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Three Mattresses and a Roll of Caution Tape: Creating Queer Space in the 21st Century

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URBS Thesis, 2022

Three Mattresses and a Roll of Caution Tape:

Creating Queer Space in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

Where do you go when you want to be seen? When you want to feel supported? What about when you want to feel free? If you were to imagine a space that is free of social constraints and expectations, where you can go to “let it all out” after a long day spent playing by societal rules, what would it look like? Who would be there? What would they be doing? How would they be feeling? Who would you choose to be in a space like that, if you could choose to be anyone? How does your body feel when you imagine yourself there? Are you smiling? Are you happy?

Queer space is built on imagination and an undying effort towards freedom. The idea of true freedom— freedom to express yourself, freedom to love and interact with others the way you want to, freedom to move and speak and be who you are— has always rested at the heart of queer placemaking in its many forms. In order to understand this, however, one must first have an understanding of what is being referenced by the use of the term “queer.”

“Queer” began as a reference to anything or anyone that was outside the norm or strange in some way. It quickly morphed into a pejorative slur against homosexuals. In more recent years, the word has been adopted by LGBT communities as a wide-reaching term that encompasses individuals on the wide spectrums of gender and sexuality.¹ While the use of the word queer to denote anyone who does not fall into the categories of cisgender or heterosexual is now the most common definition, there is a political dimension of the term that often gets left out when it is reduced to this simple descriptor.

¹ Ingram, Gordon Brent, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, Yolanda Retter, and Jean-Ulrick Désert. Essay. In *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, 18. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997.

The term queer retains its origins as a word that denotes something or someone “outside the norm.” This sense of otherness and opposition lies at the root of the queer theory and ethics. David Halpern puts it best when he writes, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence.”² Because of this sense of opposition, the word “queer” is nearly impossible to define on its own. It is not simply a form of expressing gender or sexuality but rather a reaction to dominant social and political structures.

The dominant ideas that structure public conceptions of gender and sexuality are, of course, cisheteropatriarchy. This term combines significant three ideas that combine to form systems designed to exclude and oppress those who lie beyond them, they include: cisnormativity and transphobia, compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, patriarchy and misogyny. This is not to say, however, that heterosexuality is a problem in and of itself— it is simply a point on the spectrum of sexuality that is no more natural or unnatural than anything else. It is the *enforcement* of heterosexuality and the *repression* of all other forms of sexuality that are the problem. This applies just as much for gender. This is clarified in the essay “Queer Meet Anarchism, Anarchism Meet Queer,”:

The normal sexuality, in our own society, isn’t just “hetero,” it is a particular form of heterosexuality— a heterosexuality that has a goal of a happily married couple in a permanent relationship, abiding by the plethora of norms that make up what is referred to as “heteronormativity”-- a very specific type of heterosexuality that

² Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.

reinforces the dominance of the ascribed set of norms: cohabitation, procreation, marriage, monogamous coupling, etc.³

This description reveals the complex and interconnected processes of heteronormativity as not simply being a problem for those who do not identify as “straight.” Under this framework, even a person who considers themselves heterosexual but may not be interested in marriage, monogamy, or raising a child will face some form of oppression and/or exclusion from social systems because of their divergence from the norm.

This, again, also applied to gender roles. The rigidity of gender roles in our society and the preconceived notions about a person’s character and actions that come with their assigned gender at birth are oppressive to everyone living with them. The role of man is prescribed as being aggressive, protective, strong, and emotionless. The role of woman is prescribed as soft, weak, sexual, and emotional. Anyone who does not fit into these roles, whether or not they are transgender, is likely to experience significant cultural pushback. Transgender people represent a significant threat to these systems because we show people, through simply living, that there are options outside of these traditional and suffocating gender structures.

Queer, then, is a reaction to, and rejection of, the systems of cisheteropatriarchy without pointing to a specific identity label that is meant to replace it. This is why it is important to distinguish queer politics and ideas from those of many mainstream gay and lesbian activists who promote assimilation into existing social structures. Many mainstream (read also: wealthy and white) LGBT activists have promoted work around gaining “a seat at the table.” That is, in terms of space, they work to gain access to existing public spaces without working to create their own. An example of this can be seen in the fight for gay marriage. While this was an important

³ Daring, C., J. Rogue, D. Shannon, C. Daring, J. Rogue, and D. Shannon. “Queer Meet Anarchism, Anarchism Meet Queer.” Essay. In *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, 12. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013.

fight and a huge milestone for LGBT activism, at the same time it reinforced the heteronormative ideals discussed earlier of “cohabitation, procreation, marriage, monogamous coupling, etc.” In this way, because the struggle for gay marriage did nothing to combat the societal norms that oppress anyone who does not fit the cookie-cutter mold of what love and coupling is expected to look like, rather fighting to be allowed to take place in this cookie-cutter mold itself, it ultimately fell short of being a truly radical movement.

To be clear, I am in no way advocating against marriage, and neither is queer theory. Anyone who wants to get married should be able to do so. The issue is not in the act itself but rather the *expectation* of fulfilling the act and all the ways society works against those who do not conform to this expectation. This includes everything from unmarried couples (of all genders and sexualities) having trouble adopting to not being able to visit partners in the hospital due to lack of official documentation of being “family.”

Thus, we have the emergence of the term queer as a reactionary title signalling resistance to dominant social structures of cisheteropatriarchy and existence (or an attempt at existence) beyond these social structures. But what does any of this have to do with space?

The three axes of cisheteropatriarchy work together with other dominant social systems such as racism, ableism, fatphobia, and classism to make public space inaccessible and downright dangerous for those who do not conform to these predetermined social norms. This can look like anything from a cake shop refusing to serve gay couples⁴ to 2,479 hate crimes being committed against LGBTQ individuals in 2020⁵. Public space is not safe for those who do not look cisgender and straight, so we are forced to find and create our own safe spaces.

⁴ “Masterpiece Cake Shop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission.” Oyez, 2018.
<https://www.oyez.org/cases/2017/16-111>.

⁵ “United States of America Hate Crimes Statistics.” HCRW, 2020.
<https://hatecrime.osce.org/united-states-america>.

An example of this relationship between queer communities and public space can be found in none other than Times Square. By the 1930's, Times Square had become one of the most important cultural centers of queer nightlife and culture. It was the theater district of the Square that originally attracted huge numbers of gay workers, who found an environment where they were, if not fully accepted for their sexuality, at least tolerated and not under constant threat of unemployment or violence. At the time, gay men flocked to get jobs as waiters and busboys, performers, chorus boys, actors, costume designers, and publicity assistants in the theater industry. This created a hotspot of gay men not only working in the Square but living in the boarding houses there as well. This gathering also quickly began to attract men who did not live or work in Times Square but would come to visit and enjoy the nightlife scene, attracted by the promises of like minded individuals and a space which held more freedom than the rest of the city.

Following the influx of gay men living and working in the Square, gay nightlife began to emerge soonafter. At first, both gay and straight nightlife were in remarkably similar positions of secrecy due to prohibition. Customers being ready to clear out or hide what they were doing at a moment's notice became common practices whether the speakeasy was serving gay customers or not. This meant that for a time, there was more general acceptance of breaking social taboos in nightlife, and thus marginally more freedom for queer individuals to go where they pleased.



Fig. 1: Times Square, Early 1930s, Frederic Lewis

This did not last long, however, by the end of prohibition, straight bars and clubs cracked down hard on homosexuality, not wanting any more trouble with authorities after over a decade of secrecy. This pushed gay people back into liminal spaces, having to once again create a place for themselves. This often looked like gatherings in drugstores, cafeterias, delis, and bars. However, these spaces were always at risk and in transition. For example,

In February 1927... after gay men had been congregating at the Forty-Second Streets Liggett's drugstore for some time, the management, perhaps sensing a temporary hardening of police attitudes or simply fearing for its reputation, suddenly called on the police to drive men from its premises, which led to a raid and the arrest of enough men to fill two police vans.⁶

As seen here, even the mere threat of police was enough at times to get management to turn on their own clientele. Nowhere was completely safe. But when one gathering site would get shut down, another one would pop up nearby, and when that one would get shut down, the next one

⁶ Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994.

would emerge shortly after. This cycle was ongoing and led to networks of gay men being tied strongly not to one place, but rather the community that would occupy space after space after space.

There are a few important caveats with this example. The first is that it illustrates the evolving nature of the word “queer.” In 1930’s New York, gay men were considered “queer,” outside the norm, and constantly under threat. This looks much different today through the work of the gay rights movement. Gay bars are no longer underground and being shut down by police nearly every night but rather often longstanding cultural hotspots. In this way, a discussion of gay bars in the 1930’s falls into the discussion of queer placemaking and displacement in a way that discussing gay bars in 2022 would not.

Furthermore, this example and the way the identity politics within it have aged illuminates to me an even more important point: those whose identities lie at the intersections of different forms of oppression have always been at the forefront of queer theory. While queerness primarily references those who are outside of cisheteropatriarchal norms, intersections of race, class, and more combine to create an even more intense feeling of “otherness” that furthers understandings of queerness in relation to the “norm.” This is not just a feeling of social isolation or exclusion but has real, tangible effects on people’s safety and livelihood. Black and Latinx transgender women make up the majority of violent transgender deaths year after year⁷ with no signs of things changing even to this day.

All this to say, while it is important to consider examples like gay men in Times Square as instances of queer placemaking and adaptation, it is equally as important to consider the privileges along race and class lines that allowed these men to grow their communities in such a

⁷ “Violence against the Transgender Community in 2020.” Human Rights Campaign, 2020.
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-trans-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2020>.

public space at all. Furthermore, it is important to consider the ways in which racism and classism likely contributed to alienation, othering, and continuing cycles of abuse within these spaces and how these forces continue to impact queer space to this day.

At its core, however, this example shows the reactionary nature of queer space. The men in question were constantly reacting to shifting grounds beneath them in their constant movement and adaptation to new spaces. Setting up a new gathering space after police shut down the last space— or twenty— is an act of resistance and very queer. Instances like these are some of the origins of queer placemaking practices in the modern world.

Queer space, at its best, becomes a site of liberation from the danger and oppression faced by queers in public space. It holds promises of communal care, free expression, and safety not found in the outside world. Jean-Ulrick Désert puts this best when he writes,

Queer space crosses, engages, and transgresses social, spiritual, and aesthetic locations, all of which is articulated in the realm of the public/private, the built/unbuilt environment, including decoration. Though the erotic nature of space is, by itself, difficult to categorize, the act of sex— witnessed or instigated by the inhabitant and the designer— need not be what defines queer space. The definition of queer space by erotic program would be as limiting as the word *homosexual*.⁸

The phrasing of “crosses, engages, and transgresses” is important here because it highlights the oppositional nature of queerness to the norm. Just as queer culture reacts in opposition to cisheteronormative culture, so queer space reacts in opposition to cisheteronormative space. Reducing queer space to something that is defined by sex or erotic acts is the same as reducing queerness as a whole to a descriptor of one’s gender or sexual identity. Just as one cannot

⁸ Ingram, Gordon Brent, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, Yolanda Retter, and Jean-Ulrick Désert. Essay. In *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, 18. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997.

pinpoint what exactly queer *is* and must rather attempt to describe it at least partially through what it is *not*, queer space cannot be limited to any one type of environment or activity.

Despite all of this, the following chapters are an attempt to explore some of what queer space is and can be. While theoretically it is useful to engage with descriptions of queer space through what is absent within them, practically this is not a particularly useful tool. This is mainly because queer space is so *full*— full of love, full of laughter, full of friendship and intimacy, full of movement, full of music, full of care, full of community, full of *life*. These are all things that cisheteropatriarchal structures work to repress in everyday life, begging the question: what kinds of ideas, feelings, and practices are allowed to express themselves when there is an absence of this kind of oppression within a space?

This idea of the absence of cisheteropatriarchal norms making room for all kinds of new freedoms is the root of my work here. In the following chapters, I explore multiple examples of different kinds of queer spaces and how they work to create freedom for those within them. I choose specifically to focus on nightlife spaces, as these are the spaces I have the most intimate access to and to attempt to write a comprehensive account of every kind of queer space would be far too much for one paper.

First, I explore anarchist and collectivist ideals within queer space through an interview with one of the organizers of The Moon Info Shop, a DIY venue in New Paltz, NY. Then, I move into ethnographic observations of Fight Night, an event in Poughkeepsie, NY and weave these in with the principles of harm reduction and pleasure activism. I then include another ethnographic report on a small drag show in New Paltz, NY that revealed to me the dark side of queer spaces. Finally, I use all of these observations and analyses to craft my own real life attempt at creating a positive and healthy queer nightlife space through a drag show at Vassar College. This

experience helped ground the research I had done in something active and tangible, putting into practice the theory I had gathered over the course of my work thus far. This project, while being the culmination of my work, led me to even more questions, concerns, and hopes for the future that I address in my final section.

Queer nightlife spaces hold great possibilities for liberation, one simply has to work to help turn those possibilities into a reality.

CHAPTER 1: THE MOON INFO SHOP AND ANARCHIST SENSIBILITIES



Fig. 2: *The Moon Info Shop Exterior*, 2017

I met Riley⁹ through an internship at the Newburgh LGBTQ Center. They were my mentor and point-person for social media, and we worked closely together for about 9 months on and off. Along the way during our check ins, which would often last upwards of a half hour before we started actually getting into work business, I learned a lot about them. I learned they were a queer punk anarchist with a love of pro-wrestling. I learned they had a long history of organizing and activism. Most importantly, I learned that they used to run a DIY venue in Newburgh called “The Moon.” When I asked them if they’d be willing to talk more with me

⁹ Name has been changed to protect anonymity

about the venue and their experience running it, they were eager to share their experience and the things they had learned.

The full name of the space was “The Moon Info Shop and Community Space.” It was a mesh of different ideas and events that tried to appeal not just to the punks and queer folks within Riley’s immediate community, but also their neighbors and people in the larger community in an attempt to build solidarity and connection. This meant coming up with a lot of different events such as art nights, movie nights, one (unsuccessful) board game night, and many different concerts.

The space was mostly run by Riley and one other person. At its peak, there would be 3-5 other people helping out as well. There were a handful of other people who came on at the beginning to help jumpstart the space, but when the reality of work and commuting began to set in for people, the numbers quickly dwindled. Riley didn’t have a job at the time, so they said they were the one around the shop most consistently making sure everything was clean and the space was maintained. Other than that, different people would pop up to help organize specific events they were interested in, booking bands, sending emails, and the like, and then drop off once the event was over. They said delegation of responsibility ended up happening kind of naturally in this way because it was always run by a group of people who were interested in making something happen and would do what they could to help that come to fruition.

The space was in use for about nine months before the landlord put another tenant in because Riley and their team couldn’t pay rent. Fundraising was a point they stressed off the bat. They said the space mostly got started with individual contributions and was sustained from people donating through a pay-what-you-can system during events. However, they didn’t know much about how to fundraise and tap into community resources at the time, something they said

would be much different if they were to do the project again and create another space. The lack of money was ultimately their downfall.

In those nine months, however, they did a lot of things right. The first thing that struck me was the pay-what-you-can model of the space. They said it worked surprisingly well, with most people paying more than the suggested donation because they assumed other people weren't going to. This created a solid cushion for people who couldn't afford to pay the full suggested amount (or sometimes anything at all).

They told me about one specific story that embodied this ethic for them. A friend of theirs had been down on his luck and couch hopping for several months. He often came to the shop because he knew it was one of the few places he could go and stay for a while for free. Months later, when he was back on his feet and had some extra money, he donated an extra \$20 at one of the events because the shop had been so generous and kind to him when he was struggling. Riley said that it was one of the best \$20 the shop ever made.

This practice shows deep community care for *all* members of the community, not just people who can afford to get in the door. It makes sure that no one gets left behind or turned away for lack of funds. More than just not turning people away, it creates a space where people can come in from the cold, or heat, or rain and be in a place that is designed to care and provide for them. It creates a space where people can be seen, held, have fun, relax, and just be. It responds directly to people's needs and makes sure there are no barriers of entry for them being able to access the amenities they are sharing. This sense of unconditionality in care was huge for the space.

One of the other things that Riley mentioned as being an important community care practice, one they said people still bring up to them sometimes years later, is the practice of

feeding people at nearly every event– not just snack food either but real, hot meals for free. This, as Riley put it, “was just good for everyone.” It not only meant that people who couldn’t afford to buy food could come and enjoy a meal for free, it also meant that people who were busy or coming directly from work and didn’t have time to eat could grab something at the venue instead of having to buy fast food or an expensive on-the-go meal. They said not only did this make the space more accessible (and safer with people drinking), but pointed out that sharing food has historically been an important part of building community.

It is important for me to point out this incredible duality in the way practices such as having food provide for the community. Not only are you meeting people’s direct physical needs, by extension you are helping provide for people’s social, emotional, and spiritual needs. It is the same with a pay-what-you-can model both helping people get out of harsh outdoor environments while simultaneously giving them a space to socialize and meet people. Feeding people provides for people’s hunger and budget while fostering social connections. Real community care and space building does not try to account for only one side of people’s needs. Real community care tries to care for each person as a *whole*, and simple practices such as having food around can foster this intersection beautifully and naturally.

Riley also mentioned that among the space’s many kinds of events were a handful of entirely sober events organized by people in the group who were sober and needed a space to be with others in that community. While they were not a part of this organizing process and could not speak in depth about it, the mere fact that these events were a recurring part of the space shows care and consideration of many different parts of the community. In this way, the sense of caring for each person as a whole by caring for each dimension of their needs extended to the community as a whole– caring for each dimension of the community instead of just a part.

The ethic of the space emerged from the shared political thought of the small group of organizers who created it. Mostly coming from anarchist traditions, it was important to them that the space was non-hierarchical in both the organizing process and the events themselves.

Before looking at what an ethic of anarchism looked like in practice in the space, I want to take a moment to define some foundational principles of anarchism clearly in this context. Because it is a broad and far-reaching term, anarchism often gets many different meanings and ideas attached to it that make it hard to decipher what the term actually means. This, combined with the fear and mistrust that usually accompany talk of anarchism in mainstream media make it especially important to define what the term means in this specific example.



Fig. 3: *The Moon Interior*, 2017

Drawing from the text “Queer Meet Anarchism, Anarchism Meet Queer” by C.B. Darling, J. Rogue, Abbey Volcano, and Deric Shannon in the compilation *Queer Anarchism*, I wish to emphasize the creative urge of anarchism first and foremost. Anarchists are often associated with critiquing and dismantling current systems of oppression, and while this is a real and important dimension of the anarchist ethic, the rebuilding forces of anarchist thought often

get left behind. First and foremost, anarchists oppose private property as a means of “systematized robbery”¹⁰ and seek to create spaces that produce for the needs of the people rather than the profits of capitalists. An example of “systematized robbery” would be landlords making people pay to use or live in spaces the landlords do not actually use or live in themselves. The landlord extracts no personal use out of the space except to make profit off of it and thus exploits the renter for their need of shelter or space. A space like The Moon Info Shop combats this and embodies anarchist ethics through the pay-what-you-can model, allowing people to use and be in the space as they need without exploiting them by demanding money or labor in return. Furthermore, the fact that The Moon actually used the space they had to create events and opportunities for the community deepened their *reciprocal* relationship with the community in a non-exploitative way.

Another important aspect of anarchist thought and worldbuilding is the replacement of hierarchical social relations with “human community based on autonomy, solidarity, and mutual aid.”¹¹ Hierarchical social relations always reinforce some combination of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and class exploitation. Anarchist action seeks to counter this by creating spaces of collectivity and community. This means decisions are made together rather than in a top-down manner and those normally at the bottom of the social strata in decision making processes are centered. In the context of The Moon, this meant that everyone worked together on everything and did tasks as they needed to be done without official “roles” being delegated to anyone. This also meant letting go of the mindset of controlling things at the event itself, placing the crowd on the same ground as the organizers and trusting them to know what

¹⁰ Daring, C., J. Rogue, D. Shannon, C. Daring, J. Rogue, and D. Shannon. “Queer Meet Anarchism, Anarchism Meet Queer.” Essay. In *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, 8. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

was best to take care of themselves and others around them while there. Riley said this worked well for the most part, with only one instance of a community response team being needed when a member of one of the bands playing there got too drunk and out of hand.

This instance opened up a conversation about security and how to create a safe space for people without making them feel policed. Riley said the space very consciously didn't assign anyone security roles because this would be placing someone in the role of having to police other people, and "no one wants to do that." Having distinct security patrolling the space makes people feel more on edge and less free to do what they want, even if it is not harmful to anyone. Essentially, no one wants to be a cop, and no one wants to be around cops.

But how to keep people safe? Riley said for the most part they didn't have any problems and that everyone really just took care of themselves and their friends. In the instance where someone did get out of hand and they had to kick them out, there was a group of about five trusted people who had either organized the event or were close to the organizers who stepped in to handle the situation and escort the person out. This wasn't a preplanned group, however, but simply people who cared about keeping the space safe. In this instance, Riley said it was less about assigning roles and more about knowing who trusted people were and who was able to do what.

This made a lot of sense to me, and not just in relation to security or having to kick someone out. Someone may be able to handle a situation like that but would not know what to do in a medical emergency or if someone got too drunk and passed out. Someone may be really helpful in a medical emergency but wouldn't be able to talk to the cops if they showed up to shut an event down. More long term as well, someone may be really good at keeping track of financials but may have no idea what kind of bands to book. Someone may be able to run social

media but wouldn't be able to handle getting food for an event. What people can and can't do is a constantly shifting target and something that needs to be checked in on regularly. On one hand, someone's time or money capacities may shift to be more or less. On the other hand, someone may have learned a new skill (maybe even from someone else running the space) and may be able to take on a new kind of role or responsibility than they previously could. Any way about it, no one person can do everything, and it's important that responsibilities before, during, and after an event are being shared as equitably as possible among the group or community.

This ethic of anarchist thought being the baseline for the group's activities reminded me that placemaking can never be fully separated from political ideology. The ways in which one thinks about and interacts with the world are always going to inform the kinds of spaces you are able to create. Political ideology is, at its best, a way of imagining new possibilities for what the world could look like. Placemaking puts this imaginary into practice, turning theory into action and physical reality. Without a strong foundation within the imaginary, however, one runs the risk of getting stuck recreating harmful systems and structures within the space they create. This also ends up representing one's political ideology, albeit sometimes inadvertently. It is important to actually engage with the politics of space making so that one can decide with more purpose the kind of space they want to create. By tapping into radical thought and visions of new futures, one is able to help turn dreams into reality one step at a time. As Farhang Rouhani writes in "Lessons From Queertopia," "The processes of politics are as important as the result, involving the employment of non-hierarchical, participatory, and consensus-based models of action. The result is a dynamic vision of utopia as an ongoing process, rather than as a goal that can be achieved through individual rights."¹²

¹² Daring, C., J. Rogue, D. Shannon, and Farhang Rouhani. "Lessons From Queertopia." Essay. In *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, 79–80. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013.

Looking back on it, Riley says they wish they had known more about fundraising and keeping email lists to keep the logistical side of things going. While it's really fun and important to be able to put on good events and create welcoming spaces, without a strong logistical foundation, the space will end up shut down eventually. They also mentioned that towards the last few months of the space they realized a community had grown around them that wasn't there at the beginning. As much as the space came out of the community, it also helped grow a new community from its work. This growth takes time and isn't something that can be rushed. If they had budgeted their time and resources a bit better, this community could've had a chance to flourish for longer and turn into something bigger than it had the chance to be.

I took a lot from my conversation with Riley that I hope to bring into my own experience with placemaking. The most important thing, to me, was recognizing that placemaking and the kinds of spaces one chooses to help create is an inherently political act. The practice of placemaking is the practice of putting political thought into action and imagining new possibilities for how the world can work. Making sure that my practice is informed by radical thought means making sure it is accessible to everyone, providing for community needs, and not policing anyone within the space. Accessibility, caretaking, and freedom need to be at the heart of how a space is set up.

While the DIY space wasn't successful in the long run, Riley summed up the experience nicely by saying "We had a pretty good time. A lot of other people had a really good time. And we learned a lot from it." In the end, their experiences and practices will have laid the groundwork for future community spaces to learn from and grow out of.

CHAPTER TWO: FIGHT NIGHT AND HARM REDUCTION

Fight Night had four rules:

1. It's grappling based contact. There's no biting, scratching, kicking, or punching.
2. You have to be responsible for the safety of the person you're fighting.
3. Both people have to agree to fight together.
4. If you say stop, everything stops.

This was the foundation the night was built on, and the space absolutely thrived. Let me give some more context.

Fight Night was a one-night-only event with a bunch of queer college kids in someone's basement. There were about 30-50 people there over the course of the night, and there was a different fight going on in the corner constantly for about three and a half hours. It was a blast.

The "ring" consisted of three twin mattresses shoved up against each other and a single strand of caution tape separating it from the audience. Four chairs from the dining room upstairs made up the audience, otherwise it was standing room only. The emcee stood by the ring all night, letting people choose songs for their fight, reminding people of the rules, checking in on people, stopping the fights if anything went wrong, and counting down the wins. Most eyes were over here the whole night.

Every few minutes, two people would enter the ring, their names would be announced, and they would fight. Fights went on as long as they needed to and were over when one participant had pinned the other person down for ten seconds straight. The audience would always gleefully shout the countdown, roaring if it got interrupted. If anyone got too close to the pipe sticking out from the wall or the edge of the ring, the emcee would step in to pause and reset

the fight. This only happened a few times during the night. Most people started out by fighting their friends, but by the end of the night near-strangers were fighting each other for the fun of it.

Besides the fighting corner, there was a fairly large space where people could talk and dance and plan their next matches. On the opposite side of the basement was the relaxation corner, my personal favorite touch, which was a small table stacked with candles, an essential oil diffuser, coloring books and crayons, children's books, and bananagrams. It was a really nice part of the space that I'll elaborate more on later.



Fig. 4: *Fight Night Ring*, 2022

I came to Fight Night as a friend of the house and an eager participant. Over the course of the night, I fought five times and watched dozens of other matches from the front row. My experience as both a participant and an observer is what has informed my analysis of the event as

a whole. I've worked to synthesize this experience with interview information and theoretical grounding in order to create a cohesive image of the event.

What struck me about Fight Night was a few things. First: no one got hurt. Not a single person in three and a half hours of fighting (some of which got pretty intense) was injured in any serious way. Second: almost *everyone* was fighting. It wasn't just the people you might expect; there were people I had never seen show an ounce of aggression before who got up there and gave it their all. Third, and perhaps most relevant here: there was an overwhelming sense of queer community in the space.

I knew that I wanted to talk about Fight Night as soon as the event happened, so I interviewed Paul¹³, one of the organizers of the event, and they filled me in on some of the thought that went into planning the night. I started by asking them just generally to talk about the night, so I could get a sense of what they thought was important. They started by explaining the rules, which they laid out at the beginning of the night along with a short speech telling people if they needed anything like water or if anyone was making them uncomfortable, they just had to let them or one of their housemates know and they would take care of it. They also mentioned that it was helpful that the event was very word of mouth and intentional; they weren't throwing a party, they were throwing *Fight Night*. Everyone who was there was there to fight or watch the fighting happen.

In order to explain why these seemingly small practices are important, we have to look to the principles of harm reduction. In *Pleasure Activism*, author Adrienne Marie Brown interviews harm reduction activist Monique Tula, who says the harm reduction is:

a social justice movement built on the belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. Harm reduction combines two key strategies: 1) public

¹³ Name has been changed to protect anonymity

health strategies to reduce harms associated with substance use; and 2) advocacy and drug policy reform to address harms caused to communities by the war on drugs.¹⁴

It is a strategy that takes three main things into account: substance, set, and setting, in order to reduce the harm of drug use to the user and their community.¹⁵ This has historically looked like practices such as needle exchanges, supervised consumption spaces, having narcan on hand, and more. The principles of harm reduction have since been broadened to include all sorts of circumstances beyond drug use, and they have been heavily utilized in nightlife and party spaces, especially queer ones.

For example, during the HIV/AIDS crisis, the BDSM and leather communities were huge proponents of harm reduction (before the set of practices had this name, of course) by creating spaces for queer people to express and explore their sexuality in new and safe ways that did not involve risks of transmission. They were also some of the only communities that were willing to help HIV positive people meet basic needs such as physical touch, as most were treated as lepers and were outcast from their communities.¹⁶

Harm reduction can be seen in the context of Fight Night, an event that on its surface may be considered risky or even dangerous by some, through the highly intentional construction of the event. By reading the rules at the beginning of the event and reminding people of them throughout the night, the organizers made sure that safety was everyone's top priority. The rules themselves also emphasize safety and consent. The style of fighting being grappling instead of impact immediately reduced risk of injury, and making sure both fighters as well as the audience

¹⁴ Brown, Adrienne Maree, Adrienne Maree Brown, and Monique Tula. "Harm Reduction." Essay. In *Pleasure Activism*, 142. Seattle, WA: AK Press, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁶ Nea, Chingy, Elyssa Goodman, Naveen Kumar, Lux Alptraum, and Joseph Jaafari. "Why Kink, BDSM, and Leather Should Be Included at Pride." *them.*, June 17, 2019. <https://www.them.us/story/kink-bdsm-leather-pride>.

were on the lookout for each others' safety ensured that all eyes would be peeled for risks. The focus was not on hurting one another but exploring physicality with one another. Emphasizing consent both initially and throughout the fights was important for a sense of both physical and emotional safety of all those involved. Even the relaxation corner accounted for the potential harms to some people of simply being in a loud and over stimulating environment. Overall, the harm of the event was reduced to nothing beyond a few sore muscles the next day, and the rich rewards of the night were allowed to flourish without risk to those involved.

The next thing Paul and I talked about was trying to put our collective finger on what exactly made the event so *queer*. Both of us agreed that the night was distinctly queer not simply because most of the people who showed up were not cis and straight, but that the foundation of the event was rooted in a queer ethic. The first thing we were able to pinpoint was that the activity of the event (fighting) was a method of getting to know people and creating connections that was outside of classical cisheteronormative frameworks of friendship and relationships. The immediate physical intimacy that comes with fighting someone is uniquely queer because it so quickly bypasses traditional hierarchies of talking to emotional intimacy to light physical touch to intense physical intimacy.

We also agreed that the space was highly effective in its exploration of masculinity and aggression in a safe and comfortable environment. It was a space to explore these feelings in a controlled setting without them dominating the space in a toxic way. This, while being a uniquely queer element of the space, also created a bit of a paradox because of the ways that masculinity and aggression are often demonized within queer communities. Because of the domination of masculinity in cishetero culture, queer spaces often overemphasize femininity and softness as ways of being in an attempt to counterbalance this. While it is important to have these

spaces, it also makes it very difficult to find spaces in which to explore masculinity in a safe and healthy way. This event created that space for people to explore gender and gendered impulses (such as aggression and physicality) without recreating toxic masculinity. This simultaneous acceptance and subversion of gender norms is an element that made Fight Night an important example of positive queer nightlife.

Paul and the other organizers thought about this from the beginning. They had originally planned on Paul and another masc-presenting friend being the first fight of the night, but they realized this presented two problems. As Paul put it, “We didn’t want it to be a ‘boys’ thing,’ and we also didn’t want it to be an ‘our house’ thing.” The goal from the start was to include as many people as possible in the happenings of the night.

The space for exploration extended far beyond just gender or aggression, however. The thing Paul said that stuck with me the most was this:

My friend Olivia who lived with us in Portland and was at the first Fight Night kinda taught me about the importance of just asking people questions, and it’s just a, like, if people don’t wanna talk about something they’ll say that. But normally it’s so good to just ask people what they want, what they think, *if* they’ve thought about something, like, you can open a lot of conversational doors that way that a lot of people would just shy away from naturally. Which is something I’m just trying to live in my day to day life, but worked really well in Fight Night because I realized that there were a lot of people who had expressed to me that they wanted to fight, and then when they’re talking to their friends, and no one’s fighting, and it feels daunting to be like; ‘Ok, I’m gonna go, do you wanna, like,

fight?’ right? And it’s a lot easier if someone comes up to you and is like, ‘No pressure, but do you wanna do this?’ ... Just making space for a yes.

The idea of asking people what they want seems so simple on the surface, and yet holds such powerful implications for both nightlife and life in general. Adrienne Marie Brown discusses this in *Pleasure Activism* when she discusses the erotic, saying that asking ourselves what we truly want and how we want to do it is integral to the liberation of eroticism in our lives.¹⁷ It also roots itself deeply in principles of consent, pioneered by queer and feminist activists.

The idea is to not just assume we know what people want based on what we think we know about them. This mindset, on some level, accepts people as inherently changing and cherishes everyone’s natural capacity for transformation. This capacity for transformation and fluidity is, of course, one that is highlighted and celebrated within queer and trans communities, but extends far beyond them. It does, however, make the event distinctly queer. Even at larger scale events, having hired hosts who go around to guests and check in, offer water or candy, make sure everyone is safe and healthy, show people around, and generally make them feel welcomed and invited is a common practice within queer nightlife spaces. It’s much more than simply having a “face” for a party, it’s about creating familiarity and connection that allows people to feel comfortable in a space and may even allow them to push their boundaries in positive ways. It’s about giving people the room to surprise themselves and others while knowing that there are plenty of people there who have their back.

The final important piece of the puzzle that is Fight Night is the physicality of it all. I have already discussed the ways in which the physical intimacy of fighting creates connections in a non-standard way, but it is important to elaborate on the sense of being in one's *own* body that was highlighted that night. Queer nightlife has almost always centered around some sort of

¹⁷ Brown, Adrienne R. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Seattle, WA: AK Press, 2019.

physical activity. Whether it is sex or dancing or anything in between, the body has always been a site of escape from social norms, pressures, and expectations found in the outside world. To be fully in one's body around other people *is* to feel a full and true sense of community at its core. It is a community not based on identity or interest but simply on *presence and love*, and this is the most powerful type of community there is.

While fighting, you had to be 100% there. You couldn't half-ass it or get distracted. It was a short burst of total presence in your body: pushing and pulling and grabbing and falling and flipping until the fight was over. And it felt *good*; it felt really good to be able to get the chance to use your body fully with other people. This was evidenced further by the soreness felt the next day; it felt like you had really done something. As Paul put it, "It's a celebration of your body to be like 'I know my body can handle this and it feels good.'"

Fight Night taught me some really important things about queer nightlife. My takeaways are as follows:

1. Safety and harm reduction come first. This can look like a lot of things depending on the event, and can include things like: establishing rules, norms, boundaries, and expectations to the group at the beginning of the event; emphasizing consent in your space; putting the responsibility of safety on the *whole group*; setting up safe spaces; designating safe people; and paying attention to detail. Without the foundation of safety, the positive aspects of a space cannot flourish.
2. Giving people the opportunity to express and explore something they may not get to in their everyday lives is a central component of queer nightlife and should be emphasized whenever possible.

3. Ask people what they want and *invite them to participate directly* wherever and whenever you can without the expectation of a yes or a no.
4. Find ways to get people out of their heads and into their bodies. This is where true connection lies.

CHAPTER THREE: OPEN DRAG NIGHT AND EXCLUSIVITY

The bar was full by the time Mora¹⁸ and I walked in. We were greeted at the door by a beautiful six-foot-tall drag queen in nothing but a long black wig pulled into a ponytail, a white corset, black panties, and six-inch-heels. She told us we both looked fabulous in our drag, asked our names, and said that we didn't have to pay the cover charge because we were "dressed on theme." Then she flipped around a giant Valentine's Day card she had covering her body (giving a Marilyn-Monroe-esque "ooh" as she did) and had us each sign our names. This little interaction, which took no longer than a minute, instantly made us both feel welcomed, seen, and a part of the fun. Being used to walking into clubs with cold and intimidating bouncers asking for IDs and your money before shooing you in, this was a breath of fresh air.

We were there for an open-set Valentine's Day drag show run by a drag house in New Paltz. The event went through several different phases, starting with a DJ set and general dancing, drinking, and socializing. This was followed by a series of performances by members of the house themselves, followed by a short intermission for more dancing and music before the open set began and new performers took the stage.



Fig. 5: Crowd at the drag show, 2022

¹⁸ Name has been changed to protect anonymity

The bar itself was a bit dive-y, and the beer and fishing memorabilia lining the walls told me the space likely typically held a much straighter crowd than the one here tonight. There were a few men in the back playing pool whom I took to be regulars by their seclusion and general bewilderment at the group that was currently surrounding them. Otherwise, the scene was made up of mostly gay men, with a smattering of lesbians and an even smaller proportion of visibly trans or gender non-conforming individuals.

Now, there's a lot that this event did right, and I want to celebrate that here. There are also a lot of aspects of the event that made me uncomfortable or upset, and those are important to me as well because they taught me a lot about what I value in queer nightlife spaces. I want you to keep in mind as you read this that these are my experiences in the space as a genderfluid, AFAB (assigned female at birth) drag performer in a space of primarily gay, AMAB (assigned male at birth) individuals. The space, ultimately, was not catered towards me, and that's okay, I'm not asking it to be. That said, I think there are some lessons on inclusivity and space making that male and AMAB run spaces can learn from gender nonconforming and AFAB individuals and our experiences. I hope to explore some of those lessons here without setting the expectation that all queer nightlife spaces should cater towards my specific demographic and intersection of identities.

I want to start by talking about the warmth I felt in this space. Every single member of the House exuded a sense of love and belonging that is impossible to fake. Both before and after the performances, performers were really talking to one another and asking questions, trying to get to know each other and everyone's drag. Those with more experience would give advice and encouragement to the newcomers, and there was a strong sense of camaraderie created by this

open conversation. No one was above or below one another, and everyone had something to offer to the group.

After the performances, the House Mother came up to me and Mora, who had just gotten offstage, and told us we both did wonderful performances. We thanked her and she asked us what our drag relationship to one another was; we looked at each other questioningly for a moment before settling on “family.” She told us we should never stop learning from one another and urged us to communicate on the things that made each of our drag stronger. She told Mora that he moved in amazing ways; she told me I had real stage presence. She told us not to lose one another. Everything she said felt like it came from experience and, more than that, came from the heart.

We had a follow up conversation with her where she asked us about our drag influences and what we hoped to convey with our drag, and even though the music was loud and it was hard to make out what everyone was saying, it felt like she was really *listening* to both of us. This careful attention and inclusion made sure that neither of us felt like we had come out there to perform for strangers who would forget about us the next day. It felt like we were being invited *into something*, a place where we would be seen and nurtured. It felt kind.

And it wasn’t just her, during this conversation, multiple other performers from the House stopped over to interject and tell us how great we had done, that we should be proud of ourselves, or ask us questions. There was a sense of communal support and love. Although the Mother was clearly the leader of the group and event, there was no sense of hierarchy. Everyone was there to learn, teach, and have fun. This was solidified for me when I asked the House Mother what she thought I could improve on in my future performances. She gave me her thoughts, and then said, “As much as I’m a teacher, I’m also a student, so what do *you* think *I*

could improve on in the future?” I was shocked and had to think for a minute, but when I gave her my thoughts she really took them in and thanked me for my honest opinion. At that moment, we were not a new drag performer and a House Mother, we were just two people talking to each other.

This personal touch was hugely important to me. When someone is onstage, it can feel like they’re a giant, like they’re untouchable. Being able to move from that position of power onstage back into a place of being just another person at the event, albeit one with great insight to offer, is a special skill that takes genuinely letting go of your ego. It was something I truly hope to take with me whenever I’m the one embodying that role.

At the same time that I felt there was a real effort made to welcome me into the space by the hosts, there was also a sense of alienation I felt that I could not shake. It took me some time to pin down exactly what this was: was it that I had not been sociable enough? Was I not “putting myself out there” in an effective way? Was my performance just not as good as some of the others? Ultimately, I had to try to look objectively at the space and my place in it along a few complicated axes.

I mentioned earlier that the space was primarily made up of gay, AMAB individuals. More than this, however, the space was centered around gay men. I have been in spaces where the majority of the people there are male or masc presenting and not felt excluded or uncomfortable, but in this space it was clear that I was an outsider to the core in-group of gay men the event was built around. This manifested in a few subtle but distinctive ways.

The first place I noticed this feeling of exclusion was when someone would come up and talk to Mora (who is AMAB) and wouldn’t even so much as say “hi” to me when I was standing right next to him. At first, I chalked this up to me just needing to initiate interaction, but I noticed

that even when I did, people would quickly acknowledge me and then go back to focusing on Mora exclusively, leaving me standing there awkwardly waiting for the conversation to be over. I noticed also that this mainly happened with the gay men in the bar, and that I did not experience this same sense of invisibility when we spoke to lesbians or other AFAB individuals.

Even when we were talking to the House Mother, I noticed that although she made sure to include me in conversation, her main focus was on Mora instead of me. Now, this could've been because Mora gave a better performance than me or was simply more interesting to her, but I think there are levels of it that point to a gendered imbalance. For example, when she was asking the two of us about our references and influences, she instantly knew everyone Mora mentioned because they were primarily female pop stars very well known in mainstream gay culture. However, when it came to my influences, I couldn't name a single person she knew, despite the fact that they weren't obscure figures in alternative queer spaces. This kind of cultural dissonance is no one's fault at the end of the day, but it meant that the two of us couldn't connect as strongly as she did with Mora. Again, this is to be expected, you're never going to share exact cultural knowledge with everyone you meet. The problem for me was that I did not feel as though there was anyone in the space that I *did* share common ground with, and, moreover, the ground that I did occupy did not feel valued in the group but rather minimized and ignored. I felt that the gay men the event was centered around and organized by forgot that just because their culture was the dominant one in the space, it was not the *only* one there. There was no interest in expanding the culture of the immediate community.

This gendered imbalance was also furthered, I felt, by the prevalence of hookup culture within the space. Everyone seemed to be looking for someone to go home with at the end of the night, and as an AFAB person in a space full of gay men, that process was inaccessible to me.

Oftentimes, when someone would come up and talk to Mora, it would be to flirt. Without people sharing those same motivations towards me, I was mostly overlooked and ignored. It felt at times like there wasn't room to make *friends* there because everyone was too busy looking for someone to hook up with.

This was an idea that did not crystallize in my mind as something that was affecting the space and my experience of it until I spoke to my long time friend about their style of throwing events. They have been holding small-scale queer gatherings (along with four other friends) centered around socializing and creating space for people who don't have experience with alcohol, drugs, or queerness to explore these things in a safe and controlled environment. Although this style of event did not end up fitting into my thesis on its own, one thing they said in the interview really stuck out to me and cast my experience at the New Paltz drag show into a new light. They said, "yeah, it's funny, cuz I feel like a lot of the time at straight parties or whatever you get this real focus on hookup culture, but in these spaces it's like, there's so much of that queerplatonic love there. People are just there to be with one another, and you don't have to worry about what's going on in the other room when you turn your back."

I had heard the phrase queerplatonic love before, but this quote made me revisit it. The common definition of a queerplatonic relationship is one that "bends the lines between a romantic relationship and a non-romantic relationship. A queerplatonic relationship (QPR) often goes beyond what is socially acceptable for a platonic relationship but does not fit the typical notion of a romantic relationship."¹⁹ This reminded me that some of my closest and most rewarding relationships that I have found in queer spaces have been some form of queerplatonic relationships. Physically affectionate friendships, emotionally intimate acquaintances, creative

¹⁹ Sotska, Julia. "Queerplatonic Relationship - What Is It? What Does It Mean?" Taimi, December 21, 2021. <https://taimi.com/wiki/queerplatonic-relationship-what-is-it-what-does-it-mean>.

twin flames, none of these forms of relationships center around sex in the slightest, and they are all to be found in different kinds of queer nightlife spaces.

Coming back to the show in New Paltz, it disappointed me that hookup culture was the focus. It felt limiting. Furthermore, this focus was reinforced throughout the night by partygoers and hosts alike, with one of the hosts saying at one point, “Now, I know we’re all just here to get laid, so why do you go find that person you’ve been eyeing all night and offer them a drink.”

I want to say very clearly that I have no problem with people who want to hook up at parties. In fact, queer nightlife can be the site of sexual liberation for many (including myself at times), and it is important that people are given a place to explore that. What I take issue with is when there is no way to escape from that culture except to be socially excluded. What I take issue with is when that culture takes over spaces where it should not be the primary focus. There has to be space created for people to connect with one another in all kinds of different ways, not just a singular route.

Moreover, hookup culture being such a strong focus in the space felt like it recreated harmful and oppressive social norms found in cisheteronormative nightlife spaces. The expectation that the night is not successful or complete without going home with somebody leads to people feeling pressure to engage in sexual activity they may not want to and can lead to some risky sexual behavior. This pressure to engage in a culture you may not want to engage in also heavily interacts with the alcohol and drug use in the space.

In a nutshell, the show was *not* for sober people. It was on a Monday, and I knew I wanted to pay attention so I could write about everything later, so I wasn’t really looking to get drunk. When I walked in, one of the first things I was told was that performers drink free, so I should “go crazy.” Almost everyone in the space was plastered by the end of the night (or the

beginning). As someone who was there because they loved drag and wanted to find other people who loved drag, I was disappointed that the goal of the event for most people (performers included) seemed to be getting as drunk as possible and going home with someone. This focus on alcohol and drug use, and the expectation that everyone in the space shared this same focus, meant that I was immediately socially excluded every time I was offered a drink and said no, or chose not to go to the bathroom with someone to do a line of something. Every time I said no, people looked at me with either confusion or sympathy, assuming I was either no fun or in recovery, and moved on to the next person they could find. I'm lucky enough to be able to know my boundaries and how to say no confidently when I don't want to engage with something, but if I had been completely new to that environment or recovering through sobriety, the space would have been instantly overwhelming to me and potentially dangerous.

This made me think of all my reading on harm reduction principles because the space seemed to be one that promoted harm *maximization*. People stumbling, slurring, drinking over their limits was the norm and was openly laughed at or encouraged several times throughout the night. At one point, a new drag performer ran offstage in the middle of their performance to go puke. When they came back up onstage, the House Mother asked what happened, and they said, drunk and laughing, "Sorry, it's just that I haven't eaten in about three days!" The audience laughed, and the House Mother (semi) jokingly offered them an appetite suppressant for next time. No one offered them food or water, no one was worried they would be okay.

I knew instantly that I never wanted something like that to happen in a space I was in charge of. As a host, I hoped to treat guests the same way I would treat my friends, and if a friend threw up drunkenly after not eating for three days, I would *never* laugh at them and pretend like nothing happened. I would get them food, water, a place to sit or lie down, some

fresh air, whatever they needed at that moment, and then I would make sure they got home safe and tell them to reach out if they needed anything. I was disappointed that a group that called themselves a house, was supposed to be a family, didn't treat their guests with the kindness I would expect of a family. Especially being positioned as queer elders welcoming in what they called a "new generation" of drag performers, it simply set up irresponsible and downright dangerous expectations and dynamics.

Furthermore, I knew that I wanted any space I set up to be a space where someone could be sober and not be uncomfortable, just as people could be partaking in drugs or alcohol and not be uncomfortable. There had to be space for both without judgment or expectation or else the space wasn't truly inclusive. The moments that I noticed the discrepancy between consumption didn't matter the most were the times when the show was going on, when there was something that both sober and non-sober people could enjoy together in their own ways. I knew this would translate well to the event I wanted to put on at Vassar.

There were some really amazing moments that I found at this drag show. The sense of personal connection and intimacy that the hosts were able to foster from the very first moment you stepped through the door completely blew me away. I walked away from the show feeling like I had made some significant connections and had some good conversations. However, the hyperfocus on hookup and drinking culture made for some exclusionary and concerning moments for me and others. Although there was a focus on queer joy and love that night, I did not feel as though there was enough of a focus on safety, nurturing, and community to make the event a complete success.

CHAPTER FOUR: VC ROYALTY DRAG SHOW & THEORY IN ACTION

I didn't know what I was going to say when I finished my performance and took the mic from Mora offstage, I just knew I wanted to say something.

"Uh, hi, phew," I took a deep breath, winded from all the dancing I had been doing for the past six minutes, "As the, uh, mother-father-parent of this org here, it's my official job to embarrass all these lovely people by telling you how hard they've worked to make this show happen for you," I gestured offstage to my right, looking at all the wonderful, smiling, heavily-make-up-ed faces staring back at me, "Everyone has put in so much time and effort and love into this show, and I'm so grateful for each and every one of you. None of this would've happened without you. You guys inspire me, you make this worth it. I love you all so much."

I took another breath, turned back to fully face the audience, "And I wanted to say thank you to all of you guys for coming out and creating this space for us. Thank you for being here, for cheering, for giving us money, and for creating space for all kinds of drag. The fabulous drag, the emotional drag, and the totally crazy shit too. We couldn't do this without all of you here. You guys are amazing and we're so grateful to have you here."

Another breath, I knew I had one more thing I wanted to mention... What was it again? "And one last thing! We want you up here! We want you to come perform with us! Please! We don't do auditions, if you want to come perform we will give you the space and the tools to make it happen. We want you to come join us; we have a lot of fun up here... Ok. That's it from me... And now, without further ado, I present to you the incredible... the... incredible... Miss, Anxie-Tease!"

The audience roared, and I ran offstage, smiling and eager to watch the finale.

This wasn't the first drag show I had put on, but it was by far the biggest. I had come into Vassar Royalty two years ago as a performer and managed to get one show in before Covid hit and shut everything down. While I was away from campus for nearly a year, I fell in love with drag. I would spend hours at night dancing in my bedroom to songs I had memorized every inch of, feeling the freedom of music to take me anywhere and allow me to become anything I dreamed. I was dealing with gender dysphoria, isolation, anxiety and depression, and a deep well of boredom that drag helped me work through. By the end of quarantine, when I made the decision to come back to campus, I remember being struck so deeply by the power of drag and the love it helped me find and create within myself. I desperately wanted to find a way to share that with others.

I was in luck, at the end of the previous semester, I had gotten a text from the former president of VC Royalty asking if I wanted to take over. I immediately said yes, not knowing that by the time I got back to campus, everyone else from the club would have either graduated or gone remote. I was left with a blank slate, no budget, and no one to help guide me. If I wanted to make the community I had been dreaming about happen, it was up to me to sow the seeds and make it grow.

I wasn't totally alone. The first week of the semester, my good friend and I got all dressed up, made some big signs, and went to the org fair to try to get people on the mailing list. It was a decent success, but I knew from experience that most org emails get ignored or lost in peoples' inboxes. Even so, it was the only route forward, so a few days later I sent out a scheduling email and set up the first meeting. About seven people came, and it was rough. I tried asking people what they were interested in doing, what kind of drag they wanted to do, when they wanted to do a show, but no one had ideas. Most people were silent after the initial round of introductions. I

left the meeting feeling lost and defeated. The second meeting was even worse; fewer people came, and I ended up calling it half an hour early because it was just so awkward to sit there in silence waiting for anyone to answer my questions. I came home nearly in tears that night and told my housemates that I might just give up, that maybe it just wasn't meant to be.

But over the next week I thought hard about why I was doing this in the first place. I grounded down into my original dreams of a vibrant queer community of performers, tech people, and audience members who would all be able to come together to celebrate queerness, expression, and joy in a safe and comfortable space. I thought about all the ways that drag had helped me process some serious things and meditated heavily on the possibility of collective processing. What did it mean to bring people together and hold space for one another to express something they may not have had the chance to before? What did it mean to create a space to allow people to be vulnerable? To be honest? To be scared or scary or big or strange or new? I knew it was possible. It had to be. I knew that on a basic, personal level I needed that space, and I knew if I needed it, other people probably did too. After dancing around in my bedroom for a little while and reconnecting to my own love for drag, I knew my path forward.

Our third meeting was on a muddy hill after dark with very little light. Five people showed up. I told everyone we were gonna do a warmup, and then everyone was gonna perform. Even if it was just thirty seconds, everyone had to try it. We did a warmup and I asked who wanted to go first, someone said, "Let's see what you got," and I smiled. I knew that it was my one chance to earn people's trust. I had to be honest, vulnerable, and in the moment. It sounds dramatic, but in a sense, I had to prove that I deserved to be leading people in this endeavor. More than that, I had to show people *how* I was going to lead. I grabbed my speaker and cued up DEVO's cover of "Can't Get No (Satisfaction)." It was fun, it was camp, it was goofy, it was

something I had been jamming to earlier that day on my way to and from class, and it totally rocked.

It went perfectly, but it wasn't one sided; all I could do was take the leap of faith and trust that this little group of people who were there would catch me. And they did, in abundance. I remember at one point spinning so much and so quickly that I fell in the mud. And then I kept spinning. Everyone was laughing, cheering, and smiling. It was one of the performances I am most proud of in my life, and when I was done, the most miraculous thing happened... Everyone else got up and gave the same level of trust and energy in their performance. Every. Single. Person. I was shocked. It was beautiful. I immediately saw down into the heart of who each and every person there really was because they were willing to open themselves to everyone. It was an instant community. There was no breaking it after that experience.

All that to say the first tenant of queer community building in my experience is trust. Trust that if you're vulnerable, people will be there to hold you. Trust that people will share themselves with you when they're ready and feel safe. Trust that if you're able to find the honesty and bravery to express a true part yourself, people will see that for what it is— an act of love and courage— and welcome you with open arms. That trust isn't built accidentally. It's built through following through on the promises queer community holds. It's built on making a commitment to yourself and others in the moment and continuously to love and care for everyone without judgment.

The first show had some kind of magic in it. It was just the five of us from that meeting on the hill, plus three truly incredible tech people who came through to run lights and sound and do lots of taping things down. On the night of the show, we weren't sure if anyone was going to show up, but we ended up with a full house. People had a great time, loved the show, and wanted

more. Finally seeing the space I had dreamed of for so long come to fruition, albeit imperfectly and with lots of room to grow, was one of the best feelings in the world.

Six months later, we arrived at the current show in question: eighteen performers in the Shiva theater at Vassar, more lighting and sound capabilities than we had ever had access to, a full stage, two nights of performing, and about twice the audience capacity than we had ever had before. A tall order.



Fig. 6: *Big Top Show Poster*, 2022

From my previous work and research, there were a few things I knew I wanted to do with the space already. The most important thing to me was making people feel safe and comfortable. I knew from my experience with *Fight Night* that safety was the foundation from which everything else was possible. Without this strong sense of security and being taken care of, no one would have the chance to explore or enjoy anything. However, from my interview with Riley, I knew that it was just as important to me that security wasn't there because this would

create a sense of being policed within the space that would actually infringe on a feeling of safety. I knew there were a group of about five people, including myself, that I could absolutely rely on if something went wrong, and I made sure to use them throughout the show. The five of us ushered people away from fire exits, gave announcements about how to leave the space safely if needed, announced trigger warnings before sets, and did general rounds of the space to make sure no one was in trouble. Luckily, nothing significant happened that any of us needed to step in for, but I know that if it did, we would've handled it quickly and with kindness.

The next thing I knew was important to me was that people felt welcomed in the space. Because the idea of welcoming is so individual and nebulous, there is always room for improvement. However, we worked to create a welcoming environment in a few key ways that I'm really proud of. I made sure to talk to the hosts (and everyone in the show) beforehand to remind them that this was going to be a room mostly made up of their *friends*, not a bunch of random strangers. I encouraged people to go out and talk to people in the audience before the show started, to laugh and hug and take pictures, and to really welcome people to the space as a group. In these talks, everyone emphasized wanting to combat any sense of social hierarchy that might emerge from the performance and separate the performers and the audience. Working with the two hosts of the show, we decided that it would be best not to write out any gimmicky jokes or lines, instead having fun and *honestly* addressing the audience. We had found in our own experiences going to performances that scripted hosts often felt alienating and stiff. There had to be a mutual trust between the audience and the performers just like that first meeting where everyone performed. The hosts and performers had to bring their honesty and vulnerability to the audience and trust the audience to meet them there. This was the only way to form true connections onstage. Lastly, onstage, I knew I wanted to stress in my speech as the head of the

club that this was a space that everyone in the room was creating *together* and really make sure the audience knew they were a part of everything.

It was difficult in the place we had (the Shiva) to create a truly intimate environment because of the size of the space. Our Saturday show had about 400 people in attendance, and there's no way to make every single person in a crowd that size feel personally seen. Greeting everyone individually at the door would've held up the line for a long time, and most people were happy to stay socializing in the group of friends they came with. I wanted to take elements of what I had learned from smaller scale gatherings and performances and use them to create a feeling of warmth and intimacy in the space without losing the excitement and sense of freedom that comes from larger gatherings.

One of the most important aspects of creating this sense of intimacy was by demonstrating it through the ways performers (and tech people) interacted with and supported each other. Having a group-within-a-group of about 20 people created chances for showcasing connection and inviting others into it. For example, the show was two days before my birthday, and after our first runway number, the hosts invited me back onstage to give me flowers and a birthday card that had been written in by everyone in the show. It made me cry immediately to be cared for so publicly and freely by a group of people so close to my heart. I was also grateful for the opportunity to get to show other people the kind of love and support we have for one another within the group and use it as a springboard to invite people in. It was not a show of "look at this love we have for each other that you're not a part of," but rather a sense of, "look at this love we have created together that you could be a part of too." It meant a lot to me.

This was also reinforced on a larger scale by the way performers would scream and cheer and clap for one another as loudly as they could. This not only gave the audience permission to

be really, really loud, but it showed all of us performing that we were our biggest supporters. There was a beautiful sense of reciprocal uplifting.

Another thing we succeeded in was creating a space that was not focused on alcohol and drug use or hookup culture. While these things were there, because the focus of the event was on the performance, there was freedom to choose whether or not you wanted to engage with them or not. Furthermore, the expectation was not that people would be getting blackout drunk and doing risky things, and if anyone had gotten to that point, I know someone from the response team would've stepped in to help. This was an important lesson I took from my experience in New Paltz that I'm glad was able to translate well into this space.

Lastly, one of the most important things we were able to do was to showcase all kinds of drag. We had people onstage of all gender identities, with all kinds of musical and aesthetic tastes, doing all kinds of different things. Every single person onstage got up there and showcased exactly who they were and wanted to be, and every single person was completely unique because of it. It was not a showcase of a singular type of drag, of expression, but rather a hodge-podge of many different elements and ideas. This, more than anything, I believe sent the message to everyone in the room that this space and this event was for everyone. Not only that, but it was a space where difference could and would be uplifted and celebrated communally.

This was the culmination of the little dream that grew in my heart on my own and started out with such uncertainty. From that grew something beautiful. All of the theory and research and thinking about how best to structure the space were important, but none of it could have happened at all if the space was not created from a strong sense of love. Love for drag, love for queerness, love for the people in the space, love for ourselves, love for everything we brought into the space. It might sound cheesy, but without this love and desire to make people feel happy

and held, none of this would have happened. This is the true cornerstone of queer placemaking and the key to success. Queerness embodies such a deep love and tenderness towards everyone and their unique ways of expressing themselves that it creates a foundation from which all possibilities can grow.

All that said, there are some things we can improve on in the future. Accessibility is the first thing that comes to mind. It was not an afterthought, but as my understanding of what accessibility entails grows, it becomes clear to me that we did not do enough. The theater itself was accessible for those with mobility disabilities, and we made sure there were wide aisles and enough rows of seating that people didn't have to stand the whole time if they couldn't or simply didn't want to. In the future, I'd like to pay more attention to sound on both ends of the spectrum: hiring an ASL interpreter for the show for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, and also creating a quiet space somewhere adjacent to the theater where people could go if they were overstimulated.²⁰

Thinking ahead when it comes to caring for people getting overwhelmed was something I really valued in my experience with Fight Night, and something I wish we had been able to do in this space. There was, of course, the lobby and the bathrooms that people could have gone to if they were feeling like the loud music, flashing lights, and yelling crowd was all a bit too much, but neither of these spaces were particularly inviting and we did not name them as places people could go to rest explicitly. Fight Night had the "relaxation corner," and we should have had something similar. In the future, both having and naming quiet, comfortable spaces people can go to will be a top priority of mine.

²⁰ Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver, B.C: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021.

One aspect of creating a positive environment that I wish we could have explored was having food and drink for people. Food and drink are deeply communal things, and, more practically, are very helpful to have on hand when people in a space are drinking or other alternative substances. Unfortunately, due to COVID restrictions, all audience members had to be masked, so this was not an option. Although there was nothing we could do about it for this show, it felt important to mention it as something that will be considered and hopefully acted on in future performances.

The other main aspect I feel could be improved upon in building a show is a personal shortcoming of mine: I have a lot of trouble delegating and end up taking on too much work myself. This is not only overwhelming to me, but it creates a sense of hierarchy and doesn't allow other people to share in the joys of planning a show as fully. Given the cornerstones of anarchist thought that were highlighted for me throughout this project, I am especially disappointed with this failure. In the future, I want to let go of doing all the behind-the-scenes work from poster making, to set design and building, to making pre-show and intermission playlists, to helping people do makeup. I was successful in delegating some of these things, but not all. In the times I was able to share work effectively, I found a deep joy and security in reciprocity. Starting to build webs of who can do what was vital, and the moments of teamwork, of "I can hang pictures if you can put the tape on," of "I can glue your lashes if you can pin my wig," of "I can put posters around campus if you can print them," were some of the most held in community that I felt throughout the entire thing.

This knowledge of reciprocity and communal care comes from long lines of sick and disabled Black femme knowledge. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes in *Care Work*, "Fair trade care webs draw on sick and disabled knowledge about care. Sick and disabled people

have many superpowers: one of them is that many of us have sophisticated, highly developed skills around negotiating and organizing care.”²¹ In her case, that care looks like physical and emotional support for sickness and disability. In this context, it looks like making sure everyone is helping each other get things done and that no one is left completely overwhelmed. It also looks like making sure everyone’s voice is heard at every stage of decision making processes.

This is a different kind of trust than I was used to. Trusting someone with my honest, vulnerable emotional state through a performance was something far less scary to me than trusting someone to print out posters on time. Go figure. Sometimes this fear that things wouldn’t get done got the better of me, and I took on too much. Sometimes I asked people for things, and they didn’t get done on time or correctly. Sometimes though, I asked for help and people really came through. These were the moments that deepened my love and told me that this was the direction I needed to be moving in. More concretely, these were the moments that made sure the show actually went up at all.

However, looking back, I still struggle with knowing exactly how to implement these non-hierarchical ideals as a lot of it was driven by differing capacities within the group. The truth is that most people just wanted to get up on stage and perform, not debate the ethics of queer placemaking. I think the route forward from this place is unclear, but rests in creating direct and actionable requests for help that can open up larger conversations about intentions and desires. It also depends on finding a team who has the time to work together on foundational design work for shows and spaces in the future so that decisions can be made at least with a few people if not the entire group.

²¹ Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi, “A Modest Proposal for a Fair Trade Emotional Labor Economy.” Essay. In *Care Work Dreaming Disability Justice*, 144. Vancouver, B.C: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021.



Fig. 7: *Performers and Tech People*, 2022

There are things to be learned from every success and things to be celebrated in every failure. In my heart, I consider the show a stunning success. We did what we set out to do and created a space for performers and audience alike to come together and celebrate queer joy and expression. We made people feel comfortable, excited, and welcomed. (This was confirmed for me in sticking around and talking to people after the show, many of whom said they were “moved” and would love to be a part of future projects.) By bringing more attention in the future to aspects of the show such as accessibility and communal care, I hope to improve the space and the process of creating it even further.

CONCLUSION

Queer space will always matter.

What's more, coming all the way back to the beginning where we defined the term "queer" in relation to what it is reacting against, it becomes quickly clear that queer space will always matter *in different ways*. The queer spaces we are able to create now are things our elders could only have dreamed of; a public drag show at a college could not have happened in the era of police arresting gay men for gathering in cafeterias and bars.

As the boundaries of "queer" change and expand, so do the spaces queer people create. Queer spaces continue to react to the forms of oppression put upon people by systems of cisheteropatriarchy that shift, become more nuanced, and change shape. Queer space adapts, learns, goes underground, reemerges, finds new locations, finds new communities, and continues to grow in new and unexpected ways to face the challenges of the world around it.

Above all, two things are important. The first is that we continue to talk about queer space and the possibilities it holds. This can look like essays about the theory behind placemaking and queer ideology, but it can also look like literature, dance, music, film, poetry, and so much more. These methods integrate external places and events with internal states and emotions. By using metaphor, image, gesture, movement, or ideas to convey this reality instead of charts or graphs, they add new dimensions to theoretical discussions that cannot be captured within a simple analysis or data collection.²²

Each example of queer placemaking is simultaneously a commentary on queerness and space as well as putting this commentary into action. Just as we saw that creating anarchist space was a process of putting anarchist political thought into action, without which the space would

²² Ingram, Gordon Brent, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter. "Narratives of Space: Subjective and Collective." Essay. In *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, 55. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997.

simply recreate harmful social norms, creating queer space is a process of putting queer political thought into action. The theory informs the action, which then turns around and informs new theory. It is a powerful cycle that can lead to incredible new discoveries.

Creating the drag show at Vassar allowed me to put this theoretical process of placemaking into action directly. While my analysis of the production helped solidify and describe the theory and intent behind it, the only way to truly understand the experience of the show is to have been there yourself. Just as with The Moon, or Fight Night, or the New Paltz Drag Show, there is a sensibility about the space that cannot be captured through words or pictures alone. Without being there to actually feel the energy in a space, the radical possibilities of the environment will always fall slightly short on paper. If the essence of an event was able to be put down into words and handed out on pamphlets or an essay, it would be. However, the physical event or space itself is *the only thing that can truly encompass everything it is*. This may sound obvious or even silly to say, but I say it with the point of urging the reader to explore queer spaces for themselves. Don't just read about this stuff, go find it, go feel it.

At the risk of being cheesy, queer space is important because it always comes from a place of love. This foundation of love and care for oneself and one's community is the root of the reason queer space is able to combat dominant social and political forces at all. Without this love, without this care, true community would not be able to form and grow.

This is not to say that all, or any, queer spaces are perfect. There is no utopia. All spaces, queer or not, are bound to be influenced in some way or another by the social structures that everyday life is saturated in. The point is not to build the perfect space or even try to build the perfect space, the point is to *get a little bit closer to what true freedom could be*. The point is to experiment. The point is to have fun. The point is to love one another.

Onstage, during the drag show, I felt free. I do not wish to speak for anyone else in the space, but I know what I felt, and it was powerful. I am so grateful to have gotten the chance to participate in my own small way in the long tradition of queer placemaking. I am grateful for having gotten to learn from other passionate and intelligent queer placemakers along the way. More than anything, I'm grateful for everyone who was a part of the space with me in any way: by teaching me something new, by performing, by running lights, by coming to see the show, by comforting me when I was stressed, by talking me through big ideas, by hanging posters, by laughing with me, by crying with me, and all the rest. Queer community does not begin and end within a single room or a single night, it extends far beyond the physical boundaries of a space and who is in it. It encompasses the vast network of care, support, and building that it takes to create anything. It acknowledges all of our interconnectivity.

When thinking about the impacts of queer spaces, I think of a quote from Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter, who say:

It takes nerve, a sense of humor, and dedication to envision and advocate for viable places that foster old and new ways to enjoy each other in the face of crowding, environmental degradation, and the continued hostility of the state. But these new queerings, no matter how quickly outmoded, are not only ethical in terms of promoting greater social equity and security, increased options for contact and expression, and deepened relationships— they are also a lot more fun.²³

How can we intentionally use placemaking to deepen our relationships, promote equity, and have fun all at once? How can we create places that are non-hierarchical and sustainable without asking too much of people's organizing abilities? How can we be conscious of the ways that

²³ Ingram, Gordon Brent, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter. "Strategies for (Re)Constructing Queer Communities." Essay. In *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, 456. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997.

cisheteropatriarchy infiltrates our subconscious actions in places meant to combat these systems? How can we keep ourselves and others safe while still exploring our limits and trying new things? There are a thousand questions left to be answered about queer space, and many of them will only ever have temporary solutions that shift into something new entirely by the time an event is over. Queer space is a reactionary and constantly changing landscape that evolves to fit the needs of those within it. Because of this, queer space is and will always be fluid, dynamic, and alive. Because of this, it will always ask questions about the possibilities of space as a whole.

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