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Let's Escape into the Music: A Cross-Generational Oral History of Orlando LGBTQ+ Spaces

Hannah Powell
hpowell@rollins.edu

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A Cross-Generational Oral History of Orlando LGBTQ+ Spaces
Hannah Powell

Rollins College
Department of Critical Media and Cultural Studies
Honors Thesis

Introduction

Since Orlando's first gay bar, The Palace Club, opened in 1969, LGBTQ+ spaces have played an essential role in the Orlando queer community. They have acted as loci of gathering, solidarity, identity-formation, recreation, and even healing. There is an absence of literature on the LGBTQ+ community in Orlando and, more generally, in Central Florida as a whole. The legacy of LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando is worthy of study due both to the city's rich queer history and Orlando's singular experience of the deadliest act of hate-motivated violence against the LGBTQ+ community in the history of the United States. Through documenting the experiences and stories of LGBTQ+ Orlandoans, this thesis seeks to build upon existing in-depth, interview-based qualitative studies of localized LGBTQ+ communities.

Key themes that emerged throughout the interviews included the social and political importance of LGBTQ+ spaces, their role in the identity formation of queer individuals, the importance of transient LGBTQ+ spaces such as pride parades and vigils, and the need for more woman-centric LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. In a post-Pulse context, interviewees emphasized their conflicting relationship with LGBTQ+ bars and clubs both as sources of renewed trauma and of potential healing, identified the Pulse massacre as a catalyst to social and political change, and stressed the importance of LGBTQ+ organizations and resources alongside the positive impact of community resilience after the shooting.

Review of Existing Literature

Throughout history queer spaces, both in the public and private sphere, have been central to the formation, rebellion, and collective identity of the LGBTQ+ community. In seeking to understand what queer spaces mean to LGBTQ+ Orlandoans in a contemporary context, it is

important to ground such spaces' development in the rich web of roles, battles, successes, losses, and shifts they have undergone in the United States over the past two centuries.

I begin by defining the language employed throughout this essay and in the interviews I conducted. I use “LGBTQ+” and “queer” interchangeably, but the terms have very different histories. The acronym LGBTQ stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer”; the plus sign refers to all sexual orientations and gender identities not encompassed in the acronym itself. For the sake of brevity, I use LGBTQ+ rather than a longer, more inclusive acronym. I acknowledge the full, complex spectrum of identities within the LGBTQ+ community, and I affirm the importance of any identity outside the category of heterosexual and/or of cisgender.

I use “queer” as an umbrella term for any person whose identity falls outside of the dominant hetero-/cisnormative paradigm. I employ it partially for the sake of brevity but also for its radical, non-normative implications. Queerness embodies any “anti-normative subject position with respect to sexuality,” and is used by queer theorists to “[disrupt] ‘natural’ dichotomies such as heterosexual/homosexual and gender/sex” (Doan, 2007, p. 57). With the matter of language clarified, I next examine the social and political importance of queer spaces with a brief but comprehensive overview of their history in the United States.

Queer Spaces and Communities in Historical Perspective

LGBTQ+ individuals have existed throughout history. Considering the limited queer content of history textbooks most often taught in public schools throughout the US, one might come to think that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people sprung into existence with the Stonewall Riots in 1969. This is simply not the case. Throughout history, sexuality has been

viewed through different lenses that are important in understanding the formation of LGBTQ+ communities and identities. In detailing the history of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, I will discuss eras as identified and named by sociologist Amin Ghaziani. The first is the Closet Era, which extends from 1870 to the beginning of World War II. The second is the Coming Out Era, from the end of World War II to 1997.

The Closet Era (1870-WWII)

This era in the United States is defined by the first emergences of community among LGBTQ+ people. Throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, homosexuality was not thought of in terms of identity but rather in terms of actions. Sodomy was recognized as an immoral and often criminal act, punished by law in every state, but it did not reflect on the essence of one's being, sexual or otherwise (Faderman, 1991; Faderman & Timmons, 2006; Higgs, 1999).

Evidence of LGBTQ+ relationships during this period often come in the form of homosocial relationships known as "romantic friendships." There are many instances of romantic friendships between two men or two women that were not seen as deviant in any way. A number of well-known historical figures in the United States were involved in well-documented romantic friendships with members of the same sex. One such example is Alexander Hamilton, one of the authors of the US Constitution and the founder of the United States' financial system. He wrote to his friend John Laurens a series of letters that are devoted and arguably romantic, as illustrated in this excerpt from a 1779 correspondence: "I wish, my dear Laurens, that it might be in my power, by action, rather than words, to convince you that I love you" (Out of the Past, 1997). An example from later in the nation's history, in 1890, is President Grover Cleveland's sister, who

served as first lady of the US before Grover Cleveland married. Rose Cleveland was engaged in a passionate romantic friendship with wealthy widow Evangeline Simpson, and after Rose Cleveland moved out of the White House, they lived together most of the rest of their lives. In 1890 Rose wrote to Evangeline, “Ah, Eve, Eve, surely you cannot realize what you are to me—what you must be. Yes, I dare it now—I will no longer fear to claim you—you are mine by everything in earth and heaven—by every sign in soul and spirit and body...” (see Faderman, 1991, p. X).

Before the late 19th century, these romantic friendships were not considered “homosexual” in the same context that we understand that label today. The first use of the term “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” in the United States is credited to the work of American sexologists James G. Kiernan (1852-1923) and G. Frank Lydston (1858-1923) in 1892 (Eaklor, 2008). This marked the first conception of homosexuals as a “*type of person*,” rather than someone who expressed sinful or criminal *behavior* (Eaklor, 2008, p. 35). However, this belief did not gain national prevalence until sexologists became more widely read in the 1920s (Faderman, 1991). In the 20th century U.S., immensely popular sexologists and psychologists such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) contributed to the growing concept of homosexuality as an identity (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008).

The most common sexological theory about homosexuality was that it was “the result of a physical, emotional, or psychological ‘inversion’” (Bronski, 2011, p. 95). This theory was coined by English sexologist Havelock Ellis and was first published in the second volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928). His theory quickly gained popularity, and the “invert” became the dominant figure in reference to homosexuality throughout much of the 20th century (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008; Faderman, 1991). There is a great deal of debate among

historians as to whether the widespread recognition of homosexuality had a greater negative or positive impact on the LGBTQ+ community. On one hand, it provided the first validation for many LGBTQ+ individuals that they were not alone and allowed gays and lesbians to seek out one another. On the other hand, it led to the stigmatization of homosocial relationships and resulted in the pathologization and medicalization of same-sex desire (Bronski, 2011; Faderman & Timmons, 2006). Vicki Eaklor (2008, p. 37) points out:

Whatever the intentions of the sexologists, their views entered a context in which gender was still crucial to social order, and deviance therefore threatening. Also due to this context, the medical model did not simply replace constructions of sinful and criminal behavior but was instead added to the mix and became further justification for arrest and punishment throughout most of the 20th century.

Throughout LGBTQ+ history we see this tension between the significance of acknowledging same-sex desire and the ways increased attention constructed queerness as a disorder and/or criminal behavior.

In regards to queer women, the first lesbian spaces began to emerge with the suffrage movement. In 1901, Ellis (cited in Faderman, 1991) linked his theory of sexual inversion to female emancipation and feminism; feminists were called New Women and were classified as “sexual inverts” or “mannish women” (Faderman, 1991). Not all queer women rejected this classification. Because congenital inversion was classified by sexologists as a biological phenomenon, “views of the lesbian as a ‘man in a woman’s body’ could be turned in her favor sexually if she wished: she could give herself permission to be sexual as no ‘normal’ woman could” (Faderman, 1991, p. 58). The suffrage movement also made it possible for women to live in homosocial, single-sex environments centered on advancing equality. Women’s organizations took the form of social clubs and settlement houses founded on tenets of suffrage and reform, and they often were women-only spaces. Heterodoxy, a woman’s social club in Greenwich

Village founded in 1912, was one of the first organizations that was documented as recognizing lesbian relationships and even celebrating anniversaries between female members (Faderman, 1991).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as has been extensively documented, queer spaces were developing in cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The industrial revolution and urbanization fueled the emergence of queer social spaces in particular densely-populated metropolitan areas, which allowed for the growth of many commercial institutions. In San Francisco at the turn of the century, bars and taverns that catered to homosexual clientele through same-sex prostitution and “gender-transgressive entertainments” were relatively common, and numerous public baths existed in the city that were known to cater to men seeking same-sex encounters (Boyd, 2003, p. 27; Wright, 1999). Female impersonation gained popularity throughout the 1910s and ‘20s, and the entertainment provided by “drag queens” and “fairies” drew mixed audiences of queer and straight patrons alike (Wright, 1999). The reason these performances could take place without interference was San Francisco’s reputation as a “wide-open city” (Wright, 1999). Activities that were technically illegal, such as cross-dressing, prostitution, and drinking alcohol during Prohibition, were not prosecuted by local police in return for “graft” in the form of favors or pay-offs (Boyd, 2003, p. 29). Les Wright (1999, p. 172) argues that San Francisco’s queer subculture surpassed the commercial sphere and ran deep enough to result in the formation of one of the first queer communities in the United States:

[The] institution of the gay bar emerged from an unbroken tradition of saloons, dancehalls, and speakeasies. The entertainment form of female impersonation and its blurring with effeminacy and dandyism solidified into one of a series of modern gay typologies. Gay enclaves, clusters of commercial establishments and residential neighborhoods emerged, again with differing typologies. A gay dialect, an argot

impenetrable by the uninitiated had arisen, in keeping with the increasing censorship of the times, to forge a prototypical form of community.

New York City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was also especially active as a hub of LGBTQ+ social spaces; many bars, cabarets, theaters, bathhouses, and cruising areas emerged in Greenwich Village and Harlem. In the 1920s, during the Harlem Renaissance, “open” speakeasies, gay bars, and lavish drag balls sprung up around Harlem, all run by African American lesbians and gay men (Eaklor, 2008; Faderman, 1991). Drag balls first began in Harlem in 1869 but gained greater popularity in the 1920s (McGarry, Wasserman, & Bowling, 1998). They were known publicly as “faggot balls” and provided one of the first integrated queer spaces for people of all races to gather and find community, as well as one of the first spaces that recognized transgender people (McGarry et al., 1998). This time coincides with some of the first public acknowledgements of explicitly LGBTQ+ spaces in the U.S.; in 1931, a New York-based newspaper published an exposé on “gay meeting places,” marking one of the first U.S. media recognitions of queer spaces (Ghaziani, 2015).

When Prohibition ended in 1933, queer establishments came under renewed fire; while it was again legal to open bars, the 1930s brought “strict regulation by the state through licensing,” and the deepening economic crisis that began in 1929 resulted in a crack-down on the “excesses” of the 1920s (Eaklor, 2008, p. 59). The frugal and conservative lifestyle championed as patriotic throughout the Depression was at odds with the recreational nature of spaces available to the LGBTQ+ community. Throughout New York, “the State Liquor Authority threatened to revoke the licenses of bars that served homosexuals, driving the once-public subculture underground” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 59). This is representative of a greater pattern that has run throughout LGBTQ+ history in the United States; as the country moved through waves of conservatism and progressivism, queer subcultures and establishments were allowed to become visible and then

forced underground once more in response to a public shift in attitude. Each era is complex and multifaceted when examining the acceptance and integration of the LGBTQ community within mainstream society (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008).

The Coming Out Era (WWII-1997)

World War II represented a huge shift in the lives of queer men and women in the United States. Sixteen million men joined the military, leaving behind communities that were composed of a female majority for the first time in U.S. history (Kennedy & Davis, 1997). For many with same-sex attractions, the military served as a desirable alternative to their families and hometowns. As Michael Bronski (2011, p. 158) explains, “Wartime conditions produced social systems appealing to homosexuals. Single-sex environments encouraged homosocial relationships. Lesbians who were economically and socially independent of men found the military a haven. Homosexual men could now avoid their family’s heterosexual expectations.” Women were expected to fill the jobs that men had left behind, and the number of women in the work force went from about twelve million before 1941 to over eighteen million in 1945 (Bronski, 2011). Their newfound financial independence allowed women the freedom to spend their money on social pursuits, and lesbian bar culture flourished (Kennedy & Davis, 1997).

Ghaziani (2015) describes WWII as a “nationwide coming out experience” due in large part to the thousands of servicemen and women discharged on the grounds of homosexuality. The military screened for homosexuality throughout the war, and the government classified it as a “psychopathic personality disorder.” Sodomy was banned under Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and was grounds for a Section 8 dishonorable discharge (Bronski, 2011). For the first time, thousands of gay people ended up in the same spaces: cities with major

military bases such as Chicago, Washington DC, Seattle, San Francisco, New York, and Miami (Ghaziani, 2015; Wright, 1999). Large metropolitan cities were hubs where discharged servicemen and women gathered when they couldn't return home, and many willingly stayed for the freedom urban environments provided.

Due to this mass relocation of LGBTQ+ people, “gayborhoods” first began to emerge, and the number of gay bars increased exponentially, even emerging for the first time in states such as Missouri, Virginia, and Massachusetts (Bronski, 2011). As Wright (1999, p. 173) observes, it was the “mass mobilization of World War II [that] led directly to a dawning realization by homosexuals of their numbers, which in turn led to the formation of the post-war self-conception of gays as a quasi-ethnic minority.” This realization was expedited by the publication of the Kinsey Report. In 1948, The Kinsey Report announced that there were roughly 20 million homosexuals in the United States, shocking the nation and raising awareness of the existence of non-heterosexual identities (Bronski, 2011; Ghaziani, 2015). However, the positive benefits of the growing recognition of LGBTQ+ people in the United States were mitigated by the conservative backlash against the queer community during the 1950s.

The 1950s are widely acknowledged by queer historians as one of the darkest decades for the U.S. queer community. In 1952, the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I)* was published by the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was firmly established as a mental illness and formally classified as a “sociopathic personality disorder” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 81). Treatments ranged from psychotherapy, to shock therapy, to lobotomy, and LGBTQ+ individuals found themselves increasingly at risk of being institutionalized (Faderman & Timmons, 2006).

This pathologization of homosexuality coincided with the Cold War and the rise of the Lavender Scare. Fueled by the Second Red Scare, in which Joseph McCarthy infamously claimed to be in possession of a list of communists working for the U.S. State Department, the Lavender Scare specifically targeted LGBTQ individuals (Bronski, 2011). McCarthy claimed that gays and lesbians were even more dangerous than communists to national security, because they could be blackmailed by foreign agents on the basis of their sexual orientation. As Eaklor (2008, p. 87) explains, “The definition as security risk hinged on the medical model, classified homosexuality as a perversion and characterized queers as mentally and morally unstable.” Guided by the paranoia sweeping the country, in 1953 President Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450, which made it official government policy to fire all federal employees suspected of being homosexual. This institutionalized homophobia and resulted in the dismissal of almost six hundred federal civil servants (Eaklor, 2008). These events further heightened national awareness of homosexuality and set it squarely in opposition to heterosexual society.

It was in the context of a consistently growing sense of identity within the LGBTQ+ community stoked by the publication of the Kinsey Report, and a shared resentment of the constant policing and persecution, that the first gay and lesbian homophile activist organizations were formed. In November of 1950, Harold Hay founded the Mattachine Society. Mattachine posited that homosexuals were a “distinct and oppressed class of people able to combat ignorance with education and organize against the prejudice of the dominant culture” (Bronski, 2011, pp. 179-180). The organization advocated for the acceptance and integration of the homosexual community into society. It recruited mainly gay men but included lesbians. Mattachine organized lectures, socials, and discussion groups as well as staged protests against police harassment. By 1953, Mattachine had “over two thousand members and sponsored over a

hundred discussion groups” (Bronski, 2011, p. 180). Mattachine also started the first LGBTQ+ publications, *ONE* and *The Mattachine Review*.

Five years after the founding of Mattachine, in 1955, an explicitly lesbian movement emerged with the formation of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Primarily as a social group in which to meet other lesbians, the DOB was founded by Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, and three other lesbian couples, two of which were interracial (Bronski, 2011). The group often collaborated with Mattachine on social and political endeavors and soon started their own publication, *The Ladder*. Lesbian homophile organizations also brought issues of discrimination on the basis of sex to the forefront, making their work uniquely intersectional between LGBTQ+ rights and women’s rights.

The 1950s were also socially significant due to the dawn of the Beat movement, which was inextricably intertwined with queer culture. Hugely popular poets such as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs were both openly gay, and their sexuality was an essential component of their work. As Vicki Eaklor (2008, p. 83) observes, the Beat movement was especially significant to LGBTQ history because “the Beats tested the limits of postwar sexual conformity and were a rare public voice celebrating queer lives at a time it was dangerous to do so.”

The year 1951 marked one of the first significant victories of the LGBTQ community in its fight for public space: the California Supreme Court ruled in *Stoumen v. Reilly* that California state bar owners could serve openly homosexual clientele (Ghaziani, 2015). However, police across the United States continued to raid gay bars at an unflagging rate. In Washington, D.C. alone, arrests from bar raids numbered over 1000 a year during the 1950s (Armstrong & Crago, 2006). Bar raids by police followed a consistent and predictable pattern: police entered the premises, stopped activity, and arrested patrons, sometimes publishing the names of those

arrested in local newspapers, leading to public shame and job loss for many closeted gay men (Armstrong & Crago, 2006). Most homophile activism in the 1950s and '60s was in response to this police repression and harassment (Armstrong & Crago, 2006; Bronski, 2011). Especially throughout the 1960s, homophile organizations used queer events in bars, clubs, and public venues as a way to raise awareness about issues. These organizations adopted direct action techniques such as marches and demonstrations that instigated and inspired much of the rebellion by the LGBTQ+ community throughout the era (Armstrong & Crago, 2006; Eaklor, 2008).

The 1960s and '70s: A Turning Point

As indicated, LGBTQ+ bars and clubs were important throughout the nation's history as a means of building community and finding other queer individuals in a heteronormative world. While queer commercial spaces had always been important as spheres of resistance, during the 1960s and 1970s queer bars and clubs became more crucial than ever as spaces of activist and political organizing. Eaklor (2008, p. 117) writes that in San Francisco, "a queer subculture, as represented by bars like the Black Cat, fostered queer political action." Local queer bars allowed homophile activists and community members to gather, discuss political and social issues, and organize to create change from the bottom up. For example, in 1962, a drag queen in San Francisco named Jose Sarria organized the League for Civil Education and ran for city supervisor (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008; Wright, 1999). Sarria held campaign rallies and formed connections with voters at the Black Cat. That same year, activists in San Francisco founded the Tavern Guild to protect bars from police raids and organize voter registration drives in and around gay bars (Ghaziani, 2015).

Protests, pickets, and riots in resistance to police raids of queer spaces and events occurred throughout the 1960s. One significant raid in San Francisco was of a 1965 New Year's Day costume ball and fundraiser organized by six homophile activist groups; queer attendees refused to leave the premises despite the risk of arrest and public exposure (Armstrong & Crago, 2006). Another raid occurred in 1966 at Compton's Cafeteria, an all-hours coffee shop in San Francisco that was known to cater to "gay hustlers, 'hair fairies,' queens, and street kids" (Armstrong & Crago, 2006, p. 732). The raid on Compton's resulted in the "first documented homosexual riot," and was a significantly more militant response than any previously conducted by homophile organizations; led by "screaming queens," the patrons fought back by throwing chairs and coffee cups at the raiding police officers, smashing the windows of the coffee shop and a squad car, and lighting a newsstand on fire (Armstrong & Crago, 2006; Stryker & Silverman, 2005). After the riot, drag queens and transgender women were banned from the establishment, and the local LGBTQ+ community returned the next night to picket against the decision and re-shattered the newly repaired windows (Stryker & Silverman, 2005). This marked the first divergence between the middle-class formal organizing tactics employed by homophile activists and the spark of a more radical resistance to police harassment (Armstrong & Crago, 2006; Eaklor, 2008).

In 1969, a five-day riot began in Greenwich Village, New York City, that would come to be popularly known as the event that "sparked the beginning of the gay liberation movement" (Bronski, 2011). The Stonewall Inn was a well-attended gay bar on Christopher Street. In the early hours of Saturday, June 28th, 1969, the police arrived to conduct a routine raid of evicting patrons and arresting staff (Bronski, 2011). A crowd gathered outside and refused to leave,

clashing with the police. Based on several first-person accounts, sociologists Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crago (2006, p. 736) describe the event:

As [police] started checking identification, kicking people out, and making a few arrests, a crowd of ejected patrons, nearby residents, and passers-by gathered outside.... As they loaded the van with arrestees, the crowd grew angry and started throwing pennies, bottles, and bricks. With no backup, the police barricaded themselves inside the bar. The crowd escalated its attacks, trapping the police inside... Riot police arrived around then, and tried for hours to disperse the crowd... Violence continued until the streets were finally cleared, at about 3:30 a.m. Papers reported nearly a thousand rioters and several hundred police. Four policemen were hurt and thirteen people were arrested.

People were aware of the historical significance of the Stonewall Riots as they were happening.

On Sunday, the riot's third day, gay liberation activist Craig Rodwell coordinated the distribution of thousands of flyers that stated: "The nights of Friday, June 27, 1969, and Saturday, June 28, 1969 will go down in history as the first time that thousands of Homosexual men and women went out into the streets to protest the intolerable situation in New York City" (Armstrong & Crago, 2006, p. 738).

The riots at Stonewall also marked a schism between homophile activists and a more radical form of resistance. By June 28, Mattachine members were working with police to prevent further protests (Bronski, 2011). Composed mostly of middle-class white gay men, homophile organizations wanted to assimilate into society, not rebel against it. Later that year, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) emerged to champion a more radical and inclusive form of queer politics that persisted throughout the 1970s (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008). Both organizations encouraged queer people to come out of the closet as a political act and a means to free themselves from oppression. On June 28, 1970, one year after the Stonewall Riots, thousands of queer people showed up to celebrate the first Christopher Street Liberation Parade, the nation's first official Pride Parade (Eaklor, 2008).

The widespread media coverage of the events at Stonewall, combined with the messages of organizations such as GLF and GAA, inspired LGBTQ+ individuals to come out of the closet en masse and relocate to cities in the hopes of finding a greater sense of community. This demographic movement was called the “Great Gay Migration” and lasted throughout the 1970s (Ghaziani, 2015, p. 309). Gay neighborhoods and queer clubs and bars moved beyond San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York and spread throughout the United States (Eaklor, 2008; Ghaziani, 2015). Following the tide of gay liberation, Harvey Milk was elected to the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco in 1977 (Wright, 1999). Milk acted as a political voice for the queer community and consistently spoke in defense of LGBTQ+ rights. However, Milk was tragically shot and assassinated after less than a year in office. He became a martyr in the eyes of the LGBTQ+ community and a reminder of the lethal homophobia that still existed in the United States. Despite Milk’s murder, the 1970s was a decade of political and legislative progress for the U.S. LGBTQ+ community. Political activists campaigned for the inclusion of sexual orientation in anti-discrimination laws, and by the end of 1977, more than 33 cities had passed non-discrimination ordinances (Eaklor, 2008).

In the wake of this progressive era, the 1980s and the election of Ronald Reagan brought with them a resurgence of conservative values in the United States. In 1981, *The San Francisco Chronicle* ran a column titled “A Pneumonia that Strikes Gay Males”; the AIDS epidemic had begun (Eaklor, 2008, p. 174). In the early years of the crisis, the federal government was conspicuously silent. Due to the conflation of HIV and homosexuality, the Reagan administration refused to provide sufficient funding for AIDS research (Bronski, 2011; Eaklor, 2008). The LGBTQ+ community was forced to take action themselves, protesting the lack of government support as well as forming organizations around voluntary action and care; AIDS

service organizations were formed as early as 1982 to care for the sick and fight to find a cure (Eaklor, 2008). These organizations catalyzed the development of the drugs that, since 1996, have helped keep people afflicted with HIV alive for a near-normal life span (France, 2012).

Perhaps the most well-known LGBTQ+ direct action group, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), was founded in 1987 by Larry Kramer (Eaklor, 2008). ACT UP was revolutionary because it redrew the blueprint for activism in a media-saturated world, incorporating art into acts of protest and emphasizing publicity as a means of resistance (France, 2012). While LGBTQ+ AIDS service organizations and direct action groups were the main providers of support and community during the AIDS epidemic, LGBTQ+ bars and clubs still played an important role. Commercial institutions such as gay bars provided spaces where queer individuals could come together to mourn their lost friends and lovers and recover some sense of joy. Many hosted fundraisers to support AIDS organizations and to help the sick pay their medical bills (Bronski, 2011).

The public and government apathy in response to the AIDS epidemic acted as a catalyst to further unite LGBTQ+ people in the United States, and public acts of protest and solidarity by queer groups and individuals continued throughout the 1980s and 90s. Contemporary anti-oppression activist groups are still inspired by the organizing and coalition-building of the past. As shown by this brief historical overview, LGBTQ+ spaces have throughout the country's past acted as the locus of collective resistance to discrimination. Bars, clubs, cafes, bookstores, bathhouses, and other LGBTQ+ sites are spatial responses "to a historically specific form of oppression" (Ghaziani, 2015). Understanding their role in our country's history is essential to understanding their relevance to the queer community today.

The Social Importance of LGBTQ+ Spaces as “Safe Spaces”

The LGBTQ+ community has historically been the target of disproportionate levels of violence. Queer spaces provide some of the only places where LGBTQ+ individuals can feel safe. In The Roestone Collective’s article on conceptualizing safe space, the authors explain that “[t]he idea of safety generally relies on an underlying threat of violence, particularly physical violence. Though in many respects it is considered pervasive in society, violence is often perceived not as something we continually engage with, but rather as enacted upon us in a way that interrupts daily life” (2014, p. 1347). For marginalized groups, safe spaces are especially important, because they allow the people that occupy them to be vulnerable and open about who they are without the fear of retributive violence (Whitzman, 2007). Even as society becomes increasingly accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, queer people are still targeted at alarming rates. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Program’s (NCAVP) 2016 annual report on violence against the LGBTQ community documents that there were 77 reported hate violence related homicides of LGBTQ and HIV-affected people as well as 1,036 other recorded incidents of hate violence (Hate Violence, 2017). The NCAVP argues that hate violence “explicitly targets people and groups based on their actual or perceived identities” (Hate Violence, 2017, p. 16). The rates of violence against LGBTQ+ individuals are especially high for people of color and the transgender community. LGBTQ+ spaces can offer a reprieve from the threat of violence on the basis of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, and “[m]any individuals in the LGBTQ+ community view gay bars and nightclubs as safe spaces, as places where they can be free from the day-to-day slights and homoaggressive behaviors experienced outside of such venues” (Stults, Kupprat, Krause, Kapadia, & Halkitis, 2017).

The Decline of LGBTQ Clubs and Bars

In a 2008 study on gay communities in 17 cities, four of which were located in the United States, “the number and popularity of gay bars and clubs appears to be declining” (Rosser, West, & Weinmeyer, 2008, p. 589). This reflects a nationwide decline in the existence of LGBTQ+ institutions, specifically gay and lesbian bars, although exact numbers are difficult to find because of lack of historic data on LGBTQ+ establishments. However, this decline is clear when observing the demographics of individual cities. Ghaziani (2015, p. 323) writes, for example, “[t]here were 16 gay bars in Boston and Cambridge between 1993 and 1994, but by 2007 less than half remained.” The decline of LGBTQ+ bars and clubs coincides with the dwindling of gay neighborhoods across the United States. In a demographic study of the 2000 and 2010 U.S. censuses, zip codes associated with well-known gay neighborhoods were confirmed to be “deconcentrating”; fewer same-sex households lived in them in 2010 than in 2000 (Spring, 2012). With this de-concentration of gay neighborhoods, commercial queer spaces are losing business and closing (Ghaziani, 2015). Gay neighborhoods have played a historically important role in the LGBTQ+ community, and their decline is symbolic of an overall shift in queer spaces.

Reconceptualizing Queer Spaces: What Has Changed?

Over the past two and a half decades, society has seen a significant shift in how people socialize and form relationships. Technology has changed the way we think about community. Dating apps, social media, and online forums have created a “community” that is unbound by geography” and have eliminated the “need to feel physically connected to the community they call their own” (Ghaziani, 2015, p. 320). The internet has expedited the decline of LGBTQ+ physical spaces. The aforementioned study of 17 international cities found that, in every one, the

virtual gay community was larger than the offline physical community (Rosser et al., 2008). The internet has allowed queer individuals to form electronically-mediated platonic, romantic, and sexual relationships even if they aren't able to be out of the closet in their daily lives (Ghaziani, 2015). Virtual means of forming connections are increasingly widespread in the LGBTQ+ community. A 2012 study showed that, since the year 2000, sixty percent of same-sex couples first met online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012, cited in Ghaziani, 2015).

The internet is especially significant to marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community, such as genderqueer and transgender individuals, who may feel unsafe even in explicitly queer physical spaces. Petra Doan (2007, p. 67) elaborates on the unique role the internet plays in identity formation and community building for transgender individuals:

The growing use of computer based communication has seen a huge increase in the creation of online communities, at first through bulletin board groups, and then virtual chat rooms, world wide web sites and an ever expanding list of electronic mail list servers that proliferates in cyberspace. These venues for sharing information, exchanging personal stories, and for online organizing have transformed communications between dispersed individuals and allowed the transgender community to begin organizing in new ways.

Another shift in LGBTQ+ bars and clubs over the past decades has been the increased integration of heterosexually-identified persons in queer spaces (Casey, 2004). Browne and Bakshi (2011, p. 741) observe that space itself “is sexualized... at times as simultaneously gay and straight.” However, heterosexual presence in queer spaces is not without precedent. As Roey Thorpe (1997, p. 166) writes in her article on the history of lesbian bars in Detroit: “Heterosexual couples visiting a bar to watch homosexuals interact was a widespread practice in the 1940s and ‘50s.” While this was often for the amusement of straight couples who were drawn by the novelty of “[seeing] a queer,” it also served as an excuse for closeted individuals to enter queer spaces (Thorpe, 1997, p. 166). A heterosexual date “was a safe way for people to experience a

gay bar for the first time, and for some of these people, it was a step toward entering the bar in search of a same-sex relationship” (Thorpe, 1997, p. 167). There is continuing debate about whether the presence of straight people, specifically straight women, in queer spaces constitutes a damaging form of spectatorship, or is simply a sign of an increasingly sexually-integrated society (Casey, 2004).

With the ever-growing mainstream acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, the way we think about sexuality has gradually become less binary and totalizing. There is room to move between the “gay” and “straight” poles of the spectrum of sexuality. The merging of queer and non-queer spaces and the gradual decline of homophobic beliefs in the United States have rendered straight people more comfortable in LGBTQ+ establishments. As Ghaziani (2015, p. 322) writes, “Relaxed attitudes about sexual identity have led to a greater permeability.” Polling in recent years has shown a steady and increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in the United States, with many analysts attributing this phenomenon to the fact that more LGBTQ+ people are coming out of the closet than ever before (Barrett & Pollack, 2005; Ghaziani, 2015; Stultz et al., 2017). A 2014 study of adults across the United States found that “the number of Americans who have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian has increased by a factor of three over the last two decades, from 22% in 1993 to 65% today” (Ghaziani, 2015). This huge shift in the mainstream acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community has impacted how queer individuals perceive the importance of explicitly queer spaces. Individuals, gay or straight, can move between realms with more ease than ever before. However, heterosexuality continues to be accepted and expected as the norm across society. Queer identities and spaces are still in opposition to the dominant sexuality, and therefore, queer spaces and communities still play an important role in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals (Browne & Bakshi, 2011). However, with

access to the internet growing every day and the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities continuing to increase, the role of queer spaces is gradually shifting in the United States. Exactly how and to what extent demands further exploration.

A History of Queer Spaces in Orlando

In analyzing the shifting role queer spaces play in the lives of the LGBTQ+ community in Orlando, it is important to contextualize the city's queer history. There is less documentation of Orlando's gay community in the 1950s and early 1960s than other prominent cities, likely due to the fact that Orlando developed later than places like New York and San Francisco. The strong influence of religion and conservatism in the South made the risk of exposure particularly dangerous to the LGBTQ+ community, and this is reflected in the dearth of queer narratives from the South (Eaklor, 2008).

Florida during the 1960s was an especially hostile environment to anyone suspected of being a homosexual. During the Lavender Scare, Florida began its own hunt for LGBTQ+ individuals in government and public education. In 1961, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, commonly known as the Johns Committee after its chairman, broadened its investigations of suspected communists "to include homosexuals and the 'extent of [their] infiltration into agencies supported by state funds'... [B]y 1963, 39 professors and deans were fired, 71 public school teachers lost their teaching certificates, and scores of college students were interrogated and many were expelled" (Central Florida Timeline, 2015).

Orlando's first gay bar, The Palace Club, opened in 1969 (Central Florida Timeline, 2015). Soon after in 1971, Florida's Supreme Court lowered the severity of the crime of consensual homosexual acts, specifically sodomy, from a felony to a misdemeanor (*Franklin v.*

State, 2014). This made it safer for members of the LGBTQ+ community in Florida to become more visible.

The opening of Walt Disney World in 1971 also had a huge economic and demographic impact on queer businesses, so much so that “many people set the date for the beginning of Orlando's Gay History in tandem with the opening of Walt Disney World” (Central Florida Timeline, 2015). The theme park brought throngs of tourists, including LGBTQ+ travelers, to the previously obscure city of Orlando, and new businesses began springing up to cater to this new market.

Parliament House, the oldest gay establishment that still exists in Orlando today, was opened by Bill Miller and Michael Hodge in 1975. Parliament House’s resort style complex gave members of the local queer community and the influx of LGBTQ+ tourists a place where they could “have a drink, dance the night away, and then bed the partner or partners of [their] choice, all on the same property” (Shepard, 2003). In Parliament House’s self-produced documentary, *40 Years of Parliament House*, some of the original patrons and employees speak about the impact the establishment had on their own lives and on the community.

In the early days at the Parliament House, the front entry was not closed off and you drove through. It was a one way drive. You drove in from Orange Blossom Trail and you swerved around and came around the back... Let me assure you that in those times, [Parliament House] was the best cruising spot in Orlando. What would happen is you would come and you would drive through and see who’s there...and decide if you were going through for a second trip or not, or if you were just going to stop and enjoy yourself. That was a great thing. (GLBT History Museum of Central Florida, 2015)

A central role that queer establishments have played throughout history is the formation of sexual and romantic relationships between LGBTQ+ individuals, and the legacy of Orlando’s gay bars and clubs as popular cruising spots, especially for gay men, is no exception.

However, for many members of the local community, Parliament House's draw was not solely the promise of a good time or finding other LGBTQ+ people with whom to form physical connections. Parliament House also acted as a place where local queer people could find community and support during a time when it was often difficult to be anything other than heterosexual. One of the early patrons of Parliament House described the crucial role LGBTQ+ organizations played in the community during the AIDS epidemic:

I remember back during the AIDS scare, before there was the Hope and Help, before there was a CENTAUR [Central Florida AIDS Unified Resources], there was just a group of Parliament House regulars... who decided something had to be done to help out the people who were unable to work and at that time had no programs of assistance available to them. And they started something called Aid Orlando... [T]hey just started raising money and paying people's electric bills and paying people's rent and getting people goods and services, including just feeding people who literally couldn't feed themselves and had nowhere else to turn. They did fundraisers all the time, but I know for a fact that when the money wasn't there these guys dug into their own pockets. (GLBT History Museum of Central Florida, 2015)

This speaks to both the social and political importance of queer spaces in Orlando. The first AIDS-related death in Orlando occurred in 1983, and one of the two original owners of Parliament House, Bill Miller, died himself of the virus in 1987 (Shepard, 2003). Local LGBTQ+ bars and clubs such as Parliament House, Faces, and Southern Nights all raised money to support locals struggling with HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, and spaces that were previously epicenters of sexual freedom and joy became places to mourn the friends everyone had lost. Queer spaces have played many intersecting and shifting roles throughout the LGBTQ+ community's history, and an essential element is the network of support they provide during difficult times.

Since the 1970s, the GLBT History Museum of Central Florida has documented 52 LGBTQ+ and queer-owned businesses that have come and gone—or come and stayed—in the

city of Orlando (Bain, 2007). These businesses range from clubs, to bookstores, to bathhouses, to cafes, to flower shops. The city is home to a thriving queer community, and Orlando has scored a perfect 100 for four years in a row on the Human Rights Campaign's annual Municipal Equality Index, which measures LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion in local policies in 506 cities across the nation (Cordeiro, 2017). Despite Orlando's history as a home to queer spaces and communities, however, the city is no stranger to violence against the LGBTQ+ community.

Current Context: Post-Pulse Orlando

On June 12, 2016, a mass shooter targeted Pulse Nightclub, one of Orlando's most well-known gay clubs. The attack tragically resulted in 49 dead and 53 wounded, which marked it as the deadliest modern-day mass shooting, and the deadliest act of violence against the LGBTQ+ community, in the history of the United States (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017; Harris & Jones, 2017). The shooting took place during Latin Night at Pulse, and 90% of the victims were Latinx and people of color (Torres, 2016; Zambelich & Hurt, 2016). The shooter, a 29-year old named Omar Mateen, referred to himself an "Islamic Soldier" in his 911 call to police, although the Federal Bureau of Investigation could find no evidence of formal ties to ISIS, ISIL, or any other terrorist group (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016; Lawrence, 2016). While "the Federal Bureau of Investigation was not able to find any conclusive evidence that the shooter was motivated by internalized (or regular) homophobia," the shooting at Pulse is widely considered to be both a terrorist attack and a hate crime (Stultz et al. 2017, p. 252). Pulse Nightclub had been a refuge and haven for the Orlando LGBTQ+ community, and the attack tore at the sense of safety many queer individuals felt in these spaces. It was a stark reminder of the vulnerability of queer individuals to acts of

violence and hate, and the mass shooting had a significant psychological impact on the community.

In a survey of Florida residents conducted three weeks after the shooting, “13% of respondents reported elevated psychological distress and 8.1% reported having symptoms associated with acute stress disorder” (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017, p. 57). Higher rates of psychological distress were also correlated with a disrupted worldview, a shift in political views, and a change in position on gun control (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017). In a report titled “Perceptions of Safety Among LGBTQ People Following the 2016 Pulse Nightclub Shooting,” the authors observed that the fact that the shooting took place in a gay club was likely to trigger symptoms of posttraumatic stress in LGBTQ+ individuals who had experienced violence on the basis of their identity in the past (Stultz et al., 2017). The shooting at Pulse can therefore be seen as a “collective trauma” of the LGBTQ+ community, both locally and nationally.

A survey of LGBTQ+ people in the United States conducted within three weeks after shooting found that, following the attack, LGBTQ+ people perceived heightened concerns about their own safety and the safety of their peers (Stultz et al., 2017). Further, “those with multiple minority identities” experienced greater psychological distress” (Stultz et al., 2017). Despite the fact that the shooting took place during the club’s Latin Night, there were no significant differences in perceptions of safety by race or ethnicity. Rather, the more significant correlation was between concerns for safety and marginalized identities such as “genderqueer, transgender, nonidentified/other” (Stultz et al., 2017, p. 254). This is consistent with existing statistics on perceptions of safety by transgender and genderqueer individuals: a 2007 study of 149 transgender individuals across the United States found that the participants “felt that their cities were less safe for the trans population than the LGB population” (Doan, 2007, p. 65). This

perception is also due to the higher levels of violence and harassment experienced by transgender and genderqueer individuals across public and private spheres, even in explicitly queer spaces (Doan, 2007).

The Pulse shooting occurred in a broader context of continued hate-motivated violence against LGBTQ+ individuals on the basis of their gender identity and sexual orientation. The existing literature on hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community shows that, despite the widespread misconception that rates of violence have gone down for queer minorities in the US, violence against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity has not decreased; in fact, some studies show that it has gotten worse (Hein & Scharer, 2013; Lewis, 2014). The literature also reflects that hate crimes are an inherently intersectional issue, and the LGBTQ+ community is impacted by violence to different degrees depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender presentation, and socioeconomic status. Results from a nationwide survey of 94 LGBTQ+ people of color conducted over the span of two months after the Pulse shooting in 2016 found that “[i]ndividuals with multiple stigmatized identities experience a unique kind of discrimination compared to individuals with single minority identities” (Ramirez, Gonzalez, & Galupo, 2018, p. 586). Overall, the “dimensions of collective trauma” experienced by the LGBTQ+ community on a national scale after the shooting at Pulse reflect the deep impact made by the attack (Stultz et al., 2017).

Orlando was the epicenter of the trauma experienced in the wake of the shooting, and despite the heightened feelings of fear and vulnerability by queer Orlandoans, the LGBTQ+ community found means of organizing and healing in the aftermath. In the weeks following the Pulse massacre, a coalition of more than 40 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender organizations and their supporters came together to form the One Orlando Alliance, which organized

volunteers and set up blood drives (Santich, 2017). Equality Florida, the state's largest LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, raised over \$17 million in support of the victims and their families using the online resource GoFundMe, which shattered existing online fundraising records (Santich, 2016). In the immediate aftermath of Pulse, 50,000 people gathered at a vigil to remember the lives that had been taken by Omar Mateen, and elected officials and community leaders spoke in support of the LGBTQ+ community (McLaughlin, Couwels, & Cullinane, 2017).

The LGBTQ+ population in Orlando found other forms of community and support networks following the tragedy of the Pulse shooting, but the memory, the trauma, and the fear still linger. The Pulse shooting was surpassed as the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history by the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, which left 58 people dead and 851 injured. In February of 2018, Florida was impacted by mass gun violence again after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 17 students were murdered. Gun violence and mass shootings have not decreased in the United States, and gun-control measures continue to fail on both the state and federal level (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016). These are all significant factors to take into account when considering the shifting roles of the queer community in Orlando throughout its past and present. The city has a rich history of queer spaces and community organizing, as well as a legacy of homophobic laws, policies, and attitudes that embodies the history of the United States as a whole. The experience of LGBTQ+ individuals has been shaped by this complicated past, and the complexities of their experience deserve to be explored.

Methodology

To gain an understanding of the role of LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer-identified people

currently living in the city. I recruited interviewees primarily through my own social networks as a student at Rollins College and as a former intern and employee with Equality Florida, the state's largest LGBTQ+ advocacy organization. The participants came from a wide variety of organizations, schools, jobs, and backgrounds, the common thread being their residence in Orlando and some form of involvement in queer spaces.

During the interviews, participants were asked a variety of questions about their experience of queer spaces in Orlando, beginning with their first memory of going to an LGBTQ+ club or bar. I requested that participants describe the Orlando LGBTQ+ community; define what, for them, constitutes a queer space; indicate how, if at all, queer spaces have shaped their identity; and explore the impact of the Pulse shooting on their sense of safety in queer spaces and on the community as a whole. While this thesis was originally intended to focus on LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando more broadly, the Pulse shooting deeply influenced my participants' experiences and relationships with queer spaces. Because of this, the impact of the Pulse shooting factors significantly into my findings. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour and a half; the median interview was 57 minutes.

I transcribed each interview after the fact, then isolated themes that emerged across the interviews using a color-coded system tied to words and phrases. The interview sample consists of five men and five women. Four of the men identified as gay and one as bisexual; two of the women identified as bisexual, two as lesbian, and one as queer. In the coming analysis, I use "queer" and "LGBTQ+" as a neutral identifier for all of the participants. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 68. Six of the 10 interviewees identified as white, and four of the 10 interviewees identified as people of color; two identified as Latinx, one as black, and one as Asian.

My social position as a white, cisgender, gay woman influences my own understanding and experience of queer spaces. It is important to note that my understanding of race, class, and gender is shaped by my privilege, and despite my efforts to take my biases into account, I am aware that my positionality colors my analyses and conclusions.

Findings

Social importance of queer spaces in Orlando

A unifying theme across every interview was the personal importance of LGBTQ+ bars and clubs as recreational spaces. Nine out of the 10 interviewees stated that they preferred going to LGBTQ+ bars and clubs to non-queer spaces, and seven interviewees claimed that they went to a queer space the majority of the time they went out recreationally in Orlando. Kenzi, a 24-year-old white, bisexual woman, described why she prefers LGBTQ+ spaces:

Honestly, I just love the energy that comes with a queer party space. The energy is so positive and really accepting, and you always feel very safe. Not even in a way that relates to my sexuality. It just feels like everyone's very respectful there. I've never really had an uncomfortable situation happen in a queer space... Like if I go to Tier [Nightclub] downtown, there's going to be some guy who's going to have some gross comment, but in queer spaces, you're already being accepted for who you are, so I don't feel like there's that need for toxic masculinity as much and having to prove yourself and peacock around... That's why when I go to queer spaces, it's usually a party scene, because I can relax. I can really have a good time and let loose and dance and have a couple drinks and not feel like I have to watch my back.

The social importance of queer spaces was clear throughout the interviews. Every participant had a funny or sentimental anecdote to share about their experiences going out to LGBTQ+ bars and clubs in Orlando. Carmen, a 21-year-old bisexual woman who moved to Orlando from Singapore for college, explained the important role that Orlando gay clubs played in her life during her coming out process:

During my first couple of years of being semi-out—I never did come out officially because I didn't want to make it a big deal—going to gay clubs made me feel comfortable in my own skin without feeling judged. The best part about queer spaces is that they are so diverse, be it in terms of race, gender, or sexuality. I have never felt judgment, only acceptance. Seeing queer Asian women at queer spaces is always fun. We share mutual smiles and nods, and the feeling of being alone goes away.

The lack of judgement that Carmen describes, and the comfort of knowing that people with similar identities exist, appeared to be unique to queer spaces in the experience of the interviewees. The social role of LGBTQ+ spaces in the participants' lives also came across in their description of bars and clubs as safe spaces.

LGBTQ+ spaces as safe spaces

Nine of the 10 interviewees stated that LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando play an important role as safe spaces for the queer community. Ricardo, a 32-year-old Puerto Rican gay man, captured the general sentiment of interviewees in his explanation of why he perceived LGBTQ+ bars to be safe spaces:

I think LGBTQ bars here in Orlando, and probably everywhere, are a very important safe space for the LGBTQ community. This is the place where probably most people go and actually can come out, before coming out to the rest of the world, because that's where you know you're going to be able to be you. You're going to be able to dance and to dress however you want. And you're not going to be judged for your identity there. So it's very important to have these spaces and to keep them welcoming and safe.

When identifying what made LGBTQ+ clubs and bars safe spaces, interviewees repeatedly emphasized queer spaces' role in identity formation and self-expression. Multiple people explained that being perceived as queer was something that could be dangerous in non-queer spaces and that could invite harassment, ridicule, or even violence. LGBTQ+ bars and clubs

allow for the safe exploration of one's identity. Kenzi described the personal importance of LGBTQ+ spaces:

Actually going into queer spaces kind of helped my coming out process. I feel like, in a way, I'd been holding my breath, and the first time I went into Southern Nights it was like, "Woah, there's other people like me." It's not just the kind of queer people you see on TV—if you see them... And especially bisexuality is very demonized in media, and it's not fully accepted. So going into those spaces, it felt like there were people like me out there, and I could feel more comfortable and more safe... It was like if I can feel so comfortable and so safe here, let's try it outside of these doors and see if it's as good outside, and it was.

Gianna, a 28-year-old Hispanic lesbian who presents as butch, explained that queer spaces helped her embrace her preferred gender presentation alongside her sexual orientation:

Going to queer spaces really helped me to feel like I wasn't alone. I saw other queer people who were a lot more similar to the way I like to identify or the way I felt about myself, and it made me feel like I wasn't this weird monster that had these awful feelings. I was just a regular person, I just hadn't been exposed to that or hadn't experienced that growing up.

J.D., a 30-year-old white gay man, represented the only exception to interviewees' general feelings that LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando are safe environments for self-expression.

I personally do not feel safe and able to be myself in queer spaces in this community, because it is very cliquey and very judgmental at times... I'm a 6'2" cisgender, white, gay man, and I feel uncomfortable. I cannot imagine what a person of color or a trans person feels like when they occupy a queer space.

J.D.'s statement reflected a broader issue that arose among the male interviewees regarding the attitudes of gay male community in Orlando, which I address in the following section. Overall, participants felt that LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando were safe because they allowed queer individuals to more fully express themselves with less risk than in nonqueer spaces.

Cliquishness in the gay male community

Three out of the five male interviewees stated that their experience of LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando was negatively impacted by a sense of cliquishness among the gay male community. Though none of the interviewees knew each other, I noted that they all used the same word, “cliquish,” in describing their individual experiences. All three men stated that they were more comfortable at gay bars and clubs in other cities in the US, providing examples spanning from Jacksonville to Washington, D.C. Eddie, a 23-year-old black bisexual man, describes his experience of the Orlando gay scene:

I’ve been here about four years, and for the most part, I don’t actually feel that in tune with the queer community here... I went up North and visited New York, Philadelphia, and D.C., and I felt more at home. [There] was more common ground; it wasn’t so cliquish. Going up to New York and going up to Philly, the people there say the Florida scene is very cliquish. Living here, it definitely is. There’s a hierarchy and it’s based on the clique that you’re in. So just because you have multiple ethnicities in a community, it doesn’t mean that the community itself is inclusive.

Tommy, a 22-year-old white gay man, explained, “it’s really hard to break into the gay scene here. It feels very cliquish. Especially at Southern nights. It’s still one of my favorite clubs, but everyone has their group and a huge obstacle I have to jump through [is that] I don’t really have a gay squad.” This feeling of isolation was a consistent theme among the responses of gay male interviewees when prompted about their comfort-level in LGBTQ+ spaces.

Political importance of queer spaces in Orlando

While LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando play predominantly social and recreational roles, they are also politically significant. Patty Sheehan, Orlando’s District 4 City Commissioner and Central Florida’s first openly gay elected official, recalls the role LGBTQ+ clubs and bars played during the AIDS epidemic:

Barbara [Pomo, the owner of Pulse Nightclub] has always been having events for AIDS. She was always the first one to say yes to everyone in terms of having an event, bringing awareness to a topic or something like that. [Local bars] have a lot of [fundraising events]: Babes and Bonnets for the Youth Alliance... The bars do a lot to give back to the community. And they were the support of the original Pride Parades. It was all of the bars that helped us out. (Patty)

LGBTQ+ bars and clubs represent some of the only spaces where the local queer community can regularly gather in large numbers. Because of this, symbiotic relationships formed between bars/clubs and activist organizations. Ricardo works for Proyecto Somos Orlando, an LGBTQ+ Latinx organization formed after Pulse to respond to the needs of the Hispanic queer community. Ricardo explained that through his work, he realized that bars and clubs are locations that local activist organizations commonly target to reach the largest possible number of queer individuals in one space:

The way that I see it, if you want to reach a lot of the LGBTQ community, the place to reach them is probably where they go to hang out. It's not the best place to have very thoughtful conversations, but you can let them know "hey, this event is going on," or "hey, there's free [HIV] testing," so it's a good place to reach the community.

Ricardo recalled a specific example of utilizing the political potential of LGBTQ+ spaces that was scheduled to take place at Pulse Nightclub the week after the shooting:

I was part of [the Hispanic Federation's] voter registration team back in 2016, and we were actually trying to do voter registration at Pulse during one of the Latin nights. We would have gone the week after [the Pulse shooting]. Because me being a frequent visitor of the space, I knew that it would have been a good place to reach our target population, and [get] the Hispanic community registered.

LGBTQ+ bars and clubs are consistently politically important spaces, but through the interviews, it seemed like they became the most politically significant during times of community trauma.

Patty Sheehan and Joel Strack, a 68-year old white gay man who founded the Orlando Gay Chorus and acts as treasurer for the GLBT History Museum of Central Florida, both spoke about

how LGBTQ+ clubs and bars were most important to their lives during the AIDS epidemic. Similarly, four of the younger interviewees spoke about the political role of LGBTQ+ spaces after the Pulse shooting. During both the AIDS epidemic and the Pulse massacre, the government neglected the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and refused to recognize their suffering, and for this reason, LGBTQ+ bars and clubs became more important as points of political mobilization.

Transient queer spaces

While the interviews tended to focus much more heavily on physical LGBTQ+ spaces such as bars and clubs, multiple interviewees also mentioned the importance of LGBTQ+ events such as Come Out with Pride, protests, and the vigils that were held after the Pulse shooting. As Ghaziani (2015, p. 311) points out, “participating in ritual events such as pride parades, dyke marches, and street festivals that are based in [gay neighborhoods] inspires collective effervescence.” I posit that these events represent a kind of transient queer space; although these spaces are temporary, they still allow for community gathering in ways parallel to more permanent spaces. Pride parades and post-Pulse vigils were a recurring theme in the interviews and seemed to be just as impactful in LGBTQ+ Orlandoans’ lives as bars and clubs.

The need for more lesbian clubs and bars

All five of the female interviewees mentioned their desire for more LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando specifically targeted for women. There are no specifically lesbian bars or clubs in Orlando, and there is only one weekly recurring event for queer women (Girl the Party on Saturdays at Southern Nights). Hannah, a white queer woman, captures the overall sentiment toward the lack of spaces for queer women in Orlando:

I mean, I would want a full-time lesbian bar, obviously... We lost [South Florida’s] lesbian bar. I still think that as a queer person who doesn’t identify as a lesbian or gay

man, queer spaces that are open to all LGBTQ people are really important, and I still think that there is power in spaces that cater to women and nonbinary people and lesbians and bisexual and queer women and the people who love them. I still think that has power, because I still think there is plenty of misogyny and sexism within the LGBTQ community. And I think that creating more spaces for more segments of the LGBTQ community makes us stronger, and doesn't make us segmented in a dangerous way, and so I think that having those options would be really cool.

Patty Sheehan, a 64-year-old lesbian, recalls how radically different things were in Orlando during the 1980s.

[W]hen I first came out, there was a lot of women's only space. There was the Lesbian Community Network; the Lesbian Express was our newsletter that we got, and that was a women's group... At the time... You have to remember that men were really mean to us. They called us "fish." They didn't want us around. They didn't understand why we were necessary... Having our women's only space was a safe space for us, because a lot of women had been victims of domestic violence or sexual violence. They kind of gave us a place to come into our own.

Patty went on to explain that as the lesbian and gay communities became less divided, due in part to the role of lesbians as care-givers during the AIDS crisis, women-only spaces became less necessary as women were welcomed into gay clubs and bars. However, Patty noted the drawbacks of the contemporary lack of women-oriented spaces:

When I went out, you had Faces, and Odds and Ends, and [those were] women's only spaces. [The younger generation] doesn't have that. I think it's kind of a function of the fact that we're now more accepted. Kind of ... everybody goes out together. But you miss that. Okay, this is the lesbian space, and everybody is interested in everybody else. You don't know who's who anymore.

While every female-identified interviewee brought up the need for more spaces for queer women, the sentiment that there are not enough LGBTQ+ clubs and bars in Orlando was not exclusive to women. J.D., a 30-year-old white gay man, is upset at the dwindling number of exclusively queer spaces in Orlando.

Queer spaces are very important. We live in a day and age where we have an administration that is actively attacking our community. I kind of have that same visceral reaction when people go, “Okay, do we really need gay bars? Do we need gay spaces? You know, all these safe spaces are just for snowflakes.” Here in Orlando, we most definitely need those spaces. Every year we lose another gay bar. We’re down to four, and our community is huge, so we don’t have a lot to offer our community outside of the parks, outside of Disney and Universal.

The call for a greater number of LGBTQ+ spaces in Orlando was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Even interviewees who made it clear how much existing queer spaces (such as Parliament House or Southern Nights) meant to them expressed a desire for a greater variety of options, whether for the purpose of greater representation of women and femmes or simply for the sake of having more options available.

Pulse as a catalyst to social and political change

All 10 participants stated that they saw significant political and social shifts in the Orlando LGBTQ+ community after the Pulse massacre. Interviewees emphasized the increased push for gun control, the mobilization of LGBTQ+ and allied individuals in Florida during the marches and protests, and the increased visibility of the queer community on a local and national scale. Ricardo observed that the Pulse shooting resulted in a greater awareness by the community of queer people of color, as well as a greater awareness of the need for inclusivity in local organizations:

Pulse hit a nerve in everyone. It transcended the LGBTQ community, and I feel like it’s made Orlando more aware that there is an LGBTQ community here, and there is a Latinx LGBTQ community here, that there is a black LGBTQ community here, and you can’t just pretend that these communities don’t exist. I feel like it’s made Orlando more embracing, and it’s made the Orlando LGBTQ community more embracing and more willing to come together. People would say that most organizations were catering toward the non-people of color communities, and that people of color did not feel like they were welcome. After Pulse happened, all of that shifted, and organizations are actually really doing their best to be as inclusive as they can be. At least that came from a horrible

tragedy, but it's made people change. And it's made people that would not normally talk to an LGBT person talk to them and see that, yeah, we identify as LGBTQ, but we are the same.

Hannah, who was the Public Policy Coordinator for Equality Florida when the Pulse massacre happened, talked about the heightened visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in Orlando in the wake of the shooting, stating, "I think that in those months that followed, it was so important for us to continue being as visible and out and proud as possible, and to really proclaim as loudly as possible that love wins, and that love is louder."

Whether interviewees engaged in the protests and marches after Pulse or not, it is significant that every participant recognized the political and social shift that occurred after the massacre. This recognition is a testament to the huge impact that Pulse had on the participants' lives and on the Orlando community as a whole.

Conflicting role of LGBTQ+ spaces after the shooting

After the Pulse massacre, LGBTQ+ spaces played a conflicting role in the lives of most of the interviewees. Multiple people described the tension in their relationship to LGBTQ+ bars and clubs in the wake of the shooting, both as sources of renewed trauma and of potential healing. Hannah, a 25-year-old who identifies as a white, queer femme, explained that despite experiencing a panic attack the first time she reentered an LGBTQ+ bar after the shooting, she still felt more safe in queer spaces after the attack than non-queer spaces:

I actually felt more safe in queer spaces after Pulse. I felt less safe in other spaces after Pulse...I do remember the first time I went to Southern after Pulse. I was in line. There was increased security. I was patted down; I walked in. We were on the dance floor. I had a panic attack, had to leave. But that happened at concerts and in movie theaters and in places that weren't queer night clubs, because there was still the moment of looking for the exits, hearing loud noises that I couldn't decipher what they were, just being in crowded places where I feared for my safety, and they weren't exclusive to queer

nightclubs. Other than that one experience, I have overwhelmingly felt really safe in queer spaces, because it feels like we have each other's backs.

A common theme between all the interviews was the feeling of panic and fear in LGBTQ+ clubs and bars in the aftermath of the shooting. J.D. explained, “[t]here are many times when I’ll be out on a dancefloor and I’ll just kind of get a random flashback, and be like, ‘Shit, you know, where’s the exit? I need to know where the exit is.’” Similarly, Gianna and Eddie both spoke about adopting the habit of checking exits and being hypervigilant in clubs for months after the shooting. Said Gianna:

Since the Pulse shooting, going to queer spaces was scary at first, because it was awful to hear about it and know that it could have been Southern Nights, it could have been Parliament House, it could have been anywhere else where queer people get together. Then you walk in for the first time after... It was really odd, and it was one of those things where you kind of walk into the club and you’re scoping out the exits and you’re trying to figure out, okay, if something were to happen here, where do I go, where can I hide, you know, what’s the fastest way out? And for a little while it was like that; I wouldn’t drink as much, because I wanted to be able to hear gunshots over the music in case I mistook it for the bass, you know what I mean? Then finally you start to relax again, and you start to realize, okay I am safe, but it took a little while to get back to that.

Kenzi recalled the first time she went back to her favorite club after the shooting:

Then the first time I went to Southern Nights was very odd, because there were metal detectors, and there was like the wands, and checking my purses, and you couldn’t escape it. It just felt heavy... It was scary and frustrating that I was robbed of my feeling of safety and comfort and safety in a queer space in a really traumatic way.

Despite the panic and renewed trauma that participants invariably experienced in LGBTQ+ spaces after the shooting, multiple interviewees simultaneously expressed that queer spaces acted as sources of healing and comfort. Carmen described the conflicting emotions that she felt going to bars and clubs in the wake of the massacre:

It was strange, because even though I felt so scared and helpless sometimes, I didn’t even think about not going out to gay clubs afterwards. It was worth it to me to be around

people who knew how I felt. It was empowering to be able to have fun with my gay friends even when everything was so dark. In some ways, gay clubs were triggering afterwards, but they still made me feel like myself, and I didn't want to lose that.

The majority of the interviewees expressed a similar sentiment to how Carmen felt about queer spaces after the shooting. Even though their sense of safety in bars and clubs had been deeply damaged, they kept going out because queer spaces also offered a sense of community and support, and allowed for an emotional or recreational release.

The importance of LGBTQ+ organizations and resources

Interviewees perceived that LGBTQ+ organizations also played an important role in the community after the shooting. Although interviewees spent the most time talking about recreational spaces such as bars and clubs, four participants specifically mentioned the positive impact that LGBTQ+ organizations made after the Pulse shooting. Patty talked at length about the efforts made by the LGBT Center of Central Florida (commonly referred to as The Center) to address the needs of the community in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy:

I'd have to say that The Center was incredible in the way that they responded. They were open until 7:00 a.m. that morning, and for most gay people, nothing ever opens at 7:00 a.m. They had those doors open. They had hundreds of volunteers ready to help. They had counselors available that morning, and I was sending kids... I'd say, "just go to The Center. You need to talk to somebody after what you saw." That brick and mortar center was the heart of this community, will continue to be the heart of this community. And I think it's nice that people started other organizations, that's just fine. But we still need a brick and mortar center where people can go and get help and assistance and counseling and all the things that you need that the larger community won't provide for us.

Similarly, Ricardo talked about how local organizations "stepped up" in the months following Pulse, and their role in addressing the lack of services provided for members the LGBTQ+ Latinx community who were disproportionately impacted by the shooting:

You probably heard many people say that there was a need for culturally competent services, because most of the impact community was the Hispanic community... There were language barriers, and some other issues that had to be navigated more carefully. So organizations came together and stepped up, and Proyecto Somos Orlando was born out of that need to have those culturally competent, but at the same time LGBTQ-sensitive, services to the community... At first, we were serving mostly families of the victims and the survivors, connecting them with legal resources. We had people who were facing immigration issues, so they needed to be connected with attorneys. And whatever the need was, if we could help them or connect them with other agencies that were providing those services, that was our goal.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that participants perceived LGBTQ+ organizations as pivotal to community healing. Local organizations played an essential role in addressing the financial, legal, and emotional needs of the community after the massacre.

Community resilience after the shooting

Multiple studies have shown that social solidarity in the wake of mass traumatic events can mitigate its negative psychological impact on individuals (Hawdon, Rasanen, Oksanen, & Ryan, 2012; Hawdon & Ryan, 2011; Pfefferbaum, Reissman, Pfefferbaum, Klomp, & Gurwitch, 2008). In a 2011 study of community responses to three mass shootings, greater social solidarity was positively correlated to greater emotional wellbeing (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011). The authors point out that “[n]etworks activated during times of crises can mitigate, suppress or counteract the deleterious effects of stressors by providing needed tangible and emotional resources and promoting effective coping strategies,” and that “social support can counteract the feelings of insecurity, helplessness, and meaninglessness that those victimized by a traumatic event often experience” (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011, p. 4).

These findings were congruent with statements made in my interviews. The majority of interviewees (seven out of 10) stated that they found solace and solidarity in the Orlando LGBTQ+ community after the Pulse shooting. Particularly for individuals involved in the activist community in Orlando, the support from the community was essential to their healing process. Ricardo, a survivor of the Pulse shooting who works for a Hispanic LGBTQ+ advocacy organization called Proyecto Somos Orlando, explains the role of the community in his life after the shooting:

For sure, the LGBTQ community played a role in my life right after Pulse happened. Before it happened, I wasn't involved in the activism here in Orlando or in Puerto Rico beyond activism through social media. Getting to know the community, getting to know the leaders, getting to know the support that there is certainly changes your life.

Tommy, a white 23-year-old gay college student, explained that Orlando's response after the Pulse shooting was hugely significant to his perception of the community as a whole:

I went to the candlelight vigil at the Dr. Phillips Center...that was breathtaking, to see how much love that there is in the community, that prior to the event we didn't know about. There were so many people there, clearly just normal people, who were like, "This isn't right at all. We stand with you guys. We are here for you guys." I think that, since coming out, that was the biggest sense of family, the biggest sense of community that I've ever felt.

Similarly, the interviewees who were involved in the activist community in Orlando all found their activist work after the shooting to be a source of solidarity and healing. J.D., who was on the board of three LGBTQ+ organizations in Orlando after Pulse, emphasized how much his work helped him recover from the trauma:

Getting to know all those other activists, and seeing them everywhere, and really just being in their company and knowing that we are the front line dealing with the FBI, dealing with the families, trying to make all this change happen, you know, that is what kept me going. That is what really helped me heal. Up until two or three months ago, I kind of felt like I was alone in the gay community...I didn't really have any queer friends

that I could call up and go, “Oh my god, did you watch Rupaul?” I didn’t have that. So working with those activists in the nonprofit sector really helped me heal and deal with it.

The three interviewees that did not note an important role of community solidarity in their lives after the Pulse shooting stated a variety of reasons for their withdrawal. Kenzi, a 24-year-old white lesbian, said that she mourned alone because being involved in the LGBTQ+ community reminded her of the attack.

My healing process after Pulse ... I would never question anyone’s method of healing; however, I felt a little frustrated about mine, only because I felt like I kind of played into the fear a little bit, and I felt really withdrawn. It actually took me a while to even really connect with the LGBT community again. I felt like I needed a break, so it was hard for me afterwards. I felt like being around queer spaces was just a reminder of that tragic event, so I think with my healing process I took a break... I think if I would do it differently—God, not do it over again—but do it differently, I would go to that side of the community and be there for healing. Because ultimately, when we’re together, that’s when we’re stronger. So I regret keeping to myself during that. (Kenzi Vanderberg)

Kenzi’s girlfriend, Gianna, felt that because she did not lose anybody personally in the massacre, she did not fully deserve the support of the community and felt uncomfortable participating in the vigils and protests after the fact.

I felt kind of like a coward, and a little selfish, because I didn’t want to be out in public with everyone. I didn’t find any kind of solace... I felt so happy for our community how it was coming together and how everyone was there for each other, but it wasn’t something I could be a part of. As much as it impacted me on a personal level for my own reasons, I almost felt like a fraud if I went. And I know that maybe sounds stupid, but you know, I didn’t lose anyone at the shooting. I lost my sense of security and my sense of safety, but I felt like, these are people who were deeply, deeply impacted by it, and while I was, it felt wrong to me for some reason to be out marching along [at the vigil] in front of Dr. Phillips.

Overall, the solidarity that emerged within the Orlando LGBTQ+ community played a crucial role in the healing process for the majority of interviewees. However, the variation between respondents’ coping methods reflect the diversity that exists within individual responses of queer

Orlandoans to the massacre. The Pulse shooting was a deeply painful, personal experience that impacted LGBTQ+ individuals differently depending on their own experiences, identities, and personalities. Despite the common themes that emerged between the interviews, it is impossible to capture fully the depth and complexity of the trauma experienced by the community in Orlando.

Conclusion

The interviews revealed that LGBTQ+ bars and clubs in Orlando play a significant role in the social lives of the participants, and their importance to the community has only increased since the Pulse shooting. Key themes that emerged throughout the interviews included the social and political importance of LGBTQ+ spaces, their role in the identity formation of queer individuals, the importance of transient LGBTQ+ spaces such as pride parades and vigils, and the need for more woman-centric LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. In a post-Pulse context, interviewees emphasized their conflicting relationship with LGBTQ+ bars and clubs both as sources of renewed trauma and of potential healing, identified the Pulse massacre as a catalyst to social and political change, and stressed the importance of LGBTQ+ organizations and resources alongside the positive impact of community resilience after the shooting.

A shortcoming of the study was the lack of transgender and nonbinary participants. In directions for future research, I believe that the transgender community in Central Florida has been left out of the majority of the dialogue around the Pulse shooting and the dialogue around the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Future research could also expand upon the impact of the Pulse shooting on Orlando's LGBTQ+ community, recreational spaces, and organizations. It was evident in my research that the Pulse shooting represented a deep shift within the Orlando

LGBTQ+ community. Multiple interviewees perceived it as a watershed moment for local activism as well as leading to greater recognition of the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals in Orlando.

The ultimate goal of this thesis was to provide a platform for LGBTQ+ individuals living in Orlando to share their experiences with LGBTQ+ bars and clubs both pre- and post-Pulse. Queer voices and experiences have been historically silenced, and research that focuses on LGBTQ+ lives helps create a more nuanced understanding of what it means to move through the world as a member of a marginalized community. Orlando is home to a rich legacy of LGBTQ+ spaces throughout the city's history, and as this thesis has shown, LGBTQ+ spaces continue to play a vital role in the lives of queer individuals in Orlando today.

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