

‘They look at you like an insect that wants to be squashed’: an ethnographic account of the racialized sexual spaces of Manchester’s Gay Village

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*'They look at you like an insect that wants to be
squashed': An ethnographic account of the Racialized
Sexual Spaces of Manchester's Gay Village*

Introduction

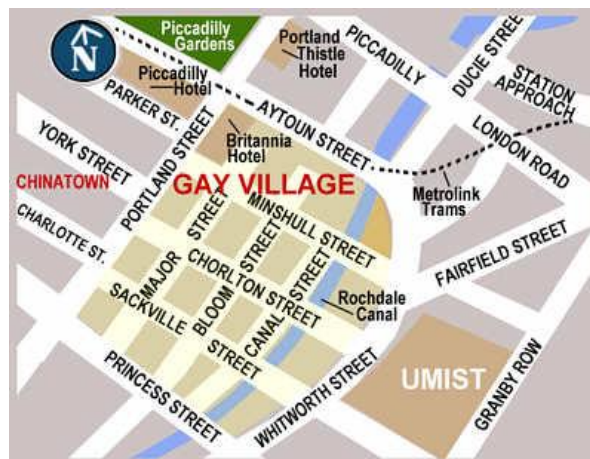


Figure 1: Street map of the Gay Village Manchester¹

There is a two-way relationship between bodies and spaces in the ways that some bodies are associated with certain spaces and some spaces are marked as belonging to certain bodies (Puwar, 2004). This becomes apparent when we examine urban areas. In Manchester, for instance, there are some areas that are ethnically, racially, or sexually marked, such as China Town and the Gay Village, which are located next to each other in the city centre (see Figure 1). Both are recognized spatial zones and are marked and named as

¹ Map by John Moss, Papillon Graphics 2002. Available at: www.manchester2002-uk.com/maps/gay-village-map.html (accessed 25 October 2015).

such on official city maps and in tourist guides. But if we imagine a woman who identifies as Chinese *and* as gay walking down Portland Street, which separates the two areas, on which side would her body belong? How would she experience her body in each of these spaces?² Whilst ethnicity and sexuality are the primary identity markers of each of these areas – as indicated in their names – in these areas, the relationship between 'race', sexuality, and space is complex and requires a nuanced exploration.

The sexualization of space has been explored in the field of sexual geographies since the 1970s, and such studies have proliferated since the mid-1990s, leading to a vast amount of research articles plus a few volumes (see, for instance, Bell and Valentine, 1995; Brown et al., 2007; Doan, 2015; Hubbard, 2012; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). These studies have shown how spaces are sexually structured and how space is constitutive in shaping sexuality, i.e., 'the ways in which the spatial and the sexual constitute each other' (Taylor, 1997: 3).

In a similar vein, critical 'race' theorists have explored the relationship between 'race' and space, and how the racial and the spatial constitute each other (see, for instance, Knowles, 2003; 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,

² I have taken this question from Esperanza Miyake, who spoke about her experiences walking down Portland Street to a Women's Studies lunch seminar at Lancaster University in 2006.

historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being “out of place”. Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders.

Puwar is interested in what happens when women and racialized minorities occupy certain positions from which they have previously been excluded, particularly in Parliament, senior civil service, academia and the art world. While women and racialized minorities can enter such elite positions (or positions of authority), inclusion and exclusion continue to function through the designation of a somatic norm which is white and male. Puwar (2004: 32) found that ‘whiteness and masculinity are embedded in the character and life of organisations’, although these spaces are not specifically defined in gendered or racialized terms.

This article looks at whether we can find a somatic norm in the night-time leisure spaces of Manchester's Gay Village. It explores how a ‘primarily’ sexualized space is simultaneously racialized. Indeed, we might argue that *all* spaces are inherently sexualized and racialized. The article examines how ‘race’ and sexuality work together to constitute space and how sexualized space that is inherently racialized constitutes racial-sexual subjectivities. Drawing on ethnographic research with bisexual and lesbian women, it focuses on the lived experiences of the intersections of sexuality and ‘race’ in certain spaces. Since the late 1970s, for example, black feminists have stressed the importance of acknowledging that different social identities intersect and that ‘the major systems of oppression are interlocking’ (Combahee River Collective, 1982: 13; see also, for instance, Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 1984a, 1984b). The intersecting experience of sexism, racism, and homophobia can

inflict a psychological toll on black bisexual and lesbian women (see Lorde, 1984a, 1984b; Nayak, 2014), even in LGBT spaces where they often have to perform 'emotional labour' (Kawale, 2004).

Looking at the co-constitutive relationship between 'race', sexuality, and space, this article reveals the significance of the spatial dimension of everyday intersectional experience and calls for researchers to pay more attention to 'space' as a concept when researching intersectionalities. As Caroline Knowles (2003: 9) argues, we cannot understand people 'without understanding their routes and the nature of their journeys: the ways in which they occupy and move through space. These things are fundamental to who they are in the world'.

According to Michael Brown (2013: 1), 'the gayborhood has become a touchstone of sexuality and space studies'. The last decade has seen an explosion of work on Gay Villages in various locales of the UK, North America, Australia, Singapore, and South Africa (see, for instance, Andersson, 2015; Caluya, 2008; Casey, 2004, 2007; Nero, 2005; Tan, 2015; Taylor, 2008; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2003, 2013). The cited studies suggest that these LGBT spaces are structured around a white, male, gay, middle-class identity and that exclusions are defined on grounds of gender, class, and 'race', in contrast to 'queer-friendly' neighbourhoods, for instance, that have the potential to be more inclusive, as indicated by Gorman-Murray's and Waitt's (2009) research in Australia. Some researchers have suggested that a certain form of *homonormativity* (a term coined by Lisa Duggan) is produced in LGBT spaces (see, for instance, Bell and Binnie, 2004; Brown, 2013; Casey, 2004, 2007; Oswin, 2008; Taylor, 2008). There have been interesting studies conducted on

the racialization of LGBT spaces in Australia (Caluya, 2008), the US (Andersson, 2015; Nero 2005), and South Africa (Livermon, 2014; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2003, 2013). In the UK, a few studies that have been conducted indicate racial practices of exclusion in LGBT spaces in London (GALOP, 2001; Kawale, 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993) and Birmingham (Bassi, 2006). Research that has looked at Manchester's Gay Village (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Hindle, 1994; Pritchard et al., 2002; Quilley, 1997; Simpson, 2013; Whittle, 1994) might mention racial exclusion, but researchers have not explored in depth the processes that are involved in racializing the space.

This article will discuss perceptions of the Gay Village as a 'racially neutral' space (see Sullivan, 2006: 158) and examine how space is sexualized and racialized through exclusionary practices and other intimate moments through which 'race', sexuality and space are made. But, first, let me provide some background of my study and the Gay Village.

Doing ethnographic research in Manchester's Gay Village

The ethnographic research³ this article draws on aimed to understand the relationship between sexuality, 'race', and space in the context of urban night-time leisure spaces for women. During 12 months of fieldwork, I conducted participant observation, primarily in the Gay Village's two lesbian

³ This study was financially supported by a Graduate Teaching bursary of the Institute for Women's Studies at Lancaster University and by an ESRC studentship (PTA-031-2006-00417).

bars, *Jaguars* and *Milk*⁴, and interviewed 19 bisexual and lesbian women, most of whom regularly visit those spaces.⁵ The women who participated in my research variously self-identified as white (11), mixed-race (4), black (3), and East Asian (1). The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 61; seven women self-identified as working-class, or having a working-class background, and eight as middle-class. (The remaining four women did not self-identify in terms of class.) I met most of the women who participated in my research in the two lesbian bars. As my study demonstrates, ethnographic research offers a particularly suitable way to grasp the spatial dimension of experiencing the intersections of 'race' and sexuality. 'Race' and sexuality are performative and we all take part in their making. Researchers are therefore complicit in this making (Fortier, 1998, 2000; Gunaratnam, 2003). My position as a white researcher in the field was complex, and I have written about my own complicity in the making of 'race' during my research elsewhere (Held, 2009).

Locating my research in Manchester's Gay Village, I look at processes of racialization in spaces specifically structured around sexuality and created for people who belong to a marginalized group. As Puwar (2004: 141) argues, the relationship between (gendered and racialized) bodies and spaces develops over time. Therefore, it is important to look at the development of the Gay Village's space. Manchester, a major city in the North West of England, is known for playing a key part in the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, the decline of the textile industry and the de-industrialisation process led to a strengthening of the

⁴ I used pseudonyms for these two bars as well as for all of the participants of my study.

⁵ One of the women is an organizer of *Black Angel*, a women's club night that usually attracts a more racially mixed clientele than any other women's night in Manchester.

service sector and growth of leisure and cultural spaces (Quilley, 1997). The Gay Village developed out of what was ‘formerly an isolated, derelict warehouse district’ (Pritchard et al., 2002: 109). When the first bar, *The New Union*, opened on Canal Street in 1959, homosexuality was still illegal in Britain.⁶ In its early days, the area was used for cottaging and as the site of secret meeting places for gay men.

The early 1990s marked a considerable change of the space from one that was dominated by hidden venues and secrecy to one that confidently expressed gay visibility. Marketing strategies and economic calculations played a central role in constructing the place that we know today. As Quilley (1997: 275) writes, the local council was generally not very supportive of lesbian and gay issues during the 1980s but because of this population’s contribution to Manchester’s leisure economy, the council sponsored the development of the Gay Village. Since 1991, it has been officially recognized as ‘gay space’ and marked as Gay Village on city maps. Today, it consists of more than 50 venues, including bars and clubs, a sex shop, a sauna, a hair dresser and several take-aways. It is one of the most popular sexualized spaces in the UK⁷ and thus plays an important role in Manchester’s night-time leisure economy and tourism. For instance, on the official tourist website 'Visit Manchester', under the heading 'Nightlife', the Gay Village features prominently:

⁶ Homosexuality was illegal in Britain until 1967, at which time it became legal only in private for two men over 21 years of age.

⁷ For instance, it was featured in the popular Channel 4 series, *Queer as Folk* (1999) and more recently in *Cucumber* (2015, Channel 4) and *Banana* (2015, E 4), all written by Russell T Davies and focusing on LGBT lives in Manchester (some of *Banana's* episodes were written by other authors).

A beacon of celebration in the city, the Gay Village is a must for any visitor to Manchester. Located just south of Chinatown, along and around Canal Street, the Village is both party central and a living piece of social history – proof that Manchester is one of the world's leading gay-friendly cities. Gay culture has flourished into a village-like community with a combination of bars, clubs, restaurants and green spaces set alongside a long stretch of the Rochdale Canal, making it the perfect setting for alfresco drinking and dining.⁸

Whilst the Gay Village came into being through a combination of deindustrialisation and the appropriation of space by a marginalized group, its development has also been affected by neoliberal marketing strategies and global city competitiveness (cities around the world promoting commodified gay space), where 'gayness' is seen as adding to the cosmopolitan, European, creative image of the city. The construction of this image, however, rests on gayness that expresses difference but is not so different as to be threatening to straight (and gay) users of the space. Therefore, a particular sexualized space is constructed that is based on homonormative consumer culture and excludes 'unwanted' sexual identities and practices like cruising areas (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). Furthermore, as Binnie and Skeggs (2004: 56) argue, while in other spaces 'race' adds cosmopolitan value, in Manchester's Gay Village 'where the essential authentic branding ingredient is sexuality, race has no place. It disrupts the homogeneity of the user-friendliness'. In addition, the commodification of gay space is structured by

⁸ <http://www.visitmanchester.com/articles/lgbt/canal-street-the-gay-village/> (accessed 10 June 2016).

gender and class in such a way that white, middle-class, gay men seem to be the users who can feel most comfortable in the space.

However, this is not to say that the Gay Village is not an important space for many of its users. The Gay Village's spaces are in some sense 'counterspaces' (Soja, 1996: 68) or 'counter-sites' to heteronormative spaces that are dominated by heterosexual identities and practices. Lesbian bars especially, such as *Milk* and *Jaguars*, might offer women a place of retreat from heterosexist, male-dominated spaces (Pritchard et al., 2004; Wolfe, 1997). In these bars, quite different versions of femininities are 'allowed' and produced than the ones expected in certain club spaces constructed as straight (see, for instance, Tan, 2014). As Natalie Oswin (2008) argues, queer spaces are not necessarily progressive spaces that transgress the normative. These spaces should be considered as not fixed but, rather, as contested space, a battleground for competing meanings of (gay) identity. As 'race', gender, and sexuality are inherent to spatial formations, these counter-sites are simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized (Bailey and Shabazz, 2014: 318).

White Spaces

Population statistics published by Manchester's City Council estimated that in 2007, when I carried out my fieldwork, all 'Non-White groups' made

up 24.2% of the city's population of half a million.⁹ On my frequent 20-minute bus journeys from Levenshulme, my neighbourhood of residence at the time, to the Gay Village, it always struck me how the racialization of space changed. Bus No. 192 passes through Longsight, a neighbourhood in the south of Manchester, which according to the statistics has the highest minoritized ethnic population (61.3%) in Manchester, before it arrives in the City Centre. Getting off the 'multicultural' bus at the Gay Village and walking down Canal Street, I was often reminded of the phrase 'sea of whiteness' (Ahmed, 2007: 157). Somehow, the area around Canal Street seems to be like a little 'village' in a big city where the 'multicultural' – coded as urban and racially diverse – seemingly disappears.

My study aimed to identify reasons for the apparent whiteness of the space. However, space is not only racialized based on the racialized bodies occupying it. My research looks at different forms of 'race making' within these spaces - how space is lived and imagined - as well as racialized perceptions. As I show below, the marking of the Gay Village as primarily sexualized space and other urban areas (such as China Town) as racialized, has an impact on how space is imagined and lived.

Most of the white participants in my study did not seem to be aware that Manchester's Gay Village is a predominantly white space.¹⁰ In addition, when women heard the title of my PhD thesis, 'Racialized Lesbian Spaces',

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http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200088/statistics_and_census_information/438/corporate_research_and_intelligence_population_publications/3, access date: 04/04/10.

¹⁰ In their defence, in the first ten years after my 'coming out', I had not been aware of the fact that most of the lesbian spaces I had visited had been predominantly white. I began to wonder: what makes lesbian spaces white? How do they become white? The question of why I had never 'seen' the whiteness of the lesbian spaces I visited was one of the starting points for my project.

they often referred me to racialized lesbian spaces other than the white ones because the racialization of whiteness and of predominantly white sexual spaces was often not 'seen' (see also Kawale, 2003). Like the perception of certain urban areas (such as China Town and the 'Curry Mile' in Manchester), club nights such as 'Black Angel' and 'Ultimate Karma' (see Bassi, 2006) are also racially marked, whereas most other lesbian and gay spaces are not perceived to be racialized and thus are racially unmarked. As scholars working on whiteness have argued, whiteness is often not considered a racial category (at least not by white people) and tends to work as the silent and unmarked 'racial norm' (see, for instance, Back and Ware, 2002; Byrne, 2006; Cuomo and Hall, 1999; Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, 1997). However, as Sullivan (2006: 158) argues, not seeing the racialization of white spaces might reinforce racism and white privilege:

The racialization of space and habits of lived spatiality often reinforces racism and white privilege. Yet the connection between race and space often is not seen because space is thought of as racially neutral.

When I probed participants in my study about the whiteness of the Gay Village, most of the white women did not mention any potential exclusionary practices. Some argued that black and Asian women and men do not go out in the village because of 'their' culture and/or 'their' religion. The accounts of two young white women, Louise and Carol, stood out in that respect. Louise (20, white, British) tried to find explanations for 'why you might not get different ethnic groups' in those spaces. She argued that

there might be some Asian lesbians or gay men that are hiding their sexuality because of how their family's gonna be treating them because it's ... there is different upbringing in different cultures, and it's against their culture and religion to be gay. I am not quite sure about the black, whether it's acceptable for them to be gay or not, but it's not many black people here, I don't think.

Cultural and religious non-acceptance of LGBT people was one of the reasons for Louise why the Gay Village is a predominantly white space. She drew clear racial boundaries here based on culture and religion and seemed to suggest that Asian and black women and men are not living a gay lifestyle because of cultural pressures.

Carol (20, white, British) used a similar argument. She said that the lesbian spaces are 'mainly ... obviously, mainly white'. When I probed her about that, she said

'cause, obviously, you're not gonna get a lot of Asians, I mean, I might sound racist here, and I apologise if I do, but a lot of Asians are possibly Muslim, Sikh, you know, anything, any kind of religion which is totally against having sex with a same-sex person.

While Louise spoke about culture, religion, and family, for Carol, it was mainly religion which accounted for the lack of presence of Asian LGBT people in the Gay Village. She used the rhetorical strategy of apologizing for

sounding racist before she constructed 'Asian religions' as homophobic. In another part of the interview, when we talked about what her dream lesbian space would look like, she said that it should be 'mixed', but that 'obviously you're not gonna get loads of Muslims in because that's their religion. That goes against their religion.' Sexuality and 'race' are thus linked in her assumption that Asian people are less likely to be gay because of their religion.

For both of these participants, it is mainly the 'other' religions, cultures and families that make it difficult to be gay. Through constructing it in such a way, they make whiteness the implicit normative device. 'White' religions and cultures are rendered as 'gay-friendly', i.e., open and accepting. This approach ignores the fact that the development of the Gay Village as a bounded space resulted from a need for safety from homophobic 'white cultures' (though this view is contested, see Visser, 2013). White (and/or Christian) lesbians and gay men are in fact often disowned by their families, and lesbian and gay spaces are often important for that precise reason. On the other hand, the construction of very popular British Asian LGBT spaces in Birmingham and London, for instance, challenge these assumptions (Bassi, 2006; Klesse, 2015).

But such arguments are also problematic in other ways. If one assumes that black and Asian people 'cannot' be gay because of their religion or culture, then black and Asian LGBT people who frequent the Gay Village are then likely to be perceived as heterosexual and maybe even homophobic. Such accounts implicitly carry notions of an 'unstable black sexuality' (Andersson, 2015: 271) and portray the 'racial other' as sexually oppressed. 'Muslim' and 'gay' seem to be especially incompatible identities, and the conflation of 'race'

and religion leads to a discourse that constructs Islam as a homophobic religion (Haritaworn et al., 2008; Puar, 2007). In addition, such arguments are problematic because intolerance towards LGBT issues is often used as justification for Islamophobia (see Hubbard and Wilkinson, 2015). These views foster homonationalism, 'where lesbian and gay tolerance is seen as a source of national pride and positioned against other seemingly less-tolerant nations' and contrasts the 'liberal' Western gay subject with the oppressed and/or homophobic non-Western subject (Hubbard and Wilkinson, 2014: 605). It is no surprise, then, that Asian LGBT people feel alienated in (white) LGBT spaces and experience racism and Islamophobia in these spaces (Bassi, 2006; Haritaworn et al., 2008; Kawale, 2003, 2004; Klesse, 2015; Puar, 2007).

Such perceptions of bodies affect not only the perception of nations as tolerant or less tolerant but also the perception of certain urban spaces. For instance, while white participants in my study did not talk about the Gay Village as a racialized space (unless I introduced the topic), other spaces such as the spaces in which they grew up and certain urban areas were defined as racialized. Carol and Louise, for instance, said that they felt 'awkward' or 'intimidated' in certain urban spaces they perceived to be racialized other than white. They, and other white women I interviewed, saw Asian men, in particular, as threatening and homophobic.

The perception and experience of the Gay Village as a sexualized 'racially neutral' space (see Sullivan, 2006: 158), and of some other areas in Manchester as racialized, creates a distance between these neighbourhoods and impacts how space is imagined and lived. Whilst the Gay Village is constructed as a tolerant, accepting and safe space, other areas in Manchester

that are perceived to be predominantly 'black' or 'Asian' (such as Moss Side or Rusholme) are perceived to be unsafe and threatening for LGBT people. In such discourses, the LGBT subject is constructed as inherently white, and racializing practices in the spaces of the Gay Village are ignored.

Racializing Practices

There are a few studies that illustrate racist practices in (white) lesbian and gay spaces in London and indicate a continuity of these practices across quite a long time period (see GALOP¹¹, 2001; Kawale, 2003; Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993). In Mason-John's and Khambatta's (1993) research on black lesbian experiences, which is 23 years old, some of those forms of racism included being refused entrance to certain venues (or only being allowed to enter when accompanied by white lesbians). Another racist practice is seen in clubs that do not play certain kinds of music in order not to attract a certain clientele (for instance, it is assumed that reggae attracts only black women) (Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993: 45-47). A survey carried out by GALOP in 2001 showed that of 145 black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals interviewed, 57% had faced some form of discrimination from the white lesbian and gay communities (GALOP, 2001: 18). The forms of discrimination identified ranged from subtle, such as being treated 'coolly' or 'stereotypically', to more direct, such as 'not getting served in clubs, being ignored and being treated as an exotic sex object.' (GALOP, 2001: 19) Rani

¹¹ GALOP is a London-based, independent, voluntary sector organization offering assistance to lesbians, gays and bisexuals who encounter homophobic violence (GALOP 2001: 4).

Kawale (2003, 2004) interviewed South Asian and white bisexual and lesbian women about their experiences in lesbian and gay spaces. The Asian lesbian and bisexual participants in her study described how they experienced most spaces as white, not only because most of the people present were white women but also because their bodies were 'read' and treated as 'the other' (Kawale, 2003: 184).

In my research the predominant racializing practices were (1) door policies, (2) practices of looking and touching and (3) the expressions of sexual desire, all of which I discuss below.

Door policies

Many bars and clubs in Manchester have bouncers at their doors, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. These bouncers decide who can enter these spaces and who cannot. In the Gay Village, in contrast to other spaces, bouncers might look specifically for people they perceive to be heterosexual and not let them in, as heterosexuals are often perceived as a threat in lesbian and gay spaces (see Casey 2004, 2007; Pritchard et al. 2002; Skeggs et al., 2004). While I was conducting 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, but I heard of and observed various incidents where black and Asian women and men had difficulties in accessing these bars (see also Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). Below are some examples.

One night, two members (an East Asian lesbian and a Latin gay man) of a 'going out group' that was formed during my research were not let into

Jaguars. When I got the text message from my participant and went outside to meet them, they told me that the bouncer did not believe that the two were not in fact a heterosexual couple (and the bouncer did not deny this). On another night, I witnessed a highly humiliating scene at the doors of a night club. I was out with two friends, a white British lesbian and a British Asian gay man. We had been to the two lesbian bars (where we had no difficulties getting in) and now approached the door of a gay night club. While my female friend and I passed the doorman easily, our male friend was stopped by the big, white, male (heterosexual?) bouncer who asked him whether he knew what kind of club it was, to which my friend obediently replied, 'Yes, I know what kind of club it is'. The bouncer then asked, 'So what is it?' 'It's a gay club'. The bouncer then turned to us and asked if our friend was gay. He did not gain entrance until we confirmed 'his gayness'. These two examples demonstrate ways in which bodies racialized as 'other' can be read as 'straight' and the difficulties this causes for black and Asian LGBT people who want to enter LGBT spaces and be part of the 'LGBT community'. Kawale (2003) also found in her research that South Asian women experienced exclusionary door policies and that their sexuality was questioned at the door. Because the space is marked as belonging to certain bodies (Puwar, 2004), it is the white lesbian or gay body (such as mine) that can claim ownership of the space.

Whilst in the two cases above, sexuality was questioned at the door, in other incidents black and Asian friends and participants were turned away at bars of the Gay Village, for reasons that they were 'too drunk' or 'not old enough' or 'it's full' or 'the bar is for regulars' (see also Tucker, 2009). One night, a friend of mine was celebrating her birthday with a group of friends in

the Gay Village. At one of the bars on Canal Street, we were all let in except for a mixed-race friend. The bouncer told him that he was not allowed in as he 'had caused trouble before', while in fact this man had never visited the bar before.

While it is often not easy for *one* black or Asian person to enter a LGBT venue, gaining access seems to be more difficult when coming in a *group*. One of my participants, Joanne (29, mixed-race, British) facilitated a black LGBT support group at a local charity at the time of my research. She told me in the interview that her group members had reported difficulties getting into lesbian and gay venues in the Gay Village, especially when coming in a group of more than three or four. The organizer of Black Angel said that she thinks one of the reasons for that 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'. I remembered her description one New Year's Eve, when a gay nightclub closed early, after a group of black people who were very visible in the predominantly white space came in. The police officers who were waiting outside hardly looked at our white faces or the faces of other white patrons when we left the club. When I asked what had happened, I was told that 'the bouncer should not have let people in who should not be in there'. We might see here, as Andersson (2015) has shown with regard to the struggles over space in New York's West Village, how black LGBT people are often perceived as threatening in predominantly white LGBT spaces.

It has been argued that because the dominant representation of LGBT people is white (Kawale, 2003, 2004), before the bouncers' exclusionary

practices are expressed, a racialized image of the space as constructed around a somatic norm (see Puwar, 2004) might already be in place. In the Gay Village, the LGBT somatic norm represented in magazines and on flyers is white. One afternoon I was sitting with Joanne and a male member of the black LGBT support group in a bar on Canal Street. He was flipping through a copy of a free lesbian and gay magazine and when he got to the last page, he began shaking his head. He told us that he had found 'not one single black face' in the magazine. On flyers advertising lesbian and gay venues, events and groups in Manchester the somatic norm is also white.¹² For instance, the specific representation on *Milk's* flyers suggest that only selected women are addressed as potential and desired clientele: women who are young, white, in good shape ('six pack abs'), and able-bodied. Women who do not fit into this image might not feel they are being addressed.

Exclusionary practices by the bouncers in combination with a dominant lesbian and gay image embodied in the bars and represented on flyers construct a somatic norm that is lived and imagined in these spaces. One night I got a text message from a friend telling me that her housemate was in the Gay Village. I had never met her housemate before, and all I knew was that she was black. My friend said, 'Maybe you'll see her, white shirt, jeans'. Here then, blackness was the decisive marker, as in those spaces on a busy Saturday night there are usually many women who are wearing jeans and white shirts. However, what this example really illustrates is how the lesbian somatic norm functions in representations as well as in the imagery of bodies and spaces.

¹² Although it might be argued that black and Asian LGBT people have been more included in the representation of LGBT people over the last years in magazines, on flyers, in the media, etc., the somatic norm underlying representations of the gay body remains white.

‘Race’ is one marker of this norm. As she was writing that text, my friend must have imagined the lesbian bodies within these spaces as being white; otherwise she could not have assumed that I would be able to spot her friend given her brief description.

‘The Look’

In *Jaguars* and *Milk*, ‘looking’ is a key spatial practice. It is a form of addressing someone in the hope that the other woman looks back and is often used as a first step in a flirtatious encounter. Studies on sexuality and space have shown how ‘looking’ practices contribute to the sexualization of bodies and spaces (Munt, 1995; Rooke, 2007; Valentine, 1995). While these studies have focused on the heteronormative gaze or the pleasurable look constructing lesbian identities, ‘the look’ as described by some of my participants is quite different (see also Caluya, 2008; Klesse, 2015).

As I conducted my interviews, one thing that struck me was that all of the women in this study racialized as ‘other’ gave accounts of receiving certain looks in *Jaguars* and *Milk*, and most of them defined these looks as forms of racism experienced in those spaces. In the following examples I discuss the three most powerful accounts of ‘the look’ that were given by mixed-race and black women, Joanne, Natasha, and Hope.

When I asked Joanne about her experiences with racism in lesbian and gay spaces she gave this description of ‘the look’:

Joanne: Ehm... one of the things what’s difficult and different about racism which is, like, really hard to explain for some people ...

sometimes, like, this is hard for people to grasp, – other than the people who have experienced it – but 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, you know. So when you go into that sort of environment, if you are on your own and you say to another white person, blah-blah, I don’t like that person, that person doesn’t like me, they are racist”, they’re, like, ‘No, don’t be silly’. But if you are with another black person, they will know instantly because they all had that feeling before.

To Joanne, ‘the look’ signals dislike, even hate and disgust. Her account echoes other accounts by ‘race’ scholars, in particular by Frantz Fanon (1967) and Audre Lorde (1984a), who both wrote about their bodies being perceived as non-human by the white looker. Fanon’s account of an encounter with a white child on the streets of Paris (in the 1950s) is perhaps the most prominent description of the racializing look as he described the fears of the child with these words: ‘The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly’ (Fanon, 1967: 113). Lorde (1984a) also uses an insect analogy for her body in her description of ‘the look’. She describes an incident that happened one Christmas in New York in the 1930s, when as a child, she was riding the subway with her mother. When she sat down in a ‘tight “almost seat”’, the woman sitting beside her started staring at her, twitched her mouth, and pulled her own coat away. She thus communicated ‘her horror’ and displayed hate in her eyes (Lorde, 1984a: 147). Not understanding that the

woman did not want to touch her, the young Lorde thought that there was a roach on the seat and pulled her coat away, too. The woman then stood up angrily and held on to a strap handle. Wondering what she did wrong, Lorde looked to see what was there, only to realize it was her the woman did not want to touch. (Lorde, 1984a: 147-148)

Natasha (32, black, British) received ‘the look’ during her first and only visit to *Jaguars*. She told me that she had noticed the whiteness of the space and seen that she was the only black customer as soon as she walked in. While she was waiting for me and her partner to come back from the bar, a white woman looked at her and started laughing and said something to her friend, who was standing next to her. Natasha described this look as a ‘piercing’ look, as 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’. After receiving ‘the look’, Natasha wanted to leave the place straight away. She never went back to *Jaguars* because she said she has no reason to go to places where she feels uncomfortable.

One night I was sitting with Hope (42, black, British) on a sofa in *Jaguars*. We were watching the crowd around us, mainly young white women. There was only one other black woman there. We talked about *Black Angel* and Hope's eyes sparkled. She said it was ‘brilliant’, that there was always ‘a mix there’ (black and Asian women). Now that *Black Angel* would run only very irregularly, she believed that nothing would be provided in Manchester for black women. When we talked about the whiteness of *Jaguars*’ space, she asked why they (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. When we recorded our interview a few months after that night in *Jaguars*, I asked her if she had ever experienced racism in lesbian and gay spaces. She said that it was not that somebody would say something, ‘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’. When I asked her to further explain ‘the look’, 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 spoke 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, i.e., how we see or do not see ‘race’ actually produces what we think we see. So in Firth’s example it seems that her black body is made into a ‘threatening black body’.

Critical ‘race’ theorists such as Fanon (1967), bell hooks (1992), Lorde (1984a), Sara Ahmed (1997) and Gail Lewis (2004) have shown how looking practices operate within relationships of power that are structured by ‘race’, and that ‘the look’ is experienced in various times and places. What distinguishes ‘the look’ from other kinds of looks is that a colonial history is inscribed in it. Looking practices are inscribed with power, which means that some people have an entitlement to look while others either do not or their ‘looking back’ does not have the same authority (hooks, 1992). The incidents these authors describe all seem to refer to spaces (and the bodies of the onlookers) constituted as white. Joanne, Natasha, and Hope experience the

Gay Village as a space constituted as white. While Fanon, Ahmed, Lewis and Lorde all write about 'the look' in sexually unspecified spaces, 'the look' my participants described occurred in explicitly sexualized spaces where, paradoxically, looking is a major spatial practice. Although 'the look' might not be experienced only in lesbian spaces, in those spaces where sexualizing looking practices are expected and often desired, it has particular affects. The different kinds of piercing looks described that express dislike and fear and signal that the person being looked at is 'out of place' are tangible racist practices that translate into feelings of discomfort and not wanting to be in the space (Held, 2015).

'The touch'

While 'the look' is a racializing practice that singles women out as being different to the white lesbian somatic norm, another racializing practice that has a similar effect is 'the touch', especially touching hair. After her description of 'the look' given above, Joanne, who has Afro-like hair (not a 'real' Afro, as she said), gave this account:

People, I mean, that's another irritating thing, I mean hair is [laughs], the difference in hair, this is quite a big thing for a lot of, a lot of my black friends and has been for me. It's like a lot of people wanna touch your hair because it's different. When you're on a night out, you don't want someone coming up and rubbing their hands in your hair because it's gonna mess it up, you know, you just don't want people touching it.

Joanne believes that white people have the desire to touch her hair because it is different. During my fieldwork, Joanne and I had a few nights out together. During almost all of these nights, the difference in hair impacted Joanne's experience of the spaces in the Gay Village, either because white women touched her hair (with or without asking) or because Afro wigs were worn as a 'humorous' accessories by patrons or promoters of the bars and clubs we visited. Natasha also mentioned her hair as being an interesting object for white women, who often ask questions about it or want to touch it, but 'even with best intentions, the constant questioning and uninformed commentary by White people can lead to frustration, hostility and hurt' (Byrd and Tharps, 2001: 147).¹³

Although some physical proximity might be expected and desired in these spaces, 'rubbing hands in your hair' is a practice that crosses physical boundaries in an unacceptable way. Critical 'race' scholars have shown that 'race' is not only a historical and social construct but that it is also a social practice that is in process and continuously in the making through everyday interactions (see, for instance, Ahmed, 1997; Byrne, 2006; Lewis, 2007). 'The look' and 'the touch' are both 'practices of the skin' through which bodies become racialized (see Lewis, 2004). As a social practice, touching can illustrate power dynamics and affirm white power as one person somehow 'consumes' the body of the Other (see hooks, 1992).

¹³ Although the other mixed-race and black participants of my study did not mention any incidents of their hair being touched, I did not specifically address the issue and, unlike Natasha and Joanna, they might have not defined this specifically as 'experiences of racism experienced in the Gay Village'.

History is thus inscribed in such encounters, as the bodies involved in the encounter are shaped by histories of colonialism (see Ahmed, 2002). As a racial signifier, hair has been historically inscribed with social and symbolic meaning. In the era of scientific racism and colonialism, the appearance of hair was used as a signifier of European superiority and African inferiority constituting whiteness as the measure of beauty (Mercer, 2002). 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 stigmatisation of black people’s hair was evident in children’s books and figures like the Golliwog and still persists every day in degrading comments made by white people (Mercer, 1994: 101-102). Joanne told me that she is sometimes apprehensive about what people are going to say when they touch her hair as she heard comments like ‘Oh, it is so greasy’, ‘It feels funny’, or ‘It’s oily’. Within white normative culture, there is little affirmation of African-Caribbean hairstyles, which, actually are often ridiculed (Bankhead and Johnson, 2014: 96-97; Thompson, 2009: 855).

Joanne also described the desire to touch her hair as a form of racial exoticification, where some (imagined) bodily characteristics are defined as particularly desirable. For instance, one night in *Jaguars* she was approached by a feminine, white, blonde woman who began flirting with her. She grabbed both of Joanne’s hands, and while she was trying to dance with her, said that she ‘loves Afro hair’. However, hair is just one racialized somatic marker. Other markers are skin, lips, sexual organs, and buttocks (see, for instance, the exoticification of Sarah Baartman, who was exhibited in London and elsewhere in Europe in the early 19th century). In our interview, Joanne told me about

other ways in which her body was exotified in the Gay Village. It has happened that women have come up to her and wanted to kiss her lips, saying things like 'I have never kissed black lips before', 'I have a friend who is black', or 'I like black people, they are cool'. With these exotifications and practices of touching the white lesbian body again perpetuates itself as the somatic norm.

'Eating the Other'

LGBT club spaces are sites where sexual desire and non-desire are negotiated. This is often channelled along ethnic/ racial lines (see Caluya, 2008; Kawale, 2003; Lorde, 1984b). Similar to what Caluya has described in his research in Sydney (2008, 284), in Manchester 'racialized desires frame and structure gay spaces'. On a night out in *Jaguars*, one of the participants of my study, Maya (white, 23, East European), quite frankly told me that she does 'not like black'. When I asked her what she meant, she said they were not her 'type'. Facing the discursive problem of finding 'legitimate' reasons for her racialized desire whilst at the same time appearing not to be racist (see Gill, 1996), she then added that she likes mixed-race women.

In the interview that I conducted a few weeks later, Maya drew on a well-established discourse of lighter skin being more attractive than darker skin (see Tate, 2007; Weekes, 1997) by explaining that she likes 'mixed skin' and 'brown' skin, which she defined as 'sexy', but that she cannot imagine having a relationship with someone who is 'black black'. On other occasions, it became clear that black women are not just 'not her type' but that the thought of engaging in physical/sexual intimacy with a black woman caused

disgust in her. One night, when a white woman whom she had kissed a night before, kissed a black woman, Maya had a disgusted expression on her face. She said, 'Uuuuh, I will never kiss her again'. Here, we are reminded of Lorde's (1984a) account of her subway ride (described above) where the white woman desperately tried not to touch her as if in fear of contamination, symbolized by the image of the cockroach.

In other moments during my research, I observed that black women were not seen as undesirable but as 'exotic'. One night, Maya brought another (white) friend with her and told me that her friend 'wants to have something with a black girl'. The same night, Maya kissed an East Asian woman. She told me the next day that she had said to her friend that she would like to 'have something with an Asian girl'. Here again we can see how 'racialized others' can experience both, sexual rejection and fetishisation (Caluya, 2008).

This account seems to be very similar to what hooks (1992) has called 'eating the Other'. Hooks argues that in mass culture Otherness is commodified as something which gives some spice to the 'mainstream white culture'. In that respect, 'race' and ethnicity are used as resources for pleasure. The desire for contact with the Other for the transgression of racial boundaries is rooted in an imagined promise of changing the white self through the encounter. As hooks (1992: 23) argues, it is 'the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other.'

Maya was not the only participant in my study who took on the 'the role of cultural tourists' (hooks, 1992: 17). We were both members of a 'going out group' that was an ethnically and racially mixed group and met regularly in

the Gay Village. In the more intimate spaces within this group, sexuality was often negotiated around 'race'. Here, not only black and Asian women were exoticized, but racialized desires were also expressed over various racial and ethnic boundaries and included 'Latin girls', 'Asian girls', 'black girls', 'Scandinavian women', and 'Indian girls' (it is interesting here to note the implicit valuation and racialization of 'girls' vs. 'women'). Because at the time I had a relationship with a woman who was mixed-race, I was made into someone who 'likes black women' in the group members' eyes. My 'racialized desire' was often a topic of conversation, as when sometimes I was asked if I liked black women and sometimes when it was just assumed that I did, which also suggested that others *excluded* black women in their own sexual desires. As Bailey and Shabazz (2014a: 317-318) highlight, 'black communities both historically and contemporaneously serve the sexual desires of the broader white world' but such desires for black sexuality are 'integral to the marginalization of black people'.

Conclusion

This article opened with a description of a Chinese lesbian walking down Portland Street, which divides China Town and the Gay Village, and the question of which side her body would belong. Essentially, this question addresses issues of the lived experience of intersectionality. The question seems easier to answer if we imagine a white lesbian walking down that same street. Although the Gay Village is primarily identified as a sexualized space,

and China Town as racialized, both are racialized *and* sexualized spaces. The spaces of the Gay Village are structured around whiteness, which is perpetuated through a somatic norm that operates in different ways. Spaces do not only become racialized through racialized bodies occupying them but also through how these bodies can enter spaces, move through them, and interact with others in them. The racializing processes discussed in this article can best be described as 'practices of the skin', a phrase coined by Gail Lewis (2004, 2007). Lewis uses this phrase to refer to ordinary, performative, everyday practices in which the boundaries of (racial) belonging are constructed and which give meaning to interactions and experiences, often through intersections with gender (or, as demonstrated with my research, sexuality).

Through 'looking' practices, expressions of racialized desire and practices of touching, boundaries of racial categories are constructed that mark the white lesbian body as the somatic norm and other racialized bodies as 'out of place'. This marking operates on a spatial level by creating closeness and distance between bodies and keeping space white. Here, not only are 'racialized others' seen as invaders of space, but by touching hair and expressing racialized desire, white people also invade the physical space of 'racialized others'. For black and Asian women, these tangible racist practices translate into feelings of discomfort, non-belonging, and not wanting to be in the space. Whenever such encounters happened, participants in my study felt reluctant to re-visit these places. Hence, needless to say, the whiteness of the Gay Village arises from exclusionary practices rather than cultural non-acceptance of LGBT identities, as was suggested by Louise and Clare. By conflating 'race', ethnicity, culture, and religion, 'racialized others' are

sexualized as heterosexual (and potentially homophobic), and the LGBT body is constructed as white, which creates the representations of a somatic norm and affects door policies. White LGBT bodies are thus associated with the Gay Village, which is in turn, marked as belonging to white LGBT bodies.

These practices challenge any definition of a unified 'community' or LGBT spaces as accepting and inclusionary spaces. Inscribed in such racialized encounters is the legacy of colonialism and power relations, where body characteristics such as skin, lips, and hair became meaning and value. Indeed, we might ask how the old cotton mills' bricks in the Gay Village carry the legacy of colonialism and slavery, considering the fact that Manchester played a central role in the trade in slaves and slavery, even after the abolition of slavery (see Sherwood, 2007). Not only was slave-grown cotton used in these mills, the Rochdale canal that passes through the Gay Village was also used for transporting slave traded goods in the early 19th century.

The experiences of space act back upon the body and feelings of belonging. The structuring of space around homonormative positions – white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered¹⁴ – makes it difficult for others who occupy different positions to feel 'in place'. Whilst this article has looked at the intersections of 'race' and sexuality, other signifiers like (cis/trans)gender, class, age, disability, intersect with them. For instance, we might ask how door policies are based on both 'race' and class so that black LGBT people might be read as being 'lower in status' and therefore not wanted in the space (see Tucker, 2009).

¹⁴ This term describes having a gender identity that matches the assigned sex.

Indeed, the question is this: Can we create intersectional spaces on the basis of one core identity as it is done in the Gay Village? Maybe the concept of Gay Villages is fundamentally flawed because it is based on Western notions of sexuality and the creation of space that focuses on fixed identities (Visser, 2013). More research needs to be done that (1) focuses on how the somatic norm operates and (2) explores processes of the racialization of whiteness – the historical production of white LGBT identities and spaces and how whiteness is inherent in the homonormative structure of these spaces. In addition, more research could be done on the psychological effects of these exclusionary practices.

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