

Defining (LGBTQ) Community: The Integral Role of the Homophile Association of London, Ontario in Sustaining Community, 1970–2001¹

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Community is a word that people often use in a plethora of ways and there are a variety of definitions for community. As French philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests, “Theorizing about community and its purpose has been going on ever since [the Western] philosophical tradition kicked off.”² For example, community can be understood as a social system;³ the interplay between organization, competition, and conflict;⁴ an imagined entity;⁵ or a paradise lost,⁶ to name a few. While community is often hard to define, it is also something that people seek out due to the positive meanings often attached to it.⁷ However, within the academic literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community specifically, there is limited research that discusses its defining elements. LGBTQ research has tended to focus on issues of belonging,⁸ sexual citizenship,⁹ or queer spaces.¹⁰ Aside from a short book chapter, studies defining LGBTQ community remain largely invisible from the LGBTQ scholarship.¹¹

Turning to the literature on the histories of LGBTQ community in Canada specifically, there is a plethora of research on gay and lesbian bars and their cultural significance. Gary Kinsman, for example, argues that bars are one of the places in which gay and lesbian cultures are produced and that the sense of community is strengthened in these social and sexual spaces.¹² Tom Warner argues that bars were formed to provide social activities for the community.¹³ Liz Millward investigates the integral role that bars played in the creation of a distinctly gay community in major cities across Canada from 1964–1984. She argues that bars were places where women could go and freely be lesbians, while also keeping the “gay money” in their own hands and thus developing economic sustainability for the community.¹⁴

Elise Chenier’s research on lesbian bar culture in Toronto (1955–1965) demonstrates the ways in which bars provided opportunities for sex, drugs, and money required for working class butch lesbians to survive.¹⁵ Similarly, Line Chamberland’s research on Montréal (1955–1975) highlights the ways in which working class lesbians played key roles in infiltrating dive bars in the city’s east end and utilized them to sustain community.¹⁶ Julie Podmore also documents how lesbian bars in Montréal played a significant role in shaping territoriality for lesbians.¹⁷ Patrizia Gentile’s research on Montréal in the 1970s describes police crackdowns on lesbian and gay bars and bawdy houses as part of a city-wide “cleanup” of “undesirables,” leading up to the 1976 Olympics, and how these crackdowns negatively affected community organizing during an important period of gay and lesbian liberation in

Québec.¹⁸

Academic research on Canadian LGBTQ histories tends to focus on larger urban centres (e.g., Montréal, Toronto), leaving smaller cities and towns under-researched. However, there are some examples of research on LGBTQ bars and communities in smaller cities, and this research primarily focuses on the prairies (e.g., Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta). For example, Valerie Korinek's research on oral histories of the gay and lesbian community in Winnipeg describes police crackdowns and anti-gay violence against lesbians and gays at various cruising locations (e.g., bars, hotels, cafes, landmarks). Bathhouses for gay men and house party networks for lesbians provided alternative spaces with increased safety and privacy compared to more public venues.¹⁹ Korinek's research on gay community activist Doug Wilson, in Saskatoon, briefly describes the 1974 establishment of a gay community centre that offered counselling, political organizing, dances, and coffee houses. She also discusses how hotels and local bars housed membership meetings for Saskatchewan's Gay Coalition.²⁰ Some cities have completed their own community-based studies (e.g., Edmonton, Calgary), while other smaller cities and towns continue to be invisible in LGBTQ histories in Canada.²¹ This includes London, Ontario; it is the tenth largest city in Canada, yet there is a dearth of research on its history and community. This article highlights one aspect of London's LGBTQ history and its significance to broader LGBTQ histories in Canada. Through qualitative and archival research, this article examines how LGBTQ people in London have defined community, and how this conceptualization applies retrospectively to the Homophile Association of London Ontario (HALO) club, which operated a bar, social service, and political hub for LGBTQ people in London from 1970–2001.

This study draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews and archival research conducted from September 2013 to August 2014. For the qualitative research component, twenty participants were purposively sampled in order to reflect a range of demographics (age, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.).²² Potential participants were recruited through posters placed in LGBTQ spaces (e.g., bars, social services) and via word-of-mouth through email listservs and social media websites (e.g., Facebook). Eligibility criteria for participation included: (1) living in London for a minimum of one month; (2) identifying as LGBTQ; and (3) being over the age of eighteen. Interviews were conducted at participants' homes, as well as libraries and other public venues. In addition to these twenty interviews, separate interviews with five key informants were also conducted. The eligibility criteria for these interviews included (1) identifying as LGBTQ and (2) living in London for a minimum of twenty years. These participants were recruited to the study through conversations between the author and various members of the LGBTQ community, and they were specifically included to provide more of a historical context. Interview guides were used in both sets of interviews to direct the research, with the guide for key informants being more retrospective. All participants provided written informed consent and received a \$20 CAD honorarium for their participation. Par-

ticipants chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Transcripts were coded by hand and a coding framework was developed utilizing *a priori* themes as well as emergent categories from the data. Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board.

Archival research was completed at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) in Toronto, and the Hudler Archives at the University of Western Ontario Libraries. For both of these collections, a research tool was developed using a list of key concepts and terms generated by the research questions, as well as themes that emerged from the interview data (e.g., community groups, events, drag performances). This tool was used to investigate the archival catalogues and collections, comparing the descriptions with this research tool to determine what might be pertinent to retrieve from the archival stacks. Documents that were of relevance were photocopied, scanned, or photographed, and organized in themes and sub-themes.

Defining LGBTQ Community in London

Participants were asked a range of questions regarding how they define, understand, and experience LGBTQ community in London. Four major themes emerged from the interviews as tenets for community: (1) support; (2) common or shared visions/goals; (3) physical spaces; and (4) LGBTQ-specific events.

(1) Support

Support was framed in various ways when participants were discussing what makes a community for LGBTQ people in London. It was discussed in terms of providing information or advice to others within a group, accepting people for who they are, and helping others who have similar lived experiences related to a diversity of genders and sexualities. Dawn, a lesbian in her mid forties, who had lived in London for over two decades, was able to reflect on LGBTQ community and how, while there have been some changes over the years, there were also some consistent defining characteristics. She said,

Community is part of recognizing people and understanding who they are and putting a hand out and helping one another. Community is something that supports itself in essence ... There will be a person or a group of people that are a constant there, and just through communicating, you get to know and share and support one another.

This was also echoed by Blake, a gay man in his mid thirties. Blake saw support in terms of feeling accepted as crucial to his years of performing as a drag queen in London. Whether it was among his “drag family” or at a drag competition with

strangers, Blake felt that support was needed in order to feel accepted and appreciated. He said,

Community. Some of the things that I attach with that word would be inter-supports, organizations within our own community supporting one another. Acceptance. You find that acceptance within the community and then appreciation as well. You'd hope that within your own community, there's people that within that group, would appreciate your contributions—not necessarily give you a ribbon or an award for it, but at least acknowledge your contributions in that way.

Blake saw this acknowledgement—particularly as it related to his drag organization—as integral for different LGBTQ groups coming together. Thus, support as a defining characteristic of LGBTQ community does not only refer to support between similar people. According to Chef, a gay/queer man in his late forties, “community [is] a sense of belonging to a group that supports and upholds all within the community and celebrates the diversity within.” This is integral for the LGBTQ community in London. Chef acknowledged a diversity of identities within the community, and saw that while there were many who identify with a particular subgroup (e.g., queer transmen), the community is still supportive of others regardless of whether an identity is shared. London, while being a mid-sized city, has a relatively small number of LGBTQ organizations and networks in comparison to other similarly sized cities. Thus, having avenues for support was crucial for study participants.

(2) Common or Shared Visions/Goals

Common or shared visions and goals were discussed as something where like-minded people came together in an intentional way to articulate their shared interests, sometimes with more of a political investment. Adam, a gay/queer trans man in his late twenties, has lived in both London and Toronto, and thus was able to reflect on how LGBTQ community operated differently in the two cities. Adam discussed the idea of community as a chosen affiliation. He said, “we are a community because we actually have a shared vision of what we want our lives and our world to look like and we choose to be together, which I think is more and more what I'm interested in and what I sort of try to create in my life.” He provided an example of what that has looked like for him:

There has to be some kind of intentionality on both sides. It's not just, oh we live in the same neighbourhood and we go to the same space and therefore, but it's like we're choosing to do—so for example in some of the activist work I've done, that's sort

of an idea like an intentional community, right? I mean we haven't just ended up being in the same room, but making a conscious decision to do work on a specific project together, but then also to support each other and to hang out together outside of that and to be supportive and to support each other and kind of have each other's backs in a way.

This support that is required of community is not based on identity exclusively, but also on shared values and conscious (and sometimes political) actions between a group of people. For example, Stanley, a gay/queer man in his early thirties, has spent most of his life in London, but like Adam, also had experiences of communities elsewhere. Stanley discussed issues with identity-based community from his experience of gay community in Montréal. He said: "I realized that there were differences between the gay community and the queer community, where the queer community was a bit kind of less identity focused and often more politically active. I just kind of fit more with how people felt in that community." Stanley, while still sometimes identifying as gay, did not feel that being gay alone was enough for being part of a community. He felt that there needed to be some sort of common and intentional political goals to achieve as a community.

(3) Physical Spaces

The idea of community requiring physical spaces was discussed in a variety of ways. These were often discussed as spaces that are designated meeting locations, such as a community hub or a bar. They were identified as mutual spaces that allow for the visible recognition of others and also allows for intentional conversation and engagement in discourse to take place. LGBTQ spaces in London provide a specific location where LGBTQ people know they can participate in functions that allow for the creation of shared visions or goals. For example, people can attend a fundraiser event at a bar where the goal is to raise money for a particular LGBTQ cause. LGBTQ spaces can also be places where people receive LGBTQ-specific support; London's PFLAG group meets monthly to provide support to the city's trans community. LGBTQ spaces can also be a place for LGBTQ people with similar interests to develop other activities (e.g., London's Gay Guy's Book Club). Lunar, a gay man in his late thirties, richly highlights the ways in which community is fostered through spaces that generate a sense of culture and tradition. Having a physical space allows people a place to engage. Even where there are smaller numbers of people, a physical space is a centralized location for the congregation of community. While Lunar did not have an LGBTQ community when he was growing up, he was able to identify how spaces were important for other communities in his youth. He said,

I think of places to go when I think of community; if there isn't an actual physical place to congregate, like in my hometown we

had a community hall. There's only 1000 people that live there, but we had a community hall and that's where people went to gather. That's what I think community brings up for me. And then when you have a space to gather, tradition happens, and culture happens, and things like that just cultivate themselves when you have a place to get together I think.

This idea that a physical space creates community was also echoed by Dawn. Dawn has been active in LGBTQ community since moving to London, and sees group activities as habitual when provided a space:

Through having a community space, you inevitably gain one thing: community groups. Because when given a space, groups occur, whether they're pottery groups or woodworking groups, or people with book clubs, or whatever. People who are interested in planting gardens or anything, but if you give them the space, they'll go there.

A space is required for community members to come together and continue as a community.

In this congregation within a physical space, community members discussed the importance of visibly identifying with others. According to Sam, a pansexual/queer genderqueer in their mid thirties, this visibility is important, particularly in London where they feel community is less visible and accessible than in their experience living in larger cities. For Sam, LGBTQ community entails being in a space among other LGBTQ people. Space and visibility tie together to produce a sense of community. Sam said,

Queer community means that I can go outside of my house and visibly be able to identify other queer people around me in the world, and be surrounded by queer people in places that I go to, or social things that I go to. It feels really important and valuable to me to be in a space where, for example, if I said, 'my pronoun is they,' people would be like, 'Okay!' and switch. And I wouldn't have to explain gender to people.

This visibility is not just being seen as a person by other LGBTQ people, but there is the added component of being recognized as LGBTQ within the community space.

(4) LGBTQ Events

Events are the last major theme of community that were discussed most frequently. When participants were asked about the defining characteristics of community, bars and their events were most often discussed. Many participants discussed the role of bars and events in London as activity and/or political hubs for the LGBTQ community. Others discussed bars as essential spaces that connect individuals to the community—particularly for those who are just coming out—or places that provide continuity to the community.

Events at bars play an integral role in London's LGBTQ community history. From the 1980s to the 2000s, multiple bars came and went, hosting a variety of events for the community. Blake, who has been a drag performer for over two decades, spent a lot of his time performing and socializing at many LGBTQ bars. He felt that these bar spaces provided community for LGBTQ people in London. He said,

I would say the late 90s/early 2000s, there was a great sense of community. You know, we had here in London, we had three bars. The community itself had very strong members and very prominent people within them. That was back in the day when our community was so big that we could support three bars that identified as gay.

Jones, a queer lesbian in her mid sixties, echoed this sentiment on the sheer number of establishments: "Ahh, as far as the community went, there was Lacey's and HALO and Upstairs/Downstairs ummm is that all? There tended to be two bars and HALO. One bar would close, another bar would open up." Both Blake and Jones spent their fair share of time working at various LGBTQ bars in London over the last couple of decades, and they found that because of these bars, there were always events for LGBTQ people to go to every night of the week. Bars, though more plentiful twenty to thirty years ago, were also identified by younger participants when discussing LGBTQ community today. Graham, who was born, raised, and came out in London, loves the bar aspect of the community. He said, "I like nightlife; that's generally one of the things I like to go do. In terms of like nightclubs or in terms of bars, and those are in many ways a major lynchpin—not a lynchpin, but a major nexus for shall we say communities as a whole, especially the gay community." It is important to point out that Graham did not just say that he liked going to bars for the sake of going out and experiencing the nightlife, but rather he identified clearly their central importance to LGBTQ community.

Events at bars play a prominent role in the development of community because they encourage engagement and participation in a particular medium, such as drag shows. Many participants spoke at length about performance events, both past and present, as being integral for community development. For example,

Naomi, a straight trans woman in her early thirties, identified the bars as her main entry into the LGBTQ community. She was encouraged to be herself and was first introduced to drag performances, which she said helped her with her transition. Nicole, a trans woman in her mid thirties, said she had a community feeling when she first participated in a performance event in London, after living in a variety of other cities and not feeling a connection anywhere else. She stated, “it was kind of like one of those things that’s like ‘ohhhh community!’—like you feel the community from being a part of all these performances and then I come here and it’s like a small, small spot in the world and it’s like, wow, this is ten times better, you know?” Similar to Lunar’s childhood experience of community in a small town, no matter how small the crowd, performance events and the bars that host them help to facilitate a sense of community and foster traditions for LGBTQ people in London.

Rose, a queer lesbian in her early twenties, moved to London for school where she accessed more community events in comparison to her hometown, which was significantly smaller than London. She suggested “I think the events and everything really help to build and foster and keep the community strong.” This connectedness is especially important for people who are coming out of the closet. For example, Su-Lee, a bisexual/pansexual/queer woman in her early twenties, said that events are important for community in terms of how they impact identity formation. She said, “especially for people that are just starting to navigate their identity as well as for people who have already ... I do think events are important to keep community going.” In fact, bar events were identified by all interview participants as pivotal for the community. They provide mechanisms for conversations, dance, and performances, that the diversity of LGBTQ community members in London can claim and foster as their own.

The HALO Club as Community

As discussed in the introduction, bars are well-documented as important venues for LGBTQ community in major cities across Canada. Kinsman suggests that “Bars, baths, and clubs are not only businesses; as cultural and erotic institutions they are also molded by their patrons.”²³ He quotes Christine Riddiough’s 1979 essay on gay and lesbian liberation as being applicable to LGBTQ bars:

[They are] the focal point of the gay and lesbian community. They are the most stable institution in a frequently unstable world. As such, they shape the culture of gay life, even as they are shaped and changed themselves ... They are our territory even with all the control that the outside world exerts. They are the main places where gay people can be gay.²⁴

According to Kinsman, “the sense of gay community has been strengthened by our defense of our social and sexual gathering places.”²⁵

Many interview participants spoke about their involvement with the HALO club, as well as the void created in London's community since its demise in the early 2000s. It even had lasting intra-generational effects on younger LGBTQ people. For example, Lunar did not get to experience HALO. However, he said, "I hear stories about when I didn't live here and I hear about HALO and people have amazing things to say about what that did for community, what a space like that did. And I hear all that, I hear great stories from folks. I didn't get to experience that." At current community events, people are frequently heard referencing HALO—including those like Lunar who never experienced it. Despite the numerous experiences and stories related by interview participants, and the amount of times people reminisce about HALO's importance at current community socials, meetings, and events, little has been published on it.²⁶ Some HALO meetings and events are briefly mentioned in an annotated chronology; however, there is no in-depth description.²⁷ In Kinsman's limited documentation of homophile organizing in Canada, for example, there is no mention of London, and he argues that homophile organizations were fragmented and did not last.²⁸ Warner, on the other hand, mentions HALO briefly, but argues that most homophile organizing was short-lived and the movement quickly became outdated and conservative by the mid-to-late 1970s. Warner also suggests "few mourned [the movement's] passing."²⁹ There is a stark contrast between the historical accounts of homophile organizing in Canada and LGBTQ people's experiences of HALO. While many homophile organizations in Canada may have been fragmented, short-lived, and conservative, the opposite is true of HALO. Here, I discuss the formation of HALO, the creation of a community space, the services that it offered, and the ways that it has created and sustained LGBTQ community in London.

HALO began at the University of Western Ontario in 1970, following a wave of LGBTQ awareness campaigns and organizations spawning from the publicity and political ramifications of the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City.³⁰ While HALO began in 1970, the earliest documentation found in the HALO Fonds Archives (a subsection of the Hudler Archives) are meeting minutes from February 2, 1971. They document opinions from the group on the formation of HALO as an association. The university was considered a safe space due to its composition of "liberal, educated people [whose] change of attitude will filter down to the lower classes."³¹ There were concerns from some members who sought to avoid exposing their homosexuality, due to threats to their wellbeing or careers. However, the pros—unity fighting oppression, a non-cruising meeting place, an educational platform, and a space for those afraid to come out—outweighed the cons.³²

Over the years, HALO began to grow as an organization, hosting bi-weekly dances and events at the university. As many as two hundred people attended a dance in March of 1973.³³ HALO grew in size and eventually expanded into the greater London community. According to one participant, Richard, a gay man in his seventies, "[HALO] realized that the money they got was all going into the stu-

dent association and that they were making quite a bit of money by having these dances and stuff, so they started holding back some of the money and rented the building at 649 Colborne Street.” The lease for this building was signed on December 2, 1974 and the building was eventually purchased by HALO through fundraising initiatives in 1987.³⁴

For the sake of this article, I am particularly interested in the ways in which the HALO space at 649 Colborne Street functioned as a community—both a nightclub and a social service—and the ways it was understood and experienced as an integral community space for LGBTQ people in London. This development of a physical space designated specifically for the LGBTQ community is one of the tenets required for community (as discussed previously). When HALO first occupied the space at 649 Colborne, it was an unidentifiable building. Located beside the train tracks at Colborne Street and Pall Mall Street, HALO was situated in a mostly residential area, close to two kilometres from the downtown core of the city. The front page of a 1986 fundraiser pamphlet reads, “the windows on the main floor at HALO are covered over. People who do not know us, fear us. Sometimes they want to do us harm. Our goal is to be able to put glass in all our windows at HALO.”³⁵ Toby, a genderqueer lesbian in her fifties, spent time at HALO both as a patron and as a staff person. Toby said that HALO originally required patrons to have memberships to attend or they had to show out of town identification. The reason for this, according to Toby,

Was because it wasn't safe just to let anybody in. I mean, I had a friend who was run over in the parking lot of the HALO club by frat boys on a dare—she had a permanent disability to her leg. Yeah, people would open the door and throw in stink bombs or whatever—like there are many places where we had to defend our space.

Despite constant threats, Toby still attended HALO. For many, it was a space for people to come together, build strength in numbers, and support one another from the homophobia of the rest of Western society. The HALO fundraiser pamphlet states, “We try to be accessible . . . The anonymity of the building helps reduce the fear that some have of being identified by friends, loved ones, employers, acquaintances, and tormentors who may not understand.”³⁶

While there were fears of violence and discriminatory acts toward both the building and the clientele, the HALO club operated successfully for over two decades. For some, it is hard to describe what exactly HALO was—whether it was a nightclub, social service, coffee house, or event space. An embroidered sign for HALO that used to hang in the building reads, “Homophile Assn. of London Ont. Entertainment, Social Services, Licensed Disco, Incorporated 1974” (see Fig. 1). The HALO club seemed to be everything the community needed, under one roof.

Toby summarized the space thusly:

HALO was you've got to remember, a club, right? Even though they had dances and they served booze, it wasn't only a bar. That's why the other places that were bars, came and went—because they were only based on making money, but the HALO was based on a dream and a vision and a mission statement.

Common/shared visions or goals are another tenet for LGBTQ community in London, where there is an intentionality and investment in the community. People saw this space as a commitment to LGBTQ people in London. It offered a variety of supports, common visions, and events that kept LGBTQ people attending while other bars and venues came and left.



Fig. 1: HALO sign, Box 73, Photo Folder, HALO Fonds, Hudler Archives.

The HALO club was understood by many as a community hub that facilitated a diversity of activities, including support groups. Supports are another main tenet for LGBTQ community in London, particularly in the 1970s–1980s, when LGBTQ people felt less safe to be out publicly. HALO was not just a space for

adults of drinking age. Toby discussed the diversity of the HALO club:

Everything was there. And even though it was hard to afford the space like to heat it and stuff, there were smaller aspects of it that kept running. They started having a martini bar open in the small part of it, and then just open the big part for other events. And actually, I'm wrong to say there wasn't counselling because I know there were youth groups and things that operated out of there. I just meant I don't think there were any personal counselling sessions. It was an awesome place!

HALO catered to a diversity of genders, ages, and sexualities—perhaps a cause for its success in comparison to other LGBTQ spaces where attendees had to be the drinking age. Stanley, a gay/queer man in his early thirties, reflected on his experience at HALO as a youth—he identified the space as one of his two sources of support around the time that he came out of the closet. He said,

There were a couple. At the time, HALO was still in London, Homophile Association of London Ontario, and they had youth nights actually that they ran I think once a week; maybe every couple of weeks? Something like that. So, I would go to that with people. That was actually where I met my first boyfriend. And also, there was a group called PAYSO, let's see if I can remember the acronym for that. Positive Attitudes about Youth Sexual Orientation—that might be it? I might be getting some of that wrong—and they were a support group for queer youth, so I would go to that fairly regularly as well. Those were the two main ones—the main social support networks that I was a part of.³⁷

When I asked Stanley to describe the space, and how it functioned for him as a youth, he stated,

I was like sixteen or seventeen when I went to HALO and it was more like a community space like downstairs there was a bar and some pool tables and then there was another room upstairs and that is where we had the youth nights and I don't even remember what we did, like I'm trying to remember if there were organized activities and someone running them? I don't think so. I think we all just went and like... it was just a place to go and hang out, which was fine. That was, you know, that was great, but it was like... what was great was that it was a place to go and hang out. Like we weren't at a bar, like you know, at that age going to a bar,

I wouldn't have known how to act, but here I was like OK. I'm in a living room or something like that, so ... so yeah, they offered a chance for a type of sociability that would've been recognizable to me as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old.

It is clear from Stanley's reflections that the HALO space facilitated a variety of activities for a diversity of members of the LGBTQ community in London. It was a physical space for LGBTQ youth, separate from the bar space, where youth could feel supported and welcome in London. Youth groups, in particular, operated at HALO from as far back as February of 1982, under the name of Gay Youth London, and later it became the London Gay Youth Association (see Fig. 2).³⁸ HALO provided a space to bring people together as a way to strengthen community and create an element of certainty for the future.

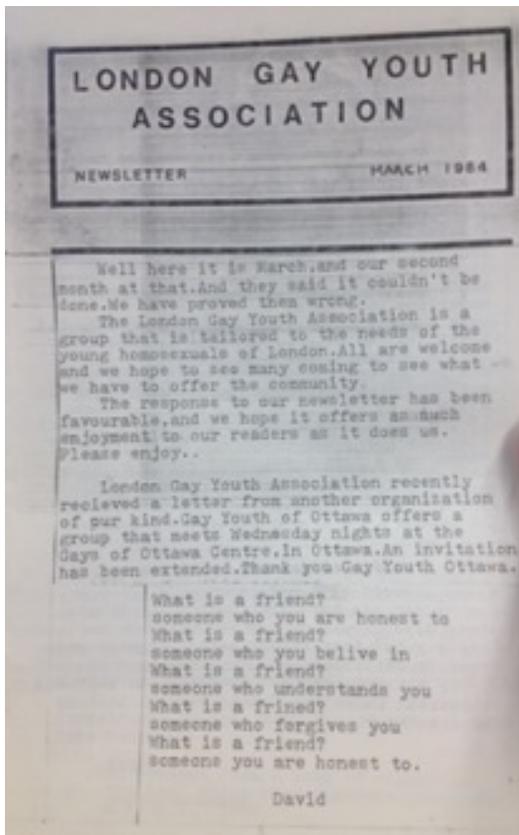


Fig. 2: "London Gay Youth Association Newsletter," March 1984, Box 20, Newsletter Folder, HALO Fonds, Hudler Archives.

The HALO club community space was not just diverse in terms of age, but also in terms of gender and sexuality. Chef described the people that attended HALO, saying,

HALO was great. I miss HALO to this day actually. It's a really unique space. I mean they had on the main floor, there was the dance floor, but they also had like a quiet bar upstairs so you can sit around and talk. It was great. And the same thing as Bannisters, there was a really diverse crowd. There were men, women, gay, transgender, whatever. It was a great experience. I love that place.

Chef's experience of HALO allowed for dancing to loud music, as well as alternative space for conversations with the diversity of people that made up the LGBTQ community. There was also a diversity of interests, particularly related to the performances and music in the bar. Dawn described the times she attended the HALO club:

There'd be ladies' dances once or twice a month and just—there'd always been a good dance or great drag show, or really—it was awesome because it was really a mixed community event. All events there seemed to be really good mixed community events in regards to age mixings, which I like a lot, I like to not just be with one age group, I like to be with all age groups. They'd have everything from polka, country/western, hip hop, you know, just all those genres of music, which makes it fun because you'd be out there, the line dancers would be out there, and then someone would throw on a polka, and someone would ask you to polka and as long as they knew how to lead, I was okay. [Laughs] It was fun.

This idea of having a variety of music genres seemed to be a good idea to draw in LGBTQ people with different interests. It is evident from HALO Newsletters spanning over two decades that an effort was made to ensure that a diversity of music was played. There were advertisements for disco, line dancing, country, and rap music nights. The HALO Executive went as far as creating a music survey, asking people how often they attended the club, their main reason for attending, and what types of music attendees would enjoy at a dance night.³⁹ This contrasts with mainstream clubs that tend to cater to specific demographics and musical and/or aesthetic tastes.

Through my archival examination of the various posters, newsletters, and advertisements in the HALO Fonds, it was clear that the HALO club organized a great diversity of events for the community. HALO encouraged diversity by offering

a variety of events, including drag shows, plays, pageants, theme nights (e.g., bondage or leather/denim nights), musical performances, and even sober dances.⁴⁰ From as early as the mid-1970s, HALO hosted Coffee House events on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, and dance events on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. These events gave LGBTQ people in London and the surrounding area something to do for six out of seven days a week.⁴¹ Coffee House events usually consisted of discussion groups and casual conversations, table tennis, pool, pinball, as well as other games.⁴² By having all of these events, the HALO club created an inclusive and supportive environment for the LGBTQ community that provided recognition and visibility to the diversity of the community members.

HALO was committed to serving all LGBTQ people in London, including those who did not drink or had substance use issues. According to Richard, who worked at HALO for a number of years, other community groups and services would use the HALO space:

AA came to me once and said, 'we want to set up AA meetings,' and I thought, 'well that's great!' I said, 'well this is a bar, you don't want to meet in a bar'; 'oh no, that's alright!' So we let them. They used the space for years. That became one of the most popular AAs! I don't know, I imagine the gay AA is still running because they weren't comfortable in the straight AA meetings. And a lot of straights would come to it because they liked it better than the straight AA, so it was a very big popular thing. It met sometimes in churches and things, and also at HALO. We always made sure there was space for it at HALO. We didn't charge them for it.

The HALO club did not want to discriminate against nor alienate LGBTQ people, so they hosted social services, meetings, and events for just about everyone. HALO's strength was in providing more than a bar for the community.

HALO played an integral role in the lives of many LGBTQ people in the London area. Despite criticism from some about it being a bar, many looked past the negative connotations associated with bars, and toward the positive implications space like HALO had for the LGBTQ community. Richard commented,

There were all these people who were very critical of even HALO, who said, 'oh you shouldn't be funding social services through serving alcohol.' Well bars I think served a very important role for the gay community. It was a place to come together and to socialize. They could have things like the drag shows and other things going on there, but it was what brought people together, to meet other gay people. And so they provided a social

service. That is a social service in itself!

The idea of a bar being a social service is unique to the history of LGBTQ bars in Canada. HALO provided peer supports and a gathering place that was a positive contrast to their experiences in a heterosexist world. It was a safe haven for many in London. And it was not just HALO offering spaces for the community. There was a plethora of other bars that came and left during HALO's tenure in London. These included: 52nd Street; The Apartment; Bannisters; H2O; Lacey's; Studio 812; SINNZ; Upstairs/Downstairs; Annex to 181; and Club 181. Many of these establishments were advertised in the HALO newsletters. Richard felt that since HALO was a community social service, it should advertise all events and spaces that occurred throughout the city. In reference to HALO, Richard said, "if you run it as a business, then you compete with the other places [...] but I said no, it's a community group, so you try to help others, you try to work with the other groups, and the other places."

This positive communication and support for other LGBTQ bars and spaces helped the community to grow and flourish. Blake shared similar sentiments—he had only attended HALO a handful of times, he felt that in the late 1990s there was always something to do on any given day, and these activities and events were all communicated through the HALO newsletter. Blake said,

So around that time, that would've been—HALO would've been in full swing and starting to come to its last curtain call and I believe, I want to say it was SINNZ or 52nd Street—I can't remember which it was at the time, but other than HALO there was the Apartment, which was the lounge bar, and then you had SINNZ, which was the dance bar and then it was only opened on Friday and Saturday nights, and so if you're out and about downtown between Sunday and Thursday you would go to the Apartment. And then there were specific nights for HALO. It was really weird how each bar worked together to provide the community with something to do that was gay-positive every night of the week.

This cohesion and communication amongst bar owners and the HALO club really highlighted a positive LGBTQ community during HALO's time. This community cohesion demonstrated a long-term commitment, intentionality, and a shared vision to make a better community for LGBTQ people in London.

HALO also engaged in a variety of political actions, ranging from writing letters to various politicians to protests and marches. In January, 1975, a newsletter described HALO as a political entity for gay rights.⁴³ Later that year, members of HALO marched on parliament in Ottawa with the National Gay Rights Coalition

to end discrimination against gays and lesbians.⁴⁴ A July 1975 HALO Newsletter reads, “gay people will no longer sit back and be shit on by the sexist straight society. The time is ripe for all gay people to band together to end all gay discrimination forever.”⁴⁵ Despite this initial pronouncement, HALO’s political actions started off slow compared to other cities (e.g., Toronto). London’s conservative climate likely made political struggles especially difficult.⁴⁶ This initially led to the formation of a gay political group independent of HALO—the Gay Activist League of London (GALL)—which called for more political action in London. GALL’s first newsletter states that political action has not been sufficiently addressed by HALO.⁴⁷ Thus, the group started off by addressing harassment and doing patrols of local cruising areas in Victoria Park.⁴⁸ GALL later changed their name to the Gay Action Group for Equality (GAGE) and held public demonstrations to support gays and lesbians who had lost jobs, children, and homes due to their homosexuality.⁴⁹ Members of this group also held membership at HALO, but felt they needed to organize separately to publicly address gay rights issues through direct actions.⁵⁰

Two years later, HALO established its own political review committee and a political action policy to increase political efforts.⁵¹ Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, HALO’s political presence grew and gained significant influence within political systems.⁵² Its Political Action Committee addressed a variety of issues over the years, including age of consent, bawdy house laws, the concept of gross indecency, and revising human rights laws and criminal codes to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination.⁵³ HALO’s political engagement extended beyond London into surrounding Ontario cities such as Waterloo. For example, in 1982 the gay student group at Wilfrid Laurier University was denied club status by the university’s student union. However, based on political efforts and feedback from HALO’s Political Action Committee, the student union reversed this decision.⁵⁴ While political action by HALO was increasing in London in the early 1980s—including marches on City Hall and protests against anti-gay fear mongering during the AIDS crisis—HALO’s membership sought further escalations of political engagement.⁵⁵ A membership questionnaire was disseminated in November 1982 to chart future directions for the club. At this time, 67% of respondents suggested that political action should be prioritized, and HALO’s executive acted accordingly, ensuring the club was based on the wants and needs of the community.⁵⁶ Multiple interview participants discussed their political involvement with HALO. For example, Chef said,

I became a lot more involved with [HALO] protesting political figures who, you know, didn’t think at that point that the whole issue about same sex benefits were coming up and there were some very outspoken politicians against that, so whenever they came to town, we were always there with picket signs!

While HALO's initial political engagement was minimal, over time HALO became a strong political force fighting against discrimination in London and elsewhere.

The HALO club successfully operated as a community for LGBTQ people in London for close to three decades. Thinking about LGBTQ community in London retrospectively, the tenets of community previously discussed were provided by the HALO club. HALO's membership had a common vision and investment in the future. It provided a space for the development of shared interests and goals as well as political action. It provided support groups and counselling for diverse LGBTQ people in London who needed information, education, advice, or help dealing with discrimination. An LGBTQ-specific physical space provided the recognition and visibility needed for the development of community discourse and traditions. Finally, the HALO club provided multiple LGBTQ-specific events based on specific interests, such as drag nights, hip hop nights, leather/BDSM nights, and youth nights. While multiple interview participants had not experienced the HALO club, their conceptualizations of LGBTQ community apply retrospectively to HALO.

HALO... Goodbye

In 1999, HALO club operations ended due to a string of major events that caused significant financial burdens on the community. While all of the details are not clear regarding the demise of HALO, according to interview data, there were two major issues that started the financial downward spiral. The first had to do with the infamous London police investigation called Project Guardian, which began in November 1993. In response to a teenager who came across a bag of pornographic videos along a river in London, the police used what Warner cites as "Canada's draconian child pornography laws" to launch an investigation against members of the LGBTQ community in London, under the guise of capturing pedophiles.⁵⁷ Two men were eventually charged with child pornography offences during the trial; however, the investigation included eleven search warrants and thirty men arrested under 1,252 charges—none of which led to convictions.⁵⁸ The investigation lasted three years and both the police chief, Julian Fantino, and the news media sensationalized the investigation, calling it a child porn ring or children being abused by predatory older men, despite claims by the perceived "victims" that all sexual acts were consensual.⁵⁹ A September 1996 document drafted by HALO and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario (CLGRO) highlights the ways in which this investigation did damage to the LGBTQ community in London. The document calls the investigation a witch-hunt full of distortions and misrepresentations of gay culture, which put the community in an even more vulnerable position.⁶⁰ The Liberal government had shown reluctance to include sexual orientation in the Charter, there were a string of important court cases regarding pension/survivor benefits that were defeated, and there was also hysteria in the media around the AIDS crisis and the LGBTQ community.

The Crown Attorney for Project Guardian suggested, “the legacy left for the youth by the men was homosexuality.”⁶¹ One of the men charged was in his early twenties, and had been having consensual sex with his boyfriend, who was seventeen. However, the media continued to refer to this case as an exploitation of children, and the defendant was referred to by the judge as “a homosexual pedophile.”⁶² HALO tried to highlight the flaws, double standards, and inaccuracies of the police and the media, but this was challenging given the perception that HALO was defending “child pornography” and supporting a “child porn ring.” In the end, most charges were dropped and while Fantino used almost two million public tax dollars for the investigation, his rationale for starting Project Guardian proved to have no basis. Of the 800 videotapes seized by police—the very tapes at the centre of attention at Fantino’s first press conference—none were found to contain any child pornography. It was all fabricated.⁶³ However, this did not mend the irreparable damage to the LGBTQ community—it divided some, and closeted others.

The second catalyst for HALO’s demise was London Mayor Diane Haskett’s 1995 opposition to a proclamation for London’s gay pride celebrations. HALO embarked on a long, arduous, and expensive legal battle with the mayor. At the Ontario Human Rights tribunal, Haskett exclaimed that homosexuality was “against God’s will ... it’s not the way God intended and I believe people should be set free from that.”⁶⁴ The HALO membership took direct action against the mayor; at a City Hall sit-in protest, members held signs reading, “Haskett the Homophobe. Shame. Shame.”⁶⁵ Interview participants also discussed how the pride celebration that year changed from a parade to a march, given the political climate in London. According to Dawn,

We rallied. We marched instead of paraded, right? So, we took the streets. We stopped traffic with motorcycles. We marched to Diane Haskett’s front yard and we pissed right on her lawn. Cuz that’s what you do when you’re pissed off. And saying that yes we deserve rights and freedoms, so yeah, absolutely we rallied. There were hundreds of people marching in the streets, which I’m very proud of ... All ages. All different backgrounds ... A lot of angry gays and lesbians wanted to take the mayor to task. Yeah, it was empowering. Truly it was. We were breaking the law by marching in the streets. And when the police came, we’d shuffle over to the sidewalk, but when they weren’t there, we’d shuffle back out onto the road.

HALO’s political engagement was alive and well in the mid-1990s in London.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission found Haskett guilty of discrimination in 1997 and she was ordered to issue a pride proclamation for LGBTQ peo-

ple in London.⁶⁶ The financial strain of this legal battle, compounded with other financial issues, ultimately forced HALO to sell its building in 2001. It rented another space, which operated strictly as a social service. Without the consistent revenue from the club space, HALO's finances started to dwindle because of the rent for the new space. HALO closed down quietly in 2005, with the remaining money donated to the Pride Library at Western University—a library dedicated to LGBTQ culture and literature.

Conclusions

Reflecting on current LGBTQ literature, community is often a notion that is presumed rather than questioned. Thus, this study sought answers to the question of community from LGBTQ people in London, in an attempt to comprehend how it is understood and experienced in the local context. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggests that community is a paradise lost, particularly given the negative implications of our modern capitalist society's neoliberal focus on individuals rather than collectives.⁶⁷ Given this political context, alternative spaces for marginalized communities are crucial. According to Gordon Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, "the social fragmentation unleashed with globalizing capital tends to limit the sites of minority sexual cultures to redefined ghettos."⁶⁸ Due to these fragmentation effects, communities like the one HALO established become increasingly important for LGBTQ community. Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter also argue that we must inhabit and defend physical queer spaces for self-protection, pleasure, and community healing.⁶⁹ As evident from the views of the interview participants, these types of communities are integral for LGBTQ lives. The HALO club provided the necessary components to develop and sustain a community for LGBTQ people in London from 1970–2001.

While HALO's demise had a negative impact on the LGBTQ community in London, HALO showed LGBTQ people (among others) in London the possibility of creating and sustaining community through a physical space, which provides a venue for supports, developing common/shared visions or goals for political actions, and events that allowed for community growth. Despite suggestions by other Canadian historians that homophile associations in Canada were short-lived, fragmented, outdated, and conservative, the opposite was true for HALO. Bars have played an integral role for LGBTQ communities across Canada, but they tended to come and go. HALO outlasted other bars and homophile associations because it provided everything LGBTQ under one roof. In contrast to other, larger cities (e.g., Toronto), London had few LGBTQ organizations and therefore less competition. Further, HALO's funding was driven by the membership, with no reliance on government funds—this allowed HALO to provide support, events, and political action that catered to the membership. LGBTQ community organizing in London drew the attention and respect of many other Canadian cities; at a 1979 Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition conference, many other cities and organizations asked

HALO how to organize a community around a bar and how to make profits that went directly back into the community.⁷⁰ LGBTQ community organizing in London drew the attention and respect of many other Canadian cities.

HALO played a significant role for LGBTQ people in sustaining community. Future archival and qualitative research should be considered, including a detailed analysis of Project Guardian and HALO's demise, HALO's adherence to the term homophile, class dynamics, identity politics, changes in the needs of the community, and a comparative analysis with other homophile associations. While not without its problems, the history of HALO gives knowledge and hope to current and future LGBTQ people in London around the ways in which community can be developed and sustained in a smaller city. In January 2018, London Mayor Matt Brown issued an apology on behalf of City Hall for the 1995 pride proclamation refusal by then-Mayor Dianne Haskett, calling the city's actions bigoted, unfair, and shameful.⁷¹ While an apology does not undo the strife and financial burden forced upon HALO, it highlights remorse for past discriminations, and a level of acceptance for LGBTQ communities in London today. This is something HALO fought for since its inception. "The time is ripe for all gay people to band together to end all gay discrimination forever."⁷²

NOTES

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