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Becoming a lesbian at lesbian and gay dance parties: Lesboratories as affective spaces

Tuula Juvonen

Walking through the city of Tampere, Finland, past the Workers' Union House or the Näsinneula sightseeing tower, there are no material traces to indicate that in the 1980s these were areas of great significance to the city's emerging lesbian and gay community.[1] The ephemerality of the lesbian and gay scene has made its history notoriously challenging to study (Reuter, 2008; Forstie, 2014). Whereas historians have successfully used old photographs to study vanishing and mundane material entities and their agency (Männistö-Funk, 2021: 64), in the case of lesbian and gay dance parties in Tampere this cannot be done, as no known photographs exist. Hence, in my research I have relied on an analysis of oral history interviews conducted with people that lived through the time period in question and participated in the communities, hoping that the analysis of their recollections would allow conclusions to be drawn on the lesbian past (Boyd and Ramírez, 2012). I am especially interested in the question of how the venues were also actively participating in the production of meaning and the forming of what was an emerging idea of a lesbian.

The literary scholar Julie Abraham has famously suggested that it takes only a woman and a novel to make a lesbian, since, as a reader, a woman can interpret herself as a lesbian (Abraham, 1996: xvii). Here we may note both the divergence from a notion of an innate lesbian identity and a constructive take that foregrounds the material entanglement of a woman and a book. It is precisely this entanglement that makes possible the materialisation of a specific configuration: a lesbian (cf. Barad, 2007: 140). However, in Abraham's interpretation becoming a lesbian remains a solitary experience, even when acknowledging the involvement of the author and the intertextuality of the written text in that entanglement.

In this chapter, I take the idea of materiality further and also include the role of spaces in the process of making a lesbian. By doing so, I depart from the lesbian, gay and queer scholarship that has mostly theorised LGBTIQ+ lives and identities as based on language, discourses and norms, or focused solely on the social relations between people, thereby considering

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spaces, if at all, merely as containers for social action (e.g. Forstie, 2014). Here my focus is the premise that spaces and people form affective relations with each other. Amrou Al-Kadhi captures this beautifully in their autobiography *Life as a Unicorn*: 'It was as though the dirt of the surroundings was a mirror to the person I really was, and I sat immobilised, unable to do anything, locked in a limbo of heartache' (Al-Kadhi, 2020).

The interplay of practices, spatial constellations, and emotions in studying lesbian and gay communities has already been scholarly addressed in the history of emotions (e.g. Gammerl, 2016), as well as in lesbian and gay geography. Here researchers have questioned, for example, how queer spaces are perceived, or how queer spaces produce embodied emotions (e.g. Taylor and Falconer, 2015: 45). It is noteworthy that in such approaches we assume a separate body that is in relation with the places it encounters and experiences. I am, however, searching for an avenue that would allow me to consider their relations differently.

Utilising the thinking of Karen Barad, I argue that bodies and spaces cannot be separated, as both arise together in an intra-action in which they are entangled (Barad, 2007: 139–40). Such an intra-action may be approached as an apparatus, which is 'formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced' (146). The phenomenon I am interested in is the idea of a lesbian, as it emerged in the open-ended practice of lesbian and gay dance parties. Hence, I examine here the dance parties as apparatuses, which I refer to as *lesboratories*. The neologism lesboratories is akin to the term laboratories, or breweries, which are also examples of intra-action; something qualitatively different and new emerges from the material assemblages that form the apparatuses in question.

Additionally, instead of focusing on personalised emotions, I concentrate more on an embodied and collective circulation of affects. Hence, for me, the situationally-emerging intra-active sensations are collective, intercorporeal and transubjective (Kolehmainen and Mäkinen, 2021: 449). As such, affects form and transform those experiencing them. The effects of being affected may of course retrospectively be interpreted as personalised emotions and identities.

In my empirical analysis of lesboratories, I rely especially on Andreas Reckwitz's lucid theorisation on the relationships of materiality and affect, discussed in his article 'Affective Spaces: A Praxeological Outlook' (2012). In the article, Reckwitz participates in the ongoing discussions regarding affective and spatial turns in analysing the past, arguing for the importance of combining the two. Although he, too, analytically separates bodies and spaces, I see that his use of affectivity, whilst also considering materiality's role in social practices, allows me to productively connect his ideas with Barad's notion of entangled intra-actions. This allows me to address

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affective intimacies of spatially entangled intra-actions that take shape in the collective, participatory social practices of lesboratories.

In this chapter I focus on lesboratories to analyse the collective bonds of affective intimacy through which the affected bodies became-with the materiality of the spaces of lesbian and gay dance parties. I first contextualise the 1980s lesbian and gay dance parties in Tampere, and then present my research material and methodological approach. Thereafter I discuss my two case studies, arguing for a conceptualisation of the emerging idea of a lesbian as a collective, embodied and affective formation.

Lesbian and gay life in Finland in the 1970s and 1980s

In contrast to many other countries, in Finland homosexual acts were illegal for both women and men. Homosexual acts were decriminalised in 1971, and demedicalised in 1981. Even when such changes first began to challenge the homogeneous self-understanding of the still rather inward-looking country, a form of heterosexual ignorance regarding sexual diversity was easily maintained due to an anti-propaganda law spanning from 1971 to 1999 that criminalised incitement to homosexual acts. Initially the law resulted in the suppression of most mentions of homosexuality in public service broadcasting. The prescribed silence was disrupted by the AIDS epidemic, but a persistent journalistic habit to not mention or discuss an individual's homosexuality in respectable media remained unchallenged until the 1990s, if not the 2000s (Juvonen, 2004).

The first scholarly book in Finnish cowritten by lesbian and gay scholars about homosexuality, *Rakkauden monet kasvot* (*The Many Faces of Love*, edited by Sievers and Stålström) was published in 1984. Prior to that, if one wanted to learn anything about homosexuality, they had to find their way to the original sources: the lesbian and gay associations, their publications and social events. In Helsinki there were two lesbian and gay associations: Psyke (est. 1969), and Seta, from the words 'Seksuaalinen tasavertaisuus' meaning sexual equality (est. 1974). They both published their own periodicals, *96* and *SETA* respectively, which were posted in discreet envelopes to their members. Additionally, there were also some local branches of Psyke, such as Vagabondi (est. 1973) in Tampere. In order to finance their social services, such as helplines, and offer possibilities for socialising, the organisations also held highly popular dance parties.

In Finnish culture attending dances is a traditional means to get to know prospective intimate partners. As same-sex dancing was rather frowned upon, people engaging in it could easily be thrown out of heterosexual venues. Such a discriminatory practice became illegal in 1995 when an

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anti-discrimination law concerning service providers was passed. Hence, until the 1990s in particular, dance parties organised by LGBTIQ+ organisations at various venues offered participants the rare possibility to find support and legitimisation from the existence of others 'like that'. It may be argued that the social practice of arranging dance parties produced spaces that were simultaneously material and cultural in nature – and which profoundly affected those that participated in the social experience.

Tampere is a particularly interesting location to study the emerging lesbian and gay community of the time. Even though it was the second-largest Finnish city after the capital, Helsinki, in 1980 it was still rather modest in size with only around 166,000 inhabitants. Since the reputation of Tampere as an industrial city was built around its cotton mills, it was sometimes referred to as the Manchester of Finland. Even though Tampere was one of the major battlegrounds during the 1918 Civil War, the divide between the Reds and the Whites was closing as the city's intellectual and cultural life was blooming. The city received a university in 1960, and its (soon-to-be international) Theatre Festival was founded in 1968, featuring in its first year a Finnish version of the musical *Hair*. As the city had an easy-going leftist feel to it, it also provided fertile ground for sustaining a budding lesbian and gay culture.

Becoming with affective spaces

My research material is drawn from thirty-six oral history interviews I conducted between 2012–2017 with people born between 1940 and 1980 that, in one way or another, participated in the lesbian scene of Tampere between the 1970s and 2000s – as I myself did from 1989 onwards. The interviews were initially gathered for a research project that sought to understand the role of the social and intimate lives of women with same-sex sexual attractions in the constitution of local lesbian communities.[2] The interviews addressed both the social life that took place at various venues and the personal and intimate relations women formed with each other. I approached all of the interviewees in person, based on their participation in the scene. As I also had an interest in the intimate aspects of lesbian relationships, most of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, aside from an interview with a lesbian couple, and a group interview with elderly lesbians reminiscing on scenes of lesbian sociability. All interviewees, barring a heterosexual woman and two gay men, were women that had relationships with other women.

For this chapter I have selected excerpts from ten interviews that refer to two lesboratories in which the local Tampere lesbian and gay association Vagabondi organised its dance parties at the weekends. One of the

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places of intra-action was fondly nicknamed ‘Hinttivintti’ (the ‘Fag Attic’). It was a club space situated on the fourth floor of the centrally located Workers’ Union House at Hämeenpuisto 28, where parties were held from 1977–1986. Another venue was the restaurant Merirosvo (Pirate) owned by a co-op, slightly further away from the city centre and attached to the base of the sightseeing tower Näsinneula in the Särkänniemi Amusement Park at Laiturikatu 1. The dance parties in question took place there between 1987–1988. In addition to the interviews, I also used some printed materials I have been able to recover regarding the venues, such as journal or newspaper articles. However, such material has proven very scarce and hard to locate, due to the ban on incitement.

As someone who has conducted interviews regarding Sydney’s drag king scene, Kerryn Drysdale has noted that anecdotes that refer to particular moments or events in a storied form are a preferred way to process experiences within lesbian scenes (Drysdale, 2019: 136–7). This observation also applies to my own interview material, which is punctuated with small anecdotes regarding these particular venues. When listening to these interviews, one gets the feeling that these stories have already been well-rehearsed, sitting with other lesbians around a table in a bar or kitchen (Scicluna, 2017: 158–66). In addition to soliciting these freely told anecdotes, I also asked my interviewees specific questions regarding the materiality of the venues they mentioned in their narrations. I asked, for example, what elements I should bring together if I was to rebuild the venue. However, I failed to ask questions specific to the senses; such as sights, scents and sounds, which Drysdale found particularly productive in her study and which were also crucial for Yvette Taylor and Emily Falconer in their work on class distinctions in queer leisure spaces (Drysdale, 2019: 141; Taylor and Falconer, 2015). Nevertheless, along with tactile and movement-based memories (Reckwitz, 2012: 249), the most detailed descriptions I received often already contained perceptions based on such sensory memories.

Observed through the lens of practice theory fostered by Andreas Reckwitz (2012), the presence of sensory elements in narration is quite reasoned. When people are understood as having sensing bodies, it follows that sensory perceptions would be foregrounded in people’s narrations. Bodies are affected by other bodies, as well as by the materiality of the spaces through which they move, the activities that take place in those spaces, and the corresponding artefacts. Even where memory might fail in detail, it may capture the embodied intensity of feeling (Drysdale, 2019: 128). Reckwitz would likely add that this is no wonder, as the states of bodily arousal form the affective relations that link the narrators both with other entities and the world (Reckwitz, 2012: 250). With Barad, one

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would go even further to argue that in a lesboratory the entangled affective intra-actions bring forth both the embodied narrator and their world in an affected intimacy.

When looking at the artefact-space structuration (Reckwitz, 2012: 251) of these dance parties, I am interested in asking which elements of a lesboratory were crucial for bringing into being the idea of a lesbian. While reading the transliterated interviews I am observing both the spatial and social practices of entangled intra-actions. Moreover, in my analysis I pay attention to the descriptions concerning the materiality of the venues, following Reckwitz's (2012: 250) reminder: 'Every analysis of practices … necessarily involves an analysis of the artefacts which are assembled to constitute these practices'. Consequently, reading his work through Barad, I especially examine the sensory-perceptive connections the interviewees collectively formed when intra-acting with the materiality of the venues while participating in various social practices. Furthermore, I am interested in the affective intimacies and bodily arousals that the participation in and the becoming with these artefact-space assemblages induced, often perceived as the atmosphere of these venues.

As people form affective relationships with their environments, the environments take part in shaping both people and their understanding of themselves. Thus, it makes sense to argue that different artefact-space assemblages induce different sets of affective structuration. This assumption can be substantiated in studies that trace how the change of a venue transforms and rearranges the affective relations of the patrons (Reckwitz, 2012: 256). In the following I demonstrate how that change took place in the lesboratories of Tampere in the 1980s, as the lesbian and gay dance parties moved from a clubroom on the fourth floor of the Workers' Union House to a proper restaurant, Merirosvo, thus offering novel possibilities for the collective, embodied and affective becoming of lesbians.

The closeted space of the Fag Attic

The location and architecture of the venues in which the dance parties were held provide particular spatial frameworks and induce affective relations that cannot easily be circumvented by their users (Reckwitz, 2012: 250). In the case of the Fag Attic, one should consider the impressive nature of the Workers' Union House; completed in 1900 and located on the city's main boulevard, it added to the power and prestige of the city's workers. In addition to a theatre, on its third floor the building housed a purpose-built event venue, where people attended large and highly popular heterosexual dance parties. Vagabondi's dance parties were organised in the same building, yet

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those parties – as if demoted – took place in a much smaller space on the fourth floor that could at best cater to no more than 120 people.

Since Vagabondi's dance parties were the only ones considered safe for lesbians and gays in the city, all of those who were somehow able to discover its existence came and participated.

> Most of the patrons were men, slightly older men, but younger ones too, and some women, but not that many. It varied over the years. Most eye-catching were the biological men that were allowed to dress as women. At that time, they may have been transvestites. It was only later on that transgender people became involved with the group.[3]

The ages of the patrons ranged from barely eighteen, the legal age for alcohol consumption, through to seventy. The parties were also mixed by gender, class and social standing. Although there are also women that have very fond memories of the exciting and fun parties on the fourth floor, the events were heavily male-dominated, especially in the early years. While even married men were able to learn about the existence of these parties through the grapevine when cruising for other men in city parks; women, especially those with children, lacked similar information networks. Thus, some nights there may have been only two women, later on perhaps ten, and even at its best maybe only a quarter of the guests were female. The scarcity of women was detrimental to lesbian bonding, and it led women to seek out the company of their gay male best friends.

The heterosexual dance parties taking place in the same building on the same evenings posed a challenge to the lesbian and gay visitors: how could they reach the fourth floor without being recognised, when they nevertheless had to use the same entrance and staircase? Those who were mindful that they had to protect their queer identities, not to mention their livelihoods, chose to use the lift; which would – if they were lucky – allow them to arrive on the fourth floor unnoticed. Yet others, such as this lesbian with her girlfriend, were determined to use the stairs, withstanding the curious glances from the party guests on the third floor:

> However, going there was always a little … dubious. Kind of 'oh, that's where you're going'. But see, me and Anne, we always just strode in with our skirts swirling and heels clicking, heads held high.

Arriving on the fourth floor, guests would register a set of bodies and artefacts that marked the entrance to the party. The first of them was a sign reading 'Closed Circle Only' at the door of the clubroom. For many of the interviewees, the Fag Attic was the first lesbian and gay party venue they ever dared to enter. 'I remember that Workers' Union place, the fourth floor, I think it was kind of like, it was straight up like the gates of hell [laughing]. When you opened the door, everything was so terribly red'. That hellish

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impression was created not only by the accumulated anxiety regarding the impending meeting of other gay people, but also by the long and heavy red velvet curtains that covered tall windows, adding to the intimate atmosphere of the space.

A gay man recalls the venue in further detail:

> When you entered the area, there was a rather narrow corridor which led to the toilets. There was [the] ticket sales [counter], and straight after was the dance floor, which you walked through to the larger side. There you had tables, heavy weight tables, heavy chairs, and then on some beer crates, or some folding tables, the bar was set up, where they sold … was it bottles of beer and long drink[s], that sort of thing, I don't recall them having any modern beer taps.

Becoming with the space began when walking into the clubroom through a small intimate hallway. There was a ticket counter at which volunteers greeted arriving guests and sold tickets to members and visitors. From here on the ensuing acts of collective participation in the event amounted to practical knowledge of how to become, at least for an evening, a legitimate member of that community (Drysdale, 2019: 78; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen, 2021: 457–9). Here the act of selling and buying a ticket to a lesbian and gay party helped to sustain the community by financially supporting its helpline and fostering its aspirations to buy an office space of its own for group meetings.

Crossing the dance floor brought one to a larger room, where sturdy tables and chairs awaited guests. Around many of the tables, one would find a mixed group of lesbian and gay friends, their evening having begun a couple of drinks earlier at their local bar. Sitting at heavy tables and chairs gave one the sensation of being firmly grounded in the space that hosted people 'like that'. Moreover, the activists of the lesbian and gay organisation would invite newcomers to dance, helping them feel included, and the regulars would make room for them at their tables. A woman who came there as a young lesbian remembers the intimacy of the place fondly: 'It was such a small and safe place, and you knew the people. And got to know older people, and many others you think back fondly on now, some of whom have already passed away'. One soon acquired a sense of belonging in the collective community of the Fag Attic.

Same-sex dancing was obviously one of the main attractions of the parties. The music alternated between disco and music for social dancing, reflecting the varying tastes of the patrons. On the dance floor one could spot – perhaps for the first time in one's life – two men immersed in social dancing that allowed bodily contact. This exciting and intimate sight of same-sex couples tuned one into the permissive atmosphere of the venue.

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Initially the music was played on a portable cassette player. Especially proud was the lesbian 'disc jane' with the hottest new disco, which she had been able to obtain from a Danish disc jockey that had recorded bootleg copies for her: 'The Vagabondi folks heard that music about a year before it sort of came to Finnish discos'.

Whereas the orderly rules of social dancing created a predictable structure for proper social interaction and behaviour, dancing to disco music broke free from all of that (Gammerl, 2016: 60–2). Dancing to disco also allowed for a different form of self-expression, as an author of the lesbian and gay magazine *96* explained: 'In dance [the current young generation] expresses its happiness and sorrow, desire and pain, fear and aggression. Dance titillates and liberates, it is endless joy of movement for its own sake, it is intoxicating without drugs, it is wriggling and orgasmic jerking with screams and shouts' (Haapala, 1983: 22). The Fag Attic was felt to be a safe space for patrons to try these things out. A lesbian recalls her experience:

> On that tiny stamp-sized dancefloor I learned to loosen my feet from the floor. I had never been anywhere, dancing, so in my first fumbling disco moves I had both feet flat on the floor, just wiggling myself a little. At some point I dared to dance with my heels off the floor a little. And eventually, my feet were coming off the floor entirely.

Hence the intra-action of her dancing to disco music together with other lesbian and gay bodies – with the aid of alcohol not to be forgotten – provided her with the necessary encouragement to experience different bodily capacities and reach a different kind of self-understanding; that of a more daring person.

The alcohol served at the parties further eased communication and helped create a joyous atmosphere (Tan, 2013). However, as the keen gay observer noted, the party venue did not have a proper bar, just beer crates and bottled long drinks stacked on folding tables. The cheap, lightweight arrangement of the bar with its lack of proper beer taps highlighted the make-do character of the lesbian and gay parties. On the one hand, the existence of a beer-selling table in a space that was not intended to be a bar in the first place was a testimony to the success of the collective work poured into organising the parties. Yet on the other hand, it was also a reminder of the temporary nature of the arrangement. One could let their hair down only for an evening, and come next Monday morning, all traces of that party would have been stacked away and hidden – quite as one had to hide one's homosexuality and pretend to be straight again.

Yet the possibility of escaping the need to conceal one's same-sex sexual orientation, even if for only one night, was highly valued. The people, women and men alike, abundantly enjoyed the rare freedom to affectively

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entangle in looking, flirting, dancing and drinking with friends and former, current or prospective partners without the need to hide their desires which would have been pathologised elsewhere (Tan, 2013: 720, 728).

> It was terribly fun. I can't remember there ever even being any fights, and we all loved the music. There was all kinds of music, and we really danced a lot, and frankly speaking, we were all pretty drunk. Almost everybody was always there to the end.

The reluctance to let go of that stolen freedom is also apparent in an anecdote regarding the activities that would take place after a party (Drysdale, 2019: 79). A raffle was a reoccurring event at the parties, and a further way to raise funds to support the ambitious plans of Vagabondi.

> There was always a raffle, and of course the prizes were always alcohol. And it was always someone we knew who won. So off we went, when the party was over, we went to the Hämeenpuisto boulevard, drank, and puked. But we had to drink it cos we won it [laughter]. It was the same thing every night.

Yet it is evident that the same venue was not perceived in a similar manner by everyone. In the early 1980s it was highly exceptional that people would have outed themselves outside of the Vagabondi events, something the organisers understood very well. This awareness was epitomised by the long and heavy velvet curtains of the Fag Attic: 'The curtains were closed, which indicated that this was not a public space'. When the dance parties were in their seventh year, the generational conflict that was previously suggested through differing tastes in music materialised into a controversy over the red velvet curtains. Two female journalists who had dared to come to the party observed the following incident:

> A very cute looking, yet very intoxicated young man heads toward our table from across the floor […]. The youngster only wants to open the curtains behind us. 'Why must all the windows be covered? Why are we enclosed in here like in a cage? Are we animals?' he slurs. […]
>
> Soon after the youngster has stumbled away from our table an anxious-looking middle-aged man arrives.
>
> 'I think the curtains need to be closed. I don't trust that guy. I saw him leave the bar once with someone that's … not one of us', he says quietly. […] 'Perhaps I'm just paranoid, but we're always treated in such a nasty way', he says apologetically and closes the curtains. (Hassinen, 1984)

The intimate and closeted space of the Fag Attic accommodated the needs of those that had a lot to lose. Whereas closeted gay identities are often associated with shame (Gammerl, 2016: 58), they can also adequately be linked with a reasonable fear of being found out. As being outed would most likely have shattered any parallel heterosexual family lives, or jeopardised one's

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social standing, employment and financial survival; the fear of being found out, sometimes amounting to paranoia, becomes quite understandable. However, in the mid-1980s a new generation of young lesbians and gay men emerged who were no longer content with hiding away.

One may observe how the recurring social practice of attending dance parties in the secluded space of the Fag Attic, with its old-fashioned social dancing, offered predictability and security for the older generation and sustained its affective habitus of incorporated schemes (Reckwitz, 2012: 255) around closeted homosexuality. Yet at the same time, new and liberating disco music signified a disruption of this stability. Additionally, the recurrent organising of these parties helped to create a group of capable activists who took pride in their sustained efforts and achievements in keeping the party going. Yet this venue's capacity to function as a lesboratory was limited, due to the heavily male-dominated makeup of its collective body. However, things were about to change both abruptly and permanently when Vagabondi lost its lease on the venue and had to move on at the end of 1986.

Merirosvo as a lesboratory

Fortunately, in 1987 Vagabondi's efforts resulted in a new venue being found. In the somewhat outlying location of the Särkänniemi Amusement Park, a co-op restaurant called Merirosvo decided to lease its premises to the association over the weekends. However, the co-op did not wish to have its name mentioned in connection with a lesbian and gay party, so the advertisements were only run with the name Gay Disco Zip. At the same time, the local conservative newspaper persistently refused to publish advertisements containing the word 'gay'. This catch-22 led Vagabondi to set up an answering machine on which taped messages would reveal the necessary details of the venue's whereabouts.

These difficulties aside, the place itself was a major improvement to the former clubroom, as Merirosvo was a 1971 purpose-built restaurant and bar. The reactions of a younger patron demonstrate how the space was perceived in the light of anticipation, recollection and comparison: 'It was an astronomical improvement, since it was a normal space, and not such a cave of concealment'. The fact that Merirosvo was a purpose-built restaurant with a proper bar made the guests feel instantly better – and also more normal.

Additionally, here the entanglement of the guests with the spatial architecture created a particular affective intimacy, one very different from the Fag Attic. When one walks into the building and through a spacious glass hall, the open staircase leading to the next floor is immediately visible on the

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right-hand side. When climbing the staircase, one feels almost elevated by the panoramic views offered by the wall of windows that await at the top.

The previously mentioned perceptive gay man also gave his recollections on the interiors of this venue:

> Merirosvo was a curved restaurant at the base of the Särkänniemi sightseeing tower. When you enter from outside, you walk up the stairs and then there are tables along the way, the bar and dance floor are at the back, at the end of the curve. I think the space was really functional, more modern, furnished as a restaurant. Nice windows that open up to lake Näsijärvi. Sort of atmospheric in the summer for example, [when] you can see the lake. The place was pretty nice.

The wide-open view from the wall-to-wall windows over the nearby lake was a welcome novelty, especially in comparison with the firmly covered windows of the Fag Attic. The uninterrupted openness of the space also suggested that the patrons themselves had more leeway and less to hide than before.

The venue's new location also contained a few obstacles for some of the older guests. The decrease in accessibility from both the entryway staircase and from the parties no longer taking place in the city centre made the venue itself less inclusive. Additionally, the differing generational tastes in music continued to cause friction. Even as some social dancing prevailed to accommodate the needs of the older patrons, at the Gay Disco Zip the music skewed noticeably toward disco tunes. The culmination of these factors resulted in a generational break in the local lesbian community.

With the founding of Vagabondi's Youth and Student Group in 1985, and their Women's Group with its decidedly feminist agenda a year later, the participation of younger women in the events increased. When Vagabondi dedicated the first Friday of every month to a lesbian party called Zippina, it paved the way to additional intra-actions. The women who knew each other from the Women's Group always went to the party together: 'We met somewhere first and ate, or ate at somebody's place, and then went to the party. That was really fun'. Sharing a meal together was a further lesbian social practice that both built up anticipation and added to the atmosphere of the party itself (cf. Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen, 2015: 34).

Consequently, and contrary to the Fag Attic, at Merirosvo there were plenty of young women. They also preferred to spend time with each other, though they did not fully abandon their gay friends either. Meeting and talking not only in the Women's Group but also at the parties meant that individualised reflections and disparate social experiences of lesbians were rendered through the retrospective reminiscing into a collective social consciousness (Drysdale, 2019: 128). Attending Vagabondi's dance parties offered a safe environment for young women to become lesbians by participating in this

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collective social practice. Hence, the possibility of sharing both spaces and stories turned out to be a further vital aspect of a lesboratory.

The parallel existence of a Women's Group also led to other inventive social practices that aimed to cultivate lesbian collectivity at the parties:

> We had just been discussing at the Women's Group how awful it is to come to the party alone […]. And then together with another girl we – we were still girls back then – decided that in our group we'll look out for if someone is alone, and we'll go and ask her to dance or something, and bring her back to our table. Then at the bar there was a woman all alone, so I went over and asked her to dance, and she said, 'I'm waitressing here' [laughter]. After that I lost the nerve to ask anyone else to dance.

Dancing was obviously an important attraction for the women. Merirosvo also had a proper sound system and, together with disco lights, it created an immersive sensory experience of music, vibration and losing oneself in the crowd (Gammerl, 2016: 61–2). In addition to dancing, the interviewees also specified a novel feature of the emerging lesbian culture present at Merirosvo: 'We always sang "Aikuinen nainen", always.'

'Aikuinen nainen' ('Mature Woman') is a song that has become the unofficial anthem for Finnish lesbians, and was covered from the Italian original 'Maledetta primavera' by gay icon Paula Koivuniemi in 1982. The Finnish lyrics contain many empowering lines, including the following which lesbians would sing along to with dedication:

> I will not turn my back
> I fight for my love, I'm not afraid
> Taking care of each other
> We'll hold back adversity
> The waves won't bring us down,
> I'll shelter you from the winds
> If you'll let me

The song resonated affectively not only with the women on the dance floor, but also with those who, in various states of intoxication, were singing along to the tune and group hugging. Being entangled with the music, bodies and singing not only added affect and intimacy to the atmosphere on the dance floor, but the musical intra-action also made the women bond more tightly with each other across the venue as lesbians.

The adversity referred to in the song was also a reality, apparent in the challenge to even arrive at Merirosvo. The local youth had a habit of cruising in their cars in the nearby parking lot, and many of the patrons were concerned that the gay crowds walking down the road from the closest bus stop to the rather remotely located bar would invite violent attacks. Hence

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several women chose to come to the bar by taxi rather than walk. However, when the elated women left the party together in the night, such worries evaporated. The group of drunken lesbians dared each other to do things few would have risked doing alone – such as celebrating a birthday with an adventurous skinny dip at the lake shore sauna of the nearby Sara Hildén Art Museum.

> We went to Sara Hildén and went for a swim from the sauna at the lake shore at like two in the morning, like after the party, and it was really fun, it was a really fun party. I remember we had a big group of women, many different kinds of women.

The same lesbians were now more eager to also take up space in the city: 'We always walked down there, by the fast-food stand, always laughing, walking side-by-side, singing like there was no tomorrow'.

After a great night out at the party, it no longer seemed dangerous for the women to leave Merirosvo on foot. The pack of hungry and drunken lesbians headed towards a fast-food stand in the city, taking up its space walking side-by-side on the boardwalk and singing out loud to hilarious and spontaneously invented lyrics. The affective resonance emerging in that group of young women was one of intimate togetherness and an entitlement to be a lesbian. Hence Merirosvo can be seen as one of the first real lesboratories in Tampere, a place where the intra-acting women could and would collectively become lesbians.

It may be argued that the new normality of becoming a lesbian was reflected in Merirosvo, a conventional bar in a free-flowing space. There 'new possibilities or new actualizations of matter – new utterances and pleasures and ways of moving, as well as alternative attunements to bodies and desires – are invented by the collision of multiple material trajectories coming into arrangement in relation to another' (Ewalt, 2016: 138). The increase in openness of that curtainless space suggested boundless possibilities and open-ended potential. It also influenced the collectivity of women who had developed a novel form of entitlement in being a lesbian.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the development of the idea of a lesbian in Tampere by utilising accounts from oral history interviews regarding lesbian and gay party venues run by the local lesbian and gay organisation Vagabondi from 1977 to 1988. I maintain that women were affected not only by the gender composition of the events, but, quite importantly, also by the material entanglements and affective intimacies that became possible

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within the social practices of these particular places. When considered collectively, these apparatuses, which I refer to as lesboratories, had consequent effects on the ways in which these women were able to become lesbians and create communities of their own.

Reckwitz (2012: 256) proposed that a change of space provides incalculable incentives for the rearrangement of affective relations, and my findings show that this was also the case for the lesbian and gay dance parties in shifting locations. The rampantly gay atmosphere of the Workers' Union House parties from 1977 to 1986 was partly due to the fact that the parties were rather extraordinary events in an everyday life that was otherwise, for most of the guests, highly closeted and restricted. Even the intimate party venue itself resembled a protective cocoon. As not very many gay women had been able to find their way there yet, the women mostly partied happily with their fellow gay male friends, without ever even calling themselves lesbians.

Moving the parties to Merirosvo in 1987 meant not only a marked shift in the party concept, but also a considerable change in female attendance. The more youthful disco music, and especially the Zippina parties, attracted more young women to the events. Taking cues from the open and ordinary space of the bar venue, the young women were also able to take a more open and relaxed attitude toward lesbianism. The intimate and affective intra-actions with a collective of other women, together with the airy nature of the venue, made them better equipped to conquer new spaces for themselves as lesbians in the wider world as well.

Whereas Drysdale (2019: 139) urges us to look at the localised politics of lesbian identity, Clare Forstie (2014: 196) argues for connecting the meanings of lesbian identity further to particular spaces. My analysis suggests that we can go even further; to consider the formative power of the materiality of the entangled intra-actions that take place within these spaces. Coining the apparatus of entangled material and social intra-actions as a *lesboratory* draws attention to the productive and affective role it has in producing the idea of a lesbian. As I have demonstrated, the materiality of these two different party venues provided not only the pre-conditions for bodily encounters, but they also significantly co-constituted and informed the self-understanding of the participating guests. Each place with its own forms of affective intimacy had consequences for the emerging idea of being a lesbian that the women collectively welcomed.

Whereas the secluded space of the Fag Attic provided predictability and security, Merirosvo in contrast offered a novel sense of freedom and possibility for lesbians – and not only for them alone. When they lost the lease for Merirosvo in 1988, Vagabondi was no longer happy to be vagabonding around in different low-key rented spaces. Realising now that it was worth

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it, Vagabondi decided to buy a restaurant of its own in the city centre of Tampere. In 1990 the country's second lesbian and gay night club Mixei opened its doors at Otavalankatu 3, where once again the materiality of the venue gave impetus to a new kind of lesboratory.

Notes

1 For a nuanced and critical discussion on the use of the concept of community in lesbian and gay scholarship, see Formby (2017).
2 *Queer narratives: Intimate and social lives of women with same-sex sexual attractions in Tampere 1971–2011*, funded by the Academy of Finland (project number 249652).
3 As my study of this very small community also addresses intimate aspects of my interviewees' relationships, I protect their identities by using pseudonyms and by keeping the interview excerpts anonymous. The audio and transliterated interview data is available for scholarly use at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, Tampere.

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