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# **Anarchism, Geography, and Queer Space-making: Building Bridges Over Chasms We Create**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the complex, creative, and contradictory processes of making queer space through an analysis of the rise and demise of the Richmond Queer Space Project (RQSP), a queer- and anarchist-identified organization in Richmond, Virginia, US. I begin by synthesizing emerging perspectives from anarchism, queer theory, and the conceptualization of queer space in geography. Then, I observe the practices through which RQSP members created a queer space; their location politics in a small-city context; and the contradictory politics of affinity and identity that led to the group's demise. My goal is to seriously consider the complexities and contradictions of queer anarchist spatial formations and to develop a perspective on queer space that is simultaneously critical of its composition and supportive of its potential for creating liberating, pleasurable spaces of relating with others. Theoretically, I argue that anarchist and geographic perspectives on queer space have much to learn from one another: queer anarchists can benefit from the critical perspectives on queer space-making developed in recent geographic work, and geographers can benefit from a deeper awareness of the positive, creative space-making processes through which alternative non-hierarchical spaces can be imagined and lived.



## Introduction

The Richmond Queer Space Project (RQSP hereafter) was a short-lived, micro-scale activist organization in Richmond, Virginia which nonetheless had a very dynamic presence and was attempting to synthesize a vision of a queer anarchist community. The sub-title of my paper after the colon, “building bridges over chasms we create,” is attributed to one of the group’s founding members. It became a running joke, as members forever tried to come up with a short, catchy phrase that could articulate the shared political vision of the collective, but never quite succeeded in agreeing how to concisely encapsulate this vision. This inability to agree on a simplification and the processes of constantly working to build bridges over internal chasms perfectly captures the challenges of such a project. It also emphasizes my central goal here: to bring together disparate ideas from geographic and anarchist thought to argue for a simultaneously critical and celebratory approach for understanding queer space-making.

In this paper, I examine the simultaneously complex, creative, and contradictory processes of queer anarchist community building through analysis of the rise, fluorescence, and demise of RQSP specifically and queer space generally. I begin by synthesizing some recent strands of anarchist thought centered around affinity, prefigurative, and queer politics, with insights on queer space from geographers. I then examine the bridges and chasms of RQSP, with a special focus on the complex processes through which the group created a queer space; how the creation of the space was negotiated in the context of larger, oppressive urban structures; and how the group engaged in some often contradictory affinity- and identity-based politics. I argue that participants enacted conflicting understandings of queer space that at some times sought to destabilize identity boundaries and at other times solidified a fragmenting identity in space. I base my observations here on semi-structured, in-depth interviews I conducted with 10 members of the collective over the period of a year. I centered these interviews on questions of how and why the group was formed, the significance and limitations of creating material queer spaces, and the factors that led to the group’s demise. I supplemented the interviews with qualitative content analysis of the collective’s publications and detailed weekly meeting minutes, which I examined primarily to understand the group’s goals, consensus practices, use of space, and undertaken projects. I employ the concept of “queer space” here both in the critical ways it has developed in academic queer theory and as a conflicting concept (and in some cases, identity) used by RQSP members. Thus, in contrast to much scholarly work in which “queer space” might solely be an applied academic concept to a particular context, I use it both as a critical framework for understanding and as a contested term used by participants themselves in different ways to reflect on their own lives.

While anarchist perspectives offer highly creative, inspiring, utopic alternatives to conventional ways of living and conducting politics, they often do not delve into the messy, contradictory processes of the enactment of these ideals. Recent work on queer space by critical human geographers has made significant

strides in approaching these complexities. My concern about this turn in approach, though, is the extent to which it diminishes the usefulness of locating queer-identified spaces and devalues the positive experiences of its participants. While such spaces have their limitations, I argue that queer anarchist approaches have much to offer geographers in affirming the positive, creative, liberating value of queer spatial experimentation.

### **Conceptualizing Queer Anarchist Space-Making**

Anarchism offers a significant body of knowledge and practice challenging the legitimacy of state-based hierarchical social relations as forms of coercion and domination, and offering creative alternatives to such state formations. Recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase in academic and activist interest in anarchist philosophies in relation to local, regional, and global movements in opposition to neoliberal capitalism, war, and other newer forms of imperialism (Graeber, 2002; Polleta, 2001; Shantz, 2003). Within the academy, anarchist perspectives have inspired and been inspired by queer theory, critical race theory, post-structuralism, feminism, radical environmentalism, and other radical frameworks that have pushed anarchism toward new directions (Amster et al., 2009). Geographers have been involved in anarchist theory on and off since its inception, more recently with a special focus on the development of autonomous spaces such as social centers (Blunt and Wills, 2000; Mudu, 2004; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2006). Their contribution has been crucial in bringing attention to the multiple everyday spaces and flows of activism and in moving beyond a fixation on the spatiality of street protest alone. Three important developments of anarchist theory that are particularly important in my examination of RQSP are: an emphasis on movements, strategies, and spaces built around a conceptualization of affinity, as opposed to identity; a prefigurative approach to politics that promotes utopic experiments, a presupposition of equality, and conscious, ethical attention to the means of political action; and the confluence of queer theory and anarchist perspectives in the form of a queer anarchism.

Routledge envisions affinity as “a group of people sharing common ground and who can provide supportive, sympathetic spaces for its members to articulate, listen to one another, and to share concerns, emotions, or fears” (Routledge, 2009, 84-85). The politics of affinity, as such, gives people a way of providing support and solidarity for one another and understands the suffering and hopes of regionally and culturally diverse populations as interlinked. Often, this move involves “an articulation of a temporary common ground,” within which people strategically negotiate cultural, political, and economic differences through an awareness of temporarily common goals and grievances (Routledge, 2009, 89).

In the context of anti-corporate globalization, Juris argues that affinity involves, instead of a “one-to-one identity,” a “confluence” between anarchist-inspired principles and other sources of critique of late capitalism (Juris, 2009, 213). Such a politics of affinity requires a move away from strict adherence to

anarchist ideology, in favor of one that is open to the possibility of multiple, fluid egalitarian networks, alliances, and subjectivities. It also requires anarchists to have a sense of humility and not claim strict ownership over ideas they may share with others, temporarily or otherwise.

An emphasis on affinity often coalesces through a prefigurative sense of politics, which demands that activists ethically live and act according to the world they would like to see, as much as possible, in the world today. It begins with an understanding of a democratic politics that presupposes equality, as opposed to demanding it (Ranciere, 1999; May, 2009). It then leads to movements and spaces that are ordered less around identity-based demands and more around an active, radical presupposition of equality that envisions a collective subject of resistance. This envisioning of politics requires us to see the process of politics as being as essential as the result; how we act politically defines and shapes the society we like to see. Movements and spaces constructed through this vision, then, often involve the employment of non-hierarchical, participatory, consensus-based models of action. They also require a utopic vision committed to defining and realizing a desired future, whether it is through a revolutionary organization seeking to realize a post-revolutionary society or through the formation of intentional communities and temporary autonomous zones (Gordon, 2007; Amster, 2003; Seyferth, 2009).

In this way, anarchists conceive utopia as a process, rather than a product. Shantz, for example, uses the term “transfer culture” to define the ideas and actions through which people “make the trip” from our society to a desired future society (Shantz, 2008, 26). Olsen warns, though, that such realized spaces, whether developed through the “insurrection” model of direct action or the “infoshop” model of intentional autonomous communities, must not be divorced from larger movements, strategies, and forms of political organization that can bind them together in the longer term (Olsen, 2009). While Olsen’s vision of anarchism as expressed through the spaces of protest and information centers is reductive of anarchist practices in everyday life, his point of the problems associated with linking to a very narrow population segment deserves critical consideration.

Sexuality is one of the realms of social life produced through state hierarchy, and queer theorists in particular have critiqued the ways in which sexuality, as well as other categories of identity, is socially constructed through hierarchical “normative” and “deviant” categories (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Warner, 1999, for example). Shepard argues that anarchism and queer theory converge around four important themes: a rejection of the paternalistic state; support for a politics of freedom and autonomy; a critique of normative assumptions about the world; and a mutual respect for pleasure (Shepard, 2010, 515-16). Anarchist and queer theoretical frameworks, thus, have much in common in that they critique existing structured, hierarchical arrangements of humanity and seek ways to subvert or transform them, though these ideas are articulated in different ways. Queer theoretical perspectives coalesce with anarchism around an affinity politics that critiques categorization into separate, unchangeable identities and a

prefigurative politics that destabilizes and reimagines how we can live our sexual lives. Historically, the politics of sexuality have played a significant role in anarchist movements, embodied in figures such as Emma Goldman and Oscar Wilde and movements such as *Mujeres Libres*, and to a limited extent, ACT-UP and Queer Nation. Kissack argues that the modern queer activist movement in the US, in fact, originates largely in the work of anarchist sex radicals such as Goldman and John William Lloyd, who themselves were strongly influenced by the works of European anarchist sex radicals (Kissack 2008).

Despite the intersections between queer theory and anarchism, anarchist ideas receive little acknowledgement in their capacity for addressing questions of sexuality within queer theory, while queer theory continues to be marginalized in the study of anarchist theory and practice. Shannon and Willis argue that queering anarchism requires a sort of “theoretical polyamory” that unpacks the academic divide between loving and thinking, seeks to move beyond the rigid, economically reductionist dictates of some forms of anarchism, and establishes long-standing affinities, as in personal relationships (Shannon and Willis, 2010). Anarchism and queer theory have, in fact, much to offer each other: queer theory in its critical perspectives on normativity and identity formation, and anarchism in its dynamic critique of coercive systems of political and economic power. A combined queer anarchist perspective offers an alternative ethical, political position from the increasingly mainstream, capitalist state-centered face of lesbian and gay politics. Jamie Heckert offers such a dynamic synthesis of a practical, political, and theoretical queer anarchism in his conceptualization of anarchism as a set of ethics of relationships. Examining the rigid constructs of “sexual orientation” as an everyday state-form through limiting identities such as heterosexual, homosexual, and the LGBTQ alphabet soup are regulated, he argues that people’s identities and desires cannot be contained in state forms and that they actively produce alternative realities in everyday life in relation to their partners that can collide with and challenge such state forms in more subtle and overt ways (Heckert, 2005). This critique is based less around states as solidified entities and more on the dynamic everyday processes of state formation (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985; Abrams, 1988; Alonso, 1994) through which aspects of identity, including sexual orientation, are regulated and constrained. Heckert’s work exemplifies the tying together of affinity and prefigurative politics, in his simultaneous critique of rigid, state-sanctioned sexual identity categories and exploration of the constrained ways in which people create more liberating sexual lives.

### ***Queer Space-Making***

While inspired by the discursive, post-structuralist perspectives of queer theory, understandings of queer space in geography are unique in how they are more often materially anchored in embodied, everyday experiences (Brown, 2000; Browne et al., 2007). The concern for materiality is one of the things that geographers who study queer space and anarchists tend to have in common. Though it would be nearly impossible to encapsulate how geographers have

conceptualized queer space, much of it has been based in a dialectical approach to how performances of gender and sex produce space and how spatial formations constrain and enable different kinds of presentation of sexualities in spaces ranging from the most private to the most public and from the most everyday to the most symbolic. They have examined the spatial formations of heteronormativity, and more recently homonormativity; the intersectionality of sexuality with race, class, and other forms of subjectivity in the production of space; and the application of queer approaches to realms of study other than sexuality (Bell et al., 1994; Binnie, 1997; Nast, 2002). More recently, some geographers have drawn attention to the need to not think of “queer” as simply equating with transgression, but to observe the ways in which queer approaches themselves may be complicit within larger normative social structures (Oswin, 2005; Browne et al., 2007). Given that queering space involves an examination of how identities of all kinds are normalized or marginalized, “a queer geography...is not about identity politics at all, but is anti-identity” (Hubbard, 2007, 156). As destabilizing, de-normalizing, and liberating as queer approaches may be, they are also situated in the material world and thus interact with its contradictions and complications. Oswin sums up recent trends in the study of queer space as challenging the focus on LGBT identity politics with non-identitarian, queer political approaches; broadening the focus from sexuality and gender to a critique of normativity in a larger and wider sense, thereby positioning “sexuality within multi-faceted constellations of power;” and complicating the valorization of queer space with a critique of homonormativity, for example in the critique of queer space as implicitly white space (Oswin, 2008, 91-93, 100).

These new critiques are crucial to a more nuanced, critical understanding of the making of queer space, certainly in the context of the experience of the Richmond Queer Space Project. But at the same time, they tend to lack something central to the discussions of queering anarchism: an emphasis on the positive, creative space-making processes through which alternative non-hierarchical spaces can be imagined and practiced. Gavin Brown’s work brings a geographic perspective on queer space together with anarchist perspectives on affinity, autonomy, and play in his research on Queeruption gatherings, committing a kind of theoretical polyamory (Brown, 2007). He finds the Queeruption gatherings to be highly creative and productive in conceiving a non-hierarchical queer community that is anti-assimilationist, sex-positive, and ethically aware in both its goals and modes of operation (Brown, 2007, 196-197). The temporary spaces of the gatherings provide opportunities for autonomous, affinity-based formation of ethical relationships that “gently challenge the social divisions that result from a politics of identity” (Brown, 2007, 202) and constitute the formation of a “queertopia.” Brown admits some limits to the sustainability of Queeruption, specifically addressing critiques that it does not have appeal across generations, has become formulaic and repetitive, and is not as politically engaged as it could be. But ultimately, he sees great value in the utopic opportunities for constructing ethical, respectful, participatory communities.

In what follows, I intend to take both the accomplishments and the limitations of the Richmond Queer Space Project seriously in order to critically explore the possibilities of such intentional queer anarchist community formations. In any process of building a new world in the shell of the existing ones, there are bound to be contradictions and capitulations. I seek to take these complications seriously, primarily as a way of understanding how the creative, liberatory potential of such projects can be sustained.

### **The Richmond Queer Space Project**

The Richmond Queer Space Project was founded in the Spring of 2001 by four self-described queers who had previously established local chapters of the Queer Liberation Front and the Lesbian Avengers. Their goals were:

- To provide a space to promote community among queer-identified people and encourage queer activity in Richmond
- To provide free meeting space for queer-positive groups who work to challenge heterosexism, sexism, ableism, racism, and classism
- To educate on queer and related issues through pamphlets, speakers, conferences, queer cultural activities, and a lending library (RQSP literature 1/10/02)

The conceptualization of “queer” is purposefully and profoundly vague in literature produced by the group, but it appears to reside somewhere between Richmond’s small but active anarchist (mostly straight) radical communities and the politically semi-visible LGBT communities. The group’s initial members participated in direct action groups such as Food not Bombs and Richmond Earth First!, as well as organizations based around LGBT identity issues such as the Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth (ROSMY). The group sought to extend a definition of queer as fluid and limitless, but at the same time, something that could serve as a radical identification for a group of sexual minorities that did not fit within existing categories.

The collective thus formed through a desire to develop an organized channel for politics and a place from which to connect with other groups, all within a small city that desperately needed it. RQSP enabled members a position from which to act as queer activists and to simultaneously connect with radical anarchist and established LGBT activists and at the same time differentiating from them. One group member noted that the relationship with Food Not Bombs was particularly productive when the latter started to hold its meetings in RQSP space: RQSP became much more connected to other Richmond radical groups, and the “straight radicals” gained sensitivities and awareness regarding radical feminist and queer perspectives. She stated in a simultaneously joking and serious way, “I always really valued the ways we were able to ‘infect’ the straight activists” (Interview 2/4/09). This notion of infection reveals both the extent to which RQSP



members felt marginalized by the larger activist community and the ways in which they were able to playfully resist their own stigmatization.

What made RQSP particularly unique were its active, prefigurative attempts to construct a queer anarchist space and set of ethics. Weekly meetings enabled the group to discuss these issues and to bring these strands together through collectivist anarchist models of consensus-building. Rules for membership required the attendance of three consecutive meetings, followed by a processing discussion. Some of the greatest achievements of RQSP that members identified included the widely successful speaker series and a variety of workshops on queer-themed topics ranging from porn to disability issues to queer-friendly yoga and massage teaching sessions. The speaker series provided an important way for the group to “build bridges” with other activist organizations, as well as a larger set of publics in the city of Richmond (Interview 8/8/09).

The collective also organized and participated in a number of local protests and rallies on issues ranging from sexuality-based and reproductive rights to the Iraq War. Among the various creative fundraisers and events, the most popular were a series of Murder Mystery Dinners, which according to some members were the most imaginative, collective, fun, and financially successful of all the group’s endeavors, drawing from the group’s diverse talents in cooking, character/plot design, acting, and spatial arrangement. These drew diverse crowds of 40 to 50 straight and gay Richmond community members who were compelled to queer themselves through the collective’s imaginative vision (Interview 3/4/09). Having participated in one of these dinners as a sexually ambiguously-written character named Wallflower, I can attest to their transformative, creative potential. We were all assigned sexually radical characters of all sorts with which we were allowed to safely experiment for an evening. At the very least, these dinners taught us how us to have fun with our sexual identities, and at the most allowed us to experiment with decentering and transforming them in creative ways.

Many of the group’s strengths lay in the insistence of maintaining a physical space, Queer Paradise, that gave members a social space for gathering, a political space for interaction with other anarchist-minded groups, and a public space from which to interact with the city of Richmond as a whole. In this sense, it simultaneously operated as spaces of refuge, collaboration, and contention with the larger urban context. As one interviewee remarked, “The project was intentionally about space from the start, and that is what allowed it to flourish like it did” (Interview 7/30/09).

The original space that the group occupied was a poorly-maintained loft in downtown Richmond, which members referred to it as Queer Paradise. From early on, the group differentiated between Queer Paradise, the physical space, and the Richmond Queer Space Project, the collective that planned events in and out of the space. Group members built queer sensibilities into the warehouse. For example, they built a room for a member in a wheelchair enclosed with a short doorway “to

remind people that handicap is about design, not bodies, since all except for this resident would have to duck to enter her room” (Interview 3/2/09). Queering disabilities became one of the central themes of the group’s work, notably through some workshop sessions. Also, the large front room, used for gatherings, was given the name Thomas/Thomasine Hall, after Virginia’s first intersex colonist, an attempt at queering the usually conservative telling of the region’s history. The use of that space ended in April 2002 when police and city inspectors condemned the building. Within the context of the group’s combative existence with the city, this forced move occurred during a time when the neighborhood was being rapidly gentrified, with “luxury living” condominiums being built right next door. The selective politics of gentrification became clear to the residents, as they were forced to leave but the landlord renting the not-up-to-code space to them did not suffer any consequences.

The salience of having a physical space became evident during the transition periods when RQSP floundered without Queer Paradise, with members meeting sporadically and ineffectively in private houses, on a farm, and in university buildings. Queer Paradise reemerged in November 2002 as a leased office space in downtown Richmond. Members chose the space because of its public visibility and accessibility. In a visioning brainstorming session that led to the decision to lease the space, some of the recurring themes included the importance of maintaining a physical space, cultivating a space that is “clearly queer and FABULOUS,” serving as a bridge between the radical straight and sympathetic gay communities, working as an “addition to the community rather than a replacement of it,” and allowing the space to be “different things for different people” (Meeting minutes 9/22/02). These goals, though, were lived through in some complex, contradictory, and ultimately irreparable ways.

### **Complicating Queertopias**

Through much discussion and debate, the group decided to stop renting the physical space in 2006, and much like the first time that they had become placeless, the group floundered and eventually ceased to operate. This was a difficult decision for many, but came about as a result of a combination of internal conflicts, competing priorities, and activist fatigue. Ultimately, there were not enough people to make the vision work and the project outscoped the commitment of the people involved. Three significant areas of contention revolved around competing visions of how the space should be configured, the location politics of radical activist community building in a capitalist urban context, and the messy politics of affinity. My goal is to examine what caused the RQSP to flourish and flounder as a way of complicating how we think about anarchism in practice and exploring how such spaces can become more sustainable.

### ***The Material Practices of Place-Making***

Members who were a part of the collective during the first incarnation of Queer Paradise reflect proudly in their accomplishments and the potential that the

space held. As a warehouse, members could make conscious collective decisions on how the space should look, for example where they should build walls and how. These decisions empowered members on both practical and intellectual levels. Having little previous construction experience, they gained senses of autonomy and mutualism through skills they learned. “There was a whole lot of DIY-ness in the air,” said one member (Interview 8/8/09). The fact that it was simultaneously a private and public space, with four members living full-time in the space that also held meetings and political and social events, gave it more immediate and substantive meaning as both a living space and a public/political space. Most participants reflected on the space with a great sense of nostalgia, how among other things “were not afraid to get dirty,” and that it was “the funnest year,” with creative activities ranging from dance parties to a graffiti art show (Interview 7/30/09).

After the hiatus and through much discussion, members chose the second Queer Paradise space based on its accessibility and visibility. With a street-facing window, the space significantly raised RQSP’s public profile, from a semi-public home-community space to a fully public space that could enroll the participation of a larger population. Despite these advantages, the space lacked the imaginative and creative possibilities of the first space. Two group members spent time purchasing fabric, mostly in a pink leopard skin pattern, to try to make the office feel more “homey” and less “officey.” (Interview 1/20/09) They wanted it to feel as comfortable, inviting, and queer as possible. Even as much as members tried to make it more “sassy,” one member argued, “it didn’t fit our needs so much as it fit our requirements” (Interview 8/3/09).

The transformation from the initial mission statement of the collective, discussed above, to the one written for the second space encapsulates some significant changes in the workings of the group: “The Richmond Queer Space Project maintains a queer-friendly space and resource center, promotes queer culture in Richmond, and links queer experience to the wide spectrum of social justice work” (2004, [queerspace.org](http://queerspace.org), now defunct). This statement reflects a significant change from the radically politicized mission statement of the first space, discussed earlier, to the more generic, thought perhaps inclusive, social justice tone of the second. The period of transition from the first to the second Queer Paradise also marked the formalization of the collective as a non-profit organization, a change described by one group member as from “DIY-ness” to “non-profitness.” Following Andrucki and Elder’s skepticism about the possibilities for radical politics and autonomy for any organization that needs to adhere to the constraints of state law and hierarchy (Andrucki and Elder 2007), I see this change as having significantly compromised the creative, experimental, prefigurative potential that the first space held. The attempts to decorate the second space with sassy accents sought to ease the transition into this more formalized and less radical stage of the group’s existence, but there is only so much that pink leopard print can accomplish.

As membership grew in the second space, so did divergence in views of how the space should be used. Some members wanted it to be a more utilitarian space for holding meetings, organizing political events, and accessing email, while others wanted to create an inclusive community living space. One of my interviews quipped at one point, “I can’t believe we never had a sex party!” (Interview 8/9/09), suggesting the limitations of how the space ended up being used. In various such ways, the space transformed from something with endless possibilities to a more limited, though active and larger, materialization of a queer community space.

### ***Anarchist Practice in a Small City***

The spaces occupied by Queer Paradise 1 and 2 are now, respectively, a condo development project and a hair salon. To understand how this came about requires attention to the larger location politics of the neighborhood and city. Both sites of Queer Paradise were located in Jackson Ward, one of Richmond’s rapidly and unevenly gentrifying neighborhoods, near both downtown and Virginia Commonwealth University, in a city marked profoundly by a history of racial segregation (see Lieb, 2002, 2004). The neighborhood largely developed in the 1890s-1920s as a product of racial segregation and as a prime hub of African American social and economic life, with bustling commercial, entertainment, and residential sectors (Bowen, 2003). It began to decline in the 1950s through a combination of the building of the Interstate Highway through the city, which cut the neighborhood in half and displaced 7,000 residents; fierce commercial competition from downtown business, in which African Americans were increasingly allowed to shop, without a reciprocal white patronage of African-American owned businesses; and a form of “Black Flight,” as more affluent African Americans left the overcrowded neighborhood, the overcrowding itself a product of segregation, for the desegregating suburbs (Bowen, 2003). By 1990, approximately two-thirds of the commercial structures were unoccupied. It began to experience new growth in the 1980s with its placement on the National Register of Historic Places and reconstruction in the form of neighborhood gentrification by affluent whites and African Americans; the building of government buildings, a convention center, which was built through the destruction of a few blocks of historical housing; and the commencement of civic activities.

In reflecting on their relationship with their surroundings, some members felt largely alienated from the “creepy, anti-community, racist, manipulative” city council, in particular, and from the real estate development surrounding them. The experience of the shut-down of the first Queer Paradise left members feeling hostile toward the city government. It showed the group members that the city cared more about real estate development than the safety of residents, which was not so much a surprise, but a reminder of how they did not fit into the narrative of neighborhood decline and renewal.

There were other ways in which the group had to endure adverse surrounding politics. Some members reflected on the transitory nature of local Richmond radical politics as a reason why RQSP was unsustainable after a certain point. They characterized progressive politics in Richmond as being divided between the older African-American civil rights movement, to which RQSP was never effective in connecting, and younger radicals associated with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) who tend not to stick around long. In this context of transience, it became difficult to establish a sense of safety, security, and stability. Both these communities were represented in the neighborhood, but the membership of RQSP mostly reflected the latter.

Other members argued that despite attempts to engender queerness in Richmond, for example through the publicization of the first intersex colonist in the form of posters, they felt like non-locals trying “to bring queer culture to Richmond” (Interview 2/25/09). Group members felt sometimes as if they were unwanted outsiders, and at other times more like colonists. The fact of having an organization comprised mostly of younger white radicals in a neighborhood comprised mostly of working-class African Americans and affluent professionals left group members feeling uncomfortable in the middle, and at the same time outside, the neighborhood.

Scale issues also led to some of the fractures, though interestingly, group members had different perspectives on how the changing size of the group affected them. Some of those who were in it from the first Queer Paradise, when there were at the most 11 members, thought that the group became too large, nearing 30 members at its most, and that the kind of intentional community they sought to build was not possible with such a large numbers. Fractures were unavoidable. “When an organization grows too big too fast it is bound to die,” a member expressed (Interview 8/3/09). Others, though, were frustrated that the group never grew bigger than that. According to one of the members, “I think that we believed that there were others like us in the area and that if we created a space like this they would come. We ended up learning that there were very few out there who identified as queer and that was shocking” (Interview 3/2/09). This was, perhaps, less a problem of the scale of the community and more a problem of there being no other such organizations and communities in Richmond with which to collaborate. One trans-identified member stated that, after RQSP’s demise, he had wanted to start a chapter of Gay Shame in Richmond, but given how small the visible mainstream gay community is, it seemed wrong to create an organization that would serve to critique it, emphasizing the profound limitations to the long-term possibilities of radical queer activism in a smaller-sized city.

At the same time, the experience of forming such a collective in a constraining urban environment provided opportunities for building bridges with other activist groups, based around issues of racism, heterosexism, and economic exclusion, and provided a sense of bonding within the group itself. “It was when we realized the larger forces we were up against that we really got the importance

of having the collective” (Interview 5/5/09). While the politics of location left the group feeling ostracized, alienated, defensive, and reactive in many ways, they were productive sources of discussion in the process of community creation, which forced the group to actively deal with race and class-related issues. Lastly, placed within the context of neoliberal privatization and the significant decrease in the quantity and quality of public spaces of interaction (Low and Smith, 2005; Leitner, Peck, and Shepard, 2007), Queer Paradise constituted a radical, creative alternative to how space can be organized and utilized in the city.

### ***The Messy Politics of Affinity***

Anarchist perspectives on affinity, while inspiring in their explorations of the opportunities for solidarity and networking between anarchists and other activist groups, often do not deal with the messy complications and contradictions involved with negotiating the ideological, emotional, and ethical practices of political action. For example, in his analysis of the cultural logics of anti-corporate globalization networking in Barcelona, Juris examines affinity politics as “the rise of a new anti-capitalism characterized by openness, fluidity, and flexibility, and the search for accompanying political norms, forms, and practices” (Juris, 2009, 222). While he argues for the empowering possibilities of working through affinity political associations, he does not deal with the on-the-ground complexities of movement formation. Given the pervasiveness of identity politics in other social movement realms, this perspective does not address the possibilities of individuals and groups falling in and out in their tactics and strategies between affinity and identity politics. Rather, it assumes that once people start being critical of identity politics, they will cease to participate in them and does not deal with the practical, material realities of trying to be open, fluid, and flexible all the time, and the implications that it has on the instability, temporality, and constant hard work of activism. An attention to the complexities of affinity requires on-the-ground research, as Knopp argues in his call for geography to “expand its empirical terrain to include more of the messy realities, including fluidity, hybridity, incompleteness, moralities, desire, and embodiment” (Knopp, 2007, 27).

These tensions are visible in the experiences of RQSP members, most notably in the context of the RQSP’s presence at a rally in opposition to Virginia’s House Bill 751, the Marriage Affirmation Act. The mainstream LGBT group, Equality Virginia, planned to have its members speak in support of gay marriage rights, and RQSP members spent a great deal of time and energy debating whether and how to participate in the rally. Ten group members wrote a very strong anti-marriage statement, but other members did not want to antagonize the mainstream LGBT movement when faced with the larger threat of the bill and rewrote the speech to establish a temporary ground of solidarity with the LGBT movement at the same time as voicing opposition to marriage for themselves. The speech that was ultimately given identifies the RQSP as “queer,” makes linkages between the queer community and other marginalized groups, and argues that the bill is not just

about marriage but more pervasive state control and works as a “divide and conquer” tactic. The speech concludes:

As HB 751 came straight into our lives, it created activists. And in that respect there is an opportunity on our horizon. Let us figure out how to struggle not just for our own group rights, but against our common enemy. And let us not grow comfortable when it is not our group that is under attack. (6/30/2004)

The rally served as a prime opportunity for RQSP members to establish temporary common ground and solidarity, while positing an anti-marriage message and a critique of state control. But it also ended up leading to the group’s most severe internal conflict. Some members ended up feeling betrayed by the change of the message of the speech, criticizing it as a form of assimilation politics, which led to the formation of a separatist “queer posse” within the RQSP. What then ensued was a divisive form of identity politics in terms of who was queerer and more radical than whom, and significantly compromised the vision of the collective.

The members who decided to rewrite the speech were also left with ill feelings about the unwillingness of the “queer separatists” to participate in their affinity-building strategy and about the subsequent division that developed within the group. One member expressed that these actions lacked an ethics of care, reflecting on how disrespectful those members were to the other LGBT activists and how divisive the formation of the queer posse ended up being (Interview 8/3/09). The split also represented a break-down in processes of consensus-building which were so central to the group’s formation. If the group had more time to process and come to an agreement, perhaps the internal division could have been avoided. But there was not enough time for that if they wanted to have a presence at the rally. As one group member commented, “Absolute consensus is ideally the way to go, but it can take some much time and energy that keeps things from happening, and how do you try to build consensus with truly insane people?” (Interview 8/8/09) These experiences bring up a very important question about whether consensus-based groups should always have agreement as their goal. In this context, an ultimately irreparable fracture developed between those members who wanted to develop a coalition with wider LGBT groups and their allies, and those who felt betrayed by the side-stepping of agreement within the group itself. It also brings up the important realm of emotions in activism, and how they can be channeled to disrupt and repair movements.

A recent issue of the journal *Emotion, Space and Society* addresses some of the problems encountered by groups such as RQSP through a focus on the connections between activism and emotional sustainability. The authors complicate the notion of activism itself, including a range of everyday spaces not often considered in the reification of activism as street protest; consider the diversity of spaces and flows through which activists express embodied, contextual emotions; and argue for a re-valuing of academic work and practical guidance on emotional

sustainability (Brown and Pickerill, 2009a, 2). Eleanor Wilkinson argues for a reflexive, queer-autonomous approach to examining emotions and politics that “is aware that our ideals about ‘appropriate emotions’ may uphold existing hierarchies—even in our attempts to create a space without domination” (Wilkinson 2009:42). This emotional reflexivity provides opportunities to discuss and appreciate the difficulties of building an autonomous community and places the emphasis of the discussion on the continuing process of constantly imagining alternatives through queer politics, rather than the failure on not having achieved autonomy in the moment. The result of not engaging in this kind of emotional reflexivity is the emotional aspect of burn-out. For RQSP members, this burn-out resulted largely from the pressures of creating an autonomous community in a context with little support. “Constantly feeling ‘different’ and apart from society adds a particular emotional pressure to activism and requires a high degree of emotional reflexivity in order to overcome or cope with this dissonance” (Brown and Pickerill, 2009b, 28). As such, it becomes crucial for us to re-value the role of emotions in activist work, and for groups to have the spaces and support to engage in this kind of emotional reflexivity.

## Conclusion

The tensions, and the lack of a collective space to call their own, are what brought about the demise of RQSP. In the words of one member, “no one gives you a handbook to tell you how to be a radical in a conservative city in a conservative country in a neoliberal world. How are you supposed to survive?” He went on to say that what he missed about the group was the “community potential that it had, that it never lived up to, but the vision kept us going, and it’s what I sorely miss in my life today” (Interview 1/22/09).

Social movement scholars have written extensively on how and why movements decline (see for example, Goodwin and Jasper, 2009; Ghaziani, 2008). These discussions usually concern causes external to the movement, such as oppression or formal political institutionalization of the movement; clashing internal dynamics, whereby a collective, exclusive movement identity overrides internal political opposition; or most often a combination of the two. There are ways in which RQSP experienced both of these causal layers of decline, but what can we learn from this experience? I recognize that much of RQSP’s brilliance lay in its temporariness; political projects need not be long-standing to make an impact. But what particularly concerns me is that in the three years since its demise, very little has happened with queer activism in Richmond. Partly, there is the issue of activist fatigue and burn-out with the group’s own members. The great unresolved mystery of the Richmond Queer Space Project is \$10,000 still left in a bank account that the group has been unable to allocate, largely because of an inability to meet to coordinate a resolution. We must acknowledge the tremendous challenges involved with building a new world in the shell of the old, the need for emotional reflexivity and support, and the specific constraints and opportunities that particular kinds of spaces, in this case a small conservative city, can provide.



At the same time, I do not intend to deflate the importance and vitality of experiments like the Richmond Queer Space Project. The members I interviewed time and time again related all the ways they found their participation empowering: sexually, through the diverse expressions and representations within the group; politically, through actions and projects organized both within and in conjunction with other groups; socially, through the linkages they were able to develop in the process of community formation; and creatively, through finding various ways to express community projects. A number of the people involved in RQSP have gone on to do all sorts of related work, from working professionally for progressive non-profit organizations to a host of other kinds of community, activist-based projects. In my discussions with activists involved with allied groups, such as Food Not Bombs, it is clear that RQSP still holds a special place in people's political imaginations, as something greater, more thought-provoking, and more creative than what progressive Richmond often had to offer. So, it would be wrong to simply cast off the experience of RQSP through a critique of the contradictions in queer spatial formations.

Instead, I would like to end this paper with a reflection on what doing this research about RQSP has taught me about approaching and understanding queer space. On the front of affinity politics, we need to find ways to foster and preserve the queering of space, and how to address conflicts, especially when confronted with the exclusionary demands of identity politics. This proposition involves finding ways to engage with the wider range of movements and finding ways to respond to the demands of identity politics when it appears even in the queerest of contexts. Instead of thinking of queer space as always transgressing hetero- and homonormativity, we need to be aware that what we call queer space might actually be lived in a constantly changing space of conflict between antagonistic identity and agonistic non-identity-based challenges. Queer space can never be entirely queer, but it is never entirely not queer either. We need to approach the queering of space as an ongoing project of dealing with the exclusivity of identity politics that tend to reside in the same spaces.

From a prefigurative political perspective, we need to understand how instances of capitulation are inevitable and find ways to fuel the energy to do the very hard work required to prevent emotional burn-out. What we get when we admit the complexities and contradictions of prefiguration, I think, is an understanding of "queertopia" as a continuing, constantly re-imagined process, rather than a project that ended in failure. Emotional sustainability, reflexivity, and renewal are central to this process. Heckert, for example, finds "gentle reassurance [in] that even the most famous anarchists didn't live up to their ideals all the time, but that they were still able to nurture radical social change" (Heckert, 2010, 406).

Lastly, I think that a queer anarchist perspective on space brings an element currently lacking in a majority of geographic perspectives on queer space: an affirmation and respect for the pleasures, creativity, and experimentation involved in making queer spaces. This affirmation comes from the shared vision of the

possibilities of sharing social forms of pleasure in both anarchism and queer theory. There is an imaginative, positive element there that can get lost in geographic perspectives on queer space. Just because identity politics often complicate the queering of space does not render the process of queering useless; in fact, it adds salience to the need to be observant and deal with exclusion and oppression where and when they arise, and to find pleasure in finding other, more liberating ways of relating with others in the process. As a body of theory, anarchism provides an opening for geographers to nurture and support the promises of queer space at the same time as critically addressing its limitations.

In sum, it is vital to take seriously both the accomplishments and the limitations of autonomous queer community formations like the Richmond Queer Space Project. In any process of building a new world in the shell of the existing one, there are bound to be complications, contradictions, and capitulations, but anarchist and queer geographic perspectives tend not to delve nearly enough into these limitations. The long-term sustainability of replenishing, renewing, and reinvigorating such movements and spaces depends on learning from the critical gap between the ideals and the enactments of the project and fueling the further realization of the ideals.

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