

Lesbians in the Crowd: gender, sexuality and visibility along Montréal's Boul. St-Laurent

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ABSTRACT *Boul. St-Laurent is a commercial artery in inner-city Montréal. Often characterised as the border zone of a multicultural and bilingual city, it is a place where a variety of populations and activities come together. It is also a central activity space for residents of the Plateau Mont-Royal District, an area of the city with a significant population of lesbian residents. Using qualitative interviews with lesbians who live in this district, the author examines how this neighbourhood shopping street facilitates lesbian patterns of social interaction, place making and expressions of desire. Most previous research on how lesbians establish a presence in urban space focuses either on the exclusion of lesbian subjectivity from heterosexual spaces or patterns of residential and institutional clustering in urban neighbourhoods. The objective of this article, however, is to focus on an area of the city that can be described as a 'space of difference' and examine how its heterogeneity accommodates lesbian visibility, especially among the lesbians themselves.*

Introduction

Over the past decade, geographers have witnessed a multiplication of research on the subject of sexuality and space. Not only have these studies been important in articulating geographies that depart from the heteropatriarchal [1] norm, they have also made a crucial contribution to our understanding of the importance of gender in mediating gay and lesbian geographies in North American and European urban centres (Castells, 1983; Lauria & Knopp, 1985; Winchester & White, 1988; Bell, 1991; Adler & Brenner, 1992; Bouthillette, 1997; Stein, 2000). In North American cities in particular, lesbians and gay men exhibit markedly different patterns of residence, neighbourhood and visibility in urban public space (Wolf, 1979; Bell, 1991; Peake, 1993; Rothenberg, 1995; Valentine, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997; Forsyth, 2001). Since lesbian businesses, institutions and domestic spaces are rarely concentrated in a single territory, lesbian geographies appear to be more dispersed, hidden and 'private'. Lesbian urban landscapes, therefore, have been described as 'invisible' (Chamberland, 1993; Valentine, 1995; Wolfe, 1998), or at least 'imperceptible' to outside observers (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Peake, 1993).

The difficulty in 'seeing' lesbian spatialities and subjectivities in urban space highlights important conceptual problems in urban geographical studies. While the less visible geographies of lesbians can be attributed to demographic and spatial factors that women experience in cities, lesbian spatialities are further obscured from view by an emphasis on territoriality, singular identities and visibility. Stein's (2000, p. 47) comparative

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research on gay and lesbian geographies in Philadelphia from 1945 to 1972, for example, suggests that contrasts between lesbian and gay geographies may have more to do with 'the ways that lesbians and gay men make themselves visible' than with a 'lack' of meaningful urban spaces in the everyday lives of lesbians. Others have more forcefully suggested that lesbian 'invisibility' in the urban landscape might be a product of how social scientists 'look' at urban landscapes. As Jay (1997) has argued, gay and lesbian studies in urban geography have uncritically adopted a methodological framework that limits our capacity to see lesbian geographies. The vast majority have too readily accepted 'that public visibility and collective presence is vital to recognition and political legitimacy' (Jay, 1997, p. 166).

While Jay (1997) suggests that lesbian subjectivity might be more meaningfully examined by integrating the domestic sphere into these interpretations of sexuality and space, there are additional feminist issues surrounding the question of lesbian visibility in cities. First, this question could be addressed at an epistemological level. The idea that a group of women are 'invisible' in the urban 'landscape' points to Rose's (1993) critique of the gender of geographical knowledge, in which she questions the heteropatriarchal nature of the geographers' claims to a comprehensive understanding of 'transparent' space. More specifically, lesbian visibility raises questions regarding essentialist definitions of territory and identity. As Taylor (1998) has observed through her case study of Sydney, Australia's 'Lesbian Space Project', the terms 'lesbian' and 'space' are unstable political concepts, 'each provoking the contestation of the other, and producing ongoing upheaval' (1998, p. 140). Her suggestion that these two terms are antithetical is informed by a post-colonial feminist recognition that the fixing of gender and sexual identities in place is always undermined by internal contradictions.

Within queer urban studies, essentialist definitions of identity and urban space create very particular problems for lesbian visibility. The continued reproduction of what might be described as a 'mosaic model' of the city's residential geography in queer urban studies, for example, reinforces lesbian invisibility in urban space. Despite the recognition of the multiplicity of identities and spaces, the city continues to be interpreted as a collection of socially isolated but physically contiguous ethnic, class or sexual territories that are made visible through the material landscape. From a feminist perspective, the 'mosaic model' is problematic because it artificially separates the public and private spheres and masks the multiplicity of identities located within enclaves and households (Gibson, 1998; Pratt, 1998). For lesbians, however, the most important problem with this model is its reliance on 'visibility' and singular categories of identity. Having little impact on the material public landscape of the city, 'others' are rarely able to detect a lesbian 'presence'. All of these observations indicate that in order to examine further the urban spaces that are important in the daily lives of lesbians, we need another 'way of looking'.

In this article, I propose that lesbian visibility in the urban landscape should be reconsidered in terms of more complex definitions of personal identity and space. Two recent studies (Rothenberg, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997) demonstrate that lesbian neighbourhood concentrations are often found in areas that might be categorised as 'spaces of difference', socially and culturally mixed inner-city neighbourhoods that experience some gentrification. Moreover, these studies show that neighbourhood shopping streets, businesses and institutions can be important sites of lesbian sociability and communality, even if they are not lesbian-specific sites. While Valentine (1993a, 1993b) has done a great deal of research on how British lesbians negotiate the various realms of urban life, there is little consensus on how lesbians mark and use the public spaces of their own particular neighbourhoods. Putting aside the search for 'lesbian space' as it is carved out

in bars, homes and community centres, I present a case study of how a social network of lesbians living in such a neighbourhood in inner-city Montréal perceive and experience Boul. St-Laurent. An important commercial artery of the Plateau Mont-Royal District (Fig. 1), this street is lined with shops and restaurants that serve visitors and the residents of this relatively diverse neighbourhood. The study is based on 18 qualitative interviews that were conducted in 1996 and 1997. I use these interpretations to contribute to and extend the debate regarding how gender mediates geographies of sexuality in the urban landscape. The objective is to de-emphasise the territorial occupation of space that renders lesbians invisible by focusing on a heterogeneous public space in which lesbians are visible to each other. I contend that for a population with little formal space of their own, neighbourhood streets can be important resources for shaping lesbian subjectivity, communality, sociability and even desire. I do not allege that this makes this population unique, but rather, that this realm of sociability be recognised as important in our understandings of lesbian engagements in urban social life.

Streets of Desire

In recent years, urban theorists have revisited the city streets to investigate public culture (Sennett, 1991; Zukin, 1995). Feminists and queer theorists, in particular, reacting to inequities in the heteropatriarchal public sphere, have turned their attention to the streets (Young, 1990a, 1990b; Golding, 1993; Knopp, 1995; Wilson, 1995). For feminists, contesting the exclusion of women from the public sphere has often been given expression in activism and research on the politics of the city streets. Queer activists have also long identified the streets as important places of subversion, whether through public sex, cruising or the carnivalesque occupation of the streets during demonstrations and pride parades. In these literatures, 'the streets' play two political roles. First, like feminist efforts to contest the separation of the spheres, queer theorists and activists often interpret the streets as the most accessible sites from which to call into question heterosexual hegemony. The streets represent both the dominance of heterosexuality as an institution and the persistent possibility of subversion and contestation by sexual dissidents. A second discourse extends from the first. In post-structural feminist literatures, the city streets have become a metaphor for a radical pluralist society (Young, 1990a, 1990b). In response to essentialist notions of gender and the anti-urbanism of earlier feminist utopias, post-structural feminists turned to the uncontrollable multiplicity found along 'the streets' of the metropolis. A counter-discourse exemplified in Young's (1990a, 1990b) definition of 'unassimilated otherness' [2], this urban ideal was a direct response to the recognition of multiple identities that postmodernism and difference brought to feminism. Sexuality and desire have also, however, been an important component of the feminist celebration of the heterogeneity found in the city streets. Feminists have, at times, interpreted urbanism as a social condition that has been necessary for the expression and experience of autonomous female sexualities (Wilson, 1991; Munt, 1995). Wilson (1991), for example, counters the idealisation of the 'rural' in feminist separatism using images of 'desiring' women walking the city streets, negotiating between their own objectification and 'other' prospects.

Some writings on lesbian desire and urban space have also taken this turn. Munt's (1995) lesbian flâneur, for example, is an attempt to insert lesbian subjectivity and desire into a heterosexist debate about gender and public space (see Wilson, 1995). In Munt's (1995) work, butch drag flâneurs merge with the anonymous crowd as they amble the

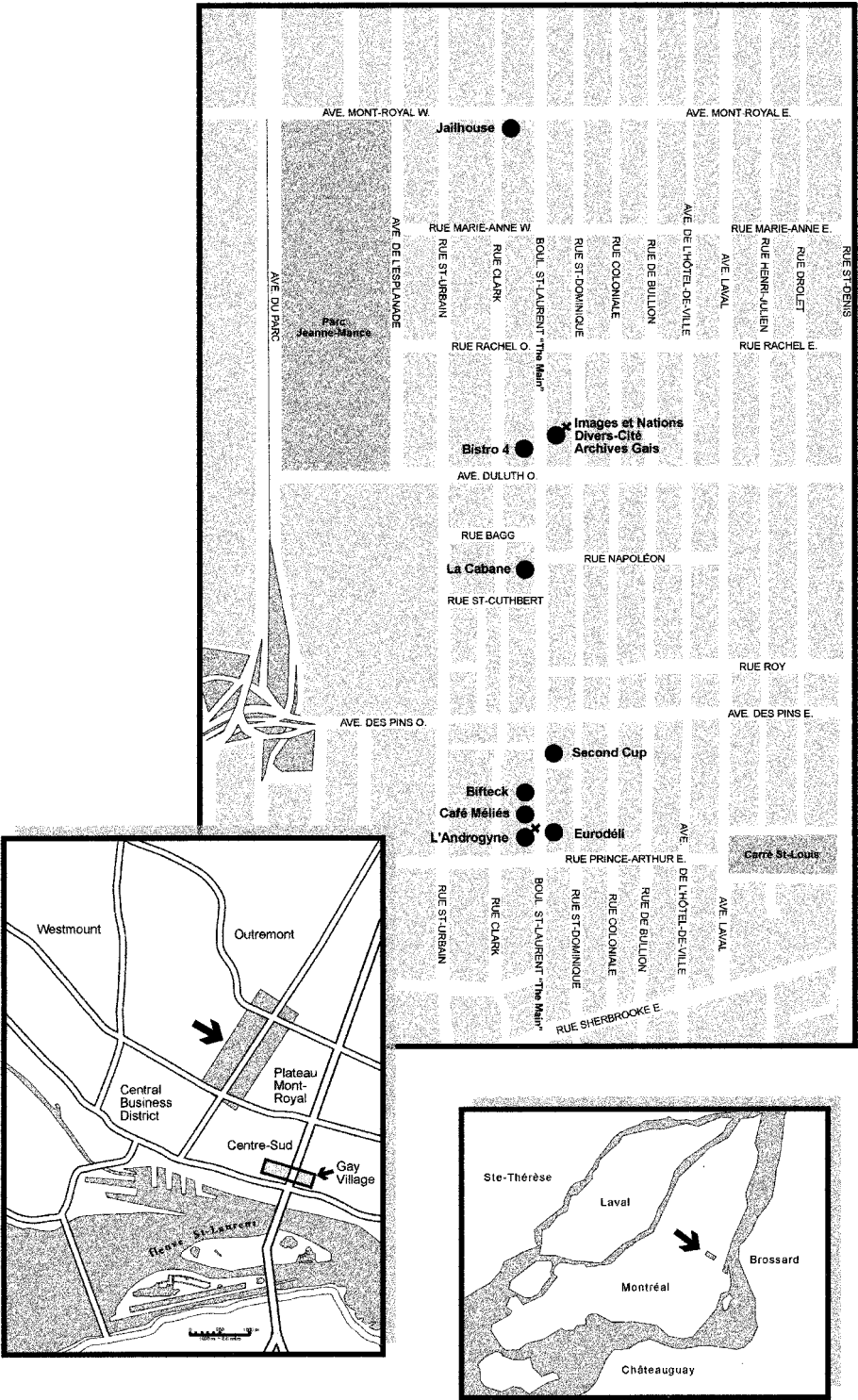


FIG. 1.

chaotic city streets. It is the importance of the paradox between repression and possibility found in the streets that Munt (1995, p. 125) seeks to articulate when she writes:

Lesbian identity is constructed in the temporal and linguistic mobilisation of space, and as we move *through* space we imprint utopian and dystopian moments upon urban life. Our bodies are vital signs of this temporality and intersubjective location. In an instant, a freeze-frame, a lesbian is occupying space as it occupies her.

Although Munt (1995) and Wilson (1991) see possibilities for women in the transience, heterogeneity and the anomie of social relations along the streets of the metropolis, they readily acknowledge that streets can be sites of conflict for women. The private nature of lesbian sexuality in heteropatriarchal society and the dominance of heterosexual codes of performance can, further, make streets sites of colonisation for lesbians (Munt, 1995; Valentine, 1996). While it is necessary to acknowledge the historically constituted limitations of 'the streets' for all women, research from a variety of sources demonstrates that this relationship need not be viewed in such reductionist terms (Marston, 1990; Ryan, 1990; Wilson, 1995; Valentine, 1996; Domosh, 1998). As Domosh (1998) illustrates, women have historically employed a variety of tactics to negotiate their presence in urban public space by making use of opportunities for transgression available in the city streets. Similarly, critical examinations of lesbians and urban social space (Munt, 1995; Valentine, 1996) also suggest that the uncontrollable multiplicity of city streets makes them accessible sites for lesbian social interaction and communality. Valentine (1996), for example, demonstrates how forms of social interaction (public demonstrations of affection, shopping for household goods as couples, or socialising in groups), the lesbian presentation of self (clothing, movement, hairstyles, etc.) and the presence of lesbian cultural icons (the music of lesbian pop stars) in public space can serve to queer 'the heterosexual street'.

The ways in which lesbians occupy city streets in everyday contexts is, however, a topic that has received only scant attention. On the ground, lesbians have been important participants in attempts to 'queer the public sphere' during gay pride parades. In North American cities, the Lesbian Avengers have also made important social interventions by occupying the streets. These temporary actions, however, tell us little about daily circulation patterns and meaningful sites of social exchange in the lives of urban lesbians. Moreover, although the ubiquitous 'city street' appears in many of the above works in the abstract, there have been few case studies. In the abstract, the uncontrollable multiplicity of the 'city street' may create opportunities to undermine exclusions based on 'race', gender, class and sexuality. But will these abstract portraits of the social dynamic found on city sidewalks be reflected in an ethnographic case study? Are these conditions more pronounced in some central city districts than in others? In addition to questioning the 'invisibility' of lesbians in the urban landscape, this case study is an attempt to ground the above metaphors in the experience of a particular urban public space. In short, I seek to demonstrate that there is a social geography to the city streets that renders some streets more conducive to lesbian visibility than others. I argue that the conditions that accommodate lesbian place-making and social interaction are more pronounced in areas of the city where dominant arrangements of sexed bodies (anatomy), gender identities (gender) and sexual desires (sexuality) are undermined by sociocultural multiplicity (Valentine, 1996; Bondi, 1998). I describe Boul. St-Laurent as an example of an inner-city street that can be characterised as a 'space of difference' and is, therefore, a site that is exceptionally accessible and conducive to lesbian presence.

Boul. St-Laurent: a space of difference

Boul. St-Laurent [3] is a major commercial thoroughfare of the industrial city that extends from the port to the northern shores of the Island of Montréal (Fig. 1). It was designated the official dividing line between east and west in 1905, but it also developed as a social and cultural symbol of the division between the city's English and French populations. In a variety of popular discourses, it came to represent the asymmetries of a 'dual city', a material and symbolic divide between the working-class, francophone parishes to the east, and the Anglo-capitalist world of commerce and property to the west. While in material space there have been many exceptions to this imagined divide, the frontier character of this street is indisputable; throughout the twentieth century, it has been a 'space of difference' where activities and populations that were remainders in this dualism found a place. Over the course of the twentieth century, new immigrant groups progressively installed themselves in the shops, factories and homes of the area and created commercial and institutional enclaves. Ethnicity, however, was not the only marker of 'difference' that became associated with the city's frontier. Along the street's lower regions, nearest to the port, the accommodation of ordinary travellers (farmers, sailors, etc.) provided an economic base for the development of a late-nineteenth-century bright lights entertainment district, which became the facade of the surrounding residential red light district after the 1920s. Strangers to the city, sex trade workers and working- and middle-class entertainment seekers flocked to the city's permissive frontier. As a civic and commercial site, therefore, the street has developed as an interstitial space, a between space where social and ethnic groups that do not fit into the city's imagined binary have created social worlds, making difference an integral element of social interaction along the street. Not only has difference been assigned to, or found a place, along this street, but, like many border zones, it is here that differences interact and overlap.

The area that I refer to as a 'space of difference', however, is spatially limited. Popularly referred to as 'the Main', it includes the portion of Boul. St-Laurent that extended from the walls of the city's original town site at St Antoine Street (Craig Street) to the northern limits of the street's first electric streetcar route at Mont-Royal Avenue. Within this sector, the multiethnic shopping zone (between Sherbrooke Street and Mont-Royal Avenue) continues to resemble the heterogeneous 'Main' of the industrial era. This heterogeneity involves the mixing of class, age and ethnic groups, as well as an assortment of land uses, including commerce, residence, industry and cultural production. This portion of the street also retains the social dynamic of the commercial street from past eras. Although the industrial workers are gone, the institutions of the street still attract a varied clientele. While strolling 'the Main' on an afternoon, one encounters the clientele of some of the most expensive and fashionable restaurants in the city, suburban shoppers in search of European foods and newspapers, tourists disembarking from buses for a lunchtime stroll, new immigrants and neighbourhood residents shopping for inexpensive household goods, and, occupying the street itself, are a wide array of interrelated youth subcultures (squeegee punks, students, artists, musicians, and gays and lesbians). At night, many different populations find their niche in the bars and restaurants, but the majority cater to heterosexual populations from outside the area, especially suburban youths and/or young professionals.

This portion of Boul. St-Laurent is not, however, by any means a 'queer' or a 'lesbian' territory. Indeed, over the past 4 years of working on this project, participants, colleagues and local lesbians have often been puzzled by my choice of Boul. St-Laurent to talk

about lesbian sexuality and space in Montréal. Although Boul. St-Laurent initially housed some of the first lesbian institutions in the 1970s (Hildebran, 1998), other streets in the surrounding Plateau Mont-Royal District developed more significant concentrations of lesbian businesses and institutions. St-Denis Street (the next major artery to the east of Boul. St-Laurent), for example, developed as the centre of lesbian nightlife throughout the 1980s and early 1990s [4]. Most Montréal lesbians over 30 years old, therefore, see St-Denis Street as 'lesbian space', even if it is only a memory. Franco-phones, who generally live in the eastern section of the Plateau, identify more and more with Mont-Royal Avenue and Laurier Street. There is also an increasing identification with *Le Village gai* (The Village) [5], located in the Centre-Sud District to the south-east of the Plateau. Since the early 1990s, gay commerce has expanded dramatically in this area, concentrated along Ste-Catherine Street East between Amherst and Papineau streets. The Village has rarely housed more than one lesbian bar, but community institutions, gay male households and 'queer' businesses are concentrated here (Ray, 1998; Remiggi, 1998). With most of the lesbian and queer spaces located in the Village, lesbians, like the mainstream public, now identify this area as the primary site of alternative sexualities in the city (even if they have little representation here).

Boul. St-Laurent, therefore, does not figure prominently on the list of Montréal's 'queer' or 'lesbian' spaces. And this is precisely my point. It is simply a commercial street that runs through the western portion of the Plateau, an area of the city that has had the highest concentration of lesbian households since the 1970s. Attracted by the bars, bookstores, cafés, restaurants and community spaces, many lesbians have made the Plateau their home, at least in the early stages of their life cycles. As part of this neighbourhood, Boul. St-Laurent has been central to lesbian patterns of residence, community and commerce [6] and continues to be an important site of leisure and consumption for the 'queer' households of the district. For lesbians who live in close proximity, daily life is intimately entwined with this street through activities such as shopping and frequenting cafés. For others living to the east or elsewhere in the city, it is a space to explore and meet, albeit less frequently. In the following account, it is described as an everyday space where lesbians comfortably circulate and share social space with a variety of other subcultural populations. I focus on (1) how the heterogeneity of this border zone renders this public space more accessible for lesbians, and (2) the typically haphazard forms of social interaction that occur on this city street. These two elements of Boul. St-Laurent provide a framework for interpreting the perceptions, desires, patterns of social interaction and place-making strategies found among lesbians living in Plateau Mont-Royal District.

Visible Subjects: lesbian desire in an everyday space

In 1996–97, I conducted 18 qualitative interviews with lesbians living in the Plateau Mont-Royal District. These were in-depth interviews regarding how lesbians in this neighbourhood perceived a variety of sites in the city (the Village, St Denis Street, the downtown area, the suburbs and Boul. St-Laurent). The material that I collected about Boul. St-Laurent represented only one-sixth of each interview, but it was embedded within much broader discussions of lesbians and space in Montréal.

I began with my own social networks and built my sample using the snowball sampling technique. At the time of these interviews, I was a 31 year-old, anglophone, graduate student from Vancouver who had lived in Montréal since 1991. I had lived in the Plateau Mont-Royal District for 5 years. I was functionally bilingual and circulated in

social networks that included both of Montréal's official linguistic groups. The sample that I built for this study strongly reflected my age, neighbourhood, student status and linguistic identity. It is important to state, therefore, that this study does not represent all 'lesbians in Montréal'. There are many other lesbian 'communities' in the city, some of whom also frequent this street, but who circulate in very different lesbian social networks based primarily on neighbourhood, age, class and especially language.

The sample population reflected this inner-city neighbourhood and the kinds of identities that are drawn together at the core of metropolitan Montréal. To gain a representative sample of this bilingual and multiethnic neighbourhood, I conducted half of the interviews in French and the other half in English [7]. Both language groups included women from diverse ethnic origins as well as regional and international migrants. Their socio-economic status, age and household configuration were also typical of a neighbourhood that houses university students and other marginal gentrifiers (Rose, 1996). Most were highly educated (with graduate degrees), with relatively low incomes, and were living in rented accommodation with room-mates or partners. The majority were employed in the educational, social service or cultural sectors. They were relatively young (between 25 and 40 years old), and only one had any children.

Their sexual identities were defined in terms of this network. They were women who were active in lesbian social networks, although they did not always identify with this term; some preferred to describe themselves as 'queer', 'gay', 'dyke' and some identified as bisexual. They were also extremely open about their sexual identities and willing to be identified by name. Due to the specificity of the social network, however, I have given them all pseudonyms in order to protect their identities from each other.

For an ethnographic study of women living in one neighbourhood, my sample size was certainly adequate. As I analysed their responses, however, I soon discovered that the linguistic and ethnic diversity of my sample had an important impact on my research. The respondents usually held similar views of the site under study, but differential experiences based on language, 'race' and ethnicity were apparent. Based on their numbers within the sample, it has not been possible to generalise about all women of colour, all immigrant women, or all francophone or anglophone women. At the same time, observations that stemmed from their experiences could not be excluded, especially considering the diversity of the site, surrounding neighbourhood and the sample population itself. When such patterns emerged from the interviews, I have discussed them simply as observations made by a particular subgroup in my sample. Two important themes of language and ethnicity, however, should be noted at the outset. First, there were only four women of colour in my sample, but their interpretations of this street and other sites offered some important nuances. Secondly, almost all of the francophone women were highly conscious of the anglophone and/or allophone character of Boul. St-Laurent.

Finally, along Boul. St-Laurent, my sample had its own micro-geography. Prince Arthur Street represented a hard southern boundary for the women in my sample. Intensive reinvestment has transformed the area between Prince Arthur and Sherbrooke streets into an elite landscape of upscale bars, restaurants and multinational clothing stores [8]. Although some of the women I interviewed occasionally patronised these spaces and walked through this portion of the street, they saw it as the night-time domain of a non-residential population of wealthy heterosexuals. Their descriptions of their own activities centred on the area north of Prince Arthur Street and south of Rachel Street. Although the 'queer' presence was not explicit in this area, the women in my sample identified a number of 'queer' institutions along this portion of the street. These included

L'Androgyne (a gay, lesbian and feminist bookstore), *Divers-Cité* (the city's gay pride organisation), *Les Archives gais du Québec* (the provincial gay archives) and *Image et Nation* (organisers of Montréal's gay and lesbian film festival). The presence of these institutions not only demonstrates the importance of Boul. St-Laurent within the queer geography of Montréal, but they attest to a continued receptiveness of 'difference' along this portion of the street. Various cafés, bookstores and restaurants were important social spaces in the everyday lives of the women who live in the area. *Bistro 4* (a bar-café), *La Cabane* (a tavern-restaurant), *Eurodéli* (an Italian cafeteria), *Café Mielles* (an alternative cinema café) and *Second Cup* (a national café chain) were common reference points for many of the women I interviewed. While these are not lesbian businesses, they were perceived as 'lesbian-friendly' because a lesbian clientele was welcome and common. As the diverse character of this list indicates, this perception was largely due to a proximity to 'queer' institutions, the 'openness' of the Boul. St-Laurent clientele, and the frequent presence of other 'queer' people. The social dynamic along the sidewalks in the stretch between Prince Arthur and Rachel streets was also significant. The women in my sample perceived this area to be the most diverse and 'open'. They also saw it as the area where lesbian visibility was most pronounced. Lesbians were seen as common figures within the diverse crowd to be found on the sidewalks of this portion of the street.

A Lesbian in the Crowd: perceptions of the street

Like many other Montréalers, the women in this sample were attracted to Boul. St-Laurent because of the 'ethnic' character of the businesses along the street. 'Multiethnicity' was the most dominant indicator of sociocultural diversity. Describing what she liked about the street, Irène (mid-thirties, unemployed), for example, stated:

It's as I was saying, the diversity of the people, the ethnic character, from one boutique to the next, be it Hungarian, Zagreb [*sic*], Portuguese, Polish, Jewish. It's those people who make the place too ... It's an 'open' space. (my translation)

Although the street has traditionally been associated with European immigrants, the women in my sample included a wide range of ethnic groups in their interpretations. They cited West Indian, Portuguese, Jewish, Italian, South Asian and African populations as the primary groups along the street. But they also included other populations when describing the sociocultural diversity of the crowd along Boul. St-Laurent. When asked to describe the people who frequent the street, they observed that young families and couples, single residents, students, squeegee punks, and gays and lesbians were also identifiable populations. Lesbians were simply seen as one population among a multitude of other forms of social, cultural and sexual differences.

Due to this mix of social and cultural groups, the street was primarily characterised as a 'shared space'. Most agreed that it could be described as a 'queer' space, but hesitated to give this characteristic primacy. As one woman stated, 'I'm not sure it's any more a queer space than it is a Portuguese space, or an East Indian space. It's a space that's shared' (Robyn, late twenties, student). Deeper questioning regarding the 'shared' character of the site revealed that it was perceived as an accessible space for marginalised social and cultural groups. For example, one woman described Boul. St-Laurent as a site that attracts populations that have little access to public space elsewhere:

It seems to be this magnetic place where people feel like they *can* have some

space on it. 'I'll take this chunk and you'll take that chunk and then we'll all be here' (Dana, mid-thirties, artist)

Although Boul. St-Laurent was characterised as an accessible 'shared space', their interpretations further reveal that the copresence of differences along the street resemble Young's (1990a) 'unassimilated otherness'. For example, when asked if she could describe the street as a 'queer space', Dawn launched into a description of the social dynamic along Boul. St-Laurent:

I think it's a space of diversity in the way that I really like diversity, not just sort of mouthing diversity, like 'let's all be diverse', but it's about being dynamically diverse ... Such contradictory things are happening all at once where you have such different kinds of communities colliding and yet they kind of are not really even aware of each other, and they are, at the same time. (Dawn, late thirties, professional)

For this population, Boul. St-Laurent offered a site where the interaction with difference was central to the sharing of space, but as Dawn's description reveals, an awareness of 'others' involved social relations of indifference rather than incorporation.

Feminists have, however, critiqued Young's (1990a) concept of 'unassimilated otherness' as a feminist principle, questioning whether heterogeneity can undermine the patriarchal structures that shape women's experiences of material urban space (Pratt & Hanson, 1994). Along Boul. St-Laurent, sociocultural diversity does not necessarily erase heteropatriarchal relations of power that render lesbians invisible, but the lack of a primary ethnic, social or sexual identity for this space was significant. During the interviews, many of the women suggested that without a dominant definition of community and territory, there was greater possibility for a lesbian presence. Even though they perceived some of the populations along the street as having 'traditional' interpretations of gender and sexual norms, when asked why they felt particularly comfortable in this space, many argued that Boul. St-Laurent was a space where there was 'no common denominator'. As one woman who lives in the area and works on Boul. St-Laurent stated:

Everything is different on St-Laurent Street. Nothing matters. And my sexuality doesn't matter on St-Laurent. I guess that's what it is. That's what I appreciate the most about it. (Josée, early thirties, store manager)

Along Boul. St-Laurent, being a lesbian in the crowd is possible. More importantly, it is commonplace.

The interviews also revealed that the street's border status contributed significantly to this characteristic. Post-structural feminist metaphors such as 'occupying margins as sites of resistance' (hooks, 1990) and 'crossing boundaries' (Bondi, 1992) came to life in these narratives of Boul. St-Laurent. The interviews highlighted two particular liminal characteristics of such 'margins' of sociocultural difference. First, Boul. St-Laurent was characterised as a 'shared margin', a place where ethnic, social and sexual marginalities came together to create an 'alternative space'. The presence of a variety of subcultural groups was crucial to this process, but alternative counter-cultures were particularly important. As Martha pointed out, 'on St-Laurent it's just so full of freaks that you're never the weirdest one there' (Martha, late twenties, dancer). They often described the street as an alternative space that had the power to attract people who revel in its diversity and to deter those that would not accept its parameters. In most cases, the visible presence of these alternative communities was interpreted as creating what they described as

'openness'. Sandra, for example, articulated the link between counter-cultural groups and the permissiveness of the space when she described the populations along the street. She described it as a place where we see:

people who are conservative, liberal, [with] blue or green hair, whatever. You see it all, the whole gamut. In that aspect, I find that people tend not to look or stare or tend not to be shocked by [homosexuality] as much as they would in other areas that tend to be a little more conservative. (Sandra, late twenties, professional)

Robyn made a similar link between alternative populations, the openness of the crowd, and the possibility of lesbian visibility along the street:

I think it's a more open environment, more open as in you can [be physically affectionate in public] and not get the same type of reaction from your spectators, and the people in the space are probably more open as individuals and that makes it more possible. So, it's partly the space and partly the people that are attracted to this openness that shows a comfort with sexuality and sexual orientation in public. (Robyn, late twenties, student)

While it is unclear whether this 'openness' translates into acceptance or indifference, encounters with populations who are marginal elsewhere in the city (such as lesbians, refugees, squeegee punks or the homeless) were seen as part of the experience of this street. As some women specified, however, the permissive character of the street may have more to do with repetition and exposure than with 'tolerance':

it's not so much that it's so tolerant, it's just that it's such a weird neighbourhood. Everyone who lives in this neighbourhood has seen everything. Two girls holding hands, who cares? As long as you're not pan-handling anybody, no one cares. (Josée, early thirties, store manager)

In addition to being a 'shared margin', the street's border status intensified the experience of multiple identities for each individual. Unlike lesbian bars, the Village and other queer spaces, these women valued Boul. St-Laurent because its heterogeneity allowed them to integrate the multiple aspects of their own identities. Along this street, they interacted with broader society as lesbians, but they were also strongly aware of their own linguistic, class and gender identities. Such experiences were not described as fragmentation and disruption, as others have depicted the experience of modern urban life (Berman, 1982). Rather, Boul. St-Laurent was seen as accommodating the integration of the multiple aspects of self that are often subsumed in other queer spaces. This was strongly articulated by the four women of colour in my sample.

You escape the ghetto of being in the Village where everybody assumes that you're a lesbian and nothing else. You can go to St-Laurent Street and be a lesbian and be so much more, it seems to me, than just a lesbian. It's where I feel the most comfortable with all the things that I am. (Asha, late twenties, professional)

I feel very visible on St-Laurent, not in a negative sense, but just because maybe on St-Laurent there are a lot of people ... In the Village, of course, I feel like a lesbian, but I feel like a lesbian of colour. There aren't very many people of colour there. I think the mix of skin types on St-Laurent is more diverse than it is in the Village. (Janice, late twenties, student)

Both of these women are specifically describing their experiences as anglophone women of colour along Boul. St-Laurent. Their emphasis on the street's multiplicity, however,

was reflected in most of the other interviews. Many lesbian sites in Montréal were interpreted as the institutions of white, francophone women, and the city's queer sites were seen as 'gay male space'. It was suggested that while more homogeneous lesbian and gay spaces lead to a repression of ethnic, linguistic and gender identity, the multiplicity of Boul. St-Laurent accommodated a more complex experience and performance of identities. Overall, however, they voiced a rejection of essentialist sites, which seemed to stem from their experience of urban space as women. Although the evidence on this theme is quite inconclusive, the sample population seemed to value Boul. St-Laurent because it was a place where sex/gender systems were undermined (or at least challenged) by a lack of dominant gender norms.

Resources of the Street: social interaction in everyday life

The importance of neighbourhood street spaces for the production of urban lesbian communities has been highlighted in two neighbourhood studies (Rothenberg, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997). Like other populations that do not always have the resources to sustain their own commercial enclaves (Díaz, 1995; Zukin, 1995), the neighbourhood street serves as an important resource for social interaction among lesbians (Rothenberg, 1995). As I have argued, streets are important resources because of their accessibility. They are public spaces where, due to the mobility and chaos of the crowd, hegemonic relations of power are never complete. A 'neighbourhood street', however, implies that there is a relationship to the homes of the surrounding area. A shopping street that developed in the era of the electric streetcar, Boul. St-Laurent is a neighbourhood site where provisioning, shopping and other forms of daily consumption take place. The women in my sample often emphasised the importance of this street in their everyday lives and its physical proximity to their homes. This was especially the case when they compared it to the Village. As Josée argued:

It's much more holistically intertwined with our lives than the Village, which is the place where you 'go out'. On St-Laurent Street it's more that you're wandering around and you bump into somebody and you go and have a coffee with them. (Josée, early thirties, store manager)

While physical proximity was an important element of their use of the space, some suggested that Boul. St-Laurent was much more accessible for them as women than the Village. In fact, some identified this street as 'their' space: 'St-Laurence is more my space than the Village. I feel like the gay men own the Village and we rent space' (Robyn, late twenties, student).

The 'neighbourhood street', however, is a term that is embedded in the 'mosaic model' of the city. The idea that ethnic and class groups living in a neighbourhood shape an area's public spaces and mark them with their particular identity is implied in this characterisation of Boul. St-Laurent as neighbourhood shopping street. In the case of this specific population, however, their impact on the space is not explicit. They identify it as 'their' space, or as a space that they share with others, yet they have little impact on the material landscape of this heterogeneous site. At the same time, their interviews indicate that this street is an important site of daily activities. For my sample, Boul. St-Laurent was a centre for activities such as shopping, 'hanging out', having a coffee and wandering the street. For Dana (mid-thirties, artist), 'it functions as a sort of neighbourhood core, a place where you will hang out, shop for food, shop for clothes, magazines, go see art shows, that kind of thing'. Although this could be a description of almost any neighbourhood street, the narrators did identify specific characteristics that made this

street an important resource. Most of the interviews described the street as an area in the city where it is possible to circulate openly as a lesbian and to integrate daily living, community and a more complex identity that includes sexual orientation. As Robyn (late twenties, student) stated:

To me St. Lawrence is one [street] that helps you connect your sexual orientation to your daily living. It's where you go buy your groceries. It's where you go have breakfast with your partner and your friends. It's where you do your everyday things, but you're able to do them as an out lesbian.

Despite the lack of lesbian institutions and businesses, Boul. St-Laurent was described by these women as a site of intensive sociability and visibility. While the activities along this street centre on consumption, many women saw social interaction with other lesbians as central to their perceptions and experiences. They valued Boul. St-Laurent for the wide variety of goods found in the shops, but also for the possibility of social interaction with each other. As Robyn (late twenties, student) argued, Boul. St-Laurent is 'a social place where I would probably run into people I knew, often other women, often other lesbians, in a place that I can feel comfortable just hanging out and browsing through stores'. As Rothenberg (1995) has argued, daily interaction in the social spaces of the neighbourhood can contribute to the construction of a kind of an 'imagined community' through looking, encountering and interacting. Meeting other lesbians in public space contributes to a sense of being a community member outside of bar spaces and feminist institutions. Asha described how being visible to one another in public space contributes to her sense of 'community':

The last time I was on St-Laurent, we met four other lesbians that we knew on the street. It seems like lesbians go there ... it seems like we tend to meet a lot of the people that we don't always see [when we are] on St-Laurent Street, on a Saturday afternoon, just shopping. I meet people I know on that street, even people I know from different areas. That street conglomerates [*sic*] people. People go there and so it's nice. It gives you that kind of ... community sense because when you're on the street you actually meet someone you know. (Asha, late twenties, professional)

For a sexual subculture that revolves around fleeting moments of communal contact in bars and nightclubs, or contained spaces such as women's centres and other women's homes, this haphazard social contact plays an important role in the reinforcement of lesbian identities because it undermines the separation of sites of lesbian sociability from everyday life. Boul. St-Laurent is a place where lesbians stumble upon each other in the daylight, where they stop and talk to acquaintances and friends and visually acknowledge those that they only know by sight.

Cafés, Taverns and Sidewalks: lesbians making 'place'

If haphazard contact and social interaction along the street contributes to a sense of community among Plateau lesbians, can Boul. St-Laurent be described as a public territory of this population? Although the women in my sample described it as 'their' space, they did so in relative terms. It was seen as a more central place than others, but few would say that it is a lesbian territory. But are they simply lost in the crowd, actors that have no fixed location or effect on the space itself? Other researchers have described how lesbians, in the absence of 'community' institutions and businesses, appropriate the 'lesbian-friendly' spaces in their neighbourhoods (Rothenberg, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997).

Along Boul. St-Laurent, my research shows that social interaction among lesbians does translate into a certain appropriation of lesbian-friendly spaces as communal sites. On Boul. St-Laurent, these generally include semi-public spaces such as bars, restaurants and cafés that lesbians frequent, although they are not the primary clientele.

One effect that the repeated presence of lesbians has in these sites is that they have become common public figures. If we take the 'queering' of space to mean the communication of a queer presence through performative acts such as behaviour, clothing, and patterns of sociability (Valentine, 1996), how do Plateau lesbians affect the street and its institutions? Does their repeated presence in the space increase their visibility as a subculture? To whom does this render them visible? Does the 'queering' of space in this manner involve the fixing of their identities in place? What strategies do they use in the appropriation process?

Carving out a place for lesbians in the institutions of the street involves different strategies for different institutions. In my sample, the bars and taverns of the street were perhaps the most contested sites, with the most limited visibility for lesbians. At the time of these interviews, the market for these businesses revolved primarily around selling cheap beer to a student clientele and catering to the alternative music scene. Although certain bars, such as *La Cabane*, are known as spaces where lesbians congregate, as a group they have no greater claim on these spaces than others. As Anne (early thirties, student) indicates, these spaces may be known to be more 'open' than taverns elsewhere. Lesbians may even identify certain taverns as places where they might see other lesbians. They are, however, simply characters that are associated with these centres of alternative culture. She compared her experience of *La Cabane* to the experience of lesbian bars in the city:

We often see lesbians even in places like *La Cabane* ... We go there but we're not exceptionally welcome. But, we feel comfortable there. I went there and it was clear that we were lesbians, but we weren't exceptionally well received, or even well received ... In lesbian bars we *are* particularly well received, but in other bars, it's like we're part of the formula. (my translation).

In other taverns, however, lesbians from the neighbourhood are drawn in by staff members who are lesbian or associated with their lesbian community. Andrea recalled that at *Bifteck*, a tavern that sells cheap beer and caters to the student population in the area, 'there would always be a couple of tables of dykes having a beer and chatting' (Andrea, mid-twenties, student). Because a woman associated with the community was bartending there, her friends frequented this tavern, making it attractive to others. As Andrea argued, having a queer employee could initiate appropriation: 'That's the whole thing. If there's one gay person and some of their friends come in, that means we can all go there and we can take over'.

These interviews suggest, however, that there were other bars in the area where a lesbian presence is less ambiguous. At the time of my interviews, there were particular night spaces where the lesbians of the neighbourhood were a visible and established clientele. Martha (late twenties, dancer), a party organiser and performer, describes the many reasons that lesbians have for frequenting the bars of the street:

Well, I think a lot of dykes, if they're in the music scene, which a lot of them are, or they're in the kind of comic book 'zine' [magazine] scene, or they like to play pool or they like to just drink beer cheap, those are things that dykes are often involved in and all those places are conducive to that. And a lot of dykes like to hang out with the boys too. The rock boys or whatever.

As lesbians live more complex identities on this street, they have often been participants in forms of alternative culture that revolve around these bars. They congregate and interact with broader-based clienteles through their social networks as artists or as music fans. Some taverns and show bars in my study, such as *Miami*, *Monkey House* and *Jailhouse*, however, attract a lesbian clientele because they feature women's music nights as part of the alternative music scene. Just before my interviews began, *Jailhouse*, a heavy metal and punk music venue just off the street on Mont-Royal Avenue, began to feature a women's music night called *Girls' Spit*. Some lesbians from the area then began to frequent this bar for other events. In the music scene, the sexual orientation of the performers was unimportant, but there was a tendency among the women in my sample to frequent venues that feature women's bands or the alternative bands of well-known women musicians and performers. Venues that featured women's music and spoken-word performances were thus important sites for lesbian sociability in this district.

On specific nights, therefore, lesbians have been an important and visible clientele in some of the bars on Boul. St-Laurent. According to my sample, the 'queering' of these sites is usually temporary and lesbian visibility has been limited to particular events. Lesbian visibility in lesbian-friendly cafés, however, was much more significant. Unlike the bars and taverns, the cafés along the street were sites that the women in my sample frequented on an individual basis. Like the sidewalks of Boul. St-Laurent, small groups and individuals chose cafés for social interaction with other lesbians and often reported haphazard meetings. Cafés were seen as places where lesbians meet friends and acquaintances, or simply catch glimpses of one another. Queering these spaces, however, involved very subtle strategies of communication, particular ways of looking and communicating that demonstrated their lesbian identity. Asha (late twenties, professional) described the specific strategies that she used to communicate with other lesbians while sitting in cafés along the street:

Sometimes I'll go and sit and drink a cup of coffee and I'll be reading *Tricone*, which is a South Asian lesbian magazine. If anybody knows anything about that, or even something more blatant, something that's lesbian ... I have exchanged furtive glances in cafés with other women who are sitting alone and who have noticed what I'm reading or who might pick-up on it.

Some cafés were more significant than others among the women in my sample. *Bistro 4* and, to a certain extent, *Second Cup* and *Café Méliès* had reputations as sites of lesbian visibility. Many women described how they communicated with other women by exchanging glances, and by using visual clues. *Bistro 4*, a café, bar and restaurant that held special events for lesbians and was an artistic centre for writers and musicians until 1998, was a site where my sample population went in search of chance meetings with other women. As Asha suggests, these cafés were also seen as sites of desire. As a café with a significant lesbian history, *Bistro 4* was identified by many of the participants as a place where exchanges with other lesbians were possible and even expected.

Desire in Space: being visible to each other

Queer politics places a great deal of emphasis on 'becoming visible' as queer subjects. While the primary objective is to be visible to a mainstream public, a secondary aim is to be more visible to each other. Queer urban studies has similar objectives, but most works involve mapping the public sites of visibility in the material landscape. While other studies demonstrate that gender makes this process different for lesbians and gay men,

few have focused on how lesbians produce place and become visible to each other within the city (Rothenberg, 1995). The Plateau lesbians in this study had very little impact on the material landscape of Boul. St-Laurent. Although they describe it as a significant site where there are high levels of visibility and sociability for lesbians, these features stem from within their own social worlds. Boul. St-Laurent was an important 'place' in their own everyday geographies because of this visibility and sociability to and with each other. By frequenting the street itself and some of its institutions and businesses, they, on some level, 'queer' particular sites for themselves. Some of these sites are even considered erotic in that they are associated with flirting and encountering other women. What role does Boul. St-Laurent play in their erotic imaginations? What forms of desire become fixed in this place? Why is it significant to this group of women even though their presence is not strongly detected by others along the street?

During the interviews, I asked the participants to describe the types of lesbians that they see on Boul. St-Laurent. Their descriptions quickly revealed both the specific character of the sample population and a particular lesbian persona that was associated with Boul. St-Laurent. In general, they described the lesbians that they associated with this street as young, white, anglophone or bilingual francophone, daring and 'radical'. Their bodily features included shaved heads or short hair, combat boots, jeans worn low on the hips, and leather jackets. Janice and Anne both provide their own interpretations of this persona:

It's not urban lesbian, it's like urban dyke. You know, it's like jeans and a chain on their belt and some funky tee-shirt or some kind of raver shirt, you know, that kind of thing. Very kind of sporty, urban dyke. Cool, they're like cool, you know? ... They're people who know a lot of lesbians and are kind of seen as the cool lesbians, the ones who have parties. (Janice, late twenties, student)

They're more fashionable ... they are perhaps younger ... but, not fashionable in the elite sense of the term, more like us, trendy, relaxed ... or others more with leather jackets, but still quite relaxed. Also, in English, 'daring', more provocative. Shorter hair, more vibrant, and there is 'a look'. (Anne, early thirties, student; my translation)

In the interviews, this urban figure was clearly associated with the youth and artistic subcultures of the street. The characteristics of her persona, however, extended beyond her clothing and hairstyle. There was a strong link between her daring, provocative, urbane, alternative and intellectual character and Boul. St-Laurent as a site of desire. Some of the participants were very explicit about the relationship between desire and the lesbians that they associate with Boul. St-Laurent. Dawn describes why she perceives Boul. St-Laurent to be an erotic site:

I'm going to see more of the kind of women that I find attractive [on St-Laurent] ... It's more a cross with the intellectual, arts community, urban, the urbanity of that noisiness, that confusion, that eclecticism, attracts. It's sort of that gravity that pulls in women who are more interesting to me. (Dawn, late thirties, professional)

Embedded in their interpretations of the street and its lesbian persona were certain forms of desire, but the street was hardly seen as a site of public sex or even intensive cruising. Returning to Wilson's (1991) assertion that the city streets have always been open to women's desires, can Boul. St-Laurent be read as an erotic site for this group of lesbians? Although few would associate women with cruising the streets for public sex,

sites of social interaction and communality for lesbians cannot be limited to the private sphere without reinforcing essentialist distinctions between lesbians, gay men, sex and public space. As the editors of *Queers in Space* have argued, 'Spaces of lesbian communality are often highly eroticised, even if the women do not have sex on site; and even the densest localities of male public sex involve considerable cooperation and communal culture' (Ingram *et al.*, 1997, p. 10). Desire, moreover, cannot be interpreted simply as a sex act without erasing the possibilities for lesbians in public space. As Probyn (1994, p. 19) has argued:

if we understand that desire is not a personal possession but that which moves us in affect, in effect to desire another's desire, bits bumping against bits, surfaces rubbing together, we nonetheless need modes of expressing the affectivity of desire as experience.

Desire in these terms can be defined as part of the productive experience of everyday social interaction, perceptible in our interpretations, modes of social interaction and presentation of self. Through looking, interacting and being visible to each other, certain parts of the city develop as sites where lesbians locate desire, sites where they seek each other out and interact through haphazard contact.

Some authors have articulated a relationship between lesbian desire and the city streets. Munt (1995), for example, uses the image of the lesbian *flâneur* to make lesbian desire present in urban public space and, more specifically, to locate that desire in the mobile and shifting contacts that occur in the streets of the modern metropolis. For Munt (1995, p. 121):

the lesbian *flâneur* signifies a mobilised female sexuality *in control*, not out of control ... In her urban circumlocutions, her affectionality, her connections, she breaks down the boundary between Self and Other. She collapses the inviolate distinction between masculinity and femininity.

Although Munt (1995) is specifically referring to 'butch' circumlocutions, her description strongly resembles the ways in which some of the women in my sample experienced Boul. St-Laurent. Although more overt questioning with regard to 'cruising' did not elicit a response, many of the women in my sample described their interactions with other women as erotic experiences. In this sense, Boul. St-Laurent was seen as a place where it was possible to make eye contact with or meet other lesbians. Nicole (early thirties, government employee) describes her experience of the street:

on St-Laurent, we have a kind of contact. Not necessarily physical but ... it's certainly nice to walk along a street where you can, you are permitted to smile at a woman, ... to walk along a street where you could meet someone. That's what's interesting. On St-Laurent it's easy. (my translation)

Unlike sites that are defined as 'lesbian space' (bars, bookstores and restaurants), Boul. St-Laurent creates the opportunity for serendipitous interactions with other lesbians, whether they are strangers, acquaintances or friends. They catch each other's eyes while doing mundane tasks like shopping and sitting in cafés, or while walking the route home from work or school.

These experiences along Boul. St-Laurent demonstrate the importance of haphazard interactions for the circulation of lesbian desire in space, but these were not always limited to this particular street. When asked why they felt that Boul. St-Laurent might be a more permissive site than others, they pointed to two particular attributes of this site. First, many described the street as a place where possibility and uncertainty

intersect. The exchanges between these women were described as being tempered by the more predominant heteronormative character of the space and the mobile character of their interactions. A subtle play with the limits of the space was commonly described in the interviews. The following is one very poetic example:

I can weave my way through and I may not feel anything, or I may in a period of five minutes feel like I have cruised five women. The contact has been made, the energies have been sent out and reciprocated, or not. That instantaneous gratification of recognition, playfulness, spontaneity ... We both know that we're doing it and we both know that we're probably not going to carry through very far, but it's fun and dangerous. That space builds the tension, and at the same time it gives permission. (Dawn, late thirties, professional)

Although there is a 'look' and even a lesbian persona associated with Boul. St-Laurent, for most women, this mixed environment still posed some problems of detection. Picking each other out in a crowd depended on certain strategies of communication because, as some women observed, there is 'no longer' a uniform lesbian aesthetic. These comments reflect the perception among my sample population that lesbian identities, manners of dress and gendered performances have become more multiple throughout the 1990s. A second attribute of their exchanges with other women on this street, however, was related to the presence of other counter-cultural populations. In many ways, sharing the space with counter-cultural communities blurred gender and sexual identities. As Martha (late twenties, dancer) observed:

I think some people just don't see us or don't differentiate between lesbians and punks. To them we're just all freaks or we're all just young or something ... I mean a lot of these girls, people just think they're boys. Who knows in general. I think it's pretty obvious and I think probably a lot of straight girls get taken for dykes as well and a lot of dykes get taken for straight girls.

Some of the women described these cases of mistaken identity as 'liberating', not because they could hide their lesbian identities, but because the differences between lesbians and other women were not so pronounced. Boul. St-Laurent was described as a place where the established heteronormative relationship between sexed bodies, gender identities and sexual desires were, at times, incoherent. The reduction of differences among female identities along Boul. St-Laurent was also described as 'liberating'. Nicole (early thirties, government employee) saw Boul. St-Laurent as a site of desire and identification—rather than prohibition and retribution—because of the disjointed ways in which women's erotic and gender identities are performed in this site. She described the difficulty and irrelevance of distinguishing between lesbians and heterosexual women along this street:

Often I don't know [if a woman is a lesbian or not]. I find that many women on St-Laurent could be either lesbians or heterosexuals. I find that cool. I like that. I find that fun that there isn't any important difference, physical or [...]. It's that that we face there because when heterosexual women are on St-Laurent, they're not stereotypical women. (my translation)

Nicole suggests that the presence of other women who resist existing heteropatriarchal norms of female behaviour and presentation fill the street with as many possibilities as uncertainties. While she was the only interviewee to clearly link this incoherence with desire, many of the others did describe the disorganisation of gender and sexual identities as an important characteristic of this site (see Martha's quotation, earlier). Like other aspects of identity along Boul. St-Laurent, these perceptions suggest that the multiplicity

of gender and sexual identities found along its sidewalks make it possible for lesbian desire to move beyond the confines of the late-night bar room and circulate in the afternoon sunlight of the street.

Conclusion

In this article, I propose that post-structural feminist critiques of essentialist definitions of identity and space should be more seriously integrated into the study of sexuality and space. Specifically, I have argued that the perception that lesbians are 'invisible' in the urban landscape is a product of conceptual frameworks commonly employed within urban studies. A continued reliance upon models that privilege territoriality and visibility in the material landscape reinforces the imperceptibility of spaces that are meaningful in the everyday lives of lesbians in urban space. A more complex, deterritorialised and anti-essentialist approach to identity and space might reveal the sites where lesbian patterns of communality and sociability become localised. In order to demonstrate the possibilities of such an approach, I chose a site that exemplifies some of the anti-essentialist spatial metaphors employed by post-structural feminists. As a border zone of social and cultural multiplicity, the portion of Boul. St-Laurent identified in this study is characterised as a 'space of difference'. Distinctive for its liminal and heterogeneous social dynamic and its counter-cultural populations, it is also an urban public space that is integral to the everyday activities of lesbians living in the Plateau Mont-Royal District. As the narratives analysed here demonstrate, it is valued by this population for its 'unassimilated otherness' (Young, 1990a, 1990b). A heterogeneous site located within a diverse inner-city neighbourhood, it is an accessible urban public space that serves as a resource for many subcultural groups in the area. For the lesbians in this study, this accessibility facilitates patterns of sociability and communality, place-making strategies and even the expression of desire—despite the fact that it is not a 'lesbian territory'.

Boul. St-Laurent is in many ways an exceptional site, emerging over the course of the twentieth century within a 'bilingual' and multiethnic North American metropolis. Congregating in the inner-city neighbourhood that surrounds this street, my sample population is also particular. But this study can contribute to a broader understanding of lesbians in urban space. At the most basic level, it illustrates that lesbian sociability is not confined to the private sphere or to designated 'lesbian spaces'. In so doing, it questions the very idea of lesbian 'invisibility' in the urban landscape. While lesbians were certainly perceived as visible public figures in the crowd along Boul. St-Laurent, what was most important was that they were visible to each other. More broadly, this research demonstrates that interpreting all urban public spaces within a heterosexual/homosexual binary is not productive in the case of lesbians. The ways in which my sample population described their patterns of interaction, their sense of communality and their visibility in this public space questioned the existence of this binary along Boul. St-Laurent, or at least highlighted its instability. These observations suggest that redrawing the map of the urban landscape to include 'spaces of difference' might provide a richer portrait of the everyday experiences of lesbians. Since the neighbourhoods where lesbians concentrate in North American cities tend to be socially and culturally diverse (see Forsyth, 2001), more research should be done regarding how lesbians use their public sites. Even if there is little evidence of a lesbian presence in the material landscape of Boul. St-Laurent, the women in this study identified more strongly with this neighbourhood street than with established 'queer' or 'lesbian' sites in Montréal. Boul. St-Laurent was perceived as a meaningful space in their urban landscapes, even though

their forms of interaction and sense of communality were transient, unexpected and haphazard.

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NOTES

- [1] I use the term 'heteropatriarchal' rather than 'heterosexual' throughout the article to draw attention to the additional asymmetries of gender experienced by lesbians within and without queer communities. I view heterosexuality as part of a reductionist binary between homosexual and heterosexual, while heteropatriarchy describes the multiplicity of ways in which sex, gender and sexuality are arranged and experienced.
- [2] In response to neo-liberal interpretations of community that subsume and erase difference, Young (1990a, 1990b) has proposed a radical pluralist ideal based on the urban condition. Drawing on Jacobs's (1961) earlier vindication of the secondary social contacts that occur in the city streets, Young's ideal is based on what she describes as 'unassimilated otherness'. This ideal is derived from the forms of social interaction observed in the public spaces of the metropolis which occur because of the presence of strangers in close physical proximity. 'Unassimilated otherness' is a political ideal that describes a society that is based on the respect for, and awareness of, difference, but rejects social wholeness, incorporation and exclusion (Young 1990a, 1990b).
- [3] For a general history of Boul. St-Laurent, see Gubbay (1989). Bourassa & Larrue (1993) also provide a detailed historical analysis of its entertainment history. For an analysis of the role played by this street in the social and cultural geography of Montréal, see Allor (1997) and Podmore (1999).
- [4] St Denis Street became the centre of lesbian nightlife and feminist activism in the early 1980s. From the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, the section of St-Denis Street between Sherbrooke and Mont-Royal has housed most of the city's lesbian bars, feminist bookstores and lesbian-owned businesses (Bourque, 1998). With increased rents, competition from the Village, and generational shifts in lesbian culture and politics, most of the lesbian institutions of St-Denis Street had, however, closed by the mid-1990s. At the time of my interviews (1996–97), there were only two women-only bars in the city and they were located on St-Denis Street (*L'Exit II* and *O'Side*).
- [5] Despite its production as the city's 'gay' area by the municipal government, the local business association and community groups, women occupy the marginal, 'queer' spaces of *Le Village gai* [The Village] (Ray, 1998). Since the early 1990s, there has been a multiplication of gay male households, and commercial and community services for gay men in this area, but sites of lesbian sociability are generally limited to the upper storeys of large 'queer' leisure complexes and to certain weeknight events. Although there is currently one lesbian bar (*Sister's*) and a few other mixed bars that lesbians frequent in the Village, at the time of my interviews (1996–97) there was a markedly low level of identification with the social spaces of this district among the women living on Plateau Mont-Royal (Ray, 1998).
- [6] Politicised lesbians have been creating and appropriating public and semi-public spaces in the Plateau Mont-Royal District since the 1970s. This process began with the use of feminist meeting spaces (Hildebrand, 1998) and was followed by the development of a large network of lesbian commercial and cooperative venues. As Bourque (1998) demonstrates, between 1973 and 1995, at least four bookstores, nine community centres and 30 bars, restaurants and cafés were created for or by Montréal lesbians, the majority of which were located in the Plateau Mont-Royal District.
- [7] Although half of my sample could be described as anglophone (English as a mother tongue) and the other half as francophone (French as a mother tongue), the division of the two groups is questionable. Of the

interviews that were conducted in English, some were with allophones (people whose mother tongue is not French, English or indigenous), with women whose mother tongue is French, and with first and second generation Canadians whose mother tongue was English but were not of British 'ethnic' origins. The four 'women of colour' in my sample were among those interviewed in English. The French language sample was much more homogeneous as only one participant was an allophone immigrant from Spain, one had immigrated from France, and one was a first generation Canadian with French as a mother tongue.

- [8] Although some of the women I interviewed occasionally patronise these businesses and walk through this portion of the street, they saw it as incongruous, a space occupied at night by a non-residential population of wealthy heterosexuals. As one woman described it, 'That part of St-Laurent, ... I find that it's an area that's really "jet-set". It's really the straights that go there, the straights who come from all over the place and are there on the "cruise". It's appearances that count there, ... so for us?' (Béatrice, early thirties, student; my translation).

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