

Let's Party! A Sense of 'Imagined Community' at Women-Only Parties in Budapest

**By
Szandra Gonzalez**

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Supervisor: Eszter Timár

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring a specific environment: women-only spaces where nightlife socialization in Budapest takes place. Empirical research was completed through participant observation for a period of five months at two specific recurring events and over a dozen in-depth interviews with partygoers. These events were the monthly Ösztrösökk parties and the weekly “ladies night” held at the gay nightclub Revans until April of 2009.

Though many elements were researched, this study focuses on the creation of ‘lifeworlds’ within a very diverse group of women. I will argue that while lesbians in Budapest come from very different social backgrounds and self-categorizations (such as ‘dyke,’ ‘femme,’ ‘butch’ and ‘elite’) and the different spaces researched call for different social classes, there is still an “imagined community” created at these events based on an individual need of belonging and identity-construction.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

It is a Saturday night around 11 p.m. and we are finally on our way. I see a few girls in the tram, all dressed similarly: baggy pants, short spiky hair, tongue piercing, ring on their thumb, text with sexual innuendo printed on a t-shirt and a necklace or wristband with subtle rainbow colors... My friends and I look at each other and we start giggling: we are all definitely going to the same place. Though the rest of the passengers have no idea what the laughs are about, we all recognize each other and smile with complicity. We arrive at our stop, get off, and all follow the same direction.

According to Béres-Deák, “lesbians are [a] denied culture in Hungary: in the media, most often they are shown as individuals, living exactly the same way as heterosexuals except for their sexual practices.”¹ Indeed, though lesbians today are more visible than ever, lesbian communities are importantly absent from Hungarian social research, as most of the studies focus on sexuality rather than any kind of subcultural or community value.

If one walks downtown Budapest, mainly near Oktogon and Nyugati, some subcultural elements are more and more visible, such as sex shops, gay clubs, gay cafés, and gay clothing stores. Even though such spaces are only noticeable to those who know what to look for, they are additionally prominently male-dominated.

¹ Rita Béres-Deák, “Style and Identity in a Lesbian Community in Budapest” (Master’s Thesis, Central European University, 2002), 1.

Spaces targeted towards lesbians are rather exceptional and sporadic. The same situation is seen regarding nightlife gatherings. While gay clubs do exist in Budapest, not a single lesbian club has ever existed in the Central and Eastern European country. Nonetheless, there have been sporadic women-only parties organized, which have also gained an increasing popularity.

As a regular attendee of such parties, many factors caught my attention while being present, thus creating numerous questions: what brings all of the apparently completely different women together? How come these parties have been attracting the same people over and over again, year after year? What do such events represent for this specific cluster? And more importantly, can we consider such diverse collective of partygoers a community?

This thesis consists of seven chapters and an appendix. In chapter two, I describe the general literature regarding the three principal topics of my analysis: subculture, communities and queer club space. After creating a theoretical framework, I explain the methodology used in this research (interviews and participant observation) as well as the difficulties and limitation I have encountered throughout this process. Chapter four focuses on the women-only club spaces available in Budapest as environments of identity-reinforcement and performance, thus arguing for their importance to the building of ‘lifeworlds.’ The following section, chapter 5, illustrates the different subgroups of women attending the studied parties, in order to claim for the diversity in performances seen at such events. Finally, chapter 6 analyzes the ‘cultureness’ element of these events through the concept of *habitus* and the fight factor, thus arguing once more for the importance of such spaces for the creation and development of ‘imagined communities.’

Though there has been some previous research completed around lesbian communities, the focus has usually been, as previously stated, sexuality and/or activism. No study has ever been carried out regarding these monthly or weekly lesbian-attracting events.

My paper is mainly based on empirical research, for which it is also more descriptive than analytical. I hope that this work will not only be able to partially fill a gap in the local literature but also provide more visibility for the lesbian communities in Hungary, which is of importance not only for the group's growth and acceptance within the larger Hungarian society but for anthropological studies as well.

Chapter 2

SUBCULTURES, COMMUNITIES AND QUEER CLUB SPACES: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Queers have very often been denied access to certain spaces such as church, state, media and private institutions. Many people who consider themselves queer have found themselves worldless, thus having to recreate their own spaces and maps, without the support of more traditional organisms, consequently giving such groups a status of ‘subculture.’ In Hungary, this is the exact case of the Budapest lesbian ‘community,’ which has had very little spaces for night time social gatherings, thus limiting its possibilities for growth and unity in such informal setting.

Though there are many elements that could be discussed within this nightclub environment such as style, dancing, bodies, music, drugs, sex, alcohol, identity and friendship, I will focus on the use of space as a claim and construction of a specific identity as well as performance, and therefore of creation of ‘lifeworlds’ or even, to a certain extent, of a community.

In this chapter, I will discuss the literature regarding the most crucial concepts and theories prior to my analysis: subculture, community and queer club space in order to show the importance of clubs for community and identity building.

Before beginning the review of the literature, I would like to first clarify the basic concepts used, such as ‘queer’ and ‘lifeworlds.’

As giving a specific definition would be rather problematic, I will use ‘queer’ as encompassing all LGBT groups (that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)

unless stated otherwise, in the sense of self-empowerment this word has been given in the last century through its re-appropriation by the LGBT community. When saying ‘queer,’ I refer to the crossing of boundaries between the private and the public, the real and the imaginary, the ordinary and the exotic. I will not be employing ‘queer’ as a tactic to deconstruct heteronormativity but rather as a creation of a necessary ‘lifeworld’ where heterosexuality is no longer the center.

Consequently, by ‘lifeworld’ I mean a self-created environment by those who live in it, containing many different practices, experiences and voices. In their essay *Sex in Public*, the authors Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that ‘lifeworld’ is different from the term ‘community’ as it “necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.”² Therefore, when speaking of ‘lifeworlds,’ I will be using such definition: an environment that cannot be defined but that regroups people through their lived experiences and opinions.

2.1. Subculture

In this section, I will briefly overview the term ‘subculture’ in order to discuss whether or not we can argue for the existence of a specific gay or lesbian subculture.

2.1.1. ‘Subculture’ as a concept

The concept ‘subculture’ was first established by the anthropologist Ralph Linton in 1936, applying to “ethnic, regional, economic and social groups showing special worlds of interest and identification which serve to distinguish them within the larger culture or society,” thus adding that it “differs from a category of people or a

² Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, „Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 558.

common behavior by virtue of its heightened sharing of values, artifacts and identification.”³ Furthermore, according to Hebdige, a subcultural group brings together “like-minded individuals who feel neglected by societal standards and allows them to develop a sense of identity.”⁴ Due to its minority status as well as its opposition to the normative cluster, such groups are constantly contesting the dominant group’s definition of them.⁵ Additionally, Donaldson argues that the greater the separation between the normative society and the subgroup, the more independent and the stronger the identification of such cluster will be, whereas the more accepting the mainstream is of the subgroup, the weaker the latter becomes before disappearing into the larger society.⁶ Based on such illustrations of the term, the question arises whether one could argue for the existence of a specific LGBT subculture?

2.1.2. An LGBT subculture

Based on the definition given above, one can affirm that the LGBT population does have certain elements of subculture. For instance, they do distinguish themselves from heteronormative society because of their sexual orientation and due to the limited number of human rights such community has in the great majority of countries. As an illustration, even in 2009, countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, Mauritania, Iran, Syria and Yemen, condemned homosexuality as illegal and punished it with the death penalty.⁷ Consequently, there is a sense of unity and common identification within such group, though each of them (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender) does live a very different day-to-day reality. Indeed, many theorists

³ Cited in William Percey, „Subculture,” Wayne R. Dynes, ed. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* 2 (New York: Garland, 1990), 1257.

⁴ Cited in Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 206.

⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁶ Cited in Stephen Donaldson, „Subculture,” Wayne R. Dynes, ed. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* 2 (New York: Garland, 1990), 1258.

⁷ Amnesty International USA, „Interactive Map of Legal Status of LGBT people in 2009,” <http://www.amnestyusa.org/lgbt-human-rights/country-information/page.do?id=1106576> [Accessed on May 18, 2009].

agree that since the twentieth century, gays and lesbians (mainly those living in urban areas) have created very distinctive ways of life for themselves, which go much further than their simple sexual preferences. Kennedy and Davis, while doing fourteen years of research on lesbian bar communities, already observed different norms of behaviors and networking patterns compared to the heteronormative ones in the mid-twentieth century.⁸ Furthermore, Herdt and Boxer, based on their research conducted in the United States, find the fact that many authors do not even recognize the existence of non-sexual cultural differences in the lives of homosexual men and women as a form of discrimination:

Some observers have seen only the sexual or else what is purely peripheral to American culture. Instead of a gay culture, they find only a gay “enclave,” “lifestyle” or “subgroup,” that is, only spurious conceptions of gay and lesbian relationships and lives. Is it legitimate, by contrast, to speak of a “women’s culture” or an “Afro-American culture” in America? Both the legitimacy and the authenticity of gay lives and thereby called into question.⁹

However, the idea of *a* homosexual subculture is still problematic. Though most of the authors cited consider gay and lesbian subcultures as separate, there may even be further separations within such groups based on characteristics such as class, age or race. Donaldson argues that referring to one single unified homosexual subculture can be considered valid when emphasizing its social separation from heteronormative society but more importantly, “it seems more helpful to think of the gay and lesbian social worlds as collections of subcultures or subsubcultures.”¹⁰ There are other terms that could perhaps better fit this conception when looking for a specific description of the LGBT community as a whole. One of them, ‘counterculture,’ is defined as “a culture, as that of many young people of the 1960s and 1970s [i.e. as the hippies], manifested by a lifestyle that is opposed to the

⁸ Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slipper of Gold* (London-New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

⁹ Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer, ‘Introduction: Culture, History and Life Course of Gay Men,’ Gilbert Herdt, ed. *Gay Culture in America: Essays from the Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 3-8.

¹⁰ Donaldson, 1258-59.

prevailing culture”¹¹ and considered to be the cultural equivalent of political opposition. Nonetheless, for the specific purposes of this thesis, I will use, as proposed by Donaldson, the term ‘subculture’ and ‘subsubculture’ in order to identify the lesbian population and its social world that is the women-only nightlife of Budapest.

2.2. Community

As we have seen so far, the LGBT cluster can, as a whole, be called a subculture, thus gathering many subsubcultures within. But when does a subculture become a community? Is there such a thing as *a* global LGBT community? What does the term ‘lesbian community’ represent for its members? And most importantly, is there a lesbian community in Budapest? In the following section, these questions will be answered in order to claim for the existence of several lesbian ‘imagined communities’ within the limits of Budapest.

2.2.1. The concept of “community”

In social sciences, the term “community” has produced countless debates, for which one specific definition still does not exist. By the mid 1950s alone, there were 95 exact definitions of the word.¹² According to German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, “community” can be best defined as a group organized around common values and social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household.¹³

Based on this definition, we can already see how the concept of *one* LGBT community may be problematic or even unrealistic. Perhaps a more appropriate term

¹¹ Victoria Neufeldt (1996). *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (USA: MacMillan, 1996), 317.

¹² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

¹³ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), 22.

would be what Weston calls to “gay imaginary,”¹⁴ based on Benedict Anderson’s definition of an “imagined community:” a local, regional, national and global constellation of spaces where community is a dreamed but emotional reality where “members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each they carry the image of communion.”¹⁵ Though physically impossible, many individuals who cannot find their own space within heteronormative society do require some kind of emotional union within a larger group as part of their identity.

Perhaps *the* LGBT community does not exist as a global homogenous group *per se* (something that could be argued, very generally, for Jews and Armenians for example) but, as already stated, there are smaller subsubcultures, which do have the characteristics and the tools to fulfill the individual needs of its members as well as the group’s.

2.2.2. Lesbian communities

The specific term ‘lesbian community’ can be understood in numerous ways. It can be based on geographical location,¹⁶ friendship networks¹⁷ or comparable lifestyles¹⁸ and can also be recognized as an “imagined community”¹⁹ or global lesbian Nation.²⁰ Nonetheless, as Krieger states, a homosexual community can actually reflect a combination of both. She describes this concept where membership is based on “community identity as women, actual or potential sexual relationships

¹⁴ Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 46.

¹⁵ Anderson, 15.

¹⁶ Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Firs Island. Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

¹⁷ William Simon and John Hagnon, *Sexual Conduct: the Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (New Jersey: Aldine Transactions, 1973).

¹⁸ Kennedy and Davis

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁰ Béres-Deák, 19.

with women and a common ideology of feminist commitment.”²¹ Among these, only the second needs a physical friendship network whereas the others could potentially connect all of the feminist lesbians around the globe through some kind of virtual sisterhood.

Also, communities achieve various important functions in the lives of their members. Krieger describes her studied community as giving its members “a group identity [...] support for their lifestyle and a sense of security and affirmation; for some people who didn’t have a strong identity other than the fact of their lesbianism, it was crucial.”²² Simon and Gagnon state that such lesbian communities provide support for individual’s identities, thus creating a language and ideology for self-acceptance, as well as an opportunity to find a partner.²³ Indeed, in Béres-Deák’s research regarding a lesbian community in Budapest, one of her interviewees “describes the time before finding a community as ‘thousand years’ loneliness.”²⁴

According to Turner, a lesbian community, whether virtual or not, can also serve as a *communitas* for its members. He argues that marginal people are never completely secluded from society. Actually, they can be part of several groups at once, within which they can also become dominant. Also, groups that are in opposition to the mainstream follow a structure of *communitas*, where social status disappears leading to a feeling of greater social equality and solidarity, and individuals are accepted in their totality, as who they are.²⁵ Indeed, in many studies, lesbians felt that their local community was able to attain such principle; that it was a place where they could truly be themselves and did not have to hide part of their

²¹ Krieger, xiii.

²² Ibid., 8.

²³ Simon and Gagnon, 272.

²⁴ Béres-Deák, 21.

²⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (New Jersey: Aldine Transactions, 1969).

personality.²⁶ Nonetheless, as Krieger points out, community membership can also constitute a threat to personal boundaries and individuality, due to an “inner conflict between the desire of being accepted as unique and the wish to be similar to others.”²⁷ Indeed, there are many forms of exclusion and to certain degree exclusivity within lesbian communities, mainly in regards to bisexuals.²⁸

As we have seen so far, lesbian communities, though not always as inclusive as believed to be, are mainly formed for safety, as support groups against homophobia developed around common lived subcultural experiences, which Kennedy and Davis call a “culture of survival and resistance.”²⁹

In the following section, I will give a brief historical background on lesbian communities in Hungary, which were built based on these exact same safety and opposition backgrounds.

2.2.3. Lesbian communities in Hungary

Very little information is known about lesbian communities in Hungary before the political transition of 1989. Though a handful of lesbians participate in the Hungarian Feminist Movement during the early 20th century, most people are unaware of any public or political lesbian activity for more than half a century.³⁰ The earliest information comes from the 1970s and 1980s when groups of lesbians held parties at the Budapest Ipoly Cinema (rented by a lesbian), but such events were only accessible to a very select group of women.³¹ Right before the transitional period,

²⁶ Béres-Deák, 22 and Krieger, 12.

²⁷ Krieger cited in Béres-Deák, 22.

²⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁹ Kennedy and Davis, xv.

³⁰ Beata Sándor's overview of lesbian history does not mention anything between the 1910s and the 1990s. [Beata Sándor, „Constantly Rewriting Herself: Lesbian Representations and Representations of Lesbians in Hungary from the 1980s to the present” (Master's Thesis, Central European University, 1999).

³¹ Béres-Deák, 25.

according to Agáta Gordon's novel *Kecskerúzs*,³² a small lesbian community was formed in the southern village of Szatina almost spontaneously.

In 1988, the first gay organization was founded in Hungary. Though supposedly an LGBT group, most of their activities were specifically targeted to gay men.³³ Though queer bars and nightclubs existed, no exclusively women-only space did. A few places had attempted to hold women-only parties but failed due to lack of customers.³⁴ The only space where lesbian worked separately from gay men was the Feminist Movement. Nonetheless, according to Béres-Deák, due to social prejudice coming from their "heterosexual sisters, many of them chose to remain in the closet."³⁵

In 1996, a group of lesbian feminists active in *Háttér*, nowadays the biggest LGBT organization in Hungary, decided to put together a photocopied newsletter called *Labrisz*, which could be found in university corridors and ordered by mail. Although only four issues ever appeared, its success was tremendous, leading its editors to begin organizing women-only social gatherings. In 1997, the first *Labrisz* evening took place in the offices of Óvegyelt, an HIV/AIDS prevention foundation, and was later moved to the offices of NaNe, a feminist organization.

Soon, more women-only oriented activities began to take shape. In 1999, they gay-friendly café *Eklektika* started organizing monthly parties for women followed by the otherwise 'straight' nightclub Metro 4. Additionally, with the rise of the Internet, many websites, forums and dating services began to appear. Self-defense classes, football games and other sport activities also took shape sporadically.

³² Agáta Gordon, *Kecskerúzs*. 1997.

³³ Béres-Deák, 25.

³⁴ Bea Sandor, pg. 42-43.

³⁵ Béres-Deák, 26.

By the end of 1999, the first Hungarian lesbian organization was founded, called the Labrisz Lesbian Association. This group began to be involved in many different activities such as school projects, book publishing, newsletters, film clubs and taking part in many political activities.³⁶ Their main activity remains the Labrisz evenings where groups of women gather in order to discuss topics usually related to LGBT Human Rights.

As we can see based on the variety and development of women-only activities where many different groups participate and organize such events and concepts, there is not only one large lesbian community in Hungary or in Budapest, but rather many smaller subgroups. The main differences between the activities and participants at these events would be the level of activism, if any. Indeed, as Kalocsai Csilla points out:

Non-political women are mostly concerned with meeting other lesbians, to develop and foster social ties among themselves, whereas politically conscious lesbian women strive for establishing a lesbian community, which could serve as a rallying point for lesbian politics.³⁷

Certainly, in Budapest alone, the more activist and political lesbians are usually part of the Labrisz evening or of other lesbian or feminist organizations whereas the more ‘social’ lesbians meet other women in many of the queer parties organized³⁸ (Ösztrösökk, Revans, boat parties, “Brutko Disko”³⁹ or any gay bar or nightclub), through lesbian or LGBT dating sites or portals (such as “Limonádé,” “Angyalkák” or “Pride.hu”) or other social networks.

One must not forget that there are also many LGBT groups and communities outside of the Hungarian capital where activities take place. Nonetheless, as much

³⁶ Labrisz, „History,” <http://www.labrisz.hu/tortenelem> [Accessed May 30, 2009].

³⁷ Csilla Kalocsai, „Conflicts Among Lesbian Representations in Hungary” (Master’s Thesis, Central European University, 1999), 103.

³⁸ Béres-Deák, 29.

³⁹ Queer parties organized every three months at different venues throughout Budapest

literature has been written on the more activism-related organisms, very little attention has been given to the women-only parties held in Budapest.

As we can see, LGBT-related communities and activities have been booming since the beginning of the 21st century. With the rise of the Internet, more services are offered for queer people, thus creating more spaces for them as well as developing networking systems. As far as social gatherings, though there is still no women-only bar existing in Budapest or in the rest of the country, more and more events are taking place, either weekly or monthly, allowing for the creation of many more subcultures of lesbians within the territory.

2.3. Queer spaces

In the following section, I will discuss the importance of queer space throughout the existence of queer clubs, as environments of identity building and ‘lifeworld’ creation, thus for the development of subculture.

2.3.1. Nightlife and queer clubs as ‘lifeworlds’ construction

With the continuously increasing proportion of people living in urban settings, a significant ratio is composed of young adults. For this, many cities around the world are reasserting themselves in order to meet such needs for consumption and entertainment.⁴⁰ Visiting pubs, bars and nightclubs is an important, sometimes even center element of young people’s lifestyle. The over 25 year-old ‘rave generation’ in both North America and Europe continues to visit clubs, for which “clubbing will remain as popular as it is now, and more sophisticated nightclubs will cater for die hard party animals in their thirties.”⁴¹ According to Collins, the phenomenon of ‘clubbing’ has also moved away from the more traditional nightclubs (which were

⁴⁰ Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, „Theorizing Urban Playscapes: Producing, Regulating and Consuming Youthful Nightlife City Spaces,” *Urban Studies* 1 (2002): 95-116.

⁴¹ Mintel, *Pre-family Leisure Trends* (London: Leisure Intelligence, 2000), 45.

characterized by violence and excess) towards the roots of the 'one-nation' dance, rave and drug cultures of the late 1980s and early 1990s⁴².

While the club scene has become much more diverse and split within smaller consumer groups, since the 1990s there has also been a clear distinction between underground and mainstream clubs⁴³ where queer nightclubs can be distinguished as being part of the latter due to their location, mainly within more 'traditional' societies where such clubs tend to be located in marginalized parts of the city.⁴⁴ As bars and pubs have transformed themselves from traditional ale-houses, bars and taverns to stylish cafés and hybrid bars and clubs, the experience and motivation for engaging in nightlife have also changed.⁴⁵ While extremely varied, the noticeable changes in this section of the entertainment sector mean that "music, socializing, atmosphere, dancing and lifestyle performance and distinction are now among the main motivations for the night out, alongside more traditional reasons such as letting go, courtship and seeking casual sex."⁴⁶ According to Holland, even though the creation of the 'night out' is still very much experimental and fragmented for young people, their market position and social identity continues to shape their experiences of nightlife.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Buckland argues for a less fragmented "night out." While experimental at many stages and depending on the age of the 'clubber,' minority groups go where they can feel 'at home,' at ease and not discriminated against. They go where they can meet other people such as themselves and where they can feel pleasure without being

⁴² Michael Collins, *Altered State: The Theory of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 56.

⁴³ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World Making* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Paul Chetterton and Robert Hollands, *Changing Our Toon: Youth, Nightlife and Urban Change in Newcastle* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ Paul Chetterton and Robert Hollands, *Urban Nightscapes: Youth, Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 75.

⁴⁷ Robert Holland, "Division in the Dark: Youth Cultures, Transitions and Segmented Consumption Spaces in the Night-time Economy," *Journal of Youth Studies* 5, no. 2 (2002): 153-73.

reprimanded. As she experimented firsthand in queer clubs, “the energy [she] shared burned bright from the fuel of knowing that this play was worked for against tough opposition and was achieved not only historically but night after night in clubs up and down the country in spite of the lack of social consensus about homosexuality.”⁴⁸

Though maybe underground for heteronormative society, queer nightclubs are an important part of the queer lifeworld as they create a safe environment for pleasure and constant identity creation and reaffirmation: “human action and interaction shaped clubs, and participants shaped themselves by going to them.”⁴⁹ Not only this but queer world-making (the making of ‘lifeworld’) is often based on a queer’s desire to connect with other queers. By being part of such spaces where gathering and bonding take place, there is also a much wider connection which, as already stated, Benedict Anderson calls “imagined community”: a global constellation of spaces where anonymous members feel connected to other members through the image of communion.⁵⁰ Though the club goers may not physically see their peers, they still imagine them and share a common vision of lifeworld construction. Perhaps stating an idea of a ‘queer community’ within the night scene would be very problematic and unrealistic, but such allusion to it can illustrate the desire for it, of belonging.

2.3.2. The importance of queer clubs: the case of New York City

As we have seen, the concept of nightlife has been evolving over the past thirty years or so, giving life to a new space for certain minorities to enjoy this newly-created concept of ‘clubbing.’ In the following section, I will give a historical background through the presentation of the case of queer clubs in New York City, in order to further illustrate the importance of such spaces for identity-construction and the feeling of belonging to a community.

⁴⁸ Buckland, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁰ Anderson, 15.

In her book *Impossible Dance*, author Fiona Buckland describes a so-called “emergency” for some queer lifeworlds; that is the rezoning of adult businesses in New York City.⁵¹ In 1994, the administration of the city under Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani proposed to regulate the zoning of “adult establishments.” According to such regulation, any establishment containing “adult” material or performances would have to relocate to a specific area which, obviously, would not only become less accessible to its customers but it would also constantly be under the watch of zoning and controlling laws. Queer spaces such as cafes, bookstores and clubs were radically changed, not only in location, but also in form and content when, in February of 1997, the highest State Court affirmed that such law was indeed constitutional. This meant that go-go dancers could only perform in establishments carrying a cabaret license and any public space where three or more clients would “move rhythmically” in an establishment without a dancing license constituted a violation.

It comes to no surprise that such rulings were disproportionately enforced in queer businesses in New York City and became part of an anti-gay political discourse. In ‘heterosexual’ clubs, there were usually no such go-go dancing acts (or only in strip clubs) and, as they were the norm, no excessive behavior was expected therefore much less inspections were carried out.⁵² As in mainstream media, queer clubs were represented as dangerous and rowdy places due to their excess of drug, sex and HIV infections, these generalizations of specific incidents and stereotypes negatively affected not only the public’s opinion on the LGBT community but also certain groups’ within the population regarding queer clubs, thus creating a very strong separation between mainstream/heteronormative and underground/queer clubs.

⁵¹ Buckland, 8-10.

⁵² Ibid., 11-12.

Furthermore, the authorities were not only using the control of space to monitor and restrain queers but also the control of the body and of pleasure. Such new environment had also very negative repercussions on the queer lifeworlds that had been constructed in such spaces. Clubs were no longer ‘safe’ as they were constantly being scrutinized by public law enforcement, which did not approve of such places. In the case of New York City, its queer clubs were and still are important not only for the constant construction of lifeworld and identities, but also because they are part of an important history as they were (more in the 1980s and 1990s than now) a center for queer socialization.

2.3.3. Queer clubs as identity-building environments

As stated above, queer clubs have become an important space for such group’s identity-building as the environment has been constructed as a reaffirmation of identities. By going to such places, the participants are stating that they are queer; that this is their own created space within a heteronormative society. According to Buckland⁵³:

Queer lifeworlds embodied utopic imagination and power whereby queerness occupied the center, in which the heteronormative couple was no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.

Based on such claim, we can state that queer clubs are not only a space of world-making, of belonging and of community-constructing but also of resistance to the norm, of the ‘outside world’. Therefore, queer clubs are also spaces for political discourse.

Nonetheless, as already affirmed previously, stating the existence of one specific and determined queer community within such spaces would be too problematic due to the lack of homogeneity of this group. Instead, in order to attempt to define the commonness and the world-making these club goers create, I will

⁵³ Buckland, 6.

employ the term “imagined community,” meaning a group of people with common interests or backgrounds that only exist in this specific space, which only exists within specific nights of the week when its members find each other. It is ‘imagined’ because such group is not entirely real as it is constructed differently: it is non-verbal, a community in the air, in the environment, in the movement on the dance floor, in the looks at the bar. This is an ‘imagined community’ which only exists within the four walls of the queer nightclubs through the complicity of its participants. But as such group only finds each other in such spaces; it is broken down once its members step out of it.

Queer clubs are also a “third space of recreation”⁵⁴ after the home and the workplace, where such world-making can be illustrated very well by the following example given by one of Buckland’s interviewees. Iain had been a regular clubber in the 1980s and had attended the funeral of a friend he had seen regularly in queer clubs. At the church, the two parts of his friend’s life were noticeably evident:

There were two separate sides of the church and we were shocked, we thought everyone knew him as we did. But he had a wife, and children and straight work colleagues and they all sat on one side and all the flaming queens sat on the other and we all just kind of stared at each other.⁵⁵

As we can see, the club world can sometimes (and very often) be completely separated from the other lifeworlds and spaces of the club goers’ lives. As living in a heteronormative world can be difficult for some queers, clubs offer them a separate space where they can be themselves and express their desires and sexualities without being judged for it. Therefore, queer clubs offer their participants a space for different realities, for queer social construction.

⁵⁴ Buckland, 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

As we have seen in this review of the literature, LGBT groups do form a specific subculture as they do not follow heteronormativity. Though most likely present in every geographical location, this “gay imaginary” is composed of several smaller communities which revolve around a common interest. In the case of Hungary, lesbian communities have fragmentally existed, usually around common interests such as feminism and activism, always remaining invisible next to certain larger groups.

Additionally, having a specific space for a community is also key for its growth and the identity-construction of its members, as we have seen in the case of New York City queer clubbing. In the case of Budapest, the “gay Mecca” of Hungary, no space exclusive to women-only socialization has yet been created.

Now that I have completed a review of the literature regarding subculture, community and queer space, as well as giving historical backgrounds about the lesbian special ‘situation’ in Budapest, I will begin a methodology of my research, followed by an analysis of my findings.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

In the following chapter, I will describe the methodology I have chosen for the purpose of this research. First, I will explain the process of conducting my study. Then, I will position myself as a researcher within the lesbian group studied. Finally, I will state some of the difficulties I have encountered throughout this development as well as a few limitations of this study.

3.1. Methodology selection and finding interviewees

The methodology used for the purpose of this study can be divided into two sections: primary and secondary data collection. Secondary data was collected in order to complete the theoretical framework in which to situate this research. For the secondary data collection section, a qualitative approach was chosen in the form of participant observation and in-depth interviews. I believe this to be the most appropriate method due to the topic and content of this work.

In a first instance, I conducted participant observation for a period of five months at both selected events: the monthly parties organized by Ösztrösökk and the Saturday gatherings held at the Revans nightclub. The selection criterion was rather simple: it had to be recurrent women-only parties within Budapest. I selected these two specific events as I had already participated in them prior, and these were the two particular parties that gave me the idea for this thesis topic. I firstly made sure that both organizers of these events were aware of my research, as I wanted to ensure no potential issue would surface at the venues. By participating at such events, I was also able to contact potential interviewees as well as observe, from an anthropological

point of view, the different social behaviors taking place. A similar approach was used by Fiona Buckland who conducted a study on the gay, lesbian and queer club culture of the 1990s in New York City. In her work, she conducted participant observation for an extended period of time and it was through such involvement that she was able to find her "informants," with whom she later conducted her interviews.⁵⁶

Secondly, I carried out in-depth interviews, "a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation,"⁵⁷ with both partygoers and organizers. As Reinharz points out, "interviews offer researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher,"⁵⁸ for which I chose this method as well as the best combination to my participant observation. Through this, I wanted to explore and better understand the realities of these women-only parties, their existence as well as their stories, from the points of view of both the attendees and the organizers. Overall, I conducted a total of sixteen in-depth interviews with partygoers as well as two formal interviews with the organizers of the Ösztrösökk parties, in addition to several shorter and informal interviews with the owner of Revans. The interviewees were selected, as previously stated, based on the participant observation I had already conducted. I chose people I had repeatedly seen at both venues, who seemed to belong to different groups of friends and had different physical and performance characteristics in order to have a more diverse and representative sample, as well as belonging to different age groups (the ages ranged from 19 to 35 years old, the

⁵⁶ Buckland, appendix A.

⁵⁷ Palea Neale. *Conducting In-Depth Interviews: a Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input* (Pathfinder International, 2006), 4.

⁵⁸ Susan Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

median age being 25). A snowball effect, where existing study subjects are used to recruit more subjects into the sample,⁵⁹ was not intended but became the natural way of participation in this study. Even though, at first, it was rather difficult to find participants for which I had to resource to my personal acquaintances, once I had conducted the first interview with a participant from outside my social group,⁶⁰ I was able to find many more. Even after my research period, a few partygoers were able to find my contact information and requested to be part of this thesis.

3.2. Conducting the interviews

All of the interviews were held separately, either at my house (for the first couple of interviews with acquaintances) or at cafés in different parts of Budapest. It was important to find a neutral place where the interviewees could feel safe and comfortable to talk about such women-only parties. I attempted to hold a few interviews at the venues but due to the loud noise and important amounts of alcohol consumption, I decided not to with one exception, which was the interview with the organizers. As they had very limited time available and they were always at the parties organized, we agreed that it would be much more convenient for both to complete the conversations at the venue itself.

Most of the interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes and were held in Hungarian. They were all tape-recorded and transcribed immediately afterwards as well as translated into English. Though I am rather fluent in Hungarian, many times, due to slang words being used, I had to ask for my interviewees to explain such terms, but overall, no language barrier existed. The interviews were based on a semi-structured set of questions [see Appendix A and B], which often ended with personal

⁵⁹ L.A. Goodman, "Snowball Sampling," *Annals of Mathematical Statistics* 32 (1961): 148-170.

⁶⁰ In this specific occasion, I bluntly approached the potential interviewee and asked her if she would like to be interviewed. Though she cancelled our interview four times in a row, once it was completed, three of her friends contacted me to be interviewed as well.

coming out stories (not part of this thesis) and discussions of other potential research topics.

The usage of pseudonyms is highly recommended in order to protect the informants, mainly in studies regarding gay and lesbian communities.⁶¹ In order to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees, I have interchanged their real names with common Hungarian names (and in one occasion, the name of a beer due to a specific request) they have either personally chosen or I have on their behalf, and kept all other personal information undisclosed. Even with the quotes used, I attempted to state as limited personal information as possible in order for their identities to remain anonymous, as many of them did not wished to be recognized neither by the wider public nor by the other members of this 'community.'

3.3. Insider/outsider position of the researcher

There has been a wide debate within the field of anthropology whether the position of an insider, when studying a specific community, is more favorable or not. When researching gay and lesbian groups specifically, there is a general claim that being an insider and belonging to the same population provides a better insight to community life, as well as the establishment of trustful relationships with the interviewees. Indeed, Béres-Deák, while conducting her research around the Labrisz (Hungarian Lesbian Organization) evenings, stated that "being an insider helped rather than hindered [her] research."⁶² Regarding this specific investigation, I would agree that being an insider was rather positive, but also brought in new limitations with this study (to be discussed in section 3.4). First, as I started attending the studied parties for personal reasons, I was able to form contacts informally and prior to the

⁶¹ Kennedy and Davis, 14-15.

⁶² Rita Béres- Deák, *Style and Identity in a Lesbian Community in Budapest* (Master's Thesis, Central European University, 2002), 16.

beginning of this study. For this, my informal relationship with the organizers of both events was also helpful and positive. Most importantly, I was able to conduct over a dozen interviews. In many occasions, when approaching people that I did not know personally, I was firstly asked if I was a lesbian. This question was always key for the informant to decide whether or not she would participate in this study, and to decide if she could trust me. By being approached as an insider of the community, these women felt safer to talk to me as I could also relate to their stories and opinions. They did not see me as a researcher but rather as a member of their network. The fact that even after my research period was over I was still being contacted for potential interviews showed that the respondents trusted me and felt that this was an interesting and/or important study where they wanted to voice their views.

3.4. Difficulties encountered and limitations

I encountered many difficulties while conducting my research. First, as I already mentioned, it was initially problematic to find interviewees as many initially regarded me as an outsider or, even though I explained them what the project was about and they agreed to meet in a first instance, they would be too skeptical or uncomfortable to give me an interview. This is why, in a few cases, the interviews were cancelled many times in a row in the last minute. Also, I had many obstacles with my contacts at Revans. I attend the events at that venue for a few months prior to scheduling a formal interview with the owner. A few days before it was supposed to take place, Revans closed its doors and the owner was unreachable as he had moved abroad. This is why I will be using the notes I kept regarding the earlier informal meetings I had with him, instead of direct quotes from an in-depth interview. Also, as the venue closed its doors,⁶³ I was not able to interview the performers, which I

⁶³ It is now also a gay club called "Glam" but holds men parties exclusively.

intended at the beginning of this project.

Furthermore, there are a few limitations to this study. Firstly and most importantly, due to lack of time and resources, I was not able to conduct interview neither with the entertainers at Revans (drag queens and erotic dancers) nor with more partygoers and follow-up interviews were not possible, for which I had to adapt my thesis accordingly. Also, when I was recruiting participants for this study, I believed I had been able to gather a rather diverse and representative group of party attendees. Unfortunately, I was mistaken. Out of sixteen interviews, fourteen were self-identified dykes, one was a self-identified bisexual and one gave me two contradictory answers regarding this question, for which I could not put her into any category. Due to this, the information I gathered about categories such as 'femme' and 'elite' lesbians is based purely on what the other partygoers thought (therefore on assumptions), and not from a personal point of view. Finally, the greatest limitation and/or difficulty of this study came with my position as an insider of such 'community.' By knowing many people, either personally or as acquaintances, sometimes I felt that some of the interviewees were answering what they expected to be my opinions (as I had had many informal conversations throughout my participant observation with all of my interviewees) rather than their own views. Also, by being a partygoer myself prior to this research and by having strong personal views and opinions as well, it was difficult at times to be completely neutral and not bias. But even with such important limitations and difficulties encountered, I am hoping this thesis will be able to bring in interesting perspectives as well as new concepts to the reader.

Chapter 4

WOMEN-ONLY CLUB SPACE

According to Buckland, queer club space is key to queer social construction, as it has always been one of the few safe places where such group could reinterpret the social world and where the oppressions of heteronormative society would no longer apply.⁶⁴ In the following chapter, I will describe and compare the two party venues chosen for this research: Ösztrösökk⁶⁵ and Revans. Then, I will claim for these two places to be spaces of identity reinforcement and performance, thus leading to the importance of such parties for lesbians⁶⁶ in Budapest.

4.1. Lesbian club space in Budapest

There have been many places for homosexuals to socialize within the Hungarian capital, such as the clubs Alibi, Capella and Alter Ego. Nonetheless, such spaces have been created mainly for males, allowing women to enter as well, but no exclusive women-only space has ever existed in Budapest. There are, however, a few clubs where “ladies night” have been created, but never as successfully and for as long of a period as the Ösztrösökk ones. In the following section, I will describe the birth of these monthly parties as well as one of its most recent competitors, Revans, in order to compare and contrast these two venues.

4.1.1. Ösztrösökk, the birth of a much needed space

⁶⁴ Buckland, 40-44.

⁶⁵ Though the Ösztrösökk parties have been changing venues almost yearly, throughout the research conducted, all but one party, the last one attended, were held at the K2 space, which is the one I will focus on in this thesis. For this, when stating “one” venue, I will be referring to the Ösztrösökk parties as a whole.

⁶⁶ In this section, the term lesbian encompasses all women attendees, even bisexuals and straight women, as lesbians compose the great majority of partygoers.

It all began around 2002, when the gay-friendly café Eklektika was holding monthly women-only parties. Ösztrösökk organizer Szilvi began DJ-ing at one of those parties and enjoyed it so much it became a monthly gig. In 2003, the Labrisz organization was looking for a place to hold a party, which was found at the Shokk Café. Szilvi and her friend Kriszta (who soon left the organizing team to follow other projects) were also spinning there. The party was such a success that the owner of the venue asked them to held even more parties:

Labrisz didn't want to have a party, but Kriszta and I thought we should do this as we had the opportunity. The next month we started with the Ösztrösökk parties and the rest is history.

(Szilvi, organizer of the Ösztrösökk parties)

This is also the reason for the name of Ösztro-shokk, with *Ösztro* referring to *estrogen* in Hungarian and *Sokk* because of the café. For the past six years, these monthly parties have become an important part of the local lesbian culture in the country due to their perseverance and success:

The first few times, we literally had these parties in such small rooms that only a few dozen people would fit. Then, the word began to spread and more and more people came. That's why we had to change venues all the time, to fit the people [...]. We grew pretty fast and now we usually average around 450-500 people. The most we had so far was 680 people at our pre-New Year's Eve party.

(Szilvi)

Nowadays, the parties are organized only by Szilvi and Juli (who became part of the project later on), two lesbians who consider these to be important events for the rest of the local community. Unfortunately, such parties can still only be organized as a hobby rather than as a profession.

Unfortunately, this is not big enough of a business to make a living. It takes a lot of time and energy, but we just really enjoy doing it.

(Juli, organizer of the Ösztrösökk parties)

Though still not sustainable, these mass-oriented lesbian parties *do* gather a lot of women due to their visibility and years of background. They have had many competitors throughout the years, but have been the only ones constantly attracting

women, while other organizers such as the Revans nightclub have rapidly felt the difficulties of this business.

4.1.2. Revans, the newest competition

In late October 2008, Revans, a gay nightclub that had come into existence only a few months prior, opened its doors for weekly women-only parties held every Saturday. The owner, a gay man himself, was constantly competing with the most successful gay nightclub of Budapest, called Alter Ego, which was located only one block away. For this, he decided to move to another direction, thus seeing a financial opportunity in lesbian parties. He therefore attempted to provide something the Ösztrösökk parties hadn't: a varied program for its guests. At first, drag shows were being held at midnight, as well as a karaoke room set up in one corners of the nightclub. A few weeks later, an "erotic show" was also introduced at 2 a.m., every single week.

At the beginning, these women-only parties were set to be very successful. Almost week after week, the place was literally filled with cues around the corner. Nonetheless, once a month, when the Ösztrösökk events would take place, Revans would become almost empty, with no more than four dozen attendees. Perhaps because almost the same shows were presented week after week, or because it only attracted one kind of clientele (more development in chapter 6) or even because the owner did not have more guidance but his own perspective for managing lesbian-oriented events, the club began its decline in January 2009. By then, the venue was rarely reaching half of its maximum capacity of 200 guests. Additionally, around that same time, the flyers changed from marketing "women-only parties" or "ladies night" to "women and their friends," in order to culminate as a space also allowing for heterosexual guests in April 2009:

I used to really like Revans [...] but then they started letting men in. I have nothing against gay men but they already have their own parties and it really bothered me having them there so I just stopped going. I prefer when these parties are only for women. It just makes me feel more comfortable.

(Dani)

Perhaps the decision the owner had to make in order to keep organizing parties for women (i.e. also allowing men in) thus reflecting the financial instability of his concept, was also the reason for its decline. Revans finally closed its doors in mid-April 2009.

4.1.3. Ösztrösökk vs. Revans

Based on the venues as well as on the services provided by Ösztrösökk and Revans, it would seem that these two places called for a completely different group of clientele. While the former one targeted masses of women, the latter focused on a more specific group within the subculture.

On the one hand, Revans was only able to hold 200 guests, as previously stated, due to safety regulations. Located downtown and possibly due to its rather small size, the presentation of the club was quite chic but very similar to its main competitor, Alter Ego. With welcoming drinks available during special nights (such as the Angyalkák night or the New Year's Eve party), three to four security guards checking identification at the door and two more working inside the club, all bartenders and waiters uniformed, *art déco* furniture, flat screen televisions, two bars, a waterfall in the unisex bathroom and very sexually-explicit paintings on the walls,⁶⁷ the nightclub could very well be characterized as fashion-forward and elegant. The entrance fee (rotating between 1300 and 1500 HUF) and the long list of cocktails and drinks, as well as their prices, also reflected the upscale feel of this venue. Even dress codes had to be followed.⁶⁸ Based on this, I can affirm that this venue was aiming at a

⁶⁷ A painting in one of the main walls of the nightclub represented a male-only orgy with dozens of bodies intertwined.

⁶⁸ In one occasion, one of my friends could not get in because she was wearing flip flops.

more specific crowd of women who would feel comfortable and at ease in such upscale environment.

On the other hand, throughout the participant observation period, the Ösztrösökk parties were mainly located at the K2 venue, an old warehouse in the South East of Budapest. The place could fit about 750 people but was never entirely crowded as it averaged about 450 attendees per occasion. Thus, the rather dark establishment was only decorated for specific themed nights such as Halloween or the Carnival. Additionally, it had two big dance floors set up (one retro and one ranging from electronic to Top 40) and a bar connecting both rooms, as well as smaller sectors where more ‘private’ gatherings took place. With two or three security guards located at the entrance, two bathrooms that ran out of toilet paper before midnight and a very short list of drinks available (cocktails were not offered, for example), K2 was mostly attractive because of its labyrinth-like space and its low entry fees (usually 1000 HUF). No dress code was required and even though the parties were supposed to be for 18 and over due to alcohol consumption, underage women were a regular part of these events. Furthermore, as a rather diverse group of attendees came monthly from all parts of the country specifically to attend such parties and due to the organizers’ choice of location as well as services available, I can state that these events targeted a mass of women rather than a fraction of them. For this, it is not surprising that these events have become the longest running women-only parties that have ever existed in Hungary.

As we have seen, both venues call for a different yet similar group of women. While Revans was a rather chic and fancy establishment targeting for chic and fancy guests, the Ösztrösökk parties targeted at the larger lesbian community within the country, in order to create a space where every attendee would find its place.

4.2. Spaces of identity-reinforcement and performance

As both these events were regularly being attended, either week after week or month after month, they also became an important space not only for safe social networking but also for identity-reinforcement and performance.

4.2.1. Safe space for lesbians

According to Hemmings, “queer spaces [...] are understood as spaces for both identity and survival, as spaces that allow queer identity to flourish in the relative safety of other queers.”⁶⁹ Indeed, by organizing women-only parties, these two venues were most importantly able to create a safe place for women to meet other women; a safe space for social gatherings where heteronormative rules did not apply. The following interviewee very well illustrates this feeling of safety:

I love going to these parties because I feel like I can really be myself. When I go to straight clubs, it is nice because you see different people but you always have to be a little bit careful [...]. But at these parties I can kiss my girlfriend when I want and not worry that I will get kicked out or that people will stare at me.

(Laura)

By being a subculture, homosexual behaviors are only accepted to a certain extent by heteronormative society. For this, as Laura commented, attending a non-homosexual venue also comes with risks of being stared at or even, in worst cases, verbally and/or physically abused. This is why, as already stated in the literature review, club spaces are specifically important for the queer community: because they offer a protected environment for leisure where, for a few hours, homophobia seems not to exist and where these women are able to articulate their sexual desires. Indeed, as Buckland states, “a queer club is a safe place, free of external and internal restrictions and oppressions they lived under outside.”⁷⁰

4.2.2. ‘Public’ spaces of performance

In her analysis on club culture, Sarah Thornton affirms that club space of any

⁶⁹ Hemmings, 46.

⁷⁰ Buckland, 50.

kind allows subcultures to reinterpret their social world.⁷¹ In the case of the women-only parties, this not only meant recreating a public space but also performing in it, thus reinforcing their identities as lesbians.

As already stated, by having very limited spaces for their social gatherings, lesbians have reappropriated these women-only parties in order to make them a sort of public space for social and sexual networking:

I don't think there is a common place where all the lesbians can meet [...] so the [parties] are somewhat like a "coming out" place for when you have a girlfriend. If you go there and you walk in hand by hand, you can be pretty sure that the next day, everyone will be talking about it.

(Erika)

Based on this statement, we can see the importance of such parties for its attendees. By knowing that their friends and networks will also be attending these events, they make sure there is a message coming across through their presence: who they are and whom they are with. In effect, such 'public sphere' is also used as a tool of identity-reinforcement where the attendees are showing other women they are part of this subculture.⁷²

Furthermore, by becoming a public environment for these specific lifeworld constructions, the Ösztrösökk and Revans parties are also spaces of performance. Indeed, Not only are queer spaces such as these venues key for meeting other women or, as one of the interviewees stated, "colleagues," but also for strengthening their identities and styles:

The most important thing at these parties is what you look like. I never wear the same clothes twice [...]. To be completely honest, I think I am a little bit dyke-ier when I dress up for these parties. I always wear pants, a [wife beater] and a button up shirt on top but I usually end up taking it off while I'm dancing. [...] I don't know why, but I like dressing up like Shane⁷³ when I go to these parties. I guess it gives me a little bit of confidence to have this style and I know people think of [Shane] when they look at me, which is what I want.

(Mari)

⁷¹ Thornton, 12.

⁷² The idea of 'community' within these spaces will be further developed in chapter 6.

⁷³ One of the main characters of the iconic lesbian television series "The L Word."

Identity, as we can see through this account, is very important at these events. The attendees seem to carefully choose whom they want to perform those nights (in this case, Mari enjoys performing a more dyke-looking version of her day-to-day self by attempting to reinterpret an iconic television character) and making sure others recognize such identifications as well. Additionally, by having a rather set and defined common conception of the model to follow, Mari suggests that her performing lesbian identity can only become reality in such specific venues instead of within heteronormative society. Or perhaps she feels as if such performance allows her to better fit within the community created around such parties.⁷⁴ Therefore, these women-only parties seem to have become a place where the attendees are able to be more 'gay,' where their styles and attitudes do not have to be stopped or refrained as they are in their own normative public sphere and where they feel like they belong.

Consequently, both weekly or monthly, these women remove themselves from a place of worldlessness to a space where they feel like they belong, and where they can be their true selves and produce perform themselves/ perform accordingly.

As we have seen in this chapter, women-only parties, by attracting a diverse or specific group of lesbians, have become not only a safe space for social and sexual networking but also of performance and identity-reinforcement. Indeed, "queer spaces enable people with marginalized (homo)sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Not knowing which self is the most 'real' (the day-to-day Mari or the dykier version of her), we can only make assumptions.

⁷⁵ Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter cited in Hemmings, 46.

Chapter 5

LESBIAN SUBGROUPS AT WOMEN-ONLY PARTIES

According to Kath Weston, “gay people” are depicted as “a constant ten percent of humanity naturaliz[ing] the imagined gay community by rendering ‘it’ susceptible to identification, qualification and special location.”⁷⁶ Indeed, as already supported in the literature review, there is a general misconception mainly coming from heteronormative society to call for the existence of ‘the’ gay/queer/lesbian community. Rather, there are many subgroups existing within a specific space, thus constructing a non-homogenous ‘gay imaginary.’ This can be seen within the women-only nightlife environment of Budapest where the clubs serve as spaces for individual performance and identity-construction.

While conducting the interviews for this research, many sub-topics became recurrent such as categorizations when the interviewees were asked to describe the other women attendees. From such groups, there were four units of lesbians that seemed to be the most well known and generally agreed upon, as well as one non-lesbian group. These were: ‘butch’, ‘dyke’, ‘femme’ and ‘elite’ and bisexuals.⁷⁷ In the following section, I will describe each of these terms of performance individually in order to determine which factors reveal such categories of identity,⁷⁸ as well as the

⁷⁶ Weston, 34-35.

⁷⁷ The terms used here in English are the exact same terms vocalized by the interviewees.

⁷⁸ I would like to remark that even though characterizations were not part of the question of description, all the interviewees cited some version of the categories about to be described, thus showing the importance of labels within such environment.

relationship between such groups in order to state whether or not we can claim for the existence of heterogeneity within this specific subculture.⁷⁹

5.1. The ‘dyke’ lesbians

The first category of lesbians to be discussed in this paper is the so-called ‘dyke’ lesbian. This, based on the results of the interviews, seems to be the most accepted and normative group of the researched space. Indeed, 16 out of 19 of the interviewees self-identified as ‘dyke’ and not as ‘butch’ or ‘femme,’ thus giving such term a sense of general approval.

You then have the dykes, who have a tomboy-ish style but you can still tell they are girls. When I go to these parties for example, mainly among the younger crowd, you can see the dykes with the styles like skateboarders, EMOs, etc. They are the ones with either really short hair, usually in some kind of Mohawk, or the semi-long straight hair on their face and tons of piercings. But you also have older dykes, the ones that dress kind of boyish but you can still tell they are women because of their face and their movements.

(Dóri)

As we can see through this statement, within this group, we can find the boy-looking females who define the mass of the party. At the same time, they appear to be what is expected from a lesbian identity: to look masculine with a certain degree of femininity.

According to Kristin Esterberg, when writing about ‘dyke potential’ (based on lesbian appearance), “to be a lesbian is to be coded as not feminine- but masculine, one of the guys.”⁸⁰ I can only partially agree with this statement. On the one hand, it is true for the parties studied that to be a lesbian is to perform masculinity. On the other hand, though trying to be masculine, I do not believe these women are attempting to be “one of the guys” (as perhaps the butch lesbians to be described in section 5.3. would better fit such description) but rather, to a certain extent, to be androgynous:

⁷⁹ The characteristics described in this chapter were taken as belonging to both party venues.

⁸⁰ Kristin Esterberg, *Lesbian and Bisexual Identities: Constructing Communities, Constructing Selves* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 90.

masculine but feminine; both but neither. Not only is this group the great majority at the parties but with this, they also seem to illustrate what a lesbian is supposed to be and to look-like since performance is what determines identity in this environment. According to Esterberg, the women attending such events indeed participate in a collective framing of lesbian presence,⁸¹ which in this case relies heavily in a coding of lesbian identity as a dyke.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that most of the interviewees self-identified as dykes. Based on this, it seems as if being such would give a person the freedom to be neither masculine nor feminine and therefore locating herself in the middle of this locally constructed 'lesbian spectrum,' where both ends would be illustrated by the categories of 'butch' and 'femme.' Even though these self-identified dykes recognized others' performances as extremists based on the scale, they did not recognize their own as belonging to such:

I am definitely a dyke. I mean, I never wear skirts. I used to wear skirts a few years ago but not anymore. I like to wear pants and I like women who wear skirts. [...] But I am not a butch because I don't really look like a guy or act like one.

(Eszter)

As we can see from this example, Eszter recognizes femme and butch lesbians based on their performances and bases her own dyke performance specifically on her outfit (i.e. the fact that she no longer wears skirts), thus trying to stay away from what is culturally approved femininity but not too far enough as to be part of an extreme category. She also seems to be much more comfortable with embracing this normative term than the other two. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, by already being part of a subculture, it is easier to fit into the normative group within such, than into another minority group.

⁸¹ Esterberg, 83.

As we have seen, the category of dyke seems to be the normative characterization within the women-only parties in Budapest, not only giving it a sense of acceptance but also of positivity. In the following two categories of ‘femme’ and ‘butch,’ we will see how these terms have a rather pejorative meaning compared to the one of ‘dyke.’

5.2. The ‘femme’ lesbians

The second most commonly identified group is the ‘femme’ lesbians, term meaning “woman” in French and arriving to Hungary as the complimentary term for the English word ‘butch.’ These women usually dress and act, therefore perform, what society sees as feminine. Though with very clear gender identification and also apparently considered rather normative due to the high number of them attending the club space researched, this group still faces many forms of discrimination and questioning of their “true” identity, as we can see from the following quote:

Then you have the femme lesbians who are obviously very feminine, but most of them are actually bisexual according to my personal experience.

(Dóri)

As the quote from Dóri illustrates, these women, by performing what heteronormative society states a woman should look and be like, are constantly having to reinforce their lesbian identity towards the rest of the lesbian community. They are too often considered and treated as bisexuals, who are themselves considered as outsiders for being non-lesbians. They are, as the butch group, considered to be at one extreme of the local ‘lesbian spectrum.’ Certainly, according to Halberstam,

The notion of female femininity as derivative [...] echoes the wholesale depiction of lesbianism as epitomizing the derivative of unauthentic. According to such logic, butch lesbians are supposedly imitating men [and] femme lesbians are wannabe drag queens, or else they are accused of blending seamlessly into heterosexual femininity.⁸²

⁸² Halberstam, 240.

Esterberg, who conducted an in-depth study regarding lesbian and bisexual identities, further states that “in general, women who were perceived to be in some sense masculine were more likely to be perceived as lesbians, whether or not they actually were.”⁸³ Indeed, as already stated in the previous section, normative lesbians are expected not to follow the heteronormative codes of femininity, for which femme lesbians are believed to be too ‘heterosexual looking’ (i.e. too feminine looking) and therefore not subversive enough to be what seems to be perceived as ‘real lesbians.’ They are considered to be able to pass for a straight woman, thus following the patriarchal rules and the advantages of heteronormative society. For this, they must constantly reinforce their self-identification as homosexuals, mainly at these Budapest parties where, as the quote from the partygoer illustrated, they are believed to be bisexuals in disguise due to their higher degree of femininity, meaning not lesbian *enough*.

Nonetheless, though these women are considered too feminine and always seen with a certain degree of untrustworthiness, they are still rather normative as far as quantity at the parties attended. They appear to be, simply based on performance, at least one third of the participants and were also the most sought-after group when discussing intimate relationships:

When I don’t have a girlfriend, I go to these parties to find one. But I don’t like the butch lesbians, they are too masculine for me. I like women. I like women who act and dress like women. I want to be with a woman, that’s why I’m a lesbian! I want to be with a woman who wears a skirt because I am the one wearing the pants.

(Eszter)

Indeed, throughout my participant observation, the most present couples were femme/butch or femme/dyke. Dyke/dyke was also seen at parties though less often, while butch/butch was rarely seen at such parties.

⁸³ Esterberg, 80.

As we have seen so far, this category of lesbians is rather popular for coupling, but for the same reasons their lesbianism is questioned; due to their high level of femininity compared to the rest of the partygoers.

5.3. The ‘butch’ lesbians

When talking about the different ‘groups’ of lesbians that can be seen in the Budapest nightlife women-only scene, the first cluster verbalized was always the one of the ‘butch’ lesbians. Though a rather problematic and ever changing term in today’s literature, its meaning is rather stereotypical and generalized for the interviewed population, as we can see below.

I think there are different categories of lesbians, and I think here we have kind of the same meaning as in the UK [*the interviewer lived many years in the UK*]: you have the butch lesbians that you can easily recognize because their every move and their physical appearance is just like a man’s.

(Ági)

These are seen as women who dress and act like men, and who therefore are believed to act more aggressively and ‘masculinely’ at such parties. Such forceful-perceived attitude is perhaps what gives them such a negative opinion from the rest of the attendees. Indeed, most of the interviewees considered these butch lesbians to be “too aggressive” or “too confident and constantly attempting to define themselves” and their masculine roles, in order to prove that they are the ones in control compared to the more feminine crowd.

Halberstam argues that butch identity has always had a problematic relationship with notions of lesbian identity, community and visibility. "Because so little has been written about female masculinity that does not reduce it to a stereotype of the lesbian or a pathetic parody of maleness, we have yet to determine what its various relations might be to either lesbian, transgender, or masculine

identification."⁸⁴ Effectively, throughout the interviews conducted with the non-self-identified butch lesbians, they always characterized such group as “too” something: “too aggressive,” “too masculine,” “too muscular.” Though visually this cluster is also an important number of the attendees at such parties, they are clearly seen as outsiders, as too far on one side of the local lesbian spectrum:

To me, [butch lesbians] are just too masculine. I have nothing against them. I am friends with many of them but they are not my type. They are just too masculine. I prefer feminine girls.

(Ági)

Based on Ági’s comments, we can clearly see such issues of belonging through the play on “them” versus what would be “us,” the normative lesbians (i.e. dykes). It is as if this cluster of women would be at the bottom of the social hierarchy constructed at these events, and not as the opposition of the femme lesbians as it would be expected. Perhaps this can be explained by the still expectancy of lesbians in this country to still retain a certain degree of femininity, as the femme and the dykes. For this, butch lesbians seem to be considered almost as outsiders within such group as they appear to be problematizing the more feminine-identified lesbian ideal at these Budapest parties. Unfortunately, as none of the interviewees self-identified as a butch, only assumptions can be made.

5.4. The 'elite' lesbians

Though there are new terms used by the queer community nowadays which may be considered rather specific such as “soft stud,” “hard butch,” “gym queer,” or even “tomboy femme,”⁸⁵ in Budapest, the terms used to characterize lesbians are still very general and could even be considered stereotypical, such as dyke, femme or

⁸⁴ Halberstam, 241.

⁸⁵ Butch Femme, “Gender Terms and Linguistics,” Butch-Femme, www.butch-femme.com [visited May 18, 2009].

butch. Nonetheless, there is a new category that has not been seen before, which is the category of the so-called ‘elite lesbians.’

This is a rather invisible group of whom every interviewee that knew of their existence (9 out of 16) spoke with some degree of envy and admiration, but also pejoratively:

You can divide the Ösztrösökk parties into several groups [...]: you have the elite lesbians who have a few degrees, only hang out in very elite circles and are antisocial. These are the ones who go to these parties and know exactly where to stand, when to smoke a cigarette, who to talk to, when to arrive and when to live. They usually speak to only 2-3 people per party.

(Réka)

This ‘elite’ group seems to be part of a higher social and hierarchical cluster, which appears to be very hard to belong to and which distances itself from the rest of the ‘community’ at such parties. Also, as no specific description was or could be given of this cluster of lesbians, they seem to exist, contrary to the other groups, beyond physical appearance, thus making their performance of knowing who they are and that everyone else does as well even more important. Indeed, though conducting participant observation for over five months and attending almost the totality of the parties held by both Revans and Ösztrösökk for such period of time, I never encountered any of the behaviors described as typical of this category of lesbians. For this, based on their description and attitude but at the same time invisibility, these women seem to be almost like an urban legend.

Just for curiosity, I asked the interviewees if they would classify me, the author, as an elite lesbian simply due to my educational background, but the question was always rapidly answered “no,” as if belonging to such a group was also negative, almost derogatory. Such reaction seems to portray a duality between “us” versus “them,” as if the members of this group were outsiders or at least women who did not belong to the norm, to the “us” group. Contrary to the butch or femme lesbians who

were also considered to a certain extent as “them,” the elite lesbians seem to take this concept of belonging even further. When talking about them, the interviewees no longer used “us” or “we” as contemplating only their group as, for example, the dykes, but rather the totality of the party attendees. It is as if, even though these women are lesbians, they represent something beyond the rest of the group, at the same time secluding themselves and bringing the rest of the partygoers together. Perhaps this is even part of their identity as elite: to be secluded in order to keep their status.

In addition, it could be that the perceived negative attitude towards them is actually jealousy. Perhaps the normative lesbian is simply envious of these “V.I.P.” women’s ability to have created and to belong to such exclusive group. Perhaps they are simply an ‘imaginary other’ to justify the “us” group of lesbians’ claim of identity and/ or community. Or perhaps they are a grown up version of ‘dykes’ to aim for.

Unfortunately, this category seems to raise more questions than it answers. None of the interviewees was able to or wanted to specifically name an elite lesbian they may know, which is possibly one of the reasons for their existence. Just as an urban legend, everyone knows an elite lesbian but no one truly knows any of them.

5.5. Bisexuals

There is another group identified at such parties which is the non-lesbian cluster. Other women such as heterosexual friends of lesbians and self-identified bisexuals also attend these women-only events but since the latter group seems to be more important in numbers at such parties and more frequently described by the interviewees, I will focus this section only on them.

In her text “Bisexual Landscapes,” Clare Hemmings states that bisexuality is an important part of lesbian identity construction as it is either stereotypically seen as

a “non-monogamous” entity interested in women or as a range of mistakes.⁸⁶ As Ann Kaloski indicated, the bisexual woman’s “place in the collective lesbian history is only symbolic: she is retained as past ‘mistakes,’ but not as a ‘real person.’”⁸⁷ The same views can be seen in the women-only parties researched, based on the words of the only bisexual self-identified interviewee:

That’s the problem with lesbians at these parties: [lesbians] are too scared that if they date me, I’m going to leave them for the first guy that comes across. They don’t understand that bisexuals fall in love with the person, not with the gender. And if I am dating someone, I am only with that person. I don’t look on the side.

(Stella)

Based on Stella’s rather frustrated statement and the quote pertaining to the ‘femme’ lesbians a few sections above (where femmes were considered bisexuals in disguise), bisexuals seem to be seen rather pejoratively by lesbians. They seem to be considered untrustworthy, not real persons, non-lesbians, or even as Esterberg states, “too free-floating to be reliable allies.”⁸⁸ Though the great majority of the interviewees had had sexual relationships with men in the past, none of them (besides Stella) considered herself bisexual. Their past relationships, as Hemmings argues, were seen as simple mistakes. In effect, many of the participants of this research considered this section of their sexual preference to be a transitional period, whereas homosexuality and heterosexuality to be ‘final destinations.’ I believe that this is the main reason why lesbian tend to see bisexual women as outsiders rather than insiders within the events researched: because they are considered ‘free-floaters.’

Though certain bisexuals may look like femmes or dykes, their characterization is not based on their performances compared to the other groups, but specifically on whom they are intimate with. Because sexual orientation is *the* main

⁸⁶ Clare Hemmings, “Bisexual Landscapes,” *Bisexual Landscapes*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 26.

⁸⁷ Ann Kaloski cited in Hemmings, 26.

⁸⁸ Esterberg, 169.

common characteristic lesbians have at these parties, this cluster also uses it as a tool to distance ‘others’ and to distance themselves from these ‘others.’ The self-identified lesbians interviewed seem to consider these women-only parties as their space by excellence for which these ‘others’ or outsiders could effectively represent the system that oppresses them on a regular basis, as is the Hungarian heteronormative society. By also being intimate with men, bisexuals come to represent the non-homosexual part of society, and therefore they become the intruders of such lesbian space. This is perhaps why it is seen so negatively to be a bisexual and why the situation seems to be so frustrating for bisexuals who are looking for partners at such venues.

As we have seen in this chapter, there are many different sub-groups of lesbians (and non-lesbians) being performed. Some are fairly recognizable at the women-only party scene of Budapest, such as dyke, femme and butch, while others are not, as is the case of the elite lesbians and bisexuals, who cannot be ‘spotted’ purely based on their performances. Though rather basic terminologies, these categorizations of the attendees seem to have a universal understanding and an accepted hierarchy, with dykes being the norm and the center of the locally-constructed lesbian spectrum. It is also important to note that such characterizations could only be possible within the researched setting since this is, as already stated, a space specific for public performance within the lesbian communities in the region.

Now that I have described the different subgroups of the women attendees, I will analyze, in chapter six, the different groups attending different parties based on the recurring topic of ‘cultureness’ within the interviews held.

Chapter 6

HABITUS, FIGHTS AND CULTURENESS: THE CLASS FACTOR

Based on the previous chapters, the Ösztrösökk and Revans parties can be considered spaces of public performance where attendees recognize other women's 'classification groups,' based on their physical appearance and attitudes. Throughout this research, another important recurrent topic, the level of 'cultureness,' was used to describe not only the people partying but also the different places.

In this final chapter of data analysis, I will discuss the concepts of *habitus* and cultureness as well as fights as differentiators within such events, in order to claim not only for class differences at both venues but also for a sense of community built in such places.

6.1. A "cultured" environment

The most recurrent word used throughout the interviews was definitely the word *cultured*. The expression used by the interviewees in Hungarian is *kulturált*, which, according to the Hungarian online dictionary "Kislexikon," means *cultivated*.⁸⁹

When the participants of this study were asked to describe such term, the definitions were roughly the same: being educated, knowing when and how to behave, and most importantly, it reflected social class (by being *cultured* or not). Even the organizers of the parties held at Revans called for the *culture* (*kultúra* in Hungarian) of their attendees on both their party flyers and website. For these reasons,

⁸⁹Kislexikon, "Kultúra," Lapoda Multimedia, <http://www.kislexikon.hu/index.php?f=kult%FAra&k=c&h=c> [Accessed May 22, 2009].

I find that the most appropriate English translation for the word *kulturált* would be *cultured*, rather than *cultivated*, for which it is the term I will be using in this section.

6.2. Habitus and cultureness

As already stated in chapter 4, the weekly parties at the Revans nightclub seemed to be much more upscale than the ones held monthly by the Ösztrösökk group. Not only were both places different in their ambience, location, entertainment program and security but the attitudes of the attendees also changed according to the places they attended, which can be explained through the concept of *habitus*.

- A ‘core’ group

Firstly, the most noticeable connection witnessed throughout my participant observation between the two venues was the fact that roughly the same groups of lesbians were present at both events:

In general you see the same people at both places. [...] At the Ösztro[sokk] parties, since they are the more ‘official’ lesbian parties, you have more people coming from outside of the capital just for it. [But] I think the same people attend both parties.
(Kriszta)

You usually see the Revans faces at Ösztrösökk but you don’t always see the Ösztrösökk faces at Revans because a lot of people just come to Budapest from the regions for these monthly parties only and they don’t want to travel here every weekend.
(Mari)

In effect, the mass-oriented parties attracted much more women, for which the constant need of larger venues. While the Ösztrösökk parties appealed to attendees not only from the capital but from all corners of the country, the more private parties held at Revans mainly interested women from Budapest. For this same reason, as Kriszta stated, the former is somewhat considered by the local subculture to be a kind of “official” lesbian party. Additionally, within the capital, the attendees were generally the same at both events, thus constructing some kind of ‘core group’ at

these happenings. This could be explained, according to Weston, by the usually much larger number of homosexuals living in urban areas.⁹⁰

- **Habitus**

Due to the completely different atmosphere of both spaces and even though roughly the same networks of women attended them, the social behaviors witnessed at both venues were very different (mainly in regards to fights, to be discussed in section 6.3). This could be explained based on Bourdieu's theory of action. While his work was mainly focused on the analysis of mechanisms of reproduction of social hierarchies, he developed this specific model around the concept of *habitus*.

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, *habitus* can be defined as a habit or system of dispositions where the individual agent develops specific dispositions (which Bourdieu divides into four groups: lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action) in response to the objective condition it encounters.⁹¹ This is why, according to Bourdieu, "an agent's whole set of practices are both systematic and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another lifestyle."⁹² Thus, he sees *habitus* as a key to social reproduction as it centrally generates and regulated the practices that make up social life. Therefore, individuals learn to want what conditions are possible to them and not to aspire to those that are not available. The lifestyle of the individual generates dispositions comparable with such conditions and in a sense, even pre-adapted to their demands.⁹³ Furthermore, an individual is socially pre-adapted to behave a certain way in a specific space with specific codes of behaviors due to a different sense of expectation, while behaving in a distinctive way in another place with different rules.

⁹⁰ Weston, 42-46.

⁹¹ Neufeldt, 364.

⁹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 170.

⁹³ Ibid., 172-173.

On the one hand, the smaller venue provided a more ‘cultured’ space where people could easily get to know each other, where everyone knew the rules of behavior and the expectations of the place (as stated on their flyers and advertisement). On the other hand, the Ösztrösökk parties, which more people attended, were more of a melting-pot-monthly-gathering, with less ‘strict’ norms and a different set of expectations. These two differences can also be illustrated by the different levels of comfort the attendees felt at both venues:

I never really liked Revans. It was too snobbish for me. I always felt better at the Ösztrösökk parties because you had more people there and I just felt more comfortable.

(Stella)

As we can see, Stella felt more comfortable at the Ösztrösökk parties because of the crowd and because of the level of comfort unconsciously written in her *habitus*. On the other hand, Revans made her feel misplaced because it was too “snobbish” for her, as it was outside of her comfort zone. Such characteristic, which was shared by several other interviewees, may also reflect differences in social classes, as claimed by Bourdieu. Based on this, it seems that Stella felt uncomfortable at the more upscale venue because it was outside of her *habitus* and of her social class. This is why she preferred to attend the other non-chic venue where more class diversity could be witnessed.

Other interviewees felt the complete opposite to Stella:

I liked Revans much better. I liked the place, the bathroom, the karaoke room [...]. It was much more *cultured* than K2. You didn’t have to worry about not having toilet paper in the bathroom and the people just seemed less aggressive.

(Laura)

Laura, contrary to Stella, preferred Revans over the Ösztrösökk events. She considered the former to be a more cultured place, closer to her *habitus*. Also, she found the attendees less “aggressive” than at the latter, thus illustrating the different codes of conducts of both venues. For her, a more private, ‘cleaner’ and upscale space

was closer to her environment of comfort. Though preferring Revans, it is important to state that Laura also attended the other venue on a regular basis, thus once more showing the variety and mass aspects of such event.

As we can see in this section, both venues not only attracted guests with different physical characteristics but also of different *habitus*, thus belonging to diverse social classes: while the Ösztrösökk parties gathered women from every kind of group, the more upscale Revans mainly attracted a selected few who also seemed to belong to a higher social group.

6.3. Fights and cultureness

Such socially programmed markers of belonging and behavior can further be seen through the number of fights witnessed at both places which, according to the interviewees, was also an important factor of the level of cultureness of the event:

There are definitely less fights at Revans. I am not sure why but perhaps it's because there are also less people. After a while you kind of know everyone so it gives you a sense of "Revans community." But at Ösztro, the groups are so spread out because they come from Győr, Szeged or Sopron [*Hungarian cities*] so it becomes a space of conflict. It's always about who was flirting with whose girlfriend or who made out with whose ex girlfriend and that's how the fights start.

(Kriszta)

Based on Kriszta's statement, there seems to be a rather important difference between both venues, where K2 is characterized as being a "space of conflict" due to its diversity compared to the 'smaller' Revans, which brings people together. This important separation based on the of numbers of regular fights of each venue can also identify distinctions in behavior and *habitus*, thus cultureness, as already seen in the previous segment.

Indeed, after attending a dozen of Revans parties, there was only one instance when a fight took place but it was very soon broken up by security guards while both attendees fighting were kicked out of the place. At least one of them was not seen

again at the venue. Additionally, the more ‘cultured’ space was able to give its partygoers, such as Kriszta, a “sense of ‘Revans community’” (a concept that will be further developed in section 6.4).

On the other hand, the Ösztrösökk parties were, as seen in the previous quote, a “space of conflict” for the majority of the interviewees. The following paragraph is taken from my own participant observation after a regular event at K2:

4:00 am. Out of the regular 400+ people attending tonight’s party, only 100 of them are left. [...] My friends and I take one last stop at the bathroom before going home. The bathroom near the entrance is completely dirty, the doors not closing and the toilet filled with paper. We go towards the other bathroom but we cannot enter: there is another fight inside. One ‘butch’ lesbian is fighting with another, for a ‘femme’ lesbian, as usual. One has the other against the wall, forearm against her throat. There are about 15 people witnessing the scene, but no one calls the security guards, only a few meters away. There is a lot of screaming. I can devise a few words such as “bitch,” “cheating” and “I will kill you.” I ask someone what is going on. “She found the two making out here when they only broke up yesterday”. Finally, when the butch that seems to be in control is about to hit the other one, a few people intervene and try to break them up and tranquilize them. The show is then over and the bathroom is finally cleared.

(March 14th. 2009. Last Ösztrösökk party at K2)

As seen through this paragraph, fights were a regular occurrence at this venue. The space, as already described in chapter 4, was not very hygienic and characterized as “uncultured” by many of the interviewees. The fight described very well symbolizes the closing of the K2 venue as an Ösztrösökk space, by illustrating the actions that took place two or three times a night. Becoming a space for constant arguments may be due to a difference in *habitus*-construction of the place: with its low lights and only basic services, less rules of conduct were set, leading to a lower sense of boundaries and of expected behaviors. By bringing in women from all different backgrounds, geographical areas and with different *habitus* to such environment, fights did indeed take place but the Ösztrösökk parties were always the most popular events.

With its sensual *art déco* ambience and its high number of security guards, Revans was able to provide a space where regulations had to be followed in order to

provide a rather high class, friendly night of entertainment for lesbians and their friends, something that the Ösztrösökk organizers sometimes failed to provide to a certain extent (only based on the fights factor), thus leading to a spacial construction considered less cultured by most of the attendees.

6.4. An imagined community

As previously seen in the literature review, queer clubs are spaces for lifeworld construction based on a need for subcultural self-identification and belonging, thus creating the feeling of an ‘imagined community.’ In the following section, I will demonstrate how, even though Revans may create a more obvious sense of community to its guests, the Ösztrösökk events are actually creating the most representative ‘imagined community’ of Budapest at these women-only parties.

The nightclub Revans, as explained previously, was able to create an intimate atmosphere with a smaller range of people. As one of the interviewees stated, “after a while you kind of knew everyone so it gives you a sense of ‘Revans community.’” Though many other interviewees qualified this venue as “snob” or “snobbish” for which this vision could be considered dystopic, it nonetheless brought together people with similar backgrounds, and/or characteristics, thus celebration a feeling of belonging to a specific lifeworld, of having an own space. This feeling of commonness can be given by the fact that the attendees saw each other rather frequently (the parties were held weekly and most of the partygoers were there on a regular basis), they shared the expected norms of behavior and they were in a comfortable environment and *habitus*. However, even with such feeling of fitting in, when the monthly Ösztrösökk parties took place on the same day, Revans became clearly empty. At one instance, no more than two dozen people were at the venue because most of its regular attendees were at K2.

Most interviewees stated that one of the main characteristics of the Ösztrösökk parties were the amount of attendees. Certainly, as these are considered to be the “official” lesbian parties, based on the fact they have been in existence for almost a decade and since they attract people from all over the country, such events create a kind of melting pot of people from many different backgrounds and with very different characteristics, as seen in the first section of this chapter. Though diversity is a trait of these parties, there is still a very strong and common ‘lifeworld’ construction, perhaps *the* ‘lifeworld’ of the women-only party scene of Budapest, which would explain why even the Revans partygoers were seen at K2. This could be explained by the general need for lifeworld construction and belonging of lesbians in the country. With such limited space available to them and with still a rather unacceptance of homosexuality within Hungary, these women have to appropriate the one constantly-exclusive space they have been ‘given.’ By being the most “official” organizers, this is how the Ösztrösökk parties also became a sort of ‘public sphere’ with an average of 450 attendees per event, thus making them the most crowded women-only social event of the capital and of the country.

Due to the general need for an ‘imagined community,’ lesbians in Budapest have recreated the few spaces available to them into lifeworld-construction environments, such as Revans and the monthly Ösztrösökk events, where the latter has also become a sort of official and public lesbian ‘scene.’

Though there is much criticism of both spaces (Revans for being too “snobbish” and Ösztrösökk for being too “cultureless”), they bring together a certain group of people who, by meeting either weekly or monthly, are able to create this ‘lifeworld,’ this sense of commonness, of belonging, of ‘imagined community,’ which

is key to the existence and growth of the lesbian identity in Budapest. Additionally, even though the majority of the women attending the researched parties are somewhat the same at both venues, the behaviors reflected are rather different, thus illustrating different levels of ‘cultureness,’ which can be explained through Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*.

Therefore, I can state that there is no single, big, common, homogenous community that can be seen in the women-only nightlife in Budapest. Rather, there is a specific heterogenous ‘imagined community’ that can now (since Revans closed its doors) only be seen at the Ösztrösökk parties, that becomes existent one Saturday per month and where, for a period of six or more hours, its participants can feel like they belong, as part of a family, and enjoy themselves without having to think or care about the obstacles they may have to face outside those four walls for being lesbians in Hungary.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Geographical location is a key part of the creation of an identity. When a common space exists, the members of a specific group can feel safe and be their true selves, as well as begin creating an important common trait.⁹⁴ This is exactly the case of New York City queer clubs described in the literature review part of this thesis. Indeed, the claiming of such space allowed the queer community of New York City not only to develop ‘lifeworlds,’ but to create a safe ‘third space of recreation’ where they could enjoy meeting other people like them, queer clubbing consequently becoming a characteristic of the city’s queer culture.

Unfortunately in Hungary, there is still no women-only space, thus making difficult the creation of any kind of real, constant, diverse and cultural lesbian social environment. As monthly parties keep bouncing from one venue to another, and the few clubs offering weekly nights for women-only exist sporadically, it becomes challenging to create a true local legacy, such as clubs like Alter Ego have become to the native gay male subculture.

However, there is still a certain degree of community built at such events coming from the necessity of belonging and identity-reinforcement its attendees seem to be subject to. Indeed, though the “imagined community” that can be found at these events may not be representative of all the lesbians of Budapest or Hungary; it still creates an important environment from which many conclusions can be drawn from.

⁹⁴ Phil Jackson, *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 5-6.

One of the main deductions is that the lack of sense of commonality of lesbians within the capital appears to be a reflection of the shortage of unity within the general LGBT community of Hungary. Ben Vient, a volunteer coming from New York in an attempt to reorganize the Budapest Gay Pride in 2009, very well illustrates such feelings of separation:

In the United States, the reason why we have such a strong LGBT community is because there was a crisis. And this crisis was called the AIDS crisis. Homosexuals came together as a community in order to fight against it because individually, they simply could not. Here in Hungary, as I understand, it is because of your communist background that the concept of community and activism are still rather new or almost none existent. When I was asked to be part of the Budapest Pride committee, it was hard to grasp the lack of community sense in this country [...] but all I hope is that it doesn't take another crisis like we had in the states in order to bring this community together.⁹⁵

As Ben's statement shows, it is most likely the communist background of the region (as well as homophobia) that have made more difficult for gays and lesbians to come together and become more visible as a larger community, as we can find in the United States. Nonetheless, it will hopefully be the need for partnership rather than a crisis which will bring the Hungarian LGBT 'family' together.

⁹⁵ Ben Vent, Opening speech for International Day Against Homophobia, Central European University: Budapest, May 18, 2009.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Questions for organizer of Osztrosokk parties

1. When did you start organizing these parties? What gave you such idea?
2. What has been the evolution of such parties?
3. What is your target audience? Has there been any difference in attendees from the beginning?
4. What do you think such parties mean or represent for the lesbian community in Hungary?
5. What kind of environment are you trying to create?
6. Do you consider these parties to be successful (financially and other)?
7. Is there any specific message you are trying to convey at such parties?
8. There are different kinds of parties: theme parties, alongside Labrisz parties and “regular” parties. Why is that? Which ones are more “successful”?
9. There are some parties with performances (for example, white party with fire performance). Why is that?
10. What do you think about the parties at Revans? Do you see them as a competition?
11. What do you think about the shows they have at Revans? Are you in any way trying to create another ‘set’ of performances?
12. Why so many changes in venues?

APPENDIX B

Questions for party attendees

1. How long have you been attending these lesbian parties?
2. How often do you go? With whom?
3. What do you think of them?
4. Why do you attend such parties?
5. How do you prepare for such parties?
6. What do you do at such parties?
7. What do you think about the other women attending?
8. Which ones do you prefer: Osztrosokk or Revans? Why?
9. What do you think is the main difference between both parties?
10. What is your opinion about the drag shows? Do you like them? Why?
11. What is your opinion about the erotic shows? Do you like them? Why?
12. What do you think about the performances?
13. Have you noticed any evolution within the performances you have seen?
14. What do you think about the performers?
15. What do you think about men attending the parties at Revans?
16. What do you think about the different performances at the Osztrosokk parties
(Labrisz with Carnival theme, white party with fire, etc)?
17. How do these parties make you feel regarding the lesbian community and
space?
18. Do you think there is a lesbian community within Budapest?
19. Do you think there needs to be another kind of space for women-only
entertainment? If so, what kind of space?

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