Karl Rivera

“Here I Can Win. Here I can be Desirable”: Exploring Safety and Liberation in the Gay Club’s Thirdspace

MA Thesis in Sociology and Social Anthropology

Central European University

Budapest

June 2017

“Here I Can Win. Here I can be Desirable”: Exploring Safety and Liberation in the Gay Club’s Thirdspace

by

Karl Rivera

(United States of America)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

Vlad Naumescu
Thesis Supervisor

Andreas Dafinger
Thesis Supervisor

Budapest
June 2017

I, the undersigned, **Karl Rivera**, candidate for the MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 14 June 2017

_____

Signature

Abstract

This thesis builds on the sociology and anthropology of space, using Edward Soja's post-modern conceptualization of the Thirdspace to investigate the way queer (and even straight) folk can find liberation and safety in the gay club. My analysis is rooted in discursive analysis of eight inductive, in-depth interviews with informants across the sexuality spectrum. Material from these interviews included maps and diagrams illustrating the multiplicities of 'space," in its real, imagined and embodied sense. Ultimately, my work concludes that safety and liberation, in varying degrees, is found in these unique institutions and it is in the fluidic treatment of both these notions that this can be revealed.

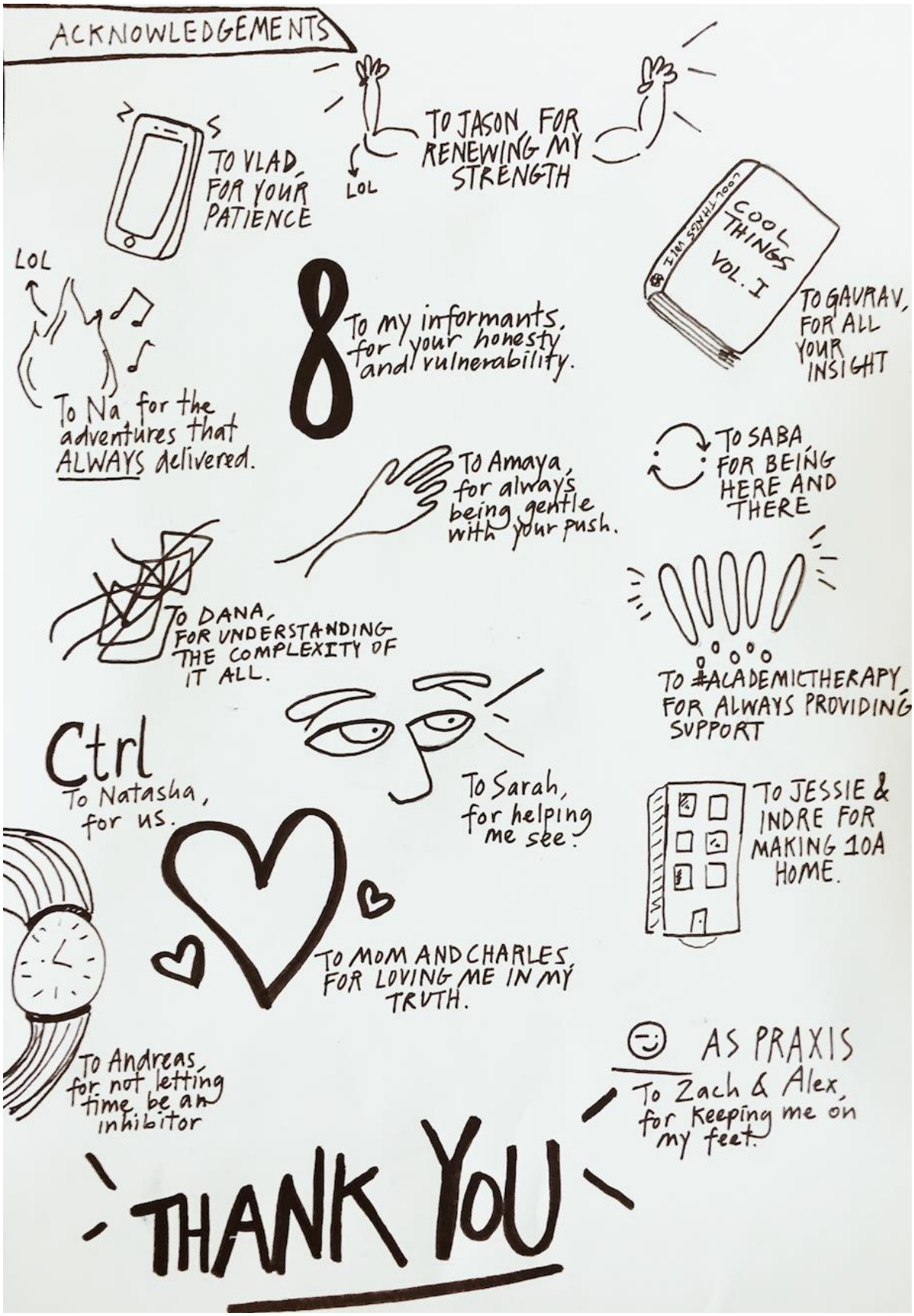

Table of contents

Introduction

"The fact that I have any kind of attraction to men makes me deviant… it makes my body and my selfhood expendable."

I recited the above epigraph to a room of 100 individuals at the Posse Plus Retreat on the campus of Wheaton College. I was terrified. I had publicly disclosed a facet of my identity that would affect the relationships that I had, the ideas I shared, and the community I surrounded myself with. My identity acted as a negative modifier, morphing me from an individual with a multiplicity of identities—artist, scholar, and more—to just one: gay. Even in those who seemed more open to my proverbial leap out of the closet, excitement came from the ability to speak to the fact that they could now tell their coworkers, or friends, or family that they had a gay *blank.* Blank because the second identifier didn't seem to matter anymore. I was now one dimensional. Since coming out, I have pondered whether there is a space that would enable a sense of safety, a degree of liberation from this stigmatized identity, I now openly embodied.

When I arrived at the Central European University, the first meeting I attended was for the LGBTQ student group. I went alone, entered late, and sat at the back. One by one, every person in the room introduced themselves, and after going over general plans and expectations for the year, we headed to Anker't, a ruin pub in the area. I made friends and found a community. Shortly after, a small group of students invited me to a gay club in the city center. I walked into a complex space: three dancefloors, multiple bars, minimal light and although quite frankly I was terrified, I felt lighter.

I ordered a drink, I walked around and then I danced, and danced. I looked around and saw intimacy that I had, for so long, been told was *not* ok, being publicly shown and without

noticeable fear. I felt free. I sought out more spaces like it, not only in Budapest, but everywhere I traveled after: Austria, Germany, Brussels, France. And in each of those places, I felt something similar. This freedom, this safety kept returning. In class, as I studied the relations of power, and the means through which they are organized, my original question was complicated, but it remained: for queer people like me, where can liberation be found, if at all? Where can safety be felt?

And so, after months of exposure to these clubs and casual conversations about the unique space that my friends and I enjoyed, I realized quite viscerally that this wasn't a singular phenomenon. It was commonplace for those who attended. As a result, I began investigating how this happened. How is safety found? How is the space within the club created? What is it about these clubs that enables people to perform in the manner which they do? Is this liberation and safety static, or does it happen in degrees, in a more fluid nature? This thesis works to answer those questions, by identifying the club through a post-modern lens, in which space, in its multi-dimensionality—real, imagined and embodied—allow for a more complex understanding.

As I begun this project, I immediately realized the heteronormative bias that seemed to dominate the text I was reading. Not just from literature in the social sciences but in the *natural* sciences as well! But this came as no surprise, as not too long ago psychiatrists begun treating homosexuals as patients with mental disease, relegating them to the periphery as their identity and personhood was made distinct and separate from the heteronormative society which they occupied. (Epstein, 1987; Foucault, 1978; Knopp, 1990; Lauria & Knopp, 1985 as cited in Ruiz, 2012). Thomas Piontek also speaks to this this point by demonstrating the notion that the inherent bias in the way in which studies are conducted gave "particular weight and authority to the medical establishment's moral judgement" against queer folk

(Piontek 1992: 145, as cited in Binnie, 1996). This reified the marginalization queer folk experienced as it naturalized the maltreatment they received.

At this point, I believe it is important to reiterate my positionality and what it means in the context of this study. As a gay identifying man, it is my intention to do some academic shaking, challenging more heteronormatively conventional conceptions of space, liberation, and safety. This is especially important given that historically, as I detailed earlier, there is a notion of distinctness between those who are 'sexually deviant' and those who are normal. Thus, the occupation of space by LGBTQ+ folk *requires* a unique conceptualization, lest the heteronormative bias continue to alter the way in which we understand this community and their confrontation with structures of violence, namely the stigmatization of homosexuality and queerness in general.

I do this in three parts. I begin by offering an overview of literature that centralizes the catalyst for the gay club's creation in the stigmatization of non-heterosexual identity. I then segue to describe how, because of this stigma, a fluidic approach is necessary to understand the social mechanics at work within the space. It is here that I introduce what Edward Soja (1996) calls the thirding of space and describe why this method is best when understanding the subjectivities of those who visit these spaces.

I then move onto Chapter Two, and I work to situate the field and the subjectivities of the eight informants who provided the empirical richness of this thesis by giving a brief overview of each of the informants' first experiences within the gay club. Moreover, I speak to the way I decided to conduct my research. I elucidate how each of my informants were chosen, and why I decided to investigate the gay club as a general phenomenon, and not simply in one geographic location.

In my final chapter, I go through the first, second and Thirdspace of the club using interview material to explicate the space's fluidity, and explore the spectrum of safety and liberation that was found. Using bell hooks' (1989) notion of the fragmented, but radical open space that exists in marginality, I concretize my findings theoretically while intertwining it with empirical analysis.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Identity, especially those which have been marginalized have a dual existence constructed by measures of power that demand they offer the means to show their embodied and socialized differential. Frantz Fanon describes this in his work The Fact of Blackness (1952). He points out that his blackness is not one that has been imposed but one that is known and acknowledged implicitly (1952:111). This is a result of the reproducing structure that enables race to have an ontological space in society. Fanon notes that "certain laboratories have been working for years in order to create "a serum for denegrification" (1952:111). As described previously, by the work of Ruiz (2012), those who identified as homosexual were treated in a similar manner, in that this embodied identity was treated as an ill that could be cured.

In this, there is an acknowledgement that racial and sexual identity is an objective reality. Specifically, for sexuality this is demonstrated in the pursuit, attraction and romance in a non-heteronormative capacity. And while this is one facet of sexual identity, there is also the socialized and constructed. These are the narratives and stories that serve to 'prove' the differential that is embodied. Thus, sexuality is not just a one-dimensional phenomenon; rather it is a multidimensional empirical, embodied, and performed one.

Stigma and the Construction of Identity

Pierre Bourdieu notes that it is space that determines power, but what makes space is difference, in the objective, subjective, and intersecting realities. These spaces are relative, in the physical and symbolic sense (Bourdieu 1994:6). And in each of these spaces, there is a principle of being, or habitus that unifies each group— together with their own, or against those who do not belong. As a result, perspective is defined by the space which informs it

(1994:13). And of course, this isn't a one sided push-pull relationship. Queerness and the habitus of said community also inform what it means to be heterosexual.

Alfred Radcliffe-Browne, a structural-functionalist explains this power differential neatly in his work On Joking Relationships (1940). Using governing principles as his framework for understanding human interaction, he claims that society is ordered through the 'joking relationship', a "peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism" (1940:180). It is this agreed upon respect that bounds people together. Conversely, using this framework of the joking relationship and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, space, and power, there is often an allowance for one group to be freer in their joking (i.e. microaggressions). Though the joking relationship is meant to strengthen alliances, it can in fact weaken connections between two different groups, negating the respect the act was ordinarily supposed to achieve. And as discussed before, structure is dualistic— being affected and affecting agents (Giddens, 1984).

When incorporating habitus into this theoretical realm, there is a reminder of the symbolic violence that can ensue; the power of the normative elite, in this case heterosexuality, can make it so that the jokes of the marginalized do not even land, because they don't have the structural power to make themselves heard, or worse they don't speak because they believe they are not able/equipped to. This makes it such that the joking relationship is reliant on the structurally powerful to function. As a result, equilibrium is not reached and the harmful constructed realities of sexuality are able to be applied more concretely on the objective reality. Thus, the subjective and objective realities of sexuality are intertwined, reifying each other. The social vignettes that straight people have regarding the queer community— past, present, and future—are applied; namely in the declaration of religious and moral deviance; and the carriers of widespread disease like AIDS/HIV due to promiscuity. All this occurs although the queer person with whom interaction is occurring

may have no manifestable connection to said religious community or those affected by such disease.

Goffman acknowledges those existing with stigmatized identities, "by definition… is not quite human" (1963:5). It provides a framework to 'understand' a person before anything that requires a degree of knowing. These preliminary conceptions are then used to create expectations regarding how a person will behave/act/be concretizing the separation of those with embodied difference from the "norm."

In understanding stigma, there must be an acknowledgment that when identified in a person or persons, reduces them. Stigma, thus creates a one dimensional being upon first interaction and in secondary and more nuanced relationships can be act as the primary facet of understanding when thinking about that person, or interacting with that person. Contemporarily, this is noted when introductions for those with stigmatized identities are made. As spoken about in my introduction, friends are no longer friends, they are "gay" friends; family is no longer just family, they are the "gay" cousin, brother, sister, etc. The objective and embodied reality are the gateway for the construction of secondary and tertiary issues with personhood. In this case, objective queerness gives way to subjective stigmatized gayness.

We reduce life chances by limiting options, by avoiding communities marked with stigma, or negative sexuality, cutting off their chances and the possibility of moving beyond their circumstance and flourishing. This widens the social-space gap *enforcing* the stigma. Further, in the personal defense of those with 'afflicted' with stigma, there is a legitimation that occurs because of the acknowledgement of what up to that point could have been unspoken or "unintentional" actions (Goffman, 1963:6). Unfortunately, even in the working

to create a less stigmatized body there is then a dualistic *separation*— from the community which was already separated and then from those enacting the separation. (1963:9)

In the conducting of what is often just proverbial 'healing' (i.e conversion therapy, suppression, exorcism) one goes beyond just a marked person but a person who has been marked, acknowledges that mark, actively works to 'correct' it, and then lives with embodied receipts of the goodhearted attempts to be 'better,' further extending the violence of the stigmatized body.

In this, the person who is undergoing the acts of 'healing' or 'bettering', points the finger at the rest of those who live with the stigma and proclaim unknowingly, knowingly, sometimes both, that they too can be like them and move forward… This ostracization continues the cycle of the constructed realities effect on the objective reality. Even in its reformed discourse, it legitimizes the constructed components of sexuality in the objective reality of the world. One's "unnatural passions" as Goffman calls them (1963:4) is different, but there is a way to make it better. This only serves to reinforce the notion that the objective characteristics are rooted in subjective realities.

Sexuality, is a mixture of the constructed and real. Real in the characteristics present, namely the inherent non-heterosexual attractions, but also constructed in the attitudes and treatment that is offered to this embodied phenomenon. Also, considering Bourdieu's notion of habitus, there is increased understanding that those who are within a space together maintain a collective habit that allow them to maintain their solidarity. Giddens notes that this collective habit informs and is informed by the individual actors making the structure interactive and dualistic. However, Bell Hooks, in her book Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (1989) describes how 'space and location' evoke pain; reminding her of the silences felt by those who have been oppressed (herself included).

> "As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision" (1989: 203)

These spaces of liminality, in the instance of this work, the gay club, can in fact be a tool for resistance as Hooks notes (1989:206). Not just resistance of the hegemonic cultural practices that ultimately catalyzed the creation of a space where a new habitude could be produced, but resistance from the internalization of stigma endangering the welfare of queer folks who are beginning to come into their own self-realized truth.

Structuration and Habitus are incredible conceptual tools that explore how power becomes enacted but we must be reminded structure is *not* omnipotent. As a result, more is required to understand how one can explore the voices and subjectivities of those who are among the queer subaltern, who are (un)intentionally using the gay club as a radical, subversive tool for healing, safety and liberation. There must ultimately be a digging into post-modern conceptualizations of space to grasp the full complexity of the power found within the gay club.

Entering the Thirdspace

In the discourse of space, it was Henri Lefebvre (1991) who most notably identified its multiple, coexisting axes, dimensions and (in)visibilities. Moving beyond the dualism of material, and imagined, he noted the significance of understanding the embodied—in a triple dialectic with the two former—in the analysis of spatiality. Building from this theoretical

framework Edward Soja (1996) identifies the *thirdspace*, an existential plane, in which to bring the study of spatiality into the fore of the multi-interdisciplinary[1] locus of study.

Soja identifies the third space (and thirding-as-Othering) as a "critical strategy" which works to reimagine and restructure the binarisms that entrench the study of space allowing for access to "new alternatives" (1996: 5). This is not to say that the original binaries for analysis are now rendered moot, but rather space is offered up to a more discursive, interpretive critique. He moves on to say that the thirdspace can be illustrated as:

> "a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the "real" material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through "imagined" representations of spatiality" (Soja, 1996:6).

Moving forward, Soja continues to ground his conceptual framework and method in Lefebvre's perceived, conceived and lived spaces, working to specify where the foundations of this form of critique have come from. He makes an acknowledgement that although Lefebvre created a groundbreaking work, academics—across disciplines—tended to focus on the Firstspace or Secondspace in their analysis. It is at this point that Soja identifies the processing of thirding as the process of "real and imagined and more (both and also…)" (1996: 11). In that, he concisely and aptly elucidates the incredible *fluidic* power of space.

But, the proverbial path has been paved. Jen Gieseking introduces the book Queer Geography (2013) with a chapter titled "A Queer Geographer's Life as an Introduction to

[1] Edward Soja specifically notes the importance of thirdspace in 'transdisciplinary' studies noting History, Sociology and Geography but he only uses this term to pay homage to Lefebvre's "triple dialectic" (1991:6). He goes on to say that this method of critique has a transcendary nature. It is for this purpose that I use the term multi-interdisciplinary studies. This is meant to push Soja's conceptualization further in that the intersections used to concretize a field of study do not occur in binary—even if triadic.

Queer Theory, Space, and Time"., the title presupposes that her embodied experience has given her greater insight into the conceptualization of space—making such that the theoretical claims she explicates, *should* fit within the expansive nature that Soja calls for in his offer to rename the act of thirding.

Gieseking speaks specifically to "queering space" and "spatializing the queer" and the means through which this allowed her to formulate an understanding of her life and her "place(s)" in the world (2013:14). She notes the Firstspace, asserting that she (and we) live in a materially grounded world; then connects it to the Secondspace in the types of language we use to describe our experience in the Firstspace[2]. Following this, she uses Lefebvre to negate space as Kant identified it ("absolute and fixed" (2013:14) and affirms that "each person is agentic and responsible in creating, occupying, and enacting space…in how it is all at once created, conceived and lived" (2013:14).

More explicitly, Gieseking goes onto explain that more than identity, she is interested in the "action of queering" (2013:15); which is to analyze space as fluid, not existing in binary. This, she explains, is rooted in the queer experience, one which informs the understanding of space. Pushing further, she explains that these queer material spaces allowed her to take *refuge*—in the idea, and also in the experience of them. This draws the first, second *and* third space together to illustrate the "both and also…" fluidic notion of space that Soja explicates in his work. As a result, the queering of space is, in fact, the thirding of space.

[2] Gieseking explains that the use of metaphor in English allows for our imagined sense to be grounded in the material by explicitly mentioning the phrases: "*where* your head is at, *standing* your ground, know your *place*, I am *here." (*emphasis mine, 2013: 14)

This is not simply a theoretical foundation but directions on how to best analyze space in a capacity that will allow for insight into the means through which constituents within gay clubs embody the space and through this, find the means for what informants have described as 'liberation' and 'freedom.'

I began this project with the original intention of speaking expressly to the experiences within gay clubs in Budapest, grounding my work solidly within a specific geographical field. But, in interviews facilitated with my informants, the experiences were described fluidly—moving harmoniously across (and through) cities, countries and continents. This may be a result of what David Harvey (1989) coins "time-space compression", or the decreasing distance between places, because of advances in communicative and travel-based technologies.

I did not want to stymie or limit the narratives offered to me, so instead I sought the means through which to understand how there was, in fact, a red thread going through what seemed to be disparate places. Gay clubs, idealized as 'safe' spaces, are created in a reaction to marginality and stigmatization working to do what Gieseking imparts as the "uproariously alter[ing] [of] everyday spatialities of heterosexuality" (2013: 14). This means that these spaces must be demarcated in some capacity. If not in the physical signage that hangs at the entrance, in the digital realm where informants noted they searched and found access to these clubs.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) explains in an analogy that the Konberg Castle in Denmark changes when Hamlet is deemed to have lived there. The imagined space infused with the material "speaks a quite different language" (1977:5). Thus, we can assume that the designation of these clubs as gay alters the imagination of the space, from vastly separate to the allowing of a continuous language across arbitrary borders and resolute seas.

In her explaining of the choice of the term 'space' over 'place', Jennifer Self, in her doctoral dissertation Queering Queer Space (2010) also briefly covers space's ability to be transcendent of these arbitrary borders. Her dissertation deals specifically with centers that are deemed 'safe spaces' on college campuses. She identified her choice for this queer phenomenon because of their ability to "operate within and from an explicit space" (2010: 61). In the same vein as Self, choosing to focus particularly on this social production allows for a more fluid approach to understanding the experiences of my informants as they have been made clear to me. This is not to say that the material space was not questioned or deemed important. In fact, the opposite was true. Material space was an ever-important part of this analysis.

Chapter 2: Situating the Informants[i] and the Field

It is vital that a brief background of each informant is provided; especially given that it is in the discursive nature of each of these interviews that the empirical richness of this work is found. Identifying the positionality of each participant, in their general views on the club space, their first foray into the space, their age, and the way they identify sexually enables deeper insight into the narratives, vignettes, and maps they offer in conversation. In addition, although all interviewees were generally asked the same questions, their backgrounds demonstrate the independent and unique thematic nature of their answers only furthering the complexity of empirical information offered. What follows in this chapter is a description of each of the eight informants I had the pleasure working with.

Z

Positioning himself as "politically queer and functionally gay", Z, a 23-year-old man, was the first and only informant who delineated one identity in that capacity. In his

explanation for this choice, he explained that "queer is wonderful in reclaiming derogatory language…". More, it provides access to those who may not have the most up to date "lingo" regarding the ever changing LGBTQIA[3] acronym. He goes further by acknowledging that his sexuality is not just a political component of his identity but also refers to how he operates sexually and romantically. In that sense, he described himself as "pretty cut and dry" gay.

Though his first time in a primarily gay space was at a bar in his hometown, he mentioned that it was during his Junior Year Abroad[4] when he first properly spent time in a gay club. In describing his first experience at this hometown bar, he noted it was "underwhelming" but what else could he expect? As will be discussed in the next chapter, Z's experience in the gay club and his recognition of the importance of the space is rooted in the liberation that he found through the freedom of performance he was able to attain.

R

24 and identifying as a gay man, R first began going out to gay clubs when he was 17. Though he was too young to enter legally, he would use his brother's identification card to gain access. Like Z, R described his first experience in a delineated capacity mentioning that the club he went to in his hometown was "gay but also queer" noting that it was in fact for the "younger audiences" and for "people who were just discovering themselves."

This exposure to the space also coincided with his coming out. His parents, wanting to know "what's going on" after his excursions with another boy, were soon made aware of his sexuality. But even in this, R made it clear that these excursions weren't "that much related to sexuality per say" but rather an attitude of experiencing a rite of passage. His girl friends

[3] Though most organizations use LGBTQIA+ as an identifier for the non-heterosexual community, the full acronym (as it exists at the time of this thesis's publication) is LGBTQQIP2SAA standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, 2S for Two Spirit, Asexual, and Ally (Hulshof-Schmidt 2012).

[4] In the United States, it is customary for third year university students to travel away from their home university to supplement their traditional curriculum with more experiential learning.

introduced him saying “Let’s dance. Let’s have fun. Let’s check it out. Let’s go out together and that’s what people are doing so…”

J

J, a 25 year old gay man, spent time in his first club when he was 17. It just so happened that the only place that he had access to (legally) turned out to be a gay space. Though he wasn’t *out* to most of his friends at this point, he described how he could bring up going out to this space since it had become such a normalized venue in the area.

His first excursion, accompanied with a group of “female friends”, isn’t remembered too well but he notes that “based on what it was usually like I was probably drunk or high or both… and just danced a lot.” Visiting the club to him, was not just a rite of passage, but a progression of the way he spent time with his friends. While initially they would have house parties “under the guise of a sleepover…[where you] sneak liquor from the liquor cabinet or like get high in the backyard and try not to wake up the parents or stuff life that.” The club offered a new type of freedom as he described, “we could be loud. We could dance. We could dress up.”

K

"I think it was like a rite of passage, to be a teenager, to go clubbing once,” is how K explained his first time entering such a space. Underage and admittedly surprised, his first expedition was in high school. But his first time going to a gay club was in when visiting a longtime friend and their partner, away from home. He qualified the experience, describing how he didn’t tell his parents that he went to such a space or that the people he was meeting were also gay. Rather, he simply said I’m going to visit friends. And in the same way he

described his first experience in the straight club, he noted that this visit to the gay club was a rite of passage recounting how he didn't know what to expect in this "open space" surrounded by people like him but it was "interesting."

Though he is now open about his sexuality, the first experience described occurred before he had come out. Now, most of his network knows the way he identifies but his parents are still unaware. As a result, he doesn't visit gay clubs in New York in fear that a bouncer (most of whom share his ethnicity and are indirectly connected to his family) will threaten this compartmentalized truth. But he has visited gay clubs across countries in three continents, and explained that soon he's gonna "start not giving a fuck," a process which he said has already, albeit slowly, begun.

G

Describing the fetishization of clubbing in his home country, G, a 28 year old straight man, explained that clubbing (in the general sense) was something that he wanted to do "just out of wanting to experience what [he] was hearing about, or seeing on a screen in a movie, or reading in a book, or seeing in a TV show." He admits that this vision he had before entering the space was "vastly different" than what he expected.

Following this line of thought, his first time spent in a gay club was inspired by the film Milk[5]. Wanting to better understand the neighborhood and community that Harvey Milk spent living and working in, he ventured into the Castro. His description of the experience was honest and raw, recounting how he had his "ass grabbed a bunch of times non-consensually, might I add."

[5] Milk was a biographical motion picture about Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in California. He was a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors for a little less than a year before being assassinated by a former colleague Dan White.

Though his first experience was not the most positive, G remarked that now he rather spend time in gay clubs as opposed to their straight, heteronormative counterparts because he's felt more safe, and included mentioning how as a person of color he has felt excluded many a times; he summed this up explaining in these gay spaces he "could do whatever the fuck [he] wanted. And dance in whatever the fuck way [he] wanted."

D

Just having returned from an intense, monumental period of field work, D, a straight 25 year old woman, offered raw insight into her experience clubbing. Her first time in a gay space, was during her years in college as an undergraduate. In narrating the event, she explained that it felt "completely counter to a lot of other things [she] was feeling at the time". She described it as "engagement with the body in a time when we don't really engage with our bodies," moving further to say, "it is what it is. It's not in preparation for something".

D explained that she was never made to feel like the space—made by and primarily consisting of queer folk—was n*ot* for her. Moreover, she recognized the fact that this is not a feeling that the gay community experiences in the hegemonically heteronormative world which they occupy, acknowledging how large a proverbial gift that was, to her.

Continuing, D notes that clubs are a space that "imparts a kind of agency to perform an identity that they want to perform in a moment… it's not a step towards, anything or away from anything so it exists in its own time". In this she described how the clubs allowed her to experience a "rare" feeling of safety. Because of this, and her described "proximity" to the LGBTQ+ community, she frequents these spaces when spending nights out.

JM

When asked if she visited gay clubs before coming out, JM, a 28 year old bisexual woman, said resolutely that "I definitely started clubbing before knowing I had any interest in anyone outside of men." She explained that her voyaging into the space had more to do with the 'fun' aspect than it did with the levels of safety that so many have identified the space as. In fact, she said that when she started to identify herself as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, her clubbing slowed. Instead, she became more interested in smaller, more "intimate" spaces. She attributes this switch in attitude to the geography of the club-space, noting "if you were looking for other women, it was harder to find them at the gay clubs." That was 10 years ago. Now in a relationship with IB, JM has held fast to her view, rarely visiting clubs, noting how even in these queer spaces, she and her partner are made into a spectacle.

IB

"I feel even safer going there," is how IB, a 23 year old bisexual woman, described her experience going to a gay club after spending much of her nighttime excursions in straight spaces. She described her first few experiences clubbing in straights spaces in her home country as "hunting," where both men and women are in direct competition with each other.

Gay clubbing, on the other hand was described with a level of appreciation noting that it was the only place where she and her partner could show affection without "risking their lives". She now visits straight clubs with her girlfriend and briefly detailed moments of violence that occurred, but juxtaposed that with her newfound knowledge of where she now knows it is ok to "be", in straight clubs. Moreover, she now uses the gay clubs to let loose and "lose [her]self," working to relieve stress.

Informants, as a Sample

In working to find participants who would engage in these hard, vulnerable conversations, I attempted to gather partakers while engaging in field work and participant observation. I would spend time in the club-space, spark conversation, and make it clear that I was doing research on the kinds of venues that we were both standing in. Most times, an interview would be agreed upon but would somehow fall through.

During one visit to Alter Ego, a gay club in Budapest, I met three men who were clustered together. We spoke for a short time, and I explained the scope of my project, and what I was wanting to understand, making it clear that these conversations and shared narratives would remain anonymous. The three men agreed and I passed over my cellphone so we could add each other on Facebook.

After the friend request was accepted, I would send a message on Facebook saying something to the effect of:

> Hey hey! I hope you remember me. We met ____ days ago at the bar of _____. I'm writing about gay clubs and I was hoping you would still be interested in being interviewed. It would be anonymous and super helpful.

Often these messages would be read (Facebook provides read receipts) but no response would be offered. Interestingly, interaction would still occur on Facebook, as these people did not delete me after not responding to my messages. In fact, they would occasionally like photographs that I had posted on the social network.

Because this method seemed to be unfruitful, I posted a call for interviewees on the Central European University's LGBTQI Facebook group. The message read:

> Hello friends--
>
> I'm writing my thesis on gay clubbing and want to hear about people's interactions and participation in the unique and important space and was wondering if anyone would be willing to be interviewed…
>
> It would be super helpful and used anonymously in my thesis :)

R, J, JM, and IB all answered this call and were subsequently interviewed. There were five other committed responses but because of scheduling conflicts, interviews were not able to be conducted. However, I did have informal conversations with a few of these people regarding my project; I also went into the field with one of these volunteers.

K, D, and G were all folk with whom I have spent time in gay clubs. Under the assurance of anonymity, they agreed to take part. Finally, Z is a close friend who recently moved to Sub-Saharan Africa for work in which he is engaged in sexual health education, and capacity building with specific attention paid to gender equity. After briefly outlining the project's intent, he, like K, D, and G, agreed to join the study.

My informants were chosen through a mixture of communication methods—digital, in-person, and over the phone—but ultimately, they make up a convenience sampling, especially given that I was connected to each person in some capacity before the study had begun. In ensuring the integrity of this work, my project was not discussed with them (outside of general overview of topic and relevant introductory material) before they were interviewed.

Further, even in this convenience, it was my intention to make the sample as representative as possible. The eight participants offering perspective for this endeavor each had distinct (even if seemingly similar) positionalities. Included are club-goers who maintain

a frequent venturing into the space, those who no longer found the 'scene' attractive; and those who are partnered (in both open and closed relationships). Additionally, there is a variety of sexual orientations: straight, gay, and bisexual. I was not in touch or connected with any person who (openly) identified as trans during the time of this project and unfortunately, an interview I had scheduled with a lesbian woman was never able to come to fruition due to time constraints. But, in the long run, these varying positionalities provided a greater, more holistic analytical foundation with four continents in which experiences were shared during interviews, and five continents in which participants found their homeplace.

Though interviews were standardized in the questions being asked, they were conducted in a fluid manner. This meant that an outline of questions was used to begin and further conversation with each participant. But in the interest of working inductively, to best understand the experiences being described to me, questions were sometimes added that only one or two people could answer (because others had already been interviewed, or they would have not made sense given the experiences shared in conversation). Also, some questions on violence, and turbulent times in clubs were not asked in respect of trauma and violence that had been described previously.

Again, I reiterate the fluid nature of these interviews, (and this study as a whole for that matter), can be attributed to the rawness of answers being offered. When asking about moments of liberation, or constriction, it would have been a disservice to participants, and this work if I would have cut them off, noting that my intention was to focus on just one geographic location. This rang especially true as informants spoke to the congruity of these clubs even though they were on different continents, in different countries and visiting different cities. As explicated in my next chapter, there was a demonstration of the red thread

that tied these places together. This came about rather organically and my perspective on space, landscape, and geography adjusted to accommodate this empirical richness.

Chapter 3: Thirding the Gay Club Space

Alfred Radcliffe-Browne describes the sociality of a space as being conditioned by governing principles. And relationships, micro and macro, are dictated by these informal (and sometimes formal) rules. In this sense, the functions of a space are dictated by the higher powers which make up its doxa. He describes these relationships as being joking— where there is an equilibrium found in antagonism.

The gay club exists in this structural joking relationship and the equilibrium is still being sorted. The power balance between these othered spaces and more normative society is uneven and even when there is room for proverbial jokes to be made, they are coming from a lower, ancillary group. In discussing the first time that informants went to a gay club, this phenomenon was commonplace. There was direct exposure to penalizing stigma but the physical location of the club provided leverage for a sort of equilibrium to be found—not complete but in process.

In speaking with R about his first time entering the gay club, there was a description of the uneasiness which he had prior to making it through the doors.

> "It had to do with something with the outside, when people were in the line on the sidewalk. That would bring me a lot of anxiety before"

Even though the space is present, there is still a danger in the understanding and accepting of a queer, othered and stigmatized identity. R used the word "shameful" in describing what it would be like to be seen on the street for "everyone to see that you're not who you claim you are".

But this isn't simply an issue of the first time of entering the space. In an informal conversation with a gay man in a club in Brussels. Dancing, kissing, and acting more flamboyantly was understood to be ok when inside but in his exit, this behavior was immediately cut-off because "I have family here." Though the club is geographically located in the same neighborhood as his family, his participation inside found an equilibrium in the antagonism he faced in the 'joking relationship' because his performance was relegated to a *respectful*—imagined and real—distance.

The First Space

This respectful d*istance*, can also be understood as what Nancy Fraser (1990) calls the "counter-public", or a space in which sub-altern groups are able to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (1990:67). This conception still exists within the joking relationship, as Fraser notes that it is not necessarily an enclave in which participants are isolating themselves, (although this can in fact occur unintentionally) (1990:27). But instead, this newly created "discursive arena" allows for the sub-altern group to feasibly engage in the *relationship.* The necessary space to perform in a manner which would distinguish the sub-altern group (in this case homosexuals and queer folks) from their counterpart (cisgendered and heteronormatives peoples) is offered so the antagonism can ensue and equilibrium (hopefully) be found.

All the while, in continuing to relay the experience of his first time in the space, R explained that in the material, physical location, something as simple as the lights, allowed him to "*transform,"* leaving his anxiety behind and decidedly choosing to enjoy the space. K pushed this thought further explaining how going into a gay club is escaping the "straight world."

Though later in his explanation K describes how he and his friends enjoyed the space, it was the physical location that took precedent in his "escape." I must iterate here that it is not my intention to separate this Firstspace, from the second and third but only explicate clearly that it's involvement along with the other two spaces is pivotal; and as is to be expected the *first* means through which access is attained.

This understanding led me to ask for informants to provide floorplans and maps of clubs in which they had some sort of memory. The memory which would catalyze this exercise was not limited, so the importance of each of these maps is varied. While some were simply the most recent club they had visited, others were ones in which a sort of violence was inflicted, or the first club they had been to. This spectrum was left open to account for the performative, participatory act of cartography (Crampton, 2009). This form of art-making was identified by Crampton as allowing for provocation, surprises, truths and alternatives (2009:3).

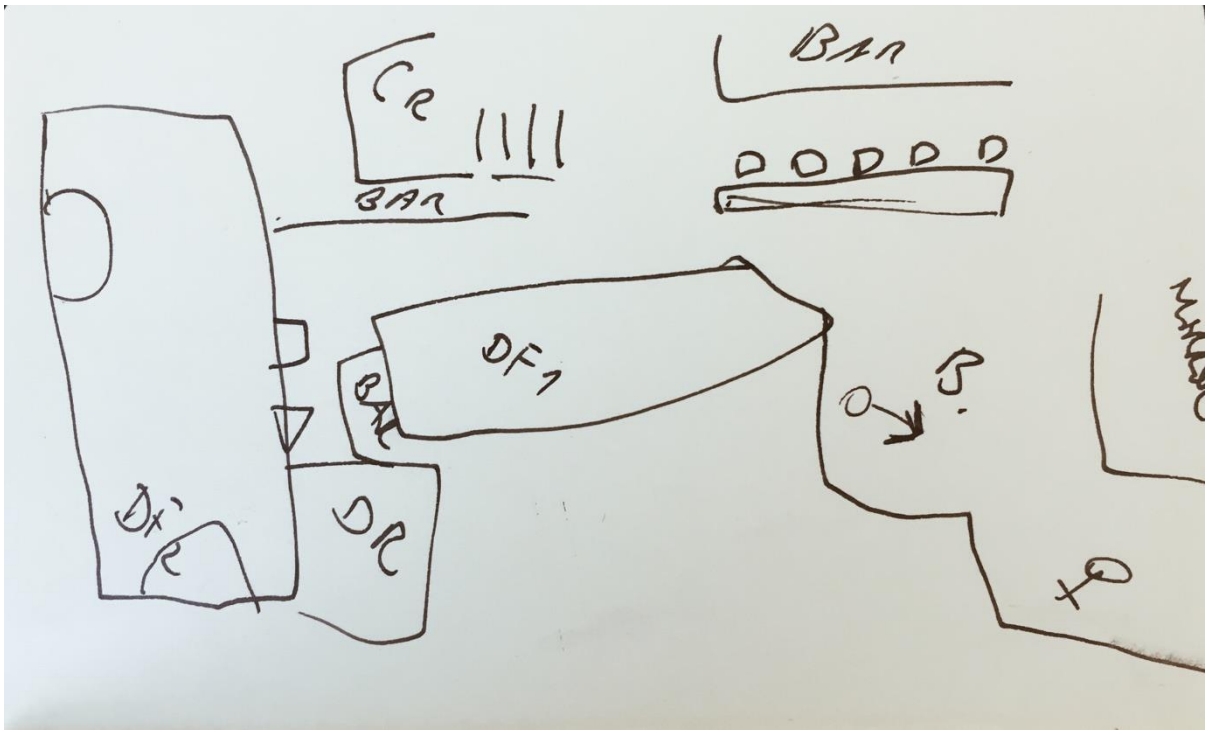

Figure 1

This rang true, even in examining the order of things plotted (or not) in the determination of the importance of material features in the gay club. I return to my interview with R. He provided a floorplan of Alter Ego, a club in Budapest (Figure 1). It was indicated that when thinking about the gay club he enjoys a diversity of space; when there are multiple rooms and things to do so if one gets tired of an area there are other faculties that could be enjoyed. Though not noted explicitly in his interview, this seemed to directly coincide with his hesitation with standing on line and waiting to enter such spaces. The ability to engage with a space in multiple capacities most certainly allows for less friction when entering and exiting from what K noted as the "straight world."

I asked R to parse through any material differentiations that he had found in the times he spent between straight and gay clubs and he went on to explain that he enjoys when they have stages—a space for performance. This made the night and event more attractive and further pulled the space away from the realm of sexuality, hooking up… and placed a particular focus on expression. "It feels more organic than you get there and you drink and hook up," is how he explained it.

Keeping this in mind, R plotted the Cloakroom first (CR), followed by the bar in the far-right corner with seats and a table facing opposite, the dancefloors (DF1 & 2), the Darkroom[6] (DR), the bar below the cloakroom (on the left), toilets, a mirror, and the final bar in front of the darkroom. I asked about the stages which he then remembered and plotted (two circles in the rectangle on the far left of the map). Though this wasn't a problem it was interesting that when considering the physical components of the imagined and remembered experience in the club, what was described as the most important, or liked feature needed to be reminded.

[6] The Darkroom is quite literally a darkroom, sometimes with stalls, where people enter to have anonymous sex.

I also became interested in the explicit designation of the mirror. When asked what was the importance of this in the physical experience, I was expecting to hear that it allows for the maintenance of a desired look. Instead, I was told coyly that it allows the ability to "face people without looking them in the face". In the size of the mirror, there seemed to be a return to the notion of explicit sexuality, with regard attraction and romance. This worked to complicate the first space, and directly entangle it with the second space, as the physical space was utilized to encounter imagined results— in the ability to catch the eye of a potential suitor.

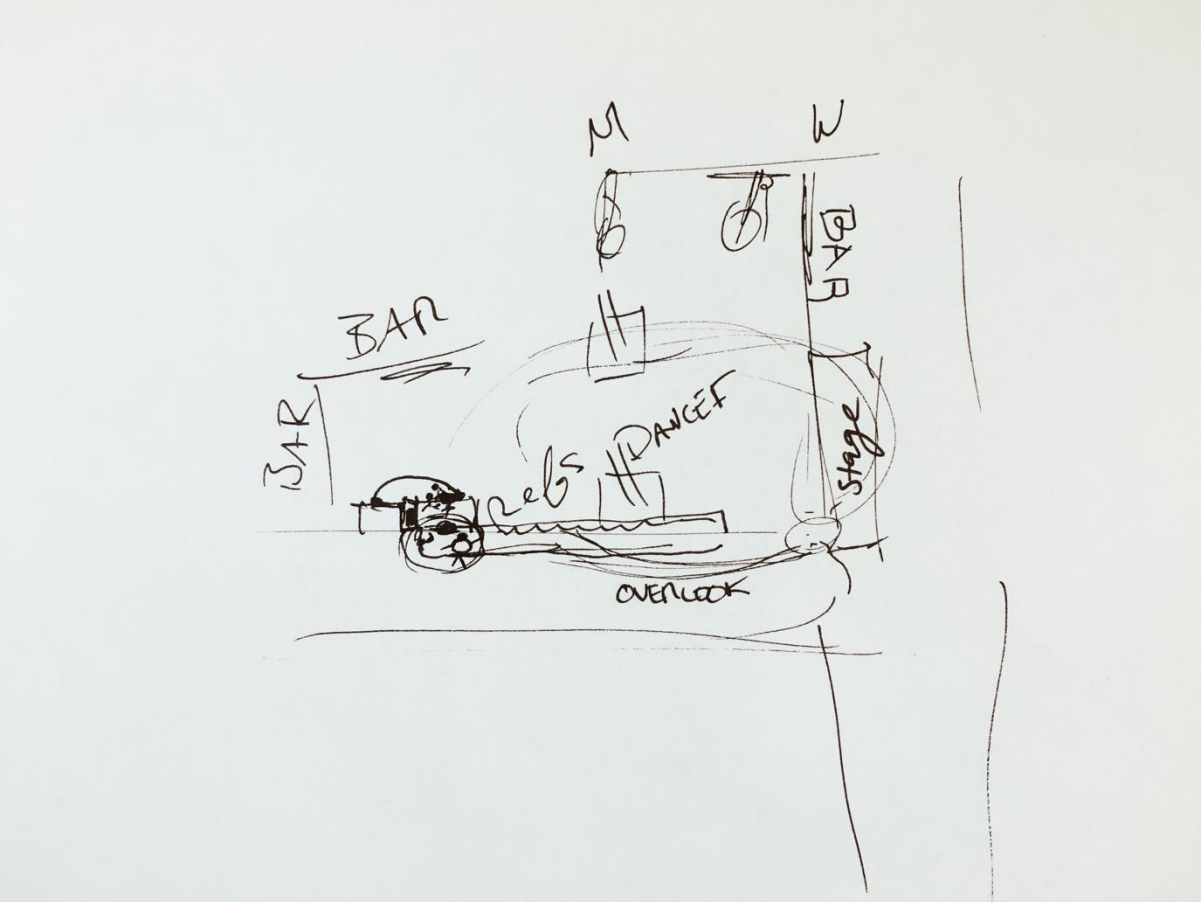

Figure 2

JM produced a map (Figure 2) of the first gay club that she had attended in her hometown. More than just the interior of the space, she designated the street that the space was built on, signifying the importance to her of location in a gay club's atmosphere. When relating her experience at Club-R[7] to pop-up queer clubs in Budapest where she is currently living, she explicitly explained that intentionality in visiting such spaces is of the utmost importance. She explained it requires a different kind of effort to visit and it diminishes the likelihood of patrons who are attending to treat the space as an exhibition. Queer pop-up clubs in Budapest she explained are often in the center of the city, in an already established heteronormative facility. As a result, the club may be queer but the attendance of straight folks is commonplace which threatens the safety and escape from the "straight world."

Club-R is in a central area but JM pointed out that the windows of the club provide a protective façade that allows for the interior to be more "free." As she began explaining the interior, general features were mentioned and marked: bars, bathrooms (M/W), stage, dancefloor (dancef) but she explicitly noted an '*interesting'* facet of the space when describing the 'overlook', an interior balcony that allows patrons within to watch the dancefloor and the space within (highlighted with concentric circles). The exercise of mapmaking prompted my questioning of how the material space of gay clubs could be differentiated from those of straight spaces; if at all? While each informant paused, and had to think of the answer to this question; sometimes asking what I meant by material space, the red thread that went through most of the responses was music and light.

Coinciding with what R attributed to his *transformation* in the club, light was also a common denominator in the differentiation of the gay space. It was described as dramatic and fancy but simultaneously as dark with the assumption that this is done in order to preserve anonymity of those inside. This, in my experience of participant observation, and fieldwork

[7] The name of the club has been redacted to protect anonymity

rang true but not exactly in line with the connotations that I believe were being discussed (i.e. complete mystery) but instead done in order to make the process of finding a hookup easier—similar to the mirror phenomenon that R discussed.

J noted: "In a gay club, usually, and this is kind of across the board, there is like the music is perceived as what super twinky[8] gay boys will like". He then pushed further and described these artists as "powerhouse singers with the dancing… fierce," mentioning singers like Kesha, Madonna and Britney Spears. D and G both similarly referred to the musicians as "LGBT Icons," or "*Glam* Music." There was an acknowledgement that these artists often play in straight clubs but tend to be relegated to specific, themed nights while in the gay space, they are the main source of ambiance.

This complicates the way that physical, material and geographic features are involved in the experience of clubbing. Because Club-R had already been clearly delineated from the heteronormative outside, the spectatorship and presence of a 'viewing station' within was not viewed with the same critique. Again, this explicates the nature of the queering of space in that the same facets that were viewed through a less favorable lens beforehand were taken in stride based on the human geography present. Though JM later brought up her critiques of the ogling she has experienced in gay spaces, by gay folk, her inclusion and explanation of the overlook proved valuable in further explicating how the intersections of space (first and second) can contextualize and offer new meaning to what is otherwise assumed to exist in a single, binary fashion.

Larry Knopp notes "as a project, queer geographies have been deconstructive and critical." In this, Knopp notes the effectiveness of using geographical tools to parse through meaning that often goes unchallenged (2007:48). This leads to the questioning of

[8] A Twink generally refers to a tall, slender, effeminate white man.

"certainties" that may even come from the pseudo-geographer themselves, which is exactly what happened in the case of the study. The mapmaking, and queering of this material offered a path through which to dig deeper into the meaning of space when considering and explicating human geographies of the clubs at the center of this work.

The Secondspace

Interestingly, the language used in the explaining of space in its geographical sense, is also used metaphorically (Gieseking, 2013). In Paris, France, while visiting La Boîte à Frissons, I spoke with a local Parisian in the smoking cabin about his experience in gay clubs. In asking if this was *the* place to be in in the city he replied that he wasn't sure because he was straight. He then followed up with "It's ok because I don't feel lost here." Given that he is a local in the city, in attendance with friends, it can be assumed that his understanding of being lost is not founded in the geographical but rather in the *imagined* space.

If it is not just the geographical, material space that allows for a feeling of being grounded, of being situated, then it is also the human geography: the way other people(s) allow for self to be found, even when one could just as easily be lost. The mapmaking exercise veered into the explication of this imagined, second space and took on a more interpretive, artistic slant. Crampton explains that this 'artistic' mapmaking has "exploded in the last decade" (2009:1) with artists working in non-typical manners to work through representation and the "kind(s) of space it sought to maintain" (2009:2)

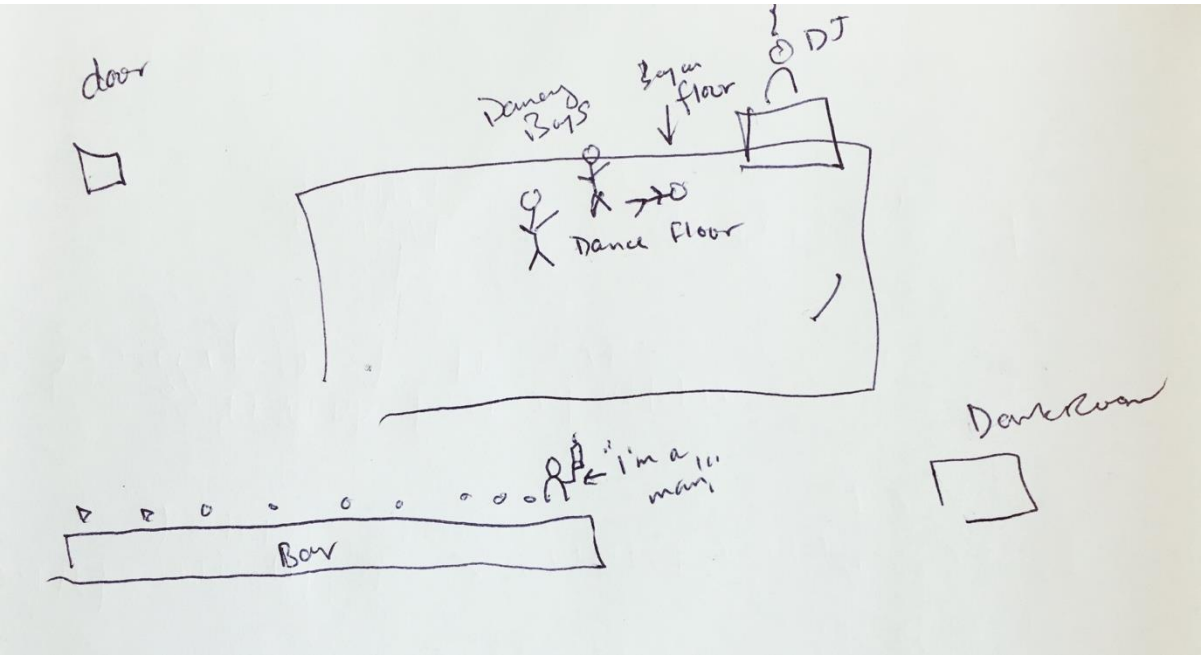

Figure 3

J offered a map of a general club space (Figure 3). The physical, material features plotted were minimal: door, bar, barstools, dancefloor, darkroom, and DJ (placed in that order). What took precedence in this map was the imagined, and locations of archetypal actors that he had found in his experience as a patron in these clubs. Sitting on a barstool near the bar is a figure titled "I'm a man!"; on the dancefloor, there are two "Dancing Boy"; and finally a figure laying parallel to the upper most perimeter of the dancefloor named "Boy on Floor"

When asked about the actors he had come across, he described two categories: the hyper masculine man aptly titled "I'm a man!", and the hyper-performing flamboyant patron named "Boy on Floor." Because of their machismo, the actor identified as "I'm a man!" was described as being able to act in the manner which they desired in and outside of the club. On the other hand, "Dancing Boy" used the social imaginary around the clubbing space to hyper-perform their flamboyant identity. J said, the space acted as a "means to an end. They're a

way for you to play a part because that space gives you the opportunity to play that part." He then went on to match this archetypal actor to a person who he had interacted with, explaining how these roles are often taken on because of what has been seen on TV, and end up "overplay[ing] the fact that he is gay" because there is an assumption that it is what the space is calling for.

This plotting and designations of space in the club was taken a step further by IB. Our interview together consisted of three focused maps, of which I will focus on two. The first (Figure 4) was used to describe a tumultuous time, she and her partner had, whilst at a straight club.

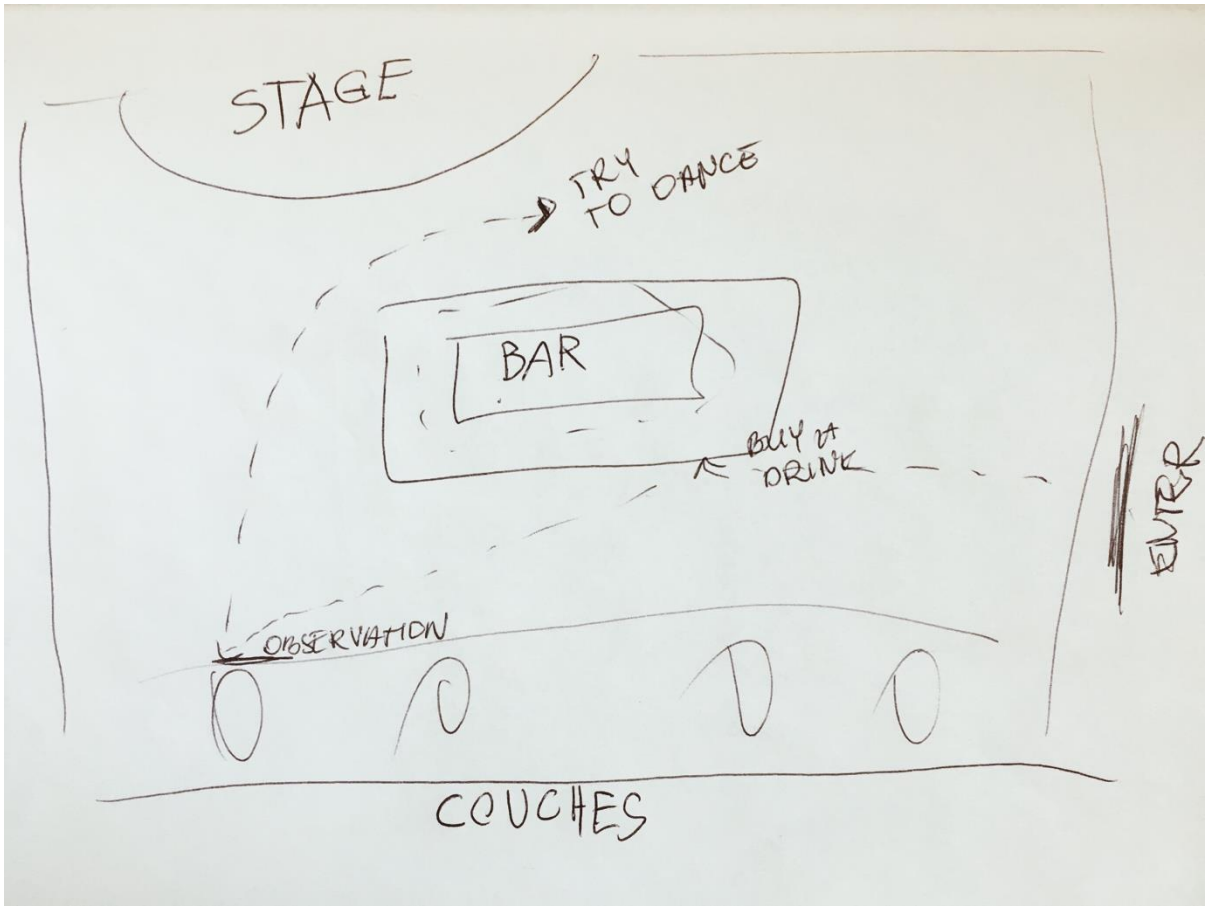

Figure 4

The map was used as a tool to ultimately elucidate how they navigated the terrain. She explained,

> "Uh, [we would] go next to the bar here ya know, dun dun dun dun dun, buy a drink and stand somewhere around and then maybe go here in a corner, kinda to observe everything. Um, then after I'm gonna drink I would go somewhere like close to the stage. That's interesting that I would go there where the thing is happening…all the dancing and yeah try to dance."

Of her own accord, she noted the curious movement toward the dancefloor where there was a large cluster of people in a space she had previously identified as being quite hostile. As she narrated the experience, she explained the trepidation she felt which could account for the dashed patterns of movement (in her speaking and drawing) when the other lines and thoughts remained solid.

She moved on to say that she and JM only spent twenty minutes in the space after being harassed by multiple men. This is distinct from her experience in the gay space, as she detailed how she would often stay well into the morning, clocking six to eight hours of dancing and drinking.

I have detailed how the creation and narration of this map illustrate the way these maps moved away from being *just* maps, even artistic-leaning maps as Crampton (2007) described, but instead morphed into diagrams. Yi Fu Tuan explains that "the ideas "space" and place require each other for definition… if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (1977:6). IB used the physical place to explain the space she was in,

abstracting her experience, thrusting the real back into the imagined as she pondered her own movements.

As such, we move from mapping the second space to diagramming the second space. Drawing from the work of Charles Peirce and Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi argues that what diagrams do is abstract, not with the intention of minimize facets of the social world, but instead "attending to their genesis" (2002:15). Moreover, the process of abstraction is described as extraction of the "relational-qualitative" (2002:15). Working in tandem with Tuan's notion of "space" and "place", this abstraction provides a larger foundation with which to understand the imagined sociality of the gay club.

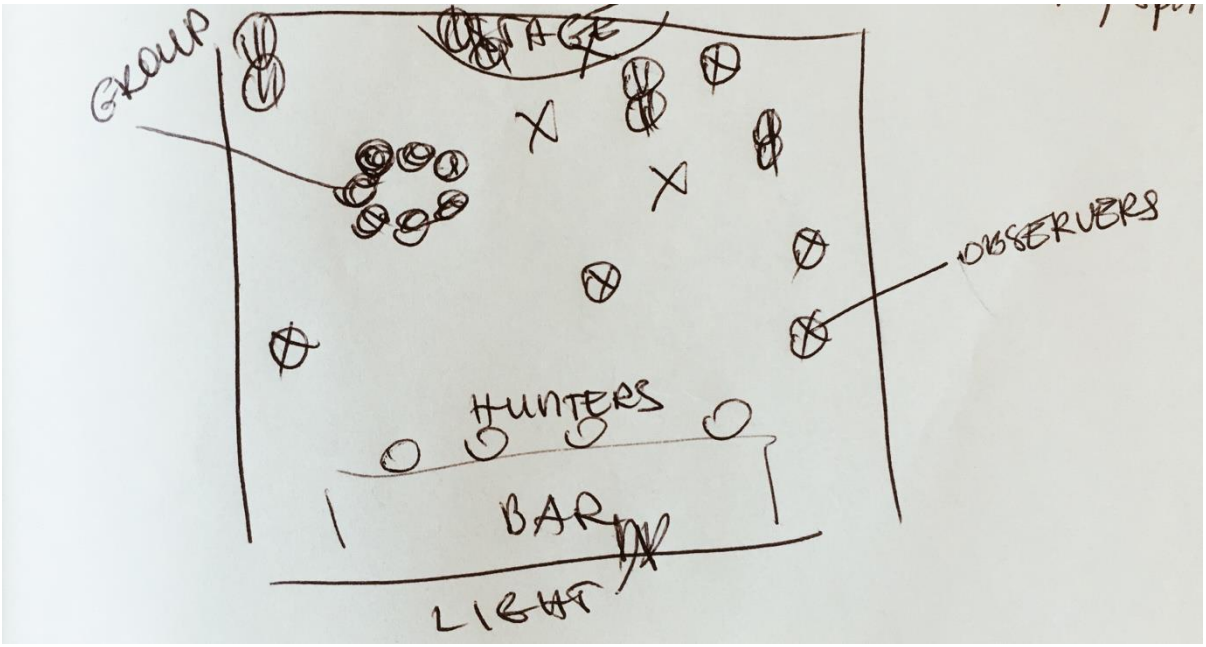

Figure 5

IB's third map (Figure 5) was a deeper conceptualization of the imagined space. In asking her to review archetypal actors she had engaged with or had seen in the club, she quite literally abstracted place and offered a "general" map of a gay club. Then, she moved onto to

illuminate space with the placement of these actors and offered explanation for the reasons why she made her decisions.

Good Dancers, marked by an X were described as generally roaming around the space, "shaking ass very well [*sic]*", but most often found on or near the stage.

Groups, labeled on the diagram, were placed nearer to the stage. IB exasperatingly stated that she hated groups because they take up so much space, and because they act as a unit, they feel powerful.

Observers, labeled on the diagram, stand nearer to the perimeters of the space, with a drink in hand watching as the space unfolds.

Couples, labeled by two circles with parallel lines running through them, were described trepidatiously and then more resolutely "They don't give [pause], they don't care about [pause], they don't give a fuck." IB identified herself within this category of actor and explained further that the has noticed herself and other couples sticking closer to the stage because they occupy the space with the intention of dancing. As a result, being closer to the *Good Dancers* provides greater access to new partners.

Hunters, were folk in the space described as, "looking for a [pause] victim [laughter]." They were noted as being placed in this area because of the ease of access for drinks, and the light (labeled on the diagram) allowing for greater visuals.

IB's markers for these occupants were also an interesting point of analysis in the diagram. *Groups*, making up a circle, were individually identified with concentric circles within, explicating the continuous movement, together and as individuals. *Good Dancers* were marked with an X, generally understood as *the* marking of a particular, desired space; while Observers were denoted with an X within a circle, revealing the reserved nature of

these individuals. *Couples*, although linked with parallel lines were made as individual orbs. This furthers the point that IB made about their general desire for new dancing partners: there is a sense of individuality even with connection already established with another. Like *Observers*, there is a level of reserve, but *Couples* roam and interact with the space as in multiple locations, extending the notion that there is a greater interaction with the space. Finally, hunters were noted with a simple circle, with no center which could point to what IB described as a more hollow, sexual occupation of the space.

IB's diagram demonstrates the fields of power in the space. The stage where *Good Dancers* were placed was explained as the bay where one goes if they wish to be seen, where their bodily and social capital could be evaluated and reified. As such, the *Groups*, tended to stand nearer to the stage to demonstrate their power as a unit, in the same vein that was described previously. The perimeters of the space remained a neutral field as interaction was not necessarily had there, because those in the area were more concerned with watching than integrating. The Hunter's location at the bar was of interest because of the middle space they occupied, existing on the perimeter but still at a high traffic area, designating their interest in the intermediary space—integrating, but not too much, interacting but not too much—as a hollow occupation of the second space. This rang true, even in IB's second map (Figure 3). In the intermediary space between the bar and stage, where she tried to dance, she became a hunter; not of the people how she described as occurring in the gay space, but a hunter of safety.

Actor:	**Description:**	**Similar to:**
"Girl Friends"	This segment of patron was explained as accompanying gay folks as they enjoyed the space. They were noted by R as doing a lot for the "atmosphere" although this point was not expanded upon.	Groups

"Straight People"	JM described this archetypal actor as negating the first space of the "gay" identified club. She went on to say that many of these people revert the unique space into the more traditional, heteronormative club. What's more is she explained that the space is often treated by them as if it were an exhibition, where ogling and (un)intentional violence occurs as they search for moments to tell their friends about.	Hunters
"Paid Queer People"	Z noted that paid queer folk were a typical actor he had seen in his experience clubbing. Interestingly, when previously being asked about the material space, he included these people (namely, Drag Queens) as a facet of the built place which reiterates how the first and second space become infused and work in tandem.	Observers
"Fabulous Dresser"	G only offered one archetypal actor that he has come across in gay clubs, noting that these people attend and occupy the space with the intention of being seen.	Good Dancers

Table 1

IB's diagrammatic presentation of the second space was one of the more holistic abstractions when considering responses from other participants. But, additional actors were mentioned by informants (Table 1), they simply fell within the parameters that IB described in her explanation and abstraction of the space.

The club's Firstspace, the built and *real*, is intertwined with the Secondspace, the *imagined.* This dialectic offers a distinct plane for analysis, the Thirdspace, or the *embodied.* Soja (1996) notes that this new atmosphere exists at the both the intersection of these spaces *and* on its own plane. The first and second space provide the foundation for which the

Thirdspace can come into existence. And, to understand its potency in the ways in which it provides liberation—in its allowance for new kinds of embodiment (and habitus for that matter)— it must be viewed through an "emancipatory praxis", "with the effort to improve the world in some significant way" (1996:22).

The gay club, exists because of social (and physical) separation enforced by stigmatization. To reiterate Goffman (1963), this stigma causes individuals to be understood as "not quite human" (1963:5). As a result, they are pushed away, being relegated to a margin. This happens both by force and choice as the normative realm specifically, and especially, within the clubbing circuit inflicts insidious violence. IB explained moments of escalating physical violence in heteronormative clubs where she was pushed and entered altercations with men. JM wouldn't go into detail about instances of violence she had encountered but said, "I've just seen so much. I don't know where to begin. I don't know where to end." And the stories of went on and on with each informant describing varying degrees of harm.

The Thirdspace: Safety

Julio Capo in his piece, "Gay Bars were Supposed to be Safe Spaces. But They Often Weren't" for the Washington Post (2016) explains that the gay club has always been political. Capo goes on to explain the first and second space of gay bars (which he uses interchangeably with clubs), elucidating the importance of a physical point in which stigmatized gay people could gather, and moving on to speak to the imagined community that is found within. He challenges the notion of safety in these places because of shootings that have occurred and ends with a single sentence, "Safe spaces can still become graves."

bell hooks (1989) further complicates this thought using thirded space. She explains it initially through the conception of home, noting how she worked to emerge from a context that incessantly, and constantly afflicted violence. She says,

> At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting." (hooks, 1989: 205; emphasis my own)

However, hooks acknowledges that often these spaces resemble the "tongue" of the colonizer, the downpressor. IB and JM each noted this by explicating the patriarchal grip that is maintained. Both individually commented on the way they are ogled by *Observers*, and grabbed by *Hunters*. Further, JM lamented how she has "yet to be in a space that is queer where people stand up for you." IB identified similar struggles but also mentioned that she doesn't attach the same connotation of aggression to these queer spaces; moving on to say, "this is the only space where we can show affection in public."

J and Z spoke to rising levels of homonormativity[9] in which they don't necessarily fit. Z identified this bodily as he explained that 'tall', 'muscled' men are given more social capital than those who don't necessarily fit into this binary. J spoke to this affect in his designation of the *Boy on the floor*, in which conceptions of gayness are fed through major media instilling a sense of what it means to be gay, leading to levels of hyper-performativity which then work to ostracize those who don't conform as.

Even in this resemblance of all too familiar oppression, hooks declares that these spaces have "undergone a transformation, [and have] been irrevocably changed" (1989:207).

[9] This social phenomenon refers to the normalization and hierarchization of particular forms of homosexuality within particular sexualized, classed, gender, and ethnic norms" (Browne 2006, as cited in Gieseking, 2013: 17)

IB demonstrated her understanding for this change in her acknowledgement of the fact that despite the present violence, she is still able to embody her sexuality and show intimacy with her partner… going so far as to say that she knows at least here she is "not risking our lives." And although JM described all the tumultuousness she experienced in the gay clubs she described how the gay club is often the "only open space" and explained this through a vignette in which illustrated how her close friend came out to her because of this openness, this sense of safety. Z described how he is critical of the club because of his innate pessimism but even in that he explained that this shift, although including much 'baggage' does in fact allow for a feeling of safety. And finally, J included the first space, the material presence of the bar, as his way through the violence inflicted, as it allows him to bypass it. He made note that it doesn't act as a social lubricant but more gives him greater strength to bypass what would usually be a focus. This queer space isn't limited to freedom for queer identifying people, the liminal offers a "space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor" Hook, 2007:207) provides freedom from other harmful structures that straight, heterosexual people feel...

D and G, who live in the privilege of heterosexuality, also spoke to a renewed sense of safety they encountered within the gay club. In asking G about his views of safety in the space, he specifically noted how he is finding it harder and harder to make friends with straight men as their masculinity is toxic and something he no longer wishes to be around. The gay club offers refuge from this and increases his ability to dance and do, as he described, "whatever the fuck I want." D described safety as the ultimate intention of the space and noted how even though she sees how certain degrees of competition are replicated (much to the same effect that Z and J spoke to), there is a "rare" feeling of safety allowing her to feel in 'communion' with other people.

As Capo's work demonstrates, safety is often explained in binary; in the absence of violence, in the presence of absolute calm. But as bell hooks explicates in her conceptualization of the fragmented home, safety can (and should) be understood in a fluidic fashion. Safety, was spoken from the perspectives of informants through this binary lens. Even though they acknowledge the ways in which they experienced safety, the fact that complete safety wasn't found seemed to negate this. It is not my intention in challenging their words to negate the harm that has been invoked against them, only to state that they explained the way they felt safer to embody their sexuality than they would in the normative outside. Z also identified how stigmatization leads to hyper-performativity because patrons can be "more sexual" they perform in an "arc" seeking to be the "most" sexual. This speak directly to the point of homonormativity and moreover the fluidic nature of safety, existing even in degrees of trouble.

hooks continues to describe the lack of safety by further explicating the conception of the fragmented home and noting, "For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance." (1989:206) It is important that this short passage is unpacked. In her description of the lack of safety, hooks identifies the space for radical openness as the Thirdspace, built from a *locatable* place and developed through an imagined community. The lack of safety she describes is aptly explicated through the notion of *place*—the geographic. Space, the physical and geographic, on the other hand, is detailed as existing in this dangerous place, this margin. Soja explains that the Thirdspace is both a creative recombination and extension" of the material and imagined first and second space, respectively (1996:6). As such, what is solidified is the way there is a simultaneous presence of danger and safety wherein safety and danger become more fluid, not remaining in binary opposition. Again, this lack of safety is a rooted in the identification of stigmatized bodies in

the gay club, but when investigated through Soja's trialectic, and the space is queered, the boundaries and parameters that safety and danger are viewed through are ultimately shifted.

This really sank in for me during a visit to Alter Ego to conduct fieldwork and engage in participant observation. Upon entering the club, I headed to the bar to purchase a drink, and talk with other patrons. In a matter of minutes, I was approached by a *Hunter,* a man in all black with glitter tattoos on his face and neck. He looked at me for a few seconds, shifted his body and forwardly asked if I was *actually* gay? I laughed and said yes. He then moved closer and advised that I shouldn't buy a drink from this bartender standing in front of me because he was straight; moving on to say that this was *just* a job for him, and he didn't support the community. Though I knew beforehand that this server was straight, I had never seen him behave in a manner that felt threatening to my safety; however, this man did. And so, he walked to the other end of the bar and ordered drinks for the both of us from someone who he knew was a 'part' of the community, who embodied the space in his sexuality and in his 'care.' The man returned with our drinks and I was reminded of hooks noting that the space of radical openness, the fragmented homeplace, offers enough safety for people to negate the control of the colonizer, of the downpressor. And in Budapest, what was described as an otherwise hostile space for his sexuality, the club offered him the safety to *be* as he wished.

The Thirdspace: Liberation

Goffman (1963) notes that stigma in its violence is a limitation, reducing the multiplicity of personhood to a singular identifier which is then used as the foundation for further 'understanding.' He explains this concisely by noting that we "impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one," (1963: 5). And in waging a fight against this stigmatization, individuals are ultimately admitting to their "defect." Yet, in the bold choice

of convening in a space, specifically designated for those identified as less than, and admitting to their 'defect', people attending the gay club space make a radical choice to liberate themselves. This embodiment produces a new geographical imagination (Fraser, 1990; Binnie, 1996), in which space is offered to deconstruct the stigma of queered identity and allow for a radical confrontation with the hegemonic violence of heteronormativity (Gieseking: 2013; hooks 1989).

Unfortunately, this liberation could also still be seen through the lens of oppression, as earlier noted in the discussion of bell hook's work. K described great joy when narrating what it meant to him to go clubbing. He started by explaining "its good to be around people who kind of um share identities with you" noting that there is a provision of escape from the violence that is the 'straight world.' Comparatively, when discussing his time in straight clubs, he explained that in gay spaces he could dance as he pleased, even going so far as "twerking on the wall," because he was not stared at, he was not an object. The space allowed him to embody that which he otherwise hid, in an attempt to protect himself. But in this liberation from heteronormative social affectations, he described this behavior as "acting crazy," or "acting a damn fool," maintaining the notion that this behavior was something that however freeing, was also an affliction. In a very different vein, J explained the liberation he felt in the way he no longer had to embody a false personhood. When visiting straight clubs, he often attended with his female friends. And when they were harassed by a "creepy guy," he was often employed as the boyfriend, acting as a layer of separation to protect his companions. They were his friends, as he said, so it wasn't necessarily an issue, because he wanted them to be safe; however he finished his brief vignette saying, "but also its just like, I rather not…"

Both of these cases explicate the nature of the gay club in its ability to provide a level of resistance, of personal revolution. Of course this occurs on a spectrum and is not necessarily complete, but it doesn't need to be, to be legitimate. In this sense, the gay club aligns exactly with hooks described as the possibility of marginality, in its ability to produce, "counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (XXXX:206). As hooks notes, this liberation doesn't need to be explicated in words, or reified in words but instead exists in the embodiment of such things, as K and J both demonstrate. D spoke to the manner in which this liberation occurred for her:

> "It imparts a kind of agency on people to perform an identity that they want to perform in a moment. And it's not mmm it's not a step towards anything or away from anything so it exists in its own time…."

Her qualification of the nature of this transformation, in its occurrence not being goal oriented, only goes to further reiterate the way the gay club encourages embodiment. She goes on to say:

> Clubbing is about engagement with the body in a time when we don't really engage with our bodies. When you hear music in a club, you're automatically reacting to it or with it. And it doesn't involve the same kinds of thought processes that I've experienced with other forms of expression. like with writing it's this big pregnancy that eventually something but with dancing it's a split production. because you're not even aware why you're reacting to the music the way you are. You're not aware why you choose to dance with a certain way.

Again, D points to the way the gay club allows for a type of embodiment that isn't necessarily deemed ok by the larger society which she occupies. She pondered and finalized this thought mid-interview as she explained that there is a "counter fascist aspect to it" in the way people are able to simply 'be', just to be and in doing so creating a "rare" safe space away from structural violence. She tempered this thought remarking that she doesn't believe

that this means that the gay club is not independent of structural violence, but it does indeed provide a haven that lessens its impact.

Using a similar train of thought, Z explained that these spaces are imagined and allow for an embodiment that enables a liberation from what he deemed "negative affirmation," or stigma but in their creation and imagining, a similar normative narrative is employed. There is a way to be, to perform, and to exist even in these spaces. Again, the gay club doesn't exist separate from these harms that it is ultimately wanting to transfigure, but as has been explicated, it does stand apart and the fluidity it allows in resistance and safety. Z furthered his thought by drawing comparisons between the club and a church saying "Presbyterians go to Presbyterian church. Gay men go to gay clubs. In church, you have this, do this; 'it's what we do.' In a club, this is what we do. This is how you do." He followed this up by explaining "It's a place where community can gather to take solace in itself but also define itself." This redefining, deconstructing and reconstructing of a stigmatized identity (specifically, within the gay club) is a liberatory practice (hooks, 1989: 208)

My interview with Z ended on this conversation regarding liberation. His words, striking and poignant, described how entrance into the gay club offered "a sense of catharsis," "a sigh of relief," as he exited the heteronormative dominated world. He described the competition he sees in daily life, "Who has the best job? Who is the coolest? who dresses the best? Who looks the best? Who talks the best? Who is the best?" and then went on to say as queer people, "it can never be you. Because you're queer. And that's, like, wrong or different or perverse." And though he identified the gay club as still existing within this competitive sphere, as D did, he declared in this space,

> "I can kind of fit the norms and expectations better and isn't that nice. Llike, I'm winning. Here I'm winning. Here I can win. Here I can be desirable. Here I can like, [pause], not be held in contempt."

He ended the interview noting how he didn't have the right words for it, but remarked on how this seemed to be the "driving factor" for what we think about those spaces and how we ultimately embody them when entering. hooks (1989) speaks to this deficiency of language, noting "the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew" (1989:204). But for those existing, and choosing to stay in the margin—who choose to remain in the radical openness that Soja identifies as the Thirdspace, language isn't always necessary. hooks says "we are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity" (1989:209). It is in the act of collection in the Firstspace, with the supplement of safety imagined in the Secondspace that individuals are able to step into a gay club and use the Thirdspace to embody all which has been othered and emancipate themselves, even if just temporarily, from the violence of stigma and its structural accompaniments of heteronormativity and homophobia.

Conclusion

I began this thesis wanting to understand if, and where, safety and liberation could be found for queer folk. Coming to the Central European University alone, and as an openly identified gay man, it became a personal mission. As I sat in class learning how sociality is organized, power is structured, and stigma is inflicted, it became an academic calling.

The gay club is a unique social institution, existing apart (but not separate) from normativities, specifically the heterosexual. In my first chapter, I use Goffman's (1963) theories on stigmatization to explain why the gay club has come into existence. I further this thought by including Radcliffe-Browne's (1940) structural analysis of governing principles to uncover how although the allowance for such a place provides a connection that stigma has voraciously attempted to keep separate, the antagonism between the social elite and the queer subaltern community remains. And as a result, I claim these theories are not enough to understand how, and if liberation and safety exist in such a space. There needs to be further digging. I move on to Soja's (1996) post-modern thoughts on spatiality, elucidating the importance of treating this 'othered' space in a more fluid fashion. This allowed for me to conduct my work in such a capacity that I was able to include *various* locations in this study.

In order to ground the locations, and explain how this was possible, in my second chapter, I provide brief histories of the eight informants that I worked with, demonstrating their views toward the club, their first forays into the space, and finally their sexuality to offer further perspective on their subjectivities.

This framework allows me, in my third chapter, to dive straight into the gay club space. I analyze the built and imagined discursively through the insight offered by the informants I worked with. I assert that the first and second space are intertwined and

ultimately allow for the Thirdspace to be created. The Thirdspace, then, allows for a degree of embodiment, of revising, and enables those who have been stigmatized to find degrees of safety and liberation. In order to not paint an entirely romantic picture, I elucidate the manner in which this safety and liberation is not static, but like the space it is housed in, is entirely fluid. I end this analysis using hooks' (1989) theory of the margin being a site for "radical openness." I use her work to demonstrate how often sites of deprivation encourage and foster liberatory practices.

Though this thesis is now completed, as I continue to work through theories of spatialization, and stigmatization, I would like to build on this study including other dimensions of identity—namely race and class—to explore how safety and liberation is sought in greater variance. However, I believe this thesis aptly illustrates how more fluidic treatments of space allow for deeper analysis of its affect and greater insight into the subjectivities of those who are deemed 'less than.'

Bibliography

- Binnie, Jon (1996) Coming out of Geography: towards a queer epistemology?. Environment and Planning, Society and Space Volume 15, p. 223-237
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998 [1994]. "The Scholastic Point of View" and "Social space and symbolic space" in Practical reason. On The Theory of Action. Stanford UP.
- Capo, Julio. 2016. "Gay Bars were Supposed to be Safe Spaces. But They Often Weren't." (Accessed 14 June 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/14/gay-bars-were-supposed-to-be-safe-spaces-but-they-often-werent/)
- Crampton, Jeremy. 2009. Progress in Human Geography (2009), 1-9.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. Excerpts from "The Fact of Blackness" in White Skin Black Masks.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. Rethinking the Public Sphere. Social Text, No. 25/26, 56-80.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration. Polity Press
- Gieseking, 2013. "A Queer Geographer's Life as an Introduction to Queer Theory, Space, and Time" in "Queer Geography". Museet for Samtidskunst.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. Stigma. Aronson.
- Harvey, David. 1989. The Condition of Post-Modernity. Blackwell.
- Hulshof-Schmidt, Michael. 2012. What's in an Acronym? Parsing the LGBTQQIP2SAA community. (Accessed 14 June, 2017: https://hulshofschmidt.wordpress.com/2012/07/11/whats-in-an-acronym-parsing-the-lgbtqqip2saa-community/)
- hooks, bell. 1989. Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics. Routledge.

- Knopp, Larry. 2007. On the relationship between queer and feminist geographies. *The Professional Geographer*, *59*(1), 47-55.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. The Production of Space. Blackwell.
- Massumi, Brian. 2002. Semblance and Event. MIT Press.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1940. On Joking Relationships. Africa: Journal of the International African Institute Vol. 13 (3): 195-210
- Ruiz, Paul (2012) Urbanism and Gay Identity. New Visions For Public Affairs Volume 4, Spring 2012 p1-15
- Self, Jennifer. 2010. Queering Queer Space. University of Washington.
- Soja, Edward. 1996. Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places. Blackwell.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience. University of Minnesota Press.

[i] All informant names have been redacted to ensure anonymity.