

## **Mapping LGBTQ+ Portland**

**Salina Chin, Class of 2023**

We are living in a historical moment scholars like Amin Ghaziani call the “Post-Gay Era.” More than fifty years after the Stonewall Uprising, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) people in the United States currently enjoy broadening mainstream acceptance—exemplified by landmark court cases such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which recognizes the legal legitimacy of same-sex marriage; more accurate media representation of the complexity, vibrancy, and joy of queer life; and increased entry into normative and normativizing neighborhoods, institutions, and places. Consequently, and alongside the continuing gentrification of gay neighborhoods, districts, and places, previously anchoring queer institutions have been forced to close. In a period of increasing LGBTQ+ acceptance, what role, then, does place have in creating and sustaining community for queer folk?

During the summer, I studied LGBTQ+ geographies in and around Portland, Maine. Specifically, I examined how LGBTQ+ people in the greater Portland area make sense of their queer identity and how LGBTQ+ places like bars help shape queer Portland residents’ sense of self. How do LGBTQ+ people conceptualize and interact with place? How do LGBTQ+ people construct and remember space as it relates to their community? To answer these questions, I analyzed the historical development of LGBTQ+ place in Portland from the beginning of the AIDS Crisis to the present, drawing on archival, interview, and spatial data to examine how changes in LGBTQ+ place reflect sociohistorical and political change.

I formally interviewed five members of the Portland LGBTQ+ community over Zoom and in person to gain a better understanding of their relationship with place. These semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two-and-a-half hours. I employed snowball sampling to identify future interview subjects, asking current interview subjects if they knew friends, family members, and/or acquaintances potentially willing to speak with me. All interviewees thus far have noticed a dramatic change in LGBTQ+ places in Portland over the past 25 years. Individual understandings of LGBTQ+ places vary among respondents; some think of queer bars and nightclubs while others think of more unconventional LGBTQ+ places like queer resource centers and churches. Most believe that Portland’s small size contributes to its reputation as a LGBTQ+-friendly town. Additionally, most interviewees viewed LGBTQ+ places as still necessary for the queer community, though a few interviewees attributed their waning significance to gay assimilation and the increasing tolerance of non-queer-specific bars and nightclubs. Most strikingly, queer pop-ups fail to hold similar symbolic importance as queer institutions in the minds of interviewees.

In addition to interview data collection, I spent the summer collecting ethnographic and archival data in Portland. I attended Brunswick and Portland Pride in early June. Portland Pride, perhaps more so than any other queer pop-up, best reflects the town’s symbolic significance to all queer people in Maine, as LGBTQ+ people from all over the state traveled down to Portland for the Pride Parade and Festival. As for archival data, I traveled to the University of Southern Maine’s Glickman Family Library beginning in mid-July to visit the LGBTQ+ Collection within the university library’s Special Collections and Archives. I examined the Diane Elze papers, the Dale McCormick papers, and the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination papers in detail. While viewing articles on Charlie Howard’s death within the Diane Elze papers, I began to observe the unexpected importance of religious institutions such as Portland’s First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church to the LGBTQ+ community. Queer institutions like bars, nightclubs, and some churches provided a place not only for community creation, but for prolonged political organizing as well.

The research I conducted over the summer is ongoing, as the work I completed forms the basis of my honors project in Sociology this year.

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