Gone ‘underground’? Lesbian visibility and the consolidation of queer space in Montréal

Julie A. Podmore
Geosciences, John Abbott College, P.O. Box 2000, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Québec, Canada, H9X 3L9, jpodmore@johnabbot.qc.ca

Over the last two decades, urban researchers have investigated how gender shapes gay and lesbian geographies in major post-industrial cities. These studies demonstrated that while gay men have often produced highly visible territorial enclaves in inner-city areas, lesbian forms of territoriality at the urban scale have been relatively ‘invisible’ since their communities are constituted through social networks rather than commercial sites. Contrasting the patterns produced by these two populations in the inner-city areas of post-industrial cities during the ‘queer’ 1990s has created a gender-polarized and historically specific interpretation of their patterns of territoriality and visibility that may differ significantly from those of earlier periods. This paper, therefore, provides a long-range historical geography of lesbians in a major metropolitan area through a case study of Montréal’s lesbian bar cultures since 1950. The focus of the analysis is on the preconditions that led to the establishment of the city’s lesbian commercial enclave in the 1980s and the factors that led to its decline in the 1990s. This case study, therefore, outlines the shifting character of lesbian territorial practices at the urban scale in Montréal since 1950. It illustrates that in Montréal lesbian territoriality and visibility have been strongly impacted by local neighbourhood dynamics, internal ideologies, and political and spatial relationships with gay men. Ultimately, these findings suggest that contemporary lesbian visibility at the urban scale may have been undermined by an increased identification with the ‘queer’ forms of community and their territorialization in Montréal’s gay Village.

Key words: lesbians, lesbian bars, queer space, historical geography, Montréal.

Introduction

The study of sexuality and space in Geography was initiated in the 1970s and 1980s by research projects that mapped North American gay and lesbian commercial territories at the urban scale (see Binnie and Valentine 1999; Valentine 2000). Expanding and multiplying in the 1990s, this area of study was transformed by feminist and queer theory, resulting in both the incorporation of a much wider variety of perspectives, scales, locations and populations and, importantly, an new emphasis on structural power of heterosexuality
to reproduce itself in space (Binnie and Valentine 1999; Valentine 2000). A deeper
inquiry into territorial practices of lesbians at the urban scale was an important part of this
expansion and more critical assessment of the relationship between sexuality and space
(Adler and Brenner 1992; Forsyth 1997a, 1997b; Peake 1993; Rothenberg 1995; Valentine
1995; Winchester and White 1988). This
research was, on the one hand, a reaction to the lack of attention paid to gender differences in determining lesbian and gay geographies at the urban scale, and, on the other hand, an attempt to assess critically the gendered assumptions of Castells’ (1983) early conclusions regarding lesbian and gay urban geographies: Castells attributed the creation of more visible enclaves by gay men to their territorial ‘nature’ and higher levels of disposable income and the invisibility of lesbian communities to a greater commitment to political activism and a reliance on informal, aspatial networks (Binnie and Valentine 1999; Valentine 2000). In short, lesbians, as women, were not territorial and rarely made use of public commercial sites for community formation and identification. In response, researchers sought to examine the intersections between gender, sexuality and space at the urban scale in a series of studies of North American and European cities that compared lesbians and gay men (Adler and Brenner 1992; Bouthillette 1997; Winchester and White 1988) or focused specifically on the territorial practices of lesbian communities (Forsyth 1997a, 1997b; Lo and Healy 2000; Peake 1993; Rothenberg 1995; Valentine 1995). Re-examining the relationships between lesbians, territoriality and visibility, this research provided evidence that lesbian geographies were often territorially based and involved territorial strategies at the urban scale (Valentine 2000). While their territories were more dispersed (Forsyth 1997a, 1997b; Valentine 1995), lesbians used strategies to appropriate territory in lesbian-friendly spaces (Rothenberg 1995), practised a form of residential territoriality (Peake 1993) and attached their identities to particular neighbourhoods known as ‘lesbian’ (Bouthillette 1997; Lo and Healy 2000; Rothenberg 1995).

Although these studies confirmed that lesbian communities were formed through territorial practices and were often neighbourhood-based, their findings regarding lesbian visibility at the urban scale was less disruptive of gender dichotomies. Most of these researchers found that lesbian communities were constituted in space through fluid informal networks that linked a variety of public and private sites and, as a result, were quasi-underground in character and imperceptible to outside observers (see Binnie and Valentine 1999). In addition, their results regarding the lesbian use of commercial space to constitute community seem to confirm Castells’ original argument: commercial sites, even lesbian-specific businesses such as lesbian bars, rarely appear in these accounts primarily because they were not located within the residential territories under study.

In recent years, lesbian forms of territoriality in contemporary Montréal seem to substantiate many of the patterns identified above: lesbian communities are constituted either through informal networks or mixed sites in the Village gai (The Village), the city’s gay and queer enclave; while there is an established lesbian residential territory in the Plateau Mont-Royal (The Plateau) district, there are few lesbian commercial establishments in this district. In the case of Montréal, however, the ‘underground’ character of lesbian communities at the urban scale is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the 1980s, lesbian communities forged dispersed
but territorially based communities on the Plateau that included institutional and commercial clustering and a high concentration of the city’s lesbian bars (Bourque 1998; Remiggi 2000). This era has recently been described as Montréal’s ‘golden age’ (Remiggi 2000) of lesbian public visibility at the urban scale, a decade during which lesbians created and made use of a ‘visible’ concentration of bars, restaurants, bookstores and commercial spaces in one district. By the early 1990s, however, there were a number of challenges to the maintenance of this lesbian territory, especially its feminist institutions and its lesbian bars. This decade brought Montréal lesbians increased public visibility through both lesbian-specific and queer forms of community building and activism, but the lesbian occupation of urban territory changed in the opposite direction. By the mid-1990s, there were only a handful of lesbian-specific commercial spaces in the city and they were increasingly dispersed between the Plateau and the Village. In addition to this dispersal, there was an overall loss of lesbian bars over this decade: between 1992 and 2003 the total number of lesbian bars in Montréal dropped from seven to one. This deterritorialization of lesbian sites was, moreover, in strong contrast with the consolidation and multiplication of gay male and queer sites within the Village over this decade. As in many other large, metropolitan areas in North America and Europe (Binnie 1995; Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Mort 1998; Quilley 1995; Rushbrook 2002), Montréal’s gay male commercial area developed into a highly integrated quasi-ethnic enclave that brought together community institutions, commerce and residence (Remiggi 2000). In addition, over the course of the 1990s the Village became the economic engine for the expansion of gay and queer commerce in Montréal, serving as both a local niche market for goods and services and as a site for local boosterism and the expansion of the city’s tourist market.

These shifts in lesbian territoriality in Montréal suggest that the decade of the 1990s may have created specific conditions that impacted the ‘visibility’ of lesbian geographies at the urban scale. Since most of the detailed studies of lesbian territoriality were based on case studies conducted in post-industrial cities in this decade (Bouthillette 1997; Lo and Healy 2000; Rothenberg 1995; Winchester and White 1988), I propose a return to this form of inquiry with greater attention to the specificity of the dynamics shaping gender, sexuality and lesbian visibility in such contexts. Two aspects of this historically and geographically specific set of circumstances require contextualization. First, as the literature increasingly indicates, post-industrial cities since the early 1990s have been marked by a pronounced contrast between the dramatic transformation of gay commercial enclaves into ‘queer’ enclaves (Binnie 1995; Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Mort 1998; Quilley 1995; Rushbrook 2002) and the ‘underground’ character of lesbian territoriality at the urban scale. The Montréal case indicates that such gender-polarized levels of visibility were produced in the 1990s. Moreover, research on gay male territoriality illustrates the historical (Chauncey 1994; Higgs 1999; Mort 1998; Stein 2000) and geographical (Knopp 1998; Sinfield 2000) specificity of this quasi-ethnic enclave model of community and territory for gay men. The lack of long-range historical geographies of lesbians in particular cities (see Retter 1997) and of comparative research on lesbians and gay men in the same city over time (see Kenney 2001; Remiggi 2000; Stein 2000) makes this claim difficult to substantiate, but these factors imply that the ‘underground’ geographies of
lesbians described in the existing literature may be a product of dynamics emerging in post-industrial cities in the 1990s. Secondly, the 1990s also brought queer politics and the unification of gays, lesbians and queer populations generally under the umbrella of the GLBT ‘community’ to large urban centres. As community strategies to establish visibility strongly determine how gays and lesbians occupy urban space (Stein 2000; Taylor, Kaminski and Duggan 2002), the historical specificity of queer politics in the 1990s and its impact on sexuality and space at the urban scale requires critical investigation, specifically with regard to the gender asymmetries produced by queer community formation and its corresponding territorialization in gay commercial enclaves (Binnie 1995). While the unification of all populations that do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms in space has perhaps enlarged and publicized the territories with which lesbians may identify, research on Manchester’s gay village (Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley 2002; Skeggs 1999) illustrates that such ‘queer’ commercial territories are produced through gender and other asymmetries that challenge lesbian visibility.

In this paper, therefore, I suggest that the specific conditions of the queer 1990s in post-industrial cities may inform interpretations of lesbian visibility at the urban scale. To this end, this paper uses a long-range historical case study of the geographies of lesbian bars in Montréal from 1950 to the present to highlight the shifting relationships between lesbian identities, communities, political alliances and territorial strategies at the urban scale. I argue that this historical geography has been shaped through shifts in the cultural foundations of the public community, spatial and political relationships between lesbians and gay men and, finally, broader shifts in the urban economy. Using a mixture of secondary sources and data from periodicals and interviews, I analyse how the production of Montréal’s lesbian enclave during the ‘golden age’ of the 1980s differed from both previous and contemporary forms of lesbian visibility and territory. The objective of the paper, therefore, is to embed the territorial enclave of Montréal’s lesbian ‘golden age’ in the long-term historical geographies of Montréal lesbians in the post-Second World War era. The focus is on the lesbian production and use of public commercial sites, specifically lesbian bars. While such sites have often been contentious arenas of lesbian identity, they have also been the most persistent geographical references for urban lesbian communities during the period under study. Moreover, their importance as sites for constituting lesbian identities and their role in shaping patterns of territoriality among lesbians should not be underestimated. Historical studies demonstrate (Chamberland 1993, 1998; Faderman 1992; Kennedy and Davis 1994; Nestle 1987; Retter 1997; Stein 2000; Thorpe 1997; Wolfe 1997) that throughout the post-Second World War era lesbians have produced thriving bar cultures in North American cities. Although private spaces and community sites are important components of lesbian territoriality, bars have been central to the process of building visibility among lesbians at the urban scale and expanding what lesbians have identified as their territory (Chamberland 1993, 1998; Faderman 1992; Kennedy and Davis 1994; Nestle 1987; Retter 1997; Thorpe 1997; Wolfe 1997). Recent studies continue to demonstrate that even within queer enclaves lesbians aspire to increase their visibility via the establishment of territory in bars and nightclubs (Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley 2002; Skeggs 1999). As I will illustrate, the historical geographies of Montréal lesbian bars demonstrate not only that lesbians have
produced visible, territorially based enclaves centred on commercial activity, but also that the current lack of this form of territoriality among lesbians is a product of contemporary conditions.

Queer politics, gay space? Gender and queer spaces in contemporary Montréal

Over the past twenty years, Montréal’s gay, lesbian and queer populations have centred their commercial and community activities around two primary districts in Montréal: the Plateau and the Village, respectively, located to the northeast and directly east of the downtown core (Figure 1). Although there are currently only a few gay bars and lesbian-owned restaurants on the Plateau, this district has a thirty-year history of housing lesbian, gay and queer sites. The Plateau is the historical location of Montréal’s lesbian ‘Golden Age’ of the 1980s, during which time lesbians produced a dispersed enclave of bars, restaurants and community institutions in and around St-Denis Street, a commercial street that runs through the middle of the district. Although this enclave has ‘disappeared’, the Plateau continues to play a central role in the city’s queer geography because it is home to many queer households and some queer institutions and businesses.

Along its southern border lies the Village, a district that houses well over 90 per cent of the city’s queer commercial activity and most of its gay and queer institutions. The Village is a commercial strip and residential enclave located in the Centre-Sud district and it is centred on the area’s primary commercial axis, Ste-Catherine Street East between Amherst and Papineau. Following the displacement of gay and lesbian nightlife from the downtown core in the early 1980s, this site was established by bar and shop owners serving a gay male clientele (Guindon 2001; Remiggi 1998). Today, it houses the commercial anchors of the city’s gay and queer populations, a number of large queer entertainment complexes, and a plethora of gay and queer-friendly small businesses. Finally, there has been a significant migration of gay and queer households to this district, adding a residential component to this commercial enclave (Ray and Rose 2000; Remiggi 2000).

As in London, Manchester and Amsterdam (Binnie 1995; Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Mort 1998; Quilley 1995), Montréal’s Village became a powerful force in developing the queer economy over the course of the 1990s (Duhaime 1996; Remiggi 2000). Throughout this decade, some gay and queer businesses and institutions in the city relocated to this area, but many more new businesses opened in response to the expansion and multiplication of the queer economy in the area. By 2000, it was estimated that Village commerce had a potential clientele of 450,000 in the metropolitan area and could attract one million tourists every year (Burnette 2002). Village-based services, tourist promotion and events have enabled Montréal to capture a large proportion of the gay tourist market in North America (Connil 2000). The impact of circuit parties and gay pride festivities on the Village economy has been dramatic: in 2000 it was estimated that the bars, restaurants and boutiques of the Village earned approximately CAN $6 million on the day of the gay pride parade alone (Bérubé 2002; Lafontaine 2002). This economic development and the resulting consolidation of queer space in the Village have also increased the territorial visibility of queer populations at the urban scale in Montréal. A plethora of new political and cultural institutions grew in tandem with these businesses as the creation of a ‘queer’ territory increased activism and outreach projects. Having a visible territory in which to canvas, campaign or educate throughout the 1990s facilitated community organization and activism (Remiggi 2000). The consolidation of the Village also transformed the queer population into an important consumer market and official political constituency and it is now widely identified as the district that represents the gay and/or queer population by the police, government bodies and ministries, politicians and corporate interests (Thérioux 2003).

Despite its economic and political successes, the representation of the queer community and the consolidation of its space via the Village has not gone uncontested from within the constituencies that it purports to serve and represent. Throughout the 1990s, there was political controversy regarding the use of ‘territory’ to build community (see Remiggi 2000). Some of these concerns revolved around ‘ghettoization’, while others emphasized internal inequalities created by the ‘territorialization’ of queer communities. As a result, class, language, ‘race’ and gender are among the many other controversies of identity that continue to surround the Village (Guindon 2001; Podmore 2001; Ray and Rose 2000; Remiggi 2000). For example, Remiggi (2000) has noted that due to the growth of the North American tourist market there has been some disidentification with the area as the
use of English increased in its commercial spaces (Remiggi 2000). Class conflict surrounds the Village not only because of the gentrification that it has brought to this working-class district, but also from within the queer ‘community’ as its more economically powerful members shape its market, culture and territory. Similar conflicts of identity and territory have been observed regarding the representation of gender and lesbian identity within the Village. For example, during interviews conducted with lesbians living on the Plateau in the late 1990s, the subjects revealed that they saw the Village as a ‘gay’ space rather than a ‘queer space’ (Podmore 1999, 2001; Ray and Rose 2000). This lack of identification with the Village as a queer space can partially be explained by the fact that the Village was ‘gay male space’ until the first lesbian bar opened its doors in 1991. Not only did most of the bars restrict entry to gay men, but also there was little interaction between gay men and lesbians in Montréal throughout the 1980s when the Village was established (Remiggi 2000). In contrast with the 1990s, and even the 1960s and 1970s, when gay men and lesbians often fought police harassment and legal restrictions together, the 1980s were a decade in which these two communities were socially, politically and spatially separate in Montréal. While the gay men were building their territory in the

Figure 2  Contemporary sites of lesbian nightlife in Montréal. Source: Cadorette (2003).
Centre-Sud District, lesbian communities were building commercial and community sites on the Plateau. Lesbian-specific commercial sites did develop in the Village in the 1990s, but a large sector of the lesbian population continued to organize, socialize and live on the Plateau (Podmore 1999, 2001), a factor that shapes contemporary lesbian geographies. As Figure 2 shows, even today, after a decade of unification brought by queer politics, the Village only plays a partial role in lesbian nightlife. Magnolia, the only remaining lesbian bar in the city for the past few years, was located here, but it closed its doors in 2003. Lesbians also frequent and appropriate space in some of the larger mixed-gender sites in the Village. As in many US cities (Wolfe 1997), Montréal’s lesbian nightlife currently revolves around temporary venues such as women’s nights held in gay bars in the Village or in community sites on the Plateau (Cadorette 2003). Advertised through networks using word-of-mouth and e-mail list-serves, these are alternative events that are not listed in the city’s official ‘queer’ guides.

The covert and temporary nature of these events and the lack of specifically lesbian-identified commercial sites in the city would suggest that over the course of the 1990s Montréal lesbians were increasingly unable to produce ‘territories’ of their own. In contrast with the concentration and visibility of the Village, the amount of lesbian commercial territory that can be ‘mapped’ at the urban scale is very limited, perhaps rendering Montréal lesbians ‘invisible’ in the urban landscape (Figure 2). Clearly gender has played an important role in producing the dichotomy between the ‘underground’ lesbian network on the Plateau and the territorially based visibility of the Village. As the following historical geography will demonstrate, the current lack of lesbian commercial venues is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon. As such, these results cannot easily be explained by a lack of access to capital on the part of lesbians or a colonization of lesbian territoriality by Village commerce. Product of the post-industrial city and shifts in lesbian identification with queer politics, this invisibility requires contextualization within the long-range shifts in identity and space produced and experienced by Montréal lesbians. In the following sections, therefore, I retrace a number of important of events, alliances, forms of lesbian identity and, most importantly, lesbian territorial strategies at the urban scale in Montréal over the past five decades. I begin by examining the shifting relationships between gay and lesbian populations via their political projects and commercial territories.

Departures and (re)unions: lesbian and gay historical geographies, 1950–2000

Queer-oriented public meeting places in Montréal first became publicly visible in the post-Second World War era. They were located in two districts, the downtown core and the city’s long-lasting and well-protected red-light district (Figure 1) (Guindon 2001; Higgins 1998; Remiggi 1998, 2000). The historical record shows, however, that gender produced significant geographical differences between lesbians and gay men in their efforts to establish territory in the city’s bars and clubs in the 1950s and 1960s. Although neither population had their own bars at this time, the territory established by gay men was less limited than that of lesbians. First, higher levels of autonomous mobility afforded to men during the period enabled gay men to appropriate sites in a wider variety of locations. While lesbian bar cultures were
limited to the cabarets and cafes of the red-light district, the network of gay male bars was large enough to be divided between downtown and the red-light, a dichotomy that was strongly marked by class and linguistic identity (Guindon 2001). Secondly, there were important differences in the ways in which each population could claim space. Both were part of the mixed social world of the cabarets and cafes of the red-light—establishments populated by a mixture of unaccompanied men, heterosexual couples, gay men, sex-trade workers and lesbians (see Podmore 1999)—but Québec laws prohibited women from entering taverns until 1971 (Chamberland 1998). The sex-segregation of the taverns created an additional and unique opportunity for gay men to effectively claim territory (Higgins 1998), while limiting lesbian access and forcing them to negotiate their presence within the mixed sites of the red-light district. The territorial strategy used by lesbians in the red-light district, therefore, was corporeal: butch-femme roles, while their origins are more complex (Kennedy and Davis 1994; Nestle 1987; Thorpe 1997), served to communicate a lesbian presence in these sites (Chamberland 1993, 1998). As a predominantly working-class form of identification, the butch-femme roles that made this lesbian

subculture visible in the red-light district also reinforced their class identity and led to their spatial isolation. In addition, the vocations of the district and the mixed character of the bars strongly deterred women of higher social status from frequenting the area (Chamberland 1993, 1998).

Gender, combined with class, language and sexuality, therefore, produced different patterns of territoriality, identity and visibility for lesbians and gay men in Montréal during the 1950s and 1960s. As Montréal researchers have indicated (Bourque 1998; Chamberland 1998; Higgins 1999; Hildebran 1998; Remiggi 1998, 2000), these patterns became even more divergent in the 1970s and 1980s. Multiplying commercial territory beyond the red-light district during the 1970s, gays and lesbians came together in the western portion of the downtown core but soon set out in different directions. In response to police harassment and the changing economy of the downtown area, gay male establishments abruptly moved eastward along the axis of Ste-Catherine Street to the current Village in the early 1980s (Guindon 2001; Higgins 1999; Remiggi 1998, 2000). Lesbians, on the other hand, moved more gradually to the northeast to create a wide variety of community sites and businesses on the Plateau (Figure 3) (Bourque 1998; Hildebran 1998; Remiggi 2000). This shift can similarly be linked to police harassment in the late 1970s but it also appears to be related to patterns of residence and community service networks created by student groups from McGill University. By the early 1980s, the physical separation of lesbian and gay territories was pronounced as the two groups began to develop their own respective ‘enclaves’ in different but adjacent districts of the city. Gay businesses multiplied in the Village after 1982, eventually leading to the consolidation of gay male and queer space there in the 1990s (Remiggi 1998, 2000). After 1982, lesbian bars, institutions and other businesses also multiplied in the Plateau, specifically along the axis of St-Denis Street between Sherbrooke and Mont-Royal (Bourque 1998). For both populations, the 1980s were productive years in terms of the creation of community-oriented businesses and institutions, most of which emanated—for the first time—from within. The enclaves that each created, however, did not ultimately have the same fate: during the 1990s, the Village grew into one of the most consolidated and concentrated queer districts in North America, and the lesbian venues of St-Denis Street closed their doors and were not replaced.

This broad overview of the historical geographies of gay and lesbian bars in Montréal demonstrates that while these two populations have often overlapped in space, they have also experienced important departures. The factors that have shaped these divergent patterns have yet to be identified in local histories. Remiggi (1998) has provided an in-depth analysis of the movement of gay male businesses from the downtown area to the Village as well as a preliminary outline of the movements of both populations in Montréal from 1920 to 2000 (Remiggi 2000). A separate, in-depth historical geography of lesbian commerce and institutions in Montréal for the same period, however, has yet to be executed. Remiggi’s (2000) preliminary account demonstrates how crucial such a project could be to current understandings of how Montréal lesbians have occupied urban space. The organization of his analysis around three phases of the development of ‘homosexual’ space (1920–1960, 1960–1982 and 1982 to present) is ultimately confounded by the inclusion of lesbians, who do not appear in the historical record until 1950, occupy more than one site in the 1970s and detour from the
shared path completely in the early 1980s. Ultimately, the difficulties encountered in reconstructing a shared historical geography are due to the trajectories of each population: the story of the development of gay male territory in Montréal, although it is disrupted in 1982, is ultimately linear and cumulative while that of lesbians reaches its peak in the early 1990s and results in a decline and loss of territory.

In comparing the two populations, Remiggi (2000) raises important questions regarding gender and territory, especially in his discussion of the expansion of the lesbian enclave in the 1980s and its corresponding decline. ‘At its height, the zone in question housed a dozen bars, bookstores and community offices, but for reasons as yet to be explored, none of these places survived in the 1990s. How can this disappearance be explained’ (Remiggi 2000: 31, author’s translation). To find an explanation, he scans the existing literature on lesbians at the urban scale (Castells 1983), but finds that arguments regarding the lack of financial resources among lesbians and the private nature of their social networks are inadequate. In response, he asks, ‘If this is the case, how can we account for the period of the Golden Age’ (Remiggi 2000: 31, author’s translation). Searching for another explanation, he asks, ‘Can we attribute the decline of the commercial enclave on the Plateau to the success of the Village, where we have found few places where lesbians can gather since its development’ (Remiggi 2000: 31, author’s translation).

The following historical geography of Montréal lesbian bar cultures and their territories attempts to respond to these questions. Using periodicals and drawing on a small body of secondary literature (Bourque 1998; Chamberland 1993, 1998; Hildebran 1998; Remiggi 2000), I have identified four phases of territorial development for this population: The Red-Light Era (1950–1970); The Age of ‘Underground’ (1968–1979); The Golden Age (1982–1992); and The Queer Era (1992–2001). In this section, I described the first phase (1950–1970) during which working-class women established a lesbian presence in the cabarets and clubs of the red-light district. In the following section, I examine stages two and three. During The Age of ‘Underground’ (1968–1979), lesbians were involved in the production of two types of territories: the lesbian-dominated bars in the downtown area and the lesbian-feminist community spaces on the Plateau near the intersection of Boul. St-Laurent and Prince Arthur Street. Territorial strategies derived from both of these contexts would later produce The Golden Age (1982–1992), during which lesbians consolidated residence, commerce and community institutions on the Plateau in and around St-Denis Street. The final section of the paper deals with the period from 1992 to 2001, when the lesbian bars and community institutions on the Plateau ‘disappear’ and lesbian bar culture is partially relocated to the queer territory of the Village.

Producing the ‘golden age’ of lesbian ‘visibility’, 1968–1992

In 1978, Marie-Claire Blais published Les nuits de l’Underground [Nights in the Underground], a novel that described the night world of Montréal lesbian bars in the 1970s. Much of the story was set in ‘The Underground’, a fictitious bar widely believed to be Chez Madame Arthur, a bar that was located on Bishop Street from 1971 to 1975 (Figure 1) (Chamberland 1998; McLeod 1996). This 1970s location represents an important shift in both the lesbian and gay geographies of
Montreal. Chez Madame Arthur was part of a small cluster of bars serving a lesbian clientele that developed to the west of the established gay district on Stanley Street after 1968 (Bourque 1998; Chamberland 1993; McLeod 1996; Remiggi 2000). Between 1968 and 1981 there were six lesbian bars located in this area, including Chez Madame Arthur, Chez Jilly's and Chez Babyface (Bourque 1998; Chamberland 1998; McLeod 1996). While some clustering is apparent, Figure 1 shows that these bars were somewhat dispersed. Another general pattern is that although gays and lesbians shared a downtown location, most of the lesbian bars were located outside of the larger gay male district.

In retrospect, Blais’ (1978) use of the term ‘underground’ to represent the bar cultures of Montreal lesbians in the 1970s seems paradoxical. Although it perhaps characterized the hidden nature of lesbian nightlife at the time, the number of these bars and their territorial concentration were much greater than in contemporary Montreal. These bars were also significantly different from the mixed cafes and cabarets of the red-light district. As Chamberland (1998) notes, the downtown bars of the 1970s were known for their distance from the ‘risks’ of the red-light district as well as their contemporary style and carefully orchestrated respectability. While they were perhaps more hidden from public view, they were in fact the first ‘lesbian’ bars: only Chez Babyface was lesbian-owned, but the clientele of these bars was exclusively female (Chamberland 1998; Remiggi 2000). This shift from the ‘overexposure’ and ‘marginality’ that characterized the red-light lesbian bar cultures to the respectable, sex-segregated ‘underground’ era bars parallels territorial and class-based shifts recorded in other North American cities in the 1970s (Faderman 1992; Kennedy and Davis 1994; Nestle 1987; Thorpe 1997). Sex-segregation meant that lesbians were less exposed to male voyeurism but it also had important implications for lesbian sociability. Located in the vibrant downtown core, these bars attracted women who may never have ventured into the red-light district such as the swelling ranks of university students and office workers as well as artists, writers and nurses (Chamberland 1998). With an increase in the numbers of women participating and the diversification of the clientele in terms of class, age and language, lesbian public sociability changed dramatically (Chamberland 1993, 1998; Remiggi 2000). Most importantly, these bars made lesbians more visible to one another (Remiggi 2000). The interaction between diverse groups also built some solidarity and brought a larger group of women into contact with political activism when they were required to defend what was now seen as their territory. While this process did involve a number of struggles over lesbian identity—class, linguistic and ideological tensions, although not absolute, did arise between feminists and other lesbians—the diversity of the population and the physical location of the bars meant that ‘Lesbians could feel more confident that they were able to live their lesbian lives without being confined in marginal “deviant” spaces’ (Chamberland 1993: 3).

The emergence of these bars in the downtown core also marks the beginning of an intense period of claiming ‘lesbian’ territory in Montreal. In fact, from the late 1960s until the early 1990s, Montreal lesbians constantly increased their territory at the urban scale. According to Bourque’s (1998: 301, author’s translation) research, ‘between 1973 and 1995, Montréal lesbians opened, managed or appropriated four bookstores, nine community offices and approximately thirty bars,
restaurants and cafes’. Events and movements in the late 1960s ushered in this era of lesbian community building. As in many other large cities in North America and Europe, this was an important era of broader social change brought on by political change and the initial restructuring of the city’s economic base. Culturally, physically and economically, Montréal was also rapidly transformed to accommodate both Expo 67 and the 1976 Olympics (Marsan 1990 [1974]). Québec society, moreover, was radicalized by the Quiet Revolution, a socio-cultural revolution which sought to modernize the Québec state and reassert French cultural identity and linguistic central-ity while diminishing the power of the Catholic Church and the local business elite (Germain and Rose 2000; Linteau 1992). This modernization and increased levels of urbanization in Québec society (Marsan 1990) resulted in a number of social changes that specifically impacted the central area of Montréal: the democratization of education and increased professionalization of the Francophone population (Linteau 1992); the installation of a cluster of public and parapublic employment in the eastern downtown area (Germain and Rose 2000); urban renewal and the modernization of the downtown core (Germain and Rose 2000; Linteau 1992; Marsan 1990); and the renovation and social upgrading of a number of inner-city districts (Germain and Rose 2000; Ley 1996).

In tandem with other Western urban societies (Castells 1983), especially the USA and France, many new social movements were ignited in Québec that were centred in Montréal’s inner-city areas. These included labour and housing movements (Germain and Rose 2000; Linteau 1992), but also feminism and gay liberation. The feminist movement was relaunched in Québec with the founding of the Front de libération des femmes in 1969, a movement within which lesbians became visible to one another (Lamoureux 1998). The ‘gay liberation’ movement began with the founding of the Front de libération homosexuel in 1971 and eventually led to the foundation of the more powerful Association pour les droits des gai(e)s du Québec (ADGQ) in 1976 (Higgins 1999). As Higgins (1999) argues, the adoption of the 1969 Omnibus Bill by the Canadian Parliament (which decriminalized private sexual acts between consenting adults of the same sex) and the violent struggles of Stonewall in New York encouraged local gay activists to begin to build their own movement. While the timing of these events correspond with events in other North American cities (see Stein 2000), locally specific contests over urban space in Montréal between 1966 and 1977 (when the Province, pressured by the ADGQ, added ‘sexual orientation’ to its Charter of Rights) also made this period one of political effervescence for Montréal gays and lesbians. Harassment and police raids on downtown bars preceding Expo 1967 and those for the Olympics in 1976 produced strong reactions from an increasingly organized social movement for gay liberation. This, in combination with the concentration of most of the gay and lesbian bars in the downtown area, produced some of the first gay and lesbian political demonstra-tions, the largest of which was in 1977 when 2,000 gays and lesbians marched through the downtown core to protest raid arrests. As part of these movements, solidarity among lesbians also crystallized. The many class and linguistic factions of the lesbian bar clientele came together for the 1974 boycott of the bar Chez Madame Arthur (protesting harassment by bar employees) and during demonstrations against an armed police raid of Chez Jilly’s in 1976 (Chamberland 1993, 1998; Higgins 1999; Hildebran 1998).
As in other North American cities, the alliances between gays and lesbians were forged through these protests and under the umbrella of the homophile and ‘gay liberation’ movements (Stein 2000). These movements also produced the first gay, lesbian and lesbian-feminist groups, providing an institutional framework for the territorial development of gay and lesbian spaces in Montréal in the 1970s and 1980s. The earliest of these groups were loosely connected to McGill University such as Gay McGill (1972), Gay Montréal Association (1973) and Montréal Gay Women/Labyris (1973) (Higgins 1999; Hildebran 1998). They developed primarily to provide social services to gays and lesbians. Others were spawned in reaction to the linguistic and political orientation of these Anglophone university groups such as Front homosexuel québécois de libération (1974), Centre homophile de Montréal (1974) and Coop-femmes (1976) (Higgins 1999; Hildebran 1998). Rather than unifying gay men and lesbians, however, these movements ultimately assisted lesbians and gay men in the building of their own communities and political identities. For lesbians, this expansion and later the reorganization of their communities along gender, linguistic and political lines contributed to their territorial practices at the urban scale. Already building commercial territory in the downtown core, by the early 1970s the lesbians participating in these groups began to build community space on the Plateau. As Hildebran (1998) has shown, there were a number of community centres in and around Boul. St-Laurent near the intersection of Prince Arthur between 1973 and 1979 (Figure 3). For example, Montréal Gay Women/Labyris opened A Woman’s Place on Boul. St-Laurent in 1973, and used it as a meeting place for a six-month period. Such sites were used to provide information and to hold discussion groups and social events, increasing the visibility of the lesbian community for its population. Groups like Montréal Gay Women/Labyris and those that it spawned generally made use of local community sites but they also created their own spaces such as the members-only café Entre-Elles. Towards the end of the period, Coop-femmes (1976–1979) created the first independent and explicitly lesbian-feminist community space on Boul. St-Laurent. Coop-femmes continued the ‘gay women’s’ practice of hosting social activities and discussion groups, but, in addition, this site was used to develop a specifically lesbian culture by producing magazines, holding concerts and video-showings, and staging theatrical events (Hildebran 1998).

In the eyes of their members and participants, these communal sites represented an alternative to the downtown bars of the ‘underground’ era: as the Chez Madame Arthur boycott and the armed police raid of Chez Jilly’s illustrate, the women that frequented these bars were still subject to harassment by the police and by the male bar staff and owners (Chamberland 1993, 1998). Ironically, however, the creation of these alternative, women-only, lesbian-controlled sites played an important role in the development of the lesbian bar enclave on the Plateau. These institutions were the first places through which lesbian communities established themselves on the Plateau and, from these sites, factions of the lesbian population began to identify with the district and claim commercial sites a few blocks east around the axis of St-Denis Street (Figure 3). The ‘Golden Age’ began with three lesbian-owned and operated bars, Labyris, Lilith and L’Exit, all of which opened between the fall of 1982 and the winter of 1983 on St-Denis. The clearest
expression of the relationship between these bars and the lesbian communal groups of the 1970s is Labyris, the name of which suggests ties to the organization spawned by Montréal Gay Women. Lilith, on the other hand, reflected many of the values expressed by Coop-femmes. Like Labyris, it was owned by lesbians and strove to offer a lesbian bar environment that would celebrate and promote lesbian artists and host lesbian cultural events. Lilith’s feminist orientation was clearly stated in an announcement of its opening in the lesbian magazine Ça s’attrape!! in January 1983. This announcement celebrated the fact that Lilith was ‘the first bar reserved EXCLUSIVELY for women, especially lesbians’ (author’s translation). Not only did its owner envision Lilith as a women’s space, the format of the bar was intended to reflect ‘women’s values’ as they were constructed at the time (Escomel 1991). Indeed, throughout its ten years of existence Lilith always advertised itself as a place for women to ‘entertain, create, hear and nourish themselves’ (author’s translation).

These bars represented an important territorial shift from the downtown bars of the ‘underground’ era. While Chez Babyface was actually the first bar to be owned and operated by a lesbian, Lilith and Labyris were the first bars outside the downtown core to be controlled by lesbians themselves. Their location is significant since these bars were also surrounded by a variety of lesbian and feminist commercial sites that were an integral part of the lesbian territory being produced around this axis (Figure 3). Bookstores such as L’Essentiel and Librarie des femmes were located near the intersection of St-Denis and Rachel. Both of these feminist businesses provided an outlet for lesbian literary activities, sociability and communications (Bourque 1998). Some of the first lesbian-operated cafes and restaurants also developed here, such as Café Haut Pluriel and L’Anecdote. The dispersal of such establishments throughout the area to the east of St-Denis is evidence that the district was seen as providing opportunities for lesbian entrepreneurs, due at least in part to its increasing identification with lesbian community activities if not to an increased number of lesbian residents.

Via these bars and the lesbian-feminist infrastructure that developed around them, a visible and autonomous lesbian public culture was rapidly articulated in this district. Evidence from lesbian magazines in the 1980s indicates that feminism, lesbian culture, territory and urban space had an explicit relationship. Although its territory was much larger and its institutions more dispersed than in the Village, in the 1980s the Plateau had the highest concentration of lesbian businesses of any district in the city’s history. According to Bourque’s (1998) data, between 1981 and 1995, 69 per cent of lesbian businesses were located on the Plateau. A much more distinctive geographical pattern emerges, however, between 1981 and 1990 (Remiggi 2000). During this period, 93 per cent of lesbian establishments were on the Plateau, 64 per cent of which were located in and around the axis of St-Denis and Rachel (Bourque 1998). Feminist aspirations to create a ‘territory’ were also reflected in business advertisements published in early periodicals such as the neo-pagan Les Sourcières (1980–1982) and the more general Ça s’attrape!! (1982–1984). In addition to the bars, bookstores and restaurants that advertised in these publications, support also came from Plateau-based grocers, lawyers, corner stores, electronic repair shops, psychologists, cabinet makers and graphic artists that were either businesses operated by women and/or had a lesbian clientele. Encouraging their readers to
frequent ‘women-owned’ businesses in the district was also part of this vision of urban space. A rare statement of this political project was found in the subheading for the business pages of Les Sourcières as early as 1981: ‘The planet of women, the country of women, the neighbourhood of women ... Our utopias all more or less describe a civilization in which we will control our own affairs ... Perhaps we can start to live it now...’ (author’s translation). While in ideology this neo-pagan feminist group perhaps had a great deal in common with the radical lesbian separatist movements that built rural communities (Valentine 1997), the occupation of urban territory was not 'essentially' outside of their utopic visions.

The territorial nature of this community and the lesbian identification with the Plateau was strongly evident by the late 1980s. At this time, a number of short-lived lesbian bars began to build on the lesbian clientele of the Plateau by establishing themselves in the area (Figures 3 and 4). Between 1988 and 1992, six new bars opened on and to the south of the Plateau. While few of them coexisted, there was a clustering around St-Denis Street. In addition to the anchor bars, Le Boom, Zorro, Stop and Kiev were all located in the territory established previously by the lesbian businesses. In 1990, Le Standing opened slightly to the west of this area, near the axis of Boul. St-Laurent below Sherbrooke Street. South of the Plateau on St-Denis, the Bar Key Club temporarily joined the long-established ‘discotheque for gay women’, Le Blitis. For a period of two years, between 1989 and 1991, there were at least five lesbian bars at any one time within the approximately 2 km² between St-Laurent and St-Denis above and below Sherbrooke. In addition, when lesbians began to map their district and create their own directories in the late 1980s, the centrality of the Plateau is readily apparent. For example, a map of ‘Places of Interest for Women in Montréal’ published in the Project Lavender Bulletin in June of 1988 centred on the Plateau and showed that five of the city’s eight lesbian bars were located on St-Denis between René Levesque and Mont-Royal. This publication continued to print this Plateau map until 1993, despite the addition of new ‘places of interest’ that appear within the boundaries of the Village. Finally, a disparate set of newspaper articles from the 1990s indicates that the Plateau was seen as lesbian territory (Cadorrette 1998, 2003; Marcotte 1992). At the height of the expansion of the lesbian territory, even the mainstream press remarked on the concentration of lesbian bars and businesses on the Plateau. In a special report on the ‘marginality’ of lesbians, Marcotte (1992: A1) told the public that although Montréal lesbians were perhaps less visible than gay men, they did have a modest network of ‘bars, [and] discotheques, located discreetly on St-Denis and Rachel streets in the Plateau Mont-Royal, and on Ste-Catherine Street in the Village gai’ (author’s translation).

The links between lesbian-feminism, lesbian self-determination and urban space on the Plateau all played a central role in the expansion and articulation of a dispersed but lesbian-identified territory in the 1980s. Within the area with the highest concentration of lesbian businesses and institutions in the city, the bars flourished and were maintained until the early 1990s (Figure 4). L’Exit (and later L’Exit II) was open for business from 1982 until 1996. Labyris endured from 1982 until 1990. Lilith was open from 1983 to 1992. In addition to the support they had from an infrastructure of neighbourhood institutions, they had a number of territorial characteristics that ensured their maintenance for the 1980s. First, and unlike any bars before them, these bars were central anchors of a neighbourhood...
that had a multiplicity of interconnected lesbian businesses and institutions. Secondly, these bars were owned and/or operated by lesbians and they were also primarily ‘women-only’ spaces. While in retrospect this practice may seem ‘essentialist’ and limiting, at the time it was seen as necessary to ensure the rare control that these women had over commercial, ‘sexualized’ space. Their women-only status, therefore, was an important territorial strategy that ensured freedom from harassment and voyeurs. Finally, these bars were embedded in a lesbian-feminist culture that was committed to increasing lesbian visibility by building ‘women’s’ culture. While this factor certainly limited the clientele of these bars, it did create an environment in which lesbians could produce bar culture on their own terms.

From ‘golden age’ back ‘underground’?: lesbian visibility and queer space, 1992–2001

When seen in the context of the existing literature on lesbian territoriality at the urban scale, the development and decline of this lesbian enclave raises a wide range of questions. Is Montréal an exception? Does its ‘disappearance’ represent a loss of lesbian visibility or a transformation of lesbian identities and their engagement with urban public space? More broadly, what does this example indicate regarding lesbians and their territorial practices at the urban scale? Perhaps the answers to some of these questions lie in reasons why this enclave declined. As Remiggi (2000) has argued, the territorial concentration, visibility and duration of the lesbian bars of Montréal’s ‘Golden Age’ challenge the idea that lesbians do not create commercial enclaves because they lack financial resources and are primarily engaged in non-commercial forms of community building. What factors, therefore, might explain the ‘disappearance’ of this lesbian enclave? One possible explanation is gentrification. More specifically, could the disappearance of this enclave—and the corresponding expansion of the Village—simply be a product of local neighbourhood dynamics brought by inner-city change? Along these lines, another possible explanation is the spatial impact of the consolidation of queer culture, commerce and politics in the Village in the 1990s. In other words, can the decline of the lesbian enclave be attributed to the ‘success’ of the Village (Remiggi 2000)? This question, however, requires the consideration of the impact of queer politics and culture on lesbian communities and identities during the 1990s and the resulting expression of these changes in urban space. In addition to the above questions, this section will, therefore, consider how the redefinition and multiplication of lesbian identities and their political affiliations in the queer 1990s impacted both bar culture and lesbian territorial practices at the urban scale.

The growth of lesbian commerce and institutions on the Plateau, like the establishment and expansion of the Village, is embedded in the process of inner-city change in Montréal in the 1980s and 1990s. The Plateau and the Village district of the Centre-Sud are contiguous areas of the eastern inner city and they share a number of physical characteristics: a history of light industry and working-class residence; a housing stock of late-nineteenth-century duplexes and triplex units; and intimate commercial streets that were built along street-car lines. Both were affected by the loss of manufacturing jobs brought by industrial restructuring over the last three decades (Germain and Rose 2000; Ley 1996). Key differences between the Centre-Sud and the Plateau, however, have
strongly influenced the development of gay, lesbian and broader queer geographies in Montréal. Located near the industries of the central-eastern waterfront, the Centre-Sud was overwhelmingly inhabited by a working-class population. The area was particularly devastated by the loss of industry in the 1970s and the destruction of large tracts of housing to make way for urban renewal projects (Germain and Rose 2000; Ley 2000). While Ley’s (1996) extensive research found some ‘up-filtering’ in the Centre-Sud between 1971 and 1991, it did not compare to the increases experienced by Plateau or comparable districts in the southwest (Ley 1996). If it is even possible to speak of ‘gentrification’ in the Centre-Sud, it has come primarily from one source, the gay male population. As Germain and Rose (2000: 207) argue, ‘Unlike many of North America’s gay neighbourhoods ... gentrification has been quite limited so that there is considerable income mix within the local gay male community and relatively little perceived threat of displacement of [working-class] “traditional residents”’. The Centre-Sud, moreover, continued to rank among the poorest neighbourhoods in the city in the late 1990s (Germain and Rose 2000; Ley 2000; Ray and Rose 2000). The Plateau, on the other hand, has consistently experienced pronounced increases in social status over the past thirty years (Ley 2000). Built by a more diverse population in terms of class and ethnicity, its architecture, neighbourhood character and proximity to amenities are all factors that have made it attractive to a new urban middle-class population. As one of the key sites of social upgrading in a city that has had a ‘marginal’ experience of industrial restructuring and gentrification (Germain and Rose 2000; Rose 1996), the Plateau attracted a wide diversity of ‘marginal’ gentrifiers throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including students, artists, single mothers, young professionals, and gays and lesbians (Germain and Rose 2000; Rose 1996). Due to these patterns of gentrification on the Plateau—unlike the gay-led social upgrading and commercial change occurring in the Centre-Sud—lesbians were a small minority in a diverse counter-cultural, inner-city district.

There is some evidence, therefore, that two quite different patterns of inner-city change over the course of the 1980s and 1990s led to the decline of the lesbian enclave and the ‘success’ of the Village. While the slow and ‘marginal’ (Rose 1996) process of gentrification in these Montréal inner-city districts enabled both populations to establish territory in the 1980s, the 1990s brought a new dynamic: the Plateau experienced much higher levels of gentrification from a wider range of new urban middle-class residents while gentrification in the Centre-Sud was primarily due to its development as a gay male commercial enclave and neighbourhood. Determining whether or not gentrification on the Plateau led to the direct decline of the lesbian commercial enclave along St-Denis Street is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is evidence that these businesses began to close in the early 1990s as the social upgrading on the Plateau progressed and the Village grew. As Bourque’s (1998) research shows, between 1991 and 1995, the number of lesbian commercial sites in Montréal not only declined to a total of ten, but only four of these establishments were located on the Plateau. The original anchor bars of the Plateau began to close between 1990 and 1992, at precisely the same time that lesbian bars began to open in the Village (Figures 1 and 4).

The ‘disappearance’ of the lesbian enclave cannot, however, solely be attributed to inner-city change and the displacement of lesbian bars by increased commercial rents on the
Plateau. The location of new bars opening in the early 1990s suggests that the consolidation of queer commerce, culture and political activism in the Village also played a role. The first Village lesbian bar was Loubar, which opened on the third floor of the popular gay male bar, Taverne du Village. This bar endured for five years under two other names, Nana Pub and P-Town. In 1992, a lounge and later a dance bar for lesbians called K-2 was opened in Station C, a large complex of bars housed in a former post office building. This long-lasting anchor of lesbian bar culture in the Village was later renamed G-Spot and then Sisters. It remained at this location until 1999, when it moved across the street to a building that would temporarily house two lesbian bars in the late 1990s. In the interim, other large bar complexes began to cater to the lesbian clientele emerging in the Village by designating certain weeknights as ‘women’s’ nights. The most popular was Girl’s in the Sky held at Sky Club that began in 1993 and continued into the late 1990s. Village lesbian bars and women’s nights began to grow in 1993, but after about four years of experimentation, the number of lesbian bars here stabilized at a maximum of two. Back on the Plateau, some new businesses did attempt to draw upon the established lesbian clientele of St-Denis Street. L’Exit moved across St-Denis in 1993 and was renamed L’Exit II. A group of lesbian entrepreneurs opened 2-Side on St-Denis a few blocks south in 1995. A Village bar owner opened Pub Dietrich in the original site of L’Exit in 1998, but it was largely unsuccessful and closed in 1999. By the mid-1990s, many other lesbian and feminist community sites on the Plateau had long since closed their doors or, like the lesbian community centre École Guilford, were struggling to find a constituency. With the closure of the anchors and the supporting infrastructure of the Plateau enclave, it appears that the relocation of lesbian nightlife to the Village was under way.

Since this relocation corresponded with the closure of other lesbian community sites, it is important to consider how lesbian identities, communities and political alliances were changing at this juncture. Factions of the local lesbian population were increasingly engaged in and identified with queer politics in the early 1990s: radicalized by police repression, lesbians were an important presence in the Sex Garage, a kiss-in to protest gay bar raids. As in many other North American cities, the early 1990s were a productive period for queer politics and the building of alliances between lesbians and gay men through common projects. At this time, some of the first explicitly ‘queer’ political groups, such as ACTUP, were imported to Montréal, largely to bolster AIDS/HIV activism. A stronger identification with the common cause of the queer community among lesbians is also apparent in the early 1990s, as many were increasingly involved in building its institutions, political networks and cultural events. For example, the struggle to develop the ‘pride’ movement and parade began in the early 1990s and, at this time, the gay and lesbian film festival expanded to include a wider array of identities in its mandate. While the relations between Montréal gay men and lesbians under the umbrella of queer politics and the linguistic, class and ideological complexities of lesbian politics in Montréal in the 1990s has yet to be studied, it is clear that factions of the lesbian population were beginning to identify with and be involved in queer politics and the building of queer culture throughout the 1990s. The Village played an important role in this process, as it increasingly became a territorial representation of Montréal’s queer constituencies. In addition to the expanding bar
culture in this area, the community was being spatially consolidated: although some of its institutions were located on the Plateau, a wide range of community services and institutions developed in the Village throughout the 1990s.

How did this relationship impact lesbian identity, lesbian bar culture and lesbian territorial practices at the urban scale? For most of the decade, Montréal lesbians had two areas for bars and a handful of sites in which to experience and create new forms of bar culture. There were, however, important differences between the Plateau and Village lesbian bars that reflect broader shifts in lesbian identity and territorial practices developing in the 1990s. Unlike the small-scale, mostly lesbian-owned bars of the Plateau, the first Village lesbian bars opened within larger commercial complexes: Loubar was part of Tavern du Village and Station C ran Sisters. Although they were often managed by lesbians, these bars were never independent of the Village entrepreneurs whose primary market was gay men. With the exception of Loubar, Village lesbian bars primarily followed the broader Village format: they were night clubs where the entertainment centred around drinking and dancing; they featured DJs rather than live music; and they were open from Thursday through Sunday between 11.00 p.m. and 3.00 a.m. Secondly, while lesbians dominated the clientele of lesbian bars in the Village, they were not necessarily ‘women-only’ spaces. Sisters, in particular, represented a new form of lesbian bar culture when it opened in 1992. While it was a ‘women-only’ space on Fridays and Saturdays, it also had a back entrance to K.O.X., the largest mixed gay and lesbian club of the early 1990s. The cover charge for Sisters gave the female clientele access to both bars: lesbians had their own space upstairs but could socialize with the larger queer community in the large space below. The format of this bar also had an important impact on the character of its clientele: in contrast with the predominately Francophone lesbian-feminist cafes of the Plateau, Sisters was a nightclub that attracted a large crowd of younger women who were diverse in terms of language, lesbian aesthetics and ethnicity.

In addition to incorporating a lesbian clientele, by the mid-1990s Village bar culture
was increasingly ‘open’ to a wider array of sexual subjectivities. This ‘opening’ involved the creation of some clubs and bars that were ‘mixed’: these were originally gay male clubs that began to open their doors to lesbians and, in so doing, catered to a broader ‘queer’ clientele. As Figure 5 demonstrates, although the number of queer-identified bars advertised in Fugues (Montréal’s primary queer publication) remained relatively stable at forty between 1995 and 2001, there was a large increase in sites that identified their clientele as ‘mixed’ within the city over this period. For lesbians, this potentially meant an increase in territory as the queer spaces in which they were included grew dramatically. The growth and location of the mixed bars and clubs, however, reveal a deterritorialization of lesbian bar culture and consequent loss of lesbian territory over the period. In 1995, 77 per cent of all queer bars and clubs in Montréal were serving a gay male clientele. Mixed bars and clubs constituted a mere 5 per cent in this year. Seven of the city’s forty bars, or 18 per cent, were lesbian bars, a high-point in the presence of lesbian bars in the 1990s. Returning to Figure 4, it is clear that the lesbian bars in this year were divided relatively evenly between the Plateau, the Village and other areas in the city. Over the next six years, however, the number of lesbian bars decreased from seven to two. It is important to note that the loss of these bars was not due to a growth in gay male bars at the expense of lesbian bar space in Montréal or in the Village. The competition for the market and the space was clearly from mixed clubs and bars that grew from two to twenty-one, or from 5 to 53 per cent of all bars serving a queer clientele in Montréal from 1995 to 2001 (Figure 5). While there was also a marked decline of gay bars, lesbian bars constituted only 5 per cent of all queer-oriented bars and clubs in Montréal by 2001.

These results suggest that the ‘disappearance’ of the lesbian enclave and the decline in lesbian bar space in Montréal is strongly related to the consolidation and multiplication of specifically ‘queer’ commerce in the Village. With the exception of the Plateau bar Paco Paco, all of these mixed sites were located in the Village. Although the number of queer bars remained stable throughout this period, the increase in mixed bars was emanating from the Village (Figure 5). This concentration suggests a reorientation of the district’s clientele away from a primarily gay male population and towards a larger and expanded ‘queer’ clientele that brought gays and lesbians together in a shared space. The increased scale of the commerce of the district, however, produced two primary types of mixed sites that challenged lesbian territorial practices. The consolidation and growth of queer commerce in the Village led to the creation of large complexes such as Sky, Drugstore or Club Unity at the expense of smaller bars and clubs. The decline in lesbian bars generally and the expansion of these queer clubs, lesbians increasingly found themselves limited to appropriating space in such complexes while gay men continued to access the queer complexes and retain many of their own ‘restricted’ entry bars. The consolidation and multiplication of Village commerce also brought increasing specialization in clubs and bars that cut across gender lines. A second form of mixed bar to emerge in the 1990s, therefore, was the smaller-scale speciality bar that brought gays and lesbian populations together around music, lifestyle and entertainment interests. These included the after-hours rave clubs that attracted the gay men, heterosexuals and lesbians that were involved in the rave scene. They also include other forms of mixed nightlife that are highly specialized and even institutionalized through
club membership such as Club Bolo, which features country and western music and line dancing and attracts gays and lesbians who share an appreciation for this music genre.

Lesbian identity, bar culture and territorial practices were strongly impacted by these transformations. The decline of the lesbian enclave on the Plateau and the marginal incorporation of lesbians into the queer bar cultures of the Village fragmented these lesbian populations geographically and along generational lines over the course of the 1990s. Even in the early 1990s, strong differences in age and lesbian identity were apparent in the ways in which the bars were described in the lesbian press (Figure 6). Bar reviews published in the Info lesbo/Lesbo Info newsletter (1992–1993) and in Treize: revue lesbienne (1993) reveal how the Village lesbian bars were initially perceived. For example, Loubar was described in 1992 in Info lesbo/Lesbo Info as ‘a dyke bar in gay town’, making reference to its location in the Village (Cadorette 1992). The author frequently comments on the appearance of the women seen in Village bars. K-2, for example, was celebrated as ‘a hot and trendy dyke bar’ where ‘the dance floor is always packed with the most beautiful dykes [the author has] ever seen’ (Cadorette 1992). Treize reviewers described Village bars in similar terms: they had a new format that catered to younger, ‘fashionable’ lesbians. K-2 and the short-lived Sky Club Girls were noted for the youth of their clientele (early twenties) and the fact that they were the most fashionable bars (Desmarais and Rochette 1993; Lacelle and Desmarais 1993): ‘I have the impression that the competition to be the bar that is the most “in” is between our two favourites, K-2 … and Sky. They have practically declared war … since the two places have their own qualities and clientele’ (Desmarais and Rochette 1993: 23, author’s translation).

As for the Plateau bars, Info lesbo/Lesbo Info noted in 1992 that Labyris, Le Boom and Standing had all closed, but two of the original anchor bars, Lilith and L’Exit, were still open. In contrast with the fashionable bars of the Village, Lilith was described as a bar that served older, primarily Francophone lesbians. Its format differed greatly from the bars in the Village: the music emanated from a jukebox rather than a sound system and its events centred on support for local lesbian artists.

Figure 6  Village lesbians, advertisement for G-Spot. Source: Gazelle (1993), used with the authorization of Les Éditions Nitram.
L’Exit was described in similar terms in the pages of *Treize* shortly after Lilith closed and L’Exit moved in 1993. ‘I hope that … the owners … will not make big changes to that of L’Exit I, like playing old-style Francophone music, and not too loudly … because, for me, the role of this type of establishment is, before anything else, to create a place of exchange and not to replicate loud dance bars’ (Desmarais and Rochette 1993: 22, author’s translation). Perhaps the most blatant statement of this new dichotomy, however, came from the pages of *Info lesbo/Lesbo Info* in 1992 when Lilith was struggling to stay open. The review suggested that the move to the Village meant a rejection of the Plateau bar format by younger lesbians and ultimately the loss of women-only spaces. Referring to the survival of Lilith the author suggested that ‘Maybe some of the more trendy dykes could drop by every once and a while and support our only dyke only space before it disappears and all that we have left are mixed bars’ (Cadorette 1992).

It can perhaps be argued that the loss of lesbian territory signified by the decline of the Plateau bars of the ‘Golden Age’ simply represents a transformation and multiplication of lesbian identities, a combination of the deterritorialization of lesbian identity brought by the mixed bars and the increased visibility of lesbians in society generally due to transformative political changes in the 1990s. In this sense, the ‘disappearance’ might be seen as the result of a disidentification with the essentialism of identity and space represented by the women-only lesbian bars of the 1980s and, further, the abandonment of territory as a necessary strategy in a society in which lesbians are less confined to their own spaces. While these are clearly large and open questions, the above evidence suggests that, at least in the case of Montréal, the local economy and shifting gender relations within queer politics, identity and space need to be considered. The asymmetries of gender within the formation of ‘community’—queer or otherwise—have an important role to play in the production of identity and space. The dichotomy between the possibilities created by the open and expansive character of the Village territory and nostalgia for the more limited but concrete territory attached to the Plateau bars provides some evidence of the conflicts created by this gender asymmetry for lesbians in the queer 1990s. Bar reviewers in the early 1990s began to articulate this conflict by lamenting the loss of women-only bars (Cadorette 1992). By the end of the decade, the dual and fractured nature of lesbian territoriality and identity was apparent. For example, in a 1998 article published in *Fugues* on where lesbians ‘go out’ in Montréal, Cadorette (1998: 40) wrote a review of one of the few remaining Plateau bars at the time, Q-Side: ‘Tired of being bumped by big muscular guys on the dance floor? You like your gay buddies, but sometimes, you would like to leave them in the Village and see something else?’ The author’s solution is Q-Side, where ‘to be certain, you will be surrounded exclusively by women’ (Cadorette 1998: 40, author’s translation). By 1998, these reviewers made an explicit link between the expansion of the Village, the identification of lesbians with the increasing number of mixed bar and club spaces, and the lack of lesbian bars in the city. Cadorette (1998: 40) introduced her investigation of sites for lesbian nightlife with the following question:

With the expansion of the Village, gay men have a more excellent choice than ever of places to go to entertain themselves. But, what is happening for lesbians? … Even though the Village is rapidly growing, there are fewer exclusively lesbian spaces in Montréal today than there were ten years ago
According to this account, the production of queer territory in the Village had produced important gender asymmetries: while the consolidation of its commercial space had resulted in the multiplication of queer and gay male nightlife, the results for lesbians were less expansive. The loss of women-only bars and the deterritorialization of lesbian bar culture brought by a partial relocation had produced a decline in lesbian bars, territory and ultimately, lesbian space at the urban scale.

Conclusion

This paper began by introducing the gender asymmetries that have shaped the production of lesbian, gay male and queer territory in two contemporary Montréal districts, the Plateau and the Village. The non-territorial and less visible community networks of lesbians based on the Plateau were contrasted with the more visible production and consolidation of gay male space within the ‘queer’ territory of the Village. The objective of the paper was to contextualize this apparent lack of territory for lesbians within the long-range historical geography of lesbian bars and their districts. The contemporary ‘invisibility’ of lesbian communities was compared to the more overt territorial practices of the lesbian ‘Golden Age’ of the 1980s, when Montréal lesbians created a separate enclave for their commerce, institutions and bars on the Plateau. Calling for greater attention to the shifting relationships between lesbian territorial strategies, identities and political alliances, the paper traced the historical geographies of Montréal lesbian bars in relation to gay and queer territories forged within the city over the past fifty years. After developing a periodization that specifically represented lesbian identity and the location of lesbian bars, I examined how local economic, social and political change in Montréal created shifts in lesbian identities and their political alliances that altered their territorial strategies and visibility at the urban scale.

The long-range historical geography in which this story is embedded demonstrates the historical specificity of the relations surrounding the current ‘lack’ of lesbian territory at the urban scale in contemporary Montréal. In so doing, it provides a number of case-specific findings regarding the shifting character of lesbian territorial practices since 1950. From the 1950s to the early 1990s, lesbian access to bars and the production of lesbian-specific territories increased. Throughout this period, the number of lesbian bars grew and they became clustered as lesbian identities and communities expanded and became more clearly defined: the overall pattern of these strategies was a shift from a corporeal version of territoriality in the red-light district in the 1950s and 1960s through butch-femme roles; to the development of a concentration of lesbian bars in the downtown area in the 1970s; and, finally, to the claiming of neighbourhood territory on the Plateau in the 1980s through the development of a dispersed enclave of institutions, businesses and bars. After 1992, the geography of lesbian bars and their territories changed in the opposite direction: lesbian bars were divided between their historic enclave and the expanding territory of the city’s queer district, where they again increasingly negotiated their presence in the mixed ‘queer’ bars. In terms of the quasi-ethnic enclave model, lesbian identity, territoriality and visibility at the urban scale, therefore, peaked in the early 1990s and then appeared to decline as lesbians were integrated into ‘queer’ commercial space.
Such observations raise questions regarding the specificity of the historical geography of Montréal’s lesbian bars while, at the same time, provide evidence that historically based and locally contextualized comparative research can provide important insights into the production of lesbian territories at the urban scale. If the location of lesbian bars can be used as evidence, this case study suggests lesbians have formed their identities through territorialization (see Skeggs 1999) at the urban scale. As the historical context of this study shows, however, this territoriality differed significantly in scale and form from that of gay men. Throughout the period under study, lesbians always had fewer bars than gay men but their bars were usually concentrated in one district. In the 1970s, for example, at least three of the six lesbian bars in the downtown area always coexisted. This was also the case on the Plateau in the 1980s, the high-point being in the late 1980s when six bars coexisted. Differences in the scale and concentration of lesbian bars, however, became more pronounced over the course of the 1990s, as the three to four lesbian-specific bars were increasingly dispersed between the Village and the Plateau.

Finally, the decline of lesbian bars on the Plateau and the consolidation of queer space into the realm of the Village does suggest that the ‘disappearance’ of the lesbian enclave was due in part to the success of the Village (Remiggi 2000): while gay and queer territory was expanded and consolidated in post-industrial Montréal’s inner-city area, lesbian communities were fragmented by this growth, resulting in a loss of territory. The consolidation of queer territory in the Village, moreover, meant that the city’s historic gay male commercial enclave came to represent all queer cultures at the urban scale. This case study suggests, however, that this process cannot easily be explained via a gender dichotomy in which gay men triumphed over lesbians in the struggle for territory at the urban scale. Neighbourhood change and queer identification were both factors in the ‘disappearance’ of the lesbian enclave, but in both cases this involved subtle and shifting gender asymmetries. This study, therefore, highlights two important gender asymmetries in the relationship between sexuality and space for queer populations in post-industrial cities. First, the types of inner-city neighbourhoods in which lesbians have established enclaves may play a role in their territorial practices and resulting visibility at the urban scale. As in Brooklyn and Vancouver (see Bouthillette 1997; Rothenberg 1995), Montréal lesbians established their territorial enclave in a diverse inner-city neighbourhood where counter-cultural movements and ‘marginal’ forms of gentrification by a diversity of social groups thrived and expanded. Lesbians shared this site with a variety of inner-city populations and perhaps chose the district for many of the reasons it was later attractive to middle and high-income populations. In contrast with the Village, where gentrification came primarily from the gay community and queer vocation of its commercial and institutional sites, the Plateau experienced greater upscaling from a wider variety of residents in the 1990s which may have displaced the lesbian enclave during this period. A second and more important factor shaping lesbian territoriality in Montréal was the transformation of lesbian identities brought by queer politics and the integration of lesbians into the territory of the Village. The shift from lesbian-feminism in the 1980s to queer forms of identification among lesbians in the 1990s had important implications for lesbian bar cultures and, ultimately, lesbian territorial strategies. While the lesbian-feminist commitment to the
creation of ‘women-only’ spaces sustained the bars on the Plateau in the 1980s, it could not respond to new market demands from a generation of women who saw themselves as both lesbian and queer. As in the case of Manchester (Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley 2002; Skeggs 1999), attempts to claim space within this queer site brought gendered results. At first, the production of new forms of a lesbian-specific bar culture within the Village brought the expansion of lesbian territory beyond their enclave, but ultimately, this expansion fragmented lesbian territory in urban space. Later, the integration of lesbians into its mixed gender sites and the closure of most of the lesbian-specific bars in the city deterritorialized lesbian identity at the urban scale.

Acknowledgements


Notes


References


Un comparaison de la manière dont les communautés urbaines sont demeurées relativement « invisibles » du fait que leurs communautés sont conçues à partir de réseaux sociaux et non de zones commerciales.

¿Qué se ha producido en zonas céntricas de las ciudades, las formas de territorialidad urbana lésbicas han sido relativamente invisibles, ya que sus comunidades son constituidas por redes sociales en lugar de sitios comerciales. Contrastar los hábitos producidos por estas dos poblaciones en las zonas céntricas de las ciudades postindustriales durante la década ‘queer’ de los 90, ha llevado a una interpretación de sus hábitos de territorialidad y de su visibilidad que es polarizada por género y que es históricamente específica y puede que sea muy diferente a interpretaciones de épocas anteriores. Por lo tanto, este papel ofrece una geografía histórica de largo plazo de las lesbianas en las zonas metropolitanas principales mediante un estudio de caso de la cultura de bares de las lesbianas en Montreal desde 1950. El análisis del papel centra en las
precondiciones que llevaron al establecimiento de la zona comercial lésbica de la ciudad en los años 80 y los factores que llevaron a su desaparición en los años 90. Este estudio de caso describe en breve el carácter cambiante de los hábitos territoriales de las lesbianas a escala urbana en Montreal desde 1950. Ilustra que, en Montreal, la dinámica del barrio local, ideologías internas y relaciones políticas y espaciales con los hombres gay han tenido un impacto fuerte sobre la territorialidad y visibilidad de las mujeres lésbicas. En última instancia, estas conclusiones sugieren que es posible que la visibilidad lésbica actual a escala urbana haya sido perdida por causa de una aumentada identificación con las formas de comunidad queer y la territorialización de ellas en el Pueblo Gay de Montreal.

**Palabras claves:** lesbianas, bares lésbicos, espacio queer, geografía histórica, Montreal.