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‘Helps Me Feel More Like Myself’: Navigating Bodies, Emotions and Identity in Australian Queer Salons

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‘Helps Me Feel More Like Myself’: Navigating Bodies, Emotions and Identity in Australian Queer Salons

While hair and beauty salons are often thought of as spaces that reproduce normative ideals of gender and sexuality, the past decade has seen an increase in salons catering specifically to LGBTQ+ clientele. More broadly, research has shown that far from only treating ‘surface’ concerns, salons in general are sites of intensified affect, making them a unique space of entangled body, emotional, and identity work. This article draws on interviews with salon workers from 2017 and client responses to a survey about salons during COVID-19 from 2020, conducted in Australia. This article gives particular focus to salons catering to the LGBTQ+ community (‘queer salons’), as well as data from salon clients that identify as LGBTQ+. Drawing on this dataset this article offers insight into how queer salons challenge our expectations of what hair and beauty salons can do for queer precarity in terms of physical, emotional and identity vulnerability and trouble ideas of the salon as a space which merely reinforces normative ideals of beauty. Furthermore, this article considers how salons might provide a sense of safety and belonging for some LGBTQ+ people, especially within the context of a pandemic.

Keywords: salons, beauty, LGBTQ+, identity, queer precarity.

Introduction: The Queer Salon

Hair and beauty salons are often thought of as spaces that reproduce normative ideals of gender and sexuality (Straughan 2010; Eknor 2018; Barber 2008; Barber 2016). However, in recent years in urban centres like Melbourne Australia, an increasing number of gender-neutral salons

that cater specifically to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) clientele have appeared (Stutchbury 2016; Ridley 2019). These sites offer different body work services that raise questions about the kind of gender and sexuality norms that may be reproduced or resisted in salons. I refer to these salons as ‘queer salons’, deploying *queer* as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community and a verb that means to resist expectations (as in McCann and Monaghan [2020]). Queer salons, as I examine them, are those that at once promote themselves to and cater for the LGBTQ+ community and which shift our expectations of what a salon can be. The intent here is not to create a hard binary between ‘queer salons’ and ‘classic salons’, especially given that LGBTQ+ workers can be found across a range of salons and that classic salons do not necessarily reproduce normative beauty. However, though there may be queering of norms across different salon types, focusing on salons that mark themselves as LGBTQ+ friendly affords the opportunity to explore salons that mindfully engage with issues of identity and non-normativity.

This article draws from two separate studies conducted on salon work. The first involved interviews with salon workers in Melbourne Australia in 2017, and the second a survey on the impact of salon closures on both clients and workers during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While these studies looked at experiences of salon work and salon visits broadly rather than queer salons specifically, this article gives particular focus to workers and clients who talked about the significance of sexual and gender non-normativity in their responses. Australia is an interesting geographic site within which to conduct this examination. Although it is perceived as a liberal democratic society, it is only in very recent times that LGBTQ+ rights such as marriage equality have been made official, following lengthy and unpleasant periods of political debate that continue to have negative ramifications (Thomas,

McCann and Fela, 2020). Interviews with salon workers catering specifically to the LGBTQ+ community provide insight into how some workers are creating safe(r) spaces and challenging beauty expectations. Similarly, survey responses from LGBTQ+ clients reveal how salons can play a profound role in identity curation and affirmation. However, responses from LGBTQ+ clients also expose tensions in visiting salons. Drawing on this dataset, this article seeks to understand what salons might offer to some LGBTQ+ people in terms of body, emotional, and aesthetic identity-based work.

In recent decades sexuality and gender diversity have come to be increasingly recognised as a key for investigation in feminist geography (Wright 2010). Contributing to this conversation in queer geographies, this article offers insight into the role that some salons play in terms of making safe(r) spaces, resisting norms, offering support in a precarious world, and shaping LGBTQ+ identities. This article begins with a brief review of literature and theories of labour in the salon that have informed the research; a discussion of methods, data analysis and results; the findings – organised into three themes relating to body work (‘Misfits, Signalling and Managing Touch’), emotional labour (‘From the Emotional to the Physical and Back Again’) and aesthetic labour (‘Is There Such Thing as a ‘Lesbian Haircut?’)–; and finally a conclusion that considers potential future research.

Literature Review: Understanding Hair and Beauty Salons

While practices relating to hair and beauty go back to ancient times, the emergence of modern salons in the West as we know them today began at the end of the nineteenth century, with processes of industrialisation, a growing middle class, and changing consumer habits (Black 2004). Though the term ‘salon’ was originally used to refer to drawing/reception rooms, it came

to be used to refer to hair and beauty establishments in the early 1900s (OED Online 2021). This linguistic doubling speaks to the intimacy of the salon as a place of talk as much as aesthetic curation, as well as the history of beauty work conducted in the home prior to the emergence of beauty salons. Indeed, the salon today is ‘positioned between the private and the public, the intimate and the corporate’ (Straughan 2012, 94).

Research consistently shows that far from only treating surface concerns, hair and beauty salons are spaces of touch and talk and involve a complex array of labours. This includes physical work, emotional labour, and work relating to aesthetics and shaping client identity. Firstly, we can understand salons as an encounter between bodies, involving touch and physical management. This is referred to in the literature as ‘body labour’ (Kang 2003; 2010) or ‘body work’ (Gimlin 2002), which involves ‘care, adornment, pleasure, discipline and cure of others’ bodies’ (Wolkowitz 2002, p. 479). Secondly, body work is entangled with emotional management, and emotional labour is key to salon practice (Sharma and Black 2001; Black 2004; Kang 2010; Toerien and Kitzinger 2007; Parkinson 1991; Cohen 2010). Workers are required to manage and generate beneficial emotions within themselves and their clients (Hochschild [1983] 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that salon workers often act as ‘informal helpers’ for clients, who disclose personal issues to workers (Sattler and Dean 2016, 687). Salon workers report being exposed to the coalface of social precarity: frequently navigating client disclosures about gender-based violence, mental health, suicidal ideation, job loss, and more (Page, Chur-Hansen and Delfabbro, 2021). Lastly, salon work involves the curation and management of identity, in the form of aesthetic labour (Gill and Scharff 2017) that is, the practice of ‘looking good and sounding right’ (Warhurst and Nickson 2007). In other

words, the salon involves a combination of ‘aesthetic, emotional and body’ labour (Sanders et al. 2013, p. 122).

The production of space as normatively heterosexual is a key concern within queer geographies (Oswin 2008). The existing literature on salons indicates that these spaces frequently reinforce heteronormative expectations of gender and beauty. For example, Barber (2008) argues that hair salons are spaces that involve grooming rituals which emphasise the classed, raced, and sexual norms of femininity. She suggests even though some men may work in or visit salons, they are generally coded as ‘feminine’ spaces (Barber 2008, 463). Furthermore, Barber (2016) argues that barbershops and salons reproduce normative heterosexual masculine aesthetics. Or as Scanlon suggests, salons generally ‘keep heteronormativity... and beauty culture intact’ (2007, 331). However, much of this work has emerged from ethnographies conducted at specific salons, missing the larger picture which now includes alternative salons that aim to create a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ clients. Importantly, alongside the emergence of mainstream beauty culture noted at the beginning of this section, so too has there been ‘thriving subcultures of gay men and trans women as beauty experts and performers’ (Homant and Sender 2019, 5388). That is, despite the dominant heteronormative coding of many salons, many LGBTQ+ people are interested and involved in hair and beauty practices.

Many feminist accounts have tended to focus on the oppressive role of beauty norms and expectations in shaping people (particularly women’s) experiences with grooming and managing bodily aesthetics (for extensive discussion see Davis [1995] and Hollows [2000]). Much subsequent feminist writing has also highlighted consumer beauty practices as a key element of post-feminism, which involves the disavowal of feminism and defence of such practices via the neoliberal rhetoric of choice (Gill 2007, Gill 2008, McRobbie 2009, Lazar 2011). Though there

have been recent attempts to understand beauty in terms of the production of raced and classed feminine identities (for example see Barber [2008]), the dominant lens through which such identity production has been understood has been beauty norms, understood to ‘control, restrict, and discipline women’s bodies, desires, and social realities’ (Jha 2015, 90). Similarly, within feminist geography emphasis has been on beauty practices in terms of the management of non-normative bodies (for example see Morton [2015]). What is missed in these accounts is how self-styling occurs in relation to, but is not fully determined by, beauty norms and expectations. Or, as Budgeon argues, we ought to consider ‘the body not as an *object* but as an *event*’ (2003, 36, emphasis in original). Relatedly, understanding the salon as a site of identity curation and production that sits in relation to but is not wholly productive of beauty norms allows more space for understanding the significance of salons to some LGBTQ+ people.

Investigating the Queer Salon

The data that I analyse in this article comes from two separate studies on salon work that did not have a specific focus on LGBTQ+ identity or the space of the queer salon.

Methods

Ethics approval was obtained for both studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia and written consent was obtained from all participants. The first study, conducted in 2017, involved hour-long face to face interviews conducted by the author with ten salon workers in Melbourne, Australia – a state capital with a population of approximately five million, making it the second largest city in Australia. This study aimed to look at the hidden labour of the aesthetic demands on workers. Participants were recruited through fliers disseminated face-to-face through inner

city Melbourne, were provided with detailed information about the study including ethics prior to interview and were given a gift voucher to thank them for their time after interviews were completed. Interviews were conducted in salons, or at a convenient location of the interviewees choosing such as cafes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and de-identified.

The second study, conducted in 2020, involved a survey of client and worker experiences of visiting, or not being able to visit, salons during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were required to be over 18 and currently residing in Australia. Aside from demographic questions, the survey consisted of seven closed and two open questions for clients of salons, and eight closed and one open question for salon workers (noting that many salon workers also frequent salons as customers and answered both sets of questions). The survey was open for a period of eight weeks between July and September 2020, was advertised through social media, salon industry forums, and other salon networks, and no remuneration was offered for participation.

Data Analysis

The first study involved the author conducting thematic analysis of the interview transcripts using Nvivo software. The second study involved the author tabulating descriptive statistics for the closed questions and conducting thematic analysis of the open answer questions. In both instances the thematic coding method involved investigation of both the explicit (manifest) and underlying (latent) meaning of data gathered in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2011). Participants were not required to provide feedback on findings. Inductive coding was used to ensure that themes identified emerged from the data through repeat reading and were not pre-imposed (Kirby et al, 2021).

Results in Relation to Current Study

For the purpose of this article, I draw only on the data from the two aforementioned studies that relate to queer salons and LGBTQ+ salon clients. This selective attention to the dataset provides consideration of LGBTQ+ experiences of salons and consideration of what queering the salon might mean especially in terms of addressing physical, emotional and identity vulnerability.

In the first study, though the focus was intended to be aesthetics, utilising thematic analysis major themes around the body, emotional, and aesthetic identity labour that workers are expected to perform were identified. For the purpose of this article, I draw only on three interviews with salon workers who identified their businesses as alternative, unisex barbershops that were LGBTQ+ friendly ('queer salons') (see Table 1) – Ava, Samuel and Jane (all barbers) – Though this is a very small sample, these three stories allow for some deeper insight into the experiences of workers in queer salons to be read alongside the survey data from the second study.

[Table 1 to appear here]

Furthermore, I look specifically at survey responses from LGBTQ+ identified clients from the two open survey questions (see Table 2) that reflect client experiences of salon closures during COVID-19 in 2020. The survey garnered 383 respondents total (including 92 salon workers) across every state and territory of Australia (see Table 2). Though the survey was not targeted at LGBTQ+ people specifically, 33% of respondents selected or described a sexual identity other than 'straight', and 2% selected or described a gender identity other than cisgender.

The sample demographic makeup differs from data for the general Australian population, with non-heterosexual people estimated at 3.2% of adults (Wilson and Shalley 2018). There is currently little data to suggest what percentage of the general Australian population is not cisgender, though some estimates put this at less than one percent (ABS 2018). These comparisons suggest that the data gathered in the survey was over-representative of LGBTQ+ people.

[Table 2 to appear here]

The first open question asked clients, ‘If you could no longer visit your regular salons because of COVID-19 or if your experience of visiting salons changed as a result of the pandemic, please explain in more detail what effect this had on you’. The second asked ‘If you wish, please provide any other reflections that you have on beauty/grooming and/or visiting/not visiting salons because of COVID-19’. This data set of answers to these questions consists of 87 (of 238 total comments) and 44 (of 129 total comments) responses from LGBTQ+ people respectively. Following thematic analysis, the five themes identified were: anxiety about the virus; worries for salon staff; feeling liberated from beauty norms; feeling anguish over appearances; and negative impacts beyond the aesthetic. Importantly, analysis of all client comments reveals that there is a similar proportion of these themes across straight and cisgender and LGBTQ+ people. However, in looking explicitly at LGBTQ+ respondents what is revealed is that within these broader themes – particularly feeling liberated from beauty norms and negative impacts beyond the aesthetic – there are reflections on negative and positive aspects of visiting salons tied specifically to gender and sexual identity.

Findings and Discussion

Making Safe(r) Spaces: Misfits, Signalling and Managing Touch

In my interviews with workers from queer salons in 2017, a key subtheme relating to body labour was the curation of space that felt welcoming for ‘open-minded’ modes of expression, in juxtaposition to ‘classic’ salons. For example, Samuel, a part-time barber, described difficulties working in a more normatively masculine space prior:

I worked at a shop overseas where I went in the way that I dress and the person told me, ‘Sorry, you're just too weird for the shop’, and then I had to completely alter my appearance to fit in, to work there, but that took a massive toll on my own mental health, like trying to be something else.

In contrast, Samuel’s current salon was a space in which he felt accepted. As Ava, a full-time barber and owner, described, ‘Someone asked me once what style – like what's the brand – like what employees I would take on, like what style of staff? And I just say, “Misfits I think”’. As the reports from these workers suggest, queer salons provide a space in which not only LGBTQ+ clientele but also salon workers drawn to ‘alternative’ styles feel accepted.

Like the salon workers in queer salons (who themselves may or may not identify as LGBTQ+), some LGBTQ+ survey respondents reported feeling alienated by mainstream salons. However, like the salon workers who found (or founded) queer salons where they could feel a greater sense of belonging, so too did some survey respondents note the positive role that salons can play in shaping one’s sense of self. As one respondent noted,

Getting my hair done properly by my barber and stylist helps me feel more like myself and more representative of my sexual identity. I miss that (queer/bisexual cisgender woman).

Avoiding salons impacted some people's sense of self and sexual identity, a finding that I return to shortly. The broader point here is to draw out how salons can be scenes of alienation for some and belonging for others, or indeed that these feelings might occur simultaneously.

Notably, the queer salons part of my study each emphasise on their websites and social media accounts that haircuts are gender neutral. In comparison, classic hair salons tend to price their cuts according to gender, with cuts marked as 'women's' haircuts generally costing more (Duesterhaus et al. 2011). The salons of the three workers interviewed also explicitly mention inclusion and diversity and creating 'safe space' for LGBTQ+ clients, in their online presence. Unlike other LGBTQ+ safe spaces which can inadvertently segregate in sometimes unhelpful ways (Schroeder 2012), queer salons are simply queer-friendly but not necessarily only for LGBTQ+ people. This is another reason why the queer salon is so interesting for consideration in the realm of queer geographies, as these spaces are not simply about LGBTQ+ existing in binary opposition to heterosexual spaces (Oswin 2008). I asked Jane how they make their barbershop queer-friendly, they described a kind of intuitive approach, but also explicit strategies like ensuring the shop has queer magazines. The use of magazines as a branding technique has been noted in previous research on salons. As Chugh and Hancock (2009) suggest, such artefacts tie in with and distinguish the aesthetic values of salons. Similarly, Barber (2008, 463) suggests that men's magazines are used in some barbershops to distinguish 'a particular kind of professional-class whiteness'. These objects act as signifiers of the values held by the salon, for example to

signal that the salon is LGBTQ+ friendly, carrying an affective weight to mark the space as safe(r).

Furthermore, Jane noted strategies for managing client anxiety, particularly around the physical vulnerability engendered by touch. Jane commented:

I don't even wash anyone's hair... a lot of people feel anxiety around getting their hair washed. I hate it when people wash my hair or do my hair, style it for me.

Again, we see here (as in Samuel's earlier account) that Jane's approach to creating a safe(r) space for clients is informed by personal experience. While traditional salons involve a high degree of physical intimacy through hair-washing, Jane's salon offers a service suitable for anyone who feels anxiety about hair washing. This may have particular significance for LGBTQ+ clients given the scrutiny around queer embodiment in mainstream society. As Ross and Setchell (2019) note in their Australian based study, some LGBTQ+ people experience fear in accessing physiotherapy due to issues around intimate touch in relation to sexualisation/sexuality or body exposure generally. Applying this to the salon context helps us to understand why queer salons may face a specific kind of 'body work dilemma' (Mik-Meyer, Obling and Wolkowitz 2018, 6), that is, a need to think about how to manage the physicality of the ordinary salon experience in a way that helps to make a safe(r) space for LGBTQ+ clients. Touch is a central part of salon work (Straughan 2012), especially given that workers touch parts of the body and head that often friends and partners would not (such as inner thighs and scalps). However, as Maclaren (2014) highlights, touch can be alienating at times and enlivening at others. While many have noted the importance of touch in the salon context – for example, for

older clients experiencing dementia (Ward, Campbell and Keady 2016) – Jane’s ‘no wash’ approach suggests not the complete absence of touch, but rather, the careful management of it.

Via these tactics – offering gender neutral services, signalling with artefacts, and mindfully managing client bodies – the queer salon might be said to create a kind of alternative queer space. As Rooke (2010) suggests on the topic of trans wellbeing, the specific creation of alternative spaces of belonging can be crucial to help facilitate feelings of ease. Though the salon may not typically be thought of as a queer space, the approaches of these queer salons suggest a kind of attentive space-making geared toward fostering comfort for LGBTQ+ clients.

Support in a Precarious World: From the Emotional to the Physical and Back Again

Aside from creating a welcoming atmosphere, we may wonder more precisely how salons can address the emotional vulnerability of being LGBTQ+ in a heteronormative world. As noted, previous research has found that salons can be sites of emotional support for clients. In the case of the salon workers from queer salons that I spoke with, the nature of some emotional expressions from clients were, unsurprisingly, specifically around difficulties to do with sexuality and gender. As Ava reflected,

I had...this great customer who is now one of my regulars who came in and he was psyching himself up to go to a family wedding. He hadn't seen his family in like 10 years because they kind of stopped talking to him because he was gay, and then giving him a haircut that he felt confident in, and then going out and going to that wedding, and then the next week he came in for a beard trim and he told me all about it as well...

Though much of the emotional labour performed by salon workers may not involve more difficult emotions, the sheer number of clients that workers are exposed to on a weekly basis means that the emotional dynamics of the salon vary. Given the vast array of disclosures that salon workers report receiving – from general stress to suicidal ideation and more – salon work may sometimes involve ‘emotional dirty work’, that is, dealing with emotions that are ‘contextually inappropriate, burdensome or taboo’ (McMurray and Ward 2014, 1139). Similarly, much body work (including salon work) is considered more broadly to be ‘dirty work’ that is tainted by the contact workers have with bodies, fluids and parts (Simpson and Simpson 2018). In this way, salon work occupies the doubly tainted position of both dealing with difficult emotions and managing bodies. However, within the space of the queer salon, the ‘taboo’ when it comes to gender and sexuality (emotional or in terms of gender presentation) is already refigured as the norm, seemingly opening up more space for free expression around diverse topics and identifications. The queer salon is positioned as place where issues around sexuality and gender (and more) might be broached, and indeed supported rather than avoided for the possible emotional ‘taint’ of these topics in mainstream settings.

The survey responses from LGBTQ+ clients also reflect the entanglement between emotional and physical support offered more broadly by salons. As one respondent noted:

When the salons opened again (very briefly in Victoria) I immediately went to get my nails done. The stress of COVID meant that I had gone back to intense nail biting and it was relaxing to be able to not have to stress about it for a while. The minute lockdown started again, I resumed nail biting which has been a source of great physical and mental pain (queer/bisexual cisgender woman).

Such reflections indicate the psychic importance of salons in terms of both the social and emotional aspect and physical bodily management. Here, the absence of the salon functions as a reminder of what is not possible under lockdown, that cannot be remedied by DIY home beauty. The psychic significance of salons was reflected by survey participants across the gender and sexuality spectrum. Thus, the question to be posed here is broader: what role might salons (queer or otherwise) play for clients (LGBTQ+ or otherwise)? Regarding *not* being able to access salons in a time of crisis, reflections highlight how salons can play a significant role in helping customers to feel socially connected and physically in control of their bodies. As noted, much literature on salons has focused on the negative impact of gender stereotypes that are reinforced by salons but has paid less attention to how some people find these sites to be a source of solace. As Ava reflected:

The way that I see...my job...barbering...when someone sits down in your chair...they look completely shit or they can feel so amazing; you can inspire that confidence in someone to walk out of there, to feel there's not a particular look that is good looking, or like beautiful.... Not that looks are important, but how you perceive yourself is extremely important.

Such claims about the connection between physical/appearance management and feeling 'confident' have been understood rather cynically within the existing literature (see for example, Sharma and Black [2001] and Gimlin [2002]). Ava's reflection hints at a less cynical idea, that confidence is not about achieving beauty norms per se, but rather ensuring that your outer appearance matches up with your inner sense of self or identity that you wish to project to the world.

Shaping Identities and Challenging Norms: Is There Such Thing as a 'Lesbian Haircut'?

This last reflection calls us to consider the salon's role in aesthetic identity curation more deeply.

While the positionality of the queer salon as anti-normative may run the risk of other 'queer norms' of beauty (or perhaps anti-beauty more broadly) emerging, reflections from the salon workers suggest a tendency toward deconstructing assumptions people have about identity and gender. Jane noted, 'I don't think there's lesbian haircuts and straight people haircuts'. Yet, while there may be no real 'lesbian haircut', simultaneously the workers did suggest that changing haircuts gives people the opportunity to try and communicate different presentational desires. As Samuel noted,

everyone's the same, everyone's skin and bones, but hair is similar to like a, maybe on a different level, like a sponge cake, the hair is just the icing on top of the cake so you can appear to look more one gender than the other, if you like...

The survey results suggest that the significance of the salon in helping some LGBTQ+ people achieve desired self-styles, to be able to communicate a presentation that helps them to feel comfortable in their skin, cannot be overstated. Several respondents to the survey noted the vital importance of salons in helping to maintain their sense of self and identity, made clear during COVID-19 lockdown closures in 2020:

Going to the barber really affirms my gender identity as a trans man. It's hard when I can't go
(bisexual transgender man)

My appearance is a big part of my identity. Not being able to have regular salon time (with business owners who have become my friends over the years) and look the way I want makes lockdown life even harder (bisexual cisgender woman)

I felt unkempt and unprofessional. Part of my identity left. I use these places to escape my children so I really missed them (queer cisgender woman)

Each of these respondents specifically mentions identity and the role of salons in identity maintenance, and how this intersects with gender affirmation, feeling control over one's appearance, and a sense of professionalism and time away from 'parental' identity.

Here we might see the role of salons in addressing queer precarity in relation to self and identity. The severity of implications of this may vary, for example, the importance of identity affirmation as a remedy to identity precarity may have more profound implications for someone who experiences gender dysphoria or whose identity is routinely called into question (see Brice 2020). More broadly, for some people salons might play an important role in addressing queer precarity in relation to felt identity vulnerability, a point that is rarely captured by accounts focused solely on beauty norms.

What is less clear is the kind of salons respondents visited – traditional versus queer salons – and how one's specific presentational desires determine whether salons visits are affirming or alienating. Returning to aforementioned survey comments, why is it that some LGBTQ+ people have generally found salons to be anxiety-inducing sites that distort their desires, while others report salons play a crucial role in maintaining their sense of self? Is it simply a case of finding the right salon to meet your identity needs? Can some 'classic' salons still play a role in affirming LGBTQ+ identity, but only if that sticks closely to gender

presentation that aligns more closely with binary expectations? All of this is to suggest that more research on LGBTQ+ experiences of salons is needed. This is important not least so that the hair and beauty industry can better prepare its workers to meet the needs of diverse communities, but also to ensure that the psychic significance of salons in some LGBTQ+ people's lives and identity affirmation is taken seriously and not dismissed as mere vanity.

Conclusion: Queering the Salon

In specifically focusing on interviews with workers from queer salons, and data from LGBTQ+ survey respondents, this article has attempted to open up space to consider the role that salons play in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in addressing felt physical, emotional and identity vulnerability. Some salons might disrupt (queer) our expectations of what the hair and beauty salon can do for queer precarity, that is, inequalities specifically related to LGBTQ+ positionality. As Bonner-Thompson, Mearns and Hopkins (2021, 4) describe, 'Precariousness is our felt vulnerability and precarity is the ways in which institutions produce and mould inequalities'. As Butler (2020) suggests, precarity is due to the very interdependent nature of social life, insofar as we are all constituted within social structures and that dependency may sometimes fail us (rendering us precarious). The aspects of queer precarity that I have discussed in this article can be thought of as the felt physical, emotional, and identity vulnerability that LGBTQ+ people experience as a result of occupying non-normative gender and sexual subject positions.

Given that some salons reinforce normative expectations of gender, it is perhaps unsurprising that some LGBTQ+ people report feeling alienated in salon environments. However, queer salons make overt attempts to challenge gender and sexuality norms in their

messaging, and to create safe(r) spaces for LGBTQ+ to feel a sense of welcome and belonging. In positioning their salons as non-normative, workers in these spaces also become confidants to clients around issues of gender and sexuality, helping them to navigate negative experiences of homophobia, for example, through listening while performing the technical surface work that helps their clients to feel most comfortable in their own skin. The queer salons, in providing fluid expectations of gender and sexuality, highlight most clearly how salons are spaces of identity curation and management. These spaces operate in relation and perhaps reaction to, but are not fully determined by, heteronormative and cisnormative beauty standards, making them a unique and fruitful contribution to discussions of safe and queer spaces in feminist and queer geographies.

The client survey responses examined in this article have supported these findings. However, the kind of salon that these clients normally access ('classic' or 'queer') remains unknown. Given the array of services described by LGBTQ+ respondents, what the client responses seem to indicate is that it is *not only* queer salons that can provide a sense of belonging, connection, and identity affirmation to LGBTQ+ people (even if queer salons may be best placed to achieve this). What may be taken away from these findings is that understanding hair and beauty salons narrowly as sites of mere aesthetic tinkering does not get to the much deeper existential implications of these sites for many people, and that might provide a queer space for managing issues around the physical, emotional, and identarian.

It is also crucial to recognise that queer precarity in relation to gender and sexuality intersects with other issues including race and class, and that queer precarity is also material (Hollibaugh and Weiss 2015). Given the array of dimensions to queer precarity the account I have offered in this article is only partial and regards how salons may address some aspects of

queer precarity. This account is also restricted given that accessing salons already requires some material means, and thus severe economic precarity as it intersects with LGBTQ+ identity is not captured here. Despite these limitations it is hoped that this article sheds some light on how some salons might act as alternative and unexpected queer spaces that do some work toward addressing certain aspects of queer precarity.

There are many directions for future study that might emerge from this work, one of which may be to investigate queer salons as a specifically rich conduit site to connect LGBTQ+ community services with LGBTQ+ people. As this article suggests, the intimate nature of the salon encounter may predispose clients to open up about their experiences, and indeed salon workers describe themselves as ‘makeshift’ counsellors. Just as many family violence services across the world have started training and providing referral resources to salons (McCann and Myers 2019), queer salons may be well placed to provide LGBTQ+ resources. Understanding the role of the salon worker, and the queer salon in the LGBTQ+ community specifically, there may be room to connect up LGBTQ+ specific public health, counselling, family violence, and other services, with these salons. Such initiatives might provide resources for workers who are currently having to deal with the coalface of client precarity with little training or support. This latter point raises the spectre of labour precarity that sits behind these discussions of the role of the salon in clients’ lives, that is, how salon workers are currently not culturally or financially valued for the work they may be doing to manage the issues identified in this article regarding bodies, emotions, and identities.

The issue of *who* can access these services also lingers: are queer salons only a feature of urban areas (as in this study), that can only be accessed by those with enough means? If the salon is a significant site for some LGBTQ+ people in helping to address aspects of queer precarity,

who currently has access and who is prevented from accessing these sites (whether that be for financial, geographic, or other social reasons)? Furthermore, even in queer salons we might wonder if there are dynamics of both inclusion and exclusion happening simultaneously, as other research on the fraught solidarities of LGBTQ+ communities have found (for example, Browne and Lim [2010]).

The shift away from beauty norms to understanding how beauty practices are enmeshed with identity and not fully determined by beauty norms, should open up greater space for discussing practices of self-curation without dismissing them as necessarily oppressed or oppressive. Such a view makes more room for understanding with greater empathy and less derision why, during times of crisis, hair and beauty services might in fact feel ‘essential’ for some. From here, we might see that to address queer precarity, we also need to queer our idea of what the salon can offer.

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