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Safe Space Out of Place

Christina B. Hanhardt

On June 12, 2016 almost fifty people were killed and more injured in a mass shooting at Pulse, a nightclub in Orlando, Florida. In the weeks following, articles and editorials appeared across the mainstream press—including the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsday* as well as innumerable local papers and blogs—describing the event as an attack on a “safe space” for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (GLBTQ) people. Written by activists, academics, and journalists, among others, these pieces often movingly described how the gay nightclub has functioned as a “refuge” or “haven” from hostile families, workplaces, and everyday life.¹

As some writers pointed out, Pulse was a safe space not just for GLBTQ people in general, but for those GLBTQ people of color, mostly Latino/as and many Puerto Rican, who made up the majority of those at Pulse that day. In this way, the idea of a safe space was not uniform, and writers beautifully conjured the complex ways in which a sense of community safety is made or undone. News coverage and opinion pieces showcased a wide variety of interpretations of the event and proposed future solutions. Some emphasized the importance of recognizing the specific experiences of GLBTQ Latino/as, whereas others suggested that this was an assault on all GLBTQ-identified people; some called for more gun control, whereas others—including many politicians—used the shooting to promote more anti-terrorism measures; some celebrated the nightclub as a place of freedom, while others focused on how that very feature made it a target.

Despite these different visions, many shared the assumptions that GLBTQ bars and clubs constitute places of security, however tenuous; that an attack on one is an injury to a larger group; and that violence is primarily an index

of hate. These ideas are not new to the response to Pulse, but have provided a long-standing common-sense basis for understanding GLBTQ people as subjects who are always vulnerable to violence and for whom designated spaces might provide protection. These convictions are anchored in a deep history of exploitation and survival: GLBTQ people have forged counter-institutions in the context of social exclusion, targeted attacks, and material and ideological structures that install and reward gender and sexual inequality. Nonetheless, the durability of this narrative has made it difficult at times to think about violence and the regulation of sexual and gender norms outside of this specific frame. This brief response sketches the history of this narrative and considers its implication for understanding Pulse today.

Since before the birth of a social movement or the growth of gay institutions, GLBTQ bars and clubs have facilitated alternative kinship networks and provided crucial resources otherwise privatized within the family or market economy. They host birthday parties and memorial services, so often denied by biological families, and provide health services, such as free HIV-testing or condoms, or act as informal sites of information exchange about prevention and treatment options. Clubs also headline performers blocked from other stages, showcasing styles that too often only find wide audiences and profit once taken up by others. Bars and clubs are also places in which people take collective pleasure in sharing bodies, desires, and gender expressions without the disapproval or punishment often found in families of origin, workplaces, and on the street.

As a result, many GLBTQ people have interpreted attacks on bars as attacks on the larger GLBTQ community, and, in turn, these events have been the grounds for political mobilization. The most famous attack and response was, of course, at the Stonewall Inn, where in the summer of 1969 patrons rose up and fought back against a police raid. Stonewall was by no means the first, nor the last: in 1965, transgender women fought police harassment at Compton's Cafeteria, a late-night hangout in San Francisco's Tenderloin; San Francisco activist supporters of slain politician Harvey Milk continued to organize after the police retaliated against protestors with a brutal attack on the Elephant Walk bar in 1979; and in 1982, over 1,100 people turned out to a rally to protest a violent police raid of the black gay bar Blue's in New York's Times Square.

But attacks on gay bars and their patrons have not only come from active police officers. In 1973, an arsonist set fire to the Upstairs Lounge in New Orleans, killing 32 people; in 1977, Robert Hillsborough was murdered on his way home from a nightclub in San Francisco; and in 1980, Ronald Crumpley, a former transit officer, opened fire at the Ramrod, a gay leather bar in New York, as part of a rampage in the West Village in which he killed two and injured six more. In all three cases, activists interpreted the attack as linked to increased gay visibility and used these

events to galvanize political response. By the mid-1980s, activism against violence perpetrated by both the police and private individuals had gained momentum among GLBTQ advocates, and groups like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force began to organize on a national scale for protection against violent attack.

But activists came up against the difficulty of accounting for the similarities and differences between violence from the police versus individuals. Most argued that both were cut from the same cloth of violent masculinity, homophobia, and misogyny, and that the slow but sure empowerment of GLBTQ people since the 1960s had been met by a repression that expanded in the 1980s with the rise of the Right. Gay activists sometimes used the metaphor of lynching, suggesting that individual violence was state-sanctioned vigilantism. With time, gay activists succeeded in achieving modest policing improvements regarding GLBTQ issues alongside other liberal reforms, including the rise of community policing and the increased reporting of crimes motivated by bias.

But these developments did not change other aspects of criminalization, including its racial and economic contours; community policing, for example, borrowed heavily from theories of anti-sociality based in the supposed cultural pathology of poor people and people of color. As a result, the bundling of police and street attacks increasingly individualized the problem of violence to “bad apple” officers and “sick” individuals and by default treated the category of GLBTQ people as those who were not also poor or people of color. The formalization of hate crime policy (laws that further penalize crimes found to be motivated by bias) solidified this, by asserting policing as sometimes benevolent while expanding its punitive reach. What is crucial is that it did so by distilling the motives for violence to singular vectors of hate organized around specific identity categories, e.g., sexual orientation, race, religion, and later, gender identity. Although these categories might be combined, hate crime statistics codified them as separate and therefore could not account for a broader matrix of stigmatized practices or social vulnerabilities or for the contradictions of how power can be at once denied to and deployed by individuals and social groups.

Moreover, GLBTQ bars and clubs have never been fully open, democratic places, even as they have played an important role in many GLBTQ people's lives. Some bars practiced formal racial segregation, and, in later years, adopted tacit forms of exclusion, especially along lines of race, gender expression, bodily diversity, and ability (through measures that ranged from double-carding to failing to provide accessible bathrooms). Of course, bars and clubs have been difficult places for those who struggle with addiction, and are not open to those below legal drinking age or who cannot pay a door fee. Increased assimilation for a small but dominant segment of GLBTQ people has led some to question the importance of GLBTQ-specific institutions in general.² As a result, those clubs that remain open

and at least somewhat accessible to those outside a GLBTQ mainstream—like “Latin Night” at Pulse—often face attacks that are not only individual and physical, but also involve the threat of disappearance through the social and economic restructuring of neighborhoods or management’s claims of less profitable clients.

Given this history, the discussion of Pulse as a GLBTQ “safe space” is part of what made commentators able to figure it as a target. As a safe space in need of protection, political responses often leaned on discrete if multiple motives, most of which revolved around the presumed interior life of the actual (or potential future) shooter and called for an expansion of state power. In this way, proposals for more gun control and increased anti-terrorism funding actually had much in common, and arguments that sought to emphasize the fact that the patrons were a majority people of color were still absorbed into a dominant framework of GLBTQ marginality and homophobic violence.

Of course, the use of the term “safe space” is often more about crafting headlines than making a precise argument, but the idea of safety-in-place is a durable one that, although rooted in real needs, is always bound up in the spatial production of racial and economic hierarchy. One piece that named and explored the contradictions of safe-space rhetoric, of inclusion alongside exclusion, and of seeking pleasure in the context of exploitation was Justin Torres’s essay “In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club,” published by the *Washington Post*. As Jack Halberstam noted, Torres’s piece embraces instability and a “disordered” approach to identity that allows for different questions than those outlined by the dominant safe-space narrative.³

Another model for discussing violence that falls on the side of the “disorderly,” that treats identity as a meaningful yet unstable category, and that understands safety more as a relation than a specific place can be found in current organizing efforts in response to the systemic killing of black people by the U.S. police. A large number of these deaths have been linked to quality-of-life policing, a strategy that focuses on regulating social norms in the name of community safety and that has been used to gentrify low-income areas. Although some activist groups have organized community watch efforts to be “safe outside the system,” and the Movement for Black Lives platform also includes the term “safety,” in both contexts safety is proposed as a method to replace rather than extend the carceral state.⁴ For example, the lack of safety is often described as the privatization of social and cultural resources.

One of the most powerful aspects of the Movement for Black Lives platform is its sheer abundance of proposals, which include policies already crafted and those that some might deem utopic, and which are written by organizations and individuals representing a broad set of political interests. It is precise about the central status of black lives while emphasizing the needs of those

most marginal, in particular queer people, and it understands black freedom to be a project of shared solidarity and collaboration across generations. In this approach, the platform is able to sidestep many dominant narratives about violence and safety and to open up more than it forecloses.

It is a challenge to hold a shared goal that might seem impossibly large while also improving people's daily lives, and to learn from the history of past movements while also forging new paths. Thus the effort to put "safe space" out of its familiar place—rhetorical and geographic—ultimately is not about what a single essay (in the mainstream media, or an academic journal) may or may not offer, but is made possible as part of a process—often messy and untidy—in which collective debating and planning might lead us not only to safety but to something or somewhere better that we have not yet known.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Michael Barbaro, "It's Sacred': A Gay Refuge, Turned into a War Zone," *New York Times*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/gay-bars-history.html>; Daniel D'Addario, "The Gay Bar as Safe Space Has Been Shattered," *Time*, June 12, 2016, <http://time.com/4365403/orlando-shooting-gay-bar-pulse-nightclub/>; Eileen Holliday, "Orlando's Pulse Nightclub Was a Safe Haven for the Community," *Newsday*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.newsday.com/news/nation/orlando-s-pulse-nightclub-was-a-safe-haven-for-the-community-1.11910021>.
2. For a discussion of these debates in the context of gay-identified neighborhoods see Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
3. Justin Torres, "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-praise-of-latin-night-at-the-queer-club/2016/06/13/e841867e-317b-11e6-95c0-2a6873031302_story.html; Jack Halberstam, "Who Are 'We' After Orlando?" *Bully Bloggers*, June 22, 2016, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2016/06/22/who-are-we-after-orlando-by-jack-halberstam/>.
4. See the Audre Lorde Project's "Safe Outside the System" project at <http://alp.org/community/sos>. The Platform of the Movement for Black Lives can be found at <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>.

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