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QUEERING BELFAST:
Some thoughts on the sexing of space

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Abstract

In this paper we use data from interviews and focus groups with gay men, lesbians and bisexuals living in Belfast to provide a queer reading of the city. Drawing on the work of queer theory, we argue, contrary to much of the literature on sexuality and space, that space is neither purely encoded as 'heterosexual' or 'gay'. Instead we posit that all space is queered, that the sexing of space is always partial and contested, always in a process of becoming; that heterosexist spatiality, for example, is profoundly unstable, continuously engaged in the process of reproducing itself. Reconceptualising socio-spatial relations in this way, we contend, allows for a more nuanced and differentiated, geographical reading of sexual dissidence, one that acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of individuals' self-identifications with regard to sexual-orientation and their diverse spatialities, as evidenced in our interviews.

Key words: space, queer theory, heterosexism

Introduction

As Binnie and Valentine (1999) detail, there has been significant recent growth in the number of studies that have investigated the relationship between sexuality and space. In general, these studies have grown in theoretical sophistication since the first studies in the late 1970s, mirroring in general terms geography's engagement with social theory. In this paper we chart how space and sexuality have been conceptualised, seeking to extend current thought.

Early studies of the relationship between space and sexuality generally focused on the formation and development of so-called 'gay ghettos' in American cities (e.g., Castells, 1983; Lyod and Rowntree, 1978). These studies tended to adopt an urban sociological perspective that posited that such 'ghettos' could be explained through push-pull models, centred on reasons of defence and comfort, and were the result of rational decision-making by their constituents. Moreover, sexuality, sexual identity and space were unproblematically understood as fixed and invariant concepts. So for example, gay men and lesbians were seen to be occupying distinct social, political and cultural landscapes whose sexual geographies were invariant across space.

By the early 1990s, such arguments and conceptualisations were critiqued on several grounds. It was contended, for example, that these studies tended to 'exoticise' gay men and lesbians, conceptualising and treating them as if a separate species and 'adopting patronising, moralistic and 'straight' approaches to lesbian and gay social and sexual relations' (Bell and Valentine, 1995, page 5). Here, it was argued that they essentialised identity, framing it as natural, fixed and innate, so that 'sexual orientation is [held as] a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property' that exists across time and space as a universal phenomenon (Stein, 1992, page 325). This essentialised understanding of sexual identity failed to recognise that same-sex desire has had different cultural meanings at different times and in different places; that how we view and understand sexuality is historically and spatially contingent, changing over time and space (cf. Foucault, 1981).

Critics instead forwarded a constructivist understanding of sexuality, which questioned the 'natural' and essentialist correspondence between sexuality, biology and family, whereby heterosexuality is the simple, innate, natural product of the urge to reproduce, and instead posited that sexuality is a social construction, shaped by a range of ideas centred on normative assumptions. Here, it was argued that 'normal' expressions of sexuality in most Western societies are centred on a specific form of heterosexuality -- that there are commonly agreed 'rules' that govern sexual encounters. Because heterosexual intercourse is positioned as ''real sex' or the 'best' way to be sexual, it is seen as the most natural, therefore normal and morally superior, and hence most satisfying' (Saraga, 1998, page 142). As Rubin (1989, pages 280-281) states:

> 'Sexuality that is good, normal and natural should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines and may take place in 'public' or at least in the bushes or baths.'

As a consequence critics contended, drawing extensively from Michel Foucault's writing (1981), that sexuality is a social regulatory framework that is currently maintained through discourses of heteronormativity and patriarchy. The power of these discourses is their ability to essentialise and reproduce those adopting sexual roles or seeking sexual experiences that are not considered 'good' as deviant, unnatural, abnormal and immoral. Such sexual dissidents[1], as Rubin (1989) noted, presently include those seeking same-sex encounters -- gay men, lesbians, bisexuals (whether self-identified or not) -- but also those involved in 'marginal' heterosexual activities such as bondage, sado-masochism, pornography, sex work or indeed the use of sex workers.

Foucault (1981) termed the dominant sets of discourse about sexuality at any particular space-time a discursive regime ('the body of unwritten rules, shared assumptions, which attempt to regulate what can be written, thought or acted upon' Storey 2001: 78), and it is the construction and maintenance of such regimes he

advocated studying. In 'The History of Sexuality', Foucault (1981) charts the discursive regimes of sexuality at different periods through a variety of institutional spaces in which sexual discourses are articulated: hospitals, schools, courts, prisons, clinics, libraries and so on. He posited that each of these spaces is a site of power/knowledge where certain 'professionals' seek to construct ideas of what constitutes 'good' sexuality.

What is evident from Foucault's analysis is that the state and capitalist relations are not neutral in the naturalisation/normalisation of heterosexuality. As such, heteronormative constructions are woven into state ideology, discourse and practices and grounded through notions of citizenship (Valentine, 1993; Duggan, 1995; Bell and Binnie, 2000). Here, the state uses constructions of morality to define the civil and welfare rights of its subjects based on their sexuality, offering rewards and entitlements to 'good' sexual subjects whilst 'bad' subjects are punished (Smith, 1989; Bell, 1995). To enforce this sexual, moral code the state legislates against dissident sexualities, so that 'heterosexuality is institutionalised in marriage and the law, tax and welfare systems' (Valentine, 1993, page 396).

This construction of the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality means that in the West today, the 'normality' of expressions of heterosexual relations are usually accepted unproblematically. A man and woman holding hands in the street or kissing in public, rituals of dating, a marriage ceremony, design of housing, the use of sex in advertising are seen as unremarkable, proper, and unthreatening (Hubbard, 1999). As such, they are unquestioned, as Hubbard (1999, page 4) states, '[m]ost people, it appears, continue to live largely in ignorance of how socio-spatial practices encourage them to adopt heterosexual identities and bodies.' Valentine (1996, page 146) thus argues that 'these acts produce 'a host of assumptions embedded in the practices of public life about what constitutes proper behaviour' (Weeks 1992: 5) and which congeal over time to give the appearance of a 'proper' or 'normal' production of space.' To Valentine (1993; 1996, page 146) this means that all space is sexed, and in the West, it is predominantly sexed as heterosexual through performative acts 'naturalised through repetition and regulation.'

Given these arguments, the push-pull models developed in early studies of space and sexuality were seen to neglect the complex structural, material and discursive practices that shape socio-sexual relations. As more recent studies have highlighted, the areas in which gay people concentrated were most often not 'chosen', they were marginal sites in the urban fabric where heteronormative conditions were relatively weak (see papers in collections edited by Beemyn, 1998; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Leap, 1999; Whittle, 1994). So-called 'gay spaces' were, and often continue to be, contested sites, situated in a web of complex power geometries.

This shift from essentialised to constructed understandings of sexuality marked only the beginning of a process of reconceptualising this issue, however. Increasingly, geographers are starting to engage with queer theory. Through an application of poststructuralism to sexuality, queer theory extends the reconceptualisation of sexual identity as socially constructed. Queer theorists argue that recognising the social construction of how society views and regulates sexuality is only part of how sexuality needs to be re-theorised. They note that social constructivist approaches rarely question or critique categories of 'heterosexual', 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' themselves, only the legitimacy and meaning of such categories within society (Jagose, 1996). Drawing heavily on the influential work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), queer theorists interrogate sexual categories and the notion of being able to draw coherent boundaries around sexual identities. Here is it is argued that sexual identity is never fixed, but is always in a process of becoming. For Butler (1990), sexuality is a product of socialisation and a dynamic project of the self, so that sexual identities are established and maintained through repeated, stylised and embodied performances in space. These performances are shaped by other aspects of identity (e.g., race, disability) and the social/political context in which they are performed (e.g., social and legal regulation). As such, it is impossible to fix sexual identity into any notional sexual category as it is always being performed, always coming into being. In other words, there is a decoupling of sexual identification from sexual roles and sex acts and a denaturalisation of sexual orientation (Jagose, 1996).

Sexuality is thus seen as being diverse and not easily labelled and packaged, with many differences and complex power geometries operating within and across communities of sexual dissidents; that there are a multiplicity of sexualities that are

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fluid and contextual. This recognises, for example, that people can engage in same-sex relations without necessarily identifying as being homosexual and that there are multiple understandings and experiences of 'gay' identification (Jagose, 1996). In other words, queer theory allows a recognition of the diversity of sexual dissidents and their lives (both in relation to sexual desire and practice and other facets of identity such as race, disability, gender, age and so on), avoiding a reductionist approach that reduces sexuality to sameness. Within this view then, the binary of heterosexual-homosexual is seen as a regulatory fiction. Consequently, the normative assumptions of heterosexism (and homosexual) are themselves fictions and thus open to rewriting.

It is important to note here that queer theory does not, however, deny that an individual can self-identify with a category such as 'heterosexual', 'gay' or 'lesbian', or that this category is in itself meaningless for that individual, but it does recognise that this category is notional, contingent and internally (by members) and externally (by non-members) contested. As such, it does recognise that the category is 'real' in the sense that people subscribe to its label, and thus it has significance, but also that the meaning of this category varies between these people and over time and space. As we discuss later, this reconceptualisation of sexual identity clearly has implications for the fight for political emancipation from heterosexism as it undermines the notion of a 'politics of identity' by bringing the category of identification into question.

Given the shift from essentialised to constructed and queered conceptualisations of sexuality, contemporary geographies of sexuality concerns mapping, both literally and metaphorically, landscapes of desire -- 'the eroticised topographies - both real and imagined - in which sexual acts and identities are performed and consummated' (Bell and Valentine, 1995, page 1), whilst simultaneously mapping landscapes of power and disgust; how socio-spatial constructions of sexuality are used as tools in specific power geometries to regulate sexual encounters between individuals (Hubbard, 1999). In essence it is a project concerned with mapping out discursive regimes, their material consequences at particular places at particular times, and how they determine how space is sexed.

Queering Space

In this paper, we take up this central concern with the sexing of space and its theorisation. Using data generated in interviews with sexual dissidents in Belfast we extend, through the use of queer theory, the contention that space in the West is predominantly sexed as heterosexual, to argue that *all* space is queered and is only ever temporarily fixed as heterosexual, and to explore the theoretical, empirical and political implications of this assertion. Our premise is that space is revealed to be queered in at least two ways.

First, as discussed above, a poststructural reading of the categories of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' render them as regulatory fictions; unstable, fluid and contested groupings. It thus follows that if all space is sexed, then all space is queered in the sense that sexual categories are fictions. This is not to deny that space is predominately heterosexed by the actions and practices of state, institutions, capital and individual social relations, or the dangers facing sexual dissidents in private and public space, but rather it is recognition that the heterosexing of space is always partial, always in a process of becoming; that heterosexist space is profoundly unstable, continuously engaged in the process of reproducing itself. As such, space is always inherently queered, although in Western societies this queerness is masked by the on-going reproduction of the sexing of space, either through dominant heterosexist discourses or its resistance that tends to create a picture of spaces (and socio-spatial practices) as either 'straight' or 'gay' (hence gay 'ghettos'). As we document below, this picture is in fact a lot more complex, with spaces always in a process of becoming so that their meanings and experiences which take place within them are constantly shifting over time, with context (that is, the situation), and across different individuals who occupy the same space.

Second, the discourses of heterosexism -- the discursive and material practices that maintain hegemonic heterosexist relations and space -- are constantly being subverted, parodied, resisted and challenged by sexual dissidents and self-identified heterosexuals themselves who recognise the legitimacy of other sexual desires and acts; the *normalisation* of heterosexist space, and hence its inherent queerness, is revealed through the practices of sexual dissidents. These ideas are borne out in the

anthology *Public Sex/Gay Space* (Leap, 1999) in which a number of academics/activists explore intersections of location, gay identity and male-centred sexual practices in public space, examining a range of locales such as parks, truck stops, beaches, alleyways, saunas, bath houses, bookstore backrooms, and so on. Taken together, the contributors note that (1) space is sexed in complex, contradictory and temporal ways (2) the consummation of 'private' acts in 'public' spaces undermines and unsettles the private/public dualism (3) there are a diverse range of men who take part in male-with-male sex in public space, many of whom do not self-identify as gay or bisexual (for example, Nardi, 1999, reports that well over 50% of men in surveys and police records are married and claim to be heterosexual), thus disrupting the binary of heterosexual/homosexual.

These observations highlight the fluidity of sexual identity and the multiple, contingent and temporally-fluid meanings and experiences of the sexing of space. As such it leads to a questioning of the social and historical contingency and construction of sexed spaces, and how locales shape sexual encounters and in turn are shaped by such encounters. Hollister (1999) concludes that sexual behaviour is not just a repertory of techniques and 'cannot be separated from the locations where it takes place.' In other words, to understand sexual practices and their meanings (to both participants and others) involves an inherently geographical reading, one that is queered. So even in a city such as Belfast which is generally considered to be quite homophobic, where visible 'gay' space is limited and highly contested (we discuss in detail the geographies of homophobia, and the reproduction of heterosexism in Belfast in other papers), it needs to be recognised that there are significant and sophisticated dissident sexual cultures that operate across space and time, creating cleaves (however temporary or transient) in heterosexist coding of space that reveals the queerness beneath.

The Sexual Landscape of Belfast

To date there has been very little research that has critically addressed the heterosexist discourses that shape the lives of sexual dissidents in Northern Ireland or attitudes towards sexuality in general (although see Conrad, 1998, 2001; McClenaghan, 1995;

Mulholland, 1995; Quinn, 2000). Drawing from this limited literature and our own research (other papers currently being prepared) it is clear that Belfast, as expressed through legislation and political policy, and institutional and public attitudes and practices, is on the whole a sexually conservative, heterosexist and homophobic society. This can be illustrated by the fact that Northern Ireland is the only place in the UK where abortion is still illegal, it has a higher age of consent than elsewhere in the UK for heterosexual and same sex intercourse (age 17, as opposed to 16), and it was the last part of the UK to decriminalise homosexuality after a lengthy campaign to 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' and a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (in 1982, as opposed to 1967 in England and Wales, and 1980 in Scotland). Moreover, the visibly 'gay' space in the city is limited (especially in the context that its population is c.350,000 and it being the principal city in Northern Ireland) to just one openly gay club (The Kremlin) and the offices of gay organisations such as Queer Space and The Rainbow Project. Of the two former 'gay' bars, The Crow's Nest has been closed with rumours circulating that it will be redeveloped into a city-centre bar, aiming to capitalise on the post-ceasefire regeneration of the inner city as a social space for Belfast residents and The Parliament now cites itself as 'gay friendly', although our interviewee's reveal that it is progressively becoming more 'straight'. Both bars are victim to gentrification as the city-centre, a supposedly 'neutral' space, is redeveloped in the wake of the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement. A limited number of other bars hold 'gay' nights, but are considered to be strictly heterosexual for the rest of the week. 'Gay' space outside of Belfast is severely limited, with one 'gay' bar in Derry, the North's second city. As we detail in another paper, homophobic intimidation in its various guises was commonly reported by interviewees, and there is little doubt that it does adversely affect the spatial behaviour of sexual dissidents in Belfast. For example, the majority of those we interviewed lead double or compartmentalised lives, 'out' in some spaces (e.g., 'gay' bars, home) but 'closeted' in others (e.g., work, family, home) and had made deliberate choices about where to live and socialise.

As we discuss below, however, whilst the discussion so far paints a very negative picture, it is important to note that our fieldwork revealed a nuanced and differentiated landscape and it is clear that those we interviewed did not live lives constantly shaped by fear of heterosexism and homophobia (although it must be noted that our

interviewees were confident enough to talk to us and it undoubtedly did affect their lives to varying degrees). Moreover, the sexual landscape of Belfast *is* changing in at least five ways.

First, there has been the formation of politically-aware organisations such as NIGRA (Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association), Queer Space, Lesbian Line, CARA friend, Belfast Pride, GLYNI (Gay Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland), university-based gay and lesbian support groups in both the University of Ulster and The Queen's University of Belfast, The Rainbow Project (gay men's health project) and COSO (Coalition on Sexual Orientation). These organisations have actively campaigned for the rights of sexual dissidents through a variety of media (e.g., courts, political parties, human rights groups, posters and press), provide a range of support services, such as health advice, counselling and providing places to meet, and their physical and discursive presence makes visible the fact that Belfast has a sizeable number of sexual dissidents.

Second, a variety of anti-discrimination legislation has been introduced since the first cease-fire which it can be argued is helping to transform, in general terms, attitudes to different identities (e.g., Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Northern Ireland Act (1998), Equality (Disability, etc.) (Northern Ireland) Order 2000). As yet, sexual orientation is only covered explicitly in the Northern Ireland Act (1998) when an obligation was placed on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity. In addition, the Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (1999) provides legal rights for those who have transformed their gender through 'medical supervision' (clause 2(1)). The Protection from Harassment Act (1997) as yet has not been extended to Northern Ireland. At the time of writing a single Equality Act that will include sexual orientation in all aspects of daily life (i.e. beyond public authorities) is being drafted, but as yet is not available for public consultation.

Third, the Equality Commission was established under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) and in 1999 took over the functions previously exercised by the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland, the Equal Opportunities

Commission for Northern Ireland, the Fair Employment Commission and the Northern Ireland Disability Council. At present, the Equality Commission can only help in relation to discrimination by public authorities, although they are taking forward a number of test cases in relation to sexual orientation and have actively consulted with 'gay' groups in relation to discrimination on sexual orientation grounds.

Fourth, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) has now (in theory at least) started to take homophobia seriously, introducing a Force Order (July 2000) in relation to 'homophobic incidents' (this extends beyond criminal matters such as assault and damage to include intimidation and name-calling). In addition, each of the 38 sub-divisions has a Community Affairs Sergeant responsible for liaison with the 'gay and lesbian community' and for overseeing a Homophobic Incident Monitoring Scheme[3] (from April 2000 to February 2001, 43 homophobic incidents were recorded by the RUC across Northern Ireland, 22 of which were physical assaults; personal communication from RUC).

Fifth, there has been a general liberalisation of society as the power of religious institutions, for example, has weakened. This has meant that, despite the limited amount of visible 'gay' space, over the past decade or so space in general has been more openly contested through the subversion of 'heterosexual' space and resistance to heterosexism (e.g., through everyday use of 'straight' bars and organised events such as Belfast Pride; more fully discussed in another paper).

It can be argued that given the changes above -- for example, the state funding of gay organisations, new legislation and changing state practices such as policing -- that there has been a noticeable queering of the state (Duggan, 1995) and society more generally; a wider recognition of the partial construction of heterosexism and the civil rights of sexual dissidents.

The Study

The data discussed in this paper were generated as part of larger project investigating how fear shapes the everyday lives (e.g., shopping, work, leisure) of people living in Belfast and how this fear is managed by both residents of certain areas and public officials and city managers. Our principal focus in this study was on the influence of the socio-spatial discursive and material practices underpinning sectarianism in shaping city life. To complement and extend the main focus, we also sought to interview members of groups whose lives might be shaped by other fears. To this end we decided to focus on how fear of homophobic intimidation and violence impacted upon sexual dissidents in the city.

Data generation followed the same format as other parts of the project, consisting of in-depth interviews using an interview guide approach (see Kitchin and Tate, 2000). In total 27 sexual dissidents were formally interviewed: 16 individual interviews, two in pairs, one large focus groups of twelve, five of whom were individually interviewed at a later date, and two of whom took part in a smaller focus group of three. Interviews lasted between three quarters of an hour to six hours, and all were taped and transcribed in full. The interviewees were self-identified as 18 gay men**,** 7 lesbians**,** one bisexual woman and one transgender. Ages varied between late-teens and early-seventies, with the majority of interviewees in their twenties and thirties. Four of the respondents were parents. All were resident in Belfast, bar three; one who had emigrated to the UK and was visiting home and two who lived outside of Belfast but travelled into the city regularly. Both authors were involved in the interviewing, with majority of interviews hosted by the second author. Interviews were organised through several organisations including Rainbow Project, NIGRA, Queer Space, Lesbian Line, GLYNI, in addition to personal contacts. To aid analysis all the interview transcripts were coded into NUDIST, a qualitative data management package, by the first author. The method of analysis followed that prescribed in Kitchin and Tate (2000): description, categorisation and connection. In the following section, pseudonyms are used in order to render anonymous our interviewees.

A Queer Reading of Belfast

The extent to which space is inherently queered and its production shaped by sexually discursive and material practices, and the utility of queer theory in understanding sexual dissidence, heterosexism and homophobia, was highly evident in our interviews in several ways.

In the first instance, it was clear that the sexual dissidents we interviewed, and the other sexual dissidents they discussed, were not always easily categorised into divisions such as 'lesbian', 'gay', and 'bisexual.' Indeed, a number of interviewees expressed ambivalence to such categories, instead suggesting that for them sexuality is much more fluid and unstable. For example, Pamela produced the following statements in the course of her interview:

> Pamela: I went from being a lesbian with a capital L, and two years ago I went back to being bisexual.
>
>   … I think it was in my head. I told a few people, but then I felt, 'I'm with this guy again. Oh my God, I'm coming out in reverse now.'
>
>   … I read the diary again from the first night and that same night I told him I was lesbian. 'How much can 'no' mean 'yes'? Oh my God, what am I doing?' I didn't have to confront the heterosexual idea, because I had just told him, this one. And I didn't have to confront the lesbian idea because he's a guy. I seemed to be set up that I needed to conform to some kind of role -- cliché -- and suddenly, 'OK, no.' And then it's so liberating, and I don't have to.'
>
>   … You should accept the person for what they are. And if this person really does it for you, it doesn't matter what bits they've got on their body. It doesn't matter whether it's two guys doing it to each other or two women or a man and a woman. It should be all even.

Similarly, Anne and Darren questioned the strict division between gay and straight, suggesting instead that everyone is in fact queer to varying degrees (changing temporally and spatially, and with context), despite how they might self-identify:

> Anne: I don't believe anybody's straight. And I don't believe anybody is totally gay either. I think they could be 99%. Like, I sleep with men. Sometimes I go out and think 'I'll have a bit of a man tonight'. And people say to me 'Oh, that's

means you're bisexual'. I say, 'No'. I actually define myself, in terms of labels I suppose, yea, I'm lesbian. … I do prefer women, but I would ultimately define myself as being bisexual. I am attracted to people. And I find people attractive, and if that happens to be a man, well and good, and if it happens to be a women, even better, you know.

Darren: Increasingly, I think all that is conditioning. I think increasingly a lot of straight men have elements of their behaviour that is bisexual. … I think how you define yourself in terms of gender is really influenced by that early period in your development, and which parent you related to more, or whether you saw what were feminine values in a positive way or masculine. … I think sex in itself is a homoerotic experience. I think homosexuality in a sense is more something which is intuitive and natural for most people. That's what I believe. I think you are socialised into sexual role play. I feel that [bisexuality] with most men. I think a lot of men - it's a fantasy or a desire - it's definitely there. … I think a lot of male aggression is linked to fear of their effeminate side or the fact that they may be attracted to the same sex.

The organisation Queer Space itself recognises this ambivalence amongst many sexual dissidents, noting that whilst the organisation is a grassroots collective 'representing a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community' one of its missions is to be known and used by 'both the LGBT community AND the general/mainstream population', that is 'accessible to all members of the community[3].' As such, Queer Space seeks to be inclusive and non-judgemental, reluctant to draw definitive boundaries around sexual categories. As Pamela again details:

Pamela: I mean, the first circulars were addressed to 'Dear Queers, Friends and Undecided.' You know, somewhere along, you're going to fit in.
   … When I first went to Queer Space I thought I would have to conform to something. Rainbow, it's the best symbol. They are so varied in that same building. I never met so many individuals in one space. There was everybody there from flashy car-drivers to old and young, rich and poor, to students with varied interests, and the ones who were in long-term relationships and the ones who enjoyed cruising. There was just everything. So in-between that you don't have to conform to anything. Just chuck it all away and be yourself.

It is also clear that there are many people in the city engaged in same-sex acts who do not gay-identify. For example, it was acknowledged by several interviewees that much (but certainly not all) of the cruising and cottaging within the city is practised by married men:

> Paul: the majority of people who would use these [cruising areas] would be married, older men. … But to say that it is all older men who are married would be stereotyping, it's not the reality, you do get younger people.

> Jonathan: If you go up to [cruising area] at lunch time, everybody is out on their lunch hour, mainly much older men, probably married with the wife and kids at home, and they are all out on their lunch hour cruising about, and jumping into the hedge rows. … it's a secret for them. They sneak off to these places.
> Int: Do you think it is really a predominantly married secret scene?
> Jonathan: An awful lot of it, yea, the majority. There are other people who aren't.

Whilst some of these men might gay-identify, it was suggested that many do not; they are merely acting on sexual desire and consider themselves to be heterosexual. This also extends to women. For example, one of our female respondents had been in a long-term relationship with a woman who insisted she was heterosexual throughout the relationship and another insisted that she only dated 'straight' women. Even a category like 'gay man' was highly contested by self-identified members of that category. For example, tensions existed between what might be termed 'gay assimilationists' or 'gay conservatives' and sexual dissidents who were more resistant to policing their appearance and behaviour for heterosexual society. There was for example differences of opinion over the role and place of 'camp' behaviour:

> Alan: Even with the issue of gay men, there's the whole thing of 'men are straight acting' or 'non-camp' and all this. So even within the gay men's culture, there is obviously the hierarchy and stuff. Even, for example, in the Pride marches and things like that. After it you would see letters in magazines. They would be angry letters from gay men saying, 'This is the image of gay men getting pride, and it's not good'.

> Thomas: Some people would say that if all the gay people appeared to be straight, everything will be OK. It's the ones that are camp and effeminate and drag queens that make people sort of antagonistic.

This tension is well documented in the literature on sexual citizenship. For example, Bell and Binnie (2000) document that a wide rift between 'gay conservatives' and 'queer radicals' exists between sexually dissident, political groups in the US. The former opposes radical intervention and instead advocates self-policing, arguing that 'if homosexuals could learn to present themselves in less disgustingly different ways, homophobia would be eradicated' (page 45). The latter rejects such calls arguing that it is assimilationist, forcing sexual dissidents to adopt modes of behaviour deemed appropriate by the heterosexual community, hence reproducing heterosexism.

In addition, to the instability of sexual categories, it was clear that space in Belfast is queered in a range of visible and less visible ways. As such, while generally less visible in relation to many other UK cities, sexual dissidents have managed to create a range of spaces in the city in which to express and fulfil desire (for a full account see other paper). These include the small number of openly 'gay' spaces such as 'The Kremlin' and the offices of gay organisations, and a small number of other pubs and clubs which run 'gay nights.' Betsky (1997) contends that these sites are important as they act as 'counterspace', providing sites which subvert and reveal the instability of heteronormativity. Beyond this space, heterosexist space is subverted and resisted through various spatial strategies. For example, a number of 'straight' bars and restaurants are regularly frequented by sexual dissidents and their clientele parodied through subtle performances (also see Bell et al., 1994). This is illustrated in the following exchange where Anthony reveals how the dominant heterosexuality of the bar can be subverted by using it as a place to pick-up sexual partners.

> Int: Can you pick up or meet someone in [named straight bar], or if you want to meet somebody do you have to go to the Kremlin and those places?
> Anthony: I've only met one person in [named straight bar]. But that was somebody I knew from beforehand, but I didn't know this person was gay.
> Int: And how did you figure that out in [named straight bar]?
> Anthony: I didn't, honest I didn't. And my mates were telling me that something was going on and that I was being stupid because he works in the canteen that I go to. But it happened. But I know my friends have met people in [named straight bar].

In addition, the heterosexual coding of public space -- of the street, parks, public toilets -- is continually resisted and re-coded through cruising and cottaging. There are for example several well known cruising areas around the city, and interviewees noted all space was open to making contact through 'a knowing gaze.' For example, one interviewee's friend was picked up when looking in a travel agent's window. Chauncey (1995) claims that these everyday strategies, such as cruising, used to subvert and claim space should not be underestimated as although they might not openly challenge anti-gay policing, they do unsettle heteronormative codings of public space (and reveal that such codings are always in a process of becoming) and allow sexual dissidents to build fulfilling lives in an often hostile society. Another strategy for recoding to whom the streets belong is enacted through political mobilisation and campaigns against homophobic violence. The most visible of these political acts is Belfast Pride, a spectacle explicitly aimed at reclaiming the streets and undermining heteronormative assumptions about to whom the streets belong. These strategies of producing 'gay' space, mobilising political identity, subverting and resisting heterosexism, in addition to the socio-spatial practices of sexual dissidents as employed in everyday life, undermine the 'complacency of heterosexual space' (Valentine, 1996, page 152). They challenge heterosexist visions of the city by revealing the inherent queerness of space and the need for heterosexism to constantly reproduce itself.

Furthermore, the queerness of space is revealed in other ways. For example, heterosexism is not resisted by sexual dissidents alone. Many people who consider themselves to be 'good' heterosexuals are not homophobic, respecting the sexual rights of sexual dissidents, and many of our interviewees discussed the fact that friends and family had supported them and had help fight homophobia directed towards them. In addition, legislation such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1982, the equalisation of the age of consent, and the Northern Ireland Act (1998), along with the changing attitudes and practices of the RUC, is helping to erode (in theory, if not necessarily in reality) heterosexism and acknowledge the legitimacy of other sexualities. This legislation and changes in how homophobic incidents are policed is important as it recognises (legally and institutionally) the queerness of space and legitimates the practices of subversion and resistance outlined above, creating more opportunities for the heterosexist codings of space to be challenged.

The significance of this changing legal landscape was not lost on some of the interviewees. For example, Matthew although cynical because of the RUC's role in entrapment cases (see other paper), stated:

> Matthew: The police now are in a situation where, like everybody else in this changing society, are having to change. And they now, for the first time, are having to deal with reporting of homophobic hate crimes. … And there's many people, not just me, I talk to people in other voluntary and community organisations who are working in situations like this with the police, where they never had to before.

Finally, it was clear from the interviews that the Belfast's sexual landscape is itself diverse and nuanced and not easily reduced to a common experience. For example, interviewees noted that whilst some sexual dissidents survive on the limited club scene, others think of themselves as 'non-scene', preferring to socialise through a drinks/dinner-party circuit, gay groups, or to meet partners through contact magazines, the Internet, 'straight' pubs and clubs, and in the case of non-gay identified dissidents, such as married men seeking same-sex relations, cruising or cottaging. These varying patterns are largely accounted for by age, class, family circumstances, length of relationships, and personal tastes, although preferences do vary and would not be easy to model.

This diversity is also illustrated by the varied experiences of heterosexism and homophobia by Belfast's sexual dissidents. So, whilst it would be relatively easy to conclude that Belfast is a highly homophobic city in comparison to other cities in the UK, such a broad-stroke, reductionist painting fails to account for the multifaceted ways in which Belfast is socio-spatially experienced. For example, although the majority of our respondents had experienced various forms of homophobia, ranging from verbal abuse to vandalism of property to physical violence, the rates and forms of homophobia varied markedly across the interviewees (see other paper). As such, although a couple of individuals had experienced sustained homophobia in various guises over a long period of time, explicit homophobia was in the main experienced sporadically. Similarly, while all had witnessed or knew of cases of physical attack, most had not been on the receiving end of such harassment, instead encountering more psychologically based homophobia such as verbal intimidation, cold

shouldering, staring and spitting. Some respondents reported that they could think of no incidents where they had been subjected to explicit homophobic prejudice. This variation is to some degree reflected in the extent to which interviewees were 'out' as gay or indeed identifiable as such. Some of our respondents were 'out' in all areas of their lives (e.g., to friends, family, work colleagues and so on). Others were selectively 'out', varying from being 'out' only to other 'gay' people, to being 'out' with certain friends or family or at particular moments in space and time depending on context and location. It is worth noting here that those who were identifiable as gay through their dress, gait and so on, often reported the highest levels of homophobic harassment whether they were 'out' or not. A queer reading of Belfast illustrates and accounts for this diversity, highlighting how the same spaces can be understood and experienced in divergent ways across individuals. For example, the Cathedral Quarter, where the many gay organisations and the three (now one) gay bars were located, is seen by some as a place of opportunity and progress, by others as a dangerous site, and others as a mix of the two. Similarly, cruising as a spatial practice is differently conceived, with some noting its liberatory potential and others its dangers in relation to sexual health and queer-bashing, but also in terms of the negative images and stereotypes such practices are believed to perpetuate about gay men in the minds of the general public.

Conclusion

In this paper we have detailed the changing ways in which the geographies of sexuality have been theorised, charting the transition from essentialist to constructivist to queer understandings. We have sought to add to this debate by arguing that queer theory be extended from deconstructing the categorisation of sexuality to spatiality. Our contention, supported by data generated as part of a survey of homophobic violence and its spatial consequences in Belfast, is that all space is inherently queered. That is, whilst space in the West is predominately heterosexist in its coding and regulation, the discursive and material practices that maintain such hegemonic heterosexist relations are continuously being employed in a process of reproduction. As such, heterosexism is revealed as partial and unstable, always in a process of becoming; always engaged in a process of masking the queerness that lurks below.

This queerness is revealed in a variety of ways through the strategies of subversion, parody, resistance and contestation employed by sexual dissidents.

We contend that reconceptualising space as queered allows us to answer Binnie and Valentine's (1999, page 175) call to provide a 'more critical treatment of the differences between sexual dissidents.' As detailed above, a queered geography allows for more detailed analysis of what is undoubtedly a varied sexual landscape, and recognises the diverse make-up and experiences of sexual dissidents at particular places and times. This allows us to move beyond what have to date been fairly reductionist analyses in which sexual dissidents have been theorised as if all the same. Moreover, such a reconceptualisation still recognises the role of the state and of capital in shaping the lives of sexual dissidents.

Adopting such a poststructuralist understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space clearly has political consequences for the legitimacy and effectiveness of identity politics based around sexual categorisation. That said, as noted in the discussion above, heterosexism is still hegemonic and thus provides a coherent focus for sexual dissidents to unite around. As such, in relation to Belfast we would contend that, at present, given the dominance of heterosexual constructions of sexuality, the strategy of creating a politics of identity around the self-identified categories lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) does at first seem sensible as it provides a location from which to publicly challenge institutional and public heterosexism. However, we would posit that ultimately this strategy is flawed as it acts to construct categories which merely lock out sexual dissidents who do not identify with the LGBT tag, for example men who have sex with men who do not gay-identify, and constructs particular notions of 'acceptable' or 'normal' dissident sexualities, for example in relation to campness or sexual health. Maybe in the long term, developing a queer politics, that is creating a politics of difference, might provide more inclusive opportunities to challenge the heterosexist, socio-spatial construction of 'normal' or 'natural' sexuality and to carve out safer-spaces in which all can express and fulfil desire.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   We are aware that the term 'sexual dissidents' is in itself a category and is thus not an unproblematical term. Through its use we do not intend to reduce all the people it represents to some kind of homogenous group, but rather to represent all those people who do not perform as 'good' heterosexuals (see Rubin quote in text). In other words, as we argue in the paper, we recognise that 'sexual dissidents' are very heterogeneous in identification and experiences of heterosexism.

2.   Indeed, this new emphasis within the police service represents part of a wider attempt to tackle various forms of violence, which comes under the rubric of 'hate crime'. In addition to sensitively and proactively tackling the issue of homophobic violence, locally based Community Affairs Sergeants are charged with dealing with attacks and crimes which could be said to have racist motivations underpinning them.

3.   See the Queer Space webpage at
     http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/7124/about.html

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