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Homonormative aesthetics: AIDS and 'de-generational unremembering' in 1990s London

Abstract

This article historically contextualises the origins of a transnational gay male aesthetic many now think of as homonormative. While typically understood as a depoliticisation that 'recodes freedom and liberation in terms of privacy, domesticity, and consumption' (Manalansan, 2005: 142), homonormativity also has an associated look defined by a set of slick surface appearances relating both to the body and design. Recognisable in various locations across the globe and in multiple settings including cruise ships, resorts, and gyms, this aesthetic is, above all, associated with gayborhoods and gay villages. Using Soho's gay village in London as a case-study of the emergence of this generic style in the 1990s, its branded emphasis on 'affluence', minimalist interior design and idealised gym bodies is contextualised with references to yuppification and AIDS. Constituting a 'clean break' with earlier forms of urban gay culture now stigmatised as 'dirty' and 'unhealthy', the homonormative aesthetic can be viewed as an example of 'de-generational unremembering' following the first traumatic phase of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s (Castiglia and Reed, 2011: 9). By placing AIDS at the centre of a discussion of homonormativity, some of the assumptions about its privilege can be queried while at the same time maintaining a critique of how class-specific 'aspirational' imagery was deployed to detract from the stigma of the health crisis.

Keywords

Built Environment, Community, Culture, Arts, Creativity, Displacement, Gentrification, Gender, Sexuality, London

In the early 1990s, several new gay businesses opened within close proximity to each other in and around London's Old Compton Street. Until then, the surrounding area's publicly advertised gay scene had consisted of two permanent clubs, a couple of bars and a restaurant, but by 1995 the weekly free magazine *Boyz* listed around 30 gay businesses in the vicinity. This unprecedented growth attracted attention from the city's gay media, but also from the *Financial Times*, the *Economist* and Britain's broadsheet newspapers, which tended to celebrate Soho's gay village as ushering in a territorial model of identity-based consumption long overdue in London. Drawing on an extensive review of this media coverage, this article identifies a set of recurring discourses around sexual minority visibility and gay male aesthetics, which have subsequently become emblematic of homonormativity (a term that did not yet exist at the time). The aesthetic themes under consideration here are quite generic and recognisable in various other locations and settings in the Global North as well as in parts of the Global South catering for international gay tourism. Above all, they have become associated with gayborhoods and gay villages such as the one in London's Soho, whose early marketing was centred on 'affluent' consumption, minimalist interior design and idealised gym bodies. As an urban milieu created in the 1990s, Soho is a suitable case-study of some of these aesthetic trends and the period in which they first became dominant.

A key argument I want to pursue is that homonormativity, not just as a politics, but also as an aesthetic was profoundly shaped by AIDS. While this is perhaps an obvious argument to make – given the scale of the health crisis, all aspects of gay male culture were transformed as a result – it is one, which with regards to aesthetics and the image of male homosexuality, has not been sufficiently paid attention to. Behind the abstract references to the 'clean' image of gay male urban spaces in the 1990s – an image that clearly must be distinguished from sexual practices – we can see the emergence of a homonormative aesthetic that deployed the themes of hygiene and affluence as symbolic resources against the stigma of AIDS. Moreover, by placing AIDS at the centre of a discussion of homonormativity, some of the assumptions about its privilege can be queried without detracting from how 'aspirational' and 'sophisticated' imagery forged an aesthetic that reinforced symbolic boundaries and exclusions. The aim of the article, then, is twofold: to provide a short history of the formation of Soho's gay village while at the same time suggesting a genealogy of homonormative aesthetics. Before looking specifically at Soho, however, the next section tries to sketch out the relationship between homonormativity, AIDS, and gay male aesthetics, while also introducing some necessary historical background on the period and politics relevant to the

case-study.

Homonormativity, neoliberalism, and AIDS

While articulations of homonormativity have a longer history in grassroots and activist circles – for example in the context of antitransgender discrimination within normative gay and lesbian politics (Stryker, 2008) – the term became influential in scholarly debates in the early 2000s. In the essay with which it is most closely associated, Lisa Duggan (2002: 179; 181) described 'the new homonormativity' as the 'sexual politics of neoliberalism' and argued that 'a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' had replaced the emphasis on 'public visibility' in the 1970s and the radicalized AIDS activism of the 1980s. Duggan placed this 'new homonormativity' in the context of the 'third way' triangulations of the Clinton and Blair-eras in the US and the UK while in common with most other theorisations of neoliberalism located its emergence in the 1980s of Reagan and Thatcher. If neoliberalism is understood as the ideas and policies that have shaped post-Fordist restructuring, Duggan's link between sexual politics and political economy can be placed within a Marxist intellectual tradition that has mapped different historical sexual paradigms onto different modes of production. Thus, it was Antonio Gramsci (1971: 295-) who argued that American Fordism had regulated the sexual lives of workers into heterosexual monogamy, while subsequent scholars have suggested that the crisis of Fordism – and its associated urban crisis and crisis of masculinity – can explain the emergence of sexual liberation movements since the late 1960s and 1970s.

David Harvey (2005), for example, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, argues that following New York's economic restructuring towards financial services, the 'narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeoisie urban culture'. While this account has been critiqued for conflating collective sexual liberation with individualistic lifestyle consumption and for neglecting 'the experiences of working-class or ethnic-racial queers' (Muñoz, 2009: 31), Harvey's equation between sexual identity politics and 'bourgeoisie urban culture' is nevertheless revealing because it taps into an image of male metropolitan homosexuality, which whilst clearly reductive is also immediately recognisable. It is this image and its associated urban milieu in London rather than New York I am concerned with here although the two cities have much in common linguistically and economically as the world's leading financial capitals as well as being important destinations

for international (queer) migration.

The neoliberal restructuring and deregulation of financial markets that solidified London and New York's global status as financial centres in the 1980s and 1990s was in cultural terms epitomised by the figure of the 'yuppie' ['young urban professional' or 'young, upwardly-mobile professional']. Often seen to capture the zeitgeist of the period, the yuppie was a relatively young metropolitan man or woman who according to an early definition 'lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money or any and all combinations of the above' (Piesman and Hartley, 1984: 12). Associated with the Conservative and Republican electoral dominance of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, the yuppie-era overlaps with the first phase of the AIDS crisis from the discovery of the virus to the availability of life-saving anti-retroviral drugs in the mid-1990s. First clinically observed in 1981 and described as 'gay cancer' in the media, the abbreviation AIDS was used from 1982 while the term yuppie gained traction in 1983: spatially the concentration of financial and legal industries in a small node of global cities overlapped with some of the urban agglomerations quickly identified as hotspots of the (western) epidemic.

The initial response to the AIDS crisis was first characterised by a homophobic backlash of which Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 is the key example in the UK. Given the timing of its introduction, Section 28, which banned local authorities from promoting 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' must be understood as a misguided attempt at HIV prevention whereby not only the virus, but homosexuality in general should be contained. This attempt at regulation instead galvanised opposition and made homosexuality more visible through public activism and eventually through the formation of gay villages in cities such as Manchester and London (Taylor, *et al.* 1996: 188). Moreover, the professionalisation of gay and lesbian politics (Richardson, 2005), and the closer collaboration between the state and gay organisations necessitated by the AIDS crisis arguably fostered a politics of assimilation that paved the way for later legal reforms including the lowering of the age of consent (1994 and 2001), civil partnership (2004), adoption (2005) and marriage (2014) rights. While this incorporation into previously heterosexual structures and reproductive family has been one target of queer critiques of homonormativity, a second focus has been on the 'co-optation' of gay cultures by commercial interests.

This latter part of the critique, which is the most relevant for this article, tends to centre on metropolitan gay men perceived as affluent – the so called 'A-gays' – whose aesthetic ideals overlap partly with yuppie culture. In this second context, homonormativity does not necessarily mean desexualisation or assimilation into heterosexual kinship structures, but instead refers to the abandonment of progressive alliances in favour of conspicuous consumption, gym culture, neocolonial tourism, white male cisgender privileges and other gentrified practices of which gay villages are sometimes seen as emblematic. In the UK, this commodification of gay culture has been linked with the economic conditions created by Thatcherism with the move towards entrepreneurial urban governance, for example, partly explaining the emergence of Britain's gay villages in the early 1990s (Quilley, 1997; Turner, 2003). Moreover, in the specific context of Soho, the new pink economy overlapped with an upmarket yuppie culture for which the area had emerged as a centre in the late 1980s and from which it borrowed some of its aesthetic themes (Mort, 1996: 170-73). In this context, it is also noteworthy that from its beginnings after the early 1990s recession to its eventual decline after the 2007-8 financial crisis, Soho's gay village's peak period overlaps with an exceptionally long period of uninterrupted economic growth in the UK.[1]

The gay villages and gayborhoods, which at least retrospectively have become associated with homonormative depoliticisation had a clear aesthetic that I will argue is *one* example – albeit a dominant one – of a proliferation of counter-representations to the longstanding deathly, perverse, and contaminated imagery of homosexuality that had been exacerbated by the AIDS crisis. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 13) suggested around the same time as the term homonormativity entered academic debates, 'the strategic banalization of gay and lesbian politics' had been directly linked to 'their resolute disavowal of relation to the historical and continuing AIDS epidemic'. This argument has been expanded on at length in Sarah Schulman's intellectual memoir *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012), in which she argues that AIDS made homosexuality visible, but at the same time gentrified gay politics by promoting a respectable image of homosexuality. While Schulman's focus is on art and activism, gay bars and consumption practices underwent a

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[1] Research in London has estimated that LGBTQ+ venues have decreased with 58% between 2007 and 2016 including several high-profile venues in Soho (Campkin and Marshall, 2017) conforming to similar trends in the US (Ghaziani, 2014).

parallel aesthetic transformation of which the most striking manifestation in London was Soho's gay village.

While urban geographers quickly turned their attention to Britain's new gay villages in the 1990s, the overwhelming focus of this early work was on the interplay between queer territorialisation and entrepreneurial forms of urban governance (Binnie, 1995; Quilley, 1997; Collins, 2004). Research on gay villages, however, has rarely dealt explicitly with the aesthetics of the built environment since queer space – at least in its early Butlerian conceptualisations (Bell *et al.*, 1994; Bell and Valentine, 1995) – was typically understood as fleeting with queerness residing in the body rather than in space (Browne, 2006; Oswin, 2008). At the same time, aesthetic descriptions and value judgments feature implicitly in some of the urban geography work on gay villages. One of the first and most frequently cited articles deploying homonormativity in this context specifically used the term to target 'desexualised gentrifying gay districts', which the authors argued had been 'cleaned up' by 'forces of purification' (Bell and Binnie, 2004: 1811-14). In similar terms, another influential critique of white gay male culture from the same period referred to the 'chi-chi cafés and restaurants, home-decorative salons, and bars' of Chicago's Boyztown (Nast, 2002: 883-4). While these references to 'cleaned up' gay villages and 'chi-chi' bars conjure up images of a specific urban milieu, it is not always clear if the hygienic language should be understood metaphorically as references to gentrification or as literal descriptors of the aesthetics of the 1990s gay enclave.

In a rare attempt to explicitly define 'homonormative aesthetics', Mattson's (2015: 3153-54) analysis of 'stylistic practices' in late 1990s and early 2000s San Francisco, describes the 'homonormative style' of the typical Castro bar with terms such as 'sleek', 'self-conscious iconic minimalism', 'clean lines and strategic lighting' and 'clean black walls and electronic dance music'. Similarly, in a deliberately stereotypical sketch of the 'affluent gay consumer', Brown (2009: 1506) refers to him as somebody who spends time in gay bars, is 'immaculately groomed' and lives in a 'minimalist loft apartment'. The suggested link between minimalist design and homonormativity here is interesting not least because historically queer or camp aesthetics have been associated with 'over-decoration'.[2] Thus, the

[2] For a more recent and not specifically queer take on the relationship between minimalist and neoliberalism, see Chayka (2016).

rational and hygienic modernism of the Fordist period – when according to Gramsci workers were regulated into heterosexual monogamy – can be seen as a differentiation from the queer connotations of ornamentation. While the modernist cleanliness aesthetic has often been understood in the context of shifting class politics (Forty, 1986), Adolf Loos's anti-decorative treatise 'Ornament and crime' (1908), for example, was also a rejection of Art Nouveau as 'erotic and degenerate' (Foster, 2002: 13-14). In this context, it is striking that when ornamentation eventually came back in fashion under postmodernism it was immediately understood as a form of inscribed queerness.

Indeed, as Castiglia and Reed (2011: 91-102) have highlighted in their critique of conceptualisations of queer space as ephemeral, Charles Jencks, in his earliest writings on postmodernism, referred to the 'Gay Eclectic' style of playful ornamentation on residential exteriors in Los Angeles while urban sociologist Manuel Castells viewed the renovated facades of Victorian buildings in San Francisco's Castro as expressions of a particular 'gay sensibility'. In addition, Castiglia and Reed locate the origins of New York's loft conversations in gay subculture and specifically in the influential work of gay architect Alan Buchsbaum. In the context of the commercial gay scene, variations of this loft aesthetic – or broadly speaking postindustrial conversions with exposed surfaces – would become particularly influential when derelict industrial buildings were appropriated for club, bar and sex cultures. Thus, if the so called 'golden age of promiscuity' between Stonewall and AIDS had an associated architectural iconography it was one largely characterised by urban decay and faux-dereliction. The ways in which this postindustrial 'look' referenced the past by appropriating historical buildings placed queer aesthetics at the vanguard of gentrification.

In contrast, the homonormative aesthetic of the 1990s – much like modernism's 'clean break' or sweeping 'tabula rasa' – can be understood as a new beginning deliberately side-lining historical references. As such it is perhaps also an example of the broader tendencies of 'de-generational unremembering' that Castiglia and Reed (2011) argue were characteristic of the first phase of the AIDS crisis (see also Varghese 2016 on AIDS and memory). Moreover, its generic yuppified style typically showed little consideration for the local context unlike the restoration ethos of earlier gentrification, which at least superficially had embraced the characteristics of the neighbourhood. This, perhaps, helps to explain why homonormative gay villages were quickly linked with homogenisation and displacement (Bell and Binnie, 2004) whereas early gay gentrification had typically been thought of as empowering, for example,

by concentrating the gay vote within specific electoral districts (Castells, 1983; Lauria and Knopp, 1985). While this early literature acknowledged the tensions arising from gay gentrification, recent work has focused more strongly on queer complicity with the processes of displacement and racial othering especially in the US where gayborhoods have a stronger residential component (Hanhardt, 2013; Andersson, 2015; Seitz, 2015; Rosenberg, 2017).[3] In contrast, the British gay villages from the 1990s were predominantly entertainment districts where the exclusionary dynamics were instead shaped by everyday consumption practices and aesthetic ideals. As research in other western contexts has highlighted the prevalence of 'Eurocentric aesthetic standards' (Green, 2007: 767) and the 'aesthetic orderings of race, gender, citizenship, and belonging' (Ruez, 2017: 893) often reinforce hegemonic whiteness and patriarchal ideals in gay bars. While this existing research has used interviews to capture experiential aspects of exclusion, the approach here instead deploys media coverage to identify some of the dominant discursive ideals of the homonormative aesthetic as it relates both to design and the body.

Media sources and discourses

For my purposes of historicising the branded themes of Soho's gay village, the large amount of media coverage surrounding its beginnings in the 1990s has provided a rich source of empirical material. Media analysis lends itself to the topic not merely because the press reported on the creation of Soho's gay village, but also because it discursively shaped its territorial and aesthetic parameters. Specifically, in the context of gay media, gay villages have been seen as examples of the 'intertextual construction of space' whereby community media and their readers constitute a 'group engaged in common activities and purposes, employing a common frame of reference for interpreting their social settings' (Miller, 2005: 68). Unlike its sister-development in Manchester, where the gay village around Canal Street had been supported by the Labour City Council (Whittle, 1994: 37; Quilley, 1996: 290), Soho's gay village was an entrepreneurial creation without any official support from the local authority, Westminster Council. Instead, as Jon Binnie (1995: 196) noted early, new gay media and in particular the free weekly *Boyz*, which launched in 1991, was highly 'successful in helping to promote the development of Old Compton Street as boyztown, a ghetto for

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[3] Although see also recent work on queer gentrification in Berlin (Haritaworn, 2015; Kosnick, 2015).

young gay boyz'.

Apart from *Boyz*, the discourse analysis for this article has drawn on Soho-related coverage in gay weekly newspapers *Capital Gay* and the *Pink Paper* as well as the monthly lifestyle magazine *Attitude*. I have scanned this coverage from the 1990s in its entirety by manually going through all the available issues in the British Library's newspaper archives and the Wellcome Institute's collections, but for the analysis focused specifically on articles devoted to the topic of Soho's gay village as opposed to more tangential pieces (the coverage is large, but ranges from multipage lifestyle and political pieces to short 'advertorials' for specific bars and clubs). In addition to these gay media outlets, an online database survey of articles relating to Soho's gay village in British broadsheets and financial newspapers was conducted. The number of articles in the national press specifically focused on Soho's gay village is small in comparison (12), but in-depth as *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Observer*, *Economist* and *Financial Times* all ran researched features (sometimes more than once). Across all the material a set of recurring discourses of the new gay scene as 'continental' and 'sophisticated' have been identified. Despite their different readerships, these tropes are similar across gay and mainstream media, perhaps because all the coverage draws on interviews with a relatively small pool of people including some of the area's bar owners.

Frequently, articles include comments on the design of Soho's new bars either explicitly with regards to the open-fronted exteriors (viewed at the time as a collective 'coming out') or implicitly on the interiors with references to their 'smart', 'cool' and 'clean' designs. The discussion of these broad design themes and the bodily ideals that accompanied them is informed by these media discourses (both in text and photographs), but also by personal observations in all the named venues. As Michael Hatt (2007: 105) has acknowledged, the reading of interiors risks placing 'a huge burden on the apparent trivia of decor' yet 'interiors are often under-read' and we 'need to speculate' while interpreting them. The aim here has been to interpret sexual culture and aesthetics through a 'conjunctural analysis' that balances economic, political, and ideological forces to understand a particular moment (Hakim, 2018). Within this focus on a specific time and place, the reading of the media material has also revealed chronological shifts in emphasis over time.

As I have argued elsewhere (Andersson, 2007), gay bars and nightclubs had featured mainly

in British newspapers as a clandestine backdrop to coverage of the AIDS crisis throughout the 1980s. Reinforcing the idea of these nightlife spaces as contaminated with disease, journalistic reporting often conflated the enclosed windowless architectural features of gay venues – designed for the anonymity and safety of the customers (Weightman, 1980) – with an unhealthy environment. An especially controversial report from the London Apprentice, a gay club in Shoreditch, written for the *Guardian* by Rupert Haselden (1991) led to protests and eventually meetings between gay activists and the newspaper's editor (Stannard, 2000). Haselden's piece published two months before the opening of Soho's first new generation gay bar, then, was arguably a minor watershed after which journalistic representations of gay and lesbians in British broadsheet media became more sensitive and deliberately affirmative. As an unintended consequence of this drive for more positive representations, however, HIV largely disappeared from lifestyle journalism about the gay scene. Despite the annual number of AIDS-related deaths in the UK peaking in the first half of the 1990s, broadsheet coverage of Soho's new gay scene rarely made references to the ongoing health crisis while gay media tended to separate adverts and AIDS-related journalism from its scene-related features. Instead, as I will discuss below, the clear association between AIDS and London's gay nightlife spaces that had dominated the journalism of the 1980s was replaced in coverage of Soho's gay village with a focus on the 'pink pound', the visibility of gay men in urban space, and comments on the design of the new bars. While the coverage from the early 1990s was almost exclusively framed positively, change can be detected by the mid-1990s when open tensions between queer activism and gay entrepreneurialism began to crystallise. Importantly in the conceptual context of this article, these emerging grassroots and journalistic objections to Soho's consumerism can be understood as critiques of homonormativity *avant la lettre*.

The following account is divided into two parts: the first section highlights how the gay village was repeatedly framed in class-specific terms as 'continental' and 'sophisticated' while the second section focuses on its hygienic design and bodily ideals in the context of AIDS.

'Continental sophistication'

The first new generation gay bar in Soho was Village Soho, which opened on the junction of Wardour Street and Old Compton Street in November 1991. The opening, covered in *Boyz* with the celebratory, but premature headline: 'Soho Gets Its Gay Village!', was described as

a 'victory' and 'celebration' suggesting that this was merely the beginning of a territorial conquest (Hudson, 1991). The name Village Soho symbolically carved out territory by referencing 'the village' in New York, which had also inspired the name of Le Village; the bar that kick-started the transformation of Le Marais in Paris into a gay district a decade earlier (Sibalis, 1999: 32). As Frédéric Martel (1999: 172) has noted about Le Marais in his book about the French gay liberation movement: 'Every bar opening was joyfully celebrated as a new milestone in the triumphal march of desire'. Similarly, in the years following the opening of Village Soho, London's gay press and parts of the printed mainstream news media reported on the city's burgeoning 'pink economy' in largely celebratory terms.

Except for a small cluster of venues 'out of the public eye' in Earl's Court (Raban, 1974: 196), London had never previously had an openly gay district and the idea of Soho's gay village representing a form of internationalisation or 'catching up' quickly caught on the broadsheet media. A fairly typical feature in the *Sunday Times* described Old Compton Street as 'a bohemian spectacle more associated with Paris, New York and Amsterdam' (Wavell, 1993), while writing for the *Independent*, gay journalist Mark Simpson (1994) suggested: 'You might be forgiven for wondering if you're still in recessed, repressed old Britain… But then, you're not in Britain. You're in Soho'. By implying that Soho had been exempt from both the economic recession and a perceived national climate of sexual repression, Simpson's article conformed to the dominant media trope at the time of the 'pink pound', which other articles made more explicit by claiming that gay men had been economically advantaged during the 1990-91 recession (David, 1992; *The Economist*, 1994). In the *Guardian*, for example, it was suggested that 'smart gay venues' had filled the empty spaces left by 'champagne bars' following the recession (Wallis, 1993). Immediately, then, Soho's 'pink economy' was associated with forms of consumption perceived to be both un-British and affluent.

Above all, the marketing and media coverage centred on how Soho's 'continental' themes – epitomised by the new prevalence of bars with open-fronted facades and cafés with chairs and tables on the pavements – had made homosexuality visible. Village Soho was the first transparent gay bar in London and its design was inspired by Manto in Manchester, which had opened the year before. With its 30 foot plate glass windows, Manto has been referred to as a 'queer architectural statement' (Skeggs *et al.* 2004: 1843) and as a 'theatrical aesthetic' whose 'goldfish-bowl windows magnify and underlie a gay presence' (Quilley, 1997: 278).

This type of open-fronted design – elaborated in several other Soho venues – was taken to its extreme in the bar Rupert Street, popular with men in suits after-work, where the whole walls were glazed. *Financial Times* reported how: 'The blackened panes of glass have gone. The furtiveness is finished. The cafe bar in Rupert Street is proud to put the clientele on display through clear, curtainless windows' (Gould, 1998).

Street furniture on the pavements blurred the boundaries between private and public further with journalists frequently highlighting the performative character of Old Compton Street. In a 'Soho Special' in *Boyz*, *(*1993, 22 May: 17), a young man called Claudio is described as 'posing' while watching people in the street: '"It's a catwalk really" says Claudio, posing moodily outside Old Compton's café. "Sitting here, I feel like I'm in the front row at a Milan fashion show"'. According to *Boyz*, these cafés and the 'continental-style bar' had brought 'Mediterranean sophistication to the West End' (9 December 1995: 37). In addition to visiting continental bars, readers encouraged by the magazine to 'do Old Compton Street' would buy 'L'Uomo Vogue' and 'some fresh parmesan' (18 May, 1996: 34). While this branding had clear class-markers and internalised the 'pink pound' discourse, it was frequently combined with liberal assertions of inclusivity. In an interview with *Attitude*, the monthly magazine launched in 1994, the proprietor of clothes shop American Retro argued that: 'Soho and my shop cater for every race, colour and creed. But one of the common themes that binds the inhabitants and consumers attracted to Old Compton Street is a degree of sophistication' (Cook, 1994: 77-8).

In the early years, queer activists supporting the idea of a sexual minority territory in Central London, tacitly seemed to endorse aspects of this entrepreneurial branding of Soho as 'sophisticated'. Over Christmas 1992, anonymous activists plastered posters in Soho greeting visitors with the slogan: 'You are now entering a queer zone'. Interviewed by *Capital Gay* (8 Jan 1993: 1) an unnamed spokesperson stated that: 'Queers want to enjoy their own space without having to tolerate the drunken hordes of abusive Neanderthals with 80s dress sense that lumber through the centre of Soho on their sad search for oblivion every Saturday night'. This attempt to designate Old Compton Street a 'queer zone', then, defined queerness less in terms of sexual difference or radical politics than as subcultural capital – a politics of style – *opposed* to drunken behaviour and unfashionable clothes. Thus, as Sarah Thornton (1995: 105) has observed 'the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't,' and, in this instance, the dislike of 1980s fashion

and public drunkenness converged with the early 1990s entrepreneurial branding of the area as 'continental' and 'sophisticated'.

While the political and commercial agendas initially overlapped, it is nevertheless striking how the terminology diverged: the preferred term of the activists who made territorial claims on Old Compton Street was *queer* while the branding of Soho by the bar owners and the media was distinctly *gay*. These terms are not mutually exclusive, but whereas queer – the pejorative which had recently been re-appropriated by activists and academics in the US to reclaim some of the wounded aspects of sexual minority experience (Love, 2007: 157) – at least as poststructuralist critique deconstructs binaries such as hetero/homo and male/female, gay exists in opposition to heteronormativity, but reiterates these dichotomies. Moreover, while queer preserves a degree of abjection as the basis for solidarity and coalition-building between different sexual minorities, gay as a semantic strategy masks negativity by offering 'happy' representations primarily of self-identified homosexual men.[4] In this context, the initial alliance between norm-critical queer activists and gay entrepreneurs perpetuating an affluent image of gayness could not last indefinitely: by the mid-1990s, the largely celebratory media tropes of Soho's gay village started to include critical features as well as coverage of intra-community tensions.

A key moment appears to have been the 'Soho Pink Weekend', an event which in its third year in 1995 deliberately excluded political voices. Preceding the event, organiser Gary Henshaw, who was also one of the founders of the Village bars, made anti-political statements in the gay press stating that: 'This is a fun weekend and in no way political, we're very clear about that' (*Pink Paper*, 1995, 19 May: 7). A similar point was made in a guest column for *Capital Gay*: 'I hope the weekend will remain free from the shackles of political correctness which often take the fun out of our celebrations' (Henshaw, 1995: 16). This open antagonism towards queer activism triggered responses of a kind that had previously been limited to fringe publications such as the monthly gay socialist paper *Rouge* (Mort, 1996: 165). A feature in the *Independent* described the 'Soho Pink Weekend' as 'more of a promotional event for drinks companies than an expression of gay pride or community spirit'

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[4] Except for First Out (1986-2011), which preceded the gay village, and Candy Bar (1996-2014), Soho has had few lesbian spaces although some bars such as the Friendly Society (2000-) have a mixed profile.

(Smith and Richardson, 1995), while a columnist for *Capital Gay* suggested that: 'This feast of profiteering by gay businesses offers space only for compulsive and passive behaviour: first, the community's alcoholism will be celebrated with a pub crawl; then we will stand and watch a tawdry bunch of ghetto egos and bumboyz act out their mediocrity in a graveyard' (Cook, 1995: 17). Revealingly, this critique targeted Soho's drinking culture, which already seemed to have lost its branded veneer of continental sophistication, as well as its spatial seclusion, no longer described in queer separatist terms, but as an enclave for 'ghetto egos'.

In the following years, influential voices that had previously supported Soho's gay village became more vocal in their reservations about its consumer-driven identity politics. In 1996, Mark Simpson, who in 1994 had written a positive account of the gay village for the *Independent*, published the provocatively titled essay collection *Anti-Gay*, while campaigner Peter Tatchell (1999), whose group Outrage! had symbolically christened Old Compton Street 'Queer Street' on Valentine's Day in 1993, eventually came to dismiss its 'gay ghetto mentality'. Targeting the expensive consumption associated with the area, one journalist argued that: 'the term "gay" comes with a set of designer cultural baggage purchased in Old Compton Street (i.e. a lifestyle that exists within sharply defined parameter)' (O'Flaherty, 1995: 17). What began to be formulated here, then, was a critique of homonormativity: a recognition not only that the consumption associated with Soho might be depoliticising, but also that the territorial foundations of its identity-politics were narrow rather than emancipatory.

Homonormative designs and bodies

Given their centrality to the territorial and social formation of the gay village, it is hardly surprising that the 'chi-chi bars of newly gay Soho' (Smith, 2002) eventually were singled out in media coverage critical of the area's 'pink economy'. Collectively, these bars had created the branded milieu of the gay village, which in early 1990s media was considered trendy and 'continental', but over time came to epitomise the bland and generic. The generic, however, is culturally significant precisely because of its mass character and what it reveals about the historical context in which it becomes dominant. Moreover, as the references to Paris, Milan and New York in the media discourses suggest, the embodied and designed ideals of Soho were not seen as expressions of a local style, but as an alignment with a transnational and increasingly homogenised image of male homosexuality, which evolved

along similar lines in other big cities in the 1990s. Towards the end of the decade, for example, the *New York Times* would report how 'A new generation of gay bars' in Manhattan had 'all but jettisoned dark and dingy interior designs for cleaner, airier, more creative spaces' (Colman, 1998). This contrasting between the 'dark' and 'dingy' venues of the past with a new emphasis on 'cleaner, airier' spaces overlaps directly with how Soho's gay scene was framed in the British media.

Apart from often featuring open-fronted facades, gay bars that opened in Soho in the early and mid-1990s conformed interiorly to a set of broad design themes – clean surfaces, white walls, chromed metals, glass and plastics over wood – that deviated from the more rustic traditions of the British pub as well as from the previous generation of windowless gay venues.[5] In London's gay media, descriptions of these new designs as 'smart, stylish, cool and clean' (*Capital Gay*, 6 December, 1991: 14) frequently merged with hygienic evaluations of the same bars as 'always spotlessly clean' (*Capital Gay*, 8 March, 1992: 9) in advertorials, which sometimes contrasted Soho's new gay scene with an older generation of 'dirty, scruffy bars' (*Pink Paper*, 20 August, 1993: 3). This sharp division between the queer past and present can be seen as an example of the 'de-generational unremembering' Castiglia and Reed (2011: 9) have argued was characteristic of the response to the first phase of the AIDS crisis. With its amnesiac whitewash of the recent traumas in favour of a carefully constructed image of trendy affluence, the designs of Soho's new bars signalled a generational shift while the emphasis on hygiene responded to the perception of gay venues as contaminated.

According to architectural historian Adrian Forty (1986: 173), materials such as metal and glass had been welcomed in 1920s furniture design 'not just because of their associations with machines, but also because they could easily be kept clean, and, above all, could look absolutely spotless'. Writing during the first phase of the AIDS crisis, Simon Watney (1989: 55) made an analogous suggestion noting how 'the *look* of high technology' in western hospitals compensated for the absence of any cure or treatment in 'the image of gleaming chromium'. Whilst for Forty (1986: 159), the disintegration of social boundaries was 'behind the middle-class preoccupation with bodily, domestic and public cleanliness' in the early twentieth-century, Soho's hygiene aesthetic evoked simultaneously both class-specific and

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[5] In addition to Village Soho and Rupert Street, which have already been mentioned, these included Kudos, The Edge, The Yard, Barcode, Ku-Bar, The Box, and Freedom.

clinical symbolism. Because of the historical tendency to link venereal disease with poverty – a tendency which in the context of the global AIDS crisis was also racialised – the parallel discursive media tropes of 'continental sophistication' and 'cleanliness' were mobilised in tandem. Thus, the preference for white walls and sometimes white furniture – most consistently expressed in the literal 'white box' bar, The Box, on Seven Dials – arguably had multiple, but interconnected symbolic meanings. On the one hand, white is 'a surgical, virginal colour which distances the body from the dangers of intimacy and tends to neutralize the drives' (Baudrillard 1996: 33), but it has also become the default 'natural' option in a 'stylish' tradition of European modernism. However, as Sharon Rotbard (2015: 162) has argued 'white cannot be considered a "Degree Zero" of chromaticity but, similar in a way to the neighbouring concept of an "International Style," is a sufferer of the very same trappings of European universalism'. In this context, the repeated marketing of Soho as 'continental' (meaning European) around a set of generic 'modernist' design themes can at least subliminally also be understood as racialised projections of whiteness.

In more concrete embodied terms, white Eurocentric aesthetics dominated the photographs accompanying the weekly advertorials for Soho's bars in the gay media. Often featuring 'topless' photographs of the bar staff, these illustrations underline the integral role aesthetic labour played in the branding of the gay village as youthful and healthy. As one of the founders of the Village bars suggested in an interview with the *Pink Paper* (20 August 1993: 3), his business formula could be summed up as 'attractive staff… in a clean and comfortable environment'. In line with the broader marketing of the area, the idea of 'attractive' promoted in both advertorials and traditional advertising for the bars was predominantly white and almost exclusively that of a clean-shaven 'pretty boy' with gym-fit physique. The gym body would become hegemonic on London's gay scene in the early 1990s when *Boyz*, (and the similar listings magazine *QX* founded in 1992) began to include weekly photographs of men on the capital's dancefloors. These highly formulaic portraits – in which one or several bare-chested customers face the camera, frequently with their underwear logo visible above the jeans – almost exclusively promoted the physical ideal of the muscular hairless torso. Indeed, this physique and its associated white underwear – against which any suspicious-looking blemish or discharge could immediately be detected – were the embodied equivalents to the white walls and clean surfaces of Soho's gay bars.

While the gay gym body has been understood to displace and cleanse fears over AIDS,[6] its origins predate the health crisis. In his memoir of disco-era New York, Douglas Crimp (2008: 6-10) attributes its sculptural bodily ideals to the invention of Nautilus machines in the 1970s, which had revolutionised work-out on isolated muscle groups: 'Within a short five years [1973-78], sculpted pectoral muscles had become one of the main attributes of gay male desirability'. Initially, associated with exclusive New York discos such as the Flamingo, this look was internationalised in the 1980s and 1990s against the backdrop of AIDS and neoliberal economic restructuring. Particularly influential in merging gay and yuppie sensibilities in the 1980s and 1990s, New York-based fashion house Calvin Klein changed the traditional 'drop' from chest to waist measurement from 6 to 7 inches on its suits while offering two-buttons instead of three to show more of the chest (Gross, 1985). More explicitly influential in promoting the hairless gym body, were the same brand's white underwear campaigns by gay photographer Bruce Weber, which were placed on huge billboards in cities across the world from the early 1980s onwards. While the first campaign with Olympian Tom Hintinaus was launched in 1982, the same year in which AIDS was first named, the influence of the brand arguably peaked with the Marky Mark campaigns in 1992 at the time when Soho's gay village first developed. Apart from adopting the physical ideals of these campaigns in adverts, advertorials and through the deployment of aesthetic labour, the Soho scene's geographical proximity to the West End fashion stores in which these products were bought reinforced the association.

While designer brands such as Calvin Klein suggest a degree of affluence, the homonormative image must ultimately be distinguished from the lived reality of many of

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[6] As different commentators have observed, the gym body 'appeared to deny the existence of AIDS and its effects upon the gay body' (Cole, 2000: 124) while also signalling 'hygienicization and containment' (Bredbeck, 1996: 93). In his book *Homos*, published shortly before the availability of antiretroviral drugs, Leo Bersani (1995: 19-21) commented on the dual 'public spectacle' of gay men's bodies: on the one hand, 'wasted bodies' on TV and in the media yet at the same time the new association between gym culture and male homosexuality as 'HIV led thousands of men to become habitués of health clubs'. This led Bersani to conclude that: 'Nothing has made gay men more visible than AIDS'.

those adopting it. Mattson's (2015: 3153-54) description of 'homonormative aesthetics' in the Castro, for example, refers to the customers wearing: 'Clothes [which] were stylishly new, hair and eyebrows were well-groomed, and colognes were frequently worn' yet he is careful to point out that: 'Although the young men we interviewed often wore expensive designer labels, most had multiple low-wage service jobs.' The homonormative look, then, is not necessarily an expression of affluence, but in many instances an 'aspirational' marker. To project wealth has a longer history in gay culture and camp humour – when taken to appropriately regal levels, its affected posh mannerisms and sense of theatricality, justifies the slang term 'queen' – yet the brand-conscious 'affluence' of the homonormative look does not exhibit any similar self-reflexive irony. In contrast, its preppy seriousness suggests a certain middle-brow 'blandness' of which the sleek minimalism of Soho's bars is another example. Indeed, the term 'chi-chi', which was used by both journalists and academics to describe homonormative bars, refers to a failed attempt at stylishness that ends up being merely pretentious: in other words, another example of a projection of 'class' which regardless of economic status suffers from a deficit in cultural capital. This, in turn, highlights how attacks on homonormativity, which may appear as class-based critiques from below, can also be condescending judgments of taste and distinction delivered from above.

As discussed earlier, critiques of Soho's consumer-led identity politics began to take shape in the mid-1990s when tensions between gay entrepreneurialism and political activism came out in the open. Often making broader ideological points about consumption and identity, the references to 'chi-chi' bars and the 'designer cultural baggage' of Old Compton Street nevertheless reveal how questions of style informed these critiques. While research on the decline of gaybourhoods and gay villages in the last decade have prioritised sociological and economic explanations such as the digitalisation of sexual culture and the impact of gentrification (Brown, 2013; Ghaziani, 2014; Collins and Drinkwater, 2017), the interconnected shifting politics of style have also played an important role. If sexual minority visibility was predicated on participation in a set of 'sophisticated' consumption practices in the early 1990s, the non-threatening image produced in these spaces and the associated media representations was clearly a reductive one bound to eventually trigger counter-representations. Increasingly, in a political context characterised by greater attention to queer racism, intersectionality, and male cis-gender biases, the fossilised style of many gay villages and gayborhoods would become emblematic of homonormative privileges. Moreover, the spatial formation of the gay village or gayborhood itself has become associated with a 'gay

ghetto mentality' whereas the geographical desegregation of queer nightlife in the last two decades has been interpreted as an expression of less binary sexual subjectivities and practices (Nash, 2013; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014).

Conclusion

Soho's gay village developed in the 1990s in a period which has become associated with the deradicalization and commodification of gay culture in the west. While these processes have varied in different geographical contexts, they were first identified in countries such as the US and the UK, which were at the vanguard of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s. Here, the argument goes, a largely rights-based agenda prioritising equality over difference replaced an earlier emphasis on the radical transformation of the sexual sphere, structural inequalities and coalition-building with other minorities. The gradual incorporation into heterosexual kinship structures and models of intimacy, which accelerated in the 1990s when gay and lesbian activism increasingly focused on partnership, marriage and adoption rights, is emblematic of one strand of this 'new homonormativity', while a second target for queer critiques has been the overwhelming focus on identity-based consumption. This second strand of homonormativity is not inherently assimilationist, but promotes and celebrates sexual minority culture on narrow commercial terms, which have diminished solidarities with more stigmatised and less marketable minorities. Often displacing the subversive, threatening or queer to remould the image of male homosexuality, this consumer-led respectability politics also marginalised the ongoing of experience AIDS.

In this article, I have argued that Soho's gay village and the media coverage surrounding its development were spatial, embodied and discursive manifestations of some of these sanitising tendencies. In contrast with 1980s media framings, AIDS was almost entirely absent from broadsheet reporting on Soho's gay village in the early 1990s when instead a set of discourses around the 'pink pound', gay visibility, and the design of the new bars and cafés took over. Through its alignment with the hygienic principles of a generic minimalist modernism and the new predominance of a gym-fit hairless physique, a cleanliness aesthetic replaced an earlier set of 'dirty' and 'unhealthy' images of male homosexuality. Yet while Soho's new gay scene indirectly may have displaced local public sex cultures and red-light economies (Hubbard, 2004; Collins, 2004; Andersson, 2012), the prominent notion of the 1990s gay village as emblematic of desexualisation is nevertheless misleading. The

marketing for Soho' gay scene was highly sexualised – and its bars clearly helped to facilitate sexual encounters – even though it represented a hygienisation and gentrification of sexual imagery.

The discursive figure of the affluent 'clean-cut' gay male – however distant from the lived reality of the many (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Sothern, 2004) – was particularly prominent in the first half of the 1990s when urban gay culture recovered from the traumatic early phase of the health crisis, but AIDS was still a deadly disease. The 'clean break' with the aesthetic themes of earlier forms of urban gay culture was an instance of 'degenerational unremembering' insofar that a new generation forged a new image of male homosexuality largely by displacing its association with AIDS. By the late 1990s, however, the availability of antiretroviral HIV treatment and the liberalisation of the licensing and policing of sex clubs and saunas took place in parallel and new scenes of dance, sex clubs, and 'alternative' queer spaces opened in Shoreditch and Vauxhall in East and South London (Andersson, 2009; 2011). The return of queer nightlife to these areas and its accompanying industrial look were driven by gentrification, but also paid homage to the postindustrial aesthetics that gave birth to queer club culture in the 1970s. Thus, in contrast with the 'degenerational unremembering' of Soho's affirmative, but revisionist gay spaces, the last two decades have arguably been characterised by intergenerational remembering: heritage and preservationist attempts have been launched to list and protect older queer venues while LGBTQ history has been incorporated into university curricula, museum exhibitions and the programming of many cultural institutions. Now over a quarter-century old, Soho's gay village and its homonormative aesthetic must also be understood as a historically specific formation shaped by both economic and cultural factors. More than simply a manifestation of the 'pink pound' or the 'sexual politics of neoliberalisation', its political and aesthetic priorities emerged from the stigma and homophobic backlash that had accompanied the first decade of the AIDS crisis.

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