Comfortable and safe spaces?: Gender, sexuality and 'race' in night-time leisure spaces

1. Introduction

> It's [the Gay Village in Manchester] still, it is still gay, but I can totally see what people say. I used to get very, I used to get quite annoyed with it, with … and people turn around, they go, 'oh, why do you need your own space and why can't you just share?' I'm like, 'Dude, you've got all the straight town. Why [have] you gotta take this tiny little part that we have to go out and *feel safe* and *feel comfortable* in?' Like, 'why have you gotta dominate that as well?' (N: yeah, yeah). Like 'come and be gay for a day in a straight club and tell me if you want your own space or not'. (Kathryn, 26, white, my emphasis)

Feelings of comfort and safety seem to play an important role in night-time leisure spaces like Manchester's Gay Village that are created for marginalised groups. As Kathryn suggests above, because marginalised groups need safe spaces, the boundaries of these spaces require protection. In that sense, heterosexuals are often perceived as a threat in lesbian and gay spaces (see Casey 2004, 2007; Pritchard et al. 2004; Skeggs 1999; Skeggs et al. 2004). But what does it mean to feel comfortable and safe in spaces in the Gay Village? Does anyone truly feel comfortable and safe? Why? Why not? On what does feeling comfortable and safe depend on? Is comfort closely linked to identity (see Holliday 1999)? Is a sense of security fundamental to identity and belonging (see Noble 2005)?

Skeggs et al. (2004) have explored how notions of comfort and safety are sexualised in research that focused on experiences and practices of safety as opposed to violence in Manchester's Gay Village. Their research participants often used the word 'comfort' when talking about experiences of safety (Skeggs et al. 2004, 83). As Skeggs et al. argue (2004, 84),

comfort is defined against a wider experience of danger and insecurity in regard to physical violence, in contrast to a more diffuse form of threat or a wider spectrum of insecurity, danger, and loss of safety. Because Skeggs et al.'s research focused on safety in relation to homophobic violence, heterosexuals somehow, and inevitably, became the focus of threats against safety. For instance, the researchers distributed questionnaires in venues in the Gay Village on which one of the questions was 'How safe would you say the Village is at moment?' (Corteen 2002, 265). The researchers linked this question and the answers they received to sexuality and the sexual identities of those who answered that question. But what about other identities that intersect with sexuality, how do they impact on feelings of safety in this sexualised space?

Geographers of sexualities who have researched gay urban areas for the last 30 years (see Brown 2013), have shown that not only sexuality but also other identities play an important role in experiences of lesbian and gay spaces. Whilst in this respect, sexuality, gender (appearance), age, class and ability have been researched as identities of 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 (GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). This article aims to address this gap by critically examining racialising processes, alongside gendering and sexualising processes, within lesbian and gay night-time leisure spaces. While most of these studies 'touch upon' the emotional impact that exclusions and a sense of non-belonging have, the relationship between emotions and space within the sexualised spaces of the 'scene' has not yet been fully explored (see Kawale 2004). I suggest that the fairly new, emerging field of 'emotional geographies', which looks at the interrelationship between emotions and space, could be productively used here. (See, for instance, Anderson and Smith 2001; Bondi et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2009.) But the relevance of emotions in night-time leisure spaces has been underexplored (see Hubbard 2005, 132). This article draws on,

brings together and contributes to the fields of geographies of sexualities and emotional geographies in order to explore the relationship between emotions, sexuality and night-time leisure space.

Sara Ahmed (2004) argues in the *Cultural Politics of Emotions* that emotions are not just personal, psychological matters, they are not just something inside of us that we personally 'own' or 'have', but neither are they just socially constructed from the outside. As she suggests, they

> create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects, and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. (Ahmed 2004, 10)

According to Ahmed, emotions are performative in the sense that they are (repetitive) social and cultural practices. This article follows Ahmed's understanding of emotions as performative and tries to explore not so much what the emotional states of comfort and safety 'are' but what they 'do'. By drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Manchester's Gay Village, it offers a rethinking of comfort and safety as not just feelings individuals have but as being constitutive of sexual, gender, and racial subjectivities and spaces. Looking from an intersectional perspective at lesbian experiences within lesbian and gay night-time leisure spaces, this article contributes to a rather small body of literature that examines these experiences (see Podmore 2013a: 222), and includes an analysis of 'race' as a social category shaping these experiences.

2. Emotions and Space

Emotions and spaces are interconnected. However, as emotional geographers argue, emotions have been neglected in geographical studies, even in human and social geography. They remain absent in most geography texts (Smith et al. 2009, 3; see also Anderson and Smith 2001; Bondi et al. 2005). *Emotional Geographies* fundamentally challenges the discipline by highlighting the lack of representation of people's emotional lives and their relationships to spatial processes (Smith et al. 2009, 4). Work in this area helps us to understand emotions not as entirely interiorised mental states but in terms of their 'socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation' (Bondi et al. 2005, 3, original emphasis), as 'produced in the interplay between and among people and environments' (Bondi et al. 2005, 9). For instance, the two edited collections published in this field to date, *Emotional Geographies* (Bondi et al. 2005) and *Emotion, Place and Culture* (Smith et al. 2009), explore the relationship between emotions, people and places by discussing themes such as health and embodiment, tourism, bereavement, memory, emotions in research, cultural constructions of emotions in art (Bondi et al. 2005), plus our relationships with animals, belonging, environmental decisions, trauma of war, loss, and grief (Smith et al. 2009). The places that are looked at in that respect are the home, hospices, hospitals, urban spaces, nature and rural landscapes (Bondi et al. 2005).

This article investigates the emotional experiences of night-time leisure spaces, which, according to Phil Hubbard (2005, 132) have been underexplored by geographers. He argues that the

> idea that evening and night-time leisure is emotionally-charged has not been widely explored, but offers massive potential for understanding people’s participation in an evening economy that is increasingly important part of the urban economy.

Hubbard looks at emotional experiences of night-time leisure spaces in Leicester’s city centre in comparison with emotional experiences of leisure spaces outside the city centre. He analyses how his interviewees emotionally experience those spaces and how those spaces are differently associated with forms of managing emotions. The main finding of his research is that many of his participants preferred visiting peripheral leisure spaces because the urban spaces were associated with negative emotions like fear (Hubbard 2005, 131). His interviewees found multi-leisure parks outside the city centre to be more comfortable and safer than the urban spaces. While he mentions that ‘encounters with social difference’ led especially to negative emotions in city centre leisure spaces (Hubbard 2005, 127), he does not explore those differences. He also does not lay out whether there were any differences in his interviewees’ responses in terms of gender, age, ‘race’, ability, class, and sexuality. He adds that it would be important for further analysis to look at how different social groups negotiate emotions in the city (Hubbard 2005, 132). As this article demonstrates, gender, ‘race’, and sexuality play a crucial role in the emotional experiences of night-time leisure spaces.

Analysing the relationship between gender and space, feminist geographers have demonstrated not only that spaces are gendered but also that the use of space is gendered and structured by women’s fear of male violence (see, for instance, Pain 1997; Valentine 1989). As Liz Bondi (2005) has argued, feminist geographies, especially geographies of women’s fear, are one of the geographical traditions (besides humanistic geography and non-representational geography) that have laid important inspirations for the development of emotional geographies. Geographies of women’s fear have explored emotions as generated by and expressive of wider

social relations. As Rachel Pain (1997, 233) has argued 'There is, however, a need to pay closer attention to what is feared and who is fearful'. Pain's work in particular shows that fear in urban spaces is not only gendered but experienced through class and age. Feminist and other emotional geographers have shown how emotions are shaped by space, how space is shaped by emotions, and what role social identities such as gender, sexuality, age, and (dis-)ability play in this relationship. By exploring issues of comfort and safety in the night-time leisure spaces of the Gay Village, this article looks at gender, sexuality, and 'race' in particular and offers an intersectional approach to the studies of emotional geographies.

3. Sexuality and Space

As geographers of sexualities have shown since the 1990s, 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). Such studies have vividly shown how sexuality is made in everyday interactions in certain places and how those interactions sexualise space. Everyday spaces (such as the street, the home, workplace), for instance, are constituted as heterosexual through repetitive heterosexual performances (see Bell and Valentine 1995; Ingram et al. 1997; Johnson and Valentine 1995; Valentine 1993; Valentine 1996). As has already been mentioned, another 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 particular lesbian and gay identities are constructed in Gay Villages that exclude differences on grounds of class, 'race', (dis)ability, sexual desires, and gender (appearance) but produce normativities and a certain form of *homonormativity,* a term coined by Lisa Duggan (see Bell and Binnie 2004; Brown 2013; Casey 2004, 2007; Rooke 2007; Taylor 2008). These studies have revealed that Gay Villages focus on an able-bodied, white, middle-class, young clientele and are male dominated.

The racialisation of Gay Villages has been shown in studies such as Charles Nero's (2005) description of the development of gay ghettos in the U.S. such as the Castro in San Francisco or Faubourg Marigny in New Orleans. His study shows how racial exclusions begin with the initial claiming of gay neighbourhoods where white, middle-class, gay men network and encourage each other to buy property. Gilbert Caluya's research (2008), conducted in Sydney's gay scene, shows how gay spaces are structured and segregated by racialised desires. He describes how gay Asian men experience the 'scene' as a space of racial segregation and racially-based sexual rejections or fetishisations and exocifications. In the UK, a survey carried out by GALOP[1] 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 range 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) Kawale (2003, 2004) and Mason-John and Khambatta (1993) demonstrate how black bisexual and lesbian women experience racism in lesbian spaces, which I discuss below.

[1] GALOP is a London-based, independent, voluntary sector organisation offering assistance to lesbians, gays and bisexuals who encounter homophobic violence (GALOP 2001, 4).

The gendering of Gay Villages has also been demonstrated. Not only are Gay Villages male (gay) dominated, but the presence of heterosexual women in lesbian and gay spaces impact lesbians' feelings of comfort and safety, often to the point that lesbians can feel totally excluded from the space (see Casey 2004; Skeggs 1999). Beverley Skeggs' research (1999) conducted in Manchester's Gay Village has shown that while 'for straight women the gay space offers a space away from the demands of heterosexuality, specifically men and hetero-masculine performances' (Skeggs 1999: 225), they still reinscribe certain gender norms which make lesbians feel uncomfortable. Because of these gender dynamics, the existence of lesbian spaces within Gay Villages has a certain importance.

As Julie A. Podmore (2013a) argues, it is important to not only focus on exclusions but also demonstrate inclusions of lesbians in gay spaces. She shows how during the 1990s lesbian venues in Montreal's Gay Village were productive sites for the production of lesbian identity and community. Her research demonstrates that while lesbians experienced gendered exclusions in the city's Gay Village, they nevertheless played an active part in its development. Lesbians also played an important role in the development of Manchester's Gay Village, and lesbian spaces such the Gay Village's first lesbian bar, *Milk*[2], can be seen as an important leisure space for lesbians in a male-dominated environment, 'becoming a safe, lesbian sanctuary; a place where women can escape the pressures they face outside, even in the rest of the village' (Pritchard et al 2004, 116).

However, this view has been challenged by research that shows that in lesbian spaces class, sexuality, gender appearance and 'race' also play a crucial role so that not all lesbians feel safe. One of the few studies that focus on black lesbian experiences is Mason-John's and Khambatta's (1993) research (which is now more than 20 years old). This research reveals forms

[2] In this article I use pseudonyms for the two lesbian bars as well as for all my participants.

of racism that black lesbians experienced, such as being refused entrance to certain venues or only being allowed to enter when accompanied by white lesbians, or clubs not playing certain kinds of music in order not to attract a certain clientele (it is assumed, for instance, that reggae would attract only black women) (Mason-John and Khambatta 1993, 45-47). Rani Kawale (2003, 2004) has also written about the racialisation of gay venues in London. Her research shows how Asian lesbian and bisexual women experience most lesbian and gay spaces in London 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). Her white participants, on the other hand, experienced these spaces very differently. It is important to note, however, that there are also other differences that produce exclusions within the group of white lesbians.

In their studies of predominantly white, working-class, bisexual women and lesbians, Alison Rooke (2007) and Yvette Taylor (2007, 2008) show how lesbian spaces are structured by class. Rooke (2007) argues that a classed 'lesbian habitus' exists that determines a sense of belonging and non-belonging in homonormative lesbian spaces. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the 'habitus', Rooke defines the lesbian habitus as *'a visible expression of embodied lesbian cultural capital'* (Rooke 2007, 232, original emphasis) and as 'ways that lesbian identity is made visible, performed, and expressed' (Rooke 2007, 239). According to Rooke, the lesbian habitus is classed but also gendered and primarily representative of butch appearances. It has been argued by others that butch women are generally regarded as more authentic than 'feminine lesbians', who are often accused of being 'straight looking' (see Cefai 2004, 108), which creates a feeling in feminine lesbians of being an outsider in the lesbian spaces. Exclusions are also produced by sexual behaviour that determines the authenticity of the category lesbian, or what a 'real' lesbian is. Women feel they are not '100 per cent' lesbian if

they experience an attraction to men; this indicates that the construction of a lesbian identity is fixed and does not allow sexual fluidity (see McLean 2008).

The studies referenced here have shown that there are differences within the lesbian and gay community that produce exclusions and shutter the vision of a place of comfortable sameness (see Taylor 1997). Podmore argues that the concept of homonormativity creates a binary of inclusion/exclusion that neglects spatial complexities and might actually reify the normative at the expense of difference (see Podmore 2013b). She suggests decentring homonormativity and focusing on intersectionalities instead (Podmore 2013b). I agree with Podmore and therefore, whilst also looking at issues of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging produced by gender, class, and 'race', this article does so by focusing on processes and complexities rather than taking identities as fixed social entities. The article examines not only how comfort and safety are shaped by intersections of gender, class and 'race' but also how comfort and safety shape these social categories. By including processes of racialisation in my analysis, my article aims to bring 'race' more to the forefront in discussions of inclusion and exclusion in Gay Villages. 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). By using an emotional geographies framework, this article brings a different perspective to the literature on experience in the sexualised spaces of Gay Villages.

4. A Mancunian Ethnography

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The present article draws on my ethnographic research for my PhD thesis titled ‘Racialised Lesbian Spaces’, which I conducted in Manchester’s Gay Village (unpublished PhD thesis, 2011, Lancaster University). Christina Toren (1996: 102) defines ethnography as ‘the comparative, descriptive analysis of the everyday, of what is taken for granted’. Most ethnographic studies are thus not about ‘spectacles’ but rather about peoples’ daily routines. Ethnographic research offers a particularly suitable way of grasping the everydayness of processes of social identities and how they are lived. But ethnography has its pitfalls, too. For instance, Judith Stacey (1988) argued from a feminist perspective that ethnography can potentially be more exploitative than other research methods because of the close relationship between researcher and researched. This became apparent in my own research in the often blurred boundaries between friend and participant.

My research aimed to understand the relationship between sexuality, ‘race’, and space within the context of urban night-time leisure spaces for women. I asked three primary questions: (1) What are the processes that racialise and sexualise lesbian spaces and bodies? (2) What role does space play in constituting sexual and racial identities and subjectivities? (3) What is the specific role of whiteness in the interplay of sexuality, ‘race’ and space? To address these questions, during the 12 months of my fieldwork, I conducted 66 participant observations of nights out, primarily in the Gay Village’s two lesbian bars, *Jaguars* and *Milk*, and interviewed 19 women, most of whom regularly visit those spaces. The women who participated in my research 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 being working-class or having a working-class background, and eight self-identified as middle-class. (The other four women did not self-

identify in any class terms.)[3] I met most of the women who participated in my research in the two lesbian bars, though a few women were found through snowballing. I also interviewed the organiser of *Black Angel*, a women's club night that usually draws a more racially mixed clientele than any other women's night in Manchester.

As Robert G. Burgess (1991, 22) points out, researchers often find participants who are similar to them, whereas others might not be included. In that sense, the multiple aspects of my own identity shape the sample of women drawn by the method of snowballing. The participants of my study are all women I connected to as a 30-something, white, German, middle-class, currently able-bodied, etc., lesbian. Sexuality, age, ethnicity, 'race', and class all played a significant role in my study, plus the fact that I was a migrant and newcomer in Manchester when I started my research. For instance, it is very striking that most of my participants are not British and that no one is a Mancunian.

The poststructuralist thinking underlying my research had particular effects on how I treated the observations and interviews in my analysis. The research aimed to identify the nuances and complexities of ordinary experiences of ethnicity and 'race' and their intersections with sexuality. I am not mainly interested in how 'lesbians' emotionally experience lesbian spaces; instead, I follow Avtar Brah's approach that 'contrary to the idea of an already fully constituted "experiencing subject" to whom "experiences happens", experience is the site of subject formation.' (Brah 1996, 116) The implications of this are twofold. First, rather than occurring on already constituted and fixed subjects, experiences shape subjectivities. This is not to say that subjects are blank slates that lack experience, but to recognise that subject formation is

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[3] While I generally asked about my participants' class backgrounds, class did not function as a main analytical category in my research. The Combahee River Collective and other black feminists, like bell hooks and Audre Lorde, have highlighted the importance of looking at how the intersections of gender, sexuality, 'race', and class structure women's lives. Empirically, however, intersectionality has its limits. Taking another social category into the equation of sexuality, 'race' and space would have only been possible in rather superficial ways.

an ongoing process and that experience continuously shapes subjects and subjectivities. In that respect, experiencing comfort and safety shapes lesbian subjectivities. Second, experience, as Joan Scott (1992) has argued, it is not foundational, but is rather the site where particular understandings of the world are mobilised. Thus, when looking at issues of comfort and safety, I am interested in the processes of meaning-making. To capture these processes, I used discourse analytical approaches to analyse my interview material (see Gee 1999; Gill 2000; Potter and Wetherell 1994; Taylor 2001). As a researcher, I am also imbricated and involved in these processes of meaning-making. The knowledge produced through my research and presented in this article can therefore only be partial and depends on my own situatedness (see Haraway 1991).

5. Sexualised (dis)comfort and safety

Issues of comfort and safety were constitutive right from the beginning of the development of the Gay Village's space (Whittle 1994). 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.[4] The area around Canal Street has been officially recognised as 'gay space' since 1991 and is marked as Gay Village on official city maps. Today, it comprises around 50 venues that are mostly bars and clubs, but also a sex shop, a sauna, a hair dresser, and several take-aways. The Gay Village thus plays an important role in Manchester's night-time leisure economy. In contrast

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

to other spaces, which are unmarked yet still sexualised (e.g., there is no area or bar explicitly defined as 'straight'), the Gay Village is purposefully constituted as a sexualised space.

Many of the participants of my study described gay spaces as being more comfortable and safer than straight spaces. In addition to her comments quoted in the introduction of this article, Kathryn said that she feels a 'hundred times more comfortable in the village' than she does in straight spaces. 'I feel quite threatened sometimes', she said, 'when I go out to hetero places. I feel really uncomfortable'. When I asked her what actually makes her feel comfortable in the Gay Village, she said it was knowing that there are people who 'have that really massive thing in common with you'. Kathryn added that she sometimes realises how comfortable she feels in gay spaces when she experiences the feeling of discomfort in straight spaces. Thus, for Kathryn it is the level of comfort that distinguishes straight from gay spaces. Because of the difference in comfort, she claims some ownership of space based on sexual identity, even though gay people own the Gay Village, heterosexuals own the rest of town. ('Dude, you've got all the straight town'.) As other studies have shown, it is not only heterosexual men that make lesbians uncomfortable in gay spaces, but also the presence of heterosexual women who might use the Gay Village as a site of liberation from gender norms inscribed in heterosexual spaces (Casey 2004, 2007; Skeggs 1999).

Another of my participants, Anne (31, white), spoke about these gender norms, which for her, distinguish 'straight' and 'gay' places. Drawing on her experiences with door policies of straight clubs in Manchester, she said that:

> the straight and the gay places are totally separate and, you know, as a, as a gay woman if you don't look really feminine, you know, and [don't] hide your being gay, well, you can't really go to any straight places. [...] If you're not dressed in a feminine way, you

> don't look feminine enough, you look a bit butchy and a bit gay, and then that's it, you know, you just can't get in.

Anne speaks to the relationship between gender and sexuality and reflects what Judith Butler (1999, xii) has argued, that 'policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality'. As Anne further explained, lesbian and gay spaces are important in the sense that they offer 'moral support … because usually you do face quite a lot of homophobic comments and homophobic environments constantly'. Lesbian spaces, she said, offer 'relief' from homophobic environments and in contrast to heterosexual spaces, here 'you can be yourself'. However, this seems to be complex and not unconditional. Later in the interview, Anne argued that because of the desire to feel comfortable there is an 'identity creation' occurring in the lesbian scene which:

> leaves less room for individuality because you have so much pressure from outside. [It's] so much homophobic, you know, things going on outside that 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 … rather than being yourself because, you know, you can't go to straight places. It just doesn't mix.

Anne argues that lesbians adapt themselves to follow certain styles in lesbian spaces. In my research, there was a common understanding between my participants and myself that certain lesbian styles exist and that there is an image of 'a typical lesbian' (butch, short hair, baggy jeans and shirt). Other participants also argued that many women adopt or copy a certain style in order to be part of 'the scene'. For instance, Lesley (30, mixed-race) 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 by being desirable and would be an image that women fancy, i.e., 'what they like to look at'. In Ruth Holliday's (1999) research on bisexual, lesbian, and gay identities, her participants expressed comfort through the ways identity is mapped onto the body, so that what one feels inside is expressed externally as self-presentation. As this comfort is also structured around desire and wanting to be desired, having the 'right' body and wearing the 'right' clothes becomes important in lesbian and gay spaces in order to gain a sense of comfort. Holliday argues that comfort is therefore always social, as some clothes, hair styles, etc., have more value than others in these spaces. As Rooke (2007) has argued, 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. In order to adapt to this habitus, Tania (29, mixed-race/black) changed her style entirely. She told me that when she first went to the Gay Village, she was 'a total hippie' and was wearing 'hippie flair trousers' 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.

The awareness of comfort in lesbian spaces is produced in relation to other spaces where homophobia is experienced. However, comfort in lesbian spaces is not unconditional. It needs to be achieved through adaptation. As Taylor's research (2007) shows, lesbian spaces are classed spaces. She concludes that for her (white) working class interviewees, 'The scene was felt to be an intimidating and pressurised place, where they had to learn the "codes" of behaviour or risk being outsiders.' (2007, 142) In Anne's view, lesbians do not challenge the pressure to adapt

because of their experiences of being excluded in straight spaces. She clarified this when I asked her what she meant by 'identity creation':

> If you feel so excluded from the rest of, you know, the non-gay spaces, then you go to the gay space and it becomes more important to be lesbian, rather than anything else; to attach that label to yourself and also wear a certain type of clothes, to behave in a certain way just to really make sure you fit in, rather than just being yourself.

Anne's account is a great example of how emotions performatively constitute bodies (see Ahmed 2004), in this example, sexual bodies. The discomfort and felt exclusion in heterosexual spaces produces not only distinct spaces based on a lesbian and gay identity (as Kathryn suggested), but also the pressure to conform to certain norms in lesbian spaces because here you can potentially feel comfortable. We might conclude from her account that the sexual identity on which the Gay Village is constructed is constituted through comfort, which includes the desire for and imaginations of comfort. What is interesting is that Anne defines being a lesbian not only in terms of becoming, and thus as performative in Butler's (1990) terms, but also that comfort is constitutive of this performative 'identity creation'. Whilst to Kathryn, comfort (and safety) produced seemingly distinct spaces (gay/straight), to Anne, comfort actually constitutes sexuality. In Anne's view, in lesbian spaces comfort (and being yourself) is not unconditional, but needs to be achieved.

Like Hubbard's (2005) comparison of city centre spaces and out of town leisure centres, the accounts by Anne and Kathryn suggest a preference for the spaces of the Gay Village because other spaces have negative emotions attached, namely discomfort and feeling unsafe. A crucial difference to Hubbard's research, however, is that the negative emotional attachment to certain

spaces is closely linked to my participants' sexual identity, their (imagined) belonging to a sexual marginalised group. However, issues of inclusion and exclusion *within* lesbian spaces are complex: feelings of comfort and safety are affected by the performance of a particular lesbian identity and 'lesbian habitus' (Rooke 2007) that is classed (Taylor 2007), racialised (Kawale 2003, 2004), and gendered (Cefai 2004).

6. Gendered (dis)comfort and safety

As I have written above, feminist geographers have demonstrated the relationship between gender and space and especially how feelings of fear in space are gendered (Pain 1997; Valentine 1989). My research adds a further dimension to this. It suggests that safety and comfort cannot be threatened only by the presence of men but also by other women and this along a gender-line in relation to the performance of gender among lesbians. Lesbian spaces are gendered spaces in terms of being created for and mainly used by women, but they are also gendered in other ways. For instance, when describing her 'dream lesbian space'[5], Danielle (29, 'officially' white but reluctant to identify as such) drew on a butch/femme discourse by explaining that her dream space would look 'less stereotyped' than in the Gay Village, where too many women would be either 'trying to look like men' or 'trying to look as girly as possible'. While she does not like either of these 'stereotypes', it is the butch women who make her uncomfortable. She said she prefers *Jaguars* to *Milk* because

> you get less of the stereotypes. You get the girly stereotypes, but you don't get as much as the other stereotypes, the really butchy kind, doing too much. That's the kind of thing that

[5] At the beginning of the interviews I asked my participants to imagine 'a dream lesbian space' and describe to me what it would look like.

> makes me not like *Milk* for example…. Some people in there are scary. They make me uncomfortable.

'Doing too much', as Danielle says, indicates an 'over performance' of gender that is immediately noticeable. Danielle seems to draw on a general image attached to *Milk*. Some of my participants referred to it as 'Gorilla', which seems to be its nickname. Danielle described the women in *Milk* as 'a lot more English', even '[more] Mancunian', than the women in *Jaguars*, and she could tell this 'because of their behaviour':

> there is, like, you know, that extreme of the English, very, very extremely butch, like, utterly aggressive and obviously drinking too much. [That] kind of person, you get more of that in *Milk*.

The gendered performance that makes Danielle uncomfortable is ethnicised through the reference to 'the English'. The Mancunian butch woman symbolises the 'extreme of the English' by being aggressive and drinking too much. Danielle's use of 'obviously' indicates that she draws on a stereotype, a figure she thinks is well known. It is significant that this knowable figure also seems to be implicitly classed. Butch appearances and performances, which in her view are excessive gender expressions, make Danielle uncomfortable. Her discomfort is produced through the visual, that is, through the women's appearances (their 'look') and through her own looking practices.

Nina: And how did they look like? I mean, were they all just young and white (D: yeah) and butch?

Danielle: Probably all around between 25 and 30, 30 odd, but all very stereotyped butch, and they were all, like, they owned the premises. I don't like that kind of feeling. I like to feel welcome in a place, and if I don't, I walk out.

Nina: Mhm, and was it mixed? Was it just white or…?

Danielle: Nah, it was mainly white and blonde.

Nina: White and blonde? [Laughs] OK.

Danielle: Yeah, yeah, that's what made me think they were mainly English

Danielle's discomfort is produced by looking and also by an interactive process of seeing/reading/performing. She sees blonde women who perform in certain ways and 'reads' them as white, butch, and English. She uses white and blonde as an indicator for Englishness and hence seems to link Englishness with whiteness (see Byrne 2006). Her particular reading of this stereotypical figure (aggressive, owning the premises) made her feel uncomfortable. Her discomfort is, on the one hand, produced by the women's gender performances and her particular reading of it, but this is, on the other hand, also linked to a feeling of not belonging. It seems that in this example, a particular classed and gendered (butch working-class) whiteness threatens her comfort, and here she draws on a very stereotypical image of whiteness.

Jess (36, white) gave a similar account of gendered performances, but in her case they threatened not her comfort but her safety. She described her dream space as 'open and safe' and said that spaces feel safe for her when she is not getting 'dirty looks'. When I probed her further about how space can be safe, she said:

Jess: It, I suppose, we talk about 'safe' in lots of different respects, I mean, obviously, there's homophobia, there's hate crime, not just homophobic hate crime, but in

terms of race, etc., all types of hate crime. But what I'm really talking about here is the self-oppression within the community. I mean the intimidation that's felt on the women's scene … and that's what I mean by safe. I find the scene very ehm intimidating and threatening because there are various cliques. A typical example is, you're going into a bar and there is a gang around the pool table and they can make another woman coming in feel very isolated, and it's quite intimidating and threatening. And if you're not part of that group, if you don't dress like them, if you don't play pool, ehm you're quite marginalised within our own community.

[...]

Nina: So you would define safety more, quite broadly, kind of, what it's like to come into a space and to feel comfortable in a way.

Jess: Yeah, yeah.

Nina: Not threatened or having feelings of being.

Jess: Yeah, or not fitting in or feeling isolated, so, yes, safety in terms of that environment an emotional impact it can have on you, right to the kind of more traditional ideas when we think about safety of being safe walking down the street or going to the cash point, but it is safety within our own communities as well. It is quite threatening sometimes.

In contrast to other participants, who, when talking about safety referred to 'physical safety', Jess speaks of 'emotional safety'. Her sense of feeling unsafe includes feelings of intimidation, threat, and isolation. The intimidation and threats are mainly triggered by the perceived exclusiveness of cliques. To strengthen this meaning of exclusiveness, Jess uses the term 'gang' (see Wilson and Zisman 1992). Jess's account powerfully illustrates the relationship

between emotions and space. She talks about the emotional impact of an ‘environment’ and how feeling included and fitting in would trigger the desired emotional impact that she defines as safety. Her articulation of safety is similar to how Wayne Myslik (1996, 165) interprets his participants’ accounts of feeling safe: ‘emotional and psychological safety that comes from being in an area in which one has some sense of belonging or social control’. In his research project (conducted in a predominantly white ‘gay neighbourhood’ in Washington, D.C.), homophobic violence was statistically more likely than in other parts of the city. But the gay men he interviewed still identified it as a safe space. Here, as in Skeggs et al.’s research (2004), feeling safe is defined against an ‘external’ threat of an out-group and does not seem to include threats of safety from somebody of the in-group, as in Jess’s case.

Jess further told me that she received ‘loads of grief’ in lesbian and gay spaces when she was younger ‘because I used to wear a leather skirt and I always wore make-up and I used to get things shouted at me, you know, “you fucking lipstick dyke” and all this shit’. Her account reflects a familiar critique of lesbian spaces that butch women represent a more authentic lesbian type than femmes (Cefai 2004; Rooke 2007). However, as Danielle's and Jess’s accounts indicate, butch women (or women who are perceived to be butch), or female masculinity (see Halberstam 1998), can also be perceived as threatening and producing discomfort. For Jess, this was gendered along a butch/femme divide, while for Danielle, who has a southern European background, it was the ethnicised image of the Mancunian lesbian in particular that made her uncomfortable. In that sense, butch women are transformed into objects of feelings, and we might argue that these feelings actually produce butch bodies that are threatening. Through a process of ‘othering’, butch women are read as intimidating, and feelings of discomfort that are triggered by this reading are then seen ‘as a sign of the truth of the reading’ (Ahmed 2004, 194).

7. Racialised (dis)comfort and safety

'Race' theorists have shown that there is a powerful relationship between 'race' and emotions (see for instance Ahmed 2004; Fortier 2008; Gunaratnam and Lewis 2001). It has also been shown that there is relationship between 'race' and space in the way that space is racialised and 'race' is spatialised (see Knowles 2003; Puwar 2004; Sullivan 2006). 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).

Thus far, I have mainly drawn on white women's accounts of comfort and safety in which 'race' or the racialisation of space did not seem to matter. Indeed, most of the white participants of my study did not seem to be aware that Manchester's Gay Village is a predominantly white space (see also Kawale 2003, 2004). When I probed them about it, it was argued that black and Asian women and men do not come to the village because of 'their' culture and/or their religion. Some even argued that in contrast to 'straight' spaces, the Gay Village was more accepting of differences. For instance, Louise (20, white) said, 'it's just like a bond kind of thing, because you're gay, you're allowed in, no one's gonna judge you for being who you are, you're just yourself'. However, in contrast to these assumptions, during my research I observed incidents

where, especially, groups of black women and men seemingly disturbed the particular racialisation of space and comfort of white women (and men).

> We went back to the dance floor. I had already done my usual 'scan' and counted just a few women I perceived not to be white, and now four black women came in together. Carol looked towards the entrance and said that she did not understand that different ethnicities always (have to?) come in groups. She then complained about an 'Asian night' held in the Student Union. While she was still looking at the group of black women, she said that it makes her angry. She asked, 'Why does it have to be like that?' She said that she does not like all the segregation in Manchester – China Town, Rusholme, and so on – and she repeated that it makes her angry. (*Fieldnotes, Jaguars, May 2007*)

Before the four black women came in, Carol (19, white) did not seem to be aware of the racialisation of the space. Her perception of 'race' and the racialisation of space worked in the way that she saw the four black women coming in together as a sign of segregation while at the same time she did not seem to be aware of the fact that the white women were also there in groups (see hooks 1992; Tatum 2003). As Ahmed (2007, 157) argues 'The fact that we notice such arrivals tells us more about what is already in place than it does about "who" arrives'. Because white people are more likely to be 'viewed as an individual, rather than as a member of a racial group' (Tatum 2003, 8), this is often not seen. In the Gay Village, the formation of groups is expected to be on grounds of 'shared sexuality'. However, groups might be also formed around 'shared whiteness'. As scholars working on whiteness have argued, whiteness is often not seen (by white people) as a racial category and thus tends to work as the silent and unmarked 'racial norm' (Back and Ware 2002; Byrne 2006; Cuomo and Hall 1999; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993,

1997). Therefore a group of black or Asian lesbians going out together is much more visible, and as Nirmal Puwar (2004, 48) argues, in predominantly white spaces, although there might be only a few black bodies, 'their numbers become amplified and they come to threateningly fill the space in much larger numbers than they literally do'.

While Carol found it difficult to understand why the whiteness of the Gay Village's spaces might be an issue for black and Asian women, she, and other white participants, described feeling uncomfortable (and intimidated) in certain areas in Manchester that are perceived to be predominantly black and/or Asian. In those moments when these participants are (or feel like) space invaders in spaces where their bodies do not represent the somatic norm, they become aware of being white-skinned. But some spaces *within* the Gay Village also produce more (dis)comfort than others. Kathryn, for instance, who generally seemed to claim ownership of the Gay Village's space on grounds of comfort and safety (see the quote opening this article), does not seem to feel safe everywhere in the Gay Village. Whilst most of the spaces in the Gay Village are predominantly white, occasionally there are club nights that attract a more diverse crowd. One of these was an RnB night that was held a few times in *Mantos*, a bar on Canal Street. One night, when we were on our way to the RnB night, Kathryn told me that she had been to the 'black night' in *Mantos* a few times before and that it had not felt 'very safe' the last time she was there. She also said it was '90 per cent heterosexual', although it was supposed to be a gay night, and she 'did not really get that vibe'. She could not tell me why she thought it was mainly straight or why it felt unsafe. These assumptions/feelings seemed to be triggered by a particular 'reading' of the bodies in that space, a racialised reading of the performance of sexualities. Indeed, it was quite common during my research that black (and Asian) women and men were not *perceived* to be gay, and often this was the reason for not being let into lesbian and gay bars and clubs.

Bridget Byrne (2006) argues that 'race' is produced through the repetitive use of perceptual practices; that is, how we see or do not see 'race' actually produces what we think we see. Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, she argues that:

> 'race' needs to be understood as an embodied performative. That is, that the repeated citation of racialised discourses and, importantly, the repetition of racialised perceptual practices produces bodies and subjects that are raced. What is critical here is that these practices *produce* the idea of differences, rather than being an effect of them.

Butler (1990) argued that the performative repetition of (gendered) norms produces gender. In Byrne's argument, it is primarily the repetition of racialised perceptual practices that produces racialised bodies. Thus, according to her theory, 'race' is discursively produced through ways of *seeing* difference. Drawn from my research, the examples above might suggest that it is not just the seeing of 'race' but the *emotions* triggered by perceptual practices that produce racialised bodies. As also indicated in the previous parts of this article, feelings of (dis)comfort are triggered by either perceived (or imagined) sameness/cultural familiarity or difference. Kathryn, for instance, said that what makes her feel comfortable in lesbian and gay spaces is that 'it's your people'. In our discussions about why the Gay Village is predominantly white, she said that it is 'human nature' to be exclusionary and 'to mix with people that you have most in common with, that you can instantly relate to'. She said that black and Asian lesbians might not feel comfortable in predominantly white spaces and that she would not feel comfortable if she were to come into a room full of people of Pakistani origin, where she would instantly feel a difference (see Noble 2005). This account suggests that her feelings of comfort and safety in lesbian and gay spaces are not only based on sexuality but also on 'race', and that the lesbian and

gay subject she constructs in her accounts is inherently white. Furthermore, her account illustrates that the relationship between seeing, 'reading', and feeling space is complex. Her (imagined) perceptual practices work in this way such that just seeing Pakistani bodies and 'reading' a (cultural) difference would trigger feelings of discomfort in the space. The felt discomfort then racially shapes those bodies and her own body (see Ahmed 2004). However, as Ahmed argues, emotions 'work to generate the distinction between inside and outside, partly by rehearsing associations that are already in place.' (Ahmed 2004, 194) In that sense, it is interesting that Kathryn chose the example of a room full of people of 'Pakistani origin' to illustrate her argument and with that she seems to draw on already established perceptions and discourses (that conflate 'race' and religion, for instance).

For the mixed-race, black, and East-Asian participants of my study, on the other hand, it was primarily experiences of racist practices that created discomfort in the lesbian spaces. They all mentioned receiving certain looks in predominantly white lesbian bars. For instance, for Joanne (29, mixed-race) 'the look' is often loaded with hatred. She described it as 'they look at you like an insect that wants to be squashed'. Natasha (32, black) described it as a 'what are you doing here?' look. She never went back to the lesbian bar where she received this look, as she has no reason to go to places where she feels 'uncomfortable'. Hope (42, black) described the forms of racism she experiences in the Gay Village as more subtle. It was not that somebody says something, 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'. She said it would not 'bother' her if she were 'that kind of sensitive', then she 'wouldn't go out to the Gay Village'.[6] One night when we were in *Jaguars* together she asked me why they all (the white clientele) look at her

[6] It needs to be said that 'the look' is not only experienced in lesbian spaces. Critical 'race' scholars have written about experiencing 'the look' in various times and places (for instance Ahmed 1997; Fanon; Lewis 2004; Lorde 1984a).

when she comes in as if they had never seen a black woman before. 'What are their *fears*?' she asked. When we recorded an interview a few months after that night in *Jaguars*, 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, God knows why, but that's people's perception of black people. They think we're, I don't know, stupid or … people have different perceptions of black people. It's interesting to know what it is. 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 perceptual practices and 'the look'. In her account, the look expresses fear. In that sense, this looking practice constructs not only Hope's body as black but also the other woman's body as white. Through Hope's perceptual practices, the 'looker' becomes someone who is fearful.

The 'look' is not the only racialising practice experienced by black and Asian women in the Gay Village. Like research that has been conducted in London (see GALOP 2001; Kawale 2003, 2004; Mason-John and Khambatta 1993), in my research the practices that were apparent were racist door practices, comments, and assumptions about 'ethnic others', often expressed in stereotypical ways, defining sexual desires by 'race' (e.g. 'black women are/are not my type'), or other racialising practices that transgressed physical boundaries such as touching (Afro) hair for instance. These practices all contributed to black and Asian women's discomfort in these spaces. Hope's comment that if she were 'that kind of sensitive' indicates that in order to feel safe and comfortable in lesbian spaces, some women need to do 'emotional labour' so that they feel what they want to feel (Hochschild 1983; Kawale 2004). According to Kawale (2004, 565), 'the

performance of emotional work is a key feature of performing sexuality and crucial to the construction of sexualised space' (Kawale 2004, 565). Also in her research, white and South Asian bisexual and lesbian participants had different emotional experiences of these spaces, in particular because of the whiteness of the scene. These examples show that being comfortable in space is racialised; and that it is about fitting into spaces and being acknowledged to fit by others (Ahmed 2004; Noble 2005).

8. Conclusion

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Manchester's Gay Village, this article has explored the relationship between emotions, sexuality, and space and what role 'race', gender, and class play in that relationship in night-time leisure spaces that are particularly sexualised. Comfort and safety are emotional states that are classed, racialised, gendered, and sexualised. They are not just emotions that are experienced by white, black, and Asian lesbians in lesbian and gay spaces, but these emotions are doing something (see Ahmed 2004). They are producing gendered, sexualised, and racialised bodies and figures, such as the 'desirable lesbian', the intimidating 'butches', and 'Pakistanis'.

Research on the experiences of lesbians in Gay Villages that explores issues of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion tends to argue that women feel excluded because of differences based on gender, sexuality, class, and 'race'. This article, however, has looked at these issues from a different perspective and argued that these differences are actually produced through feelings of comfort and safety. Gendered, sexualised, and racialised bodies are perceived and read in a certain way, which in turn produces gendered, sexualised, and racialised bodies. Feelings of comfort and safety are triggered by perceived (or imagined) sameness or difference, but they also

constitute sameness and difference. Gendering, sexualising and racialising practices produce discomfort and make some women feel out of place, whereas other bodies seem to be 'in place' or 'at home' (see Ahmed 2007). Comfort and safety are relational and 'we might only notice comfort as an affect when we lose it, when we become uncomfortable.' (Ahmed 2007, 158) In that respect, it might be argued that comfort and safety are constitutive of gendered and classed white lesbian subjectivities.

I have shown that feelings of comfort and safety are complex, and my research demonstrates the importance of looking at *how* they are produced. Whilst the article has given some new insights, it also has limitations. For instance, it is not clear *why* butch women or 'Pakistanis' are threatening or what exactly makes them into intimidating bodies that are sources of discomfort. I have argued that we need to look at intersections of identities. It is never just one category that has an impact on emotions in space. 'Race' plays a key role in how people emotionally experience space, but has rather been neglected in the emotional geography and geographies of sexualities literature. Space is always racialised even if only white bodies are present (see Knowles 2003; Puwar 2004; Sullivan 2006) and therefore 'race' could always be a category of analysis. One might argue that this is also true for other categories. More work needs to be done to explore how emotions are also produced by and produce aged, classed, religious, and (dis)abled bodies and spaces.

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