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1

Ways of Seeing

Statistics about bar closures abound in the press, resulting in a vision of nightlife as impoverished. But on the streets, people's experiences are much richer. "I think that journalists just quote this figure. They say, '58-percent of venues closed,' and then they say, 'queer nightlife is dying.' It's very easy to write a story based on that." Laurie, who tells me this, organizes The Chateau, a party that occurs in an obscure, once-religiously-themed cocktail bar. Laurie was twenty-eight when we met, and he invited me to join him one weekend on site. I traveled about an hour from Central London, where I was living, to Camberwell in South East London. A nondescript entryway leads to a door that beckons me to a basement. I walk down a flight of stairs and discover a low-ceilinged room adorned with brightly lit stained glass windows. This place looks more like a church crypt than a gay bar, I think to myself. Laurie walks over, smiles, and introduces himself. We chat for a moment, but he is eager to dive in: in a matter of minutes, Laurie cautions me against interpreting bar closures as evidence of decline, despite the appearance of a logical link. "It's lazy."

Public discussions, centered on gay bars and their closures, often look through a lens of deficit. And so, I can understand why some people are quick to conclude that nightlife is dying. But not Laurie. "We're constantly being told that queer spaces are closing," he sighs,

“like, ‘oh my god, no, it’s terrible.’” In the first two decades of the 2000s, more than half of LGBTQ+ nighttime venues shuttered in London. That much is true. Less obvious is how people make sense of these numbers as they go about their nightly lives. Hence, a question to warm us up: how do people—from city officials and party producers to revelers and activists—acknowledge the closure epidemic? And how does their response to it, or our response, shape the way we imagine the future of nightlife?¹

The Troubled Gay Bar

All revolutions require a trigger, a disruption, and for us that comes from the gay bar. Nearly every political and cultural formation in LGBTQ+ life from the 1960s onward was born from those bars, even if they have been rife with tensions. Problems and all, they were still the place so many of us went to imagine and articulate who we are. With a cultural significance so massive, we must grapple with why these places matter, and why they are struggling to survive.²

In the mayor’s office, where I began looking for clues, I found a Venn diagram that identified five “adverse underlying conditions” pressuring nightlife in the capital. In no particular order, these are: land values (while land has become more expensive, businesses like gay bars operate on small profit margins), the national planning system (with permitted development rights, it has become easier to convert gay bars into shops and small supermarkets without being subject to the full planning process), business rates (set by the government, taxes on gay bars are now almost as expensive as their rents), licensing restrictions (conflicts around opening and closing hours arise when new homes are located close to bars that generate noise and crowds), and funding reductions (public and grant funding for leasing buildings at no or low cost, as well as managing them, is now harder to access). When these risk conditions overlap, they create a “perfect storm.” Amy Lamé, who identifies as a lesbian, is London’s night czar, the person responsible for protecting places like gay bars. She explains the imagery to me: “The combination of these things has created a situation in

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London where it's very difficult for small, independent venues to survive and thrive.”³

The UCL study first publicized statistics about closures in London, as we know. That report also adds more threats to the mayor's list, including the challenge of negotiating with landlords and local councils (who are elected local representatives) over rent increases, refurbishments, lease renewals, and licensing disputes. Both reports, one from a university and the other from the mayor's office, agree that the most common culprit is *redevelopment*. Ben Campkin, the lead author of the UCL study, clarifies the point: “It was clear that many spaces that were deemed safer spaces for our respondents had closed or been sold, or been converted to other uses, often when they were apparently quite vital businesses.” His last point is important, as it refutes common misconceptions that gay bars are closing due to a lack of demand or declining revenues. “It wasn't that they were businesses that had gone into decline,” Ben emphasizes. “It was actually that the land was more profitable as something else, or that the building was more profitable as something else.” Amid these concerns about land values, “one of the things that was striking,” Ben adds, “was the link to development, and large-scale development in particular.”

Over the last decade, London has experienced some of the highest land value increases of any city, especially for parcels that can be redeveloped for residential purposes. “The cost of land is expensive in London,” remarks Dwayne, a local DJ who identifies as Black British. He shares a startling rhetorical question: “Why would you safeguard a place where you make X when you can sell it for millions?” Considerations about land values have increased the probability that nightlife venues will be demolished and redeveloped into flats, often luxury units. “Let's get rid of this scrappy old pub, knock it down, and turn it into something else, like luxury flats or luxury bars,” Gregory, the owner of a trans-friendly hairdressing service, explains.

The exploitation of land has an ignominious history. “There are examples all over the world where capitalism and its foot soldiers steal and murder people for land,” Dan Glass says. Dan is a celebrated activist and author in London who is regularly profiled in the press for his social justice work. “It's an age-old route of inequality. In a queer context, it is no different in terms of how space is stolen

from queer people.” Tom, an Irish gay man, has lived in London for a decade. He also thinks about the politics of capitalism: “Reflecting right now—not sure that ‘straight washing’ is the right word for it—it’s ‘economic washing.’ Up the rents so only massive chains can actually afford to be there.” Manuel, a nonbinary-identifying Spanish gay man, offers a similar viewpoint: “What’s worrying is when bars are closing not because of lack of use, not because there’s not people that want to use them, but actually because of things [the venues] being made into luxury flats. There’s an economics which I think is really troubling.”

Nearly everyone I met raised concerns about land values. Jon, a forty-five-year-old Basque gay man, recommends that we extend protected status to bars, like we do for churches: “It’s sad that they can do that, that they can just raise their rents like that. But again, it’s all a business, isn’t it? We live in a capitalist society. Some other places are protected, like churches are protected, and gay bars aren’t.” Protection is important because once we change something, we can’t always undo it. Simon produces Duckie, a popular weekly party that had a twenty-seven-year residence at a bar called the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, where we will go later. He thinks deeply about these matters. “It’s a bit sad though, because once a pub—or let’s call it a public social resource—is privatized into residential, it’s very hard to undo it and make it a pub again.”

Land values and redevelopment priorities are two of brightest stars in the constellation of economic factors affecting nightlife. We met Samuel in the introduction, the one who coined the term closure epidemic. He and I talked about how austerity measures impact public goods. “Everyone was talking about it,” Samuel remarks in reference to the closing of bars. “Everyone was talking about how much it was affecting the community, how many places were closing down, and it was part and parcel of the legacy of austerity that came out of the recession [in 2008].” What happened, I ask? In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Samuel explains that “the UK government bailed out—the taxpayers bailed out—the three main banks that were about to collapse.” The event “created a huge deficit in the budget,” he adds. Something similar occurred in places around the world and, as a result, “a lot of countries implemented austerity.” They reduced

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government deficits through spending cuts or raising taxes rather than, Samuel continues with disappointment, “fining the bankers.”

The British government reduced public spending to tackle the deficit, a now familiar government policy. The impact was swift. Samuel says that it felt like the government “put its hand around the necks of the people who were most affected.” A vivid visual, but for the sake of clarity, I ask him to explain what he means. Instead of addressing tax evasion or increasing the tax rate for high earners, the government reduced welfare spending, and this constricted people’s economic capabilities. “Between the period 2010, which is when the Conservative government was elected, to 2014, you really felt that no one was spending money . . . A lot of people were made redundant [laid-off]. That, I think, had a direct influence on the amount of creativity and culture” in the city. And thus began the “age of austerity,” as Conservative Party leader David Cameron described it in *The Guardian*.⁴

Austerity measures reconfigured the balance of political power. Dan Beaumont, a bar owner and club night organizer, elaborates, “In some ways, financial interests now operate above the heads of authorities, because they’re more powerful, really, than either national or local government in a lot of ways.” In what ways exactly? “That is mainly seen through the commodification of lands,” Dan replies, “through gentrification, and through pushing out communities by making places unaffordable. That’s where London is now.” This pattern, which emerged from the recession, is bigger than any one city on either side of the pond. “That’s where Berlin is heading,” Dan adds. “And that’s where New York has been.” All these places are experiencing the consequences of similar pressures. “It’s definitely a response to larger forces squeezing out places to exist that are not necessarily commercially driven but driven by culture and community.”

The more people shared their points of view, the more I realized that the closure epidemic has layers of complexity and emotional depth—far more than statistics by themselves can convey. London-based artists and lesbian duo Rosie Hastings and Hannah Quinlan share these feelings in a “moving image archive of gay bars in the UK.” Entitled *UK Gay Bar Directory*, the project presents more than one hundred gay bars across fourteen cities. By filming the bars when

they were empty, the artists draw our attention to “the rapid closures of LGBTQ venues,” as described in a brief.⁵ Rosie tells me about the locations they selected. “They were all really popular, loved, historical gay bars.” Why were such beloved bars closing? “They were closing because of reasons that seem linked to external forces to the gay scene, rather than internal forces like assimilation, or because people aren’t going to gay bars as much. We didn’t believe that narrative, so we wanted to find out what it really was.” What did you discover? Rosie’s response echoed UCL and mayoral reports. “In every case in London, it was because the lease was ending, because the council had revoked a license, because the council wanted to redevelop the area, they wanted to turn the gay bar or the sex club into a luxury hotel, or luxury flats, or a retail zone—make it a more ‘palatable’ area”—Rosie uses air quotes—“for tourists or for families.”

Ben Walters, an independent researcher and journalist, takes a deep dive into demand, offering another challenge to the idea that bar closures are a function of declining enthusiasm for going out. “There’s a rhetoric that circulates when the closure of queer venues comes up for discussion that is premised on the idea that these places are less popular than they used to be, or that they’re less socially, culturally useful than they used to be, and so their time has come.” Ben, like Rosie, doesn’t buy it. “It’s *not* that these places are less popular. It’s *not* that they’re not still serving a function. They *are* still popular. They *are* still very busy. They *are* still very packed. There *is* still a huge appetite.” What’s your answer, I ask Ben, for why bars are closing? He links demand with redevelopment and a reappraisal of land values. “The threat they face is economic, around essentially the price of square footage of London real estate. That’s really what it boils down to.” From here, Ben brilliantly explains why even financially successful gay bars struggle to survive: “It’s not a question of whether it’s commercially viable; it’s a question of whether it’s maximally profitable.”

Running a gay bar will probably never represent a maximally profitable use of square footage—I think Ben’s right about this—even if the number of people who will patronize the place is large in a city like London. “It’s always going to make more money if it’s put to use as chain retail, or chain restaurants with accommodation on the floors above,” Ben adds. His viewpoint, a calculation of

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commercial viability against *maximum profitability*, is foundational for how we understand, and hopefully protect, nightlife venues. “If the question is, are these places commercially viable, nine times out of ten the answer is yes. If the question is, is this the maximum profit that can be wrung from this central London square footage, then the answer may be no—and that’s where the threat comes in.” This logic, put forth by developers seeking to demolish the site of a gay bar, reduces venues to commodities, and it prioritizes price over something perhaps more ambiguous though arguably more important: the priceless expressions of culture and creativity. “The city is there to make money, and we are there to spend and to earn. To be in the city is just to be an economic agent, and to compete and measure your value against other people.”

Although they do not make similar distinctions between commercial viability and maximum profitability, city officials generally agree with arguments about demand. When I met him, Edward Bayes was the culture-at-risk officer. As a twenty-six-year-old, heterosexual, White British man, he was responsible for supporting the mayor in developing policies to protect London’s cultural assets, including its nighttime venues. “The demand is there,” Bayes told me. “The need is there as well.” Bayes and the night czar both predict that demand for places to go out at night will actually *increase* as London’s population reaches 10.8 million by 2041, up from 8.8 million in 2017. London is among the most visited cities in the world (a point we’ll return to again later), and demand for visitor accommodations is projected to reach 196.4 million nights by 2041, up from 138.5 million nights in 2015.⁶

Money talks. That much is clear—but in a city like London, the interactions between supply and demand are many-sided. Richard, a thirty-eight-year-old diplomat, frames nightlife as a unique market. “It will always be economic for some gay places to exist.” Why is that? “It will always be profitable,” he replies matter-of-factly. “I think the market’s there, and it’s always going to be there. It may not be to the same degree as it was ten or fifteen years ago, but I think it will always be profitable to have a few gay venues, and as some close, others will open.” Richard pauses, and then he gifts me with a memorable analogy. “Just in terms of the size, London can sustain quite a bit of—I don’t know, you can buy an egg from Russia here.

So, if you can buy an egg from Russia here, there must be a market for a gay bar somewhere in the city. It's just so big a market." I echo the phrase back to him: if you can buy a Russian egg, and there's a market for that, there must also be one for gay bars. Richard looks pleased. "It's true," he says. "I mean, you can get all sorts of crazy stuff here. The big cities are not the places that are going to have trouble sustaining these things. I think life in the regions may change. But I don't at all see it as bad. If people want these kinds of things, they'll create them, and it'll be profitable. And if people don't want them, they're unprofitable, and they won't exist."⁷

If cities are places for people to live a meaningful life, to experience the sublimity that comes from cultural contact, and to have fun and feel joy along the way, then our risk analysis should be a point of departure, not a destination. LGBTQ+ lives are about more than markets, spending, and square footage, after all. Equipped with a better understanding of why so many bars are closing, let's next inquire into how cities are trying to protect their at-risk cultural assets.

The Night Czar

There are 1.6 million people working at night in London. Of that total, 168,000 people work in fields related to culture and leisure. Meanwhile, two-thirds of Londoners are active at night, doing everything from running errands to socializing to enjoying facilities like theaters and music venues. Consider as well that London is the third most-visited city in the world for international tourists, and that four out of five visitors say that access to culture and heritage sites is the main reason for their trip. The value of London's nighttime economy, recall, is estimated at an astounding £26.3 billion (US\$33.2 billion), a figure that is expected to rise an additional £1.5 billion (US\$1.9 billion) by 2026. Forty percent of the estimated £66 billion (US\$83.4 billion) for the total UK nighttime economy is represented by London alone, and Mayor Sadiq Khan expects £2 billion (US\$2.5 billion) in additional growth of nighttime industries each year through 2030. From these figures, the economic rationale for protecting nighttime venues is as clear and compelling as a stash of cash.⁸

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In May 2016, the mayor addressed members of the creative industries at City Hall, where he acknowledged that the economically rich nightlife sector was vital for “London’s well-being.” He promised to make cultural life, in which he now included nightlife, a “top four” priority alongside housing, security, and clean air. Imagine that you were there at City Hall, listening to the mayor, and consider the implications of his words: nightlife is as important as the air we breathe!⁹

In November, six months after his announcement, Khan made good on his promise and revealed the creation of a brand new role: night czar. After reviewing hundreds of applications, he introduced Amy Lamé, whom we met earlier, as the UK’s first-ever night czar. Born in New Jersey but living in the UK since she was twenty-one, Lamé was already well-known in London as a Labor activist, broadcaster for BBC Radio, and mayor of Camden from 2010 to 2011. “It’s a privilege to be London’s very first Night Czar,” she said. “I can’t wait to hit the streets and have loads of ideas of what I can do for revelers, night-time workers, businesses, and stakeholders. For too long, the capital’s night-time industry has been under pressure.”¹⁰

Khan was inspired by similar initiatives in Amsterdam. The role he created in London signals the importance of what Mirik Milan calls “culture at night.” A former club promoter, Milan became the world’s first “Nacht Burgemeester” (the term Amsterdam uses for night czar) in 2014. The hours that begin after the day ends are critical for building “culturally diverse and socially inclusive cities,” Milan says in his explanation for the importance of an official position. Individuals like Lamé and Milan have “convening power,” or the ability to create conversations between public and private entities, including local planning authorities, who can come together and explore different ways of seeing. Convening power might sound soft, but it is a crucial asset that enables night czars to provide an opportunity for experts to share what works.¹¹

After Khan made his announcement, London became the biggest city in the world to appoint an ambassador for the city after dark. And then, soon after London, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York appointed Ariel Palitz as the first “nightlife mayor.” More than forty cities have since followed suit with their own politician-of-the-night, including Berlin, Budapest, Geneva, Madrid, Paris, San Francisco, Sydney,

Tokyo, Toronto, Zurich, and others. Lamé, Milan, Palitz, and others are manifestations of a new form of urban governance that is gaining international recognition: mayors of the night prioritize culture as an engine of urban economic development.¹²

Both the mayor and the night czar are responding to closures as if they are a clear threat to London's cultural health. On this matter, the numbers are impossible to ignore. LGBTQ+ venues: in 2017, there were 53, down from 125 in 2006. Grassroots music venues: in 2016, there were 94, down from 144 in 2007. Nightclubs: in 2017, there were 570, down from 880 in 2001. Pubs: in 2017, there were 3,530, down from 4,835 in 2001. City officials are trying to protect existing establishments and help new ones to open. "I don't want young and creative Londoners abandoning our city to head to Amsterdam, to Berlin, to Prague where clubs are supported and allowed to flourish," Khan said in a 2016 interview with *The Independent*. "We can save London's iconic club scene, which draws thousands of visitors to the capital, generates jobs, and helps ensure our city remains prosperous, vibrant and dynamic." Lamé offered something similar in an interview with the BBC that same year. "I need to stem the flow of those closures," she asserted. "That will be one of my top priorities—it's never too late."¹³

I interviewed Lamé and Bayes in 2018 in their office at City Hall. "I understand that nightlife contributes about £26 billion to London's economy, and it employs one in eight people in the city," I note as we get comfortable sitting around a circular table. "Clearly, the nighttime economy is important for economic reasons. But why else do you think it matters?" I was inviting them both to reflect on the broader significance of nightlife. "I think the nighttime economy is important, and the particular kinds of venues that we are trying to save are important, because they build resilient communities," Lamé replies. "They create safe spaces. They are places where people can be themselves without question." Her passion for the role is obvious. "Even though we know that laws have changed, for example, to be more accepting of LGBT people, we're still facing discrimination. Hate crime is up. We saw a big spike in hate crime following the vote to leave the EU. These are all issues that are very much alive, and we need to make sure that we have spaces that exist in order for communities to thrive and survive."

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I appreciate Lamé's last point, as it refutes another common narrative: societal acceptance has reached historically high levels, so we no longer need gay bars. She describes this as an "assimilationist mindset," what some academics call the post-gay thesis.¹⁴ Lamé has noticed a pattern in who raises these arguments. "This is a question that is posed to me quite often"—do we need gay bars now that gay people can be gay anywhere?—"and it's pretty much nine and a half times out of ten coming from heterosexual White men . . . saying, 'Oh, but now you can get married, you don't need venues, you don't need your own spaces.'" Lamé urges caution. "Not everyone operates in this assimilationist model." Of course not, and this is precisely why LGBTQ+ people still need our own places—during the day as well as at night.

Peter, an activist fighting to ensure the survival of beloved bars like the Joiners Arms, adds a personal note to Lamé's official rebuttal of assimilation politics. "I'm married. I'm the least radical person out there. I'm a married, White, gay, middle-class man. I don't feel safe." Tell me more, I ask, without a specific prompt to see where Peter was going with this line of thinking. "There are situations where I don't hold my husband's hand, or I think twice about kissing him or expressing affection. That's in Hackney. The mayor is gay in Hackney! I still don't feel safe, fully safe, in every space." Compelled by his words, I share how I, too, sometimes feel unsafe holding hands in public or sharing a kiss with my partner. Peter puts his hand on his heart. "If I don't feel safe, then what on earth must it be like for a trans person, a person of color, do you know what I mean, like, all these people who are further down the pecking order of social acceptance? I just don't buy it." Peter dismisses unqualified arguments about acceptance as an explanation for why gay bars are closing. "Homophobic violence is on the rise," he says. "There have been really high-profile incidents of people being attacked for holding hands or kissing each other." Why then is assimilation such a popular perspective? "I think the word 'myth' is probably the most appropriate thing," Peter replies. "It's just not true."

In offering another argument, Dan Glass first reaches across the aisle. "I think the desire, or the need, or the belief to assimilate can come from very important places, because there's a genuine level of spiritual exhaustion from our community continuously having to

fight, like every day is a battle, for a variety of reasons.” I lean in closer to him. “I understand that people just want to put their feet up, and chill out, and be accepted, and just chill the fuck out. Trauma is at the root of it.” Suddenly, I remember the anti-gay slurs I heard when I was in college; I felt outraged, and terrified, but underneath it all, I just felt drained. “But I think that simultaneously, that’s quite naïve if we’re looking at what is genuinely happening with the rise of the far right, who do not have our best interests at heart and do not want us to assimilate.” If not assimilation, then what? “They want us dead.”

City officials, activists, diplomats, DJs, and ordinary Londoners agree that how we come together at night presents a profound priority, like the breath of life. I read this in the mayor’s report, I hear it echoed by the night czar and culture-at-risk officer, and I feel it from people like Peter and Dan. In all these moments, the closure epidemic seems so much bigger than a bunch of disembodied numbers. A sense of urgency grows in my mind and in my heart as I find myself wondering: how do cities communicate to citizens that nightlife is a priority? It’s one thing for Khan to say so, but what strategies and policies signal their actual commitments?

Cultural Infrastructure

In 2019, the mayor’s office published the *Cultural Infrastructure Plan*, a report that specifies how to preserve and promote London’s cultural assets. Think for a moment about that phrase: cultural infrastructure. What an odd pair! The second word, infrastructure, points to the built foundations of cities. These are facilities or physical structures that support a place, which we can’t buy or build on our own as individuals. Examples include buildings and bridges, roads, sewer and water systems, pipes, networks of cables, railways and subways, airports, and harbors. Some researchers think about infrastructure as a “connective tissue” that links people and places, while others offer metaphors like “the sinews of the city” which ensure smooth operations.¹⁵ Now consider what happens when we attach the word culture to infrastructure. The resulting neologism foregrounds culture as the bedrock of a city.

In practice, cultural infrastructure is about the premises and places where cultural objects are produced (where culture is made, showcased, or exhibited) and consumed (where culture is experienced or sold). London boasts thousands of these places, which include museums, galleries, theaters, libraries, skate parks, community centers, performing arts spaces, legal street art walls, music recording studios, film and television studios, and now nightlife. A city's cultural infrastructure, places both old and new, tells the story of its heritage to its citizens and the wider world. "It gives London its character and authenticity," the report states. While cities routinely plan for their future when it comes to things like transportation, roads, hospitals, and schools, they seldom do so in a similarly systematic way for culture—and even less often for nightlife. To think about nightlife as part of its infrastructure is an example of a cultural policy and planning strategy that London is using to protect bars and nightclubs.

London is not alone in championing the premises and places where nightlife cultures are produced and consumed. In 2021, the German federal parliament, led by a housing and urban development committee, voted almost unanimously to reclassify its nighttime venues as cultural institutions rather than entertainment venues. The campaign began a year earlier and was spearheaded by the Berlin Club Commission (BCC), a group of venue owners and managers who protested in the streets by shouting "clubs are culture!" As with London, the economic rationale in Berlin was self-evident. When the BCC appeared in parliament before the decision was announced, they argued that nightlife venues comprise "the pulse of the city," drawing an estimated three million tourists who generate €1.5 billion (US\$1.7 billion) for the local economy. Also similar to London, nearly one hundred clubs in Berlin have closed in the past decade, with an additional twenty-five under threat due to redevelopment. Locals describe the situation as "clubsterben" (translation: the club that dies or club dying). Some even say that the bars and nightclubs in Berlin will "forever be dying." The closure epidemic, the eternity of clubsterben—these phrases point to a serious international problem.¹⁶

The change in classification, from an *entertainment venue* to a *cultural institution*, is anything but small or subtle. As entertainment

venues, nightclubs are compared with arcades, brothels, and casinos. The change to a cultural institution provides bars and clubs with the same legal status as museums and opera houses, protects them from displacement that can occur from redevelopment, and enables them to open in more parts of the city. Bureaucratic designations may seem like a banal detail, but they make a big difference! The change in the way nightlife is classified affirms the association of culture, creativity, and cities in the after-dark hours.

From jazz and blues clubs to gay bars, the message, as Pamela Schobeß of the BCC explains, is clear: “Music clubs are cultural institutions that shape the identity of city districts as an integral part of cultural and economic life. Now, an outdated law is to be adapted to reality. This helps keep cities and neighborhoods alive and livable and to protect cultural places from displacement.” The change in legal status that Schobeß described had important material consequences. It prioritized the safeguarding of nightlife venues in order to protect them from redevelopment and further upheavals. The new classification also extended tax breaks to bars and clubs—a rate reduction for the amount of value added tax, or VAT—that they pay. Germany’s financial courts ruled to lower the VAT paid by Berlin clubs, including places like Berghain, from 19 percent down to 7 percent.¹⁷

The unprecedented support for nightlife in Berlin prompted many observers in London to wonder about the situation closer to home. A headline in *Bloomberg* asked, “Berlin Protects Clubs and Nightlife—Why Doesn’t London?” The writer, Sarah Wilson, speaks bluntly about why nightlife matters: “A city without clubs is a colorless place, and allowing them to disappear means marginalized communities vanish; young people flee the city, and arts and creativity suffer. With London fast becoming a playground for developers and a city that only the rich can afford, it would do well to replicate Berlin’s example.”¹⁸ While London has yet to go as far as Berlin, creating an independent body like the Club Commission, the mayor has proposed recommendations to grow the capital’s cultural assets. The *Cultural Infrastructure Plan* lists several priorities: we need to understand where a city’s cultural infrastructure is located; create new places in the future; provide world-class opportunities; support culture at risk; increase investments in cultural assets; create policies that enable

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our creative industries to put down deeper roots; and provide guidance for how to stabilize cultural assets.

The report is “a planning tool,” Bayes tells me as I read about cultural infrastructure with him. At first, I thought the prose sounded strangely familiar, saturated with a kind of palatable-to-the-most-people-possible blandness that typifies how politicians and bureaucrats often speak. Bayes probably sensed my skepticism. The plan for culture guides local authorities when they make decisions about the public applications they receive, he says in explaining its importance. The objective is “planning for culture in the same way that we do for housing or transport.” His words start to feel more concrete, like the change in VAT in Berlin. Bayes offers an example: “If there are [developers] building new housing next to a vibrant LGBT venue or a vibrant grassroots music venue, how can those two uses coexist? And how can we use the planning system, rather than perhaps having some unintended consequences of people move in next door to a venue, then they complain, and the venue shuts down? How can we plan in a way that makes those two uses compatible?”¹⁹

Londoners agree that nightlife, as a cultural asset, should be protected from unregulated market forces. To make the case, Simon from Duckie begins with a quick review of London’s economic history. Boris Johnson, who was the prime minister when I spoke with Simon, is a “conservative, pro-market force” who believes that we should “just let the market do what it does, and that’s the best thing.” Simon is skeptical. “That doesn’t work for everything.” Like what? I asked. “It doesn’t work for fragile things, like culture, community.” If we leave market forces unchecked and unregulated, then “culture suffers.”

His remarks remind me of the cultural infrastructure plan, and we speak next about how to create vibrant scenes. “If you want good nightlife, good cultural life, good queer scenes, it needs to be a mixed economy.” What does that mean? “A mixed economy is partly commercial—the busy hustle-bustle of the marketplace, bums on seats, and cash changing hands—and partly the intervention of the public sector to help creative, ambitious, cultural programming.” As we endure a closure epidemic, we need to ensure that we rebuild nightlife in more sustainable ways. And for that to happen, market

logics—competitiveness, pricing, offering an appealing product, and maintaining demand—require public support, like funding for the arts and culture, and municipal protections. Simon repeats the message: “For cultural life to be rich, we cannot leave it to the market alone.”

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Lamé shared that the mayor has a keen interest in cultural infrastructure not just in broad terms but also its specific LGBTQ+ expressions. “Sadiq and I keep LGBT places close to our hearts and hold them in very high regard. And we’ve made it really clear that it’s an integral part of our plan to grow London culture.” She echoed the message to me in person at City Hall: “The mayor is very clear on this, that LGBT spaces are an important part of London. It’s what makes London London.”²⁰

Folding gay bars into cultural infrastructure raises the provocative possibility of nightlife as resembling art worlds, like the offerings in museums such as the Tate Modern or the V&A. This is why Dan de la Motte, a performer and activist, applauds the effort: “This is a really strong signal from the mayor’s office that he is on the side of nighttime spaces.” Going another step further, Lamé, Bayes, and the mayor drafted a companion document called the *LGBTQ+ Venues Charter*. It provides a set of practical tools in the form of a “five-point pledge” that developers, property owners, and venue managers can take to support London’s LGBTQ+ venues. “This LGBT venues charter is meant to be a way of identifying what an LGBT venue is in order to work with developers,” Ben Campkin tells me. “And this is the first case where that’s happening.”

I’ve never seen anything like this, I say to Lamé and Bayes as I glance at the one-pager:

1. A visible rainbow flag should be displayed on the outside of the venue.
 - a. The rainbow flag is a universal symbol of the LGBTQ+ community.
 - b. The symbol could be displayed as an actual flag or alternatively a sign, sticker, or other physical signifier.
2. The venue should be marketed as an LGBTQ+ venue.
 - a. This will be an integral part of the venue’s business plan.

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- b. Marketing needs to effectively reach the LGBTQ+ community, e.g., through social media, print and digital journals, blogs, and other relevant websites.
 - c. Many LGBTQ+ venues display LGBTQ+ magazines/literature/posters in the venue itself.
 - d. Venues will engage in community outreach, such as hosting events around significant dates like Pride.
3. The venue should provide a welcoming, accessible, and safe environment for all.
 - a. The venue will welcome anyone regardless of background or identity, religion, race/ethnicity, gender identity or expression, disability, age, or sexual orientation.
 - b. The venue will be accessible to disabled people.
 - c. The management will consider adopting gender-neutral toilets.
4. Management and staff should be LGBTQ+ friendly.
 - a. Door and bar staff will create a welcoming and safe environment.
 - b. Door and bar staff will be LGBTQ+ friendly. There are LGBTQ+ friendly security firms in London who provide licensed security staff (many of whom are LGBTQ+ individuals themselves). There are also relevant training providers.
5. Programming should be LGBTQ+ focused.
 - a. Where the venue programs regular entertainment, this should be principally LGBTQ+ focused.²¹

After I read it, twice for good measure, I ask if the charter has made a difference. Lamé replies that it “was written into what’s called a Section 106 agreement, meaning that when a new development comes forward [at an existing gay bar], there will be a replacement venue in the new site.” As a planning tool, the charter is flexible. It enables developers to build what they want while ensuring that they remain sensitive to the queer heritage of a given site. “The way that you can engineer a replacement LGBT venue,” Lamé continues, “is that any operator that goes into that site has to sign onto this charter.” The effects have been groundbreaking. “Section 106, that bit of legislation, had never been used before to re-provision for an LGBT

space. We're used to our spaces being knocked down or turned into other things."

Replacement venues are one part of the mayor's plan, which also includes attempts to prevent closures in the first place. "Somebody has to stick their neck out and say we're going to put resources into trying to save these venues," Lamé emphasizes. Too often, LGBTQ+ issues are an afterthought. The mayor of London, similar to Berlin, wants to protect them. "That may not have happened if we didn't have a mayor who appointed a night czar and asked me specifically to deal with cases of LGBT spaces," Lamé continues. "It may not have happened if he didn't put the resources into appointing a culture-at-risk officer whose sole job it is to find venues that are at risk and to try and help them survive and thrive. How would that have happened if we didn't have a mayor that put resources into that?" For Lamé, the answer is clear: "There is no other city in the world that is doing this."

Successful cities do not grow from policies and planning procedures that emphasize exclusions rather than connections—like whether to invest in the culture *or* economy of a place—as if we lack the imagination to do both at once. After speaking so closely with city officials, however, I wanted to hear a little less about government interventions and a lot more about participation on the ground. How do Londoners make sense of the possibility of something like clubsterben? Ultimately, for culture to matter, it must be meaningful beyond the confines of the conference room.

Half Full

When I met Olimpia, who identifies as Italian and a queer lesbian, she was a twenty-three-year-old graduate student. As we chatted over a cup of coffee, I asked Olimpia if she had any advice for the night czar. "Nothing planned can create a queer space," she declared. I wasn't expecting such a strong stance, and it made me wonder whether queer-ness is compatible with something as legislated as infrastructure, cultural or otherwise. Why not? Olimpia answered with a metaphor. "You have a garden, and some people like to plant their seeds in a specific place, and make it look very pretty, and very sanitized, and

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very well thought out.” This is what she has in mind for the work of the night czar. “The other approach would be to try and make your land as fertile and as iron-rich and vitamin-rich as possible, and then let it unfold, and see what happens.” That plot would look different. “If the ground is fertile, then you will have all sorts of flowers growing on top of each other in no systematic way. And I think that is closer to queerness than the approaches Amy Lamé has taken.”

I similarly wondered about the upbeat sounds coming out of City Hall. In our conversation, for example, I asked Lamé and Bayes if they knew about the DIY-styled pop-up parties that I had been discovering, not anchored to any specific venue or any one part of the city. “Yes,” Lamé replied. I waited for her to say more, perhaps to share an example, but neither she nor Bayes added anything else. To help them, I described some parties, particularly those that cater to Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities. I talked about how their format is different from gay bars (episodic events, not established businesses), as is the language they use (club nights, not gay bars). As I described these differences, I wondered out loud whether club nights represent a different model of nightlife. They both nodded, but again had little to add. What do you think? I inquired directly. “I think it’s brilliant,” Lamé responded. “I think that for London, we’re known for the diversity of our nightlife, and so the fact that these pop-up spaces exist is living proof that there really is something for everyone here at night in London. And I guess with our work in trying to preserve particular spaces, we want to make sure that the spaces for those pop-up events are able to survive and thrive as well.”

The response was pretty neutral, although the choice of words was instructive. Lamé didn’t mention any specific club nights, despite her long and close affiliation with Duckie, or whether the mayor was aware of their existence. The “as well” add-on, I think, separated club nights from the “particular spaces” on which the mayor’s office focuses. I didn’t intend my question as a quiz—Lamé and Bayes are area experts—but I noticed that they did not independently raise club nights, either as an expression of nightlife or when we were talking about the charter. Instead, they spoke in generalities. “While London is incredibly diverse and our LGBT community is incredibly diverse,

we can be more diverse,” Lamé said. “We *should* be more diverse. And there should be a better mix. Without a doubt. Because we are London.” It’s hard to argue the point. At least it projects an optimistic tone, although I find the language of “diversity” more unobjectionable than revolutionary.

Municipal perspectives are precisely packaged—surprise, surprise—though with some curious omissions and compelling additions. But what about everyday Londoners? How do they think? Othon and Gabriel, who organize a party called Papa Loco with themes of spirituality and other-worldliness, succinctly capture the entanglements between disruptions and new creations. “There is always an action and reaction.” From one chat to the next, I learn that there are ways of embracing generative views about nightlife without denying the closure epidemic—or insisting on a one-to-one ratio of actions to reactions. Mark, a professor who studies drag, is direct, “It’s not as if, well, one venue goes so we have to replace it with another.” From where he sits and what he sees, “gay scenes are proliferating in different forms.” What do you mean? “I think there’s more dynamism within the gay scene.” As I put together this puzzle, two ways of seeing kept coming up. The first is what I call spatial expansion, or thinking about nightlife beyond the gayborhood. And the second is what I term rescaling to the local, or evaluating nightlife not based on overall trends but on options closer to home. Londoners used some version of one or both of these discursive strategies to see the glass as half full, although within the inevitably varied messiness of their nightly routines.

Spatial Expansion

Imagine that you are looking down on London from a bird’s eye view, pointing out LGBTQ+ nightlife places. What do you see? Soof, who is twenty-six and identifies as Pakistani British, queer, asexual, and gender nonconforming, provides a sensory reply: “I think it would be very tactile, like fuzzy, quite big. I think maybe it would be radiating, so it wouldn’t necessarily be big in terms of the size or space it takes up but in terms of the shadow or the light it pulls out. Yeah, radiating,

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I feel.” I ask how the imagery of something radiating affects Soof’s thoughts about nightlife. “I feel it’s quite malleable,” they reply, “like it grows and shrinks as new spaces pop up and close down, and there’s space for more. I think it’s constantly moving. I feel like it’s changing and shifting.” For Soof, there is little lament. Instead, they promote a perspective that emphasizes a productive pluralism—more change, not more contraction.

While Soof offers us poetry, others describe specific developments. Angel, the organizer of Gayzpacho, a party we will attend later, begins with broad strokes, “[C]ertain places might be closing because of gentrification and the price of property, but surprisingly, there’s other places opening in other locations.” Manuel also insists that what is consistent is change rather than closures: “The gay scene always reinvents itself.” When I ask Soof, Angel, and Manuel where I can find these other places and radiating reinventions of nightlife, they each list three bars in East London: Dalston Superstore, the Glory, and Queen Adelaide.

East London supports a vibrant scene. “Part of East London emerging is a matter of Soho closing,” Jonathan echoes. Cassie, a cabaret producer, similarly sees a relationship between closures in Central London, home to the most visible gayborhood, and the emergence of new scenes elsewhere: “I think that the mainstream culture of LGBT bars might be closing in terms of what you see in Soho, but at the same time, you’ve got everything new that’s opening up everywhere else.” When I ask where else, she replies, “Central London bars are closing down, but areas like Hackney [East London] or New Cross [South East London] where people have moved or migrated, a little bit further out, things are reopening.” Elliott, a city planner who has lived in London for twenty-three years, says that movement of this sort is a perennial characteristic of neighborhoods and nightlife. “The scene has always moved,” he tells me. “Before I came out, it was in Earl’s Court in the west. Then it came to Soho. There’s lots of things that have been in Soho a long time, but it’s drifting on.” The movement of places and parties can feel chaotic, sometimes scary, and absolutely like a municipal failure. But what these partygoers are telling us is that this movement ensures that nightlife remains vibrant and varietal. To appreciate what this means, we need to start using a

wider-angle lens. “I think it’s a good thing that places are spreading out and that we can be queer in larger parts of the territory,” Angel says. “We don’t have to concentrate just in Soho where we used to. My impression is that queer spaces are in key places around the city, rather than in the village.”

Nightlife and neighborhoods are evolving in tandem. In decades past, the census shows that same-sex households concentrated in fewer places, like gay districts, and those areas gradually moved (from Earl’s Court to Soho and East London, as Elliot said, or from Towertown to Boystown and Andersonville, as I found in Chicago). As the decades went by, we witnessed a unique geographic diffusion, or pluralism perhaps, that comes from an expanding residential imagination—more LGBTQ+ people feeling comfortable living in many more parts of the city. Nightlife is no different. If we live in more parts of the city, especially in a sprawling metropolis like London, then it makes sense that gay bars will pop up wherever people cluster. I like to use the general idea of spatial expansion to describe this pattern of living and socializing. Unlike images of a “perfect storm” from the mayor’s office, “hands around necks,” or “clubsterben” in Berlin, here we encounter something more life-affirming.²²

Angel describes the emergence of new bars in East London as “a victory.” Nearly everyone talks about this part of the city, “a glorious mixture of otherness,” as Dan de la Motte calls it, that makes the area feel less like a gayborhood and more like a “queerborhood.” Dan is well-known as a guide for “Queer Tours of London: A Mince Through Time.” Founded in 2016, the tours celebrate London’s queer geographic histories. “Against the backdrop of the mass closure of LGBTQ cultural spaces, Queer Tours of London are being developed to support London’s queer activism, culture, and performance in all its glory,” he tells me.

I ask Dan how he talks about bar closures in his tours. He begins by acknowledging the problem: “Spaces are under threat and at risk from a combination of draconian council legislation, draconian police attitudes, greedy landlords, and rising land prices.” Just as his words start to resemble a familiar refrain of doom and gloom, Dan adopts another way of seeing. At the same time, he continues, “you’re starting to see a renaissance of queer spaces.” Renaissance. The word

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brings to mind a creative re-energizing of nightlife in the midst of ongoing disruptions. “You’re seeing these really successful case studies,” Dan continues, “such as the Glory in Haggerston, which is a queer pub and nighttime space on two floors which offers a diverse range of programming in terms of performance as well as a pub and a club atmosphere.” Dan also mentions Dalston Superstore. “The first time I went to Dalston Superstore I thought, ‘Oh my god, this is so incredible. This is such a great space.’” I hear a blend of resistance and renewal from Dan that comes from a position of geographic pluralism. I guess Soof was right: LGBTQ+ nightlife is definitely radiating.

Rescale to the Local

If there are more places to go—not just one gayborhood but queerborhoods across the city—how do people choose where to go out?²³ “I think that going out to a gay bar in Soho feels sort of like a cliché,” Stefan says. He has his favorites, but the bars closer to home have more appeal (he lives in East London). “There’s something nicer about having someplace more local that feels more relevant, even if just geographically.” Stefan is thinking beyond the gayborhood, similar to our earlier discussion, but in doing so, he’s also rescaling nightlife to a more immediate, local level. “People still want that coming together,” Stefan explains, “but they want it locally. I don’t want to take a train or a bus for thirty minutes.” His desire for access refashions how he evaluates nightlife. “It’s more the micro, smaller model of it, and the more viable way.” Rescaling nightlife to local levels is the pragmatist’s solution, as we will see, to London’s many baked-in navigation challenges: vastness of size, radial public transportation networks, the expense of car ownership, and similar expenses associated with taxis and car shares.

For thirty-six-year-old Stuart, local areas are easier to access, despite abundant transportation options. “London and New York are bigger cities and are spread over a much bigger area,” he explains. If you live in a place like that, “it’s just such a huge distance to travel that you need to create those pockets nearer home, nearer where you live,

because otherwise you're schlepping across tons of space." That's exactly why Ashley, age forty-six, and her friends "tend to like our local bars" and why they "go out mostly locally, in Stoke Newington." She describes the neighborhood as a hotbed for "entrepreneurial things," which makes her feel like "there's really good things happening around here." It helps that Stokie, as locals call it, is a lesbian enclave.²⁴ "Stoke Newington is like a mecca for lesbians," Rachel, age thirty, echoes. "There's a bar there, or there's a café there that's known to be a place that lesbians go to a lot." When I ask if she frequents those places, Rachel answers by confirming the importance of proximity. "I don't live near there, so I've never sought that space out, because it's just too much of a trek." As a validation check, I ask her to imagine what she would do if she did live closer. "If that existed in an area that I live in, that was my London, it would be different," she replies. "The gay spaces that I've been in have been created by a lot of gay people being there, rather than it being a gay space in general, if that makes sense." It does, I reply, as I repeat the words to myself. Rachel's emphasis on "being there" suggests the unique appeal of local access, rather than knowing that there may be a bunch of bars somewhere else farther away.

Unlike the pages of municipal reports, life on the ground is full of moving bodies. This, as Jonathan describes, creates challenges in getting around town: "It's a low-density city. The average building in London is probably three and a half stories high, which, if you try and fit millions of people into a city that's of such low density, you have to live in a sprawling place. It doesn't make it easy." Elliot the city planner adds public transportation into the mix. "The whole infrastructure has been built, and the road network has always been built, on a radial pattern." The cost of other forms of transportation also promotes thinking and acting locally. "Historically, the black cabs have been excellent in terms of navigating, but have been terribly expensive, and so they were a luxury for most people." Originally from Scotland, Kenny explains how all these things affect his night out. "It was much easier and almost more fun to go out in a local area where you could walk home, and not have any hassle, and where you'd probably see loads of people that you would see every week or every couple of weeks, so there was a bit of a familiarity to it." Makes sense,

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I say, as I think about the hassle of hailing a taxi, or even calling an Uber, after a late night out.

While city officials are preoccupied with threats, the rest of us, regular people who want to go out after a long week of work, see other options. There is no simple or single truth in this story, although that useful complexity is masked by the pronouncements of academic theories, media headlines, and municipal reports. This is a consequence of what social scientists call “framing.” Close your eyes and think about a window frame. Imagine that you are looking out of it. Now, go into another room, imagine a different window frame, and look out once again. What you see in front of you will change; it will depend on the frame you look through. To return to what Othon and Gabriel mentioned earlier, do you see an “action,” like the closure epidemic, or a “reaction,” like new bars and other nightlife scenes? As this thought experiment shows, reconciling people’s lived experiences with official viewpoints, media reports, and academic theories is not an easy task!

Like me, Brooke also grapples with conflicting truths and multiple realities. “I see that death,” they acknowledge, “but I also advocate for their existence.” Brooke, an artist, was thirty when we met and identified as a queer lesbian, nonbinary, and Italian American. They deliberately slow down their speech and encourage me “not to lose heart because there are always other things that will emerge.” I ask how I should think about the interplay between death and emergence—or negative capability, as Romantic poet John Keats puts it.²⁵ “The neighborhood you live in determines where you’re willing to carve out a space,” Brooke says, speaking as an artist and accenting the appeal of local opportunities for fellowship. Given the repetition of this theme, I’m puzzled that neither the night czar nor the culture-at-risk officer raised it. “On some level, it must be the case that people have always been making stuff in their neighborhoods,” Brooke affirms, “and we just don’t have the records because they’re not recording their own history, and those buildings are gone, and we just don’t know.” Perhaps local spaces have a shorter lifetime, and perhaps things with shorter life spans have historical records that are harder for us to collect, let alone quantify. I can’t be sure, but still, I thank Brooke for the pleasures of the provocation.

Beyond the Drama

You lose some—but you win some too. The people we met in this chapter showed us how to pivot from doom and gloom to an asset-based model of resilience and renewal. No one denies that gay bars are closing in alarming numbers, but those closures are not the end of our story. In government offices, appointing a night czar and culture-at-risk officer, publishing a report about cultural infrastructure, and drafting an LGBTQ+ venues charter all gesture toward the generative. Meanwhile, everyday people think outside the gayborhood box and maintain that there are vibrant options closer to home. These discursive strategies are linked, with the former (spatial expansion) enabling the latter (rescaling to the local).

In common, all these remarkable ways of seeing, from City Hall to the streets, show us the transformative power of a positive frame, a glass half full, rather than confounding our lives with dire representations of the social world. “It’s lazy,” Laurie immediately observed. Zax, a multi-racial, Black and Hungarian artist, looks to the future by suturing it to the past: “It’s never going to be over because we’ve always been there. You look back one hundred or two hundred years. There is still a queer London, even if we can’t identify obvious queer spaces, or no one would have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual.” We, and our places of fellowship, have always existed—and always will.

By considering a plethora of perspectives, we are finding ways to move beyond the drama of the closure epidemic. Recall when Olimpia remarked that “nothing planned can create a queer space.” To my surprise, she adamantly objects to the charter. The basis of her resistance is the presumption that “the rainbow flag is a universal symbol of the LGBTQ+ community.” Many queer-identified people reject that flag, as we will see later. They perceive it as inclusive only in theory, whereas in practice, the rainbow flag represents only some people, not everyone. Rather than something so stylized and overgeneralized, Olimpia wants to cultivate conditions for queerness to thrive. “I think that’s what we should be telling policymakers is that there’s only so much planning you can do around this stuff.” Something like the charter is designed “with a space like Soho in mind,” not the rest of the city.

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This strikes me as a key point: if the mayor's office is evaluating nightlife by looking for rainbows, then other forms of nightlife become nearly impossible for us to see. It's no wonder that public narratives are consumed by the decline of gay bars, and people use rainbow flags as bandages. Despite their best intentions, these bandages have become blindfolds, making it harder for us to see the revolution in queer nightlife that is happening all around us.

Femmetopia

In a Basement

There are not many places where we can freely embrace and fully celebrate expressions of feminine genders, in all their glory and gorgeousness. Phoebe and Kat were chatting about this one day. “We were perpetual guests in others’ environments,” Kat told me. She wasn’t alone in feeling like an outsider at gay bars, which often have masculine cultures and expectations. In 2018, *Dazed* magazine broke a story that woke many of us up: “Gay nightlife’s violent femmephobia needs to end.” Otamere, a self-described “flared, 70s-silhouetted, glittering, choker-wearing faggot,” shared a heart-wrenching episode:

I spent years avoiding clubs like XXL (a muscle-bound gay club near London Bridge) on the premise that it simply wasn’t my vibe, sensing that its “One Club Fits All” slogan didn’t quite ring true for my body. When my friends suggested going there a few weeks ago, I swallowed my discomfort, naively presuming that it would be short-lived. What I didn’t know was that XXL’s door policy explicitly refuses entry not only to women, but to anyone wearing what they described as “women’s clothing”—heels, dresses, skirts—a laundry list that the bouncer reeled off to me when I arrived in my strappy corset top. I was told that I would be refused entry unless I changed or took it off.

I acquiesced, shrunk myself, and complied, in the knowledge that the humiliation would be over soon enough, and I would be with my friends who were already in the club ahead of me. As I walked in, the bouncer had one last sting. He let me know that, should I put the offending top back on while inside the club, I'd be thrown out. I wasn't the first person this had happened to at XXL, nor will I be the last. Door policies like these, and indeed the culture they represent, are all too familiar—not just in XXL, but in gay clubs and spaces all across the world.¹

If not at a gay bar, then where else can we go to feel safe and seen as beautiful feminine beings? “We wanted to celebrate femininity, feminine energy, feminine power, feminine rage, feminine bodies,” Kat asserted. This was the spark that set ablaze a feminine utopia—Femmetopia!—a club night that celebrates the expansiveness of gender, from faggotry through all varieties of femininities. Tonight, I was headed there, feeling fierce in my one-piece fishnet bodysuit.

Femmetopia occurred on the first and third Saturday of the month in 2018—for just that one sparkling year. Tickets were £5 (US\$6) if you grabbed them super early, £7 (US\$9) in advance, and £10 (US\$12) at the door (although the bouncer said they don't turn anyone away for lack of funds). Following Kat on Instagram, I knew I had to make my way to VFD, a venue in Dalston that called itself “an originator and incubator of queer arts and entertainment.” The East London hub hosts many parties, but with a consistent aim to nurture emerging queer talent. As I stepped inside, I saw a flyer for the event. “We have come to build a paradise in hell.” The party's mantra was memorable, and it was plastered everywhere. Messages to “Dismantle the Patriarchy!” and “The Future Is Femme!” greeted me on a vibrant design of stars and painted faces. In the center of the flyer was the party's name, written in red with a soft cursive script.

I met up with Kat at the venue—“a dingy basement full of magic,” as she affectionately called it. Lyall, the Maori-identifying owner, shared the sentiment, describing VFD on its website as “a basement of dreams.” Kat and I walked down a flight of stairs and arrived in a concrete box below the street, a room without windows. Wearing



A flyer for Femmetopia focuses on making (and taking up) space for radical possibility.
Photo credit: Kat Hudson.

go-go boots and a hand-painted cowboy hat, Kat at 5-foot-4 could reach up and touch the low ceiling.

The room itself was small, a cozy capacity of one hundred, and it was full of bodies of many shapes, sizes, colors, and sartorial styles. “Glorify all bodies for their individual beauty and power,” I read on the VFD website and now could see in thigh-high stilettos and big black boots. Someone wore a thong with New Romantic-style makeup that made them look like an art portrait. I saw a queer Indian person in a sari and other partygoers in various states of undress. One person was in a dressing gown while another donned a homemade garment embedded with LED light panels. People presented with a nonconforming confidence I’ve never seen in a gay bar (I would never dream of wearing fishnets to a gay bar, but here, it felt easy-breezy). Phoebe and Kat created something unique and captured it in their “Femmifesto,” a document that specified a strict no-tolerance policy for nonconsensual touching and sexual advances.

The music was loud, and our bodies, pressed together, were moving fluidly with it. After a few minutes, I noticed that the room looked like it was sweating; the intense body heat made the walls wet with

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