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October 30, 2014

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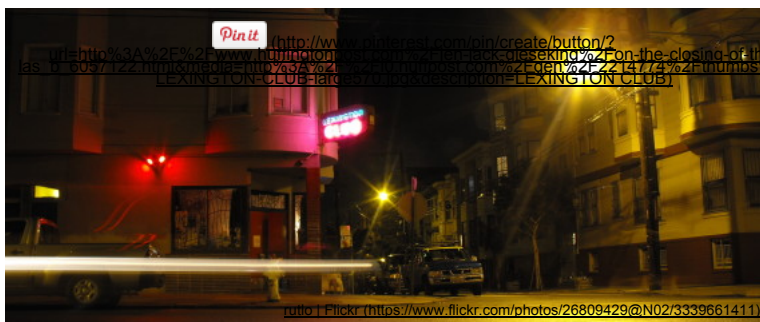


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Jen Jack Gieseeking teaches at Bowdoin College. S/he researches lesbian and queer spaces, economies, and culture. Her site is jgieseking.org.

On the Closing of the Last Lesbian Bar in San Francisco: What the Demise of the Lex Tells Us About Gentrification

Posted: 10/28/2014 7:00 am EDT | Updated: 10/28/2014 11:59 am EDT

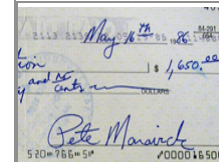


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The only bar dedicated to serving lesbians in San Francisco, the Lexington Club, announced that it is closing after 18 years (<https://www.facebook.com/shareslater.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.huffingtonpost.com%2Fjen-jack-gieseeking%2Fon-the-closing-of-the-lex-b-6057122.html>) (<https://www.facebook.com/LexingtonClub/posts/10152758004223503%29>). You may be shocked that the bar is closing and/or that there is only one lesbian bar in that gay metropolis. As a researcher of lesbian-queer spaces and economies, I am not surprised. On the Closing of the Last Lesbian Bar in San Francisco What the Demise of the Lex Tells Us About Gentrification

The bar's sole, long-time owner, Lila Thirkield, shared the news on Facebook and cited the Mission District's changing neighborhood demographics, increased rents, and the bar's decline in sales as reasons for its demise. Women from around the world who'd visited the Lex noted their shock, outrage, and sadness at the event in [blog posts \(http://48hillsonline.org/2014/10/23/lexington-club-closing-owner-says-higher-rent-gentrification-gender-inequality-hurt-iconic-lesbian-bar/#more-2549\)](http://48hillsonline.org/2014/10/23/lexington-club-closing-owner-says-higher-rent-gentrification-gender-inequality-hurt-iconic-lesbian-bar/#more-2549) and on all types of social media. But how can anyone really be surprised? Sisters Restaurant & Nightclub in Philadelphia, T's Bar & Restaurant in what was once the "Girl's Town" area of Chicago, and the Egyptian Club in Portland, Oregon, all closed for similar reasons between 2010 and 2013. Rather than succumb to shock or a narrative that this is merely gentrification at work, it is time to recognize the difference that gender plays in the supposedly universal experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) spaces, and how gender shapes cities more broadly.

What is the landscape in the rest of the country and beyond, and where do gay men fit into this? Since the 1980s, it has become common knowledge that gays and artists are evidence of a city's burgeoning economy and culture. Many not only extol the creative class as proof of a growing city but maintain that by marketing to and bringing in gays and artists, gentrification will transpire and the economy will boom. Philadelphia's "City of Brotherly Love" campaign (<http://www.nysun.com/new-york/philadelphia-campaigns-to-lure-away-new-york/52160/>) played a role in the city's resurgence. At the same time, the working and working-middle class, most often people of color, are forced to move out of these same areas while condos replace smaller housing for more affluent, white residents. Left out of this narrative is women's stories, which the closing of a lesbian bar in a supposedly LGBTQ hub like San Francisco amplifies.

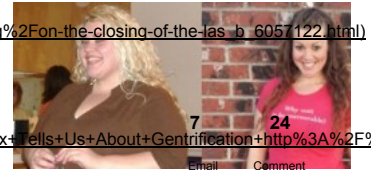
It is common to have only one lesbian bar in a major city, even if it does not meet everyone's needs. D.C., Atlanta, and Northampton each have only one dedicated lesbian bar, all of which continue to run. New York City hosts a total of three full-time lesbian bars, two in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. This is the largest number of lesbian bars in any U.S. metropolis. Based on my research, New York City has always had more devoted lesbian bars than any other U.S., Canadian, or European city, with the exception of Toronto, Montreal, and Berlin at various times in recent history. This is not a recent phenomenon. At its Amazon apex in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were as many five dedicated lesbian bars open at the same time in the city. In the 2008 NYC Pride guide in *Next Magazine*, there were nearly 60 bars and events listed for gay men under 57th Street in Manhattan, and only three for women alone. In the previous years, there were at least three times as many men's spaces as women's in LGBTQ newspapers since the 1980s. The City of New York has taken note, recently rebranding their [Gay Guide to NYC page \(http://www.nycgo.com/gay/\)](http://www.nycgo.com/gay/) to offer the "free insider's guide" [ManAboutWorld \(http://www.manaboutworld.com/?page_id=1432\)](http://www.manaboutworld.com/?page_id=1432); no such offering from women is available.

Many have made conjectures about this statistical unevenness, and research has given its best as well. Studies show that, unlike men, women drink less, age out of using bars, and are also less comfortable with meeting and interacting with other women in these spaces. However, no one has done the math, with the exception of branding agencies targeting city leaders. Given the [gender pay gap \(http://www.iwpr.org/initiatives/pay-equity-and-discrimination\)](http://www.iwpr.org/initiatives/pay-equity-and-discrimination), with women averaging \$0.77 for every \$1 that men earn, we can guess that, on average, dual-income lesbian couples earn less than dual-income straight couples, who in turn earn less than dual-income gay couples. The differences would be slight but still meaningful if not staggering when added up over time. And this may explain why lesbians tend to rent longer and buy homes later than gay men do.

In parallel, lesbians not only do not maintain large numbers of bars but are less able to secure property ownership and therefore form long-term neighborhoods. Scholars argue that gay men are prone to territorialize and need to do so in order have public spaces where they feel safe; women have long been associated with more private spaces like the home and are often linked with a sense of fear in public urban life. On the flip side, lesbians have been sexualized and commodified so that two women

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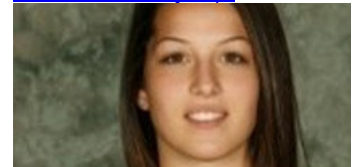
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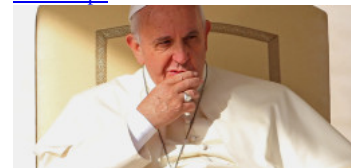
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kissing on the street is not only more acceptable than two gay men holding hands but is sometimes applauded. Lesbians and gay men still seek out their safety if not survival in cities and wind up playing key roles in creating the gentrified cities we have today. Looking back over the massive changes in the everyday lives of LGBTQ people in New York and other cities, it is clear that the lesbian role in gentrification is not identical to that of gay men.

Apparently, in San Francisco, lesbian bars are no longer needed or, rather, no longer possible. Over time, cities began to search out the next hot groups: techies and creatives. More diverse than artists, these populations have even greater capital. As reports from the leading tech companies and the art world show, these industries remain dominated by men. Thirkield wrote of her reasons for closing the Lex:

When a business caters to about 5% of the population, it has tremendous impact when 1% of them leave. When 3% or 4% of them can no longer afford to live in the neighborhood, or the City, it makes the business model unsustainable.

Two other queer bars have closed in San Francisco: [a bar catering to trans women and their admirers \(http://sfist.com/2013/01/09/marlenas_closing.php\)](http://sfist.com/2013/01/09/marlenas_closing.php) and [a bar that served Latino gay men \(http://sfist.com/2014/02/26/esta_noche_closing_straight_bar_mov.php\)](http://sfist.com/2014/02/26/esta_noche_closing_straight_bar_mov.php). Recent media reports highlight the large number of younger people leaving New York City, queers and artists among them. Swaths of the same group are being forced from the San Francisco peninsula, yet to make room for the equally youthful employees of Google, Apple, and Dropbox. Even before some select gay bars and San Francisco's only lesbian bar began to ebb from the horizon, other hubs of working-class people and people of color were the first to go, slowly pushed out by the technological wunderkind. Now it's the end of another era, and we can see the beginning of yet another form of gentrification that most urban dwellers will not get to take part in or afford.

In the end, what the Lex's closing and the gender pay gap make clear are that not only lesbians but *all* women bear the greater brunt of gentrification today, alongside people of color and the poor. While less data is available on transgender people, this group also identifies with the spaces that are disappearing and is [often economically and socially disadvantaged \(http://transequality.org/Issues/discrimination.html\)](http://transequality.org/Issues/discrimination.html); therefore, transgender people are also more likely to experience these shifts as the gentrified rather than the gentrifiers. When bars close, however, women and other marginalized groups do not stop going out or revert to OKCupid. Lesbians, bisexuals, and queer women, as well as transgender people, rely on parties to meet one another and connect. Thirkield writes that her "faith in queer San Francisco still runs deep." How true. If any population will never be stamped out, it is the queers of our fair cities, including the women among them.

Follow Jen Jack Giesecking on Twitter: www.twitter.com/jgieseking
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Rick Pinkerton · Top Commenter · Columbus, Ohio

Honestly I think our dream has turned into our nightmare. We wanted to be just another part of society and now we are.....boring milquetoast just like the rest.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 8 · [Follow Post](#) · October 28 at 4:05pm



Mylez Edward · Top Commenter · Tampa, Florida

I agree, we did it to ourselves! LOL

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 2 · October 28 at 5:47pm



Timothy O'Ceallaigh · Top Commenter · Grand Rapids, Michigan

One person's "boring milquetoast" is another person's no longer being stuck in a gay ghetto...

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · Yesterday at 6:06am



Mylez Edward · Top Commenter · Tampa, Florida

Timothy O'Ceallaigh anyone who chooses to live in a "gay Ghetto" or in a milquetoast has made a choice. I consider San Fran a mess, and don't go there but that has nothing to do with what is going on with the gay bars closing all over the country.

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Kristin Morgan · Top Commenter

What is happening in SF is a tragedy, and now they passed the bill that supports airbnb... The bust can't come soon enough

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Stephani Dooley · Top Commenter · Works at Walmart

How did San Fran only have 1 lesbian bar?! Dallas has more than that.

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Mike Bell · Top Commenter

San Francisco had one lesbian bar because lesbians and gay men commingle in what we call "gay bars". Of which there are many. The Cafe for instance is (was) probably the most popular gay bar in The Castro, was originally a lesbian bar. But it was a community bar and the ladies welcomed their gay male friends.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 7 · October 28 at 2:36pm



Lara Beth Lillibridge · Cleveland, Ohio

One thing I have seen change in the last few decades is the number of lesbians with children. As a child, I knew only one or two other kids with lesbian parents besides myself. Most of my mom's friends were child free. Now, most of my lesbian friends in my age group have kids, which makes bar nights less frequent.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 2 · [Follow Post](#) · Yesterday at 8:15am



Bernardo Espi · San Francisco Community College District

The gay community, with the emphasis on gay marriage, has become a picture of normalcy and sterility and those that supported gay marriage, instead of fighting for true equal rights and anti homophobia, and those of us who remained silent to this hubris, are to blame for it all. As Maylez Edward stated in the post below, "we did it to ourselves."

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · [Follow Post](#) · October 28 at 9:55pm



Yvette Scorse · Hyattsville, Maryland

I will say there are at least four lesbian bars in Madrid, and many mixed gay/lesbian spots in Chueca.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · [Follow Post](#) · October 28 at 11:53pm



Dee Dee Russell **San Francisco Sexist Womanist Bohemian Artist**

I'm a str8 bio woman (I don't call myself 'cis' -ridiculous) and have lived in San Francisco since 1984 have seen them come and go. The Lex has always been cool with me, great staff and a fun place for all. However this new crop of SF'ers (aka techies) seem to either want to be closeted or pass as str8. which makes no sense that's like me going to Atlanta Ga and saying I'm not Black. I wish the Lex could stay open its good for the city and gives all the young and nonconformist queers a safe haven.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · [Follow Post](#) · 23 hours ago



Chad Ramey · Top Commenter · Works at Self Employed (Business)

There were 3 lesbian bars in Atlanta at one time. I am assuming "my sisters room" is the only one left. Here in birmingham, al there was always one. Not anymore. The lesbian girls usually go to al's on 7th. It's a gay bar that caters more to the sports crowd. The always host the softball tournaments after party's and several lesbians work there so irpts more of a mixed gay bar which is kind of nice. There is no reason we can't intermingle!

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Ian Jack · Top Commenter

Not many Lesbian programmers I guess

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · [Follow Post](#) · October 28 at 3:30pm



Jenna Goebel · St. Francis IL

there are a few out there. lol.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 28 at 10:04pm



James Pendle · San Francisco, California

yes, As earlier poster said Wild side west continues to thrive. Myth of 'only one Lesbian bar' will continue.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · 16 hours ago



Christopher Lyman · Follow · Flayer of Skins at Turn Me On Dead Man

Wait...what about Wild Side West in Bernal Heights?

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Melissa Myers · Follow · Top Commenter

Come on out to St Louis, there are a couple lesbian bars here.

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Lex Lapolla · Follow · Salisbury, Massachusetts

The title scared me for a second..

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Sterling Mullins · Top Commenter · Works at Self-Employed

Not surprised. ... you'll more than likely see lesbians in church on Sunday than in a bar on Friday night. ..I don't even think we have ONE lesbian bar in America's 4th largest city

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · October 28 at 4:53pm



Renee Christopher · Top Commenter

By 35, if not sooner, most people have left the bar scene behind.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 28 at 9:06pm



Timothy O'Ceallaigh · Top Commenter · Grand Rapids, Michigan

I wonder what the numbers are for lesbian coffee shops and book stores?

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