Style and the Value of Gay Nightlife: Homonormative Placemaking in San Francisco


Greggor Mattson

Assistant Professor of Sociology

Oberlin College

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ABSTRACT: Reductionist conceptions of gay nightlife and the neighborhoods they anchor have obscured their diversity amid claims of gentrification or displacement. The divergent trajectories of San Francisco’s three gay bar districts present a natural experiment to specify the relationship between gay placemaking and urban processes. In 1999, each neighborhood anchored distinct stylistic practices but by 2004, one had collapsed, another became stylistically mixed, while the youngest expanded and became homogenous. In that neighborhood a particular gay style and mainstream cosmopolitanism converged, spatially institutionalizing what queer theorists call “the new homonormativity” comprising sexual discretion, mainstream political assimilation and boutique consumerism. Adherence to this particular gay style conferred spatial capital, allowing cosmopolitans, gay and straight, to literally “take place” anywhere, while nonconformist gays lost their places. Contrary to popular and academic claims, not all gay places are associated with gentrification: homonormativity fostered gentrification from within, nonconformist gay nightlife fell victim to gentrification from without. This study thus contributes to a clearer relationship between gay men and urban revitalization, nightlife economies, and the valuation of some forms of urban creativity and placemaking over others.
What is the value of gay nightlife?

Gay bars and the neighborhoods they anchor are in trouble (Brown, 2014; Ghaziani, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014; Podmore, 2013). Entertainment blogs mourn waves of gay bar closures (e.g. Pape, 2013), while even in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, “tolerant times bring change to gay bars” (Flanigan, 2012). Yet only years earlier, urbanists celebrated gays as bellwethers of tolerant, diverse urban economies (e.g. Clark, 2003; Florida and Gates, 2001; Florida, 2003) and heralded nightlife for its promise of cosmopolitan, self-policing, 24-hour neighborhoods (see Roberts et al., 2006; Shaw, 2013; Yeo and Heng, 2014).

Bar districts are important indicators of the vitality of gay neighborhoods as “anchor institutions” of gay community (Ghaziani, 2014). Gay bars are the public front to gay social “scenes” that spill onto the streets and into private residences (see Valentine and Skelton, 2003). For twentieth-century gay men, bars were the most important cultural institution where newly-“out” men were socialized, interpersonal contacts were made, social isolation was alleviated, and community art exhibitions, charity auctions, and political meetings were held (e.g. Armstrong, 2002). From the 1960s through the 1970s, “gay politics in San Francisco, as in L.A. and New York, had been formed almost entirely in reaction to the continuing crackdown by authorities on gay bars and gay male sexuality” (Clendinen and Nagourney, 1999: 150). Today bars are still sites of “identity pilgrimage” (Howe, 2001) for “lifestyle commuters” (Brekhus, 2003) who travel from suburbs or erstwhile straight places to “mitigate the effects of social and spatial isolation” (Hunter, 2010, p. 165).

In the fast-moving debate about gay places, the relationships among economic development, gay nightlife and the neighborhoods they anchor are still unclear. Some researchers find declarations of gay neighborhood decline alarmist (Ghaziani, 2010), supported by studies
that find younger LGBTs prefer mixed socializing over gay places (Nash, 2013). Studies document developer pressure to remove gay bars from gentrifying neighborhoods (Boyd, 2005; Doan and Higgins, 2011), yet elsewhere, urban planners create “gay villages” through strategic zoning and alcohol licensing (e.g. Lewis, 2013). Others find that small gay populations increase regional home values (Florida and Mellander, 2010), while gay residents are displaced by tourists drawn to gay enclaves (Collins, 2004). These studies share a bias towards the placemaking practices of gay men who overwhelmingly dominate erstwhile “gay” or “queer” public space, neglecting the practices of lesbians and trans people.

Descriptions of gay neighborhoods—in creative-cities promotions and nostalgic eulogies alike—are pervaded by assumptions that they are the same, are building-blocks for urban revitalization, and rise or fall according to universal rules (see Brown, 2009; Podmore, 2013). These reductionist understandings of gay scenes have obscured their different stylistic practices, the cultural and economic competition underpinning them, and their differential appeals to “potential gentrifiers” (Beauregard, 1986). As this study demonstrates, only those gay neighborhoods that confer valued qualities upon cosmopolitans annex adjacent areas and prompt concerns about preserving their gay character (Brown-Saracino, 2010). I describe this as “gentrification from within” when the stylistic practices of a neighborhood serve as an engine of development by attracting economic resources (see also ‘boutiquing:’ Zukin et al., 2009). Streetscapes anchored by gay bar districts patronized primarily by sex workers, poor gays, and men of color are colonized and displaced by mainstream stylistic practices, which I gloss as “gentrification from without.” Despite calls to protect “nocturnal rights to the city” for sexual nonconformists (Prior et al., 2012), only gay streetscapes that present low-friction consumption opportunities for cosmopolitans are valued on the market, at the expense of their nonconformity.
This study presents the divergent trajectories of San Francisco’s (SF) three gay bar districts between 1999 and 2012 to demonstrate how the practices of gay style help explain the vitality or displacement of gay nightlife and the neighborhoods they anchor. Though San Francisco is a unique case as a paradigmatic gay metropolis (Armstrong, 2002; Boyd, 2005; Sides, 2009), it is precisely its internal variation that permits an analysis of multiple gay neighborhoods (Polk, Soma and the Castro) under similar regional economic and social pressures. The nonconformist Polk district succumbed to gentrification from without (see Figure 1), unable to attract new nonconformist patronage or adapt to changing gay tastes, while Soma completed its transition from a hypermasculine fetish neighborhood to a mixed-orientation nightlife district.

Figure 1: San Francisco Gay Bar Distributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polk</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SoMa</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castro</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF (rest)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The Castro’s homonormative appeal to cosmopolitans, gay and straight, was reflected in its geographical expansion and increasing stylistic homogeneity, prompting concerns about gentrification that focused on its dilution as gay space.

By taking as its units of analysis nightlife districts and not individual bars or events, this study focuses on the importance of durable streetscapes (Yeo and Heng, 2014; Zukin, 1998), the sites of institutionalized placemaking for gay sociality. By explicitly focusing on the decline of the diversity of gay male placemaking, the implicit topic of nearly all the urban development
literature, this study contributes to our understandings of gay neighborhoods, nightlife economies, and urban cosmopolitanism.

**Homonormativity taking place**

“Respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy. But their success, their way of living, their political rights and their very identities would not have been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise.”
(Berlant and Warner, 1998: 563)

Queer theorists have critiqued “the new homonormativity” in gay politics for its “privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002). By attending to the stylistic practices in three distinct districts of a gay metropolis, I show how homonormativity was spatially institutionalized in its ability to grant cosmopolitan consumers, gay and straight, the ability to “take place” throughout the city. Ryan Centner calls this “spatial capital,” the ability of privileged urban consumers “to stake exclusionary claims, perceived by others as socially legitimate, on urban space that could reasonably be open to others” (Centner, 2008: 194–5). Spatial capital can be expressed stylistically by the privilege to not “fit in” to subcultural places or the ability to shift styles temporarily (Grazian, 2007), avoiding the negative consequences of permanent affiliation with nonconformist scenes, including a gay identity that is relevant only to private life (Brekhus, 2003). My focus on placemaking, using this synthesis of Bourdieusian spatial capital and queer theory, avoids reifying homonormativity by grounding it in local historical conditions and institutionalized practices (Brown, 2009; Podmore, 2013).
Centner’s concept of spatial capital emerged from a study of San Francisco’s dot-com workers who presided over the region’s boom-and-bust economy. These were the same workers studied by Richard Florida of creative cities fame, in his findings that high tech industries are associated with gay residential concentrations (Florida and Gates, 2001). Young workers flooded into the region in the 1990s, following venture capital-financed technology companies that celebrated a culture of entrepreneurism, free-market libertarianism, and flexibility that blended workplace and leisure (see review in Walker, 2006). As one nightlife impresario explained, “working and socializing are connected here—people don't come to San Francisco just to settle down and have a quiet existence” (Borden, 2000: 224). Such workers largely eschewed the nonconformist gay bars with their subcultural barriers to entry and explicit sexuality, as I show below, but homonormative gay bars made room for them.

The homonormative critique rejects the gay movement’s abandonment of sexual radicalism and solidarities across and race and social class in favor of bourgeois marriage. The mainstreaming of gay marriage was reflected spatially in the de-concentration of gay neighborhoods by their integration by heterosexuals (Ghaziani, 2014). This was accompanied by a shift from durable, 24/7 gay places to scenes that are “networked and online, located in nebulous, diffuse, often suburban spaces… less territorially defined” (Weiss, 2011: 37). The decline in the numbers of gay bars, especially for nonconformist scenes, increased the importance of rentable venues known as “spaces” for subcultural scenes, though these were vulnerable to pressure by neighbors for the noise and patrons they attracted. The Castro, like other gentrified neighborhoods, engaged in a “sanitation process” to remove unwanted gays from public space, conflating safety with homogeneity (Brown-Saracino, 2010), provoking
controversies that revealed exclusionary practices against the poor, the homeless, and gay men of color. These divisions exemplify the homonormative critique.

The homonormativity of San Francisco’s gay places was not inevitable. Both Polk and Soma’s 1999 configurations had survived the AIDS crisis and decades of intense municipal development pressures (e.g. Hartman, 2002; Plaster, 2009; Rubin, 1998). Gay cooperative businesses and nonprofits still espouse radical politics (Brown, 2009), and London’s Vauxhall is an exception to “assumptions about the desexualization and sanitization of contemporary gay culture” (Andersson, 2011: 85). Yet these alternatives are framed as such, and the nonconformist scenes that were uprooted in SF’s diverse gay metropolis did not take root elsewhere.

Sarah Schulman (2012) argues that gay neighborhoods gentrified when “conservative,” “consumerist” settlers replaced the “rebellious,” “queer” pioneers killed by AIDS, a political shift she calls The Gentrification of the Mind. Though not yet empirically verified, it joins other challenges to gay historical memory like reminders of Polk’s “forgotten AIDS crisis” (Sides, 2009: 182), past celebrations of promiscuity in the Castro (Murray, 1996), and Soma’s disintegration not from higher rates of AIDS than other neighborhoods, but from more concentrated urban redevelopment (Rubin, 1998). Though Schulman does not use the term, homonormativity captures this “gentrification” of gay historical memory, reflected by the conflation of homonormativity with homosexuality in folk and scholarly accounts alike.

**Observing the erotics of stylistic practices**

This study’s baseline data for documenting change in gay streetscapes come from a team ethnography of bargoing from 1999-2002. In pairs we visited each of the “sexual marketplace” bars in the San Francisco bay area (N=147) identified by key informants (Cavan, 1966). We did
not know it at the time, but we were observing the last days of Polk’s streetscape, a time before the Castro dominated regional gay nightlife, and a dwindling variety of gay stylistic practices. We made multiple visits to each gay nightlife district, observing all bars for gay men (N=51) from 9pm until lingering patrons outside dispersed after the 2am closing time. An 18-page fieldnote guide, programmed into handheld electronic devices, imposed standardized collection and coding; data were analyzed with the NUD*IST qualitative analysis software. Subsequent data come from independent ethnographic visits I made 3-4 times yearly until 2007 and annual visits from 2007 until 2012 of each district and the pedestrian flows among bars. These observations are supplemented with my analyses of newspaper articles, nightlife fliers, online nightlife reports, and the archives of the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California and the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC).

I was hired as a native informant for the initial project—a white gay bargoing man in his mid-20s, alongside ethnographers of diverse racial backgrounds and nightlife experiences. My regular patronage of gay bars in several American and European cities familiarized me with a broader range of stylistic practices than we observed in San Francisco, and my residence in a low-rent neighborhood in Oakland made me one of the identity commuters on public transportation to the gay city. My youth, height, swimmer’s physique, and light hair and eyes gave me relatively high status, experiences tempered by co-workers’ experiences.

Tasked with providing estimates of the social class mix of bar patrons, my colleagues and I were confronted with the fact that the social class presentation (Goffman, 1951) of many gay men did not match biographic details revealed in conversation. Stylishly groomed young men in designer fashions frequently revealed themselves as holding multiple low-wage service jobs.
Conversely, gay men in nonconformist bars wearing work coveralls or leather fetish gear were actually bankers and managers.

These experiences highlighted the importance of attending to the erotics of social class in cosmopolitan placemaking. These erotics are aspirational, but can be upward to appear upper-middle class but also downward to signal nonconformist or radical sexuality. Style is not mere surface, but a set of social relations and practices organized in space, the embodiment of subcultural affiliation (Hebdige, 1981; Zukin, 1998) through the (re)creation of symbolic boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984). I describe as “homonormative” the stylistic practices of décor or comportment that reflected middle-class privacy and propriety, and nonconformist those that celebrated sexual contact or socializing across social cleavages. As I document below, nonconformist streetscapes and bars were replaced by a homonormativity in the brief 5-year period of 1999-2004, reflected in the decline of nonconformism throughout the City and the Castro’s recent rise to dominance.

The decline of stylistic diversity in San Francisco’s gay nightlife districts

“In the temperate climate of San Francisco a thousand separate and unique species of queer animal have evolved, each inhabiting his or her own bar or club,” San Francisco Chronicle, 2000.

Although the Castro as “gay capital” is well known, its status as the youngest of San Francisco’s three gay bar districts is not. It was settled only in the 1970s, joining the late-1950s-era Polk Gulch, and 1960’s Soma (Boyd, 2005). In 1999 each neighborhood had 8 to 19 gay bars, with 13 others scattered singly around the city, including both lesbian bars. In 2004, Polk had lost more than half its bars and the Castro’s share had increased from 36% to 52% despite a
citywide loss of 7 gay bars (see Figure 1). These changes were durable; by 2012 there were only 3 gay bars in Polk, while the Castro’s stayed at 50%, annexing upper Market St. (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: San Francisco Gay Bars, 1999 and 2012**

Although Soma maintained or increased its share of bars between 1999 and 2012, it experienced a significant qualitative shift towards the mainstream.

San Francisco’s rising incomes caused a shift from quirky neighborhood bars to investor-backed restaurants. A state moratorium on new licenses to serve liquor (as opposed to just beer and wine) meant licenses had to be bought from existing holders at market prices, around $55,000 in 2006 (Carter, 2006: 8). California liquor licenses are issued by the state alcohol beverage control (ABC) subject to advice from county agencies, elected and police officials, and
also neighbors: a protest by any “person living within 100 feet of the proposed premises” means “the ABC generally will not approve the license” (Carmichael, 2000: 78). These many constituencies also mean that license renewals, transfers, or alterations are complicated and expensive propositions. Increasingly conservative norms of respectability and rising rents favored upscale restaurants over new bars, coinciding with the rise of restaurant investors chasing the incomes of new economy workers.

Polk Gulch’s nonconformist homosexualities

Polk Street had long been a crossroads between extremes of wealth and indigent transience, bisected by the California Street cable car line to the waterfront and financial district. In 1973 the gay enclave still hosted the annual pride parade and had made Polk “the city’s new in street” for cosmopolitan heterosexuals in adjacent wealthy neighborhoods, summarized as “asparagus tip sandwiches… [for] the hip, the hep, the gay, the mod” (San Francisco Chronicle, quoted in Plaster, 2009). By 1999, Polk’s reputation had merged with the Tenderloin, “one of the roughest parts of San Francisco, a seedy, crime-ridden mix of drug dealers, homeless drunks and hookers of both sexes” (Wildermuth, 2013).

Polk’s 1999 streetscape supported an array of LGBT subcultures rarely found elsewhere in San Francisco, nor in such concentrated proximity. Its 12 gay bars nestled among straight bars, social service agencies, late-night diners, and mom-and-pop stores selling donuts, pornography, and stationery. Nighttime sidewalks were always populated by bedraggled figures pushing shopping carts or huddled in dark doorways; men walking alone; strolling groups; transgendered women and male hustlers selling sex; and bouncers and smoking patrons standing outside nightclubs. This streetscape provoked diverse homosexual desires: “Polk Street is one of the last
remaining places where there has been cross-class, cross-gender and cross-sexuality, an interaction between street cultures” (Fulbright, 2005). For locals a bar might provide an oasis of sociability, but for male passersby the scene provoked diverse sexual possibilities—sugar daddy, John/punter, campy queen, hustler, cross-generational encounters, transgendered women, or attractions to Asian men.

Older men met much younger men at Reflections, often for commercial sex. When I first slid onto one of the barstools as a scruffy graduate student, the bartender placed a napkin in front of me, saying “the gentleman at the end there would like to buy you a drink.” Meeting the gaze of a paunchy bald man in a Members-Only jacket, I demurred, sliding the napkin back and hoping not to give offence. “Well in that case,” said the bartender as he slid the napkin back to me, “the gentleman at the other end of the bar would like to buy your drink.” As I retreated, red-faced, a third told me that he’d buy me anything I liked. Polk’s scene meant that eye contact between older and younger men was intense, prompting men to consider cross-generational desire or interaction for pay.

The White Swallow’s eponymous double entendre belied a camp sensibility in stark contrast to gay styles of hypermasculinity or restrained cosmopolitanism. To my right sat an elderly dandy, resting one white-gloved hand on the fidgety knee of a youth whom I took for a hustler. The other 10-12 patrons, mainly in their 50s-70s, wore colorful sweaters and slacks. A florid, pudgy pianist with frosted hair embellished classic songs with bawdy lyrics, while patrons joined in with off-key bellowing and raucous laughter.

Diva’s advertised itself as the premier transgender club in America. Asian women in sequined ball gowns performed duets for older men of indeterminate sexual orientation and two white transgendered women sitting alone. Upstairs, couples swayed in the strobe-lit darkness,
white men in their 50s-60s wearing business attire dancing with young brown-skinned women in low-cut dresses and high heels. A young woman beside me gestured to her swooping neckline; “They’re real, here, feel them,” she insisted, taking my hand, “but it all works downstairs, believe me,” she said, echoing newspaper sex ads by transgendered women with penises. Women of color smoked on the sidewalk outside or lingered on a busy corner well known as a prostitution stroll. As I passed one with breasts practically exposed, she purred, “Hey baby, wanna party?” The Polk streetscape thus prompted male passersby to consider whether they were sexually interested in transgendered women or paying for sex.

N’Touch was the only gay bar for Asian men in North America. Patrons, mainly East or Southeast Asian, ranged from stiff young Asian Americans in the baseball caps of any fraternity brother, to flamboyant Asian immigrants with bleached hair in trendy nightclub fashions. Caucasian patrons, older on average, were as often objects of desire as dismissed as fetishistic “rice queens.” The presence of N’Touch on Polk created a field of desire between and among white and Asian men. An Asian man’s interest in other men was not necessarily apparent until he neared N’Touch, nor a white man’s desires for Asian men.

Polk fell victim to gentrification from without, displaced by cosmopolitan nightlife for heterosexuals. This gay streetscape, already much diminished in 2004 from the loss of half Polk’s bars, was gone by 2012. A neighborhood famed for its activism to resist gentrification did not rally to defend its gay bars (Robinson, 1995). N’Touch’s closure left a 32%-Asian city without an Asian gay bar. By 2010 Polk had the largest concentration of dance bars for young heterosexuals, and its rowdy street scene prompted neighborhood groups to demand restrictive zoning and a liquor license moratorium (Wildermuth, 2013). A new gay bar opened in the
neighborhood in 2005 despite heavy neighborhood opposition, ostensibly over noise but perhaps over its wet jockstrap contests (Carter, 2006), but this last gay bar to open in Polk closed in 2012.

_Soma’s nonconformist hypermasculinity_

Soma (South of Market) continued its transition from light industry and single resident occupancy hotels to loft condos and new media companies, its nightlife from gay fetish bars to mixed nightlife venues (Hartman, 2002; Rubin, 1998). Unlike Polk, when our data collection began Soma’s gay bars were stylistically homogenous but not homonormative. Like Polk Gulch but unlike the Castro, Soma’s hypermasculine “leather” sexuality was a counterculture of fraternal libertinism, working-class romanticization and fetish sex that bridged social divides and created solidarity between strangers (Rubin, 1998). A shadow of its 1980s-self, 1999’s Soma still hosted sex clubs, notorious alleys for public sex, and accounted for 15% of the City’s gay bars, 6 of which reflected its historic styles. Folsom’s sidewalks were mixed, groups of heterosexual partygoers in their 20s, and gay men in their 30-50s in leather chaps and caps with smirking direct eye contact. Two men incredulously discussed a resident who threw water from their new condo onto men having sex below: “Don’t move here, fucking yuppies!” Unspoken was the likelihood that the yuppies were also gay.

Soma staff and patrons showed their commitment to the district’s countercultural erotics with styles that could not be removed like clothing. Punk haircuts, facial piercings and tattoos, and long unkempt motorcycle-gang beards precluded conventional employment for some. Folk accounts of Soma implicitly invoke working-class marginality as an explanation for its decline, yet our conversations with patrons revealed lifestyle commuters adopting the style to signal affiliation with radical sexuality: the PhD in coveralls and work boots, the Stanford graduate
with a literary tattoo, the shirtless investment banker with pungent body odor. Only in Soma or Polk would such men rub elbows—or more—with actual homeless men.

At the Eagle Tavern, for instance, crowded evenings frequently afforded scenes of mutual masturbation and oral sex. It sported old advertisements for motorcycles, leather bars around the world, rock music, and working-class beer brands. Its Sunday afternoons were packed with leather jackets, bulging crotches, tight Levis, high boots, bared hairy chests, and cigars. We noted, however, that much of the full-mouth kissing or prolonged hugging appeared to be affectionate greetings rather than sexual activities per se, reflecting the higher degree of public physical intimacy men had with each other in Soma compared to the Castro or Polk (also observed by Hennen, 2008).

Not all of the Soma bars fostered a visible leather aesthetic—patrons or staff at My Place rarely wore leather. Yet the participants created a scene that hewed to Soma’s aesthetic of casual sexual contact. Men stared at each other openly, a casual curiosity that seamlessly gave way to disinterest or lust—locking eyes with another man for more than two seconds provoked them to approach. Men had noticeably more conversation with strangers than in other neighborhoods. The narrow backroom lit by a single red bulb was crowded even at 8:15pm, as a man began performing fellatio on another, attracting a huddle around the duo, the impassivity of their faces belied by their shifts of position.

The nadir of Soma’s leather scene was in 2004. Two of the district’s leather bars closed, while one of the oldest became a shared venue for mostly heterosexual events. Public sex was curtailed in all Soma bars in 2003 by a joint crackdown by the Department of Public Heath, Police Department, and state Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC). This marked the extinction of one of the ethics of Soma sociality. With public sex confined to private clubs and sporadic
parties after 2004, the gay passersby increasingly reflected a cosmopolitan aesthetic and men in leather chaps walked directly into one bar rather than strolling among them.

My Place was shuttered in 2003 by the ABC, replaced by the homonormative Cip Lounge in 2005, whose website described it as a “dreamworld of inventive cocktails, eclectic wines… decadent champagnes and inspiring sights and sounds.” The backroom became a stylish restroom, and a sign out front underscored the bar’s past and its new present: “Please respect our neighbors! No public urination. No sexual shenanigans. No noise. Remember: People live here.” Its message clearly communicated that homonormative people do not do these things, and those who do them are not neighbors or, implicitly, people. These rules were formally enforced by bouncers with flashlights and informally by the disruptive presence of slumming bachelorette parties.

Soma is an instructive in-between case, experiencing gentrification from without by cosmopolitan gays and straights but with a resilient nonconformist scene. By 2012 the neighborhood had rebounded as a mixed gay and straight nightlife district, including a new gay nightclub and a “white trash” themed gay bar famed for its comfort food. Two attempts to open leather bars at My Place’s address failed in six years—during my visits in 2008 and 2010 I was the only patron in leather. It became the investor-owned Driftwood in 2012, a craft cocktail bar of reclaimed wood and fireside library that encourages patrons to play their own vinyl records. As San Francisco’s gay newspaper summarized its cosmopolitan respectability, “While it’s easy to snub one’s nose at gay bar venues ‘going straight,’ Driftwood pretty much embodies the future of nightlife; a hybrid of gay and straight, just like the bar’s new owners” (Bar Tab, 2013). But only some gays can mix well with some straights.
The Castro’s metrosexual homonormativity

As the most vibrant institutional enclave of the gay rights movement, the Castro redefined what it meant to be gay by mobilizing gay voters in the 1970s (Armstrong, 2002). These first-wave Castro settlers built a protective ghetto to escape physical violence and discrimination (Levine, 1979), with a masculine style not dissimilar to Soma’s into the 1980s (Levine, 1998). It remains the iconic 24/7 gay village celebrated by creative-cities promoters, packed with juice bars, coffee shops, bars, boutiques and clothing stores. In 1999 its 19 bars represented a third of the city’s total population and its largest concentration. From 2004 onwards it has dominated, with more than half the city’s gay bars.

In 1999 as in 2012, its sidewalks were thronged with tourists and “bridge and tunnel” visitors, clutches of under-21 youths conversing on stoops or on the street. Many bars reflected a self-conscious iconic minimalism in their names and décor: The Café, Mecca, and Home all featured clean lines and strategic lighting. The ambiguous “I’m going to The Café” distinguished insiders from outsiders. Moby Dick had an exuberantly intoxicated crowd in designer denim and sporty retro t-shirts, while in the cavernous Midnight Sun clean-cut men wearing khakis and polo shirts sipped cocktails in front of TV screens.

Castro patrons exemplified the “metrosexual” look also trendy among stylish, fastidious heterosexual men. Clothes were stylishly new, hair and eyebrows were well-groomed, and colognes were frequently worn. Compared to Polk and Soma there were more glances than talking among strangers, and more talking than touching. Castro nightlife-goers disdained public sex as undisciplined or reckless, but in 1999 there was still cruising for sex in the nearby Collingwood Park after 2am—sex that took place indoors in nearby apartments or, perhaps, cars.
The Café was the largest dance bar in the district. Once a lesbian bar, it had transitioned to young gay men, reflecting men’s dominance in the Castro. It was often called a “tourist bar,” a destination for gay visitors from local suburbs and foreign countries alike. Although the young men we interviewed often wore expensive designer labels, most had multiple low-wage service jobs. Groups of men huddled together, duos talking mouth to ear over the din of the music in the crowded bar. The dance floor was packed even at the early hour of 10:30pm—and there were lines to get near a bartender. When I approached a young man who had been looking at me he fled, as if my approach signaled something more than an introduction. In the Castro, men looked but avoided being touched by unwanted contact with strangers.

Although the homonormative style was dominant in 1999, the Castro was not stylistically homogenous. The Pendulum was the only bar in the city for gay African Americans, where stylistic practices included baggy jeans, RnB music, and logos of urban streetwear. The cavernous Detour had industrial design, loud repetitive music, and a reputation for heavy drug use—and was the only place we witnessed penetrative sex in any bar, gay or straight. Daddy’s was the remaining leather bar in the neighborhood, favored by men in their 50s with close-cropped grey hair, tight blue jeans and black leather vests. The Edge’s patrons were edgy only compared to its neighbors: patrons’ leather jackets, dress shoes and gelled hair were a far cry from the motorcycle jackets and shaved heads of Soma. Yet the bar played rock music and featured an enormous papier-mâché penis above the bar, rippling lights emitting from its tip.

By 2004, the Castro expanded down Market Street (see Figure 2) and all of the nonconformist bars had either been replaced by homonormative ones or had diluted their style. These new bars attracted increased pedestrian traffic with their contemporary furniture and gastronomy, attracting a well-dressed mixed gay and straight audience for drinks and meals.
Cementing these Upper Market bars to the Castro in 2002 were two new bar/restaurants and the new Gay and Lesbian Community Center. Even the organization founded by Harvey Milk that first named the neighborhood “the Castro,” changed its name to “Merchants of Upper Market and the Castro.” The collapse of the Castro’s leatherman heritage was complete with the renovation of Daddy’s into sleek 440; the closure of Leather Image, a combination barbershop and fetish gear store; and the ABC’s shuttering of the sex bar Detour. The Edge transitioned toward the homonormative aesthetics, replacing its rock music and giant ejaculating penis with clean black walls and electronic dance music. Though the patrons were more bearish than other bars, they were otherwise indistinguishable from other Castro patrons in their comportment and clothing. The early-morning public cruising for sex at nearby Collingwood Park waned as adjacent buildings became condos. Signs in 2008 promoted a new same-sex wedding chapel, while subway ads for an internet dating service promoted “getting real” about “long term relationships.”

Between 1999 and 2012, the Castro underwent a geographic expansion and stylistic homogenization, dominating San Francisco gay life quantitatively and qualitatively. Given Soma’s limited successes, it is unclear whether Polk’s failure was compositional (poorer gays without resources were displaced), cultural (a generational shift away from its stylistic practices), or a combination of both. It seems clear that Castro’s success was in no small part due to its broad cultural appeal to regional gay lifestyle commuters, national and foreign gay pilgrims, and metropolitan heterosexuals. Limited folk conceptions of “gentrification,” however, marginalized nonconformist gay scenes in community discussions.

**Resisting Homonormativity**
“San Francisco is considered by erotic tourists to be one of the most prudish cities in the world. Unlike other civic dens of iniquity, San Francisco has no gay bathhouses, no sleazy back rooms in bars…and a dwindling amount of mischief in the bushes” – San Francisco Guardian, 2006

Changes in the vitality and character of San Francisco’s bar districts did not go unnoticed, as the epigram above attests. An important indicator of homonormativity, defined by its “demobilized gay constituency,” is resistance. These included unsuccessful protests over the closure of the backroom bars in Soma (2003), protests over the closure of the Pendulum and a boycott of the owner’s other Castro bar (2005-2006), divisive debates about the gentrification of gay neighborhoods that ignored gay working class and men of color (2006-2007), and the successful defense of two Soma leather bars through the zoning and permitting process (2011-2013). The class-inflected erotics of gay style explain how these debates were resolved.

Charges of racism erupted when the owner of Badlands, a Castro dance bar, purchased and closed the neighboring Pendulum in 2003, leaving Northern California without a bar for African American men and their admirers. An investigation by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission found the owner had referred to African Americans as “non-Badlands customers,” discriminating against them in hiring, dress-code enforcement, and in requesting multiple forms of identification for entry.

Social class presentation was never invoked in public discussions, but helps explain why some African Americans and not others experienced problems. Black men with dreadlocks, in groups, and wearing Afro-centric or urban streetwear experienced trouble, while metrosexual men of color who defended the owner did not. The “no bag” rule was more enforced against backpacks than laptop cases, as I myself experienced in 2002 and 2008, which excluded youths.
This implicit bias was also evident in the neighborhood’s successes in fending off a homeless shelter for queer youth (see Reck, 2009). When the Pendulum space reopened, it was playing pop music to a crowd devoid of African Americans.

By the time Polk Street’s “death” was announced (Plaster, 2007), all but four of its gay bars were dark and the gay streetscape gone. Only the protest group Gay Shame insisted there was a connection between mainstream gay identity, race and class discrimination, and gentrification in all three districts (see Sycamore, 2004). Spokesperson Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore described its inspiration from the radical politics of the ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power): “misogyny, racism, classism and homophobia: it was all tied together” (Sycamore, 2011). Its actions inspired academics as well (e.g. Halperin and Traub, 2010).

In 2003, Gay Shame protested the closure of My Place by pasting wordy editorials around Soma entitled “Gay Shame Supports Sex in All Bars.” They framed the closures in martial terms: “In a city renowned for a teeming [sic] gay sexual underworld, public sex and queer visibility are under attack. Gentrification has virtually ended cruising in South of Market alleys, and Polk Street gay bars are being replaced by hip, upscale straight bars” (Gay Shame, 2003). Its flyers in Polk mapped its shift “from trannies, hustlers and queers… to hipsters, yuppies and trend seekers” (ibid.), and it crashed a Castro street festival with a protest action entitled “KKKutest in the Kastro.” Gay Shame’s radical rhetoric against the “violence of assimilation” went unheeded (Sycamore, 2004: 4), however, and they were the only group to draw attention to Polk’s plight.

The travails of two of the last old-school Soma bars reveal the perils and possibilities of SF’s nightlife regulations. While one person can slow a bar opening, the city’s inclusive permitting process also can save institutions through community mobilization. The Eagle closed
in 2011 due to a 20% rent increase, but gay community mobilization prevented the owner from opening a non-gay bar, transferring its liquor license off-site, or selling the property to condo developers, through petitions that were successful in part because of its role as a major site of charity fundraisers for gay and AIDS organizations (Brogan, 2012). Earlier, Hole in the Wall lost its lease and nearly closed when a neighbor filed multiple petitions to block its one-block move, claiming, “this neighborhood has been moving away from its sexual outlaw [demilitarized zone] rep[utation]” (Bajko, 2008). These actions delayed the move for almost a year, but sympathetic agents in the Entertainment Commission and the Board of Supervisors helped smooth its reopening. Thus two of Soma’s three remaining leather bars survived with help from a mobilized constituency, albeit one that was quiet over the removal of public sex. The new constellation of bars and club venues remade Soma along the lines of the old Polk, a heterogeneous streetscape, albeit one in which leather style or same-sex desires played only small parts.

Debates about gentrification raged in the Castro over chain retail stores and perceptions of an influx of heterosexuals. As the moderator of a symposium on the future of gay neighborhoods summarized, “with gay gentrification of course one of the great ironies is that now we are seeing this desirable location of the Castro, becoming a place that is desirable for a much broader group of people as well, potentially imperiling what we are doing” (GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, 2006: Nov. 28). The open meetings hardly addressed the other gay enclaves: Polk was mentioned four times and Soma once to the Castro’s 302. One panelist contrasted “the Castro’s fading historical role in terms of social oppression and stigmas” with current concerns: “affluent gay professionals now talk about property rights, safety and stability.” Perhaps because of the district’s recent annexation of upper market street, property
owners feared instability, conflating the dilution of the Castro’s gay character (homonormatizing gentrification from within) with the displacement that results from gentrification from without.

**Conclusion**

“Homo now stands more for homogenous than any type of sexuality” (Sycamore, 2004: 4).

Reductionist understandings of gay neighborhoods have obscured their diverse stylistic practices and relationships to urban revitalization. All gay bars, streetscapes or neighborhoods do not succeed for the same reasons or fall victim to the same processes. San Francisco’s nightlife of “respectable gays” thrived, gentrifying the Castro from within as shown by its annexation of Upper Market and pervading other gay neighborhoods. Soma showed that nonconformist venues with broad appeal to gay lifestyle commuters prompted mobilizations to preserve them—but only after their nonconformism had waned. Polk fell victim to gentrification from without, with only one radical group defending its dissident patrons and their practices, as an emerging heterosexual nightlife district displaced them.

I have invoked queer theorists’ homonormative critique to describe the convergence upon a particular style of gay placemaking that has displaced alternatives. By observing the erotics of gay styles and their geographic deployment, I have linked individual homonormative performances to the streetscapes and bars where their institutionalization is visible. The contrast between Polk’s failure, Castro’s vitality, and Soma’s limited successes attests to the importance of the interaction between placemaking styles and cosmopolitan tastes, not (merely) social class presentation or urban creativity. Gay Shame did protest homonormativity and promote nonconformist “rights to the city” (Prior et al., 2012), but its failures led its most vocal leader to
leave SF (Sycamore, 2011). By adding to the cautions that nightlife economies can come at the
cost of racial segregation (Talbot, 2004) and homogenization (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002;
Prior et al., 2012; Zukin, 1998), this study suggests that queer theorists and urbanists have much
to learn from each other when theorizing the standardization of contemporary urban nightlife.

The homonormative cultural shift says as much about mainstream culture as it does about
gays. The convergence between mainstream acceptance of gays and gay cosmopolitanism has
opened “post-gay” possibilities for the privileged (Ghaziani, 2010; Nash, 2013), at the cost of
further isolating sexual dissidents, the poor, and racial minorities (Collins, 2004; Hennen, 2008;
Hubbard et al., 2008; Prior et al., 2012). The gay lifestyle commuter’s spatial capital gives him
access to ever more nightlife scenes, perhaps at the expense of any particular attachment to one.
His “liberation” from community (Kelly et al., 2014) may come at the expense of “lost” gay
places that served less-privileged gays, paralleling the collapse of community institutions in
African American neighborhoods after the suburbanization of the black upper-middle class (e.g.
Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). If institutionalized streetscapes that foster serendipitous erotic
possibilities are important, as Gay Shame argued, then websites and monthly parties in shared
venues cannot replace 24/7 establishments, especially for those gays without the capital to travel
comfortably in cosmopolitan circles.

The shift away from gay placemaking and toward the temporary performance of
privatized gay identities in shared spaces means that the streetscapes of gay enclaves may no
longer serve as sites of subcultural socialization. Further research must not assume that this
privatization was inevitable, but assess the value that internet publics and shared venues have,
not just for their users but for nonconformists, the poor, and racial minorities. Though folk
accounts blamed the Internet for the collapse of cruising for sex in public or gay bars, it could
just as easily have socialized newcomers, just as it currently publicizes homonormative critiques. After all, gay enclave residence is not necessary for strong perceptions of the gay community although socializing with other gays is (Kelly et al., 2014). What has been gained, perhaps, is a stronger unity of purpose among the cosmopolitan mainstream as reflected in their command of city nightlife and support for gay marriage. Lost were the priceless nonconformist places when the “new homonormativity” took place.
References


Figure 1: San Francisco Gay Bar Distributions

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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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Figure 2: San Francisco Gay Bars, 1999 and 2012