



Challenging the gay ghetto in South Africa: Time to move on?



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in changes within gay ghettos, villages, precincts, and neighbourhoods in different cities and regions, particularly in the West. This includes concerns from some constituencies about the decline – or de-gaying – of some queer neighbourhoods, coupled with commentary about the emergence of newer places, sometimes espoused as mixed, gay-friendly, or post-gay. Drawing on the South African experience, the question of how central these debates should stand in gay geographical scholarship is posed. Although it is increasingly acknowledged that the “old gay ghetto debates” are in some ways parochial (both spatially and theoretically), the dominance of such concerns remains pervasive in Western gay space theorisation. In this paper, attention is focused on Western theorisations of the relationship between gay sexualities, its links to specific forms of gay space such as gay ghettos and neighbourhoods, and the South Africa context. The contention is that gay spaces (in the form of consolidated space, or villages) are not a necessary outcome of lived gay identities. It is argued that in South Africa differently constructed gay identities are differently spatialised and ultimately incongruent with Western theory. The investigation supports the growing scholarship that suggests Western theorisation of the links between gay sexual identity and space is not universally applicable.

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1. Introduction

Over the past half century, sexual as well as gender minorities have struggled for fundamental inclusion in the social, political and economic life of their communities (Binnie, 2004; Casey, 2004; Hubbard, 2012; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). Drawing on a variety of political and theoretical tools, academics and (to some extent) activists have challenged and resisted the very underpinnings of accepted theorisation about gender, sexuality, embodiment and attendant social relations (Browne et al., 2007a; Heaphy, 2011; Waitt and Markwell, 2006). In the recent past, there has been a proliferation of different approaches in feminist, as well as queer thinking with political critiques around notions of homonormativity and neoliberalism opening up a range of divisions, as well as new alliances between and amongst both theorists and activists (Richardson, 2005; Rushbrook, 2002; Waitt and Markwell, 2006). These gendered and sexual politics are potentially engaged in the formation of new so-called equality landscapes, whilst often being critical of the legislative equalities that are seen as normalising once queer lives, through institutions such as marriage, the adoption of children, and the introduction of partner pension schemes and medical insurance (Ahmed, 2006; Hekma, 2004). Yet, while much has been made of the fluidities, anarchisms and anti-normativities of these new conceptualizations, the assertion is that certain spaces that were once political and filled with radi-

cal opportunities are no longer queer, edgy, or different enough, having been absorbed into neoliberal urbanity (Hekma, 2004; Ghaziani, 2008; Zanghellini, 2009). Such spaces include traditional gay villages and other supposedly normalised sites (Casey, 2007; Chasin, 2000).

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in changes within LGBTQ ghettos,¹ villages, precincts and neighbourhoods in different cities and regions across the world, particularly, but perhaps not only, in the West. This includes concerns from some LGBTQ constituencies about the decline – or de-gaying – of some queer neighbourhoods (Casey, 2004; Hekma, 2004), coupled with commentary about the emergence of newer places, sometimes espoused as mixed, gay-friendly, or post-gay (Ghaziani, 2011; Gorman-Murray, 2006). But how centrally should these debates stand in South African gay geographical scholarship?

It is increasingly acknowledged that the “old gay [male] ghetto debates” are in some ways parochial, both spatially and theoretically (Hubbard, 2012). However, the dominance of such concerns in queer geography remains pervasive in Western gay space theorisation (Johnston and Longhurst, 2008; Tucker, 2009). In this paper, attention is focused on Western theorisations of “what gay is” and their preoccupation with the link between gay male sexualities and specific forms of gay male space such as gay ghettos and

¹ I draw on Dan Hierbert's (2009) definition in which ghetto implies that you have extreme residential concentration of a particular social group (in this case: gay men), which accounts for most of the population in that area.

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neighbourhoods. The contention is that gay spaces in the form of consolidated physical or symbolic spaces are not a necessary outcome of lived gay identities. Two key points are made in this investigation. Drawing on the South African example, it is illustrated that (1) differently constructed gay identities are differently spatialised relative to context, and (2) that Western experiences in relation to the construction and associated decline of gay space is not universal. In addition, a general call is made for a more positive argument in researching the relationship between gay sexuality and space. That type of argument should not be one which shows that gay ghettos and neighbourhoods are being displaced and are declining in necessarily negative terms, but rather that they are being replaced by new kinds of spaces, which are assuming their clearest forms beyond the West, and could be pointing towards greater inclusion and acceptance of gay minorities.

This argument is developed through three sections of discussion and analysis. First, a review of Western discourse focused on the relationship between gay male identities and physical and symbolic spaces is outlined. In the following section the central concern that arises is that gay identities cannot be kept stable in non-Western contexts, such as South Africa, to facilitate the theorisation of a relationship between space and sexualised identity/identities. It is argued that relative to experiences elsewhere, the current Western discourse requires extensive empirical testing, as the current theorisations of gay sexualities relative to space-formation are regional Western sexuality/space reflections or narratives and not (as presently implied) ready for large scale theorisation. Current Western theory is not only insufficient to explain gay spatial realities in the Western/Northern context itself, but it totally ignores (and is irrelevant to) the majority gay population located in very different and diverse settings elsewhere. The South African experience serves as an example of this contention.

2. “Gay” and space in theory

Since the early 1970s, a range of scholars have argued that the density, variety and multiple experiences that the contemporary urban landscape can offer to its inhabitants has frequently led to claims that urban and sexual freedoms go hand in hand (Casey, 2004). These claims drew inspiration from Castells' (1983) investigations of the Castro district in San Francisco. The overarching theme is that during the 1970s and the early 1980s, a number of social scientists began to observe that gay men and women were creating distinct social, political and cultural landscapes, that Levine (1979) stylised as “gay ghettos” which were later (and perhaps more benignly) renamed gay villages, found in a number of western cities (Valentine, 2002). Drawing on these observations, Castells (1983: 143) argued that the gay movement “realized that between liberation and politics it first had to establish a community in a series of [public and private] spatial settings”. Although these earlier works have been critiqued on a number of fronts (gender bias being one), they nevertheless reflected the growing significance of commercially concentrated gay areas in major US and UK cities representing mainly gay male identities and lifestyles (and making them increasingly visible) (Casey, 2004: 447; Colomina and Bloomer, 1992; Forest, 1995, for earlier multi-disciplinary research with an explicit focus on the relationship between sexuality and space).

Subsequently, research into the links between sexualised cultures of consumption and the production of sexualised space has received much attention (Collins, 2006; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Oswin, 2008; Puar, 2006; Richardson, 2005). Rushbrook (2002: 200) points out that geographers' use of the term gay/queer space has generally aimed to theorise it as a disruption of the heterosexing of space. A growing body of geographical investigation

focuses on the (hetero)sexing of space and examines how the so-called power relations of everyday life normalise space as asexual (to heterosexuals) and as heterosexual (to non-heterosexuals). Commenting on the Western context, Rushbrook (2002: 200) notes that stylised, repetitive acts actively produce and naturalise public space as heterosexual. Despite – or because of – its pervasive expression in the physical and social organisation of space (and power), heterosexual desire is invisible and thus can be performed without question. By contrast, space that appears asexual to heterosexuals unaware of their own performance of heterosexuality is clearly marked as straight for non-heterosexuals, who are said to police their own performativity, convinced that safe access to that space is contingent on the appearance of being straight.

Geographical investigations have demonstrated the significance of both space and place in the formation, development and consolidation of gay male identity (Collins, 2006).² However, the meanings of space and place are constantly contested and renegotiated. As Myslik (1996) suggested some time ago, part of a contemporary challenge to the “heterosexual street” has been the development of spaces that have come to be identified in and outside of the gay community as gay spaces. These spaces, it is argued, not only enable open displays of homosexual behaviour and affection but also allow access to a variety of gay services and facilities including shops, bars, housing, legal and medical services. Importantly, these are areas in which behaviour does not need to be edited so as to conform to the heterosexual norm. As a result, gay spaces provide community and territory, as well as a sense of order and power (Pritchard et al., 1998). In recent years these debates have become entrenched in Anglo-American geographical discourse, with the experiences of a number of large cities generally corroborating these views (Oswin, 2008; Visser, 2008a, 2008b). Lately, this literature has been augmented with a considerable amount of work redirecting the investigatory focus to suburban areas, the metropolitan fringe, as well as smaller cities and towns and rural areas (Bonfitto, 1997; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001; Lynch, 1987).

These investigations have increasingly brought into question the hetero-homosexual binary with regards to gay use and interpretation of public and private spaces. A recurring contention is that the integrity of being gay (or something akin to “gay culture”) appears to be threatened by various internal (Brandzel, 2005; Hekma, 2004; Kirby and Hay, 1997; Richardson, 1996) and external forces (Valentine, 1993), leading to encroachment on “homosexual lifestyles” and the possibility that the spatial basis of sexuality is no longer all that relevant (Ahmed, 2006; Oswin, 2008; Pritchard et al., 2000: 268). For example, it is suggested that and gays (and lesbians) who “fit” heterosexual views of normality (professionals, middle-class, suburban and coupled) are regarded as acceptable and productive members of society. In many spheres the need for a spatial base both for leisure seeking and residence diminishes and can be seen as a threat to what homosexuality could be (Bell and Binnie, 2006) – the queer, deviant, challenging of the heteronormative. In this context recent research concerning homonormalisation has emerged (Richardson, 2005), furthering Duggan's (2002) idea that heteronormativity has set in among certain cohorts of gay men (and women), and threatens “homosexual lifestyles” (also see Hekma, 2004).

In agreement with Rushbrook (2002: 203), I would argue that despite the complexity of the notion, ‘gay space’ (or queer space) in these debates implies some sort of coherence and homogeneity that does not exist. Drawing on a Foucauldian view, it is suggested that “heterotopia” capacitates the idea of a single real place in

² As Massey (2005) suggests, “space” is both process and social product, arising from and conditioning everyday spatial practices; it both constitutes and is constituted by social relations. “Place” refers to the locales and locations in which these social relations are inscribed.

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