



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



Nina Held

Manchester, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the fields of emotional geographies and geographies of sexualities by exploring the relationship between emotions and gender, sexuality, and 'race' in sexualised night-time leisure spaces. By drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Manchester's Gay Village, the article highlights the importance of taking into account intersections of social identities when exploring how people feel in certain spaces. It explores how relations of 'othering' work through emotions, in particular how people are othered through feelings of comfort and safety. Whilst these feelings are triggered by a particular reading of bodies and spaces, they also produce bodies and spaces that are gendered, sexualised, and racialised (and classed). The article 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.

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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., 2002; 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

E-mail address: NinaHeld@aol.com.

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.

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