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The Closure Epidemic

“The gay bar is in trouble.”

The sentence stumbled off the pages of *The Guardian*, as if in a drunken lament. Precise figures are hard to pinpoint, the journalist wrote, but the moral of the story is clear: gay bars around the world are closing in alarming numbers.¹

Now imagine that I have handed you a copy of the *Boston Review*, an independent, nonprofit, literary magazine and forum for public reasoning about the most pressing ideas of our times. As you scan this periodical from across the pond, your eyes, like mine, linger on another distressing headline:

“The Death of the Gay Bar.”

Reading the essay makes me wonder about nightlife: what it means, why it matters, how it’s changing. “In a world in which queer people are ever more accepted and rigid identity categories make less and less sense, what is the purpose of gay bars? Do we still need them?”²

A dour tone is widespread these days, as the media catches on to a global epidemic of closures. Where the *Washington Post* is almost blasé, noting that the number of gay bars has “dwindled,” *The Economist* sees them as “under threat.” *Bloomberg* hits harder, labeling them an “endangered species.” *i-D*, an LGBTQ+ media channel, goes further still, asking if the entire “gay scene”—meaning all of nightlife—is “dead.”³ And these headlines generally describe trends that were underway before the pandemic.

By April 2020, 57 percent of the human population—that’s 4.4 billion people—would be under some form of lockdown. *The Conversation* confirmed what I could see as I walked the lonesome streets of my neighborhood at home: all kinds of businesses, including gay bars, were “shuttered by the coronavirus” and, as *Reuters* pointed out, “scrambling to avert collapse.” These beloved gathering places of

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ours had been struggling for a while, but the pandemic shut down the party, putting gay bars “on life support.”⁴

I personally noticed the crush of closure coverage around the time I moved to London. For a sabbatical, my friend Ryan invited me to join him at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he was a member of the faculty. There was no particular reason why I needed to be there, although I have been drawn ineffably to that city for as long as I can remember. I happily accepted the invitation—five months in London sounded like a dream—deciding in the spirit of serendipity to follow my feelings and see what would happen.

I arrived in January 2018, untroubled by the grey skies and rainy days (Vancouver, where I live, is much the same). It was easy enough to establish a routine, walking along Kingsway to and from the university from my nearby flat, picking up a cortado and copy of the free daily paper by the Holborn tube stop. That’s when I first noticed it. *Extra! Extra!* A few months earlier, University College London (UCL) published a bombshell report about nightlife. Ben Campkin and Lo Marshall startled the entire city with their findings: between 2006 and 2016, 58 percent of bars, pubs, and nightclubs that catered to LGBTQ+ people shuttered. Once upon a time, there were 125 places to go, but by 2016, only fifty-three remained—a colossal loss. An audit by the Greater London Authority (GLA) found that 44 percent of all nightclubs, 35 percent of all grassroots music venues, and 25 percent of all pubs had closed too. All nightlife venues were suffering, clearly—and yet, LGBTQ+ spaces were suffering disproportionately.⁵

It was around this time that Samuel Douek, an architect turned film director, coined the term *closure epidemic* to describe the scene sweeping London—and in America, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Sweden. In the United States, Gregg Mattson documented a 37 percent decline in gay bars between 2007 and 2017, roughly the same time period covered by the UCL study. Some groups were harder hit: the number of lesbian bars fell by 51 percent, and places serving people of color plummeted by 59 percent. The rate of decline was just as astonishing. In the United States, an average of fifteen gay bars closed *every year* from 2008 to 2021. Writing for *Bloomberg*, Richard Morgan put these numbers into

perspective “In 1976, there were 2,500 gay bars in the United States; today, there are fewer than 1,400 worldwide.”⁶

The people I met in London were obsessed with these studies—and for good reasons. The city’s bounty of entertainment options contributes to its status as a global hub of finance, culture, and creativity. Its workforce at night consists of 1.6 million workers—33 percent of all jobs—and nightlife industries contribute £26.3 billion (US\$33.2 billion) to the overall economy. Forty percent of the country’s £66 billion (US\$83.4 billion) nighttime economy is represented by London alone, and the mayor projects additional growth of £2 billion (US\$2.5 billion) per year through 2030. Expanding our view, the United Nations estimates that the creative economy, which includes nightlife, had a global valuation of £780 billion (US\$985 billion) in 2023, and it will represent 10 percent of global GDP by 2030. Clearly, there is an urgency to understanding what happens in the hours after the sun sets, and when cities light up.⁷

Economic and cultural values matter a great deal, of course, but that’s not why we go out. Going out is *fun*—and that quality makes it powerful. Because life is sometimes hard, having a place where we can feel joy, where we can move our bodies to blissful sounds rather than the monotones of the daily grind—these are things of beauty. If the walls feel like they are closing in on you, enjoying fellowship in a bar with your friends or dancing in a club offers a way out. At night, we find other worlds we can inhabit, even if only for a moment—but those moments matter a lot. After I graduated from college, my then-boyfriend Aaron, best friend Jon, and brother Aziz all traveled to London for a summer of self-discovery (or so we told our parents). What we found was the dance floor. I can still see twenty-one-year-old me moving my body at G-A-Y (Londoners pronounce each letter), based then at the two-thousand-person-capacity London Astoria on Charing Cross Road. The bass is thumping, and the floors are sticky from spilled sugary drinks. I’m scream-singing along to “Feel It” by the Tamperer. It’s a thin slice of time, a sweet flash of my life that has stayed with me all these years. I still smile when I think about it, feeling an everlasting connection between me then, me now, and everyone else who spent time in that iconic space. It closed in 2009, sadly, when Crossrail, a £5.5 billion (US\$6.9 billion) railway project,

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tore through it. But still, that night, I had so much fun—and I'll never forget it.

Fun is a gateway drug. That's how Ben Walters describes it. Ben is a writer, researcher, and campaigner who champions LGBTQ+ spaces in London. Fun, he tells me, “models and rehearses ways of feeling, understanding, acting, and relating.” We'll get to know Ben later, but he makes a point we need to hear from the start. “Fun is important. Fun does things. Fun builds muscles. Fun offers a window into potential futures, including queer futures.” I nod and smile, as Ben adds cheekily that “fun don't get no respect from society—or the academy.”⁸

I have lost count of the number of studies I have read over the years about suffering and social problems, about hardships and inequalities—depictions of life for minorities as full of misery. Those arguments are accurate, and absolutely essential for guiding us toward a more just future. And yet, having fun and feeling joy is what sustains us while we grapple with the tough stuff. stef m. shuster, whose name is intentionally lowercase, and Laurel Westbrook, both sociologists, describe my discipline's tendency to dismiss such matters as a “joy deficit.” When we singularly focus on what makes life miserable, the problems and the pain, all the things that make it pleasurable vanish from view. Put differently, negative experiences are only part of the picture, never its whole.⁹

I think we need to insist on joy. When we go out and have fun with our friends, important things are happening. Those moments, especially at night, create a shared emotional energy that promotes spontaneous, unscripted conditions for group pride, communal attachments, and feelings of belonging. Joy brings us closer together, and as it does, we model positive relationships with each other. And so, what might appear as a trivial thing is in fact a crucial foundation for collective life. This makes nightlife momentous, profoundly meaningful, and fabulous, as cultural critic madison moore, who also does not capitalize their name, would say. Those moments can bloom into a broader politics that propel us beyond “the negative and toiling in the present.” These words, which I borrow from performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, move us from deficit—assertions that nightlife is dying—to asset and joy. “We must dream

and enact new and better pleasures,” Muñoz says. Nightlife is where this happens.¹⁰

When I spoke with people about why they love nightlife, they used exuberant words: euphoria, ecstasy, freedom, sanctuary, romance, and especially utopia. Kat, the organizer of a party called Femmetopia, likes that word. “I was thinking about the club space as a kind of utopia,” she told me. It happens by “flipping your minority status on its head.” Inside a gay bar or nightclub, “we’re the majority, and it’s our space—that’s what makes it so amazing.” This is a great explanation for why nightlife can feel joyful: a small group can numerically take over a place in a way that is much harder to do with the institutions in which we exist by day.¹¹

At night, we are the architects. “That’s what’s utopian about it,” Kat explains. “It’s about being in the majority and feeling—and the relief of that.” Exhaling frees LGBTQ+ people to experiment with new ways of being ourselves and being in the world. Sometimes, as I will show you, the night frees us to imagine entirely new worlds. “You walk through the doors into a different reality,” Kat adds, “in which the mundanities and prejudices of the everyday world become a distant memory.” In these places, we unravel and rebuild, rebel and resist, protest and play, and widen the horizons of what it means to be human. This makes nightlife an experimental realm, a collection of places and moments when we stride toward our own spectacular self-creations. All this is why what’s been called the closure epidemic demands our attention: places where we can pursue cultural experiments and engage in grander projects of worldmaking make life worth living.¹²

Let’s begin then with the same observation as others have made: gay bars are closing in disquieting numbers. But loss is not the whole story. Looking for creative ways that people find joy will fill in the blanks. The image of nightlife as besieged by an epidemic of closures obscures what else is happening—and the pursuit of that *what else* will guide us to places less traveled. To do that, we need to follow a different map. Rather than ask the immediate if well-rehearsed question—why are gay bars closing?—we are setting out to answer something else, something more elusive: *How is nightlife changing? How is it persisting? Where do new joys await?*

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Making Sense

Those first five months that I lived in London I interviewed eighty-eight people, like Ben and Kat. I asked questions as a sociologist would, inquiring about the characteristics of neighborhoods with LGBTQ+ reputations, cultural viewpoints about sexuality, economic pressures that people experience in the city, and perceptions about local and international nightlife scenes. When I returned home in the summer, I immersed myself in more than 1,500 pages of transcripts chock full of surprises. Later in the book, I will introduce you to Lewis, the founder of a fierce underground party called INFERNO. Lewis, who uses they/them pronouns, cautioned me against relying on numbers about bar closures to reproduce a narrative of doom and gloom. People who say nightlife is dying are wrong, Lewis assured me. And then they added with a grin, “I would laugh in their face!” I’ll never forget what Lewis said when I asked why. “I *hate* these academics and these scholars that sit on panels with three or four other academics, and they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, nightlife is dying.’ Bitch, I haven’t seen you in a nightclub once! How *dare* you sit there on your little chair, on this little panel, under the spotlight and claim that nightlife is dying when you haven’t been out to even support it or to see what it’s even like right now? How *dare* you make these allegations, these sweeping statements?” I flinched at Lewis’s words, feeling hot under my collar then and as I do again now as I recount them for you. Lewis never said it directly, but they didn’t need to: *I was an academic asking questions about nightlife!*

I’m in no position to say how many people who write about nightlife have set foot inside a bar or nightclub (I have, around the world), if they had fun (I did, abundantly), or how they grapple with explanations other than the common trope that “nightlife is dying.” What did occur to me in revelatory moments like the one with Lewis—and there were many, *many* others like it—was a detail that I think people miss. A joy deficit is the default assumption in too many conversations about nightlife. We hear repeatedly that LGBTQ+ nightlife was once better—gay bars as far as the eye can see!—but the situation now is bleak. I think that we need to resist the impulse to think about nightlife in such dismal ways, to feel only a sense of loss. It is

true that a lot of gay bars are closing, but bars are not the sum total of nightlife, are they?

Researchers and public commentators are adamant about the numbers, about counting gay bars in travel guides like *Damron*, neighborhood listings on *Yelp*, archival records, newspapers, and in magazines. This is a fine strategy—we need so-called “hard data” to make sense of big-picture trends—but counting bars will offer us conclusions only about bars. And that will lead to assessments about a landscape that is inexorably shrinking, not a horizon that is changing, maybe even growing. When I was in London, the glass looked half full. This is not just a matter of semantics. To appreciate what I mean, we need to find another point of view, other ways of seeing.¹³

There are collectives and visionary individuals, like Lewis, who are producing underground parties in London called *club nights*. Once I started to meet these people, form relationships with them, and attend their events, I recognized a truth seldom shared: nightlife—the way it looks and feels—is evolving, not dying. A key driver for these changes today comes from what Kimberlé Crenshaw, a critical race theorist, would describe as the intersectional failures of gay bars, in which one form of difference, like sexuality, overrides the others, especially race and gender.

Over the years, gay bars developed a reputation as places that appeal mostly to gay men, and White gay men, at that. A lot of other people feel left out—though not defeated or disempowered. Instead, they are producing or attending a scene of radically inclusive club nights. From ongoing events that celebrate Jewish identities, Spanish heritage, Bollywood, or cultures of femininity to one-off parties in hidden locations, this form of nightlife is episodic and ephemeral. Club nights are scattered across the city and throughout the year, and they last for unpredictable amounts of time, from a couple of months to a few years and sometimes longer than a decade. Many of them cater to individuals who identify as queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (QTBIPOC)—precisely those groups who have felt unwelcome or excluded in gay bars. Nightlife is transformative for people who are marginalized by multiple vectors of power, as it enables unique ways of seeing and being in the world. And what worlds are they building? Rather than only asking glum questions about gay bars, like nearly

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everyone else, I wanted to peek beneath the surface, where a riotously queer nightlife is *thriving*.¹⁴

The more I thought about what Lewis said, words that were harsh though honest and wise, the more I knew I had to go back to London. During my second and third visits in 2019 and 2022 (the pandemic forced me to take time off), I connected with twenty-four more people, all of whom were producing club nights like INFERNO—or Buttmitzvah, where we went earlier, and Femmetopia, where we'll go later. From them, I began to put together the pieces of an intriguing puzzle. In total, the 112 interviews and forty-two club nights that comprise the bass-heavy, beating heart of this book bring to light the significance of nightlife, the search for belonging in it, and how experiences of exclusion and the pursuit of joy inspire people to act creatively—whether in the service of protecting gay bars or reinventing what fellowship looks like at night.

Into this medley of voices and places I added viewpoints from dozens of planning reports published by the mayor's office and independent policy centers. These documents describe how city officials in London from the late 1990s onward have reframed nightlife from the embodiment of crime, anti-social behavior, and conflicts to one of the most prized expressions of urban culture. Flipping through hundreds of pages, I learned about the creative industries, the economics of nightlife, the manifold threats that nightlife venues face, how bars and clubs are like theaters and museums, and I discovered a unique mayoral charter that details specific ways to protect LGBTQ+ venues.¹⁵

My many moments at club nights, and the years I invested studying them from near and afar, have made my spirit sing—but they also baffled my mind. Although I spoke with more than a hundred people from every facet of nightlife scenes, scanned pages of dense reports, and even though I sweat my way through so many parties, the particular worlds where we are going hold little of that hard data I mentioned earlier. I cannot tell you exactly how many club nights happen every month or every year in London, or in any other city, for that matter—even though I can say with certainty that they exist all around the world. I also cannot tell you what percentage of club nights are run by people of color, trans folks, White gay men, or lesbians; what the

profit margins are of a “typical” club night (as if there is such a thing); or present a precise distribution of the types of venues in which these parties occur or their preferred neighborhoods. This is a world that thrives on improvisation, that favors mobility and intermittence over permanence, and that is synonymous with the underground, both as a metaphor and a material place of gathering. Due to these unknowns, club nights are really hard to quantify—but I don’t think that matters much. Club nights are intentionally inchoate, purposely undefined, and joyfully celebrated as such. The people who produce and attend these events are there to imagine new ways of being and new worlds of belonging—not new ways of counting.

I want us to capitalize on this uncertainty. Creativity plays with both the known and the unknowable, after all—and this potent mix is why I think the world of club nights is so irresistible. In the pages to come, I will foreground feelings and experiences as ways of knowing, and I will modulate between evidence and inferences we can reasonably derive from ambiguity. This is not a tour guide, not a memoir, not an exposé of some scandalous scene. During my visits to London over three years as an urban ethnographer of nightlife, I collected a massive amount of data. With it, I will broaden and deepen what we will learn, introducing you to people who are creating utopian forms of urban culture, those who are trying to manage it, and everyone in between—above ground and especially below it.

But First, Some History

The gay bar has a long and storied past. One of the earliest records we have comes from the White Swan on Vere Street, Clare Market, in London—more than two hundred years ago! The criminalization of homosexuality back then created a need for secrecy, which places like the White Swan provided. On July 8, 1810, the Bow Street Runners, an early version of the British police, raided the molly house (that term, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, described meeting spots for homosexuals). Nearly thirty men were arrested, six were convicted of sodomy, and two were hanged a year later at Newgate prison. Thomas White was only sixteen years old,

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and Joseph Newbolt Hepburn, forty-two, was an ensign in a West India regiment. The fate of these men, condemned by the media as “monsters,” created collective trauma, and it remains one of the most brutal exemplars of the public punishment of homosexual men in British history, though molly house raids remained common until the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Across the Atlantic, there were as many laws as states. Formal bans on selling or serving alcohol at establishments that openly hosted homosexuals, however, date to the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. Once alcohol became legal again, lawmakers created agencies to regulate its sales. In 1939, the State Liquor Authority (SLA) of New York shut down Gloria’s Bar & Grill for “permitting homosexuals, degenerates, and undesirable people to congregate on the premises.” When the bar refused to deny service, it lost its liquor license. Gloria’s sued the SLA, arguing that state officials could not ban serving alcohol to homosexuals as long as they were behaving in an orderly fashion, but they lost at trial and again on appeal. For the next twenty-five years, SLAs across the country closed hundreds of bars that catered to, or even just tolerated, homosexuals.¹⁷

Post-prohibition liquor laws in nearby New Jersey banned serving alcohol to all “persons of ill repute,” a category that lumped homosexuals, deemed a “nuisance,” with criminals, gangsters, racketeers, pickpockets, swindlers, and prostitutes. The same year as Gloria’s was targeted, a tavern in Newark was shut down for a month after a man “made up with rouge, lipstick, mascara and fingernail polish” asked for a drink in a “very effeminate voice.” State officials were ruthless. As late as 1955, a saloon owner in Paterson, New Jersey, lost her liquor license after plainclothesmen reported fifteen male couples “dancing and sitting with heads close together, caressing, and giggling,” and in 1956, a gay bar in liberal Asbury Park was fined for serving men who “rocked and swayed their posteriors in a maidenly fashion.” The *New York Times* reports, “From the end of Prohibition in 1933 through 1967, when a State Supreme Court ruling finally outlawed the practice, New Jersey, like many other states, wielded its liquor laws like bludgeons to shutter gay bars.” As context, remember that sodomy laws were still on the books in forty-nine states (Illinois was the first to decriminalize homosexuality in 1962). This, as Nick

Sibilla writes in *Reason* magazine, made the gathering of a group of gay people in public “practically a criminal conspiracy.”¹⁸

It was the same on the West Coast of the United States. The Black Cat, a historic gay bar in Los Angeles, endured years of mistreatment by the California Department of Alcohol Beverage Control. In 1948, Sal Stoumen, the (straight) bar owner, had his liquor license suspended because the establishment was classified as a “disorderly house,” a designation given to places frequented by homosexuals, since they were “injurious to public morals.” Stoumen fought the police and liquor control inspectors for the right to serve anyone he pleased. Three years later, in 1951, the State Supreme Court ruled it illegal to close a venue simply because “persons of known homosexual tendencies patronized said premises and used said premises as a meeting place.” The case, *Stoumen v. Reilly*, inspired a national conversation about the importance of gay bars.¹⁹

Because liquor licenses functioned as mechanisms of state surveillance and control, gay bars across the country became symbols of resistance. Here we can think of the Stonewall riots in 1969—or the “sip-in” some years earlier. On April 21, 1966, three men tried to break the stigma around homosexuality by presenting themselves as clean-cut citizens. Dick Leitsch, Craig Rodwell, and John Timmons knew that drinking while being openly gay was illegal. But inspired by civil rights activists who were engaging in sit-ins to desegregate diners in the American South, the three men intended to use the simple act of ordering a drink as their protest. They would wait to be denied service, and then sue. The first place they went, a nearby restaurant, was the perfect spot; it displayed a sign in the window with the stinging message, “If you are gay, please go away.” Alas, it was closed that day. Eventually, the trio walked into Julius’s Bar at 159 West 10th Street in New York (now a historic landmark). As the bartender brought over their first drink, the men revealed themselves as homosexuals—at which point the bartender covered the glass with his hand and refused to serve them. “I think it’s against the law,” he said. A flurry of legal cases ensued after the *New York Times* covered the event in a story entitled, “3 Deviates Invite Exclusion by Bars.” A year after the sip-in, a state court ruling declared that evidence of “indecent behavior” needed to be “more than same-sex cruising, kissing, or touching.”²⁰

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Rulings like these emboldened proprietors to open gay bars in greater numbers. That process had been accelerating since the Second World War, as more lesbians and gay men concentrated in port cities. Nightlife is “where queer life has happened for all kinds of historic, contingent, post-war reasons,” Ben, who we met earlier, tells me. Indeed, foreclosed from the opportunity to participate in the social world on queer terms, LGBTQ+ people used nightlife to craft a world in their own image. Ben adds, “In the absence of being able to partake in mainstream society and culture on queer terms, more of it has happened in nightlife than anywhere else.” This made gay bars a central institution, if not *the* single most important and visible expression of LGBTQ+ lives. As more networks formed around them, recognizable urban gay districts, or “gayborhoods” as I call them in my other work, emerged in the United States and in countries around the world. Even today, gay bars tend to cluster in these areas (although not exclusively).²¹

Early observers of this world, academics like Nancy Achilles, recognized the difficulties of creating communities in and around gay bars. “The bars come and go,” she writes, “like a chain of lights blinking on and off over a map of the city.” When Achilles made this poetic observation about San Francisco in the 1960s, she conceded that “the gay world” comprises a “galaxy of social types”—but she stuffed that entire galaxy into bars. There were and are different types, to be sure—“leather bars,” others for “effeminate queens,” and some for “lesbian clientele”—but when it comes to LGBTQ+ nightlife, what observers saw then, and still seem to focus on now, are bars.²²

A decade later, drawing on a national sample from the United States, Joseph Harry replicated Nancy Achilles’s findings about the “diversity of gay life-styles” expressed in different kinds of bars, which included establishments that catered to people who liked to dance, lesbians, hustlers, older people, dressy people, leather enthusiasts, and Black gay men and lesbians. Another decade after that, in the 1980s, Stephen Israelstam and Sylvia Lambert expanded the list of countries with vibrant bar scenes to include Canada, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. Slowly and methodically, researchers broadened their coverage of gay bars from one city, to one country, and then to many countries.²³

Do you notice any patterns? When it comes to nightlife, pioneering researchers acknowledged the diversity of *social types* but not *organizational forms*. The gay world was vast, containing galaxies of difference—and yet, there was only one place, the gay bar, for everyone to go. Even recent work from the 2020s describes nightlife in terms of the ever-increasing varieties of bars: bear bars for hirsute gay men, leather bars for fetishists, lesbian and dyke bars, Black bars, drag bars, suburban gay bars, and even “post-gay” bars. Across seven decades of research, scholars have talked a lot about the bars, presenting variations on a recurring theme. To be fair, researchers have described different forms of LGBTQ+ social life, including house parties, bookstores, record companies, and music festivals, but nightlife remains curiously basic in this body of work.²⁴

Disruptions

Gay bars are hugely important, both historically and currently. Places like the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando and the Admiral Duncan in London have prompted international conversations, protests, and vigils.²⁵ These and other gay bars provide vital, arguably safer places, but they often (though again, not always) center particular groups. Let’s revisit that statistic from London: of its LGBTQ+ nighttime venues, 58 percent closed in the most recent decade. But notice what happens when we take a closer look: closures were most pronounced in the city center, including in Soho. Like other gayborhoods, this area is where we find clusters of bars that, as I mentioned earlier, draw mostly White gay men. If we prioritize them in our narrative about nightlife, we will miss the fact that QTBIPOC individuals—those who face multiple forms of oppression by existing at the intersections of racism, transphobia, and queerphobia—can have painful experiences of exclusion *in those same places*. Conclusions about the decline of nightlife hinge on the erasure of these groups and their cultural creations—and this I absolutely cannot and will not do.²⁶

Picture it: you are in a gay bar in Washington, DC. Mostly pop music is playing, but when the rapper Juvenile’s “Back that Azz Up” comes on, a group of Black and Latinx men start to dance around a

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set of tables. Some jump up on the benches in the booths that surround those tables. Nearby White men slowly step back, cautiously watching the scene unfold. The episode, a real-life example, shows how Black and Latinx gay men carve spaces of belonging for themselves, even if those spaces are fleeting. Mere minutes later, the DJ plays some Meghan Trainor, and the moment vanishes. Still, what the scene shows us is that the “same space”—a gay bar full of White men—can operate as a “different place” for QTBIPOC groups when they claim it and center themselves in it. Those moments are full of possibility, sometimes creating cultural ruptures, even glorious ruptures. Consider that, during the United States’ Jim Crow era, African Americans were excluded from “White-only” music clubs. But that exclusion led to the emergence of Black-only cultural venues, like those in Newark, New Jersey, which became “a mecca for Black jazz in the thirties and forties” as Black patrons were turned away from Philadelphia’s bars and music halls.²⁷

These modified approaches to studying nightlife, in which we attend to the creation of different cultural centers in the same space or the rise of entirely new places, still don’t get us very far beyond the bar—but they do capture a critical insight: when people feel excluded from society in some way, they manifest bursts of creativity. This resistance, I think, is asset-based thinking at its finest. The closure epidemic will provide for us a similar opportunity to explore power, agency, and intersectional achievements while embracing a prismatic vision of nightlife. Thus, it is now precisely the right time to ask: under what conditions do which people create forms of fellowship beyond gay bars?²⁸

To answer that question, I will import a concept from organizational, social movement, and cultural studies into our reflections about urban nightlife, arguing that gay bar closures today are a kind of *disruptive event*. The phrase describes an unsettled moment of time, either anticipated or unexpected, that alters our routines and the ideas we take for granted. Recent examples include economic recessions, terrorist attacks, pandemics, mass shootings, union strikes, natural disasters, and wars. Our response to disruptions can create more upheaval, change begetting change as people question how things used to be, imagine how things could be, and mobilize toward those other outcomes.²⁹

Sometimes, disruptions exacerbate existing inequalities—like racial profiling, which increased following the September 11 attacks in the United States, or the “individual freedoms” backlash against public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. These reactions occur because disruptions feel urgent; those of us who are affected feel compelled to respond right away. The problem with rapid responses, however, is that they target survival, they seek a return to the familiar, and they attempt to restore stability.

Consider again the closure epidemic and the responses to it that cropped up in London. In 2016, Mayor Sadiq Khan appointed Amy Lamé as the UK’s first mayor-of-the-night, or “night czar” (the name “night mayor” was also considered, but the possibilities for puns were endless). The role represents a form of urban governance that promotes nocturnal vibrancy. “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,” Amy Lamé told me personally. Mayors of the night liaise between bar owners, planning authorities, government representatives, and citizens. “[W]e need to make sure that we have spaces that exist in order for communities to thrive and *survive*,” she added.

The appointment of a night czar and her statements, emphasizing words like “save” and “survive,” highlight a relationship between disruptions and the prototypical protective responses to them. Lamé’s mandate is to address a threat as quickly as possible and get things back on track. This makes the response prone to a cognitive trap that organizational researchers call *isomorphism*: the tendency to reproduce a similar form, to think about the thing that is most familiar or most common while overlooking other possibilities. To wit: the mayor and the night czar, like the media and many researchers, focus on gay bars, whether that’s protecting them, promoting them, or encouraging new ones to open.³⁰

In those same moments of widespread disruption, some of us will reevaluate rather than reproduce. And so, once something is interrupted or disarranged, new possibilities arise, sometimes revolutionary, for how we might put the pieces back together. When you hear that word, *revolution*, it is easy to picture something big and dramatic, impossible to miss—upheavals and transformations on a massive

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scale! But subtle revolutions are also possible. A single act or simple choice can change lives and entire political orders, switching the tracks down which history travels.³¹

To see how all this happens, these unexpected and complex things that escape notice by people who are preoccupied with survival and sustainability, we need to keep tweaking our questions: let's ask not (only) why gay bars are closing but (also) how people are responding. Squeezed out of the gay bars that catered to limited groups well before they began to shutter in large numbers, culture creatives found ways to cultivate joy in other ways and in other places. Join me as we next explore the experiments occurring in urban nightlife. Who is creating them, what is motivating them, and where are they happening?

Follow Me Underground

The night offers an opportunity to put people and places together in boundlessly creative ways. To examine these connections between our identities and the places where we go out, I want us to adopt a wide-angle lens and see nightlife as something expansive, like a field with both formal and informal rules and a bunch of actors whose varying degrees of power can enable and legitimize some while marginalizing and excluding others. Close your eyes for a moment and say that word out loud: *field*. What do you see?

When I hear it, I picture a vast, open space. To extend the metaphor, nightlife as a field is abundant with opportunities other than bars. There is room for many more types of people and places, experiments and experiences. Sure, we can still see the bars—it's ill-advised to ignore them—but other things now come into view as well. I want us to see gay bars *and* struggles to create other options in the field. By imagining nightlife in this way, we heed calls by Kareem Khubchandani, a humanist, to embrace a “more capacious” style of thinking, and what David Grazian, a social scientist, describes as a “larger landscape” of the city after dark. But where are these other places?³²

In London, the closure of gay bars was a disruption as well as an inciting event in the field. As I noted earlier, an inventive and daring

spirit is flourishing in an underground scene of club nights. There, the city's artists, audiophiles, and other culture creatives are fighting issues like gentrification and redevelopment which threaten the bars while ensuring that nightlife remains vibrant and marked by far more variety. By blending pleasure and politics, celebration and spatial acts of resistance, organizers are drawing on a long legacy of using episodic events to craft moments of fellowship in the midst of social occlusion—and they are revolutionizing nightlife along the way.

Unlike gay bars, club nights occur only occasionally, they are located in places beyond the gayborhood, and they can exist without a permanent institutional home (although some have residences). With dwindling numbers of bars in the limelight, public commentators overlook these other expressions of nightlife. Researchers—social scientists more often than humanists, I might add—misattribute events like club nights as “epiphenomena,” or secondary gatherings that orbit the bars rather than unique worlds and sovereign centers of nightlife. No wonder we know so little about them! Ritualistic gatherings, even if they are only occasional, must occupy the center of our attention and analysis. When I take you to these parties, we will see people discovering themselves and each other anew in the course of what Jonathan Wynn describes as “effervescent moments of co-presence.” In the worlds that LGBTQ+ people create at club nights, they imagine something grand, like structural change, but enact it on the dance floor.³³

While the specific parties we will visit in this book are on the newer side of things—and they may not even exist by the time you read these words—the general format of temporary or occasional gatherings outside of gay bars has a proud history. Matt Houlbrook, an authority on British queer history, found a hundred-year-old letter from Bill, who was making plans to go out one weekend. “Honey Bunch,” Bill writes to his lover Bert in 1927, “I will be outside Lees Hall at 8 o'clock on Saturday, and we can easily find a dance.” From Bill's tone, it seems that they had options. “We have fixed nothing for Saturday yet, but there are plenty of dances so don't forget to come.” The handwritten letter is an astonishing artifact. It was penned forty years before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, which partially decriminalized sex between men in England and Wales—yet there was Bill, between

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the world wars, with plenty of places to dance the night away with his honey bunch.³⁴

We don't know where Bill and Bert ended up that night. Houlbrook guesses that they went to the Adelphi Rooms, a place for short-term boarding on Edgware Road. Leslie Kinder, a local waiter, would rent out spaces for fortnightly dances, selling tickets through friends and acquaintances. His events attracted up to three hundred men—clerks, cabinet makers, a coach painter—who would come, as Houlbrook describes, “painted and powdered . . . [wearing] earrings and low-necked dresses.” If not the Adelphi Rooms, then maybe Bill and Bert went to the Caravan on Endell Street, Billie's on Little Denmark Street, or Betty's on Archer Street. These were not gay bars but venues where larger numbers of homosexual men would occasionally gather. The specific places came and went then as they do today—in Achilles' words, we can picture “a chain of lights blinking on and off over a map of the city.”³⁵

London's queer scene was extensive, although the places where people partied were not always public. The meaning of words like “public” and “underground” are far from fixed. The “public world” that Houlbrook describes consisted of streets, cafes, and urinals. Nightlife places, like the Adelphi Rooms where Leslie threw temporary parties, were “a quasi-private world in which to relax, meet friends, have fun, and know that one was not alone.” While you needed to be an insider to find them—“not everyone knew about such places,” Houlbrook says—they were anything but epiphenomenal. “Far from clandestine,” Houlbrook continues, “venues like the Adelphi Rooms were tightly woven into the fabric of London's commercial nightlife. This vibrant social world . . . was an integral part of it.”³⁶

New York had a similar scene. Gay bars opened after the repeal of Prohibition, as I mentioned earlier. Most of these places only lasted a few months before police raids shut them down (again, blinking lights). Many men avoided the bars for fear of being caught, arrested, and revealed. This concern, the American historian George Chauncey suggests, was “an especially powerful threat to professionally successful men.” Those who had “greater wealth and social status” turned to less visible places, like businessmen's bars in hotels or the opera house, further alternatives in the field of nightlife. These places

welcomed “multiple audiences” and “multiple cultural meanings,” Chauncey says, which allowed gay men to socialize under the radar—and without requiring a gay bar.³⁷

As nightlife opportunities were expanding for gay men and lesbians, so too were social gatherings for people who felt marginalized by both their sexuality and their gender. The most popular events were called masquerade balls, or “drags.” One of the earliest occurred in Washington, DC, on New Year’s Eve in 1885. The *Washington Evening Star* reported that one participant, named “Miss Maud,” was arrested while returning home the following morning. Genny Beemyn, a historian, draws us into the drama: “Dressed in ‘a pink dress trimmed with white lace, with stockings and undergarments to match,’ the 30-year-old, male-assigned, Black participant was charged with vagrancy and sentenced to three months in jail, even though the judge, the newspaper reported, ‘admired his stylish appearance.’” Roughly a half century later, by the 1930s, drags drew hundreds of cross-dressers and spectators, though mostly White, who attended in Chicago, New Orleans, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities.³⁸

Events like these were a product of their time. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham describes them as “merely drag fashion shows staged by white men two or three times a year in gay bars.” People of color rarely participated, and even when they did, they were told to “whiten their faces.” Pepper LaBeija, one of the stars of the circuit in New York, reflects, “It was our goal then to look like white women. They used to tell me, ‘You have negroid features,’ and I’d say, ‘That’s all right, I have white eyes.’ That’s how it was back then.”³⁹

Fed up with the racist scene, Black queens in Harlem in the 1960s began organizing their own ritualized performances, called “balls.” These events were flamboyant dance competitions between “houses,” or surrogate family structures led by “mothers” and “fathers.” Like club nights, balls also created their own worlds by refusing the power of mainstream representations (no more whitening your face). As the queens put together more extravagant looks, their parties attracted more spectators, first by the dozens and then the hundreds. It was these Black and later Latinx queens who made ballroom an “underground sensation,” Cunningham says, “undreamed of by the little gangs of white men parading around in frocks in basement taverns” in earlier

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decades. The 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, which took its title from the name of an annual ball organized by Paris Dupree, popularized the scene for mainstream audiences.⁴⁰

Temporary gatherings at night have been a cornerstone for queer women of color as well, even though, once again, social scientists have said little about them. The oversight, Rochella Thorpe argues, happens because we assume that bars are “the center (both theoretical and actual) of lesbian communities.” In her study of postwar Detroit, Thorpe finds separate social environments for Black lesbians, who would throw “rent parties,” and White lesbians, who were the ones hanging out in the bars. Women of color hosted their own parties because racism made it nearly impossible for them to socialize in those same bars. “White women in the bars were very prejudiced,” one woman shared with Thorpe. Rent parties took place in private homes, and people found out about them through word of mouth. The hosts provided food, music, and alcohol “for a fraction of the admission charge at high-priced clubs,” Thorpe adds, and used the profits to subsidize the high rents of Harlem apartments—hence a rent party. Ruth Ellis and her partner Babe threw some of the best. “All the gay people would come to our house,” Ruth remembers. “That was known as ‘a house where queers go.’”⁴¹

Bars that catered specifically to Black lesbians did open in later decades, but house parties remained more popular. Ronnie, a local bartender, explains the economic motivation: “What it really is about [is] Black people not havin’ very much.” House parties provided an alternative for people who aspired to open their own bar but did not have the financial means. In the 1970s, women called them “after-hours parties” or “blind pigs,” in reference to the unlicensed sale of alcohol, and Black lesbians flocked to them. The blind pigs were much larger and far more anonymous than the rent parties thrown by Ruth and Babe, and they provided spaces in which to drink and dance well past closing time at the bars.⁴²

Black women in Washington, DC, continue the tradition today. Nikki Lane calls these gatherings “scene spaces,” which she defines as a “transient group of events”—from house parties to happy hours in commercial venues. The events are popular because “there are no Black lesbian bars or clubs in the city,” Lane observes. The biggest

parties are thrown by event promoters who rent spaces for one-off gatherings. In common, writings by Thorpe and Lane highlight how intersectional profiles can inspire parties that prioritize the “desires and experiences of Black women.”⁴³

Club nights today are a manifestation of a long-standing tradition. While they are not unique, per se, I think they are uniquely important, uniquely meaningful, and uniquely revelatory in many ways.⁴⁴ For starters, club nights refashion nightlife in opposition not just to a straight mainstream, as did the drags, balls, and rent parties that came before, but also—and possibly for the first time—to an established gay mainstream. And so, rather than serving as a refuge from homophobia, like earlier scenes, they are intentional expressions of inclusion that respond to experiences of exclusion at gay bars. Club nights thus provide an alternative to those bars, existing concurrently with them. But that does not make club nights interchangeable with gay bars. If you walk by a gay bar, you will recognize it by the rainbow flags that surround it, the large numbers of White men inside, or the popular music spilling out the doors. Club nights, as we will see, refuse those flags, attract a very different crowd, and often feature experimental sounds. Parties are promoted by word of mouth or on social media platforms (they are not publicly marked). You have to be in the know to go, hence the idea of an *underground* where parties feel hidden and secret.

Gay bars are fixed and emplaced, often located in areas with discernible LGBTQ+ communities, or a place with a liberal reputation. You can go to your favorite bar any night of the week (if it hasn't closed). Not so with club nights. They are irregular and nomadic, a series of related but discontinuous events. Club nights share this feature with the house parties that happened earlier in history, like Ruth and Babe's place, but they are more structured than those gatherings. Club nights are organizationally distinct, in other words: more formalized than house parties but less standardized than gay bars. The temporary format they use enables some clever economic experiments, a third quality that, as we will see in detail later, hints at how nightlife can thrive even as many bars close. For these reasons, it feels like club nights can pop up anywhere in the city at any time—and they are not to be missed.⁴⁵

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Club nights have many more standout features. Most parties are queer, not gay—a cultural and semantic shift that has sizable implications for what power looks like and how it operates. A fifth feature: many club nights prioritize gender politics, especially trans and nonbinary representations, in ways we have seldom seen. These parties are adamantly inclusive and broadly intersectional, much more than gay bars and earlier iterations of itinerant gatherings. Finally, while gay bars emerged in greater numbers in a permissive climate, following the repeal of laws against indecent behavior, club nights are gaining ground in a constrictive context of a closure epidemic in capitalist cities like London. Emerging in the thick of a large-scale disruption and responding to the shortcomings of gay bars are a collection of club nights that are remarkably diverse and differentiated, keenly self-aware and articulated.

So many events and scenes all over the world! From drags in the late 1880s to wherever Bill and Bert ended up that night in 1927, from postwar house parties for Black lesbians in Detroit to club nights in London today: all these places capture an entanglement between the mainstream and the underground, where some of us come alive in defiant celebrations and reclaim the humanity others try to steal, whether through the criminalization of gay sex, laws banning people from wearing the clothes of another gender, or racism. That defiance takes on a distinctly joyful quality in nightlife. Bill sounded excited in his note to Bert, despite the risks involved, and I'm sure Miss Maud had a fabulous time at the ball, even if she was arrested—and Ruth and Babe's house of queers sounds like it was a blast. Are you curious yet? If so, then it's time to look beyond the dimly blinking lights on Achilles' map and see each other, *really* see each other, under the bright strobes of nightlife beyond just the gay bar.

What Next—or Where Next?

There is a cache associated with time-limited events. Many of us reflect on our life by remembering the moments, and we string those moments together in an effort to define who we are. Flashes of time are life's highlights, like colorful lasers on a dance floor that come

and go, and they light up the grey skies of daily life. Each gathering at night is an opportunity to meet up with old friends, make new ones, and create longer-lasting impressions. We love events, and we look forward to them, for this exact reason: because they are infrequent and uncommon. Events feel special. Those moments at a club night will pass in a heartbeat. But it doesn't matter. What does matter is that the moment existed at all. To be present in a place that prioritizes you, finally, feels like a revolution, a universe away from being invisible night after night in other places.⁴⁶

In the chapters to come, we will see how people are reimagining nightlife and what it means to do so underground; we will explore economic models that champion creativity despite the devastations of capitalism; we will encounter soul-crushing reflections on racism; we will learn how people reclaim nightlife, and reorient it, in response to those experiences of exclusion; and we will pay thoughtful attention to naming practices—from *gay* bars to *queer* nightlife—that gesture toward greater visibility and more voices. Richard Morgan, the journalist from *Bloomberg* we met earlier, offers a memorable turn of phrase to synopsise these themes: “In an LGBTQ+ world, bars that are merely gay can seem anachronistic.”⁴⁷

At every party I attended, I felt an intimate mingling of rebellion and joy. That dance created a sensation of belonging for the people who took part in it. I was there too, and I experienced it as the cultural core of club nights. All of us need to connect, after all, and we do it by seeking meaning-rich interactions with each other. Because belonging is such a big idea, I don't want us to think about it in a casual or abstract sense. We form attachments with other people as we hang out with them here at a gay bar, or there at a club night. Place matters.

Now, finally, we come to a crescendo about the book's title. The expression “long live queer nightlife” is a play on quintessential Britishness, but in relation to royalty, it implies the preceding assumption that “gay nightlife is dead.” The pairing of these delicate declarations, metaphors of continuity, transferal, and triumph, gives us a lot to work with! So, grab a cup of coffee (or a flask) and turn the page—it's time to go out.

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