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## A right to the city? Virtual networks and ephemeral centralities for lesbians in Paris

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### Résumé

*A large body of literature, mostly in English, now documents male homosexuals' ability to appropriate parts of the city to gain both urban and social visibility. Conversely, most work on lesbians points at their relative invisibility. This article looks at places that, since the 70s, have been opened for parties and outings for lesbians. Though these may be few in number and frequently instable, a degree of social and online networking establishes other geographies for lesbians' "right to the city". Though invisible to mainstream society, they testify to lesbians' ability to overcome spatial injustice.*

**Keywords :** homosexuality, lesbian, territory, city, network.

Diverse cities, and in particular the largest, have long been considered as places where relations are anonymous and which allow for encounters with Otherness. City life allows for freer expression of difference, in terms of behaviour and identities.

In the past two decades, in particular in the Anglophone world, the role of urban spaces as allowing for homosexual visibility, and as locus of construction of gay and lesbian cultures has been amply documented. Work has shown how homosexuals' "right to the city" has been established by the development of gay neighbourhoods in a number of large cities, and how this has also led to flourishing commercial activities (restaurants, bars, clubs...). The importance of these businesses in providing places of sociability and identity construction cannot be overstated, and we will discuss it further in the instance of lesbians. However, forms of appropriation of urban areas remain dominated by male homosexuals and leave lesbians in relative invisibility. Reasons for this range from the re-doubling of discrimination lesbians endure (both as women and as homosexual) to economic inequalities which imply they have a lower purchasing power, as well as their household formation (they have children in their care more often than gay men). This points to a greater degree of spatial injustice, since lesbians are rendered largely invisible in cities. According to some interpretations, this reflects a lesser tendency to claim visibility and public exposure, which tends to reiterate gender stereotypes and fails to show how this tendency results from oppression. Following Delphy (1998), we interpret lesbians' lesser visibility in urban space as a result of their position as "doubly dominated" within the patriarchal system.

There is however a huge diversity of places to express one's homosexual identity in cities, and it appears necessary to work beyond the dualism of classical spatial categorizations (private/public, visible/invisible, ephemeral/enduring). This is the direction taken in this paper, which looks at lesbian "territorial" appropriations in Paris, and their evolution in the last four decades. While it registers the reduction of visible lesbian presence on the Parisian "scene", it also tries to show the wide range of alternative practices used by lesbians to invent places to meet and interact. Its major aim is to map the places where sexuality and sexual identities are played out in the city. According to Binnie and Valentine (1999), that is the main contribution made by geography to gender studies and gay and lesbian studies<sup>1</sup>. We argue that to understand lesbians' engagement with the city by considering only the visible and permanent places would be mistaken.

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<sup>1</sup> "[...] how sexualities are lived out in particular places and spaces. This is the major contribution that geographers can therefore offer other disciplines concerned with sexuality." (Binnie and Valentine, 1999).

We rely on a retrospective survey of lesbian businesses in Paris, and of lesbian parties organized in various Parisian venues in the last decade. Much of the material comes from interviews carried out with managers of lesbian businesses, and the organizers of events<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. Lesbian visibility in cities

A number of publications, in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the Anglophone world, addressed the geography of homosexualities. The Stonewall riots which took place in New York City in 1969 were probably among the events which contributed to the rise of a new academic field, in social sciences, now known as "gay and lesbian studies" (Tamagne, 2006).

Geography started contributing significantly to the field in the 1990s, within various disciplinary sub-fields, but particularly in urban geography (Binnie et Valentine, 1999), probably because homosexuality had by then gained a "right to the city" in many Western cities. This was particularly exemplified in gay neighbourhoods such as the Castro in San Francisco, the Marais in Paris, Checa in Madrid, Schöneberg in Berlin, the Village in Montreal, Greenwich Village in New York City, which were not only visible but also central. A large body of work has looked at these in terms of place, access and visibility of sexual minorities in urban space, but the issue of spatial justice is rarely raised. Two major approaches have been used : one considers the nature of "homosocial" spaces, as commercial spaces which, in the same way as other cultural or community spaces, allow for the assertion of a collective identity (Sibalis, 2004 ; Leroy, 2005 ; Deligne *et al.*, 2006 ; Blidon, 2007). A second approach has emphasized the role played by gays in the social and spatial transformations of cities and their participation in gentrification processes (Knopp, 1990 ; Forest, 1995 ; Rothenberg, 1995 ; Podmore, 2006).

### The assumption that lesbians are not "territorial"

Most research is centered on gay men's behaviours in cities, and very little has been written about lesbians' spatial practices. One exception is Manuel Castells' *The city and the grassroots* (1983), which kicked off research on lesbian communities. In this book, Castells contrasts the spatial behaviour of gay men (highly territorial and visible in places of consumption), and the more typically "female" behaviour of lesbians, less territorial, based on informal networks, and more politicized. He accounts for the lack of "lesbian territories" by differences in income, and behavioural differences are accounted for by gender differences, rather than differences to do with sexuality. This pioneering work did much to demonstrate that homosexual identity is strongly spatialized (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). However, the contrast between gay and lesbian practices does seem rather rough, and numerous papers have since then pointed out the greater complexity of the matter, and argued for the need to further unravel the gender/sexuality/space nexus (Knopp, 1990 ; Adler et Brenner, 1992 ; Forest, 1995 ; Valentine, 1997).

Further research on lesbians in Western cities has developed the critique and challenged stereotyped understandings of lesbian identity and behaviour (Binnie et Valentine, 1999 ; Adler et Brenner, 1992 ; Podmore, 2006). Case study after case study has shown that lesbian space is excluded from gay neighbourhoods, but lesbian places and spaces are nonetheless there, relying on often informal, invisible networks, and with inventive, flexible uses of urban resources.

### Looking harder for alternative "territorialities"

In their study of Manchester, Pritchard et al. (2002) show how sexuality and gender contribute to the exclusion of women from public places and how, in the gay "village", hetero-patriarchy and homo-patriarchy join forces to prevent the appropriation by lesbians of this homosexual space. Those

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<sup>2</sup> We wish to thank all the people who shared their experiences with us.

emotionally and psychologically crucial spaces play a major part in the empowerment of homosexual people in a heteronormative society, but it seems that lesbians are denied this form of empowerment, in part because of the large heterosexual presence. A study of Philadelphia yields much the same result: central, commercial gay areas do not appear to be lesbian-friendly (Cieri, 2003). But beyond this result, Cieri points out the limits of the methods and sources traditionally used to study urban societies, and calls for alternative methods to collect and analyze data. From her own experience as a lesbian tourist in Philadelphia and information gathered from lesbian and bisexual women, she shows that queer and lesbian communities are constructed less around shopping areas than around places of residence, and areas outside the city centre. In Los Angeles, Yolanda Retter (1997) comes to similar conclusions: lesbian "territories" arise in ways that differ from gay ones, if only because "territory" is a deeply masculine notion. Hence the need to construct new methods to fathom lesbian uses of space, and to challenge binary categories of the temporary and the permanent to characterize lesbian places.

Rothenberg's study of lesbian communities in Park Slope (Brooklyn, New York City) constitutes a major milestone in the understanding of lesbian neighbourhoods (Rothenberg, 1995). Her work analyzes economic factors, in particular the availability of affordable housing, but also the symbolic forces which made Park Slope the largest concentration of lesbians in United States. A major attraction, when the relative cheapness of the place wore off, was the sense of security lesbians experienced there. Word of mouth spread the fame of the area within lesbian social networks. Typically, it was first identifiable as a lesbian haven by lesbians themselves, and has now become identified as such by the population at large.

So territoriality is not as devoid of interest for lesbians as Castells had assumed. It seems highly significant both in terms of identity construction and as a political act to claim residential spaces free from male infringement (Peake, 1993). This happens outside of gay neighbourhoods. Recent research on Paris and Montreal however indicates that the relations with gay, central areas are complex and ambiguous. Julie Podmore (2006) considers lesbian visibility in Montreal since 1950 by looking at businesses. She shows how local dynamics and political and social alliances influence lesbian visibility, and suggests that the identification of the community to queer movements, located in the gay Village, played a part. In Paris, the contrast between a dominant, visible gay city, and more diffuse and less easily identifiable lesbian places, shows up in mental maps drawn by gays and lesbians (Provencher, 2007). However, all the lesbians drew the Marais as a space of expression of the homosexual community. This confirms a study on gay and lesbian practices in public places in Paris, which shows that it is only in the Marais that a lesbian couple feels comfortable to hold hands or kiss in public (Cattan, Leroy, 2010). If gay neighbourhoods do not contribute to lesbians "spatial capital", at least they provide a sense of security.

In the rest of this paper, we look at lesbian "territorialities" in Paris and how they have changed in the last decades. First we look at the geography of lesbian businesses since the 1970s, and then we explore the alternative and ephemeral places constructed by parties held in the last decade. Lastly, we discuss the location of both businesses and parties with respect to the Marais.

## 2. Lesbian businesses in Paris

Paris is a major centre of homosexual sociability and visibility in Europe, ranking after London but before Berlin in terms of gay and lesbian businesses (Leroy, 2005). Worldwide, it is not far behind New York. It has a long tradition in this respect (Tamagne, 2006). In the late 19th century, Paris became one of the major cities of lesbianism (Albert, 2006). However, do lesbians enjoy similar levels of visibility as gay men ?

## What is a lesbian place ?

In Paris, as is the case in other large Western cities, commercial places, businesses, are the main locus of lesbian social interaction. For a minority which suffers two forms of discrimination, as women and as homosexual, these places are highly significant: they are of course places to go out and party, but they also offer the opportunity to meet other lesbians and socialize with them, and guarantee some degree of visibility in a patriarchal, heteronormative society that generally denies lesbian sexuality. This makes these places far more important to lesbians than they are for the general population. It does, of course, raise the issue of the commercialisation of sexual identities, but these places nonetheless have an emancipatory value since they provide a place to be oneself without risking violence or discrimination, and constitute places of resistance against an oppressive society. We shall therefore consider these places as tests of the place and visibility granted to lesbians in large cities, an issue of spatial justice and social fairness.

In a recent survey conducted among lesbians in the cities of Toulouse and Paris, Natacha Chetcuti (2010) analyzed lesbian self-identification and shows it is constructed gradually, against a heterosexual and patriarchal norm which assigns women a subordinate role to men. In this process, lesbian places play a major role, both to meet women who define themselves as lesbian, and to experience one's life as lesbian, outside of the heterosexual and patriarchal norm :

"Thus, Catherine recalls her satisfaction in discovering, after her first sexual encounter with a woman, the existence of a lesbian bar. The enthusiasm she felt in going to that bar comes from the shared enjoyment of leisure time, free from the fear of being judged for her non-conformity to heterosexual standards." (Chetcuti, 2010, p. 48)

More than the mere venue for an outing, as for the rest of the population, a lesbian bar, night-club or party can be experienced as a "counter-space" (Chetcuti, 2010, p. 49), a place of emancipation, free from majority rule, and a haven free from the insults or aggressions lesbians are likely to suffer in public space. They are a place to meet and share experiences. However, the fact that they are private businesses raises the issue of accessibility to all.

Surveying these businesses in Paris is by no means easy. A first difficulty arises merely to define what is meant by "lesbian business". Then there is the lack of archives recording their opening and closure. For the purposes of this study, we shall consider that a business can be categorized as lesbian when it is managed by one or several lesbians (often staffed exclusively by women) and patronized only or mostly by lesbians. These are the places identified as lesbian by lesbians themselves<sup>3</sup> (as well as the general public).

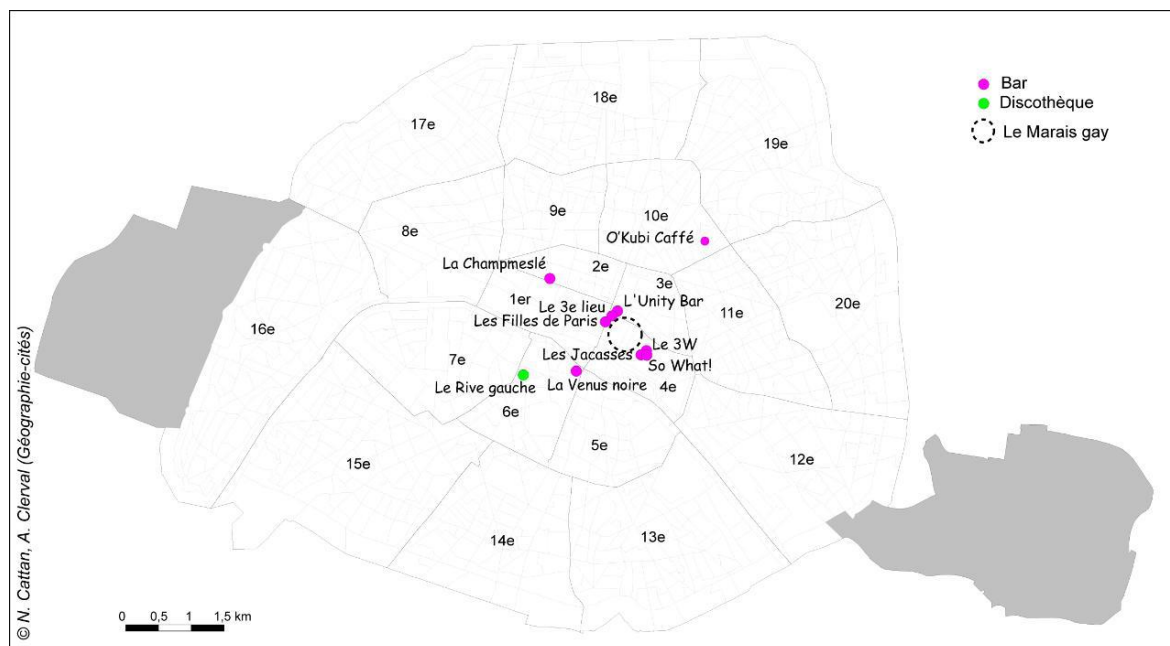
Several sources were used in this survey. We used Élula Perrin's autobiography (2000), which records her experience as manager of three lesbian night-clubs in Paris between 1969 and 1997, and "godmother" of the only one still open today, as well as historical works (Albert, 2006 ; Tamagne, 2000). We carried out fieldwork by trawling the internet for mentions of bars, clubs and parties for lesbians, and interviewed five managers or organizers<sup>4</sup>, who have a privileged viewpoint on lesbian nightlife. We also carried out direct observations.

## Lesbian businesses in Paris since 1970

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<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of places also frequented by men and heterosexuals is problematic. However, there are very few strictly lesbian places, and the former are also places where lesbians can meet, so we include them in the study.

<sup>4</sup> In the past two decades, three of them have managed five businesses that still operate in 2010 or remained open for at least five years. The other two have been active in organizing parties in different venues, several times a month, for several years.



**Figure 1.** Lesbian businesses in Paris in 2010

When this article was being written, in March 2010, there were nine lesbian bars and one lesbian night-clubs operating in Paris (figure 1). Among the bars, one had very few clients, three were quite recent creations and two were frequented by men and heterosexuals as well<sup>5</sup>. The only enduring night-club, the Rive Gauche (in the 6th arrondissement), was open on a women-only basis only on Saturday nights. Therefore, possible outings for lesbians remained limited and the virtual absence of any lesbian night-club was in sharp contrast with the large supply available to gay men (Leroy, 2005).

The recent history of lesbian places in Paris can be dated back to the opening of a women-only night-club in the early 1970s, the Katmandou, which was managed by Élula Perrin and Aimée Mori, and dominated lesbian nightlife until the 1990s. The exclusion of men, even if it was never strictly enforced, allowed for a degree of lesbian visibility. Located on the Left Bank, close to famous night-clubs of the 1960s such as Chez Régine and Chez Castel, it was a sophisticated place, patronized by relatively well-heeled women and celebrities, whether lesbian or not: the place was therefore quite exclusive socially. Despite spotless management, as the police itself was forced to acknowledge, the club was harassed by neighbours who found the presence of a lesbian night-club at the foot of their building unacceptable. New occupants of the building in the 1990s became even more hostile, and managed to have the place shut down by complaining of the "noise" (according to Élula Perrin, these new neighbours were close to political spheres of power). "Parents can now let their little darlings walk past the 21 rue du Vieux-Colombier, it has become a luxury leather goods shop. Middle-class, sleep soundly" (Perrin, 2000, p. 193).

The Privilège (1991-1995) opened in the basement of the Palace, a well-known gay night-club on the Grands Boulevards, and L'Entracte, another lesbian night-club, was created the same year. In this sort of "golden age" of lesbian night-life, there were therefore two night-clubs, relatively close to each other, and between which it was possible to walk backwards and forwards, which transformed that patch of the Boulevards into a sort of lesbian micro-territory. Several lesbian bars also opened around the same time, in the Bastille area and on the outskirts of the Marais (which had taken on a markedly gay character during the 1980s). The bar managers interviewed insisted that their aim was

<sup>5</sup> Le Troisième lieu, 4th arrondissement, and O'Kubi Caffé, 10th arrondissement.

to create a haven for lesbians rather than a profitable business: they kept prices low and did not pressure patrons to consume, which meant lesbians from quite a wide range of social backgrounds could hang out there.



**Figures 2 and 3.** Two lesbian bars to the West of the gay section of the Marais (photo by A. Clerval, May 2009)

During the 2000 decade, nine bars and three night-clubs were operating, though one of the bars, in the 4th arrondissement, changed names and management three times<sup>6</sup>. The changes sometimes brought about a greater diversity of patrons<sup>7</sup>. Other bars, all of them located in the 3rd arrondissement, west of the Marais, remained open only a couple of years.

Two very different night-clubs had a few women-only nights a week. The Rive gauche played a variety of music styles and attracted very diverse crowds of lesbians. By contrast, the Pulp, located on the Right Bank, played a very narrow selection of electronic music, also attractive to non-lesbian publics. It eventually lost its distinctively lesbian character<sup>8</sup>, and even had nights when it was open to all, free of charge. The third night-club, Chez Moune, was a women-only cabaret opened in 1936, which became a night-club in the 1970s and also lost its lesbian exclusivity<sup>9</sup>. So, of a Saturday night in the 2000s, lesbians could pick one of four to six bars, and two night-clubs to go out, meet and enjoy themselves. Not only was this supply puny, it was also broken down along social lines, with contrasts in terms of prices and types of music which further divided the community.



**Figure 4.** Chez Moune, which opened in 1936 as a women-only cabaret (photo by A. Clerval, May 2009)

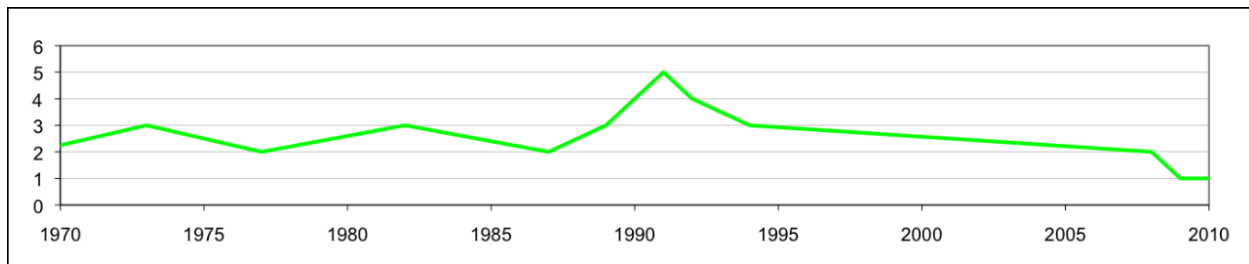
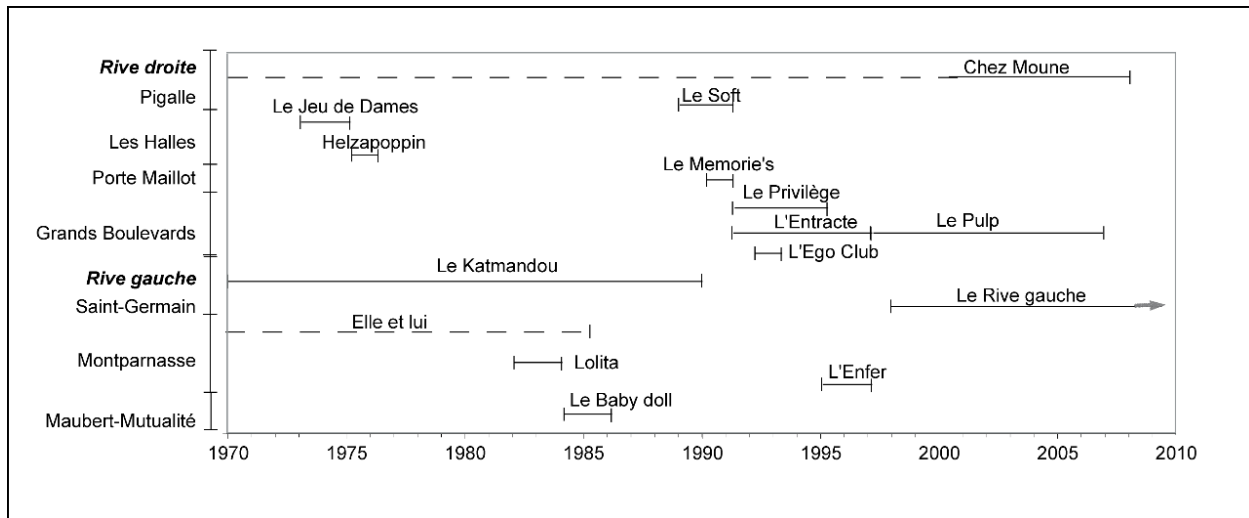
<sup>6</sup> The Alcantara, between 2000 and 2002 then became Le Bliss Kfé from 2002 to 2006 and then Le Nix between 2006 and 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Exclusively lesbian in the early 2000s, it later became more and more open to gay men and heterosexuals, before closing in 2009. It later re-opened to become the So What!, with lesbians in their 30s and 40s, and men, as patrons.

<sup>8</sup> The Pulp closed in May 2007 when the building where it was located was sold to a property developer, which deprived a section of Parisian lesbians of a place that had become mythical and has not been replaced. Its patrons were not the same as those of the Rive Gauche and they have not transferred to it.

<sup>9</sup> In the 2000s, one of the managers, a woman, had started women-only evenings again, but new management in 2008 stopped these, despite a mobilization of lesbian groups arguing they had to be preserved.





**Figure 5.** Lesbian night-clubs in Paris since 1970 : opening, closure and duration

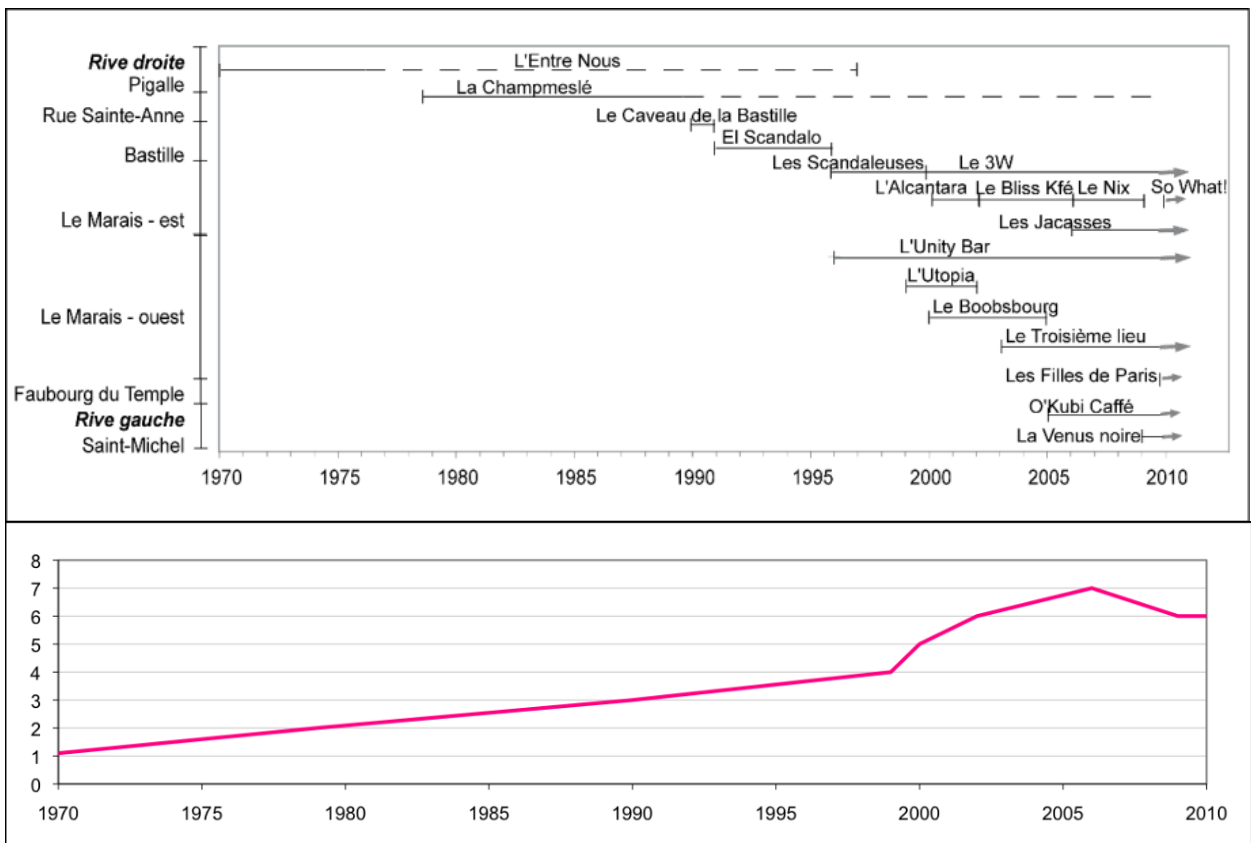


Figure 6. Lesbian bars in Paris since 1970 : opening, closure and duration

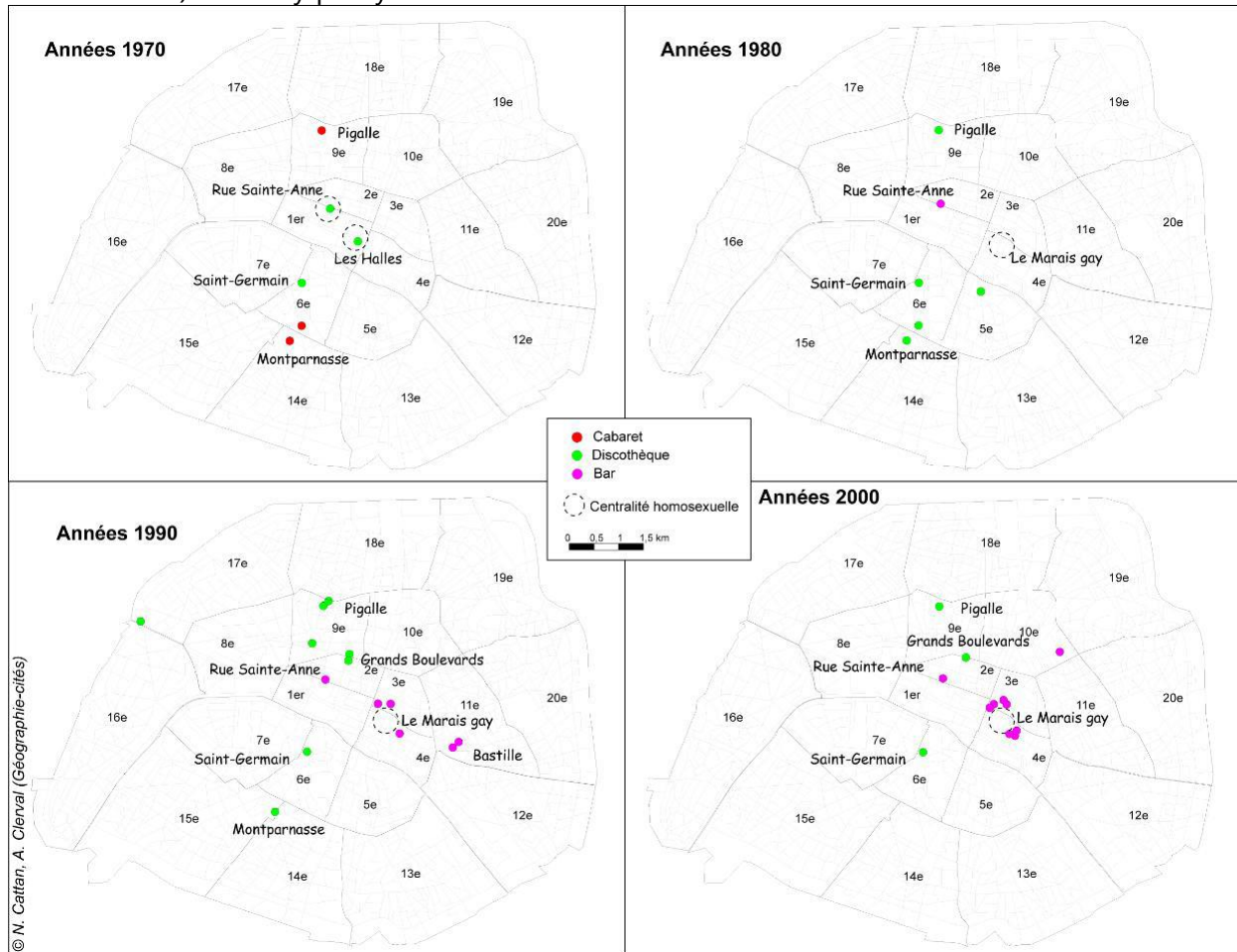
**Lesbian places: shifts from clubs to bars, from the Left to the Right Bank**

Night-clubs were most important until the 1980s and 1990s, since it used to be possible to drink and chat there until music volumes were raised. Since the 1990s, bars have taken over, probably because opening one is easier with increasingly restrictive legislation on clubs. Very few places remain open for more than a few years, as their continuity relies on the determination of a handful of people<sup>10</sup> often confronted with hostility from landlords (mostly men, gay or straight), the police, or neighbours. Bar managers complain of a hostile environment, which, using noise as an excuse, pressures lesbian businesses much harder than neighbouring bars or restaurants, in a generally lesbophobic context<sup>11</sup>. Though the bars usually make a profit, managers encounter economic difficulties to maintain women-only businesses in the long term, with shifts in fashion. Under pressure from landlords and the need to remain profitable, many lesbian businesses abandon their women-only policy, though some never had such a policy, which some managers considered old-fashioned. There is an issue of lesbian visibility at play here: women-only businesses created specifically lesbian places, places for lesbians to meet, and fostered a degree of visibility. Closing down such places or abandoning their specificity carries the risk of diminishing visibility. For lesbians themselves, places become less easily identifiable, and their sociability is threatened. There is a lack of interest from the authorities in the existence of lesbian places: when associations are publicly subsidized to manage places, they are never meant for lesbians only. The LGBT centre in

<sup>10</sup> Four bars, le Caveau de la Bastille, El Scandalo, Les Scandaleuses, Le Boobsbourg, were managed in succession by the same person.

<sup>11</sup> A survey by SOS Homophobie on lesbophobia, published in 2008, relies on approximately 1800 questionnaires answered by lesbians or bisexual women: see [www.sos-homophobie.org](http://www.sos-homophobie.org).

Paris (3rd arrondissement) is designed for both men and women and the Maison des femmes (12th arrondissement) was only partly destined to lesbians.



**Figure 7.** Lesbian places in Paris since the 1970s

The geography of the places is initially scattered, but bars gradually seem to congregate on the outskirts of the gay section of the Marais (figure 7). Historically, there is a degree of continuity with earlier homosexual centres such as Pigalle, Montparnasse or rue Sainte-Anne (2nd arrondissement), but also a proximity with posh heterosexual clubs in areas like Saint-Germain. That's why the Left Bank plays a significant part in the historical geography of lesbian places, in particular for night-clubs, that it did not have for male homosexuals (Leroy, 2005). Bars, on the other hand, tended to open nearly exclusively on the Right Bank, often in former working-class areas undergoing gentrification, as was the case with the Marais in the 1980s, Bastille in the 1990s or the Sainte-Marthe area (10th arrondissement) in the 2000s.

The spatial closeness of several lesbian businesses occasionally allows for the emergence of lesbian "micro-territories", identifiable as such at week-ends and also, once a year, during the Marche des fiertés LGBT<sup>12</sup>. This occurred on the Grands Boulevards with the two clubs in the 1990s, and subsequently in the rue des Écouffes, east of the gay section of the Marais, in the 2000s. The time-space of lesbian territories remains very limited, especially compared to the extent and durability of the Marais.

<sup>12</sup> Though "Gay Pride" is still commonly used, that is now the official name of this yearly event.

It is probably not excessive to analyze the relative fragility of lesbian places in terms of spatial injustice. However, other strategies have been developed by Parisian lesbians to meet and live openly as lesbians, in particular the organization of parties in a variety of venues.

### **3. Alternative lesbian territorialities in Paris: social networks and ephemeral centres**

Since 2000, a new type of lesbian party has flourished in Paris. A combination of factors seems to be at work here: a more general tendency for night-life to become structured around one-off events with a specific theme or a specific style of music, the increasing difficulty of opening a club (beyond the prohibitive rents, official authorizations for night-time operation are granted very restrictively) and the short supply of lesbian partying venues. Obviously, the development of the internet also played a part, though in contradictory ways. On the one hand, websites make it easier to meet and chat online, and therefore physical places to meet become less essential. But on the other hand, electronic mailing lists make it easier to network. A large part of lesbian spatiality is now organized around the parties that result from online networking.

#### **Lesbian parties**

Broadly speaking, there are two types of parties: itinerant parties that shift from one commercial venue to another, and parties that take place regularly in a single venue. Both fall within the wider genre of parties organized around a theme, which started growing in number from the 1990s onwards. They can be characterized by a specific style of music, or by a specific time of day (tea dances, early evening parties). Everything tends to indicate these have multiplied, and drawn increasing crowds, since 2000.

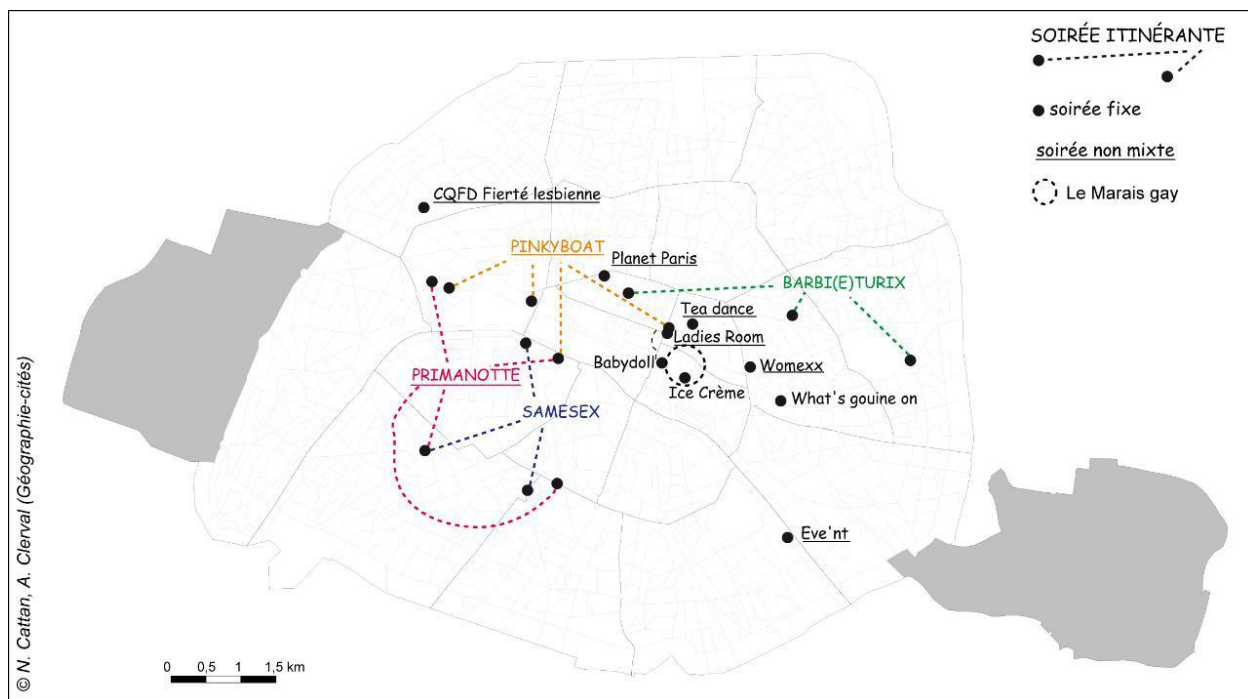
In 2010, there were five itinerant parties for lesbians in Paris (figure 8). Two of them, which appeared first, are women-only, *Primanotte* and *Pinkyboat*. The three others are meant for more diverse groups: *Samesex* for gays as well as lesbians, *Babydoll* and *Barbi(e)turix* for all. All are very successful. *Primanotte* started in 2003 and organizes more than one party per month (approx. 18 in 2008, for instance). *Pinkyboat* parties have taken place less regularly for the past six years. The parties are advertized via social networks, both informal and structured. To attend a *Primanotte* party, you have to be registered on a mailing list, which requires being sponsored by a member. The parties are therefore halfway between private and public, and organizers take care to keep it that way, by filtering access carefully. Several thousands of people are on the list according to one of the organizers, and members are not only Parisians (not only are there provincials, but also residents of Belgium, Switzerland, Italy or England).

Parties that take place in a single venue on a regular basis are generally older. We counted nine in 2010, of which six are women-only, one is gay and lesbian and the others open to all. They also rely on the internet and network advertizing, though there is no formal registration list for them.

Different profiles of party-goers attend the various parties. Some women-only parties have a broad selection of styles of music in order to attract lesbians from different age-groups and with different musical tastes, while others favour the latest electronic style and don't attract only lesbians<sup>13</sup>. The two types of parties, along the lines of the divide between the *Rive Gauche* and the *Pulp*, have socially distinct publics. The former are more expensive, the latter much less, and there is sometimes no charge at all. So though there may seem to be a large number of parties, each has its own specific target group and the choice for members of each group remains limited.

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<sup>13</sup> Others are for even more specific groups, as for instance the *Lick'n Licious* parties, aimed at Black women and their friends.



**Figure 8.** Geography of lesbian parties in Paris since 2000

### Lesbian parties criss-cross Paris

Itinerant parties use two types of venues (figure 8): on the one hand, "posh" places in wealthy areas such as the Coupole (14th arrondissement), the Qin Élysée (8th), the Bains Douches (4th), Chez Maxim's, the Concorde Atlantique barge (7th) and the Back up (15th), and on the other hand, "trendy" places, often in the process of being gentrified, as with the Social Club (9th) or la Flèche d'Or (20th). Most parties that take place regularly take place in gentrified areas such as Bastille or the newly developed ZAC Rive gauche (13th). Some take place close to the Marais, sometimes in a gay night-club (Le Tango, les Bains Douches)<sup>14</sup>, and several seem driven by a desire to access "posh" areas. The organizer of Primanotte emphasizes the quest for "beautiful venues" and argues that some women want to meet in exclusive settings that are not tainted by their association with homosexuality. This argument has multiple consequences, not least because it challenges pre-conceptions about urban spaces and spatial practices. Such parties contribute to defy lesbian spatial and social invisibility by allowing lesbian appropriation, even if it is only fleeting, of symbolic places of ostentatious consumption. This should prompt us to rethink assumptions about the nature of urban "territories", continuous, visible areas that conform to traditional theories of urban space, on the one hand, but also invisible networks, diffuse and ephemeral which criss-cross cities and displace traditional theories, on the other.

Itinerant and ephemeral though they may be, these parties can attract as many as 400 to 700 women, depending on the capacity of the venue, according to organizers. The great success encountered by these parties challenges assumptions frequently formulated about lesbians' tendency not to go out, either for financial reasons or because of their gendered dispositions. It

<sup>14</sup> The Babydoll series of parties has an interesting itinerary: it was first created in 2007, and took place on a weekly basis at a venue in the rue Saint-Martin (4th arrondissement), west of the Marais, close to two lesbian bars. It was elected best LGBT party of the year in 2008 by the readers of the homosexual journal *Têtu*, and then given access in 2009 to the famous homosexual club les Bains Douches (3rd arrondissement). Subsequently, it became a monthly, itinerant event, which occasionally takes place in prestigious places such as Régine's close to the Champs-Élysées (8th).

shows that there is an unstoked demand for outings in Paris, and in particular for night-clubs, and that lesbians have the creative resources to compensate for the lack of commercial supply.

#### **4. Female homosexuality and the Marais: location strategies**

The location of lesbian businesses and parties is organized by networks and not by territories, therefore the territorial dimension of the Marais is not very influential. When considering the arguments of managers and organizers in the light of our own experiences and of the existing literature (Binnie et Valentine, 1999 ; Pritchard et al., 2002, Cieri, 2003 ; Podmore, 2006), three major aspects stand out.

##### **A partial sharing of space in the Marais : close but no too close**

Being close to the Marais is often seen as an advantage for the location of a bar. It is a central area, and attractive given its association with homosexuality. This guarantees a degree of safety: it is safer to open a lesbian bar, and homosexuals, both men and women, feel safer in the area (Cattan et Leroy, 2010). From a purely economic point of view, the specialization of the Marais guarantees the business will benefit from economies of agglomeration.

However, according to the women we interviewed, masculine hegemony on the Marais is an incentive to stay on the margins. A location that is in-between, neither central nor external, allows lesbian bars to exist while not being too exposed. In the Bastille area, the Scandalo was located next to a gay club, rue Keller, during the 1990s. Its manager subsequently moved to the Marais with Les Scandaleuses, rue des Ecouffes. In both these streets, the bar took part in a broader process of commercial renewal and of gentrification of the area.

The partial coexistence of lesbians and gays in the Marais is particularly visible during the evening that follows the Marche des fiertés LGBT. On that evening, a crowd of male and female homosexuals moves around the streets of the Marais, overflowing from the bars. However, its distribution is all but haphazard. Men occupy the central streets, rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie and streets nearby, while women remain in peripheral rue des Écouffes and streets nearby, where thousands of women, and practically no men, are to be seen. Lesbians are present in bars open to all. But that visibility is fleeting, very localized and peripheral, compared to what gay men are likely to find in the Marais all year long.

##### **Avoidance**

If lesbians bars seem attracted by the Marais, parties have more flexibility for their venues and organizers often say they avoid the Marais.

Several reasons are given for avoiding it. While central for homosexuals, the Marais attracts a variety of people, families or tourists, which implies there is a risk for lesbians to be spotted there by their colleagues or their boss. Personal visibility is not always desirable, as it is difficult to come out as a lesbian, and there may be a degree of interiorization of lesbophobia by lesbians themselves, who would rather not be identified as lesbian. The Marais is also avoided because it is perceived as too gay, and too masculine. Women-only parties tend to take place elsewhere. The very image of a homosexual territory can be evocative of a "ghetto" and be rejected. As is the case for gay men, some lesbians claim to be "outside the ghetto" or "outside the milieu" and party organizers who want to attract them take care to distance their image from the Marais. According to the 2008 survey on lesbophobia (mentioned above, note 11), this distance from the "milieu" (or "in-group"), which is common, up to a point, to any social group, can be interpreted in several ways: it could result from interiorized lesbophobia, or from a rejection of the caricatural images of lesbians (butch lesbians or "dykes") and of the Marais.

### **Ignoring the Marais**

But rather than an actual rejection of the Marais, it may be that the distance taken by lesbian parties merely reflects an ability to penetrate a diversity of places, throughout the city, and in particular the most valued in symbolic terms. Organizers emphasize the quality of the venues and the areas in which the parties take place: "I believe in securing beautiful venues for women", one of them told us, "the aim is for women to be proud of being in a nice place where they will be lavishly received". There are two possible interpretations to this: it may be a bourgeois perspective, clearly different from the counter-culture of night-life and electronic music, or it could be a transgressive way of ensuring lesbians, regardless of their background, have access to bourgeois venues they would normally be excluded from.

There is a long tradition of lesbian partying in famous and exclusive bars and clubs, in particular on the Left Bank. While historically, in the late 19th century, Pigalle was the first area associated with lesbian and homosexual visibility generally (Albert, 2006), close to places of prostitution as in many large cities, society lesbians would meet in salons of the Left Bank, as for instance that of Nathalie Clifford Barney, an American known as "l'Amazone": writers such as Renée Vivien, Colette and Mathilde de Morny would meet there in the early 20th century, before Djuna Barnes in the 1920s, Radclyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein in the 1930s. The persistence of lesbian parties on the Left Bank, and more generally in posh areas of the city, testifies to autonomous spatial dynamics which differentiate lesbians from gays, and within which the Marais has no part.

### **Conclusion : lesbian invisibility and right to the city**

The specific point at which spatial justice meets lesbian partying is the issue of right to the city, defined by Henri Lefebvre as a right to urban centrality (Lefebvre, 1968). The existence of places for lesbians to meet and party is both of material and symbolic importance, as a condition to experience fully one's sexual identity, by meeting peers, but also as a condition to be visible in the city, and therefore in society.

Based on a survey and mapping of lesbian businesses and parties since the 1970s, this paper tends to show that lesbian centralities are either ephemeral or invisible, and sometimes both. Their precarious existence relies on the will of a small number of people. They are also rendered more precarious by the fact that many lesbian parties cease to be women-only.

Lesbians' visibility in the city does not match gay men's, but they can boast of alternative territorialities, as exemplified in particular by itinerant parties. Ephemeral centralities, for one night, or a series of one-off events, nevertheless contribute to specific forms of urbanity. They give places of reference for lesbians and allow for the construction of lesbian identities, thus contributing to the creation of a lesbian "community" of sorts, fragmented and complex as it may be. Though they are not identifiable on the phone-book or on a map of Paris, lesbian parties construct a network of places through which lesbians can negotiate their access to the city, both in posh areas of the West of Paris and on the frontline of gentrification, extending way beyond the homosexual "territory" of the Marais.

Lesbian businesses are merely the emerged part of an iceberg that, at least in the case of Paris, remains largely unexplored: we have attempted to start this exploration and hope it will result in further research on lesbian visibility in the city.

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