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Graeme Sylvio Sylvestre

University of Windsor, sylvestg@uwindsor.ca

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The Gay Commute:

On the Development of Queer Community and Identity in the

Windsor-Detroit Borderlands, 1945-1980

By

Graeme Sylvestre

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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2019

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The Gay Commute:

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

1945-1980

by

Graeme Sylvestre

APPROVED BY:

______________________________________________
R. Bondy
Women’s and Gender Studies

______________________________________________
S. Huffaker, Advisor
Department of History

May 9, 2019
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ABSTRACT

The development of queer community and identity has always necessitated the delineation of queer-friendly spaces as a locus for socialisation, sexual expression, and freedom from animosity and hostility towards queer sexuality. Within the urban area of post-war Windsor-Detroit, the threat of exposure and possible arrest affected the everyday lives of queer individuals, which necessitated a quest for private locales that were amenable to the expression of queer sexuality and gender identity. What is here referred to as “the gay commute” was a defining characteristic of the lived experiences of the white middle-class 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. 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.
DEDICATION

For my parents:

Ruth and Charles Sylvestre

Who have always loved and supported me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

The landscape of the Windsor-Detroit borderlands is especially well-suited for exploring the reciprocal development of queer community and identity. Scholarship has revealed how queer individuals have long manoeuvred metropolitan spaces and explored their own complex and dynamic identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The expression of queer identity has often necessitated the delineation of queer-friendly spaces, which have provided a locus for socialisation and sexual expression, as well as freedom from animosity and hostility towards queer sexuality.

Within the urban area of post-war Windsor-Detroit, the threat of exposure and possible arrest affected the everyday lives of queer individuals, which necessitated a quest for private locales that were amenable to the expression of queer sexuality and gender identity. Some individuals adopted impromptu private spaces for themselves, as public washrooms, overgrown parks, private homes, and parked automobiles provided temporary locales for sexual liaison. Others sought permanent establishments which provided a more lasting and meaningful scene for gender and sexual expression as well as the establishment of social ties and a sense of community. Throughout the decades immediately following the Second World War, queer residents of Detroit improvised and found queer spaces, particularly in and around a downtown cluster of predominantly white bars and in separate gay locations in black neighborhoods. As gay sites, the bars of Detroit exerted a pull that extended to queer people in the surrounding communities and suburbs. This pull extended across the international border to Windsor, where a dearth of queer-friendly spaces drove queer Windsorites to the downtown gay bars and bathhouses of Detroit.

What is here referred to as “the gay commute” was a defining characteristic of the lived experiences of the white middle-class 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. Queer individuals who improvised sexual encounters in public spaces close to their homes, or frequented queer-friendly establishments throughout the communities in which they lived, not only risked public persecution and arrest, but also exposure to their family, friends, and co-workers. This exposure could have severe consequences, resulting in alienation from friends and family as well as workplace harassment and dismissal from their jobs. The solution was to seek queer-friendly spaces further afield in adjacent communities that were removed from where people lived and worked. In the automotive capital of North America, access to queer meeting spaces required transportation. The automotive industry provided the residents of the Windsor-Detroit borderlands a high wage for unskilled work and the accompanying social mobility provided the means to purchase a car. With the postwar proliferation of automobile ownership the region’s gay culture became more visible. Where societal persecution resulted in the repression of gay identities and lifestyles, queer individuals regularly 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. 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 queer individuals of colour. The international border between Windsor and Detroit

proved impermeable to African-Americans undertaking the same commute 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, illustrate the Detroit gay bar scene as a significant locus for liaison of queer, white, males 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 the 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 and inaccessible to queer individuals of colour.

**Gay Life in the Postwar Windsor-Detroit Borderlands**

Windsor-Detroit 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. Gay property ownership, encouraged by the new availability of affordable real-estate, was an engine of gay growth in the urban centre of postwar 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. Middle-class 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

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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.
two dozen bars restricted to certain areas. Furthermore, these locales had become more accessible than ever as the 1950s oversaw the proliferation and impact of the automobile on the lives of middle-class Windsor-Detroit. Postwar prosperity had extended automobile ownership to most of the North American population. In 1941, only half of U.S. households owned a car, a figure that jumped to sixty percent in 1950, seventy seven percent in 1960, and eighty percent in 1970. In the Windsor-Detroit borderlands, and throughout much of the rust belt, the rate of car ownership was even higher. The automobile had become a tangible indicator of a rising standard of middle-class living. While white, middle-class, queer individuals purchased cars alongside their straight counterparts, many others purchased or leased locations for opening queer establishments.

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing until the early 1990s, the urban centre of Detroit experienced unprecedented growth in the number of public gay establishments including bars and bathhouses. For the queer population, new automobile ownership meant that queer locales in urban centres had become more accessible than ever, while middle-class prosperity had translated into a new affordability for a clandestine gay lifestyle.

Amid the increasing trend of postwar middle-class prosperity, the decades following the war also oversaw the widespread embrace of marital heterosexuality and sexual conformity. Concurrent with the fear and paranoia of McCarthy era politics, a powerful “breadwinner ethic” and an accelerating hetero-normativity glorified traditional gender roles and stigmatized same-sex relations. White middle-class culture had come to value the traditional gender roles of the nuclear family as the economic and cultural bedrock upon which American civilization was built. A prevailing ignorance of alternative forms of sexual and gender identity and lifestyle had helped to stoke paranoia over the perceived deviance of queer individuals and culture. Fears of a

4 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 27.
6 Retzloff, *City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit*, 27.
“homosexual menace” served as part of what historian John D’Emilio describes as a, “widespread effort to reconstruct patterns of sexuality and gender relations shaken by depression and war.”7 In the United States, many state governments undertook a series of legislative changes designed to counter the homosexual threat. By 1948, states such as Michigan had changed liquor regulations to prohibit licensed premises to be frequented by or to become the meeting place, hangout, or rendezvous for known homosexuals.8 The following year G. Mennen Williams, the newly elected governor of Michigan, established the Commission on the Deviated Criminal Sex Offender. This committee, consisting predominantly of psychiatrists, was charged with the protection of the state’s children from “sex deviates” and released a report in 1952 calling for stiffer penalties for “sex crimes” including sodomy.9 Institutionalised discrimination helped to legitimize widespread hostility towards same-sex relationships while mandating oppressive police enforcement practices towards same-sex couples.

Conditions across the border were not better for queer Canadians. The Consolidated Statutes of Canada established buggery as an offence punishable by death in 1859. In 1892, it was reclassified as one of the “Offences Against Morality,” and remained on the books until 1969. A 1948 amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada created the charge of “criminal sexual psychopath” which could be applied to any case of perceived sexual misconduct where a lack of power to control one’s sexual impulses resulted in “indecent assault,” a term used to define same-sex sexual assault. In 1961 parliament replaced the term “criminal sexual psychopath” with “dangerous sexual offender” which defined any individual who is likely to commit a sexual offence. Men who engaged in consensual sexual activity with other men were convicted of buggery or gross

8 Rule 436.3d, Michigan, Administrative Code (1944), supplement 14, 7, effective August 18, 1948.
indecency, offences that could result in the accused being designated as a “dangerous sexual offender.” The only definite way to avoid these charges was celibacy. Additionally, the paranoid Cold War mentality reached Canada and cast gays and lesbians as potential subversives and traitors. A 1953 amendment to Canada’s Immigration Act declared homosexuals a prohibited class whose entry into the country should be denied. During the same period, the Canadian government prohibited homosexuals from all government positions deemed “sensitive” so as to prevent homosexual employees from being compromised by Soviet spies. Perhaps most infamous was the RCMP’s designs for a “Fruit Machine,” an apparatus meant to identify gay men by recording changes in the subject’s pupils when they were exposed to erotic images. Though public employees were identified and dismissed, there has never been any documented case of national security being compromised by homosexuals. Most of those who were exposed were dedicated public servants, and nearly all who were identified freely acknowledged their sexual or gender orientation.

The heteronormative social landscape of post-war North 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. 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 the livelihood of those who found themselves before a judge and 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

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11 Ibid.
One in four of those homosexual individuals who were caught by the police endured incarceration for up to three months.\(^{14}\) 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.\(^{16}\) This generalised stigmatisation reached a pinnacle in Windsor between 1945 and 1946, when a brutal "sex killer" targeted homosexuals and sparked a moral panic that stoked public fear of gay men, forcing them further underground.\(^{17}\) 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 heteronormative 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 heteronormative society.\(^{18}\) Alternatively, these spaces could be more improvisational as public parks, washrooms, bus stations, and cars became sites for impromptu sexual encounters, if not rumored locations for gay liaison known to the underground gay community and the police vice squad.\(^{19}\) Private homes and cars allowed individuals to congregate in a more exclusive environment in which the privacy of an encounter could be controlled.\(^{20}\) Whether they were improvised or not, it is the process of negotiating spaces with varying degrees of gay-exclusivity and privacy against the overarching threat of persecution

\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 50.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 49.  
\(^{18}\) Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 51.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 26.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 55.
and arrest that characterised many of the lives of gay residents in Windsor-Detroit through the middle of the twentieth century.

By the late 1960s, social and political tension had risen to a boiling point and much of the western world was experiencing a period of social and political revolution and upheaval. As a part of widespread discontent over racism and the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States the motor city had burned in the bloodiest riots of the “long hot summer of 1967.” The next year in Chicago, the Democratic National Convention had erupted in rioting and protest over the very unpopular Vietnam War. That same year Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated on April 4th and June 5th respectively. By June 1969 the patrons of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City had responded to a police raid with three days of rioting. The Gay Liberation Movement that was sparked by the Stonewall Rebellion emerged shortly thereafter in the early 1970s. It was based on the notion that sexuality should be an individual expression rather than a social obligation and was in part driven by other movements of social upheaval that were underway at the time, namely, the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement, and the Women’s Liberation Movement. By the late 1970s, clusters of gay bars and businesses had existed in major Australian and European cities for years. The co-existence of these concentrated gay bars with queer residents was most prevalent in North America as queer individuals moved away from small town and rural areas for more liberal environments that would offer some respite from the pressures of heterosexist society. This concentration served as a defensive base where queer people could feel safe while exercising political power in pursuit of civil rights. Gay Liberation spread quickly such that within two years of the Stonewall riots there were gay rights groups in every major American city, as well as Canada, Australia, and Western Europe. 21 Gay and lesbian groups took various forms in the urban centres of North America. In larger cities, such as New York

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and Toronto, identifiable communities known as “villages” formed around bars and clubs. In smaller centres, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals formed social circles, set up phone lines, held rallies, dances, and other events, and created safe spaces and walk-in centres. In many of these small cities, the fledgling organisations that sprang up in the wake of the gay liberation movement constituted the first visible manifestations of queer culture.22

**Early Gay Activism in Windsor**

The first active and organized voices of the LGBTQ community in Windsor trace their roots as far back as 1971 when Steve Lough, Jim Davies, and Harold Desmarais established the Windsor Homophile Association on the University of Windsor campus.23 The organisation started in much the same way as other gay activist organisations forming in the wake of the Stonewall riots and the onset of the Gay Liberation Movement. From 1968, Steve Lough had already been involved in the student movement on the University of Windsor campus. Gay activist organisations had already organised in Toronto, London, and Detroit between the years of 1969 and 1970 and had started a gay activist press, producing newsletters such as *The Body Politic* for a growing number of openly queer readers.24 The student movement was well underway at the University of Windsor, and queer students such as Davies and Lough participated in a number of organisational meetings and on-campus protests through the early years of their undergraduate careers. Lough distributed a flyer that used slang terms for gays such as faggot, fairy, and gearbox as a way of piquing interest in queer discrimination. He followed this with a second round of flyers calling for a meeting at the student centre. The first meeting was attended by Steve Lough, Jim Davies, and Barry Brown and consisted of informal discussions on establishing a gay activist organisation on campus. Subsequent

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22 Warner, 61-62.  
meetings were held with varying numbers of sporadic attendees until a formal organisation was established as a recognised student group under the name Windsor Homophile Association. 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.”

Lough recounts how the participation of women varied widely from meeting to meeting as, “one woman would come to the meeting, but it was always a different woman. Each woman would show up and there’d be no other women there, so it would seem like a men’s group.” Lough identifies the sporadic participation of women as an ongoing shortcoming of the gay activist organisations in Windsor, as it often resulted in the underrepresentation of lesbian voices in an organisation that mandated equal representation of gender and sexual identities. The Windsor Homophile Association continued to hold meetings through 1971, organising its first dance in the fall of that year. In 1973 the association moved off-campus and into the city proper operating under the name of Windsor Gay Unity.

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. This publication was available to subscribers only and contained information on locally organized dances and other events, classified ads for people looking for gay-friendly roommates, news on labour and

25 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 45.
29 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter
immigration discrimination, information on the organization’s proceedings and budget, an advice column written by “Aunt Fanny”, and a 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.” This quote, taken from the October 1975 edition of the Gay Unity Newsletter, makes a direct reference to Palmer Park, an area of Detroit known to contain the city’s highest concentration of gay bars and bathhouses. It reveals how queer residents of Windsor are known to be a frequent, if not notorious, presence in the various queer spaces across the border.

Much of Gay Unity’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 the organisation. 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

30 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter.
31 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
33 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 6 (June 1975).
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 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.” 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.” Encounters between the Windsor Police Department and queer residents were not only characteristic of the prevailing relationship between police and queer individuals in the postwar period; they illustrate how queers had few options in Windsor for private spaces in the early 1970s. This exemplifies the extent to which queer individuals were driven out of those private spaces that were sought out locally, forcing them to commute over increasing distances in search of amenable queer-friendly spaces.

With the absence of any substantive queer-friendly establishments and the hostility towards queers in the improvised spaces in public locations, the gay population sought out spaces for social interaction that were further afield. Jim Monk recounts how he, “spent most of [his

36 Ibid.
twenties] in Detroit socializing in the gay bars there, a huge gay scene.”

He characterises Detroit’s gay community as very closeted with most people entering gay-friendly bars through alleys. Many of these bars did not have 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 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.

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 and let them come to you.”

Despite the newsletter’s allusions to Americans patronising Windsor bars, there is little documentation of queer Americans coming to Windsor for any reason through the postwar period. Given the long history of Windsor’s downtown bar district servicing American patrons, it is difficult to imagine that some percentage of American tourists to Windsor did not comprise gay or lesbian individuals. However, the difficulty with which queer Windsorites sought queer-friendly establishments within their own city suggests the overwhelming majority of traffic of queer individuals was directed into the United States.

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 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

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39 Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 6 (June 1975).
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 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 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 Windsorites 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 Windsorites 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.

41 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 23.
42 Windsor Pride. Out and Aging, 46.
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 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.44 One account of Tods Sway Lounge explains how, “If your into [sic] 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.”45 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 the city. Says Zipp Zerro, “you would be surprised at all the hot Windsorites you bump into in Detroit bars – so [you’re] cheating yourself if you settle for the Windsor scene, which is like a dinosaur – extinct.”46 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.

44 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).
45 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
46 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, 1, no. 10 (October 1975).
By 1972 the first openly gay bar, called “The Ritz,” was opened on the corner of Goyeau and Pitt Street.⁴⁷ Co-founder Dick 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.⁴⁸ 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 occasionally took matters into his own hands, fending off assailants with a baseball bat he kept behind the bar. It was not long before the establishment caught the attention of the Windsor Police. 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.⁴⁹ 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 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.”⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ 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

⁴⁷ Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 9 (September 1975).
⁵⁰ Windsor Gay Unity, *Gay Unity Newsletter*, 1, no. 9 (September 1975).
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.”

Despite this temporary drama, Gay Unity moved their monthly general meetings to The Ritz and continued using the location until March of 1977. The bar was also advertised in the newsletter until August 1978.

Though Gay Unity was closed and reopened on numerous occasions throughout its nearly decade long existence, it remained in operation until it was finally disbanded in 1980.

The chronicle of the early development of the gay community in Windsor reveals how 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. Detroit’s extensive gay bar scene provided an opportunity to queer Windsorites for socialisation and sexual encounters in well established queer-friendly bars and bathhouses, not to mention a large and more varied population of queer individuals. Additionally, the proximity of Detroit made a tempting prospect of keeping one’s sexual identity secretive in Windsor, as queer Windsorites faced the prospective consequences of coming out in a small community. In a very tangible sense, the queer sexual and gender identities of Windsor residents were developed and played out in the bars and bathhouses of Detroit, and the gay community of Windsor existed by virtue of its larger proximate neighbour to the north. Primary sources reveal how the proximity of Detroit had an effect on nearly every aspect of queer community and activism in Windsor through the protest era as the commute of queer residents across the river was the defining characteristic of gay life for Windsor’s queers.

52 Ibid.
53 Windsor Gay Unity, Gay Unity Newsletter, August 1978.
Gay Detroit in Post-War North America

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. Timothy Retzloff is the foremost authority on the history and development of LGBT Detroit. In his doctoral dissertation, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 1945-1985, 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.”

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. 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 many men to act on homosexual desires. The car granted access to gay spaces


55 Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 228.
both local and distant, and helped shape stationary gay spaces as they evolved during the 1960s.\textsuperscript{56} 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.\textsuperscript{57} 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 saw 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.”\textsuperscript{58} 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 downtown commercial district.\textsuperscript{59} 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

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 241.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 243.  
\textsuperscript{58} Retzloff, \textit{City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit}, 54.  
\textsuperscript{59} Retzloff, \textit{City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit}, 55.
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 *The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965*, Roey Thorpe illustrates the changing dynamic of lesbian bars in the Detroit metropolitan area. 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.” 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 subdividing the bar into homosexual and heterosexual exclusive spaces. For example, Thorpe illustrates how swinging double doors inside the Sweetheart divided the front section of 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. 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

62 Ibid., 166.
constituted a lesbian-positive space becoming more exclusive to members of the gay community and further reinforcing the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual.  

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.” 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 heteronormative society alike, the African American gay community was forced to establish an alternative outside of the white gay bar scene. In 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 from within the lesbian community and were subsequently relegated to semi-private 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, private 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

64 Thorpe, The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 179.
65 Retzloff, City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 76.
67 Thorpe, African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 58.
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 ethnic 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 could play out undisturbed by police and societal persecution and oppression. Conversely, the subsequent repeal of prohibition engendered new surveillance of gay bars in the 1930s. As a result, Chauncey illustrates the development of multiple gay subcultures 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 "fairies" who, "assumed the sexual and

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70 Ibid.
other cultural roles ascribed to women.” Chauncey illustrates how the fairies 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. Though other gay men sought to shape their gender and sexual identities in different ways, "the prominence of the Bowery fairies 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." 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 Bowery’s bar district which provided locations where identities of sex and gender could play out in an environment that is safe from hostile heteronormative 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

71 Chauncey, Gay New York, 48.
72 Chauncey, Gay New York, 56.
73 Chauncey, Gay New York, 34.
74 Chauncey, Gay New York, 100.
76 Chauncey, Gay New York, 100.
their sexuality (their homosexuality), a distant domain of personality independent of gender.”77 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.”78 In other words, common geography, ethnicity, and class identity were the primary factors contributing to the parallel development of distinct gay bar districts and their corresponding subcultures in New York. These communities developed in accordance with the class and ethnic identities that were characteristic of their boarder communities.

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.79 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.80 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.”81 De La Croix relates how Chicago’s burgeoning drag scene was well received by clientele of mixed sexuality and gender at all three bars.82 For a time, the public spectacle of drag performances served as a unifying force within the gay community as he

77 Ibid.
79 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 120-282.
80 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 242.
81 Ibid.
82 De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 243.
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."83
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.84 In a form of racial intermixing that was relatively rare and
frowned upon within heteronormative culture, otherwise disparate and segregated gay
communities came together in instances where they had the opportunity to make themselves and
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.85 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

83 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 298.
in Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories, edited by Brett Beemyn (New
York: Routledge, 1995), 119-146.
85 Chauncey, Gay New York, 294.
sub-culture in New York City. Garber points out that "private parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy." 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.” 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 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, private 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 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 heteronormative 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

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86 Garber, A Spectacle In Colour, 318-331.
87 Ibid., 321.
88 Garber, A Spectacle In Colour, 321.
90 Thorpe, African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 44.
91 Ibid., 43.
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.

**Sex Tourism Early 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.”

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. 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

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93 Karibo, *Detroit’s Border Brothel*, 367.
were Windsor residents.\textsuperscript{94} 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.

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.\textsuperscript{95} 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 Detroiders, and Cass Corridor catering to the wiles of low-income white residents.”\textsuperscript{96} 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 Detroiders visited Canada almost twice as frequently as their black counterparts.\textsuperscript{97} When black residents did cross the national line, they often faced an additional level of discrimination that made these trips increasingly difficult.\textsuperscript{98} Karibo maintains that the combination of segregation in Windsor

\textsuperscript{94} Karibo, \textit{Sin City North}, 367.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Karibo, \textit{Detroit’s Border Brothel}, 368.
\textsuperscript{97} Karibo, \textit{Sin City North}, 66.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
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 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.” 99 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.” 100

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

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99 Karibo, *Sin City North*, 68.
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.

Conclusion

The gay commute highlights the role of physical geography and space in the development of queer communities. Its contribution to the developing gay community in the Windsor-Detroit borderlands reveals a cross border exchange of queer sexual and social identities. As liminal spaces, border cities are well suited to exploring the reciprocal development and fluid nature of queer community and identity. This is because the gay commute of the Windsor-Detroit borderlands exhibits key differences to similar patterns of movement in similar communities that are not positioned on the fringes of national boundaries. 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 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{101} 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

\textsuperscript{101} Retzloff, \textit{Cars and Bars}, 239-243.
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 acted 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.

Queer individuals of colour are missing from the narrative of Windsor’s developing gay community as there is no indication in primary sources of their 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 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 subcultures 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. Whereas existing scholarship concerning geography and sexuality have traditionally concentrated on physical localities in the formation of queer community and identity, the gay commute is indicative of a turn of focus towards the fluidity and mobility of queer individuals and their culture. Wonderful Windsor, The Motor City, and their suburban satellites 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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VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Graeme Sylvestre

PLACE OF BIRTH: Windsor, ON

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1988

EDUCATION: University of Windsor, B.A. with Honours, Windsor, ON, 2012

University of Windsor, B.A. Windsor, ON, 2014

University of Windsor, Certificate of Public Administration, Windsor, ON, 2014