

## **Spaces to be Manoeuvred: Lesbian Identities and Temporality**

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**Je suis l'espace où je suis  
(I am the space where I am.)**

Noël Arnaud in *L'état d'ébauche*, as quoted by Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

**Sometimes discourses arrive in places in advance of the bodies who decide to take queerness up; sometimes places hold queerness until bodies are ready to become queer.**

Cindy Patton in 'Stealth Bombers of Desire: The Globalization of "Alterity" in Emerging Democracies.'

Academic scholarship in the area of sexualities and spaces has been investigated by cultural geographers, ethnographers, cultural studies theorists and sociologists in the past decade (Castells, 1983; Lauria & Knopp, 1985; Bell, 1991; Bouthillette, 1997; Stein, 2000). These studies centre on how gender plays a major role in the way gays and lesbians mediate their daily lives in North American and European urban centres. Heterosexualization of spaces is normally naturalized via surveillance and regulated performative acts (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Duncan, 1996; Valentine, 1996; Herng-Dar, 2001; Corteen, 2002). Moreover, there have been discussions on the differences between lesbians and gay men from identity formations to public visibility in urban public spaces (Bell, 1991; Rothenberg, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997; Herng-Dar, 2001; Forsythe, 2001). Discussions on queer spaces are not only limited to physical landscapes such as patterns of residential neighbourhoods, work locations, leisure sites or commercial establishments frequented by lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders. "Queer spaces" increasingly take into account various sites such as cyberspace, cultural forums and cognitive mappings.

This paper briefly discusses social and leisure spaces and the issues in utilizing these spaces as identified by women interviewed for this research. 14 women were interviewed on notions of sexual identity, family and peer relations, social and leisure spaces, social movements and love relationships. I chose to use feminist ethnography as the primary qualitative research method. I conducted life history interviews with lesbian women who engage in intimate sexual and emotional relations with other women. Interview participants were identified through local community groups and social networks. As a feminist researcher, it is important for me to attain a sampling of participants with diverse backgrounds (age, class, marital status, health status, occupation, political views, religious beliefs, ethnicity and mixed ancestry). Life history interviews were selected because they illustrate the principle that “a self story is literally a story of and about the self in relation to an experience, in this case the development of a lesbian identity, that positions the self of the teller centrally in the narrative that is given” (Stein, 1997).

I define lesbians as women who engage in intimate sexual and emotional relations with other women. I take the term queer as an all inclusive term for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders. As an initial part of a larger study towards my PhD dissertation, these preliminary findings provide insights on how lesbians *consume* and *produce* social and leisure spaces to connect, to form support networks, to cruise, to engage in sexual behaviour, to socialize and to love one another, in other words, to live out their everyday lives. These spaces include karaoke bars, lesbian cafés, game arcades, private parties and mixed venues. For the purpose of this paper, I will locate my primary

queries with the materialization of lesbian subjectivities, the intersection of lesbian subjectivities and spatialities within everyday spaces and lesbians as consumer subjects.

Consumer culture has shaped what we have come to know as gay and lesbian bars, restaurants, cafés, queer-friendly businesses and neighbourhoods. Industrialization and the onset of modernity have enabled women of middle and upper class backgrounds to attain autonomy through working in capitalist sectors. Rosemary Hennessy (2002), in her rigorous examination of the late capitalist effects on lesbian identities, alerts us to view lesbian sexualities in a broader context of daily struggles and survival needs rather than a narrow focus on sexual desires per se.

For some of us, unlearning the privilege of rallying around our sexual desires may indeed be a loss, but the loss of this privilege does not require that we forfeit critical attention to sexuality. On the contrary, developing critical knowledge of the *class* dimensions of (sexual) identity and desire could be one of the most fruitful contributions of a new generation of feminists to collective global agenda for transformative change (Hennessy, 2000: 202).

Citing the government's census and statistics, an Oxfam study on how poverty affects women living and working in Hong Kong highlights the realities of women in poverty (Oxfam, 2005). The title of the two-volume publication, *76.8% of The Sky: Social Gender, Poverty and Development in Hong Kong*, is used to symbolize that 76.8% of working women earn only half of the Hong Kong income index. Among women in the labour force, approximately 25% of them are single. Although there is no collection of data on the sexual identities among these women, it is still valid to bear in mind the level of poverty among women in general, and to query the connection made between autonomy and sexual identities as a result of industrialization.

Two binaries are at stake here, namely, public/private and global/local. It is crucial to understand the public/private dichotomy and its practices as gendered. The idea of privacy is a deep-rooted tradition within Western political theories of autonomy, private property, patriarchal family structures and personal freedom. One particular concern surrounding privacy is what constitutes as personal freedom. Modern liberal concepts of individual freedom and rights within familial structures situate an individual within state and private households that are heterosexual and depoliticized in nature. Therefore, being private, in essence, is to abstain not only in the public sphere but to be domesticated in a heterosexual reproductive unit<sup>1</sup>. An ideal private realm would point to notions of domesticity, embodiment, nature, family, property, intimacy, passion, sexuality, emotions, unwaged labour and reproduction. On the contrary, an ideal public sphere encompasses principles of disembodiment, rationality, citizenship, justice, economy, waged labour, the state and valour (Duncan, 1996: 128). As a result, women have been historically treated as belonging to the private realm, and incapable of asserting objectivity through emotional detachment. Applied to spatial dimensions, feminist geographer Nancy Duncan (1996) observes somewhat unclear distinctions inherent in the public/private domains,

Both private and public spaces are heterogeneous and not all space is clearly private or public. Space is thus subject to various territorializing and deterritorializing processes whereby local control is fixed, claimed, challenged, forfeited and privatized (Duncan, 1996: 129).

Late capitalism manifests itself in economic structures, socio-political and cultural institutions with an agenda to accumulate global capital via local sites. Local knowledges,

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<sup>1</sup> By discussing the public/private dichotomy in Western scholarship, I am not assuming that the discussion can be easily applied to Chinese contexts. The kinship structure in Chinese families has been studied by scholars, in particular, the relation to sexualities (Chou 1997, Kong 2004, Sang 2003). It is my intention to further investigate this significant theoretical strand in my PhD dissertation.

cultures and labour have been absorbed, utilised, controlled and exposed by global market forces (Hennessey, 2000). But resistance efforts are not to be undermined. Sexual minorities, aboriginals and indigenous communities, women's groups and labour organizations have emerged in response to globalization of "capital, commodities, and forms of consciousness" (Hennessey, 2000: 9). Queer theorists have rushed to the conclusion that "queerness is now global" (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan IV, 2002: 1). As consumer subjects, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and queers have continuously gain access to new media representations and human rights discourses through communication technologies<sup>2</sup>. Even though access is still privileged and is indicative of consumer power, localized meanings of sexual identities can still be influenced by global constitutions of power, as exemplified in the adoption of human rights discourses (Patton, 2002). Situating a global agenda within the context of Chinese modernity, both literary scholars Lydia Liu (1995) and Deborah Tze-lan Sang (2003) contend that Chinese modernity, in essence, has often been "a translated modernity" (Sang, 2003: 9). Sang further emphasizes the critical project of locating global forces in our conceptualization of transnational sexualities,

The complexity of translated modernity in the non-West means that, even when a particular non-Western space for inquiry is ostensibly identified as the nation, it is always already shot through with colonial, imperial, transnational, cosmopolitan, global – whatever we call it – presence and valence (Sang, 2003: 9).

As sexualities become more globalized and capital becomes a transnational phenomenon, the body has been reconfigured as an available site of "global

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<sup>2</sup> International human rights groups such as Amnesty International and International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission have major influences on many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developing democracies (King, 2002; Patton, 2002). The NGOs often adopt their discourses in articulating human rights and sexual citizenship.

consumption” (Cruz Malavé & Manalansan IV, 2002: 2). It is by no means a recent episode that bodies are sites of particular sociocultural and sexually specific contexts, and sinuously marked by power dynamics. Much feminist and post-colonial research has refuted the universalizing Western debates of mind/body and reveals bodies as demarcated by gender, race, class and sexuality, age and physical status (Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Halberstam, 1998; McClintock, 1995). Locating colonial women’s bodies in Victorian Britain, Anne McClintock (1995) has repeatedly shown women’s bodies as objects of Western imperialism and commodity spectacles in colonial histories. Among private/public discussions, the institution of family situates women’s bodies as private, embodied, domestic, natural, unwaged labour and a reproductive site (Duncan, 1996). In terms of lesbian sexual identities, lesbian bodies occupying city streets and social spaces in urban and suburban settings denote lesbian visibility and place-claiming strategies (Rothenberg, 1995; Valentine, 1996; Bouthillette, 1997).

Judith Butler’s interrogation of sexual identities, in particular, of lesbianism, is indicative of a displacement or a de-emphasis on what we came to understand as identity politics. Instead, she offers drag as a possible solution to illustrate the complexities of lesbianism and the contradictories it occupies, more clearly, the notion of lesbianism being embedded in a structure (read heterosexism) that it reproduces yet at the same time rejects. Butler emphasizes that gender is a performance and identities are constantly being destabilized through cultural performances (Butler, 1990). Gender performance disrupts what we came to know as categories of “woman” and “man”. Butler’s theory of performativity problematizes these categories and instead, proposes that even though our gendered and sexed bodies are inevitably constrained by dominant notions of gender and

sexuality, but at the same time, our bodily performances can disrupt such notions and unsettle the relations between them.

As a result, lesbian subjectivities embedded within a contested terrain of identity politics and global capitalist markets require an exercise of careful mediation. Hegemonic heterosexuality within public spaces has relegated deviant sexual practices to marginal territories deemed appropriate for sexual dissidents. Lesbian visibility in both queer and non-queer spaces has become a key political manoeuvre to eliminate homophobia. Yet, the growing commercialized nature of queer cultures has threatened to marginalize the poor, the disabled, the racialized, the elderly and the “misfits”. Transnational media has spurred an economy of representations and global governance on sexualized bodies and has affected our everyday lives<sup>3</sup>. Our bodies as corporeal matter, as flesh and blood, as occupier of space, as porous matter have become part of wider discursive schemes.

There are many possible connections between a consumer subject and a social subject (Pellegrini, 2002)? A consumer subject, let’s say, a lesbian consumer subject can purchase visibility through participation at queer-friendly cultural events (as in film festivals, theatrical productions and concerts) and through sipping a drink at the local hangout. A social subject might push for political and social rights, in pursuit of social acceptance via market visibility. Both subjectivities intersect and rely on each other to establish an effective relationship for queer visibility. But this form of queer visibility is class-stratified and not affordable for all. For the rest of this paper, I would like to provide a snapshot of everyday lesbians living and working in Hong Kong, their

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<sup>3</sup> For more literature on transnational media, see *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, eds. Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). For global sexualities, see *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: National Imprints of a Worldwide Movement*, ed. Barry D. Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak and André Krouwel (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

understanding of lesbian spaces in relation to both their participation and their sexual identity formations.

### *On Normalizing Sexual Identities*

The opinion of normalizing lesbian identities has shown to be of relative significance among respondents.

When I go with a large group of friends to a restaurant, any restaurant, I think the people know who we are. You can tell. I don't feel ashamed of myself but the point is, I won't tell people that I am one [a lesbian]. I don't need to say it. We're not 15 or 16 years old, taking drugs and drinking too much. We are normal people and we behave. As long as we act maturely, we don't need to say it.

When asked about whether there is a need for lesbian-specific places, another respondent replies,

There is a need for lesbian-specific places. But for myself, I may not go there. What I mean is that there should be, I mean, on a societal level. I think there should be spaces for sexual minorities, but I also think that these spaces isolate us. For example, if I go out with my girlfriend or lesbian friends for dinner or for a drink in a straight space, I think it is important to show them that we exist. If we only go to lesbian spaces, we are isolating ourselves and confining ourselves to our own spaces.

What the respondents meant by normalizing often point to positive representations of lesbians in everyday situations, a visible consumer culture and an affirmative discourse on sexualities. It is as if when one talks about lesbian and gay politics, one needs to think of assimilation tactics in order to be a part of the social milieu. It is understandable that some Hong Kong lesbians walk on a tightrope of carefully asserting one's sexual identity and strategically placing each step along the way for fear of discrimination. Alternate spaces are used then to assert one's sexual identity.

Travis Kong's study on 34 Hong Kong gay men has found the commercial gay scene (such as bars, parties, gyms and saunas) in Hong Kong as mainly male, upper or middle-class, youth-driven, confined by perceived gender codes and sexual behaviours, style-conscious and influenced by western notions of homosexuality (Kong, 2004). Kong locates an alternative cultural space that aims to usurp the "hegemonic embodied masculinity" through film/video, theatrical productions, fiction/non-fiction and gay web sites (Kong, 2004: 23). By producing more diverse representations that depict same-sex relations, these alternate forms facilitated discussions on sexualities and provided more positive images of lesbians and gays in general. Two questions appear to trouble me. How do positive and diverse sexualities pave the way for a cosmopolitan future? What do we exactly mean by positive and diverse sexualities?

### ***On a Cosmopolitan Way of Living***

Much scholarship has put forth gay and lesbian spaces as empowering and vital sites for healthy sexual identity formations. One respondent who owns a lesbian café, talks about her vision of the café,

I think opening a café should not be confined to just a café. I want my café to sell merchandise. You need to think of a lifestyle, too. I always want to start a sports team using the name of the café. If we can have more diverse options, we can be seen as part of a larger group.

Although the respondent may not be pointing towards a corporate identity, it is worthy to note the usage of the term "lifestyle" as to denote lesbian sexual identities. One of many sacrifices in establishing a cosmopolitan way of living is the marginalization of gay and lesbian sexualities to make room for marketable lifestyle commodities catering to

heterosexuals and overseas tourists. Gay culture has come to play a major factor in producing and consuming cosmopolitan urban spaces.

Jon Binnie and Beverley Skeggs defines cosmopolitan as follows:

To be a cosmopolitan one has to have access to a particular form of knowledge, able to appropriate and know the other and generate authority from this knowing. In most definitions cosmopolitanism is not just about movement through culture with knowledge but is an embodied subjectivity that relies on access to the requisite cultural capital to generate the requisite dispositions (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004: 42).

Interestingly enough, historic gay villages in metropolitan cities have turned to tourist dollars in order to market themselves as an attraction and a node of fluid sexualities. For example, the Castro areas in San Francisco USA, Ibiza in Spain and Manchester in the United Kingdom have seen commercialism and tourism as viable ways to preserve the areas. The Manchester gay village, for instance, have been going through a “degaying process” in order to attract heterosexual visitors (Pritchard *et al.*, 2002). The multi-million dollar Pride event in San Francisco has been accused of catering to the marketplace instead of being a community event<sup>4</sup>.

Fran Martin’s (2003) study on New Park (known as The February 28 Memorial Park since 1997), a pivotal gay male cruising site in the city of Taipei, Taiwan has claimed that access to a city is often reserved for middle-class homeowners inscribed with conventional notions of sexuality. When the Taiwanese government purports to reconstruct the site as part of a cosmopolitan makeover of the city, tongzhi groups voiced their nostalgia for the site and validated their urban histories through couterpublic spaces

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<sup>4</sup> I have worked as a program manager of social marketing with the Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center, San Francisco CA for two and a half years. The Center hosts an annual Asian & Pacific Islander stage at San Francisco’s Pride celebration. I have always been struck by the commercialism and corporate agenda of the entire event and the mainstreaming of sexual identities which can result in marginalizing those who do not fit into essentialist notions of being lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

such as holding a public tongzhi event in the New Park, creating a cyberpark online and publishing articles on the issue itself.

In many aspects, women have always been marginalized, made invisible, rendered as objects of potential violence in public spaces. Lesbians are doubly affected in this equation of marginalization. Lesbians have also been assumed to be out of the capitalist logic and consequently, large commercial enterprises have used the lack of demand for lesbian spaces as an excuse. This does not pertain to only homogenized commercial operations. Lesbians have also been excluded in many gay events and gay enclaves. An extensive study on Manchester's gay village has shown that lesbians continue to struggle for inclusion in an area widely perceived to be a flourishing gay and lesbian district in the United Kingdom (Pritchard *et al.*, 2002). This is also true of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals where women productions have routinely been "left out" due to an assumption that there is limited market for lesbian spectatorship. These spaces maintain "patriarchic power dialectics characterizing the socio-cultural construction of that space" (Pritchard *et al.*, 2002: 118).

Cultural studies scholar Chan Shun-Hing, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theories on everyday life and modernity via a Marxist lens, comments on Hong Kong consumption patterns through her study on female subjectivities among housewives. She suggests that Hong Kong has created a recent "homogenized consumption pattern" due to the control of local markets by tycoons. As a result, close personal relationships between hawkers and women have slowly diminished. Such intimate relationships, are not regularly documented or taken seriously as a slow degradation of social relations. Chen mentions that local knowledges and everyday lives of Hong Kong people are often

ignored and abandoned by various institutions. She suggests that we have much to learn from the complexities of women's everyday lives and the effects of global capitalism on local communities. I would further argue that homogenization consumption patterns also occur in how lesbians identify leisure spaces and how tensions erupt between normalizing and asserting one's sexual identity through spatial dimensions.

### *On Leisure Spaces*

The city of Hong Kong, without any doubt, portrays itself as a cosmopolitan city and functions as both a depository and a transmission site for world finances. The city boasts a vibrant commercial gay scene and an "upstairs" lesbian café culture<sup>5</sup>. The development of lesbian karaoke bars and "upstairs cafés" have even been covered by tabloids and trashy magazines. In 2004, a group of activists, academics and community members participated in an oral history project with the aim of documenting histories among Hong Kong women who have same-sex desires. Funded by the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong government, *Brazen Women: Hong Kong Women who have Same Sex Desires Oral History Project 1950-2004* is comprised of both a travelling exhibit and a booklet. Based on 15 in-depth interviews and archival research,<sup>6</sup> the organizers aim to reconstruct a community history through individual recollections of

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<sup>5</sup> "Upstairs cafés" point to cafés which are located in different floors of residential and business buildings. Rental costs for these flats are usually much cheaper than a location on street level. Some would argue that the location of these cafés makes it safer for lesbians to socialize, while others have expressed the need for street-level establishments. These cafés can be commonly found in high-density areas such as Causeway Bay, Mongkok, Tsim Sha Tsui and Wanchai. "Upstairs cafés" is by far not a queer phenomenon, that is, there are many "upstairs cafés" with different themes for the general public.

<sup>6</sup> In April 2005, the exhibit booklet was rejected by a local bookstore for display. A political action initiated by Hong Kong Rainbow Action denounced the bookstore as discriminating towards sexual minorities. The owner of Elmbook or more commonly known as Yu Lam, later confessed to be a Christian and used religion as a reason to reject the booklet. The incident resulted in a verbal battle on mainstream media, stirred up controversies among local queer communities and sparked off debates on public/private, religion/homosexuality.

their personal histories. There was a section in the exhibit including the usual lesbian “hangouts” in Hong Kong throughout the nineties. These gathering places are often publicized through word of mouth, women’s organizations and later, the Internet. Mary Ann King, in an essay documenting lesbian subjectivities within Hong Kong women’s movement, calls our attention to coalitional politics between gay and lesbian organizations and women’s groups (King, 2001). King also purports the importance of having a space to discuss our differences in understanding what we exactly mean by discrimination and human rights.

Many respondents mentioned various locations that were documented in the oral history project. When asked about whether she goes to lesbian karaoke bars, one respondent pointed out:

I don’t like going to those places. I don’t like it at all. I don’t feel that I fit into the category. I wanted to go to les bars before, but when I got there, I didn’t know what to do. People like to drink, to *chai mui*, to know others<sup>7</sup>. And I don’t do that. But I feel I need to go because it’s a tongzhi space and I should go. Sometimes I feel that going to les bar is like *yum cha*, if you only go with one other person, it feels odd<sup>8</sup>. But if you go with a large group, you feel okay.

For the purpose of this paper, I am not going into details the cultural and social origins of karaoke bars. Instead, I want to focus on leisure spaces where lesbians find safe to be out as a lesbian. The privacy of karaoke rooms or boxes provides a safe refuge for intimacies in a city where living spaces are expensive and shared housing is a familiar reality.

One respondent recalls joining a karaoke contest with 15 to 20 other contestants hosted by a gay organization back in 1997. As the number of gay and lesbian

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<sup>7</sup> *Chai mui* is a game commonly associated with drinking, much like the game *Stone, Paper, Scissors*.

<sup>8</sup> *Yum cha* is going to Chinese restaurants for a dim sum lunch.

organizations grew following the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1990, there were also more options for social activities and community services. The same respondent became a community organizer for a karaoke contest held in 2003 with over 90 persons registering as contestants. When asked about her passion with karaoke singing, she said,

I love karaoke. I used to sing karaoke twice in a week. K-box is so safe. This is a very important reason. This is especially true for girls, safety... What else can you do here? Other than staying home, going to karaoke boxes is the perfect solution... Once you step into a karaoke room, you feel safe. The girlfriend I was with then finds it very safe since she did not have to worry about others seeing her. You can tell others that you're singing with a friend! There is nothing wrong with that!

Privacy is granted in the karaoke rooms/boxes whereas for lesbian karaoke bars, they usually consist of an open area where singing is conducted in public<sup>9</sup>. Binge drinking is not unheard of and cruising is one of the main reasons for going to the bars. One of the many reasons why many lesbians are forced to be a part of the consumerist chain is due to the outrageously high property costs in Hong Kong. As a result, most lesbians live with their families or in shared housing with flatmates<sup>10</sup>. Going out becomes a necessity especially when one is not out to their family members as a lesbian. One respondent was living in a rented room with her older sister and mother. She was once married and the possibility of moving to larger housing quarters played a major factor in her decision to being married,

If I marry him, I can move in and live in his 500 square feet apartment with him and his brother. This plays a very important factor for me to get married. I think I am very fortunate this way. Also, my friends also think that there is no doubt that I should marry him and move in to live with him. At the same time, my mother and older sister got selected for public

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<sup>9</sup> The most well-known lesbian karaoke bar in the city is *Virus*. Located in Causeway Bay, the 9 year bar has a reputation of having a young rumpus clientele. Almost all of the respondents mentioned going to the bar at one time in their lives. *Virus* occupies a critical position in the histories of local lesbian communities.

<sup>10</sup> Almost half of Hong Kong's population lives in public housing estates where an average 300 square feet apartment is allocated for families.

housing in Tin Shui Wai. Everyone is saying how lucky I have a flat to move into.

A visible consumer culture is often marked by class boundaries. Lesbian-specific karaoke bars may not be welcomed by lesbians who have achieved a certain class status and have other consumer choices. A 28 year-old respondent voiced out her dislike of lesbian karaoke bars,

Actually, I don't like going to karaoke spaces. I feel old. Even though I know there are people who are older than me in those spaces, I still feel I don't belong to that place. The place is young, in terms of age. The space doesn't suit me. Occasionally I would go with a group of friends to hang out if they want to. Going to those places are mainly for cruising.

Another 42 year-old respondent also agreed but pointed out the need for a common place to just be the way you are and to be out as a lesbian.

The bars are too young for me. I'm too old for that. I feel I can go anywhere with my friends. I'm happy being anywhere with my friends. But there is not one familiar place, restaurant, café or bar to meet new friends, to meet new people, to hang out. But not to cruise, just to make new friends.

For younger respondents, going out to lesbian karaoke bars take on grave risks. A fifteen year old respondent said,

Cafés, we can go to every café. For bars, you cannot go to all of them. If there is one that is familiar, I will go there because I'm too lazy to find other new ones. As long as it is comfortable. The bars don't usually check your IDs.

Another 20 year-old respondent immediately interjected,

Depends on which one. *Elements* check your ID every time you go there. *Home* doesn't. But *Elements* always get raided by police. I've been there several times and it always get raided.

Cultural anthropologist Antonia Yengning Chao's work on lesbian spaces known as T bars in Taiwan point to a certain form of lesbian imaginary of which a woman can

identify with lesbian subjectivities beyond specific neighbourhoods (Chao, 2001). Instead, one maps cognitively and imaginatively the matrixes of the city and the possibilities it holds.

On the notion of safety in lesbian-only places, the young respondent said,

If there is no men there, it's safer. Men always try to take advantage of you. They come over and push you, tease you. They touch you.

As Eves note, essentialist notions of lesbian identities are most apparent in territorial claims (Eves, 2004). Participants in her study have lamented the loss of lesbian-specific spaces whereby straight women and men have intruded the spaces and further marginalize lesbians. Butch women felt that they were treated as desirable and femmes felt visible in lesbian spaces. On the contrary, they were often misidentified, rejected and uninvited in other places. Both butch women and femmes rely on essentialist discourses to defend the safety of lesbian spaces and to protect the boundaries of their gender identities.

Another respondent commented on the differences between singing karaoke with a lesbian crowd versus a company of heterosexuals,

There are major differences between going to karaoke with a straight crowd or with a lesbian crowd. If I go with a lesbian crowd, the butch women can sing songs by male artists and I can also sing them. I sing those songs in a low voice. The crowd would usually turn around in surprise because of my feminine appearance.

In an ethnographic study on the impact of karaoke in the reconstruction of social identity among Chinese Americans, Casey Man Kong Lum asserts that karaoke performances in a live setting make interactive relations between the singer, the audience and the cultural text on television “dynamic, hybrid, and intensely indigenous” (Lum, 2001:129). Mimesis of identity is also noted by one respondent,

I also want to see KTV representations of two women. There is this one song by Sammi Cheng that shows two women on KTV, but their bodies are like fashion models, so it doesn't feel like us. I want to see images that are beautiful and that move me.

Apart from lesbian karaoke bars, lesbian cafés can be seen as a place to foster communities, a lesbian café owner said,

The café is also a place for people to feel a sense of belonging...I listen to the love stories and problems of my young customers. I stock up on cold medicine and painkillers for headaches in case they need them.

When asked about the customer profile of her café, she exclaimed,

I never thought they would be so young! They are school-girls!...For young people like them, it's like an experiment. They [their sexual identities] are not fixed yet.

Young respondents in my research often engage in conversations regarding trends and consumer culture. They are especially articulate about the latest places to go and hang out. In describing a new mall called APM in an industrial satellite city, Kwun Tong, a 20 year-old respondent stated,

You don't need to go to Causeway Bay anymore<sup>11</sup>. All the shops, like game arcade, cinema and karaoke.

Another 16 year-old respondent interrupted,

Lesbians are everywhere. Kwun Tong, too.

When asked about whether one would hangout in a lesbian-specific neighbourhood, a young respondent replied,

It doesn't matter. It is purely a matter of fun and where to hangout. Causeway Bay is the central meeting place in Hong Kong, as Mongkok is for Kowloon. It's easy to meet friends here.

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<sup>11</sup> Causeway Bay is a mixed residential and commercial zone on Hong Kong Island. It is often referred as the commercial core for Hong Kong Island with shops and restaurants opening late. It is also a hub for lesbian cafés and lesbian karaoke bars. The area is also easily accessible from Hong Kong island, Kowloon or New Territories.

So it seems that for most respondents, there are identifiable places to go to and social networks are not as remote as it can be. Nonetheless, I want to argue that for lesbians who take up tomboy identities or who display certain hegemonic masculine traits, they often bear the emotional costs in public spaces such as the workplace. Tomboy or the term TB, is commonly noted as a masculine signifier and called upon as a label among local lesbian populations (Kam, 2003). Lucetta Kam Yip Lo, in her extensive study on 18 informants who are regularly being mistaken as males in Hong Kong, documents the emotional traumas met by these informants through offensive remarks (Kam, 2003). Routine everyday choices were made by these women as in asking female friends to accompany them to washrooms and in selecting the kind of occupations that they can feel comfortable working for.

Similarly, one of the women interviewed for my research recalls her traumatic experience of wearing a dress to work:

Did you feel that you had to change your TB image for work?

You have to, as you work in commercial fields such as Marketing and Sales. I had a job selling paper for photocopiers and I had to wear a dress. I got off work, went home and looked at myself, I broke down and cried. I felt really uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable.

For another respondent who works in a small company, she recalled her angry experience,

I work in a small company. There are some department staff who are really mean. There was an instance where a foreign client comes in for business. They asked the foreigner whether they think I'm a girl or a boy. I happened to stand close to the entrance photocopying documents. Right before making those comments, they introduced me and we shook hands professionally. They would only ask such questions after they walked a few steps away. They think it's funny if the foreigner thinks I'm a boy. I thought bitch! It's so demeaning.

One might turn to the notion of reticence and its presumably violent dialectics in everyday practices of homophobia. Even though hate crimes have been documented by a local civil rights organization, Civil Rights for Sexual Diversities, the idea of reporting an incident as a hate crime or describing discriminating incidents do not come easily for the respondents<sup>12</sup>. It is often through more careful questioning and trust-building practices do these incidents surface in their narratives. I turn to Taiwan scholars Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-Peng and their discussion on the classic literary notion of reticence which has strong roots as a Chinese virtue. They argue that one might internalize the notion and practices it as a coping mechanism to fight homophobia in hope of preserving social harmony in a broader context. Both the queer subject and the others enacting homophobia can perform reticent acts in order to present an illusion of social harmony. Both scholars assert that the symbolic violence of being reserved, being neglected, being intentionally “nice” can be read as a potent and silent form of homophobia.

The fluidity of sexual identities has provided much insight into how lesbians map their spaces both cognitively and physically. Lesbian subjectivities are engaged in an endless exercise of being created, contested and negotiated. Butler (1990) demands us to upset binaries that were held tightly under the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Sexual identities are exposed as a fictional outcome of gender and sexuality discourses. Sexual identities do not come in neat packages with instructions for easy understanding. I do believe that we have come quite far in understanding this notion on an intellectual and philosophical level. It remains a task to ground such unstable categories onto a practical life map of everyday living.

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<sup>12</sup> Civil Rights for Sexual Diversities is an NGO working for the rights of people who may be disadvantaged by the law, policies and social prejudices in Hong Kong because of their sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual expression ([www.cr4sd.org](http://www.cr4sd.org)).

Since sexual identities are managed on moving grounds, so are what geographer Phil Hubbard call as “spaces of encounters”. These spaces are defined as sites where “encounters between sexual subjects provoke emotions of desire and/or disgust” (Hubbard, 2002: 372). Thus one can be imaginative and creative about these spaces. It can be a 24 hour convenient store, a website for a hobby, a lesbian bar, an undisclosed private gathering, a flat in a housing estate, a chain clothing store, a corner food stand or an upstairs café. Drawing on post-structural and psychoanalytical theories, Hubbard gave a stern reminder of how both imagined and real encounters within a city’s sexualized spaces can “feel either strange and Other or familiar and pleasurable one moment, but alien and threatening the next” (Hubbard, 2002: 375). Spaces, as Michel de Certeau, points out aptly, is nonetheless influenced by multiple elements of mobility accentuated by the notion of speed (de Certeau, 1984). The emergence of a space is fraught with multiple representations, claims for authenticity and temporal by its existence.

To conclude, these preliminary findings can be perceived as familiar stories among women who have same-sex desires for other women. They might represent what we have already established as a way of knowing. Maybe what is more urgent here is for me to follow Meaghan Morris’ (1988) warning to be astute, to reject “banality”, to be disruptive of spatial practices among everyday lesbian subjectivities.

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