The Gay Commute

On the Development of Queer Community and Identity in the Windsor-Detroit Borderlands

1945-1980

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The landscape of the Windsor-Detroit borderland is especially well-suited for exploring the reciprocal development of queer community and identity. Historical scholarship has revealed how queer individuals have manoeuvred metropolitan space and explored their own complex and dynamic identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Within the urban area of post-war Detroit, threat of exposure and possible arrest affected the everyday lives of gay people, yet they found places to meet in and around a downtown cluster of predominantly white bars and in separate gay locations in black neighborhoods. As gay sites, the urban bars exerted a pull that also extended to people in the suburbs who desired homosexual contact. This pull extended across the international border to Windsor, where a dearth of queer-friendly spaces drove gay Windsorites to the downtown bars and bathhouses of Detroit. What is here referred to as “the gay commute” was a defining characteristic of the lived experiences of gay residents in the Windsor-Detroit borderlands through the latter decades of the twentieth century. This phenomenon can be understood as the movement of queer individuals from locations that are deemed unaccommodating or hostile to queer gender and sexual identities to spaces that are accessible and amenable to lived queer sexual and social lifestyles and experiences. Where societal persecution resulted in the repression of gay identities and lifestyles, queer individuals travelled to locations where they could engage in queer social, cultural, and sexual interaction with anonymity and security.

This project will explore the extent and characteristics of the gay commute, as it manifests in the post-war Windsor-Detroit borderlands, and uncover its influence on the formation of queer identity and community. Historians of gay Detroit, such as Timothy Retzloff and Rochella Thorpe have revealed how automobiles served as a means of mobility for the white, suburban, middle-class gay population, allowing them to participate in the downtown gay
bar scene.¹ For African-American Detroiters, segregation and the inaccessibility of similar gay-friendly spaces forced individuals to the periphery where suburban houses were used as semi-private meeting places for the black gay community. As exemplified by in the work of Holly Karibo, the border proved impermeable to African-Americans undertaking the same commute for leisure purposes as their white counterparts. The unwelcoming environment of segregated establishments on both sides of the Detroit River, as well as hostility met by individuals of colour at the border crossing provided little incentive for African-Americans to commute across the border for leisure. However, primary sources including publications by gay activist organisations based in Windsor, and testimony by gay Windsorites living through the 1970s, reveal the Detroit gay bar scene as a significant locus for white male liaison of queer individuals commuting from Windsor. These sources reveal how the proximity of the larger, more developed gay bar scene in Detroit hindered the establishment of a similar scene in Windsor as it provided a more enticing array of locales for socialisation. The development of the gay community in post-war Windsor-Detroit borderlands occurred largely as a result of a commute to spaces that were accessible, amenable, and exclusive to queer sexual and gender identities, while remaining segregated in accordance to identities of race.

**Gay Detroit in Post-War North America**

Windsor-Detroit has exhibited historical trends of suburban growth, urban decline, and racial segregation that occurred in much of the United States and Canada during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The hetero-normative social landscape of post-war North

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America, in which the sexual identities of countless gay, lesbian, and bisexual people was characterised by threat of exposure, persecution, and possible arrest, necessitated privacy and exclusivity in the spaces that were used for gay liaison. Timothy Retzloff is the foremost authority on the history and development of LGBT Detroit. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 1945-1985*, Retzloff argues that gay property ownership, encouraged by the new availability of affordable real-estate, was an engine of gay growth in the urban centre of post-war Detroit, while new expressways and the baby boom similarly fuelled an increase in the number, variety, and accessibility of downtown bars to gay suburban commuters. He describes how white men, who were often married, pursued gay life in bars and in the streets around bars, miles from their homes. Compared to some two thousand taverns throughout the city, and many more outside Detroit where heterosexuals met in the decades after World War II, gay people could claim approximately two dozen bars restricted to certain areas. Except in their homes, and sometimes not even then, those living gay individuals had to be mindful of their manner and be ever watchful for the police. From 1945 to 1965, over ten thousand men and women found themselves in Detroit police custody for a first offence of accosting and soliciting gay liaison. Policing affected real lives as those who found themselves before a judge were known to live locally. Those arrested typically pled guilty and faced a fine as well as probation, often with the stipulation that they seek psychiatric treatment.

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2 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 27.
3 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 47.
4 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 27.
7 Ibid.
who were caught by the police endured incarceration for up to three months. Even for those who received only probation, the consequences could range from harsh public stigma, to the loss of their jobs, and the breakup of their marriages. In Windsor between 1945 and 1946, a brutal “sex killer” targeted homosexuals and sparked a moral panic that stoked public fear of gay men, forcing them further underground. Homosexual individuals often fled these forms of persecution and oppression by keeping their sexual identities and encounters private and secretive.

It is against this narrative of fear and paranoia within a white hetero-normative society that the creation and negotiation of private and semi-private gay-exclusive spaces must be understood. The need for anonymity in discreet locations far from where they lived forced the creation of spaces that were friendly to queer sexual and gender identities. Often these spaces took the form of public establishments such as bars which, to varying degrees, accommodated the needs of gay, bisexual, and lesbian patrons for gay-exclusivity and privacy from hetero-normative society. Alternatively, these spaces could be more improvisational as semi-private spaces such as public parks, washrooms, bus stations, and cars were sites for impromptu sexual encounters, if not rumored locations for gay liaison known to the underground gay community and the police vice squad. Private homes and cars allowed individuals to congregate in a more exclusive environment in which the privacy of an encounter could be controlled. Whether they were improvised or not, it is the process of negotiating spaces with varying degrees of gay-

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8 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 50.
9 Ibid., 49.
12 Ibid., 26.
13 Ibid., 55.
exclusivity and privacy against the overarching threat of persecution and arrest that characterised the lives of gay residents of Detroit in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the post-war period, the politics of gay commuting took place within a broader context of a new postwar surge in suburban development, which in the greater Detroit area helped to consolidate a separation between heterosexual and homosexual, and shaped gay and lesbian life in distinct ways. In particular, Retzloff maintains that “suburbanisation altered the placement of gay spaces, it affected the residential patterns of homosexuals who pursued same-sex desire, and it influenced the queer sexual commute from home to identifiably gay social and sexual locales.”14 Lacking any form of queer friendly spaces, the Detroit suburbs were unaccommodating to a gay social and sexual lifestyle since close knit and sparsely populated suburban communities made the anonymity required for a reclusive gay space nearly impossible. As an alternative, the automobile served as a means of conveyance and a site for sex in itself. Those travelling to gay sites in the city engaged in a queer sexual commute that reflected the divergent distances and patterns of the everyday gay sexual and social quest. For residents of America’s automotive capital, cars were the primary means by which the gay commute was manifest in post-war Detroit. The role of the automobile in gay life is of particular interest to Retzloff as he illustrates how the increased mobility that was afforded to gay individuals by cars allowed them access to a wider gay community in downtown bars.15 In Cars and Bars: Assembling Gay Men in Postwar Flint Michigan, Retzloff asserts that, “cars not only allowed gay men and women to congregate in downtown bars, but also became an additional site for

15 Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 228.
many men to act on homosexual desires. The car granted access to gay spaces both local and
distant, and helped shape stationary gay spaces as they evolved during the 1960s.”¹⁶ Demand for
gay-friendly spaces in the downtown, where white gay men could congregate far from their
suburban homes and families, was a major factor in the development and growth of Detroit’s
urban gay bar district.¹⁷ Since cars were primarily accessible only to white middle-class gay men,
their commute to the urban bar district in Detroit from the suburban periphery was a major force
in constructing the city’s gay sub-culture in their image. As a result of this gay commute, gay
communities in the downtown core were often comprised of individuals who resided in the
suburbs.

Largely as a result of individuals commuting from the suburbs Detroit oversaw growth in
the urban gay bar scene which would precipitate the development of distinctive gay sub-cultures
throughout the twentieth century. According to Retzloff, a fascination with gay culture and
female impersonation among Detroiters began in the latter half of the 1930s, and peaked in the
mid 1970s with performances occurring so frequently that, “the number of venues was testament
to the raging popularity of men transgressing gender for nightclub audiences.”¹⁸ In addition to
nightclubs that booked female impersonators, several bars in Detroit prior to and after the war
attracted quasi-gay clientele and a mixture of heterosexual patrons with a stage show as the draw.
Bars like the Cadillac Bar on Park Avenue, the 509 Club on Woodward Avenue, and the
Sweetheart Bar at 3928 Third Street were located within and away from the heart of the

¹⁶ Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 241.
¹⁷ Ibid., 243.
¹⁸ Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 54.
downtown commercial district.\textsuperscript{19} Though the patronage of these bars comprised a relatively diverse array of sexual and gender performance such that Detroit had never seen before, the gay commute was made by white middle-class gay men to an overwhelming degree and thus the demographic of this emerging gay bar culture was largely exclusive to them. Particularly, in the post-war period, Detroit’s gay bars coalesced in the character of the spaces and their patronage to exclude those who did not suit this majority. Lesbians, bisexual, and transsexual individuals, as well as people of colour, developed a commute of their own in search of spaces that were amenable to their particular identities of race, class, sexuality, and gender.

In \textit{The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965}, Roey Thorpe illustrates the changing dynamic of lesbian bars in the Detroit metropolitan area.\textsuperscript{20} Paradoxically, Thorpe observes a change in the visibility of the lesbian bar scene at a time when feminist movements were making lesbians more visible, and the gay-male bar scene as well as bars of mixed gay and lesbian clientele were increasingly prominent. She argues that this changing dynamic, “reveals a complicated matrix of gender and class that caused lesbian bars to change their physical characteristics in order to respond to political and social oppression.”\textsuperscript{21} Thorpe observes how for white middle-class lesbians, the desire to be in the company of other lesbians was countered, and often outweighed, by the risk of public exposure. Consequently, many of the bars that she describes attempted to provide varying degrees of anonymity and privacy to their gay clientele by sub-dividing the bar into homosexual and heterosexual exclusive spaces.\textsuperscript{22} For example, Thorpe illustrates how swinging double doors inside the Sweetheart divided the front section of

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\textsuperscript{19} Retzloff, \textit{City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit}, 55.
\textsuperscript{20} Thorpe, \textit{The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit}, 165-182.
\textsuperscript{21} Thorpe, \textit{The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit}, 165.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 166.
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the bar, where a heterosexual neighbourhood crowd drank, from the back section of the bar, where a lesbian and gay mix gathered and where gay men and lesbians could dance with each other.\textsuperscript{23} While other bars became more institutionalised as sites for lesbians to meet, socialise, and court one another, lesbian patrons increasingly had to adhere to a changing set of criteria for what constituted a lesbian-positive space becoming more exclusive to members of the gay community and further reinforcing the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual.\textsuperscript{24}

Meanwhile, gay life for African Americans in the twentieth century often took a distinctive form and expression, sometimes at a variance with white gay life. In Detroit, as in other cities, African Americans had far different options for socialising than lesbian and gay whites. Retzloff relates how, “they were largely unwelcome at the white working-class gay bars around Farmer St. and Bates during the 1940s and 1950s, although a few were determined to patronize them nonetheless.”\textsuperscript{25} Commercial options for exclusively gay interaction among blacks were limited compared to options available to whites. While white gay bars were relatively plentiful, black gay communities lacked the financial resources to maintain the number of bars that gay whites could. Forms of institutionalised racism such as segregation further compounded the problem. Faced with limited financial resources as well as segregation and racism from homosexual communities and hetero-normative society alike, the African American gay community was forced to establish an alternative outside of the white gay bar scene. In \textit{A House Where Queers Go: African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit 1940-1975}, Rochella Thorpe discusses how the African American lesbians of mid-century Detroit experienced intense racism

\textsuperscript{23} Retzloff, \textit{City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit}, 168.
\textsuperscript{24} Thorpe, \textit{The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit}, 179.
\textsuperscript{25} Retzloff, \textit{City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit}, 76.
from within the lesbian community and were subsequently relegated to semi-private rent parties rather than the relatively public white-lesbian bar scene. She argues that the racialized and class oriented lesbian bar scene magnified growing differences among white lesbians and those of colour in Detroit during the post-war period. As an alternative to the bar scene, rent parties were often a place where sexuality was expressed more freely than in bars, clubs, or dance halls. Like the white suburban homosexuals who commuted to the gay-friendly spaces of the urban core, queer African American individuals embarked on their own commute to neighbourhood houses in the suburban periphery where black homosexuals could create a space for themselves.

The patterns of migration and the establishment of gay-friendly spaces which manifested in post war Detroit took place against a broader context of ethic and class-based segregation within gay communities throughout North America. Communities of queer individuals that had been growing since the early twentieth century in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit had developed in accordance with a long history of ethno-cultural and economic diversity. Historians of gay culture have identified how multiple distinct sexual and gender identities arose in parallel among queer communities residing within urban environments. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, historian George Chauncey embarks on an analysis of the gay community in New York City throughout the half century before the second world war by charting its geography, culture, and politics. As Chauncey explains, prohibition precipitated the creation of semi-private spaces such as illegal speakeasies and bars where the so-called “subversive” and “deviant” activity of homosexuals

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could play out undisturbed by police and societal persecution and oppression.\textsuperscript{29} Conversely, the subsequent repeal of prohibition engendered new surveillance of gay bars in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{30} As a result, Chauncey illustrates the development of multiple gay sub-cultures developing in parallel throughout New York in various neighbourhood bars and in accordance with identities of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Chauncey identifies various distinct gay bar districts within the city which were each patronised by individuals who maintained similar sexual and gender identities and correlated ethnic and class backgrounds. Notably, establishments within the neighbourhood known as the Bowery were home to predominantly ethnic, working-class "fairs" who, "assumed the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women."\textsuperscript{31} Chauncey illustrates how the fairs of the Bowery’s gay bar district were a highly visible part of the gay community as effeminacy was one of the few means they had to identify themselves to each other.\textsuperscript{32} Though other gay men sought to shape their gender and sexual identities in different ways, "the prominence of the Bowery fairs and their consistency with the gender ideology of the turn of the century meant their image influenced the manner in which all homosexually active men understood their behaviour."\textsuperscript{33} The nature of the fairy allowed their intermediate gender and sexual identity to become symbolic of the broader gay community, not only to the majority of straight people outside of that community, but also among homosexuals within it. The archetypal fairy is incompatible with the notion of a private and secretive gay lifestyle since their gender identity necessitates an externally visible flamboyancy. This visibility, and corresponding vulnerability, necessitated the creation of gay-exclusive spaces in the form of the

\textsuperscript{29} Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York}, 335-342.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York}, 56.
\textsuperscript{33} Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York}, 34.
Bowery’s bar district which provided locations where identities of sex and gender could play out in an environment that is safe from hostile hetero-normative society.

While the sub-culture of the fairy developed in the Bowery, other distinctive gay communities formed in other New York bars, including the queer gay men of Greenwich Village and Times Square. Queer men sought to distinguish themselves from the effeminate identity of the fairy which they found undesirable and even occasionally repulsive. Queers desired to portray a more masculine gender identity as a way of gaining widespread respectability and acceptance within society. Chauncey explains that whereas, "the fairy's desire for men was thought to follow inevitably from their gender persona, queers maintained that their desire for men revealed only their sexuality (their homosexuality), a distant domain of personality independent of gender." Additionally, communities of queer men remained relatively segregated from those of the fairies since they arose in bars that were exclusive to white, middle-class neighbourhoods throughout the city. Chauncey maintains that whereas, "the fairy as a cultural "type" was rooted in the working class culture of the Bowery, the waterfront, and parts of Harlem, the "queer" was rooted in the middle-class culture of the Village and the prosperous sections of Harlem and Times Square." In other words, common geography, ethnicity, and class identity were the primary factors contributing to the parallel development of distinguished gay bar districts and their corresponding sub-cultures in New York. These communities developed in accordance with the class and ethnic identities that were characteristic of their boarder communities.

34 Chauncey, Gay New York, 100.
36 Chauncey, Gay New York, 100.
37 Ibid.
38 Chauncey, Gay New York, 106.
These patterns of development are not exclusive to New York as the importance of gay bars to the emergence of urban gay sub-cultures throughout various metropolitan centres of the United States has been well documented. In *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall*, St Sukie De La Croix illustrates the history of the LGBT community in Chicago. Like Chauncey, he argues that the gay-sub-culture in Chicago has been predominantly relegated to private social spaces, particularly in the gay bar scene on the south side of the city. De La Croix relates how, in the mid 1950s, the epicenter of Chicago’s gay nightlife “was at Clark Street and Diversey Avenue and revolved around several bars, including the mixed gay and straight Orange Cockatoo, the Century, and a lesbian bar called Ruthies.”

De La Croix relates how Chicago’s burgeoning drag scene was well received by clientele of mixed sexuality and gender at all three bars. For a time, the public spectacle of drag performances served as a unifying force within the gay community as he maintains that, "in the gay cultural space the balls created, gay men could acknowledge their affinity, however contested, with lesbians in a culture in which all homosexuals were stigmatised." Research undertaken by historian Allen Drexel illustrates how drag performances were also a form of gay participation and performance within the African-American community on Chicago’s south side during the 1930s and 1940s. In a form of racial intermixing that was relatively rare and frowned upon within hetero-normative culture, otherwise disparate and segregated gay communities came together in instances where they had the opportunity to make themselves and

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39 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 120-282.  
40 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 242.  
41 Ibid.  
42 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 243.  
43 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 298.  
their culture visible to the rest of society. In solidarity for their "common queerness" attendance at the drag balls aided in developing a broad social network and a sense of community among homosexuals through congregation in public spaces and participation in dramatic cultural displays. Chauncey makes similar observations about the prevalence of drag performances at New York bars. By the 1920s the culture of the prohibition era had allowed the drag balls to grow immensely in popularity as they were frequented by large numbers of people from all corners of society including New York's social elite.45 Like Chauncey, De la Croix’s work complicates long-standing assumptions about the formation of LGBT identities, communities, and politics in the United States. Gay bars served as important spaces for the formation of individual gender and sexual identities as well as broader gay sub-cultures and communities.

Like the drag balls of Chicago’s south side, or the fairy bars of the Bowery in New York, this practice was rooted in the cultural traditions and a consequence of the economic status of the broader black gay community. In A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem, Eric Garber describes the importance of these private spaces to the black lesbian and gay sub-culture in New York City.46 Garber points out that “private parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy.”47 He claims that in the “relatively tolerant” climate of African-American jazz culture, “black lesbians and gay men were able to build a thriving community within existing African-American institutions and traditions.”48 Gay and lesbian individuals developed communities and sub-cultures as extensions of their pre-existing social, economic, and cultural practices. As illustrated in the work of George Chauncey and St. Sukie de la Croix, identities of race and class were supplanted over the

45 Chauncey, Gay New York, 294.
46 Garber, A Spectacle In Colour, 318-331.
47 Ibid., 321.
48 Garber, A Spectacle In Colour, 321.
developing institutions and practices of everyday gay life. Parallel gay institutions and practices developed relative to common identities of race and class, and included disparate sets of queer bars, rent parties, and drag performances.

It is important to note, however, that the institutions and practices of Detroit’s African-American gay community were developed in response to and despite the broader white-centred gay sub-culture. As exemplified in Thorpe’s analysis, African American lesbians organised and participated in gay-exclusive rent parties as an alternative to the emerging white-centred gay bars. In a response that is similar to the way in which the white gay community adapted Detroit bars as spaces that were removed from hostile hetero-normative culture, the African American gay community adapted existing social institutions by commuting to their own improvised spaces in order to resist racial prejudice and homophobic reactions. Whereas most historical writing about gay social life has focused on the importance of bar culture in shaping working-class lesbian communities, Thorpe’s work looks beyond bar culture to the exclusive suburban spaces that were created by lesbians of colour for socialisation and sexual liaison. By looking at how specific race and class-based cultural and societal traditions shaped the social needs of homosexuals of colour, Thorpe reveals how the black gay community was relegated to a separate stratum of gay-exclusive semi-private space through a similar process of gay commuting.

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50 Thorpe, *African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit*, 44.
51 Ibid., 43.
Gay Life in Post-War Windsor

Across the border, Windsor residents also exhibited their own forms of transgressive sexual and social behaviours. In *Sin City North: Sex, Drugs, and Citizenship in the Detroit-Windsor Borderland*, Holly Karibo explores the emergence of a sex tourism industry in Windsor through the post-war period, arguing that it developed, “as a white, working-class phenomenon, and that its integration into the broader vice economy was facilitated by the proliferation of legal bars and ‘blind pigs,’ hotels, gambling dens, cab drivers, and policemen willing to ignore the trade.”52 Straight, working-class men who travelled to Windsor in search of manufacturing jobs also engaged en masse in an illicit sex trade that comprised a substantial portion of Windsor’s post-war economy. Karibo maintains that more than half of the male sex tourists were from Detroit and its surrounding suburbs, and their migration was facilitated by the increased mobility afforded by automobiles.53 By the mid-1950s, the number of vehicles entering Windsor at the tunnel and bridge for any given year exceeded two and a half million, making it the busiest crossing point between the two countries. Beginning in 1943, the number of American sex tourists traveling to Windsor increased considerably. By 1946 fifty percent of the men arrested under charges of soliciting prostitution were Americans from Detroit and its surrounding suburbs, compared to the mere 23 percent who were Windsor residents.54 Others travelled from as far as New York, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas, and California. During the post-war period Windsor served as a destination of commuting individuals who were in search of private spaces where certain expressions of sexuality could be undertaken in private.

53 Karibo, *Detroit's Border Brothel*, 367.
54 Karibo, *Sin City North*, 367.
Additionally, the vast majority of those individuals who were arrested on prostitution charges between 1945 and 1960 were listed as “white,” with the exception of only three individuals.\(^{55}\) Considering that Detroit’s African American population more than tripled during this period, making up more than 30 percent of the population, crossing the border clearly enabled white men to traverse sexual, moral, and legal boundaries without offering men of colour the same opportunity. Cross border migration was sharply segregated affording white male tourists the comforts of their privilege wherein they could cross the border and escape the overt challenges of a racially charged Detroit. Karibo likens this migration to a form of “white flight” as she observes how Detroit’s own vice districts were segregated by race, “with Hastings Street serving the late-night desires of black Detroiters, and Cass Corridor catering to the wiles of low-income white residents.”\(^{56}\) Though this sex trade attracted men from a broad range of locales, segregation of bars on both sides of the border hindered the freedom of movement of African American men across the border for leisure purposes. In 1969, the Detroit Urban League reported that white Detroiters visited Canada almost twice as frequently as their black counterparts.\(^{57}\) When black residents did cross the national line, they often faced an additional level of discrimination that made these trips increasingly difficult.\(^{58}\) Karibo maintains that the combination of segregation in Windsor establishments and the heightened difficulty associated with a discriminatory border crossing provided little reason for black residents of Detroit to travel across the river.

Karibo’s work reveals a straight white male sexual liaison that bears a striking resemblance to the gay commute. While her work omits any mention of individuals who

\(^{55}\) Karibo, *Sin City North*, 367.
\(^{56}\) Karibo, *Detroit’s Border Brothel*, 368.
\(^{57}\) Karibo, *Sin City North*, 66.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
transgressed the sexual and gender norms of the day, she nonetheless highlights the significance of travel to the practice of sex tourism as well as its racially segregated nature. She maintains that the illicit sex trade, “marketed the appeal of crossing into a new space and of experiencing something one might not have been able to access in their hometowns.” Though it shares these qualities with the activities of queer individuals, it is important to point out that the gay commute embodied more than just a search for sexual liaison and may have differed, at least partially, from the sex tourism of post-war Windsor-Detroit. Queer individuals travelled to spaces that were amenable to the lived experiences of gay social interaction and culture, in addition to sexual gratification. Since the borderlands’ illicit sex trade accommodated the diverse sexual needs of individuals seeking a variety of sexual experiences, Karibo asserts that it, “also openly challenged the conception that heterosexual, monogamous marriage was the only legitimate form of sexual expression in the post-war years.” As all queer identities embody more than just a sexual preference, so too does the gay commute exhibit a desire and search for social, cultural, and emotional enrichment and companionship. This distinction highlights the importance of gay bar culture to the development of queer identity and community. Karibo’s work lends to the broader understanding that individuals of all sexual and gender orientations undertook a commute in search of those places and people that were most suited to their preferred identity and lifestyle. Her documentation of the illicit sex trade in the post-war Windsor-Detroit borderlands provides a tempting corollary to a similar commute of queer individuals across the border. At the same time, Karibo also crucially reveals how the border remained impermeable to people of colour who sought the same social and sexual interactions as their white counterparts.

59 Karibo, Sin City North, 68.
Primary sources authored by queer activist organisations based in Windsor through the 1970s confirm that the gay commute across the border was a relatively common phenomenon as the bars in Detroit provided queer spaces that were largely non-existent in the Windsor scene. The first active and organized voices of the LGBTQ community in Windsor trace their roots as far back as 1971 when gay pioneers Steve Lough, Jim Davies, and Harold Desmarais established the Windsor Homophile Association on the University of Windsor campus. Davies recounts how the organisation, “grew very rapidly, from three people at the first meeting, to 12 at the second, to 25 at the third, until [they] had to start finding bigger rooms.” In 1973 this association moved off-campus and into the city proper operating under the name of Windsor Gay Unity until it was disbanded in 1980. Like many activist organisations of the day, Gay Unity was vital to the development of a broader gay community in Windsor. In addition to fulfilling a queer activist mandate pursuant to various social justice and human rights related goals, the organisation also hosted events such as monthly queer dances, funded an anonymous help line for counseling and information, provided a drop in centre and safe space, curated a library consisting of queer books and periodicals, and published a monthly newsletter. The Gay Unity newsletter comprises some of the earliest and most detailed primary sources on the development of the city’s gay community. The newsletter, which was available to subscribers only, published poetry, information on locally organized dances and other events, classified ads for people looking for gay-friendly roommates, news on labour and immigration discrimination, information on the organization’s proceedings and budget, an advice column written by “Aunt

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64 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*
Fanny”, and a particularly smutty gossip column, called “Talk of the Town.” The gossip column, written with the pseudonym “Zipp Zerro,” discusses some of the more scandalous goings on between some of the locally known homosexuals, though it does not identify anyone by name. Instead Zipp Zerro will make cheeky intimations asking, “What local hairburner has become a regular at Palmer Park in murder city? – rumor has it she has done everything there except the swans – watch for feathers around the mouth and you’ll know who ‘she’ is.”

Much of the organisation’s activities and budget were centred on the queer dances which were intended to help cultivate a gay social scene in Windsor and provide funding to Gay Unity. Until the latter half of the 1970s, there was no inclusive queer-friendly space for Windsorites in the city. There were only a series of modest queer-friendly establishments including one called “The West Side” which was a straight bar frequented by lesbians who were hesitant to accept the presence of gay men in their company. The authors of the Gay Unity newsletter repeatedly lament the nearly non-existent nature of gay-friendly spaces in Windsor citing, “The West Side, Gan’s, Dieppe Park, and Vesuvio’s,” as the nearest approximations of queer-friendly spaces in the city. As in other cities across North America, the dearth of these spaces drove queer people to meet in public, an illegal practice which the newsletter specifically warns against, as it maintains that, “homosexual acts between consenting adults in private are legal, however as far as the law is concerned, a car, the bushes in the park, or a public washroom are not private spaces. Also the age of consent for homosexuals is twenty one.”

Jim Monk, a founding member of the Windsor Homophile Association, recounts how Dieppe Park was a cruising area for the

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65 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*.
68 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 6 (June 1975).
local gay population as several people were arrested there for same-sex sexual encounters. Monk recalls how Windsor police sought to solve the problem permanently and assigned an undercover officer to solicit encounters and make arrests. When Monk and other members of Windsor Gay Unity heard of the arrests they went to the media and accused the police of being homophobic and of entrapment. Says Monk, “This particular time, it actually was because the young cop was actually going up and touching people and inviting them.”70 Additionally, the encounters that were solicited by the Windsor Police officer occurred on private property, says Monk, “It was not in the park itself, but across the tracks on railway property, which had been left to grow into this wild bush, where nobody could see you. We got the Judge to agree with us that there was privacy, so there was no crime. Eventually, most of the cases were dismissed. That was a big issue.”71 Thus, during much of the early years of the gay liberation movement, Windsor’s queers continued to be driven out of public spaces throughout the city.

Windsor’s apparent lack of gay social locales drove the local gay population to seek out spaces further afield. The newsletters relate how Gay Unity made repeated attempts to attract Windsorites to their own city, “Give up going to Detroit for one night. Stay in Windsor and meet some new people, both Canadians and Americans. Remember that Americans enjoy leaving their city for a change every so often, so why not stay here are let them come to you.”72 Jim Monk recounts how he, “spent most of [his] 20s in Detroit socializing in the gay bars there, a huge gay scene.”73 He characterises Detroit’s gay community as very closeted with most people entering gay-friendly bars through alleys. Many of these bars had no doors facing the street. In Monks’ case, the Tunnel Bus served as a means of conveyance to Woodward and 8 Mile, as well as his

71 Ibid.
72 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 6 (June 1975).
73 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging. 15.
return to Windsor the next day at three o’clock in the morning. He maintains that the affordability of the tunnel bus was an economic reason why so many people in Windsor frequented gay bars in Detroit. Dick Casey, founder of one of Windsor’s first local gay bars, moved to Detroit and bought a house with his partner in the late 1970s. He states, “It wasn’t hard to cross the border in those days. As a matter of fact, I used to bring the immigration guys coffee and the Detroit Free Press in the morning. Once they got to know you, they’d just let you go ahead. They were really friendly then compared to now.” Steve Lough, another founding member of Windsor Gay Unity, also recounts how the lack of queer-friendly spaces in Windsor was an ongoing problem. Lough states, “Detroit was so close and it had a huge number of gay bars of all different kinds, and bath houses as well. There were a lot of Windsor area gay people who were straight in Windsor and gay in Detroit.” Similarly, Jim Davies, another gay community activist in Windsor, suggests that the proximity and accessibility of a far larger and more developed gay social scene in Detroit actually hampered the rapid development of a gay community in Windsor through the early 1970s. He maintains that, “the scene in Detroit was so much bigger, and so many more people from Windsor would go there, which is one of the reasons that [he] always thought we never got quite as vibrant a gay life in Windsor as they do in London, because it’s so easy for people to go to Detroit, live their gay life there, and then come back here.” Harold Desmarais, a native of Windsor and a well known activist for gay rights in Ontario, points out that the small working-class population in Windsor made coming-out a particularly public occurrence. He maintains that, “there was an element of risk involved that a lot of people were not willing to take or did not feel comfortable with accepting. No, it’s too

74 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 15.
75 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 40.
76 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 23.
77 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 46.
risky. Windsor was a particularly bad situation because why the hell should you come out as a gay person and have everyone know that you’re gay when you can just cross the bridge and go to Detroit.” Paradoxically, the pull of the Detroit gay bar scene was so strong that Windsorsites neglected establishing spaces for socialisation in their own city, while the relative ubiquity of locales in Detroit made a similar Windsor scene redundant. Windsor residents found a more extensive, diverse, and accommodating array of gay-friendly spaces in the larger metropolis across the border. Additionally, Detroit offered gay Windsorsites convenient locales that were sufficiently removed from their homes and workplaces. Detroit served as a haven for queer residents of Windsor looking for privacy and mitigation of the risk of coming out in their small working-class city.

The Gay Unity newsletter also directly lends to the contention that the Windsor gay community commuted to the Detroit gay bar scene. The gossip column reviewed more than sixteen specific Detroit locations, including bars and bathhouses, in great detail and all written in delightful camp. One account of Tods Sway Lounge explains how, “If your into tired old queens you will love it – the drinks taste like gasoline and the music, well if you like Led Zeppelin and Credence Clearwater and you do the funky chicken it’s your type of place – type of dress: plaid pants, button down collar shirt, ski jackets, and 8 inch platforms – on any Saturday night there must be at least two million dollars worth of dentures.” The column pays specific attention to those bars and baths that are frequented by Canadians, specifically mentioning the Prudential Bath on State Fair Avenue where many Windsor residents had been spotted. In general the column strongly implies a ubiquitous presence of Windsor queers at Detroit bars throughout

78 Windsor Pride, Out and Aging, 31.
79 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 9 (September 1975); Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 10 (October 1975); Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 2, no. 1 (January 1976).
80 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
the city. Says Zipp Zerro, “you would be surprised at all the hot Windsorites you bump into in Detroit bars – so your cheating yourself if you settle for the Windsor scene, which is like a dinosaur – extinct.” The purpose of the reviews was to impart knowledge of those Detroit bars that were suited to the particular racial, class, sexual, and gender characteristics of a given reader. In the course of their commute to Detroit, gay Windsorites matched their specific needs and interests with the space they found most accommodating across the river.

By 1972 the first openly gay bar, called “The Ritz,” was opened on the corner of Goyeau and Pitt Street by a local gay man by the name of Dick Casey. Casey had grown up a closeted homosexual in Windsor and spent his late teens and early twenties frequenting bars such as the 1011 in Detroit. Taking notice of the apparent lack of queer-friendly and inclusive spaces in Windsor, Casey opened The Ritz with his business partner Al Katzman whose grandfather owned the building. Shortly after opening, The Ritz saw a number of incidents caused by straight people entering the bar, harassing patrons, and throwing cinder blocks through the windows. Casey recalls how Windsor’s Chief of Police thanked him and Katzman for opening a bar geared to the queer community in Windsor, claiming that before The Ritz opened they would station three policemen in Dieppe Park, but that after the bar was established only one was required. Casey maintains that the police came to serve as a vital ally in support of the bar and were very responsive to any disturbance caused by hostile individuals. The establishment of a gay bar in Windsor provided a space for queer Windsorites to congregate within the city, however, the provision of gay-friendly space at The Ritz did siphon patronage and support from Gay Unity, and particularly its queer dances. In the Gay Unity newsletter dated October 1975 the

81 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
82 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 9 (September 1975).
organisations executive laments how the organisation has nearly disbanded since, “the last dance was in direct competition with The Ritz,” and, “the dance was a social disaster and a financial setback.” 85 At the same time The Ritz itself reportedly suffered a drop in attendance over its rising prices, as the newsletter observes, “Detroit bars make it impossible for anyone to have a monopoly on business here in Windsor.” 86 While Gay Unity and its associates clarified that they were not engaged in a campaign to discredit the only gay bar in Windsor, the general tone of the newsletter shifted towards disparaging remarks about, “the half doors on the restrooms, tables you stick to, and a dance floor even Fred and Ginger couldn’t mombo on.” 87 Despite this temporary drama, Gay Unity held monthly general meetings at The Ritz until March of 1977, and the bar was advertised in the newsletter until August 1978. 88 The chronicle of The Ritz reveals how the small and still developing gay community in a working-class Canadian town could only maintain a single exclusively gay-friendly space through the latter half of the 1970s. As the newsletter suggests, the existence of a larger and more varied bar scene across the border was a limiting factor in the establishment of queer spaces in Windsor.

**Conclusion**

The nature of the gay commute and its contribution to the developing gay community in the Windsor-Detroit borderlands reveals a cross border exchange of queer sexual and social identities and experiences. In his analysis of the post-war development of the gay community in Flint, where residents of the city undertook a journey to the wider array of proximate of locals in Detroit, Retzloff maintains that, during the immediate post-war period until the 1960s, Flint was

85 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 9 (September 1975).
86 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
87 Ibid.
able to furnish a variety of queer-friendly spaces catering to individuals traveling from across town or from other parts of the state. Eventually, widespread ownership of automobiles and the construction of Interstate 75 served to decentralise Flint’s landscape, and provided access to queer-friendly locales further afield. As suburban shopping centres, drive-in theatres, and fast food restaurants siphoned business away from the downtown, long established gay bars and other locales began to close. As the 1970s oversaw a boom in the number and variety of gay-friendly bars and bathhouses in Detroit, cities like Flint were no longer able to sustain public establishments for queer clientele.\textsuperscript{89} The experiences of queer individuals in the small, working-class city of Flint compares with another city of similar demographics and economy just south of Detroit. Perhaps to an even greater degree, Windsor also saw much of its gay clientele siphoned to its larger neighbour to the north, where queer identity could play out in greater privacy and freedom. The border enacted as the door to a closet through which the transgressive gender and sexual identities of queer individuals could not be seen. Counter-intuitively, the gay commute which enabled the blossoming queer identities of Windsorites through the post-war period also hindered the establishment of public gay institutions and spaces within their own city.

What is missing from the narrative of Windsor’s developing gay community is any indication of the presence of queer individuals of colour making the journey to either side of the Windsor-Detroit border. The vast majority of primary source material concerning this commute and the establishment of queer community organisations and bars in Windsor concern the deeds of white gay men, with only a few references to and testimonials from lesbians. The Gay Unity newsletter makes only a few token references to Windsor’s black community as a part of its mandate of inclusiveness without making mention of any queer individuals of colour. As Karibo

\textsuperscript{89} Retzloff, \textit{Cars and Bars}, 239-243.
points out, the sharply segregated nature of public establishments on both sides of the border, as well as the heightened level of discrimination towards people of colour at the crossings themselves made trips across the border far more difficult for black residents than their white counterparts in the post-war period. Without the ability to cross the border, and with a dearth of gay bars in the city, life for black queer Windsorites must have differed sharply from those of white residents and their African-American counterparts in Detroit. As a large metropolis with a substantial black population, Detroit exhibited patterns of diversity and community allowing for a range of public and private establishments and institutions that were non-existent in Windsor.

Historians have often identified homosexual bar districts as centres for burgeoning gay sub-cultures in North America. Those scholars who have focused on the history of urban gay bar culture illustrate patterns of multiple gay sub-cultures arising in parallel throughout metropolitan centres, in various neighbourhoods, and in accordance with identities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition, the development of these communities and sub-cultures is often understood relative to a dichotomy of public and private spaces in which gay life is variously relegated to private or semi-private social spheres. Metropolitan Detroit is no exception as historians of its LGBT community have explored how dimensions of race and class, as well as the dichotomy of urban and sub-urban, have influenced the public and private lives of its gay residents. Wonderful Windsor, The Motor City, and their suburban satellites, in turn, provide a rich territory for examining how queer individuals commuting from suburb and city interacted to shape gay and lesbian community and identity. Detroit’s gay history exhibits multiple distinctive sub-cultures adapting to social conditions of hetero-normativity and homophobia as well as racism and segregation. Additionally, established literature on the history of LGBT Detroit reveals a dichotomous relationship between urban semi-private spaces in the form of gay bars,
and similar gay-exclusive spaces in suburban houses. Across the border, Windsorites found amenable spaces throughout the urban areas of Detroit, as the proximity of a larger and more varied gay bar scene was a limiting factor in the establishment of similar spaces in Windsor. The lack of gay-friendly locales in Windsor, and white working-class nature of its population and culture, drove queer Windsorites to embark on a regular commute to the gay-friendly spaces of Detroit. In her analysis Karibo maintains that, “because of the fluid nature of border towns, such towns facilitate the exploration of sexual identities and their expressions to a greater degree than cities further embedded within national boundaries.”

Though white gay Windsorites sought spaces for the expression of their transgressive sexual and gender identities outside of their own city, the proximity of Detroit provided rich territory for doing so as it facilitated what is here regarded as the gay commute. For queer black residents from both cities, the freedom afforded by this new post-war mobility was significantly curtailed by institutional and social barriers imposed by a simultaneously racist and homophobic society. From the middle of the twentieth century to the emerging gay liberation movement of the 1970s, the gay sub-culture of the Windsor-Detroit borderlands developed where the urban landscape afforded its white gay residents on both sides of the river sexual anonymity in the form of gay-exclusive spaces downtown, while relegating the African-American population to a separate stratum of spaces at private homes in the suburban periphery. While queer individuals transgressed the international border in their commute to queer spaces, so too did they transgress borders of another kind as the development of their identity and community were facilitated by the liminal nature of the borderland itself.

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90 Karibo, *Detroit’s Border Brothel*, 374.
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