Gender, Sexuality and Race: An Intersectional Analysis of Racial Consumption and Exclusion in Birmingham's Gay Village

Introduction

There is a well-established body of work that explores racist hate crime and racist oppression within the United Kingdom (Burnett, 2013; Chakraborti and Garland, 2003; Myers and Lantz, 2020). Issues of racist victimisation have received significant attention since the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in South-East London in 1993 (Cottle, 2005). Equally, there is a growing body of literature exploring hate crime targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) people (Colliver, 2021a; Dunn, 2012; Jamel, 2018). However, criminological approaches to hate crime are often critiqued for adopting a 'silo' approach (Mason-Bish, 2015). As such, it is assumed that all minoritised ethnicities and all LGBTQ+ people have a shared experience of social exclusion and oppression and focus tends to be on one identity characteristic at a time. Issues of power are therefore located outside of minoritised groups. This results in the power dynamics within and between minoritised groups being overlooked within criminological literature. It is this gap that we address in this paper, by exploring the ways that queer spaces are racialised spaces and interrogate the way that patriarchal whiteness is maintained within these spaces. To do so, we adopt an intersectional approach, drawing on the work of Crenshaw (1989; 1991) to examine the ways that that minoritised ethnic LGBTQ+ people may experience a matrix of oppression, consumption, and isolation within these spaces. Whilst scholars have previously reported on the ways in which queer spaces are designed to serve the needs of cisgender men (Colliver and Duffus, 2021), in this paper, we offer a more nuanced analysis of how gender, sexuality and race interact.

Hillyard and Tombs (2017:288) argue that criminology is so powerful 'that it is naturalizes the idea that crime captures the most important and most dangerous of all social harms that will affect us from the cradle to the grave'. The dependence on legally-defined harms overshadows many social injustices. Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1970) propose that the harms arising from racism, sexism, and economic exploitation should be central to the study of criminology. Tifft and Sullivan (2001: 191) critique the definition of crime and suggest the inclusion of 'social conditions, social arrangements, or actions of intent or indifference that interfere with the fulfilment of fundamental needs and obstruct the spontaneous unfolding of human potential'. As such, we adopt a zemiological framework, that is, one that reconfigures traditional criminological conceptions and focuses on the concept of social harm, rather than crime (Hillyard and Tombs, 2017).

Throughout this paper we regularly refer to 'queer' spaces. Whilst commonly described as 'gay villages' and 'gay venues', we use the word queer to acknowledge that these spaces have commonly been associated with transgressing hegemonic gendered expectations (Bailey, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that not all queer spaces have challenged social norms regarding gender, with some preventing the liberation of masculinity from its normative restrictions (Hale and Ojeda, 2018), despite assumptions of transgressing societal norms (Warner, 1993) through the celebration and joining together of those considered 'deviant'. We also regularly use the term 'minoritised ethnicities' through this paper. This term has been chosen in response to significant critiques of the term BAME (Mistlin, 2021). Throughout the interviews conducted the term 'minoritised ethnicities' was generally agreed upon to better reflect participants' identities. Whilst it still faces similar issues of grouping diverse people under a singular term, it reflects how global majority people become minoritised through systematic and interpersonal racism. Where appropriate, we make reference to individual's ethnicity as self-described by participants.

Made up of three parts, the first part of this article explores existing literature relating to queer spaces and the ways in which these spaces are constructed and understood. Through a close examination of existing literature, it is demonstrated how many queer spaces are considered to be masculine, white spaces. Secondly, we go on to outline the methodological approach and processes adopted in the study. We sketch the ethnographic approach that was taken to data collection and describe the sites in which data collection took place. In the third and final part, we report our findings and emphasise various social norms and processes that maintain and uphold homonormative standards that result in the exclusion of those who do not conform. As such, throughout this paper we draw upon aspects of intersectionality to illustrate the complexity in negotiating access to queer spaces whilst occupying multiple marginalised social positions (Mattias de Vries, 2012). Specifically, we explore how gender, sexuality and race interact to create unique ways for minoritised ethnic men and women to be consumed and also excluded within these spaces. In this final section, our three key arguments are developed. Firstly, we address the issue of consuming Black femininity and the challenges this may create for Black women navigating these spaces. We explore how touching and speech function to position Black women as consumable for white, gay people and how a mediatised, stereotypical version of Black femininity is consumed for social gratification. Secondly, we draw on ideas of fetishization and disgust to explore the ways in which racist practices, often constructed as 'preferences' create exclusionary environments for anyone who doesn't meet 'homonormative' expectations and explore how minoritised ethnic male bodies are constructed as consumable for white sexual gratification. Finally, we address incidents of interpersonal racism, and racist assumptions and stereotypes and how these create spatial boundaries which dictate which bodies can occupy particular spaces. We contend that all of these social issues in conjunction contribute to hostile environments that serve to uphold the whiteness of queer spaces. Whilst there is significant work that has

highlighted the ways that Black male bodies and different forms of Black masculinities are fetishized and consumed by white, gay men (Eng, 2010; Johnson, 2003; McBride, 2005), this paper extends the discussion by considering gender to investigate the ways that men and women experience consumption and exclusion in different, gendered ways. We draw on bell hooks (1992: 366) idea of 'eating the other' and how 'longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy'. The analysis presented in this paper offers a more nuanced reading of inclusion and exclusion within queer spaces, in which intersectional oppressions are presented and acknowledged. These contributions are significant to criminological thought in advancing our understanding of both the spatial and social challenges of navigating queer spaces.

Understanding and Constructing Queer Spaces

There is a growing body of literature that explores how queer spaces, and in particular, 'gayborhoods' are constructed and understood (Casey, 2004; Held, 2017; Nash, 2013). Space is not just an area for interaction, but is simultaneously reproduced by these interactions (Koskela, 1999). As queer geography expands, research into queer spaces has adopted different foci including heteronormativity (Oswin, 2012), spatial planning (Doan, 2011), lesbian inclusion (Podmore, 2006) and racialization (Held, 2017). Whilst queer spaces may be considered spaces that have historically transcended social norms and hierarchies relating to gender and sexualities, other research has shown how they may uphold other social hierarchies through engrained levels of racism (Bassi, 2006; Held, 2017), misogyny (Colliver, 2021b) and ableism (Overton & Hepple, 2022).

The idea of there being one, cohesive 'melting pot' in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people unite against oppression has been challenged (Eastbrook *et al.,* 2014). It has been argued that the uniting of minoritised sexualities under the label of

‘LGBTQ’ or ‘queer’ has resulted in the needs and priorities of gay and lesbian women being neglected (Bouthillette, 1997). Others have claimed that bisexual people are often treated with contempt, disgust or disdain within gay and lesbian communities and spaces (Burleson, 2005). As such, Eastbrook *et al* (2014: 686) argue that queer communities ‘may be more like a mosaic of different groups vying for political and social power, with different and conflicting experiences even though they are all sexual minorities’.

In heteronormative societies, queer spaces have been developed and constructed as safe havens ‘in which gay men, sheltered from the wider homophobia of society, can express their sexuality without inhibition or fear of reprisal’ (Caluya, 2008: 283). However, Caluya argues that this is a utopian vision of western gay bars. Ferguson (2005: 62) claims that ‘presuming that homosexuality is the same in all people opens it to white racial formation’. In an ethnographic study, Caluya demonstrates the ways in which racialised spatial management occurs through the coding of bodies. It is also important to note here that ‘heterosexual spaces’ are not singular, consistent spaces, but are also spaces that are variously sexualised and desexualised (Hubbard, 2000). There is a wealth of literature exploring the desires and disgusts associated with sexualities considered ‘non-normative’ (Hubbard, 2000; Weeks, 1998). However, less attention has been paid to how issues of desire and disgust are also gendered and racialised within queer spaces.

However, although these spaces have often offered a safe haven from homophobia, the purpose of these spaces, and who should occupy them are contested (Nash, 2006). In discussing gay villages in Toronto, Nash (2011: 194) argues that ‘there is still a strong sense that middle class, white, gay, male interests, and a conservative politic’ that dominates the area. Nash (2006) contends that assimilationists may disapprove of particular queer spaces which challenge socially acceptable sexual behaviours, such as Sauna’s and public sex environments, in order to ‘extend’ the ‘normal’, rather than challenge it. On the other hand,

more radical, liberationists may criticise mainstream, commercial spaces which may reinforce 'homonormative' identities (Duggan, 2002) associated with assimilationist politics. Kennedy (2014) extends our understanding of homonormativity by examining the ways that 'white normativity' is intrinsic within notions of homonormativity, as 'gaining membership into mainstream society often depends on diluting any kind of queer sensibility that might challenge the centrality of white, neoliberal, middle-class values' (Kennedy, 2014: 118).

Research has been conducted that explores racialised practices in these venues (Han, 2007; Held, 2015; 2017; Kawale, 2004). This research has identified structural issues relating to door policies and door-staff, publicity materials and music, alongside interpersonal issues including interpersonal racism and sexual fetishization. Indeed, many of these issues were present in the current study and will be explored in this paper. However, as noted by Caluya (2008: 287) 'even if a bar or club doesn't discriminate at the door in terms of race, the spatio-sexual interactions within commercial gay venues can still regulate the mobility and distribution of racial bodies'. Indeed, as Caluya (2008: 284) has argued, 'if Western gay spaces are from one angle spaces of liberation from homophobia, from another angle they further entrench deep racial fissures into our sexual practices'.

Racialised practices may therefore also be experienced in relation to sexual desire and disgust, in which Black and Asian bodies are simultaneously fetishized and rejected. As demonstrated by Caluya (2008: 284), 'Asian male sexual subjectivity is a thoroughly racialised one'. It is not just Asian sexualities which are fetishized and rejected, as Han (2007: 57) argues 'rather than existing as individuals, black men exist as sexual tools, ready to fulfill, or violate, white male sexual fetishes'. In this sense, not only might Black men experience fetishization, but simultaneously be dehumanised and perceived as an object. Similar claims have been made about the experiences of minoritised ethnic women and Held (2017: 30) describes how 'not only are 'racialized others' seen as invaders of space, but by

touching hair and expressing racialized desire, white people also invade the physical space of 'racialized others'. Whilst the research conducted by Held (2017) was conducted in Manchester, in this paper, we demonstrate similar parallels are present within the queer night-time economy of Birmingham.

Birmingham as a Research Space

Birmingham was chosen as a research space for this project as it is one of the largest, most densely populated cities outside of London. It is a post-industrial city with a diverse population (Warren and Jones, 2017). Birmingham is also a global city, and as of 2019 was the fourth most visited city in the United Kingdom by overseas visitors (ONS, 2020). Birmingham has a well-established 'gay village' which stretches down Hurst Street, and also splits off into Kent Street and Sherlock Street. The Nightingale is the oldest surviving queer club in the gay village and has held several locations within Birmingham including Camp Hill, Thorp Street and its current location on Kent Street, which has been in place since 1994. However, several venues have closed down including Route 66, The Wellington and Bar Jester. The first official Pride event took place in 1997, trailing somewhat behind the London Pride event first organised in 1972.

Birmingham has also 'had a prominent Gay Liberation Front (GLF) that was politically active between 1972-1977' (Knowles, 2009: 18). Not only was it politically active, but also organised a number of night-time social events, to offer an 'alternative to the commercial gay bar scene, which was seen as exploiting their gay clientele' (Knowles, 2009: 22). Historically, bars have been distributed across the city centre, before the establishment and acknowledgement of the 'gay village'. However, by the 1990's Hurst Street had established a clear 'gay scene', although this primarily catered to the needs of cisgender, gay, men. The establishment of the 'gay village' was the result of queer people's self-investment

within the area, which was required due to a lack of council funding, of which Birmingham City Council focused on funding the generation of Birmingham's 'Chinese Quarter', located directly next to the gay village (Chan, 2004). Queer people in Birmingham have also more recently been the focus of social and media attention as a result of protests against queer-inclusive school curriculums (Colliver, 2018). Media coverage presented the protests as reflecting a problematic nature of social diversity and emphasised tensions between minoritised groups. Given these current social tensions, Birmingham provides an interesting sight for investigation. As it currently stands Birmingham's gay village is primarily centred around The Nightingale, The Village Inn, Eden Bar, Glamorous, Missing, Sidewalk and The Fox.

Conducting Research in Birmingham's Gay Village

The ethnographic research that this article draws upon aimed to explore experiences of inclusion and exclusion within queer spaces. It looked to review how normative identities are established, and in turn, how those who do not conform to these identities are positioned as 'outsiders' and therefore experience exclusion. These spaces have been considered 'LGBTQ' venues through self-advertisement and community interaction. The spaces focused on for this study were associated with the night-time economy, inclusive of bars, pubs and clubs. Shaw (2014) highlights how the night-time economy may also encompass non-alcohol centred leisure spaces; however, the geographical area of this research has a high association with alcohol consumption.

Birmingham has been the subject of a noticeable level of 'othering' towards the LGBTQ community, with events such as the intense school protests regarding inclusive LGBTQ education highlighting this (BBC News, 2019). Despite the 'othering' directed towards the community as a whole, a further level of 'othering' appears to be occurring

within the community itself, with minoritized ethnicities often experiencing the impact of this. The number of people acknowledging and recognising gender and sexual non-conformity, has led to an increase in diversity in terms of who is part of the LGBTQ community, and who is entering queer spaces (Colliver and Duffus, 2021).

There have been a number of themes developed from this study itself that reinforces this notion of a further level of 'othering' within the LGBTQ community, with the finding of queer spaces being designed to serve the needs of cisgender men having previously been reported (Colliver and Duffus, 2021). This paper however aims to draw attention to the racialisation of queer night-time leisure venues. This study explores the racialisation of queer spaces and examines the ways that patriarchal whiteness is preserved, maintained and perpetuated within these spaces. The researchers have taken an intersectional approach, drawing on the work of Crenshaw (1989;1991) to explore how minoritized ethnic LGBTQ people may experience oppression and exclusion within queer spaces.

The data drawn upon within this article was collected from 12 semi-structured interviews, with individuals over the age of 18 who have visited Birmingham's Gay Village. The researchers also conducted a series of direct observations conducted over a 3-month period of three venues within Birmingham's Gay Village. Each of the three venues were visited on both weekdays and weekends at a number of different times. This study adopts a case study approach by utilising the specific geographical area of Birmingham's Gay Village, to establish a deeper understanding of the aims of this research. This paper will draw from both the ethnographic experiences of the researchers and the views shared by participants in the interviews.

Ethnographic research has been particularly effective at gaining an awareness of issues of inclusion, exclusion, and isolation within queer spaces. The intersection between

race and sexuality has been a clear discussion point to come from these observations. The researchers observed the process of racialisation in queer spaces and how issues have developed, despite these spaces being designed to cater for marginalised groups. Twine (2000:17) argues that researchers "frequently have to negotiate the way their bodies are racialised and the meanings attached to these racialisations". This has been a particularly important thing to consider, as one of the researchers identifies as a Black British heterosexual woman, and the other researcher identifies as a white British gay man. It has been important for us to recognise the importance of how our own identities could or may impact our experiences and observations within this research, and in turn how our bodies are racialised within the spaces we are observing. We have recognised that not only would we need to consider the impact of having a white gay researcher considering topics of race, but also a black heterosexual woman researching within predominantly white, queer spaces. Navigating these experiences will be explored later when the themes of the paper are considered.

Venue 1 is a large queer space within the gay village. The venue only opens 3 evenings per-week and doesn't open between Sunday-Wednesday. It is a late-night venue and does not open at 10pm. Inside, it offers 2 separate smoking areas, gender-neutral toilets and a number of different social spaces which are themed by music. The main room predominantly plays pop and chart music, whilst other rooms offer R&B and Indie and Alternative music depending on the day and time. Venue 2 is a smaller venue, however, it still offers 2 different social spaces, with the main space offering primarily pop and chart music, with the second space, which is underground, offering R&B and hip-hop music. This venue opens 7 days a week and is open from 5pm daily. The final venue is the smallest venue, offering just one social space, which also offers a small stage for karaoke and cabaret and an off-shoot area

offering a pool table. This venue also opens 7 days a week but closes significantly earlier than the other 2 venues.

The focus of the interviews was to gather an understanding of participants' experiences of accessing and navigating the night-time economy within LGBTQ venues in Birmingham's Gay Village. Participants were asked to consider how their identity, and that of others, impacts issues of access, inclusion, and exclusion within Birmingham's Gay Village. Whilst not explicitly asked about race and cultural differences, but rather issues of identity more generally, these themes were highly discussed when interviewees voiced their experiences.

To ensure participants over the age of 18 who had visited Birmingham's Gay Village within the last 12 months were interviewed, purposive sampling was utilised. Only including individuals who had visited these venues within the last 12 months, allowed the researchers to have participants voice their experiences of visits to Birmingham's Gay Village that either were not, or minimally, affected by COVID-19 restrictions. This does however mean that participants who visited prior to the 12 months, or after, were not included. As such, to ensure inclusivity and to include post-COVID changes, a follow up study that is more inclusive in its recruitment criteria may be necessary. To gather participants, social media was the primary recruitment method. The researchers acknowledged that this may lead to limitations regarding representativeness, however given the challenges of the pandemic and therefore the online nature of recent years, it proved to be the most effective method of sourcing participants. Furthermore, this method enabled participants who have the necessary subject knowledge to partake (Denscombe, 2010), and provided flexibility for both structured and follow up questions to be asked to the participants, regarding the topic (Adams, 2015).

A relatively diverse sample of individuals, in terms of age, gender, race, and sexuality, were recruited for the interviews. All participants were aged between 18 and 52, with most participants being between the ages of 21 and 40. There were 5 male participants, 5 female participants and 2 non-binary participants, of whom 4 of the participants identified as transgender. In relation to race, 6 participants identified as white British, 2 identified as black British, 2 identified as Asian British, 1 identified as white European, and 1 identified as mixed heritage. In terms of sexuality, 5 participants identified as heterosexual, 4 described themselves as gay, 1 described themselves as a lesbian, 1 identified as queer and 1 identified as pansexual. Participants of any sexuality were included in this study, as there is an awareness that heterosexual, cisgender people still access queer spaces.

All the interviews took a semi-structured approach and were transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step guide for thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The researchers coded independently, and then reviewed the codes collaboratively. Additionally, the researchers also acknowledged the importance of engaging the participants throughout the process, and the need to ensure that their experiences were shared correctly. As such, participants were approached after analysis, to review the codes and themes. Member checking, which explains this approach, helps to strengthen the credibility of the results, and is a way of quality checking the data (Birt et al, 2016).

The topic of inclusion and exclusion based on one's identity, may lead to emotional distress. All participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study and given a debrief post interview. Furthermore, local and national networks that offer free support services were shared with all participants, so they were aware of the support available to them should they be subject to psychological or emotional distress during or after the interview. All participants, and the specific venues discussed, have all been given a pseudonym to

support anonymity. The following sections will draw upon the three key themes developed from the data collection.

Consuming and Reproducing Black Femininity

Significant issues were raised by participants in relation to the interpersonal social practices that occur within these spaces that maintain white patriarchal practices. In this section, we discuss social practices which are often constructed as non-problematic by white people and may even be considered a means of 'including' minoritised ethnic groups, but which have underlying, or explicit racist connotations and result in the exclusion of, and creation of barriers for minoritised ethnic groups to safely, and comfortably access and navigate some queer spaces. We begin this section by discussing the ways in which Black femininity is consumed and reproduced by white people within queer spaces. Following this, we reflect on the consumption and rejection of Black masculinities and bodies, drawing on ideas of fetishization and disgust to illustrate how men from minoritised ethnic groups navigate complex sexual relations and practices. It becomes clear that within these spaces minoritised ethnic people experience consumption, but this is often dependent on the person's gender, and creates different experiences for minoritised ethnic women and men. We then move on to discuss spatial dominance and how certain bodies dominate and occupy particular spaces at different times, depending on the priorities of the dominant group. We finish this section by providing examples of interpersonal racism that people from minoritised ethnic groups experience within these white, patriarchal spaces.

> 'We are in 'Venue 2'. It's a Saturday night around 9:45. The venue is busy, there is a white, drag queen behind the DJ decks, cheesy pop music is playing loudly. We are both on the dancefloor, surrounded primarily by white men. We are dancing to the music. A white man moves between us to leave the dance floor. As he does, his hand

> reaches up and strokes [Researcher's name] hair. She turns around and looks at him, he smiles and laughs as he walks off.' (Research Field Notes)

The example provided above is just one of many similar incidents that occurred throughout the data collection process. The practice of touching someone's hair can be dehumanising, constructing Black bodies as objects for consumption by white people. It contributes to the social practice of constructing Black bodies as 'exotic', and also has a gendered nature, perpetuating the notion of Black, Asian and multiracial women's bodies as inherently 'different' to white bodies (St Jean and Feagin, 1998). As Waring (2013:301) argues the word exotic 'is associated with difference, appearance and sexual connotations'. Lucy, a 30-year-old Black British woman also described many incidents with white, gay men.

> "A lot of white gays seem to think that they share some inherent form of fabulous with Black women. It is generally a very particular type of gay, but Black men and Black women get treated differently. Like, before when I am out with friends, a white gay guy will come over, tell me I look sassy, touch my hair, and put some fake accent on. It's like he wants to be me, not me specifically, but a Black woman. Then, when it comes to talking to my guy mates, it is always sexual, like making hints about dick size, them being masculine and ghetto, you know."

From Lucy's narrative, there appears to be gendered aspects to her experiences with white, gay men. Therefore, whilst Black men and women may experience being 'consumed' within these spaces, gender impacts the way this consumption occurs. For Lucy, it is the intersection of her identities as a Black woman that create a different experience to navigate compared to her Black male friends. It is here that we see not only the Black female body consumed through inappropriate touching, but also aspects of a particular Black female culture consumed, and reproduced in often inappropriate ways. In 2014, Sierra Mannie was featured

in Time, an article accusing gay white men of stealing Black female culture that received significant engagement.

Mannie's claims were critiqued from various angles, and the experiences reported in this study feed into critiques made. Whilst a lot of dialect used by white gay men may be considered to be imitating Black women from popular culture, there is a more complex history, as detailed in Paris is Burning (1990). Arguably, white gay men may perceive particular dialect to be a part of queer history and culture, rather than as appropriating a particular version of Black femininity. This was certainly evident in both interviews and observations.

> "I think queer spaces have changed in recent years, like the mainstreaming of things like Drag Race has opened up our queer culture to everyone. You know, like, you can hear straight teenagers walking down the street saying things like 'Henny' and 'Tea'." (Jacob, 22, white, gay)

> "Venue 1. We are sitting in the smoking area. A group of young-looking men are sitting on the table next to us talking about being young and gay. The conversation is about what it means to be a young, gay man living in a city. One of the men claims that he loves being gay, because he gets to choose his family (a rhetoric commonly seen in RuPaul's Drag Race) and how as queer people we even have our own language, to which one other man replies 'now, that's the T (truth)'. (Researcher Field Notes)

From participant interviews and researcher field notes it can be argued that white gay men perceive particular cultural phrases as being part of a shared queer history. In Heap's (2009:1) work, he reflects on how some may remember when Harlem was a place of 'interracial camaraderie', although acknowledges that this may be both 'well-intentioned'

whilst also ‘exploitative’. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed history of these spaces (see Heap, 2009), it is acknowledged that these spaces were carved out to provide ‘authentic Black entertainment’ (Heap, 2009:1). Others have described Harlem as a central space for African American culture but also as a ‘queer paradise’ (Stokes, 2002:58). Chauncey (1994) reflects on how the flamboyant drag queen became publicly visible in these spaces, which attracted white queer people to the space as well. Whilst carved out by queer minoritised ethnic people, Mumford (1997) has argued that these spaces blurred racial lines in which people of different ethnicities shared a sexual subculture. Barrett (2022, cited in Wired) argues that a significant amount of drag forms were initiated by African American queens, which were then widely appropriated. Furthermore, he argues that African American women were symbolic of strong femininity and inspired drag queens in claiming a feminine identity. Therefore, white, gay men may consider particular linguistic patterns and cultural norms to be a part of their own queer history, overshadowing and erasing the inspiration for much of this.

Whilst it is not the aim of this paper to argue whether particular discourse belongs to a certain group of people or not, we do wish to discuss the implications that mainstreaming of such culture have. The production of a particular type of Black femininity within queer culture, that are consumed by white queer people often result in this dominant, exaggerated construction of Black femininity becoming seen as the most authentic version of Black femininity. This has implications for Black women navigating queer spaces and their expected behaviour.

> “Venue 2. We are both standing at the bar, it is Saturday night and the venue is extremely busy. We have been here for about an hour. Two young white men are standing next to us at the bar. They are both having a conversation with the white, male researcher about what he is doing tonight. Polite conversation. They then draw

research 2 into the conversation, and one of the men asks 'so, what are you doing tonight sister, what's the Tea?' in a completely different voice. Researcher 2 replies that they are having a night out with Researcher 1. The man responds and says 'Wow, you are so well-spoken, you don't come here a lot do you?"

Whilst neither of the men used language such as 'sister' or 'tea' when engaging with the white male researcher, this was used when engaging with the Black, female researcher. It suggests that there was an expected performance of Black femininity that she was expected to engage in, and when this did not happen, they questioned her place within that space. Therefore, the use of exaggerated, stereotypical language associated with a particular performance of Black femininity is racially charged when it is reserved only for engagement with Black women. Black women who embody and perform their femininity in ways that do not conform to this mediatised version of Black femininity may therefore have their identity questioned within these spaces. When Researcher 2 asked what 'Tea' meant, one of the men made the claim that she obviously wasn't gay. This alludes to the perception that particular language is associated exclusively with queer culture, and overlooks the intersections of gender, sexuality and race. She is therefore constructed as straight as a result of not being familiar with 'queer language', whilst simultaneously interrogating her identity as a Black woman.

Beyond touching, there were also numerous incidents in which [Researcher's Name] was spoken to by white patrons of the venue who commented specifically on her race.

> 'We are in Venue 2. It's a Saturday night around 1:15am. Me and [Researcher's Name] are in the smoking area of the venue. A white woman approaches us and tells [Researcher's Name] how beautiful she is. [Researcher's Name] thanks her. The woman continues the conversation and tells [Researcher's Name] that she loves dark

skin like hers, and it’s so unfair that she doesn’t have dark skin. She continues to tell [Researcher’s Name] that she looks beautiful like cake and that her skin is like silk. Throughout this conversation, the woman continually touches [Researcher’s Name] skin on arm.’ (Research Field Notes)

The field notes above demonstrate the ways in which touching, and language become racialised practices this process in itself allows ‘the white lesbian body…perpetuates itself as the somatic norm’ (Held, 2017: 27). In the sense that bodies which are read as Black, Asian or multiracial become consumable for white people, the description of [Researcher’s Name] body as ‘beautiful like cake’ speaks directly to the notion of consumption, and these social practices uphold structures of white power that allows for one person consuming the body of the racialised ‘Other’. As whiteness is often unnamed, unmarked and uninterrogated as a racial category, it often operates as the racial norm (Back and Ware, 2002; Dyer, 1997).

As whiteness ‘operates as unseen, invisible and even seemingly non-existent’ (Sullivan, 2006:1), these practices may not be seen as racialised by white people. Therefore, the racialised language used may be seen as ‘complimentary’ despite if often leading to hurt and frustration for the ‘consumed’ person (Byrd and Tharps, 2001). The examples provided of inappropriate touching, and the discursive practices that are used to construct Black bodies as consumable and ‘exotic’ were also present within sexual politics in these spaces.

However, mediatised, stereotypical Black femininity was not only consumed and reproduced within these spaces, it was also actively rejected. Jennifer, a 29-year-old South Asian woman described a conversation she overheard:

“There was this one night I was in [Venue 1], and I was in the smoking area, and there was this group of white people, it was a mixture of boys and girls, and they were talking about they didn’t like the music in the main room, and one of them said that

they could go to the upstairs room. One of the girls didn't want to go because it was R&B music and apparently it is full of ghetto Black girls."

Within these queer spaces, particular areas become designated as 'racially segregated' areas which are dictated by the music. However, these areas also become sites of rejection by white people, who perpetuate stereotypes around Black femininity and aggression. It is here that we see the stereotype of the 'angry Black woman' which perceives Black femininity as aggressive and hostile (Walley-Jean, 2009). It can therefore be argued that Black femininity is simultaneously consumed and reproduced by white people, whilst the same Black femininity is also socially rejected by other white people.

Sexual Desire, Fetishization and Rejection of Black Masculinities

Whilst women were primarily consumed and reproduced in a social context, minoritised ethnic men were generally consumed in a sexual context. In this sense, for Black participants, it was their Black masculinity that becomes the sole desire of white admirers. As Patrick, a 37-year old Black British man explained:

> "All the time I go out, I get white guys coming up to me, trying it on. They assume I'm a top all the time. I think it's because I'm Black, they think I'm gonna be masculine, and they think masculine people are always a top[1]. Like, I don't mind talking to white guys, but then there's some like instant red flags. When guys say stuff like 'I've slept with loads of Black guys', it tells me that they just want me because I'm Black, or when they say 'I've never slept with a Black guy before', like, I'm not your fucking experiment to see if you like something. Loads of guys always talk

[1] 'Top' is culturally recognisable queer language that indicates whether an individual is 'active' in sexual relationships and is the person who would prefer to penetrate a sexual partner, rather than be penetrated.

about, and I hate this phrase, but they talk about BBC, like talking about the size of my dick, as if they know how big I am down there just because I'm Black."

It is here that we can see the intersection of gender, race and sexuality amalgamate which impacts the way that white gay and bisexual men read Patricks' identity and influence the way they express desire. Whilst Patrick believes that some of the attraction to him is purely because of his race, it is also about the racialised expectations of gendered behaviour and the intersection of race and masculinity. Individuals therefore make assumptions about Patricks' masculinity and sexual preferences based on the way they read his racial identity. This is not uncommon, as Black men are commonly represented as being hypermasculine and hypersexualised (Stacey and Forbes, 2022). Similarly, racially charged stereotypes around penis size contribute to the desirability of Black men by white men (Wilson *et al.,* 2009). As McBride (2005: 110) has argued 'black male sexuality seems to be ever in the process if being both reduced and exaggerated to its central signifier – the big black phallus'. However, this also contributes to the fetishization and dehumanisation of Black men. It therefore perpetuates white supremacist ideas around Black bodies existing for the consumption of white people and feeds into biologically essentialist positions, positions which have been used to uphold and maintain scientific racism. There were also similar experiences for other participants, in which their racial identity contributes to the exoticisation and fetishization they experienced. Billy, a 21-year-old Asian British person explained that:

> "Generally, like I either get hit on by much older white guys, or sometimes guys that are not that much older than me but are like proper masculine. Like, I'm quite small built, and they are always much bigger than me. It's almost like they want to force me into doing stuff with them. Like, a lot of the time it is small things like they put their arm across me so I can't walk away and stuff. There's been a few times when guys have come up to me to have a chat, and then like, really quickly they start talking

> about sex and some of them just like blatantly bring my race up. I remember one guy asking me if I wanted to be his Indian slave. Like, what the hell? Number one, I'm not Indian, and number two, even if I was, that is like so inappropriate to say anyway".

Whilst both Billy and Patrick experience sexual fetishization, it is experienced in different ways based on racialised expectations and assumptions of gender performance and sexual interests. Other scholars have demonstrated the ways in which Asian gay men are often perceived to be effeminate and subordinate (Han, 2007). This may be most explicitly seen through the use of the word 'slave' in the excerpt above, which reinforces white, colonial power and perpetuates white supremacist thinking. It also dehumanises Billy, and this racist fetishization perpetuates the notion that the racial 'Other' are a consumable product for the white, male sexual fantasy (Ayres, 1999). However, Billy's age may also intersect with their racial identity to create a perception of submissiveness. Given that Billy describes being primarily approached by older white men, it may be a combination of Billy's race and age that make them a target for fetishization, in which Billy's youth is also read to translate into relative powerlessness in comparison to older men who may consider their age to give them more authority and power. It is clear that racialised assumptions and stereotypes result in the sexual fetishization of Black and Asian men in different ways, and as Han (2007: 57) argues 'If Asian men are the vassals for white men's domination fantasies, black men are the tools required for white male submissive fantasies'.

However, it isn't only fetishization and exoticisation that people experience, with some participants reporting exclusion from sexual and romantic interactions because of their race. As Tate (2007: 301) has argued, 'the influence of whiteness as a yardstick for beauty has a history which extends back to slavery'.

> "We are in Venue 3. It is a Thursday evening at approximately 8:30pm. There are only around 20 people in the venue. We are standing in the smoking area, under the outside heaters. As we walk out, we stand next to 2 men, who appear to have met for the first time tonight. Both men appear to be in their 20's. One man appears to be white, and one man appears to be Black. As we stand, we overhear a conversation:
>
> Man 1: You do realise that saying you wouldn't be interested in dating me, or sleeping with me just because I'm Black is racist?
>
> Man 2: No it isn't, it's not different to saying I wouldn't date you because you are too short. We are allowed to like what we like, and it's not cool to pull the race card just because I said I wouldn't sleep with you.' (Research Field Notes)

Accusations of 'playing the race card' are commonly made by white people to reject accusations of racism (Warikoo, 2016). Making this claim deflects allegations of racism and constructs the victim as being 'too sensitive'. It also means that accusations of racism do not need to be taken seriously, and therefore the structures which allow racism to occur, and flourish maintain their structural power. It functions as a way for those who are least marginalised in any given situation to maintain their position within racialised social hierarchies. Similar experiences were reported by participants in the semi-structured interview, with Charlie, an 18-year-old non-binary individual explaining:

> "I have had a really hard time when I'm out. Because I'm non-binary, people assume I'm feminine, mix that with being mixed raced, I'm just not what people expect of people who they basically think are Black guys. I've had people say to me before that I'm too dark for them, and like, try and justify it by saying they'd sleep with a Spanish guy, as if that makes me feel better… Or just that like, they expected me to be more masculine than what I am."

Even though Charlie is non-binary, their body is often read by others as male. Again, it is here that we see race and gender intersect in the expectations that people have of Charlie's racialised masculinity. In this excerpt, we also see colourism, which Burke (2008: 17) has defined as 'the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin'. In claiming that Charlie is too dark-skinned and making comparisons to Spanish people who may be lighter skinned than Charlie, it is evident that colourism impacts Charlie's access too, and how they navigate, sexual and romantic relations. Whilst these racist practices are often defended through 'preference' discourses, there were also incidents of more 'explicit' racism occurring within these venues.

Navigating Queer Spaces

Racism was also a social practice that occurs within these spaces outside the context of sexual and romantic politics. These racist practices occurred through racist stereotypes and assumptions influencing what spaces white people were prepared to occupy. In a predominantly white, patriarchal society, there may therefore be some queer people who embody the norms and values of whiteness and patriarchy in a bid for mainstream assimilation. As Kennedy (2014) argued, assimilation does not occur by challenging the centrality of middle-class, heteronormative, white values. This therefore tells us that only certain queer bodies are 'acceptable', and those who do not fit within these standards face exclusion and victimisation as a consequence of assimilation politics. It is the rejection of the queer unwanted (Duggan, 2002). The social practices may also serve to maintain dominant social hierarchies that relate to various identity characteristics (Perry, 2001). Patrick describes the physical division within these spaces that are racially motivated:

> "Like, if you go to the village, you might see the odd Black or Brown person in some of the places, like, with white friends, but mostly there is a clear divide in them. Like,

> the Black people go to their place, with different music, and the white people stay in theirs. It's important that you know your place if you want an easy night."

For Patrick, in order to avoid racist harassment and victimisation, occupying spaces that are unofficially, but socially designated for minoritised ethnic groups functions as a risk-reduction strategy to experiencing racism. Assumptions regarding which bodies should occupy certain spaces were also discussed by Lucy, as she explained that the first time, she attended Venue 1, as she entered, the white door supervisor told her that the R&B room was downstairs, and not in the main room. The suggestion that Lucy attends the downstairs bar is reflective of racialised assumptions about music, and through these social assumptions the body becomes racialised. This was also reiterated by white participants, such as Mark, a white British, 22-year-old gay man, who explained that:

> "Like, the places that have got more than 1 room you know who is going to be in what room. The main room always plays pop music and that's where I go, and like, there is usually a room that has like R&B music and hip-hop and there isn't really any white people in there."

These informal expectations function to create spatial boundaries which marginalised minoritised ethnic groups from the 'mainstream' queer space. As Bell and Binnie (2004: 1810) argue 'many 'gay' consumption spaces are bounded communities, where processes of exclusion operate, for instance on the basis of race and gender'. Whilst it can therefore be inferred that queer spaces also offer inclusion for minoritised ethnic people, this is achieved on the basis of white supremacist rule. For example, Venue 2 offers a space called the 'Underground Bar', which is a space referred to by Patrick and Mark. The underground bar typically has R&B music and is largely occupied by Black, Asian and ethnic minority people. Symbolically, the name and spatial organisation of this space being 'underground' could be

considered a form of symbolic violence, in which respectability politics and assimilationist values influence what type of 'scene' is visible to the wider public. It is also symbolic of white supremacist attitudes, in that when the ground-level venue closes, but the underground bar remains open, white bodies move to dominate this underground space. This is reflective of broader, historical events around colonisation. The inclusive space for the racialised 'Other' is dependent on the needs of white customers. Therefore, whilst white people have a ground-floor space to occupy, the underground bar can be claimed as a space of racial inclusivity. However, this is only applicable until the white bodies need a space to occupy, which results in the displacement of the racialised 'other' to make room for the dominant white community. Informal rules and practices, whilst not enforced through policy, serve to mirror and uphold wider social practices of exclusion.

Conclusion

In this article we have addressed the ways in which racialised gendered expectations influence the way minoritised ethnic people experience consumption, fetishization and rejection within queer spaces in Birmingham. It is important to note that the areas of observation in this research were mainstream, commercial queer venues within the 'gay village', and therefore do not represent all queer spaces, which may be more inclusive, radical and liberating. Central to this article are three key arguments.

Firstly, we have argued that stereotypical, mediatised understandings of Black femininity mean that Black women experience rejection, consumption and reproduction within these spaces. Black women become racialised, and positioned as 'consumable' as a result of touch and linguistic practices. These practices are often seen as non-problematic, or even complementary by those who perpetuate them. However, this does result in Black women experience consumption and rejection on a social level. This is due to whiteness

operating as the racial norm, and whiteness is therefore not racialised and remains uninterrogated. These social processes create the 'racialised other' and uphold colonial structures that maintain white power.

Secondly, gendered expectations around racialised masculinities impacts the sexual politics that occur within queer spaces. We have argued that race is consistently used to either fetishize or reject the male racial 'other'. However, it is also the intersectional of race and gender that can create difficulties in navigating these spaces. Stereotypes and assumptions around Black masculinities and Asian femininities influence the interactions that occur within these spaces, and the sexual fetishization of Black and Asian bodies contributes to their dehumanisation, which positions these bodies as legitimate targets for violence, discrimination and exoticisation. Both fetishization and rejection based on 'sexual preferences' are inherently racist and create a hostile atmosphere within these spaces for minoritised ethnic communities and resultantly may perpetuate exclusion. Here were see that men experience consumption and rejection in queer spaces in sexual frameworks, which arguably have social implications. However, it does also demonstrate that men and women experience being consumed and rejected in different ways.

Finally, we discussed spatial boundaries which dictate whose bodies can occupy particular spaces. These practices and processes contribute to racial segregation in these spaces. This may be reflective of assimilationist politics in which the queer unwanted experience rejection for challenging societal hierarchies that privilege heteronormative, white masculinities, but are also reflective on colonial methods of displacing the racialised other for the benefit of the white body. Therefore, the social practices which occur within queer spaces maintain and uphold queer white patriarchy. Queer spaces may not necessarily be the liberating, radical spaces they are perceived to be (Nast, 2002). Rather, they are microcosms

of broader society and the interactions and social practices that occur within these spaces mirror wider societal inequalities and exclusionary practices.

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