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## (Un)Stable Space(s): An Ethnography of a (Sometimes) Gay Bar

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## (Un)Stable Space(s): An Ethnography of a (Sometimes) Gay Bar

### Abstract

Using ethnography, I studied the ways in which space was created at a nightclub with a once a week Drag Night. The history of the space (each night building on the night before for years and years) created stability for the nightclub that remained regardless of the individuals within it. Drag Night, however, did not reap the benefits of that stability. Despite site - specific (read theme - night specific) normative performances in the space, the social space was altered through individual performances as well as rules associated with the club.

### Keywords

Ethnography, Club, Gay, Identity

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## (Un)Stable Space(s): An Ethnography of a (Sometimes) Gay Bar

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*Using ethnography, I studied the ways in which space was created at a nightclub with a once a week Drag Night. The history of the space (each night building on the night before for years and years) created stability for the nightclub that remained regardless of the individuals within it. Drag Night, however, did not reap the benefits of that stability. Despite site-specific (read theme-night specific) normative performances in the space, the social space was altered through individual performances as well as rules associated with the club. Keywords: Ethnography, Club, Gay, Identity*

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Using the front entrance, I hand the bouncer my identification; he directs me to the cashier. “One dollar cover.” I’ve since found out it’s the only night the club has a cover. One dollar – it feels like such an odd amount to me; getting a soda upstairs costs more. Why a dollar? What does this admission price provide for those who pay it? What do I get as a result of this fee? But it is a dollar, so I pay, week in and week out, as I travel Club North.

The climb up the front stairs is rather steep, but the stairs themselves are not. At the top of the stairs, the bar is just ahead, and a sharp right will put you near the middle of the dance floor. Starting at the bar to get a party soda I notice the people. The people are the same; the people appear to be the same people that were there that first Saturday I went, and other Fridays and Saturdays since. This is what surprises me – everywhere else I’ve lived “Drag Night” usually guarantees a fairly large and visible gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender audience. Of course, it is quite likely that some of these people would identify as GLBT, but the club is by no means giving me a feel of a “gay space” right now.

Outside of the loud Madonna remix blasting from the speakers and the three drag queens walking around the bar stopping to talk to patrons, I don’t see much that reminds me of drag nights I’ve seen at other clubs. Walking the length of the bar, I step through the doorway into the entrance of the dance floor. The people seem to enjoy the Madonna mix, as people are dancing and laughing – by themselves, in couples, in groups. This is the first time I see an indication of this being a gay space – men dancing and touching in a way that I haven’t seen any other night at this club. There are heterosexual couples doing this too, but nobody seems to take notice of anyone other than the people they are with. Weaving through the dance floor, back out to the other side of the bar, it feels like there are more people here now, despite the fact that I’ve been here only five minutes.

Twenty minutes later, the emcee announces that the second show is beginning. Following the crowd of people back to the dance floor, I find a square foot to call my own and wait for the show to begin. The emcee is actually one of the drag queens who performs in the show. After announcing herself, she hands the microphone to one of the audience members and gets up on the stage (here a permanent fixture that takes up a third of the dance floor in the middle of the dance floor, two feet off the ground). With the exception of one, she looks like all the drag queens here: forty-ish, heavy, big hair, a little too much makeup, nice clothes, and a fair performance. Everyone seems to enjoy the performances, cheering, singing along, giving the performer a dollar. Having attended drag night regularly for awhile now, I see this part of the show differently; all of these performances are merely leading up to THE performance: Rebecca.

Rebecca is the performer who looks different from the rest. Early thirties, thin, blond, large breasts, tiny outfits, and full pouty lips. Her performances are bigger and louder; her performance of Def Leppard's, *Pour Some Sugar on Me*, ended with her and half the audience covered in beer that she shook and sprayed all over everyone. As soon as she comes onto the stage, men and women will lay on their backs around the perimeter of the stage with dollar bills in their shirts and pants waiting for her to lean over, kiss them, and take the dollar.

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## Introduction

By going to Club North and observing and participating in the goings on there and interviewing other people who participate in that space, I had an opportunity to understand what was actually happening there and how the space was being used. Though everyone at Club North is participating in the same physical space, I argue that the ways in which that space is created from night to night differs. In recognizing the different ways space is used at Club North, we are given the opportunity to recognize the ways in which power and culture function in this small piece of society. The space(s) involve not only individual performances, but also physical things (bar, tables, stage) within the space. The function of power and culture in a nightclub matters for its workers, patrons, and larger community; this is true of power and culture in any public space. As a gay woman living in not-always-gay-friendly places, the role of public spaces, and the rules and roles associated with them, matters from a personal and practical standpoint.

## Literature

There is no shortage of studies that focus on nightclubs and activities that take place within them (Hunt & Evans, 2003; Malbon, 1999; Northcote, 2006; Purcell & Graham, 2005; Thornton, 1995). Most of these studies, however, focus on drug use in club space or dancing practices. Instead, this section of the literature review will focus on club space from a wider lens – access, “authenticity,” and resistance within club space.

Scheibel's ethnography (1992) of faking identity to gain access to clubs finds that the performance of faking identification occurs for different audiences: first, for the gatekeepers (individuals who check identification to allow entrance to the club) and second, for the other patrons of the club, some of whom are also performing the same role of faking identification.

MacRae (2004) completed an ethnographic study that focuses on the ways in which “clubbers” typify dance club cultures. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, she determines that there is an us-versus-them concept in the clubbing lifestyle; many of these determinations are based on actual cultural knowledge. “Participants socialized in and sought out environments where they would find their own kind” (MacRae, 2004, p. 63). In continuing her discussion of club culture, she notes two ways in which individuals are limited in their choice of clubs and club cultures. First, the cultural knowledge that an individual has will limit their options, both in where they will fit and where they are willing to go. Second, personal identification with a lifestyle will also limit where individuals fit within a particular scene. She notes, “We use ‘otherness’ as a powerful means of identification and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion” (p. 69).

Willis' (1997) ethnographic study of “Latino Night” through Goffman's concepts of frontstage or backstage takes place at a mainstream nightclub that once a week hosts a Latino Night. She claims that the negative attitude many Anglo persons in the area hold regarding Latino/a persons increases the importance of having a Latino Night so that Latino/a persons

have a place to celebrate their culture without backlash. Willis argues that Latino night is protected by three different sets of “screens” individuals must pass through to join Latino Night. These screens include the music, the language, and the racial mix of people. There are no actual rules that limit who may attend Latino Night, but these screens limit the people who are comfortable in the setting.

## Gay Club Space

Gay space is important; through the production of gay space, gay individuals gain power through legitimacy. In historically being labeled illegitimate, insignificant, and/or problematic, gay individuals were marked as less-than, as individuals without power. Having gay space legitimizes gay individuals and therefore mark them with having some kinds of power. In the case of gay clubs, the economic power (or discretionary spending ability) of the gay community is noted. Moran, Skeggs, Tyrer, and Corteen (2003) claim that gay space puts gay persons in the position of power. It does not, however, end with power. Instead of only filling the role of quieting heteronormativity, it allows discourses of homonormativity to exist and expand (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005).

Even within areas of gay space, othering exists. Johnson and Samdahl (2005) found in determining insiders and outsiders, the clientele at a country-western gay bar othered women who attended on Lesbian Night. The authors found that the gay men who attended often felt the women were trying to take over a space that was not rightly their own. Many of the regulars at the country-western bar stopped attending on Lesbian Night due to the higher attendance by women. Interestingly, the men did not appear to be as bothered by the women who attended on other nights, perhaps due to their lower numbers. In determining the persons who were threatening their space, in this case women, the insiders lashed out against that threat.

Buckland’s (2002) text on queer clubs in New York City is the most in-depth text I have discovered on queer club culture; she focuses her work on queer world-making. She states, “queer world-making is a conscious, active way of fashioning the self and the environment, cognitively and physically, through embodied social practices moving through and clustered in the city” (p. 19). In attending various gay clubs in the city, she studies this world-making through dance, queer politics, desire, and community that occur in these clubs, and between goings to these clubs.. Within the discussion of world-making she studies both how the space is made into what it is, and how people perform identity in that given space. The co-construction of space and identity is what gets to the nature of world-making.

Fredrick Corey’s (1996) “Performing Sexualities in an Irish Pub” focuses on The George, a gay pub in Dublin. Corey considers the spaces that different people occupy within the pub, describing The Georges’s three main areas: the bar, the lounge, and the club. Individuals within the bar are usually men from Dublin who either choose not to identify themselves or claim identity as a homosexual or a man who has sex with men. The lounge usually has both gay men and lesbians in it, but more men. These individuals are younger than the individuals in the bar. The lesbian women use the space differently than the men in that they usually enter as a group or arrive alone to meet a group of friends. Men more often come alone, and many of the men who are in the lounge are from Ireland, but not Dublin. The club caters to a younger crowd, still more men than women, but the culture here is different than either the lounge or the bar; this is the one area of The George where Corey (1996) saw touching. Additionally, the individuals in the club are vocally and visibly out of the closet. While the patrons in the other areas of The George are also out, the people in the club are louder, through their touching, their clothes and their means of identifying.

Rivera-Servera's (2004) study of Latina/o queer clubs argues that there are "choreographies of resistance" which are "embodied practices through which minoritarian subjects claim their space in social and cultural realms" (p. 282). These choreographies of resistance, arguably, occur at most clubs that have a focus on a particular group. I argue that even mainstream clubs have choreographies of resistance at certain times – on the nights attributed to minority groups.

McVeigh's (1997) study of an entrance policy at a gay disco is the only article I have found studying a gay night at a straight disco. Like Scheibel's (1992) article, the determination of authenticity lies mostly with the people checking identification at the door. While there is no single gay identification marker, the bouncers instead used mostly "looks and attitude" (McVeigh, 1997) to weed out heterosexual from gay patrons. McVeigh (1997) pointed out that many of the patrons were regulars and, therefore, did not need to go through the screening process. Those individuals who the bouncers did not recognize, however, went through the process, beginning with appearance. Instead of looking for stereotypical gay or lesbian appearance, bouncers would look for the type of dress associated with the regulars who attended the club. Additionally, those individuals who were difficult to label as straight or gay were asked questions to allow the bouncer to categorize them. Straight individuals were allowed in on gay disco night, but only with a "regular" gay participant who could vouch for them. While potentially problematic, this process allowed a performance of "authentic gay night" through the literal performances individuals needed to engage in to "pass" the bouncers that other clubs with open door policies might not achieve.

In considering the ways in which Club North functions as a space for multiple audiences, I analyze how the space(s) within the club are used by its patrons. The insularity of "Drag Night," or gay night at a straight club, makes meaningful the ways in which the space gets used. As the research above has shown, gay space can be both safe and inherently risky. Nightclubs are a place for recreation, but I also consider how space is used to create home for some patrons. This leads to my research question: How are the four spaces of Club North lived by Drag Night patrons?

## Method

In asking critical questions, it is often best to use a critical method to collect data and assist in answering the proposed research questions. Because this study relies on examining queer populations, a group identified as marginalized and thus always already framed within power, I use critical ethnography here in order to examine this cultural site. This study can frame how social spaces are used within everyday power structures. In recognizing the ways in which power is produced in a nightclub, I can more accurately discuss the ways in which identity performance and the performance of space, happen.

Additionally, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that historically critical theorists and interpretive ethnographers have clashed due to their differing beliefs. Critical theorists have argued that interpretive ethnographers "...mistake cultural members' *consent* to dominant arrangement for their *endorsement* and ignore the political complicity of a 'neutral' research stance" (p. 53, emphasis in original). In turn, interpretivists have argued that critical theory is not appropriate for qualitative research. More recently, however, critical researchers have begun to use "ethnographic methods to produce careful and empathic descriptions of everyday life" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 54). In making use of critical research questions as well as critical theory to answer those questions, critical ethnography is a better choice than conventional ethnography to complete this study.

Madison (2005) argues that to successfully complete a critical ethnography one must recognize their positionality as a researcher and the way in which that relates to subjectivity.

Positionality goes beyond subjectivity in that it focuses on “how our subjectivity *in relation to the Other* informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of the Other” (p. 9, emphasis in original). Additionally, while my experience in the field is important, it cannot be *only* my experience. Within any period of time in the field I must recognize that while I am experiencing an event, so too are the Others I am studying. Furthermore, my experiencing of the event has, to some degree, changed it. Critical ethnography, according to Madison (2005), involves multiple perspectives. It is “a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world” (p.9).

I collected data through two means: participant observation and qualitative interviewing. Van Maanen (1988) states that fieldwork requires the ethnographer to engage in the culture as much as possible; to put it another way, I involved myself in the environment and, as best I could, immersed myself in the problems of the culture. Before I began this study I had gone to the club as a participant in the culture. As a participant observer, I continued to go to the club and engage socially; however, I also observed the goings on of the club. I immersed myself in the culture of the club and took note of the space and the identity performances that occurred in that space. Over the course of approximately one year, I attended thirty-three drag nights and also attended several times on Friday and Saturday nights. Before beginning my data collection, I applied for and received Human Subject Review Board approval from my university.

As I neared the end of my observation, I recruited participants for interviews. I did this through flyers as well as emails to students on campus. I interviewed twelve individuals, two who work at the club and ten who identify as “regulars” at the club, though not all identified as Drag Night regulars. All interviews were conducted at my office or at a local coffee shop during the day.

Thomas (1993) describes data analysis as the “*defamiliarization* process in which we revise what we have seen and translate it into something new” (p. 43, emphasis in original). It is at this point where I can pull apart the ways in which power is distributed and norms in the space are created and reified. I then followed Madison’s (2005) suggestions for analysis: examining each topic in a given category and compare and contrast the topic within the categories.

## Results

Throughout this study, I have seen and engaged with space being performed in multiple ways; the four ways it was most often performed was: as safe space, as risky space, as home space, and as recreation space. Safe space, while a phrase commonly associated with the GLBT community, occurred on multiple nights and through a wider path of individuals than just the GLBT community. Its conception was through dialogues regarding physical safety when going out; this moved into an analysis of my transcripts to note the ways in which individuals performed safety, which then led me to study the ways in which the space itself encouraged safety. Risky space, which arose from my analysis of safe space, was a catch all for those moments where the opposite of safe space was occurring. Through access in particular, the question of the ways in which Club North is not a safe space was answered. The third theme, home space, was more complicated than the first two themes. While neither necessarily being either safe or risky spaces, home space often shared some concepts otherwise found in the safe space and risky space themes. Home space was answer to where one should belong, where one was expected, but also a space where one was not necessarily welcomed. Home space, perhaps more than any of the other themes in this essay is paradoxical. The last theme, recreation space, notes the ways in which the performance

happens as relates to the intended use of the space. I argue that recreation space cannot happen without the other spaces.

## Safe Space

Safe space is a phrase long used within the GLBT community to denote a space (often physical space) that is, literally, safe. The question of what the space is safe for is often more broad. Safe space, as defined by Buckland (2002) is “free of the external and internal restrictions and oppressions they lived under outside” of that space (p. 50). This definition implies not only safety from external factors, but also an ability to let go of any internalized homophobia within a space. While the visibility of external oppression or lack thereof can often be noted, the extent to which an individual is fully embracing their own power as an GLBT person is incredibly difficult to discern. Despite that difficulty in naming, Buckland’s (2002) definition is the basis for my discussion of performance of safe space. My use of safe space in this essay aims to go further than just the GLBT community. This focuses on the performance of safe space and the ways in which those performances of safe space have the fluidity to potentially create spaces that are unsafe.

Club North has fewer markers of a GLBT safe space than do GLBT-specific bars. There are no big drink signs specifically targeted toward the gay community, nor have I seen a small safe space sticker at the window where I pay my cover and have my identification checked. There are markers though; I just have to look closer to see them. The signs with the day-by-day drink specials always note under the Tuesday heading, “featuring two drag shows.” There are booklets on tables and around the bar that are the gay information booklets for the Northwest Ohio area, filled with ads for the gay clubs in the area as well as special events happening in the area. The clearest marker of all is, perhaps, the drag performers themselves.

The drag queens are performers. They are fluid, changing individuals who usually complete a total of four performances each within the two drag shows each Tuesday. There is a way in which, however, for the purpose of making clear that the space is at least a gay-welcoming space, they might as well be those huge gay-friendly Budweiser signs from the lesbian bar in St. Louis. The drag performers, while walking around the bar, are often touched and hugged by patrons, usually without asking the performers’ consent. They are used to bring in a specific audience and make them feel welcome. There are ways in which they are treated as objects more than individuals; the way in which the performer are touched by audience members is one of the clearer examples of this.

In addition to the markers that indicate a safe space, the degree to which certain types of interactions do and do not occur mark the space as safe as well. The use of touch within the club, particularly on Drag Night, is not limited to the lack of personal space given to the performers; it extends to participants in the space.

Going to Drag Night alone is always different than going with a group. It’s always a little strange because I can’t really talk to people in the same way; it always *looks* like I’m observing people when I’m alone. While tucked away in the back corner of the dance floor on Tuesday, sitting on the ledge that usually holds drinks, I was surprised by three men who ran up to me and hopped onto the ledge next to me. It took me a minute to realize that I had no idea who these guys were; the way they ran up to me made me think that I knew them. Through chatting for a minute I determined they didn’t even know each other. Two of them were friends and the third guy (Brian) just met them. Just as I had grown accustomed to them being squeezed in next to me, Brian hopped off the ledge, grabbed me by the wrist and started walking through the club. As he first grabbed me I tripped (trying to stand up before I fell off my seat and onto my face) and had to stagger a few steps to catch up with his quick pace.



After wandering about for a few minutes Brian and I headed back to our original spot to await the second show. The two guys who arrived with Brian were still there; we stood there chatting. When I turned my back to them (to see what was happening on the stage) one of them grabbed my hip. It startled me enough that I literally jumped.

Brian's use of physical touch within the space implies that Brian and his friends feel that within this space that behavior is acceptable. Indeed, my own reaction, while one of being startled is not, throughout this interaction, one of fear. This is in direct opposition to how I have felt in this club while being touched by men on other nights. A great deal of this is the way I read these three men; I read all three harmless men. The space, as one that may be a GLBT safe space, allows for these touches to be (read as) harmless. My lack of concern about being hit on or in some way hurt by these men makes me read the space, and their touching within it, as not only acceptable, but safe.

Is a safe space in this instance a space where individuals can touch without asking? My first reaction is that a space that involves my being touched without having asked my permission is dangerous. From reviewing my field notes, I believe I felt safe not because of its being Drag Night, but because of Brian's size (a small guy) and apparent level of intoxication (high) allowed me to feel confident that I could extricate myself from the situation at will. My tolerance for this behavior on Drag Night is undoubtedly higher than on other nights; I am more willing to trust people on Drag Night due to my experience(s) at this and other (gay) clubs. Safe space, then, involves trusting individuals in a space, based on my perception of shared identity, which will allow that space to remain safe

The use of touch and engaging with individuals was not limited to patrons at the club. The staff, too, were teased, flirted with, and engaged in the space (though potentially, not always with their consent). Their reactions, as the following field note shows, can add to or take away from the performance of space as safe space.

Tonight, a man walked up to the bouncer in the corner [by the DJ's booth] and began flirting – eye contact, touching. The bouncer playfully, but reasonably firmly pushed the man away – he stumbled a step or two. Undeterred, the man went back to the bouncer who had been sitting and touched his arm again. The bouncer stood up and half kicked at him (not at all hard) while both of them laughed. One of the man's friends arrived and tried to get the man to dance. The man grabbed at the bouncer's shoe jokingly, and the bouncer turned on his flashlight at the young men, temporarily obscuring their vision due to the change in light. All laughing, the two men left to dance (field note 11/28)

This moment at Drag Night was interesting because while the interaction between the bouncer and the patron seemed playful, there was a degree of physicality in their interaction that made it clear that the bouncer was not interested in playing with the patron. This quote makes me ask, safe space for whom? This interaction is worthy of consideration on couple of levels: the ways in which each individual appeared comfortable in playing a particular role, and the power structure between the bouncer (who has specific institutional power) and the patron.

Though I don't know the degree to which the patron and bouncer knew one another, I read this interaction as playful rather than hostile. Even so, the actual things that occurred in the interaction are, like in the example above, something I would usually categorize as dangerous rather than playful. The bouncer did not appear interested in continuing to interact with the patron, rather than telling the patron to move on he used nonverbal, potentially violent (pushing, kicking) communication to indicate his lack of willingness to engage. The patron did not appear to feel threatened or uncomfortable throughout this interaction. The power difference, too, is an important part of their interaction; nobody else is allowed to push

or kick at people in the space without being removed from the space. The bouncer's ability to push at and kick without recourse also enhances the question of for whom the space is safe. Safe space, in this case, means safe from outsiders, but with the trade off of being watched by gatekeepers who limit the interactions in the space.

This last example of safe space focuses on space as it relates to identity. Particularly, it ties into the piece of Buckland's definition of safe space having an internal focus. The degree to which the space is read as a safe space is not limited to the comfort one feels in being in the space. Through reading what a space is (a gay space, a heterosexual space, something fluid, something static) individuals' performances match that space, thereby reinforcing the way in which that space is performed.

In talking with Rachel, a Drag Night regular with whom I became friends, I learned how she saw Drag Night as compared to the gay bars in a larger city 30 miles away. She suggests that the Drag Night at Club North is a safe choice for individuals who aren't gay, but are interested in gay culture and for individuals who are unsure of their sexual orientation. For that reason, she explained, she prefers the gay bars in Toledo. She said that she doesn't like to hang out with people who are bisexual or, for that matter, people who haven't made up their minds.

Safe space, in this example, is not necessarily about a physically safe space. It is a space, due to the multiple theme nights and history as a "regular" nightclub that allows for individuals to try out different identities without being labeled. Interestingly, in creating this safe space for individuals trying on identities, the question of for whom the space is safe must be asked again. Indeed, in creating a space that is safe for individuals to try on other identities, the space is made less safe for individuals like Rachel who are uncomfortable in engaging romantically with non-lesbian identified persons. Safe space, here, is closest to meeting Buckland's (2002) definition; through engaging in activities they would not "on the outside" individuals are letting go of their internal oppression. Buckland, in fact, might argue that it is Rachel who is not existing within a safe space due to the ways in which she is limiting her interactions based on identity claims.

When considering what safe space is, it is important to ask for whom (and for what) the space is safe. In what initially appears to be a safe space for a subculture, one must recognize that the space is not (necessarily) being patrolled by individuals who fit within that subculture. This is not to say the space isn't safe for individuals who identify with a particular subculture (gay, goth), but that one must recognize that the subculture is not the only (or even primary) audience within the space. While creating a safe space for individuals who do not claim a particular sexual identity, are bisexual, or are unsure of their sexual identity; the same fluidity of space creates risky, and potentially unsafe spaces for others. As one of my friends said in a casual conversation recently, "Yeah, it's great that there's this visibility of Drag Night for gay people, but if someone in [this city] wanted to bash some gay kid with a baseball bat they'd know where to look."

## **Risky Space**

Most of the literature available on risk in club space is related to drug use and physical abuse. Throughout my time in the field on this project, I did see individuals who appeared to be high (and some who told me they were), but I never observed anyone actually getting high at the club. While I did see people removed from the club by bouncers occasionally, I also noticed very few physical altercations. Through my own observations in addition to data I gathered through interviews, weekends had more instances of violence than did the theme nights at the beginning of the week. The employees at Club North, in fact, seem to attempt to create a space that is not risky. Through minimizing illegal drug-use and violence on the

premises, they are reasonably successful. Risk, however, cannot be contained by these two practices.

**Access.** Club North is a risky space through the simple concept of access. Being on the second floor of a building, the only way to access the club is through one of two sets of stairs. The front stairs is one long flight. You can see all the way up (or down) the staircase. Despite the clear visibility involved in this front set of stairs, I have seen people slip down them. I've never witnessed anyone tumble all the way to the bottom, but I've watched (and heard) individuals skid part way down before catching themselves. The back set of stairs involves more physical risk. The stairs are very narrow and winding; they very much remind me of attic stairs. You cannot see all the way to your destination from the top (or bottom) of these stairs. I have witnessed, as well as been a part of, many collisions at the midway point of these stairs where you need to make a sharp turn. Inevitably, the individual who was going up as I was coming down (or vice versa) reaches the corner where s/he must turn at the same time as I do and we bump/brush/slam/step into/onto each other. Usually the collisions are minor, but depending on the speed one has gathered beforehand, the bumps have been known to push me back a step, leaving me off-balance, frantically grabbing at the handrail to avoid falling on the steps.

Having engaged with the stairs to gain entry to Club North, I seldom think about those who don't have the option. There is no elevator available for patrons at Club North. Individuals who are not able to walk up the stairs cannot gain access to the club. This inaccessibility should be considered an important part of the performance of the space. Intentionally or not, there is a clear message through this limited access of who belongs in this nightclub, and individuals who are unable to climb the stairs are being sent the message that they do not belong. Fassett and Morella (2008) state "That we perform our respective abilities with such frequency and skill allows us to take them for granted, leaving us with the impression that they are inevitable and reasonably constant" (p. 150). It is through the repeated action of climbing the stairs (or not being able to climb the stairs) that marks the body within the performative space.

The space is an unsafe one based upon the violence (physical and emotional) enacted by other participants within the space. This moment is not just a moment that makes the space risky; it reconstitutes the space through his naming. The space is not the same space it was a moment before; it changes the way individuals understand Drag Night, thereby changing the way individuals interact at Drag Night. Risky space is enacted through access, violence (physical and emotional), and lack of knowledge. The performance of the space occurs through the physical design of the space (the stairwells in particular), individuals in the space, and expectations of individuals who have previous spent time in the space. Risky space, like safe space above, is important to note due to its occurrence in moments; risk doesn't happen constantly across time. Safe spaces turn into risky spaces turn into safe spaces again.

## **Home Space**

"A home of one's own is...valued as a place in which members of a family can live in private, away from the scrutiny of others, and exercise control over outsiders' involvement in domestic affairs" (Allan & Crow, 1989, p. 4). While I use this definition because I think it encapsulates the general idea I have of home, I must note that the definition is by no means complete. Home can also a place where one is scrutinized and one might not belong. The original definition is one, I believe, that is the ideal; not all homes necessarily have all of those components. As Johnston and Valentine state (1995), "Home is one site where our identities are performed and come under surveillance and where we struggle to reconcile conflicting and contradictory performance of the self." (p. 111). This tension in defining home

came through in this study of performative spaces. While none of the participants claimed Club North as a literal home, the performance of space shared many of the tensions as the above definitions.

Home was enacted through recognition and welcoming by the employees of the club as well. I, personally, had a moment like this. Bartenders know who to serve alcohol based on the stamp on the patron's hand. Everyone who goes to Club North gets a paper bracelet downstairs, but the hand stamp is different. For patrons over 21, there is a Club North hand stamp and then a mark with a yellow highlighter; those under 21 get an X on their hand with a marker. One night while wrestling with my shirt sleeve to show the bartender my stamp, she called out to me not to bother. "I know you," she said. In that moment, the first time I was a recognized person at the club, I became not just a patron but someone who belonged in the space.

While at the time I would not have called it a home space for me, personally, the performance of the gatekeeper of the space (bartender) recognized me as a member, thereby including me in the space in a way I had not been prior to that evening. Home is performed not necessarily by claiming the space as home, but by being recognized as a fixture within the space.

While you can have a physical space that belongs to you (or your family), your house is not the same as having a home – consider all the subjective terms we consider with home that we do not with house. Home is usually associated with family; while family was discussed in interviews with participants and noted in field notes, the use of family always referenced "family of choice" versus family of origin. Some participants noted that finding "family" made the place "home." Home is where you can be yourself; with your family of choice you can perform your identity as you choose. While, for some individuals, the option to perform their identities in particular ways in front of their family of origin was not an option, one Drag Night brought a very different example of family and home at the club.

As the first performer strutted from the dressing room to the stage I noticed that she had never performed at Club North on a night that I was there. Just like every other Drag Night I had been to, patrons were cheering and giving her dollar bills, and kissing her on the cheek. There was a moment, though, where I realized it wasn't like every other Drag Night I had been to. As she worked her way around to the far side of the stage, there were a couple of women who were also cheering and kissing her and taking her picture, but they stood out. Their cheers and kissing looked different, more intimate; they knew this performer. Before the end of the performance people were whispering that that was her family (of origin) in the crowd.

Perhaps it was because it was the early show and there were fewer people there, but everybody knew that this performer was new and everyone saw that she had brought family members with her. The individuals in the area where I was standing just thought it was great; after her performance people were talking with the mother and the aunt about the performance and about the performance of the other performers. There was what felt like a real effort to reach out to these new people, welcome them, and make them familiar with the night at Club North. Though it was the exception at Club North, home space was performed by family of origin and choice coming together in a space to celebrate individual performance.

Though there are benefits to home, some disadvantages include the fact that one is protected from the outside, but still has to function with scrutiny from those with whom one lives, those with whom one is closest. Any and all drama that occurs in the space stays within the space for a period of time because there are not a lot of new people. Rachel said, "It's a small pond. If I do something or say something it will always come back to me, if not on that night then the next week." While she noted that this was true throughout the [lesbian] community in the area, it was particularly noticeable at Club North on Drag Night because of

the lack of other options for community. She did not seem irritated by this; she stated it simply as what “is.” Performance of home can include being watched too closely and by seeing the same people see you to a point that you pay little attention to it.

This surveillance also exists through the bouncers watching not only the patrons, but also the other bouncers.

A lot of times the manager will go in and instruct somebody, but generally they’ll go through me and I’ll take care of it. It just happens be that it’s like a family environment. We all know each other so well that the only people that aren’t part of the little cliquy family environment are the new guys. And those are the guys that I pretty much teach how to do everything. Then not everybody is the same. There are some people that can react to situations right and some people... that’s why you put them in a rotation and let them watch (Tim).

Tim talks about home in multiple ways through this quote. The very clear use of the word family implies a certain hierarchy and additionally potential familial obligations to the space and those who run it. In describing the process he explained that the individuals who worked there were like a family and new people had to learn and would then be a part of that family. Secondly, Tim discusses the process of watching; having the new guys observe the process before doing it, having the older (experienced) bouncers watching the new bouncers, Tim himself walking around watching to see that everyone is at their appropriate station. The (home)space exists through watching; patrons watching each other, bouncers watching patrons, bouncers watching bouncers, and potentially someone watching Tim watch the bouncers. This process of surveillance allows the space to “see” individual performances and correct them to fit within the space, when necessary.

Home space is both a positive and, though not necessarily negative, a challenge. The comforts, knowledge, and welcoming about/of a home make the space one where individuals not only are expected, but one they enjoy being within. The surveillance that occurs in home spaces, however, is different than the surveillance that happens in other social space. Home spaces are more intimate, so surveillance that occurs in this space is more detailed, and often more overt in the criticism directed at the individuals in that home space than outside of it.

## **Recreation-space**

Club North, in addition to functioning as a safe space and a home space for individuals, functions as a recreation space. While the space functioned as a safe space and a home space for only some, its purpose as a recreation space cut across all the theme nights. This theme of recreation cannot exist without the other themes (safe space, risky space, home space). In other words, it is hard to have a space of recreation if it is not too a space in which one *can* feel safe, at home, and even sometimes at risk.

**Design.** Club North, being the second story of a three story building above a sports bar, has limited space to work within. Due to the size of the building, expansion does not appear to be a possibility. On weekends, extra space would be useful, but during the week the design and amount of space within the club seems to suit the number of individuals there. The club is divided into three distinct areas: pool room, bar, dance floor. The bar is in the middle of the three areas to enter or exit the dance floor, or to get into the pool room you must walk through the bar. The design of the club allows for (and encourages) particular performances in particular spaces. Through the three areas within the club, patrons are taught what is acceptable in a given space.

No matter how crowded the dance floor, I have never seen the dancing spill out into the bar or pool room. There is no rule that disallows dancing outside of the dance floor; it is just a norm within the space. While I've never seen dancing in the bar, there are many who stand around on the dance floor. Generally the people who are dancing are in the middle of the floor while those who are talking and/or watching stand around the edges. The pool room, other than being one of the entrances of the club, is an odd space. While I knew people who shot pool, more often individuals talked about it as a waiting area. When I asked Tara if she ever spent time in the pool room she said, "not unless I get a phone call." These three spaces that spill into one another have limited acceptable performances within them. This limited use, despite the relatively open design, means that individuals have learned over time (from other people in the club) what performances are acceptable. In avoiding doing activities outside of their allotted space, the normalcy of a given activity in a given space has been cemented over time. The binaries of which Butler (1990) speaks applies to space as well as identity. In creating a space which has activities that are considered "normal" enacted within it, activities that fall outside of that norm are considered abnormal. Another way of labeling that abnormality is incorrect performance. As Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1997, 1999) argues, incorrect performances are reacted to with discipline. Yet, the only way to alter normative performances is through change. In short, the only way to undo that process of cementing normalcy is through altering the performances that occur in the space.

The fact that the club is on the second story of a building, particularly that it above a sports bar, makes monitoring the space challenging in particular ways. There is a dress code at Club North; it mostly focuses on limiting particular urban-style clothing under the claim that they are monitoring for gang affiliation. As such, hats must be worn forward or backward; heavy chains with large symbols are not allowed; sports jerseys are also not allowed. While noting the way in which it limits particular individuals from attending the club, not so much gang members as much as individuals whose preferred clothing style is urban - often people of color - there is also a challenge of enforcing it from a club design perspective. As the sports bar and the club are attached through the back set of stairs, often people will flow from one to the other and then back. While team jerseys are acceptable at the sports bar, they are not allowed upstairs. Tim mentioned the difficulty in explaining to people the reason why it was acceptable in one place, but not in the other.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The physical spaces, marketing paraphernalia, staff, and reputation all affect who chooses to go into the space, the individual performances that happen within the space, and the revenue of the space. These three effects are related; individuals make choices regarding where they go out based on what they know the space to be, and what they as individuals can do in the club. The number and types of individuals who go to the club affect the revenue. Being at Club North is not enough to allow individuals to safely perform a GLBT identity. It is only within the specific site of Drag Night that performing LGBT identity is acceptable; it is only on LGBT Night that Club North is a safe space for LGBT performance. These performative spaces change based on the site and individuals within the space.

It is important to note that the spaces are fluid; my discussion of each type of space can be seen best as a snapshot within a moment. The analyses that were accurate when I observed that space has likely changed since I was there. As such, a study like this is limited in explaining how a space functioned at one time; it is not generalizable to other clubs or even to this club at other times. The space(s) blur together and examples from one type of space, in some circumstances, could certainly be labeled as another type of space. In performing

space(s) the history of the space and the repeated performances within the space, in addition to the actual individuals in the space, all make to create what the space is on a given night.

The fluidity of space is important to note because it shows that space is momentary. Its fluidity is dependent not solely on ownership, management, or patrons, but a combination of all the individuals associated with the space. Consider the categories of safe space, risky space, home space, and recreation space: they don't happen night-by-night; they happen in the moment, dependent upon who is in the space, and what those individuals are doing. This lack of stability teaches us that the space, in whatever form it might be, is not to be trusted. While this is especially true within the space of Club North, I argue that the importance of this social space carries over into other, mundane, spaces in society as well.

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