Article

"To Gay or not to Gay, that is the Question": Permeable Boundaries between Public and Private Spaces of Gay Male Academics and Students in South Africa

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Abstract

This article was informed by a study which focused on the identity construction and deconstruction of gay male participants, specifically as related to their academic lives. The findings originate from a 2012–2013 qualitative sociological study on the experiences of gay male academics and students on South African university campuses. The article reports on a subset of the data, since it provides an insightful account of these men's navigation between their communal identification with other gay men in social and private contexts. The author argues that participants' responses navigate between the *heterosexualisation* and the *homosexualisation* of these spaces, in an attempt to gravitate towards or distance themselves from a gay sensibility through temporary assimilation into "gay spaces" in order to negotiate their sexual agency.

Keywords: gay ghetto; gay sensibility; gay spaces; heteronormativity; heterosexualisation; homonormativity; homosexualisation; queer spaces

Introduction

Nash and Gorman-Murray (2014, 758) argue that communal gay and lesbian settings (in the 1970s and 1980s in America, Australia, Canada and Europe) provided supposed sexual dissidents with a greater degree of political, social and economic strength and anonymity (Ghaziani 2017; Valentine and Skelton 2003). Levine (1998, 194) cites four features arising from this: institutional concentration, which refers to the "centralization of [a] ghettoized people's gathering places and commercial establishments"; a cultural area, reflecting the dominant values, beliefs and practices of these people within that

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area; social isolation, which supposes a degree of segregation from mainstream heterosexual society; and a residential concentration of homes occupied by gay men and lesbian women; thus institutional, cultural, social, and residential.

Plummer (1998) notes that some gay and lesbian liberationists rendered their targeted identities as more privileged and sacred, and as such potentially confined their communities (particularly since the 1960s) as separatist entities outside the heterosexual domain. Ideological and literal isolation further resulted in distinctions within and among members of the homosexual community. These attempts at "self-categorisation"—according to Plummer (1998, 85)—resulted in "an ever increasing self-imposed segregation" (Valentine 2002) and potential reinforcement of their "gay sensibility" (Altman 1982), or, as Dowsett (1996) terms it, attempts at "doing gay." Although viewed as a "liberated zone" (Brickell 2000, 163; Castells 1983, 168), gay and lesbian separatism risks exacerbating the binary logic through homogenisation, "othering" and a "hardening" of gay identity categories (Epstein 1998; Van den Berg 2016) and making these individuals "become objects for the fetishisation of difference" (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, 57).

Likewise, Jagose (1996) and Weeks (2000) emphasise the strained relationship between those favouring essentialist views of homosexuality, as opposed to social constructionists and queer theorists who underline the inherent variance and deconstructive possibilities associated with the subjectivity of sexual actors (Plummer 2003; 2015). Rowe and Dowsett (2008) underscore that epistemologists may have lost sight of the inherent contradictions and contestations associated with, among others, gay male identification and communality (also see Ghaziani 2015; Sedgwick 2008). As opposed to those favouring the ethnic configuration of "gay experience," Polchin (1997, 386) argues that "queer space … cannot be located within a particular place because it does not necessarily represent defined boundaries, but rather exists through a presentation of queer bodies and desires" since we currently live in a period of "a queer pluralisation of sexuality" (Brown 2014, 1). Other studies implore an in-depth elucidation of the influence of intersectionality as it relates to sexual actors' varied experiences in terms of race, class, ethnicity, age, disability or sex (Richardson and Monro 2012). Epprecht (2005) and Msibi (2013) observe that one must be cognisant of the unique terminology, meanings and enactment that South Africans, for example, ascribe to their understanding of sexuality, separate from what they consider to be Westernised identity categories including "gay", "lesbian" and "queer." This notwithstanding, Oswin (2005), writing from a South African perspective, argues that "it is also possible to borrow from [W]estern queer cultures and still be African and homosexual … an assertion that has also been made in [research] specifically dedicated to African homosexualities." In her study of the oppositional forces of "queering" or "normalising" gay constituencies in Cape Town, she concludes that one should not necessarily focus on what a particular identity marker in a specific space *is*, but rather what it *does*, thus "how it acts as a productive social force in the queer cultural/political/economic landscape of [particular towns and cities] and South Africa"

(Oswin 2005, 583). Her thought echoes the recent views of Grace (2017, 46), who asserts that social scientists need to "move beyond normative understandings of sexuality and gender … bringing heterosexist … and homo/bi/transphobic actions and language into question; and accounting for intersecting relational and cultural intricacies."

Despite these diverse views, the article retains the term "gay" to denote the findings originating from the study on self-identified gay male participants (all of whom selected to use the term "gay" in order to denote their sexual orientation), to elucidate how the ethnic character of "gay male identity" may still manifest in public and private contexts within the South African society. The importance of conducting further research relates to considering an uncritical acceptance and monolithic application of reflexivity by sexual actors (Brown 2008; Jackson and Scott 2010; Tucker 2009).[1]

The Visible and Invisible Gay Cultural Space: Producing a Gay Sexual Identity in Contemporary Society

Valentine (2002) notes that urban areas initially offered an attractive alternative of sexual freedom, self-actualisation, acceptance, and a search for and assertion and validation of gay identity (Binnie 2004; Brown 2000; Gevisser and Cameron 1995; Gray, Johnson and Gilley 2016; Valentine and Skelton 2003).[2] Commercialised institutions emerged in American and European cities during the 1960s and 1970s (Weston 1995), owned by and catering for the specific needs of predominantly gay male patrons (Gorman-Murray and Waitt 2009) through a so-called gentrified "renaissance" (Castells 1983, 166; Visser 2003, 128). Although originally more secretive in the 1950s to the 1970s, these institutions became more visible during the late 1970s and 1980s in South Africa and abroad (Gevisser and Cameron 1995; Tucker 2009). Segregation,

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1 At the risk of abdicating a reference to the particular constituency of the participants, it should be noted at the outset that, although the empirical component of the article is informed by the larger qualitative sociological inquiry into the lived experiences of self-identified gay male academics and students (Rothmann 2014), the university context is not the central focal point of the theoretical and empirical discussion presented here. The article mainly centres on a subset of qualitative data concerning the broader societal (i.e. public) and private contexts of the participants, and not the academic context in particular. I do, however, concede that the public and private life-worlds of the participants may derive from their sexual performances on their respective university campuses. Publications which have resulted from this study (Rothmann 2016; 2017), commented on positive experiences associated with the disclosure of one's gay identity to colleagues or peers as well as the challenges which may necessitate a non-disclosure of one's sexual orientation. Such decisions overlap with factors that are applicable to the African and South African context, including ideologies which favour "un-African" understandings of homosexuality, the persistence of patriarchy and overt displays of verbal and physical homophobia (Rothmann 2018).

2 In keeping with Gray et al. (2016) and Reid (2013), among others, I wish to note the following. The overt visibility of LGBTIQ+ groups in urban areas does not assume the non-existence, unimportance or complete invisibility and lack of agency of LGBTIQ+ individuals in rural or smaller towns in South Africa and abroad. This article serves to report on the narratives of self-identified gay men and their views on communal and/or private gay male identification.

especially under apartheid in South Africa, resulted in different communal spaces for gay men along racial lines, with no intersection between the varied groups. Black gay men specifically had few opportunities to interact with gay subcultures in their immediate contexts—a reality exacerbated not only by the apartheid regime's exclusionary and discriminatory legislation, but also owing to the perceived "un-African" nature of same-sex practices (Reid 2013).

Currently, beyond word-of-mouth accounts, published directories, newspapers and magazines direct interested parties toward the gay market and provide information on accessing gay-themed entertainment and gay-friendly spaces (Rink 2008; 2013; Visser 2007). South African publications include *Exit, The Gay Pages* and the annual publication of *The Pink Map*. In providing an A-to-Z register of gay bars and clubs, these publications are also further sources for health advice, entertainment sections and classifieds for those in search of either confluent sex or stable relationships (*Exit Newspaper* 2016; *The Gay Pages South Africa* 2016). *The Pink Map*, for example, serves to "map" the queerness of Cape Town as "gay Utopia" for its gay tourist market (Rink 2013, 66), encapsulating the "epicenter of gay life and … host[s] a variety of flamboyant Queer events and celebrations" (*Pink South Africa* 2016).

Although efforts to facilitate a more liberated sexual context are laudable, Visser (2003, 134) believes the boundaries between a supposedly exclusive heterosexual and gay geographical context have progressively become more permeable, especially owing to the intersection between the production of sexual identities and the role of commercialisation. Consider, for example, Rink's (2013) critical reading of *The Pink Map.* It comments on the changing cultural, social and political South African landscape, particularly relating to the constitutional protection and how this engenders the creation of suburbs including *De Waterkant* as "gay villages"; typified as contexts for the realisation of sexual citizenship and a glimpse into a "small fragment" of a "queer destination" (Rink 2013, 68). This is a context which, according to Binnie and Skeggs (2004, 56), is "non-threatening" and sophisticated. Conversely, however, advertising through *The Pink Map* serves to encourage monetary income through tourism which exacerbates the exclusion of "non-white queers" (Tucker 2009, 188). Tucker (2009) mentions that substantiated reports in the early 2000s noted that black and coloured gay men were "turned away" from specific bars and clubs for supposedly not being "regulars" or "members," which indicates a racially motivated "undercurrent" of inclusion versus exclusion (Tucker 2009, 188). On the surface, then, such suburbs become gay male "enclaves" for mainly white gay men who seemingly assimilated into a heteronormative neo-liberal political economy, which supported the commercial and capitalist possibilities provided by the gay ghetto through international tourism, among others (Brown 2000; Rink 2013). In so doing, Elder (2004, 580) argues that this creates a "myth of [gay] community" insofar as such spaces mainly cater for the predominantly affluent (and politically apathetic) white gay male constituency of Cape Town. Tucker (2009) states that this, based on his reading of Nast's (2002) work, may reinforce the "gay white patriarch" typology which "co-exists with, and in some cases displaces,

heteropatriarchies, shoring up pre-existing racialised and politically and economically conservative processes of profit-accumulation" (Nast 2002, 878). This mirrors a homonormative "version of masculine white heteronormativity" in South Africa (Tucker 2009, 189). Elder (2005, 56) bemoans the fact that this constructed image of acceptance (or rather tolerance) of an "open secret" of gay male sexual presence and activity, largely ignores the impact of homophobia on the lives of particularly black and coloured gay men and lesbian women, in favour of "neo-liberal *laissez-faire* economic policies."

Sociological inquiry into the role of visible gay spaces has commented on how these spaces may, amid the noted bias and segregation within the community itself, serve as a source for communal identification (Abraham 2009). Several themes typify the contributions of public gay spaces (bars and clubs) that include the importance of establishing a "leisure and sociable context" for gay men (Warren 1998), serving as "facilitator for anonymity" for those gay men who wish to remain in the "closet" but want to become marginally involved in gay-identified contexts (Cass 1979). These communal contexts serve as "secondary socialisation agents" since gay men have an opportunity to interact with others "like them" and to fully contemplate and express their sexual selves (Warren 1998). In adopting the ghettoised depiction of homosexuals, the gay bar performs this socialisation function, originally likened to the family or church in heterosexual society.

Another theme underlines the exacerbation of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, since it establishes a segregated community of homosexual men. Such communities of "brotherhood" (Plummer 1998, 85) may manifest what Altman (1982, 148) considers a somewhat homogenised understanding of gay culture, or claims to a so-called "gay sensibility," which may refer to "a particular insight into emotions" resulting from a shared sense of sublimation or need for affirmation. A final theme centres on the provision of "permission and control over sexual relationships between gay men" (Visser 2007). This affords gay spaces a supposed "fickle" character through instrumentalisation, alienation, reification and sexual objectification of gay men *by* gay men through confluent and casual sex (Bech 1997). Rowe and Dowsett (2008, 337) argue that through "the many ways … men are 'doing gay', continuity and the need to belong sit uncomfortably with exclusion and resistance." Coming out of the closet, for "many men, the hope of finding a new home in the gay community is dashed, leaving them to see the community as … 'a lover who has rejected them'."

Recent studies comment on the transformative, mobile and intersectional nature of gender and sexual urban spaces, arguing that they may be disappearing in cities worldwide (Ghaziani 2015; 2017; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014), while mainstream sections of cosmopolitan areas are newly "queered" owing to the assimilation of LGBTIQ+ individuals into mainly heterosexual contexts in South Africa and abroad (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014; Visser 2007). Ghaziani attributes this disappearance to the changing social and political ideologies concerning the acceptance,

accommodation and legal protection (Carroll 2016) of the LGBTIQ+ community (to varied degrees in certain countries). Mainstream culture thus becomes an overarching inclusive ghetto for all sexual actors (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014). Ghaziani further comments that generational shifts also posit younger gay men as preferring "sexually mixed company" rather than a "gay-only" ghetto, since their homosexuality has become "secondary to their place in life" which does not necessitate an association with a common gay culture (Ghaziani 2017, 46). Dan Levy (quoted in Ghaziani 2015, 759) notes: "If lesbians and gays no longer feel confined to a homosexual safe zone, straights are increasingly less likely to be threatened by same-sex attention. Relaxed attitudes about sexual identity have led to a greater permeability." This claim remains worrisome if embraced uncritically. Consider Msibi's (2013) reminder of the continued incongruence between legal protection of same-sex rights and the actual lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals in civil society, as well as the preceding reference to internal divisions (along class and racial lines) among gay men (Tucker 2009).

This thought encapsulates the idea of permeability in considering the more covert gay residential space. Gorman-Murray (2006, 57) cites the way gay men "fluidly use" their interactive capabilities to import their public gay sensibility into their homes. This comments on the reciprocal interplay between the two contexts where the private space is constructed through public references while the external gay scene becomes "home-like." Based on his research on the experiences of self-identified gay men living in Australia, the external gay "scenes" and "beats" facilitated "connections with others" and created "personal happiness and self-acceptance" (Gorman-Murray 2006, 60) within the home, particularly relating to the socialisation and sexualisation of gay men's lifestyles. From this, marginal involvement and experimentation through first sexual experiences in public settings "validated 'private' same-sex desires" (Gorman-Murray 2006, 63). This is reminiscent of Blunt and Dowling's (2006, 2) belief in the significance of performing sexualised identities in the context of the home to establish "feelings of belonging, desire or intimacy." This may manifest in online spaces, which have superseded tangible geographic spaces where, somewhat contradictorily, gay men may seek to regain a sense of community, sociability and "sexual capital" (Simpson 2014, 152) through individualisation, self-scrutiny and potential isolation to identify *with,* rather than *as* a gay man (Halperin 2012). An example is the proliferation of such spaces on the Internet. Ghaziani (2017, 46), for example, notes that the Internet has (to some extent), "displaced" the importance ascribed to physical gay spaces (e.g. gay neighbourhoods or "ghettos"), insofar as it has become "easy to find online resources about being gay, which disenfranchises the gayborhood for younger individuals" since it creates a platform for interaction among a "diaspora of gays from traditional urban enclaves."

Private residences, whether owned or rented, are consequently regarded as important private spaces for gay men to affirm their sexual identity (Gorman-Murray 2006), with regard to which Warren's (1998) work on American cities is ground-breaking. She argues that gay men spend most of their disposable income on gentrifying their homes.

Abraham (2009) attributes this symbolic practice to the financial burden on gay men to perfect their homes for setting the perfect "safe" stage for both themselves and their guests; the objective, according to Warren (1998, 189), is to create "a place where the expression of the true self can be allowed" in a secretive manner (Gorman-Murray 2007).

Methodology

The study at hand employed a qualitative research design, embedded in an interpretivist, epistemological and social constructionist, ontological basis.

Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used. Data collection included 15 in-depth interviews with self-identified gay male academics and seven with students. Two gay male academics and 17 students also completed self-administered questionnaires. The study was conducted over six months (June 2012 to December 2012). The participants were self-identified gay male academics and students at South African universities. Included with the interview schedule and self-administered questionnaire was an informed consent statement providing an overview of the objective of the study, the duration of interviews and the ethical considerations observed throughout the process. Participants were informed that, to retain the data, audio recordings of the interviews would be transcribed later. All the participants consented to this. Through the self-administered questionnaires participants could further safeguard their confidentiality and privacy.

The questionnaire was identical to the interview schedule in thematic structure and question content, both comprising four subsections. For the purpose of this article, three of these are demarcated. Subsection A centred on the biographical background of the participants, subsection B on the academic background of the gay males, and subsection C included the opinion-related questions. Opinions on their social and private gay identity were focused on and comprised questions on their experiences in these contexts. In terms of public gay male identification, I asked the following: "Do you believe that it is important to form part of a gay group/community?"; "What are the positive features associated with forming part of such a visible group?"; "What are the negative features associated with forming part of such a visible group?"; "Do you attend public places (bars, clubs or churches) of which the patrons are predominantly/only gay men?"; and "If you answered 'yes', what were your experiences in attending these public places?" In terms of the private contexts, the following questions were posed: "Please describe your residential setting in terms of its content, design and layout"; and "Does your residential setting serve as a safer environment than an external context?" Participants were requested to elaborate on their answers.

Analysis of the transcripts and completed self-administered questionnaires was informed by open and selective coding. The first was used to identify the first-order

concepts, comprising the narratives of the academics and students and including their views on their social and private spaces. The latter comprised a focus on the subthemes of the importance ascribed to communal identification, its positive and negative features, its various configurations and the inherent design choices, safety, and financial expenditure associated with private milieus.

Biographical Description of the Participants and Ethical Considerations

Regarding the nationality of the academics, all but one (born in Europe), were South African. Sixteen of the participants were white; only one identified as coloured. In terms of the students' race, 14 defined themselves as white, nine as black and one as coloured. One of the students was a foreign national (from Zimbabwe), while the remaining 23 were South African. I am aware of the potential critique of including mostly white participants, which inhibited the inclusion of an intersectional component and different insights in the study, but the sensitivity associated with the subject matter and the "hidden" nature of the research population made it difficult to directly approach or identify potential participants based on their sexual orientation. The study adhered to the strict protocols of the Ethics Committee at North-West University's Faculty of Arts. These protocols prescribe particular practices, which include: a commitment not to inflict physical or emotional harm to the participants; the principle of voluntary consent; and to acknowledge the importance of the protection of their identities in both the interviews and self-administered questionnaires. I was mostly dependent on referrals to potential participants through, among others, snowball sampling and could thus not contact individuals without their consent. Moreover, pseudonyms were assigned and, although the inclusion of specific biographical information could have proven invaluable for analysis purposes, the geographical location, specific age, subject department and university of the participants were not directly linked to them in order to further safeguard their identities.

The subject departments of the academics belong to four academic faculties: one participant in the natural sciences, two participants in education, four in arts and 10 in social sciences. The student research population's faculty affiliation comprised various fields, including five students in social sciences, four in arts, economics and engineering, three in natural sciences and one in education, law and nursing respectively.

Findings

The findings are presented in two broad themes. The first centres on social gay male spaces, and the second on private contexts.

Social Gay Male Spaces: The Social Persona of the Gay Male Academic and Student

The Importance of Forming Part of a Visible Gay Community

The majority of gay male academics emphasised the importance of forming part of a visible gay community or group. Reasons included: a need for acceptance and inclusiveness; highlighting diversity in the gay community; political transgression; the provision of role models; a need for socialising with those displaying similar needs; experiences; interests; and support in coming out. Alec and Ian, for example, felt such an association was "nice" and "fun" and was necessary "sometimes" since it provided a so-called "emotional regeneration" from a world which may be "rife with discrimination." This could be attributed to the heterosexual society only offering varied degrees of acceptance or mere tolerance, whereas the gay community may provide a type of "alternative family" or, as Warren noted, a "united front" against homophobia. Such belonging was necessary, according to Christopher, Hugh and Matthew, when they were younger and struggling with their sexual orientation, due to the importance of being part of a more overtly visible gay group during one's teenage and early adolescent years. James, an educationalist, noted: "I think communities by their very nature have stronger and looser boundaries, and people in them situate themselves at the margins or at its centre; both are an example of belonging … whether it's a looser sense of belonging or stronger sense."

Similar thoughts emerged from the gay male students. Those students who affirmed the importance of a visible gay community or group, provided different reasons for their choice. Jason and Jay cited the provision of a role model as imperative. They noted that the importance of such a person or group depended on the specific stage of one's life, to "teach" someone how to be gay. The importance of a place of security was also highlighted. This could afford a gay male an opportunity to be himself without fearing judgement, excessive labelling or isolation; possibly leading to creating a social support structure of which the individual may form part. A student in the Faculty of Arts (Trevor) noted that this may alleviate some of the challenges and difficulties faced as part of a gay lifestyle, even if the group were informal.

Although the importance of a reciprocal social support system could prove invaluable, a student in social sciences, Russell, displayed more trepidation regarding communal identification as beneficial, but not as a "permanent point of identity reference"; it should serve a temporary purpose for those recently out of the closet to meet more gay people and gain "understanding, guidance and support." This should become less important after the gay male has learned "how the system operates" pertaining to certain "behavioural cues, body language (collectively: 'gaydar')."

Overt Gay Male Identification as Unimportant

Some gay male academics did not share this positive view of linkage to a visible gay group. Robin, an arts scholar, censors himself the moment a heterosexual individual joins a group of gay men. He does this "out of consideration for heterosexuals" and attempts to establish stronger gay bonds on a more "underground" and "secretive" level, possibly unknown to mainstream heterosexual society.

Supporting this, Rick, a social sciences scholar, emphasised the importance of merging the gay and heterosexual worlds; he believes it is also the responsibility of the gay community to enlighten the heterosexual context on what it means to be gay. It therefore becomes important to have so-called "mixed friendships" to establish reciprocal understanding and respect. The role of commoditisation and social class also figures as a factor in determining whether to assimilate or avoid group identification. Here Ian notes that, based on his financial standing, he has the opportunity to integrate into mainstream heterosexual culture since he mainly requires a sense of "fun"; not as a source of support, as when he was a younger gay man.

Given his background in sexuality studies, Ridge proposes a queer reading of the disjuncture in the power relations between the heterosexual and homosexual society. He believes that a unique and isolated gay male community only fuels ideas of a supposed, and according to him non-existent, homogeneity. Consider his poststructuralist account:

> You see I find the notion of gay community very problematic, because it presupposes some common thread that runs through all the members of community [but] … I think it's important to be part of queer spaces, spaces where sexuality is not an issue, whether you identify as a gay man or a lesbian, or queer, it's just fine.

In keeping with the preceding thoughts, the gay male students**,** Russell, Pat, Paul and Morgan, did not consider communal identification as important. According to Pat, individual development could be hindered if one were to be "overwhelmed" by the pressures of conforming to the expectations of a larger group. Morgan expressed his absolute disdain for gay groups, since they only provide "forums for sleeping around"—whereas Paul stated that it would open the individual up to unnecessary ridicule and scorn, based on an inability on the part of a gay male to conform to certain stereotypes.

Contexts of Public Gay Male Association

Several academics indicated that they frequent or have frequented public places patronised mostly by gay men. Although Alec indicated that he and his partner attend services at a Christian congregation, clubs and bars were the favourite settings for the other participants to socialise with gay males. Matthew's preference to attend gay clubs was attributed to the fact that these "condone gayness," providing an opportunity to exhibit a "whatever attitude"; however, he is more comfortable with this attitude in foreign settings, as proved by his visits to a European city. There he could "be myself,

anonymous" whereas his South African milieu makes a public display of same-sex attraction in marginalised gay settings nearly impossible. He notes: "People know me in South Africa. In [my city] people are aware of me. I'm afraid they will recognise me." This apparent display of self-reflexivity is necessary, since he does not wish anyone to know his sexual orientation.

The South African bar, *The Mystic Boer,* was cited as the most appropriate "gay friendly" environment where gay and heterosexual individuals interact. Its "bohemian style" creates a feeling of "home" and justifies a more "subtle" experience for gay men to interact in a larger heterosexual context. The role of age arose in Ridge's account, owing to his recollection of the "extremely exciting" experience of going to a gay bar in a European city. He regarded being "acknowledged as sexual object [as] great." His example reflects how men enter an exclusive, secretive milieu. This may denote that seemingly liberated contexts help to hide homosexuality. Although certain contexts are overtly conducive to being "more gay," Rick cautions against being "too much," since one has to avoid "forcing" overt displays or discussions of homosexuality on heterosexual individuals because the existing "line of tolerance is already very thin."

Other participants who abstain from going to public "gay places" supported his attitude, since they prefer more integrated social settings and a "mixed contingent" of individuals to create the opportunity for people to "adapt" to each other, rather than "only one to the other." Such integration is viewed as more appropriate for some gay men, who do "not get a 'kick' out of socialising with homogeneous groups" but prefer "gay-friendly coffee shops." Of three participants contemplating the generational aspect of gay bars and clubs, Phillip noted that he felt like "an outsider within" gay-orientated bars and clubs, finding them noisy and promiscuous. Christopher and Robin underlined their age as central yardstick to carefully consider the type of social gathering to attend, since bars "are not as compelling nowadays … my [interests] and those friends' interests have changed" as "I am too old to go to these venues; house parties are more my style."

Echoing the preceding arguments, gay students indicated that they too frequent public contexts that are either gay-friendly or primarily gay-orientated, including bars, clubs, churches and hair salons. They reflected on the therapeutic effect that female hairdressers afford gay men by encouraging them to talk about their feelings. Jason and Quincy, two natural science students, made a clear distinction between the different effects bars and clubs manifest for their gay clientele. Bars, according to them, offer men the chance to socialise with friends, whereas a club is "all sex, dance, enjoying yourself"; a context where "men come together, get drunk, reckless. [The] gay reputation of sleeping around" features greatly. Others thought that gay men tend to "exaggerate" their homosexuality in such settings. Dale (an engineering student) elaborated by reflecting on the benefits and potential difficulties of gay bars and clubs:

> … gay people always want to look better, younger and more desirable than the people surrounding them. They go out to "meet" people and not to have a good time … the atmosphere is "stiff" and uncomfortable.

He prefers gay-friendly, heterosexually owned and operated bars and clubs. The students who refrain from attending gay-orientated spaces do so for diverse reasons. Bars and clubs were described as very sexual in nature, "so, unless you're there to simply dance and enjoy yourself, with the emphasis on *yourself*, it is quite unpleasant and boring, unless you're looking for a hook-up." Initial acquaintances may be "sexually charged", "very competitive … and extremely superficial" and "too dirty and disturbing."

Positive and Negative Features Associated with Overt Gay Male Identification

Positive features

Reference to belonging and support was most emphasised in the feedback of both academics and students. Alec, Don, Ian, Rick and Steve emphasised the importance of a safe environment in which gay men can socialise with others, sharing their sexual orientation. Alec, Ian and Rick underlined the generational issue in ascribing to this need of belonging and support, since much of this manifested more evidently during their initial coming-out phases in their teenage and younger adult years. This thought was also evident in the students' emphasis on the educational role these contexts could provide, perhaps centring on safe-sex advice, role modelling and expanding knowledge through, among others, advice on current lesbian and gay issues. This sense of belonging guides gay men through their initial stages of coming out.

Secondly, an awareness of other gay men in society is also provided through increased visibility. By implication this can foster diversity and plurality within the supposed homogeneous confines of the gay community or group. Colin, Hugh and Robin articulated the importance of the inherent diversity and uniqueness of gay men, rather than the stereotypically homogeneous image perpetuated in mainstream society.

Regarding probable threats, providing a safe and secure context serves as a third positive feature. Matthew postulated that the "underlying fear of threat" gay men face daily is a major reason for associating with other gay men. The creation of such safe communal, gay spaces, could unfortunately, according to Ridge, further exacerbate a polarisation between the heterosexual and homosexual communities, since they are exclusive. He advocates the creation of queer rather than gay spaces, which may provide a more inclusive setting for all homosexually-identified individuals who wish to socialise without a persistent threat of discrimination or prejudice due to their difference. He argues that "a queer space is not necessarily a gay space for me. It is open to all types of sexualities where even people who identify as heterosexual could go, but knowing that non-normative sexualities would be there … where they wouldn't pass judgment."

Negative Features

Such a group might also have negative features. Constant intimidation and threats were cited by academics and students as dominant negative factors, which may impede a full realisation of the gay male identity at an overt level. The persistence of homophobia may overshadow what Warren (an arts scholar) calls the "bravery" of those gay men who are open about their sexual orientation. Such group identification may accordingly reinforce negative stereotypes associated with gay men. Academics critiqued the overemphasis and possible blind adherence to preconceived stereotypes of gay men, including effeminacy. The "sexualised" nature of gay men was cited as another negative stereotype. Students noted that negative stereotypical labels could be assigned to the gay male. This could result in exclusion from mainstream society or could exacerbate stigmatisation, taunting or mocking homosexual individuals. As a result, you are "always reminded that you are different" (Kevin, an Engineering student).

Academics and students highlighted a so-called "ghettoised gay male identification." Christopher, an academic, believes ideas on life in general, and being gay in particular, lead gay men to become isolated from broader society underlining the "us-versus-them" stereotype. This was mirrored by others' contributions. Rick noted: "[Conforming in this way] only creates viciousness … There has to be a balance; you have to have gay and straight friends; there has to be integration, because if you only isolate yourself, you will constantly walk into things in which conflict is embedded, within yourself and others." Students agreed with their academic counterparts. Idris, a natural sciences student, associates homogenised gay spaces with "drinking, photos of attractive guys or guys furiously looking for a 'boyfriend' … [It] creates a 'doomed picture' of a 'doomed existence' as outsider, where drinking, promiscuity and partying are the only elements of life."

Private gay male spaces: A case of reclaiming an "unfettered self"

The "WOW" Factor

One particular theme emerged from the contributions of the academics: creating the "WOW" factor. The "WOW" factor mainly involves a conscious and intense effort to impress a person's visitors through a distinctly unique environment. I thought it appropriate to integrate the information accrued from the second question on financial expenditure on their residential contexts. If one recalls Ian's reference to "his kind" of gay men, he coined the "WOW" exclamation in describing his home as something luxurious, "give[ing] [him] permission … to be a rebel." He felt that financial expense was necessary in order to fully capture the unique and pluralistic nature of gay identity, as is evident from his words:

> The core is more creative creation, creative thinking, that is what I like about my being gay, to give myself permission from a Calvinist background to be a rebel. This is My Life, as Shirley Bassey sings in reaction to but correspondingly alongside a creative space, uniqueness … that a part of you and part of them comes out.

Others also equated their homes with their personalities and interests, including their aesthetic taste. Those academics who sought a more queerly created residence provided interesting insights. Ridge expressed the need for simplicity amid expensive art and furniture and by so doing symbolically posits his sexuality as more simplified.

Safety

The second question on the respondents' private contexts focused on the issue of safety. Phrases used to describe their homes included a "sanctuary" opposed to the "unholy heterosexual world" where they "could feel emotionally and physically at ease" and "a private retreat which I feel is safe, pleasing (for me), comfortable and private. It is not invisible, but I am selective about who I invite there." James stated that a home "has to be a place where I can be, that is not in the eyes of people … that's what home is." The need for a "pleasurable place of belonging, being yourself" according to James, found representation in Robin's reference to creating a space where people can come together, or Christopher's need for a larger kitchen to facilitate more "intimate visits with friends." Others did not believe their homes to be a safer context, owing to the generally crime-ridden South African environment.

Among the gay male students, two themes were emphasised: the importance of safety within this sphere and the possible influence of its design on creating a safer milieu. Three private settings were identified: the students' own apartments, student housing, or their parents' homes. Some expressed a sense of increased safety due to their private apartments. Dallas (a Faculty of Arts student) echoed the importance the academics noted as it relates to design, insofar as this—particularly in terms of colour and art—creates a sense of safety and security for him. By creating such an artistic space, his apartment is a "safe haven" separating him and his boyfriend from the remainder of society where they can be "affectionate, and be ourselves." Dale (an engineering student) echoed his academic counterpart, namely Ian's earlier emphasis on material design, noting: "Gay people … may spend money on things to make them feel safe."

Discussion

I ascribe to Butler's (1990) definition of "doing gender" and Dowsett's (1996) application in "doing gay" to engage the possibility that gay men may rationalise (Jackson and Scott 2010) their sexual orientation in a homogeneous manner via a "gay sensibility" (Altman 1982). I argue that the findings express a duality: there were calls for homogeneity, while a sexual permeability questions the supposed rigidity of an essentialist/social constructionist/queer theoretical binary through attempts at integration.

Some gay male academics provided positive affirmations of communal identification in public spaces. Being part of a group of gay men was considered advantageous, based on what Johnson (2009) terms an "emotional regeneration." The provision of an environment which values inclusion, role modelling, support in coming out, and

protection against homophobia in a heteronormative context, underlined the need to establish a synergised attempt to curtail heterosexist violence towards sexual dissidents (Valentine 2002). Notably, many of the views of academics were associated with their experiences during their teenage and adolescent years, which may posit membership of such a seemingly exclusive gay community as pleasurable at later stages of the older academics' lives, and not as a necessity. This was evident in the students' acknowledgement of the significance of security, a sense of belonging, support structures, education and role modelling in a segregated gay male setting. References to the freedom associated with exclusive bars and clubs exemplified the importance of acknowledgement and validation of a sexual (or gay) actor within a newly discovered subculture of gay men (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995), alongside a sense of anxiety, shame and fear on the initial introduction to an exclusively gay setting (Downs 2006).

Such spaces were considered beneficial in the short term, after which attempts could be considered at either further assimilation into homonormativity or a transgressive attempt at reflexively constructing a unique "individualised sexuality" (Plummer 2015). This recalls Van den Berg's (2016) recent debate on Spivak's (1987) reference to the use of "strategic essentialism" to assimilate into a potentially homogeneous and segregated community, in order to access and enact one's agency. In her critique of Butler's (1990) assertion that sexual actors' agency may in fact be "nullified" or constrained by heteronormativity, Van den Berg (2016, 34) postulates that such views reinforce "fallacious thinking … which keeps homosexuals and heterosexuals under the norm of hetero-patriarchy." She emphasises the fact that everyone has the agency, regardless of their potential constraints, to define *and* redefine their own meanings and "narratives as gay," granted that this is context-specific.

In keeping with this emphasis on transgression, academics and students signalled the importance of and potential for diversity and plurality (Grace 2017; Oswin 2005; Plummer 2003; 2015) within the category of the gay male identity. They thus signalled the role of negotiation or "use of gay" within an already scripted category through an acknowledgement of gay diversity, fluidity and plurality. Although both groups alluded to the potential of diversification within a larger communal group, many of their narratives engaged a critique of the effects associated with the homogenisation of gay men, which may result in what could be termed "naïve essentialism" (i.e. a view which supposes a fixed and stable sexual identity) (Van den Berg 2016, 38). Academics' cautionary remarks about further marginalisation through communal identification were echoed by students. Examples included the perpetuation of stereotypes through assigning labels, which could subsequently incite homophobia, and a further polarisation between heterosexual and homosexual individuals. This difference, contrary to the arguments of the academics, equates and conflates the actions of the individual gay male with those of the larger gay group or community, which could comprise drunkenness and promiscuity (Bech 1997).

The importance of a shared geographical location was evident in the participants' feedback. Regardless of their advocacy or disdain for gay male settings, participants inadvertently emphasised their enactment of "strategic essentialism" by identifying bars and clubs as the most preferred public settings for communal identification with other gay men, as Abraham (2009), Gevisser and Cameron (1995) as well as Levine (1998) attest. These afford men the necessary anonymity and acknowledgment of their sexual orientation without heterosexual judgement (Rothmann 2016). Academics saw this as particularly important, since, regardless of their critically orientated academic area of specialisation, they continued to fear isolation if they were recognised by others in their respective cities or towns (Gray et al. 2016). Jackson and Scott's (2010) process of rationalisation was evident in words such as "to educate someone on the shared values of a gay subculture." This clearly underlines a "singular" appropriation of "being" to a particular gay subculture (Epstein 1998). Consider, for example, Halperin's (2012, 13) argument that one's sexuality is not merely something that you *are,* "but also something you do." These informally organised gay groups could provide the necessary platform for education on what Ingraham (2002) would term specific gay "rituals."

The permeability and potential intersection of gay and heterosexual spaces presented interesting insights. Heterosexual spaces were mentioned as inclusive contexts for gay and lesbian individuals (Visser 2007) in the participants' narratives. This could lead to the "'gaying' of straight space, as potential positive step … towards achieving the *homonormalisation*[3] of leisure space" (Visser 2007, 226). Although a mixed patronage may contribute to a re-socialisation of heterosexual individuals into a gay lifestyle, participants recommended a gradual introduction of heterosexual individuals to a gay lifestyle. As such, gay men may "do straight" in an attempt to retain the acceptance and tolerance of their heterosexual counterparts and avoid homogeneous gay settings (Elder 2004; 2005; Jagose 1996; Tucker 2009). Although their narratives address the noted permeability, which questions the rigidity of a binary logic, this introduction to gay men—when provided—manifests in a heterosexual context on the terms of the heterosexual contingent, where gay men may even attempt "passing" or enacting their homosexuality covertly to avoid prejudice or stigmatisation. This recalls the hegemony and centrality of heteronormativity (Jackson 2006) to which these gay men (unknowingly) conform. It emphasises the pre-existent cultural framework of sexual hierarchies in which predetermined rituals and scripts for a gendered and sexual "performance" are at play, presupposing further attempts at assimilation by gay men (Halperin 2012).

The preceding arguments notwithstanding, both the academics and students cautioned against ascribing too much importance to gay communal identification. It could, for example, fuel further ignorance by both heterosexual and gay individuals, since it risks perpetuating supposed stereotypes associated with gay male sexuality. This could include an overemphasis on the hypersexualised nature of gay spaces (Kammeyer

3 Emphasis added.

2008), excessive body consciousness (Alvarez 2009), the importance of overcompensation (Downs 2006) and even internalised homophobia and shame (Halperin 2012), insofar as such ignorance may further fuel verbal and physical homophobia (Reid 2013). The most negative inclination participants displayed towards a homogeneous group of gay men evoked Altman's (1982) critique of a gay sensibility which further encourages a binary logic, as noted in Ghaziani's (2017) reference to younger gay men's disassociation with an overtly homogeneous gay setting. This arrangement may exacerbate the "us-versus-them" stereotype (Binnie and Skiggs 2004) and minoritisation (Warner 1991), through which gay men stifle any attempt at challenging heteronormativity through exclusivity rather than inclusiveness, and rather retain their "shamed group" status (Goffman 1963, 23). This highlights an assimilationist logic, according to which the proponents emphasise the similarity between hetero- and homosexuality in an attempt to reform heteronormative societal structures in favour of equal rights for lesbian and gay individuals (Van den Berg 2016, 28)

Subtlety was, ironically, the most apparent example of queer transgression in the private spaces of some academics. References to coherence, the importance of minimalism and "mixed" design choices, underlined a subtle symbolic transgressive quality. These examples of minimalism underscore the propensity for the post-modern queer paradigm to move beyond the creation, maintenance and reinforcement of rational categories along binary lines (Jackson and Scott 2010). Its proponents rather seek to abolish such configurations and displace (and replace) it with a diverse, plural and a "mixed" intersectional understanding of social agents as autonomous beings (Plummer 2015; Tong 2008; Van den Berg 2016). One academic and a student mentioned an economic objective as the main reason to identify with their gay and heterosexual peers (Abraham 2009). The so-called "WOW" factor underlined four of the academics' emphasis on the importance of art, furniture and design choices as factors in establishing a sense of comfort, intimacy and privacy, separate from the heterosexual arena (Rink 2013). One should, however, also consider the fact that the privileged financial position of these white gay men potentially posits them as "white queer patriarchs"—as opposed to their less advantaged black and coloured gay male counterparts, an argument to which Elder (2004; 2005) and Tucker (2009) attest. Such exclusion (based on economic reasoning) was also evident in the lack of financial affluence and/or independence, which led students to establish a link between their design choices and their need for safety, based on what they could afford.

This reaffirms my previous theme that, by "projecting" a particular sense of "gayness" (whether publicly or privately), gay men attempt to "protect" and reclaim their "gayness" (Rothmann 2013) in their homes, separate from a potential heterosexist milieu. As such, the findings on their private contexts exemplify *doing gay* and *using gay* on the part of the participants. By positing gay men as a marginal group requiring safety provided by their private contexts and made possible by, among others, gentrification and a "spill-over" of gay sensibilities from the public to the private, gay

men may in fact—as alluded to earlier—“fluidly use” this reciprocal interaction between “the public” and “the private” in order to establish a connection with the broader gay community and construct their “personal happiness and self-acceptance” (Gorman-Murray 2006, 60) in their personal life-worlds (Rothmann 2018, 5).

The findings provide dual evidence of how gay spaces are informed by heteronormativity. Firstly, they perpetuate a gay sensibility through the participants’ implicit reference to performing their “gayness” (Rowe and Dowsett 2008) in their public and private contexts to regain a sense of community, a degree of safety, their lost hegemonic masculinity, or through their reflexivity on the overly sexualised nature of gay contexts. Secondly, there is also proof of overcompensating for their “lost” masculinity. They regain masculinity, not through an overemphasis on hypersexualisation or body consciousness, but rather through an increased effort at gentrifying their homes. Thus there is evidence of a dualistic permeability of sorts. These men distinguish themselves from the institutionalisation of mainstream heterosexuality by creating their separate spaces to accrue safety, while simultaneously retaining the neoliberal capitalist economy through financial expenditure on a more public platform in their gay enclaves (Rink 2013).

Conclusion

Regardless of whether a gay male-segregated context (whether public or private) seemingly provides safety, support, role modelling, unity or emotional rejuvenation, it may also potentially reinforce the centrality of heterosexuality as opposed to its marginality. To safeguard their identities or physical and emotional selves, these participants are either subtly or explicitly obliged to reflexively negotiate the particular gay performance which would best suit a given social context. By thus *doing gay* and *doing gender*, the participants underline the sublimation of gay men at a macro level, while the supposed negotiation quality of *using gender* and *using gay* affords just as limited a leeway for sexual plurality and transgression at a micro level. Through their attempts at implicitly (and to some extent explicitly) critiquing hetero- and homonormativity, I must underline the evidence of resilience on the part of these men in reconfiguring their spatial identification such as to project, protect and retain their sexual citizenship in their immediate sexual landscape. This emphasises how temporary or longitudinal assimilation into a gay context may result in a negotiation, creation and appreciation of the inherently diverse, plural and fluid nature of the “gay male identity marker,” rather than its supposed static and homogeneous nature.

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