

Graduate Institute Oral History Project

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)

Geneva, Switzerland

Delcia Orona (she/they)

Interviewed by

Amanda Monroe (she/her)

December 7, 2022

Uni-Mail, Geneva, Switzerland

Background:

This collection consists of oral histories collected by students and researchers at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies as part of their coursework or research projects. The narrators come from diverse backgrounds and recount a wide range of different trajectories, allowing us to see a broader spectrum of historical experience.

There is not much documentation on the history of queer social spaces in Geneva, Switzerland. Despite same sex marriage being legalized in the country only in 2021, queer social spaces have

been around for decades and allow queer individuals a safe location to socialize regardless of surrounding political conversations. Historically, queer spaces have been dominated specifically by gay rhetoric and culture – such as the title of “gay bar” and being spaces primarily made up of men who love men. With the domination of gay-male specific rhetoric, the large remaining portion of the LGBTQIA+ community, in particular queer women and non-binary individuals, are left without a social space.

This interview looks at the intersection between queer activism and social life in analyzing the relationship between queerness and radical politics. It discusses the personal journey of the interviewee’s self-discovery of queerness and its connections with narratives of a more liberal Europe. Broadly the interview assesses the relationship between space and identity, in particular within the Genevan context, at bars such as le Phare. A general comparison of Geneva to other major European cities is pivotal to the conversation, as is understanding inclusivity within queerness.

Narrator:

Delcia Orona, a Colorado native, is currently in the first year of their second master’s degree at the Geneva University of Art and Design. Prior to this degree, she received her first master’s in Anthropology and Sociology at the Geneva Graduate Institute. She moved to Geneva in 2020 after receiving their bachelor’s from the University of California at Santa Barbara. While in Geneva, Delcia has been a queer activist, including being the former president of the Queer International Student Assembly. She continues to be actively involved within queer spaces within the university system and beyond.

Interviewer:

Amanda Monroe is a second-year master's student at the Geneva Graduate Institute in Development Studies. While her typical research regards the intersection of urbanization and humanitarianism, she also has a personal interest in queer histories and politics. She is an active member, and former Administrative Chair, for the Queer International Student Assembly. In general, Amanda considers herself to be active within the Genevan queer social space.

Format

1 m4a audio file: (1) December 7, 2022, 53:04

Transcript:

Initial transcription produced by Descript; edited and reviewed by Amanda Monroe. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Delcia Orona. Square brackets [] indicate insertions made by the interviewee, mostly for translation purposes.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms***Audio recording***

Bibliography: Delcia Orona. Interview by Amanda Monroe. Audio recording, December 7, 2022. Graduate Institute Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Delcia Orona, interview by Amanda Monroe, audio recording, December 7, 2022, Graduate Institute Oral History Project, IHEID.

Transcript

Bibliography: Delcia Orona. Interview by Amanda Monroe. Transcript, December 7, 2022.

Graduate Institute Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Delcia Orona, interview by Amanda Monroe, transcript, December 7, 2022, Graduate Institute Oral History Project, IHEID.

Delcia Orona Interview 1/1, December 7, 2022

Amanda Monroe

All right. So, I am Amanda, and I am here in the basement of Uni Mail with Delcia who I will be interviewing today at approximately 5:30 PM on December 7th. Delcia, do I have your oral consent to record this interview?

Delcia Orona

You have my consent.

Amanda Monroe

Incredible. So, I guess to start off, if you'd like to introduce yourself - tell me a bit about who you are, what brought you here to Geneva, and things like that.

Delcia Orona

Okay, well my name's Delcia [Delcia moves phone closer to her] I'm going to put this here, just in case I'm not loud enough. My name's Delcia, my pronouns are she/they, and I am currently a student at HEAD Genève, which is the Geneva University of Art Design, and I'm doing a master's in CCC, but I got my first master's at the Graduate Institute in Geneva in 2020. So, I'll be in Geneva for another two years. I moved to Geneva in – oh no, 2022. Sorry, I got my master's degree this year! Yeah. I moved to Geneva in 2020, in August of 2020, to pursue the master's degree and I got my bachelor's degree in California in anthropology and sociology. I always knew that I wanted to come to Europe for my studies afterwards. So, I'm here.

Amanda Monroe

Awesome. As you know, this interview is about queer spaces and queer social spaces, both your experiences in general as well as here in Geneva. So, I was wondering if you could go into maybe some of your first experiences within queer social spaces, what that was like for you? If you kind of like dipped your toe in or if you were like “full send?”

Delcia Orona

Yeah, so I actually grew up in a very rural environment in Western Colorado and I wasn't exposed to anything queer. I didn't actually realize that I was queer until I was 19. So already, like a year, or a little over a year, of already having gone to university. But my first exposure to kind of queer culture and open queer culture was when I went to university in California. But before then, you know, I had some, I just had a lot of homophobic narratives and especially in high school, me, and my group of friends, they used to call us - There were three of us and one of my friends had short hair and they used to call us the dyke trio. And so that was my experience of what people thought of queer people from when I was born to 18. There was a lot of homophobic narratives.

So, when I got to California, I already had this mindset that I'm coming from a really conservative environment and it's going to be very open and that's something I'm really looking forward to. And not even, at that point, I really was confident that I was straight, but I wanted to be in a more liberal, and just a more expressive, environment coming from the conservative space that I did. I felt how politically it just felt like a bubble. And so, California was huge

because I went to a massive university - I went to the University of California, Santa Barbara and there was a huge queer community there. I was quickly involved in theater and so I was around this queer community. Still at 18, thinking I'm fully straight. Most of my friends came out of the relationships I made in theater, and I made a lot of close relationships with queer people in general.

When I also went to California, I told myself that I wanted to study abroad. So, I decided to study abroad my second year of university in the Netherlands. And it was that fall, fall of 2017, when I was 19 - when I was, yeah, I was 19 - when I finally figured out that I might be queer. This was after having dyed my hair, I had a septum piercing, and a nose piercing. Like there were so many signs and I didn't pick it up. But I was really liking someone and had like a personal identity crisis.

Amanda Monroe

And this was in the Netherlands?

Delcia Orona

Yes, and it was also a very queer friendly space, even though it was very different than the type of queer space I was in in California, which was very visual, very expressive, very - just like, there was lots of terms that I was learning at 18. You know, there was a very expressive rainbow environment, whereas in the Netherlands it was just as accepting, but you didn't see it as much. It just existed all around you, which was really nice.

I was on a student campus as well. I was at the University of Utrecht. Lots of queer people, lots of Dutch queers, which is also great. And that was the year that I kind of figured out my sexuality and I was really happy that that happened in a space where I was really happy. It felt like it was a space where I didn't feel I had to be a certain way or didn't have to look a certain way. It just was. My first relationship was also there. So, it was an incredible experience.

Then I came back to California, and I actually wasn't at all involved in queer activism. I wasn't interested and I don't know why, because now, as you know, I'm a huge queer activist. But at that point in my life, even through my coming out and everything, it wasn't really a community I was super involved in. I think there was also an essence that I didn't feel queer enough. So maybe it was part of that, but I did go to some events when I got back to California after studying abroad. But it was harder for me to make friends with just queer people showing up to like, small events versus like being in theater. I still stayed involved in theater when I came back and still made great connections with people. So, I stayed close to the queer community. After that, I studied abroad a few more times and actually all the spaces felt open. I studied abroad in Spain and I studied abroad in Paris and in both environments I still felt pretty good being queer.

And then finally, Geneva, I decided to move here, and I came to my master's program with the full intention of being involved in queer spaces, in queer activism. So immediately, even before I jumped the pond and moved, I was already contacting the Queer International Student Assembly and the president at the time and saying, "Hey, I really want to be involved. Are you having events when the semester starts?" And I remember the president at the time, actually, I don't remember the president at the time.

Amanda Monroe

That's okay!

Delcia Orona

But it was pretty horizontal, and I remember meeting Alexa and Matheus and being like really shocked because I thought they were the coolest people in the world.

The first event we went to was a popcorn movie, film thing. I remember being so scared and so nervous, but they were like, we're doing elections tonight also, it's super informal. You just have to talk and introduce yourself and then we raise our hands and vote. And so, I was very stressed. I was like, "I really want to run for something, but I don't know any of these people, but I want to know all of them." Everyone was so cool, and I was so timid. I ran for social media chair, and I lost, so they were like, "why don't you run for something else? Like, just go up and speak." So, I ran for educational events chair and got it because no one else ran.

Amanda Monroe

It was meant to be.

Delcia Orona

Yeah, it was really great. It was probably – yeah – Alexa was president then. I'm trying to remember if I have my timeline right, but I'm pretty sure Alexa was president and Matheus was vice president and Felipe was treasurer. So yeah, I got into this position right when I got to the

Graduate Institute. It was the first friends I made, the first environment I was in, and it was everything I wanted it to be. I made friends very fast. I love them all and to this day, I'm still really close with them even though they've all moved away from Geneva. That's a space I've stayed close with.

Now that I'm at HEAD, I want to say 90% of the students are queer there. So, I don't have any problem being queer. But they don't have a queer activist organization like they did at the Graduate Institute. They somewhat work with Think Out because Think Out at UNIGE kind of also is supposed to represent students at the *hautes écoles*.

Amanda Monroe

Gotcha.

Delcia Orona

But I don't know many students that actually work with Think Out. But I still like to stay involved with Think Out and QISA, even though I'm not at UNIGE or at the Graduate Institute.

Amanda Monroe

And so then in terms of growing into this social scene as you were growing into generally queer spaces, did you find yourself when you were, you know, back in California and discovering your sexuality, did you find yourself participating at all within social spaces? Like a queer bar or going out to maybe a queer themed event? Or was that more of something that you discovered once you moved abroad or maybe in those experiences that you had on exchange?

Delcia Orona

Yeah, I actually never - in California there was only one or two times that I went to queer specific events, when I was probably 20. But other than that, I never really sought out queer bars. I never really went to queer specific events, even after my coming out. I also thought about that a lot afterwards when I came really, really involved in queer spaces and I thought, “why didn't I seek out these spaces?” But I think a part of me didn't realize how great they were, maybe or, I don't know. Or it could be like some internalized homophobia working there. I don't know what it was, but it really wasn't until I moved to Geneva that that became something important to me, and it didn't feel like it was something that I hadn't done. It just felt like, “oh, these are spaces I've always known.” And all of a sudden, I was like, actually no, this is really the first time that I'm starting to go to queer bars and queer specific events, and I'm in a queer activist organization, I've never done this.

I think another part as well was that I had a lot of various friend groups, every place that I went and especially studying abroad, I just found myself in predominantly straight groups, even if there was like one or two of us queers. So, I think that I also was in spaces that they were also in and didn't see myself with groups of friends that were like exclusively queer, and we exclusively went to queer spaces. So that might have been a piece of it as well. But I never felt like I missed out, at least from the time I was in California to the time I got to Geneva. Now I'm like, “I can't believe I didn't do that more.” Because I missed out on probably some really incredible spaces, especially in California. I guess I didn't feel that I missed out at the time. But I was so involved,

like I was around these spaces generally that I still felt safe and felt very queer. I still felt safe in my identity and good in my identity.

Amanda Monroe

So, do you at all remember the first time you went to a queer bar and where it was?

Delcia Orona

Yes, it was le Phare. I'm pretty sure - I'm trying to think if I ever went to - I remember - but I don't think it was a queer bar.

Okay, I do remember the first time I looked for a queer bar. It was in Colorado, right before I moved to Geneva. It was the summer before I moved to Geneva, and I was in Grand Junction, Colorado, because that's the only place where you can actually find nightclubs and bars anywhere near my hometown. And we were looking for a queer bar and I don't think it was actually queer. I think just, it was a bar that some people said was queer friendly. That was probably my first experience looking for a queer space, but other than that, it's really le Phare. Yeah, it's the first.

Amanda Monroe

And how did you learn about le Phare? Did somebody tell you and invite you? Did you Google it? Like how did you learn about it?

Delcia Orona

It was through QISA, the Queer International Student Assembly. And actually, one of our first events, we went to le Phare. We all sat in like the top little corner - they have like a loft. We all sat up there and I was like, “this is the coolest space ever.” And it was literally probably the second event that they hosted, and I think they had consistently been going there, so that probably was why they invited us to le Phare. But also, the treasurer, Felipe, was working at le Phare and is still working there. So, I think that might have been an aspect of that.

Amanda Monroe

So, when you were first experiencing le Phare and in the times that you've been back since, can you maybe describe what it is that makes you feel so comfortable there? That draws you back to keep going? What kind of elements of the bar are there?

Delcia Orona

So, I think I was really drawn to the space when I first went, there were so many factors, but I really liked that it was cozy and it's small. So, I felt like I was someone known there. Like, I felt like when I walked in, people were like, “oh, we know who is walking in the store.” And that I knew like the bartenders, and they knew me. I had somewhat of a *reconnaissance* [recognition] or something there. And I knew sometimes when I was there, I would see other people I knew, so I would see like, Think Out friends and QISA friends. And that grew and grew. Over the years, over the two years of being here, I really also just liked that there were so many queer people and that I always felt good there. I really liked that there were always cute girls there that I could look at and enjoy from a distance.

I remember, I hosted my birthday party there. When I turned - how old did I turn? 23? 24? 2020? I would be 23. Yeah. – So, my 23rd birthday party, I was like, let's go to le Phare and I was there with Cihangir, and Birsu, and, who was the third person, Matheus. So, I think that I just really liked the environment and so I kept going back and I wouldn't say my perception of the place changed until I started hearing other people's perception of the place change.

In 2022, after I started graduating, there was like a perception that, “oh, maybe it's only straight men in here.” And I kind of was like, “oh, I've never actually noticed that.” And so now I think that's changed my perception of the place a little bit. That it's encouraged me, or maybe moved me, or influenced me, to look for more lesbian or like queer femme spaces. Also, I heard of an experience this year where someone had not the best interaction with someone working in this space, and that also affected my perception a lot. Even though it's something I never experienced personally - I've always had really great interactions with the staff. I think hearing that from another queer person kind of made me a bit wary about this place. But other than that, I went back like just a few weeks ago and I still really love it. I love the little round tables they have outside where you can just sit and smoke under the rain and you're probably getting rained on if you're not under the terrace part. It's really wholesome.

Amanda Monroe

Yeah. So then, you spoke about this just a little bit in saying as your perceptions were changing when you were hearing that maybe there is a larger heterosexual presence than you first thought, what words then would you use to describe le Phare? Do you think that calling it a queer bar is

the best terminology for it? And as someone who does not identify as male, do you feel like this is a welcoming space for you or is there still a dominating male presence within it?

Delcia Orona

I think there's definitely a dominating cis male presence. Both in the sense that there's like, sometimes quite a few straight guys there, but also a very large, cis gay man vibe there as well. So being a queer woman - I know I never really felt it that strongly unless I really am there, and I notice that I might be the only queer woman. But it's not something that's ever made me feel excluded or unsafe by any means. I still really confidently feel like it is a queer bar, even if there's straight people there because I think straight people should go to, maybe queer themed bars, because it's humbling and because they're fun. The reason why I think it's queer is because they foster space that feels a lot safer. They hire queer people, as far as I know, there's no straight people working there - Maybe there is, I've yet to meet a straight person working there - And they have a gender-neutral bathroom, two, I believe. And they post a lot of advertisements and publications surrounding queer and safe spaces in Geneva, especially with regards to LGBT, Asile LGBT, HIV testing, and numbers for SA and domestic violence, and events happening around the city. They've also advertised QISA events. They've been happy to host us and really, that's probably why I would consider it a queer space.

Amanda Monroe

There definitely have been a lot of events for QISA and for Think Out that are hosted at Le Phare. Do you have any other places you consider queer social spaces within Geneva that you

like to go? Do you find that there's a large gap in queer social spaces within the city? What are your thoughts on that?

Delcia Orona

Well, I feel that there's a large gap of like radical queer spaces or like underground queer spaces or more like - what's the word I'm looking for? - like lax, non-traditional queer spaces. But one example, a great example of one that I recently discovered this year is l'Écurie, it's just behind Gare Cornavin and I wouldn't say that they've defined themselves as a queer space. You know, you don't see any rainbow flags or anything, but it's a very predominantly queer environment and it's also a squatting location. There's this sense of like radical art, but there's a lot of graffiti and paintings happening in this environment. There's like radical living arrangements where they host people to squat and stay in these arrangements. They don't take any type of like card, so you have to pay all by cash, and sometimes it's *prix libre* [free price/name your price] for the concerts that they host. So, it's more inclusive and accessible. That's probably one of the most authentic queer spaces I've found is l'Écurie.

L'Usine is also an incredible one. And I think I've only been there one or two times and it was the first year that I arrived in Geneva, and I really don't even remember what the space is like, but I know that it's incredible because so many people talk. And because it appears everywhere, like I can't avoid looking at it, it's on Instagram, it shows up in advertisements, it's everywhere. And that's I believe in Jonction, Jonction in general is a very queer space. It feels like everything in Jonction.

What's another one I was just thinking of? There is Nathan's cafe, but that one has a lot of cis men. I want to say both gay and straight cis men. And I had a weird experience the first time I went to that bar of getting stuck talking with a bisexual man. I'm not even sure if he was bisexual. He might have been straight. What are some other spaces I'm thinking of? I just know that there's quite a few. I know that I've seen spaces where there's more, like California, there's a lot more - big cities - there's a lot more. France, it feels like there's a lot more. But for a city like this, for a conservative country like Switzerland, it's really nice to have these spaces.

Amanda Monroe

Yeah, and so I know you had said that really your first time going to a queer bar was here in Geneva, but since then, have you had any experiences outside of Geneva going to a queer bar? And if you want to explain what that was like, if you've had any.

Delcia Orona

So, hold on. I also want to elaborate on the last question cause I'm thinking of two more spaces. I have.

Amanda Monroe

Absolutely yes.

Delcia Orona

Two clubs that are queer. La Garçonnerie is great, and they host drag shows a lot, but there are so many cis people that show up to watch the drag shows. It hurts. But it is a queer designated, I

want to say that they've designated themselves a queer club. And le Pneu is maybe one of those more underground alternative spaces, but still feels queer because it's *prix libre*, a little bit, and a lot of queer people praise it. But I did also have an interaction with a straight man last time I was there. Oh, that was like last weekend.

But other places I've been to queer bars - not many, if any. I want to say that in the Netherlands, like the student bar that we had on campus felt so very queer because so many students were queer.

Amanda Monroe

And this was back when you were on exchange?

Delcia Orona

Yeah, in the Netherlands. So, when I was like 19 -20ish, that academic year. That felt like the closest thing to a queer bar that maybe wasn't, like it was for students. At the end of the day, it was a student bar not a queer bar, but it felt so very queer. I also volunteered there, and I loved it. But other than that, I don't think so. I also don't go to bars that often.

Amanda Monroe

That's okay!

Delcia Orona

When I do, I just go to bars a lot in Dijon because that's where my partner's at, but we go to just popular, well-known bars. We don't search for like specifically queer ones. I'm sure they exist.

Amanda Monroe

So, you've been talking a lot about [brief interruption from people walking past in the hallway]

So, you've been talking a lot about how “oh, it might not have specifically been a queer space, but it had queer vibes.” Could you maybe expand upon what gives you those vibes? What is, you're like “okay, this might not explicitly be queer, but I feel safe being queer in this space?”

Delcia Orona

Yeah, I think it's really the essence that it feels like a radical, maybe a bit more liberal space is what makes me feel like it's a queer space. So, when you see, you know, radical art, or lots of art projects that feels very queer to me. When I see *prix libre*, free price, or like choose your price, that feels very queer to me. I know that it's really popular in Geneva to also see venues, like concert venues and bars, also be locations of hosting homeless people and squats. Or they start out as squatting locations. And that to me also feels really queer - I think it's because I also associate that with a sense of safety and a sense of acceptance. Because it feels okay if these people are supporting these things, then I know that they also support queer people if that makes sense.

Whereas where I grew up, for example, you didn't find queer bars. It was just really hard.

Especially not in my small town, my small hometown, there was one bar the last time, because there was one or two others that closed. Maybe there's two. There might be the golf course in one

downtown, but they're most definitely not queer bars. They're very traditional, western, rural bars. And I wouldn't say, per se, that I feel unsafe in them, but I know that they're - I know that it's because I'm a local and because I know the environment and because visually, I don't come off as queer. I can very much pull off looking straight, that I feel safe in these environments. I think that's really a marker for me. I think it's really like the politics of the space almost let me make it feel queer, and how safe I feel in those environments also.

Amanda Monroe

So, do you think then if it's a lot about the location and the general environment, that a lot of these queer bars you were mentioning and places like le Phare, do you think that their success in their communities have a lot to do with the fact that they are in Geneva? And that if they were located elsewhere, it might be different? Or do you think that Geneva is less of a factor?

Delcia Orona

I think that - that's a good question because I really think that Geneva is a hard place. It's a very bureaucratic, neoliberal, space and so queerness when I think about it - and I think this also helps to elaborate more on the last question too - is that queerness to me also is more than gender and sexuality and LGBTQ-ness issues or ambiance. And so that's why I also feel like these different aspects like radicalness also feel queer to me. But Geneva as an environment just feels not at all queer. But I think that these bars being here makes it that way or at least makes it a bit better and makes it feel a lot safer for queer people in the city.

But like, I imagine those bars would do incredible, probably a lot better - Well, who knows? - I feel like they would be extremely popular in places like California and already, you know, very liberal environments. They would be very popular. But they are just as popular here because the demand is here and because there's a lot of queer people in the city and there's a lot of students. I think it's so important that they are here because if they weren't, we wouldn't have that from anything else. You know? It's hard to find that with the universities and institutions here. It's extremely hard to find that in workplaces here. It's hard to find that in commercial stores, shops, restaurants. So, it's really those spaces that are giving Geneva the good rep of being queer friendly.

[Amanda hesitates asking the next question as the classroom door next to us opens and people begin to come out]

Amanda Monroe

We're going to pause the interview for a second.

[Recording paused for about 2 minutes]

Amanda Monroe

All right. We are resuming the recording after a brief pause due to a class next to us getting out and walking out. It was quite noisy.

So just to pick it back up, we were talking about how these queer bars within Geneva are very much what gives Geneva this queer element. Without them, it wouldn't really have that. You talked a lot about “Oh well, I think if they were in places like California. It would really fit in.” and kind of alluding to the fact that you think California is a bit more inherently queer, would you maybe like to expand upon that? And correct me if I'm totally wrong!

Delcia Orona

Yeah, no, I think that there's definitely a sense of conservatism that exists, especially in Geneva and the rest of Switzerland. Very, very different than the type of conservatism that you find in the US. And when you find queer friendly spaces in the US, they're very vocal about being queer friendly and they're very visual and you see also a lot of pink washing. That's their way of trying to say, “look at us, we're queer friendly.” California tends to be one of those spaces. And one thing you find with these states is that an element of the pink washing might also mean that they do implement a lot more protections for queer people, especially institutions like universities, will have very strict protections for queer people, that you won't find looking the same way in Switzerland, especially in Geneva. Even if, per se, they're not, you know, I wouldn't say that they are anything like conservative environments in the United States where you can sometimes find a lot of violence towards the queer community or maybe conservative environments around the world. And it's also hard to use the binary of liberal versus conservatism because it looks so different wherever you're at.

But I would say there's a level of tolerance in Switzerland that mimics liberalism in a conservative environment. You know, you have some protections, but, you know, Switzerland

legalized, same sex marriage recently. So, you have things coming in, but I wouldn't just say that alone makes it feel like a queer space. I feel like safe here. I feel that I can be myself here, but it's not like ideal. Like it could be better. And that's something I know contributes to my perception of Swiss conservatism. I think that's also why these different spaces, the way you see them, they also manifest themselves in different ways depending on where you are. Because sometimes you can see really radical queer spaces in Geneva that don't at all look like radical queer spaces in other environments like California. Whereas they'll be very expressive about having flags, and having Black Lives Matter representation, and trying to show this in various ways, but seeing also squat communities in California is very not common because it's a very rich environment. You see a lot of ableist environments as well. Whereas you see some radical spaces here, testing those - like free price or choose your price is unheard of in California. Whereas Geneva, some spaces have been testing with that. So, it just really comes off in different ways and definitely hard to pinpoint.

Amanda Monroe

So then how do you feel or understand your relationship with your own queer identity when there are spaces that are queer, but the entirety of the place itself doesn't feel queer? Does that at all affect the way that you interact in your daily life, the way you live?

Delcia Orona

That's a good question because I think that I'm affected by it because when I think about it, I find it important and I can feel the tension of, I feel a sense of strong solidarity when I'm in a specifically queer space in a country or in a city or in an environment that's not queer. Like I feel

a sense of solidarity that I think a lot of other people feel, even if they can't put it in words, it's almost like a sensation. Whereas I think the other way around, like let's say I'm in a very queer, accepting country in maybe like a non-queer bar, I wouldn't say I feel super affected by it. Sometimes I do, but I can't think of an example where I could pinpoint that situation so well. But I think like having that space that feels different than the general ambiance of the environment, I think everyone feels it's important. It's almost like when you're in a conservative environment and you find a little point of refuge, you're like, "This is, this is cool. I can express my mind here and I feel a little bit more expressive here." It's like that same sensation but it's not nearly as stark in Switzerland as you, maybe you might find it if you're in Texas, and you find a queer bar, you know? It's not the same level of contrast, but I think you feel it still.

Amanda Monroe

Would you say maybe that that's why the first time you looked for a queer bar was when you had gone back to Colorado as opposed to when you were in California?

Delcia Orona

I feel like you're my therapist right now because I feel like you're right. Because I never had looked for it before, but I never felt like I needed it, you know? And I think you're totally right, but that's probably actually the answer. That when I went back to Colorado, I was explicitly looking for queer people, like chasing them down. I was like, "be my friend!" and trying to find queer bars. Maybe that's why, but even coming to Geneva, I felt like Switzerland was a very queer environment. I guess I was like, Switzerland's like the rest of Europe. And Europe is so

liberal and open. I was very constricted in my ideas of what Europe was and what Switzerland was.

Amanda Monroe

When did that change for you? From, from being like, “oh my gosh, Switzerland, Geneva, so gay!” to, “oh, maybe there's a different narrative behind that?”

Delcia Orona

Maybe it was my - I want to say I picked up bits and pieces from living in Madrid and living in Paris and living in the Netherlands. But before then I had this perception like, “oh my God, Europeans are so accepting and incredible.” I picked up bits and pieces, but it was really when I went to the Graduate Institute and I was like, “this is such a conservative environment, it makes me want to vomit.” That I really picked up. “Oh my God. This is insane, a very different environment than I was used to.”

I thought that same sex marriage was legal in every country in Europe, and to then move to a country where it wasn't legal - I did not realize this wasn't a thing. I think that I also dealt with different politics at the Graduate Institute like the scandal of seeing the Israeli embassy contact the president of the Graduate Institute Student Assembly, or seeing the protests we had to do to advocate from, you know, sexual harassment and sexual assault on campus. And to see like the recent protest at UNIGE, where there was a very anti-trans seminar and queer students came in to disrupt that seminar, and this university threatened to sue them. You see things like that and you're like, “okay, maybe I was really wrong about this”. And so, it was really over these two

years of these different political and activist spaces that I had to be a part of and protests, of us sitting in the cafeteria at the Graduate Institute, when I realized I've been really taking it for advantage. This wasn't the European utopia that I thought it was. European Utopia really doesn't exist. I think it's like an American liberalism that tells us the Europe's like that.

Amanda Monroe

So then as you then started to get a lot more involved within these activist spaces and really putting in the work, did you at all change your relationship with then queer social spaces? In that they were more of a haven of, “okay, I know that this is a safe space where I can unwind from all the work that I have to do outside of that?” Or do you think your relationship didn't really change within the social scene either?

Delcia Orona

I felt like my political life and my social scene were very much the same thing for a long time. But I also found a sense of comfort and relaxation in them where, you know, I very much saw like the Queer International Student Assembly and le Phare, these different spaces and environments, as spaces where I felt very comfortable and where I had friends and where I found community and where I could unwind. But also, it wasn't a space where we could easily escape talking about politics and talking about activism. So, it was almost like a balance of something you don't find in maybe environmental activist spaces or, you know, spaces where the activism isn't related to maybe your identity, that you find in queer activist communities and queer social communities is that they are inseparable. But our social aspect is also a huge part of our history. Like queer bars is a huge part of queer history, queer drag bars, underground bars. I don't like the

connotation of a party culture, but that refuge in social aspects was very important for the queer community and that's has very much been recognized across the United States because it's very Western and also in Europe and Switzerland.

I've never felt it's exhausted me. Whereas maybe like an environmental space when you're only advocating for, for example, the environment, but you're not getting the same sense of shared identity and shared community, it can be very exhausting because that's what I did before I was involved in activism here. I was involved in environmental activism in California. And that was the only activism I knew because I was involved in CALPIRG, and Eco Vista, and the Holly Cultural Lab. And those are all environmental organizations.

Amanda Monroe

So, you feel there's like this different dynamic - It's very much also about a shared identity that you have with the people you're around.

Delcia Orona

Yeah, because it feels like you don't have to vocalize something and argue about it. You just almost feel like there's a sense of support with what you say. Even if maybe, you think people disagree with this, you don't feel like they're disagreeing with things that are very important to you - like they don't disagree with who you are or who you date. Maybe they just disagree with like, "not all queer people drink ice coffee." You know, like very minimal arguments. Or they will correct you and say, "okay, maybe this isn't the correct terminology. Let's, let's think about using this instead." It feels like you can have productive conversations and political discussions

where people aren't going to try to tear you down. I think there's just a shared struggle that all of us care about it in some way or another for different reasons. That makes it important. And it just seeps into both sides, like of this political side of us all wanting and of us all thinking that having more protections as queer people or same sex marriage or these different aspects, those are important, and having more protection against like anti-trans events and violence are important. Those aren't things we have to dispute. Whereas in straight spaces, you do have to sometimes dispute whether like, "is this thing anti-trans?" Whereas, you know, the queer community would say, yeah "well, it doesn't seem like it." So, we, we can at least rest assured that those are indisputable things and then we can go a step further and start talking about like the specifics and what to do about it.

Amanda Monroe

Do you find it difficult then in queer spaces to maybe separate the social from the political? Are things inherently always going to have a politics to them? And then kind of further on that, in queer spaces, like at le Phare, do you think that then they play a role in politics and in hosting, you know, events that support a certain politic?

Delcia Orona

That's interesting. But I, I agree that it can sometimes be difficult to separate the two. I know a lot of queer people have also reiterated, we need to have more events that don't involve alcohol and we need to have a more events that aren't in bars. There's also this aspect that, you know, the bar space can easily be infiltrated by things that maybe we don't want in the queer community - like straight people, straight drunk people coming to these spaces. So, even though I find them

important and they're a really important part of our history, having this social aspect of bars and clubs and underground, I think there's also this essence that they should be separated in certain moments, you know? Especially because there's just always alcohol and drugs very close to those environments. And I know it was hard for me to always separate that. I always felt like I was in politic mode a lot of times in these environments because I just was always thinking, "oh, we could do this," or, "oh, well, this is important." Even though we were out having beers, I'm like, "what do you think about this new law that just passed?" So, it was hard for me to separate, but I think I wouldn't even say that le Phare is involved in a politic of any sort.

They don't come to our events. Maybe it's not - maybe it's because they stay where they are. They don't sign petitions. Maybe they do – maybe - but it certainly doesn't feel like they do. It just feels like they just stay where they are, and they just offer this open space. But they're not going out of their way to like sign stuff and host rallies or - There's always a sense that it's political when something's queer and that queer spaces are political spaces. There's some aspect about it that also doesn't feel, like as an organization or a company, that they deserve to be labeled like a fully political company, because that's not their goal. Their goal is just to be a bar and offer that, and they don't do any law seeking activism or law changing activism. I don't know.

Amanda Monroe

Do you think they should, or do you think there's an importance to these places that - ?

Delcia Orona

No, I don't think they should. Well, they can if they want to. I mean, I don't know if it really makes a difference for me. But I also am speaking from Switzerland. I think if it were like Colorado, where we recently had the shooting at the Club Q, I think a bar like that is very much going to be involved in politics because they're now the center of like a political war happening in Colorado. They're going to be signing petitions for the protection of queer people, they're going to be at rallies. To me it seems really important, but I also would understand if they don't because it's very exhausting being involved in politics. To me it is almost a contradiction that these spaces of rest and sociality should be involved in politics, or that they should always revolve around these really intense and heavy political topics or discussions or events. So, I don't think either way it changes my mind about a space. I think it is cool to see enterprises with money and companies with money advocating for causes other than us doing it for ourselves.

Amanda Monroe

I guess kind of to end on, just if you had any other thoughts or feelings about queer social spaces, about le Phare, about them specifically within the Genevan context - now would be a great time to do so. No pressure if you don't.

Delcia Orona

Yeah, I'm thinking a lot about le Phare now and my perception of it now. You know, I don't think it's a radical queer space, but it's always, it just feels like homey - a space that I've always known and that I like. I always find it very interesting because the last time I was there, I also had an interaction with a straight girl and I was so very confused because she didn't look straight and we were at le Phare, and I had so many questions, and so did everyone else I was with, we

were like, “what's going on?” So, I like that aspect that it feels just like a normal space. It doesn't feel overbearing. It doesn't feel like it's pushed on anyone. It just feels good and safe. It's a cool place, but I do sometimes wish there was a little bit more openness to students because I feel like there is kind of a side eye at students – I just feel like it's more of like an adult. I say adult, like we're not adults, but adult space.

Amanda Monroe

I get what you mean.

Delcia Orona

I don't know how to describe that vibe, but they really are like, “oh, there's students here - again,” “it's that student group that.” You know, they accept us, and they like us, but you still feel like there's a vibe about the place that's maybe more for adults. But I love it and I think it's important and I think it'll continue to be important. It's like, I think it's one of the number one places that people talk about when you search queer spaces in Geneva. They're like “le Phare”. You have like Lestime, l'Usine, le Phare, Nathan's Café - but it's always up there and I'm happy. Yeah, I'm happy that it was the space that I discovered, and I got close to.

Amanda Monroe

Awesome. Well, I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording there. Thank you.