Queer Constellations in the Big Easy: Making Space in New Orleans

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Abstract

This article explores LGBTQ+ space-making practices and spaces in New Orleans, Louisiana. It analyzes spaces to understand why, how, and for whom they were made. I conducted interviews with LGBTQ+ New Orleanians and utilized queer geographical theory, to present LGBTQ+ spaces across New Orleans as “queer constellations” of time and space on the map of the city marking places of importance to individuals and/or the broader LGBTQ+ community. To differentiate between the various types of spaces found, I divided them into four categories: lost space, transient space, explicitly queer space, and non-explicitly queer space. Through an intersectional lens of gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, this article attempts to examine whether the diversity and globality of the city were reflected in its queer spaces.

Keywords

Space-Making; Queer Spaces; LGBTQ+; New Orleans; LGBTQ+ Spaces; Gayborhood

> I remember a space I never knew existed. A space rooted in love and history […] I remember being excited for the weekend. It was my playground, my family […] I remember the first time I walked into a lesbian bar there was this feeling […] this was us.
>
> Lea DeLaria[1]

Introduction

As a teenager searching for community and acceptance, I romanticized the idea of LGBTQ+ spaces and communities in my head, thinking that if I found a space filled with queer people, I would suddenly have friends, family, and a place that felt just right. However, those dreams have not yet been realized as I have struggled in my search for a community that exists outside my own home and friend groups. In my short experience as a queer woman in her early twenties, many of the LGBTQ+ spaces that I have encountered made me question my and others' belonging within community spaces. When visiting Paris for a birthday with friends recently, we stopped to grab drinks at a popular gay bar before turning in for the night. It was fifty degrees outside, and while everyone else seated in the courtyard had been offered blankets by the waiter, we were left shivering and ignored. Three men seated at the table next to us stared at us with rude looks, and my fragmented knowledge of the French language allowed me to understand they were talking negatively about us. After one drink, we left the bar, though it was not much of an option because the waiter had handed over the check without asking if we wanted to order anything else. Of course, I cannot know if we were judged by the waiter and other patrons simply because we were not men, but it is important to note that we were some of the only women in the entire crowd of middle-aged white gay men, and it felt like a targeted cold welcome.

This experience was just one of many times I felt uncomfortable in a space I expected to enjoy. I have heard about the gay bar being a safe communal space, yet many have felt no different than straight bars, whether I am under the scrutinizing gaze of older straight men or the judgmental gaze of older gay French men. In search of an answer to whether my feelings of wanting more out

1 Lea DeLaria. "The Lesbian Bar Project, LBP History 2020." *The Lesbian Bar Project*, www.lesbianbarproject.com/the-psa-2020. Accessed 01 Apr. 2022.

of queer spaces were shared or if I was asking too much of one space, I sought out other LGBTQ+ identifying individuals ranging in age, race, gender, and familiarity with New Orleans to speak on their experiences with queer spaces in New Orleans, Louisiana. I aimed to explore how different identities intersected in the LGBTQ+ community—how people have been excluded, included, or all together created their own spaces—in search of community and kinship. Ultimately, this research has been an exploration of queer space in New Orleans—it is not, and was never meant to be, a comprehensive study of queer space. This work did not have the capacity to be all-encompassing or representative of every single queer space in the city, or the entire world. Instead, I intended to explore a flavor of the forms these spaces take on, how they are viewed by queer individuals, and the importance of queer individuals having spaces in which they feel comfortable.

Histories of Queer Space

> Even when stars fall out of view (due to pollution, racism, isolation, violence, aging, cis-heteropatriarchy), they burn bright. And even long after stars eventually burn out or implode, the light still reaches us.
>
> Jen Jack Gieseking[2]

Walking down a side street in Florence, Italy during my junior year abroad, I was truly confronted with the fact that not all queer spaces were meant for everyone. In hopes of taking solace from the cheap bars crowded with university and high school students, I googled "LGBT bars in Florence." The options were few and far between, and as it would turn out, they were mostly populated with older, white, gay Italian men—not exactly the crowd I was looking for. Alongside the small, cracked sidewalk, behind a row of Vespas, this particular bar prominently displayed a sign that read "Gay Men Only." This was not the first time I had stumbled upon an LGBTQ+ space not meant for me, but it was the first time it was physically spelled out, causing me to stop and think about what it meant.

During the summer of 2021, my girlfriend visited me for the first time in my hometown—New Orleans, Louisiana. It was my first time being fully *out* in New Orleans, both in terms of my

2 Jen Jack Gieseking. *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers*. New York University Press, 2020, p. 21.

sexuality and in terms of being a legal adult. We wanted to go to an LGBTQ+ bar in the way that many newly out queer people want to be surrounded by a community while getting drinks. I knew a portion of Bourbon Street in the French Quarter housed many LGBTQ+ bars and figured we could make our way there for the night. However, when we arrived at the corner of St. Ann and Bourbon Street, where clusters of gay bars exist, I was met with the same disappointment I would later experience in Florence. I walked past bars packed with older, white men, longingly looking at the pride flags hung from the balconies, and wondering if there was a space where my girlfriend and I would feel comfortable.

These experiences made it strikingly clear that not all LGBTQ+ spaces are made equally for all LBTQ+ people. These spaces exist in vastly different forms and places, yet they often cater to a clientele that is older, white, gay men. Thus, my questions coming away from these experiences are two-fold: What are queer spaces, and why do queer people seek them out? And how are these spaces inclusive or exclusive of certain identities?

Scholarship on queer geographies has developed greatly over recent decades looking at queer space-making practices from the end of the twentieth century to the present. Due to social exclusion and criminalization, LGBTQ+ spaces "developed as key environments for LGBTQ people to find one another, develop relationships, and build community" (Gieseking "LGBTQ Spaces"). Generally, queer scholars and geographers examining queer space have focused on the gay neighborhood and the gay bar. Prior to established LGBTQ+ neighborhoods, queer spaces were "gay ghettos" or vice districts in which cruising and sex work occurred, with LGBTQ+ bars emerging in the 1920s to function as central social and political gathering spaces throughout the 1960s. These bars were often also sites of protest and struggle due to discriminatory police raids and shutdowns, as seen during the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (Hanhardt 11-12). Gayborhoods, as they have been termed, were the first stable physical territories of queer space observed by scholars; they were defined by their unique cultures celebrating queer pride, large populations of queer residents, and the presence of gay-owned/-friendly businesses and community centers (Ghaziani 2). In the height of gay neighborhood development in the late twentieth century, these neighborhoods posed

as the most visible icon of LGBTQ+ life and were described as queer safe havens—allowing LGBTQ+ people to reside in communities that catered to their wants and needs through LGBTQ+ businesses, mutual support, and providing refuge from the broader heteronormative and potentially homophobic city (Brown et al. 13-16). But who did these gayborhoods and LGBTQ+ bars act as safe havens for, both historically and now?

For many queer women, transgender people, and queer people of color, these spaces were often sites of exclusion and invisibility. Spaces often strictly imposed “racial segregation, hostility to women, class exclusion, gender exclusion, or sexual expression exclusion” (Hanhardt 14). These exclusionary practices highlight the ways in which these queer spaces are not always places of liberation for all. Marginalized groups—women, people of color, and lower-classes—struggled to establish long-standing public spaces, such as neighborhoods or bars. Instead, these groups created spaces that were often transient and short-lived—one-night-only events that moved locations frequently, or more informal spaces of friendly gatherings. Outside of the more well-researched spaces of the gay bar and the gayborhood, lie other queer spaces that have largely eluded public awareness, such as cafes, lesbian and feminist bookstores, community centers, parks, waterfronts, comedy and performance spaces, lounges, and art galleries, to name a few (Hanhardt 15-26). Lesbians, women, transgender people, and queer people of color have often been rendered invisible in urban queer spaces.

Gieseking theorizes that queer spaces exist as constellations on a map, made by individuals recalling places they consider queer spaces in their imagination and memories. Gieseking’s queer constellation theory develops out of “the inability of LGBTQ+ people, especially lesbians and queers, to claim fixed, long-term urban spaces” (Gieseking, “A Queer New York” 3). Cis-gendered queer white men benefit from white and male privilege in that they have access to many lasting queer spaces, but transgender people, queer women, and queer people of color have lacked these long-established spaces for social activity, so they have formed their own spaces that are borrowed or temporary (Gieseking, “A Queer New York” 3; Gieseking, “LGBTQ Spaces”). Often these spaces do not last, and these groups experience constant feelings of abandonment, loss, and longing for

spaces they once knew (Gieseking, "A Queer New York" 204-205). Queer constellations are made up of "stars"—which are transient moments, events, memories, and experiences—mapped out by queer individuals and linked together as "queer space" through the imaginary (Gieseking "A Queer New York" 6). These constellations exist "as a queer feminist geographical imagination of urban pasts, presents, and futures that dislodges lesbians and queers (sexual and 'other'-wise) from the LGBTQ+ fixation on neighborhood liberation" (Giesking "A Queer New York" 198). Examining spaces through this lens allows for a more expansive understanding of queer experiences and ways people envision their lives as part of their LGBTQ+ community. This understanding of queer space as queer constellations expands the idea of what can be considered queer space and acknowledges the private and personal spaces that people create with their partners, friends, and families.

A Queer New Orleans

"Without community there is no liberation."

Audre Lorde[3]

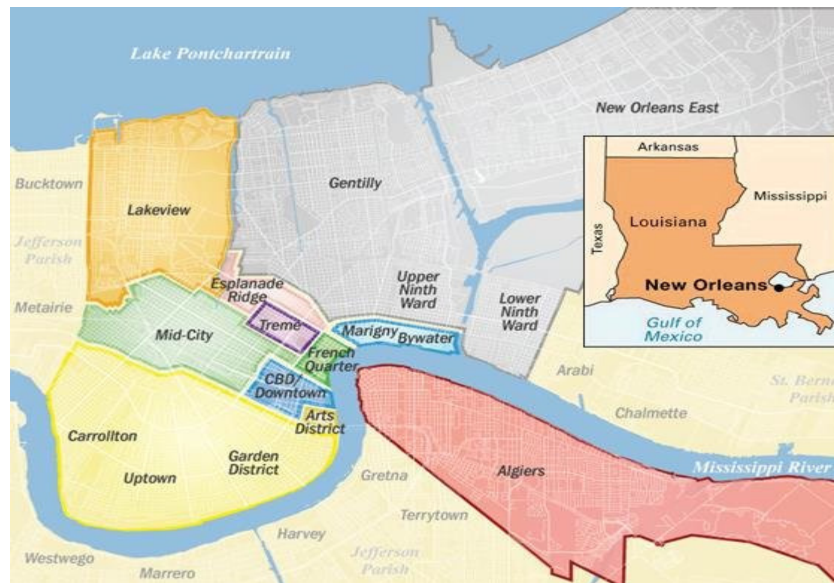
To define queer spaces, I borrow from LGBTQ+ scholars the definition of queer space as a "collective creation of queer people . . . [and] the ways [their] traces remain to mark certain spaces for others" (Reed 64). Notably, these spaces are "widely recognized or labeled as queer and are visited for this reason" (Rushbook 201). Under these definitions, queer space becomes a product of those that occupy the space. Without queer people currently occupying a space, or having previously created a space, then that space would not be considered queer.

A majority of queer spaces in New Orleans appeared in a cluster of neighborhoods at the bend of the Mississippi River: the French Quarter, the Marigny, and the Bywater. LGBTQ+ spaces in these neighborhoods can be identified and separated from non-queer spaces by certain markers visible to those in the know and occasionally outsiders, such as queer flags or visibly queer patrons. Though I would not necessarily define the French Quarter or the Bywater as gayborhoods, the Marigny was the first neighborhood that all the interview participants mentioned when asked if

3 Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984, p. 107.

there was a gayborhood in New Orleans. Looking at these places as microcosms of gayborhoods provides insight into the character and types of LGBTQ+ spaces that exist across the city. All three neighborhoods have distinct histories and are well-known for their contributions to the musical, artistic, and cultural dimensions of the city.

The French Quarter is the oldest neighborhood and the heart of New Orleans, dating back to 1718 when the city was founded on the Mississippi Riverfront by French colonists. Serving as a major port, New Orleans experienced a vast influx of European immigrants and enslaved



Map of neighborhoods in New Orleans, Louisiana.
Photo Credits: New Orleans Marketing Corporation (2013), Britannica Kids (2013), and Korsbrekk (2013).[4]

populations under both French and Spanish rule. Over the centuries, the French Quarter developed from a trade port to a residential area and a tourist destination, and today, the neighborhood is widely known for its nightlife (Magill). Though the most historic neighborhood in the city, it is common that some residents avoid the Quarter, in the same way native New Yorkers avoid Times Square. Due to its world-renowned partying on Bourbon Street and status as a popular tourist destination, it is often crowded and dirty. Neighboring areas of the Marigny and the Bywater—known today for their trendy shops and restaurants, arts, and music—were former plantations that

4 Korsbrekke, Mari Hanssen. "'Taking It to The Streets' -Community Events in Post-Katrina New Orleans." 2013. University of Bergen, MA thesis, DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.33991.34725.

date back to the early 1800s (Bradshaw). Due to its lower cost and close proximity to the booming French Quarter, the Marigny's popularity increased quickly in the early 1800s. Throughout the 1800s, the neighborhood was home to poorer French-speaking white and black individuals, and later German, Irish, and Italian immigrants (Branley). This popularity spread into the Bywater and in the early 19th century, it became a diverse neighborhood, home to Creole settlers, free people of color, and immigrants from places like Haiti, Germany, Italy, and Ireland ("Bywater Historic District"). All three of these neighborhoods were quite multi-ethnic and diverse throughout their development, and they are uniquely New Orleans.

In the aftermath of World War II, many white residents left the Marigny neighborhood for the suburbs, making space in the area for lower-income Black populations to move into more affordable housing in the city (Branley). However, the neighborhood then underwent gay gentrification transforming the Marigny "from a working-class area experiencing disinvestment (in the 1950s and 1960s) to a more solidly middle-class and substantially renovated one (in the 1970s)" (Knopp 355). Throughout the 1960s to 1980s, middle-class, white, gay men moved into the neighborhood and advocated for its historical preservation and upkeep (Knopp 355-361). It started with only a few white gay men moving into the neighborhood in the 1960s and really took off in the 1970s when many members of the neighborhood, mostly gay men, argued for the historical preservation of the area and encouraged their peers (other white gay men) to move into the neighborhood (Knopp 362). Thus, a growing gay community in the neighborhood contributed to the Marigny's status as a gayborhood with the spread of gay bars, bookstores, restaurants, and other businesses (Knopp 361). Though, at the time, the original residents of the Marigny were largely not displaced by this form of gentrification, the character of the neighborhood changed with a substantial number of middle- and upper-class gay men moving into a lower-class neighborhood (Knopp 365).

The French Quarter, Bywater, and Marigny embody the laid-back culture of New Orleans with its emphasis on community, art, music, and culture. In fact, the city's motto is "laissez les bons temps rouler," which translates to "let the good times roll"—emphasizing the importance of

the city's "anything goes" attitude. Howard Philips Smith and Frank Perez write of this attitude,

> New Orleans has always been simultaneously part of the Deep South and an odd outsider, an isolated island of hedonists carefully crafted and cared for by European settlers, or Creoles, especially the French and their Old-World affectations. The city was already populated by pleasure seekers at the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, and it continued to celebrate life to the fullest. Residents remained devoted to the illusive and ephemeral things that made life in the swamps not only bearable but even preferable. (5)

Across the city, but especially in these neighborhoods, one can find street performers, music venues, art markets, local restaurants, and trendy photo-ops. With the focus on partying in the French Quarter, and the Marigny and the Bywater characterization as hip, artsy, and home to LGBTQ+ spaces, it was to be expected that many queer spaces would have existed in these areas today.

According to the Locals

My research found that queer spaces continue to be pillars of LGBTQ+ communities for meeting fellow LGBTQ+ individuals and, as participant Jade commented, for being "surrounded by like-minded people." Most of my research participants insisted that the purpose and importance of queer spaces are to serve as a place where people feel understood and see their own experiences reflected in others. For some, queer spaces represent safe spaces. Blair, a participant who identifies as white, queer, and non-binary, commented:

> It is not that I regularly feel unsafe in [heterosexual] spaces in the city, but it is that feeling of community you get when you are around your people [in queer spaces]. I know even before going [to a queer space] that the crowd will be people that have similar experiences to me. It is easier to connect with people because you already know you have a shared experience and connection.

Ideally, these spaces exist in the world to serve this purpose, but this reality may not exist for all LGBTQ+ individuals. While Blair is white, their race more commonly does not affect their experience as a queer individual. However, Drea, a Black queer woman, stated that "there is always

the 'race' thing . . . [where] some spaces are overwhelmingly white." Drea presumably cannot see her experience as a Black queer woman shared with other white queer individuals.

I wondered if this feeling of shared experiences and community within queer spaces, or even the larger LGBTQ+ community, is actually an imaginary community among my participants' romanticized notions of queer space and community. An "imagined community" meaning "a group of people bound together… [despite their identities being] fragmented along lines of age, class, race, experience, political positioning and so on" (Valentine 99). Political scientist Benedict Anderson coined the concept of "imagined community" in 1983, however, Gill Valentine is repurposing his idea to speak on constructions of place-based LGBTQ+ community-making. Here, I am applying this repurposed definition of imagined community, to discuss the idea of a false reality of a shared queer reality that links individuals together simply because of sexuality. It is interesting that some participants expressed frustration and difficulty in finding spaces they felt completely welcome in, while at the same time reassuring their feelings of comfort and community they experienced in queer spaces. I wonder if these participants were struggling with their expectations of feeling safe and at home in queer spaces in the context of ongoing discrimination and exclusion in these very same spaces.

Jade, Mia, and Drea, all Black LGBTQ+ women, expressed similar sentiments of wishing they had more spaces to turn to that were meant for Black queer individuals. Jade remarked, "people notice that I am Black before they notice that I am bi-sexual . . . We go through life as Black women first, so I would be in a Black space before I'm in a queer (white) space." I was able to identify one Black-owned LGBTQ+ bar, located on the fringes of the French Quarter, called The Page. However, this bar is once again predominantly male-focused, with Jade stating, "it just was not a space for women . . . [I] expected more comfort there but ended up feeling the same [as I do in straight bars]." There is a complex battle of identities at play in queer spaces, where experiences may be shared across individuals simply because they identify as LGBTQ+, but those shared experiences and commonalities may stop if they cross racial, class, or gendered lines. This may be because, as Jade pointed out, people are more often able to notice one's race before

noticing sexuality. All of our identities, in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, age, and so on, impact the ways in which we experience the world and others around us. Being around others with similar identities and lived experiences is important for finding unity, and yet many spaces in New Orleans are not doing enough to cater to a diverse clientele because they are predominantly white spaces, which exclude—whether on purpose or not—the lived experiences of queer people of color.

Categories of Queer Space

To return to the definition of queer space as a marker of queer people's traces and existence, I ultimately came across spaces that fell into the following four categories: 1) *explicitly queer spaces* with fixed locations, 2) *non-explicitly queer spaces*, 3) *transient queer spaces*, and 4) *lost queer spaces*. In exploring LGBTQ+ spaces in New Orleans, I discovered a wide range of spaces that queer communities gravitate towards, each serving different purposes and significance to individuals' lives. Thomas, a participant and scholar on LGBTQ+ New Orleans, remarked that queer spaces "exist because they meet a specific need and fill a gap." This sentiment is the exact reason why queer spaces vary so much in type and target clientele. Queer spaces will continue to exist until there is no reason for them to exist, and as for now, they exist because there is still no complete inclusion or acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in broader society.

In my research, I aimed to engage not just with mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces, but also the more hidden spaces that only those "in the know" would be able to find, in order to understand the differences and difficulties in finding representative and diverse spaces. The first category of queer space, the permanent spaces explicitly centered around LGBTQ+ communities, exist as popular gay bars or community centers, and are more easily discovered.[5] I distinguish these spaces as "mainstream" because they can easily be found by searching "LGBTQ+ spaces in New Orleans" on Google. It is notable that most of these spaces are bars and nightclubs located in the French

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5 These spaces include the LGBT Community Center of New Orleans and bars such as The Oz, Cafe Lafitte in Exile, Crossing, Good Friend's Bar, The Friendly Bar, Napoleon's Itch, Bourbon Pub Parade, Rawhide 2010, The Golden Lantern, and Cafe Lafitte in Exile.

Quarter—known for its partying—and therefore attract the most attention and likely the largest crowds of locals and tourists alike. These places are thrust into the spotlight as popular LGBTQ+ spaces simply because of their location and history. Opened in 1933, Cafe Lafitte in Exile boasts the title of being the oldest continuously operating gay bar in the country. One interviewee, Thomas, an older white Latino gay man, spoke about the historical importance of Cafe Lafitte in Exile:

> When [Prohibition was abolished] . . . a lesbian woman by the name of Mary Collins along with two straight businessmen leased a space on Bourbon Street and called it Cafe Lafitte, and it was pretty much a gay bar. [But in] 1953, the owner of the building died, and the new owner said, 'I'll renew your lease, but I don't want any queer people here' . . . So they walked down the street to the next corner at 901 Bourbon Street and re-opened Cafe Lafitte, but they added the words 'in exile.'

Some of these more mainstream spaces have long-established histories and community ties in New Orleans. Despite being well-known, most of my participants did not frequent many of these spaces and those that did pointed out these bars only provided them with a night of dancing and drinking, and not much more.

Thomas also stated that Cafe Lafitte in Exile, like all bars at the time, was once racially segregated and did not allow women until the 1990s. Cafe Lafitte in Exile required women to provide numerous forms of ID and follow a particular dress code to gain entry to the bar until the 90s (Perez and Palmquist). This practice highlights the policing of queer space through formalized illegal ways of excluding women or people of color in order to limit spaces to white men. Does this affect who the clientele of this bar is today? Every one of my participants noted that the demographics of the LGBTQ+ bars in the French Quarter area are overwhelmingly white men. What spaces do other LGBTQ+ people frequent in the city, and where do they go for purposes other than a night of partying?

This is where non-explicit and transient LGBTQ+ spaces, the second and third categories, come into play as alternative spaces for those that do not prefer the more mainstream spaces. Non-explicit spaces can also be termed "post-gay" spaces, which are those that attract largely queer

crowds, like local coffee shops and neighborhood dive bars, but being queer is not "the central marker of the space" (Brown 133). In these spaces, "their clientele are many people who identify themselves as [LGBTQ+], but the sites themselves do not demand the assertion of one identity or another" (Brown 140). Not all patrons in these spaces identify as LGBTQ+ like in explicit spaces, but queer-identifying individuals are treated the same as the heterosexual clientele. I would go as far as to say that the three neighborhoods where most spaces exist—the French Quarter, Marigny, and Bywater—are post-gay spaces and neighborhoods. These post-gay spaces can be defined as queer communities and identities that coexist alongside heterosexual communities, often with a "lack of a clear demarcation of 'gay' and 'straight' zones" (Spruce 965). In these neighborhoods, there are, according to my interviewees, numerous spaces that "feel" like a queer space even though not everyone in those spaces is queer or that the spaces were not necessarily intended to be queer.[6]

Next, I identified transient spaces that exist in the form of pop-up and one-night-only events or parties. These types of spaces lack permanence and rely on planned recurring events at host locations. These events, though often successful due to the high demand for certain types of spaces (for example, lesbian nights at clubs), are at the whims of host locations in order to provide the event, and as a result, are at a constant risk of disappearing. Three successful queer pop-up events I came across in New Orleans were *Grrlspot*, a lesbian event that takes place in a different venue each month (reminiscent of Girl's Nights at bars); *Ascendance*, a monthly invite-only event in the Marigny centering the experiences of queer people of color; and COVID-friendly events hosted by Kitten and Lou ("About Kitten N' Lou"), a queer couple in the Bywater. These events represent important aspects of transient space and reflect the possibility of what mainstream queer spaces could be if more diverse businesses were to exist on a permanent basis.

An additional type of transient space exists in the personal realm as gatherings of friends in private locations, like backyards and homes. Transient spaces most directly connect with

6 These post-gay spaces include bars located in the Marigny and Bywater areas, such as, Kajun's Karaoke Pub, AllWays Lounge & Cabaret, Hi-Ho Lounge, and Saturn Bar; coffeehouse like Baldwin & Company in the Marigny, Coffee Science in Mid City, and the Neutral Ground Coffeehouse in Freret; the independent radical bookstore Frenchman Art & Books in the Marigny; and Dogfish, a monthly reading and open mic event, in the Marigny.

Gieseking's idea of queer constellations.[7] Transient spaces—both personal gatherings and pop-up events—are generally harder to find because one must be "in the know" about these types of events or must be acquainted with people hosting such gatherings. While transient spaces are not perfect, it is curious that they do not exist long-term given that they are widely popular. Do transient spaces result from the choices of certain groups or are they ultimately forced creative solutions to inequality and exclusion?

Making Space

While I have categorized the types of spaces and explored their significance for the city's LGBTQ+ community, an aspect I want to further explore is the actual character of individual spaces themselves. Most LGBTQ+ spaces in New Orleans revolve around the bar, the club, the lounge, and drinking—though I think this generally has to do with the partying culture in the city. I think it is important to also closely look at a few important spaces that represent the more hidden forms of space-making. Two spaces I selected to analyze more in-depth are Ascendance and a personal transient space of my own.

Filling a Gap in Representation

> My experience at Ascendance was amazing. They are very cautious when it comes to COVID which I appreciated. Everyone needed to be vaccinated and have a negative COVID test at the door. Another thing I liked about Ascendance is that they make sure everyone can come despite their financial situation. Me and my friends couldn't pay the cover fee, but fortunately when we [messaged] them explaining our situation they said not to worry about it. The party itself was super fun and very gay. Everyone was so welcoming. The bathrooms were gender neutral, and everyone could be themselves which was seen by everyone's vibrant styles.
>
> *Mia (22-year-old, bisexual Black woman)*

The rendering of queer people of color invisible and the absence of intersectional spaces demand that more intentional spaces must develop for the expansive identities within the LGBTQ+

7 An additional type of space, non-physical space, exists in the form of magazines like Ambush Magazine, and advocacy groups like House of Tulip, BREAKout!, and Southerners on New Ground. Though not necessarily physical, they provide a place of community building that creates a space for bonding of shared interests in social change and equality.

community. By this I mean spaces should be created specifically for Black queer people, trans and gender non-conforming people, queer immigrants, queer people with disabilities, and other groups, to provide a place that is more relatable than generalized LGBTQ+ spaces. One such space is Ascendance, a monthly invite-only pop-up event at Cafe Istanbul—a multifunctional performance art and events space—in the Marigny, hosted by a group of five artists of color since 2017. The creators of the events describe their purpose as "[healing] and [affirming] our people through celebration, joy, and spiritual commune . . . [through] hosting events that respond directly to community needs and desires" ("About"). Ascendance is not an exclusively queer space, but it is an explicitly queer-friendly and safe space, as laid out in their strict set of guidelines that guests must follow to ensure the comfort of all attendees. The event's Instagram page posted the following:

> For the uninitiated, we are an unapologetically Black and Brown and queer-centering event and we welcome all people of all races, identities, and traditions who follow our community rules and respect and embrace us and our cultures on our terms! (@ascen.dance "November")

The guidelines cover certain language, consent, and behavior that is expected of all attendees which makes this a safer space for more marginalized identities that may feel uncomfortable or unsafe elsewhere. These rules include: "Do not touch or bother anyone without verbal or confirmed consent," "[Don't] bring any transgressive [behavior] of any kind with you," and "[Don't] say the [N-word] in our space unless you're black!" (@ascendance "November" and "December"). If an attendee or their guest breaks these rules, they face the threat of being banned from all future events. One attendee reflected on their experience at an Ascendance event, stating,

> As a closeted baby Black queer woman, it was the first time that I felt truly comfortable at a party or bar. Unlike other nightlife events, this one came with rules that were specifically designed with my safety in mind . . . Ascendance's rules were "crafted with and by large contributions from Black queer and trans/GNC [gender-nonconforming] people." (Wong-Shing)

It is uncommon for events to be so explicitly radical in terms of the level of safety and inclusivity they are ensuring their guests—at least, I have not found this in any of the other spaces I have explored. The creators of Ascendance are responsive to social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Trans Lives Matter, and #MeToo, in their priorities of keeping people safe from certain behaviors.

Conscious of its clientele, the event caters to the wants, desires, and needs of its communities in any way possible to construct safe space, whether that be covering ticket fees, providing support advocates at events, or requiring COVID-19 vaccinations. Their "unapologetic" prioritizing and support of Black and Brown queer individuals is exactly why this space is important. As Drea, Mia, and Jade all shared that they would prefer to be in an explicitly Black queer space over a generalized LGBTQ+ space, there is a need for more places and events like Ascendance. Ascendance fills a gap in the lack of representation and diversity in most mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces in New Orleans by exhibiting an understanding of the fact that not all queer experiences are the same and that queer people of color face stigmatization based on their skin color within other queer spaces. Ascendance is a space of care, meaning that the space is shaped by ideals of racial justice and mutual accountability. In fact, their website was recently updated to include a statement that must be read before purchasing tickets:

> We are very fortunate to have the privilege of bringing so many different people together in this space, but we insist that you understand that this comes with a responsibility from all of us. We each have a responsibility to move with kindness and openness, to move with an understanding that people may have a drastically different perspective and experience than you . . . [We are] attempting to throw a safe, welcoming, and importantly fun monthly event celebrating our cultures and identities [and] the city of New Orleans. ("Tickets")

This space is a prime example of the ways queer space can be constructed for a specific purpose that acknowledges and celebrates people's differences. Ascendance would not be the space it is today without the efforts of its creators, nor without the will of its attendees in upholding and respecting the core tenants of the space. Thus, this type of space shows that the want to have such a

radically safe, accessible, and accepting space exists, but needs to be fostered through the creation of other more progressive spaces of care. Spaces are not only created by who is there, but by the norms that the organizers set for the space and that attendees agree to.

The Basement on Third Street

The first place I ever hinted to another person that I might be queer was on the side of my friend's house in high school. Sitting under the nighttime sky, whispering in the alleyway so as to not wake up his parents, I informed my friend, Sam, that I did not like men. I made him promise not to tell anyone (which, of course, he did not abide by), though I am not sure what it was I was afraid of since my entire friend group was queer.

Thinking back on my own experience as a queer person growing up in New Orleans, I was fortunate enough to have found my own chosen family at such an early age in high school. Despite not being out at the time, my friends were, and it brought me great comfort knowing I was surrounded by people who would support me no matter what. My friends and I, being too young to explore the LGBTQ+ bar scene in the city (except for the few times my friends used their fake IDs to sneak in), created our own space in Sam's basement. We hosted parties, birthdays, holidays, game nights, movie nights, and costume parties in the middle of summer. More often than not, the only people in attendance were my ten-person friend group. Something about the intimacy, the privacy, and the freedom of these gatherings created what I consider a private queer space in New Orleans—a constellation of queer space on my map of the city. Some of my fondest and most formative memories from high school go back to Sam's basement on Third Street.

Since Sam's parents rarely ever stepped foot in the basement, nor did they really mind what happened down there, Sam's basement was a safe haven from the outside world. I knew what happened in the basement, stayed in the basement. It was a queer space in my experience because I felt free, safe, cared for, and surrounded by family. Over the years I watched numerous friends date each other in the privacy of that basement, using it as a home base for their true selves, whether it was hiding relationships, tattoos, piercings, clothing, or just simply hiding from the world. There

were tears shed in the basement, laughs, sicknesses, secrets, truths, embarrassing moments, and dreams as well. The last time I saw all my friends in one place before we all went our separate ways for college, before moving away from home, and before coronavirus upended my world, was in Sam's basement. My friends and I let ourselves get lost in the safe space we created together in that basement on the corner of Third Street. It may not mean anything to anyone else, but this little slice of New Orleans gave us a space to socialize, be free, and develop our identities in a vacuum that existed away from the prying or judgmental eyes of older generations.

Lost Spaces

> In the 1970s and '80s, hundreds of women in New Orleans, Louisiana found bliss at their local dive bar, swaying to the jukebox amid clinking glasses. They held hands, they plotted protests; they kissed. Away from the prying eyes and very real dangers of the outside world, lesbian bars were cultural centers for many women in New Orleans for decades.
>
> Natalie Zarrelli[8]

I started this project with a mere inquiry into my encounters with LGBTQ+ spaces in New Orleans, New York, Paris, and Florence. The Coronavirus pandemic has disrupted my exploration of these spaces over the past few years, and likewise, many other queer individuals have had decreased access to LGBTQ+ spaces. With economic hardships and strains on local businesses during the pandemic, many vulnerable businesses closed, including LGBTQ+ businesses (Lang).

However, this loss of queer spaces is not unique to the pandemic. The pandemic only fueled a process that has been long underway due to other causes like gentrification, rising property costs, and decreases in business. LGBTQ+ spaces have long faced hardships "whether by the AIDS epidemic, the decentering of physical space in queer life, or the fact that marginalized communities at a higher risk for poverty have less expendable income to spend on a night out" (Lang). This trend of disappearing queer spaces contributed to the final category of spaces that I identified: *lost spaces*. I define "lost space" simply as an LGBTQ+ space that no longer exists.

Since 2007, LGBTQ+ bars for queer women have declined by 51.6% and bars for queer people of color have declined by 59.3% in the United States (Hastings et al.). This is likely due

8 Natalie Zarrelli. "The Lost Lesbian Bars of New Orleans." *Atlas Obscura*, 14 Sept. 2016, www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-lost-lesbian-bars-of-new-orleans.

to rising costs of rent, business competition, and a loss of target clientele in gay neighborhoods undergoing second-wave gentrification with wealthy straight couples. Spaces that have been lost now exist only in memory and imagination. In the late 1980s, there were approximately two hundred lesbian bars in the country; today there are just over twenty (“The Lesbian Bar”). Charlene’s and Les Pierres (both lesbian bars that shut down in the 1980s and in 1999 respectively) were two key spaces for lesbians in the latter half of the twentieth century in New Orleans, with the former being the longest-operating lesbian bar and the latter being the first Black lesbian bar in the city (“Episode 3.2” 00:04:32-00:04:40).

Exterior of Rubyfruit Jungle[9]

Poster for Charlene’s[10]

Charlene’s was the bar everyone went to for dancing, drinking, and getting involved in local activism. It was once a cornerstone of New Orleans’ lesbian community, at least the white lesbian community. The bar was largely frequented by white queer women, with some Black queer women feeling “tokenized” and “definitely in the minority” (“Episode 3.2” 00:16-52-00:17:55). In response to this exclusion, Juanita Pierre and Leslie Martinez created Les Pierres as the first Black lesbian bar in the city (“Episode 3.3” 00:02:10-00:02:18).

Prior to this, “queer women of color gathered at private house parties creating their own community spaces outside of the bars . . . [or] would go to Black gay men’s clubs, and some who had gay white friends would end up at Charlene’s” (“Episode 3.2” 00:01:30- 00:02:08). This

9 Zarrelli, “The Lost Lesbian Bars of New Orleans.”
10 “Charlene’s,” *Social Welfare History Image Portal*.

need for more diverse and targeted queer spaces reflects sentiments from Mia, Drea, and Jade discussed earlier. Spaces like these created some of the first formalized queer spaces, or queer bars, specifically targeting the marginalized communities that had been blocked out or discriminated against in other spaces in the city. Yet, bar spaces for communities of queer women (especially queer women of color) and gender-non-conforming individuals have disappeared almost entirely—once again creating feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and a lack of a cohesive community. I asked my interviewees if they felt that they experienced a lack of a certain space in their lives or longed for certain types of spaces that do not currently exist. Blair, who identifies as queer and non-binary, commented:

> Lesbian bars [in New Orleans] closed long before I had an opportunity to go to them . . . so I don't know if I really miss them, but there is no place where we can say 'this is *our* spot' . . . and it would be great to have a space that is for my specific demographic.

The problem of not having a space specifically for marginalized or intersecting identities is that they "lose power, validity, communal safety, and access to intergenerational dialogue" ("The Lesbian Bar Project"). In the stories told about lesbian bars such as Charlene's and Les Pierres, people recall the owners— Schneider, Pierre, and Martinez—often acting like a "mother hen" to their patrons (Smith 210). In terms of existing as pillars of queer communities, those types of spaces had such tight-knit groups of patrons that the bar became essential to their lives. While conducting research on lost lesbian spaces, I came across the Facebook page "New Orleans Lesbian Bar Pics 1940 till present," and was in awe of the images that had been shared from these spaces that once existed. But even more so, I was struck by the way the people in the images kept in touch. In many of the comments, users would comment or tag whoever was featured in the image. Sometimes, they would share stories or captions of the image, or a short tribute to a deceased person in the image. Though the spaces disappeared, the communities and cultures created within queer bars have not disappeared, but rather they shifted as people kept in touch over the years.

Conclusion

Despite intolerance, gender or racial exclusions, pandemics, and more, "gay culture in its myriad forms found a way to thrive, simmering beneath the surface and at times boiling over into plain view" (Smith 5). There are endless routes to establishing LGBTQ+ spaces, but in all of these stories there is a recurring theme of queer people's desire to be together to create community. Of all the queer spaces found in New Orleans, numerous types existed, and at times, represented vastly diverse identities.

It is this desire for connection with other queer people that manifests in physical space, however myriad and evolving with each generation. As hypothesized at the beginning of this research, LGBTQ+ New Orleanians produced immense trails of queer constellations across the city in their various methods of queer space-making in bars, music venues, stores, other people's homes, bookstores, streets, neighborhoods, and at home. Every LGBTQ+ New Orleanian's map—their galaxy of queer spaces—will look different, but what is certain is that queer constellations span the city, and will always find somewhere to exist.

At the present moment, a vast array of discriminatory anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is emerging across the United States. Legal attacks on the LGBTQ+ community are abundant, with the introduction of over 400 anti-LGBTQ+ bills across the country—whether they target drag bans, censorship in schools, anti-trans healthcare, gender and athletics, or bathroom usage ("Mapping Attacks"). Versions of the "don't say gay" bills and anti-transgender bills targeting young children have been introduced by Louisiana lawmakers and are actively advancing in Louisiana's current legislative sessions ("Mapping Attacks"). Though New Orleans itself is home to many queer communities and spaces, the city is located within a state that does not prioritize LGBTQ+ safety or equality. In the face of such hatred and discrimination, queer individuals may feel increasingly unsafe in their daily lives and fear the total decline of their rights. Thus, having access to queer space is of vast importance and allows for individuals to become part of a larger community, and perhaps even engage in political activism that fights back against institutionalized homophobia. Despite increasing acceptance (or tolerance) of queer communities in some U.S. cities, queer

spaces are just as important today as they were in the past. Today's continued discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality requires the fostering and preservation of LGBTQ+ spaces for future generations.

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