

THE INVISIBLE LESBIAN:
THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF
QUIET QUEER SPACE AND THE SOCIAL POWER
OF LESBIAN BARTENDERS

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive scholarship exploring relationships between space, gender, and sexuality, little attention has been given to lesbian/queer subjects in everyday heterosexual spaces such as bars. Furthermore, there is an absence of work addressing the bartender as a social actor. This research confronts those gaps by examining the social power of lesbian bartenders in straight bars to facilitate lesbian networks, and to cultivate and maintain “quiet queer spaces”—structurally heterosexual and socially heteronormative spaces that temporarily and covertly double as safe spaces for queer populations. By drawing on previous scholarship, and conducting a primary investigation through interviews and observations, I examine the creation and maintenance of quiet queer spaces in Colorado Springs bars to conclude that quiet queer spaces are both present and necessary in lesbian networks. I specifically examine the position of the lesbian bartender in straight bars as one of unique social power, essential in the creation and identification of quiet queer space.

After living in Colorado Springs for nearly four years, I could almost have been convinced that I was the only lesbian¹ in the city. Beyond the campus of the city's small liberal arts college, I saw no evidence of queer populations. This is curious, given recent studies² that suggest one in every ten Americans is gay. In a city of 419,848³ people it seemed highly unlikely I was the only lesbian, regardless of the large military and evangelical Christian presence (Colorado Springs is home to more than one hundred evangelical Christian organizations⁴ and five major military installations⁵). The available statistics point to an alarming discrepancy between how many gay people live in Colorado Springs and how many of those populations are actually publicly visible. I knew that lesbians must exist in the city, but where?

The invisibility of the lesbian population is not surprising, however, given that in order to engage in the social world—which is dominated by a specifically heteronormative dialogue and narrative—a lesbian must actively conceal her sexual identity and attempt to “pass” as heteronormative in daily life (Faderman 1991; Rich 1980; Valentine 1993b). Lesbian invisibility is necessitated and normalized to such a degree that it obscures not only the individual as lesbian but also the crisis of invisibility itself. It complicates the process of lesbian network formation, as

¹ The language available to indicate sexual identities is problematic. “Homosexual” is a strictly biological term, which I will avoid using as it is fraught with various political and medicalizing implications. For the purposes of this paper, “lesbian” will refer to “homosexual” women, “gay” will represent both “homosexual” men and women unless explicitly stated otherwise (as in “gay male”), “straight” and “heterosexual” will be used interchangeably, and “queer” will refer to all non-normative identities (specifically sexual) both to highlight the “instability of identity categories” and to function as a “catch-all for the proliferation of emergent identities” (Hammers 2008:555).

² The research attempting to quantify homosexuality in America is widely contested, both in terms of research methods and data analysis. 10% seems to be the most widely agreed upon statistic, but the disputed nature of these studies must be taken into consideration (e.g., Bogaert, 2004; Voeller, 1990).

³ <http://www.springsgov.com/units/budget/2011/00-GlanceandProfile.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4287106>

⁵ Fort Carson, Schriever and Peterson Air Force Bases, Cheyenne Mountain Air Station, and the United States Air Force Academy

the dominant heteropatriarchal paradigm renders women indiscernible even to one another. When networks do form, they are faced with a scarcity of lesbian-specific spaces.

“Safe” spaces are “fundamental to the development of lesbian social networks but they also affect their character” (Valentine 1993a:112). The lack of lesbian dominated space results in a “lesbian institutional base” that consists of a series of “time-spaces”—“the same spatially concentrated venues which are reasonably fixed in locations, and regular but not permanent in time” (Valentine 1993a:101). Because these spaces are subject to the same lack of visibility as the lesbian identity, “the lesbian institutional base, like many of the women who frequent it, ‘passes’ within the neighborhood” (Valentine 1993a:101). The invisible lesbian identity reinforces the hidden nature of lesbian public space, which affects the imperceptible character of lesbian social networks. These three factors necessitate that lesbians find safe spaces within available heteropatriarchal establishments, and result in a veiled co-opting of public straight⁶ spaces by lesbian networks.

During an informal conversation, Katie⁷, a lesbian bartender at a popular Colorado Springs sports bar called Frank’s Downtown Bar, Katie made a comment that elucidated how this actually works. “Frank’s has always been kind of like a quiet gay bar,” she told me. “Yeah, I’ve noticed,” I responded. Katie replied with laughter, “It’s crazy! But a lot of gay people actually do go there.” This conversation would serve as the genesis of my project—as we continued to talk, I realized that I was both occupying and participating in the creation of a queer time-space.

⁶ By “straight” space, I mean any venue that does not advertise itself as a space catering specifically to the LGBTQ community.

⁷ The names of all restaurants and people in this study have been changed per participants’ request.

My inquiry, which imposes a sociological lens on observations of both physical structure and interactional patterns that occur within “quiet gay bars,” yields an analysis of space, power, social control, and social interaction. I have complicated and extended Katie’s assertion of Frank’s as a “quiet gay bar”—a straight bar that doubles as a clandestine host to gay populations—and will refer to such bars as “quiet queer spaces.” These are structurally heterosexual and socially heteronormative spaces that, under certain circumstances, double covertly as safe spaces for queer populations.

The root of my inquiry is an investigation of the processes involved in creating, identifying, and maintaining quiet queer spaces and lesbian networks, as well as the significance of place—in this case the bar—and the specific role of the bartender within those processes. I examine the relationship between a bar’s physical structure and the people (employees and patrons alike) who occupy that bar in an effort to operationalize “that feeling” which indicates if a place is safe. I explore the role of the bartender specifically as one of social power, a position that cedes both physical control of the bar and, to a large extent, social control of the bar’s atmosphere.

Ultimately I will assert that lesbian bartenders in straight bars have a distinctive form of social power. They are unique in that they can be simultaneously visible and invisible—their lesbian identities remain generally undetected by a straight audience, but are apparent to a queer audience who has a significant stake in identifying them. Because of this visibility, bartenders are imperative to the creation of queer space and crucial within lesbian social networks. The ability to be visible and act in a role that creates a sense of safety, however, is dependent on certain structural and administrative features of the bar where they are employed. Incorporating an investigation of the specific role of lesbian bartenders complicates examinations of the

relationship between the structure of a bar and its occupants, and fills a gap in existing scholarship on sexuality and space.

A quiet queer space must be understood through its individual elements, and also as a comprehensive and unremitting feedback loop—a dynamic relationship of factors creating and recreating each other. This research interrogates that loop, exploring its position and significance within a dominant heteropatriarchal social paradigm, teasing out the strands that allow for quiet queer spaces to develop and thrive, and exposing the covert power dynamics within everyday space that reproduce heteropatriarchal norms and control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of the primary themes of this study have not been addressed comprehensively within scholarly research. Significant academic focus has yet to be committed to studies of bartenders and their role in network formation. Although excellent research regarding sexuality, social control of public spaces, and lesbian visibility does exist, it is in short supply and complicated by much interdisciplinary disagreement. Consequently, forming an academic foundation on which this inquiry can rest requires bringing together multiple disciplines and perspectives to create a wide lens through which the necessity of quiet queer spaces, and the processes of creating and maintaining those spaces, might be understood.

I will begin with a discussion of place, which is heavily reliant on the work of urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989). From there, the concepts of place and space will be compounded with issues of power and control. Gill Valentine's (1993a; 1993b; 1995) work on social geographies is featured prominently, as she is prolific and one of the pioneering geographers studying sexuality and the politics of space. The framework of symbolic interactionism provides perspective on lesbian visibility, both in public spaces and within the

performance of self. Although all of these academic lenses exist quite independently, it is my hope that putting them in conversation will shed new light on the (often invisible) dynamics of heteronormative control of public space, and the way that individuals create and rely upon social networks to mediate those dynamics.

PLACE

The Bar and Bartenders

The bar is a quintessential feature of American culture, though many of its nuances have been surprisingly overlooked in academic literature. As Gary Alan Fine (1996) asserts in his book *Kitchens*, “The production, service, and consumption of food is a nexus of central sociological constructs—organization, resources, authority, community, rhetoric, gender, and status” (1996:1). Restaurant employees and customers are thrown into a complicated matrix of relationship and meaning making, navigating interactions that are rife with covert classed, gendered, and sexualized hierarchies.

In the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Cowan, McKim, and Weissberg (1981) investigate the role of bartenders as “informal, interpersonal help agents.” After describing a mental health paradigm shift toward preventative practices and an emphasis on informal “person power,” the authors posit bartenders as “natural helpers” (1981:716). These are people who, because of their position in certain occupational roles (i.e. hairdressers, divorce lawyers, etc), “field considerable psychological upset” despite a lack of professional training (1981:716). Bartenders are positioned as the face of establishments that are “widely recognized as places where, for overdetermined [sic] reasons, many people go to spill their guts” (1981:717). The occasional role fusion of bartender and therapist highlights the social

importance and power of the bartender, as well as the complicated interactional patterns between restaurant employees and customers.

Third Place

In his work *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1989) presents a study of informal public gathering places that “become as much a part of the urban landscape as of the citizen’s daily life” (1989:xv). After critiquing the dissolution of modern America’s informal public life into “boredom, loneliness, alienation and a high price tag” (1989:13), Oldenburg offers a solution in what he names “the third place.”

Daily life, in order to be relaxed and fulfilling, must find its balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second is gainful or productive and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it (1989:15).

As Oldenburg conceives of it, the third place, or the space available for the “third realm of experience,” is the perfect venue for what Georg Simmel (1949) referred to as “pure sociability”—social interaction “oriented completely around personalities” that possesses “no ulterior end, no content, and no result outside itself” (Simmel 1949:255). It is a “generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg 1989:16).

Oldenburg also presents a list of universal characteristics of third places, which sheds light on the importance of location, physical structure, and regular patronage. He asserts that third places act as “levelers” insofar as they are “by [their] nature inclusive [places]” and “[do] not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion” (1989:24). The “mood” of a third place must be “playful” (1989:37), and the main focus of customers should be conversation (1989:26). Beyond that, most spaces that become third places are older, “typically plain,” and “likely *not* to

impress the uninitiated” (1989:36). The lack of fanfare and flashy décor provides these spaces with a “protective coloration.”

Not having that shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers . . . A place that looks a bit seedy will usually repel the transient middle-class customer away from home (1989:37). This, in turn, encourages a consistent patronage. “The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars” (1989:34). The regulars provide the character of the space, and “assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there” (1989:34). Gary Alan Fine (1994) also references the importance of regulars in establishing a sense of community, not only among the patrons, but with the staff of the restaurant as well.

Many businesses based on repeat patronage desire to treat their customers as acquaintances—to create the illusion of community, asking employees and managers to know these strangers “personally”—establishing a relationship of loyalty and trust (1994:148).

In order for an establishment to become a bona fide third place, these factors must combine in a way that creates “a home away from home” (Oldenburg 1989:38), where a patron could experience a sense of “at-homeness . . . the feeling of being at ease or the ‘freedom to be.’ It involves the active expression of personality, the assertion of oneself within an environment” (1989:41). What Oldenburg does not address, however, are dynamics of power in space—to whom are these spaces and this “freedom to be” actually available, and who controls that availability? With these questions in mind issues of intolerance toward certain expressions of self become glaring.

LESBIAN VISIBILITY

Space

Within geographical literature, it is widely accepted that age and gender deeply influence an individual’s perception and experience of everyday space. Gender inequalities are often

reflected in the way that space is designed, controlled, and occupied. This phenomenon has recently expanded within academic research to include studies of the structural power of heterosexuality to reproduce itself in space (Podmore 2000; Valentine 1993b). Studies of sexuality should be approached as a “nexus of the global and the intimate,” where the “private and introspective experiences of embodied self meet with the multiscalar processes of identity and power across the local-global continuum” (Wright 2010:57). Both cities and sexualities “reflect the ways in which social life is organized, the ways in which it is represented, perceived and understood, and the ways in which various groups cope with and react to these conditions” (Knopp 1995:149).

As Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1978), the fact that social and cultural norms change over space and time renders sexuality something that is not only defined by sexual acts, but exists as a process of power relations. That heterosexuality is the dominant form of sexuality in Western culture (Rich 1980) and powerfully expressed in space is imperative in exposing the myth of a “private-public dichotomy” (Valentine 1993b).

Locating sexuality in private rather than public space is based on the *false* premise that heterosexuality is also defined by private sexual acts and is not expressed in the public arena . . . However, such is the strength of the assumption of the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexual hegemony, that most people are oblivious to the ways it operates as a process of power relations in *all* spaces (Valentine 1993b:396).

Many non-normative identities are pushed into obscurity simply by existing within a dominant culture that makes their visibility impracticable.

This concept of visibility is crucial not only within individual identity formation, but for network production and maintenance as well—for populations who are more or less “invisible,” the idea takes on a critical role. Historically, the lesbian has been “viewed from the outside [as] either sick or sinful . . . no one would want to be considered one” (Faderman 1991:105). The lesbian identity was, out of necessity, pushed far enough into obscurity that “lesbian subculture

could not proliferate very rapidly in the light of day,” but was “invited into darkness and secrecy, so that the dismal popular images were more likely to become self-fulfilling prophecies than if such a subculture could have developed without fear and shame” (1991:105).

Although gay (male) bars will often host “ladies’ nights,” there are very few lesbian bars. “Lesbian and gay venues usually have a short lifespan . . . Under the weight of financial pressure lesbian bars shut down or their owners switch to targeting a different subcultural clientele” (Valentine 1995:100). As a consequence, lesbian individuals, communities, and the territories those communities frequent are often constituted through small social networks, rather than specific commercial sites—further exacerbating the issue of invisibility for lesbian networks.

Julie Podmore’s study, “Gone ‘underground?’ Lesbian visibility and the consolidation of queer space in Montreal” (2000), presents a case study of Montreal’s lesbian bar culture since 1950. Podmore refers to the relationship between sexuality and space, which, along with feminist and queer theory, has been gradually integrated into the study of geography since the 1970s. With the onset of queer politics in the 1990s came the unification of gay, lesbian, and queer populations under a broad LGBTQ “community” umbrella (2000:598). This “unification of all populations that do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms” succeeded in enlarging and exposing territories with which lesbians might identify, but also challenged lesbian visibility (2000:616). In Montreal, this manifested in the loss of lesbian territory and deterritorialization of lesbian bar culture. Podmore suggests that this “disappearance” might be the result of a “disidentification with the essentialism of identity and space” (2000:618), as well as a necessary strategy in a society that confines lesbians to private spaces (Elwood 2000; Rich 1980).

Lesbians’ integration, or lack thereof, into queer commercial space is an essential component to understanding lesbian visibility in urban spaces. In *The City and the Grassroots*,

Manuel Castells (1983) hypothesizes that lesbians' absence from public spaces can be understood by the fact that "on the whole they are poorer than gay men and have less choice in terms of work and location" (1983:140). He also contends that women and men have a fundamentally different relationship to space. Where "men have sought to dominate, and one expression of this domination has been spatial," women "have rarely had these territorial aspirations" and attach more importance to relationships and networks "of solidarity and affection" (1983:140).

However, Adler and Brenner's study "Gender and Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in the City," (1992) asserts that territorial concentrations of lesbians exist, but have a "quasi-underground character . . . enfolded in a broader countercultural milieu" without their own public territory and subculture (1992:31). In challenging the gender essentialism of Castells, Adler and Brenner reference a possible fear of male heterosexual violence and economic limitations, such as responsibilities for children, as deterrents from occupying public territory.

Lesbian Expression of Self

Lesbian invisibility extends beyond social spaces into workplaces, which "come to reflect physically and socially the ideology and social relations of the majority of the inhabitants" and reinforce an assumed heterosexual identity of the employees both as individuals and as a collective whole (Valentine 1993b:402). This sociosexual group identity necessitates that lesbians learn to blend as "honorary heterosexuals," often adopting fictional sexual identities in order to "pass" (1993b:404). To make oneself visible as a lesbian in the workplace would mean relinquishing the "ability" to engage in the required heterosexual dialogue of daily life (Elwood 2000; Valentine 1993b).

Because of their hidden nature, lesbian networks have historically been difficult to identify and break into (Faderman 1991; Valentine 1993a). They are generally invisible to those who aren't "in the know" (Valentine 1995:100), and frequently invisible to other lesbians as well (Valentine 1993b). This issue can be mitigated by what Valentine refers to as a "network broker," or "the presence of a 'matriarchal' figure in places such as public houses and social groups who appear to draw newcomers into the community by befriending them and introducing them to others" (1993a:112). These individuals help in both identifying social networks for unassociated lesbians and maintaining those networks through a social snowball effect.

Gaydar

"Gaydar," a portmanteau combining the words "gay" and "radar," is the colloquial term used to describe the ability to identify a non-heterosexual person. Recently, Cheryl Nicholas (2004) has asserted that studies of gaydar are significant within the social sciences because they provide insight to the ways that people define their social identity through communication rituals. In the *Journal of Homosexuality*, Scott Shelp (2003) suggests the following definition:

A special intuitive or perceptual sensibility (sense-ability) of gay people to detect subtle identifying characteristics in other gay people, the development of which is motivated by the desire to remove feelings of isolation many have experienced growing up gay, and the basic human need for association with like others (2003:2).

He differentiates this "Adaptive Gaydar" from "generic gaydar," or the general ability to identify gays that is practicable by anyone but is not motivated by a search for "like others." Although Shelp's study focuses on gay men exclusively, his discussion of the isolation caused by dominant attitudes toward homosexuality in the Western world, and the subsequent motivation for gays to seek like others, is relevant for all stigmatized and invisible minorities.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism generated by Herbert Mead (1934), identity can be understood as something that is interpreted through and within interactions. Similarly,

gaydar is “used by the cultural milieu around and within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community to name the interactive process within which recognition emerges” (Nicholas 2004:61). Nicholas draws on Erving Goffman’s (1963) model of stigmatized identity, which distinguishes between a “discredited identity,” one devalued because of visible physical characteristics (i.e. race, sex, etc), and “discreditable identity,” which is also devalued but lacks phenotypic distinction (i.e. sexuality). Nicholas (2004) claims that an ontological basis for gaydar is that “gay and lesbian identity recognition processes thrive in societal contexts where ‘invisibility’ dominates as the norm for gay and lesbian cultural affiliation” (2004:64). Ironically, gaydar is both necessitated by and reliant on a heteronormative environment.

Gaydar is used as a “survival strategy”; a way to function within the heterosexual standard . . . Verbal and non-verbal behavior that arise out of interactions among gay people are the actions that carry and modify a shared social meaning of what it takes to be classified as a member of this cultural group (2004:64).

Because gender and sexuality are so intensely conflated, deviating from a gendered/heterosexual norm is often perceived as a non-verbal indicator of a deviant sexuality. In many ways, gaydar is reliant on Erving Goffman’s (1959) theory of dramaturgy—social interactions are a series of self-performances, each with a specific meaning intended for a specific audience.

During the three years that Kristin Esterberg (1997) spent interviewing and surveying 120 lesbian and bisexual women for her book *Lesbian & Bisexual Identities*, each woman identified various interactional and visual/presentational signs they looked for to recognize and be recognized by other lesbians (1997:88). To successfully express and identify these cues is a process that is constantly in peril, as well as a sign of cultural competency (Nicholas 2004). “Creating a plausible account of oneself as a lesbian entails ongoing attention to dress, to demeanor, and to the small details that may signal to others that one experiences desire for women. To fail to produce or attend to these cues entails the risk of invisibility” (Esterberg

1997:94). The lesbian identity is constructed within and through these performances, as well as within and through interactions.

In this study, I examine these performances and interactions within the public, social setting of the bar to explore the ways that lesbian invisibility is manifested and mediated through certain spatial and interactional contexts. Specifically, I examine the social function of lesbian bartenders employed in heteronormative establishments to act as visible figures and network brokers within lesbian friendship groups.

METHODS

RESEARCH

All of my data has been collected using qualitative, specifically ethnographic, research methods. Over a period of about four weeks, I was a participant observer in quiet queer spaces that have developed within three structurally heteronormative bars in Colorado Springs, each of which have employed a lesbian bartender. I conducted more than 35 hours of observations, 6 formal interviews, and numerous informal interviews with lesbian bartenders, the patrons of their bars, and members of the bartenders' extended lesbian friendship groups. The formal interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes; in many cases, the conversations were extended days later via text message and email. Interviewees were selected through both snowball and purposive sampling techniques, with my target population being lesbians who work or have worked as bartenders in heteronormative establishments in Colorado Springs.

Half of my observations were conducted during the bars' daily happy hours—about four o'clock to seven o'clock in the evening—assuming that this ritual would yield a consistent crowd, and ensuring that the bar was never empty. The rest of my observations were coordinated

around certain bartender's shifts, both to provide a point of comparison as to how the atmosphere changed, and to observe the bartenders interacting with customers.

With the exception of CC, who was interviewed while working, interviews were conducted in the late afternoon before the bartender's shift, either in the bartender's place of work, or at a local coffee shop. After each interview, I transcribed the conversations and pored over the text to code the transcriptions. I then went back over the transcriptions with an eye for more specific, selective coding. Ultimately, five central themes emerged—the role of the bartender, informal network creation and maintenance, elements of the bar as facilitated by its physical structure, elements of the bar as facilitated by staff, and gender/sexuality expression. These themes culminate in discussions of space and place, spatial and interactional bias, the processes through which lesbian bartenders become visible—as well as the specific function of the bartender in both cultivating quiet queer spaces and making such places identifiable—and the nuances of lesbian social network formation.

RESEARCH SITES

Frank's is a staple of downtown Colorado Springs, and famous amongst the locals for its lively jukebox, cheap draft beers, and the “best fried cheese curds in the state.” Through interviews I learned about Ray, the owner, who moved to the Springs from Wisconsin and opened Frank's in an effort to replicate his favorite sports bar from home. On Frank's website, Ray describes the bar as follows:

. . . With our friendly staff, loyal customers, and great food, it all adds up to one thing; a great time! . . . Our laid back attitude will have you coming back for more. So, if you're looking for a place to chat with old friends, or make new ones, Frank's is the place to be.

Frank's is divided into three general areas—the bar, a series of high-top tables, and low tables facing street view windows. In each section, one of three large-screen televisions is within clear view. The walls are plastered with a swarm of athletic memorabilia and beer

advertisements, many of which are vintage neon signs that spill a fluorescent glow across the worn and stained bar. The staff's specific roles within the restaurant are fluid—with the exception of the bouncers, all employees are expected to cook, wait tables, clean, and tend bar as needed.

My initial research at Frank's led me to Katie, who would go on to become my key informant. Katie grew up in Colorado Springs, and began working in restaurants after graduating from college at the age of 23. She is currently taking classes in a teaching program, and about to pursue a graduate school degree in business. Before working at Frank's, Katie spent five years tending bar at Boston's, a franchise pizza parlor and sports bar. Katie is Asian American, 29 years old, and above average height at about 5' 9". She sports a short, stylish haircut that is normatively feminine enough for her to blend in most everyday settings, but would likely stand out as a cultural cue to another lesbian. Katie's bartending experience and warm personality make her a key player in Colorado Springs' lesbian friendship networks. Without her as a contact I doubt this project would have been possible.

Through Katie, I met Anastasia, a 27-year-old bartender at Back Yard Barbeque. Anastasia is white and petite with short, curly dark hair that, like Katie's, could be a signifier to another lesbian. She is outspoken with a quick, dry wit, and was studying for the LSATs at the time of our interview. My interview with Anastasia took place in Back Yard before she began her shift; she seemed totally at home, even excusing herself at one point to ask her manager if she could start working a few minutes late and extend her interview. Their interactions were comfortable, and the manager was very accommodating.

Back Yard is a smokehouse bar and grill that was opened in 2000 by two brothers from Alabama. Like Frank's, the atmosphere is relaxed and neighborly; "We welcome you to our

house where we Love Good Food, Good Music, Good Beer, and Good Times with our Friends & Family!” their website boasts. Because the building was once a family home, most of the dining space is divided between intimate, angular rooms. The bar is tucked away in the back of the restaurant, surrounded by wooden stools, glowing red chili peppers, and photos of bluegrass bands. During my observations most of the socializing occurred on an outdoor patio, which is heated during the winter and used regularly to host local blues and bluegrass bands.

On a Friday evening early in November, I was invited to Anastasia’s birthday party at Back Yard. After dinner, Katie organized a group to go to Angles, another bar where they could meet up with more friends and also introduce me to the bartender. For the latter part of the 1990s, Angles was a women’s bar called Furies, owned by a lesbian from Colorado Springs. At the center of the bar was CC, a lesbian bartender who was referenced in multiple conversations with lesbian bar-goers as “the face of Furies.” Eventually, the bar was not financially lucrative enough to sustain itself and was bought out. Katie told me that shortly after the bar reopened, and was no longer a lesbian bar, it lost most of its regular patronage. After a few years, Furies was again bought out and reopened by a straight couple, who renamed the bar Angles. At the recommendation of one of the few original lesbian customers who had remained faithful to the bar through the turnovers, CC was rehired. Currently, Angles operates as a straight bar, but is openly “gay friendly.” Many of the women I met continue to refer to it as Furies.

Like Frank’s and Back Yard, Angles is a typical neighborhood bar, though not as well known within the city. Inside the bar, there are two dartboards, three or four arcade games, and a small dance floor. The bar hosts weekly poker and karaoke events, which draw a consistent group of locals. CC, who is Latina and forty-two years old, is well known within lesbian networks in Colorado Springs. She would be described as a “stone butch,” with a slight but

masculine build, and very short spiked hair. CC is charismatic and easy to talk to, modestly ignorant of her legacy as “the face of Furies.”

My own status as a lesbian living in Colorado Springs is not something that can be ignored. While my identity made the process of “gaining access” much simpler, it also complicated my role as researcher. I was intensely aware of the “researcher as researched” relationship throughout the entire process, constantly negotiating boundaries of friend, lesbian peer, and researcher.

ANALYSIS

Quiet queer spaces, or the structurally heterosexual and socially heteronormative spaces that double covertly as safe spaces for queer populations, exist through a dynamic interplay between place and people (employees and social networks who occupy the place). Through that interplay spaces are constantly created and dismantled, rendering them uniquely impermanent and mobile. In Colorado Springs, the location of the bar is the most readily observable place where this doubling occurs. During all of my observations at Frank’s, Back Yard, and Angles, at least one quarter of the occupants could have been identified as somehow non-normative—many displaying observable cues such as facial piercings or visible tattoos. In addition, the patrons were consistently diverse in age, ethnicity, and both sexuality and gender expression. In referring to these co-opted establishments as “quiet queer spaces,” rather than “quiet gay / lesbian spaces,” I am making a statement about their accessibility and usefulness to all identities (not only gay populations) that somehow challenge the dominant social paradigm.

SPACE AND PLACE

Third Place

Each bar that I studied fits the physical criteria of Oldenburg’s (1989) third place—they are older, typically unadorned, and lack fanfare and flashy décor. Though they are all impeccably

clean and well kept, they exhibit a certain worn tone that comes both from the age of the bar and lack of clear decorative organization. Their humble visual profiles serve to encourage an abandonment of social pretense, and also establish the bars' protective coloration (Oldenburg 1989).

Anastasia, CC, and Katie each referenced physical characteristics of third place homeliness in their own deliberations on places to gather. "The décor obviously is going to attract certain people," Anastasia said. Likewise, Katie mentioned the importance of atmosphere:

I think it's more the setting too—like when you walk in, it's not brand new or flashy. It's just kind of laid-back and calm. I think that has something to do with it, too. Because if you walk into Back Yard and places like that, it's very relaxed and everyone's chill. You don't have crazy dance music blasting at you and stuff like that . . . I don't like super crowded bars.

CC expressed a similar preference. "Pretty much what I do is I look for the little homey bars where you just walk in and have a good time and nobody's going to bother you," she said. "You go by and you see this little itty-bitty bar and it doesn't look that crazy busy, that's what I look for."

Within my observations, a clear pattern emerged to suggest that smaller, privately owned bars and restaurants are more conducive to becoming quiet queer spaces than corporate restaurants. Due to their size, privately owned restaurants are more able to facilitate intimate or pseudo-familial relationships with staff. "Mom and Pop places are more—it seems the staff becomes more like a family," Anastasia commented. "I think it just depends on the owner, like the management." Amicable relationships among a small staff contribute to the overall hominess of privately owned restaurants and, in consequence, a feeling of comfort that aids in creating quiet queer spaces.

Location

The Springs is politically and ideologically divided quite clearly between the eastern and western⁸ halves of the city. While the “east side” of the city is populated with landmarks of conservatism and evangelical Christianity—such as Focus on the Family⁹ and New Life Church—the “west side” is host to Colorado College, a progressive, four-year liberal arts college and Old Colorado City, a historical district known for eclectic shops and restaurants.

In my conversations with CC, references to the west side were made in such a way that assumed I, as an insider of sorts to the quiet gay scene, would interpret the location as synonymous with gay friendly. “My career is mostly in the gay and lesbian bars. Five Points¹⁰ was borderline back then, so they can say they’re straight all they want but we all live on the west side!” she said, laughing. She made similar geographic references when relaying her experiences working in structurally straight bars. “Back then being on the west side, I knew a lot of gay people, so we all hung out [at Five Points] during the day,” she said. “When I’d clock out there we’d run to True Colors, one of the first women’s bars in Colorado Springs.” As is true for many lesbian bars, True Colors was not able to sustain itself financially for very long, and eventually closed.

SPATIAL AND INTERACTIONAL BIAS *Patterns of Interaction*

Lesbian invisibility is reinforced and reproduced by a discursive relationship between spatial and interactional biases. “[Lesbians] here are weird. It’s like once they hook up they

⁸ Geographically speaking, this divide seems actually to be between the north and south areas of the city, and not clearly east and west. The language of “east side” and “west side,” however, is how the divide is discussed colloquially.

⁹ Focus on the Family is an evangelical Christian non-profit organization that actively promotes socially conservative public policy.

¹⁰ Five Points is a straight bar where CC worked before moving to Furies.

never leave [their homes],” Katie said jokingly. “That’s why lesbian bars don’t stay open!” As women form committed or monogamous relationships, the performance of honorary heterosexual becomes more difficult. Because their relationships would have to be disguised in order to pass successfully, lesbians are pushed into the private sphere.

Alarming, lesbian invisibility has been normalized within social interactions to such an extreme degree that many lesbians internalize and normalize the issue themselves. When I asked Anastasia if she’d ever worked someplace where she didn’t feel she could be “out,” she told me that she was generally “pretty open about it.”

Sometimes I’ll watch what I say. I mean that’s just being respectful, though. It makes some people uncomfortable, and though I might disagree with that, that’s just part of who I am. I don’t feel like I have to parade myself. And I don’t want to make anybody uncomfortable . . . I don’t need there to be a big gay scene because that’s not—I’m outdoorsy too. I like other things. And I don’t need to make a big deal about it, it just is what it is. It would be nice to have a bar to go to though.

During one of my observations at Frank’s, I was introduced to Megan, a straight woman in her early 30’s, and former Boston’s colleague of Katie. “I like Katie because she doesn’t have to throw her gayness in your face,” Megan told me. “She’s not walking around all the time like ‘I’m a lesbian! I’m a lesbian!’” This comment clearly articulates both Katie’s successful negotiation of her own visibility, and the problem of lesbian visibility in everyday spaces and interactions. The interactional bias against the lesbian identity is so pervasive that invisibility is not only normalized, but also internalized by lesbians and valorized by a heterosexual audience.

Places that Pass

Not unlike a lesbian’s performance of self, in order for a bar to be successful and accessible to lesbian friendship networks it must be able to pass as a heterosexual space (Valentine 1993a), appearing “mainly straight” while also being covertly occupied by similarly

non-normative people¹¹. There is a “spatial bias” within bar culture that favors heterosexuals and gay men (Castells 1983), demanding that lesbian networks make themselves imperceptible within the straight spaces available to them. This pattern further exposes the fallacy of the “private/public dichotomy” (Valentine 1993b), as lesbians are essentially stripped of the option of existing visibly in the public sphere.

Because there are so few options, and lesbian communities are more often constituted through social networks than commercial sites (Podmore 2000:595), quiet queer spaces are especially important within lesbian friendship networks. Although these places cannot draw on the structural power or visibility that comes from being an established gay bar, they also circumvent the social stigma of such a visible space. This element of compromise is poignant, indicative not only of the social capital one might lose by frequenting “gay spaces,” but also the compromised visibility lesbians take on in avoiding gay bars. The spaces where support networks are available to them are carefully concealed behind a veil of assumed heterosexuality—the spaces in which they should technically be able to seek structural support are more or less non-existent.

“Meat Markets for Straight People”

Because Frank’s primary function is not to facilitate “hook-ups,” or (hetero)sexual interactions, it is immediately more prone to becoming a quiet queer space. “[Frank’s] is really friendly and a lot of people know a lot of people,” Anastasia pointed out. “It’s not somewhere you just go so you can get drunk and hook up with somebody, you go to hang out.” The redirection of patrons’ attention from potential (hetero)sexual interactions to social interactions

¹¹ This is not to say that all spaces that host generally non-normative people will be friendly or safe for gay populations. The presence of other non-normative identities is, however, an important condition of quiet queer spaces.

makes the venue more accessible to a wider variety of people. This is not to say that bars like Frank's, Angles, and Back Yard cannot also serve as venues for heterosexual sociosexual interactions, but it is not their primary function.

The myth of the “public/private dichotomy” (Valentine 1993b) was further exposed through conversations about two downtown bars/nightclubs—Ginger's and The Palace—that came up frequently with all of the bartenders. These bars are popular Friday and Saturday night destinations, advertised aggressively around the city as Colorado Springs' “hottest nightclubs.” Katie, CC, and Anastasia, however, all expressed a strong dislike for the venues. “The Palace is set up really cool on the inside but douche bags go there . . . I mean, I would rather get hit by a car than have to walk into that place,” Anastasia told me. When I asked her for more detail she responded adamantly, “The Palace is like a meat market for straight people.”

Katie also referenced the function of The Palace in facilitating heterosexual sociosexual interactions as a deterrent. “They have a specific audience and they go towards that audience to where it's just straight—come and dance and get hit on by douche bags.” Katie went on to say that she wouldn't want to pay The Palace's “ten-dollar cover to go dance with some crappy music.” This comment, combined with her previous reference to preferring places with no “crazy dance music blasting at you,” is important in understanding how spaces can structurally reinforce heterosexual social interactions. Loud dance music, when used as a tool to facilitate heterosexual sociosexual interactions like dancing, makes spaces less accessible for talking and “hanging out,” and implies forms of sociosexual interaction that are not publicly available to a gay population in straight spaces.

The popularity of these bars and their perceived inaccessibility to a lesbian population exposes more clearly the pattern previously referenced as the power of heterosexuality to

reproduce itself in space. “I prefer places that I find comfortable, and I would say that my ability to be ‘out’ and feel safe and welcome influences that decision a lot,” Keri said. Where space is constituted in a way that favors heterosexual interactions, the ability to be simultaneously “out” and “comfortable” diminishes dramatically.

BECOMING VISIBLE

Expression of Self in Public Spacesⁱ

The fact that The Palace operates to encourage certain (hetero)sociosexual interactions also accentuates the issue of the gender expression of its patrons. Unlike quiet queer spaces, The Palace enforces a strict dress code—among customers, as well as staff—that polices and standardizes gender expression to fit within heteronormative standards. Katie specifically referenced dress codes when telling me about her dissatisfaction with bars such as The Palace and Ginger’s, saying “You can’t have baggy pants or this or that . . . I don’t have a good time in those places, ever. And I feel really uncomfortable, so I’m just like ‘I want to go.’” CC also recounted negative experiences in the “downtown bars.”

I’ve been to The Palace and it took them about, oh I don’t know, twenty minutes to decide that I could go in with my Jaeger hat on. Even though there’s other girls with their dresses on with hats on getting inside . . . I saw some other girl wearing the same hat and he was giving me a hard time to get in rather than her.

Because CC was not presenting a normative feminine/heterosexual identity, there was an effort made to keep her from entering the establishment. Though she was eventually admitted, the hostility of the staff, who were drawing on the standardized gender expectations of The Palace, succeeded in making CC feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.

Expression of Self at Work

Anastasia was assertive in articulating that she “wouldn’t work in a corporate restaurant,” because “in the corporate places there are just a lot of rules.” Privately owned establishments, however, often have less rigorous dress codes and policies for their employees. The dress codes

for employees of Frank's, Angles, and Back Yard are casual and non-gendered. "I look like a 16-year-old boy sometimes. I don't know. I'm really really *gay*," Anastasia joked. "It's usually not hard to tell, I can wear like a cardigan and slack shorts here and nobody gives a shit. Like, I would never wear a dress or anything. I mean, nobody really cares." Working in establishments without mandated dress codes permits the staff to dress more consistently with their sense of self, providing a feeling of casualness and familiarity within the bar—a home away from home. It is also within this context of "being yourself" that the function of gaydar comes into place—deviant or non-normative expressions of self and gender make the bartender visible to others who have the cultural competency (gaydar) to read such cues. Something as subtle as flannel, which is often mockingly referred to as the "uniform of lesbians," acts as a signifier when combined with other elements within a certain context.

Toni used to be a door person at Frank's, and she was gay. So it's pretty funny, one night this chick comes in and she sees Toni, and I think Toni had a flannel on or something and she's like, "Why are all the lesbians in Colorado like lumberjacks??" I just started busting up laughing because I was working too. A lot of people knew both of us so they would come down and see us. (Katie, Frank's Downtown Bar)

When Katie originally applied to Boston's, she was under the impression that it would be a laid-back atmosphere—which it was, until the management changed hands. Ultimately, she moved to Frank's when Boston's started to get "super corporate":

Girls have to wear cocktail shirts and guys can only wear black polos—like super, super corporate. The cocktail shirts are really stupid. I would never wear them. I'd probably quit just because of that. They can't have like piercings or tattoos, anything like that. Even dress codes that challenge gender norms maintain lesbian invisibility. Although a woman wearing a tie is deviant expression of gender, because the transgression is institutionalized, presentation of self—even a queer self—"doesn't matter."

THE BARTENDER

Bartenders as Visible Indicators of Quiet Queer Space

“I am not sure that I would say that gay bartenders are mandatory to create a quiet gay space, rather they may make one such place more identifiable,” Keri told me. In her own experience tending bar, Keri was only “out” with customers if she knew it was “safe” or would “benefit [her] tips.” Regardless, she was definitely visible. “I was always very confident in my ‘style’ and so even if I wasn’t out it was obvious that I was not a typical girly server/bartender.” While Katie, Anastasia, and Keri might not be immediately identifiable as lesbian to everyone with whom they interact, their non-normatively feminine hairstyles and lack of “typical girlyness” would be significant to a lesbian who has, out of necessity, developed the cultural competency to read these cues.

We make guesses about people and those guesses can be helpful in creating a certain kind of comfort. Could the implementation of assumptions and gaydar be useful in creating a gay friendly bar? Yes. Just because I try not to participate in gaydar doesn't mean that millions of people don't use it. So, it may be a very beneficial thing for people in creating a safe space. (Keri)

In the same way that these women are only visible as lesbians to a certain audience, a male heterosexual audience can make them invisible. “I’m very surprised that most people look at me and they really think I’m straight,” said CC, whose short spiky hair and men’s clothing clearly distinguish her from a heteronormative /normatively feminine standard.

In this bar I get hit on more by boys than I do girls. Really scary, but that is true (laughter). I tell them the truth! *Lesbian*. I’m like, ‘I can’t help you, *lessssbian*.’ I’ve been in the business for so long, I’ll straight out tell you. *Lesbian*. But I do joke around about it.

Katie also told me a handful of anecdotes in which she was assumed to be heterosexual or put into the role of a straight woman by a heterosexual male audience.

Guys are weird though. Because if you’re nice to them they think you’re hitting on them, but you’re just being nice. I get asked out and I’m just like “Uhh, I don’t know what to do, uhh thanks” and I just step away. I don’t know it’s kind of weird. Especially guys by themselves, if you’re nice to them and talk to them they read it differently than you would expect . . . So like when guys hit on me I just kind of smile and nod and walk away. Most of the people at Frank’s know [that I’m gay], and most of the guys are like, (mocking a male voice) “Katie if you weren’t gay I’d totally go out with you,” and I’m

just like, “Sweet, high five” (laughter). So I don’t know, you just have to smile and be like, “Yeah, thanks, appreciate it” . . . A lot of people don’t know when people are gay unless it’s really obvious.

The experience of these women is indicative of a workplace that physically and socially reflects and reinforces an assumed heterosexual identity of the employees as a group (Valentine 1993b). To a lesbian audience, however, their visibility is foremost, and allows for quiet queer spaces to develop—as lesbian networks become aware of which bars have lesbian bartenders, the women begin to gather in those bars during those bartenders’ shifts. “The nights I worked it was kind of lesbian, that’s all I have to say,” CC told me, in reference to her time at Five Points. An unintended consequence of visible lesbian bartenders—and the lesbian friendship groups that form around them—is that, depending on who is tending bar, otherwise straight bars become quietly gay.

After ownership of Angles changed hands and CC was let go, the venue lost the structural reassurance and visibility that came from being an established lesbian bar, and lesbian patronage decreased dramatically. “I was very shocked that the bar closed, and everybody (the original lesbian customers) stopped coming,” CC said. “The whole reason everyone came in here was because of CC,” Katie added. “And then they just didn’t manage this place very well, like it was usually dead and stuff.” As soon as the new owners rehired CC, however, the original lesbian clientele began to return to the new bar, Angles.

CC: I came in (when she was rehired) and everybody was straight but me. Unfortunately most of [the customers] didn’t stay around, so I had to pull in the people that I knew, which—gay people! I was like “I know a lot of gay people!” I just had to go downtown and run into them.

Katie: It’s not very “quiet” here, though!

CC: Well, it depends on what time you come in!

Despite the fact that the bar is no longer technically gay, when CC is working it becomes much more like Furies. “Since I’ve been here ten years, and a lot of the customers have been here too, they still find it their home, whether it’s gay, straight or whatever the bar is,” CC

remarked. In my conversation with Anastasia, I brought up the history of Angles. “It still is [like a gay bar]!” she said. “All the people that go there—a lot of the people that go there—are still gay. It’s still kind of Furies, they just have a more open crowd. Like a lot of straight people go there now too.” Anastasia’s comment emphasizes the necessity of quiet queer spaces to be “mainly straight,” as Katie said, but visible as safe to queer populations.

When CC is not working, the bar’s visibility as quietly queer more or less disappears. “She’s a familiar face, and it’s nice to have familiar faces,” Anastasia commented. “It wouldn’t be the same [without CC working]. I mean, I don’t know any of the other bartenders and I don’t know most of the people that go there,” she continued, further highlighting the importance of both the bartender and the regulars.

Later in our conversation, Anastasia again referenced CC’s role in making Angles available to a queer population. “[Without CC], I think that a lot of the gay crowd would die off. Because, I’m not positive, but I think she might still be the only gay person working there. She was kind of like the staple of Furies too, so once you get rid of that, it’s just a straight bar in the ghetto that’s far away.” Quiet queer spaces are dynamic and fluid, constantly being created and dismantled through a combination of social and interactional patterns and components of physical space. Anastasia’s last remark, especially, captures the vital role of lesbian bartenders in this process—without a visible lesbian bartender, “it’s just a straight bar.”

Bartenders as Essential in Cultivating Familiarity and Safe Space

Beyond the physical structure of the bar, quiet queer spaces are created through patterns of social interaction—a relational element that manifests between bartenders, patrons, and pre-existing social networks to convert a venue into a quiet queer space. “I think it’s just like the way [the staff looks] at you. Like how you’re dressed and stuff. I don’t know I think it’s just like, the

way you present yourself walking in, that they judge you right away,” Katie responded, when I asked her how one might tell a friendly bar from an unfriendly one. Katie then mentioned that she, like all bartenders, sends non-verbal cues to patrons when they enter the establishment—generally smiling and welcoming them to the bar. In contrast, the implicit message sent by the staff of The Palace is that only people who conform to a certain gendered norm are welcome, which is one of many reasons that The Palace can not double as a quiet queer space.

“You can go to any bar, but it’s always like the bartender that you want to see or talk to or know,” Katie remarked. “And if they know you and treat you well, then you want to go back.” CC made a similar statement asserting that “a bartender has a lot to do with your whole atmosphere in a bar.” Knowing the bartender—whether gay or straight—brings an immediate sense of comfort to the setting. “I guess familiarity plays a big role in my selection,” Keri said. “I like going places where I am known by regulars and/or staff.” Places that double as quiet queer spaces act as host to a set of “regulars” who the bartender knows and who can be counted on being present, thus making the space feel more familiar.

The level of interpersonal relationship between staff and patrons necessary to cultivate a following of regulars is absent in places such as The Palace and Ginger’s, where a structural lack of emphasis on “hanging out” coupled with a high rate of turnover among the bartenders leaves little time to foster more intimate relationships. “If you go to The Palace and shit like that, they won’t know you and they won’t remember you ever,” Katie said. Staff in smaller more “homey” establishments like Frank’s, Back Yard, and Angles have more of a vested interest in cultivating relationships with their clientele, and forming a consistent customer base. “It’s about how long people are there, and how many people you know, and customer base—like if you know people’s names,” she continued. Even when Katie doesn’t explicitly remember a customer, she

makes an effort to mask her unfamiliarity; “I am [expected to remember people], so when I don’t, I’m just like ‘uhh...’—that’s why you just have to call people ‘dude’ or ‘hey buddy.’” These terms of friendship mitigate any lack of real acquaintance, and contribute to an overall sense of familiarity within the bar.

CC acknowledged this pattern as well. “Being a little neighborhood bar, you actually want to know these people so everyone respects you,” she said. “It’s actually best to have it that way in a bar.” In discussing her own role as bartender at Angles, she remarked with pride, “No matter what, you know these people, and they’re going to come back.” Anastasia was also conscious of her function in establishing familiarity among patrons. “I have a couple guys that come in here that don’t like it when I’m not here, you know? Because you create a connection with a customer and then that’s it!” Katie, who is friends with both CC and Anastasia and frequents their bars, explained to me what makes them successful bartenders, and the challenge the necessity of familiarity creates for bartenders.

Anastasia’s pretty good at talking and making people laugh. She just says weird shit all the time. CC will just know you. She’ll be cool and know your name and talk to you and recognize you when you walk in. I think that has a lot to do with it. Because after you go somewhere for a long time—like this is the problem with new bartenders at Frank’s. All the regulars get pissed off when you don’t know their name, or if you start them a tab and you ask for their card then they’re like “I’ve been coming in here forever!” It just takes a little bit of time.

The amount of time that bartenders in venues that become quietly queer dedicate to becoming familiar with the regulars changes the overall atmosphere significantly, emphasizing relationship building and the bar’s function as a home away from home rather than a “pick-up” spot.

LESBIAN SOCIAL NETWORK FORMATION

The Bartender as Therapist

Cultural expectations of the bartender often extend beyond providing drinks and a familiar face, and into acting as “informal help agents,” listening to the woes of their customers

(Cowen et al 1981). The visibly queer bartender is not only crucial in making structurally straight spaces available to queer populations, but also in cultivating safe spaces to engage in the discourse of bartender as therapist without risk of harassment or rejection on the basis of sexuality. “I would say that had I not been out, some people would not have confided with me about certain issues or concerns,” Keri told me.

Much like a therapist’s code of confidentiality, the women make an effort not to acknowledge their customers outside of the bar. CC articulated this when I asked her about the effects of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) on the underground gay scene.

We’ve always had DADT anyway. No matter what the military says, whatever happens in the bar stays in the bar. Because even when I see half of our customers in here, if I see them outside the bar, I don’t acknowledge them unless they acknowledge me first, just because of the type of bars that I’ve worked in.

While the bartenders might not think of themselves specifically as therapists, they are aware of the emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) they perform in interactions with customers on a daily basis. “Knowing that someone can relate to you is always a big deal,” Anastasia remarked.

If you’re gay, having a gay bartender helps. Straight people aren’t going to understand what you’re going through. Even if they can, you know, sympathize or whatever, it still doesn’t help, they don’t understand. It’s just like if you are white and you have a black person come in and they’re going through something—you’ll never understand what they’re going through. You can be there but it’s a little bit more comforting to know that somebody knows what you’re going through. (Anastasia, Back Yard Barbeque)

During one of my observations at Frank’s I was introduced to a young man named Andrew, who is a server at Boston’s. After breaking up with his boyfriend of two years, Andrew was referred to Frank’s by another server at Boston’s who knew Katie. “I don’t know I guess just because she’s gay so she gets it. I could talk to her,” Andrew told me. That Katie’s bar was suggested to him specifically highlights the nuances of the social power of lesbian bartenders to make their places of employment accessible to a broader queer population. Katie’s visibility as a

non-normative identity in a position of structural and social control within Frank's makes the bar visible (to a queer audience) as a venue with the potential to double as a quiet queer space.

The Bartender as Network Broker

The social power of lesbian bartenders extends beyond their general visibility (to a queer population) and into the creation and maintenance of lesbian social networks. Because they are visible within public spaces, lesbian bartenders are uniquely positioned to act as “network brokers” (Valentine 1993a), identifying and incorporating lesbians into both public space and quasi-underground lesbian social networks. This process is particularly evident in CC's re-integration of lesbian social networks into Angles—“I had to pull in the people that I knew . . . gay people!”

After being incorporated into a social network, the struggle of extending that network to new relationships is lessened by the ability to enlist the assistance of an entire group in navigating invisibility. “I think that once you meet one person, you meet like a whole group of people,” Katie reflected. “Everyone (the lesbian social networks) knows each other here—so I think if you move here and meet one person, then you meet a whole array of people.” Because they are so visible in public social space, lesbian bartenders often serve as gateways for a lesbian's incorporation into social networks. As the networks begin to grow, more spaces become available for queer co-option, simply through the sheer mass of the group. The development of these networks manifests in a social snowball effect of network members meeting new people through one another. “And it's just word of mouth for sure,” Katie said, discussing how the groups meet in public space. “It's like, ‘We're going to go here, meet us here.’”

Katie, Anastasia, and Keri often referenced the importance of knowing their friends' schedules, and plan which bars they visit accordingly. "Bartenders are big," Katie said, "everyone wants to know everyone else's schedule." As long as Katie is working, Anastasia has no qualms about going to Frank's by herself. "Usually I'd know someone in there anyways," she mentioned, highlighting the familiarity that the regulars of Frank's would also provide. Keri commented on the role of bartenders in the maintenance of networks, strengthening pre-existing social groups by "[contributing] to a sense of community." "I think that having a gay bartender who is familiar with parts of the [lesbian community] can be nice. I know that when I come to town to visit I always ask CC and Katie how people are doing, who is dating who, etc."

Lesbian bartenders are also instrumental in making other lesbians aware of quiet queer spaces beyond their bars. As an out bartender, Anastasia is often asked by gay customers for recommendations of other "good"—implicitly, quietly gay—bars. The fact that, to quote Anastasia, "there are no options" of lesbian-specific space is mediated by the bartender's ability to suggest alternatives in quiet queer spaces. This serves to make safe spaces and the social networks therein visible to lesbians, and also reinforces and reproduces a queer presence in straight spaces.

Complications of The Bartender as Network Broker

The informal network of lesbian bartenders both mitigates and complicates the issue of visibility among lesbians. The ability of bartenders to act as social network brokers makes spaces available to lesbians that might not otherwise be accessible. It is exceedingly difficult, however, to be incorporated into a lesbian network without knowing a gay bartender, or participating in bar culture. When I asked Katie whether or not she would have been able to form a lesbian network outside of connections she'd made within the restaurant industry she responded, "I don't

think so, no. I mean I met Anastasia outside of it, but if she didn't work at Ricky's¹² I probably wouldn't know [the people who introduced us].”

In many ways, the emphasis on networks facilitated by lesbian bartenders in straight spaces makes issues of lesbian invisibility even more problematic. It seems as though moving to Colorado Springs without established relationships or pre-existing knowledge of quiet queer spaces would leave a lesbian with few means of identifying or being incorporated into a lesbian social network. My observations suggest that, ironically, structurally gay spaces are ineffective in acting as catalysts for forming lesbian networks. In fact, it is not until after the lesbian network has been formed—likely in a straight venue—that gay spaces become habitable. Katie's friend, Liz, experienced this exact issue when she moved to Colorado. Liz's online search for “gay friendly places” to hang out and meet people directed her to Furies, while it was still a lesbian bar. Furies, however, which was on the brink of its financial demise, was nearly empty and utterly ineffective in providing Liz any social support. It was not until Liz happened to visit Frank's and met Katie that she was able to integrate herself into the lesbian scene in the city.

Like Katie, Anastasia was unsure of how a visible lesbian social network could develop without connections made through restaurants. However, in musing over what she might do if she were new to the city, she articulated an important function of gay male bars for lesbians.

I'd probably go to The Basement¹³ if I didn't know anywhere else, The Basement or Club X. But one night at Club X and you'd never go back. The Basement is pretty chill—I mean I think they have a women's night, but they don't really. Then you just start asking around those bars and, yeah, word of mouth.

¹² A local coffee shop where Keri and Anastasia previously worked and which is also known as a safe and quiet queer space. “Ricky's is always ‘gay friendly,’ there used to be a lot of gay people that worked here . . . and there's always gay people that come in here.” (Katie, Frank's)

¹³ Of the three gay bars in Colorado Springs—Club X, Bubbles, and The Basement—The Basement seems to be the most popular. Club X is a “mixed bar,” catering to both gay men and lesbians, while Bubbles and The Basement target a specifically male audience.

Although the gay bar itself is unproductive in providing a space to initiate lesbian social networks, and is only socially available to lesbians in large groups, someone at The Basement could likely refer a lesbian to a quiet queer space or a specific bartender through whom they could engage with lesbian networks. Once a lesbian bartender in a straight space has been identified, breaking into a social network and engaging in a quiet queer space is both feasible and accessible. It is the navigation of lesbian invisibility until that point—structurally and socially—that is so intensely problematic.

DISCUSSION

Although clear spatial and interactional biases exist, actively reinforcing lesbian invisibility, there is some respite to be found in quiet queer spaces. Structurally, these venues are unassuming, privately owned, not focused on sociosexual interactions, and host to a set of regulars who provide a sense of familiarity. In my observations, the bars that double as quiet queer spaces conform neatly to Oldenburg's (1989) elements of "third space," providing a "home away from home" (1989:38) through a set of familiar patrons and an emphasis on social rather than sociosexual interaction. Oldenburg describes third places as sites for "active expression of personality," where one can experience a "freedom to be" (Oldenburg 1989:41). He does not, however, acknowledge the impact of a dominant heteropatriarchal paradigm on this "freedom to be" within public spaces.

My research both complicates and extends Oldenburg's argument by compounding his analysis with issues of power and control, examining specific social actors and interactional patterns within third places. In doing this, the interactional and structural elements of social spaces can be interrogated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the accessibility of public space to queer or otherwise non-normative populations. The bartender—a figure grossly

understudied in academic research—is responsible for many of the interactional elements that allow third places to double as quiet queer spaces. The casual physical appearances of these establishments, what Oldenburg refers to as “protective coloration” (1989:37), is reflected in the social interactions that occur within the bar. A structural emphasis on conversation and personal relationships between bartender and customer is clearly present in Frank’s, Back Yard, and Angle’s, serving not only to provide a comfortable atmosphere, but also to make these establishments accessible to populations who do not conform to hetero(socio)sexual norms. Beyond providing a sense of familiarity, Katie, Anastasia, and CC are visible enough to a lesbian audience to indicate the safety of the space—providing a venue for lesbian social networks to gather and develop—but invisible enough that their places of work can still pass.

The presence and necessity of quiet queer spaces within bars in Colorado Springs exposes both the lack of lesbian-specific space and the crisis of lesbian invisibility. As Castells (1983) suggests, patterns of difference among the disposable income of men and women could serve to explain why many lesbian-specific bars do not stay open. After CC told me about True Colors shutting down, I asked her if she had any theories as to why women’s bars close so regularly. She suggested that because the owners of Furies and True Colors depended on the bars as their primary source of income—unlike the two gay men who own The Basement, “which is really just for fun, not [the owners’] lifeline”—they did not have the luxury of “keeping their doors open” when the bars were not profitable. Rather than understanding a lack of lesbian-specific space as a product of women’s fundamentally lesser “territorial aspirations” (Castells 1938:140), my study builds upon the research of scholars (Adler and Brenner 1992; Faderman 1991; Podmore, 2000; Rich, 1980; Valentine 1993a, 1993b, 1995) who suggest that the lesbian identity is made invisible by a dominant heteropatriarchal social paradigm. I have focused and

applied their findings—discussions of lesbian visibility and network formation—to the site of the bar and the social importance of lesbian bartenders. In doing so I find that, because of the power of the heteropatriarchal context in which they exist, lesbian bartenders' ability to be visible (to a queer audience) within heteronormative spaces is imperative to the formation and maintenance of lesbian social networks and the creation of quiet queer spaces. Through their visibility, Katie, CC, and Anastasia make quiet queer spaces identifiable, and can act as network brokers (Valentine 1993a) within lesbian networks. Angles' drastic change upon CC's return to the bar—from a heteronormative to quiet queer space with a largely lesbian customer base—clearly exposes the social power of the bartender to serve this function.

A study of lesbian invisibility and the importance of lesbian bartenders is made more complex by the imposition of a lens of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959). Lesbian bartenders can only function as social network brokers and signifiers of quiet queer space if they become visible to the appropriate audiences. In this respect, analyses of gender and sexuality are conflated; Katie, CC, and Anastasia all present non-heteronormative/non-normatively feminine expressions of self, which are only immediately apparent through their hairstyles and styles of dress. That presentation of self is only made possible by the fact that the bars where they work do not have mandated dress codes. Furthermore, their deviant expressions of self are only useful in creating quiet queer spaces to the extent that their queer/lesbian audience has the cultural competency, or gaydar (Nicholas 2004; Shelp 2003), to interpret such cues.

There is an undeniable parallel between the success of these bartenders—as network brokers and as salespeople—and their ability to code switch¹⁴, or negotiate multiple roles at once. During my interview with CC, she began to mockingly chide Katie for not coming into Angles enough. “You’re working too much now!” she said. “And that’s a change I have seen with a lot of my old customers (lesbians)—they’re all in the server business now, so I’ve lost them. We found our talent. We’re good with people.” I propose that because lesbians, and other non-normative identities, spend so much of their daily lives passing, they have mastered the art of code switching. For someone who perpetually exists in a high-stakes game of negotiating identities and navigating spaces, working in restaurants and bars is a logical choice; these careers demand high levels of code switching and a certain expected emotional engagement with customers (Hochschild:1983).

Once the relationship between space/place, performance of self, and interaction is understood within the context of quiet queer spaces, the issue of invisibility is exposed at an even larger scale. The assumed naturalness—essentially, the invisibility—of the dominant heteropatriarchal paradigm, is the source of its power and pervasiveness (Rich 1980; Valentine 1993b). That paradigm necessitates the invisibility of the lesbian identity in public spaces and interactions, and requires covert queer co-option of public space. This study both interrogates that relationship and exposes its manifestation within heteronormative public spaces and non-normative identities, examining interactions, space, and individuals’ self expression as independent factors, and then as a comprehensive and continuous relational system responsible for creating quiet queer space.

¹⁴ Though it is unclear whom exactly originally coined the term “code switching” (often written as “code-switching” or “codeswitching”), the concept has appeared in sociocultural linguistic literature since the 1950s (Nilep 2006). For the purposes of this study, code switching extends beyond language and into performance of self within interaction, navigating context and audience.

CONCLUSION

A shortage of lesbian-specific space is by no means indicative of a shortage of lesbians. Instead, these women exist within a three-tiered matrix of invisibility—lesbians have little or no visible public space, must make themselves invisible interactionally, and physically perform their individual selves in a way that allows them to pass. These three levels are so intensely demanded by the dominant heteropatriarchal paradigm that lesbian invisibility is taken for granted as a “natural” part of social life—the crisis itself has become invisible.

In future research, I would suggest that studies integrate and investigate the “lesbian-femme” (whose physical expression of self is normatively feminine) as a “nonvisible identity” (Samuels 2003). Are lesbian bartenders who do not subtly exhibit physical cues capable of acting in the role of network broker, or facilitating quiet queer spaces? How might gaydar take on a different, possibly more vital role, for those women? Though I did not analyze the idea critically within this study, I would venture to assert that there is a visibility threshold at which point a lesbian has been made too visible—and is incapable of engaging in the daily heteronormative dialogue—or too invisible—and her passing is so successful that she is incapable of being recognized by a queer audience. Whether or not the bartenders are immediately conscious of it, their performance of self as slightly non-normative is a corporeal strategy that makes normative public space accessible to other non-normative identities. They have struck an effective balance along the spectrum of visibility, and in doing so become crucial social actors.

I would also recommend that scholarship examine the role of technology in making quiet queer spaces visible. Though my own research did not include an analysis of social media, I was told on more than one occasion that sites such as Facebook and Yelp are often arenas for

discussions of which places are safe, and which are not. In fact, much of the commentary on Angles' Yelp page references the bar's past as Furies and its continued "friendly" atmosphere.

It is unclear to me how conscious lesbian bartenders are of their roles as network brokers and visible figures in the creation of quiet queer space. In the same conversation, CC told me that during her shifts specifically Angles is "very lesbian," and also that she does not think bartenders have much to do with who comes into the establishment and when. If bartenders and hiring managers were cognizant of the social control vested in their position, the process of making non-normative identities visible and creating quiet queer space could be more intentional—this, in turn, could be used as a tool to mobilize queer populations, further moderating the crisis of invisibility. To this end, additional research could address the processes of creating and identifying quiet queer spaces in settings other than the bar, and examine the social actors who make such processes possible. My own study was limited by the fact that I only had access to bars in Colorado Springs, and a small population of lesbian bartenders. Additionally, I did not look into spaces beyond restaurants, but rather positioned the bar as the locus of social interaction.

In order to develop a rich understanding of how power dynamics are reproduced in space and marginalized groups are pushed to the fringes, research must address the relationship between sexuality and space as both a comprehensive whole, and as an amalgamation of micro-interactive and spatial dynamics—treating each piece with equal academic integrity and inquiry. Questions should address not only how these dynamics interact, but also when, where, by whom, and to whose benefit.

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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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