

KEEP AUSTIN QUEER: PERFORMATIVITY OF QUEER SPACE

IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to Austin's LGBTQIA+ community and the allies within the community. Without them, queer spaces would not exist in Austin, and I, as a queer man who lives in the city, would not feel as safe walking down the street. This is also dedicated to the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole and its allies all around the world. We cannot forget those who paved the way for us to get to this point in society, and it is my hope that the current generations and all future generations will continue progressing forward.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Queer spaces can be physical or conceptual spaces, depending on the people who are occupying them. Austin, Texas is a city known for its progressive nature, even while being a city in the middle of Texas. That being said, Austin does not have an overabundance of physical queer spaces as other cities do. The existing literature on queer spaces discusses physical spaces such as clubs and bars, public space in the form of Pride or activist events, and cyber spaces such as social media, dating apps, and websites. However, the literature does not allow participants to offer their own definition and perception of queer spaces. This study utilizes qualitative in-depth interviews with members of the LGBTQIA+ community who live and/or occupy queer spaces in Austin. Additionally, this study utilizes ethnographic field notes and personal narratives collected throughout the research process to reinforce the findings. This study explores the way queer people in Austin define queer spaces, how queer spaces shape their self-expression and identity, and whether queer spaces can be created and/or transformed. Expanding on Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity," the participants' narratives highlight that notion queer space can be performed in such a way that allows queer space to be created anywhere and in abstract ways by anyone who is queer.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a queer-identifying individual who moved to Austin, Texas from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I find myself constantly seeking more queer-identifying friends, as well as spaces in which I feel comfortable expressing my own identity. It is surprising to me that a progressive and queer-friendly city like Austin has only a handful of blatantly designated establishments for the LGBTQIA+ community, including the small number bars and clubs on Fourth Street. There is no “gayborhood” similar to Montrose in Houston and the Castro District in San Francisco. There are no queer bookstores like Gay’s the Word in London, England. There is no gay bathhouse as there is in Pittsburgh. Why is it that, while being such a progressive and sexually diverse city, Austin, Texas is an enigma in regard to designated queer areas?

I argue that we must look to queer-identifying individuals and their personal experiences and identities in Austin to better understand queer spaces throughout the city. Drawing from in-depth interviews with queer-identifying individuals, this thesis explores the following questions: 1) What do queer individuals consider to be queer spaces, i.e. how do they define them as such? 2) How do queer individuals utilize these spaces in their creation of identity? and 3) How do queer individuals “perform” to transform queer space?

Geographies of sexualities highlight the experiences of sexual minorities in their everyday lives, as spaces are sexually coded according to the sexual identities within those spaces (Maliepaard 2015). Queer spaces and queer geographies are carved out and created by individuals who deviate from sexual norms. Critical geographers often see gays and lesbians occupying queer spaces, and queer geographies aim to transgress



gender norms and challenge heteronormativity, as these individuals oppose heterosexual space. Historically, queer space has been perceived as gay and lesbian space, thus perpetuating the hetero/homosexual binary rather than challenging normative boundaries (Browne 2006; Oswin 2008). Queer space is fluid in that it contests heteronormalization within certain spaces, and to better understand this fluidity of space, queerness should be separated from normative sexualities. Queerness in and of itself recognizes the fluidity of sexualities, as it aims to disrupt the boundaries reproduced by gay and lesbian categories (Browne 2006). I argue that both identities and queer space can be refigured through the bodies of queer individuals as they partake in expressive, fluid performativities (Crouch 2003), just as gender is acted and performed through embodied practices (Butler [1990] 2007).

I will use the term “queer” in this study as a fluid umbrella identifier for the LGBTQIA+ community, as it is used by many people in the queer community to refer to something that is not straight. In his research, Budge (2017) explains that the term “queer” contains political tonalities that are frequently utilized by the current generation, as “gay” has “come to represent a bourgeois, assimilationist identity” (11). To be queer is to challenge normative sexuality and oppose norms, power hierarchies, and oppression. In addition, “queer” can be used as a verb, in that when something is “queered,” there is an attempt to change and destabilize dominant understandings (Wilkinson 2009). Queerness allows for the celebration of “gender and sexual fluidity and consciously blurs binaries” (Brown 2007:2685).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is difficult to state how a queer space is defined, but scholars have attempted to discover the factors that are utilized in queer space formation. Queer spaces are linked to the people who inhabit them, and are formed when queer individuals gather and practice their own meanings of queerness (Budge 2017). This fact does, however, foster a sense of fragility in regard to the lasting impact of the created space. Queer spaces are considered safe spaces but can be affected by heterosexual individuals who enter the space and attempt to make them their own (Budge 2017). It is important not to forget that queer spaces are fluid and everchanging. In regard to physical spaces, individuals decide where and when to go out to various clubs and what they can do in those clubs. The mood and aesthetic of a physical space is affected by the performative nature of the space and the individuals who are occupying it. According to Davis (2013), “space is momentary” (13), in that spaces can be safe and homey, or they can be risky.

Queer spaces can be spaces of finding sexual partners or to party, and also to create networks that mean more than sex and love (Hébert 2014). They can be spaces in which activism and pride are performed, especially when considering the Queers Against Israeli Apartheid float that appeared in a gay pride parade. In cases like this activism-oriented float, public space is queered and therefore, made more visible and important (Hébert 2014). In addition, queer spaces can be created in an online context, which allows for the organization of “new forms of queer sociability, intimacy and pleasure that resist a heteronormative sexual public” (Raj 2011:10). In online spaces, queer individuals are presented with more outlets for pleasure and freedom. Moreover, online

queer spaces also reinforce stereotypes surrounding race, masculinity, and aesthetics (Raj 2011).

*Safe Spaces (For Heteronormativity)?*

Many Americans today display some level of respect or tolerance for the queer community, but historically, gay bars and the assemblages that take place within them have been important in the “cultural production of queerness” (Budge 2017:10). It is because of this that we must ask how, when considering the assimilation of queerness into society, contemporary queer spaces create and maintain the safety of queer space (Budge 2017).

Gay individuals are put into a position of power when given the opportunity to create and take part in queer space. The LGBT community views spaces such as the nightclub in Davis’s (2013) ethnography as safe. Spaces utilize small markers of safety such as posters, signs, and pamphlets. However, it is important to consider how and when safe spaces become unsafe, especially for certain individuals. Acts of touch that occur among audience members and drag queens can either designate or take away from safety, depending on who is doing so and under what circumstances. In this sense, the perceived degree of safety is reflective of performances within the spaces, and is not solely based upon comfort felt by individuals (Davis 2013).

Davis’s (2013) concept of “home space” is more intimate than other social spaces, and comes into play when employees engage with patrons in a recognizing and welcoming manner. In addition, the drag families that perform in the bar foster a sense of home. Davis (2013), despite being in the role of researcher, felt a sense of home upon being granted membership at the door of the nightclub. Queer space within the nightclub

becomes risky under various circumstances, including illegal drug use and violence, as well as accessibility to entrances and exits. Recreation space is a combination of safe, risky, and home space, in that distinct areas of the nightclub, while vastly different from one another, offer some type of interaction and performance by the individuals within them (Davis 2013).

In a comparative ethnographic study of queer space in two Russian cities—Ul’yanovsk and Moscow—Stella (2012) found that Moscow, a global city with “a lively gay scene” (1823), offered participants a sense of anonymity. On the other hand, there was more visibility of unconventional looks and expression in Ul’yanovsk, a provincial and rural city. Women in Ul’yanovsk were not prone to homophobia and violence, but they still chose not to signify their sexuality in public because of personal comfort and privacy. They were not concerned about safety as much as they were concerned about exposure and outing. Participants referred to themselves as the *tusovka*—a fluid and open group of people with shared interest—and met on a park bench in the city that was not visibly marked as queer or lesbian. As a result, outsiders and passerby did not suspect the *tusovka* as non-heterosexual, as the queering of space remained invisible to the general public. The *tusovka* wished to remain unmarked, and affectionate behavior was avoided as the women emphasized a sense of responsibility and respectability while in public (Stella 2012).

Secluded and enclosed environments offer more outlets for expression of sexuality, as being in the company of other queer individuals creates a more comfortable setting (Stella 2012; Evangelista 2014). Queer-oriented events were not publicly announced in order to maintain security and privacy from the public, rather than making

it a visibly queer event. The advertising of events would only attract attention and disrupt the comfortable atmosphere, and possibly expose them (Stella 2012). By claiming public and semi-public locations as queer, the *tusovka* was challenging the heterosexualized landscape, while “actively preserv[ing] boundaries between queer and non-queer space” (Stella 2012:1841).

Access to and membership of queer spaces are monitored at the entrances, so as not to disrupt members’ expressions of gender and sexuality (Stella 2012; Evangelista 2014). In particular, entrances to gay bathhouses are policed, as gay bathhouses are depicted as sanctuaries for sexual expression and important enclaves for gay communities (Evangelista 2014). Membership creates an exclusive and enclosed space in which safety is of utmost importance, but the fact that bathhouses typically appear as cafés or bars as a concealing strategy conforms to heteronormativity and secrecy of gay lifestyles. Considering this, bathhouses simultaneously liberate and shape gay identities through heteronormativity. They are spaces in which heterosexuality is reworked for homosexual acts and practices, while hegemonic discourse and the heterosexual gaze are reinforced and utilized when members judge bodies, identities, and desirability (Evangelista 2014).

While safety is an important aspect of space for any individual, the desire of some to find safety may undermine the safety of others in the process. Gay spaces offer a safe alternative to heteronormative establishments for some heterosexual women, as they feel less obligated to police themselves and their performance of gender when in non-heteronormative spaces (Skeggs 1999). Because male gay space allows heterosexual women to be out-of-view of the masculine gaze, gay villages in the form of bars, bookstores, and cafés are not consistently gay. Women enact a masquerade of lesbianism

to be granted admission into clubs in order to construct a safe space. In turn, authentic lesbian patrons feel uncomfortable around heterosexual women, as their claim to space has become destabilized by the reproduction of “normalized hetero-femininity” (Skeggs 1999:227).

Just as lesbian spaces become problematic when heterosexual women appropriate a lesbian identity and enter into those spaces (Skeggs 1999), bisexual geographies and spaces are challenged by a negative perception of bisexual individuals and bisexuality, namely when it is reduced to sex and intimacy (Maliepaard 2015). Gay communities are afforded their own spaces within clubs, organizations, and neighborhoods. However, concrete bisexual spaces are more difficult to find. Bisexuality becomes visible within certain spaces, such as support groups and conferences geared toward bisexual individuals. Because heterosexuality and homosexuality are typically the two sexualities that have dominated debates and discussions within existing sexuality literature, bisexual individuals are viewed as sexual objects who are still closeted, and are simply seeking the privileges that heterosexuality offers (Maliepaard 2015).

It is important to remember, however, that “sexualised spaces are never essentially heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual” (Maliepaard 2015:225). Doan (2007) finds that in overtly gay spaces today, there is little to no visible gender queerness—the subversion of conventional gender identities and norms—nor are there overt signs that gender variance is tolerated. Existing queer spaces are mostly composed of gay and lesbian residential and commercial areas, thus perpetuating a gender dichotomy that is heteronormative and exclusionary. While some progress has been made in many areas by making community institutions more transgender-inclusive, there is still more work to be

done for other identities. Gender queer individuals are typically visible in queer spaces only during special events, such as Halloween and Pride parades (Doan 2007). While these spaces allow lesbian or queer individuals more possibilities than heteronormative spaces—particularly for transmen—they still limit possibilities for gender variance (Nash 2011).

Participants in Nash's (2011) study noted that events advertised as LGBTQ were held at spaces typically defined as lesbian-, women-, gay male- or queer-only. In this regard, safe spaces were considered as such for trans individuals when they adhered to the expectations of those spaces. Many transgender participants felt unwelcome when the physical changes started to take place in their transition process. Lesbian spaces that were once safe became hostile and exclusionary when one participant began visibly embodying masculinity. Consequently, there is an emphasis on the sustainment of a lesbian identity in order to remain an accepted member of these spaces. Transgender participants benefitted from maintaining a perceived lesbian identity, in that they remained an accepted member within the space. Queer spaces lack embedded gender and sexual expectations, and therefore offer fewer challenges and easier negotiation of recognition and legibility for trans acceptance than lesbian spaces (Nash 2011). Queer spaces, while allowing for more expression and fluidity, often are masculinized by the individuals occupying them and the physical landmarks within them. As a result, queer spaces still tend to be unaccommodating for the bisexual and transgender communities, and reinforce heteronormativity and masculinity (Doan 2007).

### *Queering Public Space for Pride and Activism*

The *tusovka* in Stella's (2012) study effectively construct a queer space out of a public park bench, and others have queered public spaces for Pride and activism (Brown 2007; Johnston 2007; Wilkinson 2009; Stella 2013; Hébert 2014; Ammaturo 2016). Gay Pride parades are viewed as the most important event in which typically heterosexual public space is temporarily queered (Ammaturo 2016). When a public space is appropriated for Pride festivities, the street becomes a stage for queerness to be performed; although, queering space during Pride events still presents uncertainty of belonging and difference, as commodification of sexuality is still a prevalent issue (Ammaturo 2016).

In the parades studied by Ammaturo (2016), barriers are set up along the parade route as a security measure, which in turn changes the dynamics of the event. The barriers create a border between the participants and the spectators of the event, and they serve as a line between perceivably deviant practitioners and the safe space of the crowd. Barriers are sometimes rendered trivial when parade participants stray from the main parade route and pass through the barriers (Johnston 2007). Participants of the parade may queer a space by "making direct interventions on infrastructures or urban fabric" (Ammaturo 2016:25). By creating a semi-permanent mural painting representative of LGBTQIA+ identity and by queering a church as a challenge to relevant, cultural heteronormative space, there is an obvious attempt to highlight queer presence in the urban landscape for the world to see (Ammaturo 2016).

The appropriation of public space is a visible protest for inclusion in society (Ammaturo 2016), but it is riskier to queer some public spaces. The LGBT community



in Moscow, desiring privacy and secrecy, uses discretion as a strategy to avoid unwanted, sometimes hostile attention (Stella 2013). Even the informal, very public, and well-known meeting places and queer spaces in Moscow are not blatantly visible and recognizable. Moscow's Pride celebration gave the LGBT community more media exposure as event organizers publicized the festivities in order to have more visibility and support. The event, however, failed to successfully claim the city's public space as queer in that it did not "publicly affirm and celebrate sexual diversity" (Stella 2013:473), as there is still a lack of acceptance of diverse sexual identities in the city (Stella 2013).

Pride parades are often viewed as tourist events, and while these tourist spaces provide an opportunity to queer a space and challenge heteronormativity, parades and tourist spaces also tend to reinforce the heterosexuality/homosexuality dichotomy and hierarchy (Johnston 2007). Edinburgh is a sexually conservative city, and the bodies in the Pride Scotland parade posed a challenge to heteronormativity in the city. During the parade, members of a drumming group were marginal bodies on display for an audience that expected normalized gender and sexuality assumptions to be defied. While Pride Scotland allows the opportunity to celebrate identity and challenge heteronormativity, some members of the drumming group expressed feelings of being unwelcomed, marginalized, and Othered by spectators during the parade. Due to the location of the parade, Johnston (2007) speculated that a number of spectators had simply stumbled upon the event, thus having no intention of attending. Participants were afforded an outlet for expression and extroversion for their sexualities, but there was a constant sense of shame underlining their performances in front of a conservative crowd. In this sense, queering public space in Edinburgh was met with feelings of pride and shame by

participants, as the parade simultaneously allowed the celebration of sexuality and the concealment of identities for those in the parade (Johnston 2007).

Aside from Pride celebrations, activist spaces in which politics are the main focus are also formed when public space is queered (Brown 2007; Wilkinson 2009; Hébert 2014). Queer activist spaces “are temporary utopian experiments created through a self-reflexive process, with a strong commitment to a queered vision of social change” (Hébert 2014:157). It is in these spaces that heteronormativity is denounced and homonormative activism is avoided, as queer politics extend beyond gay and lesbian issues. Participants in Hébert’s (2014) study do not consider the Montréal Gay Village as a queer space, as it is defined by commercialization and focuses on gay men in particular. Conversely, during queer activist events, everyone is welcome, supported, and comfortable (Wilkinson 2009; Hébert 2014). Gender play, genderfuck, and gender fluidity are encouraged, and spaces are transformed for assemblages of like-minded and similarly identified individuals (Hébert 2014).

The Queeruptors in Brown’s (2007) ethnography are anti-assimilationist and sex positive queer activists. They attempt to create a network of autonomous queer spaces by challenging heteronormatively institutionalized equal rights with which the LGBT community is often concerned. Queeruptors create spaces that do not rely on the commodified gay scene, and these spaces “break open the bureaucratically planned spaces of the neoliberal city” (Brown 2007:2696). By temporarily transforming an abandoned building into a queer autonomous space to serve their activism, Queeruptors are able to free themselves from sexual and gender constraints, thus allowing for more fluidity and the subversion of normative binaries (Brown 2007).

Autonomous queer spaces of activism like those created by the Queeruptors (Brown 2007) are based on diversity, and are spaces where practices of anti-racism, feminism, and queer politics come together to allow activists reach common goals (Wilkinson 2009). Even while autonomous activist spaces seek to create comfort in expression and opinion, hierarchies of power and fear of disrupting group harmony are highlighted in activist groups. Emotions are felt in activist groups and spaces, and they actively produce space. This fact underscores the importance of activist spaces as an escape from binary and heteronormative discourses of emotions (Johnston 2007; Wilkinson 2009).

### *Virtual Queerness*

What began as public space being queered for gathering, safety, Pride, and activism is now being reimagined by the Internet and new technologies. The Internet, originally created as a heteronormative space, “construct[s] the queer body in direct opposition to the heterosexual and, as a result of this oppositional status, define[s] the queer body as necessarily unfathomable” (Fraser 2010:32). However, queer Internet spaces also allow the opportunity for queer bodies to challenge oppressive forces. The Internet acts as a closet in that it hides queerness from a heteronormative society. Even as queer Internet spaces exist in heterosexual space, the creation of queerness and queer embodiment are still allowed and encouraged by other queer individuals. The closet can be oppressive and restrictive for queer individuals, but they permit interaction and mobilization among queer communities, as well as spaces for learning and negotiation of queerness (Fraser 2010).

Online dating applications such as Grindr, Tinder, Scruff, and others are beginning to “provide new participatory spaces for gay men to organise sexual and intimate encounter” (Raj 2011:1). Individuals are relying on these apps, because they often run the risk of insecurity and even violence in face-to-face encounters in heteronormative spaces (Raj 2011). Chat and dating sites provide men who have sex with men (MSM) in particular a less risky alternative to physical encounter (Lemke 2017).

Cyberspace is viewed as a space in which users with shared desires and expectations may make connections, similar to those that would typically be made in physical interactions (Raj 2011). Internet access and mobile apps are contributing to a decreasing demand for physical venues in which gay men meet, because now, “almost any home, café and pub can potentially feature, to a very limited extent, *some* of the functions of physically gay venues” (Collins and Drinkwater 2017:767). New technology and the location services utilized by dating apps are hybridizing the way gay men meet; that is, app users are first meeting online, and subsequently having a face-to-face encounter (Miles 2017).

Participants in Miles’s (2017) study defined community as a group of like-minded individuals who have common interests, and most reference offline LGBT or queer communities that occur in London, such as Pride events, drag performances, and going out in Soho, a London gayborhood. One participant stated that apps do not foster a sense of community due to the lack of fixity and the presence of ambiguity. Because London’s gay scene is exclusionary to certain queer bodies, some participants preferred to use locative apps to socialize and identify with others. There is a shift from queer public

space to private space in that more individuals are choosing to meet new partners in the privacy of their homes (Miles 2017).

Just as physical queer spaces have their issues of exclusion, so do online spaces such as Grindr, which often reproduces norms surrounding sexuality and capital (Raj 2011). The app relies on categories that define bodies in heteronormative ways, including race, height, weight, and age. Users must navigate and negotiate a variety of codes and languages regarding sexual positions and body type, while also contending with users who desire certain racial and ethnic identities, thus ‘Othering’ users who do not fit into categories of whiteness (Raj 2011). In addition, through users’ freedom of profiles pictures and content, they are inadvertently granted the ability to create fraudulent identities to display to other users (Raj 2011).

### *Gaps in the Literature*

In this thesis, I explore what queer individuals personally consider to be queer spaces. I sought to understand how queer individuals utilize these spaces in their creation of identity, as well as how queer individuals “perform” to transform queer space.

There is a plethora of research that involves ethnography of queer spaces, but the existing body of knowledge is lacking studies in which in-depth and open-ended interviews are conducted in order to gain more personal insight regarding queer spaces. Many studies focus on queer spaces in the form of bars and other public spaces such as Pride celebrations. Rather than assuming what are considered queer spaces and asking questions about them, researchers should instead be allowing queer-identifying individuals to create their own sense of space throughout the interview process. This is what I explored in my interviews and participation in Austin’s queer scene and spaces.

Additionally, I took a more intersectional approach in this thesis than the existing literature does. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality explains the importance of considering one's various identities in conjunction with one another, rather than treating categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class as mutually exclusive. While previous studies have focused on specific groups of people in queer spaces, I assemble as diverse a group of participants as possible, in that participants have a variety of sexual, gender, and racial/ethnic identities. Doing so ensured that I adhered to an intersectional approach which further allowed me to gain authentic knowledge about the lived experiences of a variety of queer identities in Austin, Texas.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Queer space and culture are produced and maintained by individuals' bodies through various forms, expressions, and movements. Bodies are important in the expression of non-normative genders and sexualities, as "the body mediates the creation of queer spaces, and the space's existence is inextricably linked to the very people who participate in it" (Budge 2017:22). Spaces are fluid in that they change depending on the individuals within them, and spaces involve individual performances—in addition to physical objects—within them (Davis 2013). Performances of identity are deeply rooted in the spatial arrangements of physical queer space (Corey 1996); therefore, I suggest that Judith Butler's "gender performativity" is paramount to understanding the performance and transformation of queer space.

Butler's ([1990] 2007) theory of gender performativity refers to acts, gestures, and desires that produce individuals' identities both internally and externally. It is purported that, because gender is performative, "it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler [1990] 2007:185). The performativity of gender creates a fabrication within the actor's body that functions within social and public discourse. Acts, gestures, and desires allow the body to create "an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler [1990] 2007:186).

Butler ([1990] 2007) considers drag as a gender performance, and connects drag to the reframing of gender identification and gender experience. Space is created at drag events as "an active production of a radical culture of body and sex positivity" (Budge 2017:18). If gender can be performed and transformed in such a way, then so can queer

space. Spatialities are dynamic and refigure representations around us, in that they are performed in a way that reflects who we are at a particular time (Crouch 2001). Spacing focuses on performative actors and how they present themselves, and expressive embodied practice is enacted through various gestures (Crouch 2003). Bell et al. (1994) conducted a study to explore the intersection of sex, gender, identity, and space, and how they are related to Butler's (1990) gender performativity within a space. They suggested that space can be "interrogated in a similar manner" (Bell et al. 1994:32). That is, "public heterosexual space may not be restricted to heterosexuality" (Bell et al. 1994:33), much like gender performance is not restricted by sex. Similar to gender performativity, I contest that queer space performativity can allow individuals to express their identities through fluid embodied identities. By applying Butler's gender performativity to queer space, and by taking the work of Bell et al. (1994) a step further, I explored the ways that queer spaces are perceived and their influence on queer identity, as well as how queer spaces are performed and transformed by individuals.



#### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

In this study, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 queer-identifying individuals to understand how various aspects of queer spaces affect, impact, and influence their experience. In-depth interviewing was the ideal method for gathering vivid and detailed data about the experiences of queer-identifying individuals and their understandings of queer space, as interviewees are afforded the opportunity to express themselves in their own words and through stories (Webber and Byrd 2010). In-depth interviewing utilizes open-ended questions to reveal information about the topic being researched, and creates intimate conversations between the researcher and participants. For this study, I used a semi-structured interview guide, with an initial set of questions for all participants, and allowing some room for spontaneous inquiry. According to Weber and Byrd (2010), “the primary goal of using an interview guide is to balance the systematic collection of data with the flexibility needed to tap respondent’s understandings” (1). The questions in the interview engaged perceptions of queer spaces, the creation of queer identity in those spaces, and how individuals perform and transform queer space. I also asked demographic questions about the participants, the results of which can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender Identification</b>	<b>Sexual Identification</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>How long in Austin?</b>
Cameron	25	Cis Male	Gay	White	5 years
Shane	25	Cis Male	Gay	White	2 years
Lori	26	Cis female	Queer	Latinx, Mexican	7 years
Dee	35	Transmasculine, Non-Binary	Queer or Pansexual	White	5 years
David	26	Cis Male	Gay	White	4 years
Beth	26	Cis Female	Queer	Latina	8 years
Jake	31	Cis Male	Queer	Native American	8 years
Aiden	26	Gender-queer, fluid	Queer	Latinx	8 years
Jimmy	24	Cis Male	Bisexual	African-American	24 years
Caleb	25	Cis Male	Gay	White	7 years

As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I had some access to participants who could speak from firsthand experience about the elements of queer space in Austin. Additionally, as a recruitment technique, I collaborated with key informants to access potential participants, in that I provided details of my research and explained to key informants the importance of such research, so that they were able to relay the aims of my research to potential participants. Key informants provided potential participants with my information, and they reached out to me if they wished to participate. Participants who agreed to participate in this study met with me at their choice of location. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. To protect the identity of the individuals, each participant was given a

pseudonym. Voluntary participation and the ability to skip questions was emphasized in order to reduce the risk of harm and add comfort for participants.

In addition to in-depth interviews, this research drew from ethnographic data, emphasizing interactive fieldwork through observations and participation in queer spaces and the queer scene of Austin, Texas. Throughout the research, I actively participated as much as possible to gain better insight of queer spaces. In doing so, I recorded field notes with thick descriptions and personal memos that I later coded and connected to the literature and interviews. Field notes ensured the practice of reflexivity throughout the research process, so that I was fully aware of the environment, as well as my own thoughts and feelings. Crouch (2003) uses field notes to report his own performativities, and to reflect on how he responded in space. Further, I used other informal conversations to corroborate and elaborate the data collected in the interviews (Romero 2018).

Using a grounded theory approach, my research questions guided my interviews, observation, and participation, as well as the analysis of data. I began my data analysis by employing an open coding approach to find emerging themes. After developing some initial categories, I went back to the data to conduct more focused coding. Lastly, emerging themes about queer space were connected to advance present conversations about queer space.

## V. FINDINGS

This thesis explores queer spaces in Austin, Texas. More specifically, the research questions this study aimed to answer are as follows: 1) What do queer individuals consider to be queer spaces, i.e. how do they define them as such? 2) How do queer individuals utilize these spaces in their creation of identity? and 3) How do queer individuals “perform” to transform queer space? During the in-depth interviews LGBTQIA+ individuals participating in this study were afforded the opportunity to personally define queer spaces however they deemed necessary. In the process, the participants discussed queer spaces in a variety of ways, including their sexual identity in regard to the queer spaces they inhabit, and the ways they see themselves creating and transforming spaces to make those spaces queer. Additionally, I will open each category of this section with a reflection of the field during my ethnographic participation in Austin’s queer spaces.

While all participants mentioned the gay bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street and queer bars as overtly queer spaces, they also pointed out a variety of other spaces throughout the city that are less overtly related to the LGBTQIA+ community. This category of spaces includes ally establishments that host occasional queer-oriented events or fly a rainbow flag as a display of support, organizations and activist groups for queer issues, and the Internet—particularly social media. An overarching theme across the interviews was the fact that the city of Austin in and of itself is a large queer space.

Queer spaces are a seminal part of participants’ sexual and gender identities, in that these spaces allow people to express themselves more authentically than in non-queer spaces. Participants are more comfortable to dress how they want, be affectionate

with who they want, and be their authentic selves with less filtering in queer spaces. They are spaces of learning how to be queer and not be in fear of judgement for doing so.

Due to the frequently noted liberal and progressive nature of Austin, participants explained their ability to create queer spaces anywhere throughout the city. In doing so, they often pointed out the importance of their friends and other queer people surrounding them in order to create those queer spaces. Moreover, queer spaces are created by being kind and helpful to other queer people, whether in the workplace, while attending activist events, at a college campus, or on a queer-positive Instagram account.

### *Defining Queer Spaces*

*When I walk into Oilcan Harry's (OCH) and any other 4<sup>th</sup> Street gay bar, loud music is playing—Nicki Minaj, Madonna, Beyoncé, or any other gay icon artist—and a drag queen is performing on stage. As I walk to the bar to order a drink, I notice that a large number of people in the space are White men. These men are either skinny and fit or are bulky with muscles. They're wearing short shorts and tees with rainbows or words associated with gay men like "SCRUFF" or the Grindr logo. I feel a sea of stares as I walk through the bar, and I am wildly uncomfortable. I do not look like them. I do not work out at the gym every day. I do not go to clubs every night. I am not like them. The drag queen in charge is my saving grace. She grabs the mic and starts talking to the crowd about getting out there and fighting for a cause, urging everyone to be more activist-oriented for their community. Even though I may not fit in this space, the drag queen's speech makes me realize that we are all there for the same purpose: to be proud and queer.*

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Every participant discussed the gay bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street—including OCH and Rain—when asked about queer spaces in Austin. Cameron, a cis White gay man, said, "4<sup>th</sup> Street is where all the gay bars are, so there's a sense of being able to go there and have fun and do whatever you want and not worry about straight people judging you, but

there is a sense of judgmental-ness in the gay community.” Shane, another cis White gay man finds OCH and other gay bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street to be toxic in general, saying they’re “just loud bars where things happen and mistakes are made.” He explained that, even while OCH is the longest-operated gay bar in Austin, it is still a cis White gay male space, and thus ignores other identities within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

Caleb, a cis White gay man, also considers the bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street to be queer spaces. He said, “Those are definitely queer spaces,” and then went on to say, “I can’t think of any designated queer spaces other than those. Those are pretty obvious.” Dee, who is transmasculine non-binary, queer/pansexual and uses the pronouns they/them/their, enjoys Cheer Up Charlies and used to attend a workout class called “Transform” at a trans studio gym for socialization. Now Dee typically goes to a goth bar called Elysium, and they explained that Elysium is a “very traditionally queer” space, as “goth culture overlaps with queer culture so much.” Dee also noted that Elysium has always hosted drag king troupes and 80s nights, and these events are frequented by “very queerly visible people, trans people.” To Dee, the bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street “do not feel queer enough for [them], because they are “boy bars” in that they cater to gay men more than other people in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Establishments in Austin that are not inherently and directly related to the LGBTQIA+ community become spaces for queerness through events that are held on certain nights throughout each week. A popular bar called Barbarella hosts a night coined “Tuezgayz” every week when popular and iconic music related to the LGBTQIA+ community is played. This night draws in a more sexually diverse crowd and allows sexual minorities to dance and take part in a night designed for them. Regardless of this

sense of inclusion, Cameron also described this environment as judgmental and he cannot be fully himself there because. I suggest that this is due to the fact that it is not an inherently queer space with the exception of one night every week. Lori, who is queer and Latinx, goes to Tuezgayz every so often to dance and celebrate with other queer people, but recognizes that it still “draws in a lot of straight people.”

There are establishments in Austin that frequently host various drag nights, such as drag bingo and drag shows, that were also described as queer spaces. Shane discussed Irene’s, an Austin bar, as a queer space because of his level of comfort and ability to be himself there, due in part to the queer events like drag bingo that are hosted there. Additionally, he described “authentically Texan” establishments, specifically barbecue joints in Austin, as spaces that provide a sense of comfort when outwardly being gay because of the nature of Austin and the general hospitality and friendliness of Texas. According to Shane, an establishment such as Buffalo Wild Wings is the total opposite of Irene’s and similar places. This is because of the customers who go there and do not expect the restaurant to be a queer space. Shane asked if I could imagine Buffalo Wild Wings hosting a drag brunch and added, “They wouldn’t hire a trans waitress, probably, because the clientele wouldn’t want that.”

Queer spaces also form in places that are not related to typical nightlife of clubs and bars. A group of friends—Aiden, Beth, Jimmy, and Jake—hang out at Emerald Tavern, a quaint boardgame café north of downtown Austin. They also hang out at Dragon’s Lair, a comic book store that is known for supporting the LGBTQIA+ community because of the sense of safety they feel. These two spaces are not directly related to the queer community, but Aiden, a gender-queer and fluid Latinx who uses the

pronouns they/them/theirs, describes them as “adjacent” to the community, with undertones of support. This means that, while some spaces are not overtly queer or related to the LGBTQIA+ community, they are safe spaces that show their support by physical means such as rainbow flags, stickers, and signs. In this context, these establishments participate as allies in the queer space, which LGBTQIA+ individuals seem to appreciate. Shane related queer people and their occupation of spaces to Dungeons & Dragons players, in that those players may “go to game shops to play games there because they feel safe there, right? They wouldn’t just do that at a Starbucks.” From my conversation with Shane, I understand that what Shane means is that Dungeons & Dragons players feel more comfortable partaking in something that pertains to their identity in a space that was designed for that activity, and to partake in a different space may be seen as going against the norm of that space.

When considering the characteristics that identify a queer space, participants noted the rainbow flag and other flags that represent different sexual orientations waving outside in order to recognize the space as accepting and welcoming. To Shane, iconography and symbolism are important for the recognition of safe spaces, and something as physically small as signs for all-gender or gender-neutral bathrooms can help in the identification of safe queer spaces. The other people in a space also have an effect on the queerness of a space. When David, a cis White gay man, sees people in a space who “are more open with their sexuality or their sexual preference” and who are doing so visibly, he labels that as a queer space. For participants, seeing and recognizing those around them as fellow members of the LGBTQIA+ community and other communities with which they are associated creates a comfortable queer space. For a



space to be considered a queer space, Caleb said, “I would say it definitely has to have a majority of queer people and queer identities.” Regarding Emerald Tavern as a queer space, Aiden said, “A lot of people who work there, too, have mentioned...that there are these people there who are queer and kind of are represented.” Moreover, when participants are able to recognize the wait staff, bartenders, and other employees as LGBTQIA+ and when those employees are outwardly kind and positive to them, the participants find it easier to connect with others in the space and with the space itself. Beth, who is queer and Latina, said, “There are several cafes in Austin I like going to because there’s always been a queer person that’s been the barista...so it’s, like, ‘Okay, cool, I still fit here,’...that’s always a good cue, especially queer People of Color, like, ‘Okay, now it’s really home’.”

To Lori, a queer space is an “artsy space,” in that there is art all around a space. These spaces are also “grungy” and full of “queer markers,” which refer to “how you can tell if somebody’s gay, [if they] are performing queerness.” Queer people often look more artistic, donning tattoos and piercings, and are fashionable. Lori said, “You can tell by their shoes, by the amount of body hair they have or don’t have, the length of their hair, [and] so there’s a lot of queer markers that make it kind of obvious.” Dee reinforced Lori’s view of grungy spaces as queer as well as Shane’s “authentically Texan” standpoint in their description of a gay bar farther from downtown called ‘Bout Time II, in that it reminds them “of the grittiness of Texas.” They said it is queer because “it’s kind of bizarre” and it does not give off the vibe of “kitschy, like, mainstream bullshit Austin, ‘I’m gonna out-queer you’ culture.” To them, this space is more reflective of real queer people born and raised in Texas.

The comic book store, Dragon's Lair, has free stickers with the store logo and a rainbow flag on it, and Jake, who is queer and Native American, said the store flies the rainbow flag. According to Aiden, the friend group can "assume that it's gonna be safe" when they see these characteristics. Feeling a general sense of safety is another characteristic, albeit more of an abstract one, that defines a queer space for participants. This is especially true for participants who moved here from smaller, more conservative towns, as they did not have those spaces in their hometowns. Aiden said,

Coming from the town that I grew up in, it's very small, very conservative, one gay bar maybe two, definitely not being open so you move to Austin and are immersed in this hippie-dippiness that we all live in, safety's always a number one, like any place that feels safe for an LGBTQIA person and when it's part of the community, that's a space that I would affiliate with that.

The other people in these spaces help create that desired sense of safety, specifically for participants who are queer People of Color. Seeing a "library for all" sticker in both English and Spanish at the Austin libraries helped to reassure Aiden and Beth that they could be comfortable in the library. In his description of indicators of a queer space, Caleb said, "To me, the most important thing is just that it be a safe space. Everyone there is accepting and open, whether they're straight or whatever." These kinds of characteristics help foster a sense of community for marginalized identities. Jimmy, a bisexual African-American man, said it best: "We're all in this together."

Not all queer spaces in Austin are brick and mortar. A popular swimming and hang-out spot called Barton Springs and a street and area known as South Congress are

recognized by Cameron as a queer space because of the fact that there are typically accepting people in those areas of the city at any given time. David reinforced the idea of being in spaces with accepting people. He said, “I think it’s best to feel safe and accepted everywhere...so I think you’re not having to go to an actual space, like a bar or certain area for that, you can kind of just do it at your own leisure, maybe by yourself or with a close partner.” Conversely, places like 6<sup>th</sup> Street and Rainey Street that are well-known for their nightlife and drinking activities are not considered queer spaces. Lori explained a sense of homophobia on 6<sup>th</sup> Street and described Rainey Street bars as “very fratty spaces” and said she does not feel safe expressing her sexuality in these “very heteronormative spaces.” When asked about when he feels unsafe in the city, Cameron said,

It’s really nightlife. During the day, anywhere I’m at in Austin, I don’t feel like I have to reserve myself at all. It’s the nightlife of heterosexual people where I’m just kind of like, hold myself back a little bit. I might wear longer shorts or like jeans instead of wearing what I might normally wear...’cause heterosexual men sometimes are more friendly if you’re more straight, or like you appear more straight like, ‘Oh, you don’t even seem gay.’ And there’s a sense of comfort.

In this vignette, it is obvious that changing physical appearances and mannerisms is a method of coping with being in a non-queer space and creating a level of comfort.

Similarly, Shane said, “I wouldn’t go to a Walmart in Austin and be very flamboyant. Ironically, I would feel fine pretty much in any Target being myself. I mean, those are two huge corporate entities, so that’s not even really about the local

Austin scene.” This, he said, is due to the people who typically shop at each store. He further explained that it takes time to be comfortable with yourself in any space, whether or not it is a queer space. Shane also identified the suburbs as a place in which he would be more cautious in his sexual expression, but notes that it “kind of comes down to the people,” a common factor of expression in any space. Shane said, “We use the word ‘space’, but it’s not necessarily a physical thing. It’s a social thing, who you’re surrounded by.” David finds that “divey places” and “hole-in-the-wall joints” on the “outskirts of town” are spaces in which he does not feel safe to express his sexuality. Neither Shane nor Dee felt as though they can full express themselves in their workplaces, not because these spaces are unaccepting, but because there are “personal boundaries,” as Shane says, and “your personality is part of your private life.” Dee has always worked in social services fields and finds that “bringing their full, authentic self to work has always been a struggle” due to their queerness being related to kink-inclusivity and consent-based sexual liberation. Regardless, D said, “[Austin] is the safest place for me to be. I intentionally chose Austin because I wanted to return to Texas and set down some roots in a meaningful manner and try to build a relationship with their family again.”

Some participants do not ever feel 100 percent safe. Aiden explained that “100 percent is not something I shoot for. I look and I catch myself, like, okay, that person is here, they’re a Person of Color, they’re gay.” Regardless, Aiden is “always on the err of caution.” For Beth, seeing other around who are like her make her feel safer. The less People of Color she sees, the less comfortable she feels in certain spaces, a situation that

has taken place mostly in west and northwest parts of Austin, much like David's experiences in parts of Austin that are not within immediate proximity to the city.

Participants highlighted the usefulness of online spaces such as social media when thinking about the LGBTQIA+ community. Cameron, Shane, Lori, Aiden, and Caleb all described social media in terms of the ability to choose with whom you surround yourself and make it what you want. Caleb mentioned, "You can't control who's in a room, but you can control who's on your Twitter feed or Instagram or whatever." Aiden highlighted the fact that their "queerness is disconnected from [people in their hometown]" and uses Instagram and Snapchat to show their real self. Lori is a very visual person and uses Instagram, a photo-sharing app, because of the ability to "be very intentional on [Instagram] about who you follow" and follows queer folk and queer POC. Tumblr, a popular blogging site, is an online space that Shane and Caleb explained helped them lean into their sexuality. Shane noted that he "started following other gay people and other gay blogs and queer blogs and really understanding queer terminology and the issues at hand with queer people." To Shane, places like this allow people to experience the queer LGBTQIA+ community when they have no physical options to do so, and he found himself able to "muster up the courage to go into a physical space."

Dee recognizes that online spaces are creating accessibility for people who do not generally have physical access where they are, and Jimmy said that they are "even a way to find a queer space." Aiden said that "queer spaces exist online all the time" in the form of support groups, recalling that they used those spaces growing up in a rural town, similar to other young queer people who do not have access to physical spaces. They are spaces for representation and provide a means of seeing representation quickly and more

accessibly than in physical spaces. However, according to Dee, people who use those spaces are privileged in being able to do so and do not “leverage that privilege and actually get on the ground and do the boots-on-the-ground kind of hands-on activism work that we still need.” Dee sees those spaces as “promoting this fun and, like, light kind of side of the queer community and inviting a lot more straight people in.” They have previously used Facebook “as an activist outlet” to work and coordinate conferences with feminist and transgender groups in Costa Rica, but have since stopped using the platform due to Facebook’s negative reaction to transgender users and drag performers as a result of names not lining up with identities, thus directly putting these users in danger.

Much like Dee’s issue with Facebook, dating apps are not always very inclusive or spaces that are free of judgement. According to Cameron, the gay-oriented dating app, Grindr, forces users to “carry out a certain mannerism or take certain types of pictures” due to “judgement in the gay world.” He further explained that the etiquette on Grindr transfers to physical gay spaces because of that judgement. Lori said that there are not many dating apps specifically designed for queer women and has only used one called Her. Dee has struggled to find trans-inclusive apps, so they have used the website Craigslist for casual encounters and found that they could be more authentic on it, but that is not permitted on the site now. They also used FetLife five or more years ago, but people were not particularly using the term “queer” on it.

Regardless of somewhat negative experiences with dating apps, one participant found a sense of liberation using dating apps when she was younger and in high school. Beth was able to explore her sexual orientation by choosing the “bisexual” category for her profile on a dating app, and found herself saying, “Wow, I can actually put that

somewhere and people are gonna be okay with it.” She now uses the dating and friend-seeking app, Bumble, and uses terms like “queer” and “Latinx,” and it “feels so good to put that somewhere.” Beth also used the “women seeking women” section of Craigslist at one point, much like Dee.

In regard to the way these online spaces are changing physical spaces, participants seem to agree. According to Shane, online spaces are

Changing [physical spaces] in that, I think more people find them for the right reason than the wrong reason, and can go there and meet up with people they identify with, not even sexually, but just ideologically and personality-wise. I mean we’ve always seen the cliché ‘tiny young gay goes to the crazy drug insane gay bar and gets in with the wrong crowd and something terrible happens,’ and that kind of demonizes the entire community into being that, and I think those online spaces help you realize that whatever you identify with is not what its worst reputation is, and it makes going to those physical spaces easier and you can find those actual people to be with, that you feel comfortable with.

Furthermore, Lori said, “Social media creates a platform for people to organize, to create those spaces,” meaning that, even though social media are non-traditional and non-physical spaces, they still provide “a space where people can interact and meet” and “more opportunity for more spaces.” Aiden sees online spaces as involving the community more and creating opportunities for people to leave their homes to become more involved in physical spaces. To them, social media are “a driving force for communication between different parts of the queer community, because...it’s not one

community, there are a bunch of subsections.” Shane eloquently thinks that “a lot of those online spaces are kind of the first dipping your toe in the pool, and then going to a physical space is kind of like walking down the stairs of the pool.” That first step could pave the way for the cultivation of a positive LGBTQIA+ identity.

As with the existing literature, participants considered Austin’s overtly and well-known gay bars as queer spaces, as well as establishments that host queer nights throughout the week. Due to a small number of gay bars compared to other cities, queer people in Austin also noted other queer spaces. Some discussed certain areas of Austin such as Barton Creek, South Congress, and South Lamar, while others highlighted the importance of social media as a queer space. Participants also noted that some queer spaces are not always free of judgment and lack inclusivity for all identities, specifically the bars on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, while spaces farther away from downtown are not considered safe for queer identities.

#### *Self-Expression and Identities in Queer Spaces*

*A 5-minute Lyft ride away from the 4<sup>th</sup> Street bars is Cheer Up Charlies. It is a colorful queer bar full of eclectic people in a variety of clothing—overalls with a sequin top underneath, black leather pants and a mesh tank top, chain necklaces and shaved heads, septum piercings and strange tattoos. A band of twenty-somethings is performing on stage, playing funky, intoxicating music. I dance to the music with my friend, unafraid to let loose after a few drinks. I am not receiving stares. Instead, I am receiving compliments on the color of my nail polish and my wide-brim fedora. An older man is dancing with a group of men my age. A woman is dancing with and kissing another woman. Even a man and a woman are together in the crowd, without judgement. This is a queer space to me, a space where anyone can feel accepted and comfortable, regardless of sexual identity or skin color. This queer space has made me come to terms*



*and be happy with my queerness. I can now be unabashedly myself without fear of repercussions.*

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It is evident that queer spaces play an important role in helping people find and create their identity as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Self-expression is used by participants to display their sexuality when participating in queer spaces. Lori said, “I am more intentional when I know I’m going to a queer space,” in that she ensures that she appears “more visibly queer” by adhering to certain queer markers and mannerisms. Dee notes that they dress “very flamboyant,” which “can mean very slutty,” and their “physical presence feels very different in those spaces.” As “an introvert masquerading as an extrovert,” Dee utilizes dancing and moving to “shake off [their] awkwardness” and does so with their partner. David and his fiancé are outwardly affectionate with one another in queer spaces more so than in public. David explained, “There’s no holding back about what I’m saying or what I want to say.” Aiden said, “It’s easier to be more flamboyant, enjoy myself, have a good time, let loose,” in a queer space, and said, “I’m inspired by someone dressed up to the nines in leather and chaps, and I’m, like, they’re living their absolute best life and I wanna be exactly like them, my version of them.”

Shane explained that he is more comfortable when he is in a queer space, which he describes as a “melting pot of the LGBTQ community,” because there is less judgment than in public or “something you would deem a straight space.” Queer spaces allow Shane to have a certain kind of freedom for expressing himself. He explained, “Those kind of walls are what queer spaces kind of help me break down and kind of help you realize that it’s okay to just be yourself, like, who the fuck cares?” Cameron finds that he filters himself when outside of queer spaces, but stays true to himself for the most part,

while Shane finds himself “act[ing] straighter” when he’s not in a queer space, and David is “rated R as far as, like, how [he’s] talking or maybe how [he’s] acting” in a queer space and “more PG” in a non-queer space. He explains that he would not “start twerking” at a country bar. When Aiden is not in a queer space, his queer identity becomes more hidden. He said he puts his long hair up, does not express himself flamboyantly, curls his painted nails into a fist, and does not “give any kind of reason to look at [him] for more than a second.” In other words, he ensures that those around him will view him as a male-representing person. Similarly, when Jake is not in a queer space, he said, “I’m just gonna observe and see how much of this is safe, like, what can I say what, can I not say kinda thing.” Jimmy used the symbolism of a mask when trying to gauge safety. He said,

I put on that mask and wait to find those people, like, ‘Should I take...oh, no, I’m gonna put it back on,’ and just like going around trying to find those safe people, because even when I’m at work I’m like, ‘Oh, you’re cool, let me take it off for a little bit,’ and then another co-worker will come up and I’m like, ‘Let me put that back on’.

As Beth described, “It’s a lot of, like, watching and waiting and listening to the way other people act, and determining if that’s a space for me to be open.”

Beth is more confident when she is in a queer space and does not feel wrong when she looks at people and making eye contact. Beth said, “Being in a queer space and seeing other people be loud and proud is, like, inspiring and it kinda pushed me to also get to a place where I can feel that way and be, like, ‘You know what, yeah, me, too.’” Like, I feel good with myself.” Even though she said she is comfortable walking around

and being queer, she still feels more comfortable in a queer space around “other people comfortable in their own skin.” Organizations such as Out Youth in Austin allowed Jimmy to feel more comfortable with himself during his junior year of high school. He said, “I was like, ‘Holy shit. This is a space where I can feel safe and I feel like I can actually be myself,’ and I feel like, ‘Oh, wow. I can see myself in those people,’ and I kinda wanna be like that.”

Queer spaces provide an opportunity to learn. Lori said, “Queer spaces have taught me about performance, and just, like, what it means to have a queerness about you, or a queer spirit about you.” Proper ways of sitting and the lingo used in queer spaces are part of this performance according to Lori. Dee grew up in a small Texas town and had little access to Internet and other queer people, so they sought out bars—albeit they were small, distant dive bars—to find a sense of community and others like them. Because they do not drink alcohol, Dee’s connections with other queer people have been “outside of queer spaces and not centered in alcohol.” They noted that queer bars are still important, even though their age-mates are sobering up, and their community is changing and moving away from bars. Caleb echoed this “small town to big city” sentiment when he said,

Once I moved to Austin, I slowly started to creep into queer spaces, especially the clubs, and I think that was a very freeing environment, just to be able to see other gay people in real life, and truly for the first time be surrounded by people who have gone through the same things.

When David was first coming out, he said that “being around people who were open and showed their affection toward one another” helped him feel comforted in his newfound sexuality.

Even when considering all of the positive contributions and impacts that queer spaces can have on identity formation, Cameron said people are “trying to be something maybe [they’re] not because [they] are in a gay place,” and explained that sometimes he has to “join on board” to fit in. We must also consider the amount of privilege that some people have when occupying certain spaces. Lori recognizes her privilege when in straight spaces because she can “pass as straight really well.” She further explained that if she were visibly queer in a straight space, she might become a victim of violence or assault. The queer community itself is not devoid of prejudice and exclusion. According to Lori, the community itself can be transphobic. She said, “Trans folx are held to stricter standards more than everyone else” and in order for those people to pass in spaces, they “either need to be hypermasculine or, like, have exaggerated femininity and even the medical aspect of it.”

Expression of sexuality is important in existing literature. Participants’ narratives of their own expressions within certain spaces reinforced expressions and identities discussed in the literature. More specifically, queer spaces afforded participants the opportunity to express themselves fully and in authentic ways. These spaces also helped those participants who came to Austin from smaller, more rural towns that do not have many gay bars or other spaces to discover their sexual identity. However, there are non-queer spaces in Austin that inhibit participants’ expressions, thus causing them to filter themselves at times.

## *Creating Queer Spaces throughout the City*

*Austin's popular live music event, Blues on the Green, takes place in a large, open space known as Zilker Park once a month during the summer. A stage is set up at one end of the park, with the city as the backdrop. The park fills with people laying on blankets and drinking, leaving barely any room to walk or find a spot for yourself. This space, while it may not typically be considered a queer space by most people, becomes one on this night when members of an Austin LGBTQIA+ organization known as The Q flies rainbow and transgender flags in the middle of the madness for all to see. It is with those flags and those queer people that Blues on the Green suddenly becomes Gays on the Green for those who identify with the queer community. The organization sets up a welcoming camp and provides snacks and drinks for anyone who desires them. Members walk around with sheets of paper for like-minded people to fill out in a show of support. This public space becomes a queer space through the performances that occur there, and that performance of queer space is what makes people like me feel safe and welcome being in that park surrounded by strangers. It makes me feel like I am home, like I am queer and accepted.*

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According to Dee, “Queer spaces have more nuanced definitions.” They said, “A queer space is a more inclusive, almost integrated spot...so queer spaces now and queer spaces to me mean more of an umbrella welcoming space.” This is a similar viewpoint for all participants. Queer spaces are more of an abstract concept to people in the city of Austin, which does not have an overwhelming number of physical queer spaces. Simple interactions fueled by kindness and a sense of community can create queer spaces. Caleb said, rather simply, “I guess wherever you are can be a queer space.”

Lori found her “queer friends, [her] queer home” on a college campus in central Texas, and co-founded an LGBTQ organization for student Latinx folx, as well as an Instagram page centered on queer People of Color. To her, those are queer spaces that

she effectively created in order to help others like her. While Lori thinks that queer cyber spaces like her Instagram account are important, she expressed, “What’s missing from those spaces is connection. I think queer people tend to gravitate toward each other and form those spaces naturally without even trying sometimes, just because our experience is so unique and we gravitate toward people who share that experience, because we know what we’ve been through, they know what we’ve been through.” Similar to Lori’s student organization, Dee volunteered at the Transgender Education Network of Texas in the past, as well as at Austin’s annual QueerBomb, which both bring together marginalized identities to create a sense of community. By being involved in those communities, Dee said they were able to feel connected and “like a piece of history” by “cultivating activism and spaces outside of bars that are doing the work.”

A queer space was described by Aiden as “kind of exist[ing] in a moment...in an interaction, or like any time you socialize with anyone that gets being queer,” and Beth concurred by saying, “It’s not a place where you go back and it’s necessarily a queer space, it’s just, like, that moment that is.” In this sense, queer spaces can be temporary and ever-changing, depending on who is creating them. Queer spaces are not necessarily about being overtly queer all the time, but simply by performing certain actions, and by talking to people and interacting with them in an authentic way so that they feel safe. This is especially important when considering the friends with which people surround themselves. Shane discussed the way his friends interact with one another in physical and social spaces, and that those interactions in and of themselves create queer spaces, because he is not ashamed of his sexuality in those instances. Friend groups that are all queer, such as the friend group of Aiden, Beth, Jimmy, and Jake, find themselves creating

safe, queer spaces wherever they go and hang out, simply by being out in public with other queer people. Further, Jimmy said he feels that his friend group is a queer space, because he can be 100 percent himself by being around them. Aiden reinforced this by saying that their friend group is like the “sister[hood] of the traveling queer pants.”

Creating queer spaces also occurs when helping others who may be total strangers. Aiden talked about his workplace and assisting a transgender customer because their photo ID did not match their current identity. Because Aiden was understanding and willing to help at all costs, that customer was able to feel safe and comfortable in that space created in an office. Similarly, Beth works with sensitive information at her workplace, and any time she interacts with another queer person, she does all she can to make sure the “space feels safe.” Shane said, “if you can find the one queer person, like, say you work at some retail place and there’re 20 employees and one of them also happens to be queer, that’s going to make you feel better than nobody.” Along the lines of workplaces, Lori said, “My existence and, like, inserting myself into straight spaces creates a queer space.” She is able to navigate when she wants to emphasize her queerness and when she does not feel safe, but regardless she said, “I know I’m queer and in that space, so in my mind, it’s already a queer space.”

Aside from their friend groups and by helping other queer people feel safe and comfortable, participants also considered “the streets” to be a queer space. Dee said:

Yeah, the streets are a queer space. We need to acknowledge that. So queer space is what we make it, it’s how we make them, or is any place that we make a queer space, so if we take on that concept, we can make it that any space is a queer space, but we just have to embody that concept.

David agreed with this sentiment and said Austin's downtown and the closely surrounding areas can be considered a queer space, because of "the way Austin is nowadays and, like South Lamar for sure." He said other areas in north Austin would not be considered as queer spaces. David noted, "I would be more open to walking around downtown holding my boyfriend's hand over doing it just in the streets in north Austin or even, like, way, way south Austin." Moreover, David explained that the people who exist in the downtown and "inner-city" areas help create the feeling of the city being a queer space, as it is easier to feel accepted and able to express sexuality without judgment. Much like Cameron and his thoughts on non-brick and mortar establishments like Barton Springs being queer spaces, David thinks it is important to have spaces like parks or the streets for people who do not drink but still need to feel safe and comfortable expressing their sexuality. He said,

I consider myself trying to make spaces, you know, safe, because I feel like with me being part of who I am and not hiding it or anything is just kind of creating that space as well for anyone else that might be around, so I think in ways that we don't know it, we are kind of creating those spaces.

Queer spaces are important in a city like Austin that does not have as many of those physical places where people can congregate and express their queerness compared to other cities like San Francisco, Key West, and others. Austin was defined by every participant as being liberal or progressive, in that the people who inhabit the city are generally accepting of the LGBTQIA+ community. Shane discussed the fact that Austin is "a capital city in a red state," and explained that within the Austin city limits, businesses cannot discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people, in that they cannot be fired or



denied housing for their sexual orientation. Lori said that during the creation of Austin, a physical queer area was not even considered, as the main goal of the city was to separate People of Color from White people through the placement of the interstate. According to Beth, another reason there is no gayborhood in Austin is because it is “a newer city and because we are gravitating toward online platforms to celebrate queerness.” The shift in technology and the increasingly readily available social media for the celebration of queerness allows queer people to interact and communicate with like-minded people from home rather than seeking out physical spaces in the city. Further, Dee pointed out that the Internet and social media do have the ability to organize people for physical connections. They explained that Austin does queer- and trans-specific camping trips, hikes, and various outings, and those events are successful in part because of social media. Caleb’s view of social media reinforced Dee’s when he said, “I mean, Twitter en masse is not a queer space at all, certainly, but you can create those spaces, and really with any social media app, messaging apps, dating apps, all of it...I have a friend who meets queer people when he plays a video game.”

While the participants claimed that the entire city is a gayborhood or a queer space, some still think Austin could benefit from more physical spaces. Shane said that “the massive progressiveness of Austin is kind of detrimental” because there will always be people who want a physical safe space, especially those who have more marginalized identities. Even though there may not be guaranteed protection in those spaces and heterosexual people can still enter those spaces if they wish, Lori said it is “up to queer folx to create those spaces.” It is important, however, to not forget all of the -isms that exist even within the queer community, and “the queer community isn’t immune to all

these other -isms,” including racism, sexism, and classism. Lori argued that, even if Austin had a gayborhood, there would be people left out who cannot afford or access the gayborhood, due to the elitist undertones of such an area.

David mentioned that when he goes home to Houston, he does not feel totally safe everywhere he goes in regard to his sexuality, even though Houston is a generally open and accepting city. He does not feel the same in Houston as he does in Austin, and said, “I think maybe Austin itself, as a whole, is a gayborhood, like, the whole place... maybe we don’t really need one, not that it’s not good to have one, you know what I mean, but I think the feeling is already there.” Beth and her friends moved to Austin under the impression that the whole city is a queer space, in that they can be themselves wherever they go, but they realized there are “different pockets of Austin” and not everywhere is safe. Regardless, Beth and her friends have found those spaces and areas in which they can be themselves and free of judgment. Aiden mentioned the city’s “Keep Austin Weird” slogan and related it to Austin’s visitors who come to the city and relate “the weirdness factor” and “exoticism” to “where all the gays congregate” in the city. Aiden sees this relationship of Austin’s weirdness and its LGBTQIA+ community as a negative viewpoint to have. Nonetheless, Aiden’s narrative resonated Beth’s, saying that “queer culture is generally, *generally*, more accepted within some parts of the city,” and they feel as though they can go to any bar in those areas and get served, all while being openly affectionate with a significant other (emphasis added). Therefore, those brick and mortar spaces are not as necessary in Austin, even if, according to Shane, “It is kind of jarring to not really have a gayborhood when that’s actually a good thing.” He went on to ask, “Don’t you want the entire city to be a gayborhood?”

It is apparent from these narratives that Austin is considered a liberal and progressive city, and it is possible that there is no need for a gayborhood where the LGBTQIA+ community can live, drink, and express themselves. Regardless, there is still a need for the performance of queer spaces in order to embody an authentic sense of self and community throughout. Participants expressed that they do not always need a physical, brick and mortar space, though. Simply by interacting with one other queer person in any environment creates a positive and helpful queer space for all who are involved. This, paired with expressions of queerness, is how participants perform queer space throughout the city of Austin.

## VI. DISCUSSION

This study attempted to explore the LGBTQIA+ community of Austin, specifically in regard to queer spaces throughout the city. Moreover, this study was designed to allow queer individuals to discuss with me their perceptions of queer spaces in Austin, how those queer spaces shape their sexual identities, and if and how it is possible to create queer spaces throughout Austin. Through interviews and my own ethnographic observations, I found that queer spaces are scattered throughout Austin, in both physical places such as nightclubs, stores, and outdoor areas, and anywhere in the city in which queer individuals congregate and communicate. It is also evident that queer spaces are found on the Internet, specifically on social media, dating apps, and websites, as some participants emphasized the increasingly growing shift to technology as a way to mobilize the queer community. However, this may be disassociated from Austin and something to be considered on a larger scale.

LGBTQIA+ identities are shaped by queer spaces by those occupying them. Queer spaces allow people to see others like them and gain better insight into themselves. These spaces have taught some people how to dress and act in ways that more authentically express their identities, and have shown others that spaces that are not queer can be detrimental to their self-expression, specifically when they feel they must “act straighter.” Queer spaces, I argue, are vital for identity formation, even though some participants pointed out feeling as though they must be like everyone else in a queer space. It is possible that it takes finding a specific space in order to feel truly able to participate in self-expression.

Finally, this study found that it is possible for LGBTQIA+ individuals to perform queer spaces, much like it is possible to perform gender, according to Judith Butler. For example, Shane said, “Pretty much everybody probably has something about themselves that goes against the societal norm, and so in any situation that you can allow someone to be themselves, that in itself is being queer and letting them be queer and then that is a queer space.” Caleb has a similar view of creating queer spaces. He said,

I think queer people tend to gravitate toward each other and form those spaces naturally without even trying sometimes, just because our experience is so unique and we gravitate toward people who share that experience because we know what we’ve been through, they know what we’ve been through.

By being around other queer individuals and by being outwardly authentic and kind to others, the participants in this study perceived themselves as creating and performing queer spaces. Some performed queer spaces at work by helping customers or co-workers, while others did so on campus and in various LGBTQIA+ organizations. A few participants felt as though the streets of Austin are a queer space, simply because of the positive, friendly, and safe interactions that occur in them; thus, performing queer creates a space in the streets of the city, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why Austin lacks a gayborhood, or as I like to call it, a queerborhood.

The findings of this study are aligned with existing literature. Participants referred to overtly gay, lesbian, and other queer bars as being queer spaces, while also using their personal experiences to move queer spaces outside of bars and nightlife. Public spaces in Austin and online platforms such as social media, dating apps, and

websites were defined as queer spaces. Although, the narratives in this study filled the gap in the literature by posing queer spaces as a phenomenon that can be created, or performed, anywhere throughout the city. This study contributes to the existing body of literature by allowing participants to tell me about their own experiences in queer spaces, either fixed or fluid, and to define queer spaces however they see fit. Additionally, there has not yet been any research conducted in a progressive city like Austin specifically regarding its queer spaces. I recognize that there are limitations and weaknesses to this study. The most prevalent limitation and weakness is the sample size. Having more conversations with and hearing more narratives of queer people in Austin may have yielded more substantial results. However, the smaller sample size allowed the participants' narratives to be better understood and highlighted throughout the study. A more diverse sample in regard to race/ethnicity and sexual orientation may have led to more variance in the results, thus highlighting the difficulties that People of Color and underrepresented queer populations face in their occupancy of queer spaces. I recognize that the lack of a more diverse group of participants may be the result of my status as an outsider to certain racial and ethnic identities as well as pockets of the LGBTQIA+ community. Lastly, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other research on queer spaces or other aspects of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is due in part to the continually noted progressiveness of Austin. Not all cities are the same, nor are the queer people performing in them.

This study paved the way for more conversations and narratives of queer people in a seemingly progressive and liberal city, and their relationship with queer spaces in the city. However, there is still more work to be done. Future qualitative research should

expand on this work by developing more immersive conversations about new queer spaces in the ever-changing LGBTQIA+ community. How are cyber queer spaces affecting younger and older generations of queer people? What does queer space performativity look like in less progressive and more conservative cities? What role do queer spaces play in the coming out process? Do People of Color perform queer space in different ways than White queer people? While I attempted to find a more representative sample that included People of Color and sexual identities other than those that are more often discussed in the literature, more representative work can always be done to include as many marginalized identities as possible.

Creating a queer space does not have to be an exhaustive and unreachable task. It does not have to be “a giant group of gay people show[ing] up and mak[ing] something super gay,” as Shane stated. Simply talking to one other person like yourself rather than coming to terms with your sexuality on your own can create a queer space. Caleb said, “Any time you have a conversation about queer identities or ideas, I think that can become a queer space.” To Shane, it is possible that “queer is a synonym for just [feeling] comfortable to be yourself.” The words of each participant highlight this notion of queer meaning comfortable.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### I. Queer Spaces

1. Tell me where in Austin you go to have fun, celebrate, etc.
2. Would you consider those spaces as being directly related to the LGBTQIA+ community?
3. How do you decide what is a queer space?
  - What characteristics/aesthetic does the space have?
  - What kind of people are there?
4. Where, if anywhere, do you feel unsafe in Austin in regard to your sexual identity, i.e. where do you not feel as though you can be yourself?
5. How would you describe social media in terms of a queer space?
6. How do you think these outlets are changing physical spaces in regard to the LGBTQIA+ community?

#### II. LGBTQIA+ Identity

1. How do you express yourself when occupying “queer spaces”<sup>1</sup> in Austin?
2. In what ways do you think that queer spaces help shape your sexual identity?
  - How important are queer spaces to you in forming an identity?
3. How do you perceive yourself outside of queer spaces?

#### III. Doing/Performing Queer Space

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, “queer” refers to a fluid umbrella identifier for the LGBTQIA+ community, as it is used by some scholars to refer to nonheteronormative-identifying individuals. In his research, Budge (2017) explains that the term “queer” contains political tonalities that are frequently utilized by the current generation. The researcher is aware that the term “queer” remains contentious.



1. How does your participation in the community and events contribute to the collective/group identity of a space?
  - Give me an example of things you do that help shape the identity of and create a space.
2. Describe queer spaces that are not physical and your experience within these spaces.
  - How do those spaces compare to physical places that celebrate queerness?
3. Tell me what you think of the idea that we can create queer spaces.
  - Do you consider yourself doing that, and if so, in what way?
4. Why do you think Austin does not have a specific gayborhood like other cities have, i.e. Montrose in Houston and the Castro District in San Francisco?

#### IV. Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your sexual orientation/identity?
4. What is your race/ethnicity?
5. Do you live in Austin, Texas?
  - How long have you been here?

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