

Leigh Marie Taylor
October 21, 2016
Professor Toloumi
Contested Spaces

Queer Space and Presentation of the Other: An Analysis of Lil Deb's Oasis as a Queer Hybrid

In Hudson, NY on a street a block or two away the major street of consumption is a queer owned and employed restaurant called Lil Deb's Oasis. Unlike most queer spaces, Lil Deb's Oasis does not obscure itself from the outside world. It is situated in the middle of a dimly lit street, surrounded by dive bars and closed store fronts. Rather than blending in to the surrounding scene, Lil Deb's Oasis stands out as the only place illuminated on the street. While the light produced renders the space visible on an almost forgettable street at night, the bright pinks and greens found on the outside of the restaurant also stand out during the day time. The time of day is negligible in considering the individuality of this restaurant. Furthermore, the windows allow the scene within the restaurant to be apparent. They are not obfuscated and darkened to hide the presence of queer people within, they line the front of the building and expose the interior of opaque purple, blue, and pink lighting cast over the patrons. While the conspicuousness of Lil Deb's Oasis elucidates its presence within the greater area, it simultaneously presents itself as the other. Veering from the typical aesthetic of dark brick and renovated industrial buildings within the Hudson area, Lil Deb's exterior is composed of painted wooden panels and neon LED lights that spell out "oasis". It does not attempt to camouflage its difference by assimilating with the aesthetic of neighborhood, it alienates itself by individuating the space visually from the surrounding environment. In this sense, Lil Deb's postures itself as the queer and operates as an actor in the production of queer identity in the neighborhood. If

queer spaces are posited to remain within the marginalia in order to protect the individuals that inhabit it, Lil Deb's operates as an antithesis.

Lil Deb's complicates the narrative of invisible queer histories by obviating its presence within a relatively homogenous landscape. This is reflected in the layout of the space. The front door opens to a small alcove that leads into the restaurant. Once entering the main space of the restaurant it is clear that nothing is enclosed or disguised. Every table can be seen from the front of the room, including a bathroom with a sign stating that "all the bodies" are welcome to use it. With only about five tables and several stools lining the bar, it is nearly impossible to hide oneself within this environment. In order to get to most tables in the space you must pass by other customers. As well, when you sit down you are not removed from the vision of others. The loud music pushes you to speak loudly, but also be in conversation with the tables surrounding you. Customers become apparent to each other and thus create a community. This is not artificial however, many of the patrons of the restaurant are a part of the same community. They traverse from table to table, some laughing, some having intense conversation, but all breaking from the traditional norms of restaurant behavior. This is because Lil Deb's is less of a restaurant, and more of a community space. The employees are not regulated by typical restaurant restrictions – they are allowed to expose their skin, body hair, and other facets of themselves that make them most comfortable. Because there are no formal dress codes the distinction between employees and customers is eroded. While this produces community it also disrupts and challenges bourgeoisie conceptions of labor and decorum. Rather than perform the differences of the worker and the patron through dress and formality, Lil Deb's destabilizes the typical hierarchy within a restaurant space.

While these aspects of Lil Deb's might not immediately connote a queer space, I believe that they explicate contemporary queer culture and the shift away from subversive tactics. In George Chauncey's work "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," Chauncey describes the way in which gay men subverted gender norms to communicate queerness within public space. The tactics utilized in public spaces created a covert community of gay men while maintaining security from surveillance of pedestrians and the police. While these communities created a mechanism to communicate in the public sphere, they also congregated in safe spaces such as drag balls and tea houses in order to perform their queerness without possible scrutiny. Lil Deb's acts as a hybrid of the public and the private negotiation of queerness. It presents itself to the public through aesthetic choices and conspicuous open windows, while allowing community members to congregate and feel safe on the interior. This became cogent after discussing the construction of the space with an employee. She noted that the space was produced through various community efforts. Friends were called on to help build and paint as well as create textiles, fabrics, and murals to be used for the flooring and bathrooms. The community that arises from the presence of the space is reflected in the production of the space. The queer is no longer the abject, but the subject who inhabits the built environment, as well as the employees and the customers.

While Lil Deb's is an important space within the queer community of Hudson, NY, it is important to acknowledge why it is able to express itself with few repercussions. Existing as a queer space that is open and accessible, is a radical and dangerous act. The ability for spaces as such to survive is contingent on the openness of the surrounding community. I believe that Lil Deb's is able to function as a queer space with limited contention due to the support of the neighborhood and the surrounding community. Queer spaces are often relegated to the margins

of a neighborhood in order to protect the lives of people that inhabit them. Because of the support demonstrated by the Hudson community, a space like Lil Deb's Oasis can continue to complicate the narrative of invisible queer spaces and enact the efficacy of producing a queer history.