

60 Belonging in gay neighborhoods and queer nightlife

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Imagine that I have given you a copy of the *New York Times*. As you scan the cover, your eyes linger on a single headline: “Gay enclaves face prospect of being passé.” When I first read it, the sentence leapt off the front page and lunged at my heart. The year was 2007. I was a graduate student living in Chicago. The article predicted the demise of San Francisco’s iconic Castro district. This most famous gay neighborhood in North America was changing, like the Boystown district in Chicago where I lived. The causes were numerous: an increase in societal acceptance of homosexuality, gentrification, the ability to connect in digital ways, an influx of straight people, and the fact that many LGBTQ+ people felt safe beyond the borders of this one place. “These are wrenching times for San Francisco’s historic gay village,” the journalist wrote, “with population shifts, booming development, and a waning sense of belonging that is also being felt in gay enclaves across the nation” (Brown 2007). That same year, a free daily paper in Chicago published a story with another dramatic title: “There Goes the Gayborhood.” The people interviewed by the journalist in my hometown were conflicted about this “culture clash,” as they called it. “Some residents and activists welcome the gay migration, saying it’s a sign of greater equality, while others say Boystown is losing its identity” (Kyles 2007).

I feel uneasy when I read stories like this. Gay neighborhoods promote a sense of belonging, like a homeland. A vibrant literature on “gayborhood studies” (Ghaziani 2021: 87) has emerged in recent years in which scholars debate why these districts are changing. Rather than rehash those arguments, I invite us to think about the significance of place for what it means to belong.

First proposed by psychologists, the *belongingness hypothesis* (Baumeister and Leary 1995) posits that human beings have a fundamental need to belong by forming stable, positive, social attachments with other people. Psychologists concede that “no person is an island” (Donne 1975), but as a sociologist, I want to explicitly broaden the scale beyond the individual. We form attachments with people as we interact with them in particular places (Putnam 2000; hooks 2009). This changes our perspective from belonging, in some vaguely defined sense, to *belonging in place*. Hence my question: What do we learn about belonging when we look at it through the lens of place?

In the spirit of bridging studies of belonging and sexualities, I present two cases in this chapter: one about gay neighborhoods and the other about queer nightlife. Our knowledge about belonging is often based in the context of globalization, nationalism, and citizenship (Yuval-Davis 2011), or the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and colonial subjects (DuBois 1903; Wekker 2016). The history, struggles, and perspectives of LGBTQ+ people are often absent from these discussions.

I use gay districts to reflect on why belonging still matters in urban places, despite declarations of their decline. When an international newspaper declares that gay enclaves are becoming “passé,” such remarks do not refer to a collection of streets or shops. Something else is going on. Although gay enclaves are changing, we must resist a narrative of “demise.” We need an alternative perspective about what it means to belong, one that is sensitive to doing belonging or creating belonging, not just finding belonging in passive ways. Gay neighborhoods enable LGBTQ+ people to feel seen, self-realized, and connected to each other as part of an imagined community.

I then discuss queer club nights (the shift in language from “gay” neighborhoods to “queer” club nights is deliberate, as we will see). This second case requires us to confront the diasporic specter of not belonging, or un-belonging (Ahmed 2007; Rosenberg 2021). I examine the effects of exclusion, the underbelly of belonging, in places where queer people grapple with racism and the politics of representation. Feeling like a stranger in a place where you think you should belong can bring suffering, like sitting by yourself in a school cafeteria; however, exclusion can also motivate and create opportunities to reimagine what it means to belong.

Gay neighborhoods

Gay neighborhoods formed following World War II. When gay men and lesbians were discharged from the military for their real or perceived homosexuality, many of them remained in port cities rather than returning home potentially disgraced. Bars consolidated dense social networks that made nonheterosexuals visible and inspired them to assert a right to gather in public places (Meeker 2006). Before the war, laws in several American states prohibited LGBTQ+ people from congregating in public places, even in bars. Because sodomy laws were still in place, police could construe a gathering of LGBTQ+ people as a “criminal conspiracy,” and bars that served drinks to them could lose their liquor license (Sibilla 2015). In an interview about his book *Stonewall*, David Carter described early activists as “triply condemned. They were condemned by the law as being criminals, they were condemned by religion as being sinners and by medicine as being mentally ill” (Teal 2010). Neighborhoods and bars became politicized in this repressive context. For LGBTQ+ “moral refugees” (Castells 1983: 161) of the time, gay neighborhoods were spaces of safety, belonging, and celebration.

But do gay districts still promote a sense of belonging today? As an urban sociologist, I know that neighborhoods are a “basic building block” of cities (Forsyth 2001: 343); we form attachments and connections on the sidewalks where we interact with others. To examine the persistence of belonging in a context of change, I interviewed 125 Chicago residents and analyzed 617 national media reports about gay districts. I discovered that gay districts matter for many reasons: they influence elections; they help queer people find friendship, fellowship, sex, and love; they offer safety from harassment; they nurture non-profits and businesses; they are hotbeds of activism; and are conduits of community (Ghaziani 2021).

Let’s take a closer look at the theme of community, which sheds light on creating belonging in a culturally significant place. The *Washington Post* compared gay districts to the Wizard of Oz:

For decades, . . . gay neighborhoods . . . embodied the promise of change, freedom, friendship, and acceptance. Greeting cards and T-shirts were emblazoned with the

slogan ‘I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.’ To come out of the closet, to move to those gay utopias was to be swept up by a tornado and dropped into Oz. The black-and-white landscape dissolved into color. . . . Reborn, gay [people] often find that old assumptions about family, love, and community fall away as well.

The sense of belonging gay neighborhoods create is so significant that cities are marking them. In 1997, Chicago became the first city in the world to use tax-funded dollars to create an official LGBTQ+ streetscape. The Boystown district today has 20 rainbow-colored, art deco pylons resembling skyscrapers located along North Halsted Street. The decision to install these pylons was controversial, however. A local paper published a front-page editorial that illuminates the interconnections between people, place, and belonging. “Why should a neighborhood have a public sexual designation when sex is the ultimate private act?” the writer asked. Tracy Baim, who manages a local queer newspaper, offered a response:

The city’s plan isn’t about sex, it’s about community. Society has forced us to define ourselves as a community to protect ourselves. . . . Community has given gays the force to fight against hate crimes, against job discrimination and housing bias. The gay community has become family for gays whose families have thrown them out. The city’s plan simply would recognize that community, along with the work it has done to turn the neighborhood into a place where straight people, along with gays, want to shop, eat and live. Why does the city do it for Chinatown? Why does it do it for Greektown? Because it helps bring pride to an area of town that has traditionally been built by those communities.

What appears as an individual and private act is in fact evocative of collective identities and communities – and thus worthy of public designation.

Ten years later, the mayor of Philadelphia dedicated 36 new street signs to celebrate its LGBTQ+ communities. A local paper remarked on the significance of the decision:

A welcoming vibe is what organizers hope to inspire when visitors see new street signage that will designate a portion of the Center City District as the city’s official gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender-sensitive neighborhood. . . . The new street signs will feature the traditional GLBT rainbow, or “Freedom” flag underneath the usual street signs. . . . “The signage is an important symbol for this city,” [said Tami Sortman of the Philadelphia Gay Tourism caucus]. “We can say that we have a neighborhood. . . . Not only does this bring a sense of welcoming to the local community, it’s a symbol to the world.”

One of things that stood out as I read such media reports is a recurring reference to gay neighborhoods as a mecca, or a homeland for LGBTQ+ people. For example, the year 1994 marked the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, a 1969 police raid on a gay bar in New York that inspired international protests. To celebrate it, the *Washington Post* printed a story that blended Islamic and American images:

There will be a constant stream of pilgrims coming to gaze at the brick-and-stucco facade of the Stonewall over the next few days. Because a police raid turned into a riot there 25 years ago, because the patrons of a gay bar did not go gently into a paddy

wagon, hundreds of thousands of people will descend on New York for a weekend of commemoration. The neighborhood surrounding the old saloon, a hangout-turned-landmark, will become an international mecca, a symbol of gay liberation.

But that's what Greenwich Village has always been. A kind of Ellis Island for generations of gay men and lesbians, a crucible of gay history since before the Jazz Age, it is America's most celebrated gay enclave. What the Village offered was a handful of places where gay people could reveal themselves: a cafeteria here, a bar there, a park, a bookstore, eventually a community center. But what it provided was freedom. "It's a mythic place," says Joan Nestle, co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Even though Stonewall was not the first bar raid, or even the first bar raid in which the patrons fought back (Armstrong and Cragge 2006), the names Stonewall and Christopher Street – where the bar is located – is used by organizations around the world, including in France (e.g., Collectif Stonewall), Germany (e.g., CSD Deutschland), Japan (e.g., Stonewall AJET), Poland (e.g., Stowarzyszenie Grupa Stonewall), Switzerland (e.g., CSD Bregenz), and the United Kingdom (e.g., Stonewall Equality).

The use of religious imagery, calling a gay neighborhood a "mecca" or a gay bar a "church," is ironic but unsurprising. At the heart of any spiritual iconography is a communal affirmation (Durkheim 1912). An editorial from *Chicago* echoed this insight: "Our eroticism is the closest thing we have to what in the past was called a spiritual life." In this sense, gay neighborhoods resemble the totems described by Émile Durkheim in his study of religion in Australian Aboriginal tribes. There is a common motivation to seek the sacred, and to represent the gods we seek as ourselves. Hence, place becomes our church. This is why belonging often takes on territorial, tribalistic, and at times transcendent tones.

Queer nightlife

From 2006 to 2016, the number of LGBTQ+ bars, pubs, and other nighttime venues in London declined by an alarming 58%, falling in number from 125 venues to 53 (Campkin and Marshall 2017). This trend is part of an international pattern. From 2007 to 2017, the number of gay bars in the United States declined by 28% (Mattson 2019 and Chapter 63 in this volume). Writing for *Bloomberg*, Richard Morgan (2019) describes a bleak landscape: "In 1976, there were 2,500 gay bars in the United States; today, there are fewer than 1,400 worldwide."

Responding to the decline of London's nighttime venues, Mayor Sadiq Khan appointed Amy Lamé as the United Kingdom's first-ever night mayor, or "night czar." London's move follows the successful appointments of nighttime mayors in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and Zurich, and since Lamé's appointment, the role has diffused globally (Seijas and Gelders 2021). "I don't want young and creative Londoners abandoning our city to head to Amsterdam, to Berlin, to Prague where clubs are supported and allowed to flourish," the mayor said. "We can save London's iconic club scene" (Nelson 2016). Positions like Lamé's signal the importance of nighttime arts and culture as a way of creating belonging in large urban environments.

I interviewed Lamé in London City Hall and learned that the mayor and she drafted a "cultural infrastructure plan." This document focuses on the organizational embodiments of culture, the places where culture is produced and consumed, including museums and

art galleries, theatres, music studios, performing arts spaces, and bars. The plan proposes to put culture at “the heart of local regeneration,” Lamé told me, and identifies five ways to do this: we need to understand where in the city culture lives and thrives; plan for and create new places for it to grow; support culture at risk, such as declining LGBTQ+ spaces; increase investments in cultural assets; and create policies to enable creative industries to put down deeper roots (Ghaziani 2019).

Similar to American conversations about endangered gay neighborhoods, British public officials see a problem of decline with gay bars are closing. Their solution is to protect those that remain and encourage new ones to open. Attention to protecting or replacing existing venues overlooks the problems that existed in those places, as well as efforts to create new platforms that can enable people to reimagine what belonging means, and, importantly, for whom.

I conducted two years of fieldwork in London, interviewing 111 city officials, bar owners, and the creative geniuses responsible for producing new forms of collective gathering called *queer club nights*. My conversations, like the ones that journalists are having about gay neighborhoods, challenge dominant narratives of decline. In this second case, I saw how queer people of color redefine belonging when they encounter exclusion from other LGBTQ+ people.

Mwice organizes the Cocoa Butter Club, an event which showcases queer performers of color in a cabaret. “The Cocoa Butter Club was born from a frustration of seeing people who blackface,” she says. “I was just sick and tired of it – that black bodies aren’t getting booked, but bodies that can do things which have strong connotations to black culture *are* getting booked” (Onibada 2018). During our interview, Mwice tells me her reaction to the closure of gay bars:

I think there’s a small joke when all of these places are being closed down, which is, how many people of color were their clientele? How many versions of not-a-cis-white-gay-man were these venues catering to? Perhaps those are the venues that are closing down, and the venues that are thriving or starting are ones which are founded by people of color.

Madison organizes a techno fashion club night called Opulence, which centers the aesthetic practices of marginalized queer artists. Madison echoes Mwice’s intuition about why gay bars are closing, and presents a sentiment I do not see in the mayor’s report: “racism in the gay community,” he says to me directly. A report from the UK found that 80% of Black gay respondents, 79% of Asian gay respondents, and 75% of South Asian gay respondents experienced racial bias from within the LGBTQ+ community (Lang 2017). This pain provides the raw material for creativity. “Marginalized people stride through their annihilation, turning pain and struggle into opulence,” Madison says with poetic elegance. He started Opulence as a response to racism:

I was tired of going to parties where I felt ostracized for being queer, parties that didn’t have a lot of people of color in them, parties that had DJs that were basically white men with the occasional white woman. I wanted to do something about that.

In London, I discovered creativity, art, and entrepreneurship thriving in the city’s underground club scene. Sam organizes CAMPerVAN, an event in a Caravan that he drives across the city and the country. He describes the event as “a transportable queer

performance, and LGBTQ community event space that can be deployed anywhere in the world to bring performance art, film screening, panel discussions, and workshops into the public realm.” For Sam, club nights reinvent the temporality of belonging: “I think that the biggest thing to come out of the wave of closures was the emergence of nights, temporary nights. It’s very impressive to see the resilience of the queer community and its ingenuity and adaptability.”

Although city officials see decline and embrace a defensive position – “gay bars are dying, and we need to protect them” – queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, or QTBIPOC organizers, see the ascent of something new. A movement is underway of artistic individuals and collectives who are elevating London’s marginalized communities by creating spatially mobile underground parties that offer a more inclusive vision of belonging. For example, Lewis is described as an “icon of London’s queer clubbing scene” by the *Boiler Room*, an online music broadcasting service (O’Connor 2021). A DJ, performance artist, and activist, Lewis merged a fine arts background with a club night platform to produce a party called Inferno which explores queerness, fatness, and finding beauty in the grotesque. Like Mvice, Madison, and Sam, Lewis is also intentional about re-centering nightlife. They describe Inferno as a “techno rave come performance art platform that prioritizes and champions trans+, nonbinary, and queer DJs and performers. Inferno marries the camp with the underground, pop with techno and the good with the bad, creating an exciting and unique clubbing experience.”

Lewis becomes animated when we talk about the closure of gay bars in London. People who say “nightlife is dying” are wrong, they say dismissively and with disbelief. “I would laugh in their face.” When I ask why, their amusement yields to anger: “I hate these academics and these scholars that sit on panels with three or four other academics, and they’re like, oh yeah, nightlife is dying. Bitch, I haven’t seen you in a nightclub once!” Lewis exclaims. “How dare you make these allegations, these sweeping statements?” I flinch at Lewis’s words, feeling hot under my collar as I become acutely aware that I am an academic asking questions about the closure of gay bars. However, as an organic intellectual (Gramsci 2011), my goal is to advance a uniquely queer perspective about place and belonging. Mvice, Madison, Sam, and Lewis amplify a counter-narrative, one that resists a story about decline, and challenges whiteness in the process.

City officials, bar owners, and club night organizers agree that gay bars are closing, but from there they diverge. London’s 56-page cultural infrastructure plan does not have a single reference to racism, yet the organizers with whom I spoke all mentioned it. This discrepancy shines a light onto the “whiteness of gay urban belonging” (Rosenberg 2016: 137). QTBIPOC people are stigmatized and often excluded from imaginaries of belonging in gay neighborhoods and gay bars, including experiences of racial slurs by bar owners, insidious practices of enforcing dress codes to enter the space, requiring multiple pieces of ID, or being denied entrance under false pretenses, like a bar is at capacity (Street 2021).

When racism restricts the number of places to be queer *and* Black, or queer *and* Brown, QTBIPOC entrepreneurs create spatially mobile, ephemeral, and underground club nights that foster intersectional expressions of belonging (Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019). These events are for “the most marginalized groups within the queer community,” Lewis tells me. They are “platforming them, and really giving them a voice.” One final example comes from Tia, who is part of a collective of seven queer

Black artists called BBZ (pronounced “Babes”), which is an acronym for “bold, brazen Zamis.” They are a self-described “curatorial and creative production collective with roots in nightlife and clubbing culture.” Club nights like BBZ cultivate a “culture of authenticity,” Tia says, so QTBIPOC people can “be their full selves” and “learn how to love yourself” in a racist, misogynistic, and transphobic world of exclusions. Such efforts re-center nightlife away from the whiteness of urban gay belonging to an inter-sectional queerness.

The emplacement of belonging

Belonging is the main idea that motivates this chapter. It is alluring, yet difficult for us to access because it is such an abstract notion. The need to belong is a “fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 497), but we enact that motivation in specific places. We need a place to plant our flag. This makes “place” more than just a container or context (Gieryn 2000). It must take center stage as we sketch the landscape of belonging for sexuality studies.

With this as my baseline, I propose six propositions for the *emplacement of belonging*, that is, how place shapes our sense of belonging (Figure 60.1).

First, when people gather, they bring with them *symbols* of their collective identities. These representations connect us with our actual and imagined communities (Anderson 1983). Consider that gay neighborhoods exist all over the world: Zona Rosa in Mexico City, Cheuca in Madrid, the Marais in Paris, London’s Soho, Schoeneberg in Berlin, Oxford Street in Sydney, the Changning District in Shanghai. These places are culturally distinct, yet they cultivate belonging in similar ways by using shared symbols like the rainbow flag, which you would see as you walk along their sidewalks. Incorporating representations of sexuality in the built environment is critical. It connects individual people with their collective identities, fosters proud associations with a place, and it thus reinforces a feeling of belonging to it and to each other.

Second, the *global and the local* interact in our sense of belonging. Gay districts all over the world blend shared symbols, like the rainbow flag, with events of local significance. For example, the Admiral Duncan is a popular gay bar in London’s Soho district, surrounded by rainbow flags. Near its entrance, you will also see a plaque that reads “Queer Heritage: 3 People killed, 70 injured, neo-Nazi nail bomber, 30 April 1999.” The sign commemorates a local historical event that mattered to London’s LGBTQ+ communities.

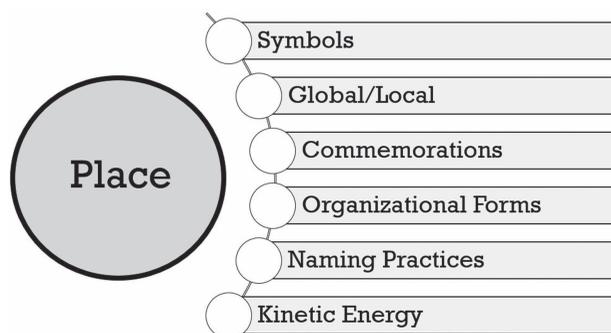


Figure 60.1 Positions for the emplacement of belonging

Over three weekends between April 17 and 30 in 1999, homemade nail bombs detonated across the city, one from inside the Admiral Duncan. Each contained 1,500 nails, and each nail was four inches long. The explosion killed three people, including a pregnant woman, and injured 140 others, four of whom lost their limbs. This example, though difficult, shows us that belonging is multi-scalar: the global and the local interact in the attachments between people and places.

Third, places facilitate *commemorations* and thus introduce temporality into our sense of belonging. London commemorates the nail bombings at the Admiral Duncan every year in its pride parade, which itself commemorates the 1969 Stonewall riots that occurred in New York. As commemorations, pride parades connect the present with the past across multiple places. For example, whether I'm in Copenhagen for World Pride in one year and Vancouver the next, I can still participate in fictive kinship relations (Guttman 1976) that reach back to Stonewall in New York City in 1969. Using sexuality to think about belonging moves us away from conventional notions of "reproductive time and family time" toward *queer time* (Halberstam 2005: 10), an idea which posits nonlinear and heterogeneous temporalities of belonging.

Fourth, LGBTQ+ groups are innovating *organizational forms of belonging*. In London, I interviewed an artist named Rosie, who created an installation about the closure of gay bars across the United Kingdom. "I think there's something about this newer queer culture . . . [of club] nights," she said. "They're more about people of color, trans people of color, and I think there's a sense that there's no actual model that exists for spaces like this, and that's why they're a bit more temporal and a bit more experimental." I heard this sentiment repeatedly. "Pop-ups are the model now," another organizer told me. Club nights are ephemeral, but they have enduring effects. Spatially mobile underground club nights create more inclusive and intersectional platforms. I see them as a spatial act of resistance (Rosenberg 2021), a form of protest against racism. Histories of exclusion thus give birth to new forms of belonging.

Fifth, in terms of *naming practices*, club night organizers intentionally use the word "queer" rather than "gay." When we speak words out loud, we breathe life into them, give them power, and they resonate outward beyond any one person or place. Naming practices are political acts. The shift from "gay" to "queer" gestures toward more visibility and more voice. This is why, "in an LGBTQ world, bars that are merely gay can seem anachronistic" (Morgan 2019). That said, there is a tension in naming practices between the utility of crafting a politically legible group, and representation, and being mindful of differences. This raises hard questions: When we use a traditional name like "gay," what is gained, and what is lost? As we re-name something, what is gained, and what is lost? How do we navigate these compromises? To name a place or an event implies something about its history, politics, significance, and for whom it matters. Therefore, we must attend to naming practices with great urgency and care.

Sixth, a commonality across these principles is an undeniable *kinetic energy*. Imagine that you are walking along the streets of a gay neighborhood. As you look around, you will see the traditional rainbow flag, a symbol that San Francisco native Gilbert Baker created in 1978. You may also see some new iterations. In June 2017, the city of Philadelphia unveiled a redesigned flag that added black and brown stripes to represent the inclusion of people of color in LGBTQ+ communities. This Inclusive Pride Flag comes in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and in response to reports of racism in gay bars. This flag diffused globally and was adopted by Manchester Pride, as the CEO of the festival explains, to confront "racism and exclusion experienced by black and minority

ethnic LGBT+ people in LGBT+ spaces” (Dhaliwal 2019). In 2018, Daniel Quasar, who identifies as nonbinary, redesigned the flag again by adding five arrow-shaped lines that include black, brown, and the trans colors. “The inclusion of the additional stripes means placing emphasis on voices that need to be heard,” Quasar said (Lang 2017). This version, called the Progress Pride Flag, evokes motion and movement in a way that parallels the trajectory from gay bars to queer club nights.

This metaphor of kinetic energy is an apt way to conclude this chapter. Belonging is not a static outcome that we achieve with finality; it does not end here. Based on the examples of gay neighborhoods and queer club nights, I have shown that belonging is an interactional, intersectional, and an emplaced process that we use to link ourselves with our local and global; fixed and ephemeral; past, present, and future communities.

Chapter review questions

1. What are different ways that our sense of belonging connected to place? According to Ghaziani, how does this “belonging in place” express itself on city streets?
2. Why has there been a need for pop-up parties in LGBTQ+ urban nightlife?
3. Why does the author argue that we should not see the closing of gay bars as a sign of decline?

Author biography

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