

OUT ON THE SLOPES:

Activism, Identity, and Money in Whistler's Gay Ski Week, 1992-2012

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WHISTLER'S FIRST GAY ski week was organized quietly. Organizers put up posters announcing that "Friends of Dorothy" – code for gay men – were meeting at a bar in Whistler, a resort town nestled at the base of two major ski resorts, Whistler and Blackcomb, just north of Vancouver, British Columbia. A couple of dozen men showed up to hear Brent Benaschak, the owner of a local bed and breakfast, pitch his idea to host a gay ski group at the resort.¹ The first event, a casual, somewhat disorganized affair, was held in February 1992 with around seventy participants.² By 2012, Whistler's gay ski week had become the largest annual gay ski week in the world, attracting between two and three thousand attendees and generating \$4.2 million annually for the resort, making it the largest annual event for Whistler.³ The 2012 event saw the first Pride march in Whistler, the first proclamation of "Pride Week," and the first flying of the rainbow flag from City Hall.⁴

The growth of Whistler's gay ski week reveals a good deal about the evolving relationship between gay activism, gay identity, and business, even as it illuminates a previously unexplored aspect of British Columbia's queer history. This examination of Whistler's gay ski week complicates the argument that the marketplace undercuts the movement towards gay rights and reveals how gay organizations can function as profit-orientated businesses and advance gay rights. Though never without complications and contradictions, Whistler's gay ski week created a queer space, challenged heteronormative assumptions about

¹ Joe Rachert, telephone interview with author, 13 August 2012; Alison Taylor, "Whistler Unfurls Its Rainbow Banners at the 20th Anniversary of WinterPRIDE," *Pique*, 2 February 2012.

² Brent Neave, telephone interview with author, 25 August 2012.

³ Brian Morton, "WinterPride a 'Roaring Success': Majority of Guests from Outside Canada," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 February 2012. Gay ski week is currently the largest annual event at Whistler.

⁴ Dean Nelson, telephone interview with author, 7 September 2012; Christopher Poon, "WinterPRIDE Celebrates 20 Years with Milestones," *Question*, 19 January 2012.

sport, and eventually became a platform for an array of gay organizations and community actions.⁵

In recent years, the commodification and marketing of gay identities has come under intense academic scrutiny. The relationship between the gay community, the gay civil rights movement, and the marketplace is exceptionally deep. As Michael Warner points out, for the gay community, “the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos, special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, [and] urban commercial districts.” Because these were all commercialized institutions, middle-class white men tended to dominate the gay organizations to which they gave rise.⁶ With middle-class white men as the face of the gay rights movement, by 1992 advertisers came to believe that gay consumers had large amounts of disposable income and intense brand loyalty.⁷ Gay consumers and activists embraced this shift, trumpeting the transformative effects of “pink dollars” as companies began to openly market to the gay community.⁸ More recently, scholars have found significant limitations in the transformative power of pink dollars, noting that gains won through the market tend to mainly benefit white middle-class men and can be easily lost.⁹ Additionally, the literature on gay rights civil movements in Canada and the United States tends to present “real activists” as detached from the market, as individuals who prefer engagement with grassroots organizations supported by private philanthropy or government grants. Business is generally presented as either opposed to these ends or, more commonly, as opportunistically

⁵ This article draws heavily on a series of interviews conducted over Skype with organizers, participants, and resort officials between 27 July 2012 and 16 January 2013. The Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee gave approval to conduct interviews (certificate #12-233-H). Informants were recruited through the snowball sampling method. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. These interviews provide insight into the internal struggles and development of gay ski week – information that does not exist anywhere else – particularly for the early years, for which there is virtually no documentation at all. The interviews have been checked against each other and against existing documentation for accuracy.

⁶ Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xvi-xvii.

⁷ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 127-29.

⁸ Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 29-38; Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 125-30, 138-74.

⁹ Jon Binnie, “Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality and the Production of Queer Space,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine, 169-71 (London: Routledge, 1995); Chasin, *Selling Out*, 42-44, 48, 206; Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112, 132-39.

taking advantage of gay struggles for social change.¹⁰ This view ignores the civil rights component of events like gay ski week, the goals of gay businesspeople, and the logistics and economics of creating queer spaces.¹¹

Whistler's gay ski week has important implications for the articulation of gay identity on the part of organizers and participants because the town is a major vacation resort. One of the central appeals of a holiday is the escape from everyday social norms. This is particularly important for gay travellers, who often have to abide by heteronormative standards or pass for straight at home and who sometimes risk severe reprisals if they fail to do so. Gay holiday events are therefore important because they create a queer space that allows often-isolated individuals to connect with a broader gay community and, indeed, to openly articulate and come to understand a gay identity.¹² Successive organizers of Whistler's gay ski week have identified the creation of gay space as one of the primary goals of the event, though how they created that space, and its form, changed considerably over time.¹³

For most of those who attended, Whistler's gay ski week was not just a holiday but also a sporting event. Though the emphasis has shifted over time, skiing, snowboarding, and other winter sports have remained central to Whistler's gay ski week, and the sporting dimension has remained more marked than it is in circuit parties, gay cruises, and other gay holiday destinations.¹⁴ This emphasis on sport enriched the ways in which organizers and participants understood both the event and themselves. In his seminal work on the subject, Brian Pronger argues that gay sport contributed to gay liberation by challenging, subverting, and exposing "the frailty of masculine power."¹⁵ By decoupling the rela-

¹⁰ For some examples of recent works that are critical of the influence of the market on gay rights and on the related dominance of the accommodationist strain within the gay and lesbian movement, see: Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*; Chasin, *Selling Out*.

¹¹ I am using the concept of queer space in the Lefebvrian sense of "lived space" – that is, space that is both occupied and imagined. See Cathy Van Ingen, "Geographies of Gender, Sexuality and Race: Reframing the Focus on Space in Sport Sociology," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38, 2 (2003): 204.

¹² Howard Hughes, *Pink Tourism: Holidays of Gay Men and Lesbians* (Wallingford, UK: CABI, 2006), 22–23, 50–57. It should be noted that this space is mediated through the market, disproportionately accessible to middle-class white men.

¹³ Dean Nelson, Brent Neave, Wayne Hartrick, separate telephone interviews with author, 27 July 2012.

¹⁴ Wayne Hartrick, John Sutherland, separate telephone interviews with author, 15 September 2012; Oona Woods, "We're Here. We're Queer. Whistler's Spirit, Friendliness Brings People Out on the Slopes," *Pique*, 30 January 1998; Robyn Cubie, "Beyond All Politics and Just for Fun," *Pique*, 2 February 2001.

¹⁵ Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 76.

tionship between athletic bodies, heterosexuality, and masculinity, gay sports undercut one of the primary claims of heteronormative culture: that gay bodies are necessarily effeminate and subject to domination by heterosexuals.¹⁶ Whistler's gay ski week therefore needs to be understood simultaneously as a profit-seeking business, a civil rights vehicle, a queer space, and a sporting event challenging heterosexual gender norms.

Academic attention to gay sports events has focused almost exclusively on the Gay Games, a major international competition with over 100,000 competitors and spectators that is held every four years.¹⁷ The only winter sport included in these summertime games is ice hockey.¹⁸ Studies of gay tourism, on the other hand, have tended to focus on major events like Sydney's Mardi Gras or on the marketing and consumption of holidays in general.¹⁹ Histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) groups in British Columbia and Canada similarly overlook events like gay ski week, despite their size and impact, and focus mainly on grassroots groups in major urban areas.²⁰ Paying attention to Whistler's gay ski week helps fill these lacunae.

ALTITUDE, SNOWBALL, AND THE CIRCUIT

Whistler's gay ski week started with both social and commercial aims. For Brent Benaschak, gay ski week was a way to increase gay awareness of Whistler in general and of his recently opened bed and breakfast in particular.²¹ He also wanted to create an outdoors event that would

¹⁶ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁷ Ibid., 251-56; Gordon Waitt, "Boundaries of Desire: Becoming Sexual through the Spaces of Sydney's 2002 Gay Games," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, 4 (2006): 773-87; Gordon Waitt, "Gay Games: Performing 'Community' Out from the Closet of the Locker Room," *Social and Cultural Geography* 4, 2 (2003): 167-83; Caroline Symons, *The Gay Games: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁸ Federation of Gay Games, "All Sports," available at <http://gaygames.org/wp/sport/sports-program/list-of-sports/>. Indeed, in the broader field of sport history, winter alpine sports have received scant attention, despite being a \$12 billion-a-year industry in the United States alone. An exception is Anne Gilbert Coleman, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing," in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, ed. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard, 141-68 (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Anne Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). On the economic impact of skiing, see "Global Warming Melts Ski Revenue," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 December 2012.

¹⁹ See, for example, Hughes, *Pink Tourism*; Steven Kates, "Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations: An Interpretation of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 6, 1 (2003): 5-22; Kevin Markwell, "Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 8, 1-2 (2002): 81-99.

²⁰ See Warner, *Never Going Back*; Miriam Catherine Smith, *Lesbian and Gay Rights in Canada: Social Movements and Equality-Seeking: 1971-1995* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

²¹ Cubie, "Beyond All Politics."

bolster gay pride;²² however, he had only recently come out as gay and was not very comfortable with his sexuality, and this attitude was reflected in gay ski week.²³ Ultimately, Benaschak hoped to create a gay-friendly event that would be attractive to the straight community as well. Although the company Benaschak created to run gay ski week was called Out on the Slopes Productions, Benaschak decided to brand the event “Altitude” to emphasize his vision of a “huge celebration ... multicultural, all-inclusive,” and focused on skiing and parties. Benaschak made a conscious decision to eschew the use of the Pride flag (which is omnipresent at the vast majority of LGBT events) in marketing Altitude on the hill and at après-ski events in order both to make it stand out in the gay community and to be more appealing to a broader gay and straight market.²⁴ Although Altitude was primarily a gay event, Out on the Slopes Productions encouraged straight attendance at Snowball, the major party of the week, by offering discounts to any locals who wished to attend.²⁵

As Brent Neave (the co-producer of early gay ski weeks) remembered them, the first two years were “pretty grassroots” affairs, “just a group of gay skiers getting together on a particular date, [a] particular weekend.”²⁶ During this period, gay ski week was not hidden on the mountain, but it was not aggressively advertised either. In 1993, when the event hosted a charity ski-a-thon to benefit Vancouver’s Dr. Peter Centre for AIDS Care, those involved wore ski bibs that said “Ski-A-Thon for AIDS,” but as Joe Rachert, who ran that event, remembers: “We weren’t very prominent. You would actually have to go right beside me to actually see what I was doing.”²⁷ As John Sutherland, head of the ski-guiding program and an attendee in the earliest years recalls, on the mountain gay ski week “was visible, but not incredibly visible.”²⁸

Started as an end-of-the-week party the first year, Snowball soon became the signature event of Altitude, reflecting Benaschak’s love of a good party and his sense that, in order to grow, Altitude needed to become part of the Circuit, a series of massive gay and lesbian dance parties held mainly in North America.²⁹ Some of the larger Circuit

²² Kevin Griffin, “Aspen Boycott Sends Gays to BC Slopes: Ski Week Expected to Attract up to 1,000,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 February 1994.

²³ Kevin Griffin, “Gay Ski Week Celebrates 10th Year,” *Vancouver Sun*, 26 January 2002.

²⁴ Rachert, Neave, separate telephone interviews.

²⁵ Neave, telephone interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rachert, telephone interview.

²⁸ Sutherland, telephone interview.

²⁹ Neave, Rachert, separate telephone interviews.

parties involved multiple venues on several nights and drew well over ten thousand attendees.³⁰ Sometimes derided as “E&K fests,” (ecstasy- and PCP-fuelled events) Circuit parties started as celebrations of life in the face of the horrific mortality rates of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s and 1990s and in reaction to the generally unsympathetic attitude of the straight population.³¹ Circuit parties became major fundraising events for a range of gay charities, and they aggressively asserted and claimed queer space, if only for the duration of the event.³² Benaschak’s decision to make Altitude a major event on the Circuit helped fuel its growth from fewer than four hundred attendees in 1993 to a reported two thousand by 1996.³³

Although Snowball was crucial for the growth of gay ski week, organizers found it difficult to secure space for gay ski week events. Brent Neave recalls being told: “‘Oh, no, no, we don’t want anything to do with you’ ... Some were more subtle than that, they just said ‘Oh, you know, we don’t have enough space, blah, blah, blah.’”³⁴ This hostility and lack of interest on the part of local business was paralleled by a lack of support from the municipality and ski resorts, especially Blackcomb. Although television marketers were discovering the gay niche market in the early 1990s, Whistler’s economy was roaring and the resorts felt very little need to court a niche market that they knew little about and that they feared might have an adverse impact on existing patrons.³⁵

Antagonism and antipathy from the business community and local government could have killed or severely hampered the growth of gay ski week if Benaschak and others had not found key business community allies. Foremost among these was Beverly Brown, general manager of Monk’s Grill, who agreed to host the first Snowball and many of the après-ski events over the next few years. There was substantial risk in this, not least because there was no robust estimate of the numbers who

³⁰ Hughes, *Pink Tourism*, 141–42.

³¹ Cindy Filipenko, “Gay Whistler Ski Week Building Momentum,” *Pique*, 3 February 2006. “E” refers to ecstasy, “K” to PCP. Both are popular recreational drugs among Circuit party attendees. See Jabir Puar, “Circuits of Queer Mobility: Tourism, Travel, and Globalization.” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 8, 1–2 (2002): 105.

³² Hughes, *Pink Tourism*, 141–42.

³³ Griffin, “Aspen Boycott”; David Branigan, “Gay Ski Week,” *Pique*, 2 February 1996; Woods, “We’re Here”; Rachert, telephone interview.

³⁴ Neave, telephone interview.

³⁵ The town of Whistler serves two ski areas, Whistler Mountain and Blackcomb Mountain, which were owned by different companies until 1996, when Intrawest (the company that owned Blackcomb) bought Whistler. Neave, Rachert, separate telephone interviews.

might be drawn to gay ski week events. In the end, businesses like Monk's took the risk because they supported the idea of a gay ski week.³⁶

Circumstances conspired to reward their commitment. When the State of Colorado passed Amendment 2, a revision of the state Constitution that eliminated legal protections for homosexuals, LGBT groups boycotted Colorado businesses, including the world's largest gay ski week held at Aspen. The event that once drew over five thousand people attracted only fifteen hundred in 1993 and only seven hundred in 1994.³⁷ Benaschak and Altitude were able to court these tourists, assisted by Whistler's emergence as the premier ski destination in North America and by the legacy of the 1990 Gay Games hosted by Vancouver. Tourism Whistler also began to support gay ski week by providing ski passes and accommodation for media. This enabled Altitude to fly in a number of reporters who gave the event an international profile just as its attendance began to climb dramatically.³⁸

Increasing patronage of Altitude in 1993 and 1994 produced serious homophobic reactions. In March 1993, the *North Shore News* published a column by controversial and outspoken conservative reporter Doug Collins, warning: "Avoid Whistler! You might bump into one of those people and get AIDS."³⁹ In response, gay businessman Reed Hortie filed a complaint with the BC Press Council.⁴⁰ Then, in 1994, homophobic flyers entitled "Fagism Rules," were put on cars and under the doors of local businesses during Altitude. It seemed to argue that homosexuals were AIDS-carriers, that they were deliberately trying to destroy the heterosexual family, and that they should therefore be discriminated against.⁴¹ Both of these incidents were strongly condemned by the mayor of Whistler, Ted Nebbling.⁴² The crude claims of the 1994 flyers offended many in Whistler's straight community who began to speak up publicly in defence of gay ski week.⁴³

³⁶ Neave, Rachert, separate telephone interviews.

³⁷ Christopher Reynolds, "Vacation Planning and Political Correctness Trends: A Proposed Boycott of Colorado Shows How Tourism Dollars Can Be Cast Like Ballots," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 November 1992; Denny Lee, "Was That Liza on the Black Diamond Run?," *New York Times*, 3 February 2006; Woods, "We're Here"; Griffin, "Aspen Boycott."

³⁸ Rachert, telephone interview; Woods, "We're Here."

³⁹ "Collins Column Spurs Complaint," *Vancouver Sun*, 31 March 1993.

⁴⁰ Reed Hortie, telephone interview with author, 16 January 2013. The complaint does not seem to have been acted upon.

⁴¹ "Flyers Target Gay Skiers," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1994.

⁴² Incidentally, Nebbling was himself gay and would later go on to be the first openly gay MLA for British Columbia. It is unclear how many people outside of the gay community were aware of his orientation at this time, however.

⁴³ Kevin Griffin, "Gay Skiers Choose Whistler over Aspen," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 February 1994.

Altitude's growing profile had increased appreciation of the gay community's economic impact. But the mountains and businesses of Whistler remained wary of gay ski week. Although Vancouver, two hours away, was a fairly liberal bastion and had two well-known gay neighbourhoods, the majority of the visitors to Whistler were "pretty straight ... pretty conservative ... the same people who play golf."⁴⁴ Because there was no easy way for businesses to identify gay customers, several of those opposed to gay ski week questioned its economic benefits. Benaschak's solution was to encourage Altitude attendees to literally spend pink dollars. Those attending an après-ski event were provided with pink stickers to place on any bills they spent in Whistler.⁴⁵ Altitude organizers also asked Whistler businesses to put a rainbow flag on their door to let gay patrons know they were welcome. Altitude participants were then asked to spend money in establishments that displayed the flag. As the numbers attending Altitude events grew and their purchasing power became more visible "the whole attitude changed," said Brent Neave: "All of a sudden we were heroes."⁴⁶

These developments paralleled a broad social, cultural, and political shift towards supporting gay rights that was occurring across North America in the early and mid-1990s. One of the most significant aspects of this shift was that homosexual characters and plot lines became a significant feature in the programming of the major US networks (who broadcast into Canada and whose shows were syndicated here).⁴⁷ Locally, the victory of Mike Harcourt's left-wing New Democratic Party in the 1991 BC election brought amendments to the Human Rights Act that included prohibitions against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Simultaneously, an increasingly diverse array of LGBT groups became active in the Lower Mainland and, indeed, throughout Canada.⁴⁸

Still, the main driver of change, especially among the business community (which was crucial to the success of gay ski week in Whistler), was the growing economic impact of Altitude and the way that event organizers skilfully leveraged the perception of that impact in their dealings with the ski resorts, the municipality, and local businesses. This is particularly evident in the changing relationship between Altitude and Whistler and Blackcomb resorts. Although Whistler Mountain's marketing team had been somewhat supportive, Blackcomb had been "very

⁴⁴ Sutherland, telephone interview.

⁴⁵ Nelson, Neave, separate telephone interviews.

⁴⁶ Neave, telephone interview.

⁴⁷ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 147-54.

⁴⁸ Warner, *Never Going Back*, 204-5, 252-56.

standoffish” and had refused to sponsor Altitude, even as it supported other ski organizations that brought in far fewer visitors. Frustrated with the situation, Benaschak and Neave threatened Blackcomb’s management with a boycott or a relocation of the entire event to Lake Louise, Alberta, or elsewhere. Blackcomb backed down and began offering support, but the relationship between gay ski week and Blackcomb’s parent company, Intrawest, would remain strained until Intrawest was purchased in 2006.⁴⁹

In 1995, attendance at Altitude topped two thousand and continued to climb to a high of thirty-five hundred in 2003.⁵⁰ Snowball remained the marquee event, but there was a growing range of additional events, such as concerts, a pool party, fashion shows, auctions, tea dances, and a women’s-only dance (Thunderthrob).⁵¹ While the Circuit aspect of Altitude was clearly a factor in its success in these years, on-mountain activities also distinguished Whistler’s gay ski week from its competitors. While the earliest gay ski weeks at Whistler had had informal skiing groups on the mountains, in 1995 Brent Neave and Daniel Moesching began a formal program to guide groups of skiers and snowboarders according to their abilities. Here, as elsewhere in Altitude, volunteers were crucial. Growing attendance also helped Altitude attract larger corporate sponsors, which reduced the overall cost, allowed organizers to keep ticket prices relatively low, and moved the formerly money-losing event towards profitability.⁵²

As Altitude grew, it became more visibly a gay event. Gay skiers and snowboarders asserted their presence on the slopes, either by wearing the Pride flag or by engaging in impromptu drag-queen performances at the lift lines.⁵³ All of this had the snowball effect of increasing the number of skiers who publicly identified as queer. Much of this was led by Benaschak, who, as he became more comfortable with his identity as a gay man, added naked slalom races, drag queen performances, and screenings of gay-orientated movies like 1996’s *It’s My Party* (about dying from AIDS with dignity).⁵⁴ As the event became larger and more overtly

⁴⁹ Neave, telephone interview.

⁵⁰ “Whistler Hosts Gay Ski Week,” *Vancouver Sun*, 18 November 1995; Clare Ogilvie, “Revered Founder of Gay Ski Week Dies Suddenly,” *Pique*, 9 January 2004.

⁵¹ Branigan, “Gay Ski Week”; Woods, “We’re Here”; Katherine Monk, “Carving a New Niche: The Out on the Slopes Gay Ski Week at Whistler Is One of the Biggest Events in the Multi-Billion-Dollar Business of Gay Destination Travel,” *Vancouver Sun*, 5 February 2000; Cubie, “Beyond All Politics”; Griffin, “Gay Ski Week Celebrates 10th Year.”

⁵² Neave, Rachert, separate telephone interviews.

⁵³ Rachert, Hartrick, separate telephone interviews.

⁵⁴ Hartrick, Rachert, separate telephone interviews; Robin Perelle, “Whistler’s Gay Ski Week a Hit,” *Xtra! West*, 19 February 2004; Branigan, “Gay Ski Week”; Kevin Griffin, “Prominent

gay in nature, its claims to queer spaces both on- and off-mountain became more aggressive.

Benaschak's sudden death on 30 December 2003, weeks before the start of Altitude 2004, threw the future of the event into doubt.⁵⁵ Ownership of Out on the Slopes Productions passed to his parents, who wanted to see the event continue but had no interest in running it themselves. At that point, Lee Bergeron, a gay businessman who had attended Altitude since 2000, offered to buy the company. The family quickly appointed Bergeron director, tasking him with putting on Altitude 2004 while they completed negotiations for the sale.⁵⁶

Bergeron framed Altitude 2004 as an ongoing tribute to Benaschak, announcing that he was renaming several charity events in his honour and that he would use a portion of the proceeds to create a foundation in Benaschak's name.⁵⁷ In the end, Bergeron managed to host twenty-eight events over a nine-day period for what he claimed to be between thirty-five hundred and four thousand people, even though these numbers were almost certainly inflated.⁵⁸ However, despite this promising start, Bergeron soon ran into trouble.

Though Bergeron talked about transforming the event into "a festival, not just parties," and attracting twelve to fifteen thousand people by 2007, these dreams were always paired with complaints about a lack of local support.⁵⁹ There was probably some truth to these complaints, but most members of the gay community read them as an attempt to deflect criticism from the sharply rising costs and declining quality of the events at Altitude.⁶⁰ Many attendees began to see the event as a money-grab rather than as a celebration of the gay community.⁶¹ Bergeron

Producer Dies Suddenly: Organizers Hope Popular Whistler Ski Event Founded by Brent Benaschak Will Go Ahead," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 January 2004.

⁵⁵ Gareth Kirkby, "Altitude Founder Dies," *Xtra! West*, 8 January 2004; Robin Perelle, "Altitude Is a Go," *Xtra! West*, 22 January 2004; Robin Perelle, "Moguls Ahead," *Xtra! West*, 6 January 2005.

⁵⁶ Perelle, "Moguls Ahead."

⁵⁷ "Festival a Tribute to Benaschak: Bergeron," *Question*, 29 January 2004.

⁵⁸ "Altitude Twelve Set for a Gay Time," *Question*, 22 January 2004; "Couples Can Find Wedded Bliss at Altitude Twelve," *Question*, 29 January 2004; "Festival a Tribute to Benaschak," *Question*; Adam Daff, "Altitude Organizer Looking for Community Support," *Pique*, 21 January 2005; Clare Ogilvie, "Gay Marriage Boosts Visits to Whistler," *Vancouver Province*, 1 February 2004.

⁵⁹ Nicole Fitzgerald, "Altitude Expands Event Offerings," *Question*, 30 December 2004; Daff, "Altitude Organizer."

⁶⁰ Hartrick, Nelson, separate telephone interviews.

⁶¹ Adam Daff, "Bergeron Says Altitude Will Be Back," *Pique*, 11 February 2005; Tyler Hopson, "New Friends Still Make Altitude Worth It for Most, But It's a Bit of a Rip-Off," *Xtra! West*, 17 February 2005.

also angered people by attributing problems to Benaschak's financial mismanagement and by failing to create the promised foundation in his honour. The event slid quickly into debt.⁶² By the end of Altitude 2005, much of the support and goodwill shown Bergeron by the gay community and local businesses had evaporated.

In the summer of 2005, a group of Vancouver-based LGBT businesspeople offered to purchase Altitude. Bergeron signed a letter of intent but then refused to release financial information about the event's revenues and expenses. As the negotiations dragged on into the autumn, it was learned that Bergeron had signed a second letter of intent with a group of gay businesspeople from Seattle, apparently in the hope of getting a better deal. Instead, the Vancouver group contacted the Seattle group and joined with it in late November 2005. But with Altitude 2006 only months away, and in the face of Bergeron's continuing refusal to release financial documents before the transaction was completed, the prospective buyers pulled out.⁶³

WINTERPRIDE, MR. GAY WORLD, AND THE OLYMPICS

Late in January, Bergeron's company cancelled Altitude 2006, twelve days before it was due to begin. Financial losses, bad weather, and "less than enthusiastic" support from Whistler resort were adduced as reasons.⁶⁴ Many speculated that Bergeron was actually busy dealing with the fallout from Hurricane Katrina, which had devastated his food and beverage business in Louisiana.⁶⁵ Reflecting the importance of gay ski week to Whistler, the municipality contacted those who had sought to buy Altitude in 2005 to ask if they could host the event. Dean Nelson, Wayne Hartrick, Sean Kearns, Mark Clements-Kearns, and Tatiana Kostiak expressed interest – but only if they had a written guarantee that the "rights" to run gay ski week at Whistler would belong to their company.⁶⁶ Given this guarantee, the new organizers set about trying to create a gay ski week in less than two weeks. Local businesses, many of which had bills unpaid by Bergeron and, in some cases, Benaschak, remained sceptical and demanded payment in advance. As a result, each

⁶² Daff, "Altitude Organizer"; Perelle, "Moguls Ahead."

⁶³ Hartrick, telephone interview.

⁶⁴ Cindy Filipenko, "Losing Altitude: Out on the Slopes Cancels Gay Ski Week," *Pique*, 27 January 2006.

⁶⁵ Nelson, telephone interview.

⁶⁶ Hartrick, Nelson, separate telephone interviews. There was a sixth member of the new team, an anonymous financial backer.

of the organizers had to commit his or her own funds to the event.⁶⁷ Renamed GayWhistler Gay Ski Week, the event managed to draw sixteen hundred people from 5 to 12 February.⁶⁸

New management meant opportunities for new directions. For some, like organizer Wayne Hartrick, who owned a Vancouver-based public relations firm, the appeal of gay ski week was primarily, though not entirely, financial. Hartrick saw the event as a business that had the potential to expand to other mountains while simultaneously promoting gay sports and community.⁶⁹ For others, like Dean Nelson, a local hotelier, financial concerns needed to be balanced with a social justice and civil rights agenda.⁷⁰ In the rush to put together a program in under twelve days, these competing visions were put on hold as organizers struggled to offer a stripped-down version of the planned Altitude events. Nonetheless, organizers broke with the long-standing policy of their predecessors and convinced the resort municipality to hang a few rainbow banners on the street poles of Whistler's main thoroughfare; they also pressured businesses to do likewise.⁷¹ The name, GayWhistler Gay Ski Week, also signalled a more assertive link to the queer community.

Planning the 2007 event, all the organizers agreed that gay ski week needed to be rebranded and relaunched. The spur to action came from Nelson's attendance at the human rights conference at the World Out Games in Montreal in the summer of 2006, which, he recalled, "opened up my eyes to a totally new perspective as to what it means to be gay and how so many people around the world are struggling with their own basic human rights to live an authentic life." Nelson returned to the organizing team, arguing: "We need to do everything in our power to make our gay ski week more inclusive." Nelson held that the phrase "Gay Ski Week" suggested that, in order to attend, "you need[ed] to be a white male and you need[ed] to be a two-planker [skier]."⁷² WinterPRIDE was settled on as more inclusive and because it resonated with other owners like Hartrick who noted that, because it "cast[] as broad a tent as possible for the gay community," it had more potential for growth.⁷³

⁶⁷ Nelson, Hartrick, separate telephone interviews; Derrick Penner, "Promoter Attempts to Rescue Whistler Gay Week," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 2006.

⁶⁸ Carolyn Ali, "Gay Ski Do Grows Up Proud," *Georgia Straight*, 1 February 2007.

⁶⁹ Hartrick, telephone interview.

⁷⁰ Nelson, telephone interview.

⁷¹ "Gay Ski Week Marks Milestone," *Question*, 2 February 2006; Filipenko, "Gay Whistler Ski Week."

⁷² Nelson, telephone interview. The World Out Games is a competing organization to the Gay Games. The inaugural event was hosted in Montreal in 2006.

⁷³ Hartrick, telephone interview.

The name “WinterPRIDE” signalled a new, more overtly political, agenda. Nelson envisioned the event as a winter version of the Pride marches and festivals that occur throughout the world.⁷⁴ Building upon the 2006 event, WinterPRIDE 2007 embraced the Pride flag that had been so long eschewed by Benaschak and the organizers of Altitude. Again, Nelson convinced the resort municipality to hang rainbow banners on the street poles of Whistler’s main thoroughfare, and a rainbow-coloured WinterPRIDE banner adorned the entrance to Whistler Village Square.⁷⁵ The organizers encouraged local businesses to display the Pride flag as a way of “celebrating diversity and acceptance” and to court the “highest spending” demographic to visit Whistler.⁷⁶ These flags claimed Whistler as a queer space, at least for the duration of WinterPRIDE, on a scale that had never been attempted with Altitude, and they furthered WinterPRIDE’s goal of establishing a safe space where homosexuals who were often closeted at home could be their “complete, authentic selves.”⁷⁷

Because the Circuit, which had been so central to Altitude, was in decline, and because a survey of gay ski week 2006 had revealed an aging demographic whose members were increasingly in long-term relationships and looking for something other than a huge party, WinterPRIDE organizers offered four different “Experience Tracks”: sports, culinary activities, health and wellness activities, and health education.⁷⁸ Most of these events were fun activities (like aphrodisiac cooking classes) intended to provide events for non-skiing partners.⁷⁹ More serious events, such as a three-day conference for medical professionals on LGBT medical care, were also planned.⁸⁰ WinterPRIDE also sought to reposition itself as a more “authentic” ski week by revamping and expanding its on-mountain guiding program under the leadership of John Sutherland, a ski school director from Seattle.⁸¹ Sutherland brought in mandatory

⁷⁴ Nelson, telephone interview; Ali, “Gay Ski Do Grows Up Proud”; Nicole Fitzgerald, “Mountain Rainbows: Inaugural WinterPRIDE Festival Builds on 15 Years of Gay Pride in Whistler,” *Pique*, 2 February 2007.

⁷⁵ Douglas Boyce, “Whooshing It Up at WinterPRIDE,” *Xtra! West*, 14 February 2007.

⁷⁶ Fitzgerald, “Mountain Rainbows.” As noted earlier, the claim that the gay demographic spends more is problematic.

⁷⁷ Boyce, “Whooshing It Up”; Hartrick, telephone interview; Dean Nelson quoted in Dan Woog, “The OutField – Pride House: A Home for Gay Olympians,” *Seattle Gay News*, 24 July 2009.

⁷⁸ Nelson, telephone interview; Stan Wu, “Gay Ski Week Is Revived as WinterPRIDE 2007, and the Canadian Rockies Are as Cool as Ever,” *outtraveler.com*, 15 November 2006, available at <http://www.outtraveler.com/features/story.asp?did=534>.

⁷⁹ Ali, “Gay Ski Do Grows Up Proud”; Nelson, telephone interview.

⁸⁰ Ali, “Gay Ski Do Grows Up Proud”; Hartrick, telephone interview. The medical conference was ultimately cancelled due to organizational difficulties.

⁸¹ Boyce, “Whooshing It Up”; Sutherland, telephone interview.

training workshops for all guides and streamlined the organization of the ski guiding program.⁸² The vision behind WinterPRIDE was fundamentally different from that which had characterized Benaschak's Altitude.

In 2008, Hartrick, Kearns, Clements-Kearns, and Kostiak sold their interest in WinterPRIDE to Nelson, who then brought in a new partner, Ken Coolen, president of Vancouver Pride, to further his vision of a socially responsible and inclusive Pride event.⁸³ As part of this shift, Nelson and Coolen decided to host the inaugural Mr. Gay World event at WinterPRIDE 2009.⁸⁴ Despite its superficial similarity to the Miss America, World, and Universe pageants, this was more than just a beauty pageant. It aimed to "raise the self-esteem and visibility of gay men internationally" while creating "positive role models" to help break the "negative stereotype of being gay or different, which is used to justify lesser forms of human rights for gay people."⁸⁵ Although the event included a swimsuit and fashion show, its purpose was to "identify leaders who will take responsibility not only in his [sic] own community but also on a global stage speaking out for equal rights."⁸⁶ The pageant subverted traditional standards of masculinity by linking the über-masculine gym-built body to homosexuality while identifying spokesmen for the gay community and putting considerable resources behind the winner to raise awareness of gay issues worldwide.⁸⁷ After hosting the first Mr. Gay World competition, WinterPRIDE hosted the annual qualifier for this event, the Mr. Gay Canada pageant.⁸⁸ These pageants operated at a loss and were funded by WinterPRIDE as "a community outreach project."⁸⁹ Again, however, activism and financial interests were intertwined. Hosting Mr. Gay World and Mr. Gay Canada pageants at WinterPRIDE allowed them to share organizational expenses and to reduce their overall cost, and Nelson told the resort and municipality

⁸² Sutherland, telephone interview.

⁸³ Hartrick, telephone interview; Bruce Constantineau, "Ski Week Tones Down Partying and Adds Classes: Whistler WinterPRIDE Reaching Out to Wider Segment of Community," *Vancouver Sun*, 3 February 2007; Holly Fraughton, "The Roots of Our Rainbow," *Pique*, 28 January 2011.

⁸⁴ "Mr. Gay World to Be Crowned in Whistler," *Question*, 13 November 2008.

⁸⁵ "Rules and Regulations," 23 October 2008, available at http://www.mrgayworld.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=21.

⁸⁶ Alpenglow Productions, "Mr. Gay World Press Release, 10 October 2008," available at <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs073/1101795615828/archive/1102319184871.html>.

⁸⁷ Nelson, telephone interview; Pronger, *Arena of Masculinity*, 273-74.

⁸⁸ Nelson, telephone interview. Mr. Gay Canada had previously been held during summer. See "Whistler to Host Mr. Gay Canada Competition," *Pique*, 13 June 2008.

⁸⁹ Nelson, telephone interview.

that the pageants would reach untapped markets and raise awareness of Whistler's brand.⁹⁰

Because Whistler was the alpine sports venue for the 2010 Olympics, WinterPRIDE was forced to move from February to early March, in the period between the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games. Unsurprisingly, attendance at WinterPRIDE declined and sponsorship dollars, already suffering because of the recession, dropped even further.⁹¹ But if the Olympics undermined WinterPRIDE, they also provided an unprecedented opportunity to create a highly visible queer space in Whistler. Countries participating at the Olympics often open national hospitality houses to showcase their country to tourists and to provide a meeting spot for athletes and their supporters. Coolen and Nelson invested close to \$100,000 to establish the first Pride House in an Olympic venue designed to represent what Nelson referred to as the "Rainbow Nation."⁹² After participating in the violence-marred 2008 Budapest Pride Parade, at which right-wing protesters had thrown eggs, bricks, and explosives at the marchers, Nelson came to believe that it was "really important to have a safe space for out athletes, coaches, fans and allies" at the Olympic Games.⁹³ Nelson and Coolen also saw Pride House as a challenge to stereotypes about sexuality and sports, as a mean of raising awareness of the gay community both locally and internationally, and as a venue to assist LGBT athletes apply for refugee status if they so desired.⁹⁴

Pride House was located in the Pan Pacific Whistler Village Hotel near the heart of Whistler Village.⁹⁵ At 85 square metres, it was large enough to hold art exhibits, seating areas, television screens, and a cocktail bar.⁹⁶ Much of the artwork installed in Pride House played with or subverted the normative relationship between heterosexuality and sports. The piece of art that got the most attention in the press was a one point two metre-tall bronze sculpture of a hockey player, nude except for helmet, gloves, skates, and stick, winding up to take a slapshot. In both name and pose, the sculpture, *Slapshotolus*, played

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Fraughton, "Roots of Our Rainbow"; Nelson, telephone interview.

⁹² Fraughton, "Roots of Our Rainbow"; Heather Kitching, "Olympic Pride House: The Final Hours," OutQnews.com, 1 March 2010, available at <http://outqnews.com/2010/03/01/olympic-pride-house-the-final-hours/>.

⁹³ Jeff Lee, "Gay Athletes to Get Whistler 'Safe Space': Pride House Will Be a Special Meeting Place Tailored to Gays and Lesbians," *Vancouver Sun*, 9 May 2009; Claire Piech, "Pride House Starts a New Olympic Tradition," *Pique*, 19 February 2010.

⁹⁴ Lee, "Gay Athletes"; Woog, "OutField"; John Branch, "New Olympic House for 2010 Games," *New York Times*, 20 July 2009.

⁹⁵ Woog, "OutField."

⁹⁶ Branch, "New Olympic House."

with ideals of masculinity and sports as manifested in the ancient Greek sculpture, *Discobolus*. *Slapshotolus* not only laid bare the homoerotic appeal of hockey, arguably Canada's quintessentially masculine sport, it also suggested the existence of strong, powerful homosexual athletes.⁹⁷ Receiving less attention in the press, but arguably more powerful because of its subject matter and media, was Jeff Sheng's *Fearless* exhibit. *Fearless* is a series of photographic portraits of LGBT high school and college-level athletes. In each, the athlete is flush from having just finished an intense workout or practice and is staring directly into the camera. Like *Slapshotolus*, *Fearless* links homosexuality and skilled performance in sports, upsetting the myth of clear gender divisions that were so steadfastly defended by the International Olympic Committee, the governing body of the Olympics.⁹⁸

Nelson and Coolen's great hope was that an Olympian would celebrate victory at Pride House, sending the message: "I'm gay, and I won gold." However, only one competing Olympian, straight ally and Canadian gold medalist in the Men's Skeleton, Jon Montgomery, appeared at Pride House during the games.⁹⁹ This led blogger Cyd Zeigler Jr. to argue that "cocktails and champagne aren't going to change anyone's mind, make the NHL decide to enact gay anti-discrimination policies, or open any doors for closeted Olympians."¹⁰⁰ This ignored the work that Pride House was doing to undermine the link between heterosexuality and sports while raising awareness of homosexuals in sports. Pride House's primary goal was to call attention to issues arising out of sexuality and gender in sports, which it did most notably in response to comments made on 17 February by Alain Goldberg and Claude Mailhot on their Canadian French-language show *Le Réveil Olympique*. Goldberg and Mailhot criticized American figure skater Johnny Weir, suggesting that his perceived femininity "sets a bad example" and that he should undergo

⁹⁷ Jim Buzinski, "Nude Hockey Sculpture at Gay Olympics Venue," 5 January 2010, available at <http://outsports.com/jocktalkblog/2010/01/05/nude-hockey-sculpture-at-gay-olympics-venue/>. The artist (Edmund Haakonson) and organizer (Dean Nelson) both offer slightly different interpretations.

⁹⁸ Heather Kitching, "Olympic Pride House: Photos of Out Athletes on Display," 23 February 2010, available at <http://outqnews.com/2010/02/23/olympic-pride-house-photos-of-out-athletes-on-display/>; Pronger, *Arena of Masculinity*, 75-79; Lee, "Gay Athletes." It is telling that the IOC has had little comment about Russia's anti-gay "propaganda" law or on Russia's decision to deny the permit for a Pride House at the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014.

⁹⁹ Branch, "New Olympic House"; Heather Kitching, "Olympic Pride House: Staff Stand Up for Johnny Weir at Press Conference," 25 February 2010, available at <http://outqnews.com/2010/02/25/olympic-pride-house-staff-stand-up-for-johnny-weir-at-press-conference/>.

¹⁰⁰ Cyd Zeigler Jr., "Pride House Was a Starting Point," 1 March 2010, available at <http://outsports.com/olympicsblog/2010/03/01/pride-house-was-a-starting-point/>.

gender testing or skate as a woman.¹⁰¹ In response, Pride House held a press conference with the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport, Interpride (the body that oversees all Pride events), and Mark Tewksbury, an openly gay former Olympian for Canada, at which they explained the challenges faced by homosexual athletes, criticized Goldberg and Mailhot, and argued that Weir's sexuality was irrelevant to his athletic performance.¹⁰²

CONCLUSIONS

With flags, banners, and an increasingly visible presence, the organizers of gay ski week made ever more assertive and successful attempts to create queer space in Whistler. This success was necessarily short-lived, however. Visitors arriving afterwards would be hard pressed to find any markers of the queer space created during gay ski week. In the village, on the mountains, and online, gay ski week did little to alter the dominant imagery of Whistler, which marked it as the domain of heterosexual white men.¹⁰³ The one notable exception was the Tourism Whistler website, which prominently touted "Gay Friendly Whistler."¹⁰⁴ While LGBT skiers could still independently create and experience queer space in Whistler, nothing approached the scale of, and therefore the potential impact on dominant understandings of gender found in, the queer space created during gay ski week.

For gay ski week to continue to advance gay rights and to create safe queer spaces that challenge the heterosexual norm, the event needed to turn a profit. While this situation highlights the crucial role that the organizers of gay ski week played in running a profitable event in

¹⁰¹ Kitching, "Olympic Pride House"; Dean Nelson, "Out at the Olympics," *Question*, 24 February 2010; "Gay Rights Group to Launch Complaint over RDS Comments," *CTV News*, 22 February 2010, available at <http://montreal.ctvnews.ca/gay-rights-group-to-launch-complaint-over-rds-comments-1.485869#ixzz2K1qp7DTi>.

¹⁰² Kitching, "Olympic Pride House."

¹⁰³ Whistler/Blackcomb, "Home" and "Photos," 2013, available at www.whistlerblackcomb.com. In the case of the American ski industry, Coleman argues that the dominant imagery used to promote skiing and ski areas positions men as participants and women either as passive consumers or as objects to be consumed by male participants. See Coleman, *Ski Style*, 62–64. A similar dynamic seems to operate in the representations of other sports as well. See Belinda Wheaton, "Lifestyle Sport Magazines and the Discourses of Sporting Masculinity," in *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell, 215–16 (Malden, MA: Blackwell/Sociological Review, 2003); Susan Frohlick, "That Playfulness of White Masculinity: Mediating Masculinities and Adventure at Mountain Film Festivals," *Tourist Studies* 5 (2005): 175–82.

¹⁰⁴ Tourism Whistler, "Gay Friendly Whistler," 2013, available at www.whistler.com/gay_friendly_whistler/.

Whistler, it also underscores that this space and the call for civil rights that it supported were ultimately determined by market forces that were beyond the control of event organizers. That this vulnerability is shared with many, if not most, queer spaces does not diminish its significance. At the same time, however, gay ski week is part of a far larger network of sites of cultural production. And, while each individual piece may be vulnerable, taken together, they have had a significant impact on advancing gay rights and challenging heterosexual norms.

What is really problematic about gay ski week is not that the space it creates is vulnerable but, rather, that access to the space is restricted by both market forces and by the silencing of non-dominant discourses within the LGBT community. This is particularly troubling given gay ski week's claims of inclusivity. That most of those who participated in Whistler's gay ski week were gay males in their mid-thirties has drawn criticism that mirrors broader critiques of the gay rights movement as dominated by middle-class white men to the detriment of a more diverse range of LGBT individuals.¹⁰⁵ Organizers of Altitude and of WinterPRIDE were aware of this, and both groups made efforts to reach out to a more diverse LGBT population by offering specialty events and parties. While this apparently attracted bears and drag queens, people of colour and lesbians remained under-represented at Whistler's gay ski week.¹⁰⁶ Given the predominance of white participants in winter sports in general and the way that participation in these sports is racially coded as white, it is hardly surprising that there were few efforts to attract people of colour to Whistler's gay ski week.¹⁰⁷ But event organizers did devote considerable time and resources to increasing lesbian attendance. From the very early years of Altitude there were women-only dances, pool parties, activities, and après-ski events, yet lesbians made up only a tiny fraction of those attending.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Rachert, Nelson, Neave, Hartrick, Sutherland, separate telephone interviews.

¹⁰⁶ Craig Takeuchi, "Whistler's WinterPRIDE Broadens Its Reach," *Georgia Straight.com*, 29 January 2009, available at <http://www.straight.com/article-198453/whistlers-winterpride-broadens-its-reach>; Oona Woods, "Whistler's Big Gay Heart," *Pique*, 22 January 1999; Cubie, "Beyond All Politics"; Nelson, Rachert, separate telephone interviews. "Bear" is the term used to denote gay men who embrace a hairy, often heavy, body aesthetic and project a rugged masculinity. See Erick Alvarez, *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture* (New York: Haworth Press, 2008), 3, 204.

¹⁰⁷ Coleman, "Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing"; Mark Stoddart, *Making Meaning Out of Mountains: The Political Ecology of Skiing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 5, 144-49.

¹⁰⁸ Branigan, "Gay Ski Week"; Cubie, "Beyond All Politics"; Fitzgerald, "Altitude Expands Event Offerings"; "Altitude Has Something For (Almost) Everyone," *Question*, 29 January 2004; Nicole Fitzgerald, "Pumping Up the (Festival) Volume," *Question*, 27 January 2005; Dian Katz, "HOTSPOTS," *Lesbian News* 32, 7 (2007): 46; David Luc Nguyen, "Seattle Gay News Hits the Slopes at WinterPRIDE 2008 in Whistler, BC," *Seattle Gay News*, 1 February 2008;

Lesbians, like other women, are more likely to be employed in lower-paying jobs than men.¹⁰⁹ In the 1990s, the economic vulnerability of the LGBT community in general and of the lesbian community in particular led to an expectation that events in the LGBT community would be on a not-for-profit, sliding-scale, pay-what-you-can model. As Brent Neave recalls: “[This led to] people com[ing] in, ... usually more the lesbians than it was the gay men, and they would say ... ‘I’ve only got ten dollars to pay, so I’m only paying ten dollars’ [for a fifty-dollar event].” Given the substantial costs of hosting gay ski week, organizers could not implement such a system, with the result that participation by the generally less well-off lesbian community remained low.¹¹⁰ Lesbian attendance began to grow in 2007 and 2008, largely due to intense marketing and more events planned and run by lesbians, but it plummeted again in 2009 as the effects of the recession hit home.¹¹¹

High costs have been the single greatest barrier to participation in winter sports in general, a reality that is reflected in the demographics of those participating in Whistler’s gay ski week. The price of a day pass at Whistler rose from approximately forty dollars in 1992 to almost one hundred in 2012 (or, in constant dollars, from sixty-six to one hundred dollars). Hotel rates, travel to and from Whistler, and food easily pushed the cost of participating in gay ski week to more than one thousand dollars.¹¹² This meant that economically vulnerable LGBT’ers were less likely to attend, especially if they did not already live within commuting distance of the mountains. This was a particular concern to event organizers as it translated into lower levels of attendance by lesbians, younger homosexuals, and homosexuals of colour. To try to mitigate the cost of WinterPRIDE 2013, Nelson and Coolen introduced a pay-as-you-go plan, enabling monthly or quarterly payments in advance.¹¹³ Gay ski week organizers from Benaschak onward also sought to reduce the overall cost of the event by securing corporate sponsorships. The idea

Carolyn Ali, “WinterPRIDE Gears Up in Whistler,” *Georgia Straight*, 27 January 2011; Sean Horlor, “3,000 Queers Flaunt Their WinterPride at Whistler,” *Xtra! West*, 11 February 2009; Nelson, Rachert, separate telephone interviews.

¹⁰⁹ Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, “Canada’s Failure to Act: Women’s Inequality Deepens,” submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, January 2003, 71.

¹¹⁰ Neave, telephone interview.

¹¹¹ Nelson, telephone interview.

¹¹² Price estimation based on author’s experience. Prices are in Canadian dollars and do not take into account discount or special rates. One reporter estimated a weekly cost of \$51,500. David Luc Nguyen, “Flurries of Fabulousness Blanket Whistler’s Winter Pride,” *Seattle Gay News*, 11 February 2011.

¹¹³ Nelson, telephone interview.

was that, as the event grew bigger, it would become more attractive to corporations, which would increase their sponsorship dollars and, thus, reduce the cost of the event, making it more accessible and facilitating further growth.¹¹⁴ Of course, neither the pay-as-you-go plan nor the desire to increase sponsorship dollars was a particularly radical solution to the barriers that high costs erected against a more inclusive event. At the end of the day, skiing, especially in a venue like Whistler, was and is expensive and will likely remain out of reach for economically vulnerable LGBT groups.

Compounding the economic challenges facing lesbians, younger homosexuals, and homosexuals of colour is the silencing of other non-conventional sexualities in queer spaces. While organizers billed both Altitude and WinterPRIDE as inclusive events for a range of sexualities and undertook greater or lesser efforts to encourage a broader range of participation, the event remained dominated by gay white men. Studies of other queer sport spaces suggest that spaces dominated by one or two sexual identities often act to silence and exclude more marginal sexual identities even as they claim to include them.¹¹⁵ As a result, potential transgender, bisexual, and even lesbian participants may feel unwelcome in a space that, while claiming to be inclusive of all LGBT'ers and allies, is dominated by gay white men and their images.¹¹⁶

For some commentators the claim that WinterPRIDE would advance gay civil rights in a location dominated by middle- to upper-class whites and only two hours away from the liberal bastion of Vancouver was somewhat preposterous. As one of the original Altitude organizers, Joe Rachert, puts it: “[The emphasis on Pride in WinterPRIDE is] very strange. To me gay Prides are about fighting for rights and I don’t know what rights anybody’s fighting for up in Whistler, it seems like everyone’s pretty much got them up there ... I’m not sure high-end resorts that are fairly liberal ... and progressive ... [are] the place for a Pride march.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Nelson, Hartrick, separate telephone interviews.

¹¹⁵ Cathy Van Ingen, “Therapeutic Landscapes and the Regulated Body in the Toronto Front Runners,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 21 (2004): 258, 264–65; Barbara Ravel and Geneviève Rail, “On the Limits of ‘Gaie’ Spaces: Discursive Constructions of Women’s Sport in Quebec,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 24 (2007): 413.

¹¹⁶ One of the starkest instances of this is Homorazzi’s photo album and accompanying video montage to WinterPRIDE 2013. Out of one hundred photographs, only six appear to contain women, transvestites, or cross-dressers. The video shots of Snowball reveal an even more homogenous crowd. See Homorazzi, “WinterPRIDE 2013” *homorazzi.com*, 11 February 2013, available at <http://www.homorazzi.com/photos/album/72157632741904564/winterpride-2013.html>; Homorazzi, “Homorazzi Does WinterPRIDE 2013” *youtube.com*, 12 February 2013, available at <http://youtu.be/nAGDyspe7Mc>.

¹¹⁷ Rachert, telephone interview.

The idea that Whistler was “fairly liberal ... and progressive” became a widely repeated truism by the 2000s as the resorts, event promoters, and local businesses sought to attract pink dollars.¹¹⁸

Yet the situation may have been less inclusive than this suggests. Surveys of the ski industry have shown that skiers and snowboarders are far wealthier than are members of the average population. One industry survey in 2008 revealed that 72 percent of ski area visitors had median household incomes in excess of \$50,000 a year, and 48 percent had incomes in excess of \$100,000 a year.¹¹⁹ Whistler’s visitors tended to be even wealthier, with 58 percent having incomes above \$100,000 a year and 89 percent having household incomes above \$50,000.¹²⁰ In 2008, the median household income was \$56,000 in Canada and \$52,029 in the United States.¹²¹ Ski area visitors, especially from the United States or Canada, are also overwhelmingly white.¹²² Racial identification and income levels are fairly strong predictors of political leanings, and wealthy whites tend to be socially conservative.¹²³ This suggests that the liberal image so often attached to Whistler may need to be reconsidered. Perhaps wealthy, older, and conservative vacationers in Whistler are less likely to protest or plaster fliers around the village than are other groups, giving the impression that Whistler’s population is more liberal than it actually is. If so, WinterPRIDE may have served to raise awareness of gay issues among a particular group of conservatives.

¹¹⁸ Bob Andrea, telephone interview with author, 9 September 2012; Adam Daff, “Whistler Pursuing Gay Travel Market,” *Pique*, 3 December 2004; “Whistler to Host ‘Mr. Gay Canada’ Competition,” *Pique*, 13 June 2008; Fitzgerald, “Mountain Rainbows.”

¹¹⁹ NSAA National Demographic Survey, 2008. Numbers in US dollars.

¹²⁰ Although these numbers are in Canadian dollars, the Canadian dollar fluctuated between US\$0.964 and US\$1.103 from 1 November 2007 to 1 March 2008, making it essentially at par with the US dollar for that period.

¹²¹ US Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey; Statistics Canada, “Canada at a Glance, 2008: Income,” available at http://www45.statcan.gc.ca/2008/cgco_2008_007-eng.htm. For a detailed analysis of the dynamics of Colorado’s ski resorts, which are very similar to those of British Columbia, see Coleman, *Ski Style*.

¹²² Coleman, *Ski Style*; Stoddart, *Making Meaning*, 5, 137–39. It should be noted that, while Whistler’s international draw means that it has a comparatively more diverse clientele than do many other resorts, whites remain the dominant racial group. See “Whistler Statistics and Research,” available at <http://events.whistler.com/About-Whistler/Statistics-And-Research/>.

¹²³ Though the correlation has grown weaker in recent years, race and income still remain strong indicators of attitudes towards social change. Edward Glaeser, Giacomo Ponsetto, and Jesse Shapiro, “Strategic Extremism: Why Republicans and Democrats Divide on Religious Values,” Harvard Institute of Economic Research Discussion Paper no. 2044, October 2004; Michael Dimock, “Money Walks,” Pew Research Center, 12 April 2007, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/04/12/money-walks/>; Pew Research Center, “Trends in American Values: 1987–2012,” available at <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/>. Other studies have shown that the urban rural split is emerging as a key factor in identifying political leanings, but Whistler does not track such data.

Ultimately, gay ski week faced a variety of challenges to its goal of creating an inclusive safe space and of advancing LGBT rights. However, just because gay ski week's challenge was limited, complicated, and conflicted does not necessarily diminish its importance. To view an event like Whistler's gay ski week as a failure because it is not clearly a counter-hegemonic rebellion ignores the ways in which it has challenged the connections between heterosexuality, masculine dominance, and skiing while also creating a space (albeit temporary and conflicted) that provided a very real haven for some LGBT participants who came from less queer-friendly locales. It also ignores the ways in which Whistler's gay ski week, particularly since the advent of WinterPRIDE, has been used to leverage support for other community and civil rights organizations. Though complex and oftentimes contradictory, Whistler's gay ski week offers a reminder that, although the commercialization of gay identity and activism exacts a price, without it, little would be possible. Commercially driven events, acting to create queer spaces and to advance social justice causes, can supplement the work of more radical liberationist groups by acting in locations and ways beyond the reach of traditional grassroots groups. Instead of seeing the organizers of gay ski week as self-interested businessmen or misguided activists, we might see them as activists whose actions were framed by the economic and social context in which they operated.