The sexual politics of clubbing: a feminist corporeal analysis of Palms, Oxford Street, Sydney Australia

Dominique Pezzutto

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Abstract
Individual and collective subjectivities are central to geographical research on clubbing (Binnie, 2014). The sexual politics of clubbing is usually approached along homonormative conceptualisations that position clubs together with narrowed expressions of gayness such as young, white, gym-toned bodies. Drawing on feminist, corporeal geographies inspired by Elspeth Probyn (2003) and Gill Valentine (2007), this research argues that such an approach to the politics of inclusion and exclusion may overlook the diversity of gay subjectivities that clubbing experiences give rise to. This thesis draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted on one nightclub, Palms, on Oxford Street, Sydney, to argue that the politics of inclusion and exclusion needs to attend foremost to how ideas about sexuality are configured through the materiality of clubs and affective elements like music, lighting and other bodies. An interpretation is offered as to how Palms is embedded in sets of ideas about Oxford Street that project meanings about who belongs in the club based on intersections of age, gender, sexuality, class, and dress codes. The queuing practice outside Palms illustrates how the club enables particular classed, gendered and sexual subjectivities to flourish. Inside the club, the 'light vibe' expressed through a love and vulnerability to 'uncool' music and a 'daggy' decor demonstrated how Palms sits in contrast to understandings of clubbing being defined by drug-taking or pretentious codes based on age, music and fashion. In the context of arguments about post-gay life, or mobile gay cultures experienced in Sydney, this thesis expands understandings of clubs, clubbing and gayness in queer times. Knowledge produced in this thesis calls for more research into the embodied dimensions of a night-out that consider more spatially situated evaluations on the politics of clubbing.

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Dominique Pezzutto

University of Wollongong

A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirement of the Honours Degree of Bachelor of Science in the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities 2019.

Supervisors

Professor Gordon Waitt and Dr Scott McKinnon

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Signed

[Signature]

20 May 2019
Abstract

Individual and collective subjectivities are central to geographical research on clubbing (Binnie, 2014). The sexual politics of clubbing is usually approached along homonormative conceptualisations that position clubs together with narrowed expressions of gayness such as young, white, gym-toned bodies. Drawing on feminist, corporeal geographies inspired by Elspeth Probyn (2003) and Gill Valentine (2007), this research argues that such an approach to the politics of inclusion and exclusion may overlook the diversity of gay subjectivities that clubbing experiences give rise to. This thesis draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted on one nightclub, Palms, on Oxford Street, Sydney, to argue that the politics of inclusion and exclusion needs to attend foremost to how ideas about sexuality are configured through the materiality of clubs and affective elements like music, lighting and other bodies. An interpretation is offered as to how Palms is embedded in sets of ideas about Oxford Street that project meanings about who belongs in the club based on intersections of age, gender, sexuality, class, and dress codes. The queuing practice outside Palms illustrates how the club enables particular classed, gendered and sexual subjectivities to flourish. Inside the club, the ‘light vibe’ expressed through a love and vulnerability to ‘uncool’ music and a ‘daggy’ decor demonstrated how Palms sits in contrast to understandings of clubbing being defined by drug-taking or pretentious codes based on age, music and fashion. In the context of arguments about post-gay life, or mobile gay cultures experienced in Sydney, this thesis expands understandings of clubs, clubbing and gayness in queer times. Knowledge produced in this thesis calls for more research into the embodied dimensions of a night-out that consider more spatially situated evaluations on the politics of clubbing.

Keywords

Oxford Street Sydney, sexual politics, clubbing, feminist corporeal analysis
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Chapter 1 Introduction

‘It’s like going down to the secret little bar…down those stairway and suddenly bang, you’re there, it’s like a whole world’ - (participant: John)

1.1 Background

Nightclubs are understood by Valentine and Skelton (2003) as paradoxical places to lose and find oneself through the possibility of escape, transformation, connection and disconnection, empowerment and disempowerment. There is a politics to nightclubs that Browne (2007) suggests operates through sustaining spatial and social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The geographies of nightclubs tend to focus on the politics of inclusion and exclusion of younger people from the dancefloor in both so-called mainstream and underground clubs through bringing to the fore social dimensions such as music, drugs, sex and fashion (Malbon, 1999). Less attention has been given to clubbing and older people, particularly in relation to sustaining understandings of gayness and community. This thesis addresses this gap in the literature by seeking to better understand the meanings and experiences of one venue, Palms, during a night out on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney. This venue continues to pitch itself unashamedly as a gay nightclub amidst rhetoric of a ‘post-gay’ era.

The significance of this research arises from the presence of a thriving gay venue that counters arguments of the ‘demise of gay culture’ on Oxford Street, Sydney (Reynolds, 2009). Discourses of demise or in more vernacular terms, the ‘death of the Golden Mile’, are often understood in terms of the ‘post-gay’ subject aligned to more fluid understandings of sexuality (Reynolds, 2008), processes of gentrification and the emergence of the cultural economy (Ruting, 2007), and the influx of straight people. Instead, this thesis is more closely aligned to the idea of Gorman-Murray (2009) that draws on mobility theories to chart the way LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, queer) crowds have dispersed in suburbs across Sydney. Within this theoretical context, Palms may be understood as a ‘mooring’ for those people celebrating and performing a specific notion of gayness aligned to camp, retro music and the uncool. This thesis draws on a feminist corporeal theoretical approach combining Valentine’s (2007) discussion of intersectionality with Probyn’s (2003) notion of the ‘spatial imperative of subjectivity’ to better understand the collective and individual subjectivities sustaining in and through the nightclub Palms in the context of a night out on Oxford Street, Sydney, Australia. A corporeal feminist geographical approach draws attention to embodiment, and conceives of emplaced subjectivities that
rely on understandings of power as operating not only through discourses but alongside the emotional and affective components like music, lights, decor and relational sensations of other bodies.

The aim of this thesis is to better understand the subjectivities and communities that thrive in Palms nightclub, Oxford Street, through paying attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion as an embodied spatial process. To address this aim, three research questions underpin this thesis:

1). Attention first turns to how people understand the process of inclusion and exclusion with Palms in the wider context of a night out on Oxford Street itself. The thesis asks: What brings people to, what brings people together, and what divides people on Oxford Street?

2). Next, the focus turns to better understanding how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate when crossing the threshold of Palms during a night-out on Oxford Street. The thesis asks: How is Palms narrated as part of a night-out on Oxford Street?

3). Third, the politics of inclusion and exclusion are better understood through focusing on the experiences and meanings inside the venue. Hence, the thesis asks: Why do people return to Palms for a night-out on Oxford Street?

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into the following chapters to address the aim and research questions.
2) *The historical geographies of Oxford Street*; This chapter provides a historical background of Palms, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney over four decades of operation. This chapter argues that life-course experiences are central to configuring subjectivities about belonging when negotiating processes of inclusion and exclusion. I.e. This chapter argues that in order to comprehend oral histories of Palms, it is crucial to put them into the context of the past. This chapter chronologically situates Palms within the greater politics of each decade. From exploring the beginnings of Palms as a cabaret venue celebrating radical, political satire, to it’s progression as a venue within the context of commercial inundation of Oxford Street, to where it sits now within a rhetoric of post-gay culture on Oxford Street, this chapter provides insight into changing meanings across time.

3) *Literature review*; This chapter situates the thesis within the scholarship of sexualities and the city and geographies of clubbing. Gaps in the literature are identified by tracing how scholars have thus far positioned the role of nightclubs in facilitating processes of inclusion and exclusion that shape how sexual identities are experienced in cities. A gap is identified around better understanding the role of a vibrant and commercially viable venue that pitches itself to a gay community and confounds arguments of either gay village demise or mobile gay night-life culture. Attention then turns to discussions on the role of affect and emotion in shaping subjectivities in nightclubs. Here, a second gap is identified. Literature on clubbing has yet failed to recognise the meanings of unconventional methods of clubbing that overlook experiences of older lesbian and gay people and clubs fashioned as ‘uncool’ or ‘daggy’. This chapter then provides a discussion on the conceptual framework underpinning the knowledge produced in this thesis.

4) *Methods*; This chapter discusses the use of oral histories combined with sketches, song play-backs and a research diary as the methods used to investigate the processes of inclusion and exclusion in Palms, Oxford Street. This chapter argues that the use of song play-backs in oral histories are an effective way to trigger memories of the non-conscious subjectivities that operate around affect and emotion in nightclubs that are notoriously difficult to relay in words. This chapter documents the highs and lows of
recruitment and provides an explanation to why the sample is arranged in generational cohorts. This chapter then provides an explanation for the use of rhizoanalysis to identify the ways emotion and affect work in nightclubs to sustain individual and collective identities. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how ethical procedures were carried out in the research.

5) Processes of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street; This chapter provides insight into the first research question. This chapter argues that Oxford Street exists as a paradoxical sight of belonging and alienation through (re)productions of certain understandings of queer through spectacles like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Intersections of social categories such as gender, sexuality, age, and dress codes work to configure ideas about the street and shape processes of inclusion and exclusion. Oxford Street is narrated as an important community meeting-point to celebrate political moments like the recent Marriage Equality vote. This chapter highlights how the street is embedded in meanings of celebration that are associated with partying through clubbing in an effort to affirm a collective identity that rejects a hetero or homo-norm.

6) A night out at Palms; This chapter addresses the second research question. This chapter makes an important association between age and meanings configured of Palms. By exploring how participants position Palms as part of their night out on Oxford Street, this chapter identifies processes of inclusion and exclusion operating through the politics of the queue, the telling of inside stories with camp humour, and the policing of subjectivities made to flourish or be discouraged on the dancefloor. This chapter argues that the embodiment of age shaped by generational life experiences is central to how participants configure meanings of a ‘gay community’ along with what constitutes a ‘good night out’.

7) The affective intensities and atmospheres of Palms; This chapter addresses the third research question. This chapter identifies the important unique qualities about Palms that highlight the power of emotion and affect in constituting processes of inclusion and exclusion in the nightclub. Participants draw on a love and vulnerability to the music
played at Palms. The music generates an empowering collective identity built from engaging in uncool music and rejecting codes of pretension that are associated with other clubs on Oxford Street like ARQ. In comparison, oral histories in this chapter reveal how the pleasures generated at Palms, constituted as ‘light’, are configured by ‘daggy’ affects such as camp music, tacky decor, bodies in relaxed attire, fairy lights, and the lack of drugged or sexually promiscuous bodies.

8) Conclusion; This chapter revisits the aims and research questions and concludes by summarising the arguments presented in this thesis. The chapter then reveals three future research agendas. First, it calls to further investigate gay sexualities celebrated by uncool, camp, and retro identities. Second, an onus on the embodied experience of age over quantitative understandings is encouraged in future research. Third, this thesis promotes further research on sexual minority groups such as transgendered geographies of clubbing.
Chapter 2 The Historical Geographies of Oxford Street

‘History legitimates one’s identity and place in society: understanding one’s place in the past is essential in the construction of individual and group identity in the present’ (Gorman-Murray 2004, p.9).

2.1 Introduction

Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney, became increasingly understood as a place that sustains the lives of particularly gay men during the 1960s. Narratives that fashion Oxford Street both nationally and internationally as a gay homeland, ‘our strip’ or ‘Golden Mile’, have strengthened over four decades despite drastic change to policies, public opinion on homosexuality and commercial and social services supporting primarily the lives of gay men (Wotherspoon, 2016). In part, this is because of the annual Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras parade that has occurred every year since 1978. The Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras began as a radical revolt against gay and lesbian oppression in Australia. Today, the parade is caught up in public and academic debates on whether it has become a commercial spectacle without political meaning (Markwell, 2002).

For this thesis, in order to comprehend oral histories of a night-out at Palms on Oxford Street, it is crucial to situate them within the context of the past in the present. As Reynolds (2013, p.165) puts it, ‘subjects formed in certain moments do not disappear; they live in the present, their sense of self and behaviour constituted by a lifetime of
experience.’ Following Reynolds, this thesis seeks to better understand how certain moments in Palms are important to the lifetime of experiences that help configure and stabilise subjectivities. First opening its doors to steps that lead to an underground venue in the 1970s as a cabaret, Palms is unique in showing how a commercial business can offer a platform to configure subjectivities across generations (Robinson and Reynolds, 2016).

This chapter is divided into three sections that chronologically chart the progression of Palms as a commercial venue, in order to situate historical meanings configured through generations (see Chapter 4.5 for further justification of this method). The first section documents the political beginnings of Palms as a cabaret venue. The second section discusses Scooters (Palms renamed) in the 1980s, an era transformed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, drugs and crime. The third section discusses the re-opening of Palms in 2000 under new ownership. Specific attention is given to the certain ethos instilled by the new owners in an era of metamorphic commodification of the gay scene. This section then provides a discussion of Palms in the context of the so-called ‘post-gay’ era. This section highlights how Palms challenges arguments about the demise of gay culture and venues.
2.2 Going underground: opening more than doors

Figure 2.2: Palms nightclub, stairs open to go underground. Google maps accessed online, 1/4/2019.

Figure 2.2 illustrates that only the front door of Palms is visible on Oxford Street. This venue is underground, located at the bottom of a flight of steep steps. Palms dates to the late 1970s, operating then as bar and restaurant. It was an unusual venue for the strip, opening during the disco era when nearby bars like Patch’s pumped out disco hits for a dancefloor full of shirtless men.

In the late 1970s, Palms secured a niche with the launch of ‘Cabaret Conspiracy’, a radical, political drag show. While missing from the Weekender gay-guide published in the *Oxford Weekender News* (see Figure 2.3) in the early 1980s, Palms became a platform to celebrate radical politics through artistic expression (Reynolds, 2002). Sydney-sider Johnny Allen started the shows. Johnny brought to Oxford Street strong influences from the gay, cabaret movement of San Francisco and the punk, political movement in New York. Allen had lived in both these cities around 1976, at the height of the gay liberation movement and a period of great social and political radicalisation. He was determined to bring back to Sydney the cabaret culture he had experienced in America (Allen, 2018).

Although an increasingly open gay commercial scene was visible in Sydney through the 1960s, the city’s first gay and lesbian rights organisation did not form until 1970. The first of the more radical gay liberation groups in Australia was founded in 1972 at Sydney University. In these early stages of political mobilisation, the commercial scene of Oxford Street remained largely apolitical and the target for groups like gay liberation was contained mainly on-campus (Reynolds, 2002). Through an entertainment venue on Oxford Street, Allen paved the way forward for celebrating the political, social and cultural achievements of the time within a commercial venue. Figure 2.4 shows advertisements from media describing the release of Cabaret Conspiracy billing at Palms, Oxford Street in 1979. The reviews in both the *Daily Mirror* and *Sun Herald* portray the show as being alternative, underground and welcoming. Furthermore, the reports suggest Cabaret Conspiracy addressed a crucial gap in help to build a culture that celebrates sexual and gender diversity in Sydney, at a time when homosexuality remained a criminal act. Figures 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7 are posters that depict the cabaret as ‘cool’, ‘hot’ and ‘ruff’.
The only rule at Cabaret Conspiracy is that there are no rules...
- Daily Mirror, June

There are punks and spunks, hippies, has-beens, drag-queens, surfies, trendies, transvestites ... but don't get scared off.

There are mothers and kids and ordinary people like us as well ....

There are more and more people coming every week. Obviously Sydney has needed a venue like this for a long time.... Up until now, performers had nowhere to learn their trade. Their artistic testing was done in Central Railway tunnel or in some dismal hotel back room.

There's so much Aussie talent - at last there's somewhere to display it!
- Sun Herald, April.

Sydney's liveliest alternative theatre group ....
- National Times, October.

... off the beaten track, and I do mean off (in a glorious way).... truly alternative entertainment.
- Canberra, October.

In these days of becoming glazed of eye and mind before the tube, we forget that there are real live people out there with great talent.
- Melbourne Age, August.

If you haven't yet caught up with Sydney in the seventies and are nervous about the prospects of the eighties, get along to where members of the Cabaret Conspiracy are playing.

They won't reassure you, but they'll sure as hell entertain you.
- Sydney Shout, August.
Figure 2.5: Advertisement for Palms, circa 1979. Source provided by Allen, J. (2018), accessed 18/11/2018.
Figure 2.6: Advertisement for Palms, circa 1979, Source provided by Allen, J. (2018), accessed 18/11/2018.
Although decriminalisation of homosexuality occurred in New South Wales in 1984, discrimination towards LGBTIAQ people was ongoing (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2019). Through the artistic expression of cabaret, Palms emerged as a unique and thriving place to celebrate sexual freedom in a supportive and safe environment (Star Observer, 2018). Cabaret Conspiracy helped Palms secure a legacy of the celebration of gender and sexual diversity. Furthermore, integral to shaping experiences of Palms is the fact that the venue is understood as underground both in a literal and
figurative sense. Oral histories in this thesis point to the act of venturing down the stairs and into the space as central in shaping an understanding of Palms as edgy, unique, private and safe (see Chapters 5, 6, 7).

2.3 Clubbing in Scooters, Oxford Street during the late 1980s and 1990s

In the late ‘80s, Palms changed ownership and was renamed Scooters. The new business owners received planning approval as a nightclub, though still with a restaurant (see Figures 2.8 and 2.9 showing approval of the plan signed in 1988).

Figure 2.8: Floor Plan for Scooters Nightclub (1988), City of Sydney Archives, accessed 11/09/2018.
The opening of Scooters was at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic alongside a clubbing era accompanied by an increased use of party drugs (Jackson, 2004). The HIV/AIDS epidemic transformed Oxford Street in the 1980s. Along with the substantial loss in lives, the HIV/AIDS epidemic whirled up a homophobic hysteria. As Wotherspoon (2016) points out, the bars and nightclubs on Oxford Street increasingly became a non-safe zone because of ‘gay bashings’ by homophobic crowds. That said, the HIV/AIDS crisis and homophobia strengthened the notion of a ‘gay community’. Community gatherings and networks mobilised on Oxford Street in support of those affected by the illness and public slander that accompanied it. Reynolds (2013) reflects that the 1980s were a bitter-sweet time of loss but also strength and resilience. These attributes often are part of the narratives of those who lived through these times.
During the 1990s, changes in drug use also changed the way people experienced Oxford Street at night. The chemical affect from drugs like Ecstasy allowed clubbers for the first time to stay up and dance all through the night. A clubbing culture defined by drug use, cliques, and ‘cool’ dress codes defined nightlife in the ‘80s and ‘90s (Jackson, 2004). Synonymous with what was happening in other global cities like New York, San Francisco and London, clubs like ARQ started to transform Oxford Street into a ‘super-club’ mecca (Hutton, 2007). Paul Goodyear, a resident DJ on Oxford Street during 1985-2006, tells of Scooters as a place that was never considered a ‘cool’ place for the ‘fashion’ crowd:

It was a total time for change and the future of our Golden Mile was not looking good. During the 80s and early 90s we started losing club owners and managers; HIV/AIDS, drug overdoses, suicides, and this alone was changing our scene. The irony was, drug culture was well and truly underway so while we were partying we were also going to funerals every week. At ARQ on a Saturday night we could have up to a dozen ambulances taking people to St Vincent's Hospital from GHB overdoses. People would be resuscitated at the hospital and then go back to the club for more partying. It was incredibly sad.

A lot of the art and fashion crowd wouldn't be caught dead at Scooters…it was certainly never the "cool" place to be. It wasn't the kind of place where you would take acid, ecstasy or anything else for that matter. The crowd was more on the conservative side [and] preferred their music on the “safe” Top-40 side. It had it's own little vibe going on and was quite unique to the other venues on Oxford St.

Paul Goodyear narrates the music, drugs, clothes and people that comprise the vibe in Scooters as both ‘conservative’ and ‘safe’. For Paul, Scooters was a place he fashioned as unique at this time because of it’s ‘uncool’ but endearing character in relation to other nightclubs on Oxford Street. As shown in the next section, this reputation of
‘daggy’ but loveable carried on with the opening of the new Palms in 2000, and is still how many people narrate Palms today.

2.4 Palms in the context of Oxford Street; post 2000

‘Where to daggy dance under a disco ball like no one is watching’ – Timeout magazine guide to Sydney, *Palms on Oxford*, 7 March 2018.

Scooters closed on Oxford Street around 1994. The business did not re-open until 2000 when the premises was bought by the current owners John Innes, Peter Inwood and Kevin Du Val. They re-opened the licensed premises with its original name, Palms, and secured planning permission to open a basement nightclub with no restaurant (see Figures 2.10 and 2.11 for the official plans).

Figure 2.10: Floor Plan for Palms Nightclub (1998), City of Sydney Archives, accessed 11/09/2018.
Oxford Street was transformed during the 2000s by several intersecting forces. The politics of Oxford Street had long moved on from origins of gay and lesbian activism rooted in leftist, radical ideals that resonated with the first Sydney Mardi Gras. By the 2000s, Oxford Street was well established in a conservative, pluralist system, or what some people describe as a mainstream culture (Reynolds, 2013). Oxford Street became entangled in State policies that sought to secure Sydney’s position as a ‘world city’ through the selling of a particular version of gayness. Hlousek, (2011) refers to this
process as Pink Economy. To attract international capital, including flows of tourists, a marketed version of sexuality became critiqued as the ‘homonormative’, relying on the production of a young, white, male, gym-toned body (see Chapter 5 for further discussion on the homonormative subject). Consequently, the new millennium brought the Sydney 2000 Olympics and 2002 Gay Games that went hand in hand with increasing marketing of acceptable versions of gayness and the policing of unacceptable versions of sexuality on Oxford Street. Specifically, this was through the crack-down on drugs on Oxford Street and in neighbouring precinct Kings Cross. That said, heavy-handed regulation of the scene had an affect on an overall capital and cultural inundation by the State.

One expression of the mainstreaming of sexualities for public audiences was the involvement of corporate sponsorship in the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras. For the first time in 1997 the parade was broadcasted on Channel Ten, one of Australia’s largest commercial television networks. According to Wotherspoon (2016), this was selling out to the market, affirming what many believed to be a loss of the parade’s satirical and political bite through appeasement by accommodating standards of its corporate sponsors (see Chapter 5 for contextualised discussion on Mardi Gras in participants’ oral histories). Alongside the increased property prices of the inner-city through the process of gentrification, the selling of gay culture brought increased numbers of people who identified as heterosexual to Oxford Street, eventually changing the dynamics of the commercial and residential property market (Ruting, 2008).

In light of this change, the new owners of Palms aimed to honour the legacy of gay culture on Oxford Street. They identified a number of unique qualities with Palms when compared to other nearby clubbing venues, including that Palms is the only gay owned and operated venue left on Oxford Street. As part of the gentrification process, venues along the strip have progressively been bought over by wealthy (straight) business owners. Consequently, nostalgia for the last standing gay-owned bar is attributed as generating a strong sense of collective ownership. John Innes shares a story displaying this notion of collective ownership at Palms:
You know you’ve won when the customers adopt the bar, adopt ownership. She (patron of other venue) came into our bar, racks up a line of coke on the bar, right? And Carlotta’s sitting there. Carlotta was one of our regulars…and she went ballistic! She went off! “How fucking dare you! In my bar! Come in here and do that and jeopardise their liquor license!”…and I thought, “Woah!”… You know you’ve won when the customers step up and defend your bar (laughter).

John revealed how the re-naming of the business as Palms was a deliberate strategy to foster a more inclusive commercial venue that celebrated the notion of ‘community’. John tells the story behind opening Palms that came from an experience of going out clubbing on Oxford Street with a female friend:

We’d been to Midnight Shift upstairs at the nightclub level partying, and we’d had enough of that so we came downstairs, and they wouldn’t let her (female friend) in! … the Shift was always sort of this men’s only type bar…and that really pissed us off, and we said: “Hang on, she’s just been upstairs with us, it’s the same venue, she’s part of our scene”… And they just, nup, wouldn’t let girls in. And we thought: “Well fuck this, this scene’s really pissing us off”…you’ve got this service with attitude… you had to be privileged to be served a drink…we griped about that. We griped about Tracey not being allowed into the Shift, and we thought: “Fuck this, let’s open a bar!”… and that’s what we did.

John expresses the re-opening of Palms as a rebellion against the exclusion of women from certain nightclubs. Feminist scholars have long linked the politics of space to the politics of gender. Increased crowds on Oxford Street during the 2000s only accentuated proprietorial entitlements of men (Moran and Skeggs, 2004) (see Chapter 5 for more detail on this discussion).
Palms also challenged the norms of the clubbing scene by setting up a space that celebrates the ‘uncool’. Peter Clare, who was the original licensee of Palms, explains the owners’ intentions with the choice of music that characterises the club:

It’s just about the music you’d play for yourself at home with the doors shut so you can be silly and have fun. That’s all it is. Don’t take it too seriously…your comfortable flannelette shirt and tracky dacks that you can lounge around in…you can sing along to ABBA… you can do all that uncool stuff that you wouldn’t dare do anywhere else.

Palms made possible what is impossible clubbing elsewhere on Oxford Street. The music creates a sense of togetherness that permits different social groups to connect. John spoke of Palms as facilitating connections across different categories of sexuality and gender when they first opened:

When we first opened you had all these different tribes in the gay community, drinking in different venues. [Then] Palms opens, so people trickle in and look at the place. [They] thought, “What’s this bar all about?” They couldn’t quite get it (laughter). There’d be [a] bunch of [cross-dressers] over there visiting from the Taxi, there’d be a bunch of leather boys over here, there’d be some twinks over here, some old theatre queens over here, and they’re all lookin’ at each other thinkin’, “oh what is this bar?”... And then the music starts. Next thing they’re all singing along their hands are in the air! And that was it...[people] get it now. It’s not about tribes. It’s just about community. And that’s never changed in 20 years.

John illustrates how commercial venues help to sustain particular identities through reputation, decor, entertainment and specifically music. In contrast, the decor and music at Palms worked across difference through celebrating the uncool. As the Lonely Planet Guide to Sydney 2018 states about Palms: ‘No one admits to coming here, but the lengthy queues prove they are lying.’ (See Figure 2.12).
The lengthy queues outside Palms takes on particular significance in the so-called ‘post-gay’ era which refers to the notion that sexuality no longer operates to discriminate between the lives of people (Reynolds, 2013). The post-gay era offers social, institutional and legal equality. Therefore, sexual orientation is argued to be no longer paramount to understanding identity (Lea et al, 2015). As a result, same-sex attracted people may not feel the need to seek out places to affirm their individual and collective identity, such as gay bars and nightclubs. In light of arguments about the demise of global gay districts such as Oxford Street, studies have strongly attributed post-gay understandings to explain why gay villages are not as thriving as they once where (Doan and Higgins, 2011). Hence, the question becomes; who is then comprising these lengthy queues outside Palms? Does the composition of the queue support the argument...
of a post gay-era? Or, are there other forces at work in sustaining the queues outside of Palms? These questions will be addressed in Chapter 6.

2.5 Conclusion

The basement commercial property named Palms has been an integral part of the gay night-time economy of Oxford Street over four decades. Crucial to differentiating Palms from other commercial properties is its underground attributes, hidden from the public gaze. In the 1970s, this allowed the possibilities for a highly sexualised cabaret culture celebrated at the time as ‘hot’ and radical. Since the 1980s, the basement has allowed people to party without coming under the scrutiny of conventional clubbing ideals that often celebrate narrow versions of gayness configured by market forces. Instead, Palms offered the celebration of an alternative version of gayness to the homonormative underpinned by the uncool and daggy. In part, this may be attributed since the 2000s to the owners, who are conscious of how the uncool music, decor, alcohol and people who are allowed entry enable particular subjectivities and community to thrive. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, the unique characteristics of Palms will be put in context of oral histories told about the venue and Oxford Street. First, however, the next chapter contextualises this thesis within the geographies of sexualities literature.
“People keep talkin’ about the death of the scene and the death of Oxford Street and all that stuff. I think [they’re] calling that a bit too early. I think there will always be a demand for, exclusively gay bars…and age doesn’t matter. It’s just as strong in twinks as it is in a retiree.”

(Participant: John)

Photo: featuring Glenn Osborne, drag performer ‘Black Eena’ (right), original curator for the dj music played at Palms, post 2000 (exact date unknown), photo supplied by John Innes, Palms photo archives, 4 January 2019.
3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to situate the thesis within the scholarship of geographies of sexualities, and discuss the conceptual framework. The chapter begins by situating the thesis within two broad strands of literature, that of sexualities and the city and geographies of clubbing. The section titled ‘sexualities and the city’ pays specific attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The section begins by tracing the contribution made by Marxist and socialist-feminist approaches. Specifically, attention is given to the politics of visibility and the emergence of the so-called ‘gay village’. Attention then turns to contributions of post-structuralist feminist and queer approaches and how these scholars embrace ideas about sexuality and space as relational and fluid rather than separate and fixed. A gap is identified in the literature around better understanding the role of a vibrant and commercially viable venue that pitches itself to a gay community that confounds arguments of either gay village demise or mobile gay night-life culture.

Within geographies of sexuality, attention turns to clubbing literature and discusses the politics of inclusion and exclusion from the dancefloor through a focus on drugs and alcohol regulation and emotions (Jackson, 2004). This section highlights while attention in the literature has been given to the role of emotion and affect in making and unmaking subjectivities in the context of underground clubs, little attention has been given to older clubbers and those clubs fashioned as ‘uncool’ or daggy. Lastly, this chapter discusses how the feminist theories of intersectionality are combined with the spatial imperative of subjectivity to offer analytical tools to better understand the role of embodied knowledge of clubbing in the politics of inclusion and exclusion on the dancefloor.
3.2 Sexualities and the City

This section is concerned with the conversations geographers are having on cities and sexualities. Sexuality was a taboo topic in geography until groundbreaking texts like *Mapping Desire* (Bell and Valentine, 1995) opened up a platform for discussions. At the forefront of initial discussions on sexuality and the city during the 1990s was the metaphor of ‘the closet’ (Brown, 2000). Scholarship informed by Marxist concepts highlighted the State’s role in shaping the invisibility of sexuality within Western cities (Brown and Knopp, 2016). Knopp (1990, 1992, 1995) was instrumental in exploring the relationship between sexuality, capitalism and the spatiality of the closet in urban life. Embedded in this discussion is a politics of LGBTIAQ visibility. This work pointed to the role of hetero-patriarchal-capitalist structures in the masking and marginalisation of sexual diversity to closeted spaces like nightclubs and bars since the 1950s (Podmore, 2006). Marxists contribute to the discussion by pointing out the role of the market in structuring individual and group sexual identity, because it works to support and monopolise on what is profitable at the time as expressed by changing sets of ideas about sexuality in mainstream society. This approach helps explain how lesbian and gay visibility in the 1960s brought the emergence of the so called ‘gay village’ in cities across the Global North (Binnie, 2004).

Socialist feminist scholars drawing upon Marxist ideas then started asking questions about how gendered privilege was reflected in the processes of gentrification that sustained the gay village and were subsequently at the heart of a mainstream gay culture (Bondi, 1999). Since the 1960s, gay men have played a key role in the economic restructuring of cities in the Global North (Binnie, 2001). While lesbians have been pushed out of the gay village due to issues of affordability (i.e. dual female income is disproportionality lower than dual male). Bondi (1999) uncovers a group of feminist urban researchers who build on Marxist ideas to explain the ways in which women are disadvantaged in cities through the force of the market, public policies, male violence, and/or discursive practices (Bondi and Christie, 1997; Booth et al, 1996; Garber and Turner, 1995; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1983; 1991; Pain, 1991; Roberts, 1991). Socialist feminist thinking that aligns the oppression of capitalism with patriarchy helps explain why the gay village has always been male dominated and classed (Nast, 2003).
Capitalism has long relied on patriarchal, gendered stereotypes to justify oppressive market strategies like increasing property prices in city centres. This leads to gentrification which pushes out poorer classes (i.e. low income earners and minority groups of sex, gender, race and disability) and caters only to those who can afford the costs of living in an upcoming suburb (i.e. most commonly white, male, middle to upper class men) (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). As illustrated in Darlinghurst, Sydney and reflected in similar patterns in Western gay villages everywhere, gentrification leads to visibility through tourism and mainstreaming of a non-threatening ‘homonormativity’ (Quilley, 1997).

Post-structuralist feminist geographers then turned to queer theory, an approach that prioritises fluidity over fixity in the shaping of individual and collective sexual identities and places. In the groundbreaking text Geographies of Sexuality (Brown et al, 2007), queer thinking started to trouble the binaries of space as either ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ by offering fluid understandings of sexuality and space (Rosenberg, 2017). Queer thinking projects space and subjectivities as relational and mutually constituted through both material and social dimensions.

Queer thinking draws on several different post-structuralist philosophers, including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Elspeth Probyn. How sex and sexuality are understood in social consciousness underpins Foucault’s (1980) discussion of knowledge and power as creative rather than assigned, Butler’s notion of performativity (1990) and Probyn’s (2010) concept of corporeality. Geographic circles recognised there is no such thing as fixed gay space, and what constitutes ideas of gay are in constant flux. Understandings of space and subjectivities as co-constituted points to how at any given time sexuality is fleeting and situated. Subjectivities on gay space are shaped by social stigmas that are reinforced through discursive practices, repeated performative acts, and visceral ways of knowing through the body (Knopp, 2004).

This appreciation of fluidity in sexuality and space brought into question theories on ‘demise’ of the gay village by those advocating for a ‘politics of mobility’. Over the
past two decades there has been a strong basis of literature on the demise of the gay village in cities across the Global North (Doan and Higgins 2011; Brown 2014; Archer 2002; Reynolds 2008, 2009; Ruting 2007; Matejskova 2007; Rosser et al 2008). One strand of this literature draws on concerns that play on emotions of nostalgia about losing gay space (Reynolds 2008, 2009). Another suggests factors like dating apps have contributed to the loss of gay bars and clubs by removing the need for people to go out to pursue sex when ‘hooking-up’ is made easy from a phone anywhere (see Race 2015a, 2015b). And yet another cultural economy strand appoints the demise of gay villages to gentrification, rising housing costs and homonormativity and toleration (Christensen and Caldwell, 2006).

In contrast, Gorman-Murray and Nash (2009, 2014a, 2014b) offer an alternative entry point to theories of demise that center on fixed ideas of space. Their work has been instrumental in mapping Australian geographies of sexuality, particularly in Sydney. Their approach instead explores a politics of mobility which proposes that LGBTIAQ urban geographies are not lost but continuously constituted and mobile. Past geographical literature on sexual and gendered minorities tends to focus on place-making and fixing territories of gay or straight space without recognising processes of flux and movement. Instead, thinking temporally, places in Sydney like Oxford Street, Newtown, Marrickville, or Erskineville, can be understood as ‘moorings’ for LGBTIAQ people due to the queer performativity that momentarily sustains these places (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014a; 2014b).

The body is central to strands of post-structuralist feminists and queer thinking. Attention turns to how the process of inclusion and exclusion in the city operate in and through the body. Thus, another strand of geographies of sexuality and the city have drawn attention to the role of ‘social’ emotions and ‘biological’ affects. The next section explores these concepts in greater detail through the literature on clubbing cultures.
3.3 Clubbing Cultures

Geographies of clubbing are relatively new. This is because clubbing is a recent phenomenon in itself. This section discusses how geographers have approached processes of inclusion and exclusion operating through clubbing cultures. To help contextualise Palms, two broad strands of clubbing culture literature are discussed; first the night-time economy, and second emotional geographies.

3.3.1 Night-time economy

How nightclubs are differentiated in the night-time economy is one theme of the literature. Following the work of Lynch and Badger (2006) ‘mainstream’ clubs are differentiated from those categorised as ‘underground’. According to Lynch and Badger (2006) the former tends to be alcohol-based and consist mainly of a hetero-crowd of strangers. Consequently, those clubs characterised as mainstream clubs are often sites of macho, aggressive and sexually problematic behaviour towards women. According to Lynch and Bader (2006), underground clubs tend to be more drug orientated, have less alcohol-related violence, and consist of a sexually diverse, accepting and familiar crowd congregating as a result of an ‘explicit’ collective identity. Hutton (2004) has explored how underground clubs can be important places for the inclusion and safety of minority groups. Acknowledging this diversity is important for this thesis, given the smaller numbers of people who go clubbing at Palms, often comprised of specific people in-the-know and ‘in the scene’. Yet, Palms does not fit neatly into the categories proposed by Lynch and Badger (2006) because Palms tends not be a drug-orientated club while comprised of an intimate and well-known crowd that supports the presence of women who identify as straight.

How alcohol and drug laws that regulate public spaces at night is a second night-time economy theme. These laws raise important questions of inclusion and exclusion (Alvarez, 1996). Following the arguments of Jayne et al (2006), tighter restrictions
around alcohol service laws are being employed as a mechanism by the neo-liberal state to exert control over who is present on the streets at night. ‘Lock-out laws’ are being employed in cities across the Global North as a strategy to address anti-social behaviour outside nightclubs during the night. As discussed by Race (2016), Sydney is no exception. Introduced in 2014, Sydney’s 1.30am lock-out law was intended to remove the ‘wrong’ type of people from the street. However, the lock-out laws resulted in alcohol related problematic behaviour mobilised to other areas of Sydney like Newtown. Race (2016) has charted the profound cultural impact of lock-out laws, dissipating crowds on Oxford Street, and increasing homophobic violence in the inner-west. His studies follow a political agenda focused on LGBTIAQ clubbing as a form of resistance to oppressive regulatory structures. In contrast, little attention has been given to the crowds who continue to visit Oxford Street, and to venues that are not notorious for drug-related violence, drug raids or drug-taking. This thesis helps address this gap through a focus on Palms, Oxford Street.

3.3.2 Emotional geographies

Again and again I arrive at this point… I simply cannot describe it any further…the sensation of dancing, of moving without thought, of moving before thought, or just letting go, letting it all out? Words fail me; words become redundant and unnecessary (Malbon 1999, p.1).

Groundbreaking clubbing texts include those by Jackson (2004) and Malbon (1999). These texts discuss how consumption of music, drugs and alcohol is an important component of the experience of clubbing. Building on this work, the transformation in the way people experience clubbing has been studied through dance music (Saldanha, 2005), and arrival of party drugs like ecstasy onto clubbing scenes since the 1980s (see Slavin, 2004; Duff, 2005; Ross et all, 2003; Naidoo, 2017; Yamamoto, 2013; Hunt and Evans 2008).
The ‘affective and emotional turn’ in geography has been paramount in revealing how non-conscious experiences with music and drugs are at the heart of how subjectivities become negotiated. The affective turn encouraged geographers to address the biological body (see Thrift, 1997). Specifically, attention turned to the non-conscious dimensions of human action in geographical explanations; that is the body’s capacity to act, engage and connect (Clough, 2008). After Deleuze and Guattari (1987), scholars like Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2008) discussed the notion of affect as the push in the world before one has time to think and give it meaning.

Feminist scholars argued against separating emotion and affect. In the emotional geographies literature, Caluya (2008) builds on Probyn (2003) to argue that emotion and affect mutually inform each other. Feminist geographers embrace this phenomenological approach that positions subjectivity in the body rather than in the conscious mind (Longhurst, 1997). These scholars position the body as central to pleasure, and at the heart of informing subjectivities from visceral ways of knowing (Bell et al, 2001). Embodied knowledge is produced by living an experience. It can’t be well-relayed literally, as it is acquired corporeally, through the feeling and sounds of music and dance (Davidson and Milligan, 2004).

Equipped with these ideas, attention turned to think about the emotional and affective role of drugs and music as offering possibilities of finding and loosing oneself in clubbing cultures (Malbon, 1999). In nightclubs, embodied ways of knowing that are non-consciously informed by our senses (i.e. sounds of music, feel of bass, touch of bodies, smell of space), interact with the affect of everything that is occurring fluidly in our minds through our memories, histories, thoughts and feelings, to create subjectivities that are informing our experience (McCormack, 2008). This literature often positions nightclubs as unique spaces of belonging for particularly young people. This research points to the importance in processes of belonging based on the discursive, emotional and affective qualities of drugs, styles of dress codes, music genres, gender, sexuality, age, or ethnic groups (Jackson, 2004). Race (2003) argues that for some people in minority groups, nightclubs are particularly important for feelings of belonging to a community after being excluded from a mainstream norm. For example,
gay clubs are argued to be important spaces to many LGBTIAQ people for the forging of a collective identity that is not accessible in the everyday heteronormative world (Ruting, 2008). Furthermore, Caluya (2008) points to the possible politics of clubbing to overcome racialised discourses. Caluya (2008) points to how the affective qualities of dance music and drugs offer possibilities for connection or disconnection on the dance-floor. Yet, as noted by Valentine and Skelton (2003), nightclubs may also be places where people question narrow understandings of sexuality that are reproduced in and through these venues. For some people, the very affective and emotional qualities of sets of ideas, music, and drugs, operate to disconnect people from a specific place, and offer no possibilities to sustain a sense of self.

Missing from this literature is any consideration of the emotional geographies of clubbing for older people. Perhaps this is because studies on clubbing have followed a generation born from the 80s and 90s club era, where youth is positioned alongside other acceptable ‘cool’ stereotypes like fashion-codes, cliques or drug-taking. This thesis helps address the gap in the literature; clubbing and older lesbian and gay people.

3.4 Conceptual Framework

Knowledge in this thesis is derived though combining Valentine’s (2007) notion of intersectionality with Probyn’s (2004) ‘spatial imperative of subjectivity’. This section illustrates how these concepts may help better understand the processes of inclusion and exclusion in clubbing as an emotionally embodied practice through thinking of subjectivities as always multiple and spatially constituted.

Intersectionality is a framework that theorises the dynamics of power and social inequalities as an outcome of the relationship between different social categories such as gender, sexuality, class, or race (Hopkins, 2017). This feminist framework acknowledges embodiment at the heart of processes of inclusion and exclusion. There
has been some debate in geography about how to effectively apply an intersectional framework empirically (Valentine, 2007). McCall (2005) suggests that case studies are an effective way to research the complexity of intersectionality experienced in a subject’s everyday life, by starting with an individual then working outward to unravel larger contexts of social categories lived and experienced. As Valentine (2007, p.15) notes; ‘This approach means looking at, for example, accounts of the multiple, shifting, and sometimes simultaneous ways that self and other are represented, the way that individuals identify and disidentify with other groups, how one category is used to differentiate another in specific contexts, and how particular identities become salient or foregrounded at particular moments.’ Longhurst and Johnston (2014, p.272) call for more research that study ‘the embodied intersections between race, ethnicity, indigeneity, gender and other axes of subjectivity that intersect contributing to systematic social, political and economic inequality.’

Nightclubs offer possibilities to further discuss the notion of intersectionality because of how subjectivities are being constituted at the intersections of ideas about sexuality, gender, age, class, race etc. This thesis displays the multiplicity of intersections in motion to inform subjectivities of self in relation to place (see Chapter 6).

Probyn’s (2003) notion of the spatial imperative of subjectivity is concerned with how subjectivity is informed through sets of practices that are relative to space, not just within ourselves. As Probyn (2003, p.290) notes, relational knowledge is the fundamental factor in subjectivity because at every moment ‘our bodies and sense of ourselves are in constant interaction with how and where we are placed’. Probyn’s concept of the spatial imperative of subjectivity builds from the work of Foucault’s (1977) notion of regimes of truth, Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity, Althusser’s (1971) notion of interpellation and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of affect.

Following Probyn (2003), subjectivity is a reciprocal process occurring in situ, as the space and place we inhabit produce as, and we produce the space and place we inhabit. While ‘places and bodes may appear separate and fixed, following Probyn (2003), both
bodies and places are constantly being made in and through how they are ‘folded’ in and through each other. The process by which bodies and places are folded together involves not only sets of ideas, but also emotions and affects. Hence, ideas about a place may bring certain people into connection, and not others (Skelton, 2001). For example, there may be particular sets of ideas that designate a nightclub as ‘gay’ or ‘straight’. Our subjectivities are thus in part conceived as made and unmade by constant interpellation and embodied performance of our selves (Foucault, 1977). That is, in a nightclub we may choose to do our sexuality or gender through following particular social norms to present our body under the gaze of others as sexy. For example, young men may attend the gym to develop a toned body. Once bodies are located in a place, they become folded together through the role of affect and emotions that increase the capacity of bodies to act and be affected. These capacities may be increased or enhanced through the decoration of lighting, drugs and music. For example, particular affective intensities that are felt as a sense of belonging may be generated in a club by a particular dance track. Furthermore, people feel their subjectivities differently within a place, not only because of their embodied past, but by sets of ideas that configure a place. For example, a straight woman in a mainstream nightclub may feel her subjectivity differently to a man because of how the place is configured by gendered and sexed norms and therefore performs the space differently (Butler, 1990). See Figure 3.1 for a diagram showing the relationality of these conceptual frameworks.
3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the strands of literature this thesis is informed by. By doing so, it has shown the significance of this thesis in addressing the gaps in the literature around venues that celebrate the uncool, retro, daggy, camp and older lesbian and gay bodies. Geographers now widely accept how sexualities are performed in cities through constructionist viewpoints of power as creative rather than oppressive. While the night-time economy is central to discussions on clubbing, this thesis highlights how more attention needs to be directed towards emotional and affective dimensions of nightclubs of older bodies. Palms contradicts the demise theories that have been central to discussions of Oxford Street in the literature since the 2000s. Instead, Palms illustrates Gorman-Murray and Nash’s notion of a ‘mooring’, specifically for older gay clubbers. To better understand how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate with this
venue, this chapter combined the notion of intersectionality with the spatial imperative of subjectivity. These concepts enable the possibilities to think of the politics of inclusion and exclusion as operating in how a sense of self may be felt and coalesce by how the body is folded in and through space. Particular understandings of self are enabled to thrive, or not, through the intersection of embodied histories, materiality of place, discursive ideas and performance of clubbing. The next chapter will justify which methods align with this corporeal feminist approach.
Chapter 4 Methods

(A) ‘I found that it was generally the nostalgia thing, people of my age trying to recreate something from the past’

(I) ‘And the music facilitated that?’

(A) ‘For me, that was the big thing’.

(from interview with participant: Alex)
4.1 Introduction

Oral histories combined with sketches, play-back song tracks, and a research diary are employed to better understand the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Palms, Oxford Street. These qualitative methods resonate with the project aim: to better understand the role of nightclubs in sustaining individual and collective identities. To justify how these methods align with a corporeal feminist approach, this chapter has six sections. First, deployment of a research diary is established to reflect on how the researcher and participants’ positionality were at the core of shaping epistemologies. Second, an explanation is provided for why oral histories were combined with listening back to dance music sound-tracks to provide insights to meanings alongside the affective and emotional dimensions of clubbing. Third, the methods of recruitment are documented, including reflection on challenges and successes in recruitment, and an outline of who consented to participate. Fourth, an explanation is offered as to how the sample was divided into generational cohorts. Fifth, an explanation is offered as to how the project adhered to ethical standards. Sixth, a rationale for the use of rhizoanalysis is detailed to map the meanings and experiences of a night out in Palms.

4.2 Positionality and personal research diary

Crucially, the project aimed at all times to be grounded in the fact that both researcher and participants are positioned from the perspective of their own subjectivities that are spatial, multiple and fluid (Waitt, 2010). Thus, the relationship between researcher, participants, and the project is constantly growing, shifting and working together to shape the knowledge produced in this thesis. A personal research diary was used to document and reflect upon these changes throughout the project. Just as the researcher shapes the project in its aims and execution, the project also works to shape the researcher as knowledge is continuously co-produced and reproduced as the project unfolds. Deploying this type of critical reflexivity is an effective strategy for dealing with subjectivity (Dowling, 2010).
Excerpts from the research diary are incorporated in this chapter to illustrate these reciprocal relationships. First, a positionality statement and a short reflection from the researcher’s first night out to Palms is given to display how, in embodied research, past experiences are integral to this reciprocal relationship and why conducting the research aligned with personal goals (see Box 1). It is important to establish this because as author, the researcher’s positionality influences how epistemologies are presented, and it is crucial to be aware of how knowledge is always situated (Whinchester and Rofe, 2010).

**Box 1 - Initial thoughts: positionality statement**

Before this project commenced, I had never heard of the nightclub Palms. Being a woman and gay, I would tend to steer clear of Oxford Street when going out at night. As Oxford Street is mostly a male space, I’d prefer to party in lesbian crowds usually in the inner-west of Sydney.

This project was appealing to me because it incorporates an LGBTIAQ element and involves exploring from different lenses a passion of mine which is clubbing. My clubbing experience is different to what clubbing is at Palms. Where Palms might be considered mainstream, I prefer outdoor doofs or indoor raves. These parties usually have a small and familiar crowd and are defined by a genre of EDM (electronic dance music), my preference being psytrance. Drug taking can be a big part of this experience. For that, knowledge of drugs has played a large role in shaping my understanding of clubbing environments.

When visiting Palms for the first time for the purpose of this project, I entered apprehensively and strictly from a researcher’s perspective rather than a punter. This portrays a distancing that reflects how I initially saw myself out of touch with this place as a leisure space. But what I found from my night out at Palms debunked my
expectations. Almost immediately I was enthralled by the vibe and started to shift my stance. I found the music nostalgic and the energy engaging which were familiar feelings similar to my own clubbing experience. I left thinking it was a place I could come back to party with new and different people.

This experience of first visiting Palms was important to educate and prepare me for interviews with people that this place means a lot to. The experience grounded me for the project and I was excited to see what I could learn and where it would take me.

4.3 Oral histories

Oral history interviewing was the core project research method. Oral history is particularly useful in conducting research involving marginalised groups, including LGBTIAQ people whose voices have been sidelined through history (Plummer, 1995). Oral histories utilise an open-ended question format to provide interviewees with an opportunity to talk openly of lived experiences within their life narrative (George and Stratford, 2010). As Gorman-Murray (2004, p.11) tells us: ‘understanding one’s place in the past is essential in the construction of individual and group identity in the present’. Given that Palms has been one of the most enduring venues on Oxford Street over four decades of bourgeoning change in Sydney’s LGBTIAQ narrative, oral histories of Palms provide possibilities for conversations that offer oversights into changing meanings across time. Oral histories allow interviewees to reflect on their changing subjectivities and connections to places and communities on Oxford Street. In turn, this provides valuable insight into how Palms is positioned within life narratives and within the history of LGBTIAQ identities in Sydney.

The oral histories were designed to collect insights about the conscious and non-conscious understandings of how people negotiate their subjectivities in and through space. Storytelling provided access to conscious understandings of how participants
negotiate their subjectivities in reference to social categories such as age, gender, race, sexuality and class that applied to them (Pile, 2010). This offered the researcher insights to how participants’ sets of ideas generate possibilities of inclusion and exclusion along social categories. (See Appendix I for an indicative list of questions asked in interviews).

4.3.1 Techniques used in oral histories

Methods that access the non-conscious dimensions of everyday lives are an ongoing source of debate (Willink and Shukri, 2018). To access embodied memories, that is the non-conscious dimensions of a night out on Oxford Street and Palms, oral histories were combined with asking participants to sketch a night out at Palms and listening back to a favourite song-track from Palms to help stimulate memories and convey meanings and experiences. The sketches were particularly helpful to gauge the intensification and circulation of affect from lighting, music and people (e.g. see Figures 4.1 and 4.2 of sketches).

Figure 4.1: Participant sketch of a night out, Nat, 22/11/2018 (left)

Figure 4.2: Participant sketch of a night out, Michael 29/11/2018 (right)
Geographical literature on affect and embodiment position sound and music as one of the most current and effective ways to better understand the non-conscious dimensions of the politics of inclusion and exclusion (Willink and Shukri, 2018). Furthermore, music is an especially useful tool to navigate memory because of its power to stimulate embodied reactions of past experiences (Bondi, 2014). Listening back with participants to song-tracks that resonated with them as a night out at Palms provided access to the affective intensities of music that shaped their clubbing experience. Following Perks and Thomson (2006), who have documented the ways songs trigger access to embodied memories, questions were structured to scope the emotional and affective dimensions of the clubbing experience. For example, questions that were helpful at invoking emotions and memories while playing back a song in interviews consisted of: Can you explain to me what is happening in the room as this song plays? How are people responding as the chorus plays here? How does the room feel when everyone is singing along at this point in the song? In Box 2 below, an entry from the research diary reveals how this technique was effective during interviews.

**Box 2: Reflections from interview with Harris - 21/11/2018**

This technique of playing a song in interviews is working well. Today when playing Harris’s song, he instantly started dancing while describing to me what was happening in the room and at what point in the song people started waving their arms in the air and engaging with everyone else. Given our interview was conducted in the lounge area of a shopping mall, it was hard to hear the song. But even with people passing by, Harris still engaged with the song like he was at Palms. This was a good illustration of the affective force in music to relay meanings beyond just talking about how he felt.
4.4 Recruitment

Recruitment of participants into a potentially sensitive study such as one on sexuality comes with certain implications and challenges (Gledhill et al, 2008). For example, concerns around anonymity can deter some people from participating. Facebook and other social media sites are increasingly utilised for recruitment in a digital world (de Jong, 2015). Yet, this project found that recruitment via social media platforms like queer collective groups on Facebook was not effective on its own. While there were plenty of excited responses to the project advertisement (see Figure 4.3), enthusiasm rarely translated into an interview. Instead, recruitment relied upon working through community stakeholders, telephone calling and emailing presidents of LGBTIAQ community groups, including Lost Gay Sydney, Frontrunners, Pride History Group and 78ers (see Appendix II for indication of recruitment message). As trusted community leaders, group presidents provided access that facilitated snowballing among their membership.

As shown in Table 4.1, snowballing was the most effective recruitment strategy from participants and the researcher’s social networks. Importantly, participants recruited through community stakeholders, rather than social networks, were the most passionate about Palms (see Table 4.1 for indication of regular status).
On-the-ground recruitment at a party in Wollongong held by LGTBIAQ community organisation Unity, brought many potential participants (see Figure 4.4 of recruitment sign). As argued by Duffy and Mair (2018), the embodiment of LGBTIAQ people at the party facilitated recruitment in a safe, trusted and relaxed context. Here, potential participants could learn more about the project aims face-to-face. This secured eight potential participants. However, given the researcher was approaching the end of the recruitment timeline for an honours thesis, only one interview was conducted from these leads.
Working within the timeline of an honours project, recruitment stopped at twenty participants. Significantly, two participants, John and Peter, are co-owners of Palms (see Table 4.2). Their oral histories offered crucial insights (see Box 3), however they have been separated from the larger cohort as their viewpoints differ from that of a visitor to the venue. Their accounts were used to enrich the project by offering insights into the previously undocumented history of Palms (see Chapter 2). Along with sharing their memories in an interview, John and Peter also provided access to photo collections and other documents in their personal archives.

The politics of the naming of research participants is a sensitive concern that needs attentive care, particularly in the area of sexuality (Moore, 2012). On the Participant Consent Form (see Appendix III), participants were required to select whether they wished to appear as a pseudonym or not. Some participants selected to use pseudonyms to protect anonymity, while others were either indifferent or adamant that they should be identified in the research (see Table 4.1 and 4.2 for indication of pseudonyms).
**Table 4.1: Participant Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (Y/N)</th>
<th>Recruited by</th>
<th>Returns to Palms regularly now or in the past?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex (Y)</td>
<td>Referral from participant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David (N)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia (N)</td>
<td>Referral from participant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine (N)</td>
<td>Referral from participant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Brown Shuga (Y)</td>
<td>Referral from participant</td>
<td>Yes, performer at Palms (drag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul (N)</td>
<td>Response via email</td>
<td>Yes, performer at Palms (dj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris (Y)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sid (Y)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael (N)</td>
<td>Response via email</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea (N)</td>
<td>Referral from participant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah (N)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam (Y)</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare (N)</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym (Y/N)</td>
<td>Recruited by</td>
<td>Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb (Y)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nat (N)</td>
<td>Referral from friend</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jas (Y)</td>
<td>Friend of researcher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess (Y)</td>
<td>Friend of researcher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyde (N)</td>
<td>Friend of researcher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Participant Table 2

The research diary documented the highs and lows of recruitment. In the early stages of the project, lack of willingness for people to accept the invitation to participate generated research lows. In contrast, one of the most memorable moments was the overwhelming positive response to contacting presidents of LGBTIAQ Sydney community groups. Box 3 conveys how this became a turning point and shaped how the project unfolded.
Box 3: Breakthrough in recruitment – 19/11/2018

This week, after emailing the presidents of queer collective groups like Frontrunners and 78ers, I’ve received emails of interest and dates to follow up with a big gain in direction. One of the co-owners of Palms has contacted me and is keen to sit an interview. I prepared notes today with my supervisors about how to structure this interview. As owner, the information to gather will be different to other participants who are speaking as party-goers of Palms. I’ll be aiming to gather information about the history of Palms in relation to Oxford Street, intentions and influences for the club, licensing and venue restrictions, and an insight from a business perspective into how and why the club has been so successful. This interview will provide valuable context for the project. Given how I was feeling last week when things were moving slow, I’m very grateful and excited for this breakthrough.

4.5 Sample

The sample aimed to be inclusive of difference within the LGBTIAQ community. Ultimately, however, the sample lacks diversity along the lines of class, sexuality, ethnicity and gender. The sample is primarily comprised of relatively socio-economically advantaged white women and men who identify as lesbian or gay, respectively. Five women self-identified as lesbian. Twelve men self-identified as gay. All participants self-identified as cisgender. Most participants were employed in average to high income-earning positions. Seven participants indicated they were in relationships. The sample was differentiated along the lines of age. Nine participants were between the ages 45-60, five participants were between the ages 31-45, and six participants were between the ages 26-30 (See Tables 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 respectively). The sample reflects the recruitment process and how Palms holds specific significance for this group of relatively older, socio-economically advantaged men and women.
To understand social sexual life, it is crucial to put narratives into the context of burgeoning LGBTIAQ histories. Hence, life narratives reflect the different generational experiences of sexual politics (Plummer, 2010). Generational cohorts are employed in previous research to think about the attributes of the sample in terms of life course (Robinson and Reynolds, 2016). In this project, generational cohorts are employed to think about Palms in the context of Australian sexual politics. As discussed in Chapter 2, since the establishment of the original Palms nightclub in the late 1970s, the meanings of gay bars and nightclubs on Oxford Street have shifted over time in the context of dramatic change in public opinion and policies on homosexuality in Australia and the greater Global North (Gorman-Murray, 2004). Table 4.3 specifies significant, historical events in each decade since the 1980s that may have shaped participants’ life narratives relevant to their generational cohorts. (See Chapter 2 for further insight on these events).

**Table 4.3: Historical events relative to generational cohorts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Significant Historical Events</th>
<th>Affected Cohorts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS epidemic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Period of drugs and crime on Oxford Street</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>Capitalisation of gay market. Mainstream/super-club era on Oxford Street</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010+</td>
<td>Envisioning of post-gay era</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Participant Attribute Table 4.4

Cohort 1 (aged 45-60)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Self-identified sexual orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Cis female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Cis female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Brown Shuga</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Undefined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Participant Attribute Table 4.5

Cohort 2 (aged 31-45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Self-identified sexual orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sid</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Cis female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Cis male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 4 provides an entry from the research diary that reflects on the lack of diversity within the sample. This entry illustrates how the project is an ongoing learning process that requires the constant negotiation between defining, negotiating, structuring and executing the project aims.

**Box 4: How to talk about exclusion in Palms? – 04/12/2018**

It’s been my concern from the beginning that I might not be able to get a diverse sample of participants in order to assess narratives of exclusion effectively. How am I meant to talk about exclusion when my participants are mostly gay, white, middle-aged and male because that’s the general clientele of Oxford Street? Their understanding of these processes is from their perspective and not people who self-exclude. Though, in my meeting today with my supervisors it really clicked that the project is not about quantitatively assessing how many times people say Palms is inclusive or exclusive.
The focus is on how people make sense of themselves and navigate boundaries because of who they are in relation to intersections of social categories. Thus, there is as much opportunity to explore issues of exclusion than there is inclusion.

4.6 Ethics

Research in the field of sexuality has significant benefits in developing understandings of diverse experiences and resisting heteronormativity. That said, it is important to acknowledge and mitigate the potential harm to participants (Plummer, 2005). For this project, potential harms consisted of possible triggering of trauma associated with stories of coming-out, violence, harassment, or personal hardships due to experiences of belonging to the LGBTIAQ minority group. In line with University of Wollongong ethics requirements, all interview participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix IV) and asked to sign the Consent Form (Appendix III) that provided contact details for LGBTIAQ mental health support hotlines. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the interview or broader project at any time. In some interviews, sensitive stories were exposed. In these cases, the researcher responded compassionately and offered to pause or conclude the interview. In each case, the participant was happy to continue. More commonly, the oral histories generated joy among participants when relaying their memories of Palms.

Participants responded positively about being involved in the research. Participants were very willing to assist the researcher with the project aims (see Figure 4.5 for participant feedback). In most cases, participants were eager to know whether other participants shared their views on the club. Some participants contacted the researcher after the interview to offer positive feedback and to request a copy of the thesis.
4.6.1 Sensitivities and safety

Establishing a safe and comfortable environment for interviews is always a priority (George and Stratford, 2010). This was particularly the case for this project given the sensitivities involved with talking to people likely to have experienced social marginalisation as a result of their sexuality. Time and place of interviews were therefore at the participant’s discretion. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of participants. Some interviews were conducted in cafes or work offices. These locations facilitated comfortable environments where participants felt at ease to converse and in some cases discuss sensitive topics. As part of the fieldwork risk assessment, the researcher notified a friend before and after the interview. The researcher debriefed with the project supervisors after each interview to ensure ethical guidelines were maintained.

Box 5 shares an excerpt from the research diary reflecting on ethical considerations involved with interpreting interview data.
As I’m starting to write the results chapters and interpreting the analysis I’m conscious of how my participants may be represented in the results. Even though quotes won’t be taken out of context, I’m realising the responsibility in the way I discern them. Throughout this whole project I aim to be conscious of my subjective positionality. The same goes in this process in order to ensure respect and integrity to participants.

### 4.7 Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. This project utilised rhizoanalysis to assess the emotional and affective content expressed in interviews (Bondi et al, 2005). Rather than quantitatively coding discourse, rhizoanalysis attends to the affective intensities, ideas and materialities associated with participants’ experiences in Palms and on Oxford Street (Waitt and Welland, 2019). Mapping of affective intensities required paying attention to not only what was said, but how it was said alongside bodily gestures, to offer insights into meanings and experiences that shaped subjectivities of belonging. Pink (2015) has documented the ways ethnographic research has been re-thought with a focus on sensory perception. Analysis conducted in this thesis aimed to identify the ways participants expressed their subjectivities informed by the interconnections of multiple senses in Palms (i.e. smells, sights, touch, sounds).

### 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter aim was to offer a justification of the methods chosen for this investigation into how the embodied politics of inclusion and exclusion operate in and through the social and material relationship that comprise the nightclub Palms, Oxford Street. To do
so, the project combined oral histories along with sketches, sound tracks and a research diary. This combination of methods offered insights not only to the dominant sets of ideas that configure meanings of the people and places that comprise a night-out on Oxford Street, but also access to the emotional and affective dimensions. Music tracks and sketches were particularly helpful in accessing the emotional dimensions of a night out that may have otherwise been left unspoken in oral histories. The research diary was employed to remain alive to arguments that knowledge is always situated, and is co-produced with participants through sharing ideas and experiences. Recruitment relied primarily on responses to emails sent to community stakeholders of queer groups. People with a long-lasting relationship with Palms as well as past and present owners of the venue were the most eager to be involved. The sample reflects an older demographic of fairly affluent, white people that claimed a lesbian and gay identity.

In the following three chapters, a rhizoanalysis is offered of the empirical data. The analysis is structured into three chapters. The first discusses how the politics of inclusion and exclusion play out on Oxford Street to produce boundaries of belonging. The second turns to Palms itself and explores how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate during a night-out at Palms. The final offers an interpretation of the affective and emotional components on the dancefloor in Palms and how they work to fashion who belongs in this venue. Together the three chapters provide insight on why Palms retains importance on a night-out on Oxford Street, and how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate to make and remake subjectivities in and through Palms.
Chapter 5 Processes of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street

‘You hear guys sort of saying snarky comments to girls like, “We shouldn't have to line up for you. This isn't your place.”' - (participant: Michael)
5.1 Introduction

This chapter asks three questions in order to better understand the politics of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street. The combined framework of intersectionality and the spatial imperative of subjectivity are at the heart of this discussion of identifying processes of belonging. First, this chapter asks: What brings people to Oxford Street? Oxford Street is embedded in homonormative understandings of queer that are (re)produced through media-broadcasting events like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. This offers positive opportunities for affirmation of a queer identity but also works to alienate those who do not prescribe to the narrow homo-norm. Second, this chapter asks; What brings people together on Oxford Street? Oral histories in this project reveal how Oxford Street is a place for more than just clubbing. Oxford Street is an important gathering point for the LGBTIAQ community at significant moments like the recent celebration of Marriage-Equality. Embodied histories of Oxford Street constituted through life experiences reveal how the intersection of age and sexuality is paramount in constituting ideas such as ‘community’. Third, this chapter asks: What divides people on Oxford Street? This section explores an interesting spatial dynamic attached to ideas of age, ‘tribes’, dress codes and who belongs to which ‘side of the street’. Next, the gendered dynamics of Oxford Street are explored to highlight how the politics of exclusion continue to constitute boundaries for women.

5.2 What brings people to Oxford Street?

This section is divided into three subdivisions to help address this first question.
5.2.1 Coming out on Oxford Street

Gay and lesbian life narratives are most frequently structured around a process of coming to understand one’s sexuality and eventually ‘coming out of the closet’ in order to live openly as homosexual or queer (Plummer, 2010). As Brown (2000) has identified, the closet in these terms has both metaphorical and material elements and the coming-out process often involves a migration from one physical place to another. In the context of Australia, journeys to Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney, New South Wales, has since the 1970s been positioned as integral to a coming-out process (Annes and Redlin, 2012). Indeed, several participants positioned Oxford Street as a spatial endpoint of their coming-out journey. For example, David (Cohort 1), a resident of Sydney who self-identified as gay, stated:

When I moved here from Brisbane it was still illegal to be gay in Queensland. And it was this amazing experience of going to a place of freedom and love and happiness and all this. But that was counterbalanced with…young people were closeted you know… kids are coming out in high school now, or even in primary school. So you know I think they’re very lucky to live in that sort of environment but I think it’s a great shame they’re missing out on the friendliness and energy of a real community… you used to go into all the venues around the area 20, 30 years ago, and the gay dude that owned it was there. And you got to know them, and there was that connection.

For David, coming from Brisbane in an era where the closeting of homosexuality was legally enforced, Oxford Street represented a place of liberation. There is an explicit focus amongst members in Cohort 1 on the idea of gayness being at the heart of a ‘real’ community. Moreover, a community of difference is hard to imagine. This excerpt from David works to reproduce a homonormativity through a nostalgic reflection on how things used to be. Homonormativity is a narrowed perception of queerness that highlights privileges within LGBTIAQ minorities (Brown, 2012). On Oxford Street, the market caters to a white, gay, male presence and subsequent performativity of this subculture works to reproduce an imagined gay norm.
Common with participants in Cohort 1, in weighing up how things have changed over time, David draws on the notion of community being fundamentally different to ideas today. David alludes to the absence of the closet within younger generations today. Reflecting on the notion of positionality in oral histories is crucial here in understanding how social categories and life experiences interact to shape subjectivities of ‘the other’ (Barker and Smith, 2001). Take for example Nat’s following story of coming-out in Sydney. As a member of Cohort 3, she grew up in an era that celebrated acceptance and diversity. However, her story counteracts arguments that link the dissipation of gay nightlife on Oxford Street with this growing acceptance by claiming young gay people can now find community outside of social and commercial night-life hubs like Oxford Street. For Nat, this was not the case. As she explains:

Where I came from, I didn’t know anybody gay, lesbian or whatever, and pretty much I was the only one out in my friends at that time. Not until my early 20s, [was I] feeling more comfortable in those areas (Oxford Street). Although, when I went home it was tight-lipped. I never spoke about it, where I went, what I did. [It was] very hard.

Speaking as a young lesbian, Nat confirms ideas that places imagined as queer homelands may not always be welcoming to everyone. As Valentine and Skelton (2003) argue, the commercial gay scene may be a place for people to loose and find oneself. Moreover, Nat confirms Gorman-Murray’s (2007) argument that the Australian home usually exists within the dominant norms of heterosexuality. For Nat, the performance of her sexual identity was managed spatially between Oxford Street and home.

5.2.2 Finding out about Oxford St

Media representations accessible to closeted young people work to constitute Oxford Street as an endpoint of queer migration journeys. For example, the televising of the
Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras was Nat’s (Cohort 3) first real indication that a like-minded people existed beyond what she was confined to in Western Sydney. As she explains:

I think I was what, going on 17, I saw my first Mardi Gras on TV and thought ‘omg’. So I actually ended up probably doing a little bit of research finding out what Mardi Gras was ‘cause I didn’t know what it was. And then, yeah, knowing about Oxford St, and then later years trying to get there.

Nat confirms Waitt and Staple’s (2011) argument that Sydney’s Mardi Gras sustains a cultural politics of belonging beyond the city centre. Television broadcasts of Mardi Gras reinforces narratives of Oxford Street as a queer homeland, by renewing ideas of queerness on a temporal basis (annually) through the broadcasting of the parade. These television broadcasts work to both repel or attract LGBTIAQ people by how they navigate ideas of belonging to the homonormativity of the spectacle (McKinnon et al, 2018). For Nat, growing up in Western Sydney, a place lacking narratives and events that celebrate sexual diversity, the broadcasting of Mardi Gras helped expose the possibility of becoming through visiting the imagined gay Australian homeland of Oxford Street.

Similarly, Jas (Cohort 3) talks about the role of media in producing and circulating ideas of Oxford Street as a place of belonging through the movie Priscilla Queen of the Desert. Growing up in the regional town of Wollongong, Jas chose to move to Sydney in his early twenties to experience a more adventurous lifestyle. During his early twenties, Oxford Street was at the center of his world every weekend. When asked where he would go out at night, he replied:

It’d be Oxford St. Or for me anyway because I have such a close bond with Priscilla Queen of the [Desert]. Love the movie, Priscilla, you know [you’d] like to think, go to Oxford St, go to Priscilla. I’ve been everywhere in the movie.
Although featuring the Imperial Hotel in the inner-west suburb of Erskineville as its starting point, the 1994 movie brought significant ramifications for how Oxford Street was understood and experienced at night. It was not just LGBTIAQ people that were attracted to the Sydney gay scene by Priscilla, but also straight people wishing to sight an extravagant spectacle. Peter Clare (Cohort 1), license holder of Palms in 2000 reflected on the impact of the film:

Release of movie Priscilla Queen of the Dessert; everybody wanted to see drag shows after that. And all of a sudden you would have buses, and I mean tourist coaches pulled up at the Albury Hotel. And that’s when Mardi Gras started becoming more widestreamly (sic.) popular. Then you’d get mums and dads and the kids coming in from the burbs.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, LGBTIAQ people have exhibited mixed feelings towards the influx of straight crowds on Oxford Street. On one hand their presence is understood as an opportunity to celebrate inclusiveness across sexualities. On the other hand, their presence works to reproduce tensions as some straight people use the space as an opportunity to affirm their heterosexuality.

5.2.3 Troubling queer migrations

Participants’ narratives of Oxford Street reveal a pattern of spatial migration and scale that associates different layers of ideas about queerness with the street. The journey for David, Nat and Jas consisted of inter-state, inter-city and regional migrations to Oxford Street and shows how an understanding of the street, heavily embedded in ideas of being Australia’s gay homeland, can have positive implications for feelings of inclusiveness and belonging. However, central and confined representations of queerness exhibited through popular media can have negative ramifications for some due to the pressure they feel to fit to a prescribed norm. For example, Sid (Cohort 2), a
resident of Sydney who self-identified as gay talks about how his first experiences with Oxford Street were traumatising:

It was part of my social coming out process. I mean, I feel like a lot of people who are under the queer umbrella or the LGBT+ umbrella have to encounter that beast once in their life or several times… so yeah we were outside there (club on Oxford Street) and I was freaking out… there was so many colourful people, I was like, “I’m not accustomed [to] this”. We stood there outside [and my friend] was really trying to convince me to go in and support me and all this kind of thing, and I went in and it was a nightmare. I was groped and I was actually, come to think of it now quite traumatised. There was this couch that used to exist at the back of the [room] and I literally got on the couch and hiked up my knees and sat in the fetal position. And so a girl came up to me and she was like “come dance with me”. She was one of my friend’s friends. And everyone tried to make me feel comfortable and… that was kind of my foray into the gay scene.

Sid’s story complicates the idea that a greater celebration of LGBTIAQ acceptance and diversity made it easy for gay people to connect to a community. Sid’s story supports what Wait and Gorman-Murray (2011) explore in their study on non-normative sexualities, visibility, and mobility. Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2011) troubled the normalisation of rural to urban migration in portrayals of metropolitan gay centres as sites of unproblematic belonging. In Sid’s situation, the homonormativity of the clubbing scene on Oxford Street worked to initially alienate him from opportunities to connect.

5.3 What brings people together on Oxford Street?

Intersections of age and sexuality were crucially important in this project for shaping subjectivities of belonging on Oxford Street. Ideas about what constitutes a sense of
community were relative to how historical events shaped participants’ understandings across generations. Participants spoke about Oxford Street as not only being a place for clubbing or partying, but also an important meeting point for the LGBTIAQ community at significant moments. Though, meanings attached to ‘community’ varied between participant cohorts. For older generations with a longer connection to the Oxford Street, the street holds particular importance because of life course events experienced by this generation. For example, David (Cohort 1) expresses how the HIV/AIDS epidemic was paramount in fostering his understanding of community:

My more recent and younger partner has grown up without that, HIV is meaningless to him and AIDS is foreign. And when I moved to Sydney in ‘91, it was a peak epidemic… that health epidemic created a very, very strong sense of community. There were fundraisers in all the venues around Oxford Street continually… The closest we’ve come [to that] is the recent marriage equality… You could not get into any bar [on Oxford Street]. They were all completely full. So we kind of just wandered around. And we kept on bumping into people we knew, all ages, everyone was out celebrating. People had just converged on it, and it was the greatest sense of community that I’ve seen since the early 90s. So there was this massive celebration as opposed to, a community getting together because people were getting sick and dying.

David exhibits what Reynolds (2009) explores in his study around anxieties over dissipation of gay life on Oxford Street. David has an emotional investment in the idea of gay community on Oxford Street and shows anxieties for the decline because of how his experiences living through the HIV/AIDS era shaped him. Life experiences shape meanings across generations through a collective consciousness of shared experiences (Plummer, 2010). David references Marriage Equality as another important event that sign-posted meanings of togetherness transcending age.

On November 15, 2017, thousands of people gathered on Oxford Street to celebrate the ‘yes’ vote that legally awarded same-sex couples the right to marry in Australia. This
historical event was referenced by participants in this project as a powerful moment of victory and coming-together for the LGBTIAQ community and straight allies across Australia. For example, Clare (Cohort 3), as a young queer person who travelled from her home town of Wollongong for the event, reflects on the emotions of the moment:

I went to the day of the vote... and everyone's just in the street. They closed the street thank goodness. That was great. You couldn't get in anywhere, but you didn't have to either. Just the positivity and the vibes around the place was great… in the park it was televised so everyone was listening and waiting. And then everyone was crying.

Clare’s story illustrates how history, emotions and affect interact to inform subjectivities of place. Decades of LGBTIAQ pilgrimage to Oxford Street embeds the place in meaning and ignites a powerful affective atmosphere for the celebration of such an event. Virginia (Cohort 1), who self identified as lesbian and has lived close to Oxford Street for the past seven years, shows how members of her generation particularly hold the street in high esteem due to having a longer historical relationship with the place. Virginia shows how this is expressed like a sense of responsibility they feel in nurturing lesbian and gay youth while out on Oxford Street.

The amount of times that I've been stopped [on Oxford Street] by younger gay men, just to talk about how they feel and where they're sitting. Especially during marriage equality, I was getting a lot of messages from younger kids, feeling quite threatened. They felt that the only safe space they had was Oxford Street. They knew that their community was around them, and a lot of the older gay community were looking out for these young kids.

Virginia’s story challenges arguments around the dissipation of gay life in a post-gay era. An era that is post-gay lends to a greater acceptance of gay people in the mainstream and therefore places like Oxford Street as a gay enclave become obsolete (McKinnon, 2015). Instead, Oxford Street is still seen as a safe-haven for LGBTIAQ
people. In turn, this symbolic significance of Oxford Street connects to a desire to celebrate and party through clubbing outside of times spent gathering for important community events like the celebration of marriage equality.

5.4 What divides people on Oxford Street?

‘It’s very tribal. It’s very cliquey. Being accepted as gay is only half of it, now you have to find your tribe.’ – Jas (Cohort 3)

Slavin (2004) draws on a feminist conceptual framework of relational space discussed in this thesis (see Chapter 3) to theorise the notion of place-making and territories. Tribal relationships are performative and fashioned from sets of ideas about belonging based on intersections of social categories. Moreover, intersectional factors produce complex forms of inclusion and exclusion. This section investigates how intersections of age, gender, sexuality and ideas about dress codes determine how Oxford Street is understood and experienced. This section is divided into two parts to address the question: What divides people on Oxford Street? First, which side of the street do you belong on? and second, the gendered geographies of Oxford Street.
5.4.1 Which side of the street do you belong on?

Participants in Cohort 3 revealed an interesting spatial divide that splits Oxford Street according to age, ‘tribes’, and dress codes. In response to the question; Who do you think Oxford St caters to? What kind of crowd? Jas (Cohort 3), who as a young gay man spent his early 20s frequently partying on Oxford Street, explained:

[It’s] the cookie cutter scene. So you’ve got your femmes, you got your mascs, you got your twinks, that sort of genre. So that’s probably anyone under 20, 25. And then, seems like there’s this gap between 25 and 35…then when they start going into their 40s and 50s that’s where you go across the road [to] Palms and Oxford Hotel and stuff. They sort of party on the other side of the road… it’s unspoken. But my experience is, you don’t really go over there. I just never needed a reason to go there. Maybe it’s a different era. Like, older generation that goes there, but when I was 20, 21, no one even mentioned it once. It was
either ARQ, or Stonewall, or Shift, or the Colombian even. (see Figure 5.1 for reference of nightclubs)

Jas points to the ongoing importance in his personal geography of Oxford Street of stereotypes bound to the categories ‘masc’, ‘twinks’ and ‘older generation’. These categories shape his understanding of where different people belong, in which the aged body plays a crucial role. As a younger person, he avoids crossing the road to venues he understands as popular with people aged in their 40s and 50s, including the Oxford Hotel and Palms.

Likewise, when asked the question; Do you think Palms fits in with the overall feel of Oxford Street? Clare (Cohort 3) responded:

The position of Palms to me, it's all about the side of the road. Like the Shift and Stonewall and Colombian [are] all on, depending on where [you are], [the] right side of the road, say if you're looking east. And ARQ is at the top there and it's also towards there. So it's kind of like, you cross that road and you're somewhere else almost? I think it's in a good spot, because it gives you options. You can start off somewhere else and you can always go, “ah we’ve always got the safety of Palms across the road.”… ‘Yeah I don't know. It's like ... I wouldn't say rule, or law, but it's like an unwritten law almost.

Interviewer: And what divides it?

Clare: I think a lot of it's age, and also how people dress. Less clothing sticks to the other side, where more clothing goes to Palms. It's an odd observation but it's true.
Clare, like Jas, illustrates how the notion of ‘the other’ has shaped an embodied identity on Oxford Street of who belongs where according to age and dress codes. Clare’s words confirm England and Simon’s (2010) argument around the notion of ‘otherness’ in perceptions of belonging on the street. People draw on particular sets of ideas to constitute boundaries of the self in the way they make sense of themselves and others on the street.

5.4.2 The gendered geographies of Oxford Street

Bell et al, (2001) theorise ideas about masculinity and femininity as spatial and performative. This approach explains how people continuously work to structure gendered and sexual meanings of Oxford Street. On Oxford Street, ideas about dress codes intersect with gender and sexuality to inform subjectivities as emplaced. For example, Nat (Cohort 3) shares a story of how she was excluded from a venue by a bouncer for not confirming to dominant understandings of how gender and sexuality intersect to gain entry to a particular venue:

One night I wasn’t allowed in… I don’t know, the idea of me not looking butchy enough? I was done up… I had long hair back then and shorts, high heels, you know, I think I just wore a singlet top and something lacy on top of that.. yeah.. maybe a bit too much… ‘cause the dude looked at me and was like: ‘You just look too feminine or something’, and I’m like “what?”

Nat’s story illustrates the dynamics of the spatial imperative of subjectivities and how ideas about who belongs are shaped through the interplay of discursive ideas, materials, emotions and affects (Probyn, 2003). Lesbian historiography has long conflated lesbian sexuality with ‘butch’ cross-dressing. As a result, lesbians who dress outside of masculine appearances are met with skepticism (Boyd, 1999). For Nat, the bouncers assumed she was not a ‘real’ lesbian because of her dress code representing a heterosexual facade. Nat’s story reveals how Oxford Street is embedded in narrow
understandings of gendered and sexual codes that regulate the space by excluding people that don’t fit homo-norms like ‘butch’ lesbian.

Likewise, Virginia (Cohort 1) reveals the role of gender in creating layers of inclusion and exclusion. Virginia’s following story shows, for example, how the intersection of gender and sexuality works to limit opportunities for belonging to the small lesbian scene in Sydney:

I remember walking up the stairs of [the lesbian bar] Ruby Reds, by myself. Not dissembling my sisters, but it was a very [hip] crowd, so it was mainly a lot of leather. A lot of buzz cuts. A lot of colours and chains and stuff. I went, "Fuck. Okay, so if this is lesbianism, I don't quite know that that fits my mould." I thought, "Okay, maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe that's not where my emotional life sits." So that put a damper on my virgining lesbian career, at a very early age. But that was it. There was that one gay bar, Ruby Reds, and there was another bar in Bondi. Basically, that was the female gay scene. And even now, there's very few female gay bars.

Virginia’s story is particularly important because a lack of social concern for women's experiences, particularly in the past has meant that few written sources relating to the lesbian social scene in Sydney exist. Browne and Ferreira (2015) have addressed the wider absence of lesbian geographies within queer studies (see also Browne, 2007; Holland, 2002; Valentine, 2000). Moreover, histories that are recorded tend to privilege the voices of political-feminist lesbians over the experiences of every-day lesbians in bars who were less inclined or invited to share their stories (Jennings, 2009). Virginia goes on to reveal the implications arising from limited commercial venue choices for lesbians:

A lot of the lesbian bars are really boring. A lot of the girls [can be] very intense. If I go out on a Friday night, I just want to rip my lid and have some fun, and
sing to a few songs. I don't want to talk politics. I don't want to talk about saving
the world.

Virginia’s reference to talking politics is relevant to her holding a particular semi-high
profile position around Sydney. Therefore, she often gets recognised for her political
ties in small circles. Virginia confirms arguments around how moments of boredom
work against the confirmation of subjectivities (Anderson 2004; 2015). The affect of
boredom is perhaps intensifed for Virginia because of her anticipation for excitement.
Likewise, Nat (Cohort 3) talks about boredom in the context of going to a lesbian bar in
the inner-west of Sydney, and how she didn’t experience the excitement that a larger
party scene could foster. She says:

Maybe [I] found it a little bit boring just because of the outing that it was. Sitting
down and drinking…[I wasn’t going] there to pick-up or anything like that.

For women like Nat and Virginia, Oxford Street offered something different to what
they considered to be the political or sexual intensity of other lesbian spaces. Lesbian
space has been vastly documented as limited, temporal and fleeting (see Podmore 2001,
2006; Pritchard et al 2002; Casey 2004; Jennings 2009). In Sydney, much like all gay
cities across the Global North, lesbian bars have been few and far between. Lesbian
space exists instead through parties at known bars on certain nights on a weekly or
monthly basis. The voices of lesbians in this chapter confirm and extend arguments
around the limitation of lesbian space and effects of marginilisation due to such
realities. Some gay male participants were also alive to the gendered power dynamics
that exclude lesbians on Oxford Street. As Loyde (Cohort 3) notes:

Some of the biggest issues I had, especially when going out clubbing, was that
the scene is male dominated right? Which… doesn’t sound like a big problem
until you have female friends and you care about them. Because, so often
especially when [my] (lesbian friend) and I would go out, it would be, ‘Hi… bla
bla bla’, and then I would get a response and she would be ignored. And it’s not
just her because she’s a person but because of her gender. And so often, gay men are not interested in getting to know any sort of girl, because they’re not there for that.

Loyde’s observation contributes to the body of research that highlight the complexities that comprise lesbian space. Taylor (2002) has studied the unstable symbolic territories of Sydney’s lesbian community through her study on the Sydney’s Lesbian Space Project. She states; ‘The displacement of internal differences amongst marginalised peoples through the process of consolidating an identity itself constituted through its exclusion from hegemonic social space, is the spatial paradox of identity politics (p.130)’. The perpetual contest for a space that fosters an appropriate or ideal sexual identity points to how intersections of sex, gender, identity and space are inherently constructive, performative and always changing (Bell et al, 1994).

Following Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2011), LGBTIQA counter-narratives of belonging reveal how the intersection of heteronormativity and patriarchy operate to exclude lesbian identities. Gay spaces are male dominated due to homo-patriarchal power dynamics. As a result, these places can tend not to welcome women (Pritchard et al, 2002). A night out on Oxford Street involves, therefore, a constant negotiation between feelings of belonging as a queer person and feelings of exclusion as a woman.

**5.5 Conclusion**

Oxford Street was an important place of identification in the narratives of all participants, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or place of birth. That said, the meanings attached to the street differed amongst generations. Participants revealed how Oxford Street was something other than just a space for clubbing. Oxford Street continues to operate as a focal point in Australian politics of sexuality, as illustrated by how the coming-together of people at significant moments, including the annual Sydney
Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras, works to (re)produce ideas of belonging. That said, the social and material relations that comprise Oxford Street suggest that it is a paradoxical place that operates to include and exclude people through the intersections of gender, sexuality, class and age. The personal geographies of a night-out on Oxford Street suggest how spatial segregation operates along the lines of age and gender. For some, where Palms is located on the east-side of Oxford Street means it is already bound as attractive to only older people, and outside of the attractions of the ‘gay scene’. The next chapter explores a night-out at Palms starting with the queue and moving inside the club to identify how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate within the venue.
Chapter 6 A Night Out At Palms

‘...I'm dancing. I just feel safe, and I feel happy. I feel like, yeah, that world is up that staircase and away.’ – (participant: Virginia)

Stairs leading underground to Palms nightclub. Photo taken by author, 16 May 2019.
6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to draw on the concepts of the spatial imperative of subjectivity and intersectionality to better understand how Palms is narrated as part of a night out on Oxford Street. Drawing on participants’ narratives the chapter offers an interpretation of a night out at Palms chronologically, starting with the queue, then moving inside, then finally onto the dancefloor and to sharing stories of a ‘good’ night out. The chapter argues that meanings and affective intensities of Palms on a night-out within participants’ narratives is relative to how life events have shaped their understandings of ‘community’, ‘the gay scene’ alongside a ‘good night out’. Older participants who have a long-lasting relationship with Palms, i.e. Cohort 1 and some Cohort 2 members, engage in polished techniques that allow them swift passage through the queue. Older generations also share inside jokes/stories about what makes a good night out at Palms. This works to (re)affirm their identity with the club. In comparison, Cohort 3 seem nonchalant about making sure Palms is part of their night-out on Oxford Street. Once inside the club, some participants engage in a surveillance/policing act dictating who should belong in Palms based on sexuality and gender. Embodied histories are integral to the politics of inclusion within Palms. Life-course is integral to how participants spoke about Palms within the context of wider ideas about community. Palms is narrated through personal experiences of the changing Sydney gay scene and how it sustains sense of self. Embodied histories and geographies are integral to better understanding how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate within Palms and become incorporated into or excluded from a night out on Oxford Street.

6.2 The Queue: privileges at the door

On most weekends, a queue forms outside Palms after 11pm. The queue exists as a liminal threshold of transition to and from spaces of belonging (Jaimangal-Jones et al, 2010). How participants spoke about the process of negotiating the queue and crossing the threshold of Palms offers insights to how subjectivities are negotiated and
constituted through the intersection between ideas, emotions, affects and materialities (Johnston, 2018). While nightclubs work to accommodate difference, they tend to replicate structures of exclusion found elsewhere, including along the intersections of sexuality, gender and class. This is prominent in the workings of the queue (Malbon, 1999). How Palms was configured in a night-out on Oxford Street varied between generations. For younger generations, Palms was narrated as a starting point, in which they did not intend to linger. For example, as a young gay man who spent his formative years partying on Oxford Street, Sid (Cohort 2) said:

It wasn’t a place that you kind of stayed at long term I think. A lot of people kind of kicked off there, or it was like another place to go afterwards. Unless you were a huge fan of the retro stuff?

Likewise, Loyde (Cohort 3), who as a gay man also spent his formative years out often on Oxford Street narrated Palms as a starting point to a night out because he experienced the social-material arrangements that comprise the venue as ‘relaxed’ in comparison to other nightclubs. In his words:

It’s a good place to start ‘cause it’s a bit more relaxed…it’s not as intense.

In contrast, for many participants in Cohort 1, the purpose of the night out on Oxford Street was to go to Palms after dinner with a group of friends. Entry to Palms thus became narrated as a source of social kudos. Mechanisms that facilitated ease of entry were spoken about with pride. In exploring the politics of the queue, Merriman et al (2014, p.209) states; ‘queues configure time as space and make delay and stillness a political issue’. This means that the way participants navigated the queue, either by attempting to jump it or by waiting their turn, reveals how social categories such as age, gender, and sexuality interact to reveal disparities between social classes.
The time of night and length of queue outside Palms, for many participants in Cohort 1 was noted as of little concern. How class intersected with age and sexuality often operated to facilitate privileged access through paying for entry. For example, Harris (Cohort 1), an older regular of Palms attending for around three decades spoke of the privilege of paying for entry:

Some of my friends when we were in a big crowd and we were in the queue, would be bold enough to go to the bouncers and slip them a $50 note, and we’d get straight through like VIPs.

Harris regarded himself as a serious clubber on Oxford Street throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During this time he would show up regularly to Palms with a group of friends. He still attends Palms today, though less frequently because he lives outside of Sydney. For Harris, paying for access to Palms configures social status and enables him to narrate himself like a VIP. However, Harris goes on to explain that even for those unable to pay, queuing can create pleasures by opening up the possibility to bond with friends or strangers within the liminal space of the queue. For example:

If you’re with a group who’s not willing to give the bouncer 50 bucks, you’d have some amazing conversations out there with your group and also the people in front, people behind…we’re all in the same line up ready for the same party.

Bouncers thus play a key role in the meanings and experiences of the queue. As argued by Malbon (1999) the bouncers’ role facilitate a process of self-identification through sustaining sensations of belonging to a crowd beyond the door. For example, being interpellated by the bouncer as a regular was narrated as offering not only a sense of belonging but privileged entry by many participants in Cohort 1 regardless of gender. For example, Virginia (Cohort 1) reveals how privileged access by being a regular alongside guest lists could be understood as a form of gendered empowerment and belonging:
You'd get in if I put you on my list. I've gotta say that is such a win, that all these gay guys are saying, "Oh, Virginia, please, can you get me in?" I said, "Look, I'll get five in tonight. That's all I'm gonna do." That's actually quite nice, because unfortunately, in that whole sexual world, gay men do tend to have the power. So it's nice to flip the coin. And it's nice to have somewhere like Palms, where they can't get in, and I can just walk in with a crowd of 10, and just say: "Look, is that cool?" They say: "Absolutely."

Virginia is recognised by the bouncers in the queue as a regular. Most weekends for the past seven years she goes out to Palms. Yet, Virginia is alive to the powerful gendered dynamics of place. As a lesbian, she talks of having to ‘earn your place’ at Palms through becoming a regular. Virginia goes on to explain that:

The guys see [Palms] as their own, and it is… I say you'd probably have to prove yourself… I've never been turned away from Palms. I've never not gotten in, and I've only queued maybe once. So I'd say that for whatever reason, they like us and we like them. If ever I get people in, I'll always thank (member of staff). And he'll always say, we're the exception, we're not the rule for lesbians.

Virginia illustrates how troubling the ideas that constitute Palms as a men’s only space requires not only attending the venue nearly every weekend for a series of years, but also befriending the staff, including the bouncers. Studies of gay space in other global cities such as Manchester’s gay-village have shown that lesbians envision gay space to be just as important to them as it is to gay men in terms of developing social networks (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). Yet, gay spaces often work to disempower lesbians due to homo-patriarchal power structures stemming from ingrained social-cultural constructions (Pritchard et al, 2002). Virginia’s experience illustrates an unspoken but ever present gendered-power dynamic playing out at Palms.

Michael (Cohort 2), who self identified as gay and is a resident of Sydney living close to Palms also speaks of paying for entry. However, crossing the threshold did not hold
the same sense of creating a special social status as narrated by Virginia or Harris. Michael talks of how the threshold of Palms helped particular heterosexual femininities to fluoresce:

Before when we used to go, like in 2006 or 2010 or '11, we just used to bribe the bouncers. So, it started off with $10, but by the end of it we're paying like $50, which you're always happy to do but then they changed the bouncers or I don't know what they did, and we couldn't get in anymore… I mean, now I've got a straight girlfriend who loves going there, and she's really pretty, so she knows who all the bouncers are. And she'll sort of go up and try and convince them to let her and us in.

Michael’s narrative illustrates the important role of women who identify as straight in the lives of many gay men. In the context of the Palms queue, women who identify as straight and perform heteronormative femininities start to trouble the ideas that configure the queue in terms of same-sex attraction. How people do their gender and sex is how places become sexed and gendered (Butler, 1990). The bouncers at Palms embody a type of masculinity that informed Andrea’s assumptions enabling her to act on heteronormative cues. Gorman-Murray (2013) has explored how straight-gay friendships create landscapes of both equalities and inequalities. Owners at Palms are alert to the potential unease generated by the presence of bodies that ascribe to heteronormativity in a venue pitched to gay clientele. Hence, one way that access to Palms is regulated in the queue is through a ‘no open-toed shoes’ policy. This is based on ideas of heterosexual female dress codes, i.e. straight women are likely to wear open-toed shoes. As John, part-owner of Palms discloses:

This open-toed shoe policy thing, it is a device really to stop Hen’s Nights coming in. And I always felt a bit uncomfortable about it because they’ve taken it too far sometimes you know. And the risk of doing that is you’re excluding women. Including gay women and I don’t want to do that. It shouldn’t be that. But you do have to control, strike that balance between male and female, gay
and straight. Otherwise it changes the whole dynamic of the room; the bar. But, you gotta do it in a nice way, and a non-obvious way.

The phenomenon of Hen’s parties out on Oxford Street is met with contradictions in Palms. Hen’s parties are groups of women celebrating the marriage of (until very recently) only straight women in Australia. The next section will explore how participants negotiated tensions of inclusion and exclusion regarding Hen’s parties in Palms.

Regardless of age, for those people who can neither afford to pay for entry, nor are constituted as regulars, nor are willing to flirt with the bouncers, the queue on weekends may act as a deterrent, particularly for people out on their own. Some participants spoke of self-exclusion because of the negative affects of seeing a long queue while out and about alone. As David (Cohort 1) says:

Unless the line was too long and I thought: ‘Ah, I can’t be bothered’… I’m not going to stand in a line for half an hour or 45 minutes.

Others spoke of changing their night-out plans and arriving early. For example, Noah (Cohort 2), a gay man who lives outside Sydney but makes a point of attending Palms when he is in the city says:

After the first few times going and knowing the fact that there's always a queue after 11 o'clock, I would be like: "No, we're going there before 10:30."

Hence, the pleasures of a night out at Palms are often weighed against the meanings and experiences of standing outside for 30-45 minutes. As members of the older generations had plenty of strategies to ensure their entry into Palms, younger generations expressed less of a concern to queue for Palms to ensure it would be the purpose of their night-out.
6.3 Inside Palms: regulation in the club

Hen’s groups were central to several narratives of a night out at Palms. The appearance of Hen’s groups should not be a surprise. As Casey (2004) points out, the increasing focus on capital and tourism in lesbian and gay leisure spaces in Western global cities has resulted in the increased numbers of people who identify as straight, particular Hen’s groups. Oxford Street is no exception (Ruting, 2007). Narratives about the influx of straight crowds are contradictory. On one hand, young straight women are positioned as ‘hope for the future’. As Alex (Cohort 1), an older gay man and regular at Palms says:

As you see younger people coming or the Hen’s groups, you think, “Thank god these girls now come to our bars.”… I think it lets you see the hopefulness of the future.

As a member of Cohort 1, Alex is speaking from an experience of living through a time of segregated homosexual oppression. Integration of straight and gay people is seen as a movement towards acceptance and equality and is therefore welcomed.

On the other hand, there is a limit to the tolerance that some participants in Palms are willing to undergo, particularly in regards to Hen’s groups. For example, Clare (Cohort 3) states:

It's just a bit odd. I just find it odd. You've got everything girls, give us something.

Unlike Alex, Clare is less hopeful about the presence of women who identify as straight in Palms. Indeed, Clare uses the language of ‘odd’ to question why these women would choose Palms over any other location. As a member of Cohort 3, growing up in an era of increased integration of gay and straight culture, the inclusion of straight women in
Palms is seen as less of a celebration and more as a threat. Clare’s statement confirms what Matejskova (2007) suggests about the opening of gay bars to straight clientele creating tension through concerns of imposing a heteronormative order. Particularly for lesbians, Eichenberger (2012) has argued that diffusion of straight women in gay bars has helped push lesbian women to the periphery of the subculture, leaving them with little space of their own. Clare configures straight women in Palms as advantaged because of their sexuality, and disadvantaging lesbians by their presence. Clare positions heterosexuality as privilege. Yet, many heterosexual women come to gay bars for the reason of not being objectified by men. This objectification is what they find everywhere else but in gay bars (Hutton, 2004).

Participants revealed important insights into how they are constantly regulating what sorts of sexualities and genders are allowed to flourish in Palms, and those that are actively discouraged. Several participants spoke of Palms as an inclusive space for those living outside the norms of heteronormativity. As Miss Brown Shuga (Cohort 1) says:

'It's such an eclectic collective group of people. I watched a movie the other day, Bohemian Rhapsody, and there's a point where he says, the main actor; "We're misfits, and what we do is talk to other misfits." So yeah, it's kind of like that if that makes sense.

Miss Brown Shuga, an aboriginal gay man who performed drag at Palms in the early 2000s narrates Palms as ‘an eclectic collective group of people’. For Miss Brown Shuga Palms is understood as special because it is inclusive of all people who are positioned as ‘misfits’. Hence, Palms becomes understood as outside of lives configured by mainstream understandings of gender and sexuality.

Likewise, Clare (Cohort 3) illustrates how sets of ideas configure Palms as a space for same sex desires, and position heterosexual displays of affection on the dancefloor as out of place:
I think the last time I was there, there was a straight couple making-out quite a lot on the dance floor. And they got some looks, whereas if two guys were making out, it's fine… Definitely, if you're straight and you're making out there, you get an odd look.

Clare illustrates Foucault’s notions of power as creative through constituting regimes of truth that structure taken for granted ideas about people and places (Jagger, 2008). For Clare, Palms is taken for granted as gay space, which operates to exclude opposite-sex displays of affection as ‘odd’.

The felt intensity of displays of opposite-sex affection were expressed as most strongly felt by some Cohort 1 participants. For example, Virginia said:

I think now that marriage equality is in, there doesn't seem to be that delineation between a straight club and a gay club. There's a lot more symbiotic relationship between the two… Which, I have to be honest, I can get a bee in my bonnet about. If I go to Palms, and I see the gay kids queuing up there to get in, and I go downstairs and I see 30% of the population is straight little kids from the North Shore…

Despite an awareness of arguments that the binary between straight and gay is less relevant today than in the past, some participants, particularly those in Cohort 1 spoke passionately of the ongoing importance of maintaining Palms as a club in which gay subjectivities could flourish exclusively (Rosser et al, 2008). Virginia is angered by the presence of bodies in Palms that she categorises as kids, straight and affluent (North Shore). Virginia goes on to explain that the presence of these bodies works against the possibilities to be and become gay in Palms:

…Christine's (Virginia’s partner) had to pull me up a few times to say, "Look, Virginia, just zip it." I'll go to these kids and I'll say, "Come on, guys. You've
got so many clubs that are specifically for you, and this is just one small club that is gay-centric. If you've got mates that you're out here with then, that's completely fine. But if you're out here to have a night out, then fuck, go somewhere in Newtown... It does bother me, because here we are supposedly in our gay centre of Sydney, and we have two, maybe three bars that we can choose from…. I’m selfish, I want Palms to be just for us…. I want the people who really want to be there, and my community, to be able to go to Palms.

Virginia positions Palms as the centre of gay Sydney, and the presence of these straight bodies as a threat. One way that Palms becomes configured as the centre of gay Sydney that sustains not only lesbian and gay identities and collectives but also that of a regular is through the sharing of stories about a ‘good night’ out at Palms. The next section explores stories that regulars of Palms have shared to affirm their identity with the club.

6.4 Stories from the dancefloor

'The joke that my partner tells, and this is what we always say every time we raise Palms we say the same thing; "enjoy your death trap, ladies," and the reason, I don't know if you get that reference, there was a Simpsons episode years ago where Homer was looking for another bar. For some reason he couldn't go to Moe's anymore. So he's going to all these different venues, and he's in this one bar and it's clearly a lesbian bar, there's just women everywhere. And he's sitting at the bar, and he goes, "Hm. There's something funny about this place. This lesbian bar has no fire exit! Enjoy your death trap, ladies." And that's the big joke my partner says, because when you're in Palms, there is a fire exit, but we're like: "This place is a death trap." – Noah (Cohort 2)

Memory and humour acts within a community to reinforce group identity through repetition. McKinnon (2016) has shown how movie memories enable connection
through performance of gay identity. The telling of Noah’s joke works to create a sense of belonging to Palms through repetition and camp humour. Camp humour has been described in Kates (2000, p.294) as ‘an ironic appreciation and celebration of excess, exaggeration, and flamboyance, reworking the conventional meanings of things, icons, and publicly figures associated with popular culture.’ Camp humour works in Palms to challenge hetero-normative understandings of clubbing and empower lesbian and gay minorities.

Likewise, Virginia narrates a story about PRIs, known within her circle of friends as ‘Palms Related Injuries’:

We go to Palms and we play. There's a few of us that had things called PRIs, Palms Related Injuries, to which there have been two broken wrists and one broken shoulder. I took the shoulder out, and the boys took out the wrists with pins and plates. That's actually kind of a badge of honour. If you've got a PRI, then you've cracked a good night out… it was [after] we'd got home at about 3:00. I got up and I was walking down the staircase, and I just lost my footing, and face planted, and tore my rotator cuff. Andrew slipped outside trying to get into a cab. Slipped off the gutter and broke his wrist… It's after you leave Palms. No, you're always safe in Palms. If you make it up the staircase, you're safe.

As Harker (2005, p.60) states; ‘playing is often about conformity and socialising to an imaginary norm’. The embodied performance of playing by Virginia and her friends allows them to consolidate a sense of belonging that associates an injury as an accolade at Palms. This story resembles a similar psychology of how sports injuries have been understood in sporting teams as proof of belonging through notions of toughness and pride (Adjepong, 2016). Virginia’s sharing of the story helps to create truths about what constitutes a good night out at Palms. This act of storytelling affirms an exclusive sense of collective belonging to Palms.
Similarly, Michael (Cohort 2) tells of always posting photographs of his night out at Palms on Facebook:

They have these flashing coloured lights that are sort of kaleidoscope. And the number of times when we're drunk we take a photo with our face in it and then put it on Facebook ... and people are like: "Oh, you're there again." Like, yep (laughter).

Studies on the culture of selfies in the age of social media have pointed to the act of posting photographs to be a form of political resistance and empowerment. Murray (2015, p.490) has explored the way young women have used selfies ‘as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture’s obsession with and oppressive hold over their lives and bodies.’ In a similar sense, Michael’s action of posting photographs of Palms draws on the notion of pride as a defensive strategy in the rejection of (hetero)normative concepts of what constitutes a ‘cool’ or usual clubbing experience. There is an ironic pleasure in the celebration of the abject that (re)claims a collective identity through clubbing in Palms. This notion is supported by studies that have shown similarly how the claiming of LGBTIAQ space resists the oppressive naturalness of heterosexuality like for example in the Sydney 2002 Gay Games (Waitt, 2003). The 2002 Gay Games followed the monumental 2000 Sydney Olympic Games but with an onus on celebrating LGBTIAQ athletes and resisting the dominance of heterosexism in sport in an empowering way (Markwell and Rowe, 2003).

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate through a night-out at Palms, starting with the queue, to gaining entry, then to the dance floor and reflecting on stories of a ‘good’ night-out. Palms is narrated as a gay space that is increasingly visited by a straight crowd. Hence, the narratives bring to the fore how
participants were constantly negotiating their subjectivities in the queue, on the dancefloor and in stories about a good night-out. In telling these stories, participants revealed insights into how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate across life-course through the intersections of social categories such as age, class, gender and sexuality. Participants who most strongly narrated Palms as a gay space were often those with the longest embodied histories and memories of this venue. For many of these participants, the venue was the key reason for going-out on Oxford Street. Participants in Cohort 1 and 2 were more likely to regard themselves as regulars and share inside jokes that helped affirm a sense of belonging to a Palms collective. Consequently, these participants often articulated the strongest emotions in defence of Palms as gay space and protecting a gay community. Those bodies that reconfigured Palms through the social relationships of heteronormativity were viewed as ‘odd’. The next chapter explores the dancefloor at Palms and the role of emotional and affective atmospheres in the politics of inclusion and exclusion.
Chapter 7 The Affective Intensities and Atmospheres of Palms

‘[Palms has] that magic of same place, different people, same vibe, same music. It’s got the recipe which is perfect’ - (participant: Harris)

7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the question: ‘Why do people return to Palms for a night-out on Oxford Street?’ To do this, the chapter is divided into two sections: 1) ‘The highs of Palms: love and vulnerability’; and, 2) ‘The ‘light’ affective atmosphere of Palms’. Drawing on corporeal feminist concepts of subjectivity, intersectionality and affective atmospheres, I argue that nightclubs are not only places for people to perform subjectivities based on conscious ideas about the night-time economy. Rather, the experience of clubbing is fundamentally influenced by affective intensities that are triggered by elements such as music, lighting, alcohol and crowds. Emotional and affective intensities shape how bodies and spaces fold together to make and remake what it means to do clubbing in Palms (Anderson, 2009). The enjoyment participants experience in Palms sits in contrast to literature on clubbing being defined by intensities like drug-taking, picking-up and dressing to impress (Malbon, 1999). Instead, participants referred to Palms as being relaxed and non-pretentious. The music, lights, decor, and performance of other dancing bodies were some of the affective elements participants spoke about as fostering a ‘light’ atmosphere or vibe.

7.2 The highs of Palms: love and vulnerability

‘You go to there to rip your lid, and to dance on the dance floor, and just have a great time, and you always do.’ – Virginia

Virginia turns up most weekends to Palms with her partner and a group of friends. As a result of her family and political ties, Virginia has a public profile that often puts her in the spotlight while out and about on Oxford Street. Palms is a place where she feels she can escape from the pressures of the everyday. In her words:
I just feel safe, and I feel happy. I feel like, yeah, that world is up that staircase, and away.

Virginia’s description offers insight into why people return to dance spaces to experience joy and pleasure. Clubbing is a visceral experience that allows one to shake off the body of the everyday and recreate an experience that produces embodied knowledge of belonging (Malbon, 1999). Dancing to music in Palms seems to always create a high through how bodies are folded into the space through dancing. Dancing is a powerful kind of freedom that can transcend anxieties of ‘looking-good’ while caught up in the shared expression of emotion on the dancefloor (Jackson, 2004). For many participants, dancing at Palms was the ultimate high of a night-out on Oxford Street. Participants explained that the consumption of alcohol rather than other drugs was often part of the high:

Clare: I don't think I've ever been to Palms when I haven't been drinking. And usually I'm not a massive drinker either, so when I go to Palms, I mentally prepare, “This is what I'm gonna do”, kind of thing. And it's always lived up to my expectation as well. I've never come back like, “oh, that's a crappy night”. That's what makes me going back as well.

Andrea: ‘After a few drinks you drag your friends to the middle of the dance floor, where you have multi-coloured disco balls and lights going off. And cues like that.

The participants express that while drinking was often integral to a night out in Palms, imperative to the high was a willingness to dance and sing-along to ‘uncool’ music and embrace decor that was often described as ‘daggy’. As Michael, a gay man in his 40s explained:
You love that [90s] era of music…the way it makes you feel…I love the older stuff they play. You're not going to get that at too many places, and that's one of the reasons people do love going there is because you can hear all the music you don't hear anywhere else…as soon as the words start, everyone starts doing their actions. And I guess that's one of the reasons I remember it because people are so into it. Everyone knows what movements to do and it's just fun and happy. It's the perfect song to represent Palms because I mean, Spice Girls are not the coolest thing in the world but gays love them.

Likewise, Andrea said ‘sometimes it’s so bad that’s it’s good’. For Andrea, her experiences of growing up clubbing in Singapore have shaped her love for Palms. She explains:

In Singapore, if you're rich, you get special treatment. If you're a celebrity, you get special treatment. Palms, no one gives a shit.

Similarly, David spoke of the importance of Palms being a ‘bit daggy’. David has spent many nights partying on Oxford Street during the 1990s and 2000s. Although he doesn’t go out much anymore, he has been to Palms many times over the years and maintains that:

It’s got a real buzz about it, because it’s sort of bit daggy, there’s not a pretentiousness about it. All sorts of people go there [to] just have fun and get silly.

Participants who returned regularly to Palms were aware of the discourses that positioned Palms as outside of contemporary clubbing culture. As Malbon (1999, p.51) states: ‘The sensations of belonging that appear so central to clubbing are partly constituted through the processes, practices and experience of being cool (or not) while clubbing. Styles of dress, of speech, of dancing, choices about which beer to drink,
about clubbing venues, or about drugs may all be central.' In contrast, participants spoke about their love of Palms being constituted because it opposes pretentious codes of belonging. This makes party-goers of Palms vulnerable to playful criticism from outsiders. However, it is possible to reject feelings of shame or embarrassment for being uncool through a shared identity that embraces the love of partying at Palms. As Michael states:

They have these flashing coloured lights that are sort of kaleidoscope. And the number of times when we're drunk we take a photo with our face in it and then put it on Facebook ... and people are like, "Oh, you're there again." Like, yep (laughter).

The highs of dancing at Palms sustains a kind of love that fosters from celebrating the uncool. Participants explained how the intoxicating affects of group inclusion is more than enough to compensate for concerns about being constituted as uncool, daggy, retro or old. For example, Harris, a gay man in his 50s and long-time regular of Palms conveyed his willingness to dance to the song ‘Nine to Five’ by Dolly Parton. Listening back to the dance-track with Harris during the interview he explained that:

You’d run onto the dancefloor and find your little kind of space, as this song’s on, and everybody just danced. Everyone was doing a bit of bootscooting, you know, getting into the groove, country western… (Chorus) So all the hands are up in the air! Doing this (puts hands in air), you’d do a few spins, probably bump into some of the people on the dancefloor right about now… yeah the whole room is up in it absolutely right now.

Listening to the song during the interview triggered memories for Harris of his time on the Palm’s dancefloor and the affective atmospheres created by a shared love of ‘daggy’ music. Similarly, Clare, a young queer woman recounts memories of her first time at Palms:
My first time at Palms… was the first time I'd been to a club situation where it had music that you could sing along to. Had words and stuff. And I remember, it was probably about 2009, 2010, and they're playing “Don't Stop Believing”, but the Glee version. I just thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world.

Clare expresses that the love of Palms is fashioned not only by embracing retro dance music, but also knowing the words of a song to sing-along. As Eyerman (2002) argues, being able to cite the words of a song is one way that people may express affinity with a specific collective. It is a love of the uncool alongside the endorphins from dancing and drinking that points towards participants’ experiences of the highs of a night-out at Palms.

Similarly, Alex spoke of a community forged by singing and dancing to songs configured by techno clubbing cultures as uncool. Alex has been attending Palms for two decades. He details how the music the club’s DJs play is central to his love of the venue. While listening back to the track he selected to play in the interview, ‘Better the Devil You Know’ by Kylie Minogue, he explained:

I think it’s just always happiness and because basically everyone knows [the song] it’s just such an iconic piece. And it was when Kylie reinvented herself and she went from daggy to cool and that sort of thing. It always makes me think of Palms. No matter where I am in the world and I hear it. And I always think it’s kind of like an anthem that’s always played there for that reason, ‘cause it was such an identity piece for me in those times… And see, Kylie was a great supporter of the gay community. She was kind of our pin-up girl. I never cease to be amazed that they’re still playing it…25 years later… That was the sound of what the gay scene used to be like… I just think it’s positive. It’s a lovely sound, in a world that can be harsh in so many ways.
Alex’s reflection illustrates the way music can trigger emotions of nostalgia (Barrett et al., 2010). Though it is not just nostalgia associated with songs that can trigger feelings of belonging. For example, Noah talks of his partner’s puzzlement for his love of returning to Palms for a night-out on Oxford Street. Noah pointed out his love of the retro music is what keeps him coming back:

One thing that my partner always says [is] "I don't know why you like that place so much." And I’m like, "I love the music." He says, "It's the same music you listen to on your iPhone anyway," which is mostly true. But…it's something about being in a public space where others are also listening to it, others are dancing to it, others are singing along, you're sharing it. And I think maybe that's what it is about it. So, there's nothing about the music per se, of taking me back, because I listen to it anyway. But maybe it's the sharing of it?

Noah points to how his love for the music played at Palms is not only about recalling memories of the past but revolves around sharing with others. Noah’s love of retro music brings to the fore what love means in this respect. His words echo that of bell hooks (2000) who argues that love is about purpose and community. Certainly, for Noah, his love of music in Palms is about building a collective through dancing and singing-along to the songs.

7.3 The ‘light’ affective atmosphere of Palms

McCormack (2008, p.413) articulates the idea of ‘affective atmosphere’ as ‘something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies while also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal’. Participants shared a felt intensity of the affective atmosphere of Palms as ‘light’ in comparison to other clubs on Oxford Street. For example, Nat, a young lesbian who spent many of her
formative years clubbing in neighbouring venues of King’s Cross and on Oxford Street, contrasts Palms to other venues by saying:

I think with the music? Again, if I could compare it [to] being like Retro … Yeah, very light feel.

Likewise, Sid reminisces on his early twenties when he used to visit Oxford Street regularly as part of his coming-out experience. He remembers other clubs, such as Midnight Shift, as overbearingly intense. Palms was different because:

[It] was more relaxed, it was more casual. Definitely like a retro vibe. Sometimes they [had] really good kind of house retro music which was really fun…I’d be the only guy usually to be like “let’s go to Palms”, and everybody’s like “no I’m sick of the retro shit”…I think for a lot of people it seems like the kind of place to go to before, because it’s really light, and [maybe] if it graduated its music into something a bit heavier towards the end of the night it might be a bit of a destination for people?

Similarly, Alex said: ‘[Palms] doesn’t have the intensity that a nightclub has.’

Following Anderson (2009), affective atmospheres are forceful moments that modulate a body’s capacities to affect and be affected in a specific place. For participants, alongside knowing the words to songs, the intangible qualities of how the music registered on bodies were integral to how Palms was understood as ‘light’ in comparison to the intensity of other clubs. This affective force of lightness is imperative in allowing bodies to feel relaxed, joyful and open to interaction with strangers on the dancefloor.
Alongside the music, participants attributed other elements such as lighting and other bodies to the affective atmosphere that circulates in Palms. For example, Nat spoke of the lighting and alcohol:

[Palms] was different music, and the inside…from dark and dingy and cages and dark walls (comparing to other club) to bright fluro lights. Very random night, great night…although probably hazy…

Nat continues:

…the neon lights…walking down…[Palms] was just lit up… even the bar itself had all the lights in there. Think we went in there, maybe even ordered a Long Ice Tea because we just felt so festive…more cocktail style rather than the normal vodka and lemonade I was drinking at the time.

Nat illustrates Anderson’s (2009) notion of the doing of affect. The feeling that the lighting produced in the club led to Nat engaging in subjectivities that were felt as ‘festive’. Similarly, Alex spoke of the importance of alcohol and the absence of people using ‘harder’ drugs such as ecstasy or crystal:

…which again is a reason that I didn’t go there (ARQ), ‘cause that’s (drugs) something that I haven’t involved myself with. But at the Palms, maybe that’s why people are so jolly, I don’t know. I’ve always thought the Palms was more a few drinks and a laugh kind of thing than a full-on party night, like the other places.

Likewise, Noah spoke of the absence of drugged bodies as generating a more relaxed affective atmosphere:
It is a relaxed venue. People aren't uptight. It's not a venue where everyone's drugged up.

Drugs and alcohol play a large role in generating the socio-sensual shift that marks out the club as different to other forms of public space (Browne and Bakshi, 2013). In Palms, however, participants described a sense of relief at the absence of drugged bodies that usually defines clubbing cultures. Several participants used comparisons with the club ARQ as a way of explaining the lighter affective atmosphere of Palms:

Loyde: ARQ was a bit intense ‘cause it had so many shirtless men and that’s not really my scene. It was a bit intense. Palms was nice cause it was a bit quieter.

Andrea: I generally always have a much better time at Palms. I think ARQ might be definitely more of a “pick-up” place for gays? I don’t know. Maybe that’s just the vibe that I’m getting … ARQ’s definitely more exclusive…a lot of people standing around looking at you. Whereas Palms, no one’s looking at you, no one’s caring what you’re doing.

Clare: I feel it's (drug taking) more in the bathrooms. Where, ARQ, you walk through and you have amyl all over you. People poppin’ caps wherever, front and center kind of thing. Where, I don't know if I'm just having too much of a good time and at ARQ, I'm like, I hate it, so I'm more conscious towards it all. But I don't feel it at Palms. I don't feel it's that crowd either. We're a chill like... stereotypically we're like, “you're not into that” kind of thing.

The ‘light’ affective intensities of Palms are integral to the highs of a night-out. As Anderson (2009, p.78) argues, ‘affective atmospheres are a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions’ (emphasis in original). Participants spoke of individual and collective subjectivities emerging and dissipating
during a night-out at the club. For example, Michael explained how the ‘light’ affect of Palms emerged through the possibilities of working outside prescribed dress and body codes he sensed in other clubs.

It just makes me feel happy... I don't like wanky people…you just feel you don't have to put on a show. You can just be exactly however you feel that night. You don't have to be all dressed up, but you can just go and have a good time.

Similarly, Loyde described the coming together of music, bodies, lights and alcohol to constitute Palms as ‘chilled’:

I was with (a friend), and he said [Palms] was like an older more chilled crowd so we went there and had drinks and that was a really fun time. I really liked that.

For some participants, a night out in Palms is about losing themselves. Valentine and Skelton (2003) talk about the paradoxical role of the scene in gay nightclubs. While clubs can be sights of cliques and exclusion, they can also be sites to escape the pressures of the everyday. For Virginia:

It's just that feeling of not having to think about anything. I mean to go out somewhere locally and be able to dance, it is ... I don't want to go to Stonewall and have to sit there and talk to randoms, who want to talk to me. Or, a drag shows on that’s fine. If I'm just there, I just want to do what I want, and I find that I can't do that. I have to go to other venues, because people harass you. Which is great that they want to come and say nice things to you, but sometimes you want to say, "Fuck, this is my zone out. I just wanted to have this space." I go to Palms, and I get on that dancefloor, and it's great. Nobody hassles me. People are usually in there saying; "Hi. It's great to see you." It's a completely different energy.
Miss Brown Shuga also talks about the possibility for inclusion in Palms. Miss Brown Shuga is an Aboriginal gay man who performed drag on Oxford Street and in Palms in the early 2000s. He talks about Palms as a place where he felt safe and welcomed compared to other clubs he performed at on Oxford Street. As he notes:

Sometimes they just looked at me with daggers in their eyes…and when you do drag it’s very intense…in the other clubs I was treated quite differently…no one was nasty or mean or any of that kind of stuff. It was just like I had that feeling of, “Oh, I don't belong to this place.” But [not] in Palms.

Moreover, for others the experience of Palms offers the opportunity to become part of a larger collective through possibilities of dancing with anyone:

Clare: It's not too cliquey. And on the dance floor it doesn't matter if you're on there by yourself. Anyone will dance with you.

Andrea: Often you line up to get a drink, and you sing along to songs you like, and the person next to you knows the song, and you both sing it together, and there's that camaraderie, that exclusivity there.

These participants illustrate how dancing in Palms enables them to perform an identity through physical closeness and appreciation of music that produces a sense of togetherness regardless of any differences (Buckland, 2002). Andrea describes how this unique sense of togetherness sets Palms aside as ‘exclusive’ to other clubs on Oxford Street.
7.4 Conclusion

As a thriving gay space on Oxford Street, Palms challenges traditional understandings of gay nightlife being defined by intensities offered by drugs and sex. The highs experienced from a night-out at Palms are achieved, in part, through a shared love of retro music that transcends concerns of being daggy or uncool and facilitates collective moments of dancing and singing-along. The ‘light’ affective atmosphere of Palms was the attraction of this venue in comparison to others on Oxford Street. The music, fairy-lights, and bodies in relaxed dress-code triggered affective feelings of a welcoming, safe and unpretentious vibe. Participants contrasted the atmosphere of Palms to the intensities they felt at other clubs on Oxford Street like ARQ. The lack of pulsating music, strobe lights, dingy corners and drugged bodies was felt as a relief at Palms. Alongside ideas about gender and sexuality, affective intensities triggered by the materialities of the club, and how they mobilise bodies, or not, are crucial to understanding the politics of inclusion and exclusion on the dancefloor. The next chapter concludes this thesis by revisiting the aims and arguments of each section, before presenting future research agendas.
8. Conclusion


To conclude, this chapter revisits the aims of the thesis, outlines key findings and suggests pathways for future research.
8.1 Research aims and findings

The research aims and questions were introduced in Chapter 1. The research aim is to better understand the subjectivities and communities that thrive in Palms nightclub, Oxford Street, through paying attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion as an embodied spatial process. The research questions are 1). What brings people to, what brings people together, and what divides people on Oxford Street? 2). How is Palms narrated as part of a night-out on Oxford Street? 3). Why do people return to Palms for a night-out on Oxford Street?

The aim of Chapter 2 is to provide the context of the thesis. A historical geography is offered of the nightclub Palms, located on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney. Since the 1970s, Darlinghurst grew in importance in the politics of sexuality. The historical geography of Palms is important to enable the reader to better understand how the politics of inclusion and exclusion operate through sets of ideas and materiality that fashion both Palms and Oxford Street.

Chapter 3 offered a literature review to help situate the research aim and questions within the broader field of geographies of sexualities. The project aim sits at the intersection between geographies of sexualities and cities and geographies of clubbing. In terms of geographies of sexuality and cities, the argument is offered that there is a lack of research into venues that counter narratives of decline of the so-called ‘gay village’. Although ‘post-gay’ analyses often position gay villages as in demise, the case study venue of Palms continues to draw enthusiastic crowds each weekend. Following the language of Gorman-Murray and Nash (2014a, 2014b), Palms is a mooring for a particular expression of sexuality within the city. Building on the geographies of clubbing literature, attention turns to the role of emotions and affects in the politics of inclusion and exclusion on the dancefloor. Here, the argument is presented that the thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by focusing on a venue that is sustained by an older cohort of people, a love of retro music, the uncool and the absence of a highly sexualised vibe and drug culture.
To offer an interpretation of the politics of inclusion and exclusion on the dancefloor, Chapter 3 turned to the work of Gill Valentine (2007) and Elspeth Probyn (2003). The notions of intersectionality and the spatial imperative of subjectivity are combined to offer an interpretation of subjectivities as multiple, emplaced, discursive and material. Attention is drawn to the importance of affect and emotion in thinking through the politics of inclusion and exclusion as an embodied process. In doing so, subjectivities are revealed as always emerging within the material and social dimensions that comprise place.

With a theoretical framework attuned to embodied knowledge, Chapter 4 offers a justification for the methodology that combined oral histories with the selection and playing back of favourite song-tracks during interviews. Oral histories are justified through how storytelling offers possibilities to tap into memories that, while always partial and selective, offer insights to both meanings and experiences. Sounds are discussed in the literature as particularly effective in accessing emotions and affect. This was confirmed in this project through asking participants to play back their favourite music tracks from Palms. Analysis for this thesis built upon those outlined by Pink (2015), that calls for mapping emotion and affect through the interview process.

Chapter 5 addressed the first aim of the thesis, that of the politics of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street. This chapter asked three questions. First; What brings people to Oxford Street? Within participants’ oral histories, Oxford Street is imagined as ‘Sydney’s gay heartland’ and is embedded in stories of coming-out journeys. Media broadcasts like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras are particularly important in sustaining understandings of queerness of the street. Oxford Street was narrated as a paradoxical site of belonging and alienation. The politics of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street confirmed arguments of the homonormative subject. For those who reproduce understandings of the homonormative, Oxford Street was narrated as affirming and liberating. For those who do not fit a prescribed homo-norm, the pressure of trying to belong can be dispiriting and isolating.
Second, Chapter 5 asked: What brings people together on Oxford Street? Clubbing is described by participants as an important reason for why people may be out and about on Oxford Street. In addition, Oxford Street is spoken of as an important meeting point at significant political moments like the recent Marriage Equality celebration. Hence, Oxford Street is embedded in sets of ideas that support sexualities not configured by heterosexuality.

Finally, Chapter 5 addressed the question: What divides people on Oxford Street? The concept of intersectionality was identified as key to understanding the politics of inclusion and exclusion on Oxford Street. Younger participants in particular shared an understanding of the geography of Oxford Street divided along the lines of age and dress codes, with the east side of the street configured for older people and the west side for a younger more ‘hip’ crowd. Oxford Street is ultimately embedded in a gendered geography that reflects broader structural forces of homo-patriarchal power dynamics in configuring ideas of belonging.

In order to better understand the politics of inclusion and exclusion operating within Palms, the aim of Chapter 6 was to better understand how Palms was narrated as part of a night-out on Oxford Street. Descriptions of a ‘good night out’ drew on participant’s life-course, embodied histories and sets of ideas that informed their understanding of ‘community’ and ‘the gay scene’. Those older participants with longer embodied histories of Palms spoke of the venue as a site of inclusion to a gay community. Camp humour was revealed as integral to forming a sense of belonging to the gay community sustained by Palms, particularly through the retelling of inside-stories that work to constitute ‘regular’ status. Older participants often attached nostalgic meanings to Palms as a place for the gay community based on a sexual politics that work within the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Thus, participants revealed a number of ways in which certain social groups were made to feel unwelcome, particularly by more affluent straight white men. For example, some participants engaged in a policing of the dance-floor that constituted heterosexual identities as ‘odd’. Equally, the queue acts as an important threshold to play out the politics of inclusion, specifically the sometimes problematic figures that constitute the ‘Hen’s night’.
Chapter 7 answered the question: Why do people return to Palms for a night-out on Oxford Street? Attention turned to how participants spoke of the affective atmosphere of Palms. For participants who considered themselves regulars, crucial to the pleasures of a night-out at Palms was a love of retro/camp music. There is a celebration of the abject in the ‘uncool’ or ‘daggy’ that is liberating to people who party at Palms. This shared vulnerability operates through a refusal to conform to either homo- or hetero-normative sexuality and creates a unique sense of togetherness that helps to define the atmosphere of the club. Participants spoke of the ‘light’ vibe of Palms in comparison to other highly sexualised and often drug-fuelled clubs on Oxford Street like ARQ. The ‘light’ affective intensity conveyed by participants cannot be separated from the material: the underground basement, the fairy lights, ‘tacky’ decor, retro music and other dancing bodies in relaxed attire. Participants drew attention to the lack of intense displays of affection, pulsating electronic music, strobe lighting and drug-affected bodies that they had experienced at other clubs.

8.2 Future Research Agenda

Future research agendas suggested by this thesis include the application of practical advice around methods, alongside avenues worthy of further analysis. First, the practical advice on methods: The thesis employed a unique combination of oral histories alongside listening to song-playbacks to help access the embodied knowledge of clubbing. Listening with the participants to soundtracks of a night-out in Palms proved highly successful in accessing the affective and emotional dimensions of clubbing culture. Future research that seeks to better understand the emotional and affective dimensions of clubbing may wish to employ the use of listening back to participants’ favourite music tracks. Indeed, given the widespread use of headphones and music in everyday life, this method could be deployed in a wide range of social and cultural geography projects. Specifically, in order to better understand what soundtracks do in the context of commuting, holidays, running and exercise classes.
Three areas for future research: First, Palms, as a thriving gay venue on Oxford Street troubles the rhetoric of ‘post-gay’, and calls for further research in investigating places that sustain gay subjects in queer times. While Palms is embedded within capitalist relations, the politics of inclusion equally trouble arguments that depict a corporate and mainstream gay scene that narrows the sexual subject along the lines of the homonormative. Further work is required to identify and open up debate around gay sexualities and places celebrated as uncool, camp and retro. This is important in order to understand the politics of inclusion and exclusion, alongside the significance of these places in sustaining the lives of people who go there.

Second, future research may consider opening up closer dialogues between geographies of sexuality and the life-course. This thesis has illustrated how clubbing is embedded in embodied histories, and how these may differ across generations. Furthermore, the thesis has illustrated that older people continue to go clubbing, queering conventional notions of clubbers as younger bodied. Future geographies of sexuality research must pay greater attention to the notion of ageing that builds on work of the embodied experience of age.

Third, this thesis provides room for research into the experiences of further marginalised groups such as transgender people through geographies of clubbing. Genderqueer geographies are an emerging field (see Johnston, 2016). Yet, little attention has been given to the transgendered politics of inclusion and exclusion from nightclubs. This research has pointed to the importance in negotiating a night-out in terms of how gender intersects with sexuality, class and ethnicity. Such research is important in better understanding the processes of inclusion and exclusion in the everyday lives of trans, gender-queer and gender non-binary people.
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Appendices

Appendix I: Indicative list of interview questions

Thank you for participating in this project. Our conversation is going to be structured into 4 parts:

1. Getting to know you

2. A 'night out' on Oxford Street: past and present meanings – this section opens up a conversation about the meanings and experiences of ‘going out’ in the past and now.

3. Palms: meanings and experiences

4. Closing thoughts

1. Getting to know you

To begin with, I would like to learn more about you:

Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?

Why did you choose that neighbourhood? Tell me about life at your place.

How long have you lived in Sydney? What brought you here?

What do you do for a living?

Where do nightclubs/bars fit into your story?

How does Oxford Street fit into your story?

2. A ‘night out’ on Oxford Street – this section opens up a conversation about the meanings and experiences of ‘going out’.

In what ways do you think Oxford Street at night has changed over time (re the venues, atmosphere, crowds)?
What do you think has impacted these changes (online hook-up apps, lock-out laws, tourism, ‘mainstreaming’, shift of ‘queer’ space, changing attitude on public opinion/policies on homosexuality)?

How do you see Oxford Street in relation to sexuality?

Do you think it plays a large role in shaping sexual identities in Sydney?

Do you think other parts of Sydney play a significant role in shaping sexual identities? How so?

Are other parts or places in Sydney more important to you on a night out (especially for gay nights out)? Why is that? What is it about these places that are appealing (crowd, atmosphere, music, vibes)? What about the role of alcohol or drugs, how does that play a role in influencing where you might go at night?

**Oxford Street - past memories:**

In the past, in what ways were the venues along Oxford Street important to you, or did you go out somewhere else at night?

Do you remember the first time you went out to a venue on Oxford Street? Could you tell me about it?

Where did you go?

Who did you go with?

Why did you go out?

What did you do?

Still thinking about the past, tell me about how the venues along Oxford Street played a role in your nights out. Were particular venues important to attend on your nights out?
Could you tell me about a really good night out that you’ve had on Oxford Street?

What made it good?

Where did you go?

Who did you go with?

How did you get ready for the night?

Thinking about the past, can you tell me about a bad night out that you’ve had on Oxford Street?

What made it bad?

Where did you go?

Who did you go with?

What happened?

Present nights on Oxford Street:

Thinking about the present, can you tell me about how the venues along Oxford Street play a role in your nights out?

Thinking about the present, can you tell me about a best night out that you’ve recently had on Oxford Street?

What made it good for you?

Where did you go?

Who did you go with?

How did you get ready?

Thinking about the present, can you tell me about a bad night out that you’ve recently had on Oxford Street?

What made it bad?
Where did you go?
Who did you go with?
What happened?

The past in the present:
In what ways do you think your past experiences of a night out on Oxford Street shape your current experiences? (i.e. do memories of events or places impact your decision on where to go?)

Other places in the present:
In what ways do you think other places you have been shape the meanings and experiences of a night out on Oxford Street? (Other places in Sydney, or the world)

3. Palms, Meanings and Experiences - this section delves into more details around the meanings and experiences of Palms.

So to begin with, have you been to Palms during a night out on Oxford Street?

- (If yes) - Can you quickly doodle or sketch a night out at Palms? (Very basically, the key things that come to mind, perhaps about the space, what do you see when you walk in)
Tell me what you have drawn.

Do you often go to Palms?
Do you plan to go specifically there?
Why do you go there?
Is it the main focus of your night?
*If you were going to describe Palms to a person who has never been before - how would you describe your experience of this venue?
What is it that you like about the place (music, atmosphere, crowd, the space etc)?

What is it that you don’t like? What do you expect from a night out at Palms (what do you wish to achieve)? i.e. friends, hook-ups, unwind

Can you talk a bit about how you think Palms fits in with the overall feel of Oxford Street?

Do you think Palms is different to other clubs on Oxford St (why/why not)?

- (If no) – What do you know about Palms (any pre-conceived ideas)?

Do you not go there for any particular reason? (If yes, what are those reasons?)

Can you talk a bit about how you think Palms fits in with the overall feel of Oxford Street?

Do you think Palms is different to the other clubs on Oxford St (why/why not)?

4. Closing thoughts – this section is an opportunity to confirm any points or add any more material that might be important.

We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation. Did you want to add any particular points about what you think on...

- The role of Oxford Street in shaping sexualities in Sydney?

- Going out at night on Oxford Street? Or going out to other gay nights in Sydney?

- Going out to Palms?

Is there anything else you wanted to mention/talk about regarding any of the conversations we’ve had?
Appendix II: Recruitment message

Dear Sydney, I am looking for anyone to share with me your stories of Palms nightclub, Oxford Street.

These may be stories of avoiding Palms while out and about on Oxford Street, or planning your night out to Palms. Whatever your story, I would love to learn more about the meanings and experiences of Palms for you both past and present.

Why am I interested in your past and present stories about Palms?

I am an honours student at the University of Wollongong. For my honours project I am seeking to write a thesis based on oral histories of Palms. The nightclub Palms has been an enduring venue on Oxford Street. Love it, or hate it, Palms has remained while other venues have disappeared. Yet, little is known or documented about this venue. The aim of the project is document the past and present meanings and experiences of Palms to better understand this venue in the lives of people who are out and about on Oxford Street.

Participation will involve an interview with myself, Dominique Pezzutto. Location and time of the interview will be at your convenience, and expected to last approximately between 1-1.5 hours.

If you would like to be involved, please send me an email to dp945@uowmail.edu.au and I will be in touch with participant and consent forms.

Thank you kindly,

Dominique
Appendix III: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH TITLE: A place for everyone? Palms, Oxford Street, Sydney

INVESTIGATORS:
Dominique Pezzutto (Honours Student), University of Wollongong
Dr Scott McKinnon, University of University
Professor Gordon Waitt, University of Wollongong

I have been given information about the project: ‘A place for everyone? Palms, Oxford Street, Sydney’, I have discussed the study with Dominique Pezzutto, who is conducting this research as part of an Honours thesis in the School of Geography and Sustainable Community, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with the study. I understand that I will participate in an oral history. I understand that my research participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. If I decide not to participate or withdraw my consent, this will not affect my relationship with the University of Wollongong.

I understand that I can withdraw any data that I have contributed to the project up until the end of December 2018 by contacting Dominique at dp945@uowmail.edu.au.

I understand that if any aspects of the discussion become distressing I can contact the LGBT National Hotline (1-888-843-4564).

If I have any enquires about the study, I can contact Gordon Waitt (gwaitt@uow.edu.au). If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can
contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on (02) 4298 1331 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

☐ Participate in an interview
☐ Have an audio-recording of the interview made for transcription
☐ Request for my name to be replaced in the study by a pseudonym

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for an honours thesis and may be published in scholarly publications (i.e. journals, book chapters, www.theconversation.com.au). I consent for the data I provide to be used in these ways.

Signed

Name (please print)

.................................        ...../....../.......
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE: A place for everyone? Palms, Oxford Street, Sydney

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of the research is twofold. First, to document the oral histories of Palms, Oxford Street. Second, to better understand the past and present role of Palms in the lives of people out and about on Oxford Street.

INVESTIGATORS:
Professor Gordon Waitt, University of Wollongong (contact: gwaitt@uow.edu.au; Ph: +61 2 4221 3684)
Dr Scott McKinnon, University of Wollongong (contact: scottmck@uow.edu.au)
Dominique Pezzutto (Honours Student), University of Wollongong (contact: dp945@uowmail.edu.au)

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO: You will be asked to share you stories with Dominique on your past and present meanings and experiences of Palms nightclub. Your involvement is voluntary. It involves a conversation with Dominique that will take a life narrative approach. The conversation will last approximately between 1-1.5 hours. It will be at a time and place convenient to you.

Dominique will ask you about your experiences of going out and about at night on Oxford Street. Can you tell me about what makes a bad night out on Oxford Street? What makes a good night out on Oxford Street? Dominique will ask you questions about the role of Palms nightclub in your life. Examples of the sorts of the questions you will be asked include: When was Palms important to you or not? Why is Palms important or not? What is it about the club that informs your likes or dislikes? How have your meanings and experiences of Palms changed across your life-course? You will be asked to quickly doodle or sketch a night out at Palms and describe what you have drawn. You may wish to bring a piece of music on your phone with you to the
interview to prompt a discussion on why this music might be particularly important to you on a night out at Palms. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of the interview on request and will have an opportunity to redact information if you wish to do so.

**HOW TO PARTICPATE:** This is an invitation to participate in an honours student research project. To participate please contact Dominique by email at dp945@uowmail.edu.au to express your interest.

**POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS:** We ask to take 1-2 hours of your time, as a small inconvenience to you. The interviews will be audio-recorded. You will not be pressured to answer any questions that might make you feel uncomfortable, and you are free to terminate the conversation at any time. You also have license to withdraw any or all information you have provided up until December 2018 by contacting the researcher, Dominique at dp945@uowmail.edu.au. You have the choice to remain confidential, to use a pseudonym, and to change your mind on this up until the finalisation of the thesis. If participating in the interview causes you any distress please contact the LGBT National Hotline (1-888-843-4564).

**FUNDING AND BENEFITS:** This honours project is supported by the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong. If you choose to participate, you will help to document the oral histories of Palms that to date are missing from the archives, and offer insights to the importance of venues in processes of belonging and exclusion along the lines of different social categories. Research findings will be included in an honours thesis and may be published in scholarly publications (i.e. journals, book chapters, www.theconversation.com.au).

**ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS:** This study was reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong (Protocol: HREC 2018/397). Please note, following the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research one of the responsibilities of the researcher is to report illegal activities. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted please contact the UOW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. If you have any questions about this study, please contact the project leader, Gordon Waitt. Thank you for your interest in this study.