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Straight to Halsted

Boystown's tourists are intentional.

There is nothing gayer than Sunday Funday: afternoon brunch mimosas followed by cheap drinks into the evening.

I fucking love brunch. I don't care if it makes me a basic bitch, but I don't think I can state it any more clearly how much I enjoy going to Boystown on Sunday. As I began to wind my fieldwork down, I largely stopped going out on Fridays, because I enjoyed Sunday's activities so much more.

After a night out, I will roll out of bed between ten and noon, because it is criminal to go to brunch before 1 p.m. Two glasses of water and a cup of coffee later, Austin and I are ready to head out for a relaxing Sunday Funday.

Sun shining, we will walk slowly from our apartment at Sheridan and Buena Avenue in Uptown south into Boystown to our favorite brunch spot, Angelina Ristorante, or Angelina's.

Several of these brunch spots dot Boystown. Kit Kat Taverna 750 Angelina's.

Others offer more classic breakfast, minus the mimosas for those nursing hangovers. Nookies. Melrose. Stella's.

Others later got in on the Sunday Funday brunch game, offering unlimited mimosas and an entree at a slightly lower price point: D.S. Tequila. El Mariachi. mEAT.

Walking into Angelina's, I'll often spot a friend at another table, or a former trick. It can seem like all of Boystown is out on a Sunday.

Two, five, or eight mimosas later—they are unlimited after all—the server will hand us a coupon for a free bottle of sparkling wine at Progress. Several of the restaurants have these arrangements with bars, although usually with other bars managed by the same people, or owned by the same company, like Taverna 750 and Scarlet.

By this time, it's usually three in the afternoon, but Progress is already packed. Formerly Cocktail, the half-naked go-go boys have been replaced

with tasteful seating, a green herb garden, and an arty lightbulb ceiling installation. Austin and I will stand at the window, drinking our free bottle of bubbly, so bad it has to be diluted with orange juice to make it palatable, and people watch.

Inevitably, someone we know will walk by—Matt, Caleb, Brandon, and soon—and we'll pull them inside for a drink.

Everyone has work the next day, but the afternoon has barely begun. After Progress, it is time to walk across the street to Roscoe's for dollar beers, perhaps the only time I can convince people to go into Roscoe's. A few beers later at 7 p.m., it'll be off to Scarlet to get some dancing in before wandering home at 9 or 10 to get ready for the work week.

Sunday Funday.

In this way although reflecting an earlier cultural activity of the Sunday tea dance, Sunday Funday, today, is a manufactured outing in gay Disneyland. You are on rails, escorted from one venue to another by deals worked out between bar owners. Boystown wants to keep you in it, spending money.

But it doesn't just want gay money. It wants bigger profits. The Northalsted Business Alliance wants to bring people "Straight to Halsted."

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The Northalsted Business Alliance are hard people to get ahold of. Like the Center on Halsted and other elite organizations, they are insulated and worried about their image. They want to control the message. Confidentiality, combined with persistence verging on annoyance, can get them to talk.

I cold-contacted Tom after reading an article about his business in one of the local publications. He ignored my first several e-mails, but then replied with vague agreement but no commitment for a time to interview. After seeing him at a community event, I pressed again. Finally, the e-mail stuck, and we agreed to meet at his place of business.

The evening was rainy. I wore a purple oxford shirt and a gray blazer with a faint houndstooth pattern because I wanted to look professional. Between the humidity, the slick of the rain blown sideways under my umbrella, and the speed at which I was walking to get there on time, I arrived breathless and sweaty, the very picture of someone overplaying the degree of his professionalism.

I shouldn't have worried. Tom wasn't ready for me. One of his employees directed me to sit nearby and wait for him. Ten minutes later, he arrived, turned down the music, and directed me toward the back where we could talk.

He talked and talked and talked. Fast. My typical interviews last an hour and fifteen minutes to two hours. He covered the same material in forty-five

minutes. He talked in a manner both nervous and authoritative, like he was used to commanding a room with long speeches of his opinions, but as though he was uncertain who I was, unclear about the purpose of the interview, nervous that I might have some hidden agenda other than the one listed on the consent form he signed.

Like most business owners in Boystown, he was a member of the Northalsted Business Alliance. I was attempting to tempt him into letting me present to the alliance a proposal to do establishment surveys—they ultimately turned me down—when he segued to another way the alliance was attempting to shape the clientele of the neighborhood.

“Actually, we are starting a marketing campaign called ‘Straight to Halsted’ and we’re advertising for Sunday Funday. It says ‘Sunday Funday Straight to Halsted’ with a rainbow separating the two slogans. We know that on trains and buses we’re marketing to a straight customer. We want everyone to know that we’re a place where we can go to have a lot of fun. It’s not to shy away from being gay in Boystown—that’s what the rainbow is there for—but it’s opening up people’s mind to say, ‘We’re here too. We have amazing establishments. Come visit them.’”

Another tactic to increase neighborhood visibility had been in the news lately: a hotel. I asked him about it.

He responded, “Neighbors with kids. Gay neighbors. Straight neighbors. Having a thirty million dollar project with jobs, I feel like would be a positive thing for everyone. It gives the neighborhood a face-lift. It gives an energy to the neighborhood. It gives publicity to the neighborhood. Makes it international.”

He briefly then discussed the architecture of the proposed building, his likes and dislikes about it, a discussion not relevant here.

He continued, “As for Boystown and the gay community itself, I think it’s great. Gay men, especially, travel, and gay women but I can’t speak as much to them, but gay men travel for gay destinations and cities that are marketing themselves as open and accepting of gay culture. This will put Chicago on the map as one of those cities. Chicago is number five in terms of gay tourism as a destination. It’s actually tied with two other cities. So we’re top eight. We should be number two or number one, if that is possible. This will help get us there. It will allow us to have a place, a place to gather [for people] that are like-minded. It’s exciting to have that option. I can stay downtown as well and have that kind of environment, but the OUT Hotel will give you that option. I would want to give that business my money.”

“It would give the neighborhood a face-lift,” I echoed his sentiment back to him. “Turning to Boystown right now, rather than what it could be after the hotel, because I’m not really that interested in the hotel as much as, what

do you mean by—does Boystown need a face-lift? What are your thoughts on that?”

He responded by listing more of the programs the alliance was engaging in to increase street traffic, though only from a particular kind of customer. “The street itself definitely needs a face-lift. There definitely needs to be space on the sidewalk to sit and eat and drink. Roscoe’s had the first window that faced Halsted, Sidetrack was just that itty-bitty sign that faced the outside. No one really wanted to be seen inside these bars. The bars landed on streets where people didn’t want to sit outside. They didn’t want to have cars drive by and yell at them. Nowadays, we need that. We want to sit outside. We want to be part of the community, but our streets don’t really allow for that. [The alliance] has a twenty-year plan that’s evolving. The idea of widening our sidewalks or providing park spaces. The face of Halsted should be uplifted that way.”

Breathlessly, he continued his litany of projects: “The look of all the buildings. We have a facade program. We refund people that put money and effort to improving their facade, but it’s not always done. The security of the street. We have a lot of problems. We have a cultural problem that arises after midnight. Where some people come from other cultures of the city and they just want to stand in one place, they are used to sitting down on front doorsteps and, you know, not really doing much and just standing and socializing which doesn’t really work on this street.”

His words were tentative, choosing them very carefully, given the racial overtones of his statements on these “other people.”

“And it causes problems because the more people that stand in one place, it spills over into the street. Cars can’t get by. They start pushing each other, and fights develop. And all that. With this hotel and with a more modern approach to this street we can alleviate these issues with twenty-four-hour security.”

He started to run out of steam, but kept going. “Um, and lighting, and uh, and down the neighborhood needs more lighting. This hotel might bring the revenue to invest in those types of progress. Every street in Chicago needs a face-lift. I think it was the nineties that the pillars got erected, and that was the last big time the street—maybe the planters but those planters don’t do us much good especially with our culture problem. People are sitting on them, putting drugs into the planters for other people to pick up, rather than using them for beautification. We need to reanalyze how the street works and feels. We want a more twenty-four-hour destination thing where you could walk during the day, sit down and have a cup of coffee and get a haircut, grab a donut, and feel like it’s a walkable stretch of territory. Where in the past you’d want the cab to drop you off and then speed away, run inside.”



The tourists are intentional, but not just the straight ones. The business owners want to bring the straights to Halsted, but also they also want to bring the gays back.

They are threatened by the fact that people don't need to spend time in the neighborhood because gays have become more accepted in society. The combination of acceptance outside of the gayborhood and internalization of straight norms means that the old concept of the gayborhood as exclusive community isn't economically viable.

New opportunities to find men online and acceptance in the more traditional settings of family and work leads some people to avoid the gay bar. Or rather, they are no longer forced to go there to meet people.

As Alexander, the good gay, said, he doesn't need to go out to the bars. He can find men through work events, through casual interactions in the straight world. He can find people the way his straight friends find people.

These changes scare the business owners who are afraid their livelihoods will disappear should the gayborhood empty out. Without men needing to come to the bars to meet others, or feel they have a safe space, then their businesses, the work many of them have poured their entire lives into, will disappear.

Their reaction has been to market the neighborhood as a destination of style. The gayborhood doesn't disappear. It reacts. It engages in "heritage commodification."²



In early 2013, a property group announced it would hold public meetings with neighborhood condo associations to discuss building a hotel in the heart of Boystown called the OUT Hotel, modeled after the OUT Hotel in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. A journalist leaked the time for the meeting called by Triangle Properties, which represents condo owners living in buildings west of the proposed build site at Halsted and Buckingham Street. The room overflowed. Thirty-three neighborhood residents, fourteen business owners or employee representatives, and many more unaffiliated queer people, political staffers, and journalists filled the tiny room at the Addison Street Police Station. When I arrived only fifteen minutes early, I already had to take a seat at the front of the room facing everyone. Awkward for the everyday observer, but a perfect seat for an ethnographer taking notes.



Figure 10.1. Women waiting at Scarlet bar

The OUT Hotel's developer, Ian, began his presentation with telling words: "Boystown needs to be cemented as the gay epicenter of Chicago. I've noticed a migration trend away, but I want to revitalize it." The developer explained that he had the full support of Minibar and Sidetrack's owners, although neither was there at the time. Apparently, Minibar's owners were headed back from a political fundraiser, while Sidetrack had sent a representative, since they were away in Cuba for their humanitarian work. The proposed building would be twelve stories, facing a center courtyard with Minibar moving to the roof as a lounge, and a ground-floor door that opens directly into Sidetrack.

"There is no hotel for the LGBT consumer," Ian explained. "At best you have homo-friendly hotels."

Similar to the OUT Hotel in New York, there would be no closets. "Out of principle," he laughed.

He finished his pitch with an appeal to Boystown's future vitality.

"This will bring business to the neighborhood. Thirty million dollars and a hundred jobs to your community... the publicity will be good for nearby businesses."

The question-and-answer period began largely negatively. The building brought out many of the concerns every community meeting in the neighborhood revisits. Straight families were concerned the hotel would bring more noisy traffic to the neighborhood.

"My husband and I raise a family here. This is a residential neighborhood!" one white woman practically screamed.

Another resident expressed, in a much quieter tone, similar sentiments: the neighborhood was becoming a magnet for people from other parts of Chicago—the implication always is the south side—that would bring their crime to the neighborhood. She was in her late fifties, and with a level, serious tone emphasizing each word she started by saying, "I raised children here."

Having fewer people at the bars during the week was a positive development in her opinion, she explained. She wanted more overall quietness.

"Lately, we've had such not so good traffic, too, which you might have heard about."

This is the specter of Black youth and crime that Tom had evoked earlier, which I will return to in chapter 12, "Take Back Boystown."

"You are going to bring more of that drama here."

Continuing the litany of complaints by mothers, a board member of the Triangle Neighborhoods challenged Ian by saying, "You're missing the families that live here."

Her main concern was that she saw that New York's OUT Hotel had a shared room that young people could rent.

"I'm not sure that's the right kind of clientele [for the neighborhood]," she explained.

Ian responded, "This is nothing like Steamworks!"

Everyone in the room laughed.

Except the owner of Steamworks.

"Hey!" he exclaimed with a jovial tone, causing Ian to profusely apologize. Ian reiterated there would not be any "ranky-panky" going on in these rooms. He said they were only shared rooms for people of all sexual orientations and genders that did not have the full fare, but wanted to stay in the area. "I can take it out if there is community resistance." He assured her.

Only rich good gays allowed apparently.

However, then, when it seemed as though everyone in the room was against the building, Stuart, an owner of Minibar, gave an impassioned speech in support of the project. While he obviously stood to gain substantially from the proposed building personally, his reasons for supporting the project were more community oriented.

After living in the area for twenty-seven years, he said the neighborhood needed a gay project like this to revitalize it in the face of young people moving north.

"We can't just let the LGBT part die." He stressed. "We're dying here! Young gays go elsewhere—It's not like it used to be. It is changing. We need to bring change to bring this back to what it used to be."

What it used to be.

To recapture the vivid gayness of the neighborhood's early days, there was only one proposed solution: make Boystown a tourist destination for style.

Even straight people would want to stay at this hotel, Ian said, because "the place is funner, better decor, trendier, better food, better music."

In short, it would have all of the cultural objects one could buy to support a gay habitus. Straight people would desire a gay sensibility and could acquire it by consuming appropriately in gay spaces.

The proposal that they needed to bring a gay sensibility of style—and that the OUT Hotel would secure straight visitors wanting to stay at that kind of hotel—led one white-haired resident to wonder aloud: "So, is taste only for gay people? I'm concerned about the LGBT versus straight [dynamic here.] Life will never be like it was. The more we get our rights, the less relevant our businesses will be."

Building a hotel would save the neighborhood by bringing outsiders in to keep the lights on, to keep the business afloat. The only way to save the neighborhood was to engage in heritage commodification. A concept from tourist studies, heritage commodification refers to the process by which a culture becomes sold to outsiders.² For example, a luxury African safari, in which companies, and sometimes the state, collude to create an "authentic

experience" that may or may not be recognizable as authentic to insiders of the culture, like having a mash of different African tribes' ceremonies and foods under the bill of a single unified Africa.

Business owners in Boystown have a stake in the financial viability of their businesses. More than that, they have concern for the continuing "gayness" of the area. How can it survive in the face of assimilation into the straight mainstream? How can they keep their businesses, and the neighborhood, relevant?

They translate this concern into a concern about Boystown's viability as a destination. How can it attract gay people that have moved out of the neighborhood back to consume a gay lifestyle? How can it attract wealthy gay travelers to have a city experience? How does consuming this gay lifestyle and this destination result in the continuing of a group known as "gay" that will ease this business owner's concerns about "dying"?

These business owners, advocating passionately for the ODT Hotel, reveal that the changes to Boystown are not driven solely by cold profit. They do not just want straight people to come on safari. They see Boystown, a gay neighborhood with gay businesses, as a way that gay culture gets transmitted. Through heritage commodification, they can create a gay Disneyland, one that will instill a gay habitus in visitors, a set of dispositions that transmits gay culture from one generation to the next.

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I've felt like a historian the further along I have gotten writing this book. The bars on the strip are changing, sold out from under us as I write this. I continually came back to this section, updating a new bar that has been sold to straight owners, or a new institution lost to the tide of heritage commodification.

The general "there goes the gayborhood" sentiment led business owners to shift their tactics to save the neighborhood. If rents keep rising such that they can't afford their businesses or if the customers who used to come have all moved away to Edgewater, then how they can afford to keep their businesses open? They have to shift with the market realities. They have to change how they are going to stay afloat in the rising tide of gentrification. They have to sell themselves. They have to sell gayness.

Assimilation changed Boystown. As gay people are accepted in society, they no longer have to live in the neighborhood. They can live anywhere that they want. Yet, despite not living there, or never having lived there, as is the case for Black and Latino gay men, gay men still travel from across the city to partake of Boystown's gay Disneyland.



Figure 10.2. Woman with stroller walking by the Kit Kat Lounge and Supper Club

Business owners feel like their investments are threatened by the residential movement north by white gay men out of the neighborhood. Their livelihoods rely on gay dollars. If people don't live in the neighborhood, how can businesses attract that money back to the neighborhood? Again, the answer lies in its transformation into gay Disneyland. They can only save the neighborhood—and gay culture—by selling it. By selling it, they could keep the institutions and space of a neighborhood that could teach a new generation how to be gay.

However, heritage commodification changes an area to make it more palatable to those that have the wallets to buy it: primarily upper-class white gay men and straight white women. It whitewashes. It cleans up. It removes the messiness in favor of a curated experience.

Kit Kat Lounge, for instance, primarily makes its money from the straight women who come to Boystown to have a night out on the town. Kit Kat is designed to make money from bachelorette parties. On their website, you can find a list of their divas and coordinate your bachelorette party with the male revue across the street in Circuit. From its design choices, to its drink choices, to its entertainment and staff, Kit Kat is a *See and the City* version of gayness.

Any night I walk by Kit Kat and peer in the windows, the only people I see in this business—ostensibly a gay bar—are tables of straight women.

And I'm not the only one to notice this. Once, when walking to the Whole Foods attached to the Center on Halsted, which is across the street, three white macho straight 'bros' were walking back from the Whole Foods toward the Wrigleyville neighborhood, each carrying a large case of beer.

As they walked by the bar, I overheard one of them say, "Huh. I thought that was a gay bar. It's all chicks!"

One Easter, I went with a group of gay men to get brunch at Kit Kat. I had to see it for myself. The staff who greeted us at the door stepped out of the gay "plastic" stereotype: name-brand designer pants and shirt, twinkish, gelled hair, white. While we weren't the only gay men there for brunch, the one other table of three gay men was sat right beside us at the window, as though we were on display for those walking by, validating this as a gay establishment.

Kit Kat specializes in "martinis." Their four-page menu overflows with over forty types of cocktails served in conical glasses, as though the glass's shape gave it the right to be called a martini. (There's gay habits! You can hear my condescension at their taste.) This being brunch, mimosa were the best option for us. The whole venue sparkled white with silver and pink details, not exactly the most masculine color palette.

Midway through our meal, we were treated to the main attraction: a drag queen performing in high fashion style.

As she paraded up and down the length of the restaurant, she lingered longer at the two tables of gay men, since we were actually handing her dollar bills. A placard on the table advised:

Do not stand on the tables or chairs to take pictures.

Please tip your performers! It is considered polite to give dollar bills to performers during their songs.

It is inappropriate to touch a performer without their permission.

Evidently, these kinds of guidelines were needed for Kit Kat's regular customers. I can only imagine what happened one night to warrant that last proscription.

But it is this kind of novelty that brings straight women to Boystown.

In my interview with Celeste, a straight white woman in her late twenties, I asked her about the last time that she came to Boystown.

"The last time we went out was probably to D.S. Tequila. Um, we like to do brunch there."

"Uh huh."

"I'm thinking the last time was brunch at D.S. Tequila."

"Sort of like a Sunday Funday kind of thing?"

"Oh yeah! And an evening outing? Was Kit Kat Lounge?" she hesitated, but then shook her head affirmatively.

"Tell me a little bit about Kit Kat Lounge, and then we'll talk about DS," I asked.

"We had a new person start at work and I found out that they live just south of me, south of Diversey actually, and they were new to the area. They just moved from the east coast. And she was, like, 'I haven't been to Boystown yet, where do you suggest?' And I said, 'Let's start at Kit Kat and see where we end up.' It was five of us including me, girls from the office. We had our own little banquettes, and we ate and drank and enjoyed the entertainment."

"What do you like about Kit Kat?"

"In the summer, I really like the outdoor area."

"The lounge-y sort of thing?"

"I'm clearly articulate in interviews."

"Yeah," she confirmed. "I also like that about Kit Kat."

She paused, maybe unsure of how to phrase her words properly.

"It's not your run of the mill night out."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Bars are bars are bars, by the end of the evening. With Kit Kat, it's more of an experience. It's not just cocktails with friends. There are other things the establishment brings to the table—"

I laughed, remembering the establishment needed to literally keep people off the tables.

She continued, "—that you don't find everywhere. Plus I think it borders on it being a novelty a little bit, but I also think that, but they do get a lot of repeat customers, because it is just fun, it's not for every night, but it is fun and you go back."

"So what is it about the novelty of it that makes it more fun?"

"Because it's different! Because it's different! And it's not the every-week-end Friday nightspot. [It is for] maybe someone like me or my group of friends." She paused, mulling it over more. "It's interesting. I never thought about that."

Heritage commodification doesn't have to be flashy like Kit Kat. It doesn't have to be explicit. In fact, heritage commodification works better if the space isn't explicit, because then it is more likely to at least retain some of the gay men that the business is trading on when they attract other customers.

An easy example of this kind of space was the change over a year of Spin Nightclub to several different bars. Spin was a nightclub in the style of Sidetrack farther up the street. It had a nineties vibe, from back when gay bars were megacomplexes meant to contain you for the entire evening, moving



Figure 10.3. The line outside Manhole

from one room to another, a gay Disneyland of spaces within one bar, instead of spread out across the neighborhood. Spin had four different spaces, although most of them weren't used as the club got less busy.

In a surprise announcement in the spring of 2014, the space was sold to three straight men, who broke apart the different bars into two different clubs. The main part of Spin was turned into Whiskey Trust, a craft cocktail bar focusing on making their own house bourbon. The downstairs bar was turned into Chloe's, a dance club.

It is interesting to note as disconfirming evidence, Chloe's was also short lived, it only managed to stay around for about two months before the owners turned it into a different kind of club, a revitalization of Manhole, which also closed after a short time. Chloe's and Whiskey Trust failed because they were geared toward straight people. They traded on Boystown's gayness, they had the right consumption choices to correspond to gay habits, but they weren't gay enough. They didn't inspire enough gay men to return to make the space feel authentic. Similarly, Manhole was rejected by people in other sexy communities because, while it had the trappings of a sexy space, it didn't encourage actual sexiness in an authentic way. One can't foster sexy communities by merely throwing on a leather harness and calling it a leather night.⁴

Almost every club on Halsted Street has transformed, a new clean upscale establishment replacing a dirty gay dive bar.

Whenever I introduced this topic to people over fifty, often one of their reactions would be, "Like LA Connection?"

LA Connection used to sit where Kit Kat is today. LA Connection was known most of all as a hustler bar, a place for Johns to pick up hustlers for the night, and for everyone to score drugs. That it should now be Kit Kat, the pink wonderland of heritage commodification, is perhaps the biggest change of all the bars on Halsted.

Cocktail changed into Progress. Dirty dancer stripper bar to clean, well-groomed, bright Progress bar. Even the name cleaned up.

Buck's Saloon was a classic older dive bar, with an older male crowd, that became Replay, an arcade that serves craft beer.

"Buck's is the neighborhood bar," Adam, a middle-aged Black gay man, stressed to me.

"Buck's," I repeated as I wrote the name down on the map of Halsted Street I would produce during my early interviews with participants, as they explained the different spaces in the neighborhood. Buck's was still open at the time.

"Buck's is the neighborhood bar," he stressed again.

"Interesting," I tried to be noncommittal to get him to go on about the scene there. He obliged me.

"It is the most welcoming, friendly, gender-neutral, low-attitude place on the strip or anywhere you'll ever find. It is great. And Cocktail used to be like that, too, but everybody forgets about Buck's."

"Only one person has mentioned Buck's to me and they were, like, 'Uh, I'm never going to Buck's again,' but it's different from that?" I asked.

"Yeah, if you want to have a nice, regular time and you don't care if anybody notices your Armani and, you know you didn't blow your entire income on Prada," he said to my laughter. "And you just want to have a beer and you wanna have a conversation—"

"So, it's not Mimbbar?" I joked.

"No, God," he said.

Even Hydrate, that dark late-night hookup bar, attempted to change its image.

"Hydrate aims for 'totally different feel' after major renovation," proclaimed the headline of a *Chicago Phoenix* article on the subject.

The owner, Mark Liberson, is quoted as saying:

"The amount of money is significant," said Liberson, who declined to disclose the actual dollar amount. "From the initial plan to now, we doubled our budget. We kept extending to it more and more, and ultimately we ended up ripped out the bars in both rooms. We're rebuilding it. It's time. We've served a lot of cocktails over the years, but it's time to breathe new

life into Hydrate and to bring something closer to where the block is heading. We want to grow in the community, and we want the street to be that great piece of gay nightlife.⁵⁶

"Where the block is heading?" Dark late-night hookup bars are out. Sleek modern design, cleaner, is in: "We're adding a lot of upscale finishes to the space, and a whole new feel from the exterior to the interior! Liberson said, 'We're redoing the bathrooms, redoing the bars, changing all the materials, and even changing the exterior of the bar. We're changing everything. It's about as completely new as you can get.... We decided that it was time to create something that has a totally different feel!'"

Do all of these changes to Boystown—all of these bars and spaces that have been warped by heritage commodification—mean that sexy community has been lost in Boystown? Do they only want straight women and upper-class gay men to come spend money, and then go home to other areas?

This common refrain is the "ideology of lament."⁵⁷ It is the idea that community has been lost and we must return to other, older values.

In her book, *Jim Crow Nostalgia*, Michelle Boyd discusses similar changes and reasoning by Black leaders in the Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago's south side.⁵⁸ To encourage investment, resettlement, and tourism, Black community and political leaders framed community life as being better in the olden days. Black-owned businesses, strong Black neighborhood groups, Black churches. However, by emphasizing these elements, they sanitized, idolized, and in many ways covered up the true workings of oppression during Jim Crow.

In contrast, here, I am not sanitizing or idolizing the olden days of the darkness of stigma that queer people endured. I'm not singing an ideology of lament.

Instead, I want to emphasize that we haven't lost community. It has shifted, moved. But that movement changes the people we become from these spaces. Several communities overlapped in these physical spaces of the gay bar. Now, they diverge, gay and queer. Sexy community spaces may be leaving Boystown, but sexy community isn't being lost. The stage of Boystown is changing because of economic pressures, but also because of different characters coming into the scene. That doesn't mean it's going away, it means that people are finding it in different ways and making it possible through different means. It's not lost, but the gay habits that Boystown teaches changes.

While it may seem as though this chapter has been building to a casting of the "evil, ruthless business people" that changed Boystown's nightlife, instead here is a different reveal:
I go to these places more.

That's economics isn't it? If the old bars and clubs—LA Connection, Cockcall, Bucks, Spin, etc.—made as much money as the new bars, then they might still be open.

They didn't make that kind of money though. The old guard that frequented them got, well, older. They didn't keep going out to spend money at bars. Young people want different kind of spaces today: fancy cocktails, brunch specials, different decor.

I am much more likely to go to Replay to play a game of Frogger while drinking a twelve-dollar glass of scotch than I was to go have a three-dollar Bud Light at Bucks. I went to Chloe's more in the first three weeks of it being open—dancing the night away with friends either as a way to end the night or just as a quick jaunt in between bars—than I did in the previous year of Spin being open.

And I'm an ethnographer! I went to those places to get a sense of the neighborhood. If I didn't go there that often, if I felt like it was work to go there, imagine what the rest of people who frequent Boystown felt about them.

That doesn't mean there wasn't a profit motive involved. The bar owners and the Northalsted Business Alliance could make more from young white men, and the middle-aged white men with money who chased them, than they could from poor kids on the street.

However, these reimaged bars stay open. That is a form of resistance to assimilation. This may seem contradictory at first. Gay Disneyland's goal, the goal of heritage commodification, is to sell the experiences, the objects of consumption, people believe will lead them to a gay habitus.

It is the goal of a culture to perpetuate itself. Cultures can die. Boystown and those who run it fear the postgay era. If Boystown could be saved without heritage commodification, it would be doing so. Gay Disneyland is a transformation of Boystown, but also the gay habits of the gay people that frequent it. It resists complete disappearance into straight culture, complete assimilation, by retaining an identity as a separate culture that can survive by being sold to outsiders.

Yet the outsiders to whom it is being sold are transformed into insiders through those acts of continual consumption. It is that transformation, the slow internalization of gay habits, that gay Disneyland is built for.

Assimilation in the context of gay people is not about gay people taking on the values of straight culture, as though there is something essential to being gay that means that you want to have multiple partners and listen to divas.

Assimilation is a matter of not acculturating newcomers to gay society. We've already grown up in straight society. One doesn't need to learn how

to be straight as we are accepted into straight society. We already know how to act like straight people.

Heritage commodification is less a matter of selling out and more a matter of survival. For all of the problems I discuss throughout this book—sexism, racism, queer repression, that tangled intersectional knot—we should keep this in mind. Gay Disneyland has no malicious intent.

No one is born gay. We must become gay anew with each generation. If we don't learn it in Boystown, through gay cultural outlets, through the Internet, then we don't learn it at all. Gay culture dies.

Who is surviving though, when I say that gay culture dies? Which voices are privileged in the process of survival?

The voices of the young men, women, and trans people that populate the street at night are not present in these new clubs. The voices of queers, of sexy community, and those that are on the outside of the charmed circle are not present in these new clubs.

Full assimilation would be people not acculturating to gay habits. But assimilation can also be piecemeal. Gay habitus is not static; it is changing.

Moreover, heritage commodification answers some of the questions raised by Ghazarian's *There Goes the Gayborhood* and other scholars about the future viability of gay neighborhoods. In many ways, those that run these spaces—whether explicitly, like the Northalsted Business Alliance, or embodied in the economist sense of the collective decisions of business owners—saw the pressures of people moving away and they responded. They responded in a way allowing them to remain open. They responded in a way that makes the gayborhood live on, even if it's a rebirth in a different form.

Has or will the gayborhood disappear? Perhaps it depends on our definition. Whom is a gayborhood for? The obvious answer—gay people—might be less relevant in today's context.

Boystown has become a gay Disneyland, a tourist destination for people around the city, and across the country, to consume gay culture. Assimilation changed the profitable bars, the acceptable bars, in ways that may be irreversible. The sexy community that these bars used to contain may not be attainable anymore, without the mediating technologies of augmented reality hookup apps. Gay men's newfound acceptance changed the bars, as new people started to come enjoy them. However, it attracted them for a reason. Who are these new patrons, these social tourists? Why is Boystown so attractive to them?

11

Girlstown

When straight women come to a gay club, they go on safari. When I go to a straight club, like those across the Red Line train tracks in Wrigleyville, it feels like visiting the aquarium.

I'm not the one on display. I don't feel somehow more gay in comparison to the hypermasculine "no homo" antics of the bros around. Sure, I feel my sexuality heightened. I notice the difference in my display of masculinity. I feel tenser. I'm on guard. I can sense the presence of power.

But I'm watching the scene through glass, not fully one of the people that are milling about in the tanks. There is something separating me from the predators inside. My maleness, the privilege of my gender, keeps me safe in these situations. The same is not true for women.

Even in a friendly space, like Holiday Club on the corner of Irving Park Road and Sheridan Avenue, just on the border between Boystown, Wrigleyville, and Uptown, I feel uncomfortable, not at ease. Austin and I stopped in for a bite to eat after a movie one night, desiring some bar food with salt and grease. The Holiday Club is a welcoming, safe space. It hosts open-mic reading nights. It has nerdy trivia nights. I didn't feel out of place as a gay man, but it certainly was not the kind of bar space I usually attended.

Straight spaces have their own sexual fields, their own political economy dictating the rules, their own consumption-creating straight habitus. When the sexy waitress silled up to our table, she leaned toward us slightly, pushing her rack in Austin's direction. She wore a tight, low-cut white T-shirt over blue jeans. She had her own economic incentives. She might make better tips from a table of two men if she gives off the allure of sexuality.

After ordering, while Austin read the show notes from the indie theater, I took my own show notes about the scene of straight spaces; these nightclub places I don't normally go. A few feet away from us a table of three straight guys stood near the center pole holding up the ceiling. While I ate my fries, I watched the hunt.