"NO FAGS OUT THERE": GAY MEN, IDENTITY AND SUBURBIA

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Abstract

This paper speculates on the role of place in the formation of gay men’s identities in the Sydney region. The high visibility of inner city gay territories in Sydney can make it easy to assume that there are no gay men or lesbians outside of these places. Territories like these have been the major focus of research into the relationship between sexuality and space. This paper discusses issues around broadening this research into suburban spaces. Such investigation can diversify our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space and may also yield positive benefits for gay liberation. The paper concludes by discussing ways forward for investigating the relationship between gay men’s sexuality and suburban space.

The guide to the 1994 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras included a map outlining the location of venues associated with the festival, parade and party. This map focussed on the inner city of the Sydney region, with most venues on or around Oxford Street, Darlinghurst and a smaller cluster on or around King Street, Newtown. These streets and their surrounds house a concentration of bars, nightclubs, restaurants and community services catering to Sydney’s inner city lesbian and gay populations. Furthermore, commentators such as Wotherspoon have argued that many lesbians and gay men live in the surrounding residential areas. Because of this concentration it is easy to assume that the lesbian and gay spaces of Darlinghurst and Newtown constitute lesbian and gay Sydney.

Those of us from the suburbs know otherwise. Revealing my suburban western Sydney roots to my inner city lesbian and gay siblings has often elicited remarks such as "Oh my god - there are no fags out there!". In this context the word "out" may be read in two ways. First, the construction of western Sydney as Sydney’s "other", as asserted by Powell, has relegated it to being "out there", outside of the rest of the Sydney region or away from the "centre". Second, "out" is used to denote lesbians and gay men who are open about their sexuality rather than people "in the closet" who attempt to hide their sexuality in some or all facets of their lives. There seems to be some incredulity from inner city lesbians and gay men that there are "out" gay men and lesbians "out" there in the suburbs. The implication is that the inner city "gay territories" are the only places where gay men and lesbians can truly be "out".

This paper speculates about the role of place in the formation of gay men’s identities in Sydney. I focus first on issues of visibility for lesbians and gay men through a brief survey of the sexuality and space literature. Historically, this literature has argued the importance of "gay territories" (like Darlinghurst) in the formation and maintenance of gay identities and gay political power. I agree with recent critiques that question the spatial and gendered focus of this research and suggest that studying gay men in other places not only diversifies an understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space but may also contribute to gay political power. Second, I argue that the relational nature of identity formation means that although the suburbs are not usually seen as gay space they have played a role in constructing gay spaces (and therefore gay identities) by becoming gay Sydney’s "other". Third, I outline some research that reveals a diversity of sexual practices and sexual identities in the suburbs and discusses the relationship between inner city and suburban gay men. I conclude by presenting some suggestions for further research to build upon the...
SEXUALITY AND SPACE

Issues around the visibility of lesbians and gay men have been important in debates in the sexuality and space literature. Valentine argues that because of social intolerance toward homosexuality "many lesbians and gay men feel pressured into concealing their sexuality from others and hence adopt strategies to 'pass' as heterosexual in everyday places" (109). The most acute example of this social intolerance is homophobic violence. Eradication of homophobic violence has been a central goal of lesbian and gay liberation and the creation of "safe spaces" has been an ongoing political project to reach this end. The concentration of lesbians and gay men into "gay territories" has allowed many to feel there is safety in numbers and that they are less at risk of homophobic violence than in everyday places.

Early research concentrated on mapping the location of these "gay territories" in major western world cities. In 1979, Levine noted the use of the term "gay ghetto" by both gay people and sociologists to refer to certain areas of American cities with residential concentrations of, and points of social interaction for gay men. Levine concluded that three neighbourhoods (one each in New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles) could be called ghettos in the sociological sense defined by Park and Wirth. One factor that allowed Levine to label these neighbourhoods gay ghettos was the visibility of gay men:

Many social conventions within these areas are distinctly homosexual. Gestures of affection, eye contact, and other signals of sexual interest [between men] are exchanged openly. For example, men are frequently seen walking with their arms around each other's waists or holding hands. (372)

Later work not only mapped gay territories but also commented on their role in the political empowerment of gay men. Castells' 1983 study of San Francisco noted "the emergence of a social movement [gay liberation] and its transformation into a political force through the spatial organisation of a self-defined cultural community" (138). The creation of the Castro as a gay territory could therefore be seen as a significant factor in the formation of gay identity and political action in San Francisco. The positive role of the Castro as a "gay territory" which affirmed gay identities was juxtaposed with experiences of non-gay spaces by some gay community leaders: "when gays are scattered they are not gay, because they are invisible" (Britt quoted in Castells 138). Britt also preferred the term "liberated zone" because of its more positive connotations for gay liberation than "gay ghetto".

Further research in sexuality and space continued to focus on gay territories in inner city neighbourhoods. Lauria and Knopp called for further analysis of the role of cultural identity in the "urban renaissance" underway in the inner city of many American cities. They argue that this analysis had yet to occur "[i]n spite of the development of highly visible gay communities in areas experiencing rapid urban development/rehabilitation" (163). The political benefits of visible inner city gay territories were again noted in Knopp's 1990 study of gentrification in New Orleans: "Openly gay and lesbian communities have achieved more of their social, cultural and political goals in the inner cities of large urban areas than elsewhere" (337). More recent debate has problematised issues of visibility in the sexuality and space literature in three ways.

First, there has been a call for sexuality and space research to be carried out away from highly visible gay territories in inner city areas. Commentators such as Bell, Davis and Kramer argue that a fuller understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space will occur if other spaces such as the suburbs and rural areas are studied.
Second, some commentators have noted the gender specific nature of the majority of research, notably its concern with identifying the geographies of visible gay men. Adler and Brenner criticise Castells' decision not to study lesbian neighbourhoods. Specifically they question his assumption that "lesbians do not concentrate in a given territory" and are dubious about his assertion that lesbians do not need a territorial base from which to organise politically (24). Further developing this argument, Peake asserts that "[i]t is not that spatial expressions of sexuality are unimportant for lesbians, or that territorial bases have no significance for their political identity. Rather, the form these spatial expressions take are different from those that have so far been studied" (425-6).

The problem for Peake is therefore a problem with "ways of seeing" in research. The fact that the ways of finding visible gay men in previous research made lesbians invisible does not mean that lesbians were never there and had no relationship with territory. Instead, it means the entry points of previous research have been geared to finding high visibility (primarily gay male) gay territories. Peake further argues that studies of gay territories do not represent all gay men: "It is highly improbable that the studies of the high-visibility gay ghettos of the Village (New York) and Castro (San Francisco) encapsulate the territorial experiences of most gay men" (426).

Third, as Davis argues, the visibility of some gay spaces has made them easy targets for homophobic violence resulting in "the utopian idea implied by the term liberated zone [becoming] a term of isolation and continued oppression - the gay ghetto" (284). While recognising the role of gay territories in gay liberation, Davis also notes the movement of lesbians and gay men to other parts of urban areas, including the suburbs.

Because of the high visibility of gay men in gay territories and the need for lesbians and gay men to "pass" as heterosexual in "everyday places", it is easy to assume that there are no lesbians or gay men outside places such as Darlinghurst and Newtown. Peake's arguments discussed above demand that we break through this assumption. We need to ask who has been made invisible, what places have remained invisible and what positive political consequences for overcoming homophobia have been missed by concentrating on highly visible gay men in gay territories. Investigating the relationship between gay men and place outside gay territories contributes to an understanding of the diversity of gay men's lifestyles. While such investigation also permits a broader understanding of sexuality and space, studying the suburbs may also reveal strategies for overcoming homophobia that may not have been clear in research on gay territories. The role of gay territories in increasing the political fortunes of gay men is clear in previous research, but an understanding of the way suburban gay men negotiate homophobia in their lifeworlds could also contribute to the political fortunes of gay men generally. Suburban places are not usually seen as gay spaces, but they still play a role in gay identity formation. All places are constructed, both gay territories and the suburbs. The definition of one place is made in relation to another place. It is to these issues that the discussion now turns.

MAKING PLACES, MAKING IDENTITIES

The cultural process by which people construct their understandings of the world is an inherently geographic concern. In the course of generating new meanings and decoding existing ones, people construct spaces, places and landscapes, regions and environments.

As Anderson and Gale (4) argue above, places are constructed, they do not exist in isolation from cultural processes or people's imaginations. Places are more than locations on maps (which are themselves representations of material space), they are cultural creations with varying meanings to the different people that experience them. The cultural construction of
places therefore involves the creation of identities for particular locations.

These issues around the creation of identity have been the subject of considerable debate in contemporary social science. Rose argues that identity is relational: "Who I think I am depends on me establishing in what ways I am different from, or similar to, someone else" (5). To exemplify this point Rose argues that the construction of masculine identities requires the existence of femininity, the construction of heterosexual identities requires the existence of homosexuality and so forth. In creating an identity, what we define ourselves as not being can be termed "the Other". Rose further argues that the construction of identities is "not simply a matter of free choice and the unbiased perceptions of others" (5). The relationship between "Same" and "Other" is therefore more than simply relational. These constructions also involve power relations and misconceptions because representations can never be complete or impartial.

The construction of place identities also involves the process of "othering". Said argues that the diversity of the Middle East and North Africa was constructed as an easily packaged "Orient" that could be readily digested by European audiences. This "orientalism" constructed an "other" that not only allowed Europe to define itself, but also aided in the justification of European colonialism in "the Orient". The "othering" of places has been introduced into geographical literatures through Anderson's research on Chinatown precincts in Sydney and Melbourne. Anderson argues that the othering of these places has been made possible through an easily digestible set of ideas held by Europeans about "a Chinese race".

One way that places are constructed is through their representation in the media. The representation of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade in both print and electronic media has helped construct the place that the parade route occupies as "gay and lesbian space". In 1994 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation first televised the parade providing a representation of the parade route as gay and lesbian space in the homes of many viewers who may not previously have had any knowledge of Oxford Street. This gay territory, however, is not the only place constructed and represented in the parade telecast. The telecast of the 1995 parade provided some insights into the way gay men have represented "other" spaces in order to construct their identities relationally.

The comperes of the telecast (Angela Cattens, Julian Clary, Julie McCrossin, Elle McFeast and David Marr) introduced the floats in the parade as they passed by. Floats represented a variety of lesbian, gay and queer groups and the comperes made references to the style, creativity and flair put into designing the floats and the vigour of the participants. David Marr noted that there were many groups from outside the inner city but even more interesting is the negative way some of these groups were represented, particularly by Julian Clary:

DM: These are the "Coastal Links", they're a mid North Coast gay and lesbian social group.
JC: They're not terribly interesting are they?
DM: They've started having parties and they're enjoying themselves hugely.
JC: They look a little bit provincial to me, I mean look at that banner! (20 minutes)

And again, further into the telecast:

DM: And now more country floats.
AC: Oh here are the groups from the Northern Tablelands.
JC: Where on earth is that?
AC: Oh sort of Armidale, Tamworth, Inverell, Moree, Narrabri....
JC: Is that why they're so bad at dancing? (85 minutes)

(Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade Telecast 1995)

This points to the possibility that inner city gay men may have constructed the gay
territories as truly "gay" by relationally constructing other spaces as "heterosexual space". If this is the case, then the construction of the inner city gay territories and gay identities has "othered" spaces such as the suburbs and rural areas. Othering these spaces involves denying their diversity, in the same way that orientalism denies the diversity of the "Orient". This process therefore makes gay men in the suburbs and rural areas invisible and "out of place". The following section reveals a diversity of sexual practices and sexual identities in the suburbs, opening up research into sexuality and space away from territories defined as gay.

GAY MEN IN WESTERN SYDNEY

The relationship between sexuality and space is different in inner city gay territories than it is in other spaces. The visibility of gay men in the inner city, however, does not mean there are no gay men in these other spaces. Below I outline research that has documented sex between men in suburban settings and provided a voice for self-identifying gay men in western Sydney. This latter work demonstrates not only the difference in gay identity between inner city and western Sydney gay men, it also introduces issues of exclusion of western Sydney men from the inner city gay community. Before this, however, I want to outline the fluid nature of some sexual identities in some ambiguous spaces, further highlighting the diversity of relationships between sexuality and space.

Research into the social aspects of the prevention of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) has documented sex between men away from gay territories. An investigation of the practices of men who have sex with men is necessary to understand the nature of HIV transmission. This investigation is necessary as Kippax et al note that the majority of HIV transmission in Australia has occurred through male-to-male sexual activity (10). One set of diffuse sites of male-to-male sexual activity are "beats" which Bennett et al define as "meeting places for men who want to engage in sexual practices with men [offering] ambiguous locales for men who do not wish to be clearly identified as seeking homosexual contact" (310). Beats are widespread in western world cities and include particular public toilets, parks, bushland and beaches. The ambiguous nature of beats emanates from their overt function as lavatories and places of recreation while covertly being sites of sexual activity. Because of the homophobic violence and police harassment sometimes associated with beats they can be transitory in nature. Smith notes that after several violent incidents against beat users by "poofter bashers", graffiti appeared at one Sydney beat warning potential beat users to beware (21). If this didn't cause the site to cease operation as a beat, it more than likely curtailed the activity of the beat for some time.

One observation that can be made from research into the behaviour of men who have sex with men is that public sexual identities may be incongruous with actual sexual behaviours. Bennett et al found that some men who have sex with men at beats identify as heterosexual even though they have regular sex with men (312). This inconsistency means that safe sex campaigns have needed to target high risk behaviours (for HIV transmission) rather than simply targeting high risk groups (such as gay men) who are assumed to be the only individuals undertaking such behaviour. This inconsistency between sexual identity and practice also disrupts the notion of the suburbs as "heterosexual space". Men who perform heterosexual identities yet have sex with other men point to the fluid and complex nature of sexual identity. The ambiguity of the beat's identity as a place provides an entry point for research into more diverse notions of sexuality and space.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that all sex between men in western Sydney is clandestine in nature. There are self-identifying gay men in western Sydney. The location of lesbian and gay social groups such as the South Western Area Gays and Lesbians
(SWAGLS) and Gays and Lesbians Out West (GLOW) in western Sydney is also evidence of "out" lesbians and gay men in western Sydney. Gay men in these groups are therefore "out" because, as well as having sex with other men, the politico-cultural construction of the gay male identity discussed by Dowsett et al forms part of their public identity. Unlike inner-city Sydney, however, no easily discernible gay residential or entertainment/service concentration exists in western Sydney. This means that entry points for research into sexuality and space in the suburbs are different from those used to investigate inner-city gay territories.

Research into HIV prevention again provides one entry point for such research. As part of the Social Aspects in the Prevention of AIDS (SAPA) project, the National Centre of HIV Social Research (NCHIVSR) undertook the Class, Homosexuality and AIDS Prevention (CHAP) project. The project generated both resource material for use in HIV/AIDS education and contributed to academic debate about class and homosexuality through papers in scholarly journals. Fieldwork was undertaken in western Sydney and "Nullangardie", a provincial city in New South Wales. Both fieldwork sites were selected because of their association with "working-class culture" (2.1-2.4).

The CHAP report goes further than identifying men who have sex with men by documenting the existence of self-identifying gay men in western Sydney. The report noted that while some of the men who have sex with men in western Sydney self-identify as gay men, they see themselves as different from gay men in the inner city gay territory:

Men from Western Sydney and Nullangardie call themselves "gay" although this may not correspond to the international gay cultural meaning that is more representative of inner-city Sydney. (3.17)

The report does not define the "international gay cultural meaning" which is ascribed to the inner city. It does however, note that gay men in western Sydney have a different relationship to the "wider heterosexual world" (3.12) than that experienced by the inner city gay community. One respondent explained the importance of the home he shared with his partner in building their relationship and their gay identities. Their suburban home, however, was not a place where all heterosexuals were excluded, but neither was it a place where he and his partner were closeted. Rather it was a place where bridges could be built between straight and gay:

I think the reason I get on so well with people at work about it [being gay] is the bosses come every Christmas for dinner with their wives...the bosses sit there and get pissed and that's been going on for years. It's not shoving gay down people's throats, it's showing that people can live together. (3.12)

Not only is there a perception of difference from the inner city gay community, there is also a feeling of exclusion:

Men from the West feel excluded from the "self-absorbed" inner-city gay community. They perceive rejection by organisers of key cultural events (eg. Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras) and inner-city agencies. These men therefore miss out on the HIV/AIDS education built into gay community activity. This emphasises the importance of more specific targeting of men from outside the inner-city community. (3.14)

The role of "other" spaces in the construction of inner city gay territories as gay places may, in part, account for this feeling of exclusion. Gay men living in western Sydney may have been othered in a similar vein to the othering of non-gay spaces in the construction of a gay identity for the inner city gay territories. The CHAP report provides a starting point for investigating sexuality and space in suburban settings by documenting notions of suburban gay men's feelings of difference and exclusion from the inner city gay community. It also notes the consequences of this exclusion for HIV/AIDS education, prevention and support. For these
reasons, as well as those discussed previously, the role of place in forming sexual identity in suburban settings needs further investigation. This paper concludes by outlining some ways forward for this research.

CONCLUSION

A variety of places have been important in the formation of gay men's identities in Sydney. The high visibility of gay territories in the inner city makes it easy to assume that these are the only places where issues of (homo)sexuality and space intersect and need consideration. They can also be seen to constitute gay Sydney. The role of the suburbs as "non-gay space" in relationally constructing the inner city gay territories as gay space needs further investigation. This work could involve ethnographic research with residents of gay territories and textual analysis of gay texts such as the gay print media. Research into HIV prevention has documented not only sex between men in suburban settings, but also the existence of self-identifying gay men in the suburbs. These men, like all gay men and lesbians, have to negotiate homophobia in their everyday lives. Ethnographic work with gay men will not only document the diversity of gay lifestyles outside of gay territories, but it may also highlight ways of dealing with homophobia other than clustering in gay territories for safety. The findings of the CHAP report point to the importance of place in the formation of suburban gay men's identities. As well as furthering our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space, issues of exclusion and difference need to be understood so that HIV prevention services are more accessible to these men. Again, further ethnographic research like that undertaken by CHAP could extend understanding of the role of place in gay men's identities and lives in suburban settings. Research such as this will allow us to say that indeed there are fags out there.

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Note

[1] My focus on gay men is not intended to make lesbians (and people who hold other sexual identities) invisible. However, I agree with Peake who argues that a different range of issues affect the relationship between lesbians and space from those that affect gay men and their relationship with space. As much of the motivation for this paper comes from my personal experience as a gay man, I do not feel that it is appropriate for me to represent lesbians.

Works cited


Hodge: Gay Men, Identity and Suburbia


