

Gay Ghettos for the New Millennium: Oxford Street meets Mogenic.com and the question of queer space

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ABSTRACT

Much work has gone into investigating of the ways public and private spaces have been used by various groups. Recently, this work has extended into the sphere of the Internet. The destabilization of the public/private binary is applicable to the formation of GLBTIQ/lesbigay/queer spaces, both online and off. Historically, slogans like "don't ask don't tell" and "consenting adults in private", as well as "behind closed doors" etc. have relegated homosexuality to a private space - the homosexual is constituted as a 'private' being. Furthermore, stigmas associated with queer identity have reinforced this notion of the homosexual subject as relegated to the private space—young people particularly are reluctant to disclose their sexuality or appear as anything other than heterosexual beings. However, the relegation of non-heterosexual relationships to a private space only is not without challenge. As an example, the 1979 (circa) slogan "Out of the Bars and onto the Streets" queers the notion of what was an appropriate space. The Internet is, in some respects, the extension of the bar - a place where the lesbigay community creates its own space to blur the lines of the enforced public/private confinement. This paper will explore ways the Internet acts on and in the lives of lesbigay youth, particularly in regards to ways that various spaces work on the production of particular subjectivities. The paper will examine the ways identities and ways of being are discursively policed and played with by lesbigay young people in Internet spaces. Through this examination the ways that lesbigay youth are exploring and potentially challenging the ways that private and public spaces influence and regulate their lives as lesbigay subjects is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

As an eighteen year old, I clearly remember the feelings of excitement and anticipation as my girlfriend and I rode the train in to the city, got off at Museum Station and walked through Hyde Park towards the infamous Oxford St – home to gays and lesbians from all over Sydney. It was to be my first ever experience of the Gay *scene*, my initiation into the GLBTQ community. That day, I was sure that I would meet the community to which I now knew I belonged. I was pretty sure the street itself would be paved rainbow and sissy boys and butch dykes would all jump out and welcome me with open arms into the community.

My expectations were never fulfilled. Oxford St on a December Saturday at lunchtime, the year 2000, was not paved rainbow. About the only things that were rainbow were the tattered flags flying in Taylor Square and the odd shopfront display or “safe space” sticker hidden under the “all major credit cards accepted here” motifs on café doors. No butch dykes came out to meet me, no sissy boys. The only sign of “community” was a large number of couples or groups of androgenous girls and boys sitting in the Columbian; perhaps gearing up for the night at the Oxford, Stonewall or ARQ, perhaps just on their lunch breaks. There was no eye contact, no chance that we could afford lunch at that particular café in Sydney either. A couple of women walked passed TJ and I, passing us by quickly without even a nod of acknowledgement. We stopped into a pub for a quick drink—a pub like any other pub in Sydney. The illustrious gay community that I had heard so much about was nowhere to be seen, or, if it was, I certainly was not a part of it. Here I was in its heart and soul – the centre of Sydney’s very own gay ghetto, and I felt no more like I belonged there than I did at Bondi Beach.

It is my contention that for many lesbian youth, their experiences of the Internet and the illustrious rainbow hyperlinks is similar to my experience of Oxford Street. Although silenced in current Australian research in favour of descriptions of community and belonging, my own forays into the experiences of lesbian youth online has demonstrated that involvement with lesbian websites online may for some bring no more sense of community and belonging than they would get in the real world.

Despite this, there is a growing youth population on the Internet; a trend mirrored in lesbian youth portals. In three years the website *Mogenic.com* (advertised as the worlds largest gay and lesbian youth community) has changed web-server three times to cope with it’s ever expanding bandwidth (caused by increased traffic on the site) and its commitment to providing a free service to gay and lesbian youth. Such expansion, coupled with the presentation of the Internet as a site where lesbian people can connect with a large, “albeit hidden community”¹ leads to my assertion that the Internet has become the gay ghetto for the new millennium.

This raises some questions about space, and the multiple meanings that can be inscribed on spaces, places and bodies. As Valentine and Skelton maintain in relation to the scene, certain places and spaces provide a context where lesbian young people can for the first time interact to some extent with something of a lesbian community². Munt, Basset and O’Riordan discuss the implications of this in terms of online spaces and how sexual subjectivities and user perceptions are formed, looking par-

ticularly at the ways that interactions with websites and users by lesbian youth can be seen as a learning and practicing environment for real world interactions³. As their paper demonstrates, there is a need to consider that along with providing an initial point of contact with a ‘practice community’, spaces have implicit expectations of appropriate presentation underlying belonging and involvement⁴. Further, the Internet is not simply a site where lesbian youth interact as a practice environment, but a site where involvement and negotiation is often ongoing throughout the course of their lives. What then becomes interesting is the negotiations of space that occur when lesbian youth encounter paradoxical space, when that space is further queered through questions of private/public, real and virtual, and the possible readings of lesbian space, place and bodies that are therefore enabled.

To explore this in depth, I will focus on my own experiences coupled with the experiences of a participant, Leisha⁵, in my current research. Leisha shared stories of her involvement online with me in a semi structured interview which took place in 2005. At the time of the interview Leisha, a self-identified lesbian, had been participating with website *Mogenic.com* for approximately five years. The interview was taped with Leisha’s permission, and the transcripts were analysed using discourse analysis⁶. The transcripts were arranged into themes which centred on key linguistic signifiers selected from the text; based around the key concepts of belonging and recognition which emerged in the interview. Examples of the key linguistic signifiers were “weird”, “excluded”, “stereotyped” and “wrong”. Linguistic markers such as these helped to develop an idea of the Internet as a Queer Space divergent to the dominant readings of it as safe, inclusive, empowering and free⁷.

Although it might be argued that the use of single participant and personal experience data is limiting, in depth and detailed involvement with individual cases can provide space to reveal understandings that analysis of multiple voices do not⁸. As Walsh, citing Duruz, argues, “spending enough time with one person allows us to include the unexpected, unpredictable, disruptive moments and resonances”⁹. From this, I believe Leisha’s account has much to offer in terms of understanding the multiple readings of the Internet in terms of space and belonging.

This paper will explore the Internet, in particular *Mogenic.com* as a potential queer space—a space existing for the creation, exploration and affirmation of queer identities and lesbian sexualities, as well as a space of disruption to dominant readings of public and private space, place and activity. Particularly, this paper will engage with a post-structural understanding of the influence of discourse on space (and place) and the subject.

The subject, according to Davies, is the person made possible through discourse—constituted by the different sets of power relations that work on and through us¹⁰. Understanding and referring to the subject and subjectivity in this way, rather than referring to the individual, is important as it takes into account the belief that the a person’s ways of being in the world are not fixed and unitary, rather that they are shifting and fragmented in response to the different discourses and discursive operations they find themselves in. This is highly visible in the analysis of Leisha’s use of the websites that this paper discusses.

Discourse then becomes the condition for all action¹¹—the rules and operants which govern all situations and make action pos-

sible. According to Foucault, discourse is the very thing that makes all beings and things knowable and understandable¹², that which constitutes the subject in space and place.

IN THE GHETTO

Arguments of the “queer unwanted”¹³ are particularly relevant when exploring the way membership processes on *Mogenic.com* work on website users. On this website, the opportunity to present oneself as Other to the website status quo is limited through the use of “tick boxes”, and policing action (which Leisha discusses in her interviews) when these tick boxes fail to have the desired effect.

Through the website it is possible to see a taking into the home (via the Ethernet cable and modem) the pressures, expectations and attitudes of the bars, clubs and pubs in the gay ghetto – those attitudes so often complained about on the websites which discursively reproduce them. Bell and Binnie argue the re-appearance of the backroom and public space for the private gay¹⁴. However, it seems that the reverse is, and has been, also happening. The Internet becomes in a sense, the bar in the bedroom – the space where lesbian youth are accessing, legitimately, from a younger age those discourses previously restricted to the public queer space – the queer space of Oxford St, Darlinghurst, the bars, and beats. The Internet has become, as the bars once became the space for private interaction¹⁵, private space for public interaction, affirmation, exploration, visibility, and, for some, rejection.

As Bell & Binnie state, the idea of public visibility is problematic. Visibility is always a produced and constrained state – heavily policed and guarded, with only certain types of public selves enabled in certain discursive spaces at certain times. However, following Deleuze, these enabling and disabling discourses are constantly folded into the subject¹⁶, making a study of the types of public private selves enabled in the private public spaces of *Mogenic.com* particularly interesting in forming an idea of how queer spaces work on queer (and not so queer) bodies.

Considerations of the text of websites, as well as the benefits that lesbian websites have for lesbian youth¹⁷, are important to developing an understanding of the role of the Internet in lesbian and queer becoming – not just for individuals but for queer public spaces and “communities”. For this reason, the work of Lisa Nakamura on cybertyping¹⁸ is useful to developing understandings of the discursive impact of textual foreclosure in burgeoning queer space on lesbian becoming.

Nakamura argues that the way websites are ordered and structured impacts on the types of identities available to the user of those websites, or the way that identities not supported by the websites are viewed¹⁹. The way that *Mogenic.com* enables website use is via an upfront process of inclusion and exclusion – becoming a member. It is through the membership process of the websites that users are able to enter into the queer public space, to move beyond the bedroom walls and into a public which will respond to them and their presentation of self.

The website provides a profile form as the way of a user creating a bodily presence in the online domain. The user is presented with a series of tick box responses to questions of sexu-

ality, personality, “type” and attitude. In the majority of cases, only one response is ever allowed, with a space for a general comment only at the end of the form. As Nakamura argues, when one is only given the option of selecting one identity to which they belong, with no opportunity for modification, identities that do not appear on the menu are foreclosed on and erased²⁰.

The erasure of particular or other ways of being lesbian on these websites may be something similar to the gentrification process of “real world” queer space that Bell and Binnie discuss in their work²¹. However, the exclusion or eviction of particular lesbian subjectivities may speak more of a complex process of space creation. Further, the continued presence of some “queer unwanted”²² in these spaces may speak further of the discursive impact of space on bodies and the queered, and some times problematic, status of public and private in the lesbian web portal.

QUEERING QUEER SPACE: LEISHA AND THE NEW GAY GHETTO

In this section of the paper I would like particularly to explore the idea that Bell and Binnie discuss—removing the unwanted queer. Discussions of the Internet as queer space, particularly for lesbian youth, have largely discussed them as the new public space for queer exploration, the bars for the underaged²³. While this analogy sticks, it is important to take then into consideration the discourses surrounding public queer space and the ways that they impact on the lesbian subject accessing public queer space.

For Leisha, there was no doubt about the link between her experience of the venues and public queer spaces that she had queried in a “real life” sense, and the websites which queered the boundary between public and private space. In her words:

[the websites] foster the very stereotypical type image of [the community] I guess, that everyone likes the same things and you know you're not a real lesbian if you don't listen to Ani Difrancio or you know whatever, whatever's cool that month and I don't know, I guess it does foster the feeling of community if you fit in but it can make you feel very excluded if you don't.

Leisha demonstrated throughout the interviews that the websites encouraged members to present themselves in ways that she felt were endemic of the way lesbians were presented in public queer spaces—the profiles coming across to her as clone after clone. However, as the quote above demonstrates, for many this is adequate and welcoming as a community, public queer space. On the other hand, Leisha felt that her presence in the community space of the websites was unwanted, and this non-belonging centred largely on her not wanting to present herself the way the website was advocating the authentic lesbian subject.

Leisha discusses her non-belonging and her realisation of herself as unwanted through her not getting any messages. However, these discussions highlighted an interesting process of creation and special use that Leisha undertook, pointing towards

a different use of queer space than readings of belonging, affirmation and community.

Although Leisha regards herself as not getting any messages and therefore not belonging, she gives account of a message received from an older woman, who for the purpose of this analysis will be referred to as 'Sara'. In this account, Leisha demonstrates the ways that she can work within the constraints of the website which seemingly limit her ability to present herself meaningfully on the websites²⁴ in order to maintain different presentations of self against the status quo or dominant readings of lesbianism being.

The message from the woman on the south coast [Sara] made me feel a little bit creeped out actually. It seemed like what she was looking for from her profile was partner material, and I just didn't quite understand why she would want someone who was so much younger than her for that sort of thing. And we didn't have that much in common from what I could tell so... It made me a little bit creeped out that maybe she was looking for a sort of trendy girlfriend or something.

Leisha's presentation of self, which she demonstrated in the interview largely consisted of her not disclosing a response for any of the tick box questions has resulted in her being hailed or recognised by an older user, Sara. However, Leisha does not recognise Sara in any affirmative way and so goes on to not recognise herself within the context of the discussion or the context of the website.

Leisha's interview account of this event further disclosed that she, following this message, returned to her profile, recreating it in order to no longer be recognisable to the older woman, re-establishing a presence on the web of Other – the unwanted Queer. This was affirmed in the space by the absence of messages from other website users.

Leisha can only work within the frames of the websites to create herself as both different to and belonging within a particular queer space. However, in so doing, Leisha finds that she is able to queer the space, to play with the discursive rules in such a way that she can maintain what is to her an authentic presence—one that, although obviously fluctuating and fluid, holds continuity for her in both the public/private, online/offline worlds to which she belongs.

IN CONCLUSION

Within the websites, the online queer spaces, discursive boundaries of private and public are blurred, with rules from each space infiltrating into the other. Particularly in the case of Leisha, the maintenance of authentic presence in both online/public and offline/private spaces involves a queering of the strict forms which necessitate belonging in the websites. Her presentation of self as Other via the forms designed to ensure a place of belonging makes possible other readings of the website, beyond the idea of a separate space for young lesbian people to belong to a world previously unavailable to them.

The bringing of the public into the private space of the young lesbian person's home or bedroom enables us to see some of the complex processes involved in lesbianism becoming. Al-

though Leisha's story creates a perhaps dark view of Internet space and lesbianism becoming, it is interesting for the congruency it demonstrates between public and private, and lesbianism's ability to transverse and queer the boundaries between seemingly exclusive spaces.

¹ Lynne Hillier, Chyloe Kurdas & Philomena Horsley, *'It's just easier': The Internet as safety-Net for same sex attracted young people*, Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, 2001, p. 17

² Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton, 'Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself: The Lesbian and Gay 'Scene' as a Paradoxical Space,' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27, 4, (2003): 849-866

³ Sally Munt, Elizabeth Bassett & Kate O'Riordon, 'Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity and Coming Out Online,' *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 7, 2/3, (2002): 125-137

⁴ Valentine and Skelton, 'Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself,' pp. 856-857

⁵ Pseudonyms have been employed throughout this paper to protect participant anonymity.

⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998

⁷ Lynne Hillier, Philomena Horsley & Chyloe Kurdas, 'It made me feel braver, I was no longer alone': The Internet and same sex attracted young people,' in J. Nieto (ed.) *Sexuality in the Pacific*, 2004, Spanish Association of Studies in the Pacific; Hillier, Kurdas & Horsley, *Its Just Easier*; Steve Silberman, 'We're Teen, We're Queer and We've Got E-Mail,' in D. Trend (ed.), *Reading Digital Culture*, 2001, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, pp. 221-225

⁸ Katie Walsh, 'Dad says I'm tied to a shooting star!' Grounding (research on) British expatriate belonging,' *Area*, 38, 3, (2006): 268-278, p. 270

⁹ Walsh, 'Dad says I'm tied to a shooting star!', p. 271

¹⁰ Bronwyn Davies, *Poststructuralist theory and classroom practice*, 1994, Geelong: Deakin University Press

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 1993, New York: Routledge

¹² Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, A.M. Sherridan Smith (translator), 1972, New York: Pantheon Books

¹³ David Bell & Jon Binnie, 'Authenticating Queer Space: Citizenship, Urbanism and Governance,' *Urban Studies*, 41, 9, (2004): 1807-1820

¹⁴ Bell & Binnie, 'Authenticating Queer Space', p. 1811

¹⁵ Chauncey, 1996, in Bell & Binnie, 'Authenticating Queer Space', p. 1811

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, T. Conley (translator), 1993, London: The Athlone Press Ltd.

¹⁷ See Hillier, Kurdas & Horsley, *Its Just Easier*, for an account of these benefits in an Australian context.

¹⁸ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet*, 2002, New York: Routledge, p. 101

¹⁹ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*

²⁰ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, pp. 101-102

²¹ Bell & Binnie, 'Authenticating Queer Space'

²² Bell & Binnie, 'Authenticating Queer Space'

²³ See for example Hiller, Kurdas & Horsley '*It's Just Easier*'; Silberman, 'We're Teen, We're Queer and We've Got E-Mail'

²⁴ Vikki Fraser, *A Willing State of Bondage: The Internet Development of Lesbian Self*, 2005, Thesis, Sydney: University of Western Sydney