

# **ART BEYOND BORDERS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY.**

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This research combines qualitatively based ethnographic methods with contemporary urban anthropological theory in order to analyze how art has been conducive to the economic and cultural development of Hillcrest, a community in the center of San Diego, California. This area, which is known as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, is also known for its numerous artistic and cultural events and activities. The goal of this research is to investigate this phenomenon and its effects on surrounding areas. The first stage of the project involves social mapping, the analysis of historical and demographic data, and the collection of initial ethnographic data through personal interviews with artists and venue operators. Preliminary results indicate that while Census data delineate clear geographic boundaries, the social borders of the community are not nearly as static, and in fact are continually changing and affecting surrounding areas. Social mapping and cultural analysis of these borders and overlapping communities provide glimpses into the development patterns of an ideologically-based, minority community, as well as how information is exchanged between the LGBT community and outlying areas. These kinds of data can be used to predict future urban growth patterns, as well as how minority communities develop cohesive networks and economies. Furthermore, studying how art works as an expression and indicator of urban growth and development may enable us to better understand how the cultivation of theater and other arts can be actively used to improve or transform a particular area.

The original goal of this research was to look at how art in all its forms, but particularly performance art, is important to the history, development, and cultivation of identity and empowerment within the Queer/LGBT community of Hillcrest in San Diego, California. Historical research shows that, indeed, art serves a function as a dynamic indicator and source of change; a way of expressing issues that are important to the group producing it. However, preliminary results indicate that locally, art has a multiplicity of functions and is not only a catalyst for change, but also an indicator of the more subtle processes and events behind the scenes, including the conflicts that exist between the various populations that live in the vicinity. Some venues, for example, are actively stating that they do not support "gay theater", but seek to represent a broader spectrum of people.

The lives of the artists who live and work within the community and just outside its borders are intimately involved with the politics, business and cultural networks, and events of the region. Their works reflect the artists' lives, positions, and views as they fit within the larger sphere of influence. Another thing that is particularly fascinating is the interplay and dichotomy between the intended function of art and its actual results. There is both conscious (intended) and inherent expression. What art reveals about its creators – and the community that forms the environment of its creation – is a fascinating study. Art reveals and expresses underlying political and social patterns in which its creators are involved. The work of a particular artist serves as a vehicle for the artist's views and experiences, as well as the artist's position in the community. In that sense, art is not only a conscious projection of intended values, but also a force that extends beyond the awareness of its owner. As such it is a complex external manifestation of internal values and interactions within the community and the individuals involved in its production.

## **Literature Review**

### **Terminology**

Despite its controversial nature, the word "Queer" is used here to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex, or questioning individuals, because it is truly the only all-inclusive term available. It is used here so as not to exclude anyone who might be part of the subcultures or community in question. While the term originally had offensive connotations, it has in recent years become a term of empowerment, often used by members of the LGBT community to describe them. It has also become increasingly common in academic and intellectual circles and has led to the formation of queer theory. I only use the words "gay" and "lesbian" by themselves when referring to literature or events that concern gays and/or lesbians without mentioning people who self-identify as bisexual, transgender and intersex, or questioning. It is necessary to do this because the effort to include transgendered, bisexual, intersex, and questioning people in relevant discussions is a relatively new one and is rarely reflected in literature written prior to the late 1990s.

History shows that nationally, Queer individuals have formed a sort of ideological subculture in response to ostracization from mainstream society. This research assumes, as historical documents suggest, that Hillcrest formed as a result of the interaction between this subculture or counter-culture and mainstream society. The Queer population, whether locally or on a broader scale, can be defined as a subculture based on its status as “social group” or based on the fact that sexual orientation is a point of discrimination within many industrialized societies, including the United States. In some cases, a Queer community might be classified as a counterculture, if the surrounding community is especially hostile or oppressive. For this reason, it is important to understand how a marginalized subculture or counterculture assumes a sense of opposition with the dominant culture to such a degree that the sense of opposition becomes part of its cultural identity. The use of these terminologies is not meant to imply that Queer individuals maintain a certain type of “lifestyle” or that they are inherently different from other people. The distinction is made to represent the complex political and social history that has caused the formation of distinct communities and subcultures among many types of minorities who continually struggle against discrimination and stereotypes.

### **Background**

Since ancient times, and in all of the social sciences and humanities, people have tried to define art and elucidate its function. Much has been written of it in philosophy; A.L. Cothey, for example, has tried to show how the practice of art has far-reaching implications that have so far been denied by theorists (1990). Dipert has examined the role of art as a form of expression and communication through artifact form (1993). Edmin (1928) wrote that art "is the name for that whole process of intelligence by which life, understanding its own conditions, turns them to the most interesting or exquisite account. Its theme would be the whole of experience; its material and its theater the whole of life" (1928: 12-13). Psychologists have tried to discover the nature of the relation between art and the human mind; usually art is considered (as postulated by Sigmund Freud) an expression of our latent and repressed desires (Solso 2003, Zeki 1999). The anthropology of art is a relatively recent development in a discussion that has been integral to science and philosophy. Anthropologists have introduced the notion that much of our interpretations of art in other cultures has been based on an ethnocentric, Western view of what "art" is and how it functions within human culture and psychology (Boas 1955, Hatcher 1999, Layton 1981). Since the works of Franz Boas, who published *Primitive Art* in 1955, modern American anthropologists have been trying to approach the definition, structure, and purpose of art as a local-cultural phenomenon, one that can only be understood from the perspective of the producers of the art themselves. By combining philosophical and psychological interpretations with cross-cultural studies, anthropology has formed a rough outline of how to study art within a particular culture.

Evelyn Payne Hatcher, in her book *Art as Culture: an Introduction to the Anthropology of Art*, attempts to provide a summary and outline based on multiple perspectives arising from cross-cultural studies, psychology, art history, and other fields, thereby providing a holistic view of the subject matter (1999:xii). She takes the position that while all of these theories can contribute to our overall understanding of art and its significance, no single perspective can explain every manifestation of the phenomenon. Rather, there is so much cultural variation that the definition and function of art is a palette of grays, not blacks and whites. This by no means renders art an abstract concept that is beyond scientific scrutiny. In her words, “Much of ‘Western’ discourse is phrased in terms of binary opposition, as if everything falls into either/or categories. The current use of Manichaeic dichotomy with regard to art versus science seems incredibly naïve and ethnocentric” (xx). According to her, we can best study art by studying the where, how, who, why, what, when and whence of art on the local level, then trying to understand the significance of "patterns or systems that have yielded insights in the past" (xxi). She calls this approach 'field theory'.

Following Hatcher's field theory, the first step in understanding a specific culture group's art is by paying attention to the geography and environment wherein it was produced. The use of symbols reveals the importance of certain natural elements, such as the appearance of clouds and rain in Southwest Native American art works (1999:27). The materials used also reveal the level of technological adaptation to the environment, as well as trade relationships that might exist between communities (49). Craftsmanship is also important, since crafts can be considered another type of art that is often overlooked by researchers. Then, of course, there is the psychological component: who produces the work, and why they produce it. Art can reveal a people's “cognitive and symbolic systems” (85): how they think about the universe and their role within it. Artists may also portray deviant and/or model forms of personality, express repressed desires that resonate with other members of the society, or provide an outlet for the “collective unconscious” formed by common experiences or culture specific themes. Hatcher refers to

Devereux, who expanded on these largely Freudian and Jungian themes, stating “art is communication of a very special kind, highly structured yet always changing” (105).

One of the major problems in any study of art is how to define the word as it pertains to the particular culture in question. Hatcher stresses that Western society has typically tried to define art for its aesthetic value alone, also trying to understand its function by studying artifacts that are now far-removed from their culture. Hatcher takes a broader approach to the subject, labeling art as “an aspect of culture” intimately related with the way of life, in all its facets, of the people. The anthropologist must be willing to study objects and works outside of what one might initially consider art, instead looking at objects as part of their complete cultural context. For that reason it is important to understand an object’s *use* (its physical form: a bowl, for example, used to hold food) its *function* (that is, its psychological, social, or religious attributes) and its representative, iconographic, and interpretive meanings (1999: 1-13). Hatcher stresses that it is important to understand art works as part of *cultural processes* or *active events*, rather than as *artifacts*; studies of artifacts are extremely limited because we can only judge them subjectively and somewhat arbitrarily unless we have experiential knowledge of how they are used, how they fit actively within the culture (14).

### **Contributions from Other Fields**

Anthropology and sociology, psychology, art history, and philosophy have provided theories and perspectives that are relevant and applicable to the analysis of Queer art and culture. Specific case studies of marginalized groups, such as the Queer population in the United States, are more difficult to find. Anthropologists have studied the art of many cultural groups. Hatcher (1999) uses cultural studies of native peoples in North America, Oceania, and Africa to show how art is a locally specific, extremely important aspect of culture that is intertwined with daily life and ideology. Layton (1981) also uses culture-specific references from tribes in Africa, New Guinea, Egypt, Australia, and North America. Traditionally anthropologists have recorded and analyzed the arts of indigenous peoples, enabling useful cross-cultural comparisons. Recently, some have begun to delve into representation through art in industrialized societies. An example is Ragnar Johnson’s 1999 study of how people in contemporary Western societies use photographs to recall the lives of deceased family members as part of a process of mourning. He uses this data to speculate on how photographs can be used to evoke emotional responses for therapy and other purposes (1999:131-141). However, it seems that one must often look outside of anthropology to find data on city-bound subcultures specifically. Relevant studies can be found in psychology, sociology, political history and theory, feminist theory, human sexuality studies, and literary and artistic criticism. There is a need for more anthropological (holistic) analyses of subcultures and the importance of art within social and political movements.

In psychology, much work has been done on how particular personality types, or people with certain disorders, express themselves through art. Some of these – such as Woodfield’s *The Essential Gombrich: Selected Writings on Art and Culture*, and Halle’s *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* – tie psychology together with specific cultures. These studies may offer valuable insights into how the individual mind expresses itself within a cultural framework, or possibly how individual art works provide a glimpse into group psychology.

In order to understand a group or subculture, it is important to look at the political issues and mainstream discourses surrounding it. It is reasonable to assume that political and social strife have formed much of the way they establish and express their identities. There are many works that could shed light on this, such as Ross’ *Mapping the Margins: Identity, Politics, and the Media*.

It is also useful to look at cultures that have had comparable experiences, such as ethnic minorities. There is an extensive amount of literature published on art as it has been involved with minority activist movements, such as Powell’s *Black Art: a Cultural History*, and Hirschman’s *Art on the Line: Essays by Artists About the Point Where their Art and Activism Intersect*. *Voices of Color*, by Phoebe Farris-Dufrene, is an insightful compilation of interviews with minority artists that reveals the charged political, expressive, and empowering functions of art for various minority communities.

### **The Queer Subculture**

In order to understand how art is relevant to the community of Hillcrest in San Diego, California, it is important

to look at the history of the Queer rights movement, and Queer art, in a broader context. For the purpose of this study, the development of Hillcrest as a community will be analyzed in the context of the history of the Queer rights movement in the United States.

John D'Emilio (1983), a leading authority on the history of sexuality, documented the emergence of the homosexual minority in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the 1970's. Until the nineteenth century, there was no concept of "homosexuals" as a distinct category of people; rather, homosexuality was another perversion lumped together with bestiality, adultery, and the like (1983:10). This changed with the emergence of capitalism and commercial city centers. The family, no longer the central economic unit, had less control over individual actions. Gay men and women, finally realizing that there were others like themselves, were able to stake out the beginnings of a community (11). Still, gays and lesbians faced tremendous persecution from religious, political, and medical fronts. Alfred Kinsey had reported that religion affected the sexual activities of Americans more than any other factor; when McCarthyism took hold in the 1950's, homosexuals were condemned along with Communists and anyone deemed "anti-American;" and doctors and psychologists treated homosexuality as a perversion or a sickness (13-39). All of this caused homosexuals to seek each other out and start building a community. As D'Emilio says, "a society hostile to homosexual expression shaped the contours of gay identity and the gay subculture" (13). In 1951, the first gay men and women's organization, the Mattachine Society, was founded. The founders were the first to encourage a separate gay identity and community whose members should be proud of their sexuality (58). The first lesbian political organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, was founded in 1955 (Lewis). Lesbians formed their own organizations because they felt male-centered gay rights groups such as Mattachine were not addressing their needs. Lesbians found the need to form a different identity and subculture, not only as homosexuals, but also as women (D'Emilio 1983:92-93). By the sixties and seventies, more gay and lesbian communities had coalesced in urban centers, forming hot spots of political activity.

D'Emilio has noted that literature and the arts have played a significant part in the development of gay and lesbian subcultures. From the late nineteenth century until the mid- to late-twentieth, homosexuality in the arts was heavily censored (1983:19). Gay men and women produced material within their communities, establishing their own venues and publishers. A few widely successful pieces like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* attracted gay readers and let them know they were not alone. The arts also helped to solve one of the major barriers preventing gay communities from mobilizing. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there was a rift within gay and lesbian communities between politically active people who were trying to fit in as productive members of society, and the lower class so-called "bar subculture" who saw the former as traitors or sell-outs. These two factions came together in a powerful way, however, within the "beat subculture" of San Francisco in the early 1960's (176). The popularity of beat poets – several of whom were gay – contributed to a "literary bohemia" that became a breeding ground of nonconformists, social reformers, beatniks, and artists (177-178). According to D'Emilio, this scene "propelled politics into the bars and the bars into the orbit of the movement" (176). Since the artistic and gay and lesbian subcultures intersected both geographically and ideologically, their lives, politics, and art coalesced and began to form a different kind of movement (182).

### Queer Art

It is clear that the Queer community as a whole produces a relatively large volume of literature, performances, gallery pieces, and other forms of art. Even that which does not contain sexual material is often met with anger and disapproval when it is introduced into mainstream society. An example is a book of photographs produced by Gigi Kaeser and Peggy Gillespie (Matthews 2002). These two women put together a series of photographs of same-sex parents and their children engaging in activities typical of the American nuclear family: picnics, going to the beach, and so on. The book was then introduced in public schools. Although the images were benign, conservative parents and instructors immediately took issue with it, and took steps to have the book removed from circulation in schools (Matthews 2002:13-15). The book was released as part of an activist agenda to increase awareness about the existence of same-sex couples and, of course, to promote tolerance. Kaeser's goal was "to de-exoticize lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans gender individuals, drawing on the vocabulary of ordinariness to make them an unremarkable sight" (15).

Artistic events also provide a way for members of a group to gather, exchange ideas, and mobilize. An article in the *Queer and Lesbian Review* advertises the Michigan Womyn's Music Fest, an annual tradition since the

1970's. Located in an isolated rural area, the festival provides a safe haven where "womyn" can come and celebrate together from all over the state of Michigan and beyond (2003:16-18).

Performance art seems to be a common medium. According to David Román, one of the editors of *O Solo Homo*, Queer solo performance is becoming more popular because "it's one of the few areas in public culture that is immediately understood as multiracial, cogendered, and multisexual" (1998:1). It also comes under heavy public scrutiny for its political and artistic content, and addresses pressing issues such as "Queer families, HIV and AIDS, breast cancer, race relations, and the role of the arts" (1). At the same time this art form is attracting attention, it is facing problems of censorship and reduction in funding for the arts (2).

Queer literature probably includes a variety of works with entertainment, activist, and community-building motives. Interestingly, this form of media seems to be on the decline in some circles. Small, specialized printers publish most Queer literature because their authors experience difficulty getting published elsewhere. As a result, books that speak specifically to Queer issues do not get circulated as widely, and usually are relegated to the shelves of independent Queer-friendly bookstores (Bronski 2002:27-30). Books about transgender issues, or about Queer issues within specific minority ethnic groups, are even more rare (Moore 1999:11). On the other hand, business is booming for a few select entrepreneurs. One example is Two Lives Publishing, a firm established by a lesbian couple who wanted to publish Queer-friendly children's books (Planck 2001:51).

## **Hypotheses**

1. Performance art has been conducive to the economic and cultural development of Hillcrest.
2. Performance art functions as a political voice, a way to express issues faced by Hillcrest and the Queer population, including issues of discrimination and interaction with mainstream society.
3. Art may expand the borders of the community and create outside interest in Queer issues by actively engaging people from outside the community and gradually changing the demography and economic status of the immediate vicinity.

## **Methodology**

1. Following the Critical approach, analyze historical and demographic data to obtain an accurate historical perspective.
2. Conduct social mapping: map the community over time to show the development of local performance art venues, beginning with theaters. Map the economic, social, and personal relationships made evident through the ethnographic process (participant observation and formal interviews). The latter process will be completed at a later stage in the research.
3. Collect initial ethnographic data through personal interviews with artists and venue operators.

### **Modified Hatcher Field Theory**

To study Queer art on the local level, I have utilized a modified version of the field theory outlined by Hatcher to focus on the San Diego community of Hillcrest. This involves the following steps:

1. Mapping and analyzing the geography and physical environment of Hillcrest and, as gathered data expose relevant centers, extended areas. (Includes reading local historical documents to aid in mapping and learn about the historical development of art venues.)
2. Noting what types of art are produced and what common themes emerge.
3. Gathering historical and holistic information by interviewing venue owners and/or operators.
4. Analyzing who produces art and what social positions artists hold within the community. This will be done through participant observation and information gleaned through informal interviews. Relevant information will also be collected through the application of a screening process, a few questions meant to ascertain the geographical origin, age, and sexual orientation of participants.
5. Determining *why*: asking artists, producers, and performers why they produce or participate in art.
6. Evaluating how members of the audience perceive art and its functions within the community, as opposed to how the researcher may interpret its functions through participant observations.

### **Art Forms Used**

Because of time and other restrictions, this research must be conducted in stages. For the summer of 2004, the primary focus was to map the historical distribution of performance art venues, establish initial contacts, begin participant observation at venues, and begin interviews with artists, producers, and performers to assess the ideologies and intentions of those involved with the community. Venues in immediate surrounding areas were also included in the research, with modifications to the questions as needed. Because of difficulties associated with surveying audience members – potential disruption of business flow, intruding on the artists' or customers' sense of space, etc. – this stage of the research will need to happen at a later time, once enough rapport has been established within the community that the researcher may move more freely. At a later stage it may also be necessary to develop survey instruments to be circulated throughout the community in order to ascertain the level of exposure to art experienced by community members at large.

This research is not limited to any particular style of art, and will eventually include other types of performance art, gallery art, body art, and other types of representation. Due to time constraints, however, this particular project deals only with performance art, specifically plays and monologues produced by local theaters. This medium was chosen because it is very common in Hillcrest and surrounding areas.

Initially, only venue operators have been interviewed, to form a more solid historical perspective based on the views of participants. Later, artists and performers, and possibly members of the audience will be interviewed or surveyed as the research develops.

### **Protection of Informants**

The research protocol obtained Institutional Review Board approval from San Diego State University. The identities of individual informants were kept secret by assigning pseudonyms where relevant. Specific venues and businesses are not mentioned by name. Participants were given the option of selecting their own pseudonyms.

## **Preliminary Results**

### **Demography and History of the Performing Arts in Hillcrest**

Hillcrest is usually described as an area bisected down the middle by Highway 163, bound on the north by Washington Street and Interstate 8, on the west by Dove or Front Streets, on the east by Park Boulevard, and on the south by Upas Street and Balboa Park (Dillinger 2000:1, San Diego Union 1969:1, Stein 1988:1, Weisberg and Showley 1997:1). This general area has been used to describe Hillcrest in local newspapers since the 1960's, barring a few disagreements about the west and north borders. This same area fits nicely in Census Tracts 3, 4, 6, and 7. The U.S. Census Bureau gathers demographic data consistently based on these boundaries (Census.gov 2000) (See **Figure 1**).

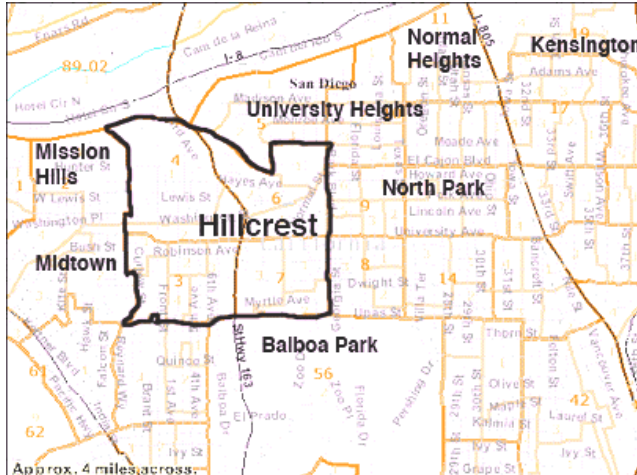
Since the 1970's, local newspapers have often referred to Hillcrest as the local "Greenwich Village" (Evening Tribune 1973:1). One writer called it "a melting pot of cultures, people, and places" in 1972 (San Diego Gas and Electric 1). Today, the community is known for its diverse restaurants with flavors from all over the world, its bars and coffeehouses, and its galleries and theaters. James A. Clapp, a professor of Urban Planning at San Diego State University, stated in 1991 that Hillcrest was a "popular hangout for soldiers during WWII. Professional athletes and entertainers patronized restaurants such as Pernicano's in the 50's and 60's. Gays and intellectuals discovered it in the 70's and 80's. Most recently, mods, punks, and yuppies have enriched the demographic mix" (1).

Interestingly, Hillcrest was not known for its rich demography until after the 1970's. Prior to that decade, it was an inexpensive area largely populated by the elderly. Although the community had flourished during WWII, things took an economic downturn in the 1960's when Mission Valley began to attract more business (Dillinger 2000:3). According to Dillinger, Hillcrest subsequently "suffered through economic stagnation, social isolation, and deteriorating housing conditions" (3). Of course, this meant that housing became much more affordable, making it an ideal place for younger people to settle (3-4). In the 1960's and 70's – during a major turning point in the

nationwide movement for gay rights – openly Queer individuals began to take up residence in the area. By 1977, resident Betty Soloff had noted the "female impersonators" who emerged on Halloween (6). Aside from the cheap prices, Hillcrest was an ideal place for Queer individuals to settle because it was known as a safe neighborhood. This is because there was little street traffic and residents were predominantly elderly (Dillinger 2000:9). Other areas of San Diego were dangerous for gays and lesbians: they were often arrested for any sort of public affection, and were subjected to "near-constant harassment" (9). As more affordable housing became available, more young people settled, and the region quickly became a community dominated by single men and women (8). Due to its proximity to Balboa Park – a popular destination and meeting place – Hillcrest was an ideal place for socializing and networking. Bars also served as the first and only "central institutions of the gay community until the 1970's", according to Dillinger, who goes on to say that the bars "provided shelter and relative solace to gay men and women able to express themselves freely only amongst their peers ... The bars also allowed gays and lesbians a forum where ideas and thoughts could be expressed and exchanged to help build a sense of community in San Diego" (10). The public transportation system was also excellent, compared to other areas (Soloff 7). These and other factors led to a flourishing community. Many locals started businesses, including culturally diverse restaurants that would attract economic contributions from outside. Dillinger describes the appearance of coffee shops and bookstores in the early 1970's (11). Hillcrest's reputation as a Queer community was widely known by the 1980's. Today, many of the residences and businesses display rainbow flags, pride signs, political stickers, and advertisements. Several LGBT publications are now produced within the community, including the *Gay and Lesbian Times* and *Lavander Lens*. Gay pride parades are held annually, and there are many community centers and activities, including the Gay Men's Choir, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the LGBT Center (formerly known as the Gay Center) (12).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, local reports mention very little about artistic venues in Hillcrest. In 1969, a writer for the San Diego Union mentioned only "a neighborhood theater that shows films 'exclusively erotic in nature'" (1). Later, Betty Soloff described the art scene that existed in 1977. According to her, there were two X-rated movie theaters, one on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue (the proverbial artery of the community) and one on Park Boulevard. A program aimed to promote family films was unsuccessful, she noted. Some galleries had already been founded, and there was one dance studio (5). By the late 1980's, the X-rated theaters had been replaced by movie houses and theaters playing independent films, Shakespeare plays, and the like. Today, there are at least five playhouses and theaters in Hillcrest and in surrounding areas, and one independent cinema that is located well outside of Hillcrest, but is owned by the same company that operates Hillcrest Cinemas.

However, it seems that small-time theaters and similar venues cannot afford central locations in Hillcrest. Concern with rapid growth and the introduction of chain stores and malls emerged as a common theme in many local newspapers throughout the 1990's. According to the Hillcrest Business Association, there were over one thousand businesses by 1997 (Weisberg and Showley 1). Housing prices have risen steadily over the years, and in interviews venue operators mention rising rents and the difficult of fundraising. Areas outside of Hillcrest may be undergoing a similar process. The 2000 Census found that the demography of outlying communities is very similar to Hillcrest, largely populated by young people in their 20's and 30's, a fact which may indicate a homogenization of these communities as more people move to cheaper areas surrounding Hillcrest (Census.gov).



**Figure 1.** Hillcrest is shown here as an area encompassing Census Tracts 3, 4, 6, and 7. This is approximately the same area described in newspapers and other accounts since the 1970's. Immediate surrounding areas are demographically similar to Hillcrest (Census 2000). LGBT literature, pride insignias, and other symbols common to Hillcrest can be found as far to the east as Kensington and south toward downtown. Balboa Park, a common place for political and festival gatherings, is just south of Hillcrest.

### Social Mapping

Social mapping shows that symbols common to Hillcrest – such as rainbow flags – have also become common in areas immediately surrounding Hillcrest. It is not unusual to see same-sex couples in University Heights, North Park, or even farther in areas along main avenues. Bars, coffee houses, and other social hangouts have established themselves in these areas as well to take advantage of local clientele. This is especially true of University Heights and North Park, possibly because these areas are located between Hillcrest and College Area (close to San Diego State University). Symbols such as rainbow flags, pride stickers, and LGBT literature also appear common south of Hillcrest, toward downtown, and northeast as far as Kensington. More extensive mapping of businesses and of social networks is necessary to better understand how border areas are developing, and how they are interrelated with the ideological community known as Hillcrest.

As explained above, theaters used to be centrally located. Today, all of the theaters exist on the fringes of Hillcrest, or in outlying communities (See Figure 2). This is due to the fact that rent is lower outside of Hillcrest, according to interviews. However, there are many other interesting factors contributing to their locations that informants mentioned in the interviews. It seems that they felt that they would be ostracized within Hillcrest unless they produced only "gay art" (Personal Interviews). However, being close to Hillcrest is advantageous for small venues, because the community is known as a "cultural center" and therefore attracts tourists along the same avenues where these venues are situated. Furthermore, communities outside Hillcrest tend to be more diverse, and therefore attract a more eclectic crowd, according to one informant.



**Figure 2.** Most theaters are now situated just outside of Hillcrest or on its edges. With inflation and the arrival of businesses, small storefront theaters are typically relegated to cheaper border areas. While there are many Queer-centered arts produced within Hillcrest, there is only one theater whose mission is to explore Queer themes. The other theaters produce a more eclectic range of plays. Some venue operators feel that, because they do not support "gay theater" alone, they would not receive the necessary support from residents if they were established in central Hillcrest.

### **Participant Observation and Interviews**

The website of one of the local theaters says that the mission of the theater is "to produce plays with gay, lesbian, and bisexual themes that portray characters in their complexity and diversity both historically and contemporarily" (1). "Since its inception, [the theater] has flourished and grown to meet a rising demand in the community for people to see their own life experiences represented on stage," according to a reviewer at EnterSanDiego.com. Located just outside of Hillcrest on the northeast side, this is the only theater in San Diego that focuses on producing art dealing with Queer issues, although there are other politically active performance groups that do, such as the Drag Kings (Czyczynska 1-4). It was found that the other theaters produce plays of all types, including comedies, monologues, and dramas. One of them, located in Balboa Park, deals mainly with Shakespeare plays. At a venue located in a cross section between Normal Heights and North Park – the farthest from Hillcrest – the operator, who is an openly gay man, often produces plays containing gay characters. However, he is openly against the notion of "gay theater" (Personal Interview). His pseudonym in this paper is "Jim". In his words, "I don't believe in gay theater. I think that's a diminutive thing now ... that's such tiny thinking ... and you've also just dismissed 90% of the world if 10% of the world is gay." He sees his venue as a "teaching institution", and a way to bring people in from outside and enrich the local community. When he was searching for properties, he looked for a place that was diverse. Hillcrest was not ideal because it was expensive, had no parking and therefore could not bring in enough people from outside the community, and the residents there were fairly homogenous and would not sustain anything but "gay theater" (Personal Interview). In the current location, the venue potentially has access to people of all different ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. It also has its drawbacks: it exists in a fairly rundown community, a part of North Park that is ignored and which rarely receives funds for renovation or improvement. The venue does not receive any support from local businesses, because (according to Jim) the city and its residents do not have a general mindset that is supportive or appreciative of the arts, and because the businesses themselves are struggling to some extent in this developing and transitory community. The informant stated that this predicament is typical of small storefront theaters: they tend to settle as pioneers in rundown neighborhoods, and once businesses and tourism have come in, the theaters lose their space to redevelopment and soaring rent prices (Personal Interview). The operators of another venue south of Hillcrest expressed similar views. "Linda" stated that, although her venue is located on one of the main drags, the immediate area is not automatically a tourist attraction or "artsy" area. She also stated that settling in Hillcrest was impossible, citing an event that occurred in 1984 when she first founded the venue. Some gay men walked by the place while it was opening and let her know that they would only support "gay theater". Like Jim, Linda believes that this is a limited view, and asserts that her theater is open to all sorts of plays and a variety of characters. She is also open to gay themes, and she employs several actors who are gay (Personal Interview).

The works observed at local venues were, in fact, very diverse. Aside from the LGBT theater –which produces four plays per year – the others regularly produced comedies, monologues, drama, poetry, hand puppeteering, belly dancing, and other types of performance art. Most characters were heterosexual, although a relatively large number of gay characters appeared at Jim's venue. Jim mentioned one gay character at the Shakespeare venue that was very stereotypical and was only present for laughs, a fact he found unpleasant (Personal Interview). Audiences at all venues were predominantly white, and consisted mainly of middle-aged customers, although people of various ages were present. Minorities were more common at plays that dealt with minority issues, such as one play at the LGBT theater whose main character was a gay Latin American male. Young patrons seemed to be more common at comedic acts.

### **Discussion**

In many respects, the formation and development of Hillcrest during the 1960's and 70's seems to be a miniature replica of what was happening to LGBT persons all over the nation. The pride movement began in the bars, where people were able to express and build on ideas without repression for the first time. Later, formal institutions began developing, such as political institutions and support networks. As these began to emerge, Queer issues began to populate the arts, including literature, performance, music, and film. This was especially evident in San Francisco, where art was a popular way of communicating and expressing. There were a number of factors that contributed to the formation and success of Hillcrest, but the political climate of the state and the nation at the time seem especially important. In addition, people banded together precisely because they needed a safe place to live and work. External pressures drove the community underground into the bar scenes, and inward to the safest and cheapest land,

where they were able to collect and eventually emerge with the backing of a cohesive support system. This was initialized through the exchange of ideas, a process that began in the bar scene and eventually became prevalent in other mediums.

While it is difficult to say exactly when and how the arts developed in Hillcrest, some theater venues were founded in the 1980's. The clientele they attracted probably helped to bring in business, including the restaurants that now make Hillcrest a famous part of town. Theaters tend to exist in marginal locations, inside border communities that are experiencing their own transformations. The operators of these venues seem to be aware that they thrive on bringing in business from outside, and that they are the instigators in cultivating an artistic community in their immediate areas. They express some interesting tension regarding Hillcrest and the "LGBT theater," which brings in the majority of available funding. Marginal storefront theaters are generally not able to obtain non-profit status, or find the application process too expensive and complicated. The consensus is that funding for the arts is hard to come by in San Diego, a fact that reveals some interesting political issues. Venues that deal specifically with minority issues are more likely to receive funding, while general arts fall by the wayside (an exception is the Shakespeare theater, which is located in Balboa Park, a place that attracts high amounts of tourism because of the zoo and museums there). Furthermore, the marginal theaters receive less support from businesses. According to them, the LGBT theater is tied into the close-knit community networks of Hillcrest, and receives more support from all sides. Residents of Hillcrest, meanwhile, predominantly support the LGBT theater and other arts focused on Queer themes.

This preliminary data reveals that there are local issues and conflicts that were not predicted in the hypotheses. While there are many arts that serve to affirm identity and serve as political voice in Hillcrest – the Gay Men's Choir, Drag Kings, and various literature such as the *Lavander Lens* attest to this – local storefront theaters are challenging stereotypes and, seemingly, rejecting the need for "gay theater". It is possible that they are responding to the sentiment expressed to Linda in the 1980's, a message put out from central Hillcrest: "We only support gay theater." The presence of Queer signifiers (such as LGBT magazines) in border communities may also show that the ideological borders of Hillcrest are very different from the literal ones, and are in fact expanding, causing a constant renegotiation of the arts and other forms of expression in the areas experiencing this transformation.

Hillcrest was born as a response to discrimination and external pressure, a fact that is evident in the history of the community. It is a community built on pride; pride symbols are exhibited everywhere. It is generally regarded as a very internally supportive community, where businesses sponsor renovation projects and whose community centers deal directly with issues faced by LGBT youths and adults. The community is very politically active within San Diego, and is home to an openly gay councilwoman. As such a cohesive community, however, it is probably somewhat isolationist, a fact that can result in reverse discrimination. Studying the development of the arts in border communities, as well as the themes expressed by LGBT art inside Hillcrest, will help to illuminate this problem that may be faced by many ideologically-based minority communities and the areas surrounding them.

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