AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by June Thomas, author of *A Place of Our Own: Six Spaces That Shaped Queer Women's Culture*, to tell us about lesbian bars, feminist bookstores, softball pitches, communes, sex toy shops, and holiday destinations. So why don't we start, as you do in the book, with the bars?

JT: Yeah, so bars, it's funny, when I wanted to write this book, one of my many sort of thoughts about it was, “oh, everybody knows about bars. Bars are so over covered. There's too much tension placed to bars.” They're just over indexed in the literature and everything. But then I realised they really are important because apart from anything else, they still are kind of the default space. If you are thinking you might be queer or just curious, or just want to be in some kind of queer friendly space, the easiest place to find that is a bar. And it's easy these days to figure out what's the nearest queer bar to me. So it's accessible. I would actually want to say though that in the US, which this book is mostly about, because the, I guess we could say the drinking age, but it's also the going into a place age is 21, that's pretty high. And so for a place that is kind of the default homosocial space, excluding anybody under 21 is kind of a big deal. And that's something that I think is pretty unique to the US. But anyway, apart from that little digression, yeah, bars are a place where you know how to find them, you know what to expect kind of, although I think people often go in there thinking, “this is going to be, it's a hub, it's a bar.” Like you haven't been in one before? I remember a few years ago, people, I wrote a series about gay bars for Slate, and my editors who were straight were like, “well, what are they like?” Well, it's a bar. But for women, for lesbians, there are fewer of them. There always are. There always have been. And right now, they are especially thin on the ground. When I was writing the book, the lesbian bar project, which is a project to kind of bring attention to the remaining lesbian bars in the US, counted, I believe 33. And I know for a fact that many of those have closed since.

AT: So it's less than one bar per state.

JT: Yes, exactly. And only I think at that point, six cities had more than one bar. Again, many of them have now closed. So that it's this problem of they're, they're few and far between. And in most places, even in cities, there's one. And so if you want to go to, especially a bar that is particularly geared toward queer women, you've got probably a choice of one. And that just puts a lot of pressure on those places. They have to be all things to all people. And that is very, very difficult because let's not forget, they are businesses. And as businesses, they are there to sell booze. That's how they make their money. And probably if you ask a bar owner, “well, what do you do?” And they'll say, “we bring people together. We're a community place. We're a third space.” And all those things are true, but they're true because they're selling booze. And so they are businesses. And so for me, I think we overemphasize them as I've said, but also I think there are a lot of things that are, it's not good for that to be our default space.

AT: I know there are a lot of problematic aspects around alcohol and queer communities, not just as you were saying, the exclusion of younger people, but someone like me, maybe it's my autism, but I have never been a bar person. I don't drink alcohol. I just, I never liked the taste. And anyone who knows me can tell you, my inhibitions are probably already lower than they should be. And alcohol is expensive. There are plenty of reasons that I personally don't drink, but I also feel overstimulated. I like quiet places that I can talk. I don't like crowds. And so a bar environment is just not welcoming. And there's this great sentiment that Hannah Gadsby expressed in *Nanette*. She was talking about watching the Sydney Mardi Gras, which is one of the biggest queer parties in the world. And she is basically asking where are the quiet gays supposed to go?
And I'm just going to quote, “the pressure on my people to express our identity and pride through the metaphor of party is very intense. Don't get me wrong. I love the spectacle. I really do, but I've never felt compelled to get amongst it. I'm a quiet soul. My favourite sound in the whole world is the sound of a teacup finding its place on a saucer. Oh, it's very, very difficult to flaunt that lifestyle in a parade.”

JT: Oh, first of all, I mean, what an amazing sentiment. Like, yes. Yes, Hannah. Yes.

AT: And there's also the realities of small business ownership. Opening a bar is a risky endeavour in the best of circumstances. (JT: Yeah) And as you mentioned, there are these expectations that the community puts on lesbian bars. So they've got the baseline risks. You've got the fact that your clientele is inherently smaller and more diverse, I would argue than most bars have to appeal to, (JT: Yes, yes.) because because of that trying to be all things to all people. You've got the fact that your clientele generally has lower pay than their male counterparts that are frequenting the male gay bars. And there's an example in the book where these women were protesting the only lesbian bar in town.

JT: That story to me is so fascinating. And I have to say, this is my first book, and you don't know what you're going to enjoy when writing a book. It isn't all fun. But I loved going through old feminist publications. And I came across an interview in a quite short-lived publication out of Portland, Oregon, called Pearl Diver. So in their town, there was at that point, a gay bar that the women went to and then a lesbian bar opened. It was run by lesbians. And one day, the bar had had a sticker put across it that said, “this bar exploits women.” The lesbians in the community felt that that bar was taking advantage of them. And so women from Pearl Diver went to the bar, and they asked the owners for their take, for their response to this protest. And it was really fascinating, because in the way of our people, they shared everything. They had their profit and loss statement, which, why would they do that? But, well, I know why. And I'm glad they did, especially as a researcher. But basically, they said, “Well, we have to charge more than 50 cents that the bar down the street charges, because we haven't paid off our equipment, we still have loans, we're still having to lease this equipment, it's not ours yet, we just have higher expenses. Also, we attract a smaller group of people. Women only come here because there aren't men, we can't exclude men legally, which again, upsets women, but t's the law, you cannot exclude people from place of public accommodations.” The women in the community had such a high expectation of this bar, they wanted it to be playing women's music, they wanted to be able to have political discussions. They wanted, they wanted, they wanted, because this was going to be their place. This was a place where all of their hopes and dreams could be fulfilled. And the women who owned it said, “that bar down the street,” I don't remember what it was called, “they treat you all that well, right? And yeah, you only pay 50 cents for a beer instead of 75 cents that we charge, but they don't treat you well in any other way.” But they didn't expect them to. But they really had these expectations for the women's bar.
And, I get it, because I feel that way, too. My expectations of the world in general pretty low, that's a way of finding happiness, is managing expectations. But when I'm in something that I consider our space, I want it to be great. And so I'm so much often more disappointed by something that in any other kind of space would be fine. So I could really relate to that. But my God, the emphasis and the difficulty, the degree of difficulty of running any kind of community space is so great, especially when, in all likelihood, you are not making money. You're getting a lot of stress, you're getting a lot of aggravation. And you probably could be earning much more elsewhere. So it's always tough to have to run a values-oriented business, values-based business. But when there's this element of, “this is our one place, and this is so important.” Oh, that the sort of the challenge of that is just so high.
There were other things that women tried. Many feminists were kind of bookish types who didn't necessarily want to be in a dark room. They didn't think that was the best place for them to find a partner or friends or whatever. Just being in a noisy bar is just not that conducive conversation. So they tried other things. They tried coffee houses, which often were in the basements of churches. They might start somewhere else, but they always seem to end up in church basements. I don't know what that says about coffee houses. They also started restaurants, some of which actually are still in business today, decades after they were founded. But again, there was that challenge of the business model. Having a coffee house every Saturday night, it's okay if it's in a church basement. But actually, the people who ran the churches often had issues with that. Once they found out who was there and what they were doing, even if it was like listening to folk music, that wasn't

necessarily the crowd that they wanted in their church basement. So the people who ran the churches often kind of got into trouble because they were offering a home for a community that was in need. And some might have been quite long-lasting, but it was always on a shoestring and a hope. And then restaurants, again, were just so difficult. And food is, booze has a much higher profit margin. And so once you introduce that element of food, you're just making the business even more of a challenge to run. So bars are the ones that have survived, and not many of them survived. But, you know, it's not that they're the only places that people have thought of. It's just they're the only places that have survived such as they have.

AT: And as you're talking about profit margins, and of course, particularly bars that were run by lesbians, because you do talk about some that were not run by queer people, that were more run by people who were exploiting the fact that these individuals didn't have really anywhere else to go and often mistreating and actually were exploiting them. But you have to assume that queer women who were opening these establishments also were facing gender and homophobia barriers as well trying to get a loan and that sort of thing.

JT: Yeah, absolutely. And wasn't until the 1970s, 50 years ago, which is either a long time ago or not very long ago, depending on your view of history, that women could even conceive of owning or operating a bar. As you say, at least in the US until the ‘70s, such bars as existed, and actually, they existed in far greater numbers then, were run by the mafia. Not because the mafia thought that queer people were cool, but just because it was a community that could be exploited. As is so often the case, the laws that pertained to queer people, whether it was legal for queer people to gather in a bar, whether it was legal for somebody operating a bar to serve people who were openly queer, the laws were vague, intentionally so. And that meant that any sort of legitimate business person, why would they get into that business? That was just asking for trouble. So that left people who were looking for what might be called the twilight world to move into that business. So the mafia operated gay bars all over the country, especially perhaps in New York City and in Chicago and other areas. And they were places of exploitation. So in the 1970s, when lesbians decided that they could either manage or later operate and own bars, it was radical. And there are these great quotes of people saying, “hey, listen, when you go into these bars, be nice to the people who work there, they're our sisters, tip them.” Because people had to be told, “I know you've had a certain experience in these mafia room bars, but things are changing. And they had to be really reminded that now queer people were also trying to operate places for queer people. And it was very hard for those women. The person who I particularly focus on in the bar chapter, Elaine Romagnoli, who ran, I think, four bars in Greenwich Village, she did make money, actually. She was a very good bar owner. But she said, “I never had a girlfriend,” or “I had a lot of girlfriends, but I never had a partner.” Because basically, she worked crazy hours, she got home at four every day, she left at noon to go back and start the work of the bar. She was focused entirely on business. And she said, “working in bars, at first, you think it’s always a party, and then you realise, first of all, you're talking to a lot of drunk people, which is not fun for anybody. And also, everybody wants to tell you how to run your business. And that is just no fun.” So, I think it's actually very, very difficult to run any kind of queer business, queer for queer business, or any kind of values-based business, actually. But I think given the challenges again, especially in the 70s, I think until 1974, it was legal to deny credit to women for no reason other than they were women. It took a piece of legislation in 1974, to even make that theoretically likely that banks would offer loans to women and especially to unmarried women. So, there's so many challenges that even though I too am a little bit of a, I mean, I love to dance, but I don't really, especially as I get older, I'm not terribly interested in going to bars. But writing about them and researching them merely made me realise, yeah, it's okay, it might not be your place, but they are important. And one of the things I was very keen to do in this book was not to, I think there's too much kind of crying over closed businesses. Is it bad that there are only, let's just say 30 lesbian bars in the US? Yeah, that's not a good thing. But the fact that a bar closes or that any kind of business closes, that's not to me a defeat for the community that's like, hey, this thing was there for however many years, let's focus on that and don't spend

our energy crying over what could have been and what was. There are so many challenges. It doesn't surprise me one bit. The miracle is that anything does survive really.

AT: You could look at it as, in the ‘70s, this was partially seen as the only option and you could look at it as, well, now we have other options for folks like me who don't want to go to the bar in the first place.

JT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. There are more options. I don't want to be a Pollyanna, there's some terrible things happening in many countries right now. But I know that having been out since the late ‘70s, there is more freedom right now. You can be open and out in more places. You can hold hands. You don't have to go to a special place anymore. Are there reasons still to want to go to a community place? Yes, but it isn't that same, “oh my God, this is it” anymore, which I think is better for everyone.

AT: I want to come back to sort of combining two things that we were talking about where a similar vein has actually come up in conversations about feminist history in the sense that I find that feminists are willing to forgive historical feminist icons, whether they're eugenicists, whether they're racist, whether they're homophobic - looking at you, Betty Friedan, we'll come back to that - but they will forgive feminist icons anything except being a bad feminist. So in particular, this came up in a conversation about Mary Ward, who wrote a incredibly popular, incredibly feminist novel called *Marcella* in the late 1800s. But then she went and was the president of an anti-suffrage league for a few years. And it was an interesting conversation about reconciling those two things. But in the ‘70s, when there was this feminist reclaiming, she was basically blackballed because they said she was anti-suffrage, therefore bad feminist, blackball her. So I think there's a throughline here in what we've been talking about where when someone feels that they have ownership of something, whether that is feminism, whether that is a particular queer space, if they say this is mine, we ascribe much higher standards to things that we feel we have ownership over. And those standards are dictated by our personal needs and wants and views, not by reality and often lacking empathy for the other person involved.

Listen to Josephine Browne on Mary Ward, Marcella and the New Woman or read the transcript.

JT: Yeah. Yeah. I hope I'm not straying too far from where you're hoping to go. But I mean, this feels really pertinent when we get to women's land, which was in a way the chapter that gave me the most personal challenge. So let me just explain what it is. So again, starting in the 1970s, some women, we don't know exactly how many, but there was a group of women who, inspired by, I would say, by the Back to the Land movement, by the move towards communal living said, “broader society, larger society is killing us. It is not supportive of lesbian culture, of lesbian spirituality, of just letting us live. We need to figure out what we stand for, all of these things. And we can't do it here. So let's go out to the country.” I think they did want to get away from the city. They felt really attacked in the city. They felt a lot of violence and aggravation. And so they decided they would go to the country. They were going to go to these rural places and they were going to start, effectively, communes. Women did it all over the country, but there were some places where because of the nature of the land, just perhaps in that way, that a lot of women discovered that when you go out into the country, you might have been going for safety, but you actually feel quite exposed. And many of them had to, again, for their safety, for their security, they had to effectively be very secretive. And so they didn't really announce their presence and they ended up being quite isolated.
But there were certain places where there were several communities, most famously, southern Oregon, down close to California. And it was just very, very hard. To the extent that they, any of them had money, they only had enough money, even pooling it, which you can imagine brought a lot of challenges because, I think again, when you have little, what you have becomes all the more important. So there were certainly a lot of disputes over money, a lot of disputes over everything, basically, but it was very, very hard. The physical circumstances were hard. The fact that everything was in these places. It was your relationships, your shelter. It was how you

earn your living often, to the extent that it was possible to earn a living. These women were, and for the extent that they still exist and they do, they still are extremely poor and being rural people, often cut off from medical care and dental care and the internet. They experienced the same problems as many isolated rural people. There was much to be celebrated in what they did. The plus side of being in a slightly isolated place was that many of them still did have to do what we always used to refer to as straight jobs, find work in the nearest town or whatever, but they didn't work as much, they didn't need as much money. And they dedicated their time to spirituality. There was a great deal of rediscovery of what I would describe as goddess worship, of other kinds of rituals. They also did incredible creative work. There were a lot of publications that came out of these women's land or lesbian land, had various names.
But over the years, fewer people went there. It was really hard. And as it became easier to be out and to be supported in the city, there was less need, I guess you would say. And it's just very, very hard. And so in a way, these women got stuck, is my explanation for this. They really didn't see other women. They didn't talk to other women. They talked to each other. And that's my explanation. And people have said, I can't remember the term that they used actually was a new term to me. It's almost like you're forgiving your mother for being a bad mother, you are sort of being too forgiving of these women because many of them, now not all of them, but most of them, I would say are incredibly trans exclusive. They have a very narrow view of what a woman is and who should be on that land. And I think quite rightly, many people, especially young people, but not exclusively are kind of revolted by that and don't want anything to do with those women and reject entirely what they did. And that was tricky because I also reject their views. I also think that they are wrong to exclude in that way. I don't think they are seeing historical patterns that are clearly repeating themselves in my view, in the way that they're behaving. I also understand kind of why they have gotten to be in that situation. So it was hard to celebrate what they did do because I think they did do remarkable work, created remarkable things. Also, they were doing some really interesting work on re-imagining relationships because that was another real focus of, we are focusing on our relationships. And much of the time that was, not that they invented polyamory, I'm not suggesting that, but certainly they were much more interested in exploring non-monogamy than most other communities. And before it became as much of a conversation topic as it is these days. So again, it's just, that was very hard. These women did amazing stuff. They also have some views that I find very alienating. And so there are a lot of challenges of these groups and these places, basically.

AT: Well, and it wasn't just the transphobia, which yeah, no, screw that. But there was also a lot of interpersonal drama. So like you mentioned, these relationships and it varied from commune to commune and some of them had policies, shall we say, that I think any psychologist would tell you, “oh, that's probably not going to end well.” (JT: Yes!) And I think just anytime you have a group of people isolated, like we saw this during COVID lockdowns and even in COVID, we were less isolated because we had the internet. These women were much more isolated and that's just begging for drama. But outside of anyone who wasn't a cisgender woman, there were also issues because there were women who had sons, children.

JT: Yeah. And this to me is something that like, where I recognize, if you have lived through something, what seems normal or acceptable is different from if you learn about this thing later, like in the ‘70s, actually more in the ‘80s, I took part in things that were, yes, women only, but that excluded male sons, that excluded male children. And I see that all the time. I'm now researching a group that kind of split over where the children should be present. And by children, they meant girl children. They'd already gotten rid of the boy children. Wait, if you have a child, it's not like you get to control which kind you have. How do you justify that? But that kind of felt like, “yeah, well, can’t have boy children here,” the people who had that view tended to be people without boy children, of course. And of course, as you said, there were the seeds of kind of destruction, right? That once you have rules that you may or may not think are arbitrary, people change, what they think is reasonable changes, what they're interested in changes. It could be about smoking, it could be about guns. Certainly in the US, that could be more of a thing. It could be anything. But once you say “you are excluded, you have to leave

if this circumstance befalls you.” It just is back to those old arbitrary rules, arbitrary, just maybe experience that's tolerated. You always see the same, see where problems begin. And it so often is in the same kind of urge.

AT: Well, it also seems like one of the big issues with the commune specifically was this gap between this sort of romanticized ideal that folks who have never had to work on a farm have about getting back to nature. (JT: Yeah, yeah.) And like we see this today with, the trad wives, where it's like, oh, no, that person definitely has money and definitely is not doing real farm work. They're just posing for Instagram photos. But it's that kind of idealized vision that I think a lot of people have sort of a montage where they're going to be empowered by growing their own food, not knowing how much work goes into that, and also that sometimes your crop fails.But there were also situations where I don't think a lot of them were prepared, either in a skills sense, or in terms of actually being prepared for the amount of work that was going to have to go into this. But also, you had people who were trying to treat it like a vacation situation.

JT: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that was such an interesting part of it. And again, I can be generous or I can be ungenerous about what those women thought. So yeah, that was a source of real stress, because the women who lived on the land full time constantly wanted new people to come. You understand, not only on a farm, you need a lot of hands, right? I think very few women, even ones who stuck on the land for a long time, really thought of what they were doing as farming. Some did, some did, but really, they were trying to do their spiritual creative thing, and be back to nature, be in nature, have the freedom that they were allowed. And yes, they would grow things, but they were very, very rarely self sufficient. They tried, but I think, for the most part, they gave up on that, it just wasn't possible. But they always wanted to attract people to come and join them. And so they would encourage short term visits, because they knew you weren't going to blow up your life and relocate to the country without visiting. So they always encourage visitors. And it just was very difficult, because on one side, there are the women who live there, who just are, it's hard, again, just to say, it's really hard. They have chores, they probably have, in many cases, an outdoor job. However, they might present things in their magazines, they're actually not sitting around, having sex all day and taking photos and creating their magazines all day. They do have time to do that. And that's great. But that is not how they spend their time. They have a lot of chores and work, and processing to do, a lot of meetings, a lot of meetings, a lot of decisions to be made through exhaustive process of meetings.
And so when women would come, actually on vacation, because they wanted, yes, they were interested in trying it out. But honestly, a lot of them just wanted, “hey, let me spend a week if I've got a week to be on vacation.” And let's face it in the US, I'm not sure how much people who don't live in the US realise how few vacations Americans have. And it's really not part of their mentality in the way that it is in many other countries, through no fault of their own. They wanted a break, they wanted a break from their daily life, their hard daily life, they were like, “Okay, I'm gonna go” and they thought it was like a camping trip. And no, it was really hard for them, it was freezing outside, they had to sleep in a tent, people who became frostbite, and the women weren't there just to be their helpers. There was this beautiful piece by a woman who lived on lesbian land for many years, and who was disabled and said, look, I understand why you think of this as like, “Oh, my God, it's almost like a hospital, I can check in for a week and have somebody care for me. It's like going to a retreat and, and people will make my dinner - that's not what it is. That would be great. Wouldn't that be wonderful.” And some of the some of the things that I think sometimes people thought that. They thought that it would be like, I wasn't brought up as a Catholic. But I think if you aren't brought up as a Catholic, you often think, “Oh, convents, that seems like a nice life.” And like, yeah, I would have thought, “Oh, it'd be great to go spend a week in a comment that be a night,” but no, actually not. So it was just like a constant source of stress with the women who lived there, they had to look after these women because they weren't prepared, no matter how much they said, “we can't look after you, you have to bring your own equipment, we're not going to be feeding you. We just want you to check out the land.” Nobody ever really understood what they were getting in for. And

the women didn't really have a nice vacation, because it wasn't a vacation. It was just like, go and be in on someone's not very well developed land. So yeah, it was just caused some more stress on both sides.

AT: Well, and I think a recurring theme that you see in most of these areas is the requirement of sacrifice, by which I mean, in order to take up space in a bar, there is an expectation that you will spend money on alcohol. (JT: Yeah, yeah.) And again, going back to the difficulty of running a values-based establishment that you were talking about earlier, does the lesbian bar owner kick out people who aren't drinking alcohol, because the backlash from that could actually sink your business on its own. (JT: Yeah.) But at the same time, that's how you keep the establishment open. That's how you support yourself. That's how you, in part justify the 16-hour days that you were talking about. (JT: Yeah, yeah.) And similarly, with the communes, you've talked about how the women who were visiting were spending money, and there was an expectation on their part, that clearly was not met. I don't think it was any more of a realistic expectation than the idealized, romanticized, getting back to nature folks.

JT: Right, right. Yeah, no, exactly. You understand on both sides. So the women who lived on the land were offering women a chance to check out their land in the hope that they might move there. The women who were going on vacation may have had that as a possibility in their mind, but they were on vacation and they did what people do when they're on vacation. They maybe were a little bit more relaxed. That's why they were going out to this place. They weren't at work. They didn't have to dress the same way. They didn't have to be as uptight. And they would just be a little bit more laid back. And they would go into the towns close to where the communes were and be openly lesbian, which sometimes you'll see these writings from women who were on the land. Like, sweetie, people knew you were lesbian. Don't even think that you needed to have purple hair for the people in town to think that you might be a little bit different. But they were very concerned and you understand why they were concerned about not kind of setting off alarms in any of the local people. And then these women would be not being uptight, not taking those precautions because that's what we do when we're on vacation. And I tell you, it's one of the areas. So I was born in the UK. I then moved to the US. I spent 40 years in the US. I spent more time in the US than I have anywhere else. And yet one of the few things that has stayed with me that I think is sort of an innate Britishness or an innate non-Americanness is just feeling that you should have a vacation every year. And again, to anybody, I am not suggesting that Americans don't appreciate vacations. I think financially, it's very hard for people to take vacations in the US. And I think outside of the US, people don't appreciate that. It's not that Americans don't want to go on vacation. It's not that Americans don't understand vacation. They often, it's not an option for them.
However, I think in the UK, you know, where I grew up, we were very poor. We always went on vacation. I see people who I know earn very little, they find a way to take a vacation because it is an ingrained part of, for some people taking a Sabbath might be part of their culture. For some people, some nationalities taking a vacation is part of your culture. So I think that when I went to the US first, even though I had very little money, I ended up going to Provincetown, which was the closest queer vacation spot that was accessible to me. It's right at the tip of Cape Cod. Like most of these places, it's quite remote. Fire Island is not surprisingly, no shock is also a remote tip. They all tend to be places where, say you run into someone from work, you'd be like, Oh, hello. You tend to be places you don't find yourself in accidentally. They tend to have a similar history of how they got to be that way. Usually it involves a little bit of settler colonialism. But to go to a place, even if it is just for a few days, they're quite old-fashioned places, at least the ones I've been. Say Provincetown, it basically is two streets and on Commercial Street, which is kind of the main street, every night, there are performances cabarets. There are bars where there's dancing, my favorite thing in the world, tea dance, because I love to dance, but I don't really want to go out at 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock. So if you can go dancing at 3 or 4, how perfect is that? But really just the idea that this, again, is that same thing where this is a place where you are safe. You don't have to worry for the most part about showing affection. You don't have to worry about defending your culture. Although let's not pretend there's only one queer culture, but the things that are

available are at least theoretically taking your aesthetics, your cultural values in mind. And it's crazy how special that feels. It's crazy how when you're there, you're like, “wow, wouldn't it be great if everything was like this?” Thing is now, especially places like Provincetown are so expensive, so expensive. So it's not something that's particularly available to people. It's quite exclusive, but if you can swing it, it's kind of amazing.

AT: And then you've got lesbian cruises, which are sort of an evolution of what we've been talking about.

JT: That's a really interesting evolution though, because the big lesbian cruise line is Olivia and Olivia started as a women's music label. The creators of Olivia were lesbian feminists. They'd been in lesbian feminist political communes and political projects. So at first they were recording and touring. And then there was this movement toward having music festivals, which were a little bit, often had a lot in common with women's land. Many, not all, but many were women-only. So women would gather. It was a chance to be out with only, in many of them, other women, to see performers who were from various parts of our community or from various communities. And many of these performers were Olivia artists. And then, as society changed, they decided, “instead of us going to the women, why don't we have the women come to us?” Another way that you can have a semi-private space is on a cruise ship. And I think probably Olivia now is the most successful lesbian feminist business that is a lesbian feminist business rather than a business operated by a lesbian or a lesbian feminist. And it's incredibly successful and incredibly expensive. I'm not poor anymore. I can't afford to go on that. Or I could, it would be, again, sacrifice. It would be, I did go to some women's music festivals. They were fun. I enjoyed it. Don't really like being outside. Didn't really like having cold showers in a big field, which is how they were in my era. They got a bit more bougie toward the end. But people who were into it, some women went to several a year. It wasn't that expensive. And there tended to be things like you could volunteer and you could do work to kind of bring down the price. There was some sliding scale, in the feminist way. Now you might have to save for many years for a kind of once in a lifetime thing. So it's interesting to me that the cheaper alternative died out and the expensive alternative is the one that survived. But again, I think it's capitalism.

AT: And of course, as we're talking about being trans-exclusionary and otherwise exclusionary music festivals have their own history of those issues as well. So I don't want to go down that rabbit hole because we could have a whole other conversation about exclusionary activism on both feminism and queerness. (JT: Yeah, yes.) But I want to come back to because I'm also I'm not a music person. I'm not a commune person. I'm probably not that much of a cruise person. But I probably would have been found at the feminist bookstore. So I find this one particularly interesting, not just because I love a feminist bookstore. But these weren't explicitly queer, but what I thought of as coincidentally queer when I read it.

JT: Yeah, yeah, exactly. I think it's a good way of putting it. Bookstores, I think, because it's a bookstore, and it's part of the kind of ethos of bookstores. were never exclusionary. There was this tradition of feminist bookstores, which were owned and run by women, feminists, which would have a lot of lesbian material in them, because, again, that that was what people were interested in and what people had trouble finding elsewhere, or maybe didn't feel comfortable buying elsewhere. But they also always had lots of non-lesbian material. Most of the women who own feminist bookstores were lesbian, but not all. Certainly not to begin with. They were very welcoming places that, they weren't narrow, they had a broad interpretation of feminism. There were also gay bookstores that tended to be run by men, a few of which were feminist. They always would have some lesbian books. It's always interesting to me that there were more feminist bookstores than gay bookstores, even though the gay bookstores tended to actually make their profits from porn. Again, there are always exceptions. But it is interesting that we all find ways to kind of pay for our, subsidize the values stuff. There are many different reasons that people started feminist bookstores, different evolutions for each store, one that I am very fond of and that I actually worked at in DC was Lammas Books, which started as a jewelry store. Some lesbians who got sick of working in straight workplaces, learned how to work with silver from

books from the library. First started selling things kind of on the street in Georgetown, just had little stalls and then started stores. And those stores evolved. And I asked a woman who worked in one for a long time and eventually became the owner of it said, “it's not like we had this big plan. It's just people came in for things.” Yes, they wanted books. They wanted jewelry. And they wanted to be able to be in a place where they could buy jewelry for each other without having to pretend that it was for someone else or always for your boyfriend's going to buy, they didn't have to pretend. They felt that they could be themselves in that store.
One of the things actually that's interesting that I didn't really get into in the book, but that feels kind of relevant here is that, as I said, feminist bookstores, they were a broad church, they sold a lot of different things, one, and because they were most active, they were most successful in the ‘70s and ‘80s were also times when recovery from drinking, drugs, also from incest, we're getting a lot of attention. There were things that had a lot of book-related material. And I think women went into feminist bookstores to get books about recovery from addiction, to learn more about recovery from incest, they weren't necessarily because it was a feminist store or lesbian stores just because they felt safe. They're asking about those things. Those books, certainly the addiction books could be found in other places. But these were topics that people just felt more comfortable asking about, talking about in feminist bookstores. And certainly that was true of lesbian material. Someone wrote that feminism and lesbian feminism, which kind of developed alongside it, were movements that were fueled by texts, which is a very difficult phrase to say, but I think is really true. This was a movement, it was a civil rights movement, it was a political movement, it was an empowerment movement that in many ways was a text-based revolution. Other kind of revolutions that were text-based, but also the message was delivered orally, but I think lesbian and feminist texts of the ‘70s and ‘80s, people read books.
And there was an oral component. Poets, I think had an extreme degree of importance and relevance at that time, but people wanted to go into bookstores to find books that reflected their lives. Lesbian romances were very popular, probably kept a lot of bookstores in business, but also poetry, also pretty dense texts that women just had this thirst for. Even though books, actually if a book is available, you can get it, anyone can order it. That's how books work. But women went to these particular stores because they felt there was a level of expertise. The women who worked in the stores knew the material and could make really informed recommendations. And they certainly would be supportive rather than, it wasn't the experience perhaps that you would get in a general bookstore. But yeah, there was a level of support. There were just places to hang out. I remember working in Lammas and sometimes it would be like, it wasn't a bar, it wasn't a bar, but people would just come to hang out. They would come, “oh, who's going to be in the store? Who are they going to find there?” And that's a lovely place where you can go and hang out. Yeah, they sell books. You can buy books if you want to, but you don't have to actually. And you buy records, buy jewelry, you can buy other things.

AT: Get some Olivia records. (JT: Exactly, exactly.) I just want to go back to how you mentioned that the men-owned gay bookstores often had porn. If I recall correctly, there was overlap in terms of inventory and ideology between the bookstores and the sex shop. So you do distinguish between them, but sexual liberation and education was very much a part of feminism. And obviously you can see how that coincides with that coincidental queerness.

JT: Exactly. No, totally. It is really interesting actually that, so one of the things, as feminist bookstores had a harder time staying in business, mostly because of online shopping actually, discounting online shopping just made it harder for all businesses, for all bookstores, but including feminist bookstores. So as their numbers shrank and as the business became harder, many, again not all, many feminist bookstores also stocked sex toys. And why? Well, because it was a place of trust. It was a place where you could have an open conversation. Because one of the things that I think is what differentiates feminist sex toy boutiques, feminist sex toy stores from, what do we call them? Adult stores, is just the kind of the level of trust and the level of communication. You can ask a question and you can trust that you will get an informed, educated response. People aren't just trying to get $40 bucks, $100, whatever out of you. They actually want to help you. They

want to help you solve a problem. They want to return customer, but they generally want to help you. And so that feeling was part of the DNA of women's bookstores, of feminist bookstores, that level of “here's a trusted person that you can go and talk to that will help you.” And also, again, that this was a place of security. And then books and sex toy stores has always been a thing. There really are some amazing pioneers who started the movement for feminist sex toys. They typically started with mail order or with workshops, hands-on workshops, so to speak, but that wasn't particularly scalable. Maybe that's the ideal situation to learn, but that wasn't scalable, as I said. So a lot of these women are evangelists. They wanted to get the word out. They really believe that women's liberation, queer liberation isn't possible without sexual liberation. And they wanted to help women have orgasms. And if they couldn't talk to them in person and help them do this, they would find some material. They were typically very enthusiastic and very evangelistic about vibrators. And they wanted women to know, these are the options, here's how you use it. Something very basic for them was communicating this and they tended to do it via books. And it's always been the case that once there were more and more feminist sex toy stores, they typically had a large book selection.
And it's only because I actually was talking for the book, so I hadn't actually seen her store yet. I was talking with Searah Deysach, who owns Early to Bed in Chicago. And I said, oh, do you have a lot of books? And she said, no. And I was like, oh. And it turned out it's because they're across the street from Women and Children First, one of the oldest continually operating feminist bookstores. So it's just a matter of, well, there's a feminist bookstore across the street. They can get their books there. It's not because, they're all about the communication. They're all about helping people. But yeah, funnily enough, texts are often relevant to helping people figure out how to improve their own sexual satisfaction. So yeah, there's a huge interaction.
Is that queer? Well, again, not all of them were queer. The women who started Good Vibrations, which is probably the best known and the most successful feminist sex toy store wasn't queer, but she was based in San Francisco. She saw very clearly that what was going on in the queer community as far as more openness, more communication, more saying “we're here. We have needs. We have demands.” And just other kind of groups that were developing, especially around communication, she immediately saw that connection. And certainly, as far as to the extent that sex education existed, it wasn't being given to help young queer people figure out how their queer sex lives would be. So the need was greater, I think, for queer people.

AT: This may be an example of how sheltered I was, or perhaps just that I've never been a sports person. But I actually didn't know until I read your book, but softball was queer-coded.

JT: Well, it's funny, because I'm not at all sporty, in terms of actually playing sports, but I always liked sports. And actually, I found my first queer community in person at tennis tournaments in England, where I grew up. There, in the preamble to Wimbledon, because it gets played on grass, people had to play other tournaments to get used to the surface. And that actually was a place where you could hang out. And I discovered, that was where I first met other queer people and just to find people to talk to was at Eastbourne, which was at that time, the pre-Wimbledon tournament, which also is a seaside resort. So also was a place where there were places to stay and so on. So I kind of knew that there was a queer sporty aspect. But I too was surprised that softball was certainly in North America. I'm told actually that in Australia, hockey is the lesbian sport. And I think in most countries, it's actually soccer. Basically, you need a sport that doesn't need much equipment, that people play outdoors. And it was exactly this. People don't know exactly why softball got that role. But it seems to have been that companies, industries that had pretty awful working conditions, one of the things they started to do was to offer kind of recreation for their workers. Softball at that time was becoming a bit more of a popular sport, certainly in the Midwest, in the South. And because the women who were more likely to have time to play the recreational sport and not have to get home to do childcare or family responsibilities, perhaps were more likely to be lesbians, or at least to maybe have that desire, even if they hadn't found community or weren't living it out. But then it did become that kind of an open secret. It's one of those things, the great thing about softball is, it isn't a bar on the edge of town that everybody knows is queer. Like, “hey, I'm just playing

softball. I don't know where you got that idea." Which makes it sound like something negative, but the truth is that it has been necessary to have deniability for people's safety, for people's maintaining relationships and so on. Would that it were not so.

AT: Something else that was occurring to me when we were talking about the downsides to bars is the safety element, right? Especially if people know that that's the lesbian bar. Being out on your own or with another woman late at night is just fundamentally more dangerous compared to, "oh, we're just at a softball game in broad daylight, surrounded by other people. And we're all going to our cars at the same time and maybe we're going out together afterwards." But again, maybe I'm sheltered, but that feels a lot safer to me.

JT: Absolutely. Absolutely. And for various historical reasons, at least in the US, bars tended to be in remote places. Again, you didn't want to run into someone from church, from work, whatever, your mom's best friend. So they tended to be in remote parts of the city, at night. And also, there is a history too of why do we have queer bars? Well, in many ways, police were, again, these vague rules keeping queer people out of straight bars, putting them, "okay, they're all over there or they're all in that bar." It also makes them a target. So yeah, the safety of queer bars is safer in some ways, not in others. Yeah, the idea, and I think there is something too, like this is true in feminist bookstores and especially in softball, that it is healthy, that it is a lot of women who kind of discovered softball. Especially again, in the '70s and so on, where in the US until the passing of the Title IX legislation, girls didn't get sporting education. Girls didn't play sports or if they played sports, they certainly weren't coached. They didn't have the same facilities that were given to male sports, to men's sports. And so especially in the '70s, '80s, even '90s, women, they'd not really learned to throw. They hadn't maybe played softball. Some had, again, but there were a lot of women who just hadn't had that experience. And so people talk a lot about like, "oh my God, this was amazing that I learned that I could throw." They found their Amazon prowess. They felt this sense of camaraderie.
Softball, I think too, like cricket perhaps, rounders, they're games where you have a side that's in and a side that's out. And so whoever's batting, the rest of the team are kind of sitting in the dugout socializing. That's a nice aspect. And this provided a place to have conversation, which again, is something that even if you're in a bar, for the most part, it's hard to have general conversation. And softball provided that. And one of the experiences that I think is very important is that, yes, all these places happen. If you are in a city or maybe a town that has multiple places that has bars and softball, and perhaps other things like maybe a judo dojo or something. So there was a case that I learned about where there was a bar that was actually one of these kind of parties that would rent out different places. But at their events, they had a habit, which was not altogether, and I don't want to talk in the past tense as if it never happens anymore, although it happens less. They kept the number of women of color to a certain percentage by having different entrance policies for women of color, especially if they were in groups. So in the US again, because of the 21, you have to show ID to prove your age to get into a bar. They would require maybe one ID for white women, two or three for black women. Or they would say, "oh, you don't meet the dress code." Even if you could see it was a white woman is dressed exactly the same way in there because they didn't want to have "too many," and I'm definitely making air quotes, women of color in the bar. People have a sense of that, but it was only when people were playing softball. And again, they were chatting. They're like, "yeah, where did you go last night?" "Well, I tried to go to that bar, but we didn't get in." "Wait, we didn't get in either." "Well, I got in when I was with my white girlfriend, but when I was with my black friends, they didn't let us in." And having this ability to have conversations can be really politically motivational. That conversation led to organizing that led to a pretty extensive protest in New York that led to, it wasn't exactly a lawsuit, but a Division of Human Rights complaint. And that all came because people had a place where they could talk. And that was in the softball dugout. So it's healthy. It's open. You don't have to be in some crazy place out at night. You're just out there in the sunshine. Maybe there's just an old geezers match going on at the next diamond where kids are playing. Again, it's not this, we have to be off in the side because there's something shameful. No, we're just outside playing and having fun

and it's healthy. Yeah, it's something that's very positive, I think.

AT: I think it's that wholesomeness. (JT: Exactly.) It's the only one of these where they're not isolated or somewhere that people might find sketchy because feminism was still considered radical by a lot of folks. And so even the feminist bookstore doesn't have that same just wholesomeness, like purity, you might say.

JT: Exactly. Exactly. No, so wholesome. So wholesome. Playing sports together.

AT: I do want to note that as you've sort of indicated throughout the conversation, you're very open about different privileges within different communities. So class, race, cis privilege, and then how those play out in these spaces, often excluding more marginalized members of the community. So someone who can't afford to buy things, who can't afford to go on the vacation. There's a story, so as you were mentioning, the softball teams would go out to bars and some of the softball teams were specifically for women of color. And there's a great story in the book. I'm guessing you know the one I'm referencing.

JT: Yeah, no. This happened over and over that, again, there's a historical element and it isn't always possible for me to give the exact historical reference of where we're talking about. But one of the stories I tell in the book is of, in the Midwest, one of the areas where softball culture is particularly strong, there would be tournaments. And then at this tournament, so a lot of clubs are in a town, they're playing. And again, there's this tradition of going out to bars afterward. I think probably a little bit less so today, actually, maybe because of the numbers or the fact that there are other organizations that are willing to sponsor. But typically, lesbian bars would sponsor feminist softball teams or softball teams. But in this tournament situation, people were going to this bar and the bar said they would not allow women from, I believe they were called the Motown Soul Sisters, a team from Detroit into the bar. And in that case, the white teams were like, “don't think that we're going to stay and drink now here.” That's a historical incident that really happened. And I do think that there has been solidarity. But many of us who were going into bars, I'm a white woman, probably noticed that the ID situation was different. We still went in the bar. I think older women, bars are for everyone. It's a place of public accommodation. I think at the same time, no, you don't want a whole lot of older women in the bar because then the younger women are going to think, that's an old women's bar.
There are all kinds of, again, this whole pressure that we have this one bar. I'm not saying that that leads to discrimination because no, that's not an excuse. That does not excuse it. But there have been all kinds of situations where, yes, sometimes we stand up. Sometimes we support the campaigns to just let people know that we see what you're doing. We see what you're doing. This is not okay. We're not okay with this. You cannot exclude people from these bars. And I think to a certain extent, I don't know if you can say that this COOL campaign, COOL was the Committee Of Outraged Lesbians who were doing an anti-racist campaign to say, “bars exclude women of colour. We can't allow this. We have to stand up for this and just let them know that we're seeing them and that they need to stop discriminating.” I'm not saying that people remember that this COOL protest happened in this year, but I do think that now for all kinds of reasons, there is more awareness that exclusion is not the path and that spaces, we might have more lesbian. That's one of the things that I'm very, the reason that I'm not freaked out about the declining number of lesbian bars is that there are so many more queer bars and queer spaces. In some ways it's a definitional problem. Yeah, there's 30 lesbian bars, but there are more queer bars where lesbians are very welcome. Obviously we're seeing, there are still attempts to exclude and people celebrate exclusion, which I do not know what planet you are from that you think this is a good thing. But I think the general tide is of more broader community definitions and broader sense of “we're in this together. We're all looking for a safe space. We all belong in the same space. We don't want to be gatekeeping. So, welcome.”

AT: Now, you interweave your own experiences in different parts of the book, which I really like that additional

perspective that it provides. But I am curious, what inspired you to frame a queer history through this particular lens?

JT: Yeah, well, about my own presence, like that felt like a feminist thing to do. I understand as a journalist, you don't want to insert yourself into stories that are about other people, other things like this story is about X, but this is a story about my community and my history. And to the extent that when I did have something to offer, there are some things I've never played softball. I went to a softball match and I did find it very interesting. So I did write about it, but some chapters I have more to say than the other because I have more connection with them.
As to why this lens actually, it really did start because there was this focus on bars and the disappearance of bars, which just didn't feel right to me. Again, like on an objective level, yes, but we can't stop with, oh, there are a few of bars, therefore things are worse. I mean, things are bad, but that just felt like a weirdly narrow view of the world. And then also I was working with people who were young and very, very interested in queer history and very interested in queer people. And for various reasons, just discovered that they didn't, I'd never heard of certain things, which is the problem of history. But also I think is, you've just written a book about lack of credit. So I know that you have some exposure here, some sense of how this happens, but also I think with queer history, it was particularly challenging because to the extent that there were queer publications, let's just say publications, because that's typically how we pass on information. Yes, there's some conversations wherever they might happen, but they tended to be only in larger cities. Even if there were, even if the place where you live did have such a paper, it was probably mostly about guys, even if it had a woman editor, which many times they did. And so, there are real reasons why people didn't know of things. So it felt like a way in of, these are some places you might have thought about, you might have heard about, or also places where community happens. I read a lot of history, you typically get things about what we shorthand as great men, but the eminent people in our community or in any community, so famous people, people of achievement. I don't want to knock that, there's a reason that they get written about, or histories of movements or histories of how we got, for example, marriage equality. That makes sense, but it leaves out that kind of everyday life. And certainly I think one of the most important things in my life has been *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which is about everyday life. It's where people worked, where people had a potluck, where people played softball, where almost all of the places in *Dykes to Watch Out For* are places in A Place of Our Own. And that's because that's where our lives were lived, and to a certain extent still are lived. So it just felt like a good way of telling our story.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.