or you made eye contact because you are polite? I don't know." Manuel (Latino, 31), elaborated on the many interpretations of an overture such as "Hey, I think you're really cute:"

Well first it's like, 'Thank you,' it's a compliment. But then it's like, 'Do you want more? What are you looking for? Why are you asking me?' All these things go through your mind... It's uneasy, because you don't know what to expect. You don't know if they're there just to say, 'Oh I think you're attractive' and move on, you don't know if it's like, 'Oh I wanna get to know you,' you don't know if it's like, 'I think you're hot, let's have sex.' Like, you don't know that.

The multiple interpretations of these gestures made men "uneasy" and produced stressful situations where men were not sure whether they were misinterpreting the frame.

Finding oneself out-of-face in this type of encounter was embarrassing and possibly subject to ridicule from friends. In an extended example, I went to Woody's one night in March with a group of young men that enveloped a smaller group of college

students into their circle. This is typically how the men I spoke with met new people out—through friends of friends. One of the college students, Liam, started talking intently with Mike, a twentysomething, in the circle, and they sustained their conversation throughout the night as we moved to the upstairs dance floor. They danced side-by-side in the larger group and they occasionally paired off and danced face-to-face. Individuals in the group noted that they seemed to be interested in one another. Once Woody's turned on all the lights at 2am and herded its patrons out onto the sidewalk—where, in good weather, people socialized well past 2am—our enlarged group negotiated how we were all getting home. Mike told Liam that he was taking an Uber home if he wanted to come along, and Liam quickly turned to his friends seemingly to deliberate. One of his friends excitedly said, "Go!" It seemed clear to Liam, his friends, and me that they were going to hookup. I later heard that Mike was "mortified" because once they were at his apartment and he tried to kiss Liam, Liam pulled away and said that he only went to his place to hang out as friends. "How did I think he was into me when he wasn't?" Mike expressed, shaking his head into his palm as he relived the encounter at Woody's the next weekend. One of his friends consoled him, calling the student an "idiot" and saying that he was "probably embarrassed" about what happened. While this situation's duration is extreme—persisting beyond the bar and ending at an apartment across town—it illuminates more generally how two men could hold competing definitions of the same situation as sexual or platonic in the bars and not realize the discrepancy until the situation exposes one or both men as being out of face.

Some men deliberately closed themselves off to these situations, which was an effective face-saving strategy to avoid embarrassment and an ineffective one for fostering social interaction. For instance, Ethan (white, 22) reported approaching women in the bar but not men—"I'm not one to go up to people and start a conversation unless it's

[with] a woman...”—because of past negative experiences trying to casually chat with gay others: “If you try to be friendly and go up to a [guy], most of the guys are like, ‘No, don’t talk to me’... So I’m like, ‘Well, okay, [my friends and I] are going to have a good time and you guys can stand there being fucking bitches.’”

Ethan’s remark highlights another avoidance strategy: immediately cooling out interactions before the initiator’s intentions are clear. A young white patron and I watched the Woody’s dance floor from the sidelines (where it felt ten degrees cooler) while another young white patron stood two feet away. My informant leaned over and asked the stranger, “How’s your night going?” He briefly looked over at who was asking the question and looked back to the dance floor. He said that he was “just waiting for my boyfriend to come back from the bathroom.” It was clear in his lack of eye contact and in his response that he was not opening himself up to continue the encounter, and presumably interpreted the question as a sexual advance. My informant looked at me, rolled his eyes and laughed it off. He later said he thought it was “a little ridiculous” that the guy mentioned his boyfriend, and—either truthfully or to save face—explained that he wasn’t trying to hit on him. Situations like this foreclosed interaction. A college student in Woody’s lamented that gay men “act very aloof” towards one another because “they think that if you talk to them, it means you’re interested.” His friend agreed, likening the dynamic to heterosexual cross-gender friends. He said that making friends at the bar was “a tricky thing to navigate,” explaining that “you have to make it very clear that you’re not trying to dance with them or *on* them but actually legitimately [talk with] them in a platonic way.” Early one evening at a non-gay bar in the Gayborhood, a late 20s patron dryly summed up what he described as “the problem with the gay community:” “The people you want to sleep with want to be your friend, and the people you want to be friends with want to sleep with you.”



### *Navigating Ambiguous Social Ties*

Virtual spaces can create interactional barriers in physical space. Men routinely encountered gay others whom they knew, chatted with, slept with, dated or hoped to sleep with/date through mobile dating apps in the bars. While cultural norms around not interacting with former hookups is a documented aspect of hookup culture and is socially salient in this context (cf. Wade 2019), men lacked norms around interacting with acquainted strangers.

By looking steely and not smiling at gay others, men were not only ignoring total strangers but a range of acquainted strangers. This was only clear, however, once I learned to ask. Standing with two friends in their mid-20s at Woody's, I asked, "How many people here do you know in some capacity?" One glanced around, rolled his eyes and said, "I know about 50%." Given that I had yet to observe him interacting with anyone in the bar besides his friend and me, I was surprised by his estimate. They began to point out patrons with whom they were acquainted but did not acknowledge. "I almost went on a date with that guy," one said in a hushed voice as a thirtysomething white guy in a rainbow tank top walked briskly past us, avoiding eye contact.

Running into acquainted strangers created potentially embarrassing moments of context collapse where club-goers had to manage discrepancies between their online and offline selves. Daniel's failed encounter with an acquainted stranger that caused him to worry about the tenor of his voice suggests that meeting men from online for the first time offline can be discrediting. The interaction lines men take online may not be available in physical space. In the context of dating apps where men often engage in sexually explicit conversations and exchange sexual photos, offline encounters can heighten men's vulnerability to discrediting context collapse. For instance, Jorge (Puerto Rican, 26)

reported that he and his friends share nude photos exchanged through Grindr conversations with each other, which creates uncomfortable encounters offline:

The thing is, I know who the people are because they put their face pictures in there... They all go to [the café where I work], so when I'm at [work] and I see this person, I'm like '*Oh my god*, I just saw your dick pic yesterday because my friend showed me; this is embarrassing. This is really embarrassing.'

By expressing embarrassment and labeling the situation as embarrassing, Jorge suggests that the lines and selves available to individuals in digital interaction may not comfortably align with offline interactions.

Typically, men avoided eye contact, shifted their bodies, and limited their spatial movements in the bars to minimize direct contact with acquainted strangers. Adam illuminated the norm of ignoring acquainted strangers by describing how he occasionally breached it by trying to catch men "out of face" (Goffman 1967:8):

I've literally seen people's anuses and ball sacks on Grindr, and then you see them out and they act like they have never seen you! ... Sometimes I make people purposefully uncomfortable because I see they are avoiding me. I'll go up to them and say, "Hi, I didn't see you!" just to be a dick about it.

In another example, I was standing with a group of young men at Woody's when Pete (white, 25) leaned into my ear and asked:

"What's that guy's name?" He nods toward Nick, a slender young guy whom I had met earlier in the evening through Daniel. Daniel had invited Nick out after messaging on Grindr. I ask why.

"He messages me on Grindr a lot," he replied, eyeing Nick standing mere feet away. "Does he live near you?" I ask. "Very close, literally a block away."

I ask if he messages back, and he says yes. "Would you meet up with him?" I ask. "I don't know," he says, sighing. "Why would you respond then?" I ask.

“I don’t want to be rude!” he says loudly, then, softer: “I would get like, coffee with him, but every time he messages me it’s like, ‘Do you want to hang out right now?’ and from his pictures I couldn’t tell if he was actually cute or not.”

Pete seemed uncomfortable standing so close to Nick, sneaking glances at him in a way that signified he did not want Nick to know, should he glance at Pete, that Pete remembered him from their online interactions. They neither spoke nor acknowledged one another that night.

Interviews illuminated how some men also try to cognitively distance themselves from acquainted strangers. For example, Steven (28, white) described deciding whether to acknowledge an acquainted stranger as “competing shames:” “Is the shame that we only know each other from this hookup app more powerful than my shame of being a shitty person in the real world?” While Steven “used to feel really shitty” when encountering acquainted strangers in the bars “because I was like, ‘Oh, but you *know* me,’” he now manages context collapse by cognitively reaffirming the boundaries between online versus offline spaces and relationships:

I don’t *really* know [acquainted strangers]. They don’t really know me... Grindr is like a different world from the club... at least in my head. I separate them... because otherwise you’re just going to feel terrible all the time walking around and people who have literally seen you naked are going to pretend like they’ve never talked to you—ever. I’ve been on the receiving end, where people have come up to me and been like, ‘Oh hey,’ and I’m sort of like, ‘Oh, what do I do? You’re breaking the rule! The rule is app land on the phone is a different place than where we are now. Why are you breaking this wall? This is not okay.’

As Steven illustrates, both ignoring and being ignored by acquainted strangers exacerbate men’s stress and anxiety. In another situation, I got in a bathroom line at Woody’s with Cam, a mid-20s patron, when the man in front of us briefly glanced back to see who had joined the line before turning his attention to his phone. This moment did

not register as thwarted interaction until after we left the bathroom and Cam sighed. He relayed that he had been messaging with this man on Grindr, on and off, for months. They discussed meeting up for sex and exchanged explicit photos and videos. Cam seemed dejected and annoyed by the man's brief, blank stare, though he gave the man a blank stare as well.

## **Conclusion**

Urban gay bars are visible “institutional anchors” of gay community that signal “the presence of a distinct way of life” (Ghaziani 2014a:384). Scholars of sexuality and space posit that gay institutions will continue to attract young sexual minorities—for whom their sexual identity is variably important (Brekhus 2003; Ghaziani 2011)—because these spaces offer opportunity for sexual expression (Orne 2017). As this study shows however, young club-goers once inside gay bars young club-goers in Philadelphia often engaged in defensive face-work in ways that inhibited their collective ability to initiate social interaction with gay others, foster connections, and affirm positive gay identities. In turn, patrons reported feeling uncomfortable, constrained, or unlike themselves in the bars, which soured their perceptions of Philadelphia's gay “community.” Several informants stopped going out to gay bars altogether due to negative experiences. Scholars critique gay bars for fostering exclusivity and inequality (Brown et al. 2014), particularly along raced, classed, and gendered lines (e.g. Greene 2019; Orne 2017). This study contributes to this literature by examining how issues of embodiment, the framing of social experience, and relational ambiguities shape young gay men's experiences in gay spaces. These factors both intersect with and cut across categorical differences, as club-goers—regardless of race, class, and gender presentation—expressed ambivalence about going out.

Some bar contexts engendered thwarted interaction more than others. Spaces popular with young gay club-goers, such as the main bar areas of Woody's and iCandy, fostered multiple definitions of the situation, lacked clear interactional roadmaps for action, and promoted homonormative beliefs and practices around respectability (cf. Alhm 2017). However, the upstairs dance floor at Woody's offered fewer situational definitions (for a \$10 cover fee) compared to the first floor; patrons felt that they could better interpret a shared glance as sexual interest and initiate interaction there. Gay bars with ritualized guidelines for action tended to cater to distinct gay subcultures, such as Tavern on Camac where patrons engaged in campy banter with one another while singing along to showtunes to enact a "showtunes queen" gay identity at Tavern on Camac (cf. Orne 2017). My data also suggests that homonormative beliefs and practices constrained club-goers' identity enactments and interactions. Young club-goers reported feeling constrained out of fear of being judged as sexually undesirable (e.g. "too gay") or promiscuous (e.g. "trashy"). However, not all gay bars practiced this kind of homonormativity. For example, the Bike Stop, a leather bar, privileged public displays of sexuality by hosting weekly underwear and jockstrap nights where men were encouraged to socialize in the near nude (cf. Hennen 2014). The situational variation within and across gay bars underscores that while these spaces tend to be conceptualized as sexual fields (Green 2008b), sexual spaces can contain multiple meanings for the patrons who participate within them.

This chapter identified three mechanisms that thwart interactional accomplishments such as enacting and affirming one's gender or sexual identities at the individual level or generating collective effervescence or "we-feeling" at the group level (Collins 2004; Durkheim 1995; Vaisey 2007): managing stigma corporeally, negotiating discrepant frames of social activity, and navigating ambiguous social relations. These

mechanisms highlight how various inequalities are reproduced not only through particular interactional accomplishments but also through interactional inactions, misalignments, and ambiguities.

### VIGNETTE 3: BEST GAY BAR TO BRING YOUR GAY FRIENDS TO

Club-goers may seek out spaces where they can experience gay culture in the Gayborhood, but they tend to “have fun” in bars that are culturally familiar. This includes young gay club-goers. The gay bars offering a culturally familiar experience are usually not those marked by a gay *subculture*. One night at Woody’s in 2015, I chatted with a group of four gay, racially mixed freshmen and sophomores in college who looked so young that I was surprised their fake IDs actually worked. One told me that it was their first time going out in the Gayborhood. I asked where they had been so far. They already checked out U-Bar and iCandy. A pretty standard going out circuit, I thought to myself. “This is *much* better,” one of the freshmen said. The other three nodded and uttered “yeah” in agreement.

“Yeah, U-Bar was so *old*,” another says.

“And iCandy was just weird.”

I asked how so.

“The music was so... gay,” one says.

*Gay?*

I wait for him to elaborate. “Right?” he asked, looking to his friends for affirmation. “Right.”

He continued, “They were playing ‘It’s Raining Men’ and it’s like, who wants to listen to that? At least here they’re playing normal music.”

*What is normal music?* I posed in my fieldnotes. Woody’s primarily played Top 40 music popular with gay men—and the non-gay mainstream. The demigoddesses of the early 2010s ruled the bar: Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Kesha. Sometimes we

prayed for a Gaga song to come on—a rain dance in a sonic drought—and it felt like divine intervention when the DJ finally played one. Is there anything gay?

I talked the most with the young guy to my right, who was a blonde, skinny freshman. I learned that they're exploring the Gayborhood because the oldest looking member of the group, Ian, just turned 20. They were fraternity brothers, in a non-gay fraternity (I asked), on their college campus. He told me that there were gay/queer activist and social groups on his campus, but after he attended two meetings of his school's main LGBTQ student group, he concluded that they were "very closed off." Since rushing his fraternity, he has not pursued gay marked social groups or spaces on campus.

"Are there any other bars like Woody's," he asked me hopefully.

*Not really*, I thought. I list off the other options—Boxer's, Tabu, Knock... He nodded his head, seeming to understand the implicit message that he probably would not enjoy the other bars.

However, it is the bars that foster a gay subcultural reality that seem to be best buffered against the straightening of the neighborhood. In 2018, *Philadelphia Magazine* released their annual "Best of Philly" local business superlatives, and gave the Bike Stop the superlative: "Best Gay Bar to Bring Your Gay Friends To." Technically a leather bar, the bar is host to the Philadelphia leather community, as well as the bear community, and is a space that fosters "sexy community" (Orne 2017) for (predominately) queer men. That said, there is also increasing representation of trans and nonbinary folks in the bar, and one nonbinary informant told me that they felt most comfortable at Bike Stop because of the space's more explicit culture of consent to touch compared to other gay bars. As other bars straighten, more gay people who do not identify as a leatherman or a bear are including the Bike Stop in their nightly rounds as a distinctly gay dive bar.



In 2019, I text Benny, a 24-year-old Black and Latino queer man who hangs out at Bike Stop, to see if he was going to the DILF<sup>8</sup> party there that night. The party is run by a North American organization that puts on themed dance parties in roughly 20 cities to “help connect older and younger men” per their website. He replies that he didn’t know DILF was tonight: “Fuck yeah.” He says that he will have some friends over for a pregame around 9:30 if I want to join and to bring whomever else. I tell Steven and James about the pregame. Steven’s down. James is hesitant, saying that underwear/jock parties “aren’t really my scene.”

We arrive at Benny’s lofted studio downtown at 9:45. Benny works a corporate a job but is dating a college senior, and the pregame includes the boyfriend and his two women undergrad friends. A familiar scene. Steven and I drink grapefruit flavored hard seltzers while the others drink orange juice and a flavored Svedka. Benny arranges a line of ketamine, a dissociative recreational drug, on a plate in his kitchen and snorts it. He tells us that we need be “fucked up”; we need to keep drinking, we need to do some K. I am not trying to be “fucked up”, for obvious reasons, though I recognize that getting “fucked up” can be an important way for people to feel part of the space, to feel comfortable taking off your clothes and being touched by strangers on the dance floor.

After two hours of hanging out and dancing to a mix of pop music and techno, Benny, Steven, and I then set out for the bar at 11:30pm while the three undergrads head to “Charlie was a sinner.”, a non-gay cocktail bar in the Gayborhood. As we walk west down Locust Street, Benny becomes increasingly giddy and incoherent. “Where are we going again?” Benny asks, laughing and twirling around on the sidewalk.

The Bike Stop is on Quince Street, another small side street like Camac nearby, that is only wide enough for one car to get through. The metal door is unmarked, but the

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<sup>8</sup> DILF (noun): “Dad I’d Like to Fuck”

crowd of men and women smoking and laughing outside signals that something queer is happening inside the tired but architecturally ornate three-story building.

The first floor, complete with a motorcycle suspended in air and a pool table in the back, is packed with people. Some folks are wearing harnesses and jockstraps and nothing else, while others are fully clothed. On the televisions, there is the usual slideshow of photos of naked men, mostly amateur-looking shots of men's penises and butts. The bar always smells musky, and tonight, particularly so. When I first came to the Bike Stop, I remember asking a friend what they thought the bar smelled like. "Like that," they said, pointing to the photo on the TV of a man's hairy butt in a white jock strap. We take space at the bar in the back, next to a group of four black guys who are all wearing harnesses/jockstraps. Two of them are caressing as they talk to their friends, grabbing one another's butts and kissing intermittently. We find ourselves next to Kevin and Greg, a white gay couple in their 20s who live in the Gayborhood. Kevin is wearing a bright green jockstrap and a leather harness while Greg's in ass-less briefs and a harness. Benny compliments Kevin's jockstrap. "Look at this cock ring, too," Kevin says, whipping out his penis. We inspect his cock ring like it's a new watch. I tell Greg and Kevin that they're looking very fit. When I met Kevin around this time last year, he was a bit chubby – now he is almost sinewy, and Greg was sinewy before and now he has bulging biceps and broad shoulders. They go to the new \$140/month gym in the Gayborhood, which is a far cry from the inexpensive, outdated, and beloved "gay gym" on 12<sup>th</sup> Street that closed a year ago. They tell us how they work out six times per week, and they only eat carbs on weekends, sometimes.

Benny wants to get to where the real action is—either the basement, which is called "The Pit Stop," or the third floor where the DILF party is. He heads down to the basement without us; we aren't sure how with it he really is from the ketamine. Steven

goes to put our coats in coat check and reports back that there is no more room in coat check. We take off our shirts for now and carry our coats. We head down the steep stairs into the basement.

The basement is several degrees warmer than upstairs, and everyone is bathed in warm red light. House music quietly reverberates off the stone walls. Though there is no actual sexual interaction happening here right now—and technically sex is not allowed here—there is a unique intimacy here. Men of various body and subcultural types stand around in tight circles, holding beers. There are daddies, leathermen, twinkies, and muscular gays who look like they’ve been plucked from a circuit party (probably taking a breather from the DILF party upstairs). We find Benny among a shirtless group of guys – including Matt, my thirtysomething “gaybor” who lives one floor above me in an apartment building nearby – in the dark alcove near the front stairwell of the basement. “Hey girl!” Matt says, hugging me, once there is enough movement in the circle (half of them go upstairs to check out DILF) that allows us to enter the group. A muscular white 20something in full clothes walks up the stairs, Matt looks over and says to me, “I’d like to meet that butt. I’d like to put something in that butt.” Benny flirts with Matt’s friend, who I meet briefly but whose name I forget. They play with each other’s belts and lower abs, but don’t do more than that. “I need to find the hottest guy here before my boyfriend gets here,” Benny slurs to me, albeit a little more pulled together compared to when we first got here (I later learn Benny vomited in the bathroom after he left us on the first floor).

We decide to go upstairs to the DILF party. I help Benny up the stairs. We show our tickets for the party to the bouncer on our phones to get upstairs. As we do, I run into another white gay grad student who I’ve never seen at the Bike Stop before: “I’m not drunk enough for this!” he says, laughing nervously when I greet him as we pass.

Steven has to pee, so we stop on the second floor. We lose Benny again. It's the least packed of the four floors. Several older men in gear are playing pool and just generally hanging out. It is the easiest place to get a drink tonight. While waiting for Steven, an older guy comes up to me to ask if I happen to own a historic house in Germantown and we laugh when I tell him no but I wish I did. I thought maybe it was a pick-up line and that he would try to keep talking to me, but he doesn't.

On the third floor, the DILF party is in full swing. Throngs of shirtless men and men wearing harnesses, mostly wearing tight colorful underwear and jockstraps, and some shirtless in jeans, dance to house/techno music. Other shirtless men stand and watch, and men have conversations on and off the dance floor. The dance floor becomes more packed throughout the night. Around 11:45, there are large pockets of open space, and by 1:20 or so, there is less open space. There is an array of body sizes on the dance floor, but notably most men are what I would consider "circuit queens" – muscular to lithe, not much body hair, white. Some "daddies" are on the dance floor. Not all of Bike Stop's parties cater to this demographic; the bar has also hosted parties popular with queer women and trans/nonbinary patrons in this upstairs space. Here at this party, though, men grab each other's crotches. This space is also erotic, but in a slightly different way from the darker, more mellow tension in the basement. I assume more men are on party drugs up here, especially as many are holding water bottles (a signifier that someone is on a party drug that is dehydrating). It is not difficult to make eye contact with a guy on the dance floor and to start dancing with them. As we dance, Benny makes brief eye contact with a muscled guy in his late 30s/early 40s and they start to dance with one another. The guy tugs at Benny's chain harness. They both lightly touch each other's torsos, squeeze a nipple. Benny asks for Steven's poppers, which he brought in his fanny pack, and he and the guy move into a darker corner.

We spend the night traversing the four floors, mostly between the basement and the party. As we work our way through the now-packed basement towards the back stairs, I pass a muscular Latino in his 20s leaning against the wall. He is shirtless and wearing jeans—and his erect penis is sticking out of his unzipped fly. He is holding it and shaking it a bit. His facial expression is friendly. Given the size of the crowd, it's not immediately obvious what he's doing if you aren't right next to him. Benny leaves our path to the stairs and walks over to him. They start talking and Benny touches his cock. He then comes back to us, "Can I borrow your poppers to suck this guy's cock?" Steven says sure a bit bitchily and takes them out of his fanny pack. Steven grabs them and he leads the guy away from the wall and through the crowd again. It is difficult to track where they go – I basically lose them. Then, I spot them heading towards a darkened corner where we were chatting with Matt earlier. "Before we leave we have to find Benny again," Steven says. "Okay," I say. Perhaps not hearing me, Steven explains his motive: "I want my fucking poppers back."

## CHAPTER 5: FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND THE INTERACTIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT OF GAY SENSIBILITY

### **Overview**

In this chapter, I examine how a gay piano bar in Philadelphia's Gayborhood neighborhood accomplishes its reputation as a gay bar each night through collective rituals of cultural consumption that are not necessarily predicated on sexual identity. Through performing and consuming songs that are not explicitly marked as "gay" primarily from the Great American Songbook and Broadway, as well as pop songs sung by "divas," I show how interactions between pianists, soloists, and audiences foster feelings of gay community through generating sociability and a campy atmosphere. I identify three interactional mechanisms that construct Tavern's sexual reality: micro-shifting bar patrons' embodied attention towards the musical performance, invoking "culture talk" about music, and deploying camp as a subcultural strategy in interaction.

## Introduction

How do identity communities consume culture and reconstitute it as identity-based? How can the gay piano bar Tavern seem to “straighten” in clientele while retaining its gay reputation and ephemeral feeling? While in 2018 *Philadelphia Magazine* gave the Bike Stop the superlative “Best Gay Bar to Bring Your Gay Friends To,” the magazine appointed the piano bar Tavern on Camac as the “Best Gay Bar to Bring Your Straight Friends To.” The notion that Philly gay bars are undergoing clientele shifts, which may be diminishing Gayborhood bars’ reputations as *gay* bars, is implicit in the superlatives. As gay bars become popular with straight patrons, people fear that bars lose their gay character. Furthermore, as gay revelers feel they can go out as queer safely beyond the Gayborhood or find “queer pop-up” events in other neighborhoods, they may be choosing to revel beyond the traditional gay bar in greater numbers (cf. Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019). Amid scholarly, national, and local debates about the fate of gay neighborhoods and spaces, Tavern on Camac’s superlative is particularly striking. While Gayborhood mainstays such as Woody’s are labeled “straight gay bars,” Tavern is maintaining its marked identity while also “straightening.”

Tavern on Camac’s gay reputation is not static. Rather, it is a nightly, collective accomplishment that involves an array of actors engaged in particular kinds of interactions. This accomplishment requires not only that gay-identifying actors engage in interaction in particular space, but also a situational re-coding of cultural objects *as* gay. These cultural objects – such as genres of music and musical styles – are not in and of themselves created through sexual identity cultures. Through the collective consumption of showtunes, standards from the Great American Songbook, and popular music across decades sung by “divas,” patrons interactionally code performing this music as gay, generate sociability with other gay patrons, and create an ephemeral gay

feeling through moments of collective effervescence. This chapter is aligned with a tradition in the sociology of culture that analyzes how individuals and collectives consume and experience culture to affirm collective identities, from bowling (Whyte 1943) and drinking expensive champagne (Mears 2020), to playing the blues (Grazian 2005) and participating in rap battles (Lee 2009).

### **Gay Sensibility**

Unlike other gay bars in the Gayborhood, Tavern is able to accommodate sexual diversity and retain its distinct gay vibe, in part, because the space's gay reputation is achieved *through rituals of cultural consumption*. We generally think of gay bars as sexualized environments. Gay culture, however, is not solely about sex. In this vein, queer theorist David Halperin (2012) analyzes *gay sensibility*, which he argues is distinct from gay sexual identity. Drawing on literatures ranging from psychoanalysis, anthropology, and economics, Halperin asserts in *How to Be Gay* (2012) that “homosexuality is not just a sexual orientation but a cultural orientation, a dedicated commitment to certain social or aesthetic values, an entire *way of being*” (12). He outlines some of the broad contours of a homosexual cultural disposition:

“How about the friend who says to you, when he or she discovers that you are a great dancer or cook; that you love Cher or Madonna, Beyoncé or Björk, Whitney Houston or Kylie Minogue, Christina Aguilera or Mariah Carey, Tori Amos or Gwen Stefani (not to mention Lady Gaga); that you have a weakness for mid-century modern; that you would never dream of dressing for comfort; or that you drive a VW Golf or a Mini Cooper convertible or a Pontiac G6, ‘Gee, I guess you really *are* gay!’?” (14)

Halperin defines homosexuality—“even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity”—as “a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world” (13). If we



consider homosexuality as cultural practice, then “in principle, if not in actuality, anyone can participate in *homosexuality as culture*” (Halperin 2012:13). By decoupling gay culture and gay identity, Halperin gains leverage to explain why so much of gay culture is borrowed from heteronormative, mainstream culture:

“Gay men routinely cherish non-gay artifacts and cultural forms that realize gay desire instead of denoting it... Cultural objects that contain no explicit gay themes, that do not represent gay men, that do not invoke same-sex desire, but that afford gay men opportunities for colonizing them and making them over into vehicles of queer affirmation exercise a perennial charm: they constantly get taken up by gay male culture and converted to queer uses.” (112)

Drawing on a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, queer studies scholars have theorized how queer cultural practices re-code mainstream culture or ideology (Halperin 2012; Koestenbaum 2009; Muñoz 1999). For example, Muñoz (1999) theorizes queer performance as political through a framework of resistance of “disidentification,” which entails:

“[R]ecycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.” (30)

Rather than trying to either assimilate into or reject mainstream culture (identification versus counteridentification), queer people refashion the mainstream to generate new meaning.

This literature’s focus on homosexuality as cultural practice is instructive for my own here, though our analytic foci differ. Halperin is interested in uncovering what gay culture is—“a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world”—and the logics

underpinning its varied forms. For Halperin, gay cultural practice “consists in a series of subcultural responses to mainstream culture—namely, the appropriation and resignification of heterosexual forms and artifacts” (424).” He examines why this form of gay culture has persisted in popularity today in comparison to what he calls “gay culture proper,” which encompass “new works of literature, film, music, art, drama, dance, and performance that are produced by queer people and that reflect on queer experience” (422). Halperin is interested in why some people are drawn to these forms of gay cultural practice when not every gay person is, which has the effect of focusing too much attention on a binary outcome: do you or do you not identify with x gay cultural form? Take, for example, Halperin citing the sociologist Barry Adam, who recognizes the importance of musicals and opera for many gay men, but not for himself:

“I, for one, am not alone in being left cold by the Broadway musical / opera complex that is undeniably an important facet of culture for many gay men,’ Adam writes, ‘but I nevertheless recognize the subjective location [literary critic D.A.] Miller points to. Musical theater is one of a number of possibilities that speak to *the sense of difference, the desire to escape, and will to imagine alternatives* that seems a widespread childhood experience of many pregay boys.” (104)

On busy weekend nights at Tavern, for every former theater kid in the bar there was usually a patron who loudly shared Adam’s lack of identification with the “Broadway musical / opera complex” — that’s not the focus of my argument here, though it’s an interesting boundary that runs through gay (male) communities.

Halperin’s and others’ analyses of gay culture resonates with my experience in the field, and especially at Tavern, where patrons at the mic often engage in the gay subcultural practice of appropriating and recoding mainstream culture. In this chapter, I shift away from Halperin’s focus on the content and logic of gay cultural practice to

analyze the micro-dynamics that *produce* the accomplishment of these practices, and their meso-level effects on space, in a gay piano bar. I am less interested in whether patrons are committed to a particular form of gay cultural practice than I am in the boundary work that producing this practice does for gay selves and gay spaces. This abstraction allows us to see how people are pulled into or pushed out of gay cultural practices and the spaces in which they're enacted. I will discuss the content of the culture being deployed, but it's secondary to the work, for example, that micro-shifting between being a bar patron and an audience member accomplishes for individuals in the bar and the bar's gay vibe more broadly. Through my observations at Tavern, I contribute to this interdisciplinary area of research by illuminating how a particular form of gay culture is interactionally accomplished by bar patrons and staff.

My interactional analysis is informed by sociological literature on cultural consumption to examine "how people consume music in real life within spatial contexts of social interaction" (Grazian 2004:207). I conceptualize Tavern as a dynamic "interaction mesh," or a meso-level network of interaction rituals "connected both laterally and in the flow of time" (Collins 2004:250). Tavern's distinctiveness makes it an instructive case for illuminating how overlapping interaction rituals aggregate into a meso-level reverberation of emotions that comprises a bar's reputation or vibe.

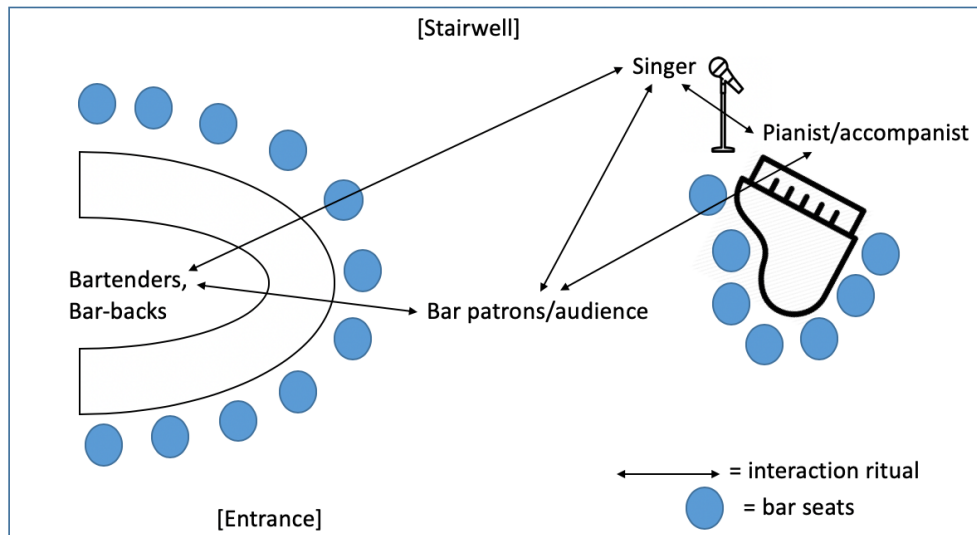
### **Mapping the Bar**

Tavern on Camac, a three-story gay bar adorned with rainbow flags on the quaint Camac Street, has been a gay establishment of different names and owners for almost 100 years. Known as "Philadelphia's Greenwich Village" in the 1920s, Camac Street—barely wide enough for one modern vehicle to drive through it—is currently home to three gay bars, a gay-owned boutique hotel, two arts clubs and a private society. Between

my first (2015) and second phases (2018-2019) of fieldwork, Tavern on Camac and its upstairs dance floor became increasingly popular among younger club-goers as Woody's declined in gay status and as people boycotted iCandy. For a time, if you wanted to dance at a gay bar in the Gayborhood, you found yourself at Tavern.

To map the piano bar as an interaction mesh, I have roughly illustrated the bar's routine interactional structure in Diagram 1. Missing from this diagram are the two-person round tables that are set up in the empty space between the horseshoe bar and the piano, which also has a high-top table around it.

Diagram 1: The Interactional Structure of Tavern on Camac's First Floor



Tavern's distinct campy vibe stems from overlapping interactions between patrons, staff, the pianist, and the momentary soloist that could produce meso-level emotional effects, such as a sense of camaraderie and shared identity in the bar. Tavern serves as a case study to analyze bars as "interaction meshes," which I introduced in Chapter 1 to help explain how and why gay men activated membership boundaries when they did.

Walking through Tavern's doors, people are transported "to another time," as a gay patron in his mid-20s described it. The bar sounds and feels different from other bars; the sound of piano playing fills the room at almost all times of the evening. The bar oscillates between quiet and noisy, subdued and exuberant, depending on the time of day or the song being performed by the pianist and/or a soloist. Patrons engage in light chatter and laughter. While pianists play the piano for several hours at a time and work on a regular schedule for tips, soloists elect to join the pianist from the audience. Soloists typically sing one song at a time. Sometimes, pianists play their own sets and do not invite soloists up. At quiet times, the bar is filled by the sound of the grand piano and someone singing, punctuated by the bartender at the horseshoe-shaped bar across the room asking patrons "What can I get you?" and the clinking of ice against stainless steel in cocktail shakers. There are several flat screen televisions on the first floor that play pop music videos, but the sound is muted.

In the corner on the first floor, there is a grand piano with a table built around it. The main bar is shaped like a horseshoe, and circular cocktail tables fill in the rest of the room. The stairwell in the back of the first floor leads to either a restaurant downstairs or a small dancefloor and bar upstairs. Changes in gay club-goers' nocturnal "circuits"

over the last three years are particularly noticeable on weekend nights at Tavern. In 2015, Tavern's dance floor was off the beaten path and often nearly empty. The DJ played remixed disco songs, and groups of friends would go earlier in the night – before going to the popular dance bars like Woody's – where they could dance with a wide berth and not worry about bumping into fellow dancers. By 2018, Tavern's dance floor was so popular that if patrons do not get there early enough (around 10pm), then a long line formed down the stairs and sometimes to the front entrance as a bouncer allows one person in as one person leaves. Like Woody's in 2015, club-goers are packed in like sweaty sardines on weekend nights. The music also changed. Rather than remixes of Donna Summer hits, the DJs play current top 40 hits, rarely delving back into the early 2000s let alone 1990s (save Britney Spears' "Toxic" and other gay club mainstays).

### *The Pianist*

More than any other actor in the bar, the pianist fosters and supports Tavern's distinctive atmosphere. When the pianist takes a break, the bar plays Top 40 music and the bar becomes non-distinctive. Seven pianists—all white men, some gay and some straight—play at scheduled days and times each week. On a typical night, one pianist played from 6pm-10pm, and a second played from 10pm to 2am. Some came to the piano with heaps of binders with sheet music in them, while others carried an iPad to access sheet music digitally. Pianists work for tips. Each night, a jar shaped like a top hat sits on the grand piano. To sit at the high top around the grand piano, it's best to give a tip to ingratiate yourself.

When the bar is at low capacity, such as a weekday evening or early on a weekend night, the pianists perform long sets. At busier times, pianists perform a set or two before inviting members of the audience to sing—or, more often than not, patrons line

up by the piano unprompted during the pianist's set, waiting to be invited to sing. I learned from some piano bar regulars that it is gauche for an audience member to try to sing without being expressly invited up by the pianist. However, few patrons seemed to defer to these tacit norms, and pianists rarely enforced these kinds of deference rituals.

Each pianist has his own preferred repertoire and style. For instance, while one pianist performed jazz standards and rock songs during his sets, another tended to croon contemporary Broadway and pop music. Some pianists foster more of a following than others. I met several gay patrons who follow certain pianists throughout the city and the greater Philly area to listen to them perform at different venues. More casually, sometimes patrons expressed disappointment that a pianist wasn't playing on their scheduled night.

### *Bar Patrons*

In the piano bar, patrons become singers when they step up to the mic. Just as bar patrons shift in and out of being audience members, patrons are only singers for three to four minutes when it's their turn at the mic. In this moment, the pianist becomes the accompanist. These micro shifts matter for conceiving of how the bar's gay feeling is collectively accomplished.

The demographics of people who tend to become singers over the course of a night comprise two groups: regulars and non-regulars. Regulars are frequent patrons who possess cultural knowledge of particular music genres. Not all regulars get up to sing, but many do. Regulars tend to be middle-aged and older, white, predominately gay men, though there are a few women regulars as well. There are some younger regulars, in their 20s and 30s, who come from a wider range of racial and sexual backgrounds. At most times of the night, whether on a weekday or weekend, there will be at least a few

regulars who sit around the piano and who get up and sing. Regulars aren't usually professional singers, but rather enthusiasts of particular genres of music. Consider how a regular patron moves through the piano bar with ease and familiarity:

Around 9pm, a white man in his early 40s walks into the bar. The pianist, who is playing "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess* for a black gay soloist, nods to him from across the room. The man walks across the bar to the piano, where he greets a white man and a white woman who occasionally get up to the mic to sing tonight. He pecks the man on the cheek and hugs the woman. He makes his way back to the main bar, takes an empty seat, and waves hello to the bartender as he makes a cocktail. The bartender has already begun preparing his drink—he places a martini and water glass on the bar—before the man orders a Fireball martini and a glass of water. They briefly banter—how it's going. The man takes a sip of the martini and then carries both drinks to the seat closest to the pianist, who is now performing "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. As he sits down, the man begins mouth the words to the song in perfect sync with the pianist.

Regulars tend to know and be friendly with the pianists, and the bartender knew his drink order as well. If there is any group or space in the Gayborhood that captures the quintessential "where everyone knows your name" feeling of a community watering hole, it is the regulars at Tavern on Camac.

On weekend nights, most patrons who become singers are not regulars. They encompass a wide range of ages, genders, sexual identities, and races. Sometimes these singers are professionals; I observed Broadway singers in town with traveling tours, as well as professional opera singers, take their turns at the mic. Some singers are amateur crooners who could be regulars if they came to Tavern more often. Other singers are novices who treat the experiences as karaoke; some of these singers are good, and some are not. The karaoke singers usually brave the mic late on a weekend, after a few drinks,



with friends egging and cheering them on while taking videos on their phones of their friends potentially making fools of themselves.

### **Interactional Mechanisms**

In the following sections, I describe how patrons and staff interactionally generated sociability and collective effervescence around gay identity through cultural consumption. I identify three interactional mechanisms that construct Tavern's sexual reality: micro-shifting bar patrons' embodied attention towards the musical performance, invoking "culture talk" about music, and deploying camp as a gay subcultural strategy in interaction.

#### *Micro-Shifts in Embodied Attention*

It's a Thursday night around 1am, and it feels like it's winding down here. There are only ten or so people left in the bar, less than a third of the crowd at its peak about an hour ago. I chat with a white gay man in this late 50s and a white queer bar regular in his 30s who is standing nearby. The older man asks if I'm going to sing. I shake my head, probably not tonight. He responds, "Well, it's okay to be the audience. We need an audience!"

Tavern's live music does not demand total deference from its audience. That is, patrons are not expected to be full-time audience members by sitting in silence and orienting themselves, both physically and cognitively, to a performance. However, as the patron in the above vignette states, Tavern and its singers need an audience. How, then, do bar patrons become audience members?

The centrality of the space's live music waxes and wanes throughout the night and, more fleetingly, over the course of a particular song. While there are several norms in the bar, such as not shouting or playing music through a phone while the pianist is performing, these courtesies do not hamper sociability. Patrons interact throughout the

night. Live music shifted in and out of bar patrons' perceptions, sometimes being relegated to background music or ambiance and other times forcing its way into patrons' bodies and minds. Thus, the patrons shift in and out of an audience role in the bar. Consider, for example, the varied ways three different patrons shift into being audience members over the course of one song:

A bar regular is singing Adele's 2008 single "Chasing Pavements." Few people in the bar are observably paying attention. When the chorus starts, however, I see flickers of recognition around the bar. A black queer woman who is chatting with a friend at the bar, her back to the performance in progress, begins to bop her head back and forth slightly. She raises her arm and wags her finger around. As she does this, she turns her upper body slightly to watch the performance. Her friend follows suit and turns her head to the piano. Meanwhile, a middle-aged white gay patron at the bar is nursing a drink and looking at his phone during the song until the singer hits a high note, perhaps flatly, during the chorus, and the patron's eyes momentarily bulge as if by reflex. The note passes, his eyes relax, and he takes a sip of his beer. As the song reaches its climax following the bridge, the singer tries to belt in their head voice: "OhhhhoOOHHHH! Should I give uuuuuup—" A young gay patron next to me turns and says to me, "You should give up." I can't help but chuckle.

While one patron recognized the song during the chorus and became rhythmically entrained, another seemed forced into reckoning with the performance after a particularly high note, and another still used the moment to engage in sarcastic, evaluative talk with the person sitting next to them (me).

These micro-shifts matter for several reasons. This fluctuation in embodied attention and roles facilitated a shared focus of attention between bar patrons, casual interaction between patrons, and heady moments of collective effervescence in the bar. The music may not provide an immediate or absolute shared focus of attention, however,

the “action” starts with sudden micro-shifts, such as a patron recognizing the song being performed and starting to mouth the words. In the following sections, I address how pianists and soloists work to ensure that these micro-shifts occur by creating a “moment” and supporting a soloists’ performance to sustain play.

### **Creating a “Moment”**

Late 20s gay patron deliberating what to sing: “I wanna sing a song no one else will sing, what no one else will know.”

Me: “Why?”

Patron: “So people won’t sing along! I want to be the star.”

(fieldnote)

“Literally there is not a musical theater homosexual, including myself, who has not sung [“Maybe This Time”] at a bar thinking it would be a moment.”

(fieldnote)

On an individual-level, patrons shifting into audience members also provide validation for those patrons who briefly become singers. These patrons want to have an audience and be paid attention to. Many drew on the folk notion of “a moment” to describe what they wanted, which I interpreted to mean a being at the center of a heady moment of collective effervescence. A 50-something gay patron explained one night that singing at Tavern was unique because you sang with a live accompanist: “[It] fulfills a fantasy. It makes you a star – if just for a moment.”

To build towards “a moment,” the pianist and soloists worked to strategically shift patrons’ attention toward the performance happening in the corner of the bar. Perhaps most important was choosing the right song, which involved considering one’s voice as well as the time of day and the level of crowdedness in the bar. Pianists often helped soloists choose a song, and sometimes diverted them away from songs that were too

quiet or slow for how boisterous the crowd was, or songs that were too popular to play so early in the night for only a handful of people. When the bar was quiet and skewed older, pianists and soloists often sang tunes from the Great American Songbook, in particular music by Cole Porter, The Gershwins, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, or songs that might be obscure to younger audiences. Later at night, singers drew on contemporary Broadway songs, contemporary pop music (e.g. Adele, Lady Gaga, Whitney Houston, Bruno Mars), and Disney songs.

While vocal prowess usually grabbed folks' attention, choosing the right song could outweigh poor vocal technique. The gay patron quoted at the beginning of this section, who was neither a regular nor a singer, was a bit misguided in how to grab the audience's attention and feel like the "star." Novices who picked popular songs generally received more attention, and audience members singing along could actually help sustain a weak performance. For example, on a busy Saturday night, a woman patron looked nervous as she started to sing Adele's "Rolling in the Deep." She had trouble coming in with the piano; she sounded like a novice. Patrons, however, paid attention when the pianist started playing the well-known intro, and patrons throughout the bar sang along during the chorus. A middle-aged patron who I was sitting next to at the bar said that this was a case of "bad singer, good song." After several other soloists cycled through at the mic (who, during busy hours, filed into a line for their turn at the mic), I was surprised that she got up to sing again. She chose "Colors of the Wind" from *Pocahontas*, and the crowd drew a collective gasp—some squealed, others sharply inhaled in preparation to singalong—when the pianist started playing it. "She knows how to pick songs," my bar-mate said.

Even for trained singers, the wrong song at the wrong time could produce a disappointingly meager response from the audience. One night, Chris, a mid-20s white

gay patron who sang in a gay men's chorus, chose to sing Whitney Houston's "Saving All My Love For You." He sang the song in a soft, jazzy style, and as he performed, I noticed that the bar was getting progressively louder rather than quieter. A large group of people had entered the bar, boisterously interacting with one another. When the song ended, only the folks around the piano clapped. Chris smiled slightly and walked away from the mic. Afterwards, Chris said that he "needed to redeem himself" by singing again later in the night. I asked him to explain. He expressed that, in his experience, the "Whitney number" was an "attention grabber" for being "a little left of center," which had surprised and delighted audiences in the past. Chris felt that he had messed up the song's intro by coming in on the wrong chord, though the pianist helped save him by "adding the melody in his right hand," which enabled Chris to find the note. "It didn't sound wrong yet but it was about to," he explained. It is notable that Chris blamed his technical error that few could probably discern rather than situational factors such as the increased bar noise with his softer singing voice. Later in the night, Chris sang "New York, New York" with bravado, generating a singalong of the chorus around the entire bar. He had redeemed himself.

### **Sustaining Play**

While a bad performance could draw attention from the audience, bad performances could ruin the bar's mood. Occasionally, I met club-goers elsewhere who cringed at the idea of going to Tavern after sitting through awkward performances in the past. Thus, to sustain the bar's overall mood and reputation, the pianist and audience members helped a performer's line by getting them through a song as painlessly as possible. Pianists helped support singers by being good accompanists, and audience members sometimes helped singers by singing along.

It is a skill to sing with an accompanist; trained singers and novices alike can make mistakes. It requires spontaneous coordination of an unrehearsed song, often between strangers. Pianists acted as accompanists for singers in a variety of ways: the pianists took the singer's lead by adjusting their speed to match the singer's, by changing keys at a moment's notice, by adding a song's melody into the music as seen in Chris's example above, and by singing along softly with the singer in more dire situations. Most of these moves, save for singing along, go unnoticed by most patrons. As an ethnographer, I leaned on musicians at the bar to help me hear the work going into these three-minute interactions between the pianist and a singer.

In an example where both the pianist and the audience supported a performance, a woman started to sing Adele's "Someone Like You" (a particularly popular song for novices on weekends) when she let out a low, unsure first note ("I heard..."). It sounded disconcerting to an untrained ear, and there was a reason: She was singing in a different key than the pianist's key. I was sitting with a gay patron who later explained that the pianist used "passing chords" to subtly change his key to better fit her voice in the moment. The pianist could have plopped into her key, which would have been obvious and potentially embarrassing. Instead, he navigated his way to the new key from within a chord in the original key, thus sonically easing the transition. She continued singing and struggled with some of the words, as well as the high notes in the chorus. The pianist started singing along in the mic, filling out her sound and allowing her to find the right notes. Then, several of the patrons around the piano started to sing along, too, adding more sound and then, later, interesting harmonies. This work led the entire bar into a singalong of the final chorus of the song, which both allowed the singer to save face and for the entire bar to come together and enjoy the music. In this situation, a nervous

performer was sustained by the pianist, and then by the inner circle of patrons particularly interested in music at the piano, and then finally by the whole bar.

### *Culture Talk*

It's 11pm on a Tuesday night, and every seat in the bar is taken. V.—a regular in the bar and at the mic—gets up to sing. Across the room, I am sitting at the main bar with B., a white guy in his late-20s who I've just met, and we watch V. confer with the pianist on finding the right key for the song. As the pianist fiddles at the keys, B. says, "I think he's gonna choose a song from [the musical] *Waitress* and I hope he doesn't." Intrigued by this snap judgment, I ask, "How do you know?" "Because of the chord [the pianist] just played," he responds. Once V. starts singing, B. sighs performatively—just as he thought, V. chose the ballad "She Used to Be Mine" from *Waitress*. I am impressed by B.'s "ear," or cultural knowledge of musicals, to be able to identify a song based on one chord, and I'm pulled back into my memories of dancing among sweaty throngs of people at Woody's when a young guy like James could hear the opening instrumentals of the next song layered deep into the DJ's extended set—"Oh my god, Rihanna!" he'd exclaim a minute before a layman's ear could hear "We Found Love" in the mix. [fieldnote]

While B. and James would both do quite well as contestants on a game show like *Name That Tune*, their cultural knowledge of particular music genres were deployed in different ways in Tavern versus bars like Woody's. On a dance floor, patrons remarked on the music within a friend group, whereas at Tavern discussing music was a mechanism that generated sociability among acquainted and unacquainted patrons. The function of discussing music at Tavern aligns with Lizardo's (2016) definition of *culture talk*: "the (more or less) routine deployment of cultural knowledge associated with aesthetic goods as a resource to generate conversation" (2). As I've discussed elsewhere (Baldor 2020), gay patrons often critiqued or lamented the lack of sociability in gay bars, which made Tavern patrons' success at deploying culture talk for generating social

interaction particularly striking. A gay patron in his early 40s expressed to me one weekday night at Tavern that he thought the bar was “unique” among gay bars for this reason. He explained:

“There isn’t that pressure [here]... [the music is] like a security blanket. If you go to a normal bar, there’s the expectation that you’re there to get drunk or pick someone to take home and when you get approached by someone there’s an 80% chance they’re hitting on you. But here, you can come to the bar by yourself and be legitimately here to enjoy the music. You don’t go to other gay bars just for the music.”

The role of live music as a “security blanket” in a gay bar evokes multiple Goffmanian layers of strategic interaction and face-saving. It’s true; the piano bar brings in patrons who are there for the music. However, live music also provides a “cover” for people who *are* interested in meeting new people by serving as a shared object to orient one’s mutual attention. If, as in other gay bars, toggling between a community and a sexual frame is fraught and personally risky to one’s face (Baldor 2020), Tavern offers a third, broader frame: a cultural consumption frame. This frame allows for general sociability without being quickly spoiled—though the consumption frame can also be exploited for sexual advances. Patrons deployed their cultural knowledge to discuss trivia and other facts about the music or its production. Sometimes this also involved engaging in evaluation or judgment of particular performances (cf. Wohl 2015). This matters beyond simply meeting new people or having a good time at a bar; meeting and interacting with gay others is an important part of gay men’s identity work. In this way, I argue that culture talk not only generates conversation, but also affirms positive gay identities and strengthens the bonds of collective identity.

Once patrons were attuned to the song being performed, the bar buzzed with interactions revolving around the song. At the most fundamental level, people discussed



basic facts about the song, usually when someone did not know the name of the song, or who it was by. For example, how to pronounce an artist's name:

It's early on a Wednesday night, and the bar is nearly empty save for a few guys at the bar and a few who are sitting around the piano. After the pianist sings a song from "West Side Story," he and two other older white gay patrons start to talk about the musical's composer, Leonard Bernstein. "Is it pronounced BernSTEIN, or BernSTEEN?" one asks. An older man at the main bar yells out from across the room, "BernSTEEN!"

The above example underscores how culture talk around trivia about particular songs or musicians could open and sustain encounters in the bar. As an ethnographer, I found that culture talk effectively opened up interaction with strangers. For example, a shared, renewed focus of attention of the piano as the pianist started playing "Edelweiss" inspired a patron next to me to tell me some "little trivia" about the song's genesis:

I'm sitting next to two white guys in their 40s at the bar. Our backs are turned away from the piano—not the ideal vantage point for an ethnographer. As the pianist begins to play "Edelweiss" from *The Sound of Music*, I twist my body around so I can watch. The men I'm next to do the same, and our shared physical maneuver seems to open myself up for interaction. One of the men looks over at me and excitedly says, "I was just telling [my friend] about this little trivia but..." He tells me how the song "Edelweiss" was not in the original songbook for the musical. Theodore Bikel, who played the Captain, was a folk singer and Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote an extra song for him two weeks before the show opened on Broadway "while it previewed in Boston," the man further clarified. While I didn't have much to add by way of *The Sound of Music* knowledge, I expressed interest in the trivia (and made sure to mentally index the details so I could Google this myself later) by smiling, nodding, and saying things like, "Oh really?" After this, I was enveloped into the pair's conversations for the rest of the evening.

In this moment, conversing about the music allowed us to interact in a particularly circumscribed and contextually relevant manner.

Beyond basic facts, patrons shared with others' their more extensive or arcane cultural knowledge, as a kind of capital in the space. This was often coupled with patrons' first-hand experiences seeing a show or interacting with a notable artist:

Early on a weekday night, the pianist plays a "Gershwin set," as an older patron describes it. During the set, he starts playing "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*. Two older men at the bar start discussing the show: "I saw an unedited version of this at Houston Grand Opera... I had never seen the show so I didn't know it at the time." The other patron responds, "It's a great show." They continue talking, shifting their discussion to the different versions of the show, and discussing the Broadway singer Audra McDonald's turn in the leading role. Elsewhere among six older patrons, the Gershwin set generates a lively discussion of "divas" who performed in Gershwin musicals, like Elaine Stritch.

I jotted down the above details from their conversation, and later Googled some of the details to fact check. Underscoring the cultural knowledge needed to understand their conversation (which I lacked), I had surmised that Audra McDonald recently performed at the Houston Grand Opera (she played Bess on Broadway). However, this patron saw the show in Houston in 1976; it was a famous production that restored the original score among other corrections. It became clear that this anecdote was a brag, and a form of cultural capital in the space—he could impress his fellow patrons by sharing his experience.

Culture talk also created and sustained intergenerational contact between younger and older gay men. For example, I was sitting with Chris at the bar around the piano on a weekday evening. He got up to order another beer, and when he did not

return for ten minutes or so I glanced back at the bar and saw that he was in conversation with an older man:

Chris takes a long time to get a drink because he started chatting with Richard, an older white guy with white hair. When he gets back to his seat, he tells me that Richard started talking to him about Judy Garland because the pianist was performing a Judy Garland song (from *A Star is Born*). Richard regaled him with a tale of how Judy kissed him on the cheek when he was in the audience of a television show she was in. “How many gay men can say that Judy Garland kissed them?” he asked rhetorically. “Probably not as many as Liza!” Chris retorted.

Later, I asked Chris whether this kind of interaction was common in his experience at piano bars. He nodded his head and said that he has “a lot of memories of specifically Judy Garland facilitating these kinds of young/old interactions.” Because Tavern and gay piano bars he’s been to in New York are “just pitched older in terms of crowd, and there’s more conversation I would say that happens in a lot of them because the volume is more amenable to conversation, I’ve had a lot of instances of older men chatting with me about one thing or another. I know a lot of the cultural references that they want to refer to. It often has that tone of like, ‘I bet you young whippersnapper don’t know about X, Y, or Z gay thing’ and then there’s an element of me proving myself that I do...” This patron’s experiences interacting with older gay men in piano bars specifically suggests that culture talk is used as a generational bridge in this space. This is particularly striking in the context of nightlife, which is often considered to be within the domain of youth culture and where older patrons, especially in research on gay bars, experience discrimination in sexual fields that value youth.

In another example, a younger patron in his 20s told a story about helping a famous Broadway singer remember the lyrics to a song at a fundraiser, which spurred a collective sing-along across generations. While sitting at the table around the piano, the

pianist played a Cole Porter song, which precipitated a passing mention of Sutton Foster (who won the Tony for the 2011 Broadway Revival of *Anything Goes*) between the other two patrons at the bar. A younger patron in his mid-20s chimed in to say that he saw Sutton Foster perform at a private birthday party where her presence was “won” a fundraiser, and she forgot some of the lyrics to “Anything Goes.” Matt said that he fed her the next lyric, and she thanked him. The patrons and the pianist listened, eyes widening as he told this anecdote. “How could someone’ve won her?” one asked. The other signals “money” by rubbing his fingers together. The pianist plays “Anything Goes” and the four of us sing along. Given the age stratification in many Gayborhood bars, this was a rare moment I experienced where strangers of vastly different ages came together in mutual entrainment.

### *Subcultural Speech*

At 2am on a Thursday night, I am leaving the bar and overhear a conversation between Cleo, the plus-sized drag queen who sings live upstairs on Thursday’s at 11pm, and a younger white gay man watched the show. Cleo asks him how he liked the show. He responds emphatically, saying it was his first time, and asks rhetorically, “What was I doing with my life?” She responds unnecessarily but devastatingly, “Probably watching Netflix with a mediocre boyfriend.” The patron laughs, understanding the jab. She takes a drag from her cigarette.

Culture talk in the bar also took the form of camp. While I separate these aspects of culture analytically, patrons often engaged in culture talk using subcultural speech patterns. In doing so, patrons actively linked culture not explicitly gay with gay identities and gay cultural consumption. Patrons’ and staff’s deployment of camp was strategic; camp infused otherwise unmarked interactions and performances with a gay feeling. While camp is a notoriously difficult concept to define or identify (indeed, camp is ‘in the eye of the beholder’ (Newton 1972:105)), anthropologist Esther Newton (1972) and

historian George Chauncey (1994) usefully define camp through a sociological framework that identifies camp as a strategy particular to gay subcultures. Drawing on a social history of the gay world in New York at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chauncey (1994) argues that camp is a style of interaction and display that uses irony, incongruity, theatricality, and humor to both highlight the artifice of social conventions as well as to signal to others “in the know” a gay identity. Aligned with Chauncey in the sense that camp is interactionally deployed, Newton (1972:110) cites Goffman and research on stigma experienced by African Americans to describe camp as a “creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and in the process, a positive homosexual identity” in her ethnography of professional drag queens in the Midwest in the 1960s. She argues: “[T]he homosexual problem centers on self-hatred and the lack of self-esteem. But if ‘the soul ideology ministers to the needs for identity,’ the camp ideology ministers to the needs for dealing with an identity that is well defined but loaded with contempt. Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a *relationship between* things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality” (105). Newton identifies three main characteristics of camp: “*incongruity* is the subject matter of camp, *theatricality* its style, and *humor* its strategy” (106).

While camp is not one kind of subcultural style, its sociological characteristics generally cut across gay subcultures. The sociocultural linguist Rusty Barrett (2017:19) generalizes camp as a language ideology “in which forms of language are given high symbolic values on the basis of both their linguistic and rhetorical structure and their ability to index interactional contexts associated with gay culture.” While camp may be “in the eye of the beholder,” Barrett argues that camp achieves interactional currency in gay contexts because of a shared understanding of the situation as queer, where queer “norms for interpreting indexical signs” (21) are salient. Barrett’s analysis helps to

explain how camp is used in social situations—camp can foster a gay reality between strangers regardless of setting (e.g. activating gay space anywhere) and camp can reassert a gay reality in gay spaces such as bars.

At Tavern, patrons deployed camp interactionally in a context where they continually accomplished a camp situation; that is, the broader situation of predominately gay men embodying figures such as Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* is itself camp. By drawing on camp interactional styles, patrons imbued interactions with gay subtext and thus asserted or reasserted the gay definition of the situation. For example, one night I was sitting at the piano bar and the pianist was chatting about singing techniques with a middle-aged woman patron who was taking voice lessons. The pianist discussed the benefits of opening your mouth widely while singing. Then, the pianist turned to me and another patron, “I assume you’re both gay men.” We chuckle and nod. “Gay men don’t have a hard time opening their mouths wide to sing.” He smirked and the patrons at the table laugh. “Oh, is that what we call it?” the woman quipped. The pianist replied, before playing a Cole Porter song, “Yes, I have a lot of practice; I’m a *practicing singer*.” In this situation, the pianist drew a parallel between singing and fellatio through the act of opening one’s mouth widely to humorous effect.

As with drag queens (Newton 1972; Rupp and Taylor 2003), some singers intentionally engaged in camp as part of their performance. Given that patrons’ attention and deference toward the piano fluctuated, camp was another hook (after song choice) to shift their bodies toward the performer. This was clear in how the pianists and the bar’s resident drag queen engaged with the audience in the piano bar. Cleo, who headlined her own revue upstairs on Thursday nights, sometimes sang at the piano bar before her show. She is trained in musical theater and costume design, wore voluminous gowns over her large frame, which created a visual spectacle as she careened around the small

tables to get to the piano mic on the first floor. One rainy Thursday night, she came downstairs in full drag *before* her show in a pink gown with puffy tulle shoulders.

“This is too much entertainment for no cover charge!” the pianist exclaims. They briefly talk about her show, which starts in about an hour. Cleo wonders if anyone will come: “Do the gays come out in the rain?” She asks this in a singsong pattern, sighing at the end as if, inevitably, the gays do not. “What should I sing?” she asks the pianist into the mic, thus expanding her performance to include this pre-song back-and-forth. The pianist pauses and suggests, “Springsteen?” Cleo feigns shock, retorting, “What kind of fag do you think I am?” Bar patrons sitting around the piano laugh.

Even before singing two songs (“Till There was You” from Meredith Wilson’s *The Music Man* and “She Used to be Mine” from the musical *Waitress*), Cleo grabbed bar patrons’ attention through her campy back and forth with the pianist. On another occasion before her show—in which she also quips campily before, after, and sometimes during her live set—she sang “Let It Go” from the film *Frozen* at the piano. Between her trained voice and the theatrical spectacle of a drag queen singing at the mic, patrons largely stopped conversing and watched her perform. Some sang along. At the end, she quipped, “I feel like Kathy Bates in a poorly cast *Frozen* TV special.” Patrons laughed and giggled throughout the bar.

As the above example suggests, the use of camp could liven up the bar at quiet times of night. On another quiet weekday night, the pianist was playing for ten people scattered around the bar, four of whom were sitting at the piano. As he played, he bantered into the mic in a campy tone, and then corralled us into singing the song with him, which livens up a quiet bar:

He begins performing “Sing” by the Carpenters. In the middle of the song, he banters into the mic, “I think I heard Michael Bublé do a cover of this the other

day...” His sentence trails off as if this was a questionable choice. A queer woman patron at the piano exclaims, groaning, “Now that’s just weird!” The pianist quips, “I could’ve been hallucinating, but.” He continues the song and after he sings the string of “la la las” that end the song, he says, “Now let’s be egregious and do one more!” Then, he sings a refrain of the chorus, and the three of us at the piano sing along: La la la la la la! La la la la la la, la la la la la la laaaaaa!

While patrons seemed to draw on camp to amuse themselves and others by keeping interaction witty or interesting, their use of camp also marked boundaries between who was a cultural insider and who was not in the space. While straight patrons could contribute to the bar by singing the right kind of song, they may not share the same frame for understanding what was happening culturally in the bar. I sometimes heard straight patrons refer to Tavern as a “karaoke bar” and not a *gay piano bar* (Tavern did have karaoke nights upstairs with a machine and not a live accompanist), which was a telltale sign that they were unfamiliar with the bar’s cultural context.

For example, one night I was sitting in front of a mixed gender group of young patrons who had been chatting amongst themselves since they arrived and only occasionally focused on the music. They pressured one of their guy friends, a mid-20s bearded white guy in a Sublime t-shirt, to get in line to sing. He timidly approached the mic when it was his turn and conferred with the pianist about singing an Adele song. The pianist sifted through a book of sheet music and introduced the patron to the crowd by invoking a famous aria from a Strauss opera: “And now!” he said, pausing dramatically. “Adele’s ‘Laughing Song’ from *Die Fledermaus*!” The pianist and a few others in the bar chuckled while the singer looked briefly puzzled. This moment struck me as campy: the pianist created a technical and cultural incongruity by suggesting that a male patron who appeared to be out of his element (if only because the 90s punk band Sublime marked his taste as misaligned with the typical Tavern patron’s musical taste) was going to sing—



—let alone know—an operatic aria sung by a soprano. Furthermore, the pianist did so in a theatrical manner by taking a dramatic pause, as if he were announcing a well-known and highly anticipated act. Sociologically, the pianist's deployment of camp re-established the ritual of a man braving the mic at Tavern to sing a diva's torch song as distinctly gay—and not just karaoke.

In an example where camp demarcated group boundaries even while bringing people across sexual identities together, a patron performed a campy version of a Disney song to entertain the majority straight crowd. I arrived at the bar at 8:30pm on a weekend night. The bar was mostly empty save for the table around the piano. Three heterosexual couples sat around the piano, and two gay friends. Several minutes later, a nonbinary bar regular deployed camp by singing a “gay” version of a Disney song and engaging in suggestive banter with the pianist to engage the heterosexual audience when they stepped up to the mic:

They confer with the pianist on what to sing. The pianist gestures to the straight folks at the piano as if to indicate that they had guests tonight. “Since they don’t know my repertoire,” they quip into the mic, which engages the bar patrons. There is a brief exchange between the straight patrons, the pianist, and the singer. One of the straight patrons mentions Disney. “Little Mermaid? Yeah?” they suggest. Two of the women exclaim, “Yaas!” They proceed to sing a revised (and rehearsed) gay version of “Part of Your World” to the delight of the women, who cheer and clap. “How many drunk assholes can one Tavern hold?” he croons, which elicits a few giggles. As they sing, “I’ve got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty,” the pianist says suggestively into his mic in the beat between lyrics, “Show me your gizmos.” They sing the next line then quickly retorts, “How much you payin’?”

After the performance, I spoke with the singer about how they thought the performance went. They shrugged and invoked technical knowledge of singing: “I didn’t warm up

enough. I hit my high notes, but I didn't have any middle. It was so weird, but at least I had"—they paused to look over at the straight patrons at the piano—"my drunk straight audience who loved it." I asked how they feel about straight people at Tavern. They responded, languidly, "I try not to pay much attention to straight people." As I began to ask a follow-up question, the pianist played the opening chords to "Seasons of Love," which abruptly shifted the singer's attention toward the piano. "Excuse me," they said, interrupting me, and ran over to the piano with their beer. They stood close to the pianist, harmonizing loudly with him. Soon, nearly everyone in the bar was singing along or mouthing the words (myself included). In the song's climax, they took the female counterpoint solo ("Measure, measure your life in looooOOOOVE!") by using reinforced falsetto to reach and sustain the high note at the end. As they belt the note, the bar erupts into applause. People cheer. "Yas bitch!" someone shouted. It was a triumphant and exciting moment of catharsis. The patron beamed. "Well, not in the same key but," said my friend next to me, clapping politely. I couldn't help but laugh at the unexpected incongruity—a triumphant note, but the wrong key.

As the above situation illuminates, the interactional mechanisms I've outlined in this chapter that produce Tavern's gay feeling are not distinct in situ; they overlap in situations. In this interaction, the patron I spoke to engaged in culture talk around musical knowledge and subcultural talk through a campy quip ("I try not to pay much attention to straight people"), they sharply turned their focus of attention to the music when they heard "Seasons of Love" playing, and they contributed to a moment of collective effervescence in the space by singing along and contributing a cathartic belt in the song's climax. Another patron, who I already knew, then campily deployed their own knowledge of music to evaluate the singer's performance.

## Conclusion

Tavern may be the “best gay bar to bring your straight friends to” because its gay feeling is generated through performing and consuming forms of culture that are not borne out of queer communities. As I’ve argued in Chapter 1, belonging in urban space is not necessarily predicated on identity, but rather on situated conduct. By singing the right song, straight patrons could contribute to the bar’s atmosphere, and straight patrons could contribute to moments of collective effervescence by singing along to tunes like “Maybe This Time” side-by-side with gay patrons.

This, however, creates a tension. If anyone can contribute, what exactly makes Tavern—or any gay bar—a gay space? In other words, how is the sexual reality of Tavern as a gay space constructed and sustained? Furthermore, showtunes and Great American Songbook standards are not products of gay culture in the same way that, for example, rap music is a product of Black culture. Scholars have theorized how and why non-gay culture is so integral to particular forms of gay sensibility, though these analyses tend to not be emplaced in particular spaces (e.g. Halperin 2012). In this chapter, I identified several interactional mechanisms that construct a particular kind of gay culture around showtunes: micro-shifting bar patrons’ embodied attention towards the musical performance, invoking “culture talk” about music, and deploying camp as a gay subcultural strategy in interaction. In doing so, patrons and staff collectively work to accomplish Tavern’s reality as a *gay* piano bar.

## CONCLUSION

Each night, diverse revelers patronize bars, restaurants, and nightclubs in a slice of Center City Philadelphia where there are rainbow street signs, rainbow flags, and a rainbow crosswalk. These symbols alone do not foster a gay definition of urban space. Collectively, these groups of people re-accomplish the sexual reality of the Gayborhood as gay public space to varying degrees through interaction rituals of socializing, drinking, dancing, holding hands, kissing, singing, and more. As I have shown across the four empirical chapters, gay rituals do not necessarily need to be enacted by gay people to generate positive emotions and feelings that restock gay symbols with excitement and cultural resonance. Queer people engaging in physical intimacy in public may be the gay ritual par excellence, but sometimes all it takes to generate gay solidarity is getting incredibly excited about the right song coming on at the right time in the bar.

That said, just as people come together through ritual, rituals also powerfully demarcate group boundaries. Gay public spaces, like all urban space, are unequal geographies. Gay neighborhoods tend to exclude racial minorities, women, trans and non-binary people, lower-class queer people, queer people who don't want to go out and drink or dance, etc. In my focus on interactions, I have shown how, even in situations where people come together such as in broker rituals, social inequalities around normative gender and sexuality can be reinscribed in a queer nightlife setting. I have also shown how gay bars do not necessarily foster just one reality that club-goers can orient their presentations of self around. These are social spaces that offer multiple, potentially competing realities, which can also exacerbate inequality.

I conclude the dissertation by considering how my findings could be used to explain interactional dynamics in other kinds of cultural and institutional contexts. What can a study of nightlife interactions in Philadelphia's Gayborhood teach us about

contexts beyond its borders? Broadly, these lessons from the Gayborhood can tell us something about: (1) how gender and sexuality shape how people get along in public and (2) how people manage precarious situations and relationships.

### **Getting Along in Public**

A hallmark of urban ethnography is an attention to how people navigate urban diversity through interaction in public, with particular attention to race, class, and gender (e.g. Anderson 2004). There is relatively less work on how sexuality shapes how people get along in public. As sociologist Mignon Moore (2015) observes, this is partially due to heteronormativity in research design and analysis: “Most ethnographic approaches to the study of city life are biased toward the experiences of people who claim heterosexuality... Ethnographers who spent months or years studying the detailed and mundane aspects of life in urban areas have devoted very little space in their published work to the existence of sexual minorities who also inhabit these spaces” (245). My findings have import both for how people navigate public spaces generally and in the context of sexuality.

Chapter 2’s theoretical lesson that the salience of who “belongs” in spaces with contested meaning or function depends in part on the generation of shared emotions across groups can be extended to many types of spaces. When men and women were able to generate collective effervescence on a dance floor, in part by women aligning their own interests with those of men (i.e. having a good time in a gay space), identity-based claims to space were overcome and not enacted. However, when collective effervescence was generated within distinct groups with conflicting emotional goals, such as straight rituals versus gay ones, men activated boundaries. These dynamics may also explain when diverse groups come together and when they do not in spaces with contested functions or

meanings, which recent research in diverse nightlife settings and gentrifying neighborhoods has noted is prevalent (e.g. Aptekar 2015; Ocejó 2014). For instance, Aptekar (2015) highlights how conflicts arose among gardeners in a community garden over the garden's intended purpose or "vision." At the interactional level, positive emotions generated in interactions among gardeners who shared the same vision for the garden could help explain how gardeners across social divisions came together in solidarity with one another but not similar others who did not share their vision for the garden. In the social movements literature, where there is a diverse body of research on emotions and political organizing (Jasper 2011), these findings may help explain when outsider groups, such as men at Take Back the Night (Kretschmer and Barber 2016) or white anti-racist groups at a Black Lives Matter protest, are welcomed into these identity-based movements on the ground and when they are seen as co-opting the movement.

In gay space, people often actively reckon with gender and sexuality in ways that they may not have to in other contexts marked by compulsory heterosexuality. In gay space, people consciously categorize people into sexual orientations; men often did this to women to assess whether a woman belonged in the space, and men and women did this to one another when they entered into broker rituals. The process of sexuality categorization should be similarly salient in other types of sexual fields for evaluating gendered others. In non-sexualized contexts where sexuality categorization may be less situationally salient, this interactional process may operate differently but no less consequentially. At work, school or in public, individuals may not always consciously categorize others by sexual orientation unless an individual presents an atypical gendered presentation of self, which may lead others to question their sexual orientation (e.g. West and Zimmerman 1987). In schools and family contexts, sociologists have

shown that educators and parents implicitly categorize children as heterosexual as they interpret cross-gender play as rooted in heterosexuality while interpreting same-gender play as friendly and platonic (Martin 2009; Ganser 2017). The unequal salience of sexual orientation categorization in non-sexualized contexts both reveals the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality as well as the hyper-visibility and othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000) of non-heterosexuals.

Additionally, rather than treating gender and sexual identities as unknowable or fluid prior to interaction, patrons felt confident in their gender and sexuality judgments and activated both gender and *sexual beliefs* to make sense of bar others, draw boundaries, and guide subsequent interaction. I have argued that sexual beliefs include assumptions about the natural attractions of gender/sexuality identities and the norms and expectations of cross-gender and cross-sexuality interactions. The maintenance of normative sexual beliefs is an important and powerful aspect of heteronormativity; indeed, one of queer theory's main political commitments is to the destabilization of categories and normative alignments between them (cf. Valocchi 2005). In this study, bar patrons oriented cross-orientation/cross-gender interactions around the belief that there was a fundamental lack of sexual or romantic attraction between gay men and women. This belief allowed gay men and women to engage in bar interactions (e.g. going up to a stranger and complimenting them on their looks or outfit) that would have been interpreted differently and subject to immediately cooling out between two gay men. Sociologists have demonstrated that the activation of sexual beliefs about the natural attractions of gender/sexual orientation categories is common and consequential in interactions occurring not only in public sexualized settings such as bars but also organizational contexts such as at school and work. For example, sexual beliefs undergird how and when students and workers label sexualized interaction as sexual

harassment or misconduct (e.g. Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Giuffre and Williams 1994). Sexual beliefs shape norms around same and cross-gender behavior in other contexts, too, such as rehabilitation facilities. For example, Chris Olsen, a popular TikTok creator made a video that an informant of mine sent to me about his experience in rehab for alcohol addiction<sup>9</sup>. In the video, which has been liked over 1 million times, he highlights the incongruity between being gay and the heteronormative rules that prohibit cross-gender socializing in his rehab center:

“So I figured I’d do a thing I got in trouble for saying at rehab. So at the first one I went to you weren’t allowed to talk to members of the other gender because they thought you’d be swapping your drug or alcohol addiction for sex addiction, but I’m gay so I did not listen to that. So one night I was hanging out with my girls—‘cause nothing stops girls night—and one of the counselors came up to me and was like, ‘Chris, we cannot have you doing this anymore.’ And I was like, ‘I’m gay! What do you not get about that? I’m gay.’ And he was like, ‘Well you could be lying to us so we can’t be taking any chances.’ I looked him right in the eye and I said, ‘I’ll prove it. I’ll prove it to you.’ Yeah, he didn’t like that one—no one in the administration actually liked that one.”

In the context of rehab, the institution implemented rules for interactions and relationships based on heteronormative sexual beliefs, and Chris’s self-proclaimed gay identity is met with distrust by the institution.

Furthermore, broker rituals in particular produced gendered and sexualized inequality through women’s unequal face and emotion work on men’s behalf, recreating an unequal gender dynamic found in the home and at work (e.g. Devault 1999; Hochschild 2012). The persistence of women’s unequal emotion work in everyday and leisure contexts like this one is powerful because these everyday inequalities can help

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Olsen, “Things I Got In Trouble for Saying at Rehab.”  
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMd54BHMY/>



support emotion work inequality in more formal institutions (cf. Ronen 2010). I contribute to this literature by articulating the concept of *situational management*. In a context where patrons struggled to define the situation as friendly or sexual, women engaged in active work through emotional and bodily cues to help gay men to settle onto one definition for the purpose of fostering interaction. Though not explicitly discussed in this way, scholars have shown how women provide situational assistance for men's dealings in other contexts (cf. Hoang 2014).

### **Managing Precarious Situations and Relationships**

In her study of how doctors and patients sustain the clinical reality during gynecological exams, Emerson (1970) writes: "Situations differ in how much effort it takes to sustain the current definition of the situation.... A reality can hardly seem self-evident if a person is simultaneously aware of a counterreality.... [T]he ordinary reality may contain not only a dominant definition, but in addition counterthemes opposing or qualifying the dominant definition. Thus, several contradictory definitions must be sustained at the same time" (75-76). As I have shown in this dissertation, gay bars can foster multiple, and at times competing, realities, which could hinder sociability and damper people's enjoyment. The mechanisms I identified in Chapter 4—managing stigma corporeally, negotiating discrepant frames of social activity, and navigating ambiguous social relations—can be generalized to other kinds of precarious situations.

First, individuals are held accountable for looking and behaving appropriately in their assigned sex category, and embodied enactment is a critical part of this process of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Through suppressing embodied femininity by not speaking or standing stiffly, men collectively reproduced a gender and sexual system that devalues and stigmatizes men expressing femininity. Men othered

effeminacy by not embodying it (cf. Schwalbe et al. 2000). Thus, the specter of effeminacy, rather than the enactment and rejection of feminine displays, influenced men's behavior, which may shape men's experiences at school and work as well (cf. Pascoe 2005). Furthermore, men's constrained corporeal displays also created unequal disadvantages for those who felt they had "gay voice," which intersected with race and class to negatively affect some men's social experiences in the bars.

Second, while frame misalignments are sometimes compatible with interactions that occur, such as when parents take their children to zoos (Grazian 2015:70) or when humans play with animals (Jerolmack 2009), situations where frames are discrepant create interactional barriers to meeting new people. This most disadvantages individuals who wish to gain access to social networks for either sociable or instrumental purposes. In other words, discrepant frames may block individuals' ability to generate social capital (cf. Hunter 2010). Discrepant frames can also be exploited. For example, the MeToo movement has brought greater public awareness to how powerful people can exploit discrepant frames in everyday life and at work to sexually harass and abuse subordinates (cf. Giuffre and Williams 1994).

Beyond sexualized situations, academic conferences are another context where discrepant frames can disincentivize interaction and perpetuate inequality among scholars unequal in power and status. Here, participants may experience misalignment between framing activity around objective/impersonal evaluation and subjective/collegial sociality. For example, journal reviewers may feel uncomfortable negotiating interaction with a conference panelist who presents the paper that they are anonymously reviewing. If the reviewer and the author find themselves in close proximity, the reviewer may decide the discrepant frames are irreconcilable and avoid interaction. For the author, particularly grad student, untenured, or adjunct authors who

are working to formally join the discipline, this moment of thwarted interaction is a missed opportunity for making an instrumental contact, for building one's confidence that their ideas are valid, and for fostering the feeling that they "belong" in the discipline.

Third, these findings suggest that social media use can thwart offline interaction as users foster digital relationships that ambiguously translate offline. While discrepant frames produce misalignment where individuals are unable to negotiate a working definition of the situation, social media use creates relational ambiguity that can be embarrassing to negotiate without a normative interaction code (cf. Goffman 1963a). Individuals struggle with whether and how to interact with acquainted strangers; approaching an acquainted stranger with too much familiarity may be uncomfortable while disregarding them as a total stranger may feel like a social offense (Goffman 1963a).

Relational ambiguities shape social experience. This work contributes to new media and sociological research on "context collapse" (boyd 2010) by defining and beginning to describe the *relational* issues present in moments where performances and audiences are desegregated. As a type of digitally mediated social tie, acquainted strangers are not exclusive to a particular context, population, or form of social media. The concept of acquainted strangers is a generative one for future research. Acquainted stranger relationships may vary depending on the digital platform (e.g. Instagram versus Twitter versus Tinder) and the physical context where users run into one another. People encounter acquainted strangers not only in bars but on the street, on public transit, at work and in school. Future work should investigate whether and how different contexts, populations, and forms of social media shape the contours of these social ties, and whether and how individuals engage with them. In doing so, researchers can continue to

bring a sociological tradition of studying social relationships in public spaces (e.g. Goffman 1963a; Lofland 2003) into the social media age.

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