

MILE-HIGH MASQUERADE
QUEER COMMUNITIES IN DENVER - 1880-1920

by

EDWARD SCOTT

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This thesis for the Master of History degree by

Edward Scott

has been approved for the

History Program

by

William Wagner, Chair

Marjorie Levine-Clark

Rachel Grosse

Date: December 17th, 2022

Scott, Edward (MA, History Program)

Exploring evidence of Denver's first queer communities from 1880 to 1920

Thesis directed by Associate Professor William Wagner

ABSTRACT

During the late-19th century in Denver, a queer entertainment district was established among “female impersonators” at the edge of the Red-Light District. This was a culturally and racially diverse cross-roads within the larger district of commercialized vice, the sexual liminality of which allowed for non-normative gender and sexual expression to exist relatively unimpeded for at least twenty years. After the turn of the century, the majority of Denver's queer residents and communities clung to bohemian enclaves, eventually settling in the North Capitol Hill neighborhood, where the majority of Denver's queer community still lives to this day. However, it was the visibility of the female impersonators as queer archetypes of their era that allowed for common queer identity to be recognized and for these first communities to form.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: William Wagner

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Richard de Bonair left Denver in the spring of 1893, he intended to permanently close this chapter of his life and start anew in the town of Pueblo. Known fondly in his community as “Pretty Dick,” Richard departed without even leaving a forwarding address for his loved ones to reach him. Perhaps it was a tense parting, perhaps he simply wanted to be remembered as he was. Regardless, the variety actor, dressmaker, and female impersonator boarded the train south to Pueblo, never again to return to the city of Denver. Bringing only his sewing machine and a trunk or two of belongings with him, Richard searched frantically through his bag, unconcerned whether he was disturbing the other passengers in the train car. But as his hand clasped around the stack of letters, he let out an audible sigh of relief and melted back into his seat, watching the mountains drift by through the window. He tried to say goodbye to Samuel in his last letter, but he could not wait for the reply. Even if he didn’t live across the country in Milwaukee, Samuel was powerless to change the course of Richard’s life. Regardless, the minister had seen and loved Richard for who he was, and the feeling was mutual. Would Samuel search for him? A part of him hoped that he would, but Richard did not want to be found. He intended to be remembered exactly as he was the last time that Samuel saw him; at least this he could control. When Richard stepped off the train, Denver and his community in the Windsor district might as well have been a world away. He set his jaw and walked boldly toward the next and final step of his journey. Richard had come to Pueblo to die.

The announcement from Sunday morning paper left little to the imagination. Taking up almost an entire column of *The Pueblo Daily Chieftain*, the article grabbed at the reader’s

attention with bold capitals reading: “Suicided with Chloroform.” Nearly two years had passed since Richard had arrived in Pueblo, during which he managed to build a quiet life for himself waiting tables and making dresses for the actresses at the Standard Theatre. However, on the evening of July 27th, 1895, Richard de Bonair died from suicide. When the investigating officers from the Pueblo Police Department rifled through his belongings in his small house on West D Street, they took a particular interest in a stack of letters, signed by a Reverend Samuel W. Chidester. The correspondences laid bare the “very warm” relationship that these two men shared, the written records of which were obviously cherished by the deceased. Why, then, did the police department report the contents of these letters to the press?

The cause of Richard’s death was evidently enough to create a sensation in the town of Pueblo since suicide was referenced three times *before* the first sentence of the article even began, which lists his known effeminate nicknames and once again references his cause of death. What followed was an exposé of what could be perceived about his life and death, featuring his illness, struggles with unemployment in Pueblo, details about his suicide, state of his post-mortem decomposition, and the evidence of his queerness. The letters from his beloved minister were highlighted, which when paired with the deceased’s past as a female impersonator—as well as his printed nicknames—held less than ambiguous connotations about the nature of their relationship. In fact, Samuel’s Milwaukee address was printed in the article, as if inviting readers to come forth with more information about the queer context of their relationship. In death, Richard was a spectacle, and the more details about his mental state, queerness, and post-mortis decomposition that were provided, the less human he became to readers. In fact, this may have been the very reason that Richard left his queer community and connection to Samuel behind in Denver; to preserve the person that he was to his inner circle within the compassionate context

that only they could conceptualize. There, along Denver's infamous stretch of Larimer between 18th and 20th Streets, Richard de Bonair had lived and loved according to his own terms.¹

The Denver that Richard de Bonair knew was a place of rapid growth and re-invention as it was transforming into the industrial center of the region. The mile high city was still only a territorial capital when the Kansas Pacific Railroad established a rail connection through Denver in 1870, enabling members of the working class to afford the long trip across the Great Plains or through the Rocky Mountains, and thus sparking a massive population and building boom over the following two decades. Indeed, the population leapt from 4,759 to 35,000 between 1870 and 1880, reaching 106,713 by 1890, second only to San Francisco among the cities of the West.² Such rapid expansion stalled after the Sherman Silver Purchase Act was repealed in 1893, ending a program of Federal subsidization of silver and effectively causing the silver industry to crash. Given the region's economic reliance on mineral extraction and refinement, the panic immediately unemployed roughly 45,000 people throughout the state. It would take until the end of the decade for the state's economy to fully recover, and another similar boom would not come again until World War II. However, even though the mid-1890s were a time of economic stagnation, the social and ethnic dynamics of Denver were always in motion as the state's economy diversified and immigrants from China, Japan, and Mexico vied for space and employment within an increasingly racist and xenophobic society.³

¹ "Suicided with Chloroform," (Pueblo: *Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 28 July, 1895); "Suicide at Pueblo," (Denver: *Rocky Mountain News*, 28 July, 1895); Denver Fire Insurance Map, 1903 and 1904.

² Thomas Noel, *The City and the Saloon* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1996) 67-77; Robin Courtney Henry, *Criminalizing Sex, Defining Sexuality: Sodomy, Law, and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Colorado*, (Indiana University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 116-117.

³ Thomas Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 28; Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State, Fifth Edition* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013), 198-203 & 212-216.

As the immigrant and general working-class populations exploded throughout the 1870s and 80s, so did that of American-born middle-class white women, who carried with them society's enforced standards of "respectability." However, this required the strict designation of what and who were conversely *not* respectable, and therefore the division between the uses of public spaces became paramount.⁴ By the 1880s, Denver's wealthier citizens were relocating to the outskirts of the city—into what would become the first streetcar suburbs—while the historical center of town densified with the rapidly growing immigrant and working-class populations. Within these increasingly run-down neighborhoods, the city's "Tenderloin" took shape along Larimer Street from 15th to 23rd Streets, satisfying the city's growing need for commercialized "vice." Around the same time, the expanding sex work economy was legally confined within a single stretch of Market Street from 19th to 23rd Streets—known as "the Row"—, which ran along the northwest side of the Tenderloin.⁵ Unsurprisingly, such an area became notorious throughout the city for its diverse (or non-respectable) demographics and easy access to a wide variety of low-brow or even "lewd" modes of entertainment. Even though this area hosted the highest crime rate in Denver, many behaviors that were otherwise forbidden throughout the city were routinely overlooked here, as long as such behaviors remained within the confines of this cordoned-off world of vice.⁶

⁴ Thomas Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 67-77; Robin Courtney Henry, *Criminalizing Sex, Defining Sexuality: Sodomy, Law, and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Colorado*, (Indiana University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 116-117; Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audiences," (*American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3, Sep., 1994), 378-380; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, (U.S.A, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 87.

⁵ Clark Secrest, *Hell's Belles: Prostitution, Vice, and Crime in Early Denver*, (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2002), 89-90.

⁶ That taboo sexual and gender behaviors were legally overlooked in this area of the city is a significant argument within this paper, the evidence for which will be cited within "The Fairies of the Windsor District" section, from pp. 17-26.

During the same year as the Silver Panic, the women of Colorado won their right to vote, making the Centennial State the third in the nation to enact women's suffrage.⁷ With the Progressive Movement beginning to gain ground, women's voices were added to those crying for better "moral hygiene," primarily targeting prostitution, alcohol consumption, interracial mixing, and vagrancy as fixable blights on society. Women themselves were targeted as the patriarchy doubled-down on efforts to control the bodies of middle and upper-class women—who were becoming increasingly educated and politically-active—and to classify women of the working class as innately licentious and therefore "degenerative." Though the Tenderloin and Row both served as effective ghettos for the world of commercialized vice, by the 1910s Progressive moralists were convinced that even the mere presence of such establishments, however confined, were obstacles to a "clean" and safe society. Therefore, the city rapidly censored even working-class spaces by abolishing legal prostitution and forbidding interracial drinking venues in 1913, as well as enacting statewide prohibition by 1916.⁸ However, as the 1920s loomed in the wake of World War I, a new generation—dancing cheek to cheek in underground speakeasies—dreamed of a sexually freer society, while policies of racial segregation and subjugation doubled down in a backlash to the growing Black and Hispanic minorities.⁹

However, back during the late-19th century—when the theories of sexologists were only gaining traction within academic circles—individuals like Richard de Bonair were understood to exist outside of social "respectability," but this was not because de Bonair was believed to be homosexual or transgender. Prior to the dissemination of Progressive Era thinking, violations of normative (cis heterosexual) gender or sexual expression were contextualized—if indeed spoken

⁷ Carl Abbott, et al, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State, Fifth Edition*, 183-187.

⁸ Abbott, *Colorado*, 252-260; "Driving Last Wedge Home," (Denver: *The Denver Star*, 6 May, 1916).

⁹ Abbott, *Colorado*, 222 & 273-278.

of at all—simply as “sinful” behavior. Like with most other behaviors that were considered sinful by the American Christian mainstream, homosexual behavior or violations of normative binary gender expression were seen as isolated actions rather than classifications of a type of person. If an individual was known to have had a homosexual encounter (or relationship) with another, the behavior was seen as temporary—like all behavior—, even if it was sinful, and therefore had no bearing on their identity, nor their current or future behavior. Therefore, de Bonair’s past as a female impersonator and dressmaker, as well as his evident homosexual relationship with Samuel Chidester were enough to classify de Bonair as a serial sinner, which was similar to the way that sex workers were contextualized.¹⁰

Throughout this paper I will use various terms when classifying a person or group’s gender and/or sexuality, and I want to briefly discuss why I use the terminology that I do. In reference to gender, I will use the binary pronouns prescribed to the person by the source in which they were recorded unless there is strong evidence to suggest that an individual was transgender, in which case I will use their proper pronouns. This is not to definitively label anyone as cis or transgender, but to maintain clarity within the limited context provided. If I am unsure of the full context of a person’s gender, or if the subject appears to clearly have dissociated with the gender binary, I will use the pronouns they, them, and theirs. When referring to sexuality, I will only use labels such as homosexual/bisexual/etc. when discussing specific behaviors rather than to classify a person or population; I will also use those terms when alluding to an outside party’s use of them. In reference to *anyone* who was not cis and heterosexual, as well as behaviors that fell outside of that category, I will and have used the umbrella term

¹⁰ Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles: and the Making of Modern Politics*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) Kindle Locations 756-761.

“queer.” Understand that any such labels are always potentially inaccurate, especially within historical sources, and that I will make these classifications shrewdly and with compassion.

By shortly after the turn of the century, Progressive theories of eugenics were beginning to gain a foothold within the popular consciousness. For the first time, scientific labels were projected onto non-normative gender and sexual expression, but not as separate identities from one another. Sexologists theorized that non-heterosexual and non-cis gender behavior were both signs of the psychological “inversion” of a person’s assigned gender, labeling them as “congenital invert.” This meant that homosexual behavior in a man was understood to be a sign of his “female” psychology, and therefore he would be categorized within the same sexological classification as a transgender woman or non-binary individual—all of whom were misunderstood within the same context. Though the innate nature of queer identity was introduced with these theories, sexologists broadly categorized congenital invert within a class of people they termed “degenerates” who were believed to have inherited their non-normative characteristics genetically. Including the mentally and physically disabled, people of color, vagrants, prostitutes, and the most vulnerable members of the working-class, these populations were identified as such to bring awareness to the “degeneration” of the American gene pool.¹¹

Therefore, when searching for queer communities in Denver during the 19th and early-20th centuries, I had to contextualize my sources within the period’s shifting understanding—or lack thereof—of queer identity and behavior. Overwhelmingly, the sources within which these individuals were most visible were newspaper articles, often recounting a person’s run-in with

¹¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, Basic Books, 1994), 47-62; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, Kindle version, (Berkley, University of California Press, 2003), Kindle location 310-327; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th-Century America*, (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 55-59.

the law. Apart from the details about the arrest and individual, such articles usually presented the crime from a social perspective and would hint at a person's queerness (or other eccentricities) even if it had nothing to do with the crime. Unsurprisingly, though these legal confrontations were rarely directly related to the expression of non-normative gender or sexual behavior, such vulnerability to law enforcement was a direct product of a person's socio-economic status. Therefore, all reported queer behavior during the period was only witnessed among working-class individuals, who lacked the same access to resources and—above all—privacy as their middle-class counterparts. I used Denver City Directories and Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from throughout the Progressive Era to locate and map these occurrences to identify any spatial relationship between individuals and events. While the boundaries of a potentially queer entertainment district indeed took form within the downtown working-class neighborhoods, I still obviously lacked access to the residential, and therefore *private* world of queer Denverites.

Inspired by projects published by Dan Bouk and D. Michael Quinn, I began to search through Denver's census records on Ancestry's online database for the years 1900, 1910, and 1920, hoping to identify the settlement patterns of those who were potentially living domestically within homosexual partnerships.¹² It's important to note that the Denver census for 1890 was destroyed in a fire, and the censuses for 1880 and 1870 lacked the information needed to adequately filter my results, so I was not able to address them in this study. I filtered my search by an individual's listed relationship to the "Head of the Household"—including "partner," "roomer," and "friend"—and created spreadsheets containing only those who were evidently living with only one other person of the same listed-gender who was also not their kin. I mapped

¹² Dan Bouk, "The Partners of Greenwich Village," *Census Stories USA*, 3 July, 2018, <https://censusstories.us>; D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*, (Chicago, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 152-174.

these data points, like I did with the potentially queer occurrences downtown, and I addressed published examples of queer residential enclaves in other American cities during the era to help contextualize the clusters and patterns that emerged. In fact, without the work of queer historians of the 90s and later, I would never have been able to understand the queer geography that was taking shape in front of me.

Most modern literature about 19th and early-20th century queer communities are built upon the foundations established by George Chauncey's prolific book *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. Since the title was published in 1994, similar studies have also been conducted and published about many major American cities, as well as further studies about New York's trans and lesbian histories.¹³ These studies, as well as mine, recognize shared patterns among early urban queer individuals and communities, and have used other cities as models when searching for evidence within a local context. The earliest examples of queer expression or identity during the 19th century are often records of non-theatrical "female impersonators," whose outward violation of socially acceptable gender norms made them particularly vulnerable to the police, a spectacle that the press was loath to miss.¹⁴ According to models in New York, Chicago, Seattle, and San Francisco, these individuals were found in or near a city's Red-Light District and were often sex workers themselves. They participated in the queer nightlife as dancers, singers, servers, or customers, and bound together in what could be considered queer communities.¹⁵

¹³ I addressed published studies from the following cities, all of which are cited throughout the paper: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, and Salt Lake City.

¹⁴ "Female impersonation" was the earliest recorded expression of queer identity in George Chauncey's *Gay New York* (pp. 33-44), as well as in my own research regarding Denver.

¹⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33-44; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, Kindle location 356-474; Jim Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town: Sodomites, Female Impersonators, Third-Sexers, Pansies, Queers, and Sex Morons*, (Chicago, Ill:

However, the wider consensus regarding the earliest self-aware queer communities ties them to the bohemian enclaves that thrived in American urban centers from the 1890s through the 1920s. Both non-normative gender and sexual expression were repeatedly witnessed among the self-prescribed bohemian communities of New York, Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and it is commonly believed that the first queer communities formed within them during the 1910s and 20s. Chauncey, as well as Peter Boag classify these early communities as cis male and female middle-class homosexuals, who developed mostly separate gendered-communities in and near the same social spaces as one another. They were able to recognize their shared-homosexual identities due to their heightened access to privacy and recreation, as well as their independence from their families and communities of origin.¹⁶ However, Lillian Faderman counters with the assertion that middle-class queer women did not have the same access to such social spaces as their male counterparts until the 1920s, and that it was the increased use of sexological labels for queer people during the first two decades of the century that gave them a categorical classification through which they could find others like themselves.¹⁷ Regardless, middle-class homosexual enclaves could evidently be tied to physical spaces—usually bars or restaurants—that were catering predominantly to queer people, perhaps for the first time.

The bohemian wave of sexual freedom was carried over to Black entertainment districts during the 20s, who hosted their own queer communities, both Black and white.¹⁸ However,

Chicago Review Press Inc., 2018), 14-25; Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, 9-17.

¹⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227-243; Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, Kindle location 124-136 & 1828-1852; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 63-83; Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Kindle location 1060-1099; Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans*, 116-117.

¹⁷ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 59-60.

¹⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 243-266; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 98-104.

neighborhoods such as Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville were commodified by middle and upper-class white "tourists" taking advantage of the "naughtiness" that they projected onto Black culture and entertainment. While these neighborhoods gained a reputation among white society for promoting homosexual experimentation, the reality was likely similar to what Faderman called "sexual colonialism," where white people "vacation[ed]" into Black spaces—which they believed to be inherently licentious—only to return to "normal" society after they had their fun.¹⁹ These communities of color, however, challenged the assumption that self-aware queer communities originated among middle-class cis homosexuals by the sheer diversity of queer identities that were represented in places like Harlem and Bronzeville. Indeed, the visible presence self-aware homosexual, bisexual, and trans communities by the 1920s suggest that the formulation of a collective queer identity had begun prior to that time and was possibly tied to entertainment districts before that of bohemian enclaves.

I argue that the first queer community in Denver appears to have developed within working-class spaces among "female impersonators" as early as the 1880s. The sustained presence of these individuals—who were marginalized even within the working-class world—and the eventual acceptance of their visibility within this small area created a figurative beacon for other queer people in the region. The creation of such a neighborhood was due to its liminal position between the Tenderloin, the Row, and Chinatown, yet the area was able to retain its queer character *after* the abolition of both prostitution and alcohol due to its cultural past and the continuing participation of a queer Black community just two blocks northeast—a community that likely formed due its vicinity to this queer entertainment district. The queer white community, on the other hand, appears to have settled within the bohemian enclaves along and

¹⁹ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 68-70.

south of Curtis Street's "Theater Row," chasing cheaper rent prices northeast until they eventually settled within North Capitol Hill. The existence of queer communities of any race, however, owe their foothold to the "female impersonators" of the late-19th century and the community they created in order to survive both the dangers of urban hardships and social/legal ostracization. Their visibility gave a context—however misunderstood—through which queer people could understand their otherness, as well as hinted at the existence of a socially designated area where sexual, gender, racial, class, and political taboos were permitted to develop and even spread, safely away from the judgmental gaze of normative society.

CHAPTER II

IN THE SHADE OF THE WINDSOR – 1876 - 1899

A Lady by Footlight

The term “female impersonator” refers to a couple different types of individuals during the 19th and early-20th centuries, and they were each regarded and treated differently by both the working-class and dominant middle-class cultures. The most visible and widely perceived were professional female impersonators who performed within theatre companies on vaudeville stages. These individuals—regarded by society as cis “men” who performed “female illusions”—were actors of varying popularity and success, most of which depended on the quality and reputation of their theatre company.²⁰ Vaudeville was the most popular theatre form in the United States from the 1880s through the 1920s, usually consisting of a variety of disparate acts featuring any combination of a great many modes of performance. A theatre company would perform what we would call a “variety show” as a single evening or matinee program, featuring any combination of the following: one act plays or operettas, comedy acts, dance numbers, musical numbers, magic shows, strongman acts, acrobatics, blackface minstrelsy, and female and male impersonation—just to name a few. The “star” of these shows, and often one of the first to be billed in advertisements, was the female impersonator.²¹

²⁰ “Amusements,” (Denver, CO: *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 16 June, 1876); “Amusements,” (Denver, CO: *Rocky Mountain News*, 22 May 1881) keyword: J. Arthur Doty; “Amusements,” (Denver, CO: *Rocky Mountain News*, 15 June 1882); “Amusements,” (Denver, CO: *Denver Evening Post*, 3 Dec 1895); “Erminie Superbly Sung,” (Denver, CO: *Rocky Mountain News*, 27 Dec 1897); “Mahara Minstrels,” (Denver, CO: *Rocky Mountain News*, 1 May 1897); “Orpheum,” (Denver, CO: *Denver Evening Post*, 22 Oct 1905).

²¹ Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, (U.S.A, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8-9.

Theatrical female impersonation was popularized in the United States through blackface minstrelsy, which was a racist satirical mode of theatre that gained national popularity in the 1840s and remained popular through the end of the century—eventually as individual acts within a larger vaudeville show. Minstrel theatre originally featured white actors impersonating Black slaves in the American South. They did this by covering their faces with black makeup and poking fun at middle-class modes and manners through the “perspective” of enslaved Black people. Rather, these disparate variety shows—a clear ancestor of the vaudeville theatre form—used the platform to “comedically” mock the Black race through a white middle-class point of view. The female impersonators of the minstrel era were therefore required to depict comedically awkward characterizations of women by accentuating their masculine behaviors and features—in short, an institutionalized mockery of Black femininity. This dynamic of a female-satire bled over into non-minstrel dime museums and burlesque shows, which preceded vaudeville throughout the 1860s and 1870s.²²

On a mid-June evening of 1876, the “great original and only” Alf Wyman added the finishing touches to his outfit and makeup, completing the costume with the ratty wig that he’s worn on countless stages, in countless cities. Though he was the first female impersonator recorded to have performed on a Denver stage, he was likely been preceded by many. Vaudeville is in its nascent years in North America, and the type of performances produced by the Peak Family Parlor Comique Troupe probably resembled a cross between minstrelsy and dime museums in their format, however without the dominance of racial satire. On the night of June 16th, as Wyman listens for his cue to make his entrance at the Denver Theatre, he was billed

²² Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 7-9; Lemons, J. Stanley, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” (*American Quarterly* 29, no. 1, 1977), 102-106.

toward the top of the broadside advertisement as a “comedian and female impersonator,” nothing more. While his high billing reflected the value of his specialized role within this traveling theatre company, the only things that the audience expected from him were goofy characterizations and well-delivered jokes.²³ There were no reviews of his performance because, though he did his job and poked fun at the social construct of conventional female appearance and behavior, true stardom alluded Alf Wyman. In fact, few theatrical female or male impersonators gained stardom until vaudeville was able to attract middle-class women back to the theatres by “cleaning up” the acts. During this time the role of male and female impersonators shifted from comedic gender satire—the expression of which was considered “lewd” among middle-class society—to convincing gender illusion.²⁴

The vaudevillian use of coarse female satire never truly died out, but it became less of a specialization and more of a component within a comedian’s larger bag of tricks. By the late-1880s and 1890s, Denver’s theatre goers expected those who were billed as the “female impersonator” to attempt convincing portrayals of socially acceptable feminine appearance and behavior, deviations from which attracted criticism and bad reviews from the press. However, when a female impersonator succeeded in producing a convincingly feminine performance, they were lauded with praise and often stole the show.²⁵ Almost twenty years after Alf Wyman

²³ “Multiple Classified Advertisements,” (Denver, *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 16 June 1876)

²⁴ Henry Miles, *Orpheus in the wilderness: a history of music in Denver, 1860-1925*, (Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 2006), 204-205; Schoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, (Denver, CO: The Old West Publishing Company, 1941), 261; Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 1-19.

²⁵ The following are positive reviews for well-known female impersonators Richard Harlow, Julian Eltinge, and John St. Leon. Within them, they state the standards upon which their performances are judged: “Amusements,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 15 June 1882); “Orpheum,” (Denver, *Denver Post*, 22 Oct 1905); “It’s a Real Present to Yourself to See Lind Do the New Dance of the Five Senses,” (Denver, *Denver Post*, 20 Dec 1908); “Amusements,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 6 Feb 1881); “Amusements,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 11 July, 1886).

presented his comical impersonation of feminine awkwardness, Richard Harlow delighted audiences at the Tabor Grand Opera House in the show “1402” with his “absolute freedom from coarseness. [His performance] was an excellent makeup, an attractive interpretation and his singing was more than credible.”²⁶ In fact, such reviews focus on very little about a female impersonator’s performance other than the effectiveness of their female illusion, with skills such as character expression, movement and singing put into the context of how they served the expression of conventional femininity. The case for vaudevillian *male* impersonators was similar, but complicated by the societal limits of female expression.

Male impersonators were certainly a common staple in American theatres during the period, but the public display of a (perceived) woman wearing male attire was considered an act of lewdness, almost regardless of the quality of their performance. This automatically categorized shows containing male impersonation as closer to “burlesque,” which throughout the 1890s focused increasingly on modes of displaying the female body—and was therefore considered to be smut by middle-class social standards. Male impersonation at its essence was seen as vulgar due to its display of the unconstructed female form (i.e. un-corseted, shape of legs visible, and hair pinned or covered to look cropped), and therefore gained an association with prostitution.²⁷ While actors such as Katie Emmett were able to gain middle-class audiences and even critical acclaim as excellent male impersonators, advertisements for their shows usually displayed a note about the believability of their male illusion and therefore the respectability of the production for (middle-class) female audiences.²⁸ Male impersonators as a class of actor

²⁶ “Amusements,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 Dec 1895)

²⁷ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, (Chapel Hill: *The University of North Carolina Press*, 1991), 152-155; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 57.

²⁸ “Emma Abbott at the Opera House...,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 18 December, 1884); “An Actress in a Boy’s Part,” (Salida, *The Salida Mail*, 28 April, 1891); “Amusements,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 22

generally performed within less reputable theatre companies and were far less celebrated than their female impersonating counterparts. However, a male or female impersonating actor was certainly viewed as more reputable than those who “cross-dressed” *outside* of vaudevillian or even burlesque theatres.

The Fairies of the Windsor District

Non-theatrical male and female impersonation in 19th-century Denver took a few different forms. The earliest surviving newspaper records in the state regarding sartorial gender violations are overwhelmingly about male impersonators, the earliest being an 1874 reminiscence of a “buck-skinned” woman “in male attire” called “Mountain Charley” whose business prowess and sensational tale of survival made local papers in 1859—copies of which no longer exist.²⁹ Along with other buck-skinned-attired legends of the West, such as Calamity Jane, Colorado hosted a handful of crossdressing women who demonstrated the archetypal Western “virtues” of riding, drinking, shooting, and making money. However, while these cases potentially featured queer behaviors or individuals, the press was sure to heterosexualize them with either associated tales of cis heterosexual romance, or a conclusion where these individuals were “returned” to cis heterosexual society, usually “back East.”³⁰

February, 1897); “Amusements,” (Aspen, *The Herald Democrat*, 6 January, 1897); “At the Wheeler,” (Aspen, *Aspen Daily Times*, 28 April, 1899).

²⁹ “Colorado Reminiscences,” (Fort Collins, *The Fort Collins Standard*, 22 July, 1874).

³⁰ “City and Vicinity,” (Pueblo, *The Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 26 April, 1876); Untitled, (Pueblo, *The Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 29 April, 1875); “City and Vicinity,” (Pueblo, *The Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 2 September, 1876); “Female Horse Thief,” (Pueblo, *The Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 12 July 1878); “Multiple News Items,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 14 July, 1878); “Horse Thieves Killed,” (Colorado Springs, *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, 20 July, 1878); “Mountain Charley,” (Leadville, *The Leadville Daily/Evening Chronicle*, 15 July, 1879); “Death of Nettie Picket,” (Leadville, *The Leadville Daily Herald*, 18 August, 1882); “Charlie Parker,” (Denver, *The Queen Bee*, 10 October, 1883); “A Tragedy at Owl Creek,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 31 January, 1892); “A Weary Life’s History,” (Leadville, *The Leadville Daily Herald*, 15 February, 1885).

The mass majority of reported cases of male impersonation in Denver from the 19th century involved women and girls who donned male attire to simply travel safely out West or to secure job opportunities that were only available to men. While these individuals participated in what would come to be considered a distinctly queer form of expression—the violation of binary gender norms—there is thus far no evidence to suggest that any of them did so as a reflection of their non-cis or non-heterosexual identities. Lillian Faderman clarifies that “they often saw themselves not as men trapped in women’s bodies, as the sexologists [would suggest] they were, but rather as women in masquerade, trying to get more freedom and decent wages.”³¹ This does not mean that genuinely queer cases did not exist, but they were likely misunderstood, overlooked, or simply not reported.³² With the eugenics movement still in its nascent years during the 1870s, the popular American consciousness did not yet know to associate alternative gender expression with taboo sexual practices; and the general lack of “respectable ladies” in Denver during this period stifled the need to heavily police either male or female gender comportment. Such censorship truly began during the 1880s, when the population boom incited by the arrival of the railroad brought a rapid migration of middle-class women across the plains for the first time.³³

³¹ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 42; “People and Things,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 9 November, 1877); “The Female Mail Clerk,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 5 July, 1885); “Living Lies,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 27 November, 1885); “Mary Dressed in John’s Clothes,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 8 December, 1886); “Petticoats Renounced,” (Salida, *The Salida Mail*, 27 August, 1889); “A Runaway in the Hills,” (Leadville, *The Herald Democrat*, 28 December, 1894).

³² A few isolated cases of convincingly queer subjects were recorded *outside* of Denver, however, like Charles Vaubough who lived and worked as a trans man for decades in Trinidad, even marrying a cis woman. His “true identity” was only discovered while being treated at the local hospital shortly before his death; “Was Man In All But Sex For Forty Years,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 7 October, 1906); “Woman Who Passed As Man,” (Lafayette, *The News Free Press*, 12 November, 1907).

³³ Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 67-77; Robin Courtney Henry, *Criminalizing Sex, Defining Sexuality: Sodomy, Law, and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Colorado*, (Indiana University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 116-117.

The first reported examples of potentially self-aware queer individuals in Denver are non-theatrical female impersonators; whose violation of gender norms did not contribute to their survival. In fact, the penalty for public male or female impersonation could be violence, arrest, or even a prison sentence if an individual was unable to pay the \$25 (and costs) penalty. The charge was often for “vagrancy,” an umbrella term used to criminalize homelessness, physical or mental disabilities, sexual degeneracy, or cross-dressing during the 19th century.³⁴ In 1885, however, Denver’s lewdness and obscenity laws were strengthened to target all “unsightly” individuals in an effort to create normative public spaces for the rapidly expanding middle class.³⁵ As the city grew and industrialized after the arrival of the Kansas Pacific Railroad in 1870, the former-frontier town attempted to redefine itself as a burgeoning world-class city, which required the redesignation of its public spaces for white middle-class families. The result was an increased targeting of “problem bodies,” as Clare Sears called them (basically consisting of the demographics above, plus people of color), in order to cordon off these individuals within marginalized spaces where their visibility to the upper classes could be controlled.³⁶ It was in between these marginalized spaces, where middle-class convention was denied, that female impersonators found one another and built a community based on safety in numbers, and on controlling their own social and sexual agency.

In 1883, however, it was “a very uncommon thing for men to be caught in Denver masquerading in the clothes of a woman.” Whether this meant that some female impersonators went unnoticed in public—assumed to be cis women—or stayed out of view in semi-private

³⁴ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, Kindle location 640-649; Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Kindle location 1790-1803; William M. Eskridge Jr., *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 258-267.

³⁵ *Laws and Ordinances of the City and County of Denver, 1886*; William N. Eskridge, Jr., *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003* (New York: Viking, 2008), 29-30.

³⁶ Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 9-12.

spaces, it is unclear. But on a summer evening in 1883, the Merchants' police General Dave Cook spotted a "handsome looking woman" with "flowing brown tresses" walking down Larimer Street in an expensive looking gown of the "most ravishing and fascinating style." Cook had been tipped off about this individual, otherwise he would not have realized that the "young lady" who was making "innumerable 'mashes' on the hearts of the tender young men who hang around in the shade of the Windsor hotel" was known as Edward Martino—an "alleged Spaniard"—, who Cook presumed to be a cis man dressed in female attire. When Martino began flirting "in a manner that nearly drove two or three young men of the dude order into hysterics," Cook and other members of the Merchant Police intervened and arrested the mysterious "damsel," who was apparently "not surprised" to be taken into police custody.³⁷

By the time of Edward Martino's arrest at the corner of 18th and Lawrence Streets, Denver's Red-Light District, or "the Row,"—beginning just two blocks to the north at 19th and Market Streets—was a little over a decade old. The area was already occupied by the city's largest Chinese community when the brothels went into business during the 1870s, creating an overlap of worlds that drove some of the Chinese occupants into the alleyways north of Market between 19th and 21st Streets. With the Tenderloin running along Larimer Street only one block to the southeast, the space between was a place where three worlds collided—the working-class entertainment district of saloons, dancehalls, and burlesque theatres along Larimer, the world of commercialized sex along Market above 19th Street, and the world of the Chinese immigrant and popular opium dens from Market to Wazee Streets and within the conjoining alleyways.³⁸

Standing on 19th between Market and Larimer, a person stood within sight of every mode of

³⁷ "In Female Attire," (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 2 July, 1883).

³⁸ Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 28-29; "Didn't See It," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 7 February, 1900); "Chinese Girl Slavery in Denver Being Investigated," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 23 April, 1901).

commercialized vice that the city had to offer, and worlds away from the enforcement of middle-class moral hygiene. Though it was a “very uncommon thing” to spot a female impersonator in the streets of Denver, this was the place to do it if a person knew where to look and what to look for.

The court building where Edward Martino stood trial the following day was eleven blocks away from this liminal world: and here, a female impersonator—especially one who looked and sounded so conventionally feminine—drew a sizeable crowd. Martino was “allowed” to attend the trial in the full outfit that they had been arrested in, including their wig, to “mystify” the crowd, yet consequently reducing the defendant’s personhood to a mere “morbid curiosity.” If Denver was to become a world-class city like Chicago or San Francisco, individuals like Martino needed to be placed firmly outside of the norm, and therefore paraded in court akin to the subjects of the curio shops and freak shows of Larimer Street. Martino evidently understood this and gave the court what it wanted by confessing their “male” identity and crafting a tale that they donned the “disguise” to locate a long-lost sister, whose female attire the defendant wore. Though Martino denied wearing such attire to attract men, “to the average observer this explanation was unnecessary”—the defendant obviously donned female attire regularly and with the clear intention of “flirting” with men. Evidently, such flirtations could be lucrative since Martino was able to pay the \$25 “and costs” up front and “without any hesitation.” Despite being caught *this* time, Martino had likely made “‘mashes’ on the hearts of the tender young men” of Denver before, and quite possibly continued to do so with a lower profile.³⁹

³⁹ “Personating a Woman,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July, 1883).

The most famous and archetypal queer entertainment district from this era was New York City's Bowery district, also stretching along the city's oldest thoroughfare. During the 1890s, this overcrowded working-class entertainment district sat at the threshold of where the Italian and Jewish immigrant communities overlapped with the world of commercialized sex (both interactive and performative). This was an incredibly homosocial world meant to offer cheap respite to working-class men living in crowded boarding houses with little to no privacy.⁴⁰ Saloons, aside from their obvious recreational purposes, offered community resources like hot meals, groceries, local news, social interaction, and would even cash workers' checks—though payment in saloon credit was common.⁴¹ In these areas, cheap and low-brow entertainment was a part of the social fabric of life and was offered in abundance. While such districts were certainly not representative of all urban working-class environments, the most vulnerable members of society often clung to these areas for survival—cheap living, cultural belonging, or relative anonymity. The diversity and density of such areas promised the comradeship of shared eccentricities, and it was out of these working-class spaces that queer individuals created their own enclaves of relative safety, based around a shared divergence from normative gender or sexual expression.⁴²

In a younger, smaller city like Denver—overeager to outgrow its frontier—the balance between vice and “respectability” needed to be tightly regulated to stifle the former and expand the latter. Vice and problem bodies were therefore compartmentalized, restricting “legal” prostitution within a four-block stretch of a single street, and restricting the expansion of ethnic

⁴⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33-36.

⁴¹ Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 63-64.

⁴² Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 132-134.

communities through unchecked vigilante violence and discriminatory business practices.⁴³ The result, however, was the creation of a cultural, racial, and ethnic overlap that existed nowhere else in the city. In the block between 19th and 20th, and Market and Larimer: the worlds of the white working-class American, German and Jewish (and eventually Greek and Italian) immigrant, Chinese immigrant, Southern Black American, and sex-worker (of any nationality or race) all intersected at the top of the city's entertainment district. Here, taboos reigned supreme; and though arrests in this area were common, few after Edward Martino involved the targeting of individuals for cross-dressing. This is likely because police had little reason to target such individuals as long as they paid off their neighborhood officers and remained inside their enclaves within the world of commercialized vice.⁴⁴

During the late-19th century, the term “female impersonator”—outside of a vaudevillian context—referred to a small spectrum of individuals whom society perceived to be men, but who displayed varying degrees of feminine appearance or behaviors. This could range from full female attire and makeup, like Edward Martino, to simply an aesthetic element or two that were socially designated to be “feminine”—i.e. red neckties, white gloves, shoes with higher heels, long hair, tweezed eyebrows, or rouged cheeks or lips, to name a few—paired with feminine behavior. These visual and behavioral cues were not created by the mainstream culture to identify non-normative gender or sexual behavior, but were used by participants of the queer subculture to identify a person's interest in sexual interaction.⁴⁵ In this context, queerness was understood in eugenic terms that classified those who violated cis heterosexual norms as

⁴³ Clark Secrest, *Hell's Belles: Prostitution, Vice, and Crime in Early Denver*, (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2002), 77; Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 26-28.

⁴⁴ Given that no other female impersonators besides Martino were arrested within the Windsor District, it's possible that they regularly paid off police officers like the prostitutes of Market Street; Secrest, *Hell's Belles*, 77.

⁴⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 41-42, 49-54; Boag, *Same Sex Affairs*, 1118-1172; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 81-83.

“congenital invert.” Female-impersonating sex workers were the most visible examples of this and were therefore the class most closely associated with what we would call “queer” identity. They were also metaphorical beacons for both other queer individuals and those who never identified as sexually “abnormal,” but who regardless participated sexually in the subculture.⁴⁶

This system enabled those belonging to the “fairy” class—a more culturally specific term than “female impersonator”—to both seek out others like themselves, as well as to gain relative autonomy over their social and sexual relationships with men. Though most fairies from the New York and San Francisco models were sex workers in some capacity, individuals from outside of the community would sometimes don the tell-tale fairy aesthetics in order to advertise their willingness and availability to have sex with men. These sexual cues, however, were only understood in this context within the (semi-officially) designated area where female impersonation was both permitted and expected; and could consequently attract harassment or arrest if demonstrated outside of such enclaves. Normative cis men were therefore able to participate in this subculture without risking their status as culturally normative men if they took the stereotypically “masculine” role during sex. Conversely, fairies were understood to have inverted gender identities—as long as they displayed enough “feminine” visual and behavioral cues, and performed the stereotypically “feminine” role during sex—, and therefore sexual interaction with one of them was contextualized as similar to coupling with a female prostitute. If everybody performed the sexual role that was socially prescribed to their projected binary gender, then fairy enclaves were accepted as a niche within the larger world of commercialized sex.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 49.

⁴⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 41-42, 49-54; Boag, *Same Sex Affairs*, 1118-1172; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 81-83.

The fairies who occupied the space between the Windsor Hotel and the first block of the Row were witnessed as burlesque performers, saloon singers, petty thieves, potential sex workers, dressmakers, and/or simply as residents of the area (possibly belonging to one or more of the former four occupations). In fact, all but one case of locatable female impersonation in Denver during the period occurred within a single block radius of 19th and Larimer Streets. However, aside from Martino—who was the first publicized case of non-vaudeville female impersonation in Denver—all of these individuals clashed with law enforcement for reasons unrelated to their female impersonation. Therefore, their sustained presence in the area over nearly two decades indicates that their existence was recognized but not legally targeted after 1883, preserving a community that possibly remained intact until the abolition of prostitution and the Row in 1913.⁴⁸ It is likely that the occupations listed above were supplemented with sex work, and models from larger cities demonstrated that these individuals cultivated their own community with other female impersonators, developing a distinctly queer culture and identity that served their role within the larger working-class milieu.⁴⁹

As with any community, however, economic hardships and internal tensions could drive individuals to seek better—or more lucrative—lives for themselves. When an ex-convict and female-impersonating prostitute named Joe Gilligan was arrested for forgery and grand larceny in 1895, their wardrobe of female regalia was discovered by police in their room, along with

⁴⁸ These individuals—whom I located using Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1887 to 1904—were discovered through the following newspaper articles: “In Female Attire,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 2 July, 1883); “Personating a Woman,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July, 1883); “In Female Attire: J.B. Winslow, Alias ‘Blondie’ Parades as a Woman,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 10 March, 1891); “A Queer Case, This,” (Denver, *The Denver Evening Post*, 25 April, 1895); “Suicide at Pueblo,” (Denver, *The Rocky Mountain News*, 28 July, 1895); “Suicided with Chloroform,” (Pueblo, *The Colorado Daily Chieftain*, 28 July, 1895); “Female Impersonator Evans,” (Denver, *The Denver Evening Post*, 3 January, 1898); “Bag of Feminine Gear,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 8 September, 1901); “Paris Theatre Kicking Soubrette Proved to be Young Caesar Attell,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 10 September, 1901).

⁴⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 42-43; Boag, *Same-Sex Desires*, Kindle Location 412-413.

intimate letters from men and family members, and a book “with the addresses of prominent men in the city,” generating cries of “Oscar Wildism” and Denver’s own Cleveland Street Scandal from the elated press. Though Gilligan’s female impersonation and sex work were the primary focus of reporters for *The Denver Post*, the inmate was quoted actually threatening arrest to “others like himself” if they “intend[ed] to bother him.” Evidently, Gilligan’s relationship with Denver’s sex-working fairy community had soured, and they were in the process of leaving it behind. Gilligan, however, claimed to be making “sufficient money without doing anything like forgery,” meaning that the address book of “prominent men” potentially reflected a role similar to a courtesan or modern escort than a district-bound prostitute. Unfortunately, social elevation was anything but easy for the fairies of the Windsor District as Joe Gilligan would spend nearly half of their life in and out of Colorado and California penitentiaries.⁵⁰

Despite potentially frayed relations between members of Denver’s fairy community, their existence and survival were harbingers of the development of more diversified queer subcultures in the area. However, none would display their queerness so openly as the fairies of the Windsor District, shining a figurative beacon that was visible even to present-day historians. However, the sexual, racial, and class fluidity of this area not only offered relative safety to female impersonators, but also housed other spaces that fostered different modes of queer identity and expression. The one block stretch between the Windsor and St Charles Hotels housed one of Denver’s early bohemian community during the final years of the 19th century, and the Windsor Turkish Baths—at the lower end of the district at 18th and Larimer—was catering to middle and

⁵⁰ “A Queer Case, This,” (Denver, *The Denver Evening Post*, 25 April, 1895); California State Archives, Sacramento, CA, Secretary of State California State Archives San Quentin Prison Registers (1897-1910), 275.

upper-class homosexual white men by the 1890s.⁵¹ Due to the already-established world of sexual liminality that surrounded them, it's likely that both of these social worlds gravitated toward the Windsor District for those very qualities.

Jockers, Punks, and Turkish Baths

In 1893, prolific German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld visited the United States to study sexuality in American society, and almost-20 years later he published his findings in *Homosexuality in Men and Women* (1914). Printed within the book was a letter written by a male homosexual professor from Denver about his knowledge of homosexuals in the mile high city. Though most of his observations were stories about individuals that he knew personally, the professor alluded to a few locations where “Uranians”—a period term for homosexuals—were known to gather in Denver: The Turkish baths, private bohemian parties, and around the gardens of the Capitol. The latter was described as the place where “male prostitutes” could sometimes be found, which was also true for the area during the late-20th century; could the Capitol gardens have hosted sex workers continuously from the 1890s through the 1980s?⁵² Since the incomplete State Capitol building was opened 1894—one year after the professor referenced the location—the area around the State Capitol building would have been a massive construction zone since 1886, when the city broke ground on the project. Construction would also continue intermittently on the site until 1901, so perhaps the location became favorable for male prostitutes due to the

⁵¹ “Candlelight Club,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 15 January, 1895); “Czar Seeks Engineers,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 22 February, 1904); Denver City Directories, 1881-1914.

⁵² Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (Berlin: Louis Marcus, 1914), 550-554, translated by James Steakley in Katz, Jonathan Ned. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York City: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), 49-51.

homosocial atmosphere of a large long-term construction site, similar to a scaled-down mining camp.⁵³ While female and female-impersonating prostitutes were restricted to the area in and around the Row, young working-class men and adolescent boys hanging around a construction site (composed of other working-class men) likely drew little attention from moralists.

Referred to as “punks,” this type of sex worker was a product of the train-hopping tramp culture that flourished in the United States and throughout the West around the turn of the century. In their separate extensive studies of transient men in America during the period, Nels Anderson and Josiah Flynt both witnessed a rather codified system of homosexual coupling among adult men and adolescent boys who had been seduced by the idea of a shiftless life apart from societal constraints. While these couplings did not represent the majority of transient men and boys, it was a large enough proportion for them to notice many common dynamics that were shared across these distinctly homosexual relationships. The adult transient—or “jocker”—would ideally serve the role of mentor and protector to the boy, teaching him how to live the life of a vagabond, while the boy would handle the domestic chores. There was a consistent sexual dynamic between jockers and punks, but sexual roles were not always fixed like between fairies and the cis men they coupled with. However, when winter arrived and cities flooded with both idle seasonal laborers and transient hobos alike, many jockers abandoned their punks to weather the difficult months alone.⁵⁴ Consequently, these adolescent boys and young men often turned to theft and sex work to survive—not necessarily identifying their prostitution with non-normative

⁵³ Carl Abbott, et al, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, 247.

⁵⁴ This dynamic would have been exacerbated during the mid-1890s following the Silver Panic of 1893.

gender or sexual identity. Therefore, although these individuals likely banded together in a common fight to subsist, any resulting community had little to do with a shared queer identity.⁵⁵

If the “male prostitutes” of the Capitol gardens were anything like those of the 20th century, then they were young financially-vulnerable cis men surviving off (homosexual) sex work, regardless of their prescribed sexuality—much like the punks of the late-19th century. Though the male prostitutes of pre-AIDS Denver who plied their trade around the Capitol building—known in modern times as “sodomy circle”—likely did not participate in a train-hopping subculture, they served the niche of the stereotypically masculine prostitute within the larger economy of commercialized sex.⁵⁶ The true sexuality of these individuals was irrelevant—much like punks—, as long as they performed the “masculine” roles during sexual transactions. It’s uncertain whether a solid chronological line can be drawn between the punks of the “Capitol gardens” and the prostitutes of “sodomy circle,” but considering the subcultural (and therefore under-studied) quality of both, a connection is entirely possible. While this queer dynamic developed far from the city’s demimonde, the only Turkish baths in the city when the 1893 letter was written was located conveniently between 18th and 19th, and Market and Larimer Streets, firmly within the liminal and notorious Windsor District.

Turkish baths in the United States (as well as in Europe) were considered by Hirschfeld’s friend—as well as queer historians like George Chauncey—to be one of the most popular meeting places for gay men, generally considered “very safe” since “the people you meet have not come there to blackmail.” While sexual activity was understandably forbidden in the public

⁵⁵ Boag, *Same Sex Affairs*, loc. 223-481, 1031-1106; Josiah Flynt, “Children of the Road,” (*Atlantic Monthly* 77, no. 459, 1896), 58-71.

⁵⁶ “History of the Center,” The Center on Colfax, <https://lgbtqcolorado.org/about/our-history>, Last visited 28 October, 2022.

bathing areas, clients had lock and key access to private dressing rooms or could arrange to rendezvous with one another in the privacy of a nearby hotel. When the Windsor Turkish Baths opened in 1880, it was the first establishment of its kind in the city and remained so for twenty years, until the Albany Turkish Baths opened ten blocks to the southeast in 1899. Though Denver's baths were admittedly less active than in cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, or New York, "six out of nine of the masseurs who work[ed] in the baths of Denver [were] known to be tolerant and [were] probably themselves homosexuals." However, unlike the saloons and dancehalls populating the surrounding area, Turkish baths primarily catered to middle and upper-class clientele, charging a base entry price "high enough to keep the ordinary male prostitute out," which likely discouraged participation from many members of the working class as well. Ultimately, *Turkish* baths provided the middle-class luxury of privacy, but within the homosocial working-class template of public bathing.⁵⁷

So where did the "ordinary [male] prostitute" go when dissuaded by the entry fee of the Windsor Turkish Baths? Evidently their presence in the area was common enough for the professor to point out the need for exclusion. We know that Edward Martino propositioned men along the street in front of the Windsor Hotel, but such visibility was likely what led to the arrest. The alleyways behind the Turkish Baths, across the street, however, should have proven a safer and more accommodating atmosphere for prostitution outside of the Row. But does the reference to the "ordinary prostitute" refer to members of the fairy class—like Martino—, or does it refer to male-presenting punks, like those in the Capitol gardens? It's difficult to discern the difference since both were referred to at the time as "male prostitutes," if referenced directly at all. One could discern the use of "ordinary" as a biased reference to their cis-male presentation, or

⁵⁷ Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität*, 50; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 207; Denver City Directory, 1899.

perhaps it was meant to determine between streetwalkers and higher-earning escorts like Joe Gilligan. Whichever type, the accepted presence of queer prostitution in the area around the Windsor Hotel—and therefore outside of the legally-prescribed limits of the Row—merited a mention from Hirschfeld’s professor. Given the area’s liminal place between worlds of vice, it would not be unreasonable to believe that both male and female-presenting “male prostitutes” could have utilized the district’s reputation for non-normative sexual transactions.

Such a reputation would have fitted in well with the ideologies of the subcultural movement that was quickly gaining influence around the Windsor Block and the rest of Denver. During the 1890s, groups of anti-establishment-minded artists, writers, musicians, poets, and journalists began to meet with greater frequency in public spaces along Market and Larimer, like the St. Charles Hotel wine room. They called themselves “bohemians” after the early 19th-century French movement of the same name, originating from the Latin Quarter of Paris.⁵⁸ The Denver meetings were small and informal at first, consisting of political lectures and debates, poetry readings, musical recitals and workshops, or simply holding space for like-minded people to socialize.⁵⁹ This was an anti-capitalist movement based on the rejection of money and the reverence of artistic talent and development; a belief system that rejected the Progressive Era conventions of materialism, gender, race, and sex. Therefore, queer identities were relatively acknowledged and welcomed within bohemian communities, which famously pushed the boundaries of normative gender and sexual expression, even among cis heterosexuals.⁶⁰

However, as Denver’s bohemian community grew too large for the ballroom of the Windsor

⁵⁸ Roy Kotynek and John Cohassey, *American Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers, and Musicians from 1850s through the 1960s*, (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 5-9.

⁵⁹ “The Candlelight Club,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 15 January, 1895); “Prosperous Bohemians,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 20 January, 1896); “Bohemia’s Carnival,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 22 March, 1897); “Czar Seeks Engineers,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 22 February, 1904).

⁶⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227-232.

Hotel, they set their eyes on cheapening prices of a nicer neighborhood south of the city's Theatre Row.

CHAPTER III

MASQUERADES OF DENVER – 1900 - 1914

Little Bohemia

The 1893 letter referenced one more “place” in Denver where queer people would gather during the period, or more precisely, where they were included. He wrote that “parties are given by a young artist of exquisite taste and a noble turn of mind, and some of his homosexual friends appear at these in women’s clothing.” Though the professor never used the word “bohemian,” no other cultural context from 1893 could feasibly contain such a dynamic: a heterosexual artist throwing parties that casually featured fairies. What’s more is that the fairies are labeled as “friends” of the artist, meaning they were likely not invited as performers or sex workers. During the Progressive Era, this dynamic—the social intermingling of non-homosexual artists with visibly queer people, namely fairies—was exclusive to and indicative of bohemian communities.⁶¹ This could also help explain why some of the earliest bohemian gatherings in the city occurred within the Windsor District, the very enclave of Denver’s fairy community.

By 1900, however, the city’s bohemian community had outgrown the Windsor Block and was populating the area below the southeastern edge of Theatre Row—Curtis Street between 15th and 19th Streets—, and the immediate blocks surrounding the 1500 block of Glenarm Street. Between these two enclaves, a string of fashionable “bohemian” establishments lived short but competitive lives catering to the ever-blurring line between the bohemian subculture and the newer more mainstream “haute boheme”—which referred to the wealthy bohemian.⁶² As the

⁶¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227-232; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, XVI.

⁶² As explained on pages 8 & 9, I created data sets filtered from the Denver Censuses from 1900, 1910, and 1920. I mapped the data points and I have drawn my theories about potential queer residential enclaves from that. I determined the existence and location of “Bohemian” establishments in the city from Denver City Directories

bohemian movement popularized, it came to be understood by the mainstream as delightfully eccentric and was passionately imitated, though omitting the anti-capitalistic foundations of the subculture. In practice, however, “true” bohemianism was definitively marked by poverty, whether elective or circumstantial, compelling members of the community to rely heavily on one another for both artistic inspiration as well as survival. Consequently, if an area became known as a bohemian hub, middle and upper-class slummers would flood the local economy and drive up the price of living until the original bohemians could no longer afford their rent. So, while “haute” Bohemia moved in, “Little Bohemia” moved out.⁶³

How do we know that a queer population was even among the shiftless bohemian community of Denver? An answer could be through the method that I used to map such patterns of settlement. I sifted through the Federal Censuses for Denver from 1900, 1910, and 1920, mapping the addresses of those who labeled themselves as a “partner,” “roomer,” or “lodger” in relation to the head of the household. I also filtered the results to only include individuals who were perceivably living with only one other person of the same recorded gender who held no familial relation. The reason for this was to eliminate as many factors of convenience or survival as possible. While these pairs are certainly not representative of all queer relationships, it was the only living situation that suggested two people had at least four walls of privacy between them and others, and that they were not kin. A person’s marital status factored very little into the analysis because most known queer individuals from this period married at some point during

(1890-1920) and the following newspaper articles: “Prosperous Bohemians,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 20 January, 1896); “Bohemian Ball,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 26 February, 1901); “Little Hungary Roof Garden,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 1 July, 1906); “Bohemia,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 31 December, 1908); “New Year Ushered in with Glee,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 1 January, 1909); “Bohemia Amid Picturesque Surroundings of Nan-King Café,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 12 July, 1911); “Wealthy Man Poisoned at Party is Charge; Denverite is a Guest,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 5 August, 1913).

⁶³ Kotynek, *American Cultural Rebels*, 47-51.

their lives, often continuing their queer lifestyles apart from their spouses. I also analyzed the data filtered to only show pairs that worked different occupations from one another to eliminate yet another factor of convenience, and though these results were scant, they only reinforced the potentially queer areas of interest.⁶⁴

I had hoped to see an obvious correlation between suspected queer areas of town and the mapped points of data, but what I saw was a clear correlation between the settlement of “domestic partnerships”—as I will refer to these pairings from now on—and the most widely-advertised bohemian establishments of the decade, populating the blocks between Curtis (Theatre Row) and Welton Streets above 15th Street. However, most of these establishments did not yet exist in 1900 (at least in their widely advertised forms as “bohemian” venues) when the concentration of domestic partners was recorded to have occupied the space. In fact, by the time that these bohemian resorts gained city-wide attention—from 1907 to 1912—the majority of Denver’s domestic partners had moved several blocks northeast, as well as directly east into north Capitol Hill. Obviously, I wondered why there was such a clear spatial relationship between the settlement patterns of domestic partners in 1900 and the popular bohemian venues from 1907-1912, and yet they occupied this space nearly a decade apart? My guess is that the city’s most widely advertised commercial bohemian venues occupied the spaces where the “true” bohemians had *formerly* lived as residents, driven out by the price of popularity. One could assume that the popular bohemian venues of 1920 would have popped up in advertisements among the 1910 settlement of domestic partners to the northeast, but the advent of statewide

⁶⁴ U.S Census Bureau, City and County of Denver (1900, 1910, 1920), using [ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); <<http://www.ancestry.com>> (January – April 2022).

prohibition in 1916 likely stifled the exposure of either “true” or “haute” bohemian establishments, both of which probably moved underground.

Regardless of the exact location of the current bohemian epicenter, the cluster of domestic partnerships around the 1500 block of Glenarm Street points to the city’s potentially densest queer enclave in 1900. The first distinguishing feature is the sheer density of this grouping of domestic partners, with ten partnerships filling a single block radius. On average, the difference in age between partners was just over 5 years, with an average age of 30.5, both lower than any other grouping of domestic partnerships in my data. With a perfect divide between male and female partnerships—all Caucasian—the bohemian context of this area is easy to believe given the location of The Bohemian Club’s former headquarters (as of 1895) only one block away. The Orpheum Theatre, where the legendary female impersonator Julian Eltinge would give one of his earliest Denver performances, stood in between old Bohemian Club and the newly constructed Albany Turkish Baths on Glenarm—the only other Turkish baths in the city. What this all tells me is that the densest grouping of domestic partnerships in the city was nestled among the turn-of-the-century bohemian headquarters, a low-brow vaudeville theatre featuring young female impersonators, and one of two Turkish Bath establishments in the city (the other being the Windsor Turkish Baths in the Windsor District).⁶⁵ With strong elements of the bohemian subculture, queer entertainment, and middle-class gay male cruising grounds, we potentially have a snapshot of Denver’s most consolidated queer neighborhood (both residential and commercial) at the turn of the century. The difference between this area and the Windsor District is that while the latter developed out of the diverse world of commercialized sex, the

⁶⁵ Denver City Directories, 1895-1900; “Orpheum,” (Denver, *The Denver Evening Post*, 22 October, 1905); “Albany Turkish Baths,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 24 September, 1899).

former developed later (and for a shorter period of time) within the city's primarily-white bohemian subculture.

However, by 1910, this settlement appeared to have dissolved and another seemed to have begun near and within the block of 18th and Lincoln Streets, which was a development called Brinton Terrace that a 1906 newspaper article called Denver's residential "mecca" for bohemians.⁶⁶ As a 1919 *Denver Post* article would eventually confirm, as well as the mapped partnerships from my 1920 Census data, this block would remain a major cultural center for both the bohemian community and for domestic partners into the early-1920s.⁶⁷ This strongly suggests that there was an undeniable correlation between Denver's bohemian communities and the settlement patterns of same-sex domestic partnerships. Therefore, though all domestic partnerships were certainly not indicative of a connection to the bohemian community, they appear to have created their densest settlements among them. Paired with the many accounts of urban queer individuals finding acceptance among bohemian communities, as well as knowledge of the queer neighborhood that existed in Capitol Hill during the mid-20th century, it could be safe to assume that these clusters of domestic partners from 1900, 1910, and 1920 are at least partially indicative of the areas where queer people felt safe enough to settle with their partners and make lives for themselves.

Within the socially blurred lines of a bohemian gathering, queerness in its many forms was encouraged in the name of exploring one's "true self," almost to the point of fetishization. However, for the first time, a person's non-normative expression of their gender and/or sexuality was not tied to gender inversion or sexual "deviance" because the typical structures of class,

⁶⁶ "Artists Make This Terrace Their Center," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 21 October, 1906).

⁶⁷ "Denver's 'Greenwich Village' Begun by Architect Sterner," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 1 June, 1919)

gender, and sexuality had already been adamantly deconstructed. Like the liminal area between Denver's worlds of commercialized vice, bohemian spaces created a world between worlds where middle-class conventions were safely flouted and people were seen as fellow travelers rather than freaks.⁶⁸ Though we can only locate the hotbeds of bohemian activity within shiftless windows of time, it is the very nature of Bohemia to be shiftless. As a journalist from *The Denver Post* reflected in 1909, "Bohemia travels not in a beaten pathway and jealously guards her traditions from the beginning to the end of every year in the calendar."⁶⁹ However, back in the old bohemian stomping grounds of the Windsor District, a new demographic of queer participation suggested that the area's glory days were far from over.

"Masquerading in Male Attire"

Mary Garcia left the Montana Bar, a loud seedy saloon along Larimer near 19th, and surveyed the busy streets of the Tenderloin for something... even seedier. A proud bohemian musician, Garcia was unusually privy to the type of establishments that were rumored to exist along Larimer, above and below 19th Street. The blue serge suit only fit passably well, but Garcia adjusted the golf cap partially obscuring their freshly-cropped hair, took a long drag of their cigarette, and strode toward 18th Street. Given the short walking distance from their home further down 19th in the current bohemian quarter, this was likely not the first time that Garcia ventured into the Windsor District unaccompanied by their husband; and with all luck, it would not be the last. While the bohemian parties that took place in their neighborhood between Curtis and Welton typically featured both non-normative gender and sexual expression, Garcia was

⁶⁸ Kotynek, *American Cultural Rebels*, 9-12; Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Kindle Location 1060-1064.

⁶⁹ "Revelry Marks Advent of 1909 in All Bohemia," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 1 January, 1909).

searching for something that the bohemian community did not provide. The Windsor District, however, had an established tradition of queer-gender expression, and if Garcia looked hard enough, maybe they could locate a venue catering to lesbians and individuals called “male impersonators.”

What Mary Garcia didn’t know was that Patrolman Orbach stood across the street observing as they “unconsciously betray[ed] [themselves] in an effort to ascertain if [their] trousers were on straight.” He followed them into a saloon near 18th and Larimer and put a swift end to what could have been an eventfully queer evening. Down at police headquarters, Garcia attempted to avoid jailtime with a story about how the outfit was a costume for a (likely bohemian) masquerade ball on Larimer, and while waiting for a friend to join them, decided to have a drink in a nearby saloon. However, Deputy Chief Leyden found their cropped hair to be suspect, —something that Garcia “could not explain”—and believing “that [they] had some other motive in donning [their] husband’s clothing,” held them in jail overnight. While Deputy Chief Leyden was likely not worrying (or even thinking) about Garcia’s gender or sexual identity, a perceived middle-class woman’s direct involvement with the Tenderloin’s nightlife was considered “lewd” by the standards of the blossoming Progressive Era; as was the wearing of male attire. Regardless of Mary Garcia’s true intentions, their exploits were simply understood within the context of “slumming.”⁷⁰

“Never has the forbidden district of the red lights attracted so many people from the respectable actions of the city until just now. Every night parties of evidently respectable women...make their way... to see the life that the women of the half world live.”⁷¹ Though the

⁷⁰ "Woman Enters Bars As Man But 'Hitching Pants' Betrays Her," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 14 November, 1913).

⁷¹ "Respectable Women in the Tenderloin," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 27 October, 1906).

practice of slumming began in Denver as early as the 1880s, this 1906 proclamation by *The Denver Post* reflects the growing frequency of this pastime during the first two decades of the 20th century.⁷² Since middle and upper-class women could not visit saloons, brothels, or any other venues of commercialized vice without risking their status as “respectable ladies”—which was the only acceptable status for middle and upper-class women—, they would disguise themselves as men in order to frequent the popular vice districts of a city. Sometimes referred to as “slumming tours,” such excursions could be a woman’s first personal experience with alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs, gambling, or even commercialized sex.⁷³ However, while the motives of these women to experience a city’s nightlife were understandable, it’s incredibly difficult to discern whether their “male impersonation” was simply a disguise or an expression of queer identity. Given Mary Garcia’s reported flirtations with women during their outing, their bohemian lifestyle, as well as the fact that they cut their hair rather than simply pinning it under a hat, it is more than possible that they were expressing their own queerness and/or searching for others.

Though George Chauncey asserts that male and female queer communities formed around the same time and within the same spaces as one another in New York City, Lillian Faderman refutes the claim, stating that the social stigma against female participation in urban nightlife during the 19th century, regardless of class, caused a stagnation in the development of queer female, non-binary, and trans-masculine spaces in most American cities. This stigma

⁷² The following are all of the accounts of women slumming in Colorado that I could find: “A Mountain Maid’s Frolic,” (Las Animas via Denver, *Las Animas Leader*, 7 March 1879); “A Mad Masquerade,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 July 1884); “Masquerading Dora Dow,” (Leadville, *Leadville Evening Chronical*, 21 Sept. 1888); “A Woman in Male Attire,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 29 Oct. 1889); “A Tough Female,” (Aspen, *Aspen Daily Chronical*, 26 Sept. 1889); “They Went Slumming,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 17 June 1891); “A Runaway in the Hills,” (Leadville, *Herald Democrat*, 28 Dec. 1894); “Young Woman in Men’s Garb,” (Denver, *Denver Evening Post*, 11 June 1899); “They Changed Clothes,” (Leadville, *Herald Democrat*, 26 Oct. 1899).

⁷³ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 42; Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 64-65.

continued for middle-class women into the first decades of the 20th century, but by the 1910s, working-class women—other than prostitutes—were beginning to frequent saloons that served both food and drink, enabling them to participate in the saloon nightlife culture without drawing the err of mainstream society. This also allowed women, non-binary individuals, and trans men who were aware of their sexological status as “congenital invert” to seek out one another within working-class saloons. Little is known about such venues outside of New York and before the 1920s, but it was during this period that such “lesbian bars” evidently formed, displaying a dual masc-femme dynamic similar to fairy communities. Such a display of perceived “male impersonation” was difficult to disguise merely as “slumming,” especially during the heightened surveillance of “female” comportment during the late-Progressive Era. Therefore, such dynamics gravitated toward the same sexually liminal places where queer men, non-binary individuals, and trans women had already formed their enclaves.⁷⁴

When Bird Lang—a potentially-trans man who had been “masquerading in male attire” in the area for the past four years—was arrested in 1910 for public drunkenness in the alleyway between 18th, 19th, Market, and Larimer Streets, they could have been frequenting the same venues as Mary Garcia. Indeed, given Garcia’s thorough exploration of the saloons on the 1800 block of Larimer, an overlap is more than likely—if not within venues of the same name, then within the same literal spaces.⁷⁵ When Helen Odom was arrested for wearing male attire at 19th and Lawrence the previous year, she declared that she was on her way to 18th and Larimer Streets, intending to pass through the same small stretch of commercialized vice as both Lang

⁷⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 59-60 & 79-81; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227-243; Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, Kindle location 124-136 & 1828-1852.

⁷⁵ “Woman ‘Vag’ Says She’ll Be Good,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 22 February, 1911); “She Cursed Policeman and Had Let Beard Grow, Though in Female Garb,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 10 April, 1911).

and Garcia, the same location where Ruth Meyers would be arrested in 1914, also dressed in male attire and being coaxed into trying cocaine.⁷⁶ Whether it was the Montana Bar, a venue of another name, or several such places along the 1800 block of Larimer, the nightlife here attracted alternate modes of gender expression at a rate that was unparalleled elsewhere in Denver.

This sudden appearance of male impersonators participating with the nightlife of the Windsor District from 1909 to 1913 could simply reflect the increased number of slummers that were frequenting the area, but the purpose of slumming was primarily to visit a city's Red-Light district. Every single case of male impersonation within the Windsor District, however, occurred on Larimer (or in the alley) between 18th and 19th, close to, yet entirely outside of the Row. In fact, 67% of all locatable cases of male impersonation in Denver occurred within the Windsor District, as well as 100% of those who were interacting in any way with the world of commercialized vice. Could it be possible, then, that these individuals were part of—or attempting to participate in—the pre-existing queer subculture that was located there during the final two decades of the 19th century? Given that 75% of all locatable cases of male *or* female impersonation between 1883 and 1913 occurred within this small area, it's likely that the blocks of Larimer between 18th and 20th were the home to such establishments. If true, this would mean that the Windsor District served as Denver's primary queer entertainment district for at least thirty years, likely moving underground in 1916 with the dawn of state-wide prohibition.

⁷⁶ "Woman Wearing Trousers Held," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 25 November, 1909); "Girl Hobo Turned Over to Police by Boy Comrade," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 19 July, 1914).

What's Happening at East Turner Hall?

Just three blocks to the northeast of the Windsor Entertainment District loomed an imposing and opulent brick and sandstone building called East Turner Hall. Built in 1889 on the “east” side of town, the building loomed over a sea of one and two-story brick or wood-framed houses, vestiges of the former middle-class German and Jewish suburb that was built to feel worlds away from the rowdy saloons of south Larimer.⁷⁷ However, now this densifying area sat only a stone throw’s away from both the Row and the queer entertainment district; the result of a population and building boom throughout the 1870s, 80s, and early 90s. Perhaps it was a consequence of the Silver Panic of 1893, perhaps there were other reasons, but by the turn of the century, the neighborhood’s former residents had been partially replaced by a diversifying group of demographics. Though initially all-male, this was the only racially-diverse cluster of domestic partnerships from the 1900 census data, containing White (both American-born and immigrant), Black, and Chinese domestic partners living together—and with other members of their ethnic communities—within the same small neighborhood. Since Caucasians made up 96.8% of the city’s urban population in 1900, such a demographic is enough to make a person wonder: what was happening over at East Turner Hall?⁷⁸

By 1910, the density of domestic partners in the area nearly doubled and the demographics shifted to become predominantly Black, with an even divide between male and

⁷⁷ “The East Turner Hall fire,” *Denver Public Library Digital Collection*, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll22/id/18544>, Last visited 29 October, 2022; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1903 & 1904*.

⁷⁸ Abbott, *Colorado*, 475-476; Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Place In The United States,” (*United States Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce*), <https://web.archive.org/web/20120812191959/http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.html>, Last visited 29 October, 2022.

female. While Chinese residents appear to have moved away, back toward the Chinese enclaves above Market Street, a few American-born white domestic partnerships lived within sight of East Turner Hall, firmly yet uncharacteristically within this Black neighborhood. In fact, this area showed the only grouping of Black and mixed-race domestic partners from the 1900 and 1910 censuses and was one of two such areas by 1920. Though the cluster of Black and mixed-race domestic partnerships is eye-catching—especially when all other clusters from 1900 and 1910 were almost-entirely Caucasian—the sudden increase of Denver’s Black population between 1900 and 1910 likely reflects the dawn of the Great Migration.

While Black people had been present in Denver since its frontier days, only middle and upper-class individuals (predominantly men) of any race were able to afford the trip across the Great Plains or Rocky Mountains before the arrival of the railroad in 1870.⁷⁹ After that, the majority of Denver’s Black population worked either as railroad laborers, porters, or servants, and remained working class until the 1920s.⁸⁰ The Great Migration, beginning around 1910 and lasting in phases until the 1970s, was a massive migration of Black people—and sometimes entire communities—from the American South to the Northern, Midwestern, and Western states of the country. During the first years of the 20th century, the Homestead Act was still in effect, providing adult American citizens or prospective citizens with 160 acres of government land—illegally seized from the native tribes of the Western and Midwestern states—regardless of their race. Such equal access to privately owned land was a huge draw for Colorado’s earliest Black residents and put the region on the map for those migrating out of the Jim Crow South after the

⁷⁹ Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 67-77; Robin Courtney Henry, *Criminalizing Sex, Defining Sexuality: Sodomy, Law, and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Colorado*, (Indiana University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 116-117.

⁸⁰ “Immigration to Denver, 1920-Present,” *Colorado Encyclopedia*, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/immigration-denver-1920-present>, Last visited 29 October, 2022.

turn of the century.⁸¹ Though the most widely-known historic Black neighborhood of Denver is the area surrounding 27th and Welton Streets—or “Five Points,” as the streetcar stop was labeled at this five-way intersection—evidently one of the city’s earliest Black and mixed-race communities developed within the vicinity of East Turner Hall, located between 21st and 22nd Streets on Arapahoe Street.

The club was built by the Turnverein Society in 1889 and included a ballroom, theatre, gymnasium, dressing rooms, bowling alley, and meeting rooms, among other social and functional spaces. The society was a German-American social and athletic club, originally situated within the German and Jewish communities of the late-19th century.⁸² During the early 20th century, however, the “Turnhalle” catered to a diverse demographic, hosting Turnverein events, Jewish community events, bohemian masquerade balls, Black masquerade balls, and Black theatre companies.⁸³ In fact, Oscar-winner Hattie McDaniel performed in front of her first audience at East Turner in her father’s travelling minstrel show.⁸⁴ Evidently, the events hosted at the hall mirrored the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood, hinting that the area was potentially a bohemian enclave as well. Given the density of domestic partnerships within the immediate area, the racial diversity, nearby masquerade balls, as well as the presence of young

⁸¹ Stewart E. Tolnay, “The African American ‘Great Migration’ And Beyond,” (Annual Review of Sociology, 2003, Vol. 29, 2003), 210-214.

⁸² Katie Rudolph, “Remnants of the Past: Building Fragments of the 1890 Denver Turnverein Building,” The Denver Public Library, < <https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/remnants-past-building-fragments-1890-denver-turnverein-building>>, Last visited 31 October, 2022.

⁸³ “Bohemian Ball,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 26 February, 1901); “People’s Sunday Alliance,” (Denver, *The Colorado Statesman*, 13 February, 1909); “All Star Minstrels East Turner Hall Thursday November 19,” (Denver, *The Colorado Statesman*, 31 October, 1909).

⁸⁴ “Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952), *Black Past*, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/people-african-american-history/mcdaniel-hattie-1895-1952>, Last visited 29 October, 2022.

artists living in small or subdivided residences, the East Turner Block resembled a bohemian enclave better than any other part of the city at the time.

Therefore, could the bohemian—and potentially queer—communities of the Windsor District and East Turner Block be linked? With only two blocks separating the communities, it appears increasingly more likely that the clustering of domestic partners in the latter are reflective of its vicinity to both the center of the queer nightlife, as well as the city's oldest bohemian community, both within the Windsor District. What's more is that 100% of the Black domestic partnerships to settle below 20th Street—the boundary of the historically enforced Black ghetto— between 1900 and 1920 were located within or along the edge of the Windsor District. So, these are two areas tied by mixed racial dynamics unseen in any other part of the city, by their evident ties to the bohemian and potentially queer subcultures, as well as by their incredibly close vicinity to one another. While one of these areas historically demonstrates social and sexual liminality, the other was racially liminal, both of which appear to have attracted the qualities of the other. Given the continuing presence of Black domestic partnerships within the East Turner Block in 1920, as well as the racially-mixed settlement of the Windsor District that occurred around the same time, a greater queer neighborhood potentially takes form.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEMPLE OF THE ARTS – 1915 - 1920

Harlem of the West

“JAZZ MUSIC” seemed to shout out from the page of *The Denver Post*. “A brazen, screaming, screeching, confusion of whang-banging, intermingled with moans and groans, cowbells, sleighbells, skillets, Chinese gongs, barnyard bedlam and all noises weird and unearthly that human ingenuity can suggest.”⁸⁵ Directed at a white readership, such a description reflected mainstream anxiety over the new musical style crooning out of the venues along north Welton Street. Only four blocks east of the East Turner Block, the area was rapidly populating with Black professionals, musicians, and laborers who had relocated to Denver primarily from the Jim Crowe South. And at the center of it all was Fern Hall, featuring young couples energetically dancing to the syncopated “rag” of Morrison’s Jazz Orchestra as early as 1917.⁸⁶ This area of the Five Points neighborhood—surrounding the “Welton Corridor” from 24th to 30th Streets—was the Black entertainment district of Denver, hosting up to fifty bars and clubs during its height in the mid-20th century. But on a hot summer evening in 1917, the gyrating youth of Fern Hall were at the very beginning—and at the very center—of a cultural watershed that would transform this five-way streetcar stop into the “Harlem of the West.”⁸⁷

One thing to understand about the Five Points neighborhood is that it remained predominantly white until the 1920s, when a housing boom caused many of its white residents to move to newer and nicer neighborhoods. These neighborhoods developed racist laws to keep

⁸⁵ “JAZZ MUSIC,” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 6 July, 1917)

⁸⁶ “Baseball,” (Denver, *The Denver Star*, 14 July, 1917)

⁸⁷ Laura M. Mauk, *The Five Points Neighborhood of Denver*, (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2001), 6-8.

people of color out and prevent white businesses from catering to Black customers—beginning with the Black and Tan Order of 1916, which forbid businesses from serving multiple races in one establishment—, effectively creating a Black ghetto within Five Points.⁸⁸ Back during the later 1910s, however, the area housed German, Jewish, Irish, and Hispanic residents with a rapidly growing Black population along the southeast side of the train tracks and around north Welton Street. Though white residents were still in the majority by 1915, the density of Black residents and businesses settling in the blocks around 26th and Welton began to reflect the growing influence of Black culture in that area. Unsurprisingly, such visibility served as a cultural beacon for Black migration in the West, attracting professionals, laborers, and artists alike throughout the 1910s. Simultaneously, the Welton Corridor also began to host a growing number of saloons and dance halls, developing into an entertainment district by late in the decade.⁸⁹ By 1920, Black domestic partners had settled in the blocks above 25th between California and Washington Streets, within a stone’s throw away from Fern Hall and the Denver’s other nascent jazz hotspots like Rice & Rice Confectionary and Ice Cream Parlor.⁹⁰

These partnerships were both male and female—though predominantly female—, working class, with an average age of 43 and an average age difference of just under 11 years. What’s notable about this grouping, however, is that all but one of these partnerships contain individuals who worked different occupations from one another, dramatically decreasing the likelihood that they were living together merely out of convenience. With an “artist” counted among these partners—an uncommonly-listed occupation that was only represented within the

⁸⁸ "Public Safety and the Commissioner's Statement," (Denver, *The Colorado Statesman*, 28 June, 1913)

⁸⁹ "Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History," The Denver Public Library, < <https://history.denverlibrary.org/five-points-whittier-neighborhood-history>>, Last visited 28 October, 2022.

⁹⁰ Untitled, (Denver, *The Colorado Statesman*, 15 June, 1918), 5.

East Turner Block, Capitol Hill, and here—, one could assume that the housing conditions were also favorable for the bohemian lifestyle. The only white individual within this grouping lived with a Black partner, which wouldn't have attracted the same attention as a heterosexual interracial pairing, but nonetheless reflected a mixed-race dynamic that was evidently absent from other parts of Five Points. By 1920, the Department of Safety's Black and Tan Order evidently had its intended effect in segregating businesses both above and below the 20th Street race line.

Queer historians have demonstrated how the Black queer communities of New York and Chicago first formed within Black entertainment districts toward the advent of the Jazz Age, attracting members of all races to the jazz venues that were unparalleled elsewhere in the city.⁹¹ Given the obvious grouping of Black domestic partnerships within Denver's future-jazz quarter, paired with the knowledge of where queer Black neighborhoods developed in cities like New York (Harlem) and Chicago (Bronzeville), it is entirely possible that this was yet another queer neighborhood tied to a nearby entertainment district—the "Five Point" streetcar stop along Welton Street. It should be noted, however, that every single jazz performance north of 20th Street up until 1920 occurred at one of four locations: Fern Hall and Rice & Rice Confectionary on the same block, Old Colony Hall, and East Turner Hall.⁹² Since Old Colony sat near 28th and Larimer Streets, far away from other similar venues or any groupings of domestic partnerships, it appeared to have served the Black community but lacked evident ties with any larger entertainment district or potentially queer area. East Turner, however, displayed a high

⁹¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 243-266; Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 98-104; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 68-70.

⁹² The mass majority of these performances occurred at Fern Hall. Rice & Rice hosted jazz every Sunday starting in 1918, there were a handful of formal events at Old Colony which featured a "jazz orchestra," and a few jazz performances were recorded to have occurred in East Turner Hall.

concentration of domestic partnerships from as early as 1900 to 1920, and sat only a few blocks away from the Windsor Entertainment District. Given that the building was destroyed in a fire in 1920, it's not surprising that East Turner is not popularly linked to Denver's jazz history, however this appears to have been among the city's very first repeated jazz venues.⁹³

One prominent thing that my data from 1920 revealed to me was that the mixed-race dynamics between domestic partnership groupings became nearly non-existent—the only exceptions being the interracial domestic partnership mentioned on the previous page, and the Black domestic partners living south of 20th Street within the Windsor District. The other groupings of domestic partnerships from 1920, either white or Black, became homogenous or settled in homogenous groups. With the Ku Klux Klan establishing its Colorado chapter in 1915 and rapidly growing to cultural and political dominance by the 1920s, as well as the recent enforcement of the Black and Tan Order, this stark racial segregation of communities on either side of 20th Street and Park Avenue makes sense within the context of an expanding white supremacist mainstream.⁹⁴ Interestingly—yet not entirely unexpected—, the only bastions of interracial communal dynamics among domestic partnerships in 1920 survived within the Windsor District, where venues appear to have potentially defied the 1916 Black and Tan Order, and within the Black entertainment district near 26th and Welton Streets, where the Order was more or less unenforced within predominantly-Black establishments. Such dynamics, however, did not survive in white communities, even among the bohemians spreading out within the stylish apartments and subdivided mansions of Capitol Hill.

⁹³ "Permit Given to Wreck Turner Hall," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 16 July, 1920)

⁹⁴ Abbott, *Colorado*, 273-278.

Capitol Hill

Located south of 20th Avenue, the Capitol Hill neighborhood rises steadily uphill, ascending eastward from Broadway. When the city sprawl began to encroach on the first streetcar suburbs—like Curtis Park in northern Five Points—during the 1880s, Denver’s wealthiest residents began to build their homes on the higher ground east and southeast of downtown. However, when apartment buildings were constructed throughout the western part of the neighborhood during the 1910s and 20s, the wealthy moved further east to City Park, Park Hill, Montclare, and Hilltop, and south below 7th Avenue—the southern boundary of the greater Capitol Hill neighborhood. The area, in turn, transformed into a white working and lower-middle class neighborhood, known to house the bulk of Denver’s bachelors and bachelorettes within the new sprawling apartment buildings and old subdivided mansions left behind. Such a transition began as early as 1906, when the white bohemians of Denver began to colonize the formerly prestigious residences in the very northwestern corner of Capitol Hill; a development called Brinton Terrace.⁹⁵

An ornate Tudor-style row of townhouses, the “future nest of Denver’s Greenwich Village”—a parallel meant to highlight the area’s bohemian culture—was built in 1882. The development originally housed members of Denver’s upper crust, but as the area densified, the wealthy tenants likely moved further east. By the 1900s, “Brinton Terrace began to run down at the heels,” attracting bohemians who allegedly “like[ed] this sort of thing” because “the possibilities of a ‘come back’ [was] too alluring.” Whether that was the reason for the bohemian

⁹⁵ “Denver’s Capitol Hill,” *Colorado Encyclopedia*, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/denver’s-capitol-hill>, Last visited 29 October, 2022.

colonization of the northwestern corner of Capitol Hill or not, there was believed to have “always been an aloofness among [the bohemians] because of widely separated residences. Now they [were] to be colonized.” Though we know that Denver’s bohemian enclaves shifted around the area southeast of Theatre Row, it is true that even a semi-permanent location was difficult to nail down in any given year with much accuracy. However, Brinton Terrace became the *known* center of Denver’s “Little Bohemia” over the course of the 1900s and 1910s; and by 1920, it anchored one of the densest groupings of domestic partners in the city. The other two densest groupings were located only three blocks to the east and six blocks to the southeast, evidently spreading across North Capitol Hill.⁹⁶

These groupings of domestic partners were overwhelmingly upper-working class (literate labor), female, and were entirely white and American born. The majority of them worked in different occupations from one another, had an average age of 38 and average age differences of less than 7 years. They also held the highest density of artistic occupations found in any of my data, including an artist, music teacher, orchestra pianist, music company bookkeeper, and a magazine writer—all of whom were female. Overall, when combined with their connection to the bohemian enclave at Brinton Terrace and the knowledge that the modern (post-WWII) queer community of Denver existed within the greater Capitol Hill neighborhood, these characteristics provide a compelling argument for the nascent-queer context of North Capitol Hill by 1920. However, while a few male domestic partnerships clung to edges of these groupings or to the eastern side of Broadway, half of the 1920 male examples located south of 20th Street were still found along Theatre Row or within the Windsor District, indicating the lasting draw that such

⁹⁶ "Artists Make This Terrace Their Center," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 16 July, 1906); "Denver's 'Greenwich Village' Begun by Architect Sterner," (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 1 June, 1919).

areas potentially still held for queer men. Therefore, could such a skewed gender dynamic in Capitol Hill potentially hint at a larger cultural shift?

The introduction of Freudian theory into popular consciousness after World War I marked a profound change in the way that mainstream American culture understood and interacted with sexuality. Replacing eugenicist beliefs that atypical gender and sexual expression were indicative of the “inversion” of a person’s biological gender and innate “degenerative” status, Freudian theory stated that sexual desires reflected a natural yet complicated internal psyche that should be explored rather than repressed. This theory fit in well with the bohemian mindset, and when it settled within the post-war mainstream culture of the youth, America’s first sexual revolution commenced.⁹⁷ Consequently, in trendy places like Greenwich Village and Harlem—where conventional middle-class norms of sexuality were visibly violated—bisexual experimentation was encouraged in everyone, but especially among young women. This is largely reflected by a cultural fascination with lesbianism throughout the 1920s, which was often fetishized by the heterosexual male-dominated mainstream. Bisexuality among women was accepted as long as it was exclusively sexual in nature and temporary. However, while long-term homosexuality was stigmatized in contrast, such permissiveness still allowed for queer subcultures to form and flourish like never before.⁹⁸

Such was potentially the case on the 1600 blocks between Pearl and Clarkson Streets, where one of the densest enclaves of female domestic partnerships formed within the shadow of the founding church of the Colorado College of Divine Science. The organization was founded and led by women who sought a divine path with a more harmonious relationship between

⁹⁷ Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Kindle location 918-969.

⁹⁸ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 82-88.

science and religion, given how women's bodies and health were historically controlled by male medical "experts" or science-resistant religious leaders. This was an all-woman led and operated community that taught atypical, and even taboo theories about a woman's role in modern Christianity.⁹⁹ It was a feminist organization, a portion of whose founders and early leaders were themselves rumored to be lesbians. With musicians and writers living so closely within such a small area—an unusual cluster within my data—, it appears that Bohemia and the Church of Divine Science found comfortable common ground in their rejection of the mainstream, and potentially as a haven for queer partnerships. With two other groupings of (mostly female) domestic partnerships gravitating toward the bohemian cultural center of Brinton Terrace, this portion of North Capitol Hill potentially hosted either a number of small predominantly lesbian residential enclaves, or a larger residential queer community stretching from Broadway to Clarkson Street, and from 16th to 18th Avenue. This could certainly have served as the foundation for the late-20th and early-21st century queer community that still calls Capitol Hill "home" to this very day.

As the late-Progressive Era rapidly re-interpreted Denver's public spaces during the mid-1910s with the Black and Tan Order, statewide prohibition, and the abolition of prostitution, the city's nightlife and problem bodies were effectively forced underground or into racial ghettos. However, the world of commercialized vice, marginalized subcultures, and interracial dynamics thrived within the semi-private/semi-public spaces of speakeasies, which descended from working-class saloons and cabarets. Such venues may have survived within the Windsor District, or they could have potentially clustered south of 20th Street along Broadway, where Denver's

⁹⁹ Nona L. Brooks, "The History of Divine Science," Althea Center for Engaged Spirituality, <https://www.altheacenter.org/our-history>, Last visited 28 October, 2022.

queer nightlife would re-surface during the late-1930s and thrive into the early-80s. With the YMCA establishing its headquarters at 16th and Lincoln Street in 1906, two blocks directly south of Brinton Terrace, the establishment gradually replaced the role that Turkish Baths played for the gay men of Denver, encouraging their eventual migration eastward.¹⁰⁰ But what did Denver's queer community of the 1920s look like, and in which spaces did they build these communities? That, dear reader, is a story for another day and another historian.

¹⁰⁰ Denver City Directory, 1906; Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1903-1904; Chauncy, *Gay New York*, 151-159.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

While Denver's queer history prior to World War II has yet to be published, research by David Duffield—head of the Colorado LGBTQ History Project and a trailblazer in Colorado's early queer history—has confirmed the existence (and location) of a queer establishment in the basement of a steakhouse on 17th Street and Glenarm Place called the “Snake Pit.” Raided by police in 1939, this venue appears to be the first entirely queer establishment recorded in the city of Denver.¹⁰¹ This would pin-point Denver's cis male homosexual nightlife during the late-1930s just one block northeast of the densest grouping of domestic partnerships from 1900, those surrounding the Albany Turkish Baths, which no longer existed in 1939. Considering that the next three queer establishments to be identified were located only one block southwest on Glenarm and Welton, —Theatre Bar & Lounge (1955), The Back Door (1959), and The Court Jester (1961)—all within a single block of each other and the Snake Pit, it's likely that the blocks just west of the Brown Palace Hotel were home to Denver's post-prohibition cis male homosexual nightlife.¹⁰² Evidently, this former residential queer enclave evolved into a queer entertainment district as the area densified. By the 1970s, similar establishments appeared along Broadway (only a block or two to the west)—between 12th and 20th Streets, which would remain the center of the city's cis male homosexual nightlife until the area was transformed by urban renewal throughout the 1970s, and 80s.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ David Duffield, “Queer Spaces in Denver 1870-1980,” Historic Denver (Spring 2022), <https://historicdenver.org/hd-news-spring-2022-cover-story/>, Last visited 31 October, 2022; Noel, Thomas J. “Gay Bars and the Emergence of the Denver Homosexual Community.” *Social Science Journal* 15 (1978): 59-74.

¹⁰² “Homosexuals in Denver: Clientele Feels Safer in ‘Gay Bars,’” (Denver, *The Denver Post*, 16 February, 1965)

¹⁰³ Advertisements throughout the issue, (Denver, *OUT FRONT*, Vol. I, No. I, 2 April, 1976).

There are very few physical vestiges of Denver's 19th and early-20th century queer communities, with the Windsor Block almost-entirely transformed due to its vicinity to Coors Field stadium. However, despite the late-20th and early-21st century "rejuvenation" of the neighborhood, the area is still an entertainment district—albeit without the queer or racially diverse context. Though East Turner Hall burned down in 1920, the foundation and conjoining buildings survive, as well as many of the historical residences in the surrounding blocks. The potentially queer Black neighborhood that sat just south of the Rossonian Hotel between California and Washington Streets has been designated a Historic Cultural District, preserving much of the area's original character. However, the neighborhood has been a 21st-century hotbed for gentrification, regardless, and has likewise suffered from transformative development and renovation projects. North Capitol Hill has attracted the attention of preservationists for more than a generation, as well as a new wave of wealthy residents drawn back to the neighborhood's historical charm. Therefore, countless residences that housed Denver's mid and late-20th century queer community survive to this day, as well as much of the city's current queer population. Though the class and racial dynamics of most of these areas have changed with time, each of these queer communities originally formed among working-class individuals and within working-class spaces, a template pioneered by the fairies of the Windsor District.

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