

Review of Marie Cartier's *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*

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*Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall* by Marie Cartier. Pages: 226. Acumen Publishing, 2013. ISBN: 978-1844656493.

**Abstract:** Dr. Marie Cartier's *Baby You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall* provides an accessible and thought provoking analysis of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American butch-femme bar culture and how it should be interpreted as a sacred space for its community and the various movements it spawned as a result. Set in a time when homosexuality was still deemed as a mental illness, bars were the only place where gay and lesbian individuals could not only find community but also discover and shape their individual and sexual identities that the outside world was defining as sinful.

**Keywords:** religion, gay, lesbian, theology, Stonewall

In Marie Cartier's opus, *Baby You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*, Cartier provides an accessible and thought provoking analysis of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American butch-femme bar culture, how it should be interpreted as a sacred space for its community, and the various movements it spawned as a result.<sup>1</sup> Set in a time when homosexuality was still deemed as a mental illness and likened to perversion and molestation, bars were the only place where gay and lesbian individuals could not only find community but also discover and shape their individual and sexual identities that the outside world defined as sinful. Much more than a space where gay and lesbian individuals could gather, bars, specifically before the Stonewall Inn Riots of 1969, were a site of corporeal theology, thriving sexuality, and communities that ultimately birthed the gay and

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Cartier, *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*. 2013. Acumen Publishing

lesbian civil rights movement that we know today. Cartier's thesis points to the fact that although varying religious and LGBTQ communities are often depicted as at odds with each other, in the space of the bar, the sacred meets the profane and—more importantly—the *sinner*s ultimately became saviors.

While religious and LGBTQ communities may seem like oil and water, Cartier's thesis symbolizes the need to further explore how and why the mixing of the two birthed movements that shaped today's ecclesiastical, social, and sexual landscapes. Through comprehensive and exhaustive interviews, Dr. Cartier helps to bridge these movements by contextualizing the historical divide that existed between sexuality and spirituality. In addition, Cartier's interviews tell the story of how her informants, upon being kicked out of traditional religions, created and populated not only new non-traditional religious spaces but also prominent movements that would soon gain popularity in the mid-1970s. The bar becomes more than a bar, not because of the various advocacy movements that grew out of its four walls, but more importantly because of the individuals, and in Cartier's case, the women, who brought about a new age of LGBTQ identity.

Having read the original dissertation, I can confirm that Cartier's oeuvre has been trimmed in size but not in worth. The main argument is that the bar was “the only space” that these women could find to intertwine community, spirituality, and sexuality together to create new spaces for women to actually be and discover an “identity that felt natural to them” rather than one prescribed to them by a heteronormative society.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that each informant was aware that they could be arrested and classified as sex offenders, felons, or mentally ill during this specific time in America, Cartier stressed the growing need to protect both the individuals and the space that they called home. The first part of Cartier's book is dedicated to her interviews with these women and the subtle and direct stories that took shape around them. From exploring aspects of sexuality as well as what it meant to identify as either “butch” or “femme” during pre-Stonewall years, Cartier's oral histories deconstruct established understandings of sexuality, spirituality, and

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<sup>2</sup> Cartier, *Baby, You Are My Religion*, 16

theology, and as a result create, new histories and contexts that emphasize the need for both singular and communal experiences that many of the individuals she interviewed reach out for. For example, consider Myrna's story. Myrna was married from 1953 to 1963, but it wasn't until she went through the process of divorce that she discovered her need to experience the community that gay bars offered to women who had no outlets. Myrna states that:

[She] would get up at one or two a.m. and would call every gay bar [she] had the number to from the 1940s. [She] wouldn't say anything. [She] would just stay on the phone and listen to the sounds in the background. [She] would stay on until they hung up, and then [she] would call another one of [her] numbers, until [she] had called all the numbers [she] had. That was [her] lifeline.<sup>3</sup>

Myrna's lifeline was in the gay bar, whether she was actively present there or not. The existence of the gay bar provided Myrna—and others like her who were searching for a community to call their own—the lifeline they needed, one that might not have existed if the individuals who created many of these spaces had not fought for them while the police raided and threatened to shut them down at every turn.

The second and third parts of Cartier's book explore the Quaker definition of "Friend" and the Quakers' relation to their larger religious community. Since there is no intermediary who hears the word of God and relays it to the larger Quaker congregation during their meetings, each "Friend" and/or "witness" must attempt to understand God on a personal and experiential level. Seeing God as a friend and establishing a parallel between "human friendship and the divine human relationship" is a model that Cartier employs and ultimately succeeds in using in juxtaposition to the vast amount of responses she collected.<sup>4</sup>

The major success of Cartier's book lies in the third and final part in which she creates a new type of theology called theology. Simply, theology is a religion of friendship or way for gay people who were alive during the pre-Stonewall period to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 172

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 159

view their lives as having sacred meaning during that period even if all they did was go to a gay bar.<sup>5</sup> Since gay men and women were considered sinners, they did not have access to God because their access was either considered non-traditional or outside of the patriarchal religious communities they came from. Theology created access to the divine both through friendships and the ways gay people lived their lives during a time when community was the first step in finding meaning and, more importantly, experiencing the divine.

However, the major downfall to Cartier's book is that in her dense, well researched bibliography, there is no mention of John D'Emilio's canonical text *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970* (published by the University of Chicago Press in 1983). While Cartier connects many of the theoretical and historical aspects of D'Emilio's text to actual people who were living in the environments that he discusses, her book could have utilized his research as a foundational text that could further emphasize many of the topics that her subjects discussed in her interviews relating to the gay bar and the making of a pre-Stonewall butch/femme lesbian identity.

Seeing World War II as the crucial factor in the emergence of the homosexual community, D'Emilio argues that many homosexually orientated individuals were able to develop communities in non-familial environments overseas or in large port cities. The emergence of gay and lesbian culture happened as a result of many of these individuals choosing to remain living in these places at the end of the war, especially in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Historically speaking, we can infer that Long Beach, being a large port town just like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, benefitted from this same influx of gays and lesbians, and as Cartier shows, developed a large subculture of gays and lesbians at the turn of the twentieth century as a result. While the entirety of D'Emilio's book offers foundational insights into Cartier's *Baby, You Are My Religion*, it is his specific

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<sup>5</sup> John Erickson, "New and Old Queer Frontiers: Redefining Sacred Space," *Feminism and Religion* Blog, <http://feminismandreligion.com/2012/01/31/new-and-old-queer-frontiers-redefining-sacred-space-by-john-erickson/> (January 31, 2012).

mention of the gay bar becoming the center of the developing urban subculture in these port cities that is most crucial to her text and the one that is left out.

Marie Cartier's book will not only stand the test of time, but it will also start showing up more frequently on the bibliographies of upcoming and future students interested in sexuality, gender, religion, and theology. Cartier's book offers new wisdom and rejuvenation to those activist religious scholars searching for a religious history of LGBTQ inclusion only to find that one does not exist. Marie Cartier's epigraph, from her one woman show *Ballistic Femme*, signifies the various ways in which gay and lesbian individuals find religion; while some find religion in church and others in a bar, it is often found within the object one falls in love with, regardless of their sex: "I've had butch women say to me, 'Baby, you are my church. You are my...religion.'"<sup>6</sup> Cartier shows that the sacred space we are often looking for is not only where we are located, but also who is with us as we experience the divine. While the proverbial "last call" in Cartier's final chapter rings true, her book, *Baby, You Are My Religion*, inspires her readers to have another symbolic drink of the knowledge she has presented and come back often to revisit the stories of the unknown women who help to shape out modern day LGBTQ movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Marie Cartier, *Ballistic Femme*, 1997

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