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### **EMPLACED BARS AND EPISODIC EVENTS: REFLECTIONS ON NIGHTLIFE FORMS**

*by Amin Ghaziani*



*"The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular": the power of embodied knowledge (Donna J. Haraway.) Image courtesy of The Chateau archive.*

**Amin Ghaziani argues that the closure of gay bars disrupted the field of nightlife and encouraged the visibility of other forms of fellowship called "club nights." Ghaziani calls for conceptual plurality in how we think about nightlife forms and proposes a strategy for studying episodic and event-based scenes.**

[Ed. note: This article is part of a dossier on [New Directions in Queer Nightlife.](#)]

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In the first two decades of the 2000s, the number of LGBTQ nighttime venues in London, a global capital of finance and culture, declined by 58 percent, falling from 125 to just 53 remaining venues. An audit by the mayor's office found that 44 percent of all nightclubs and 25 percent of all pubs in the city had also closed during this same period. And so, while all nighttime venues are struggling, the impact on queer spaces is more dire.<sup>1</sup> The challenges confronting the gay bar, arguably the most visible form of nightlife, is part of an international pattern, with similar outcomes documented in cities around the world. Writing for *Bloomberg*, Richard Morgan puts the rapidly changing landscape into perspective: "In 1976, there were 2,500 gay bars in the United States; today, there are fewer than 1,400 worldwide."

How do we interpret these numbers? I argue that bar closures disrupted the field of nightlife — but they did not decimate it. Disruptions by definition are messy, and they have consequences that are not always anticipated or predictable. Disruptive events, like the large-scale closures of gay bars, shake things up and invite people to imagine new possibilities.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I consider the relationship between the closure of gay bars and the rise of underground parties called club nights. From here, I remark on the challenges associated with studying two very different nightlife forms: one is fixed and emplaced in particular parts of the city, while the other, by comparison, is episodic and event-based, often spatially mobile and roving around the city.

## **Theorizing Nightlife Forms**

Nightlife has never been solely about the bars, even if the media, municipal authorities, and academics emphasize them in disproportionate measure. While recent writings complicate a simplistic reading of gay bars as places that cater to limited groups, they continue to prioritize arguments about adaptation over reinvention, such as municipal efforts to protect and preserve existing gay bars or encourage new ones to open. Yet we still have little systematic evidence, especially sociological, about nightlife forms beyond the bar.

In London, the closure of gay bars was a disruption as well as an incitement to creativity. An inventive spirit is flourishing in episodic and event-based scenes called club nights, parties with fantastic names like Adonis, Pxssy Palace, Sink the Pink, Anal House Meltdown, Hungama, Femmetopia, Inferno, Gazypacho, Buttmitzvah, Chapter 10, and others. At these events, the city's artists, audiophiles, and other culture creatives are fighting concerns about affordability, gentrification, land use, and redevelopment which threaten gay bars while ensuring that nightlife remains vital, vibrant, and marked by more variety of organizational forms than expressed only in gay bars, regardless of the diversity of those bar types.



*A visionary look at Hungama. Image courtesy of Hungama (@hungama\_idn)*



A scene from Hungama, where bindis beckon you back home.  
Image courtesy of Hungama (@hungama\_ldn)

Unlike gay bars, club nights occur only occasionally (you cannot attend the same party night after night), they are located in venues outside the gayborhood (city centers are frequently unaffordable in the context of late-stage capitalism and advanced gentrification), and they can exist without a permanent institutional home (although some have residences). However, with dwindling number of bars in the limelight, public commentators often overlook these events, while many academics misattribute them as epiphenomena, or secondary gatherings that orbit the bars rather than sovereign centers of nightlife. But I maintain that events are analytically vital; they teach us how disruptions can create bursts of creative energy and change.

Club nights are part of a long and international history of LGBTQ groups using event-based organizing at night. Examples include queer parties at the Adelphi Rooms, a boarding lodge in London, in the 1920s; drag parties at speakeasies during American prohibition in the 1920s and 1930s; and rent parties that Black lesbians organized in postwar Detroit and elsewhere during the 1940s and 1950s. From the 1970s onward, the ballroom scene emerged in the United States, with revelers voguing to house music on the east coast and waacking to disco on the west coast; British raves bloomed in the 1980s and 1990s; circuit parties diffused around the world in the late 1990s and through the 2000s; and techno parties in Berlin, like Buttons and Cocktail d'Amore, became increasingly popular in the 2010s. To locate club nights in this list does not make them less important but more so, I would argue, as it shines a light on a hidden history. Each of these scenes used the episodic and event-based nightlife format with great effect, and each demonstrates that nightlife is a place of resilience, resistance, reclamation, and renewal.

## **A Methodology of Messy Moments**

Using bar listings in travel guides to study nightlife has been a methodological feature of the literature in both urban sexualities and in urban sociology for decades. While imperfect, like all data, tracking changes in bar listings can establish statistical trends about closures, like the numbers I reported earlier. That said, counting bars will offer us conclusions only about bars, while leaving unexamined other nightlife forms that are harder to quantify.

The episodic and ephemeral nature of club nights, along with the use of stories on social media platforms to publicize them, enables at best rough approximations that are vulnerable to a variety of validity challenges. Still, policy reports from the mayor's office suggest that the number of club nights in London was growing during the same period that gay bars were closing. Although I cannot establish a causal relationship between these nightlife forms, I can reasonably argue that bar closures encouraged club nights, not to emerge per se, but to increase in number, visibility, and variety. Expressing the association in this way suggests a relationship between forms without artificially fixing or reducing the complexity of that relationship.

While my inability to count club nights poses a constraint on my ability to track them, it also presents an opportunity for an approach that I would call a methodology of messy moments. Knowledge creation in creative industries and cultural markets, like nightlife, does not always

fit the standard account of rational, cognitive, and countable ways of knowing that are championed by social scientists. Shifting the focus from fixed and emplaced gay bars to episodic and event-based parties like club nights requires that we rethink knowledge as embodied and embedded in local networks, spatial and situated in the cracks of the capitalist city.

How then do you study the episodic and the ephemeral? The feminist scholar Donna Haraway offers useful counsel: “The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.”<sup>3</sup> Studying club nights involves a process of counting what we can alongside a practice of participating in the scenes we want to better understand. In other words, to do the work, we have to show up and be in the places where and when the action occurs.



*Hungama, a club night where fierce is fashion-forward.  
Image courtesy of Hungama (@hungama\_ldn)*

## Conclusions

Nightlife provides an opportunity for communities to imagine new worlds of being and belonging that may be foreclosed elsewhere, especially for QTBIPOC groups. This makes the closure epidemic an urgent matter. That club nights exist, even if they compared to gay bars are harder to see and count, suggests that closures do not scale up to the institutional decline of nightlife.

QTBIPOC groups often feel excluded from mainstream venues, like gay bars, due to the intersectional failures of those bars. For example, experiences of exclusion stem from the racialized use of dress codes, the selective enforcement of requiring multiple pieces of ID to enter an establishment, or being denied entrance under false pretenses, like being at capacity. During the closure epidemic, club night organizers redefined nightlife using principles of intentional inclusion and intersectional queerness.

The wisdom that emerges from this discussion is for us to strive for complexity, rather than reproduction (or “isomorphism,” as organizational researchers describe it), in how we study nightlife.<sup>4</sup> Nightlife is a cultural field consisting of numerous forms, including gay bars, pubs, nightclubs, raves, house parties, ballroom scenes, music festivals, street parties, popups, club nights, and many others.<sup>5</sup> Emplaced bars and episodic events are not oppositional, mutually exclusive, or even comprehensive as expressive forms of nightlife. Our insistence on plurality will support a politics of intentional inclusion, intersectional queerness, and thus a more robust intellectual inquiry.

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Amin Ghaziani is Professor of Sociology and Canada Research Chair in Urban Sexualities at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. He is the author or editor of six books, including most recently *Long Live Queer Nightlife*, published by Princeton University Press. This work examines forms of underground queer nightlife that have emerged in the context of large-scale closures of gay bars around the world. Ghaziani is an active public intellectual who has contributed to conversations in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *American Prospect*, and *Time* magazines, as well *The Guardian*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Times*. He can be reached at [amin.ghaziani@ubc.ca](mailto:amin.ghaziani@ubc.ca) and on X at @Amin\_Ghaziani.

## Notes

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1 For trends that occurred from 2006 to 2016, see Ben Campkin and Laura Marshall, *LGBTQ Cultural Infrastructure in London: Night Venues, 2006-Present* (London: UCL Urban Laboratory, 2017). Between 2021 and 2022, the Nighttime Industries Association (NTIA) reported that the closure rate accelerated to 14 venues of any kind per month, or one closure every two days. Closures now represent “a cultural crisis,” the NTIA said. “Nightclubs serve as vital hubs of social interaction, artistic expression, and community cohesion, making their preservation imperative.” For the report, see <https://ntia.co.uk/ntia-says-government-is-ripping-the-heart-out-of-nightlife-as-1-in-3-nightclubs-face-closure-by-the-end-of-2022/>. For the quote, see <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/62055/1/uk-clubs-will-be-extinct-by-2030-warns-nightlife-expert>.

↑2 For theorizing about disruptive events, see Letian Zhang, “Shaking Things Up: Disruptive Events and Inequality,” *American Journal of Sociology* 127, no. 2 (2021): 376–440.

↑3 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 590.

↑4 For research on isomorphism, see Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983):147–60.

↑5 For research on cultural fields, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

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