

What does a ‘genuine lesbian’ look like? Intersections of sexuality and ‘race’ in Manchester’s Gay Village and in the UK asylum system

Introduction

This chapter explores the ‘racialisation of sexuality’, whilst also acknowledging the intersections of sexuality and gender. The intersections of ‘race’ and sexuality are explored by using material from different projects: ethnographic research conducted in Manchester’s Gay Village and examples from grassroots activism gathered through my involvement as a volunteer for the Lesbian Immigration Support Group (LISG) in Manchester. Since the late 1970s black feminists have stressed the importance of acknowledging that different social identities intersect. In their ‘Black feminist statement’, first published in 1978, the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based, black, lesbian feminist group, argued:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. (1982: 13)

Intersectionality, a concept coined by American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), has become a buzzword in feminist scholarship (see Davis 2008). In her work, Audre Lorde showed vividly how these intersecting forms of oppression work together and illustrated their psychological impact on black women (Lorde 1984a, 1984b; see also Nayak 2015). She also wrote about the damage that is caused by having to neglect and reconcile different parts of your identity as a black lesbian. In *Zami*, for instance, Lorde (1984b) describes her difficulties when socialising in predominantly white lesbian environments in New York in the 1950s. Some authors have argued that the identity categories ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ are coded as white (Creet 1995; Fuller 1999). And indeed, to follow truly intersectional

analysis, it seems that the category ‘sexuality’ itself needs to be interrogated to discover how it might be racialised.

Geographers of sexualities have researched the development of lesbian and gay spaces in urban areas, or ‘Gay Villages’, over the last thirty years. Within this literature some authors have argued that these spaces produce normativities and exclusion, a certain form of *homonormativity*, a term coined by Lisa Duggan (2003), that is young, able-bodied, male, white and middle-class (see, for instance, Bell and Binnie 2004; Brown 2013; Casey 2004, 2007; Rooke 2007; Taylor 2008). However, less attention has been given to how homonormative identities produced in the Gay Villages are racialised.

The first part of this chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2006/2007 as part of my PhD research on ‘Racialised Lesbian Spaces’, which aimed to understand the relationship between sexuality, ‘race’ and space within the context of urban night-time leisure spaces for women (Held 2011). During the 12 months of fieldwork, I conducted participant observation, primarily in the Gay Village’s two lesbian bars *Jaguars* and *Milk*¹, and interviewed 19 women, most of whom regularly visit those spaces. The women who participated in my research variously identified as white (11), mixed-race (4), black (3) and East Asian (1). Most women identified as lesbian, except one woman who identified as bisexual. The participants’ age ranged from 19 to 61; 7 women identified as working-class, or having a working-class background, and 8 as middle-class; the remaining 4 women did not identify in terms of class. I met most of the women who participated in my research in the two lesbian bars. A few women were found through snowballing. In addition, I interviewed the organiser of *Black Angel*, a women’s club night that usually attracts a more racially mixed clientele than any other women’s night in Manchester. By drawing on this material, I explore how a certain ‘somatic norm’ (Puwar 2004) is produced in the Gay Village through

¹ I use pseudonyms for these two bars as well as for all of the participants of my study.

representations/images, door policies, and other racialising practices that determine which bodies are recognised as unproblematically ‘lesbian’.

The second part of the chapter explores how assumptions about the ‘genuine’ lesbian body, which is produced on ‘the scene’, can also be found in a very different territory, namely in the asylum process, where women have to ‘prove’ that they are lesbian (or bisexual) when they claim asylum on grounds of sexuality. Here, I draw on examples that have arisen through my work with LISG for which I have been a volunteer since 2009. LISG is a support group for bisexual and lesbian asylum seekers and refugees who come from countries such as Pakistan, Jamaica, Cameroon, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Afghanistan, Uganda, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and South Africa. The sensitivity of these cases and the need to protect the women’s identities mean that when I discuss decisions on their cases I do not refer to the country of origin, nor provide any other details about the claimant. By focusing on issues around ‘relocation’ and ‘credibility’ I show that for asylum claims to be successful, the claimant must conform to homonormative notions that are racialised and constructed around a Western model of sexuality that is ‘out and proud’.

Being a ‘genuine lesbian’ in the Gay Village

Manchester’s Gay Village is one of the most popular sexualised spaces in the UK, and was featured in the popular Channel 4 series, *Queer as Folk* (and more recently in *Cucumber* [Channel 4] and *Banana* [E 4]). It consists of more than 50 venues including bars and clubs, a sex shop, a sauna, a hair dresser and several take-aways. Since 1991 the area around Canal Street is officially recognised as ‘gay space’ and marked as Gay Village on city maps. The Gay Village thus plays an important role in Manchester’s night-time leisure economy. In contrast to other spaces, which are unmarked yet still implicitly (hetero)sexualised, the Gay Village is purposefully constituted as a sexualised space.

Geographers of sexualities in the UK have shown since the 1990s that sexuality and space are interconnected. Lesbian and gay or queer geography look at ‘the ways in which space is sexed and sex is spaced, or in other words, the ways in which the spatial and the sexual constitute each other’ (Taylor 1997: 3). A focus of the sexual geography literature has been on the development of lesbian and gay spaces in urban areas. As Michael Brown (2013: 1) argues, ‘the gayborhood has become a touchstone of sexuality and space studies’. In this literature, especially over the last decade, sexual geographers have shown that within these spaces exclusions are produced on grounds of identifiers other than sexuality. In that respect, it has been argued that homonormative lesbian and gay identities are constructed in Gay Villages (see Bell and Binnie 2004; Brown 2013; Casey 2004, 2007; Rooke 2007; Taylor 2008).

However, whilst in this respect sexuality, gender (appearance), age, class and able-bodiedness have been researched as markers of inclusion and exclusion (see, for instance, Casey 2004, 2007; Cefai 2004; McLean 2008; Rooke 2007; Taylor 2008), ‘race’ and the

racialisation of lesbian and gay spaces in the UK have only been marginally explored. The existing studies in the UK have mainly been conducted in London (GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). Research that has been conducted in Manchester's Gay Village (Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Hindle 1994; Pritchard et al. 2002; Quilley 1997; Skeggs et al. 2004; Whittle 1994) has not investigated the importance of 'race' in structuring these spaces, although this has been shown in studies conducted elsewhere (Caluya 2008; GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993; Nero 2005).

This chapter aims to contribute to the geographies of sexualities literature but also to research that explores the relationship between 'race' and space in the way that space is racialised and 'race' is spatialised (see Knowles 2003; Puwar 2004; Sullivan 2006). As critical 'race' theorists have shown, 'race' is a historical and social construct but it is also a social practice; it is in process and continuously in the making through everyday interactions (see, for instance, Ahmed 1997; Byrne 2006; Lewis 2007). The connection between 'race' and space is not always apparent and becomes most recognisable when a particular racialisation of space is disrupted, such as when racialised bodies are 'out of place' in certain spaces (Puwar 2004; Sullivan 2006). In her book *Space Invaders*, Nirmal Puwar (2004: 8) argues that in certain spaces:

Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being "out of place". Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders.

In the Gay Village, some bodies are perceived and constructed as the ‘somatic norm’ while others are (made) ‘out of place’. This norm is produced through representations, door policies, and other spatial practices described below.

A lesbian image

Most of the participants of my study talked about a certain lesbian image that exists in the Gay Village, especially in the two lesbian bars *Jaguars* and *Milk*. For instance, when I asked Joanne (mixed-race, British, 29) if she thinks something like ‘lesbian knowledge’ or ‘lesbian culture’ exists, she replied:

Lesbian knowledge or lesbian culture? Yeah of course. Go to *Milk* [laughs], yeah there’s definitely lesbian knowledge and culture, stuff I didn’t know, I had to learn about, yeah [laughs]. I still don’t know about, flipping hell. [...] I can’t identify it, but there is a lesbian culture in terms of, like, *Milk*, where you’ve got butch lesbians, lipstick lesbians, you know what I mean, ehm, a certain look, an attitude, a way to speak, actions, mannerism, and things like that.... , ehm... [...] Everybody has a Tony and Guy haircut, with the gel and the flip on it and they’ve got their boxer shorts, their Calvin Klein boxer shorts, showing over their jeans and stuff, a few tattoos, some piercings.

Joanne experiences the Gay Village as a white space. In defining *Milk* as an example of lesbian culture, Joanne includes dress, hairstyles and a general ‘habitus’ in her description. Her portrayal seems to reflect what Alison Rooke (2007) calls ‘lesbian habitus’. Rooke argues that a sense of belonging in lesbian spaces is only achievable if the ‘lesbian habitus’ is successfully generated through specific ways of walking, holding a drink, expressing and talking about sexuality, and wearing hair, clothes and accessories. Some participants of my research argued that many women adopt or copy a certain style in order to be part of ‘the scene’. For instance, Lesley (mixed-race, British, 30) said that ‘there’s something that’s comfy’ about putting a certain lesbian image on, which she described as jeans, a vest and trendy hair. The comfort, she said, is produced through being desirable and would be an

image that women fancy, 'what they like to look at'. In order to be desirable, Tania (mixed-race/black, Southern European, 29), changed her style entirely. She told me that when she first went to the Gay Village, she was 'a total hippie', she was wearing 'hippie flair trouser' and had 'a bit of a like a hippie hair, bit of a dreads, on the side and I was wearing hippie clothes, you know a jumper, and stuff like that'. She felt that she was not 'welcomed' in *Milk* but that the women in there were staring at her at first when she came in, but then ignored her. It made her so uncomfortable that she decided to change her style so that she looked more like them to be accepted. Alice (white, Central European, 31) argued that because of the homophobia many women experience outside of lesbian spaces, 'you make more effort to adapt yourself to the gay scene and to become one of them because that's where you feel comfortable and that's where you want to be part of' (see Held 2015).

What the dominant somatic norm in lesbian and gay spaces is becomes also apparent through imagery that is displayed in magazines and flyers displayed in venues across the Gay Village. The organiser of *Black Angel*, a women's night held at different venues in Manchester, told me that one of her motivations for starting the club night was that when she was growing up she never saw any images of black gay people:

And then once I came out and I go around the village, all the imagery was of white men...., predominantly, there would be white women, but it would be predominantly white men, so there's never anything that I could identify with and the music they played, it wasn't, you know, it's not what I [like]...

She stressed two important issues to create a more inclusive space: the imagery and the music. According to her, *Black Angel* was the first event in the Gay Village that played RnB and Bhangra music. She told me that when she and the co-organizer of *Black Angel* started the club night (more than ten years ago), they did not want the flyers to specifically say that the event was for black and Asian women because then other people would feel

excluded. Instead, they decided to use the name in combination with the imagery to indicate that the club night was addressed to black and Asian women:

Well, I tell you what's really interesting. It's like if you look at flyers and they have a white person on it, I don't look at that flyer and think I can't go to their nights, whereas we get white people and they see the flyer and they have black and Asian women on them and they're "alright, we didn't think we could come". It's interesting how people's minds work. They don't see the reverse and think about the imagery they're putting on, then what that says to people and they don't realize how important imagery is.

Although the imagery has arguably changed slightly over the last years, it is still predominantly white. As Rani Kawale (2003: 183) argues, '[a] group or commercial venue does not need to specify that "white" people are welcome: this is assumed because the term "lesbian" is racialised and usually refers to "white" lesbians'. Conversely, events like *Black Angel* are imagined to be (solely) for black lesbians.

Exclusionary Door Policies

Vignette 1

It was very busy in *Jaguars*. We were on the dance floor. When I looked at my mobile phone, I saw that Qooz had tried to call me and had also sent me a text message saying, 'They won't let us in. Please come out to get us'. Wondering how I could help them to come in, I went to the entrance. I was still inside, Qooz and Juan were standing outside, and the door man represented a border between us. Qooz told me that he did not believe that she and Juan were not a heterosexual couple. I tried to negotiate and told him that we were all 'regulars'. But he misused his power by telling them that they should come back later, when it would not be as busy, and that he might let them in then. My stomach hurt when I saw Qooz begging him to let them in later. Standing there, *inside*, I had the strange feeling that my body had more right to be in that space than theirs.

The few studies that illustrate the racialisation of (white) lesbian and gay spaces in the UK highlight door policies as one of the racist practices experienced by black and Asian LGBT people (GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). While during my research, I never witnessed any of my white participants or friends being turned away at the door of a bar in the Gay Village, I heard of and observed various incidents where black and Asian women and men had difficulties in accessing these bars. Most bars and clubs in Manchester's city centre have bouncers at the door, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, so this practice is not specific to the venues in the Gay Village. The Gay Village, however, is a space created for a marginalised group and therefore the boundaries of these spaces seem to require protection. Heterosexuals are often perceived as a threat in lesbian and gay spaces (see Casey 2004, 2007; Pritchard et al. 2002; Skeggs 1999; Skeggs et al. 2004) and therefore, in contrast to those other spaces, bouncers in the Gay Village might specifically look for people they perceive to be heterosexual and not let in. But how do they 'judge' whether someone is gay (or bisexual) or not? In the example above, the bouncer's perceptions were wrong when he decided that Qooz, an East Asian lesbian and Juan, a Latin American gay man, are a heterosexual couple. Unlike them, that night as well as on any other, I had no difficulties in gaining access to the bars and clubs of the Gay Village. I seemed to be easily recognisable as a lesbian, being a white woman with short hair, usually wearing jeans and t-shirt/shirt when going out and having adapted a 'lesbian habitus' (Rooke 2007). I seemed to have a more legitimate claim on lesbian space.

While it is often not easy for *one* black or Asian person to access a gay venue, gaining access seems to be even more difficult when coming in a *group*. Joanne facilitates a black LGBT support group at a local charity. She told me that her group members had reported difficulties in getting into lesbian and gay venues in the Gay Village when coming in a group of more than three or four. The organiser of Black Angel said that she thinks one of the

reasons is that some of the club managers are racially prejudiced, and when they see ‘more than two black people [together] in the place they think it’s a gang and [that] there’s gonna be trouble’. One night, after their monthly meeting, Joanne and members of the black LGBT group joined me in a bar on Canal Street where I was sitting with a group of friends and participants; I was the only white woman in the group. It was a warm evening and we were sitting on the bar’s balcony, talking and laughing. Suddenly the bar’s bouncer came out and told us, in a quite aggressive manner, that we should be quieter. Our racialized group, or members of it, was somehow perceived as ‘loud’. We disturbed the place not only visually but also aurally. Joanne then told us that the bouncer had been reluctant to let them in to begin with. It is quite disturbing that a LGBT support group, which is part of the biggest lesbian and gay organisation in the Northwest of England, where they had just been to their monthly meeting, had almost been refused permission to enter a space that has been purposefully created for LGBT people. Inside those spaces, however, there are other practices at work that make some bodies ‘out of place’ and establish white bodies as the somatic norm.

‘Looking’ and other racialising practices

In *Jaguars* and *Milk* looking is a key spatial practice. It is a form of addressing someone and is often used as a first step in a flirtatious encounter in the hope that the other woman looks back. Studies on sexuality and space have shown how ‘looking’ practices contribute to the sexualisation of bodies and spaces (Munt 1995; Rooke 2007; Valentine 1995). While most of these studies have focused on the heteronormative gaze or the pleasurable look constructing lesbian identities, ‘the look’ described by some of my participants is quite different². All of the black participants of my study gave accounts of

² It is important to note here that ‘the look’ is not only experienced in lesbian spaces. Critical ‘race’ scholars have written about experiencing ‘the look’ in various times and places (see for instance Ahmed 1997; Fanon 1967; Lewis 2004; Lorde 1984a).

receiving certain looks in *Jaguars* and *Milk*, which they defined as forms of racism experienced in those spaces.

For Joanne, ‘the look’ signals dislike, even hate and disgust. She said that ‘sometimes it’s just the way that someone looks at you and you can tell by the way that they look at you that they are racist. They look at you like an insect that wants to be squashed’. Echoing Frantz Fanon (1967) and Lorde (1984a), Joanne’s metaphor suggests the black body is seen as non-human by the white looker (Lorde uses the analogy of a cockroach). Natasha (32, British, black) received ‘the look’ by a white woman during her first and only visit to *Jaguars*. She described it as a ‘piercing’ look, as a ‘what are you doing here?’ look. It was not just a matter of looking at her, but that it ‘felt as though [the woman] was trying to tell me something with that look, which felt like she was questioning my presence in the room’. Hope (42, British, black) described the forms of racism she experiences in the Gay Village as more subtle: it was not blatantly spelled out, she told me, ‘but it will be a look or there’d be somebody make an offhand remark and I probably never heard it but somebody else has heard it’. One night when we were in *Jaguars* together she asked me why they all (the white clientele) look at her when she comes in as if they had never seen a black woman before. ‘What are their *fears*?’ she asked. During the interview, conducted a few months after that night in *Jaguars*, I asked her to explain ‘the look’ further. She said: ‘I don’t know people’s perception of black people. They find us intimidating, sometimes threatening [...] I think they’re just scared of the unknown, that’s what it is, they’re just scared.’ Hope speaks powerfully of the relationship between ‘the look’ and what Bridget Byrne (2006) has called ‘perceptual practices’. Byrne argues that ‘race’ is discursively produced through the repetitive use of perceptual practices, through ways of seeing difference; that is, how we see or do not see ‘race’ actually produces what we think we see (here the ‘threatening black body’).

In my study, these perceptual practices did not only become apparent through ‘the look’. There were other racialising practices such as comments and assumptions being made about ‘ethnic others’, or defining sexual attractiveness in terms of ‘race’ (e.g. ‘black women are/are not my type’) (see also Caluya 2008; GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). One of the racialising practices that were described by black women was white women wanting to touch black women’s hair. As a racial signifier, hair has been historically inscribed with social and symbolic meaning. In the era of scientific racism and colonialism, hairstyle was used as a signifier of European superiority and African inferiority, constructing whiteness as the measure of beauty (see also chapters by Robinson and Reynolds in this volume). As Kobena Mercer (1994: 101) argues, ‘black people’s hair has been historically *devalued* as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin’. The desire to touch hair carries an element of exotification.

These examples indicate that the lesbian norm that is constructed and confirmed in the Gay Village through representations, door policies and other spatial practices is centred on a white lesbian image and body.

Being a ‘genuine lesbian’ in the asylum system

Vignette 2

I go outside for my lunch break and check my phone – one missed call, I don’t recognize the number. The caller left a message on my voicemail. I listen to it. It’s a female voice. She says that her name is Hope and that she wants to join the Lesbian Immigration Support Group (LISG). She asks me to please call her back. When I get home in the evening I give her a ring. We introduce each other, she sounds distressed. She tells me that she does not live in Manchester but in Sheffield and that there is no group for lesbian asylum seekers in Sheffield. After just a short moment of conversation she says ‘can you explain something to me? They [Home Office officials] say that they don’t believe that I am a *genuine lesbian*, what does that mean? I don’t understand. How should I prove it?’

Hope comes from one of the 78 countries (which makes 40% of all countries in the world) where legislation is in place that criminalizes same-sex consensual acts between adults.³ In some of these countries these acts are even punishable by death. If Hope is not able to ‘prove’ to Home Office officials and the courts that she is a ‘genuine’ lesbian then it will be seen as ‘safe’ to remove her from the UK.

Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, *membership of a particular social group* or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.⁴

All asylum claimants need to prove that they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for a Convention reason and that the state is unable or unwilling to protect them. Asylum claimants need to provide evidence of political activity for instance, ethnicity and so on, and in lesbian and gay asylum claims evidence of persecution or fear of persecution

³ See www.ilga.org.

⁴ The emphasis is mine.

because of sexuality. The existence of laws that criminalise same-sex consensual acts between adults itself is not enough for asylum claims to be successful. It is only since 1999 that gender and sexual identity are recognised as a ground to claim asylum in the UK, since then it has been accepted that women and lesbians and gay men can form a 'particular social group' (Shah and Islam v SSHD).

For an asylum claim based on sexuality to be successful, the asylum seeker has to prove that he/she is lesbian or gay and need to show a well-founded fear of persecution. This seems to be difficult as the low percentage of accepted lesbian and gay asylum claims indicates. A report by the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG) based in London from 2010 suggested that while general on average between 60 and 70% of all initial asylum claims are refused by the Home Office, with regard to claims based on sexuality it is 98% (UKLGIG 2010). Since this first report was published, there have been some positive changes in UK asylum law, in particular through a ruling by the Supreme Court which has affected how decisions on asylum claims based on sexuality are made, as indicated by a seconded report by UKLGIG (2013). However, especially issues around relocation and credibility still seem to be problematic.

Relocation and 'being out'

Before July 2010, based on case law (HJ Iran 2009), lesbian and gay asylum seekers could be returned to the country of origin if 'safely' relocated to an area where their sexuality was not known. The assumption was that they would be safe as long as they lived discreetly: the case law implied that they can be reasonably expected to be 'discreet' about their sexuality in order to avoid persecution. In their 2010 report, UKLGIG identified that in 68% of the cases they looked at case workers cited the ability to relocate as the basis of refusal of the claim, and often argued that the situation of LGBT people is not 'that bad'. In these cases, Home

Office officials often relied on outdated or ill-informed sources such as the *Spartacus Guide* or *Gay Times*, magazines that are designed for the white middle-class Western gay traveller, and describe the situation of LGBT people in different countries including information about gay venues (if there are any). In some of the decisions of asylum claims from LISG women, these magazines were used as resource for country evidence by Home Office officials and in the courts (in one case even by a High Court judge). In other cases it was argued that the country of origin is large and therefore, women would be able to relocate to a different part where nobody knows about their sexuality.

In one case of a LISG member who comes from a small African country where homosexuality is illegal and punishable by death, the Home Office used the relocation argument stating that only people from her village would know that she is a lesbian but that her country of origin has a population of *1.7 million* people and that '[i]t is therefore considered that the country is large enough for you to relocate to another area'. When she appealed against the decision, in the appeal hearing in January 2010 the Immigration Judge agreed with the Home Office and argued that she could move to an alternative area:

It is considered that in this alternative area you could commence and develop future relationships with women in a discrete manner which would not bring you to the attention of either the general public or the police. It is concluded that expecting you to continue any future relationships with women in a discreet manner would not place you in a situation of persecution. (IJ, First-tier tribunal, January 2010)

As Toni Johnson (2011: 61) writes, with such decisions the UK courts 'were effectively perpetuating the silencing of sexuality in the home state' and forcing people back into the closet. Moreover, this often meant forcing women into heterosexual relationships.

On 7 July 2010, the case law on which such decisions were based (HJ Iran 2009), and another case law (HT Cameroon) were challenged by the UK Supreme Court. The five judges who looked at these two case laws decided that the test used in them was incompatible with

the purposes of the Refugee Convention. In his decision, one of the Supreme Court judges, Lord Hope, argued:

The group [particular social group] is defined by the immutable characteristic of its members' sexual orientation or sexuality. This is a characteristic that may be revealed, to a greater or lesser degree, by the way the members of this group behave. In that sense, because it manifests itself in behaviour, it is less immediately visible than a person's race. But, unlike a person's religion or political opinion, it is incapable of being changed. To pretend that it does not exist, or that the behaviour by which it manifests itself can be suppressed, is to deny the members of this group their fundamental right to be what they are – of the right to do simple, everyday things with others of the same orientation such as living or spending time together or expressing their affection for each other in public.
(HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2010] UKSC 31.)

The Supreme Court decision has had an impact on the ways in which decisions on asylum claims based on sexuality are made. Because of this judgment it is now much more difficult for Home Office officials and judges to argue that claimants can go back and live their sexuality in secret, without openly claiming a sexual identity, as it had been argued in the example above. However, as Janna Weßels (2013) points out, the new test that is proposed to be followed by tribunals in order to establish whether a claimant lives in fear is problematic. This test asks to first establish that the claimant is gay (or would be treated as gay) and whether gay people who lived openly in the claimant's country of origin would be likely to be persecuted. The test then requires identifying how openly the claimant would live their sexuality if returned. If they lived their sexuality openly, the fear of persecution would be well-founded. If they did not live their sexuality openly, then the tribunal needs to ask why they would live their sexuality discreetly. Here, the test then distinguishes between those who would be discreet because they chose to do so, or because of social pressures (family, friends), and those who would live discreetly because of the fear of persecution (Weßels 2013).

I want to illustrate this with an example, a LISG case that was heard in court in June 2011. In their decision the tribunal made the following findings:

The appellant has since been dispersed by NASS to Wigan. She does not feel at risk there or indeed anywhere in the United Kingdom, because there is legal and police support here. She finds it rather dull and tends to meet her girlfriend in London rather than Wigan, where they go to bars, out to dinner, and dancing together and with other friends. She stays in with her girlfriend too, just watching television and being *normal*. She meets their families and has no difficulty being accepted for who she is. (IJ, Upper Tribunal, June 2011)

The tribunal did not question the fact that the appellant was a lesbian. It did, however, discuss whether she would be persecuted if she lived her sexuality openly and whether she would in fact live her sexuality discreetly if returned. It should be noted here that her account, summarized by the judge above, was given in response to particular questions that aimed at identifying whether she lives an openly gay lifestyle in the UK (including her account of being a member of a couple of lesbian and gay groups and having attended Gay Pride events). After her ‘gay lifestyle’ was established, further questioning then centred on the level of openness:

The appellant was asked in cross-examination whether she would be discreet if she were on a brief holiday in Saudi Arabia [not her country of origin] with a girlfriend (though why she might contemplate going there was unclear), or walking on a beach in the United Kingdom where there had recently been a homophobic attack. In both cases, the appellant stated that she would still behave openly, mentioning the sufficiency of protection in the United Kingdom in relation to walking on a beach where there had been a recent homophobic attack. (IJ, Upper Tribunal)

Satisfied with this (rather exaggerated) answer, the court concluded that the appellant would not live her sexuality discreetly if returned, or if she would then only because of the fear of persecution rather than social pressures. Therefore, her asylum claim was successful.

Hence, the ‘discretion requirement’ is still alive in this new test. There are a few

pitfalls in this reasoning (see Weßels 2013). The Supreme Court test divides the social group of gay people into two categories, those living their sexuality openly and those living it discreetly. It is, however, rather paradoxical to assume that in a country where homosexuality is illegal and/ or heavily stigmatized, where it is likely to be sanctioned through violence, rape, torture or death, that LGB people would even 'try' to live their sexuality openly. For instance, most asylum seekers and refugees supported by LISG were not open about their sexuality before coming to the UK, but it took only one incident for someone to find out (for instance when forgetting to lock door when being sexually intimate and family member coming in). Hence, in these cases it did not matter whether the person tried to conceal their sexuality or not to be persecuted.

The Supreme Court ruling has been praised as progressive change (see Spijkerboer and Jansen 2011) and there is some indication of better decision making since July 2010 (see UKLGIG 2013). In contrast to other areas of law, in asylum claims there is often not much evidence provided and as Jane Herlihy et al (2010: 364) argue 'decisions are inevitably based on assumptions about the content and quality of the information presented. These assumptions draw on subjective understandings of human interaction and behaviour.' The example discussed above indicates that the Supreme Court decision is based on a particular understanding of sexuality, namely one that is 'out and proud'. This 'type' of sexuality seems to represent a stereotypical white male middle class gay identity (see Morgan 2006).⁵ This understanding of sexuality draws on a Western model of sexuality whereby gay identity and homosexual conduct are interchangeable and 'which presumes clarity of boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual identity and requires public expression of private and sexual behaviour.' (Morgan 2006: 151-152) Public expression of sexual behaviour is especially difficult for LGBT asylum seekers, who come from countries where such expression would

⁵ For instance, in his judgement Lorde Hope also drew on stereotypical images of gay men going to Kylie concerts and drinking 'exotically coloured cocktails'.

have caused homophobic violence and potentially imprisonment.

Credibility – the ‘not lesbian enough’ asylum seeker

The assumption of an ‘out and proud’ sexuality is not only relevant in asylum cases where relocation is considered. Unlike the example above, in most of the asylum cases based on sexuality it is not even accepted that the claimant is lesbian or gay. Negative decisions on grounds of ‘credibility’ seem to have increased since the Supreme Court decision (UKLGIG 2013). The UKLGIG found that while before 2010 the majority of claims were refused by the Home Office with the argument that the person can go back to their country of origin and live their sexuality discreetly (UKLGIG 2010), in the majority of negative decisions made between 2010 and 2013 the claimant was not believed to be gay (though that does not mean that it was necessarily believed that the person was gay when the ‘relocation argument’ was used) (UKLGIG 2013).

With regard to the US asylum system, Deborah A. Morgan (2006: 136) argues that decisions are based on racialised sexual stereotypes and culturally specific norms of sexuality and that ‘it is not good enough for an asylum applicant simply to be attracted to people of the same sex; the applicant must be “gay enough” for the government to find that they have met their burden of proof’. This seems to be similar in the UK. For instance, Claire Bennett and Felicity Thomas (2013: 26-27) argue that it is not only the claimant’s sexual narrative that is taken as the basis for the decision-making but also her appearance in the court and whether she conforms to Western stereotypes. The authors conclude:

Clearly, decisions regarding someone’s claim to be a lesbian were frequently based on the extent to which they conformed to Western stereotypes. Failure to meet these preconceived ideas often resulted in asylum claims being refused and women’s individual credibility being questioned.

The asylum system asks for membership of a particular social group and therefore focuses on fixed social identities. The system requires evidence for an ‘out’ sexuality: having a relationship, adopting a gay lifestyle including participating in lesbian and gay groups and Gay Prides and visiting the Gay Village, can form part of that proof that is expected to be produced (see Morgan 2006: 147; Bennett and Thomas 2013: 26). It is also often assumed that once LGBT people found ‘liberation’ and can live an openly gay lifestyle in the UK, they would do so. There is an assumption that they would ‘immediately’ start sexual relationships and if they do not so then this damages their credibility (O’Leary 2008: 90). Living a ‘Western’ sexual lifestyle is difficult for LGBT people who have been persecuted and/or prosecuted in their country of origin. They often experience internalised homophobia and a fear to talk about their sexuality. Women often come from cultures where they have learned not to talk about sexuality in general. In addition, the terms ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ often do not exist in these countries, where constructions of gender and sexuality might be different and therefore it is difficult for asylum claimants to identify as such when they come to the UK (see Berger 2009; O’Leary 2008).

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the intersections of ‘race’ and sexuality by drawing on two different territories of contestation of what it means to be a ‘genuine lesbian’. In the Gay Village some bodies that do not conform to the genuine lesbian norm are out of place and are made out of place. The dominant racialised image of the ‘genuine lesbian’ is performed through a certain habitus and is visible on ‘the scene’. Racist door policies include some and exclude others. Racialising practices such as ‘the look’, touching hair and racialised desire constitute the lesbian somatic norm.

The question of who counts as a 'genuine lesbian' becomes apparent most dramatically in the asylum process where women have to 'prove' that they are indeed lesbian if they claim asylum on grounds of sexuality. The country evidence that is used by Home Office officials and judges often draws on information that has been created for white middle-class gay travellers. The Supreme Court ruling is in some ways progressive, in other ways problematic. By dividing the group of gay and lesbian asylum seekers into two categories, those who live their sexuality openly and those who do not, it draws on a Western model of sexuality that requires public expression of sexual behaviour. A lesbian or gay asylum seeker needs to conform to racial and sexual stereotypes in order to be credible and to get the claim accepted. Part of this is to produce evidence of a (white) gay lifestyle.

In the asylum system, proof of 'belonging to a particular social group' is based on normative and racialized notions of the 'genuine lesbian', and so does belonging to the spaces of the Gay Village. As this chapter has demonstrated, whiteness seems to structure this normative sexual identity.

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