

queer pop-ups

by amin ghaziani and ryan stillwagon

The world is post-gay, some people say. The American statistician Nate Silver is a prime example. Silver rose to fame for predicting the outcome of the 2008 U.S. presidential election with stunning precision. In 2009, *Time* magazine named him as among the world's 100 most influential people, and *Out* magazine selected him as their person of the year in 2012. During his interview with the editor of *Out*, Silver rocked the boat when he defined himself as "sexually gay but ethnically straight." Cynthia Nixon, a star on "Sex and the City," created a similar kerfuffle that same year when she said that being gay was a "choice." And then there are big-ticket Hollywood actors like Tom Hardy who speak casually about their sexual exploits with other men, while self-identified straight women routinely kiss other women. A realtor in Fort Lau-



panic that some of us feel about the alleged death of queer communal life in cities across North America. "There Goes the Gayborhood," the *Globe & Mail* and *New York Times* declared in

Financial Times predicted that "gay areas in cities may disappear" altogether.

Headlines like these have some truth to them. Demographers like Amy Spring show that more straight people are moving into gayborhoods while gay people are spreading throughout cities and even branching out to the suburbs and rural areas. One effect of these migrations, we are told, might be the demise of gay bars. In 2007, *Entrepreneur* magazine put gay bars on its list of "businesses facing extinction," and a decade later, the *Economist* was still describing them as "under threat." Meanwhile, a blogger for the *Huffington Post* saw the emaciation of gay bars as symptomatic of a bigger cultural problem: "the gay community is dying."

While gay bars might be dropping like flies, a new innovation in queer nightlife is thriving: the phenomenon of temporary hang-out spaces—or pop-ups. Spontaneous and ephemeral, these gatherings are often dance parties, but they can also include pop-up museum exhibits, theatrical performances, drag balls, cruising spaces, dinners, thrift-shops, poetry slams, and kick ball games. The specific venue matters less than the communal effervescence. Conversations in Vancouver, where we live, have opened our eyes to lesbian social justice warriors congregating at "Denim Vest," gender fluid virtuosos flocking with irony to "Man

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derdale summed up the new state of sexual nonchalance: "No one gives a good goddamn if you're gay or straight."

All this fluidity might explain the

2007 and 2017. The *Los Angeles Times* lamented in 2015 that gayborhoods are "a victim of the gay rights movement's success." Around the same time, the

Up,” trans folk gathering at fire spinning parties, and indigenous individuals celebrating at the annual “2Spirit Rebellion” and weekly “powwow dances.” Characterized by outrageous names, costumes, and a bacchanalian spirit, each space is brimming with possibilities. “I am still beholden to the idea of a queer Mecca,” one organizer told us. “Like queer heaven.”

Queer pop-ups take several forms. “Canvas-style parties” are held weekly, monthly, or quarterly. They bounce from place to place as part of a strategy to curb costs and include people who are scattered across the city. Canvas parties attract a close network of patrons who enjoy the experience of social familiarity. “Community-need parties” have emerged in response to the perceived Whiteness of the gayborhood and its bars. These are frequently people of color-only events—with sassy and empowering names like QTPO-Colypse. They provide forums for investments in queerness that do not require residence in expensive, gentrifying gayborhoods—or “vicarious citizenship,” as urban sociologist Theo Greene calls these extralocal forms of territoriality. Finally, there are “guerilla-styled events” in which partygoers coopt an existing bar and transform its tone, vibe, and composition with a queer density of bodies and styles of interaction. Demographers may be right about residential diffusion, but our research suggests that pundits are wrong in their interpretation of its institutional effects. Gay and lesbian bars are not the only hub for communities to form and flourish.

Organizers of queer pop-ups are invested in a number of political projects, including safety, self-expression, and inclusion. One said to us, “I’m an



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A Man Up Vancouver event in 2017.

organizer for queer events, such as Denim Vest, which is a dance party that is centered around community-determined access and collaboratively trying to figure out what safer spaces can look like.” Shanice, who organizes QTPOColypse, focused on the visibility of people of color. “I think about queerness as a kind of radical self-expression and an encompassing of difference. That separation [into a party space] can be really awesome.” And then there’s Nia: “When I’m with everyone, I feel like I’m just a one of a many: there’s a couple of south Asian gay boys, and then there’s also the queers, and there’s also the transfolks. When I have to choose—who wrote that poem? [Pat Parker]—I want to be

able to talk to everyone in one space, because otherwise I always leave a part of myself behind at the door when I walk in.” Lilliam echoed the importance of connecting queers with each other: “We are reaching out to people that need the space. We are reaching out to people who don’t really feel like they belong in other places.

The only real distinction [between pop-ups and gay bars in the gayborhood] is that we’re not actively seeking out people who already have a lot available to them.” Pop-ups offer a space for people who feel uninvited to the party in the gayborhood, where bars cater to a narrow segment of wealthy, White, male, and cis-gender patrons who flaunt a consumerist aesthetic.

Attendees echo what we heard from organizers. “Pop-up events have the opportunity to include folks who are not cis-gay men,” Wei, a 30-year-old Taiwanese gender queer individual told us. “That would be for me the differentiator [from gay bars]. The event is really about the diversity of the community.” Aeron, another reveler, added, “Of the times that I’ve danced with folks, sometimes they have been in straight spaces where I am female presenting at the time, and someone female is drawn to me, and that set-up is not a safe one for me, right? But within queer spaces, you can let down your hair. Go and explore, figure yourself out. This is a space to do it. No questions asked.” We also spoke with Xinyi, who described how she felt when she attended her first pop-up party: “I think one of the most memorable moments, when I first went, was just

seeing queer women together, just seeing the different kinds of queer couples that were there, seeing cute queer people of color together instead of just seeing like the regular White women making out. It was just so nice to see them just being intimate with each other in this safe space.”

Pop-ups provide a peek inside a thriving world beyond the gayborhood and its bars. Although demographic and institutional upheavals certainly surround those spaces, we must resist making sweeping, not to mention alarmist, conclusions about their death and demise. Most of the attendees that we talked to disputed claims about a dwindling need for separate social spaces. “What

gay people are you talking to?” one of our interviewees wondered when we showed him a news headline. “That actually doesn’t make sense to me, because as a queer person, I’m always going to be searching for queer-specific events.” He then drew a comparison with his race: “For me, as a Black person, I would never be like, ‘There’s too many black-centered things in the city. Because there literally are not.’ The same logic applied to queer gatherings. “Even if there are specifically gay bars in the city, I’m never—in my mind, it doesn’t make sense to be like, ‘We’ve reached our limit.’ There should always be so many more. Always.”

Pop-ups are ephemeral, lacking specific geographic anchors, but they still

shape an enduring sense of self and community. They are an innovative expression of contemporary urban sex cultures that showcase the exquisite diversity of queer lives, especially those individuals who feel excluded and marginalized by the gayborhood and its bars. Pop-ups display the power of spontaneity, organizational flexibility, and empowerment in placemaking efforts. Some people, it seems, still give a good goddamn about their sexuality.

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puerto rico’s politics of exclusion

by bianca gonzalez-sobrino

On September 20th, 2017, Maria, a Category 5 hurricane, slammed into the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Its residents are still grappling with the humanitarian crisis that followed. Most Puerto Ricans were without running water for more than 30 days, and food continues to be scarce, particularly in the mountain region of the island. Nearly half the island

Americans—They Need as Much Help as Any State” (*The Hill*) and “Are Puerto Ricans American Citizens? Yes, They Are” (*Atlanta Journal-Constitutional*). Still, the U.S. federal and local governments have been slow to deploy aid—Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) even announced that aid would stop in early February 2018 (though it backed down

citizens know that Puerto Ricans are their fellow citizens. I have to wonder if this reflects a real deficit in our education system, or if it reflects the more insidious issue of racism around popular conceptions of who belongs and who does not?

Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917 (via the Jones Act), yet they have never been truly “American.” As a Puerto Rican woman, I struggle with this presumption of not belonging in my own country. Every time someone asks if I have a visa or if I can legally work in the U.S., I am reminded of the disjuncture between my legal citizenship and my substantive citizenship (social belonging). Hurricane Maria meant that push came to shove—the sense that Puerto Ricans do not really belong among Americans impacted how much relief aid and how much effort was and is invested in saving the lives of those perceived as not quite “American.”

Questions like “Where are they going to go?” and “What are we going to do with them?” are, in this light, fair. It *isn’t* clear where Puerto Ricans can go.

Today, the post-Maria migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland U.S. echoes the numbers of Cubans emigrating in the 1980s.

It’s a big problem wrapped in a century of denigration.

was without electricity by New Year’s. Yet its plight is not forgotten: Citizens of the mainland United States are crying out on social media for the government to move more quickly with food, water, and medicine. Media outlets continue to run news articles with titles like “Puerto Ricans are

from this threat. Why is Puerto Rico such a low priority for its federal government?

Those calling for the immediate help of 3.5 million Puerto Ricans reflect the belief that the U.S. government has a responsibility to all of its citizens, but polls show that only about half the mainland’s