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The production of gay and queer space in East London

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**THE PRODUCTION OF GAY, POST-GAY AND QUEER
SPACE IN EAST LONDON**

Gavin Phillip BROWN

King's College London

Ph.D.



ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies differing formations of gay and queer space in several socially mixed inner city neighbourhoods away from the hyper-commercialised gay playgrounds of Central London. By concentrating my research in three boroughs in inner East London, I have attempted to examine the social relations that sustain and are reconstituted by the large resident gay population in this area, with its focus on that

I, Gavin Phillip BROWN, declare that the work contained within this thesis is entirely my own.

Signed:



class and mobility. I examine the nature of different spatial networks. These include the spaces of the gay night time economy, public sex spaces, as well as gay men's involvement in the local employment and housing markets and a range of other spaces that escape easy categorisation as 'gay space'.

Taking this analysis further, I consider the relationship between different spatial expressions of (homo)sexuality and different fractions of capital. I identify a number of distinct middle class gay fractions to which the men I interviewed were affiliated. I consider these men's relationships to the local housing market and the commercial gay scene with those of working class gay men. In the context of the men's ethnically diverse population, I contrast the experiences of gay men from some of east London's more established minority ethnic communities, with both recent migrants and those (mostly) white cultural producers who epitomise 'cosmopolitan' cultural capital in areas such as Spitalfields.

ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies differing formations of gay and queer space in several socially mixed inner city neighbourhoods away from the hyper-commercialised gay playgrounds of Central London. By concentrating my research in three boroughs in inner East London, I have attempted to examine the social relations that sustain and are constituted by the large resident gay population in this area, with its more modest infrastructure of bars and other services for gay people.

The thesis explores the intersections of (homo)sexuality and class as they are mutually constituted in and through space. I examine the co-constitution of social class and sexuality within a range of different spatial networks. These include the spaces of the gay night-time economy, public sex spaces, as well as gay men's involvement in the local employment and housing markets and a range of other spaces that escape easy categorisation as 'gay space'.

Taking this analysis further, I consider the relationship between different spatial expressions of (homo)sexuality and different fractions of capital. I identify a number of distinct middle class gay fractions to which the men I interviewed were affiliated. I contrast these men's relationships to the local housing market and the commercial gay scene with those of working class gay men. In the context of the area's ethnically diverse populations, I contrast the experiences of gay men from some of east London's more established minority ethnic communities, with both recent migrants, and those (mostly) white cultural producers who cultivate 'cosmopolitan' cultural capital in areas such as Spitalfields.

Finally, I draw together several threads of queer thinking about the city to offer a queer urban critique of the ways in which gay space has become saturated by the commodity and to seek glimpses of what a *queer* city might be like. This queer urban project works with aspects of everyday gay life in the present and attempts to do them differently. It stems from an ethico-political commitment to how we might engage with sexual and gender differences in ways which challenge practices that perpetuate division, exploitation and domination. In contrast to the alienated and commodified social relations of neoliberal homonormativity, queer urban life experiments with ways of engaging with the city that are not limited by existing (sexual) identities. Queer is not an identity, but a process of relating to others that is sustained through the practical involvement in creating prefigurative experiments with collective autonomy that encompass multiple modes of difference.

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Paul Warren (1974 – 2004)

I hope you're still enjoying the chocolate.

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CHAPTER ONE
QUEER URBANISM IN EAST LONDON

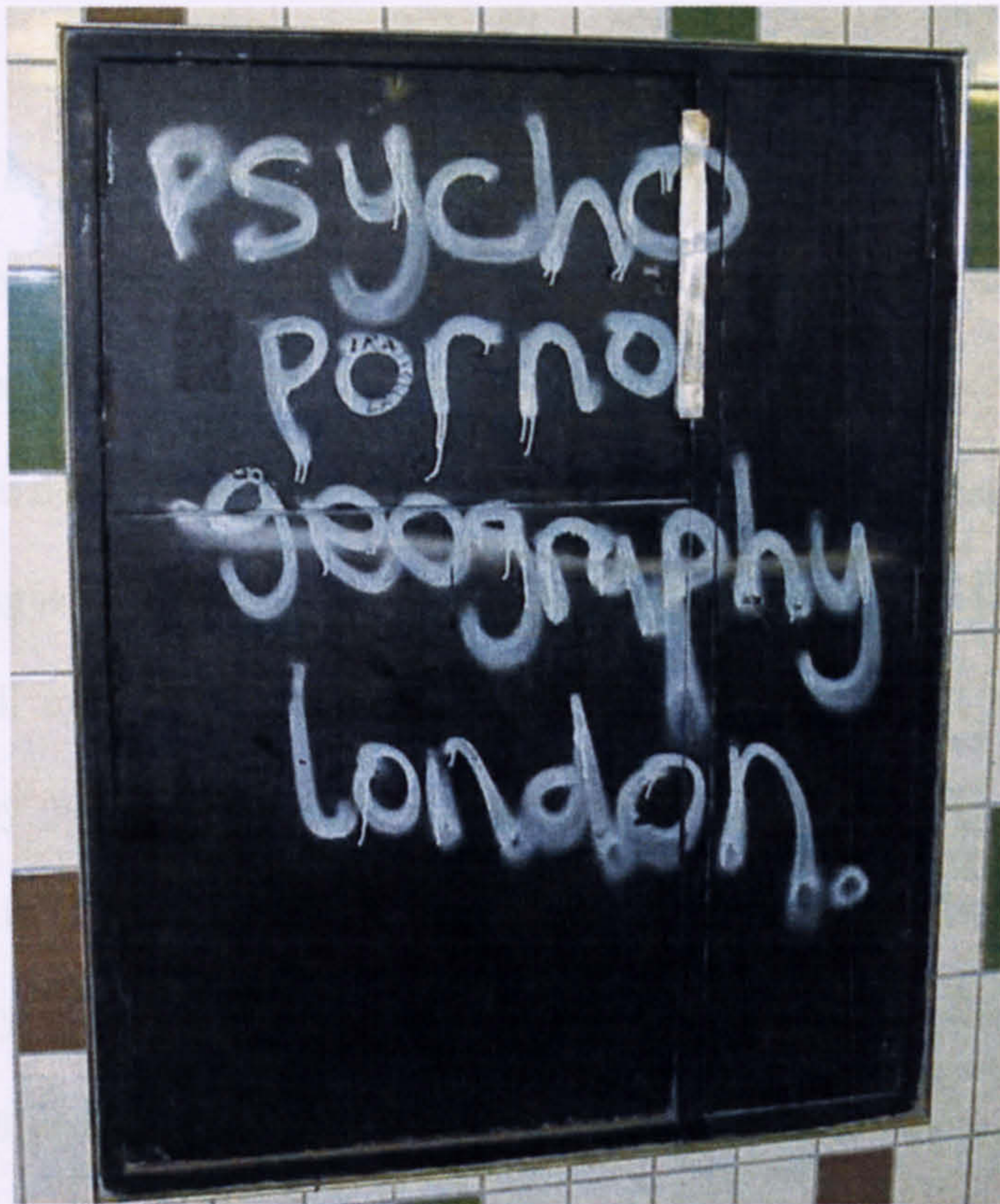


Figure 1: Graffiti, Bromley-By-Bow, March 2002

CHAPTER ONE

QUEER URBANISM IN EAST LONDON

It has now become commonplace for scholars to argue that the urban is central to the creation and sustenance of modern gay life (Bech 1997; Delany 1999; Knopp 1992). However, there is a real danger that this body of work is beginning to over-research city-centre concentrations of the commercial gay economy at the expense of other urban spaces that shape the lives of gay men. As an attempt to begin the process of redressing this imbalance, this thesis is focused on gay life in London outside of the West End. This dissertation is based on research into gay life in three boroughs in inner East London (Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets). This work still examines commercial gay spaces in these areas, but attempts to balance this by paying attention to a diverse range of other spaces that shape gay men's lives in East London. The thesis offers a critical ethnography of (predominantly) gay male life in those boroughs over the last decade. In doing so, it recognises that just as the city is not a unitary place, neither is there a singular form of gay life in the city. This work takes as its starting point the recognition that men are different from one another and that their differences shape the lives they lead in the city, the ways in which they experience it and their sense of self. In many ways, this dissertation is less about gay identity in East London and more about gay and queer ways of being in that part of the city. In the chapters that follow, I examine gay and queer life as it is lived in East London and consider the ways in which these engagements with gay urban sub-culture(s) are mediated by class, age, and different

forms of masculinity (or, indeed, male femininity). The thesis touches on the intersections of sexuality and ethnicity in the context of East London, but does not explore these issues in great depth.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I set out in further detail the primary aims of my study and attempt to offer some working definitions of ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, as I use the terms in this work. I then offer some general contextual information about the three East London boroughs where the research was undertaken. Finally, I offer a short guide to the rest of the thesis and the focus of each chapter.

1.1 Research aims and objectives

Like any large project, many of the aims of this doctorate have mutated in meaning or changed in priority over the five years that it has taken to complete the work. Nevertheless, one central aim has remained constant throughout, and that is the examination of differing formations of gay space in socially mixed inner city neighbourhoods located away from the hyper-commercialised gay playgrounds of the city centre. As I argue in the literature review chapter that follows this introduction, studies of gay male space over the last twenty years have tended to concentrate on the high profile, visible concentrations of gay bars and clubs in city centres (studies of lesbian space have been a little more diverse in scope). By concentrating my research in three boroughs in inner East London, I attempt to examine the social relations – what Houlbrook (2005: 8) has described as the “diverse desires, ways of being and cultural practices,” - that sustain and are

constituted by the large resident gay population in this area, with its more modest infrastructure of bars and other services for gay people.

The second core aim of this research, and again, it is one that has been present throughout the study is the exploration of the intersections of (homo)sexuality and class as they are mutually constituted in and through space. Issues of class are not entirely absent from the growing body of sexual geographies, but little work has really addressed the ways in which class-based social relations shape the quotidian lives of gay people. In this dissertation, I examine the co-constitution of social class and sexuality within a range of different spatial networks. These include the commercial gay spaces; as well as, gay men's involvement in the local employment and housing markets. I also examine sites of public homosex; and, a range of amateur and autonomous spaces that fall outside the parameters of what has come to be thought of as 'gay space'.

Closely related to this aim, is a third intention of the present work, and that is a consideration of the relationship between different spatial expressions of (homo)sexuality and different fractions of capital (including its sceptics and opponents). In the chapters that follow, I identify a number of distinct middle class gay fractions to which the men I interviewed are affiliated. Many of the men I interviewed were gay welfare professionals working (mostly) in the public sector, such as doctors, social workers and teachers. These men relate to the local housing market and the commercial gay scene quite differently from middle class gay men working either in more corporate settings or in the cultural industries. Their experiences differ again from the working class gay men I spoke to, who are more

likely to find themselves working in the more routine areas of social care, catering and retail. The experiences of the men from all of these gay class fractions differ by varying degrees from the lives of the radical queer activists encountered in Chapter Seven. This milieu fosters a bohemian, counter-cultural outlook that at times papers over the very real differences between some of the more professional men and women in the network and those living extremely precarious lives that are reliant on the informal economy.

Although the intersections of ethnicity and sexuality are not a major focus of this work, in the context of the area's ethnically diverse population, I do give some consideration to how ethnicity is 'classed' in East London. In Chapter Four I note how a number of working class London Irish men I encountered performed their sexuality differently from their middle class and British peers. The complex and uneven ways in which class, ethnicity and sexuality constitute each other is considered in greater depth in Chapter Five. In that chapter, I contrast the experiences of gay and other non-heterosexual men from some of East London's more established minority ethnic communities, with both recent migrants, and those (mostly) white cultural producers who cultivate 'cosmopolitan' cultural capital in areas such as Spitalfields and Hoxton. This discussion also reveals much about the ways in which white British men relate to men with other ethnic and cultural heritages.

My final aim in writing this thesis is one that has developed out of the work itself. That aim is to sketch out potential forms of queer urbanism. For me, queer urbanism operates both as a critique of existing expressions of gay space and as a

utopian ambition for unleashing the potential for different ways of engaging with the city that are not limited by contemporary reified 'gay' identities. As both critique and utopian imagination, queer urbanism is, for me, an anti-capitalist project. I approach this task through a heterogeneous set of theoretical positions that I have come to recognise as a form of post-anarchism. Newman (2003) has suggested that post-anarchism refers to a theoretical move beyond classical anarchism into a more open and hybrid theory, achieved through a synthesis with key concepts and ideas from poststructuralist theory. In this respect there are clear similarities with Post-Marxism, in that this body of work is both *post-anarchist* and *post-anarchist* in its outlook. The concept of post-anarchism will be elaborated further in the next chapter.

1.2 Defining some key terms

Before proceeding further with this introduction, I feel it is important to define what I mean by certain key terms, in particular 'gay' and 'queer'. It is important to distinguish between these 'identity' categories and, by extension, the spaces that they inspire and in which they are (re)produced.

At various points in this research, I have tied myself in knots trying to come up with a clever, theoretically-informed definition of 'gay'. That was a thankless and largely unnecessary effort. In this dissertation, I use the term 'gay' as it is used by the men I worked with, to refer to themselves. There is no monolithic gay identity. The term refers to a wide range of inter-linked, overlapping and contingent ways of being and sub-cultural affiliations. For the most part, those identities and

subcultures offer meaning and comfort to the men who participate in them. But they have their limits. In the last thirty years the commercial gay scene in London (and beyond) has grown in both absolute size and relative diversity. There is big money to be made both from the gay 'night-time' economy and from enabling gay consumers to participate in their chosen sub-cultural lifestyles. Urban gay life is now saturated by the commodity to a greater extent than it ever has been before – although, as Houlbrook (2005) has highlighted, commercial venues have been at the centre of gay life in London for at least a century. Over the last thirty years, British society has become more tolerant of homosexuality and the limits of sexual citizenship for gay people have shifted significantly. Few gay activists now speak of sexual liberation, but dream instead of full formal legal equality (with heterosexuals) without any radical questioning of the basis of the social relations they are buying into. These changes present many contradictions. On the one hand there are more people living openly gay lives than before and the market appears to offer them an increasing range of ways in which to enjoy themselves. And yet, despite this proliferation of gay niche marketing opportunities, there is a creeping normativity to urban gay life – one may buy into any sub-cultural market that one chooses, but to *really* be gay, one must buy into *a* market. The liberalisation of social attitudes presents a similar conundrum: in order to be granted certain sexual citizenship rights, gay people are expected to take on certain responsibilities that place limits on what it means to be a 'good' sexual citizen. So, while I chart the ways in which gay men in East London lead their lives, I also offer a critique of the ways in which the neoliberal marketplace and Third Way communitarian social policies have fostered a

growing 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2002) that incorporates some models of gay life into the 'authoritative centre' of political discourse (Connolly 1998) and curtails the options for living a more expansive and enchanted (Watson 2006) gay life in the city.

When I write of 'gay space', I am thinking about those spaces in which this continuum of gay identities is reproduced – primarily the bars, clubs and saunas of the gay night-time economy, but also those social and support groups that constitute gay civil society, as well as certain housing developments and aspects of the housing market that have been largely marketed to the gay consumer. Had I been starting this research today, the list of gay spaces that I studied might also have included the local Registry Office!

As Roseneil (2000: 5) has stressed, 'queer' relishes, almost by definition, being a slippery term that is hard to pin down.

[T]he notion of queer operates at two levels: as a noun in the realm of sexuality it refers to those outside the boundaries of heterosexual normality; and, more widely, as an adjective, it denotes that which is strange, odd, eccentric, of questionable character, shady, suspect, and which differs from the normal or usual. Much of the appeal of queer lies in its openness to these multiple meanings and in the resistance to definite definitions of those who use it.

In contrast to how the term has been used by some scholars, 'queer', for me, is *not* an umbrella term for all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people. On those occasions when I do need to utilise an umbrella term for men performing a mixture of different homosexualities, I tend to use the term 'non-heterosexual men.' However, I recognise that this is hardly a sufficient term for the range of positionalities I am trying to include.

I think of queer as the excess that escapes reified gay (and straight) identities. It playfully celebrates the fluidity of gender and sexual identity categories. It acknowledges that consensual adult sexuality need not necessarily be defined purely by the gender of one's object of desire and that it shifts over time and space. I understand queer as a relational process of becoming rather than an identity (although that is not to say that it is never claimed as an identity). As such, it is often easier to offer evocative possibilities of who and what might be queer than to offer a clear definition of the term. For example, a flier for a recent fundraising party organised by the queer activist network discussed in Chapter Seven, advertised the event as being for:

Dykes, fags, trans, pansexuals, perverts, politics freaks, pain pigs, sissy rioters, house heads, submissive masters, asexuals, butch lovers, homo squatters, dildo players, gender fuckers, magic witches, anarchist slaves, party monsters and all of the others. (Queer Barrio Benefit Flier, November 2005).

At first glance, this may just appear like an ever increasing variation of the identities captured by the LGBT label, but what appeals to me about the list is its inclusion of identities that are not obviously defined by sexuality ('politics freaks' and 'magic witches') and others which invert or disrupt normative gender or political expectations ('sissy rioters' and 'submissive masters').

Most of the queer spaces that I describe in this dissertation (attempt to) exist outside the market and are self-organised in a way that confounds the division of labour between producer and consumer. In Chapter Six, I consider sites of public homosex as examples of queer space, in which the stability of identity categories are destabilised and actions speak louder than words. These are contrasted, in Chapter

Seven, with the autonomous queer spaces (such as convergence spaces, fund-raising benefit parties and squatted social centres) organised by a network of radical queer activists.

There is a third category of sexualised space(s) that I analyze in this thesis. I describe these as 'post-gay.' Like queer, post-gay is a sexualised performance and relational process rather than a straightforward identity category. It represents those identity performances that push the boundaries of homonormative gay identities. It is articulated as a need or a choice *not to identify* (as gay or bisexual) without necessarily hiding one's homosexual desires (in this respect, it could be argued that it shares much with the 'pre-gay' moment). For me, the post-gay exists in the border territory between gay and queer. It is the '/' between 'good gay' and 'bad queer'. I tend only to use the term to refer to spaces, rather than people. These are spaces that acknowledge and celebrate the presence of other-than-straightforwardly-heterosexual people without having a non-heterosexual audience at its core. These spaces are still caught within and sustained by the market. There are really two, overlapping, sets of spaces to which I apply the term 'post-gay' – they are upscale, aspirational sites in the night-time economy that epitomise a 'cosmopolitan' coming together of certain gay and straight social factions; and also some of the more commercial ventures emanating from within the queer radical networks I describe elsewhere. This tension between the squatted, self-organised queer parties and a number of post- (or more-than-)gay club nights on the fringes of the commercial gay scene that have been organised by members of the same activist networks is explored further in the relevant chapters. However, it does serve to illustrate the

relationality of the terms I use. There are no clear and unambiguous lines that can easily be drawn between gay, post-gay and queer space(s) and ways of living. What might appear unexceptionally 'gay' in the context of East London could be quite radically queer in many smaller towns.

1.3 Locating the research

The empirical aspects of this dissertation largely rely on qualitative data and ethnographic description. However, I think there is some merit, in this introduction, in considering what official statistics can tell us about the areas of East London where I conducted my research. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics are from the 2001 Census (National Statistics 2003).

Tower Hamlets is situated immediately to the east of the City of London. The south of the borough has been subject to major redevelopment over the last twenty years and contains the Canary Wharf complex. In 2001, the borough had a resident population of 196,106 people. A slim majority of these local inhabitants (51.4%) are white, with 33.4% of residents being of Bangladeshi heritage. 36.4% of local people are Muslim. The borough's population is youthful, with 52.5% of residents being under the age of 30. Just less than half (47.8%) of local people over the age of 16 are single and have never been married. Despite the pockets of luxury housing in Docklands and on the City fringes, Tower Hamlets regularly vies with the other two boroughs I studied for the dubious honour of being the most deprived local authority in the UK. At 6.6%, unemployment is running at twice the national rate. The majority (52.5%) of the borough's residents live in rented social housing

(compared to 25.5% of London's population). Just 29.0% of local residents are owner occupiers, which is half the rate for Greater London (58.4%). Whichever sector of the housing market they occupy, the vast majority (83.6%) of local people live in flats rather than houses. It is a measure of the borough's complex demographics that it has both a higher rate of residents without any formal qualifications (34.3% against a London average of 23.7%) and a higher concentration of graduates (29.6% compared to 19.8%) than the rest of England and Wales (although this is lower than the figure of the whole of London: 31.0%).

Newham is the next borough on the north bank of the Thames to the east of Tower Hamlets, it too has gone through a process of recomposition as a result of the closure and subsequent redevelopment of the Royal Docks. The borough has a resident population of 243,891, half (50.1%) of whom are under the age of 30. Newham was one of the first local authorities in the country to contain a non-white majority population. Just 39.4% of the borough's population is White (and a growing proportion of these are originally from East European counties). People of Asian and British Asian heritage make up the second largest component (32.5%) of Newham's population, with the single largest group of them identifying as Indian (12.1%). There is also a significant Black/Black British population (21.6%), largely made up of people from sub-Saharan Africa (13.1%). There is some evidence of out-migration by people from minority ethnic communities from inner London, especially Bangladeshis moving from Whitechapel to Upton Park and Black Caribbeans moving from Dalston and other areas of Hackney to Stratford (Buck *et al* 2002: 70). The religious affiliation of local residents is equally diverse, with

24.3% of the population being Muslim, 6.9% being Hindu, and 2.8% adhering to the Sikh religion. Here too, unemployment runs at twice the national rate. Compared to Tower Hamlets and Hackney, Newham has more owner-occupiers (43.6%) and fewer people living in rented social housing (36.4%); although these figures are still at odds with national trends. The borough also has a lower rate of single adults that have never been married (41.4%) than the other two boroughs in this study.

Hackney is situated to the north of Tower Hamlets. The borough contains some of London's earliest gentrified enclaves in Stoke Newington and De Beauvoir Town. More recently, Hoxton (where the south of the borough meets the City) has been subject to arts-led regeneration and gentrification. Nonetheless, like Newham and Tower Hamlets, it is one of the poorest boroughs in the country. The 2001 Census identified a resident population of 202,824 people. Officially the majority of the population is White (59.4%), although this masks the UK's largest concentration of people from Turkey and Kurdistan. Black and Black British people make up a quarter of the borough's population (24.7%) with almost equal numbers of Black Caribbean and Black African people amongst this group. In line with this ethnic mix, a smaller proportion (13.8%) of Hackney's population is Muslim than in the other two boroughs. However, Hackney is home to one of the UK's largest Jewish populations, many of them ultra-orthodox, in Stamford Hill in the north of the borough (making up 5.3% of the area's population). Nearly half (46.4%) of the residents of Hackney are under the age of 30 and half of the adults (50.5%) are single. As in Newham and Tower Hamlets, unemployment in Hackney (6.9%) is twice the national rate. Half of the borough's residents (50.8%) live in social

housing, with 32.1% being owner-occupiers. Nearly a third of local people (32.9%) have a degree or higher qualification.

Although the 2001 Census allowed co-habiting same-sex couples to identify themselves for the first time, the census data tells us little about the gay populations of these three East London boroughs, because, by counting only co-habiting couples, it missed out all those who are single, who live apart from their lovers and bisexuals living with a partner of the opposite sex (amongst others). For a flavour of the composition of the local gay population(s) it is worth examining the results of the 2004 National Gay Men's Sex Survey (Sigma Research 2005), although it is important to remember that this draws on a self-selecting sample. That survey found that 2.1% of the London sample lived in Newham (n=83); 3.9% lived in Hackney (n=153); and, 5.0% were resident in Tower Hamlets (n=198). In this respect, Tower Hamlets ranked fifth amongst the London boroughs for the size of its resident gay population. Only Camden, Islington, Southwark and Lambeth ranked higher, with Lambeth seemingly home to 8.2% of London's gay population.

The 2004 survey did not gather data on the social class of respondents, but a previous survey (Sigma Research 2003) suggested that the gay population in Newham is more working class than that of London as a whole (with 23.8% of men there identifying as working class compared to 19.0% across London; 16.8% in Hackney; and, 17.6% in Tower Hamlets). At the same time, Newham's gay population is also more 'lower middle' class (with 41.5% of men there identifying as lower middle class compared to 31.8% across London; 38.5% in Hackney; and, 27.5% in Tower Hamlets).

Significantly, the ethnic composition of the gay populations in these three boroughs, as identified in the 2004 National Gay Men's Sex Survey, does not reflect the broader demographics of East London (82.2% of the men from Hackney; 85.5% from Newham and 87.4% from Tower Hamlets identified as white). These figures are broadly in line with the figure for Greater London as a whole (86.0%). However, given the number of (white) gay men who migrate to London from the rest of the UK, as well as those who are attracted to London from across Europe and the major economies of the southern hemisphere, it is perhaps to be expected that the ethnic mix of London's gay population might better reflect the demographics of the UK rather than the general population of the metropolis (Kelley *et al* 1996). More than one in ten of the respondents in each borough were HIV positive (17.9% in Hackney, 22.92% in Newham, and 16.7% in Tower Hamlets; compared to 11.1% across London).

This thesis is concerned only with contemporary gay and queer life in these boroughs, but it is important to remember that gay life in the area is not just a recent phenomenon. In the early 1970s, Tower Hamlets was home to at least two experiments in gay communal living initiated by members of the Gay Liberation Front. Houlbrook (2005), in his history of gay life in London in the early twentieth century, records several narratives of working class gay men's lives in Whitechapel and Stepney during that period. He notes that in pubs like Charlie Brown's on West India Dock Road, "dock labourers, sailors from across the world, and families mingled freely with flamboyant local queans and slumming gentlemen in a protean

milieu where queer men and casual homosexual encounters were an accepted part of everyday life,” (Houlbrook 2005: 88).

In December 2005, there were seven gay bars in Tower Hamlets, another four in Hackney and one in Newham. Each borough housed a gay sauna. There were two gay nightclubs based in Tower Hamlets. Only the number of venues in Tower Hamlets has grown over the course of this research. When I started the project five years ago, there were at least three venues in Newham and one or two more than at present in Hackney. Some venues have closed, new ones opened and others have transformed themselves in search of new (often more gentrified) clientele. I explore the dynamics of the commercial gay scene in Chapter Four, as it helps to demonstrate broader class dynamics amongst the area’s gay population.

Finally, it needs to be stated that I have a significant personal investment in the East End. I grew up in outer East London and have lived in Tower Hamlets since 1985. Some of the men I interviewed were friends. Some of the sites I have described have been particularly important to me (whilst I despise others). As such, there is an important element of auto/biography that informs this work. As I explain in Chapter Three, when I consider the role of auto/biography as a research method, I have attempted to reflect critically on my place in the East End throughout the dissertation. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly places where my prejudices and emotional investments in certain sites and social networks seep through in a less than reflexive manner.

1.4 Structure of the work

I conclude this introduction with a guide to the chapters that follow. Chapter Two offers a critical review of recent work by sexual and urban geographers. Through this, I elaborate the post-anarchist theory that informs this work and begin to sketch out what I mean by queer urbanism in this context. Chapter Three proceeds with a consideration of my use of ethnography and auto/biography as my main research methods, and elaborates how these further a post-anarchist analysis of the gay East End and the development of a queer urbanism critique.

Chapter Four examines issues of social class as they impact on the lives of gay and queer men in East London. The chapter surveys the occupational class positions of the men who were most closely involved my study, and suggests the presence of a number of local gay class fractions on the basis of the patterns that emerge. I analyse these men's attitudes to class and the way in which they talk about their own class position, as well as that of others. Finally, in this chapter, I examine how these gay class fractions shape the local landscape through their participation in the housing market, and how they create their own distinctive forms of gay space in East London through their consumption of the commercial gay scene.

In Chapter Five, I consider the position of East London within networks of transnational gay urbanism and diasporic 'gay' communities. I contrast the place of 'gay' men within some of East London's more established diasporic and migrant communities with those men who consume Spitalfields as a symbolic cosmopolitan zone that incorporates post-gay space. I pay particular attention to the ways in

which Spitalfields provides contradictory opportunities for non-heterosexual men living and working in the area and consider how non-heterosexual men from various class and ethnic backgrounds engage with (post-gay) cosmopolitan difference. I suggest that some men from minority ethnic communities attempt to utilise these spaces of cosmopolitan cultural consumption in order to mitigate other social exclusions, whilst others are further marginalized in the process.

My focus then moves away from gay and post-gay space in East London and turns towards the different expressions of queer space in the area. In Chapter Six I turn my attention to sites of public homosex. I argue that one of the important features of these sites is that they offer an example of queer space being (re)produced by men who do not necessarily think of themselves as gay, let alone queer. I examine the nature of the encounters that occur in these spaces and the ways in which, through their relation to each other and non-human aspects of the sites, men experience acts of cruising and public sex in ways which can revitalise their lives, challenge preconceived notions of identity and offer new 'political' modes of relating to others. In discussing these issues, I draw on aspects of recent elaborations of 'more-than-representational theory' in geography. The intention here is to reveal the modes of encounter, being and becoming that operate through these spaces and to articulate a minor politics of care-taking and spontaneous explorations of autonomy.

The final empirical chapter examines the construction and uses of autonomous queer spaces by radical queer activists aligned with the anti-capitalist/global justice movement. This loose network of activists has come

together to organise a series of international ‘queeruption’ gatherings (one of which took place in Tower Hamlets in 2002) where ‘queers of all sexualities and genders’ can share ideas and practical skills [Fig. 7]. These fluid networks of activists have organised a series of other actions and events in East London over the last five years that fuse politics, culture and sex in a spirit of creative playfulness. This process questions the rights claims made by more mainstream gay activists and creates a ‘do-it-yourself’, autonomous alternative to a passive, a-political involvement in the commercial gay scene. This chapter examines the intensity of feelings experienced by those activists involved in building these utopian, autonomous queer spaces, but also critically engages with some of their failings and limits.

On one level, the four empirical chapters in this thesis chart a progression from a study of the gay East End as it currently exists towards a glimpse of a queerer city that could be, based on recent experiments in creating queer autonomous space. The thesis offers only a partial exploration of the complex spaces and practices that constitute gay life in East London. There are links and continuities across and between the topics addressed in individual chapters, but there are also gaps and disjunctures. I would caution against reading the dissertation as a simple, linear narrative. In many ways I think of the chapters as working best as a series of overlapping pairs. Chapters Four and Five examine the mainstream spaces of gay East London from various perspectives. Chapters Five and Six consider spaces that fall outside of the commercial gay scene, and performances that fall between gay and queer. Chapters Six and Seven offer glimpses of what could be. In my concluding chapter, I attempt to pull together these various threads, review my

analysis of gay, post-gay and queer space in East London, and tease out further proposals for future queer urban interventions and sexual geographies more generally.

CHAPTER TWO

CHANGING SEXUAL GEOGRAPHIES: FROM IDENTIFYING GAY SPACE TO AN AFFINITY FOR QUEER URBAN NETWORKS

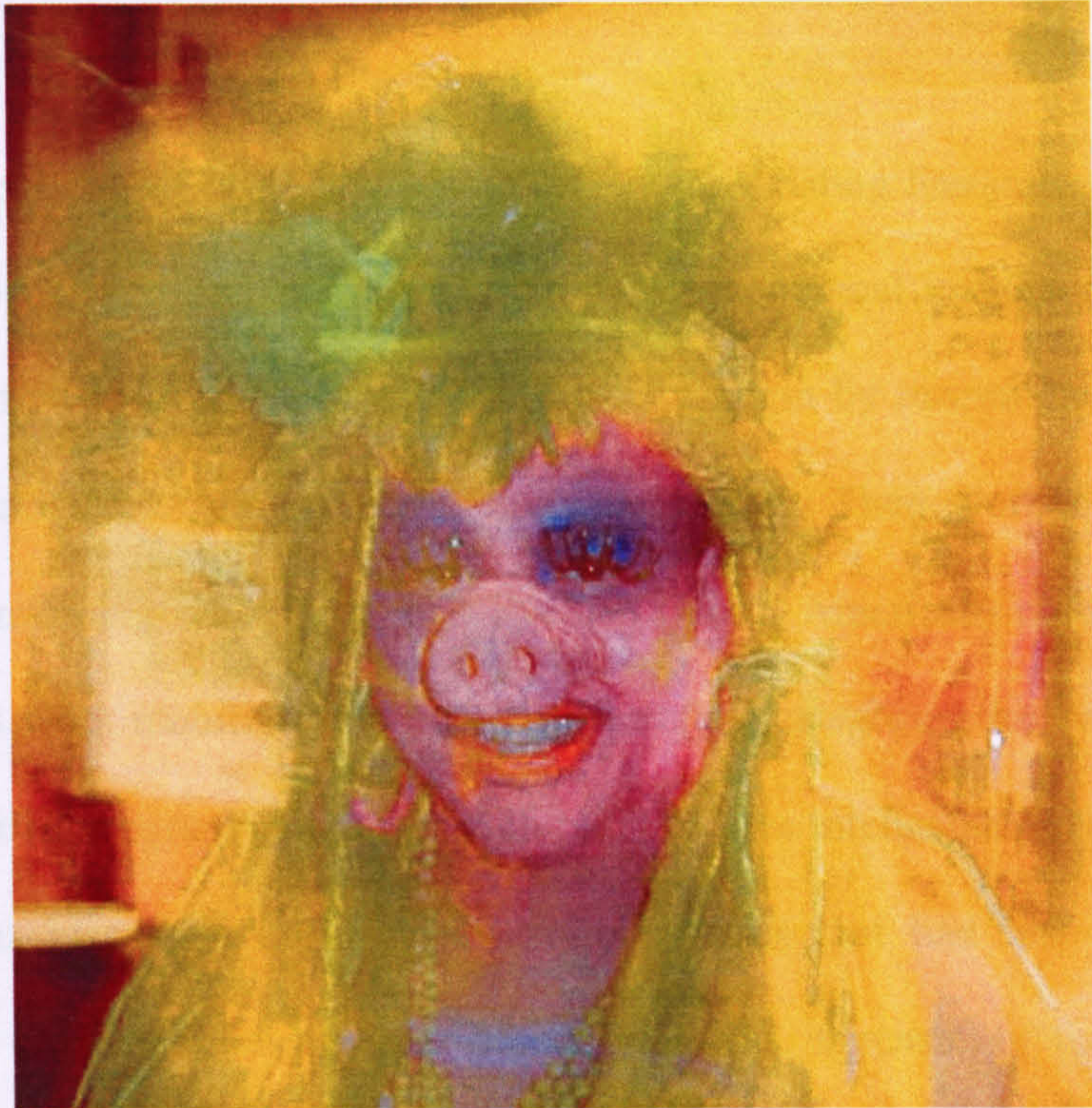


Figure 2: Post-human drag

CHAPTER TWO

CHANGING SEXUAL GEOGRAPHIES: FROM IDENTIFYING GAY SPACE TO AN AFFINITY FOR QUEER URBAN NETWORKS

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing literature on gay urban space and to position my work in relation to the theoretical insights developed by sexual geographers over the last two decades. I begin by examining the work of early gay (and lesbian) geographers from the 1980s. Their work predominantly focused on mapping where gay men lived in (North American) cities. Although much of this work mobilized the Marxist theoretical categories that were dominant in radical urban geography at the time, in order to give intellectual credence to their ideas, it was also rooted in a gay identity politics that had lost much of the liberationist ethics of the previous decade and was increasingly focused on the advocacy of equal rights claims.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, that political strategy was re-evaluated, initially as a result of the devastating impact of AIDS in the gay enclaves of North American cities and the new forms of coalition building that arose out of activist responses to AIDS. At the same time, a new generation of young scholars in Britain and North America began to rethink theories of sexuality through their readings of (mostly French) post-structuralist writers. From these overlapping processes of

tactical and theoretical reflection came the body of work that we now know as Queer Theory.

In the second section of this chapter, I review a body of geographic work that has appeared since the early 1990s under the influence of Queer Theory (as well as wider encounters between Geography and post-structuralism). I examine four key themes in this work that relate to my present study. First, I consider work that built upon queer theories of performativity to demonstrate how public space becomes sexualised and coded as either (unacknowledged) heterosexual or gay space through the repetition of gendered and sexual performances. Second, I engage with work that has complicated the public/private binary in relation to sexuality and attempted through this critique to offer a material, geographic perspective to theories of the closet. Next I consider work that has theorized the intersections of sexuality, class and ethnicity, not as fixed stable identities but as contextually specific social relationships. Finally, I engage with work that has utilized these insights to conceptualize changing forms of sexual citizenship in Britain and other areas of the Global North. If early gay geographies focused on *where* we live, sexual geographers' encounters with queer theory have paid more attention to *how* we live and *how* we occupy urban space.

Under the influence of queer theory, several sexual geographers have sought to complicate and destabilize the hetero-/homo- binary; others have argued that the fault-lines have been redrawn between 'good gays' who can easily be accommodated within the confines of mainstream society and 'bad queers' that are less easily assimilated within the communitarian social policy agenda that so

frequently accompanies contemporary neoliberal economics in the Global North (Richardson 2005). In the final substantive section of this chapter, I begin to identify theoretical fragments that might contribute to a queer urbanism developed from the perspective of those 'bad queers'. This work is concerned with an ethico-political consideration of *how we might* live in the city. In order to develop this perspective, I argue, it is important to move more thoroughly beyond the political logic of identity politics. To this end, I examine recent post-structuralist and post-anarchist writings and practices that advocate small-scale prefigurative experiments in autonomous living based upon collective affinity rather than fixed, individualized identity. I conclude the chapter by outlining how these theoretical insights will be applied throughout the rest of this dissertation, as I offer a queer urban geography of east London.

2.1 Creating space for gay (and lesbian) geographies

Before the late 1970s, geographers had paid very little attention to the spatial distribution of *where* gay men lived. Throughout the 1980s the small amount of work that was published originated in North America (Castells and Murphy 1982; McNee 1984). The earliest works were primarily positivist mappings of gay residential clusters in major US cities. Later in the decade, work was published that offered a more theoretical analysis of the political economic factors that enabled these enclaves to grow where they did (Knopp 1987). Much of this work was inspired by Marxist theories that were common, at the time, in urban geography. Whether Marxist or not, most of the work offered a materialist analysis of the impact

of gay men on the American urban landscape. This section offers a survey and critique of that 'early' work. Although the theories and methods of sexual geographers have moved on quite considerably since it was first published, this work continues to exert a subtle influence over much gay urban writing and consequentially some discussion of it is warranted here.

In one of the earliest geographic examinations of gay life, Castells and Murphy (1982: 246) concluded that there was an identifiable 'gay territory' in San Francisco and that this was not simply a residential space but "also the space for social interaction, for business activities of all kinds, for leisure and pleasure, for feasts and politics". They came to this conclusion having asked key informants from the gay community to offer a time-line for gay residence in particular areas of the city and mapping the proportion of multiple male households in each city district; as well as, the spatial distribution of votes for a gay candidate in a city-wide election; the location of bars and other meeting places primarily aimed at gay patrons; and, the location of businesses belonging to the city's Gay Business Association. Although this methodological approach identified 'gay territory', it was incapable of considering how these spaces and the men who occupied them related to other inhabitants and areas of the city.

For Castells and Murphy the 'gay city' appeared as "a *contiguous urban space* with its own norms and institutions, a city within a city" (Castells and Murphy 1982: 246). They identified young professionals and small businessmen working in the 'advanced service economy' as a key component of San Francisco's gay population at the time. This same class fraction has been identified as central to gay

gentrification by Knopp (1987) and more recently by Florida (2002) who has argued that certain groups of gay professionals are part of a broader 'creative class' driving successive waves of gentrification in American cities. This work has some influence on my analysis of class, housing markets and the location of commercial gay venues in Chapter Four. However, much of my work is more interested in moments of deterritorialization of fixed gay identities than mapping discrete gay territories.

Binnie (1995: 184) has argued that the positivist 'dots on maps' approach to charting gay space (typified by Castells' and Murphy's work) is that of a detached, scientific outsider and fails to get 'under the skin' of the communities being studied. This desire to 'get under the skin' of gay communities has inspired many more recent sexual geographies, but was not completely absent from the academic agenda at the time when Castells was writing about gay San Francisco. Outside of geography a body of ethnographic research by sociologists and anthropologists was slowly accumulating that began to move beyond simply acknowledging the existence of gay enclaves and gay spaces to exploring their everyday dynamics. Some of these writers positioned themselves within the expanding gay subcultures of the 1970s (Styles 1979; White 1980) and were writing explicitly from a political agenda that sought to further the rights claims of gay social movements. Like several more positivist gay academics (Levine 1979; Murray 1979), they hoped that if they could prove the existence of quasi-ethnic gay enclaves (in the United States) through the production of their maps, they would strengthen the argument that gay people were an oppressed minority akin to many minority ethnic groups and the case for progressive anti-discrimination legislation would be strengthened as a result. Of

course, as Davis (1995: 286) has highlighted, this political agenda required the 'gay community' to be seen as singular and unified to stand any chance of success, so it is hardly surprising that it downplayed internal differences and exclusions (especially those around class, gender and ethnicity) within those communities or that the researchers concerned did not stop to reflect on the fact that they, as young white middle class gay men, were those who had most to gain materially from its potential success.

One of the most sustained criticisms of Castells' work has been over his treatment of gender issues and his dismissal of the notion of 'lesbian territory' (1983: 140). He argued that gender-based income discrepancies between men and women restricted lesbians' choices in the housing market and that this made it harder for lesbian residential enclaves to develop. This materialist argument, however, was undermined by his essentialist assertion that women have less interest in expressing territorial aspirations than men. These arguments remain contested - Adler and Brenner (1992) and Rothenburg (1995) have both charted the development of lesbian-led gentrification in particular areas. In contrast, Podmore (2001) and Peace (2001) have contended that it is how urban space is analysed and explored that restricts explorations of lesbian space. They critique (gay) urban geography for its single-minded focus on territoriality, singular identities and an over-investment in the importance of 'visibility'. Podmore suggests that lesbians have very different means of making themselves visible (to each other) than gay men, and that to properly explore these practices, geographers need to (re-)integrate the domestic sphere into their interpretations of urban space (Jay 1997). Indeed, it is

probably a failing of geographies of gay male life that so little analysis has yet been made of the domestic sphere. This suggests that essentialised understandings of the gendered division of public and private space continue to run deep through our work. What little work there is on gay men's use of their homes (Gorman-Murray 2006; Houlbrook 2005) suggests that these locations have played an important role in men's socialisation into gay networks. Similarly, as my observations throughout this thesis suggest, not all 'gay' men feel comfortable visibly asserting their sexuality in public spaces, whilst others can only find a degree of privacy in such spaces (albeit trying to be as *invisible* as possible).

I now turn my attention to Knopp's work on urban gay space. Like Castells, much of his early work focused on the study of gay urban territories and the processes by which gay men came to gentrify certain neighbourhoods. His approach contrasts quite markedly with the early work of British pioneers of sexual geographies (Bell 1992; Bell and Valentine 1995a; Binnie 1992a; 1992b) who were more prepared to engage with issues of love, intimacy and embodied sexual practice. This is probably a reflection of the more conservative outlook of American geography departments, but also (as Knopp himself has reflected in a 1998 paper) a measure of the different political and cultural traditions of gay 'communities' on either side of the Atlantic – a British 'cultural politics of resistance' (Knopp 1998: 161) versus American attempts to spatially consolidate gay economic and political power through the creation of the urban enclaves. In many ways my work draws more strongly on this 'British tradition.'

Knopp's early work on gay gentrification partially employed Marxist rent gap theory (Harvey 1982; Lauria 1984; Smith 1979) to his case studies. However, under the influence of Marxist feminist theories, the work also started from the premise that the development of contemporary gay identities was linked to the development of the Welfare State after World War Two. That development facilitated the entry of more women into the workforce and weakened the ideological grasp of 'the family'. Lauria and Knopp (1985) argued that it was too simplistic to argue (as many Marxists and feminists had) that all fractions of capital and the ruling class relied on 'the family' as an ideological device to instil a division of labour that oppressed women and sexual minorities. They suggested that the on-going reconfiguration of social relations of sexuality and gender from the 1960s onwards was in the interests of certain factions of capital, such as city-centre service sector employers. At the same time, other sections of capital (for instance, the manufacturing sector) remained more firmly wedded to traditional sexual divisions of labour (Knopp 1987: 257). Nevertheless, Lauria and Knopp acknowledged that this process has been uneven and by the early 1980s was more advanced in those (American) cities that already contained substantial gay populations (recognising that many young gay men were already migrating to large urban areas from small, rural towns and communities in the American 'hinterland'). They also accept that white, middle class men have traditionally found it easier (economically and otherwise) to lead openly gay lives, although they did not stop to consider the extent to which working class gay men may attempt to engineer their entry into 'middle class' professions in order to enjoy a more comfortable 'gay lifestyle'. I explore

these issues in greater detail in Chapter Four, where I identify a number of gay class fractions that can be found in East London.

One of the strengths of *Sexuality and the spatial dynamics of capitalism* (Knopp 1992), which sought to deepen a theoretical understanding of the mutual constitution of sexuality, space and place, was a recognition of the link between the construction of the built environment and the (re)production of particular regimes of sexual and gender relations. Referring to Harvey's (1990) elaboration of the postmodern politics of place in which spatially constructed 'othernesses' in the form of place-based identities become part of the material basis of social and political struggles, Knopp (1992: 661-2) stated:

This approach is very powerful but, as I have said, it ignores gender and sexual relations. Let us consider from a slightly different perspective the processes Harvey describes.

In patriarchal, heterosexist capitalism, investment in the physical and social infrastructures that constitute places is investment in particular configurations of gender and sexual relations as well as in particular production systems and class structures. A built environment or social configuration that facilitates a certain technology and organisation of production, consumption and exchange also presupposes certain divisions of productive and reproductive labour.

This is an important methodological lesson for the study of sexuality and space. However, Knopp's concentration on the tendency of capital to harness particular place-based identities in search of new markets and the accumulation of profit has tended to mean that his methodological approach has only been employed in studying the role of affluent gay men in the gentrification process or the development of high profile gay-focused leisure zones and sites of consumption. Nevertheless, as Knopp himself has acknowledged (Knopp 2001: 86), his

concentration on the role of gay men in processes of gentrification was strategic, as there was a high profile debate about gentrification within geography at the time, and he saw this as an opportunity for the discipline to begin to take questions of sexuality seriously. I examine a similar set of relationships between the built environment, place-marketing strategies, and sexuality, in the second half of Chapter Five, where I consider post-gay performances in the construction of Spitalfields as a cosmopolitan leisure zone. However, it is Chapter Six, in my discussion of cruising sites that I really examine how the built environment (and urban natures) can directly shape men's sexual practices.

For all his talk of sexuality and (class) struggle, the urban spaces that Knopp described in his early papers were curiously devoid of 'real' people. In his work on the accomplishments of lesbian and gay social movements in Minneapolis (Knopp 1987), Knopp did begin to 'flesh out' the different movement actors and explain in some detail how and why they aligned themselves (consciously or otherwise) with the interests of different factions of capital, but offered little insight into the everyday realities of their lives. This is perhaps not surprising as the work (Knopp 1987) relies most heavily on an analysis of media coverage of the gay social movement activism, rather than any direct, qualitative engagement with the lives of gay men in the cities he studied. This work typifies the 'fleshless economy' that Longhurst has highlighted in her critique of Marxist geography (2001: 16-7). Although there is much of merit in Knopp's attempt to articulate the various ways in which patterns of investment in the built environment and capitalist social relations shaped the sexual geographies of American cities in the 1980s, he presented a very

one-sided analysis that over-emphasised structural factors over the messy materiality of what we do with our bodies. It is very difficult to fully understand the (re)production of gay space(s) without stopping to think about how and why non-heterosexual people use those sites. Of course, Knopp's ideas have continued to develop over the last fifteen years, and I discuss some of his more recent work later in the chapter.

The work discussed in this section was important and useful in placing the geographic analysis of sexuality on the disciplinary map. However, in hindsight it has many limitations that restrict its continuing application in the analysis of sexual geographies. Even so, some of these limitations persist in other forms, and some of its most salient insights have been lost in the wake of subsequent paradigm shifts (particularly the attention to the economic geographies of gay urban life). Much of the work discussed in this section was concerned with the consolidation of an increasingly confident gay identity through the spatial concentration of economic and political power. As such, it was tied to a form of identity politics that predominated in the USA at that time. As might be expected at the time, this was a social (rather than a social *and* cultural) geography. It understood the social construction of sexual identity almost entirely from within a political-economic framework. Although this work offered some appreciation of class differences amongst gay men, it did not begin to take the dynamic intersection of sexuality with other identity categories seriously until the very end of the 1980s. Some of this work (for example, Castells and Murphy 1983) has subsequently been criticised for its scant attention to gendered differences in gay space. Ethnicity too is almost

entirely absent from these early analyses. These are important criticisms and the challenges that they posed have been taken up in subsequent sexual geographies (albeit unevenly). But there is one further problem with this work that is apparent on re-reading it nearly two decades later – it is particularly abstract in its theoretical form and lacks any meaningful engagement with the messy, fleshy materiality of quotidian gay lives.

In acknowledging the work of Knopp (and others) as groundbreaking in “adding lesbians and gay men to geographical analysis,” Jon Binnie commented that, “it is my contention that there is a fair amount of *stirring* which still needs to be done” (Binnie 1997: 232). In the next section of this chapter, I consider work from the 1990s that began to engage with Queer Theory, as it had developed in the humanities, and apply those ideas to the geographic study of gay space. This began the process of ‘stirring’, but not always as vigorously as was needed.

2.2 Geographic engagements with queer theory

As sexual geographers began to engage with the emerging field of queer theory in the early 1990s, their work took on a greater concern for difference amongst gay people, the multiplicity of gay identities, and the ways in which this impacts on the form and functioning of gay space. There was a gradual expansion of the scope of sexual geography beyond core lesbian and gay identities, to include bisexuals, transgendered people and, just occasionally, the sexual geographies of heterosexuality. At the same time, sexual geographers began to demonstrate a closer attention to the materiality of gay (and queer) bodies moving in and through space.

Tied to this, was a growing attention to sexual performances over identities. In contrast to the earlier writers on gay enclaves and gentrification, who understood the spatial expression of sexuality to be socially constructed by political-economic forces, those sexual geographers who engaged with queer theory held a more dynamic understanding of the social *and* cultural basis of sexual performances. Queer theory, as it had developed in the humanities departments of American universities was primarily discursive in its understanding of sexual performativity (Butler 1990, 1993; Fuss 1992; Sedgwick 1990, 1994). The new wave of sexual geographers took these ideas and gave them a material grounding in space. If the earliest expressions of gay geography tried to pinpoint where gay people lived in space, the influence of queer theory on later elaborations of sexual geography shifted the emphasis to *how* gay and queer people live in space.

In this section, I examine four themes that developed in sexual geographies in the early 1990s and have continued to be developed since then. First, I examine the development of sexual geographers' engagements with theories of performativity and embodiment. Second, I consider how the influence of queer theory prompted sexual geographers to challenge, complicate and rethink a number of key binary oppositions, between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and public and private space. Third, I consider work that examines the intersections and mutual constitution of sexuality and class, alongside other social categories such as age and ethnicity. Finally, I review Bell and Binnie's (2000) work on sexual citizenship, which has examined how some forms of gay identity are afforded 'equal rights' within neoliberal political cultures, whilst other, less easily assimilated, queerer

practices are pushed back towards the margins of society. They pose the pertinent question of who stands to gain most from current gay rights organizing. Given the focus of my study, this work is particularly relevant to the development of my own ideas.

2.2.1 Performativity and embodiment: from knowing to doing

The multi-authored paper 'All Hyped Up and No Place To Go' (Bell *et al* 1994) was one of the first pieces to put British sexual geographers on the disciplinary map. It went beyond both the earlier positivist influenced American work that had 'mapped' lesbian and gay presence in the cityscape and also Knopp's (1992) attempt to provide a historical materialist analysis of how sexuality shaped urban space. Bell and his co-authors initiated a discussion of how sexed and gendered performances produce space and conversely how spatial formations shape the ways in which sexual dissidents present and perform their sexualities in public space.

At the core of their argument are some awkward questions for professional geographers (Bell *et al* 1994: 32). Why, if we accept that all space is socially produced, do geographers normally assume that heterosexual space precedes gay space? Why is gay space assumed to subvert an always already existing space in which heterosexuality is so normalised that it is held almost to be naturally occurring? In order to fully interrogate the sexualised production of space and the performance of sexual identities, the authors concentrate their focus on the production of space that appears to be heterosexual, but is not. They do so by

imagining the spaces that are formed by the presence of hypermasculine gay skinheads and hyperfeminine lipstick lesbians. They attempt to demonstrate how the presence of these characters represent a camp, double-coding of the space in which they are located in that some observers will 'see' them as 'authentic' heterosexuals, whilst those 'in the know' will 'read' the space very differently. The authors acknowledge that by passing as heterosexual the gay skinhead and the lipstick lesbian enjoy some of the privileges of heterosexuality whilst their presence simultaneously signifies an altogether different production of space – for example, the queer space that is created by the mutually-constituting moment of recognition when two gay skinheads pass on the street (Bell *et al* 1994: 37). In this context, they pose the question,

If, as Butler argues, the parodic repetition and mimicry of heterosexual identities robs heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality, then is the unquestioned nature of straight space undermined and disrupted by a copying of that space – of gay space in straight drag? (Bell *et al* 1994: 33)

In response, the authors acknowledge that the potential to subvert largely depends on the viewer's awareness and perceptions. Furthermore, they acknowledge that not all gay men have the ability or the capacity to carry off such a parody, even if they wanted to, and highlight that the authors themselves could not agree on how effectively the lipstick lesbian's parody of heteronormative femininity presents any kind of challenge to patriarchal social relations. This over-reliance on the positionality of the viewer in order to produce a queering of space has been subject to criticism from a number of quarters. Kirby (1995) questioned how much radical potential such parodic gender performances really have if those who are not

in the know (and who presumably may be most 'in need' of having their assumptions challenged) do not get the 'joke'.

The examples Bell and his co-authors discuss pose questions about how each of us 'reads' the identity of those around us and how, in turn, they 'read' our identity. Reliant as it is on Butler's (1993) writings on gender and performativity, this work is primarily concerned with epistemological questions of how gender and sexuality can be known through embodied performances. There is little room for discussion of the potential for *doing* gender and sexuality differently.

For Bell *et al* the site in which transgression occurs is crucial. They emphasise that heterosexual space is actively produced through 'the performance of a set of identities which employ the heterosexual matrix of sex, gender and desire' rather than being prediscursively or essentially produced (Bell *et al* 1994: 44-5). Theoretically, this attention to context could provide the basis for a critique of the trend in queer identity politics to read the construction of subversive sexual styles as virtuoso performances. As the article suggests, attention to context allows us to theorise figures that do not initially seem visually to destabilize heteronormative gender/sexual identities as much as the bodies of the drag queen and the stone-butched lesbian (the icons of early queer theory). In effect, a regard for context shifts us from privileging the individual's performance of gendered identity to imagining identity as being produced *in relation* to other people at specific places and times. It encourages questions about when, where, and for whom, gendered performances are either 'passable' for straight or readable as queer (Walker 1995: 71).

I would certainly agree that all identities are produced in relation to others in specific time-spaces. Probyn (1995) took the arguments of Bell *et al* one step further and stressed how sexed space is produced through the relational movements of affective, desiring bodies. Indeed, she argued (1995: 72) that the lipstick lesbian represented in Bell *et al*'s paper appears particularly abstract because her body is not described in relation to those of other women. Her desire is absent; theoretical but never corporeal. For all of their stories of gay skinheads and lipstick lesbians, Bell and his co-authors were more concerned with bodies as texts to be 'read', as part of a discursive performance, than as messy corporeal entities in the material world. There is a danger that work such as Bell *et al*'s (1994), by emphasising discursive readings of queer bodies rather than engaging fully with their material presence, not only ignores the real effects of social relations on the gendered performance of sexual identities, but leaves out of the equation altogether what those bodies actually *do*.

Here I invoke Longhurst's challenge that although 'the body' and 'embodiment' have increasingly been discussed by geographers and other social scientists "no messy traces of any particular kind of material body [are] being invoked" (Longhurst 2001: 4) in these discussions. For her, 'the body' of social theory is seldom one that leaks or seeps, is always clean, and is seldom 'out of shape'. Similarly, the anthropologist Stoller has argued that by treating the body as a text that can be read and analysed scholars strip it of its "smells, tastes, textures and pains – its sensuousness" (Stoller 1997: *xiv*) and writing on the body becomes, ironically, quite disembodied. For now, I want to stress that, when theorising the

place of queer bodies in space, it is important to consider what it means to wear drag (of various types), to flirt, to be so enraged by an injustice that you need to take direct action to oppose it, or why some types of dancing are more ecstatic than others. Such a position has some resonance with recent post-Deleuzian elaborations of non- (or more-than-) representational theory in British geography that have attempted to get to grips with the tactile, affective potential of the body rather than (just) the representational meanings that are attached to it (Harrison 2000; Thrift 2004a). This approach does not argue that the representational system is wrong, but does challenge the assumption that it is the only framework for a sensible understanding of the world (Dewsbury 2003). Knopp's (2004) work on queer ontologies of placelessness, which is discussed later in this chapter, is still one of the few pieces of published work to have utilised these insights within the context of a sexual geography (Lim *forthcoming*).

Despite these criticisms, Bell *et al* (1994) made an important contribution to sexual geographic work by demonstrating how public space becomes sexualised and coded as either (unacknowledged) heterosexual space or gay space through the repetition of gendered and sexual performances. These theoretical developments posed both important questions about how gay men and women use both public and private space; and complicated the mapping of moments of both visibility and privacy onto these spaces.

2.2.2 More than private space: complicating the closet

Since the 1970s, metaphors of the closet have been central to descriptions of gay life. Frequently these narratives pose a simplistic alternative – one is either an ‘out and proud’ gay person who discloses one’s homosexuality to everyone one meets, or one is ‘closeted’, secretive and assumed to be wracked by internalised homophobia. There are several linked dualisms at work here – between the public gay man and the private homosexual; the former being modern and contemporary, the latter an anachronism. In many ways the concentration on gay territorializations by geographers in the 1980s took these binary oppositions for granted. In the 1990s, sexual geographers began to acknowledge that life was often more complex.

In his theoretical exploration of the geographies of cottaging and public homosex, Woodhead (1995) questions just how ‘public’ public toilets are. In doing so, he highlights the gendered division of space that marks men’s public toilets as sites that afford men privacy from the female gaze and public embarrassment (Browne 2004b). In this way, he argues, the toilet becomes *both* a public *and* a private space, blurring the point at which the definition of one category becomes the other (Woodhead 1995: 238). Moreover, it is precisely this ambiguous separateness from the outside world that allows some toilets to be appropriated for ‘public’ sex, but it is also the source of the moral outrage that periodically marks social and political responses to cottaging. As Woodhead states,

The contained space is also a containing space which leaves those men using the cottage in a vulnerable situation. That is to say, once the space becomes a forum for sexual expression and freedom it potentially becomes the forum for restraint and control.” (Woodhead 1995: 239)

Over the last decade, several geographers have explored the public/private binary in relation to sexuality and the lives of sexual dissidents, and recognised, as Woodhead did, that the two concepts interact through a both/and dialectic rather than an either/or one. Bell and Valentine (1995b) have highlighted that in contemporary Britain public space is marked by an etiquette of ‘minding one’s own business’ based on a ‘public privacy’ structured around the normative family unit (Bell and Valentine 1995b: 154). In this way, they argue, sexuality is not simply something defined by sexual acts carried out behind closed doors and curtains, but a public process shaped by social power relations between “actors with sexual identities in sexualised locations.” (Bell and Valentine 1995b: 146). One response to this regulatory regime can be the kind of time-space strategies of separating the articulation of different sexual identities across time and space as circumstances dictate, highlighted by Valentine (1993). She drew attention to the fact that many lesbians and gay men continue to conceal their sexualities and so ‘pass’ as heterosexual, at least at certain times and in certain spaces, depending on how they anticipate others will react to their sexuality. As she points out, lesbians (and gay men) are able to ‘pass’ as heterosexual as a result of the inaccurate stereotypes of gay people that circulate in British culture and the fact that in many walks of life most people are assumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise. As Bell (1997: 85) has astutely remarked, the advocates of spectacular queer transgressions in public space underestimate the importance of privacy for many sexual dissidents.

Such scenarios pose an important ethical question of how to respect the needs of individual gay people for privacy, whilst still working to undermine

heteronormativity and homophobia. It also poses the question “of whether or not the closet is essentially a Western space of desire, and if it is, how then do we engage in a radical-democratic queer politics of resistance to ‘it’?” (Brown 2000: 145). In her seminal work, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1990) insisted that the ‘closet’ was (metaphorical) space that was always both open and closed and that this duality was the exact mechanism through which homophobia functions. In other words, the social oppression of gay people does not just function through a straightforward erasure of our existence by heterosexuals. Instead, the process works through a series of contradictory rules that both separate and conflate the public and private spheres (Sedgwick 1993). Her central thesis is that gay identity is known by heterosexuality’s refusal to know it - that is the epistemology of the closet. Even the most closeted person is always in some ways highly visible, whilst remaining completely invisible in others.

Brown (2000) examines the functioning of the closet at a series of geographic scales from the body, through urban neighbourhoods to the world stage. A central thesis of Brown’s work is that, to date, considerations of the closet in queer theory have treated space as if it were merely representational of social relations, rather than constitutive of them (Brown 2000: 16). For him, “[e]xploring the closet as a spatial manifestation of homophobia and heteronormativity” (Brown 2000: 19) rather than just a metaphor for them is politically and theoretically useful and overrides some geographers’ concerns with the fixity and stasis of the closet metaphor. However, he is keenly aware that postmodern feminist and queer theorists overplay the importance of the discursive at the expense of more material

occurrences. He is not opposed to examining the citational practices of camp performances or the iterative uses of shame by heterosexuals when confronted by them, but Brown (2000: 28) does seek to reassert the importance of considering the geographic locations where such performatives occur.

In a discussion of the experiences of 'pre-Stonewall' gay men he notes that the closet was very often "a material space [such as hidden bars and cruising grounds] in which their bodies 'did' sexuality" (Brown 2000: 51). Once again this reinforces the point that the closet is not simply a process of concealment and erasure, but one that is central to the construction and expression of sexual identities. The closet is not simply a function of gay men's sexuality, but "is closely linked to the structuration of capitalism" (Brown 2000: 21).

One of the strongest chapters in Brown's book is his discussion of the place and functioning of gay public sex venues in Christchurch, New Zealand. He argues that, at the urban scale, the closet is more than just a spatial metaphor. It is a material process through which heteronormativity is inscribed in urban space. The same process of 'knowing through not knowing' that marks the functioning of the closet in relation to individual sexual dissidents also allows commercial gay venues to function in even the most conservative of settings. As such, the closet enables gay desire to be commodified for profit, and in that way "the closet is also a production not only of heteronormativity in urban space, but simultaneously of capitalist relations" (Brown 2000: 56). The closet is, he argues, a spatial fix "by which sexuality can foster capital accumulation" (Brown 2000: 83). Further examples of this process can be seen in the spread of gentrified gay housing

developments that displace existing working class and minority ethnic populations from inner city districts.

On the basis of this and other findings, Brown concludes his book by suggesting that the closet “can have spatiality, an existence in space that has location and situation, which signifies placement, interaction, movement and accessibility” (Brown 2000: 141). Importantly, he argues that the recognition of the closet as a spatial process might serve to “extend geographers’ recent attempts to reject the dualism between metaphor and materiality when discussing space and spatial metaphors.” (Brown 2000: 142).

The works discussed in this section have complicated the public/private binary as it functions in relation to (homo)sexuality. It has demonstrated that sexuality is a public process shaped by power relations functioning across many spatial scales. These mean that some gay men can only find a modicum of privacy in which to express their sexual desires in *public* spaces. As such, the closet is not just a process of concealment, but can also act as a spatial fix that facilitates ‘knowing through not knowing’ and capital accumulation through the commercial gay scene in even quite conservative environments. Nevertheless, as I examine throughout this dissertation, but particularly in Chapters Four and Five, class and sexuality overdetermine the ways in which non-heterosexual men relate to ‘the closet’ and who can take advantage of this spatial fix.

2.2.3 Sites of multiple differences

The areas of East London in which I have conducted my research are amongst the most socially polarised and ethnically diverse districts in the United Kingdom. One of the central themes of my research is the interplay of sexuality, class and space in this context. In the pages that follow, I examine some of the key work of the last fifteen years that has examined these issues. My primary interest is the ways in which sexuality and class work together (and against each other) in shaping gay and queer space. Issues of ethnic difference are only of secondary interest in the current work; however, I appreciate that ethnicity is heavily bound up with class difference, especially in east London, and so I will spend some time considering how sensitivity to ethnic difference can aid our understanding of the dynamics of class and sexuality in the area. Too often in work on sexuality and space, ethnicity is abstracted from wider social relations and reified in a set of closed ethnic identities that ignore the complex and contradictory dynamics of European hegemony. I believe it is important to pay attention to the ‘multiple axes of identity that constitute subject positions’ (Anderson 1998: 206) for these are contingent, place-specific, and seldom aligned in a neat and coherent manner. Similarly, as I recognise class as a set of social relations, rather than a fixed and immutable status, I appreciate that a person’s class relations are in constant flux over their life course and thus age and class are also mutually constitutive.

In this context, I find it useful to return briefly to Knopp’s work and a consideration of the development of his ideas about class during the 1990s. Despite being influenced by Marxist-feminist writers, his earlier work (Lauria and Knopp

1985; Knopp 1990a, 1990b) was still primarily Marxist in outlook and conceived class as a foundational analytic category that shaped and structured all other social identities. By the late 1990s (Knopp 1998: 151), he had moderated this approach and would claim,

‘class’ must be seen as always sexed, gendered, racialized, and sexualized, and in turn for sexuality, say, to be seen as always ‘classed’, sexed, gendered. In this way the complex configurations of interests that are served (and victimized) by a social totality which is not only capitalist but also racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist can be more fully understood and combated.

In pursuing this theoretical shift, Knopp complicated his understanding of gay identities, as well as class. He goes on to argue that the creation of essentialized identity categories, such as ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ (but also ‘capitalist’ and ‘worker’) is an important method of social control which eases the (re)production and distribution of cultural values and material products when people are forced to govern themselves to conform as members of “supposedly homogenous groups” (Knopp 1998: 152).

In thinking through class and sexuality in East London as relational processes, I found it useful to utilise two different approaches, each of which places its emphasis at a slightly different spatial scale. The first approach builds upon Knopp’s work (and others’). It locates local social relations of class, ethnicity and sexuality within broader processes of class formation, (or class composition (Holloway 2002)) at a national and transnational scale. The second approach draws upon Skeggs’ (2004) recent work. It is less influenced by post-Marxist ideas and is predominantly based on a critical re-working of Bourdieu’s work on social, cultural and symbolic capitals (Butler with Robson 2003; Reay 2005).

One of the best examples of the first approach is Anderson's (1998) comparative study of the Chinatown districts in New York City and Melbourne. By drawing on the reciprocal determinations of class *and* race, as well as, culture *and* economy, Anderson was able to contrast the experiences of (often undocumented, and non-Cantonese speaking) immigrant workers employed on below minimum wages in the districts' restaurants and sweatshops, with those of their more established 'Chinese' employers who were tied into broader (transnational) capitalist networks. In doing so, she began to displace the positioning of Chinatown districts as 'eternally (racially) othered' (1998: 210). I find Anderson's work useful for the way in which it demonstrates how 'sites of difference' are materially inscribed in everyday struggles over living conditions and the many ways in which 'difference' is encoded in the urban landscape, 'not as *itself* but as a *process of struggle* embedded in the between-spaces of metropolitan capitalism' (1998: 216). Her work powerfully reminds us not to overlook the heterogeneous variety of subject positions to be found within 'ethnic minority' spaces. Furthermore, she has highlighted the importance of addressing the complex and (frequently) contradictory interdependence of economic, cultural, and political contestations within and between these spaces.

Although she does not ignore the role of the economic in the process of class formation, Skeggs (2004: 5) is more concerned with how cultural and political discourses produce class conflicts that are fought out at the level of the symbolic. She claims that, "[t]o ignore this is to work uncritically with the categories produced through this struggle, which always (because it is struggle) exists in the interests of

power,” (Skeggs 2004: 5). She is interested in how certain forms of culture are inscribed on the bodies of individuals and social groups such that they have an exchange value that can enable those people greater access to certain spaces and entitlements than those without the requisite cultural capital.

From Deleuze and Guattari (1977), she understands inscription as a process that is about ‘making through marking’, that “scars bodies in the process of assembling them into composite forms, segments, strata and habitual modes of behaviour,” (Skeggs 2004: 12). Class (like sexuality) is a form of inscription that produces the subject through classificatory schema and a complex set of practices designed to control and coordinate bodies. However, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Skeggs (2004: 13) does not see the interruption of libidinal energies as the sole driving force behind processes of inscription.

[R]ather it is the history of inscription that produces the conditions of marking and the possibility for taking perspectives. It is in this process that the value that is attributed to certain markings comes to have an exchange-value. But establishing exchange-value is not enough to control the energies contained by inscription; it is the ability of energy to leak beyond its inscription that makes a class struggle. (Skeggs 2004: 13).

It is in considering the ways in which certain cultural markings can have exchange-value that Skeggs turns her critical attention to Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and symbolic capital and his related understandings of economic and social capital. Although I find these theorizations useful, I share with Gibson-Graham (2006: 58-9) a concern that the particular nomenclature chosen to describe these social relations is ‘capitalocentric’ and assumes that they can eventually be used to generate profit (rather than other, non-capitalist, forms of sustenance, mutual aid and support). One of Skeggs’ major criticisms of Bourdieu’s approach stems from his

definition of cultural capital as high culture. In this way, cultural capital is pegged against the tastes and dispositions of the (French) middle classes. When assessed against this measure, the majority of working class people will always be marked as lacking cultural capital. In contrast, Skeggs (2004: 16) argued that “the value of a particular culture can only be known by the different fields in which it is realizable and can be converted [into a resource].” She continues,

[t]he *conversion* into the symbolic is central to understanding power and inequality; that is, what is realizable and propertizable as a resource can be made legitimate, attributed with dominant value and converted into the symbolic. I want to focus on resources (economic, cultural, moral) instead of just capitals, to show how some cultural resources do not operate as forms of capital – hence are not exchangeable but do have value for those who use and make them. ... What may have use-value for one group may not have exchange-value. (Skeggs 2004: 16-17)

In considering how these concepts apply to gay people, it is important to remember that gay and queer bodies are always also inscribed by relations of class and ethnicity. Some forms of gay symbolic and cultural capital are predominantly sub-cultural and have little exchangeability outside of those subcultural contexts. For example, the style of the hypermasculine gay skinhead discussed by Bell *et al* (1994) certainly carries an erotic use-value within many gay spaces, but its exchange value beyond those spaces may be quite limited. Conversely, as Binnie and Skeggs (2004: 53) have suggested in the context of Manchester’s ‘Gay Village’, a shared cultural capital based on “glamour, hedonism and anti-pretentiousness” that binds many gay friendship networks and which finds an expression through the design, entertainment and banter that is found in many commercial gay venues, also has an exchange value in that it creates a safe, comfortable and attractive space for certain groups of heterosexual women. While the ‘invasion’ of some gay venues by

hen parties and other groups of straight women can dilute and diminish the gayness of those spaces, the women themselves can use their ability to negotiate these sites of difference as a means to boost their own cultural capital in other settings, as it demonstrates their cosmopolitan credentials to others.

Cosmopolitanism has become one of the most desirable forms of cultural capital within late capitalism (Rushbrook 2002). It has come to be about more than just openness to ethnic difference (Bridge 2005; Watson 2006). It can take in an enthusiasm to sample and combine a broad set of (sub)cultural forms, including sexual difference. As Florida (2002: 256) has suggested, 'a place that welcomes the gay community welcomes all kinds of people.' With the proclamation 'where gays go, geeks follow,' Bishop (2000) suggests that toleration of gay people becomes a marker of social liberalism in a city that in turn attracts cultural and technological entrepreneurs who can act as a driver for the growth and sustainability of the regional economy. Of course, there is a danger that in lauding the benefits of cosmopolitanism, we overlook the many multiple layers of exclusion and differential power relations that underpin it at every spatial scale. Not everyone can enjoy the cultural, economic and political benefits of cosmopolitanism. And, as Day (2005) has argued, the rhetoric of multicultural inclusion has been used by many governments in the Global North to gloss over the multiple material hardships experienced by many people of colour as a result of the heightened international division of labour that has resulted from the enactment of neoliberal economic policies over the last three decades. For Day (2005: 81) "recognition and integration are, and have always been, about much more than culture and ethnicity."

All of which should serve to remind us that when studying the geographies of sexual dissidents in the urban landscape, it is crucial to remember that the interests of gay men and women are fractured along lines of class, ethnicity and age. At the same time, it must be remembered that these multiple axes of identity do not always combine in neatly aligned ways, or even in the ways that one might expect. In developing this area of work further, it will be important to understand multi-faceted social identities as being produced *in relation* to other people at specific places and times. It will also require questioning what identity does in specific contexts – to what extent does it constrain or enable people to realize their potential? This will necessitate a further exploration of the everyday embodied experiences of queer folk and the traces they leave on the fabric of the urban landscape.

2.2.4 Queering sexual citizenship

In considering the intersections of sexuality, class and other forms of social difference, as they impact upon the material lives of sexual dissidents, I have found the work of Bell and Binnie (2000) on changing regimes of sexual citizenship to be particularly useful. They offer a queer (re-)appraisal of various facets of contemporary sexual citizenship that are ultimately highly mediated by social class. They consider the role of the market and arguments that gay people can buy claims to full citizenship through conspicuous consumption courtesy of the ‘pink pound’. Before examining what their work has to say about class, it is important to take a step back and consider their understanding of the sexual nature of all citizenship. The central role of the heterosexual family “draws in sexualised constructions of

appropriate (and inappropriate) modes of living together and caring for one another” (Bell and Binnie 2000: 10) and serves to ‘sex’ all discourse around citizenship. As a result of this pervasive heteronormativity, they suggest that contemporary articulations of ‘gay rights’ that are centred on equality with heterosexuals frequently perpetuate the marginalization of those queer identities and lifestyles that are deemed inappropriate or unacceptable.

[G]iven the current political climate, this tends to demand a modality of sexual citizenship that is privatised, deradicalised, de-eroticized and *confined* in all senses of the word: kept in place, policed, limited. (Bell and Binnie 2000: 2-3; emphasis in the original)

This is precisely the political agenda that Duggan (2002: 179) has termed the ‘new homonormativity’ – a politics that both refuses to challenge heteronormativity *and* actively works to win gay people’s compliance to it through a depoliticised culture based on domesticity and privatised consumption.

In contrast to the denigration of ‘bad queers’ by mainstream lesbian and gay lobbyists who increasingly promote a homonormative policy agenda that favours the interests of the ‘good gay’ middle classes, Bell and Binnie (2000: 9) advocate the importance of dissident forms of sexual citizenship. They favour a strategy of ‘queering’ the citizen. This would return the “erotic and embodied dimensions” of queer life to discussions of citizenship and “find new spaces of dissident sexual citizenship that do not seek to deny the presence of such erotic topographies,” (Bell and Binnie 2000: 20). They promote a new ‘politics of rage’ and a ‘politics of the body’ (p. 22) centred around sex-positive strategies of ‘refusal’ (p. 141) – refusal to act ‘appropriately’ or “to buy into liberal-statist grammars of rights and welfare” (p.

21). This understanding of the importance of refusal resonates with the ideas of post-anarchism that I discuss later in this chapter.

Building on the work of Isin and Wood (1999), Bell and Binnie (2000: 70), argue

the distinction between the social and the cultural, or between the politics of redistribution and the politics of representation, is an oversimplified and outmoded distinction to make. The realms are, in fact, complexly intertwined, in that economic capital is inseparable from social, cultural and symbolic capital in structuring and sustaining patterns of inequality and injustice.

They make the point that even if it is accepted that sexual identities are the product of discourses, those identities and the discourses that produce them still have material consequences. An overemphasis on the discursive origins of sexual identities ignores the fact that many people “suffer materially *because of their identity*” (Bell and Binnie 2000: 71; their emphasis). As they argue, the lives of many socially marginalized queer folk are erased from public view by poverty. Because these people cannot afford to go out on the gay scene, it is easy for those gay people who are able to enjoy all that the scene has to offer, as well as straight onlookers, to fool themselves that all lesbians and gay men are affluent and economically privileged. As a consequence, throughout *The Sexual Citizen*, Bell and Binnie constantly reiterate the need to reintegrate elements of economic and class analysis into studies of queer space and sexual citizenship in order to minimise the risk that class-based discrimination continues to divide queer communities. Before any rights claim is advanced, they argue, the question should be posed, who stands to win and lose from this?

I have attempted to demonstrate throughout my extended discussion of sexual geographers' encounters with queer theory that one of the most significant contributions geographers have made to the field of queer theory has been to ground and materialise philosophical texts in the lived experiences of sexual and gender dissidents in physical space. In the early 1990s, Bell *et al* (1994) demonstrated how public space becomes sexualised and coded as either heterosexual or gay space through the repetition of gendered and sexual performances. Such arguments inspired a partial shift away from the study of lesbian and gay identities, towards a focus on the productive nature of the performative practices enacted by sexual dissidents. Later in the 1990s, work was developed which examined how multi-faceted social identities are produced *in relation* to other people in specific time-places. Writers such as Brown (2000) have demonstrated that sexuality is a public process shaped by power relations functioning across many spatial scales. He suggested that the closet is not just a process of concealment, but can also act as a spatial fix that facilitates capital accumulation via the commercial gay scene (and the property market) through a process of 'knowing through not knowing'. At the same time, class, age and ethnic difference (amongst other social relations) shape men's relationship to 'the closet' (and the possibilities for taking advantage of this spatial fix) in uneven ways. This poses the important questions of what sexual identity does in specific contexts and to what extent it constrains or enables people to realize their potential? These are questions that I will now attend to in greater detail.

2.3 The queer city and queer urbanisms

In the 1980s gay geographers largely mapped where we live. For the last fifteen years these scholars have frequently spent their time theorising how we occupy gay space and other sites in the city. Increasingly, many critical sexual geographers are following the lead of Bell and Binnie (2000) and Nast (2002) in critiquing the many ways in which mainstream gay spaces have become saturated by the commodity and assimilated into neoliberal markets, and the communitarian political agendas that so often accompany such economic policies in the Global North (Richardson 2005). However, little work has yet been published that proposes any ethico-political alternatives of *how we might live*.

If 'gay' increasingly refers to a set of reified homosexual identities that are located in the atomised individual, 'queer' must return to being more than just a synonym for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.' For me, queer is less an identity and more a relational ethics of engaging with sexual and gender difference. It is a collective process of experimenting with multiplicity and difference; and should be understood as a state of *becoming* that is developed through the very process of claiming and experimenting with forms of collective autonomy that can encompass multiple modes of difference.

In the pages that follow, I examine the city from the perspective of the 'bad queers' who cannot or will not be easily assimilated into the 'new homonormativity' (Duggan 2002). I start by sketching out some common themes that emerge from existing queer studies of the city, which take our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and urban life beyond a reliance on identity politics. I then

attempt to articulate how a politics of affinity rather than identity might offer a productive way forward for experiments in the creation of queer spaces in the city.

In pursuing this direction, I take on board Oswin's (2005) challenge that there is a danger in queer theorists attempting to claim (consciously or otherwise) an authentic otherness for queer that positions it outside of any complicity in the machinations of neoliberal consumer practices and identity formation. For me, although the queer urban project that I am advocating is an anti-capitalist initiative, it works with aspects of everyday gay and bisexual life in the present and attempts to do them differently (Gibson-Graham 2006). As Gibson-Graham (2006: 98) has proposed, "we must necessarily "start where we are" to build ethical economies." In this context, there is little to be gained from 'simply judging' practices that are antithetical to the world we envisage.

It would seem more positive and practical to treat the *existing* situation as (problematic) resource for projects of *becoming*, a place from which to build something more desirable in the future. (Gibson-Graham 2006: 98).

The queer urban project I advocate stems from an ethico-political commitment to how we might live queerly, attempting to foster a more relational ethics of engaging with sexual and gender difference in ways which challenge practices that perpetuate division, exploitation and domination. Queer urbanism plays with both the joys and dissatisfactions found in everyday gay life in order to experiment with radical new possibilities of how to live in the city.

2.3.1 Queer urban critique

Most of the queer spaces that I describe and analyse later in this dissertation attempt (consciously or otherwise) to operate with only a very loose connection to mainstream consumer markets and social relations based upon exchange value. These spaces are self-organised in a way that confounds the division of labour between producer and consumer (Chatterton 2005). This is one of the central aspects that distinguishes the production of queer spaces from that of 'gay space'. In this context, for me, queer urbanism functions as a critique of existing expressions of gay space in the city; as such it is a utopian ambition for unleashing the potential for different ways of engaging with the city that are not limited by contemporary reified 'gay' identities. As both critique and utopian imagination, queer urbanism is, for me, an anti-capitalist project. My understanding and definition of 'queer space' and 'queer urbanism' is quite distinct from much of the earlier work in this area, although it does build upon and draw together earlier theoretical threads. For example, Ingram (1997: 31) recognized that queer space encompassed more than just sexual difference when he argued,

[a] queerscape is just as much the product of marginalizations derived from inequities based on gender, race, culture, language, class, age, and disability as queer desires and acts.

But we get little sense from his writing of the importance of collective experiments with autonomous modes of living as a means to counter these multiple marginalizations. Binnie (2001: 107) better articulates this active process of creative experimentation by arguing that,

sexual dissidents are acutely aware of space in our everyday lives because we constantly have to re-create it from nothing. Heterosexual space and heterosexual desire are all-pervasive – just *there*. Heterosexual identity is ubiquitous and thereby *placeless*. In this sense, queer space is intimately dependent on a sense *for* place for its realization.

This shares with my approach an understanding that queer space is actively created because there is no ready-made alternative to the ubiquity of heterosexist norms within every aspect of social life. However, Binnie's argument obfuscates the issue of mainstream gay space. I would argue that in most places this offers a very timid alternative to hegemonic heterosexual space. In many ways, gay space is now just as *straight*, just as limiting as heterosexual space. Of course, this is not always the case – in some time-spaces, gay space can actively challenge heteronormative values. However, once it becomes incorporated and recuperated within capitalist markets, once it becomes a product to be consumed, it ceases to be very queer. The process of creating queer space is always partial and incomplete. This partiality and state of flux is captured in Ingram's (1997: 40) definition of the 'queerscape' as being more than a 'landscape with sexual minorities.' He offers instead a more holistic understanding:

A queerscape is also an aspect of the landscape, a social overlay, where the interplays between assertion and marginalization are in constant flux and the space for sexual minorities is 'decentred', in terms of increasingly supporting stigmatized activities and identities. Queerscapes embody processes that counter those that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate.

In contrast to the work of both Binnie and Ingram, Delany (1999) more clearly locates queer urban space outside of commodified social relations. For him, the spontaneous, un-commodified erotic contact between strangers that takes place in public sex environments is the basis of urban queer life. I examine the role of

public sex in the production of queer space in Chapter Six, however, I would argue that it is limiting to think of public homosex as the only form of un-commodified queer life in the city. And yet, this work makes a serious theoretical point about the importance of challenging heteronormativity through an “erotically charged *detournement* of the heterosexist city” (Bell 1997: 83) and the centrality of erotic potential to our experience and enjoyment of the (post)modern city – what Bell has described as “polymorphous decentred exchanges in polymorphous decentred landscapes” (Bell 1997: 81).

This emphasis on ‘decentred landscapes’ anticipates Knopp’s recent (2004) exploration of queer ‘ontologies of placelessness.’ This work stems from an observation that many gay men have a restless need to keep moving that is expressed through an ambivalent relationship to place and the identities that are most readily available for them to claim. Knopp suggests that these men find emotional and ontological security in their on-going ‘quests for identity,’ which he defines as,

personal (and sometimes collective) journeys through space and time – material, psychic, and at a variety of scales – that are constructed internally as being about the search for an integrated wholeness as individual humans living in some kind of community (if not society). (Knopp 2004: 122-3).

He recognizes that this restlessness exists in relation not just to mainstream, commodified gay scenes, but also that it emerges out of the failures and disappointments resulting from more counter-hegemonic experiments such as Queer Nation(alism), radical faerie sanctuaries and lesbian separatist communes. For him, these identity quests are about

testing, exploring, and experimenting with alternative ways of *being*, in contexts that are unencumbered by the expectations of tight-knit family,

kinship, or community relationships – no matter how accepting these might be perceived to be. (Knopp 2004: 123)

There is a danger that Knopp's description of these processes of perpetual personal reinvention fails both to examine the root causes of this restlessness and uncritically equates all experimental forms and processes. It also privileges those who are in a material position to engage in such identity quests (when they involved extended travel or physical relocation). It is easy to forget, amongst the flurry of recent geographic writing on mobilities (Latham and McCormack 2004) that there are many people who, due to their youth, income levels or family commitments (amongst other factors, including a fear of the unknown) are prevented from uprooting themselves in order to journey in pursuit of a 'better life'. As Prytherch and Marston (2005: 98) have recently noted, even supposed global actors display 'unexpected "fixedness".' I would suggest that Knopp's work fails to adequately locate the source of this restlessness in those social relations that produce alienation. He also seems somewhat timid about evaluating the ethics of different forms of identity quest or suggesting where they might more productively lead us. For Braidotti (2002) where one begins, where one is going, how one plans to get there, are unavoidable *political* questions for any project of nomadic becoming (Day 2005: 166).

A few years ago, Baeten (2002: 148) pessimistically observed that contemporary urban theorists have eschewed "encompassing visions of alternative cities" without inequalities or repression. Baeten's critique has accompanied a modest critical re-engagement with utopianism amongst urban geographers that followed Harvey's (2000) book-length exposition of the need for the Left to develop

a 'dialectical utopianism' that can offer hope without privileging either the form of future societies or the process by which they might be achieved. Pinder (2002, 2005) has been at the forefront of attempts to defend and promote utopian thinking amongst urban theorists. He has acknowledged that many writers have offered utopian visions of future cities but been reticent about identifying them as such in response to an ideological assault on utopian thinking as the epitome of fantastical naïveté. His aim has been to defend the value of utopian thought to the advancement of critical perspectives on the city and for alternative forms of urban life. In doing so, Pinder (2002: 231) acknowledges that urban theorists must move beyond the 'unifying vision' of most modernist utopias.

Instead, I suggest taking a different approach that seeks what is possible and what could be from within the conditions of the present as a means of intervening in space and time. (Pinder 2002: 231)

This would entail identifying the "gaps and opportunities for struggle" within contemporary urban spaces and seeking means to exploit these, "as well as uncover[ing] the desires that remain embedded within the[se] developments as the basis for oppositional politics," (Pinder 2002: 237). In terms of my queer urban critique, this will entail looking beyond the commercial gay scene, the spaces of 'homonormativity' and 'queer patriarchies', whilst also not being blinkered to the needs and desires that they (are perceived to) satisfy for so many gay men.

Pinder (2002: 238) advocates that new utopian urbanism should be "more open and process-driven" than its modernist predecessors, and focus on the "desire for a better way of being and living." In doing so, he aligns himself with Debord and the Situationists' concern with struggle and "the [uncertainties of] striving

towards something,” (Pinder 2005: 241). There is an interesting parallel here with Knopp’s (2004) consideration of gay men’s ‘ontologies of placelessness’ that I discussed earlier. Similarly, Baeten (2002: 146) has observed that,

[t]he spatial utopia of yesterday – urban and fixed – has rather been rescaled into a globalised, fluid space of flows. If anything, today’s utopia cannot be fixed in an exact location in space.

However, Pinder (2005: 255) cautions that the Situationists’

opposition to temporal and spatial fixity through continual change certainly take on different connotations at a time when cities have been overturned and remade through processes of commodification; when planning has been undermined by neo-liberal advocacy of free markets; [and] when capital itself requires high geographic mobility for ‘flexible’ and temporary workers.

This experience can be gravely unsettling, however, it can still be harnessed for a progressive spatial politics of “becoming, rather than being,” (Tajbakhsh 2001: 29). Drawing on Doron’s (2000) work on transgressive architecture and the ‘Dead Zones’ of cities, MacLeod and Ward (2002: 164) appreciate that for many groups that are marginalised by neoliberal capitalism, those urban spaces that are dismissed as dystopian sites of societal failure can actually “be *practiced* as essential havens, transgressive lived spaces of escape, refuge, employment and entertainment.” This highlights that transformations of urban space cannot be separated from the transformations of everyday life in the city (Pinder 2005: 3). Like the queer urban project I advocate here, modest alterations in the uses of the city in the here and now can reveal new forms of queer sociality, and *vice versa*.

It is almost impossible to envisage exactly what a queer city might look like. As Pinder (2002: 238) has recognized, utopian thought attempts to envisage a future that cannot easily be defined in advance precisely because our imaginations and

language are formed by the social relations within which we currently live, even as we seek to move beyond them. Indeed, as Bell (2001) has acknowledged, the shape of a queer city can only be glimpsed by collecting together the fragments of potential found in the present. Citing Golding (1993: 217), Bell (2001: 102) suggests that the queer city can be found in the ‘creative and wild possibilities’ that are (barely) contained within the urban form. In this context, rather than offering a utopian blueprint of the future, queer urbanism advocates prefigurative experimentation in the present that can expand our understanding of what might be possible.

2.3.2 Beyond identity politics – queer affinities

If, as Golding suggests, the queer city exists in the cracks within existing urban forms, I now want to explore the queer potential that exists in the cracks between fixed, bounded identities. Over the next few pages, I shall consider the potential for social change to occur as those fixed (gay) identities dissolve or are recognised as containing and restricting, rather than enabling queer lives. In advocating these arguments, I cannot deny that many gay men *do* find comfort, meaning and security in the various gay subcultural identities that they claim. Nevertheless, I believe that these identities are limited, limiting and ultimately tie us to consumer capitalism. As an alternative, I suggest we need to think creatively (and ‘wildly’, perhaps) about social change and collective identifications beyond the ‘dilemmas’ of identity politics. Before elaborating further on the tactics of the refusal of identity categories and exodus from the commercial gay scene through the building of autonomous networks based upon affinities rather than identities, I will

consider the links between capitalist social relations, alienation and reified identities. Through my reading of recent work by writers from a range of political and theoretical traditions, I suggest that counter-hegemonic political strategies based around identity politics actually end up perpetuating and sustaining capitalist social relations. On this basis, I argue, they are unlikely to aid the emergence of post-capitalist alternative modes of living.

At the core of the political alternatives that I envisage are processes through which people can reclaim responsibility for their own lives and take collective action for practical social change, rather than relying on others to change life for them. Indeed, as Holloway (2002: 1) has succinctly put it, capitalism can be understood as precisely the opposite of this: “the separating of people from their own doing.” He continues to explain that our ‘power-to-do’ is always collective and, therefore, social, because it relies on flows of doing – what we do or produce builds upon and is enabled by the prior ‘doing’ of others, just as our work creates the conditions for others to produce other things in the future. Our ‘doing’ is connected with the ‘doing’ of many others across time and space, even if we seldom stop to consider the distant work put into the objects we use everyday. Holloway (2002: 3) continues, offering a concise explanation of classic Marxist theories of alienation:

The separation of the done from the doing and from the doers means that people relate to one another no longer as doers, but as owners (or non-owners) of the done (seen now as a thing divorced from doing). Relations between people exist as relations between things, and people no longer exist as doers but as the passive bearers of things. ... Doing is converted into being: this is the core of power-over. Whereas doing means that we are and are not, the breaking of doing means that the ‘and are not’ is torn away. We are just left with ‘we are’: identification. ‘We are not’ is either forgotten or treated as mere dreaming. Possibility is torn from us. ... The rule of power-

over is the rule of 'that's the way things are', the rule of identity. (Holloway 2002: 3)

Importantly, Holloway (2002: 5) reminds his readers that the separation of doing from done is an on-going (and, therefore, incomplete) process, rather than an accomplished fact. To speak of alienation and recognise how it works to lock us in an individualising identification with the present, at the expense of unleashing our potential to collectively shape the future, means that the process cannot be complete and there is hope.

In response to these theories of alienation, it is tempting to make caustic comments about gay men who are locked in 'off the peg' identities that tie their sense of self, the way they make sense of their emotions and act upon their desires, to consumer capitalism. While this critique has some merit (just as it carries an unpleasant air of worthiness about it), there is ultimately a deeper link between emotions and processes of alienation. Hennessy (2000: 22) has suggested that capitalism has historically organised sensation and affect such that some ways of meeting these needs have been deemed as legitimate, whilst others have effectively been 'outlawed.' Another way of thinking about alienation is to acknowledge that under capitalism, workers retain scant control over their human potential for self-realisation through labour. For Hennessy (2000: 22) affective potential is one aspect of the human potential for self-realisation that is inherent in our labour power. By extension, it is one of the positive potentials that are traded away as each worker commodifies their labour power on the wage market. Approaching a politics of sexuality from the vantage point of capitalism's continual construction of allowed and legitimate needs offers a promising way out of the dead end of identity politics.

As well as being separated from the meeting of human needs directly through exploitative labour, Hennessy (2000: 216-7) argues that sensation and affect are also ripped from us more indirectly through forms of consciousness that abstract mind from body and private from public.

In the process of reifying consciousness into forms of identity, whole areas of human affective potential are effectively outlawed. In constructing sexual identity, for example, the discourses of sexuality provide social contexts whereby sensations and affect are made intelligible in terms of normative and perverse sexual identifications and desires. 'Outlawed needs', however, are not just those sensations and affects that the normative discourses shame – by naming them 'gay', 'lesbian', 'perverse', or any other illegitimizing name. They are also those unspeakable sensations and affects that do not fall easily into any prescribed categories. In other words, the interface between the available modes of intelligibility and human affective and erotic capacity is never complete (Hennessy 2000: 217-8).

In response, Hennessy advocates a politics that addresses the many ways in which capitalism has outlawed the satisfaction of so many human needs (including the affective). Central to the process of creating this new politics, she suggests, will be the practice of 'disidentification,' which she defines as a method of unlearning the identities that we embrace and take for granted by confronting the historical conditions that have produced them. This is a similar project to that in which Gibson-Graham (2006: 54) and Tajbakhsh (2001) have recently been engaged. Disidentification is not just about challenging ways of thinking that view reified identities as natural, but about situating those identities and heteronormative prejudices against them within "a mode of production that outlaws a whole array of human needs" (Hennessy 2000: 229). As she puts it,

one of the ways to make use of existing identity forms is to highlight the gap between identities promoted by the dominant culture and the lived 'experience' of social relations that is not summoned up by these terms. This is the 'excess' that is often 'experienced' as an inchoate affect of not

belonging, of not fitting in or not feeling at home within the terms that are offered for identity. (Hennessy 2000: 230-231).

More than this, it should appraise the extent to which identities “*encourage* or *discourage* the maintenance, emergence and development of equitable relations between autonomous individuals and groups,” (Day 2005: 134). This method begins to suggest developing a radical politics rooted in everyday life. Of course, this is not a new idea – Lefebvre (1991a) recognised more than three decades ago that although everyday life had (even then) become increasingly saturated by commodities, it was also the arena where meaningful resistance to the excesses of capitalism was most likely to be found, because it was in their everyday lives that people really experienced the brunt of modern capitalist social relations and longed most for liberation. It could be argued that sexual geographers have still largely failed to research very much of the everyday lives of gay men – there is little work on the spatiality of gay men’s romantic relationships, for example, or the beliefs, meanings and emotions enrolled in these quotidian practices. In the empirical chapters, I attempt to offer rich descriptions of gay men’s lives, fleshing them out and engaging with their feelings and emotional responses to the life choices available to them.

In constructing a new queer politics beyond the logic of identity politics, there are lessons that can be learnt from writers like Lefebvre (1991b, 1996), for this politics to really be *queer* it is likely to require a re-envisioning of conventional concepts of the ‘social’. For Bell and Binnie (2000: 78), for many sexual dissidents “the erotic has been at the very core and definition of sociality.” An understanding of sexuality as erotic play, they claim, is problematic both for mainstream social and cultural theory, as well as for much of the Left because “it cannot accommodate

such a politics of pleasure alongside the victimology of class injustice,” (2000: 78). To meet this challenge will require social movements that look, think and act very different to the forms of activism described by Castells (1982), Knopp (1987) and Quilley (1997), which focused around strategies for being, rather than tactics of becoming (Amin and Thrift 2005). One of the major impediments inherent to identity politics is that it is based on the ‘politics of the demand’. As such, it engages in “an endless repetition of a self-defeating act that only perpetuates the conditions that give rise to its own motive force,” (Day 2005: 15). Rather than continue to advocate an identity politics that at best operates counter-hegemonically (thus never seriously challenging the functioning of capitalist social relations which themselves rely on a logic of hegemonic capture) it is time to proliferate experiments that attempt to operate non-hegemonically.

By avoiding making demands in the first place, it offers a way out of the cycle through which requests for ‘freedom’ or ‘rights’ are used to justify an intensification of the societies of discipline and control. (Day 2005:15)

In contrast to Marxist advocates of political revolution, Day is writing from within an anarchist tradition that has long recognised that social revolution is about *breaking not taking* power. Despite the explicitly geographical writings of some key anarchist thinkers from the late 19th century (for example, Kropotkin [1885] 1979; and Réclus (see Dunbar 1978)) and a brief reappraisal of anarchist ideas in the 1970s during the birth of ‘radical geography’ (Breitbart 1975; Horner 1979; Peet 1975), until very recently anarchist inspired ideas (other than those of the Situationists (Pinder 2005)) have been largely ignored by British critical geographers (although

there are a growing number of exceptions, see: Blunt and Wills 2000; Chatterton 2005; Halfacree 1999; Routledge 1997).

Day, however, is a post-anarchist theorist (May 1994; Newman 2003) and is involved in a political and intellectual project to explore the productive points of affinity between elements of anarchist praxis and post-structuralist theories. Within this context, he stresses the connections between anarchist-inspired activist practices that refuse to make hegemonic demands and certain post-structuralist concepts, particularly Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of 'becoming minor,' where change is "explicitly oriented to avoiding becoming major, [and] is in fact defined in such a way as to associate it inseparably with non-hegemonic practices," (Day 2005: 143).

If gay identities are inherently tied into the alienated social relations of consumer capitalism, then I see 'queer', as I understand it, to be based in what Day (2005: 9) has called "an *affinity for affinity*, that is, for non-universalizing, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based on mutual aid and shared ethical commitments." This clearly takes queer beyond simply being an umbrella term for non-heteronormative sexual and gender identity categories, and attempts to rescue it from being the latest trendy marketing strategy for homonormative lifestyles (e.g. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and similar television shows). For me, queer is an ethical process by which sexual dissidents and gender outlaws strive collectively to reclaim and develop their ability to determine the conditions of *their own* lives. It is about attempting to prefigure in the here and now, through form and process, aspects

of life beyond capitalism, and beyond the limiting range of consumable identities that are currently sold to us.

The person with an affinity for queer (as I define it) can still be as complicit in homonormativity and Nast's (2002) 'queer racist patriarchy' as any other gay man or lesbian. Queers certainly do not exist outside these power relations of domination and oppression and cannot easily claim to have no complicity with them (Oswin 2005). Many people who act queerly *do* identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (some even identify as heterosexual) most of the time. Most use the commercial gay scene (and enjoy it) at least some of the time. Despite these caveats, gay and queer are still very different orientations. They move at different speeds and in different directions in relation to post-industrial capitalism. But, when they don't move fast enough, queers risk having their experiments recuperated.

By utilising post-structuralist theory to analyse capitalism not as a 'thing' or an all-encompassing structure, but as a set of relationships between subjects, it is possible to understand how small-scale experiments in building alternative modes of social organisation might offer a means to avoid *both* postponing all alternative ways of living until after 'The Revolution' *and* perpetuating existing structures and social relations through reformist demands (Day 2005: 16). Gibson-Graham (2006) have recently been engaged in extending their earlier work (Gibson-Graham 1996) to reveal the multiplicity of non-capitalist economic practices that currently exist around the world, in order to destabilise understandings of capitalism as dominant, all-pervasive and unassailable.

[Second-wave feminism's] focus on the subject prompts us to think about new ways of cultivating economic subjects with different desires and capacities and greater openness to change and uncertainty. Its practices of seeing and speaking differently encourages us to make visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that *everywhere* abound, and to connect them through a language of economic difference. If we can begin to see noncapitalist activities as prevalent and viable, we may be encouraged here and now to actively build on them and transform our local economies. (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxiv)

By expanding the vocabulary of economic processes, Gibson-Graham hope to develop a 'weak theory' (Sedgwick 2003) of economy in contrast to the dominant strong theory of capitalism that talks of '*the* capitalist economy.' They seek to undertake this weak theory in a reparative mode that "welcomes surprise, entertains hope, makes connection, tolerates coexistence and offers care for the new," (Gibson-Graham 2006: 8).

By marshalling the many ways that social wealth is produced, transacted, and distributed *other* than those traditionally associated with capitalism, noncapitalism is rendered a positive multiplicity rather than an empty negativity, and capitalism becomes just one particular set of economic relations situated in a vast sea of economic activity. (Gibson-Graham 2006: 70).

Like my exploration of queer autonomous spaces in Chapter Seven, they (Gibson-Graham 2006: 81) seek to identify sites where 'ethical economic decisions' based on an understanding of the importance of social, economic and environmental interdependence can be made. As well as attempting to re-socialise those practices of caring and tending that have traditionally been feminised and domesticated, Gibson-Graham (2006: 96-7) stress the importance of creating and maintaining 'commons', a process which they consider is

by definition an ethical practice of being-in-common, one that informs material practices and social boundaries of community. ... The commons can be seen as a community stock that needs to be maintained and

replenished so that it can continue to constitute the community by providing its direct input (subsidy) to survival. Clearly there is a delicate relationship between nourishing and preserving this stock and placing pressures on it to provide higher levels of consumption or inputs into the surplus-generating machine of production. Whether to deplete, maintain, or grow the commons is a major focus of ethical decision-making. (Gibson-Graham 2006: 96-7).

In Chapter Six I recognise non-commercial sites of public homosex as important queer commons that foster alternative modes of communality and which need to be defended. Again, many of the queer autonomous spaces described in Chapter Seven are also attempts to foster new commons.

Of course, to proceed along these lines forces us to confront one of the central dilemmas for anarchists – in order to attempt to prefigure the type of society we want to live in, we can neither wait for the rest of society to choose to live on the edge of statist, capitalist social relations, nor can we violate their autonomy by forcing our choices on them. Indeed this means that there is no choice for those of us who desire to live differently than to engage in the process of building alternatives ourselves, now (Day 2005: 125-6; May 1994: 98).

Contra Agamben (1993), Day (2005: 17-8) explains that a commitment to autonomous experimentation forces us to think of the coming *communities* in the plural,

but not in the form of liberal pluralism, and that we need to guide our relations with other communities according to the interlocking ethico-political commitments of *groundless solidarity* and *infinite responsibility*. In the simplest terms, groundless solidarity means seeing one's own privilege and oppression in the context of other privileges and oppressions, as so interlinked that no particular form of inequality – be it class, race, gender, sexuality or ability – can be postulated as *the* central axis of struggle. This insight has been developed most fully by postmodern/anti-racist feminist theorists, but is finding its way to other discourses and disciplines, and is gaining much currency in activist circles. The second principle, infinite

responsibility, means always being open to the invitation and challenge of another Other, always being ready to hear a voice that points out how one is not adequately in solidarity, despite one's best efforts.

Of course, despite these ethical commitments, creating autonomous, affinity-based networks and spaces does not just invite us to connect with our friends, or those who look and think like us, and affinity for affinity obliges us to challenge and work against those whose practices 'perpetuate division, domination and exploitation' (Day 2005: 186).

Over the last twenty pages or so, I have begun to consider what the city might look like from the perspective of the 'bad queers' who refuse assimilation into the 'new homonormativity' or are more actively excluded from it. To begin with, I uncovered some of the common themes that emerge from existing queer studies of the city. These offered glimpses of what urban queer life might be like if it were not constrained by the limits of identity politics. In the last few pages, I have attempted to offer a theoretical exploration of the links between identity politics and the alienating social relations of capitalism. As an alternative, I have offered a post-anarchist politics of affinity as a potentially productive means of experimenting with the creation of queer spaces in the city. In doing so, I have drawn upon recent critical reappraisals of utopian praxis from within urban geography and Gibson-Graham's geography of the diverse range of non-capitalist economic practices that currently exist. Braidotti (2002: 84) has suggested that a politics of affinity emerges from the process of abandoning the illusion that fixed, stable identities are either desirable or possible. It is about experimenting, as we go, with modes and methods of identification, once the fantasy of fixed identities has been left behind. An

affinity for affinity and autonomous experimentation, as an attempt at living non-hegemonic, non-hierarchical relationships is also about resisting the temptation to 'convert' others to your cause. To quote Day (2005: 206) one last time in this chapter,

[t]hinking outside the logic of integration, being a minority does not appear as a reason to attempt a hegemonic reversal of one's relationship to the majority. Rather, it motivates the construction of spaces that are more fully minoritarian.

These are issues that I grapple with throughout the rest of the dissertation, but particularly in the final three chapters, as I explain in the section that follows, which outlines how the theories I have elaborated throughout this literature review will be applied in the remainder of the thesis.

2.4 Applying a queer urban critique

I started this chapter by explaining my central aim in writing this dissertation as being to examine the relationship between sexuality, class and space as they are expressed in East London. My intention in focusing the study on the production and uses of gay and queer space in three socially mixed inner city boroughs is threefold: first, to examine the functioning of commercial gay bars and leisure venues that are located outside the main nodes of the gay night-time economy in Central London. The second objective is to consider how and to what extent, in an area of considerable social polarity and cultural diversity, sexual difference is being incorporated into the marketing of certain neighbourhoods as 'cosmopolitan' zones. The third aim is to study the social relationships that are sustained by non- and less-

commodified queer spaces that operate on the fringes of (or intentionally at some distance from) the mainstream commercial gay scene.

In the previous section of this chapter I outlined my approach to queer urbanism as an ethico-political commitment to experimenting with forms of queer autonomy that move beyond the limits offered by identity politics and post-industrial consumer capitalism. Central to this process of critical engagement with the gay city is an understanding of the potential offered by practices of disidentification, which expose the gap between the promise of those identities promoted by the dominant culture and the lived experience of those social relations. A project that has the spatial experience of everyday gay life at its core requires research methods that are consistent with that goal in order to effectively achieve its stated intentions. Like Lees (2002; 2003), Gibson-Graham (2006) and Prytherch and Marston (2005), I believe that one of the best ways of re-materializing and re-socializing urban social and cultural geographies is by paying particular attention to the everyday social practices and relationships which underpin the formation of social groups and their use of the city. In this way, it is possible to understand the “new connections that bind people and places together,” especially if a relational approach is taken that can appreciate the city as a porous space of flows and connections (Prytherch and Marston 2005: 98).

For me an ethnographic approach offers the best way to fuse an interest in the economic and social relationships that produce queer space with the sensuous embodied experience of those spaces (Stoller 1997). As I shall explain further in the next chapter, my ethnographic approach consists of several related elements. Most

conventionally, it relies on participant observation in a range of different gay and queer sites locally, as well as the analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews with various gay and bisexual men who live, work and play in East London. However, because I am one of those men and this research started in part as an attempt to answer various questions I found myself asking about my own place in the East End, there is also a significant strand of auto-ethnography in the work. This is also because, despite all the best advice contained in so many research methods textbooks, throughout the process of undertaking this doctorate I found it impossible to disentangle the research from other areas of my life. Rather than ignore this cumbersome detail, it seemed more effective and ethical to tackle it head on and incorporate reflections on my own positionality and place in the research process within the text. As I acknowledge both in the next chapter and within my closing reflections in Chapter Eight, my personal investment in the queer urban project I have elaborated here is not without its contradictions.

CHAPTER THREE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AN EXPEDITION TO THE QUEER

CITY

This chapter examines questions of methodology and method in relation to my research. I believe research methods (or, at least, should be) closely linked to



Figure 3: Clearing in The Cemetery

I acknowledge that this

is thinking about how to structure this chapter and write about my research practices. I initially considered writing a very extensive, thorough explanation of how I

CHAPTER THREE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AN EXPEDITION TO THE QUEER CITY

This chapter examines questions of methodology and method in relation to my research. I believe research methods are (or, at least, should be) closely linked to the broader theoretical and methodological approach that underpins a piece of research (Hoggart, Lees and Davies 2002). In the pages that follow, I reflect upon the ways in which the queer urban critique that I outlined in the previous chapter shapes my ontological and epistemological views and examines the research methods I have employed to collect and analyse data in this context. In expanding upon the core aspects of this queer urban critique which stresses the importance of multiple non-hegemonic experiments in modes of autonomous queer urban life that arise out of careful observation of contemporary gay life, I reflect upon the ways in which this research can (or cannot) be seen within the tradition of Bunge's (1971) concept of the urban 'geographical expedition'. I suggest that like Bunge's expedition (Merrifield 1995), my work is part of an attempt to produce a socially engaged piece of research that is grounded in local, situated knowledges. However, I acknowledge that there are real tensions in claiming Bunge's legacy, given the important differences in our respective conceptualisations of progressive politics.

In thinking about how to structure this chapter and write about my research practices, I initially considered writing a very systematic, linear explanation of how I

set about defining my research questions, finding field sites, observing local gay men, asking them questions, analysing my notes and writing up this thesis. However, I soon recognised that my working methods progressed quite differently from that. Different stages of the research process folded in on themselves in a less than linear manner and that is reflected a little in the structure of this chapter. Having outlined the core aspects of my methodology, I turn to a discussion of the politics of fieldwork and Katz's (1994) feminist understanding of 'the field' as a contextual social terrain of ideas and action, rather than simply the 'place' or 'people' studied by researchers. I also offer some personal reflections on my relationship to the East End and the spaces in which I have researched.

The next three sections of the chapter examine in greater detail how I carried out my research. They start with an attempt to place myself within both this research and the gay East End. Through an examination of the numerous ways in which the research became (indeed, always was) tangled up with other aspects of my life, I explain my decision to thread autobiographical details and reflections throughout the thesis. In doing so, I consider the various ways in which geographers have deployed auto/biography in their work and explain my understanding of autobiography as a process (like 'queer') that is never complete and is always in a state of 'becoming'. On this basis, I discuss my use of ethnographic methods as a means of making sense of the quotidian beliefs and practices of gay and bisexual men in East London, as well as the processes by which they make sense of the spaces they inhabit in the area. Here I discuss my desire to record a more embodied, sensual geography of the gay East End, from my role as an observant participant in

those spaces. But, at the same time I acknowledge the limits of adequately representing these embodied desires, affects and practices. The chapter closes with an exploration of the ethical issues raised by my work, especially in the context of the blurred boundaries between my research and the rest of my everyday life, as well as the specific ethical dilemmas raised by the relationship between this research and my engagement with political practices that attempt to move beyond the (counter)hegemonic, representational mode.

An attentive reader will notice that this chapter makes very little reference to work from within the sub-discipline of sexual geographies, other than Binnie's (1997) paper on queer epistemologies. This reflects a major lacuna within this body of work. One exception is the work of Browne (2004a; 2006a), who has recently published a number of methodological papers stemming from her social geographies of small-town lesbian lives and discussing the problem of trying to inject a queer perspective into large-scale quantitative surveys of LGBT populations.

3.1 (Not quite participating in) a queer geographical expedition

In order to fully explain my methodological approach to this study, it is necessary to bear in mind my positionality in relation to the research (as a queer man, involved in radical politics, living in the East End), and my motivations for undertaking it. I explore these issues, and the place of autobiographical reflection in my work, later in the chapter. For now, though, I want to make a comparison with Bunge's (1971) concept of 'the geographical expedition' as a form of engaged, geographical research with an explicitly activist agenda. At the same time, I

recognise the impossibility of making Bunge's politics (which were, essentially, Leninist) sit comfortably with my own. As Day (2005: 95) has highlighted in elaborating his understanding of 'immanent critique', "the immanent critic tries to proceed with her eyes as open as possible demanding that her readings make sense not only on the basis of a single text, or passage, but in the ever-widening contexts into which the texts under study might be placed."

Merrifield (2002: 199) has described Bunge's expedition to inner city Detroit as "a grim voyage to urban America" through which he "constructed highly vivid maps of urban spatial and social disparities" and "put his amazing geographical imagination to explicitly leftist political ends." Furthermore, he describes it as an experiment through which professional geographers could work with the poor and marginal citizens of the inner city and, in the process, "radicalise one another, join hands, and turn into something dangerous."

At first glance, the links between Bunge's expedition and my work on the social and cultural geographies of gay and queer space in the East End of London might not be immediately obvious. I certainly hope that this thesis offers something other than a 'grim voyage' to anywhere. However, it is important to remember that I am particularly interested in the relative opportunities for gay men from different class and ethnic fractions to leave their mark on the urban landscape and the differential access they have to spaces where they can express and indulge their desires. But this is not a purely academic endeavour – it is informed by my own experiences as a gay man living in the area and is motivated by my involvement in various queer and anti-capitalist political initiatives over many years. The process of

undertaking this research and engaging in dialogue with local queer anarchists has re-focused my political ethics. I hope that the findings of this research will, in turn, inform future activist tactics.

Bunge recognised (ahead of his time) that a partial and partisan perspective, grounded in local circumstances, was preferable to the ‘god-tricks’ of positivism (that were still so pervasive in geography at the time) precisely because it could be held accountable within the context of the locality being studied. As I noted in my critique of early gay geographies in the previous chapter, positivist methodologies held sway in the emerging study of urban gay life well into the 1980s. In his study of inner city Detroit, Bunge listened to the tales of everyday urban life from local residents and the ‘folk geographers’ he worked with (i.e. local residents who were actively involved in collecting research data and analysing the expedition’s findings). The details of everyday life and hardships that he recorded were precisely the type of experiences that are ignored by census-style surveys and which, all the same, shape people’s lives and the meanings they attach to their neighbourhood – children knocked down by speeding cars at a notorious crossroads, or the intentional negligence of a slum landlord. Importantly, Bunge, his students and the local activists they worked alongside, did not just record and analyse these stories, they worked with local community groups to build and implement proposals to improve the quality of life for local people.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in similar participatory approaches in various areas of social geography (Pain 2003, 2004), including the creation of a Participatory Geographies Working Group within the

Royal Geographical Society. Many of the geographers who are experimenting with participatory modes of researching are interested in doing so to further explicitly progressive political goals, most often at a local level [for example, Gibson-Graham (2006)]. Although my work has not fully utilised participatory research methods, such as participatory action research (Cameron and Gibson 2005; Elwood 2005) or participatory appraisal (Fuller, O'Brien and Hope 2003), I am very sympathetic to such approaches. Indeed, if I were to be starting the project all over again now, I might consider applying participatory research methods throughout the fieldwork and really involving the research participants in doing the research *with* me. As it was, I utilised more conventionally ethnographic research methods. I discuss issues relating to my research practices later in the chapter. First, though, it is time to consider my relationship to the area in which I have carried out my research.

3.2 The politics of fieldwork

In the previous section, I discussed Bunge's 'geographical expedition'; as an addendum to that discussion, it is worth remembering that Bunge found it difficult to move onto the streets of inner city Detroit and become fully involved in the world he was researching. This personal barrier forced him to question the ability of academic researchers to empathise with disadvantaged 'others'. He was concerned that he could not position himself outside of his own history and experiences. For him, part of the research process was learning to cope with this dissonance. In many ways, it is hardly surprising that Bunge (who had been born into a privileged upper middle class family) found it difficult to adjust to living in 'the ghetto'. As Katz

(1994: 68) has quipped, “only in the *Wizard of Oz* do women [*sic*] descend on other lands without obvious cultural baggage.” Before discussing the areas of London and the gay/queer sites within them that form the ‘field’ of my research, or my relationship to those spaces, I want to explore in a little more depth the politics of ‘the field’ in geographic research.

Doing fieldwork encapsulates a complex politics – why has the particular field been chosen? How best can the researcher relate to and represent the interests of the inhabitants of that field? Should researchers even attempt to represent the interests of others? What power relations exist between researchers and the researched? Nast (1994: 60) has argued that “by politically situating the ‘field’ and by suggesting that fieldwork is a form of resistance,” it is possible to frustrate the common distinction between the ‘politics of fieldwork’ and ‘the politics of representation.’ She goes on (Nast 1994: 57) to suggest that the ‘field’ should not be

naturalized in terms of ‘a place’ or ‘a people’; rather it is located and defined in terms of specific political objectives that (as such) cut across time and place. Such objectives involve a number of political criteria that operate on different but connected levels. Most importantly, the objectives ideally work toward critical and liberatory ends, which are *not* formulated in terms of altruistically saving an exoticized ‘other’.

Nast’s arguments are important because they reposition ‘the field’ away from a specific research location or researched social group and solidly identify it with the social terrain of politically engaged, emancipatory ideas and action. As such, it could be argued that the ‘field’ of my current study is not three boroughs in east London and the gay men who live, work and play in them, but is *really* radical queer praxis. I am sympathetic to this argument because the focus of my current work is the emancipatory potential of (radical) queer spatial practices in a general sense.

However, at the same time, the work is solidly located within the spaces and populations of east London and it draws on situated knowledges that are specific to those locations and people. Nevertheless, this qualification does not necessarily contradict Nast's argument. Indeed, as Katz (1994: 67) has argued in a companion piece to Nast's (1994) paper,

the questions raised by conducting fieldwork in human geography at once invoke boundaries and blur borders. Where are the boundaries between 'the research' and everyday life; between 'the field' and not; between 'the scholar' and subject? Under contemporary conditions of globalization and post-positive thought in the social sciences, *we are always already in the field* – multiply positioned actors, aware of the partiality of all our stories and the artifice of the boundaries drawn in order to tell them [emphasis added].

The blurring of boundaries has been a central feature of the process of conducting this research. As a queer man living in the East End and engaged in creative political activism in that area, I have found it particularly difficult to ring-fence my research and neatly separate it from the other aspects of my life. Throughout this research, I have truly always been in the field.

When I began this PhD, it was my intention to study gay (and queer) space in three East London boroughs – Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets. Although those three boroughs have remained the main focus of my work, I have ended up carrying out more work in Tower Hamlets and part of Hackney than in Newham and the boundaries of *my* 'East End' have become more porous, so that the web of sites I studied eventually included spaces in outer East London and elsewhere in the capital that were important to the networks of men I worked with.

This observation highlights that the study of gay and queer space is about more than just the analysis of fixed, physical sites. The movement of gay bodies

through space is also important. The confidence with which gay men move through the city streets can tell us much about their attitude to their sexuality and their relationship to the environment and society that surrounds them. The time-space strategies that men employ to separate different aspects of their lives can reveal the uneven impact of heteronormative strictures. Movement through space can open up new possibilities and opportunities for both gay and queer socialisation and communality.

I end this introduction to my field of study as I started it – with a brief discussion of the politics of fieldwork. Building upon the work of Bunge and feminist geographers such as Katz and Nast, I have argued that the ‘field’ is more than just a location or a group of people, it is a social terrain “through which researchers can forge a bond between the academy (also a field) and the world at large” (Hoggart *et al* 2002: 270). For Nast and Katz, their feminist objectives defined their ‘field’ as an embodied process of working *with* the women they met through their research against oppressive structures and experiences. Just as Bunge encountered limits to his ability to fully identify with the Black working class residents of inner city Detroit, so Nast (1994: 58) cautions that the socially engaged feminist research she advocates does not mean that researchers can parachute into any situation and play an effective role in local struggles, just because they agree with their political goals:

There also needs to be a recognition that some historical and material realities are beyond our personal and social reach. Such reflexive analysis requires that we link larger-scale political objectives to smaller-scale methodological strategies which break down hierarchical objectivistic ways of knowing in the field.

In the next section of this chapter, I want to explore some of the constraints and limits on my attempt to produce an embodied geography of the queer East End by examining in greater detail the place of my own autobiography within this research. To an extent, like Katz (1994: 72), “I am always, everywhere, in the ‘field’.” At the same time, I recognise that despite being a queer man living in the area I have studied, there are limits to my ‘insider’ status and I have found myself “always positioned simultaneously in a number of fields, in a constant state of ‘betweenness’” (Hoggart *et al* 2002: 270).

3.3 Placing myself in my research: autobiography and geography

I want now to position myself more firmly in the text and begin to explore the state of ‘betweenness’ in which I have found myself during the process of conducting this research. Katz (1994) has argued that it is important for researchers to analyse their own practices as much as those of their research subjects. This section provides an opportunity for some initial reflections on my place in the research. It also offers me the opportunity to begin to unpack some of the cultural baggage that I bring to the research. But, most importantly, in the pages that follow, I will position my work in relation to recent attempts by other ethnographers to more fully include autobiographical detail as a central element of their research strategy. This section, then, is not just about me, it is about autobiography as a research method in critical geographic work. As one queer anthropologist has remarked, by continuing to separate our professional and personal lives, academics are implicated in the perpetuation of the prevailing social order (Wafer 1996: 262).

I have lived in Stepney (in the borough of Tower Hamlets) since buying a small flat in a Victorian tenement block there in 1995. I feel secure in the knowledge that gay people occupy at least a quarter of the flats in my block. I am somewhat reassured by the knowledge that within ten minutes walk of my flat there are at least four gay venues. Some of the sites I have studied are also places where I go to relax, to meet friends and (when not in a monogamous relationship) find sexual partners. This suggests that I am always 'in the field' and this has posed some complex issues around personal boundaries – where does my life as a local resident end and my role as a researcher begin? How can I ensure that this research is more than just a journal of where I've been with my friends and lovers over the last five years?

Although I first came out when I was still at school and have been openly gay (and/or queer) in almost every aspect of my daily life for the last twenty years, I have never chosen to spend much of my time socialising on the commercial gay scene. And therein lies another important issue that needs to be borne in mind when contextualising my work. This does, of course, give me a certain distance from (some of) the sites and men I am studying, while still providing me with the 'empirical literacy' of an insider in that environment (Roseneil 1993). However, as Nayaran (1993) has argued, the dichotomization of 'insider' and 'outsider' is bound to be problematic insofar as the identities of all people, including academic researchers, are shifting, multiple, and situated in specific historical and geographical contexts. She calls, instead, for the 'enactment of hybridity' (Narayan 1993: 672) – a research and writing strategy in which scholars acknowledge

themselves as belonging to the world of engaged scholarship and the quotidian world simultaneously. Lewin and Leap (1996: 17) have made the point that lesbian and gay ethnographers may be better placed to enact this strategy than most because we are likely to have direct experience of continually managing and negotiating the performance of our identities, both in gay contexts and in the mainstream heterosexual world.

If I have seldom engaged very much with the commercial gay scene, my relationship to public sex environments is a different matter. Not only do I enjoy the thrill of (outdoor) cruising, but I have always found the greater diversity of men using those sites and the particular forms of solidarity and communality that they foster far more conducive to my needs than anything most gay venues can offer me. Interestingly, as I began to engage more seriously with my fieldwork and forced myself to visit local venues that I had previously written off (as a result of my own prejudices) or never visited because I could not see myself fitting in there, I have experienced some pleasant surprises (the conversation about Foucault that I overheard at the bar in a local fetish club beats the more usual tabloid celebrity gossip hands down every time).

Given all of this, it has often been quite difficult for me to completely disentangle my everyday life from my research. I cannot completely separate my role as a part-time research student from the other aspects of my life in the area – as local resident, community activist and my ‘day job’ as a university widening participation practitioner engaged in outreach work in local schools (Brown and Garlick, *forthcoming*). Expeditions that began with one purpose often ended up

fulfilling others (Wafer 1996). These multi-levelled entanglements between different aspects of my life and my different identities led me to appreciate the importance of acknowledging this situation in my work and to use my own experiences (in comparison with those of the men I have met through participant observation fieldwork and the interviews) up front in this thesis.

Moss (2001: 10-21) has identified a number of different uses of autobiography in geography. Amongst them are several uses that I hope to avoid. I am certainly not interested in mobilising my own experiences to lend a tone of authority or legitimacy to my analysis (Maxey 1999). My 'truths', experiences and opinions are as partial and contingent as anyone else's – indeed, by placing myself in the text, I want specifically to acknowledge that there is no fixed 'me' and that my experiences and opinions are open to multiple interpretations. Similarly, I hope to avoid, or at least minimise, adopting a confessional tone in my writing. However, I suspect there is an extent to which, despite my best intentions, elements of my work will be read as confessional – it is, after all one of the main tropes through which gay life stories tend to be told. However, this is not simply a 'gay' problem; Ewing (1992: 237) has highlighted that most ethnographers who attempt to include themselves in the text inevitably end up relying on 'confessions', precisely because researchers are still not trained effectively to observe and reflect on the many ways in which they actually shape social interactions during their time 'in the field'.

One of the uses of autobiography that I am most interested in utilising, and it is the way geographers have most frequently referred to their lives in academic writing, is as part of the process of reflecting on my role as a researcher and my

location in the tangled web of power relations that constitute the social world I am studying. Although many geographers (and other social scientists) now routinely attempt to reflect on their positionality in relation to their research, few scholars still fully integrate their own lives into their work and “relate their intellectual development both to changing social and cognitive micro-environments close at hand and to the encompassing macro-environments provided by the larger society and culture” (Merton 1988: 20).

By researching ‘close to home’, in social environments with which we are already familiar, researchers should be able to minimise the potential for misinformation and misunderstandings. However, such a strategy does strongly rely on close reflexive attention to our own actions and assumptions; for, without engaging in such a process of reflection, we are as likely to overlook ‘taken-for-granted’ everyday notions and activities as the people we are researching (Garfinkel 1986). As Maxey (1999: 202) has highlighted in his highly reflexive appraisal of his dual, and overlapping, identities as an academic and an activist,

Our identities are deeply uncertain, as they do not exist prior to our performance of them. The shifting nature of identity and human agency, (re)produced continuously in our daily practices, has implications for the process of reflexivity. This view of identity denies that there can be a fully conscious researcher able to survey not only their own self-conscious, but also a clear set of social relations into which they fit.

Indeed, in this context, Maxey (1999: 201) sees reflexivity as being a central, defining feature of both his activism and his academic practice, precisely because it “enables us to place ourselves actively within [the] process” of producing the social world through our everyday thoughts and actions. For him, there is a ‘radical, transformatory role’ for reflexivity, but he cautions that because we, as activists or

academics, cannot fully know ourselves, let alone the motivations of others, there is always a danger that reflexivity can “hide relations of power and oppression” (Maxey 1999: 201). Skeggs (2004: 126-134) highlights this danger more forcefully and has admonished social scientists not to fool themselves that reflexivity helps them understand others better. She urges researchers to recognise the privilege that is inherent in being willing and able to write about one’s self and demonstrates (through the work of Beck *et al* (1994)) how central the reflexive self is to the ‘cultural politics of neoliberalism’. Clearly, this poses a certain dilemma for anti-capitalist writers like Maxey and myself. There is no simple solution to this problem, except that we continue to reflect upon and confront the manifold ways in which our work deploys power (Katz 1994) and recognise that our experiences of power (our own or others’) may be very different to those of the people we are researching. It also requires that we are honest with ourselves about the limits of our reflexivity and the extent to which we refuse to fully reveal ourselves through our work.

In this context, as Binnie (1997) has argued, I believe an important aspect of the process of reflecting on my own position as a researcher and a gay man living in the East End of London is the recognition of my own embodied sense of self and my own embodied experiences in the sites I am studying. As several of the sites I have studied are public sex sites, that must include an acknowledgement of my own desires. Like Binnie (1997; and Roscoe 1996), I believe it is important that queer researchers bring sex centre stage in their work as part of a strategy of resisting the heteronormative pressures to constrain it and keep it out of the public gaze. In doing

so, though, I have tried to keep this in balance so as not to obscure issues around class, age and ethnicity as they are expressed in these sites. Again, the lure of the confessional raises its ugly head, as does the recognition that as an author I have the power to supply only edited highlights, while the men I encounter and observe in the field do not. Having said this, of course, I recognise that they will only have provided edited highlights in talking to me. And, as I acknowledge in Chapters Five and Six, there were a number of times when men that I got to know through the fieldwork greatly modified the stories they told me about themselves as they became more relaxed in my presence. This then, throws into question the veracity of other stories that I recorded. In the light of this challenge, I have tended to analyse the stories the men tell about themselves, thinking about why they might choose to talk in those terms, rather than worrying overly about the 'truth' of these narratives.

There is one final way in which I am interested in using autobiographical details in my work and that is to "think of autobiography, not as a record of a life or some aspect of life, but as life itself" (Moss 2001: 19). That is, to think of autobiography as a process of 'becoming' and to recognise that even the most thorough piece of critical self-analysis is never complete. Effectively, as Moss (2001: 20-1) suggests, this is about writing one's life and charting "the construction of 'I' and 'me'" in multiple contexts and in relation to others. It is about recognising that our sense of self is a 'work in progress' developed through relationships with other people and a material world in which we are active participants. Certainly, the 'Gavin' writing these words now is not the 'Gavin' who started thinking about this research five years ago. I will reflect on some of the ways in which I have changed

through the process of carrying out this research in the concluding chapter. Next, however, I examine in more detail the processes of data collection and analysis.

3.4 Looking, listening and feeling ethnographically

At the core of this research project is an ethnographic study of the lives of non-heterosexual men in the East End of London over the last decade. Ethnographic methods of inquiry offer an opportunity to re-inject some ‘colour, movement, and sinewy action’ (Dowsett 1996: 47) into the study of sexuality and focus on exposing the social process at work in gay men’s lives. However, before embarking on fresh fieldwork for this study I revisited and re-analysed the transcripts of interviews recorded for two earlier research projects that I had carried out with gay and bisexual men in east London. These included interviews carried out as part of my Masters research on gay gentrification in Tower Hamlets (Brown 1998; 2000; 2001) and those recorded as part of the Newham Gay Men’s Survey (Rickard & Brown 2001) which I undertook for the local health authority.

I have continued to return to these earlier interview transcripts throughout the project, asking new questions of the data as my ideas and concepts have developed and changed. I have attempted to tease different ‘threads’ out of the earlier data and have tested concepts developed in one setting against the data collected in other areas of east London. If I was thinking about social class, for example, I searched the interview transcripts for occasions when men used the word ‘class’, as well as, closely related terms and concepts such as income, employment or education. I carried out similar processes when considering race and ethnicity, or any of the other

core concepts examined in this work. I looked for examples of how men spoke about themselves (in 'classed' terms, for example), who they seemed to feel an affinity with, as well as the ways in which they established relational distinctions between themselves and others. I also searched the transcripts for the men's descriptions of key gay sites in the area. Here I was interested in how they spoke about their use of these sites (or the reasons they gave for avoiding them) and their thoughts about other users of these sites. I took note of those non-gay venues and public spaces that were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. I cross-referenced the connections between men's discussions of social difference and their description of these sites. All of these themes were utilised to frame the questions I asked myself during my periods of ethnographic fieldwork.

Ethnography (Herbert, Gallagher and Myers 2005; Whatmore 2003) is the process of participating in people's lives, watching what they do, listening to what they say and asking questions about their actions and beliefs (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Herbert (2000: 550) has argued that ethnography is a uniquely useful (but still largely under-used) research method for geographers because it allows us to uncover

the *processes* and *meanings* that undergird sociospatial life. Humans create their social worlds through processes that are symbolically encoded and thus made meaningful. Through enacting these meaningful processes, human agents reproduce and challenge macrological structures in the everyday of place-bound action. Because ethnography provides singular insight into these processes and meanings, it can most brightly illuminate the relationship between structure, agency and geographic context.

In carrying out ethnographic observations, I paid particular attention to the conversations I overheard in the sites I visited, the non-verbal gestures and

expressions I witnessed and the way men moved around the sites. I listened to and noted what was being said, by and to whom (and who was not being spoken to or included in conversations). I recorded the postures men adopted, their modes of occupying the space and the many ways in which they used their whole bodies to convey complex attitudes and emotions. I documented how the users of the sites dressed and considered what their apparel might reveal about their social class, relative masculinity or subcultural affiliation (or, at least, the image they might want to be imputed from their appearance). For the most part, my field notes took the form of a narrative description, but they also included maps, photos and diagrams of the sites, including the choreography of men's movements through them. Where possible I found ways to engage men in conversations pertinent to my research (about their use of the sites, as well as many other aspects of their lives). I examined all of this data for discernible patterns of behaviour within and across sites; and interrogated it for the ways in which my observations confirmed or challenged ideas that had emerged from the more formal interviews. I read and re-read the field notes, extracting descriptions of key incidents and observations. I combined these notes with quotes from the interviews that illustrated related concepts. I built up my arguments and analysis from these combined data sets; whilst also considering how these data confirmed or denied existing theoretical models from the literature on urban and sexual geographies. This was an iterative process – my emerging theories were repeatedly tested against new periods of observation and again later theoretical reading, until I was not seeing anything new. This is not to say that there are not still more sophisticated theories to be developed about gay men's lives in East London,

but to recognise that there came a time when I was satisfied with the ideas I was elaborating and could no longer see alternative means of interpretation.

If ethnography seeks to make sense of the actions and beliefs of human actors, then it is also an attempt “to make sense of their making sense of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life” (Ley 1988: 121). As Herbert (2000: 553) has highlighted, though,

the tissue of social life is not always directly observable. The meanings of objects and events are often revealed through practices, reactions, cursory comments and facial expressions.

Nevertheless, an encyclopaedic record of these quotidian activities would, in itself, reveal little about the ways in which social structure impacts upon people’s lives. In preparing for my ethnographic research, I read not only the academic work on sexuality and space reviewed in the previous chapter, but a range of ‘grey’ literature in the form of government statistics about the area and applied social research on the lives of gay men in London. In part this was a process of preparing to ‘enter the field’, but it was also a means by which I hoped to be able to triangulate my findings in some way against existing research. I hope, that in producing a theoretically informed ethnography, I have succeeded in uncovering “how structures are made real in the contexts and commotions of daily life” (Herbert 2000: 533) in the gay spaces of east London.

The selection of the sites where I carried out most of the participant observation emerged through the process of doing the research. At the start of the project, my intention was to build upon earlier work (Brown 2001) and focus on the relationships between different expressions of ‘conventional’ gay space in East

London. As a result, my early observations took place in a selection of mainstream gay bars, clubs and saunas in the area. I made initial visits to as many of the gay venues in the area as I could and eventually focused my attentions on what seemed like a strategic sample of venues that were spread across the three boroughs and included a range of types of venues that attracted different client groups. From the beginning, I was interested in contrasting gay men's use of these commercial spaces with the spatial practices that construct certain public toilets as 'cottages', and parks, cemeteries and commons as cruising grounds where non-heterosexual men meet for sex and companionship. Several months into the fieldwork, it occurred to me that I was largely ignoring the greatest resource that I had available to me – my own life and experiences. It seems bizarre when committed to paper, but I realised that for the most part I chose not to drink in many of the gay bars I was studying and that I was far from the only gay man using the pubs, bars and cafes where I felt more at home. This inspired the extension of my fieldwork into a range of commercial venues where non-heterosexual men form a visible and (mostly) accepted strand of the clientele even though the sites themselves are nominally 'straight'. About two years into the research, I realised that I also needed to include in the study the rhizome of alternative 'autonomous' queer communal spaces created by radical queer activists. I had been aware of this network's activities for some time, but they fortuitously shifted the focus of their attention to East London in the middle of my research. Through them, I was also introduced to a number of semi-commercial post-gay clubs and events that I discuss in Chapter Five, as well as the autonomous queer spaces that are the subject of Chapter Seven.

As I stated earlier, in researching for this doctorate, I often found it difficult to disentangle my 'fieldwork' from the rest of my life. Nonetheless, I attempted to keep 'field notes' throughout my research. I was particularly scrupulous about writing up notes of my initial visits to new and unfamiliar sites. As I became more familiar with a particular venue or social group, my notes tended to become a little more sparse – recording only those incidents that seemed particularly relevant because they exemplified the functioning of the space, or seemed curiously 'out of place'. On visiting a site for the first time, I would record details of its spatial layout and observed how men use different areas of the space. I often paid particular attention to the demographic mix of men present in the site, as well as their physical, sartorial and attitudinal appearance. I attempted to record how different groups of men seemed to interact with each other. I listened intently to the language they used. And, I reflected on my own feelings about the space and my reactions to the behaviour of the men who were present during my visit. On subsequent visits, I would consciously seek out any details that I might have missed first time around. Across and between my many visits to each site, I would mull over the similarities and differences between the men present there, and their uses of the space. I made a conscious effort to visit each site at several different times of the day and night, on different days of the week and in different seasons to get a better feel for the rhythms of how each space worked.

Herbert (2000: 559) has remarked that,

few of us will encounter the milieu about which a specific ethnographer writes, and thus need more immediate reasons to accept a given set of interpretations. Ethnographers must therefore be explicit about how they derive their interpretations, how they rendered sensible given sets of actions

and reactions with the apparatus of meaning they inferred. ... Analysts can also outline other potentially plausible interpretations, and explain why a given interpretation best accounts for the observed phenomena.

In recording the details of my observations, I attempted to be clear about how and why I interpreted certain situations in the way I did. In some cases, my status as an urban queer man familiar with certain of the sites I researched enabled me to make quick and easy, 'pre-theoretical' classifications based on my life experience (Sacks 1992). Nevertheless, I have attempted to interrogate and reflect upon these assumptions, as much as the more 'hard-won' classifications I have grappled with in less familiar surroundings. As Herbert (2000: 559) has commented (drawing on the work of Nash and Wintrob (1972)),

the observer's reactions, initial stumblings, discomforts, confusions and hard-fought competencies are all instructive in teasing out the broader background knowledges and meaning structures invoked in daily action.

Wherever relevant, I have quoted excerpts from my field notes in the empirical chapters that follow and reflected on my own experiences of carrying out the research and being in the sites I was studying. Traditionally, ethnographers have written up their research in such an arid style that it would appear that "they never make mistakes and they are never deceived by themselves or others" and complete their entire research projects without experiencing any emotions towards the people they meet or the frustrations of the process (Barley 1988: 9). I hope that, in drafting this dissertation, I have been honest enough to accept the initial mistakes and prejudicial assumptions I made upon entering unfamiliar spaces and new social groups. I have certainly attempted to be open about my emotional reactions to

certain situations and not been too coy about my reactions to some of the characters I have met along the way.

In this respect, I have attempted to live up to Thrift's (2000a) call for ethnographic researchers to be *observant participants* rather than *participant observers*, so as to better understand the situated, everyday practices through which urban spaces are used and produced (Thrift 1997a; Lees 2001). This approach also allows for a greater recognition of the embodied actions and emotions of myself as a researcher. As Kenna (1992; quoted in Parr 1998: 31) has observed, "fieldwork memories are nearly all bodily ones." Longhurst (2001: 4) has observed that although 'the body' and 'embodiment' are increasingly being discussed by geographers, few "messy traces of any particular kind of material body [are] being invoked" in these discussions. For Stoller (1997: 23) "the full presence of the ethnographer's body in the field also demands a fuller sensual awareness of the smells, tastes, sounds and textures of life." He goes on to explain how sensuous scholarship records the cultural memories and histories of the dispossessed that are inscribed and incorporated into flesh, in the form, for example, "of a scar that recalls a tortuous episode" or the memories triggered by "the stylized movements of dance" (Stoller 1997: 47).

This insight is particularly relevant in many of the spaces that I have studied. After all, a description of a night out clubbing that does not attempt to capture the exhilaration of dancing, the sensation of being pressed against a moving wall of sweaty bodies, 'hearing' a thumping bass line in your chest, and finding oneself lost in the light show would be an even poorer description than this already is. What I

am trying to suggest is that in many of the sites I am studying, senses other than sight play a very important role in an individual's capacity to use the space effectively – certainly in the 'darkroom' of a sauna or a cruising ground at night sight is of considerably less use than touch, taste and smell in making the most of the space.

Stoller's work on sensuous scholarship covers much the same ground as Thrift (1996, 2000a, 2000b) has in attempting to develop 'non-representational theory' in geography over the past decade. This work (which I draw on particularly in Chapters Six and Seven) has attempted to examine more than the meanings that people attach to their actions, but how they actually *do* things (Hoggart et al 2002: 33). Unlike the interpretative tradition in social scientific enquiry, non-representational theory has attempted to get to grips with actions, practice and performativity. This is precisely why Thrift (2000b) has called for researchers to act as 'observant participants'; because, in moving beyond representation, what becomes important are "methods that are concerned with documenting and doing" (Hoggart et al 2002: 34). Sadly, much of the literature that utilises non-representational theories is fairly obtuse about the actual methods and processes involved in carrying out work in this vein. This may be because, despite their pretensions to theoretical innovation, geographers who utilise this mode continue to rely on more established ethnographic methods (Cloke *et al* 2004: 188). In studying the practices of cruising, for example, I have largely relied upon careful observations of the men participating in the sites I studied and reflection upon my own actions in those spaces. I have considered what it feels like to be in a cruising site (for

example). I have noted the senses, other than sight, that I have employed in assessing and participating in these sites, especially after dark. And, I have reflected upon the clues I garnered about the uses, spatial functioning and etiquette of individual sites from the non-human objects in those spaces and the non-verbal practices of other users. Thrift and Dewsbury (2000: 415) have described how non-representational theory “emphasises the flow of practice in everyday life as embodied, as caught up with and committed to the creation of affect, as contextual, and as inevitably technologised through language and objects.” In concentrating on the performance of everyday skills and practices that “usually go unnoticed in the background of our lives” (Thrift 2000a: 274), non-representational theory acknowledges that embodied performance of these skills can never be fully articulated in words (Thrift 1996: 34).

The focus of non-representational theory on performative acts and its acknowledgement of the discrepancy between those acts and the language used to describe them, should serve as a reminder that the men I have studied include those that *do* queerness or *act* queerly, rather than just those who identify as ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’ or ‘queer’. This can be particularly useful in confronting the limits of language to adequately describe these men’s experiences and their subject positions (especially in those circumstances where their sexual behaviour does not neatly map onto conventional understandings of identity categories).

Despite my sympathy for many aspects of non-representational theory, I retain a suspicion that it is unable, in itself, to account for the influence of larger structural factors in shaping the performative acts and practices to which it draws

our attention. This gap has been acknowledged by Dewsbury (2003) who accepts that there is nothing wrong with representational systems of thought, except the belief that they offer the only means of sensibly understanding the world. It is for this reason, that I prefer the term 'more-than-representational' theory to 'non-representational theory' (Lorimer 2005). I am also concerned that for all its attention to bodily practices, the 'body' discussed in much non-representational writing can appear universal (Nash 2000; Tolia-Kelly 2006) and less than corporeal.

More-than-representational theory adds yet another strand of complexity to the question of how to adequately and appropriately write up and 'represent' the actions and opinions of the men I spoke to and observed during my research. These concerns were in the forefront of my mind, not just throughout the process of writing up this thesis, but also whilst carrying out the participant observation and thinking through the interview transcripts (Pryke, Rose and Whatmore 2003).

Whether I was recording formal research interviews, or talking to a man in a bar, I often found that my research data was gathered through conversations rather than 'interrogations' – the men I spoke to asked me almost as much about my own experiences, recollections and opinions as I did of them (Roseneil 2000). These dialogues gave me an opportunity to test out emerging ideas and concepts as much as to gather 'data' for future analysis. In an in-depth interview, just as in an ethnographic encounter, researchers and interviewees jointly produce knowledge (Bryman 1988; Rabinow 1977), but there is always a gap between lived experience and its retelling through narrative (Hoggart *et al* 2002: 210). In telling our life stories (whether in a research interview or in the pub with friends) we always edit

the information we share, some is included for effect, some is omitted, details are forgotten or reinterpreted for the audience. As Murray (1996: 250) has cautioned,

in answering questions or inscribing life histories at a researcher's behest, as in having sex with them, the person whose sexuality is being studied is likely to be guessing what the researcher wants to hear rather than representing his or her most fundamental desires and identities.

In analysing my field notes and the interview transcripts I tried always to bear in mind that the men I spoke to may have been tempted to tailor their responses and stories to what they had perceived (or known) my views to be (Hoggart *et al* 2002: 234). In doing so, my ethnographic observations, personal experiences and the findings from previous 'grey literature' served as a means of verifying (or, at least, contextualising) the views of these interviewees. I also interrogated the interview transcripts for 'dissenting voices' that contradicted my findings and assumptions. The importance of the interview process is not the search for absolute 'truth' but a process of examining the interpretations, opinions and emotions that are revealed through the (re-)telling of a narrative (Dean and Whyte 1970). Even so, in writing up the thesis I found myself constantly battling against a desire to promote certain voices over others. I often prioritised the voices of men who concurred most with my own observations and was overly dismissive of those men I disliked. I hope that a better balance of voices is in evidence in this final version of my work.

There were a number of men who I met through my ethnographic fieldwork who had important and interesting stories to tell, but who were resistant to the idea of recording a formal interview with me (or where the circumstances in which we met made it impractical to pursue this option). Mostly, these were one-off or infrequent encounters and thumbnail sketches of the men and their lives were

recorded in my field notes. However, there were several men with whom I had lengthy conversations over an extended period and listened to the stories they had to tell about their lives. In one or two cases we even became friends for a while. These men's stories were recorded at some length in my field notes and I attempted to include, wherever possible, key phrases and anecdotes recorded as close to verbatim as I was able to recall (at the earliest opportunity) after our conversations. In order to fully capture and utilise this rich data, I constructed case studies of these men from my notes (Dowsett 1996). These have been analysed and interrogated in a similar manner to the transcripts of the more conventional interviews I recorded. However, because at best their opinions appear as reported speech, rather than direct extracts from interview transcripts, their voices can appear a little lost in the text. It is unfortunate that so many non-white men were amongst this group, as it means that the dominant voices are those of white British men.

In analysing the lives of the men who have taken part in this study, I have examined the stories they tell about themselves and the spaces they use, in order to attempt to understand the symbolic attachments they associate with these sites and the social networks they establish, maintain or secrete through, within and between those spaces. In listening to the men's stories, I constantly had my ears open for the contradictions, inconsistencies, ambiguities and prioritisations in the tales they told. In this way, I hoped to reveal how they understood and performed their identities in relational terms and to expose the social processes that shape and affect their lives.

In some cases these men have shared a similar outlook to me and been involved in constructing alternative pre-figurative queer spaces. The majority,

though, did not. My queer urban critique builds upon the positive and negative experiences of all the men I met, but I accept that the vision I offer here for what the queer city could be like will not appeal to them all. In some ways, that is the point – queer urbanism does not seek to be hegemonic. I explore the ethical implications of carrying out research of this type in the section that follows.

3.5 From ethical dilemmas to ethical commitments

Ethical commitments have permeated every aspect of this research. In particular, there is an ethico-political engagement with how we might live queerly at the core of my queer urban critique. This methodological approach understands queer not so much as an identity category, but as a relational ethics of engaging with sexual and gender difference that challenges practices that perpetuate division, and domination. Queer urban life experiments in a very hands-on, do-it-yourself way with means of engaging with the city that are not limited by existing reified sexual and gender identities. This approach holds as ethical commitment to the importance of individuals remaining connected to the social processes of collectively and creatively building queer space. This queer urbanism offers signposts towards a world in which we care more for ourselves and others. It offers opportunities for moving towards this goal, without necessarily having all of the solutions for how to get there.

Informed by this vision, I now consider my ethical responses to the process of carrying out this research. The post-structuralist assault on universal philosophical categories poses a significant challenge to traditional understandings

of ethics (Popke 2003: 300). After all, post-structuralism suggests that any universal claims to truth and knowledge actually act as an obstacle to a sensitive engagement with difference, “and thus ethics would need to find its purchase in the radical instability of meaning and the deconstruction of universal normative claims” (Popke 2003: 300). Popke (2003: 311) suggests that there is a positive way in which to engage with this dilemma and still act ethically in our research:

The theoretical disruption of our ontological and political certainties can be a means to reinscribe a sense of responsibility toward the other, because it implies that we must weight alternatives, make judgements and intervene in contexts whose complexity with always exceed predetermined formulations.

This approach resonates with Day’s (2005) concepts of ‘groundless solidarity’ and ‘infinite responsibility’ that were discussed at the end of the previous chapter, and which can be found in Bunge’s geographical expedition, that I discussed earlier in this chapter. As I argue in the pages that follow, I have largely attempted to follow this advice and apply my ethical beliefs in the context of specific situations and encounters. As my quotidian life is so entwined with the spaces and people I have studied for this project, normal standards of ethical research have been complicated. For the last five years (and more), I have been living, working, playing and acting-up in the East End, as well as carrying out research there, and this has entailed negotiating a whole range of different ethical stances. As I have already stated, journeys through east London that started with one purpose often ended up fulfilling different ends. This has meant that acting ethically in the ‘field’ has required me to apply a flexible balance of professional, sexual and political ethics, alongside an ethical approach to my research, and a respect for the specific ethics of the sites I have visited. Sometimes those different ethical codes and impulses have

been in contradiction with each other. Judgements about what may (or may not) be ethical have needed to be applied in site and situationally specific ways and have, of necessity, had to be open to constant re-assessment and negotiated in practice (Bailey 2001). Furthermore, I have not attempted to sweep these ethical dilemmas under the carpet, nor have I ignored the moments of dispute and disagreement that have occurred during my fieldwork, or the times when my loyalties have been tested and thrown into question. These tensions are part of everyday life and friendly dispute often enriches normal human relationships (Jarvie 1969). All of these moments and dilemmas are included in this text because they are central to the autobiographically informed, reflexive ethnography that I have attempted to produce (Marcus 1999).

Let me give an example of a situation in which 'normal,' and increasingly risk-adverse (Thrift 2003), guidelines for ethical research are confounded - in sites where non-verbal communication predominates, such as public sex spaces, there are limits to normal standards of informed consent. In this context consent (to be there, to watch the action or to participate in it) is communicated through the complex, silent choreography of cruising bodies. In a public sex environment a non-participant is potentially a policeman or a queer-basher and can squash any action that is taking place, whilst the presence of a voyeur will often change the dynamic of play. Overt observation would disrupt the integrity of the site (which I believe is in itself ethically dubious) and potentially distance me from more 'hard to reach' groups of men. Conversely, covert observation in itself causes no harm to the men concerned (as long as due care is taken to maintain their anonymity etc.). However,

as Katz (1994: 71) has cautioned, sometimes it is not enough simply to protect the anonymity of research participants, at times it is more important to withhold some data (or to report it selectively) in order not to expose the “sensitive practices of subaltern people to those who (might) use this knowledge to oppress them.” I have borne this advice in mind when drafting my reports both of public sex environments and some of the practices of the radical queer activists I have been working with. For example, throughout the process of writing up this dissertation, and presenting various conference papers over recent years, I have repeatedly agonised over how much information to reveal about the location of one particular public toilet where men meet for homosex. Such sites are increasingly rare and I did not want to contribute (in even the smallest way) to drawing too much unwanted attention to this site. But then the site appeared to close permanently and I started to be more open about its location, only to find that, as I worked on the final draft of the dissertation, the toilet had re-opened, albeit under closer scrutiny. I am now in the awkward position of having named the site in academic circles at a time when its continuing existence is arguably more precarious than ever. Although it always amused me how many queer geographers and historians have a personal investment in this site – more than one was able to identify it even at the times when I tried hardest to obscure its real location.

Throughout that strand of my fieldwork that took place in cruising sites, I found it easy to be open about my research with men from diverse backgrounds once initial rapport had been established and I had been acknowledged as a ‘regular’ in the sites that they frequented. This approach allowed me to communicate with a

wider range of men than I might hope to have recruited through press adverts or snowballing from my established friendship networks. I certainly believe that my participation in these sites provided me with a better understanding of the embodied experience of cruising and the specific dynamics of using each site than I could otherwise have appreciated. The transgressive thrill of communal sex and the disappointments of rejection are an important aspect of the act of public homosex that could never be fully captured without experiencing them.

The American anthropologist, Bolton (1995), has written about his own participation in the sexual cultures of Belgian gay men, which resulted in a body of work on sexual behaviour in the context of the AIDS pandemic (Bolton, Vincke and Mak 1994). He argues that the nuances of sexual cultures are best learnt about through direct participation rather than pure observation or simple interviews. As he puts it, “[o]nce one has shared physical and emotional intimacy, sharing other knowledge about oneself seems easier” (Bolton 1995: 149). In the face of a certain amount of professional criticism for his active participation in the sexual life of the Brussels’ gay scene, Bolton (1995: 149) was unrepentant.

I cannot imagine doing field work without sex... It is most definitely not a sacrifice I would make for my profession. But the question of identity is implicated as well. In the hierarchy of components of my personal identity, gayness ranks higher than ethnicity, nationality, and profession. And that aspect of my being is expressed and celebrated through sex.

Of course, as Bolton has highlighted, standard processes of informed consent and research ethics are in themselves no guarantee that research participants will be protected from harm. He cites his own involvement, as a research subject, in a major AIDS study that left him feeling violated and harmed, when the published

findings included conclusions and recommendations that he viewed as culturally insensitive and deeply homophobic. In response to this experience and his critics, he concluded that,

in the final analysis, the protection of participants in research depends much more on the integrity, intentions, and intelligence of investigators and on their primary allegiance to the well-being of the population being studied than on formal, bureaucratic instruments (Bolton 1995: 156).

It should be clear from what I have already written, that I care passionately about the East End of London and that my primary allegiance remains with the men and women I meet on a day to day basis in the area.

Routledge's (2002) research on the environmental impact of the international tourist industry in Goa similarly blurs the simple norms of traditional research ethics. During his fieldwork in southern India, Routledge posed as a European tour operator, 'Walter Kurtz', in order to pursue covert research in the tourist industry with the aim of gathering evidence for two local activist organisations that were opposed to the destabilising effect of tourism on the local economy and environment. Once again, the question of what is (or is not) an ethical form of research must be considered in the context of the socially engaged aims of the research project and the loyalties of the researcher. As Valentine (2003: 378) has commented,

sticking to ethical guidelines or codes of good practice can be particularly challenging in the course of research that aims to explore the institutions that produce marginalization.

Nevertheless, as Routledge (2002) has acknowledged, as academics, we cannot fully escape our institutional identities and locations. This, once again, raises

the need for critical geographers to be aware, not only of our own privileges (which include the opportunity to pursue research itself, as well as the material resources, such as computers, grants and libraries, that we have access to (Chouinard 2000)), but also the ways in which we attempt to represent the views and interests of ‘resisting others’ that we may be working with (Routledge 1996, 2001; 2004). Routledge (2002: 485) does, however, suggest that whilst we cannot ignore our privileged positions as academics and intellectuals, we can “at least subvert them, or make them work for us in political ways that attempt to effect social, environmental, and political change”.

There is also the issue of whether it is possible for a researcher to adequately represent the views and opinions of members of social groups other than their own. I have already explored the limits of representational forms of writing to describe those affects, practices and intuitions that occur pre-cognitively. To ignore these activities is to limit our understanding of how humans relate to the world. However, representational thinking of a different kind also has significant political consequences for academic writing, as May (1994: 48) articulates:

The critique of representation in the anarchist tradition runs deeper than just political representation. ... What motivates the critique of political representation is the idea that in giving people images of who they are and what they desire, one wrests from them the ability to decide those matters for themselves. Representation, in the anarchist tradition, must be understood not merely in its political connotations but more widely as an attempt to wrest from people decisions about their lives.

On one level, this highlights the imperative that due care needs to be employed to ensure that we as academics work as much as possible *with* subaltern groups, rather than *on* them. The socially engaged research strategies advocated by

Bunge (1971), Nast (1994) and others (Gibson-Graham 2006), which I discussed earlier in this chapter, go some way towards suggesting how such an ethical approach might be enacted. However, in the context of a research project that seeks (at least partially) to offer a vision of what the future queer city might be like, this ethical concern highlights the centrality of the non-hegemonic, minoritarian mode to the politics I am attempting to articulate here. Herbert (2000: 562-3) has suggested that in order to avoid presenting an over-simplified, tidy, vision of a social world, ethnographers should pursue: forthrightness (with both research subjects and audiences), reflexivity and modesty. As he remarks, “if knowledges are always positioned and partial, it follows that our claims for them should be moderate” (Herbert 2000: 563). Again, this is reminiscent of Day’s (2005: 18) call for an ‘infinite responsibility’ that is always “open to the invitation of another Other, always [...] ready to hear a voice that points out how one is not adequately in solidarity, despite one’s best efforts,” and Gibson-Graham’s (2006: 8) preference for practising ‘weak theory’ that refuses to know too much or extend analyses too far.

That this research draws upon the opinions and experiences of men who are my friends, colleagues and neighbours has also posed certain ethical dilemmas for me. Throughout the process of researching this doctorate there has been an extent to which, like a policeman, I have never been off duty. I do not think this has meant that friends have edited what they have said to me, but it has certainly made me think long and hard about when to record a chance, revealing comment made by a friend after one too many beers. Equally, I am conscious that in writing up the empirical aspects of my research, I have tended to take greater care than normal to

preserve the anonymity of people who are close to me. That, in turn, has forced me to question whether I have taken sufficient care to mask the identities of the other men I have written about. It also potentially exposes the tensions between the ethics that inspired this research as a piece of socially-engaged research intended to inform progressive political practice and my duty of care to the men I have been working with. However, I take a certain amount of solace in Maxey's (1999: 203-4) suggestion that, as academics, we may sometimes tend to overestimate the importance of our research to the lives of the people we interview and work amongst.

In common with Oakley (1979) and Stanley and Wise (1993), for example, I now recognise that most of the people studied do not relate to me primarily as a 'researcher'. I am at various points a friend, acquaintance, rather enthusiastic (and, for some, extreme) activist and fellow activist. ... I cannot attempt to fulfil all my responsibilities to the residents solely in terms of my research role, as my research is not the defining moment in my life nor in the lives of the case-study residents. ... There is a tendency, when engaged in research, to elevate its importance. For some of my interviewees, 'forgetting' my research was part of their making sense of the world – research meant very little in their lives. They did not relate to me as a researcher, even after I had discussed my work with them, because there were, for them, far more salient links between us.

Maxey's honesty in this respect is a salient reminder of the importance of intellectual modesty, reflexivity and understandings of power and identity as relational and performative. In particular, a reflexive approach highlights the importance of acknowledging the multiple relationships played out in and around our research. An ethical approach, for me, must be contextual and acknowledge the blurred boundaries between my research and the rest of my life.

3.6 Towards a queer urban geography of East London

In the chapter that follows, I examine issues of social class as they impact on the lives of gay men in East London. Although I recognise that they are not representative of all gay men in the area, and despite my best efforts to engage with a wider pool of men, the men whose voices are heard most recurrently in the next chapter are all pretty much men like me. They are reasonably well-educated men rapidly approaching forty who grew up in suburban London and Essex to working class parents and now work in professional roles within the public sector. Some times I think they represent those aspects of my life that are seen by the greatest number of people. Or perhaps they reflect the most respectable persona that I present to the world? Of course, there are aspects of my life to be found threaded through all four of the empirical chapters that follow. I am certainly there in the coffee bars and funky boutiques visited in the discussion of cosmopolitan space in Spitalfields in Chapter Five. I hold embodied memories of cruising and public homosex that I don't intend to fully disclose, but which mean that I have a degree of empathy and common experience with some of the men encountered through the discussion of opportunist moments of queer autonomy in Chapter Six. And, as I have also discussed throughout this chapter, I spent two years completely entangled with the activist networks about whom I write in Chapter Seven. That my involvement in those networks has waned somewhat over the last year or so says something about the pressures of juggling part-time doctoral research with a full-time job and the rest of life. However, it also speaks of a more reflective period in which I have recognised the limits of autonomous queer urban experiments when

they fail to engage with the needs of a broader range of people than just twenty-something queer punks living precarious lives in the neoliberal city.

I have just charted the parallels and connections between my own life, my autobiography, and the spaces discussed at different stages of this dissertation. It could be argued that the dissertation progresses from how I live my life now, and my doubts and frustrations with that, through a series of experiments with other ways of living in the city, each of which have their own limitations. The autonomous queer spaces discussed in Chapter Seven offered me a glimpse of how things could be, and in my conclusion I consider other ways in which these lessons can be applied without ever expecting or wanting them to become hegemonic. After all, at the core of my queer urban critique is the recognition that the city can only really become queer as we each work with others to actively shape it in ways that offer the best opportunity of meeting our needs and our desires.

Before progressing further, it is worth restating the focus of each of the remaining chapters. In the first of my four empirical chapters, I consider issues of social class as they impact on the lives of gay and queer men in East London. In this chapter I analyze the occupational class positions of those men who were most closely involved my study in order to attempt to identify which gay class fractions have been most attracted to inner East London over the last decade. I examine how these gay class fractions (differentially) shape the local landscape through their participation in the housing market, and how they create their own distinctive forms of gay space in East London, through their consumption of the commercial gay

scene. Finally I question how these different class fractions win and lose as a result of how the area is coded.

I take this analysis further in the following chapter by thinking more holistically about 'sites of difference' (Anderson 1998) in East London. In particular, I contrast the differential experiences of transnational gay urbanism between 'gay' men from some of east London's more established diasporic and migrant communities and those men who consume Spitalfields as a symbolic cosmopolitan zone. I pay particular attention to the ways in which Spitalfields provides contradictory opportunities for non-heterosexual men living and working in the area depending on their class and ethnic background. I also question whether some avant garde 'queer' cultural experiments have already become valorised and recuperated, such that they further add to the bohemian, cosmopolitan coding of areas such as Spitalfields and Hoxton.

My focus then moves away from gay space in East London and turns towards the different expressions of queer space in the area. Chapter Six examines sites of public homosex, which I argue offer an example of queer spaces being (re)produced by men who do not always necessarily think of themselves as gay, let alone queer. In line with the prefigurative aspect of queer urbanism, I examine how, through the practices that occur in these spaces, men experience acts of cruising and public homosex in ways which can revitalise their lives, challenge preconceived notions of identity and offer new modes of relating to others. The intention here is to reveal the modes of encounter, being and becoming, that operate through these

spaces and to articulate a minor politics of care-taking and spontaneous, opportunistic experiments in autonomy.

Building upon this discussion, Chapter Seven considers the lessons for future queer urban politics that can be learned from recent intentional experiments in the creation of autonomous queer spaces in East London. Here I examine the processes by which a loose network of radical queer activists have organised a series 'do-it-yourself', autonomous alternatives to the commercial gay scene over the last five years. Although this chapter examines the intensity of feelings experienced by the participants in these autonomous queer spaces, it also critically engages with some of their failings and limits.

In the final chapter I offer a summary of the key findings of this research, especially as they suggest elements of a distinct geography of gay life in East London. I reflect on some of the many ways in which the process of being engaged in this research has forced me to question some of my own assumptions about my class and ethnic privilege, and the changing ways in which I have approached my sexual identity and my masculinity. I note some of the key ways in which my political ideas and attachment to particular modes of academic theorising have changed over the last five years. On the basis of my findings and my personal reflections, I suggest some potentially useful strands for queer geographic enquiry, as well as recognising how my work might help take these forward. I close by contemplating how, on the basis of the experiments I have witnessed in East London and the theories I have developed, we might begin to creatively experiment with queerer forms of urban living.

GAY CLASS TRACTION IN EAST LONDON

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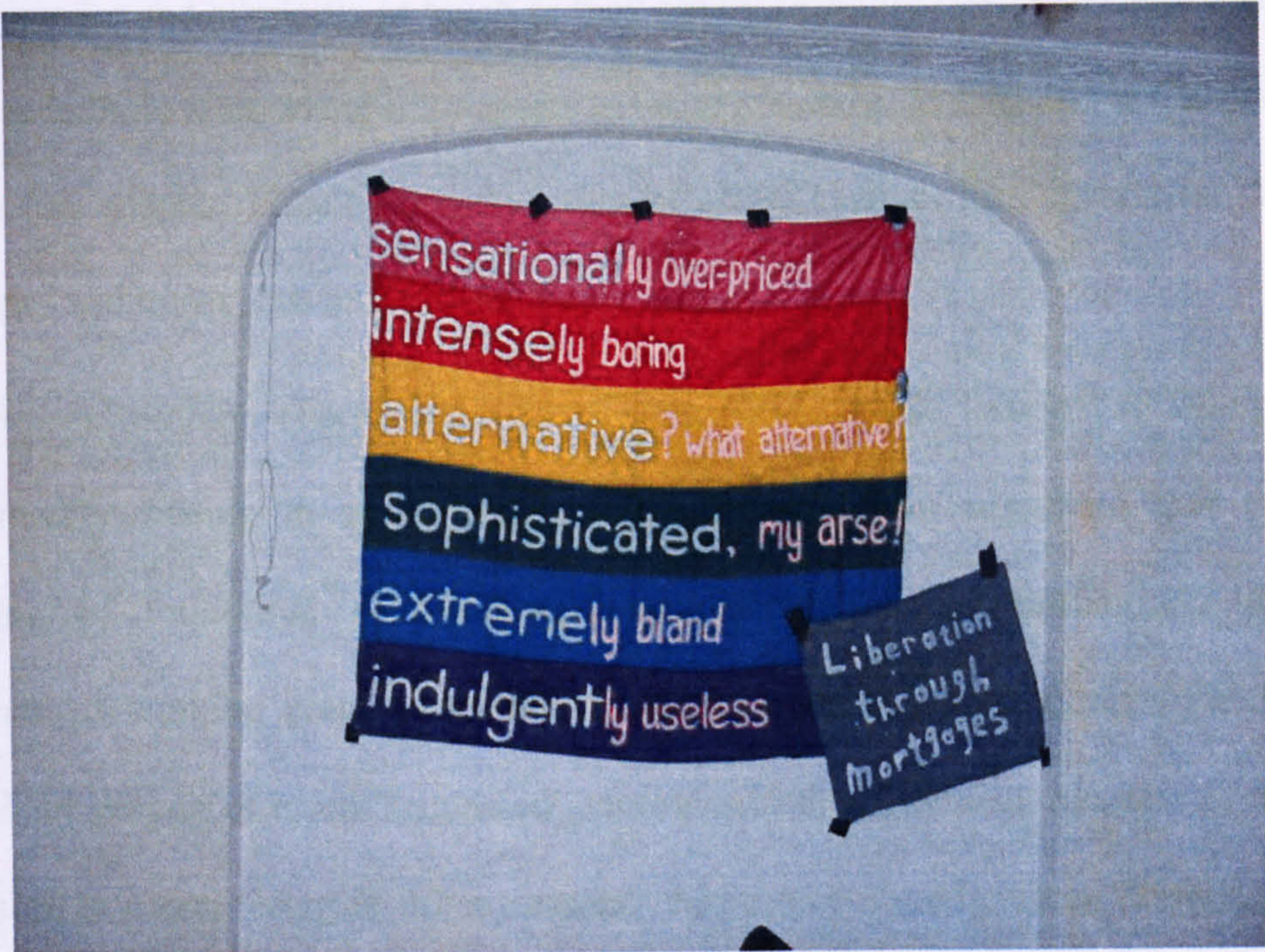


Figure 4: Alternative rainbow flag, Queer Mutiny party, June 2003

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CHAPTER FOUR:

GAY CLASS FRACTIONS IN EAST LONDON

The gay, post-gay and queer spaces discussed in this dissertation are shaped by class, gender and ethnicity, as much as they are by sexuality (this is the case even in the case in those sites where sex appears to be centre-stage, as I discuss in Chapter Six). In this chapter, I shall examine issues of social class as they impact on the lives of gay and queer men in East London.

Several authors (Escoffier 1985; Knopp 1987, 1992; Lauria and Knopp 1985), mostly writing in a North American context, have suggested that the weakening of traditional gendered divisions of labour and particularly the dominance of working class masculinities tied to manual labour along with the concomitant growth of more 'feminised' service sector employment has served the interests of gay men living in urban centres. More recently, Hennessy (2000) has initiated a more detailed consideration of how different gay people from various class and ethnic backgrounds win or lose in the contemporary international division of labour – for example, gaining materially, if they happen to be working in the more professionalised echelons of the service sector, where the flexible performance of a gay identity can be a highly marketable 'soft skill'. Less optimistically, Bell and Binnie (2000) have critically engaged with the dominance of middle class social norms within British society, suggesting that it has served the interests of those gay people who are willing and able to adapt to these normative values, but further

marginalizing those who continue to live their lives according to other, queerer mores.

In the pages that follow, I begin by surveying the occupational class positions of the men who were most closely involved in this study, and suggest the presence of a number of local gay class fractions on the basis of the patterns that emerge. Then I analyse the men's attitudes to class and the way in which they talk about their own class position, as well as that of others. Finally, I examine how these gay class fractions shape the local landscape through their participation in the housing market, and how they create a distinctive form of gay space in East London, through their consumption of the commercial gay scene.

4.1 In search of gay class fractions

In an echo of earlier feminist debates about gender and class, there are limits to what quantitative research on class can reveal about how gay people understand and experience class in their everyday lives. Even many otherwise useful qualitative studies of processes of class formation, such as Butler and Robson's (2003) examination of the role of local education markets in shaping processes of gentrification, tell us little of the lives of gay people because they rely on an unacknowledged assumption of heterosexuality. As Skeggs (2004) has described, class is known and spoken in myriad different ways, always working through categorisations of race, gender, nation and sexuality.

In this section, I begin the process of attempting to identify the range of different class fractions that exist within East London's gay populations. In the context of their study of gentrification and middle class formation in London, Butler and Robson (2003: 8) warn of the danger of 'simply reading different groups off from their 'objective' class/occupational positions'. For them, processes of class formation are better understood as

emerging out of the dialectical interplay of varying forms of social capital and *habitus* on the one hand, and the distinctive opportunities, across a range of fields, offered by metropolitan marketplaces on the other. (Butler and Robson 2003: 8).

In a similar vein, Skeggs (2004) favours understanding social class as a process. At the same time, she recognises the continuing salience of positionality to the study of social class. In bridging these two positions, Skeggs argues that instead of thinking about class purely in terms of social location, qualitative class analysis should consider the degree of flexibility and fluidity available to individuals. She suggests that while everyone is fixed, to some extent, in their class location, some individuals are better placed than others to utilise economic, social and cultural resources to modify their class status, this includes the extent to which gay men can convert forms of gay symbolic and cultural capital into resources that have exchange value outside of those sub-cultural contexts (despite my decision to work with these terms, I acknowledge Gibson-Graham's (2006) critique of their 'capitalocentrism'). In the narratives of the gay men that follow, these processes of mobility (or being chained in place) can be seen time and again. Some men have utilised formal education to escape limiting family backgrounds in order to lead more openly gay lives or enjoy a level of material comfort that enables them better

and more frequent access to the trappings of an urban gay lifestyle. Some have enjoyed a degree of social mobility as a result of cross-class relationships with more middle class men. Others have accepted a degree of downward social mobility as the 'cost' of enjoying to the full a hedonistic gay lifestyle – reduced income, status and security is traded for the ability to lead a carefree life of clubbing and partying. As Reay (2005: 140) has remarked, for some sections of the middle classes, downward mobility is experienced as a playful process that can actually enhance rather than diminish their social and cultural resources.

Like the other researchers already cited above, Savage and his co-authors (Savage *et al* 1992) have stressed the importance of disaggregating crude class categorisations in order to elucidate more subtle analyses that acknowledge the increasing horizontal and vertical segmentation within class groupings. Despite the warnings of Savage, Butler and others, in the rest of this section, I examine the various occupational groups found amongst the men that I interviewed and got to know through the course of my research. In doing so, I utilise the narratives of several men to elaborate further on the social processes by which the men came to occupy their current class positions. I also pay attention to the ways in which they relate their sexuality to their occupational positionality. In the sections that follow, I listen more carefully to how these men talk about class (or don't), as well as how they *do* class. Mindful of Butler and Robson's (2003) argument that class should be understood as emerging out of the interplay of social class and habitus in the context of various metropolitan markets, I then examine expressions of class formation and classed symbolism through gay men's engagement with local housing markets and

on the commercial gay scene. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I attempt to get to grips with the way class is lived on a daily basis and permeates even the most mundane judgements and relationships (Reay 2005: 142). In doing so, I remain attentive to the tendency for middle class experiences and values to be viewed as normative, with the consequent depiction of the working classes as personally and collectively deficient (Reay 1998). There is certainly a danger of attempting to replicate Butler and Robson's analytical model too widely, as it was explicitly developed in the study of middle class gentrifiers, and must have its limits in understanding the (more limited) choices in the housing and employment markets available to working class people.

The largest group of men I encountered through my research were those who worked in broadly welfare-related jobs in the public sector. These men were employed across a spectrum of jobs from routine care work through semi-professional administrative support roles to highly educated men in the higher status health professions. They included a support worker in a hostel for the homeless, a finance officer attached to a local social services department, several nurses, a teacher and a general practitioner based in a deprived area of south Newham (although he lived in the highly gentrified zone of Stoke Newington (Butler 1997)).

I now examine in a little more detail the working lives of two men I interviewed who were working in welfare-related roles in the local public sector. Steve grew up in a working class family on a council estate in Poplar. At the time I first met him in the late 1990s he was a senior manager for a local council. He has

subsequently gone freelance as a trainer and researcher. He is in a long-term relationship with a hospital physician. Steve told his story in the following terms:

I was unemployed for five years after leaving school. I went to a local catholic boys' school, which I suppose is a bit more unusual. And ... and, sort of, wasn't particularly interested in ... grew up feeling quite alienated from my peers, really; and wasn't particularly interested in following the occupations of my parents, who were both factory workers, which is part of the reason why I was unemployed, because I would rather not work than have anything to do with that sort of work. ... Didn't go to university after school, that wasn't expected. I did do A levels, but I abandoned most of them and ended up going to university much later, but only two people from my year actually went to university, out of a hundred, again that was fairly typical... (Interview with Steve).

Although Steve's experiences confirm that higher education was not a common aspiration for white working class young men from the East End (a trend that has not changed significantly in the twenty years since he left school), they complicate the assertions of some educational sociologists (Archer *et al* 2001) who have suggested that those working class men who progress to higher education are usually motivated by practical and, often, financial ends, rather than any desire to become (like the) middle class. Steve's engagement with higher education and his relationship with his parents' class background is clearly a little contradictory – although, as we shall see later, he is very proud of his working class roots, he was adamant that the routine, production line work of his parents was not for him. Still, in his alienation from his parents' milieu, he was prepared to exist on the dole for a long time until he was able to re-embark on his education. Although, Steve has now achieved a degree of professional recognition, status and financial security, he was keen to explain that had been a long time coming.

I didn't earn very much money until recently. It is only in the last three years that I've almost, sort of, made it in terms of my profession and been making a

decent amount of money. Up until [the mid-1990s] I hadn't made more than about £8000, 'cos, I was doing bits of voluntary work and part-time work, and stuff like that, so... the economics certainly kept me in Tower Hamlets. (Interview with Steve).

Steve's current position adds credence to Reay's claim (2001: 334) that in the few cases when working class young people achieve academic success, their education becomes a means of escaping their 'working classness' rather than validating it. Unlike middle class children who endure education in order to reproduce the status of their parents, working class young people frequently lose or give up something of their parents' habitus in the process of obtaining a university education (Ball *et al* 2002: 69).

We shall hear more from Steve later in this chapter. I turn now to Chris's tale.

I'm from the West Midlands originally, Staffordshire, and also from a small village in South Staffs, then left school and went into engineering in that area. Decided not to stay in engineering, but get into community work, so I went to work for the army for two years or three, as a community worker, in Germany and that was strange - it was very homophobic. ... Very racist, very sexist, it was all that. And then I retrained in Birmingham for two years to become a youth and community worker. I moved down to London and moved straight into the East End, actually, straight into Bethnal Green. [Originally] I worked in Shadwell as a project worker providing primary health care services and support services to people living on the streets. (Interview with Chris).

Like Steve, Chris (eventually) used higher education as a means of leaving behind his manual working class roots; although, unlike Steve, he initially tried out factory work in the engineering industry before using that other standard means for working class men to escape their place of origin – joining the army (Bell and Binnie 2000). Interestingly, as we shall hear later in the chapter, Chris claims to have found all the positive benefits of the close-knit working class village life that he

left behind amongst the gay community in Bethnal Green. Having previously worked as a project worker with homeless people, at the time of our interview, Chris was working as a youth worker with lesbian and gay youth, a job which he claimed, with a certain amount of punning irony had turned him into a 'professional gay man'. Although, Chris gained a great deal of job satisfaction from this work, he found that it made his use of the commercial gay scene quite problematic:

I don't tend to find a club/pub sort of environment very conducive for what I need, you know, my contact needs, or whatever, community, my community. Working with lesbian and gay young people means that a lot of the young men that I work with I can bump into in venues, which creates all sorts of boundary issues. (Interview with Chris).

Instead, Chris primarily socialised via various gay social groups – going on walking holidays with the Gay Outdoors Club and singing with the London Gay Men's Chorus.

A second significant group of my respondents worked in the cultural industries. These men included those who were directly and creatively involved in the production of cultural products – an architectural technician, a DJ and a web designer – but also several men working in more managerial positions in the cultural support industries, such as theatre marketing and public relations for clients in the film industry. Another man worked just a couple of days a week as a consultant organising large exhibitions and tradeshow at various major venues around London. He also made a substantial income from property investment that had initially been financed from the profits resulting from a sale of a previous business of his. In general, these were amongst the most affluent and most entrepreneurial of the men that I have interviewed for this project. All of these men, apart from Agustin, the

(Spanish) architectural technician, were openly gay (or bisexual) in their working lives.

With a small number of exceptions, most of the (now) middle class men I spoke to worked in the two sectors already discussed. A small number of men, who (again) had mostly grown up in working class families, worked in intermediate technical roles related to IT. Joe was one of them. At the time I first met him in 2000, he was working as an IT technician for a major high street bank. He has subsequently been made redundant and, after a short period of unemployment, is now once again employed in a technical role, this time for a large telecommunications company. Joe is in his mid-thirties and grew up in a working class, London Irish family. He wasn't formally educated beyond A levels, but is intelligent, articulate and well-informed about politics and current affairs. When we first got to know each other, Joe was in the eleventh year of a relationship with the mother of his five-year old daughter. Prior to, and throughout, that relationship he had had a number of affairs and one-night stands with men. Although, at the time, he was prepared to identify as bisexual in 'gay' company, he was not 'out' to any members of his family or close friendship circle (Hemmings 2002). I found it quite interesting, therefore, that Joe, who was a trade union representative in his workplace, participated in meetings of his union's lesbian and gay caucus. I shall return to Joe's story later in the chapter to further tease out the ways in which his changing attitude towards his sexual identity has been shaped by his class background. However, for now, the point that needs to be made is that, in many ways, Joe's working life exemplifies a post-industrial version of the traditional

working class prioritisation of on-the-job training over employment in order to achieve a certain degree of financial security.

Jim also worked in the IT industry. On one level, also coming from a working class London Irish family, his life history was quite similar to Joe's. However, Jim's route into work as an IT technician was quite different. Unlike Joe, he was highly educated, having undertaken a PhD in biomedical sciences. Jim had grown disillusioned with the relatively low wages available for post-doctoral scientific research in British academia, the insecurity of living from one short-term contract to another, as well as the pressures to publish regularly in prestigious journals. As a result he had quit academia for the IT support sector. Curiously, like Joe, Jim was also reticent about being too open about his sexuality amongst most of his friends.

The life histories of most of the men I have introduced so far in this chapter, record the experiences of relatively intellectually capable working class men who have utilised higher education or advanced vocational education to progress their careers in various sectors and acquire a modicum of financial security as a result. They are men whose lives have followed a very similar trajectory to my own, and I felt very comfortable working with them. For less academically capable (or engaged) young gay men from similarly working class backgrounds, the available career opportunities are more limited. Over the years that I have been carrying out this research, I have met many such men who end up working either in the most routine aspects of social care or in catering. Very often these men flip back and forth between the two sectors. Work in the retail sector is another option for these

young men. In writing this, I have in mind a young man I met in passing a couple of years ago; who had been educated in a succession of 'failing' schools, achieving just a few basic vocational qualifications in Health and Social Care. He claimed to be dyslexic, and this may well be the case, but I got the distinct impression that his learning difficulties were more severe than that. At the time of our meeting, he was working as a chef in a large chain-pub, but was signed off work, having badly scalded his hand in an accident at work – a reminder that employment in retail, catering and the lower levels of social care is increasingly precarious, with poorly enforced health and safety measures (Gleeson 2001).

Of course, not all the men I spoke to who worked in the catering and leisure industries found themselves stuck at the bottom of the career ladder. Nigel had worked in hotel management before retiring. Ed works as a catering manager for the Royal Mail.

Another broad area of employment that was popular with the men I surveyed were those aspects of the transport sector that involved most contact with the public. Warren had worked as an airline steward for nearly twenty years, much of that time being based overseas. Since returning to live in UK in the late 1990s, he has continued to work for the airline, but now has a desk-based role in their London offices. Several other men worked in more quotidian aspects of the transport infrastructure as bus controllers, or as station staff on the underground. Although such work is popular with gay men in London, Stan pointed out that his shift pattern as a station supervisor, disrupted his ability to access the gay scene. Nevertheless, he claimed that with the exception of occasional forays to 'bear' clubs (for the fuller-

figured, hairier gay man), he was not that inclined to make too much use of the scene anyway, which he felt was generally too expensive, pretentious and out of step with his needs.

It is worth remembering that gay employment in the transport and travel industries is not a new phenomenon (Houlbrook 2005). In his survey of gay people living in Newham, Barlow (2003) interviewed an older gay man, Peter, who had settled in Newham after leaving the merchant navy.

Given the erstwhile location of London's docks in Newham and Tower Hamlets, it seems likely that Peter is not the only older man locally to have enjoyed a similar career. On leaving the merchant navy, Peter worked as an entertainer on both the local gay *and* straight pub circuits. Barlow (2003: 26) recounts that Peter 'remembers Newham as a place where it was difficult and dangerous to be gay, except in the traditional pubs, where you were welcomed if you were camp'. Peter's reminiscences disrupt prejudicial middle class assumptions that equate the working classes with social backwardness and homophobia. Nevertheless, Chris reported how, in an earlier phase of his career, he had worked with older homeless men in Tower Hamlets, many of whom had been in the merchant navy. He believed that many of these men, who were "basically drinking themselves to death" were "dealing with ... internalised homophobia," (Interview with Chris).

There was a range of men I met whose employment did not fit neatly into any of the categories I have previously discussed. There were a few men, mostly either well into middle age, or from well-established minority ethnic groups, who were working in more traditionally 'masculine' working class jobs – as bricklayers,

maintenance staff or electricians. Bill, who was in his early fifties when I first met him described his life, his sexuality and his relationships in the following terms:

I am a builder, a brickie, from Manchester, based in London since 1966. I came down for the World Cup and never went back. I have been married twice and have five children. I was a footballer for [my local pub] and played until I was forty-five. I will get involved with community projects when I retire from being a brickie. My access course in IT, politics, history and English inspired me to become a more active member. ... I'm bisexual (90% gay). I had a sexual encounter in 1966 and never went back. I had an alcoholic drink in a pub, went to a sex booth and a bloke followed me in. We had oral sex and masturbation, I told my wife and we split up. I go to saunas for sex now – it's cheaper. I have gay friends and all my family know, but I am not out about my sexuality generally - my wife knows but I don't want the lads to know (aged 28 and 25 years) - they are against gay people, racist and homophobic. (Interview with Bill).

Although Bill now recognises that he is mostly attracted to men, he suggests that his initial sexual contact with another man was largely a chance encounter. He also charts the contradictory and sometimes tense negotiation of his sexuality with members of his immediate family – by implication suggesting that he has found it easier to be open about his desires with female family members than with his sons (who he positions as reactionary on a number of fronts). Although, like Joe and Jim, Bill was not open about his sexuality with the men he played sports with, he was more optimistic that the two younger men about how his team-mates might react, if he did tell them:

I play football with five mates - if I outed myself to them I think it would be OK, I'm sure of that. (Interview with Bill).

Like Bill, most of the men who were working in more manual jobs identified as bisexual, rather than gay. As many of these men volunteered to take part in the Newham Gay Survey (Rickard and Brown 2001), it seems unlikely that they are simply using a bisexual identification as a semi-closeted state – indeed to make such

an assumption is to buy into a homonormative discourse that privileges an authentic and homogenous 'gay' identity (Hemmings 2002). More accurately, this data highlights the spectrum of available non-heterosexual identities and the complexities of working class homosexualities.

There were also a group of men who were not in formal employment when I spoke to them. Several men, particularly amongst the Newham sample (who, it must be remembered were originally interviewed not for this project, but for a local authority-sponsored sexual health needs assessment) had been medically retired as a result of their HIV status. One man, who was married with two children, was engaged in sex work, running a dungeon for masochists and submissives. Finally, through my fieldwork in various public sex environs, but particularly the public toilet discussed in Chapter Six, I met several men who were homeless and either living on the streets or in temporary hostel accommodation in the area. Most of them appeared to have substance abuse problems, untreated psychiatric disorders, or both.

Throughout this brief narrative survey of the occupational status of gay men in East London and the processes by which they arrived at their current social position, we have caught a few telling glimpses into the broader social and cultural circuits within these men live their lives, as well as the meanings that they attach to those networks and processes. In other words, I have touched on the habitus of a number of gay class fractions in the area. As Butler and Robson (2003: 8) explain, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus refers to "the ways in which processes of class formation, and reproduction, are facilitated by the storage and (transposable)

transmission of core cultural dispositions in the individual.” In other words, class dispositions and histories are materialised in the individual body. Bourdieu conceived that this array of dispositions were inherited and conditioned one’s bodily appearance and movement, as well as cultural tastes and judgements, according to class position. In the context of specifically gay class fractions, class habitus is complicated by the array of gay subcultural affiliations – after all, very few of us acquire these ‘bent knowledges’ (Joyce 2001) from our parents or our schooling, picking them up instead from media representations and active participation in gay social networks.

Through his many studies of gentrification, Ley (1980, 1994, 1996) has identified the habitus of new middle class fractions with liberal political orientations as being central to the initial processes of gentrification in many inner city districts around the world. For him, these middle class professionals distinguished themselves from more traditional sections of the middle class through a set of cultural values that favoured and appreciated the historic preservation of the urban core and the consumption of non-standardised commodities (Bridge 2001: 205). As will become clear later in this chapter, as I examine gay involvement in East London’s housing markets, elements of this habitus can be found amongst many of the more middle class gay men living in the area, albeit with a distinctly gay twist. However, such cultural values are contested by other men and are far from universal. For me, it is important to remember that class formation is a dynamic process that is produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic (Skeggs 2004). As such, I find it useful to interrogate the (‘new’) middle class norms identified by

Ley, and to problematise those concepts such as meritocracy, 'success' and social mobility that frequently result in the stigmatisation of working class lives. In doing so, I concur with Bell and Binnie's (2000) observation that such values tend to be heteronormative as much as they are normative along class lines.

In the next section of this chapter, I examine the ways in which the men I interviewed talked about themselves (and their sexual identities) in classed terms, as well as their more general attitudes to issues of class.

4.2 Attitudes to sexuality and class

Travers (1999) has criticised qualitative studies of class for their tendency to squeeze respondents' narratives into the existing class schema of the researcher, rather than listening to what they have to say about the meanings they attach to the role of class in their quotidian lives and how they conceive their class status. He forcefully argues that researchers should allow respondents to speak on their own terms, partly as an ethical imperative, but mostly because he believes it actually reveals far more about their terms of reference for their lives. Mindful of this criticism, I have attempted to remain faithful to the narratives told by the men I interviewed in East London. Although a minority of the men I spoke to, including Steve, directly conceived of their lives (and those of others) in class terms, most of the men did not. Nonetheless, very often they made distinctions between themselves and others, and spoke of themselves and others in a language that was infused with judgements based on status and cultural distinction.

I am also conscious that, in my ethnographic observations in gay venues and other sites, I have frequently made assumptions about men's class status based on how I have read their appearance (or interpreted their accents). These observations are clearly coloured by my own upbringing in a relatively affluent, suburban working class family (that predominantly mixed in more conventionally middle class social circuits) and my current positionality. The following excerpt from the field notes I made after an early visit to one of the local gay saunas (where without the benefit of clothing as a clue, judgements are made almost entirely on the basis of a man's body) is illustrative of the process by which I made an assessment of a man's class status at the time.

About half the crowd appeared to be scene queens who were well-toned, fashionably groomed (in part I make this comment on the basis of the style and quality of their tattoos and other body decoration, jewellery and the quality and design of their glasses etc.). The rest were more 'ordinary' or 'normal' in their appearance, and it is fair to say on reflection that I made assumptions about their social background on the basis of their body/appearance – both in terms of their grooming, physical shape and posture/deportment – therefore, a man who is tidily groomed, with a reasonable, but not 'perfect' body and a certain level of self-assurance is assumed to be professional/middle class, whereas a man with a boxer's face, a less expensive haircut or an ungainly way of holding his body is assumed to be working class! (Field note: The Small Sauna, 6th November 1998).

In the light of the earlier discussion of habitus as an array of embodied dispositions, I think my reading of class from the men's bodies is interesting (as well as mildly embarrassing). I also note that I use the term 'normal' to describe working class men; whereas much literature on class suggests that it is the standards of middle class lifestyle and values that have become symbolically marked as 'normal' in contemporary British society.

A handful of men described local gay men in class terms (or at least through the proxy of income levels):

There are lots of young gay men aged 20-30, but not many professional gay men. Most gay men live on my estate and around the E15 area - they live where there are railway stations and rental accommodation -in areas where there is a transient population. (Interview with Jason).

I think gay men living in Newham are professional people and working class people living with families. (Interview with Raj).

There are a very wide variety of gay men living in Newham - I've seen people in the job-centre who are gay and my neighbour is a gay diplomat. There are complete stereotypes and non-stereotypes. I only really know about gay men living in my local area. It predominantly seems to be gay white men in the pubs. There are many different ages involved - I'm sure it's represented by every creed and colour. (Interview with Drew).

Gay men in Newham are not affluent but comfortable - they can afford to go out and enjoy themselves. (Interview with Dimitri).

To my mind, assessing a man's income on the basis of his ability to go out and party, as Dimitri does, seems a particularly gay judgement.

In contrast, many more of the men I spoke to located gay men in the East End and described a working class feel to the area, rather than directly ascribing a class status to gay men living in the area themselves. Chris described his own attachment to life in Bethnal Green in the following terms:

I like Bethnal Green because I kind of have, have class roots and I regarded it as an area that wasn't pretentious. (Interview with Chris).

Ed, spoke of the area in very similar language:

Just it was very real, it is quite working class, it's not pretentious, er, that it's got a high - especially that end of Bethnal Green/Brick Lane - it's got a high Bengali population. But I think the biggest thing was thinking that this place was fairly real, rather than pretentious and [laughs] not very real. I don't know whether that makes sense, but I just related... because often people say of Bethnal Green that it's hostile, no it's not! Because I do not find Bethnal

Green intimidating or rough or anything, I just find it... obviously there quite a few people that look a bit short of cash and probably there's a lot of people on Income Support and such, but I just think it's a very real place, as opposed to some other places which tend to be a bit snooty and a bit, maybe not as community-based. I don't know that's just me perception of it. (Interview with Ed).

It should be remembered that Chris and Ed are from working class backgrounds in the West Midlands and Yorkshire respectively, even though they both now work in managerial and quasi-professional roles. In this context, it is perhaps not that surprising that they choose to equate working classness with 'reality' and a lack of pretension. However, it wasn't only once-working class men from the north of England who spoke about the East End and its inhabitants in these terms. I met a South African man at The Small Sauna once who explained that he had travelled across London to attend that venue, rather than others closer to home because the customers were 'more down to earth' and 'typical East End'. As a 'native' Eastender, this was an attitude that Steve had found himself on the receiving end of.

Yeah, the sort of romantic image of the rough East End thing. Yeah, I mean, I think there probably is that. I mean my partner says it's certainly an attraction for him. I mean, although he likes suits as well, he seems to like a whole set of stereotypes. Um... and people do seem to like the idea of me as an Eastender still living in the East End, and that's certainly there.... And, Greg, the Australian guy that I was with, he wrote pages and pages on it. He was one of these Australians who was doing their 'round Europe thing, and he was living here for two years and he wrote reams and reams about me, basically, almost as if I was an Aboriginal still living in the area. So, yeah, I suppose there is that. ... a fascination with the whole idea of the East End, but also, you know, the romantic image of the rough Eastender. (Interview with Steve).

Although Steve found this romantic projection amusing and a little embarrassing, it didn't diminish his own pride in his working class roots:

well, this is where I put my hat on, where I always used to get into trouble in the lesbian and gay groups that I was involved in because I would always say that I was a working class man first (but I can't really say that anymore because I've got a degree and a profession, as well). But certainly in terms of my background that has probably had a greater impact on me than being gay - it probably counts for more for me than being gay. (Interview with Steve).

Steve's point here indicates the way in which different facets of a person's identity and sense of self can take precedence over others; and the ways in which the articulation of identity can be temporarily and spatially specific. The more middle class men experienced the East End slightly differently, although they still acknowledged the ubiquitous working class culture in the area. For Roger (an affluent public relations executive – and one of the few men I met through this research who I actively disliked), the inclusive, welcoming nature of local gay bars was a pleasant change from the more materially driven social networks he previously associated with in West London:

You also don't find that the first question you're asked other than age and name is 'what do you do for a living?' That doesn't seem as important in this area. It doesn't seem such a materially based gay community, which is interesting. We all buy each other drinks, don't we? There's none of this 'he should be buying me one, because he earns more than I do.' It... it doesn't even come into conversation. (Interview with Roger).

Roger clearly enjoyed the sense of reciprocity that he experienced in his local gay pub [see the discussion of social capital on the gay scene, later in this chapter]. It may be an uncharitable judgement, but I get the sense that Roger expected the working class gay men he drinks with to take advantage of his material wealth. Roger also spoke of mixing with working class lesbians who looked 'like Angie from EastEnders.' Despite his talk of feeling at home and included in working class East End social networks, I got the distinct impression throughout our interview that

Roger was continually setting up distinctions between himself and those around him. What is missing from the retelling of his description of the local lesbians, as it is set out on this page, is the thinly veiled tone of disgust that is noticeable on the taped recording of our conversation. Another middle class man I spoke to, Graham, who worked as a translator for a Japanese merchant bank, dealt differently with his sense of separation from many of the other men who socialised in his local gay bar. His preferred tactic was to modify his speech and behaviour, adding some glottal stop to his voice and refraining from having 'big middle class conversation about books in the Basic Bar', leaving that instead for drinks with friends in Soho. Once again, we observe how a specific local habitus becomes expressed through the body; but also the reflexive manner in which one gay man is able to negotiate the habitus of different gay fractions, adapting his deportment, language and cultural references accordingly. Later in our conversation, Graham explicitly acknowledged that he perceived the 'gay community' in Tower Hamlets to be "a very stratified" one that "probably divides quite rigidly along class and income lines," (Interview with Graham).

So far, this section of the chapter has primarily focused on how openly gay men consider their own class position and relate it to the status of the gay men they find themselves around. Before moving on, it seems worthwhile to examine how the class milieu of two working class gay men has shaped and limited their ability to fully engage with the gay world. In large part, this is about the ways in which they find themselves caught up in working class male social networks that will tolerate (or, more to the point, turn a blind eye to) their sexual difference, as long as they

continue to perform according to normative gender roles in their company. In the first place, I am thinking of a painfully skinny, fey young man who I encountered out drinking in a straight pub in Stepney with a group of young heterosexual men who he had known since school. As I observed the group over the course of an evening, and chatted to a few of them who were acquaintances of the people I was drinking with, it became clear that although Kyle had apparently never come out to the group, his sexuality was an open secret – he was fooling no-one. Interestingly, his continuing acceptance within the group seemed to be partly predicated on the fact that he had once ‘proved himself’ in a fight, defending a mate. Towards the very end of the evening, a drunken Kyle started making playful passes at one of the group – attempting to hug him and plant a kiss on his forehead. At this point, the delicate truce seemed to be about to unravel. It appeared that, as long as he did nothing to ‘threaten’ the heterosexuality of the rest of the group, it mattered very little how camp he behaved. After all, he had already proved himself to be ‘man enough’ by showing himself to be willing to physically defend the honour of another member of the group.

Similar observations can be made in respect to Joe’s life. After eleven years, his relationship with Mandy, the mother of his child, broke down when she guessed that he was having an affair and that it was with a man. While he undoubtedly loved her on some level, in hindsight, Joe acknowledges that he entered into that relationship largely because he felt that was what friends and family expected of him. Even now, Joe is still not out to most of his straight friends (although he suspects some of them have guessed) and keeps different aspects of his life quite

segregated. He is particularly careful to ensure that the men he plays sport with do not find out about his sexuality, as he fears disclosure would lead to his exclusion from the masculine camaraderie that he enjoys with them. Throughout his relationship with Mandy, he found most of his male sexual partners via various chat lines and internet sites, and he still continues to do so with much success. At that time, he rarely stepped onto the gay scene, and restricted his rare visits to commercial venues to the small number of bars in North London that tolerated sex on premises, where he could have fast, uncomplicated, anonymous sex with other men. He was also adamant that he only ever played the penetrative role in sexual encounters. Although he was always willing to passionately kiss the men he had sex with, oral or anal penetration of his body was a taboo he was not prepared to confront. When I first met Joe five years ago, he described himself as bisexual, but he has recently admitted that over the last couple of years he has become 'gayer'. He has found a passion for the gay club scene and the drug culture that accompanies it (Buckland 2002). He is also now in an open relationship with another working class man who lives close to him. Through this man, and his continued use of internet sites such as gaydar.com, Joe now has an extended network of friends and 'fuck buddies' in North and East London. With them, and the assistance of a host of recreational chemicals, Joe has been exploring (with some relish, it seems) the more esoteric side of homosex, including fisting and BDSM.

I have chosen to recount Joe's story at some length because it offers a useful illustration of the complex ways in which class, ethnicity and religion (Joe grew up in a London Irish, Catholic family) work together with gender and sexuality to shape

the life choices made by individuals, as well as the ways in which they not only carry their body, but conceive and guard its boundaries (Longhurst 2001). Furthermore, Joe's narrative suggests that the links between these different factors are complex and non-linear and that changes in one area of a person's life can have unexpected consequences elsewhere. It also exposes the futility of attempting to separate men's experience of their sexuality from their class position.

4.3 Gay choices in the housing market

In the next section of this chapter, I examine the place of gay men in East London's housing market. In part this is an examination of the role of gay men in the gentrification of the area, and an exploration of whether the gay men make the same choices in the housing markets as their heterosexual peers from similar class fractions. More than that, however, it continues to analyse the ways in which gay men talk and think about their place in the East End, and begins to tease out the place of different gay social networks in the area. Together, these differing strands contribute to an analysis of processes of gay class formation in a specific urban setting.

In their recent study of gentrification in London Butler and Robson (2001; Butler with Robson 2003) propose that middle class enclaves in the city are shaped by the interplay of the employment, housing and education markets. I raise the example of their work here, in passing, to highlight that, if their analysis is correct, there are inherent differences in how gay and straight people engage in the processes of gentrification. Although there are, of course, a minority of gay parents, the

quality of education in an area is not a factor that often makes too much of an impact on the residential location choices made by the gay middle classes. Nevertheless, Barlow (2003: 43) cites the case of a lesbian mother living in Newham who sent her children to school in Hackney, because the schools there were more used to dealing with the children of non-heterosexual parents. It seems, potentially, that lesbian gentrification in Stoke Newington and Dalston may have had some impact on the outlook of schools in the area. A more likely and widespread relationship between local education markets and gay gentrification, however, may be that lesbians and gay men enjoy the privilege of buying properties in areas that have been largely untouched by their heterosexual peers because the quality of education locally is so poor. Indeed, one or two of my respondents did make the point that at least they did not have to worry about the quality of the schools in Tower Hamlets when buying flats there. For example, Graham said:

Well, if it was straight friends that you went to school with then the basic problem would be that they would have kids and then they would have to ask themselves "where the hell am I going to educate my children?", and because we don't have any problems about educating our children (well, the majority of us don't, anyway), then we really don't give a fuck about the schools, and if you're not that bothered about the schools, then you've probably got no problem at all. (Interview with Graham).

For a minority of the men I spoke to, there was another factor that affected their place in the housing market. The HIV positive men and those with an AIDS diagnosis were realistic about the difficulties they would have in obtaining a new mortgage, if they wanted to move home:

I have lived and worked in Newham for 10 years. I moved here from Dulwich. House prices are cheap, its convenient for travel and its now an up and coming area. I plan to stay indefinitely - now I have an AIDS diagnosis,

I'd have trouble with my mortgage if I moved. If job prospects were to improve, perhaps I'd move out. (Interview with Clive).

Others chose to stay put in order to continue to access local HIV clinics where they felt comfortable with the treatment they were receiving (Wilton 1996). None of this is meant to suggest that an HIV diagnosis was the only reason why these men chose to live where they did (or the only justification that they gave for their housing choice). Dimitri explained that he had chosen to live in Stratford both to access HIV care at the Royal London Hospital and 'because it is an up and coming gay area'. Dimitri's and Clive's description of Stratford (and Newham more generally) imply that they are shrewdly ahead of the game, having moved into the area before its implied imminent gentrification. This, of course, reveals an unspoken class dimension to 'gay areas'.

In Newham the consensus amongst my respondents was that most gay men tend to live in Stratford and Forest Gate, with a smaller contingent living in new-build developments in Canning Town and around the Royal Docks. However, as several men pointed out, those who are most settled in the area tend to be professional men over the age of thirty, with those in their twenties living more transient lives. Barlow's (2004) survey of lesbians and gay men for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets found that the largest number of gay people lived in E1 postcodes (Spitalfields, Stepney, Wapping and Whitechapel), as this is the most populous postcode in the borough, this finding is perhaps not that surprising. However, 23% of Barlow's respondents lived in Bethnal Green (E2 postcodes), which is an over-representation compared to the proportion of the borough's population living in that area. For me, it is startling that 22% of his respondents

lived in E14 postcodes (Poplar and the Isle of Dogs), as in my earlier research on the Tower Hamlet's gay population (Brown 1998; 2001) this was the only area of the borough where men stated that they felt unsafe and would not consider living.

Steve, who it should be remembered grew up in Poplar and lived in Tower Hamlets for most of his life, contrasted the changes in the housing market in different parts of the borough.

You know, in Bethnal Green I think it's more obvious, but in other areas it contributes to a process that is happening anyway - a process of professionalisation, rather than gentrification, I suppose. But, I don't think you're getting that with a lot of the new people, I don't think you're getting gentrification, as we did before when we had the big estates with the fortresses round them, now that really was gentrification - everyone could see that you were rich. But most of it is professionals moving in which is a big change. (Interview with Steve).

Steve's analysis of the 'professionalisation' of the local housing market echoes Hamnett's (2003) explanation of gentrification in inner London over the last four decades as being the spatial expression of the shift to a post-industrial economy based on financial, business and creative services. Butler and Lees (2006: 477) have challenged this one-dimensional analysis suggestion, through their analysis of 'super-gentrification' in Barnsbury, that London is now experiencing "a tripartite class separation between super wealthy professionals and managers, middle-class professionals, and the working class/economically inactive".

In part, I read Steve's analysis as an attempt to justify his own changing class position within the borough - at the time of this interview he was working in a senior managerial role within the local authority and living in Bethnal Green. It is clear that he identifies gentrification negatively with the worst excesses of the

Docklands development (Foster 1999). This, in itself is an example of a liberal, welfare-sector professional seeking to distinguish himself from more corporate sections of the middle classes. Steve went on to identify this process with the type of welfare professionals that I have already identified as forming a prominent class fraction within the local gay population. Although my research findings largely support Steve's hypothesis regarding the gay middle class fractions who are making a home for themselves in Tower Hamlets, it would also seem to be the case that he is largely describing his own social network. Steve acknowledged that this process of 'professionalisation', as he conceived it, brought a range of benefits for men like him:

So, it means that companies, retail outlets or whatever, that can read the runes will think about opening up and coaxing the whole process of regeneration. ... But that's something that for me as a gay man in Tower Hamlets makes life much more interesting - there's certainly that. And I suppose in a sense of, um, leisure and a social life.... a lot of those pubs would be closed. There would be... there probably wouldn't be decent restaurants in Bethnal Green opening up. It's hard to think what else that would be particularly a contribution of gay men ... apart from shunting up the house prices. (Interview with Steve).

It is indicative of Steve's left-leaning politics that he is happier to think of himself being involved in a process of 'regeneration' rather than gentrification. Indeed, this is probably tied not just to his own political convictions, but a broader ideological discourse associated with his professional role as a senior local government officer. When I asked Steve if he saw himself continuing to live in Tower Hamlets in the long-term, he replied:

I wouldn't move out to the countryside - I'm not a Labrador type with a chunky jumper and a... No! (Interview with Steve).

From this comment, and his earlier advocacy of the influx of 'decent' restaurants in Bethnal Green, we can begin to distil a sense of the type of lifestyle led by Steve and his circle. They are a distinctly urban group. Graham, described gay men living in Bethnal Green as,

people who can't afford Islington, for a start. ... Probably people that would define themselves as being liberal and/or.... People who are more likely to vote Labour, I would say, for a start. Lots of people from the suburbs that want to get off on urban grit, like me. (Interview with Graham).

And people who were using the area,

as a stepping stone on towards I don't know, Hoxton or somewhere like that. It's like the Great Mongol Trek, you know. (Interview with Graham).

Graham's disavowal of his suburban upbringing and subsequent search for 'urban grit', tied to Steve's antipathy towards the prospect of a retreat to the country, tend to confirm the analysis of Ley (1996), Bridge (2001) and other researchers who have suggested that those members of the middle classes who engage in the gentrification process are utilising a stock of cultural capital that privileges pro-urban lifestyles and liberal, frequently bohemian, political outlooks.

Over the years, I encountered a number of men who had turned their backs on the suburbs where their parents had settled and brought them up, but who took great comfort in the fact that their grandparents had originally lived in the East End. They seem to find some sense of 'belonging' by returning to their family roots, and it seems to make them feel less like outsiders in the area. It gives their residence a sense of legitimacy and authenticity that helps mediate their liberal discomfort with their involvement in the processes of gentrification; or offers them some continuity through the (unexpected) changes in their lives.

Yeah, I mean, the thing about the family history and that's just like hopeless romanticism, in part - it's kind of nice to feel that you live literally about a hundred yards away from where my grandmother or my great-grandmother was born, you know, and she was born in 1872, or something like that, so... It did feel in some ways a bit like some kind of homecoming, but that like I said sounds like a load of bollocks, if you know what I mean. (Interview with Graham).

I've lived in Newham now for ten years, three years in Upton Park and before that in Plaistow. I first came to East London to become a monk and lived in [a] priory. I met my first partner there and changed my mind about being a monk. ... I am happy to stay here forever, as I love Stratford. My grandfather's family was from this area and I have now contacted the whole of my extended family. (Interview with Doug).

Yeah, I'm originally from Essex, Basildon in Essex. I moved to Tower Hamlets about six years ago. I had council property in Basildon, which I swapped for one up here, basically because there's nothing in Basildon, it's a bit of a cultural desert, generally, compared to up here. So I got a swap fairly quickly because there're a lot of connections between the Essex corridor and here. ... This area is where my grandparents come from. (Interview with Gary).

Several of these liberal, urban professionals (including Steve and Graham) were living in purpose-built Victorian and Edwardian tenement buildings, others were living in ex-council 'right to buy' properties. Most of these men had bought their flats as first-time buyers in the mid-1990s, when the price of property in the area was still relatively low. Chris described the process by which he came to live in his current flat:

I needed to move, I needed to find a place. I put my name on the council waiting list, which at that time was twenty-two years it would have taken me to get a council flat, but because I got on the list, I was offered some shared ownership scheme, this is a shared ownership scheme, for people who had lived in Tower Hamlets for a year and then, sort of, worked in Tower Hamlets or whatever. So I qualified for that, so that was why I bought into a one bedroom flat, which was much cheaper than going for commercial rent. ... And I didn't know anybody else in the area to share the rent, so that was the basis of that. (Interview with Chris).

He went on to describe how he manipulated the equal opportunities policy of the housing association that co-owned his flat, in order to upgrade to a larger property.

A friend moved in from my area back in Staffordshire, who needed a life change and virtually as soon as I'd moved into my flat asked if he could stay for three months and it ended up being more like a year. And it got pretty fraught [sighs] because he needed my support, but bear in mind, we were living in a one bedroom flat, he was in the lounge and my bedroom was very small. ... But during that process, I thought one of the solutions to that situation, because it wasn't tenable to continue that way, and I was just too much of a sucker really, um, was to go for a transfer. So I asked the housing association "have you got a larger flat? There's two men living together" and I said, "he's my partner" and they said "Oh yeah, there's one just over the road that's fallen through and if you can sell your own, you can have the larger one." And then they said, they just laughed, and I said "Why are you laughing?" and they said "Well, basically, we've been trying to sell one in this street for two years and we can't sell them." 'Cos at that time it was the peak of the housing market. ... So I put it in the Pink Paper and I had five people there within a week and it was sold to a... it's strange, well strangely, to a straight nurse, I don't understand this very well but, in the Pink Paper and this straight nurse heard about it and she got her family to buy it for her. (Interview with Chris).

Graham described his building in the following terms:

I live on my own, in a flat that I've bought. It's one of the late, one of the very, very late Victorian, early Edwardian tenement buildings, with the open balconies, open stairways going up. It's very much like, I don't know if you know, erm, the development in Arnold Circus, which was one of the first council flats, erm, ever, I think, just about. And it's very much like that. It's got this nice big plaque on it that says, you know, 'erected by the East End Dwelling Company', and all that kind of stuff, you know and it's sweet. (Interview with Graham).

What is noticeable in Graham's description of his flat, apart from his very obvious pride in the property and enthusiasm for its design, is his ability to place the building in its historical context and to make associations between it and the social history of the East End. Chris spoke about his flat in similar terms:

This isn't quite a loft apartment, no, but it's a renovated block built in 1902 for people that worked in workhouses. ... That's right, it was either the Industrial Dwellings, Industrial Dwellings, that's right, the Improved Industrial Dwellings that built this and a number of blocks in the area and took a right income for the philanthropists that put up the capital to clear the slums. That appeals to me too. (Interview with Chris).

This exemplifies the aesthetic and social values that are important aspects of the cultural capital of his class fraction. Like Graham, I live in a former East End Dwelling Corporation block, and was very excited to discover, quite early in my residence, that it and the block next to it had been home to a number of prominent anarchists in the early years of the Twentieth century (Fishman 1995). This knowledge offered me an intriguing sense of continuity between my own activism and the history of my building.

For men with similarly aesthetic tastes and liberal values, but greater reserves of economic capital, the small terraced houses dating from the 1900s that are located around the Columbia Road flower market were a prized possession. However, other men I spoke to contested the desirability of these properties.

But I mean, it's more about money, it depends how much you want to pay for accommodation, because they're what I consider to be nothing-special-terrace-houses, straight onto the pavement. (Interview with Ed).

In making this comment, Ed, perhaps, reveals his upbringing as a working class Yorkshireman. He certainly reinforces an observation highlighted by Bridge (1994) when he noted the disdain for new middle class tastes for terraced housing amongst some working class inhabitants of the inner cities for whom getting out of the urban neighbourhood means getting on.

While for many of the men I interviewed, buying a property in the East End in the mid-to-late 1990s (when they were in their twenties or early thirties) was as much about the limits of their economic capacity as about the positive enactment of their preferred lifestyle choices, at the upper end of the income scale, Roger offered a slightly different take on choosing to live in the East End.

I think in this area, particularly around here [in Limehouse], attracts a lot of people because of its older properties, it's well maintained, it's got a lot of individual properties. The new Docklands estates also offer that, particularly Limehouse Marina - very individual, individual styles. ... Also, don't forget, it's that much cheaper. Properties of this type would be far in excess of what I paid in the West End or Chelsea or Islington, and I think a much better investment at this time, as well. (Interview with Roger).

He went on to describe an added attraction of these 'individual' properties:

I think gay men particularly do like to stamp their own brand of lifestyle and an ordinary property won't take that. (Interview with Roger).

Roger's description of the attraction of properties in the East End, for gay men, is densely packed with layers of meaning. His focus on 'individual' properties suggests an attempt to delineate markers of distinction between himself and his peers who live in those more traditionally upper middle class urban neighbourhoods that he mentions. For him, the distinctive qualities of home ownership in the East End are both cultural and economic - he, after all, is the shrewd one who has made a 'better investment' and lives in a property that he implies is not 'ordinary'. He also describes, what he considers, a distinctly gay form of cultural capital in terms of the desire to stamp a gay 'brand of lifestyle' on a property. This may well be the case, but the size of the DIY market, the popularity of interior design shows on television, and the research literature on the investment of 'sweat equity' in inner city

properties by initial waves of gentrifiers would suggest otherwise (Rose 1984; Saunders 1990).

Roger was also the only man I interviewed who attempted to make a (positive) link between the area's older properties and new-build developments and conversions. For several of the less affluent men I interviewed, particularly those with more progressive politics, the prospect of living in a gated community, such as Bow Quarter (the former Bryant and May match factory) was an anathema. When it was first converted into 'loft apartments', Bow Quarter, along with many similar new developments in East London, was heavily marketed in the gay press. Chris offered the following critical comments on this trend:

I think there are advertising campaigns in certain press that tend to affect the nature of how people see what they should be living in, the same as what clothes they should be wearing and what lifestyle they should take. I know that sounds a bit facile, but I do think that sometimes that is the case, because if something becomes too much to do with identity ... It becomes the kind of thing that you're looking for and it feeds into something about your identity around being gay. So I do think there are going to be people that are employed, particularly couples, particularly males who are employed who will go for particular kinds of places, in Bethnal Green. ... I suppose the only thing that springs to mind is Bow Quarter, because that kind of epitomises to me the kind of, um, kind of mews kind of environment, where it kind of sets up a mini-ghetto, that you think you're safe in [chuckles]. (Interview with Chris).

Despite these criticisms, I think it would be too simplistic to propose a dichotomy between liberal, welfare professionals living in historic tenement blocks and small terraces, and more affluent, corporate gay men living in new conversions and similar developments. Over the years, I have certainly spoken to a number of relatively affluent gay men, often working in the cultural industries, who were living

in loft-style apartments, but who aspired to buying into the small pool of large Victorian houses in Tower Hamlets.

Clearly for the majority of gay men in Tower Hamlets, this is not an option, and many men who cannot afford to buy in the borough, but want to accrue the cultural capital of living in this part of the capital rent (former) council properties in the area. As Gary, who had done just this, commented, 'but you can live near it, though, can't you?'

Amongst the Newham sample, in particular, there were a number of men living in various forms of social housing. Generally, they spoke in positive terms about their accommodation and the support their landlords offered them.

I'm moving back to Australia in August, although I've been happy living in Newham. I was living in a co-op in Cambridge, when I found out about the Newham co-op and moved in to find cheap accommodation. (Interview with Jason).

I was working in the City. I came to Newham four years ago following a mental breakdown. I live in a ten-bedroom shared housing cooperative. I want to stay in Newham - I help in the building of co-op properties in Waltham Forest. They have an open policy in the housing coop which is important for me, being a black gay man. (Interview with Patrick).

I live in Newham and work outside Newham. I live here because of harassment in Hackney, then I moved to North Woolwich and again had homosexual [sic] harassment so moved to Plaistow. Now I'm living in Stratford following the break up with my partner. ... I'm very happy with the attitude of Newham housing department about gay couples and homophobic attacks. (Interview with Andy).

The one thing that these different strands of gay migration into the East End have in common is that for those working class gay men who were born locally (and had neither utilised higher education as a route into professional employment, nor moved out to the suburbs) they were all seen as a threat to the integrity of the area,

as they knew it. Ironically, one of the men who was most forceful in expressing this view, was in a relationship at the time of his interview with Roger, so it seems likely that, whether he was prepared to admit it or not, he had accrued some benefit from the influx of high income gay gentrifiers to the area.

In this section, I have attempted a brief sketch of the ways in which various gay class fractions have engaged differentially with East London's housing market. In doing so, I have highlighted the differing modes of material and cultural asset-deployment by the occupational groupings that I identified earlier in the chapter. In the next section, I shall continue this analysis with an examination of the ways in which these different class fractions reproduce themselves through their consumption of the commercial gay scene. In doing so, the added complexity of the matrix of different gay subcultures comes into play.

4.4 Socialising with class: a survey of the commercial scene

My attention now turns to the ways in which different gay class fractions use the local commercial gay scene and are (re)produced through their involvement in this act of consumption. The commercial gay scene is important to the study of gay fractions precisely because it is the primary site in which gay men socialise (with) each other *as* gay men. The commercial gay scene is also a significant location through which gay men maintain and delineate a sense of cultural distinction.

In the pages that follow, I provide a general overview of the gay scene in East London, before focusing on the cluster of bars in Newham, as well as two (now

closed) bars in Tower Hamlets that had particular significance for many of the men I spoke to. Through these case studies, I will examine how individual men position themselves in classed terms in relation to these bars and their customers. I also examine the extent to which the bars serve as a focus for the development and sustenance of social capital within East London's gay populations. Social capital refers to the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in various formal and informal networks. Social capital exists in the relations between individuals. Although an individual may benefit from their investment in social capital, they cannot produce it alone (Blokland 2002). Certain social structures are more conducive to the accumulation of social capital than others, and I am interested in examining the extent to which men accrue social capital through the bar scene and the specific forms that this takes, as well as the extent to which access to social capital on the gay scene is uneven and unequal.

Typically, studies of social capital (Blokland 2002; Portes 1988) focus on examining the networks of trust, reciprocity and mutuality within communities and social networks, as well as the means by which these qualities are mobilised to offer access to knowledge, information and social support for members of the community in question. Gibson-Graham (2006: 58-9) might recognise these as 'non-market transactions' that foster interdependence. I would suggest that the social networks that develop through the commercial gay scene might offer their members access to information about more formalised support groups for people coming to terms with their (homo)sexuality, information about safer sex practices and other sexual health resources, as well as leads to 'gay-friendly' companies and service providers in the

area. The more visible commercial gay venues also serve as a gateway to more specialised venues supporting specific gay sub-cultural groups. In this way, the scene offers cultural and symbolic capital, as well as social capital – through it, young gay men and other new-comers learn ways of *doing* gay, as well as access to friendship networks and support services. As Joyce (2001: 2) has argued,

through the maintenance of space, social transgressors often begin to acquire various forms of capital, including informational, social, and symbolic, based on their transgression. The acquisition of such capital helps to normalise the transgression and to provide an air of legitimacy for the transgressor. This legitimacy has an impact, however slight, on social structures.

Of course, this poses the question of how men who find it difficult to access the commercial gay scene, or simply do not enjoy it, gain access to this information. A recent survey of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals living in Newham (Barlow 2003; see also Rickard and Brown 2001) revealed that only half of the respondents had ever accessed the commercial gay scene in the borough and many of those had visited the local bars once and once only. Of course, this does not necessarily imply that none of these men and women ever visits the broader gay scene across London, but it does suggest that the commercial gay scene only meets the social and cultural needs of a proportion of gay people – quite possibly, the minority.

As Barlow (2003: 69) reports, “the style of the venue and the entertainment provided suits some of the participants in the survey, but others would like something a little smarter, quieter, or not focused on alcohol.” Nevertheless, the existing venues in Newham (and elsewhere in East London) are mostly quite successful, with the Local Pub in Stratford regularly attracting up to three hundred customers on busy nights.

I shall return to a specific discussion of a selection of local bars shortly, but first it seems important to examine my respondents' contrasting views on the commercial gay scene, in order to provide some context to the discussion of specific local venues.

A number of men consider that local venues offered an atmosphere that was more conducive to their needs than that which they could find in venues in central London. Ed, in particular, offered this expansive appraisal of the opportunities available to him locally:

I tend not to go to the West End very much, I usually only go to the West End if I've got friends down from Sheffield and they want to see round. Generally, I tend to stay [in] East or North London. [I go to] The Dance Bar, The Cabaret Bar, Basic Bar, erm, The Large Sauna, Twisted Feature, the one on 'ackney Road (I can't remember what it's called)...The Working Boyz Bar, occasionally the one [near Bethnal Green], sometimes I go to The Sports Bar at Kings Cross, sometimes I go to The Sports Bar at Walthamstow, erm, and that's really it, I suppose. ... Oh, I've thought of another one that I go to as well... I can't remember it now, it's [in Islington].... Slum Dweller, don't worry, I've thought of it now. If I were just going out for a drink I would stay local and I'd particularly go to Basic Bar because it's cheap - drinks are cheap and they have an act on every Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. So I can be entertained, they don't charge you a door charge and the drinks are about the cheapest I know anywhere, to be honest, and I don't have a taxi fare home...blah, blah, blah. It's just I can walk to it and come home. But it certainly wouldn't be any good from my perspective as far as the picking up point of view, the cruising point of view. If I wanted to pick up, I'd probably either go to Slum Dweller, which has got a darkroom etc. and likewise, The Sports Bar at Kings Cross. Not that I necessarily want to use darkrooms particularly, because I tend not to, but people who go to them sort of bars are more on pick-up, as opposed to going to Basic Bar which is very locals just out having a drink and tends not to be as pick-uppie. Likewise, The Dance Bar is just, like, an ordinary sort of pub. Oh, I sometimes go to Screamers, as well, but that's not my scene, really. ... Occasionally, I've been to... what's it called? Leather Bar, two or three times, but I'm not particularly into that sort of leather image thing of, you know, it's not really my scene. ... And I'm not into, I mean, I'm forty-six this week, I am not into all night... the one on Clerkenwell Road, what's it called, where they stay open 'til...? ... Mega-club and that sort of thing, that's just not my thing, you

know? I'm quite happy to be drunk at two o'clock in the morning and go home [laughs] you know, that suits me fine. (Interview with Ed).

For Ed, the range of bars in (and within easy reach of) the East End provides for most of his needs from a gay venue, and there is sufficient variety to sustain his interest depending on his mood. Although he positioned the West End primarily as a tourist venue that he showed off to visitors from outside London, he went on to compare the relative price of nights out in East and Central London. For him, the intimacy, conviviality and the inclusiveness of a venue (around differences based on age and class) was also an important consideration in choosing where to drink. This had an impact on his choice of venues locally, as well as putting him off drinking in Soho. He favoured more working class bars that encouraged communal participation in the entertainment on offer.

I suppose it does revolve around money really, not having to pay for a taxi home, but just the fact that... particularly this bar [Basic Bar] is one of the most, in my view, one of the most local locally type ones: they go out of their way to learn your name and acknowledge you, they remember what drinks you drink and to me that does mean something as opposed to being anonymous and going out [in the] West End and paying a pound extra for your drink and you don't even get looked at unless you're eighteen and got a tight T-shirt on, and that's just not me scene. ... Oh, for instance I won't go to Twisted Feature on a Sunday night, because it's five pound, and I just think it's outrageous to charge five pound; and also it's not a karaoke bar. 'Cos you used to be able to go in there for a couple of quid (I don't know what they charged, but it was two or three quid, maybe) and you could get a bit drunk and put your name down on a slip and they'd let you sing. But now they don't do that - they charge you five pound to get in and if they know you can't sing, or unless they know that you can sing properly, they won't let you sing, which, well I just think "sod that"; I'm not going to pay five pound if they won't let me do karaoke (or what I consider karaoke, which is people who can't sing getting up). (Interview with Ed).

For Doug, the former monk who was still active in gay Christian organisations, the West End was typified by 'see and be seen' venues that were

intimidating and overpriced. Again, perceived differences of age and class seem to be at stake here.

When I first came to London [in the 1980s], the centre of gay life was Earls Court and commercial places in the West End, which is very fashion-oriented and attitude based. Since then the gay commercial scene has changed as there has been a liberalisation of public attitudes and the rise of the pink pound. I like Newham, as I prefer an area that doesn't have too much attitude. ... I was very into the clubbing scene but now mainly stick to pubs and saunas. Locally I go to The Shiny Bar, The Local Pub, The Older Man's Pub and The Cabaret Bar (in Tower Hamlets)... I avoid '*attitude - see and be seen*' places [in Soho] - they have over-priced drinks, whereas local Newham places don't. I haven't really noticed much change over time in who chooses to stay local and who goes into town. I really miss The Hotel [in Stratford] - it was cheap and there was a mix of ages, some ethnic mixing and it was friendly and easy to pick people up. (Interview with Doug).

Located close to the (then) Polytechnic of East London, this large former hotel was open throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s. It primarily attracted a young, 'alternative' clientele. The jukebox and the DJs were more likely to play The Smiths or The Cure than hi-energy disco or other dance music. For most of the period it was open, only Friday nights were officially the 'gay night', but these evenings attracted a very mixed crowd and the pub was safe, friendly and welcoming of gay people throughout the week. It was a strategically important venue in my life – as a gay teenager growing up in the East London suburbs in the mid-80s, it was the first gay venue that I visited and the only one where I felt safe and 'at home' for many years. Doug was not the only man to acknowledge that the patrons of the erstwhile Hotel in Stratford were not those who were likely to frequent the more upscale bars in the West End (although others were less charitable about its clientele).

The kind of people who visit The Hotel - you wouldn't see them in Soho. East End people who look East End and dress East End tend to venture to the

East End alone. I don't feel part of this gay community. My friends live elsewhere. I just have one-night stands locally with people stuck in the '80s. But it's easier to become acquainted with people in the East End compared to the city. (Interview with William).

This temporal dissonance, by which gay venues (and their customers) in the east End are deemed to be anachronistic and not in tune with the latest trends and fashions to be found in Central London is a theme I will return to shortly. It is a deeply classed discourse.

Like Doug and Ed, Jim stated that he preferred the East End bars because he was not "into drinking in a wine bar." In making this distinction he simultaneously positions the Soho bars as a pretentious, status-driven and middle class, whilst implying that his local gay bars were more 'down-to-earth'. It is important to note that only a minority of venues in the West End specifically cater to professional gay men. The rest are actually accessed by a wide-range of men and women. Nonetheless, there were men amongst my sample who chose to drink in certain West End bars precisely because of the opportunity to socialise with other professional men – "people have a good social class in [these places] - professional people, well-educated people who know what they want," (Interview with Agustin).

The perceived friendliness of the local scene was exemplified in this extract from my interview with Carl, a young man who had grown up in Tower Hamlets:

The first time I went to [The Cabaret Bar] I went there alone and within five minutes I was talking to loads of people like I'd known them all of my life. So it's really easy to fit in. (Interview with Carl).

Of course, a cynic might suggest that it would be hardly surprising for an attractive young man on his own in a gay bar to quickly find himself the centre of

attention. What strikes me about Carl's description of The Cabaret Bar is his emphasis on the ability to talk freely and easily with a range of the customers. What implications does this have for the development of lasting friendship networks and the development of social capital through those networks? Although I have always found the atmosphere in The Cabaret Bar to be unthreatening and good spirited, a place where I enjoy the occasional drink, I have not really experienced this warm welcome from the regulars. Indeed, I have always felt like something of an outsider in the bar – possibly a reflection of my own classed positionality and prejudices.

It seems worth pausing briefly to discuss the role of economic capital on the local gay scene. The larger and more popular bars, such as the Local Pub in Stratford and The Cabaret Bar and The Dance Bar in Tower Hamlets, are successful businesses generating significant takings. Indeed, their leaseholders and the parent breweries regularly invest funds in significant and comprehensive redecorations of the bars to keep them feeling fresh and attractive to their core clientele. Bizarrely, however, the resulting décor can sometimes feel somewhat anachronistic – almost as if the bars are striving not to appear too modern or 'up market'. Glitter balls and glitzy drapes still predominate. Certainly a significant amount of money was invested in the design of The Small Sauna in Limehouse (now part of a large chain of gay saunas). One phase of renovation at the end of the 1990s reportedly cost upwards of half a million pounds. There have been several more large refits, as well as a series of smaller on-going works on the design and decoration of the building since then (as I outline in Chapter Six). In contrast to these relatively large enterprises, there have been a number of smaller (and frequently short-lived) gay

pubs established in the East End over the last decade. For the most part these venues only attracted men from their immediate vicinities and were too small to attract or sustain a large enough pool of regular customers to stay in business.

Once, when I moved in, I went (out of some sort of morbid curiosity, more than anything else) to The Bunch of Flowers which was the world's saddest gay pub and is now... It was great because it got taken over by some straight people in the summer and they've put up this big slogan saying "we are now a family-run pub," (Interview with Graham).

When I first arrived in the East End, a decade ago, most of the gay bars were quite anonymous and did little to advertise their presence to the casual passer-by. The smaller, neighbourhood pubs were undistinguishable from their straight counterparts and the larger venues did everything they could to separate their customers from the outside world: windows were boarded over or shielded by heavy curtains and the customers stayed put inside the bar. Times have changed. The majority of the larger venues now fly rainbow flags, clearly advertising their identity as a gay bar. The boards over the windows at The Cabaret Bar, and elsewhere, have come down offering the possibility at certain times of the day and week of looking into the bar from the street. Similarly, the interiors of the bars are no longer so clearly demarcated and separated from the street in other ways – at the Gentrified Pub, drinkers spill out onto the street on warm summer days and the windows can now completely open up to create a porous barrier between the street and the bar.

At the time that I carried out the interviews for this research there were two main gay bars in Stratford that had existed long enough to establish themselves within the local area – The Shiny Bar and The Local Pub. The Shiny Bar has subsequently closed. A third pub, The Older Man's Pub had recently opened at that

time; which, as this pseudonym suggests, was perceived by several men to primarily serve as a meeting place for older gay men. Bill, the fifty-something builder, I introduced earlier, was the only man I interviewed who admitted drinking there *and* enjoying it. Opinions about the two established venues, and particularly The Shiny Bar, were equally mixed. Most men agreed that both venues generally attracted a fairly mixed group of customers and did their best to foster a sense of (local) gay community.

Several men stressed that The Shiny Bar was adequate precisely because it was on their doorstep, and therefore very convenient. Doug pointed out that he “wouldn’t travel across London to go there.” This highlights the fact that different types of gay venues attract customers at different spatial scales. Local venues, such as those in Stratford (and other localities with a sizeable gay residential population) can operate at the lowest common denominator to sustain a business based on local custom. More ‘sophisticated’ venues and those tailored to a specific niche market tend to rely on customers from across Greater London and beyond. Several of the Newham residents spoke about travelling into south and central London if they fancied a bit more ‘glamour’, often to visit particular dance clubs or to participate in the fetish scene. The ability or willingness to travel across London to visit specific venues was also considered to be age-specific or associated with phases in the lifecycle – with younger men, and those who weren’t in stable, long-term relationships, considered more likely to travel into the West End to socialise. It should also be remembered that the traffic in people travelling to attend gay venues is not all one way (out of the East End) – a number of men commented that The

Local Pub seemed to attract men from outer London and Essex at weekends. In other words, even the smaller, more locally-focused gay venues can attract custom from a wider hinterland, where the gay population is too sparse to sustain its own local venues.

Two venues in Tower Hamlets, Basic Bar and The Orgy Pub, which had both closed shortly before I conducted my interviews, held a certain nostalgic place in the imaginations of the men I interviewed from that corner of East London. The Orgy Pub has been lost to area's gay population and a fried chicken takeaway now sits in its place. A new venue, The Lounge, has now opened in the place of Basic Bar. Although this is no longer specifically a gay venue, it still regularly hosts queer and post-gay music events of the type discussed in Chapter Five. I concentrate here on its previous incarnation, as that was the venue discussed by the men I interviewed. Nevertheless, its reincarnation as a post-gay venue serving a more cosmopolitan, artistic and bohemian crowd is indicative of the changing face of the East End, and a significant strand in the gentrification of Bethnal Green.

I first visited Basic Bar in late December 1998 and recorded the following description of the interior of the venue in my field notes at the time:

The interior of the venue is fairly bare: there is a bar along the back wall and a small stage in the corner where the entrance once was. There are a small number of tables and chairs in the room, and these are mainly concentrated in the furthest corner from the (current) entrance. Behind the small stage is a black backdrop painted in fluorescent paint with a fantasy scene including a unicorn and a castle; given the rather fey Christmas decorations hanging from the ceiling, the whole place feels like something out of Narnia. In terms of the rest of the décor, the walls are mostly painted in a deep boudoir red. (Field note, 27th December 1998).

The clientele was primarily male with a smattering of working class lesbians and a few other – apparently straight – women there with gay male friends. The men were an extremely mixed bag – about half of the men were dressed in varying shades of gay skinhead ‘drag’ (Healey 1996), in addition there were a couple of men wearing upscale designer clothes, a small group of more counter-cultural types, then a number of older men still sporting the classic 1970s ‘clone’ look (Levine 1998). However, by far the largest group of appeared not to conform to any particular subculture. They were dressed quite ordinarily and looked as if they had just popped down to their local pub for a pint without consciously dressing up to go out to a gay bar for the night. I observed a similar mix of men on all of my visits to Basic Bar. The majority to the middle aged and older men appeared, from their accents, demeanour and dress to be working class men from the East End and Essex. However, the social background of the younger men was often harder to establish from simple observation as many of them had bought into the gay skinhead subculture which, although modelled on working class masculine subcultures of the recent past, appeals to gay men of all social backgrounds. It is an illustration of the ways in which the middle classes plunder working class cultural resources for their own benefit (Reay 2005). In amongst these ‘authentic’ and more contrived working class performances, there was always a cluster of more middle class accents to hear emanating from expensively dressed bodies. Remember, this was the bar where Graham regularly added some glottal stop to his Home Counties accent, in an attempt to fit in (or at least not bring too much attention to himself as an outsider). And yet is it a testament to how much middle class values have become the norm in

society that, despite the appropriation of working class masculine attire by many middle class men in this bar, even once-working class men perceived it to be a somewhat old-fashioned, and unsophisticated place. In my own notes, I described the bar as having a 'provincial' feel; comments echoed by Graham and Steve.

Basic Bar reminds me of... It strikes me it's like if you go to somewhere like Gloucestershire, or somewhere like that, and it's the only gay pub in the town. (Interview with Graham).

You walk into it and it feels as if you're walking into a Northampton gay bar and everyone turns round. It's a fairly working class pub, and there's, you know, no sort of attitude in there. It's certainly no fashion parade. (Interview with Steve).

It is perhaps not surprising that Oxbridge-educated Graham, working on the fringes of the transnational business class, should look down on the venue in this way. However, it should be remembered that Steve grew up in Tower Hamlets and is fiercely proud of his working class background. Their discussion of this bar has some resonance with the 'temporal dissonance', which I discussed earlier, through which some men identified East End gay bars as being stuck in the past. If men like William used a temporal metaphor to place these local venues as 'other' than the epitome of fashionable, metropolitan gay venues, here a spatial metaphor is employed to place these bars outside this milieu. This implies that London's mainstream gay bars are now so defined by middle class consumer values, that any overt expression of working class forms of gay sociability are deemed either out of time or place in the contemporary metropolis.

If Basic Bar attracted its customers for its resemblance to any other standard East End pub (bar, perhaps, the kitsch decoration around the stage), the pull of Orgy Pub was located on a very different plane. The Orgy Pub was essentially an

unregulated sex club masquerading as a pub. This was an open secret in the East End and beyond, with the pub coyly promoting its 'interactive games room' in the gay press for many years. Still, the pub's dark rooms were not its only attraction and several of the men I spoke to held fond memories of it.

But the Pride, obviously, attracted people for the sex, it was quite clear, but even so there was still a group of regulars who, you know, enjoyed the social side of it. (Interview with Steve).

Well, really the [Orgy Pub] was just going mad and having a laugh, and no-one gave a shit what you got up to. (Interview with Gary).

Several authors (Bech 1997, Delany 1999) have stressed the erotic nature of gay social life and the fact that gay men are frequently socialised as such through their sexual encounters. I shall engage more fully with these debates in Chapter Six, when I discuss the opportunistic autonomous spaces created in and through sites of public homosex. Nevertheless, in the context of the current discussion, it is important to stress that such spaces are strategically important sites for many gay men, and can facilitate (at least temporary, situational) social mixing between men of different classes, ethnic backgrounds and age cohorts in a way that is less common in more conventional leisure venues. They also enable the socialisation of gay men into ways of being and doing 'gay.' This situation highlights the centrality of sexuality to understandings of gay sociality. However, as we have seen throughout this chapter, at the same time as the commercial gay scene facilitates some social mixing (for those who have access to it) it is also the site for the articulation of a complex web of distinctions between different gay class fractions.

4.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have examined the spatial expression of the predominant gay class fractions that I have observed through my studies in east London, particularly as they shape the commercial gay scene and the local housing market. The purpose of this exercise has been two-fold: to reinforce the argument that there is no single, universal gay experience of urban space; and, to observe how gay space in east London is mediated by class difference.

The various case studies used in this chapter confirm the complex ways in which class works together with gender and sexuality to shape the life choices made by individual men, as well as the ways in which they carry their bodies. I have argued that the links between these different factors are complex and non-linear, such that it is futile to attempt the separation of men's experience of their sexuality from their class position. For some men, the co-constitution of their class and sexuality opens up possibilities for the expansion of their life opportunities, while others are fixed and trapped in places that limit their chances to live the lives they desire.

In examining the ways in which different gay fractions shape the local housing market and use the area's commercial gay scene, I have demonstrated how men embody the habitus of their particular class or sub-cultural grouping. I have also observed the reflexive manner in which some gay men are able to negotiate the habitus of different gay fractions, adapting their deportment, language and cultural references accordingly. My study of the gay scene has suggested the ways in which

some middle class gay men plunder working class cultural resources for their own benefit.

I have also suggested that men from a variety of class positions have a personal investment in understanding the local gay scene as being less pretentious and status-driven than the bars and clubs that are found in central London. The bar owners are responsive to this mode of understanding East London gay life and (under-)design their venues accordingly. At times the décor of these venues can appear slightly outmoded as a result. Nevertheless, several gay pubs are becoming less insular and 'private' in their design, with the result that the boundary between the interiors of the bars and the street is becoming more porous. Although the politics of this attachment to 'down to earth' spaces is complex and not always obviously progressive or egalitarian, it does still offer an optimistic reminder that there is a need for something other than upscale, gay consumption spaces.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to a critical examination of further sites of difference experienced by gay men in east London. Whereas this chapter has predominantly focused on class difference, the next considers in greater detail the intersections of class and ethnicity amongst non-heterosexual men in the area.

CHAPTER FIVE

SITES OF DIFFERENCE: COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE
LIMITS TO BELONGING AMONGST A COMMUNITY OF



Figure 5: Queers Without Borders flier, September 2006

CHAPTER FIVE:

**SITES OF DIFFERENCE: COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE
LIMITS TO BELONGING AMONGST A COMMUNITY OF
STRANGERS**

In the previous chapter on gay class fractions in east London, and their specific attachments to particular residential areas and leisure venues, I explored something of the specific context in which this study took place. What I hope I have begun to convey is a sense in which multiple different gay social relations are situated simultaneously in east London. So far in this thesis, I have predominantly considered the relational geographies of local housing and leisure markets. However, cities are constituted by far broader networked infrastructures (Graham and Marvin 2001) - flows of people, capital, information and transportation systems, to name just a few (Amin and Thrift 2002). These flows are crucial to an understanding of networked urbanism, in which identities and subjectivities are also mobile and contingent. These network-based approaches insist that 'the global' does not operate at a general level, but works through specific contiguous ties and connections. As such, these approaches construe 'the local' as hubs connecting other networks, joined by ties that are as fluid and temporary as the subjectivities that move through the networks. In other words, there is no singular 'global', but "an infinite multiplicity of global relationships, all constituted in various forms

through particular local configurations” (Savage et al 2005: 6; see also Prytherch and Marston 2005).

To think of East London in networked terms, whilst still paying attention to local experiences and practices (Tonkiss 2005), is to note the diasporic connections between villages in rural Turkey and Dalston or (the Bangladeshi region of) Sylhet and Whitechapel. There are the flows of international students who come to study in the area’s universities. There are the transnational business deals brokered through Canary Wharf. There are spiritual connections through various paths of Islam or the Catholic Church. There are gay men who relocate to London from small town England and beyond, in pursuit of love, freedom and security; or adventurous gay tourists who break free of the West End to visit one of the area’s better known gay clubs. Having discussed differently classed gay social networks in Chapter Four, in the pages that follow I attempt to think more holistically about ‘sites of difference’ (Anderson 1998) in East London as they are experienced by gay and non-heterosexual men. I contrast the differential experiences of transnational gay urbanism between ‘gay’ men from some of the more established diasporic and migrant communities across East London and those men who consume neighbourhoods such as Spitalfields as highly desirable symbols of cosmopolitan chic. Such tensions between elite and marginal or abject experiences of transnationality and their relationship to understandings of cosmopolitan urbanism have been widely debated in recent years (Binnie *et al.* 2006; Bridge 2005; Watson 2006).

As I noted in Chapter Three, few men of colour volunteered to be interviewed for this project, despite my best efforts to encourage them to do so. This chapter draws on those small number of interviews, as well as conversations and events involving men from East London's minority ethnic communities that I recorded in my field notes. It also relies on a number of interviews with white men who were in relationships with non-white men.

I start by examining the flows of gay bodies to and through East London. In doing so, I touch on the migration narratives of gay men from small towns across the UK, as well as the stories of non-heterosexual men from Latin American, South Asia and elsewhere. In contrast to Weston (1995) and Knopp (2004), I question the extent to which some 'gay' men migrate (to East London) in pursuit of somewhere to 'belong' in anticipated respite from homophobic abuse and heteronormative familial assumptions. I examine the search for fixity and elective belonging through the experiences of Jaime, a well-educated middle class man from Honduras who had sacrificed much of the privilege he enjoyed in his home country in order to try and live a mode of gayness which he believed to be currently impossible in Central America. In the following section, I consider the place of 'gay' men within some of east London's more established diasporic and migrant communities. In taking this approach, I am conscious that, as King (1993) has highlighted, metropolitan sexual categories frequently negate the complex cartographies (Binnie 2004: 79) of sexual acts and identities outside the Global North. However, and this is the point of the second half of the chapter, mainstream contemporary gay identities are historically and geographically specific and are increasingly outliving their usefulness for

various groups of non-heterosexual people. Following on from the earlier discussion on migration and transnational connections, I examine the incorporation of sexual difference within the promotion of cosmopolitanism as both a place-marketing strategy and a desirable form of cultural capital. I pay particular attention to the development of Spitalfields as an exemplary cosmopolitan zone and consider how, in that context, it provides contradictory opportunities for non-heterosexual men living and working in the area depending on their class and ethnic background (Brown 2006). I will suggest that the incorporation of openness to sexual difference within the practices of cosmopolitan urban life sometimes finds expression as a sexual indifference, in which the boundaries of mainstream sexual identities become more ambiguous and open to reconfiguration. Consequently, I suggest that in these sites a range of post-gay identities and practices are at play. I examine the spatial expression of these post-gay practices in the final substantive section of the chapter. In particular, I question whether some avant garde 'queer' cultural experiments have already become valorised and recuperated, such that they further add to the bohemian, cosmopolitan coding of areas such as Spitalfields and Hoxton.

In the following pages, I look for points of convergence and difference between the lives of 'closeted' non-heterosexual men of colour who refuse to identify as 'gay' and more privileged young white bohemians for whom gay identities no longer work. The very different experiences and life histories of these numerous groups of men resonate (in their own ways) with Knopp's recent (2004) exploration of queer 'ontologies of placelessness,' in which he suggested that many gay men have a restless need to keep moving that is expressed through an

ambivalent relationship to place and the identities that are most readily available for them to claim. If, as Golding (1993) has suggested, the queer city exists in the cracks within existing urban forms, this chapter begins to examine the queer potential that exists in the cracks between fixed, bounded identities, however uncomfortable that might sometimes feel for the individuals concerned.

5.1 Migration and 'queer' diasporas

Over the last three decades, some aspects of 'gay culture' have become truly transnational. An international network of tourist destinations that are particularly marketed at the (relatively) affluent lesbian or gay consumer has developed, including London, Manchester, Amsterdam, San Francisco, Sydney, Mykonos, Gran Canaria and many more sites. Within these broader circuits of tourism, there are more specialist networks focused around particular niche markets and subcultures, such that there are specific networks associated with the leather scene or dance music circuit parties. Off the radar of the marketing executives and less visible to the gay travel writers, there are also the radical queer activist networks discussed in the penultimate chapter of this dissertation. And, of course, there are gay and queer fractions within a host of other transnational networks not necessarily defined by the sexuality of their participants.

Binnie has identified internal and transnational migration as occupying a central place in gay men's 'coming out' narratives. For him (Binnie 2004: 86) it represents "a key way in which space and place play a significant part in the formation of sexual identities, cultures and communities." The process of changing

location in order to 'come out' frequently compels gay men and women to confront and share their, once secret, sexual desires (Brown 2000: 50). Certainly, in his recent survey of lesbian, gay and bisexual people living in the east London borough of Newham, Barlow (2003) found that 46% of his respondents had been born in areas of the UK outside of London and a further 17% had been born outside the UK. Similarly, his survey of lesbian, gay and bisexual people living in neighbouring Tower Hamlets (Barlow 2004) found that 41% of those surveyed had been born in the rest of the UK (outside London) with 30% born outside the UK. Although many of these people will have migrated to London with their parents in childhood, or have moved to London primarily for education or employment (rather than directly because of their sexuality), these figures do demonstrate that a very significant number of non-heterosexual men in East London have experienced intra- or transnational migration at some point in their lives.

Amongst the men I interviewed, there were some, like Dimitri from the Ukraine, who explained their migration to London in terms of the economic and educational opportunities on offer, without relating these to their sexuality. Other men, like Agustin from Spain, linked the two more closely. He explained that he had primarily come to London to undertake a professional qualification in architecture, but that his final choice of London as the venue for his studies was determined by a desire to "experience different cultures and to come clubbing in UK." Agustin's awareness of (and attraction to) the London gay club scene is, in itself, indicative of the ways in which transnational gay networks are sustained and promoted through marketing campaigns, travel journalism and the tales shared

amongst informal friendship groups. After all, travel and migration seldom totally erase or disrupt existing friendship networks (Smith 2001: 4) – friends still phone, email and return home for varying lengths of time.

And yet, Binnie (2004: 84) suggests that the experience of homophobia and rejection in one's place or family of origin can mean that,

many queers have no home from which to wander and are locked in a continuous struggle to find a secure sense of self and home, place and identity, while finding that many of the identities on offer lead to a sense of disidentification.

In such circumstances, the differences between life in the migrant's country (or region) of origin and their new location, can "become central to the management and formation of identity" (Binnie 2004: 94), suggesting a relational sense of identity forged across space and between two (or more) times and places. It is in this respect that Binnie (2004: 94) articulates his contention that there are similarities between the processes of migration and 'coming out', in that both "may involve considerable dislocation, emotional cost, a mixture of fear and joy in forging and developing new social networks and creating space between old and new [lives] and identities." Blunt and Varley (2004: 3) have suggested that claiming a home is always a process of finding a workable balance between nostalgia for the past, the means of living in the present and enacting one's dreams of the future. But, for Ahmed (1999: 336) "the very experience of leaving home and 'becoming a stranger' leads to the creation of a new 'community of strangers'" such that the migrant experience, no matter over what spatial scale it occurs, is an act of balancing the cost of not having a home or being at home with the formation of new friendships and

support networks. As such, there is still a danger of feeling out of place, often as a very visceral and embodied sense of discomfort (Ahmed 1999: 343).

One man I spoke to explicitly linked his coming out as gay with his relocation to London from South Wales, almost to the point of conflating the two experiences. As Hywel explained:

My decision to come out originally was affected by a fear of violence in South Wales - I left to avoid gossip and because there was no scene in South Wales. (Interview with Hywel).

For him, South Wales offered both the negative prospect of being ostracized, talked about and, ultimately, threatened with physical violence as well as a lack of positive support and refuge on the gay scene. In moving to London, he must have been faced with the challenge of finding or creating new support and friendship networks, amongst the 'community of strangers' in the absence of a "shared terrain of knowledge" (Ahmed 1999: 344). Viewed in this way, flows of migration and movement can be understood as a creative, constitutive process of becoming.

Less optimistically, Binnie suggests that in such circumstances gay men are trapped in a constant search for fixity. In making this claim, he (2004: 82) highlights the discrepancy between those postmodern queer theorists who celebrate the fluidity and uncertainty of identity categories and the lived experience of, he claims, most gay people, who desire "certainty, structure, order and the attachment to specific localities where sexualities can be performed, celebrated, recognized and made public and legitimized." I find this dichotomy unsettling, both for what it implies about gay men's lives and for some of the implications of its critique of queer theoretical approaches. First, although I share a critique of much queer theory

as being considerably divorced from the 'real' lives of gay men, I still maintain that there are modes of queer critique that can offer valuable pointers to alternative modes of being (as I consider in the next two chapters). Second, whilst recognizing that the hope of certainty and stability offers comfort and sustenance to many gay men at various stages in their lives, I question whether the very concepts of fixity and stability are themselves over-determined by heteronormative values tied to capitalist property relations.

Two of the white British men that I interviewed in Newham had both recently returned to the UK after a period of time living abroad. They were both in relationships with men they had met abroad. At least one man in each relationship was HIV positive and, in part, their treatment needs had motivated the couples' relocation to London.

I've been with my Thai partner for 4 years. We met in Thailand for a holiday romance. We're both HIV positive and that strengthened the bond. I applied for my partner to enter the UK and this was granted. He's been here since January 2000, which was a bit of a culture shock. HIV dictates that we stay here, though we'd rather be in Thailand. (Interview with Nigel).

I live in Newham and work for an airline in Finchley. ... I plan to stay in the area as long as I stay in England. My partner is Brazilian with a visa to live and work here. We'd like to return to Brazil in a year or two maybe. ... I've been in the same relationship for 16 years. It took 3 years for my partner to get a visa and it will be checked again in two years - we still have to be together to get it renewed. ... [M]y partner is HIV + ... We weren't so open in Brazil where the social climate is very different. (Interview with Warren).

These stories of multiple relocations across different spatial scales, in search of a place where these men feel they can 'put down roots', resonates with Massey's (1994) argument that people come to perceive their relationship to place through the many ways in which they come and go, moving in and out of places over regular and

irregular periods. Savage and his co-authors (Savage et al 2005) have described this process as the search for 'elective belonging', which they understand as a "socially constructed, embedded process in which people reflexively judge the suitability of a given site as appropriate given their social trajectory and their position in other fields" (Savage et al 2005: 12). As they theorize it, people feel that they belong in a place when they are able to locate it within the biographical stories they tell to (and about) themselves. In this way, Savage and his colleagues (2005: 207) suggest that people's sense of belonging is linked to a "contingent tie between themselves and their surroundings."

As I have previously charted, Binnie (2004) believes that migration by gay men is part of a never-ending search for fixity and stability in places where they can feel safe and secure in expressing their sexuality. In this respect, his argument works well with the conceptualisation of processes of elective belonging developed by Savage and his collaborators (Savage *et al.* 2005). However, Binnie (2004: 36) also cautions that there is a danger in such formulations that 'the local' becomes constructed as the authentic site of sexuality, based on "an essentialized, autobiographical gay identity." Perceived in this way, he argues, sexuality is reduced to a natural essence occurring at the local level that is passively shaped by the forces of global capital with little or no agency of its own. Furthermore, these same approaches can compress and restrict sexuality to the intimate spaces of 'the home'. "Intimacy is seen as the natural, authentic state where one goes to escape the contaminants of global capitalism," (Binnie 2004: 37). In other words, theories which counterpose the global and the local as separate and distinct scales should be

treated with caution by sexual geographers, as they can be used to trivialize sexual cultures and deny their role as a material force outside the domestic sphere. I take these cautionary arguments on board. But, I believe that the notion of the search for 'home' and 'elective belonging' is a credible one when held within the context of the network-based approaches to the fluid, folded links between 'the global' and 'the local' that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

5.2 The transnational search for belonging: Jaime's story

In this section, I examine the complex transnational search for elective belonging undertaken by Jaime, an upper middle class gay man from Honduras who came to London, ostensibly to undertake postgraduate study, but motivated by the search for a professional gay man he could settle down with and lead the romanticized dream of the perfect gay life that he saw as a means of escape from the constraints of his privileged life in Central America. Jaime's story is a rich and complex one.

When I first met Jaime, in the summer of 2002, he had just celebrated his thirty-third birthday. He told me that he had been in London for a little less than a year upgrading his MBA in International Development Economics at a leading London university and was working occasional shifts as a cleaner at a hospital in North London in order to supplement his savings. For him, this work was something of a come down from his previous career as a senior account manager for a major international retail bank in Honduras and a life of relative comfort and affluence there (although he always maintained that neither he nor his family had ever been

that rich). Although Jaime was born in Mexico and had lived in El Salvador, Peru, Panama and (as an undergraduate) New Orleans, most of his life had been spent in Honduras where his family was still based. He explained that his father was of Palestinian heritage and his mother's family was originally French. He was very proud of this cosmopolitan blend in his genealogy and frequently referred to it, as a means of asserting his cultural capital and distinguishing himself from the majority of his fellow Hondurans (both indigenous and *mestizo*). As Sidaway (2002: 21) has explained, there are complex hierarchies of class and racial hierarchies within different Latin American societies, which defy simple generalizations. Additionally, Jaime found every opportunity to point out that his father was a successful businessman, that many of his family held senior positions in the banking and financial sector across Latin America, and that his mother was an assistant to a minister in the government of the time. To use Ahmed's (1999: 342) phrase, Jaime is implicated in "complex and contradictory relationships to social privilege and marginality."

Over the course of my numerous discussions with him (which he never allowed me to record – forcing me to rely on the extensive notes I wrote up immediately after our meetings), I discovered that Jaime had a strong commitment to (what he understood as) gay rights. Although, it is fair to say that his interpretation of what this meant often seemed quite alien to me, and from my perspective as a British queer academic, seemed stuck on the cusp of the homophile and gay moments. These discussions forced me to reflect how much 'queer' is a product of the Northern transatlantic economies. Jaime explained that he had been

openly gay back in Honduras and prior to coming to London had been in a six-year relationship with a slightly younger man, called Miguel (who he described as being heavily Americanized and not particularly proud of his Latin roots – comments that seemed somewhat at odds with Jaime’s own attempts to delineate distinctions between himself and much of Latin society). This relationship and his openness about his sexuality not only caused tension with his devoutly Catholic mother and the rest of his family, it also apparently caused Jaime some difficulties in his employment at the bank (where his superiors objected to the car of one of their senior managers being seen outside the small number of gay bars in the capital). As he described it, it sounded to me as if, in Honduran terms at least, Jaime was something of a minor gay activist and was involved in attempts to foster a sense of gay community that didn’t entirely revolve around the limited bar scene. However, he was somewhat cynical and despondent about his lack of success in this endeavour. In hindsight, though, I find myself questioning to what extent this aspect of Jaime’s testimony was based in actual events, or whether he was actually trying to impress me, and recasting his own experiences in relation to my own interests and beliefs.

The more we talked, the more it became clear that Jaime’s sexuality, more than the prospects of career advancement on the back of his MBA, had played a major role in his decision to come to the UK and his exploration of the possibilities for staying in London once his studies were completed. In developing these desires and making tentative plans for their realization, Jaime had been encouraged by a

close female friend, who he had known since childhood, and who had been resident in London for more than a decade with her British husband and young family.

I found Jaime to be enthralled by the size and diversity of London's gay scene and the relatively liberal laws and public tolerance of homosexuality in the capital. However, to my mind, there was a large dose of naïveté within his perceptions of liberal London that meant he had yet to realize or confront the limits to the capital's tolerance. At the same time, his enjoyment of London's commercial gay scene was tempered by a grave discomfort with the sexual mores of most gay men within the capital. Perhaps as a result of his orthodox Catholic education and upbringing, Jaime held a quite conservative and romanticized belief in the sanctity of long-term, monogamous relationships, and he found his European friends' enjoyment of public sex environments and casual encounters quite distasteful. Similarly, although he enjoyed visiting many of the glitzier, upscale gay bars in the West End, Jaime found many of East London's bars to be tawdry, sordid and depressing. This was most exaggerated in the case of venues offering drag acts as entertainment – although it should be stressed that this was not because he found drag distasteful or uncomfortable in any way, but actually because he found British drag acts lacklustre and uninspiring when compared with their Latin American sisters.

Jaime's attitudes and aspirations reveal a complex and frequently contradictory relationship between his Latin American upbringing and his over-investments in the desire to settle down with an affluent, educated British gay professional. At times his outbursts betrayed a deeply conservative outlook and

morality – an Italian friend of his remarked that for all his pretensions to being a ‘modern’, cosmopolitan gay man, Jaime still approached the world through the mind set of a ‘Mexican housewife’. And yet, at the same time, it was precisely in reaction to that outlook on life that Jaime decided to come to the UK. For Jaime, having been educated in the US and had some experience of gay life there, the Honduran gay scene was never going to be ‘big enough’ to accommodate him. For Ahmed (1999: 337), the process of migration allows the migrant the privilege to see more and to appreciate the world beyond the confines of ‘home’. Jaime suggested that in Honduras, the minority of men who choose to live an unashamedly open gay life used ‘absolute indiscretion’ and flamboyance as a cover; while professional gay men tended to try and either assimilate absolutely or (more frequently) live a very closeted existence. This interpretation both reinforces and differs from the situation described by Fernandez-Aleman and Murray (2002) in their anthropological study of Honduran homosexualities. The situation, as they explain it, is that homosexuality in Honduras is still dominated by a ‘heterogender’ model that is highly stratified by age and class. They found that for many working class Hondurans, ‘gay’ was often associated with the more traditional, gendered identity of the *maricon* or the *pasivo*. As the visibility and power of gay political movements in Latin America has spread and grown over the last decade and a half, these traditional models have been complicated. There has been a growing aspiration for a North American model of gay identity, but this has primarily only been open to assimilationist, upper middle class urbanites. The assertion of such an identity has had the consequence of actually splintering earlier forms of affinity and solidarity

between men positioned in different places within a complex matrix of gender and sexual roles, such that 'active'/'masculine' men no longer see common political cause with their more 'feminine' or transgendered peers. This development exposes the 'closet' as concept based on egalitarian and/or reciprocal modes of homosexuality that are now dominant in the Global North.

In pursuit of his ideal professional gay partner, Jaime was prepared to give up a comfortable lifestyle and well-paid professional position in the higher echelons of Honduran middle class society. Several months into our discussions, Jaime finally revealed that having secured a place on his MBA course and entered the UK on a student visa, he had never actually enrolled on the course and was living 'illegally' in the UK, where he was prepared to endure long hours of gruelling and demeaning minimum-wage domestic work while attempting to find the man he dreamed of. Sadly, I feel that Jaime will, ultimately, be disappointed in his search, as the beliefs and cultural assumptions of the type of metropolitan gay men he desires are likely to be very different to his own, and at odds with the values that he projects onto them.

Having revealed his undocumented status in the UK to me, Jaime clearly felt he had put himself and his dreams at risk, and stopped frequenting the places where I had met and talked with him. In many ways this turn of events made me realize how much I take the liberal circles within which I mix, and the broader social tolerance offered by London (however imperfect it may be) for granted. For a while afterwards, I would occasionally bump into Jaime on the street. Mostly we would acknowledge each other's presence, but conversation, if it occurred at all, was

always awkward and perfunctory. Several years on, I have no idea if Jaime is still in the UK, moving in different networks to try and realize his dream, or if he has returned to Latin America.

I think it worth ending this section by elaborating and considering the many scales of movement and migration that led to Jaime's relocation to London, and the various transnational networks implicated in his search for somewhere he could feel as if he belonged. In the background to his entire odyssey are the many prior border crossings of his particularly transnational family heritage – both in terms of how his French and Palestinian ancestors came to be in Latin America and the many relocations throughout the region that he experienced in childhood, as a result of shifting political instabilities and his father's search for profit. Of course, it was his father's business interests that enabled his undergraduate education in the USA, and his exposure to alternative modes of being in the world. His family's status and his own privileged education provided the opening for him to gain employment at a relatively senior level within a large multinational bank, involved in their management of the finances of international aid programmes funded by the United Nations. The relative affluence that this employment afforded him allowed him the possibility of travelling to the UK, although he was never established enough within those circuits to take advantage of 'legitimate' and 'legal' means of relocating to the UK. Perhaps for this reason, it was also the focus of his discomfort with his inability to relate to his homosexuality in the way he would prefer within the context of Honduran middle class life. It proved to be the fault line between the lived experience of his life in Honduras and his exposure to the diffusion of North

American and European gay rights discourses. In London he found support and sustenance both amongst the Honduran and Mexican Diaspora in the city – friends whose tales from afar had partially inspired his travels – and broader networks of Latin men on the capital’s gay scene. Of course, the harsh realities of his undocumented status in the UK compelled him to find work cleaning a hospital with other *sans papiers* – people for whom he frequently expressed considerable contempt. When life in London got tough and his search for the ideal romantic British gay professional seemed frustrated or doomed, Jaime found comfort in the arms of the Catholic Church – the very body whose influence on social attitudes to homosexuality ‘at home’ (in terms of both the Honduran nation and his family) had compelled his journey in the first place. His search for belonging was (and probably still is) a complicated one. Despite his dreams and desires of a new metropolitan gay life, Jaime continued to hold on to complex and contradictory identifications with many of the places, people and networks that had shaped his path. Rather than realizing his search for fixity, Jaime experienced multiple, temporary moments of gelling when, with certain people in certain contexts, he felt he was nearly there – an optimism that was continually destabilized either by material pressures, or the contradictory impulses of his many competing identities and affiliations.

5.3 Belonging from the fringes

I now examine the ways in which a number of South Asian men in the East End have negotiated the search for ‘elective belonging’. I draw on interviews with these men and encounters with them from my fieldwork. I also analyze the tales told

to me by some of the white gay men that I interviewed for what they tell me about their attitudes to ethnic difference and their perceptions of the non-white men they meet in the area. I end this section with a discussion of Jim's reflections on the tensions and difficulties involved in sustaining his relationship with a South Asian man who still lived with his family.

My observations suggest that the number of South Asian men using mainstream commercial gay venues in East London has increased significantly over the last decade. Nevertheless, the numbers of South Asian men using these venues is still very small, and men from different South Asian ethnic and religious communities use the scene unevenly. These differences appear to be over-determined by class. Sikh and Hindu men from (middle class) Indian and East African families are more likely than their Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim counterparts to feel able to use these venues. At the same time, in response to increasing societal Islamophobia resulting from the 'War on Terror', lesbian and gay Muslims are increasingly organizing themselves to offer mutual support and a safe space for religious observance (Minwalla *et al.* 2005; Rouhani *forthcoming*). Young Pakistani men and women from East London have been in the forefront of organizing support groups for British gay Muslims.

Raj, a young Sikh man in his mid-twenties, described the contradictory experience of being gay and Asian in East London. It should be noted that, as well as making use of the local gay bars in Newham and Tower Hamlets, Raj mostly socialized in leather and fetish clubs across London.

I've lived in Newham since I was four years old. I studied and worked in Newham until I was 20, doing business and administration. In the last 3 years I've been unemployed due to stress-related issues. I wasn't able to complete my degree due to lack of money and stress. ... There is a small gay community [in Newham] that changes over the years and is growing now. ... I don't feel part of this local gay community as sometimes the scene can be pretentious and there is a small racial issue in the local community. Newham is different to the rest of London - there's a more relaxed atmosphere in the east, more easy going, more acceptable to be who you are. ... A lot of Asian people are unaware about homosexuality in general. I feel unsafe in Green Street. (Interview with Raj).

His testimony suggests that despite some 'small racial issues', Raj feels more at ease on the gay scene than he does in the main public spaces of Newham's numerous Asian communities. Nevertheless, his assessment of the local gay scene is a little contradictory – he considers it to be 'more relaxed', 'easy going' and more accepting of difference than venues in the rest of London; and yet, he still does not feel part of it. He is caught between belonging and not belonging in several different communities.

Another gay Asian man that I met had found a very different social network in which to reconcile the different aspects of his identity. For him, this largely involved turning his back on both his middle class family background and the mainstream gay community.

I got chatted up in the steam room by a tall, lanky South Asian man (I guess of my age or perhaps a little older). ... We retreated to the lounge and had a long, wide-ranging conversation. He turned out to have been born in [East Africa], raised as a Hindu and had studied [Pure Mathematics] at [a Oxbridge college]. Now, however, he is an ordained member of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order and lives in one of their communal chapter houses. ... He was a little coy about how he had got involved in the FWBO, but said that he 'had been looking for something', went on a retreat and it felt right. He was open about the high concentration of gay men and women in the Order but was keen to point out that a significant number of the ordained members work outside the Order's businesses. (Field note: The Small Sauna, 16 March 2002).

This was not the only time that the FWBO and the cluster of business they run in Bethnal Green were mentioned by men I interviewed (Steve, Graham and Jim all mentioned it in our conversations). For some well-educated men who are alienated by the materialism of the mainstream gay scene, the FWBO offers an alternative site in which to meet other gay people on different terms. In building a relationship with the Order, this particular man appeared to be employing a counter-cultural capital more associated with his class and level of education, than his ethnicity.

Mostly, however, I met a number of young South Asian men (from various class and religious backgrounds) who utilized a range of tactics in order to make contact with other gay men without causing distress or shame to their families. Frequently this entailed complex 'time-space geographies' (Valentine 1993) in order to keep different aspects of their lives apart, travelling some distance from their homes (often under cover of darkness) to pursue their 'gay lives' out of sight of extended family surveillance networks.

Damien, the Bangladeshi lad, who used to hang out with Dee's clique, and who works on the deli counter in a supermarket in Poplar (I could swear he used to call himself 'Abdul' when I first met him) was in for the first time in months. He says that he has been going to Hyde Park, Hampstead Heath and [The Common] instead. If anything, he's getting more camp as time goes by and we spent some time gossiping conspiratorially. (Field note: The Cottage, 18 October 2002).

This young working class Bangladeshi man employed a number of different tactics to keep physical and social distance between his family and his erotic desires. I met him in a cottage a couple of miles away from the area where he lived. However, it became clear, over the course of the year or more when I met him with

some regularity, that he was gradually expanding the geographical distance over which he was prepared to travel (always by public transport) in order to meet men for sex. Over this period, as he came to adopt a more 'camp' persona and clearer gay identity through these sites, he also adopted a new, Anglicized, name that he used with other gay men – another example of creating cultural distance between different aspects of his life.

One of Damien's friendship circle at The Cottage appeared to employ similar time-space tactics.

I was standing chatting to Dee and 'her' short cheeky mate when we were soon by a young Indian lad and 'Damien'. The Indian lad is called Ajay and lives with his parents in Billericay (travelling into the East End as it is safely out of their way). He stood chatting with us and flirting with me for a long while. (Field note: The Cottage, 13 October 2001).

Like Damien, Ajay appeared to travel some considerable distance away from his family home in order to meet men. However, it soon became clear that, although this was largely true, he had initially provided me with a cover story that obscured key details of his life:

It turns out that Ajay lives in Forest Gate not Billericay. He claims to be bisexual (although he admits he has never had sex with a woman) and wants to get married when the time comes. (Field note: 19 October 2001).

For a young man who went to such efforts to keep his family life separate from his gay life, it is perhaps not surprising that he chose to withhold his exact place of residence from a stranger he was meeting for the first time. For men like Ajay and Damien, who create space to pursue their 'private lives' in semi-public spaces, notions of privacy, home and belonging are complex and porous. They

display a form of 'transversal rationality' in their ability to cope with their distance from established community norms (Bridge 2005: 151).

Ajay was not the only young Asian man that I met who displayed an investment in describing himself as 'bisexual' rather than 'gay'. Ajay frequently told me that he wanted to marry a woman eventually and that, although he enjoyed having sex with men, planned to stop that once he was married. For him the prospect of marriage was both an important obligation to his family and deeply connected with his own sense of masculinity. Similar considerations may help to explain the following encounter that I had with a young Bengali man who attempted to pick me up on the street (which I experienced in equal parts as intriguing, slightly comic and more than a little unsettling):

Outside the Snooker Club in Whitechapel I was approached by a young, drunken Bengali lad. At first, he tried to drag me into the Snooker Club, where he promised me I could buy some excellent skunk. He was very insistent and wouldn't [physically] let go of me. To be honest, he scared me a little. Finally, once I persuaded him that I didn't want/ wouldn't go into the Snooker Club, he asked if I wanted my cock sucked. Thinking that he was possible for rent, I asked what the catch was, to which he replied, "nothing, I just want to suck white cock." He followed this by repeatedly questioning whether I was gay or not, explaining that he was bisexual and only slept with straight men and other bisexuals, but not gay men! (Field note: Whitechapel, 4 July 2003).

Like this young man, Ajay, Damien and many of the other young South Asian men that I met in public sex environments over the years, most often chose white men (not other South Asian men or men from other ethnic groups) as their lovers and sexual partners. It is difficult, without further evidence (particularly from the young men themselves), to speculate as to exactly why this might be or what power dynamics are at play within these relationships. Although, potentially there is

some kind of projection of the 'gay lifestyle' they aspire to onto a whole stratum of European gay men. Indeed, as Minwalla et al (2005: 121) have commented, the dominance of images of white gay men in media representations of homosexuality, can lead some (young) gay men of colour to believe they can only validate their desires in relation(s) with and to white men.

A number of times during the execution of this research, I encountered attitudes from white gay men that served to deny the existence of gay men of colour. This was particularly the case in relation to Bangladeshi men, and frequently took the form of de-sexualizing them, or suggesting that homosexuality was beyond their comprehension. Such attitudes can be witnessed in the following comment from my interview with Ed, a middle aged working class Yorkshire man, who was trying to explain why Bengali men were seldom to be seen in East London's gay bars.

Well, the type of guys [I'm attracted to are] not necessarily going to live in Bethnal Green, because I'm into black guys. ... That's my sexual preference, therefore, there's a lot more out black guys in London than there is in Sheffield or anywhere else, really. It's certainly not specific to Bethnal Green to be honest, because I don't know that many black guys in this area, to honest. ... Obviously, as I said, there's Bengalis, but they tend not to be... or don't appear to be that sexual, or if they are they must be closets because you don't see them out and about. I suspect they might be a bit more closeted. (Interview with Ed).

The notion that sex, and particularly homosex, is 'beyond' Bengali men living in East London was also a theme that came up in my interview with Roger, the public relations executive introduced in the previous chapter. In that interview he commented that he felt safe as a gay men living in Tower Hamlets as from his experience there seemed to be no threat of homophobic attack. In itself, this is a positive comment, however, his explanation of why this might be the case is more

problematic, as he stated that Bengali youths did not attack (white) gay men “but is that because they don't really understand it [homosexuality]?” (Interview with Roger). I would question whether these middle aged white men use their projection of Bengali men as being closeted and a-sexual as a means of reinforcing their understanding of themselves as potent and confident ‘modern’ gay men. They certainly do not appear prepared to countenance the possibility that the Bengali men that they encounter might be socially tolerant, open to difference or queer themselves!

It does not seem to cross the minds of Ed or Roger that the racist, negative and negating views that they hold about (gay) Bengali and Bangladeshi men might actually contribute to those men's distance from, and lack of visibility on, the local commercial gay scene. Undercurrents of racism and the ethnic exclusivity of dominant white gay social networks can serve to make the gay scene an unwelcoming, uncomfortable and unsafe space for ‘gay’ men of colour.

Whilst there are a growing number of ‘niche market’ gay club nights existing (mostly) on the fringes of the mainstream gay scene, such as the monthly events organized by Goddess Club for lesbians and gay men of South Asian heritage, these events are still small in number. A further complication is that some of these venues appear to exist more for the titillation of white gay men, where they can objectify the ‘ethnic Other’, rather than as meaningful resources for queers of colour. Certainly, several of Vaid's (2005) respondents expressed their discomfort with the presence of predatory, older white men at Goddess Club.

Few, if any, of these venues currently exist in East London, although this in itself might be more of an advantage than a hindrance for the men they attract, as it minimizes the risk of unexpectedly meeting friends and relatives on the way to and from these venues.

Minwalla *et al.* (2005), in their recent study of the development of progressive gay Muslim organisations [in North America] contend that the closet, despite serving as a key concept within queer theory and gay studies, has a limited application within the cultures of many Muslim and other South Asian sexual dissidents (see also Khan *et al.* 2005). In his important study of the geographies of the closet, Brown (2000) makes the point that the closet is not just a metaphor for the concealment, erasure and ignorance of homosexualities. It does work metaphorically, but it also has an existence in material space. It has location and situation. Still, it is fundamentally a Western epistemology and so to apply it universally risks colonizing other constructions and understandings of sexuality and desire. Equally, as I suggested at the end of my previous chapter and as other scholars have also proposed (Binnie 2004: 80), it is becoming increasingly clear that the applicability of the closet metaphor is limited amongst rural and working class gay men in Britain. Nonetheless, it is extremely difficult to discuss processes of contemporary homosexual identity formation (or resistance to it) in Britain without finding oneself caught up in the language of the closet. Still, in thinking about alternative means of expressing these relationships, it might prove useful to remember that in pre-World War Two New York City gay men did not come *out* of the closet, but *into* the gay world (Chauncey 1994: 7-8).

The complexities and frustrations of living lives beyond the reach of the closet metaphor are exemplified in the following extract from my interview with Jim (who I introduced in the previous chapter). In many ways, Jim does relate to the concept of the closet, even if he does not consider himself to be particularly 'out', however this either/or relationship to an open homosexual identity appears to be less clear cut for his South Asian lover. This has led to misunderstandings, frustrations and suspicions on Jim's part about his lover's commitment to the relationship:

My, sort of, [partner], he doesn't like pubs because of the alcohol side, although he does drink (a bit). I suppose if you're Muslim and gay you might as well drink as well (or that's the way he sees it). But he's, sort of, he's quite obsessed with cleanliness and stuff like that, you know, so that's another thing he doesn't like about pubs. The smoke he doesn't like, he doesn't like to have to go home (he lives with his parents) and his parents having to smell the smoke and the alcohol on his clothes. So that in a way quite limits what we do because he doesn't like to be seen walking around, you know, out in the open air, but then again he doesn't want to go to the smoky bars. So he generally just likes to come round here and stay in [laughs]. ... Yeah, I mean, so it's very difficult to have a relationship with a man like that because, you know, they won't be seen with me in public and they won't go into gay bars, so a lot of its conducted after dark and, you know, it's 'oh, but somebody might recognise my car' and that sort of thing. Yeah, I don't know how they stand it, because they do seem to have to live this, sort of, double life, if not triple... I could have picked an easier guy to be with, but you don't pick 'em. ... Well, there are certain things with [my boyfriend], like I don't know where he lives - he's a mobile phone away and that's it, so it's... I feel like a, I don't know, a *slut*? But that gets quite depressing at times because he knows my phone number, he knows my address and my house inside out, whereas, to be honest for all I know he could be married. And, like, I'm quite frank with him about that, but the answer comes back that he lives with his parents and it's awkward so he can't give out his home number, and you know, I certainly understand that... if it's true [laughs]. (Interview with Jim).

Whilst men like Jim's partner continue to live with their parents, they (and, by extension, their lovers) experience considerable constraints on the sites where they can find some privacy. Unlike men like Ajay and Damien, Jim's partner even

feels unable to seek privacy in (semi-)public spaces. The uncertainty created by these spatial limitations on their meetings clearly causes Jim much pain, even as he struggles to understand and accommodate them.

It is hardly surprising that Jim, who has spent all of his life living and working in multi-cultural contexts in inner London, should be open to viewing the world through other frames of reference. It should be noted though, that Jim was one of the few (white) men I interviewed for this project who displayed such a keen sense of ‘global reflexivity’ (2005:202) – more so, indeed, than some who had spent extended periods of time living outside Britain. I would suggest that the reasons for this partly lie in Jim’s experience of growing up immersed in a culturally diverse neighbourhood, mixing at school with children from many different ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, he actively utilizes his reflections on his encounters with difference to locate himself as belonging within (or at least alongside) east London’s many diasporic communities, as they gel around him.

In the first half of this chapter, I have considered the centrality of processes of migration in the lives of many gay men, as they search for somewhere to belong – what Knopp (2004) has referred to as an ‘ontology of placelessness.’ In examining the lives of a small group of non-heterosexual men from east London’s diasporic communities, I have highlighted the frequently tense negotiation of different cultural understandings of sexuality, which can result in awkward affiliations with both their ethnic communities and social networks focused on the mainstream commercial gay scene. I have highlighted how for some men this compounds and exacerbates their embodied feelings of alienation and not belonging. More positively, I have also

revealed some ways in which men and women find playful and creative opportunities to make the most of this ‘in between-ness.’ In the rest of the chapter, my emphasis shifts from the limits of the search for a sense of belonging within established, fixed identities, towards the cultivation of cultural capital through the embracing of a more ambivalent understanding of the relationship between those identities.

5.4 Sexual (In)difference and Cosmopolitanism

In recent decades, many British local authorities have worked to incorporate the presence of visible ethnic diversity into their place marketing strategies; and, have sought to capitalise on local minority ethnic populations as a driver for social and economic regeneration (albeit usually just by highlighting ‘ethnic’ restaurants and carnivals (Jacobs 1996)). In Tower Hamlets, Spitalfields has been subject to both processes (Keith 2005; Shaw *et al.* 2004), with Brick Lane’s Bengali restaurants serving as a focus for the regeneration of the area and the newly regenerated area being promoted internationally as an example of ‘multicultural’ London. Here it is important to note those critiques of the promotion of multiculturalism as set of policy initiatives which are deployed by dominant groups as a means of spatially managing minority ethnic groups (Day 2005; Hage 1998, cited in Watson 2006: 8).

Two of the white men I interviewed who had long-term family connections with the East End spoke about how they perceived the areas (and Spitalfields, in particular) to have changed over the last three decades.

I can remember, actually, um, when I was very little and we used to go down there because we had some Jewish friends. So that's, that's changed hugely since I was a kid. I mean, that's what? Mid-70s? And there were still quite a few Jewish tailors and textile merchants there. And then when I was, as I grew into my teens it became much more Bengali and now it's become [chuckles] painfully hip, and.... And so, yeah, you see lots of, you know visible middle class white gay men there. Whether they actually live there or not, I don't know. (Interview with Graham).

It's become a lot more... A lot younger and a lot more trendy, which is quite interesting. I remember, actually, visiting the area when I was younger to go to Petticoat Lane and that and I remember the real poverty, and it's really nice to see it coming up, because there's some really nice Georgian buildings round there, so.... It's a nice area, it's pleasant. (Interview with Gary).

Cosmopolitanism is about more than being open to ethnic difference. It can take in an enthusiasm to sample and combine a broad set of subcultural forms, including sexual difference and bohemianism. In recent years, an increasing number of cities have promoted the presence of 'gay villages' as an additional example of their cosmopolitan chic (Quilley 1997). As Florida (2002) and Bishop (2000) have suggested, in the context of the United States, that toleration of gay people becomes a marker of social liberalism in a city that in turn attracts cultural and technological entrepreneurs who can act as a driver for the growth and sustainability of the regional economy.

The dynamics of Spitalfields' development as a cosmopolitan zone has been slightly different, in that Tower Hamlets council have made no conscious effort to foster a cluster of gay businesses in the area. The concentration of Bengali businesses in Spitalfields, and the area's history of receiving successive waves of immigrants have acted as the main focus of its promotion as an exemplar of cosmopolitan London. Simultaneously, the area has a significant gay presence, supported by a small and relatively diffuse infrastructure of gay venues.

Interestingly, though, few of these venues are ever included in place marketing materials or tourist guides about the area. Part of my motivation in writing this chapter has been to explore the place of sexual difference in a city neighbourhood that is promoted as a cosmopolitan space without any explicit acknowledgement, contra Florida (2002), of the role of gay bodies in contributing to its cultural mix.

Whenever urban space is consciously promoted as cosmopolitan, the space becomes sanitised in order to maximise its appeal as an attractive site of consumption for the broadest range of visitors. Perhaps, if the presence of gay space is downplayed in the broader Spitalfields area (Shoreditch Gay Map 2004), it is not simply an attempt to render unruly, hyper-sexualised spaces invisible, but an indication that, for certain social layers who enjoy this cosmopolitan playground, mainstream 'gay' identities have outlived their usefulness. To this end, the rest of this chapter will consider the extent to which the production of Spitalfields as a cosmopolitan zone has also produced a layer of 'post-gay' space in which the need to clearly define and delineate our sexualities is largely deemed unnecessary. Post-gay spaces are those where sexual difference is visible and acknowledged without being the central marker of the space. They are distinct from the 'queer' spaces that I shall discuss in later chapters, which consciously disrupt normative sexual and gender binaries. Despite this attempt to distinguish and define these categories, I should stress that I do not view them as discretely bounded; rather, they are overlapping, relational and place-specific. What is (homo)normatively 'gay' in the context of cosmopolitan inner London might be deeply 'queer' ten miles away in the suburbs.

I want to suggest that, to some extent, the dynamics of everyday life in Spitalfields contributes to the suspicion that for certain sections of the population 'gay' identities as they have been defined and lived over the last thirty-five years have begun to outlive their usefulness. Sinfield (1998) has put forward a case that 'post-Stonewall' lesbian and gay identities are tied to the metropolitan centres of capital in the post-colonial world; and, as a result, exclude as many people as they include. However, at the same time, they have opened up new possibilities for other people to explore the fluidity of their sexuality. As he has elaborated:

The relative legitimation that the lesbian and gay movement has achieved has allowed everyone to move one space across.

If this is the case, the proportion of people likely to engage in same-sex experience is larger than we have supposed – probably far larger than the proportion of people who will ever identify as gay or lesbian (as those terms are currently conceived). A stronger availability of bisexuality as a positive condition may afford them a dissident identity if they want it. Even so, the drawing of these people into les/bi/gay consciousness will never be complete: for as we incorporate one cohort, the further legitimation thereby produced will enable another cohort to feel they can have sex with people of their own gender, while not taking the further step of identifying as other-than-straight. (Sinfield 1998: 13).

For Sinfield the post-gay does not necessarily represent a radical break with existing lesbian and gay identities, but builds upon what has gone before. He acknowledges that 'gay' (as we generally understand it today) was forged in response to a specific historical situation at the beginning of the 1970s. That situation has been transformed, and 'gay' has continued to evolve over the intervening thirty-five years. As a result, contemporary metropolitan gay identities are a product of their time and place, and a combination of both our own subcultural

production as well as interactions with broader social, cultural and political trends and events. As Sinfield (1998: 14) argues,

lesbians and gay men need to recognise that, for all our anti-essentialist theory, we have imagined sexuality to be less diverse and less mobile than, for many people, it is. Our current identities will never account for more than a proportion of the same-sex passion in our society.

In response, he suggested in 1998 that we were entering the 'post-gay' period in which "it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities" (Sinfield 1998: 14). If 'gay' was an identity initially (re)forged in the post-1968 period of rebellion and collective experimentation, then the 'post-gay' has some resonance with the current neoliberal emphasis on 'flexibility' in production, consumption and the labour force. The post-gay allows individuals to play with the boundaries of existing sexual identities and gives them the scope to enact different sexual and gendered identities in a range of situations.

I would stress that I am not denying that there are men who use the post-gay spaces that I discuss in these pages who hold mainstream (metropolitan) gay identities. What is important to my analysis is that these identities are neither 'compulsory', nor particularly 'Other' within post-gay space.

A related shift in contemporary conceptualisations of masculinity has been observed by Simpson (2002) who coined the phrase 'metrosexual' to satirise a particular layer of young urban men (of all sexualities) who are turning their backs on more traditional expressions of masculinity. Compared to the 'old-fashioned' heterosexual model of masculinity, the metrosexual is 'less certain of his identity, less altruistic, more interested in his image – programmed to consume' (Simpson

2002: 143-4). The streets of Spitalfields, Hoxton and Shoreditch are awash with 'metrosexuals'. After all, it was David Beckham, the metrosexual *par excellence* who popularised the ubiquitous late 1990s hairstyle previously known as the 'Hoxton fin'. Indeed, it is to the emerging fashion styles worn by the art students, DJs and web-designers who hang out in the area, that the fashion industry looks for inspiration that can be sold on to those men who aspire to embody these new expressions of masculinity.

Even though I believe that the cosmopolitanisation of the area renders gay space as invisible, I do not want to suggest that the promotion of Spitalfields as a space for middle class cosmopolitan consumption has necessarily been a uniformly bad thing for (some) non-heterosexual people who live, work and play in the area. Like Binnie and Skeggs (2004: 44), I acknowledge the importance of examining the sexual, class and ethnic politics of cosmopolitanism together, to avoid the common practice of subsuming one set of politics within the others. Looking at the everyday spatial practices of Spitalfields' cosmopolitan venues and street life through a queer lens prompts me to question whether the invisibility of gay venues and non-commercial queer space in the area might actually be of benefit to some sexual dissidents, just as others find new opportunities in the more mixed leisure spaces that the area has on offer (Brown 2006).

Nevertheless, alongside this (largely) optimistic line of enquiry, I find that it is still important to question whether these emerging consumption practices 'inscribe new or reinforce current exclusionary practices along the lines of race, ethnicity, class and gender?' (Rushbrook 2002: 184). In particular, I shall question the extent

to which white gay consumers act voyeuristically and contribute to the exoticisation and marginalisation of (sections of) the local Bengali community by participating in the commodified cosmopolitan whirl that Spitalfields has become.

5.5 Spatial Practices of Post-Gay Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism can only be meaningfully understood if it is examined in the context of locally situated practices (Binnie *et al.* 2006: 13) and encounters with difference in the quotidian spaces of ‘ordinary’ urban neighbourhoods (Bridge 2005: 13). In this section, I will examine the everyday spatial practices by which non-heterosexual men use different local sites to their own advantage. Rather than examine how and why these men use the small number of gay venues on the fringes of the Spitalfields area, I shall concentrate my discussion on their use of a number of ‘mixed’ venues and public spaces. Primarily, I will discuss a number of bars and coffee shops on Brick Lane that could be described as ‘post-gay’ spaces (Sinfield 1998) in that amongst their clientele are many people who identify as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or ‘bisexual’, but the sites themselves do not demand the assertion of one identity or another. Most times they contain a majority of heterosexuals, less frequently gay people may be in the majority, but that’s not necessarily important. In these sites there is an openness and acceptance of (sexual) difference.

Brick Lane is home to several independent coffee shops. They fulfil many of the functions one would expect of coffee shops in a mixed-use inner city neighbourhood and fit comfortably into the quotidian spatial practices of Spitalfields – a stop-off point for a quick hit of caffeine on the way to work and a hang-out joint

for shifting groups of friends. In part these cafés exemplify a shift towards the blurring of spaces of business and leisure. The cafés' staff mostly consists of artists and students, many of them from countries other than Britain. Some of them are gay men, but many more of the male 'baristas' are of more indeterminate sexuality – the classic 'metrosexuals'. The customers are equally diverse and include a large number of gay folk. None of these venues tend to draw many customers from the local Bengali population.

Mostly, the gay men and women who frequent these coffee shops tend to reflect the broader demographics of the clientele. They may be from many corners of the world, but they are mostly cultural producers or young professionals; and, mostly white. They use the coffee shops for the same range of practices as the other customers – a young new media designer holds his business meetings there, groups of young gay men chill out together on a Sunday afternoon after a night out clubbing. Even the few non-white gay men who frequent the place reek of privilege – I recently overheard two unequivocally wealthy young men (one from Pakistan, the other from Singapore) discussing how they were deliberately prolonging their university studies so that they could continue to live an openly gay lifestyle in London before returning 'home' to confront their parents' expectations of marriage and grandchildren.

At one point, a couple of years ago, a disproportionate number of the (few) Bengali men visiting the coffee shops were also gay (or at least not-heterosexual). Unlike the local gay bars, with their focus on alcohol consumption, the coffee shops carry no particular stigma for men from Muslim communities. Equally, in a venue

whose regular customers are drawn from so many nationalities and every sexuality, few people (other than the beady-eyed queer geographer in the corner) are likely to take a second glance at a group of young men sharing their latest (homo)sexual adventures or a thirty-something Bengali man whispering sweet nothings to his (white) lover. Such episodes simply do not stand out as unusual or worthy of any more comment than the discussions taking place simultaneously at every other table in the place. I mention this here to reinforce my point that, for the most 'cosmopolitan' inhabitants of Spitalfields, cultures of sexual difference are included on the menu of experiences they are open to exploring and accepting. At the same time, this tolerant atmosphere can occasionally provide cover for *men* from less privileged social groups. More recently, however, as I have come to write up this chapter, the regularity with which I have noticed non-heterosexual Bengali men using these sites has diminished. It may be that the 'cosmopolitan' spaces of Brick Lane have finally been consolidated as the preserve of the fashionable, 'bohemian' set and are no longer a comfortable retreat for even the most daring local Bengali men; or it may be a consequence of the growing insidious Islamophobia that has penetrated every layer of British society since 9/11. Keith (2005: 134) has acknowledged that, for some in Spitalfields, these sites are vilified as promoting white hegemonic 'ethnic exotica'. His commentary appears to empathise with this critique even though, for much of the last decade, he led the ruling Labour group on the local council and championed this 'regeneration' of the area.

Another modestly post-gay space that I want to consider is the Designer Bar in the former Trumans' brewery on Brick Lane, which was one of the first of the

new breed of bars to open in the area. Time and again throughout my research, its name got mentioned to me in conversation by local gay men as a 'mixed' bar that they favoured. Over the years it has been listed with considerable regularity in the 'favourite bar' section of local 'gay' men's personal profiles on various internet 'dating' services. There would appear to be a number of different (if overlapping) reasons for this. For some men living or working in the immediate Spitalfields area, it is simply a convenient and comfortable local bar, albeit one that signifies a certain level of attachment to the cosmopolitan and bohemian image of the area. However, a disproportionate number of the men listing it as one of their favourite bars on gay internet sites appear to define their sexuality as 'bisexual' or 'open-minded' rather than 'gay'. Gary, a support work in a local hostel for the homeless, describes why he likes the bar:

I use quite a lot of mixed venues now, like the [Designer Bar], well it's mainly the [Designer Bar]. ... It's just a mixed venue and I like the area, it's in Brick Lane and I work in that area. Yeah, it's just nice. It's not so concentratedly gay. ... [It's] a lot less cruisy, well there is cruising that goes on there, but it's a lot more subtle. It's just not so in your face, I suppose. (Interview with Gary).

Gary's comment that subtle homoerotic cruising takes place in the Designer Bar reinforces my assertion that it is used by a significant number of non-heterosexual men, who are bored of or put off by the more 'in your face' atmosphere on most of the gay scene.

The Spitalfields area, or at least parts of it, at certain times of the day and week, is today relatively safe, comfortable space for gay people to use. Of a weekend it is a common sight to see (invariably white) young lesbian and gay couples walking hand in hand through the street markets. But there are limits to this

safety, and just a few blocks away, off the main commercial streets, visible expressions of affection between same sex lovers brings the risk of violence (East London Advertiser 2004).

A number of quite inconsequential incidents, witnessed in the area over recent years have prompted me to reflect on the relative visibility of different non-heterosexual bodies moving around the locality. As I have already mentioned, it is not unusual to see same-sex couples showing affection in public in the area, particularly when the local markets are open for business on a weekend. While some of these couples display overt sub-cultural dress that identifies them as 'gay', more often than not, there is little about their dress that marks them out as distinct from the mix of people in the rest of the crowd, other than the interplay of their bodies. A scene witnessed on a warm summer evening two years ago perhaps best exemplifies the range of 'post-gay' (in)visibility on view in Spitalfields. I was sitting outside a popular café on Drays Walk in the Trumans complex drinking a beer and carrying out some reading for this research. A well-known performance artist and his companion sat down nearby. The artist's presence was striking. With nearly every inch of visible flesh covered in tattoos, his head completely shaved and his teeth capped in silver, his extreme body modification made him look like some strange reincarnation of 'Oddjob' from the 1970's Bond films. With him was a young man in his early 20s (possibly younger) with his hair shorn to a zero-crop and wearing a t-shirt from the erstwhile gay fetish club *Fist*. Together their bodies and the items of clothing adorning them effectively queered the surrounding space. At about the same time, DJ Greenman (a character discussed further in the next chapter)

sauntered past in the company of a tall mixed race man sporting a huge afro haircut, ghetto-chic clothing and carrying a basketball. Greenman passed by wearing his normally cheeky, stoned grin and swagger. In contrast to the artist and his young companion, DJ Greenman completely 'passed' and had I not seen him cruising the local cottage on many occasions over the previous year, I would have had no reason to question his (hetero)sexuality. Ironically, he performed a far more traditional hetero-masculinity than many of the slightly fey, but undoubtedly heterosexual 'metrosexuals' that hang out in the area. Here we witness the co-existence of differing 'post-gay' identities within one space - each of them drawing to some extent on earlier gay subcultural forms, but all also without a clear lineage. Even DJ Greenman's refusal to identify (or be identified) is distinct from earlier forms of passing in that it is a reflective, ludic manipulation of the signifiers of identity, rather than being motivated by shame or a desire to hide.

Over the last five years, there have been an increasing number of one-off cultural events and occasional club nights in the vicinity of Spitalfields that have celebrated cultures of sexual and gender difference and marketed themselves to queers of all sexualities and genders. These included an evening of live music performed by an international cast of 'queercore' punk bands at the Bistro Venue above Old Spitalfields Market in August 2003. After the live music, the dance party was deejayed by the women from Unskinny Bop with an eclectic mix of very danceable rock, punk and disco. Being an Unskinny Bop event, there were plenty of 'unskinny' bodies getting down on the dance floor. The crowd was a mix of (apparently) heterosexual music fans and diverse queers; and, once the dance party

started, the atmosphere in the venue quickly became less 'straight' with several same sex couples getting off on the dance floor or in dark corners of the bar. With hindsight, I am not sure whether there was an exodus of the heterosexual music fans after the live bands finished, or whether the presence of the non-heterosexual revellers simply became more visible at that point in the evening. Certainly, I observed the obvious discomfort of some of the older, heterosexual music fans not so much with overt displays of same-sex affection as the ambiguous gender performances of some members of the crowd. It seems that despite their choice to attend an evening of 'queer' music, they found themselves on the outside of the kind of subcultural capital that Thornton (1995) has described as the process by which 'alternative' social groups distinguish themselves from the 'mainstream'. It also reminds us that the post-gay 'blindness' to sexual (and, to a lesser extent, gender) categories forms part of the cultural capital of the cosmopolitan caste in East London. There may also be an element of generational differences at play here. The use of the music venue by these particular audiences opens up possibilities for seeing things differently – particularly the illusion of a neat separation and containment of different sexualities in distinct spaces. For the duration of these gigs, the Bistro Venue was an open and tolerant space full of fluid possibilities.

During the autumn of 2003, a two-day Queer Storytelling Festival took place at Oxford House in Bethnal Green. On the evening I attended, the performance burst into life with a faerie and two fauns who wove a magical, poetic dance on stage to bid us welcome and open the proceedings. Their costumes were fabulous; the performance was part pantomime, part carnival and part radical faerie ritual

(Thompson 1987). Following this overture, the storytelling commenced. The stories, and their performance, were a mixed bag. For me, two of the most innovative and entertaining stories were told by young women of South Asian heritage who explored, with some humour, the complexities of managing the expectations of their families and the (apparent) contradictions between the different elements of their identity.

The crowd at the storytelling festival were mostly white, middle class, over-thirty and (from listening in on conversations in the bar at the interval) I got the impression that many were involved in the arts. It was very gender-mixed and there was a sizeable contingent of 'tranny bois' (i.e. female-to-male transsexuals and queer women presenting a boyishly masculine gender performance). There was also a cluster of young, camp, Pakistani men in the audience who seemed to have come along to support one of the South Asian women performers. If the Unskinny Bop events mostly attracted a young and slightly counter-cultural crowd of rock music fans, the Queer Storytelling Festival appealed to an older and more conventional audience for spoken-word performance events. Despite the inclusion of a number of trans performers on the bill at the festival, the event seemed to largely trade on the retelling of static, reified identities. Here there was none of the sexual fluidity found at the queercore gigs.

Although all these events were marketed as 'queer' entertainment, and in many cases were organised by people on the fringes of the queer activist networks discussed in Chapter Seven, I would suggest that these music and cabaret nights actually encapsulate a far more 'post-gay' ethic and largely reinforce the mainstream

representation of Spitalfields as a bohemian, cosmopolitan space. Unlike the autonomous queer spaces discussed in the Chapter Seven, these spaces rely on a more passive consumption of the performances by the audience, who are excluded from the production and running of the events. These event spaces contribute to a symbolic reading of this corner of east London as an open, inclusive cosmopolitan and bohemian zone in which sexuality is just one more register of difference to be negotiated and consumed.

5.6 Concluding remarks

Whilst discussions of cosmopolitanism tend to focus on the appropriation of ethnic difference, Rushbrook (2002: 188-9) has suggested that, 'queer space is one more place in which cultural capital can be displayed by the ability to negotiate different identities, to be at ease in multiple milieus, to manoeuvre in eroticised surroundings.' She and other authors have suggested that whenever urban space is consciously promoted as cosmopolitan, the space becomes sanitised in order to maximize its appeal as a desirable site of consumption for the broadest possible audience. In cases where gay space is branded as 'cosmopolitan,' as Binnie and Skeggs (2004: 47) have argued, 'the more threatening, less easily assimilated aspects of urban sexual dissidence are rendered invisible – and most specifically, the sexual side of gay men's urban cultures are downplayed, with only certain aspects of gay male culture promoted.' On one level, this can be seen in the promotion of Spitalfields as a cosmopolitan leisure zone, where the presence of a number of gay venues barely registers in the area's place marketing strategies and the location of

Britain's largest gay sauna is kept studiously under wraps (Shoreditch Map Company 2004; but, see also Shoreditch Gay Map 2004). At the same time (as was seen at the end of the previous section), the celebration of sexual and gender difference, when promoted as a cultural experience, can play a minor role in contributing to the cosmopolitan reputation of the area.

As well as considering the complex and contradictory ways in which everyday practices of cosmopolitanism in Spitalfields have engaged with sexual difference, this chapter has also considered the role of intra- and transnational migration in gay men's restless search for a place where they can feel safe and belong. In this respect, I have considered the ambiguous relationship of non-heterosexual men amongst east London's diasporic and migrant communities to the mainstream (white) gay scene. Here the social and economic exclusions that are masked by cosmopolitan discourses in Spitalfields are frequently replicated. Just as there are limits to the cross-class and inter-cultural social mixing that takes place in a 'cosmopolitan' zone of Spitalfields, so similar 'social tectonics' (Butler with Robson 2003) can be witnessed in relation to much of the commercial gay scene.

In contrast, one of the sites where I witnessed the greatest mingling of different social fractions was the gents' toilet in Old Spitalfields Market. There, on summer weekday afternoons (until 2005), it was frequently possible to stumble across temporary, opportunist examples of 'cosmopolitan' mixing, when expensively suited bankers, muddied East European labourers, as well as trendy fashionistas got caught up together in sex play. But once again, local Bengali men were conspicuous by their absence. In the next chapter, I shall examine in further

detail the micro-geographies of homoerotic cruising and public homosex, including an examination of a local cottage where Bengali men have far more visibly asserted their presence and involvement in the site.

It has frequently been argued that the performance of cosmopolitanism relies on the deployment of a certain kind of cultural capital. To be cosmopolitan one must be open to encounters with the 'other' and be willing and able to appropriate something of that 'otherness' (Hannerz 1992). It is also about generating a certain kind of authority from these appropriations (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 42). All of which raises questions about how one can access the skills, knowledge and cultural capital in order to be in a position to develop a cosmopolitan disposition out of intercultural encounters. These are important questions, but once again there is a danger that in answering them we reproduce an exclusionary definition of 'cosmopolitanism' as the preserve of the educated, (mostly) white, urban middle classes. To do so, ignores and invalidates the multiple, hybrid identities constructed and performed by many working class youths, particularly those from minority ethnic communities, as they attempt to make sense of the numerous, conflicting pressures on their lives. As Binnie (2004: 127) has argued recently, "for the less privileged cosmopolitanism is not a matter of choice but shaped by coercive forces." If cosmopolitanism is about a certain kind of openness and curiosity about different cultures, often constituted through consumption, in which multiple identities and lifestyles are tried on for size and then discarded (Rushbrook 2002); then, a complete analysis of cosmopolitanism in Spitalfields, would need to factor into the equation the social and spatial practices of young Bengalis, as much as those of the

'fashionistas' browsing the designer boutiques or the gaggles of City workers out for a curry.

The people who gain most, materially and culturally from the cosmopolitan experience of Spitalfields remain mostly white, young middle class professionals. And most of them seldom truly engage with the other cultures around them. However, whilst the boundaries of class and ethnic identities are reinforced and reproduced in Spitalfields, I still maintain that sexual identities can, at times, become more fluid there. The multiple ways in which different individuals and social groups live out their roles in the area can, occasionally escape established social norms and open up possibilities to think differently about how sexual and gender identities are performed in particular kinds of social space. In particular, although the presence of gay space is downplayed in official representations of Spitalfields, the resulting array of leisure spaces provides room for a layer of non-heterosexual men, for whom mainstream 'gay' identities have outlived their usefulness, to enjoy a more fluid set of encounters in local bars and cafés.

CHAPTER 6

CRUISING FOR OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTIONS

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the role of the HIV-1 virus in the pathogenesis of AIDS.



Figure 6: Cottage interior

assumed into the academy – Jack was a brilliant student. It is rare to find such a combination of qualities. You would expect to find many that have one or the other, but to make 'straight' squares.

Perhaps this chapter will gradually give you a sense of what it is like to be a student in a classroom.

It is a discussion of what some of the most important things are in a classroom.

Will get a reaction. Of course, the big part of the class is the discussion.

and all reactions between them is a continuous process.

CHAPTER SIX:

CRUISING FOR OPPORTUNISTIC AUTONOMY

In the preceding chapter I suggested that one of the few places in 'cosmopolitan' Spitalfields where I witnessed any significant mingling of different social and ethnic fractions was in a number of local public toilets where men sought (and continue to seek) (homo)sexual encounters. In these sites, unlike the rebranded 'Banglatown' district, local Bengali men appear to interact on an equal footing with men of other ethnicities and class fractions and are, at times, assertive in their appropriation of the space(s). In this chapter, I turn my attention to sites of public homosex. Although I discuss several sites across East London, much of the discussion will be focused on events in the toilets around Spitalfields that I have previously mentioned.

In a recent paper, Binnie (2004: 74) issued a scathing attack on much queer theory; accusing it of being over-reliant on 'abstract post-structuralist thought' and for becoming

assimilated into the academy – [such that it] has lost a radical cutting edge. It is rare to find much discussion of pervy sex or bodily fluids. Nowadays you would struggle to find much that is challenging within queer theory – or much to make 'straights' squeamish.

Perhaps this chapter will (partially) abate his critique? There are certainly going to be discussions of what some might consider 'pervy sex' and bodily fluids will get a mention. Of course, the fact that (often) quite ordinary and mundane sexual encounters between men in a quasi-public space might be considered 'pervy'

says much about societal attitudes to both sex and appropriate uses of the public sphere. Although I will touch on both of these issues in the course of this chapter, they are not the primary focus of my argument. I am more interested in the nature of the encounters that occur in these spaces and the ways in which, through their relation to each other and to the non-human aspects of the sites, men experience acts of cruising and public sex in ways which can revitalise their lives, challenge preconceived notions of identity and offer new 'political' modes of relating to others. In discussing these issues, I draw on aspects of recent elaborations of more-than-representational theory in geography (Lorimer 2005) – demonstrating, I hope, that it is possible to discuss both 'abstract post-structuralist thought' and 'pervy sex' on the same page.

In writing this chapter, however, I have encountered another problem identified by Binnie, who has commented (2001: 128) that,

I sometimes experience a certain discomfort when I read some accounts of public sex and SM in academic texts. This discomfort is not the squeamishness associated with queer sex, but rather an uneasiness about the distanced representations of it. For whom are these acts, these spaces being made intelligible? What's the point? ... texts, like bodies and spaces, are read as well as written, and the production of urban queer space and embodiment is always matched by its own consumption, which can be ambivalent.

This is an important ethical consideration, and I have attempted to utilise the rich descriptions stemming from my field notes in order to capture the experience of being either a player or an observer in these sites. If those descriptions provoke either squeamishness or titillation in my readers, then so be it. The intention here is to reveal the modes of encounter, being and becoming that operate through these

spaces and to articulate a minor politics of care-taking and spontaneous explorations of autonomy.

Before considering these issues, though, it is important to elaborate the distinct spatial practises that constitute the art of cruising, as well as explaining how these acts take quite site-specific forms. In the third section of the chapter, I consider at some length the processes by which cruising is enacted and performed in relation to human and non-human bodies, objects, and the environment in which it takes place. I contend that these relational encounters ensure that cruising is primarily about the potential resulting from the interaction of bodies in place and less about the performance of reified sexual identities. I conclude the chapter by drawing these various threads together in the context of events that reveal new forms of communality and alternative modes of reclaiming urban space, which I believe are a direct result of the embodied generosity through which men relate to each other in these sites.

6.1 Micro-geographies of cruising

In this opening section of the chapter, I hope to set the scene by examining the micro-geographies of cruising and public homosex as (predominantly) urban spatial practices. Contrary to some recent writings on cruising (Bech 1997; Clarke 2000; Turner 2003), I contest the notion that this is a purely visual phenomenon, constituted through the cruiser's gaze, and set out my proposition that it is a more fully embodied act. Finally, I consider how neoliberal politics, the changing fabric

of the city and the ubiquity of certain now-common technologies have changed how, when and where cruising takes place.

In his recent monograph on representations of cruising in literature, art and historical records over the last 150 years, Turner (2003: 7) has described cruising as “one way of conceptualising the man on the streets that exploits the ambivalences and uncertainties inherent in the city.” He contextualises this conceptualisation within the vast body of writing on the large-scale social and material changes brought about by the expansion of the urban population since the mid-nineteenth century. But, he suggests that by its very exploitation of the ambivalences of modern urban life and the anonymity of the crowd on the city’s streets, cruising “‘queers’ the totalizing narratives of modernity” (Turner 2003: 46).

Central to Turner’s (2003: 8) description of cruising is the place of “the ambiguous meanings of a backward glance” between men in the cruising encounter.

This was exemplified by the following extract from an interview I conducted:

Well, it's eye contact, basically. I mean from a further distance it could possibly be clothes, I mean, if they were wearing something camp, or something. Or it could be the way somebody's walking because often you can see oh that one's mincing. But a concrete yes on that would be eye contact and then when you've walked past them you look back to see if they're looking back, and if they are then you were right in making the assumption in the first place. Yes, it's eyes, basically, I would think. (Interview with Ed).

Sometimes, in certain contexts, this exchange of glances can appear completely unambiguous:

the biker went and stood directly opposite me across the double line of urinals and with a flash of his eyes, a smile and raised eyebrow or two, gave me a very definite come on. (Field note: The Toilet, 28 March 2002).

It was precisely the quick succession of gestures in this encounter – the cheeky, lustful vitality in the man’s eyes, the sly smile and the enticing raising of his eyebrow – each building on the one that preceded it, that led me to interpret it as a sexual advance. Of course, the fact that the encounter took place in a known ‘cottage’ (a toilet appropriated for public homosex), late at night when few non-cruisers were likely to be using the facility, aided my interpretation. Quite possibly, in a less ‘notorious’ venue, or even in the same place earlier in the day, I might have exercised more caution in my interpretation of his gestures. A less easily interpreted encounter occurred on a nearby street:

I’d only got [a block away from The Toilet] when a very sexy man who I guessed was in his early 30s cycled up on a BMX. He was short and wiry, with short dusty blond hair and a couple of days’ growth of stubble. He reminded me a little of [an ex-lover] and I found him extremely attractive. We circled each other cautiously for a few minutes and there was lots of eye contact. After a while he turned and moved slowly (almost as slowly as he could without falling off the bike) off towards Spitalfields Market. I followed and we were soon talking. (Field note: The Toilet, 30 December 2001).

Clearly, on a deserted street, late at night, this could have been fraught with danger and threat (Bell and Binnie 1998). What was this man’s motivation? Was he a thief, a mugger? What if I was misinterpreting his intentions and he responded to my return of his gaze with homophobic violence? Undoubtedly, it was my attraction to him, my desire that encouraged me to take my chances, to linger to see where the encounter led, and not to hurry off to a less isolated place of safety. And yet, it was also something about the way he held my gaze. There must have been something gentle, rather than threatening about it. The way he circled me slowly on his bike

must have dissolved my fears. There was something seductive in his circling that is difficult to adequately capture in words. As Turner (2003: 10) has recognised,

cruising is the stuff of fleeting, ephemeral moments not intended to be captured. The problem with writing about cruising is that of writing about many other urban experiences – it doesn't remain static, it passes quickly, it's over in the time it takes to shift one's eyes.

And, I would suggest that in the encounter I have just described, it was partly because neither of us did shift our gaze that we were able to work through the ambiguity of the situation. Once the spark of mutual recognition had been established through the gentle locking of our respective gazes, the other man slowly cycled away from the scene. By that time, the backwards glance he offered up to me was an unambiguous indication of consent for me to follow and approach him.

Although our visual appraisal of each other and the exchange of eye contact were undoubtedly important in this encounter, I think there is a danger in over-playing the role of the gaze and the visual in cruising at the expense of other sensory experiences and bodily acts. More significantly, "cruising is a *process* of walking, gazing, and engaging another (or others)" (Turner 2003: 60). However, even this description fails to fully convey the complex choreography of postures and gestures (Thrift 1997a; Bridge 2005) that constitute moments of cruising. I will discuss these intricate, relational body performances later in the chapter, but for now one more example should suffice:

It was a gloriously sunny afternoon with the temperature reaching into the high 20s or higher. When I first reached the cruising zone, I took my time to have a slow wander around the maze of paths to acclimatize to the space and re-acquaint myself with the layout, trying to remember which of the little paths off the beaten track led to the hidden dens that facilitate sexual adventure. On my second circuit of the ground, I realized that a tall, well-

built, gay skin in his 40s was cruising me at a distance of perhaps ten metres. As I passed one of the well-worn tracks off into the undergrowth, I turned to look at him and noticed that he had stepped off the main path onto a smaller track. I turned back and he took a few steps into the undergrowth. I reached the edge of the path and he stepped deeper into the bushes. I followed at a slight distance. Once he reached what I knew to be the sex zone (a small 'cave' underneath and between some fairly thick trees and shrubs) I stopped at a point that gave me a good view of him, indicating interest, but also that the next move was his. He slowly unbuckled his belt... (Field note: The Victorian Cemetery, 30 May 2003).

Although visual exchange is important here, what I want to draw attention to is the process of mirroring through which myself and the other cruiser mimicked each other's movements. It is like a call and response refrain in which each man appraises the desirability of the other and, iteratively, we established mutual interest (for comparison, see Bridge's (2004) description of heterosexual dancehall etiquette). With each gesture reflected, the stakes are raised and the actions become a little more explicit. The call and response also provides a mechanism by which, if mutual interest is indicated, the men can move closer to each other. What should be clear is that this exchange enrolls not just a visual exchange or a gaze of mutual recognition, but a set of accumulating, mutually reinforcing gestures, touches, stances, and movements. Bodily acts and performances are mobilised to communicate desire. Feelings are conveyed through doing (Crouch 2003: 1946).

What should also be evident from the encounters relayed in the preceding paragraphs are the ways in which urban cruising is a form of *dérive*, the practice of urban drifting proposed and celebrated by the Situationists. Like the *dériviste*, the seasoned cruiser notices how sites, streets, or buildings resonate with particular states of mind, in this case, desire (Plant 1992: 59; Pinder 2004, 2005). They can see

the potential for utilising the street, the overgrown cemetery, the building site or the public toilet for purposes other than those for which they were designed.

As our cities change, so to do the opportunities for *detournement* and cruising. With a certainly nostalgic regret, Turner (2003: 162) has stated:

cruising the streets of our cities isn't what it used to be. The 'secret and divine signs' that Whitman imagined in urban encounters still allow men to connect, but circumstances have changed, our cities have changed and our understanding of sexualities has changed.

New forms and infrastructures of transport allow men to travel further in search of sexual contact and companionship. New technologies of communication have also changed the dynamics of cruising. The internet facilitates new opportunities for casual sexual encounters between men, and there are websites such as www.cruisingforsex.com which map the pleasures and dangers of cruising and public homosex in most major cities across the globe. With a quick phone call or text message, men can alert their friends to the vitality of a given cruising ground or cottage – either encouraging them to join in the action, or warning them off from a wasted journey on particularly quiet nights (thereby further reducing the opportunities for those men who do venture out to that site).

The reduction in the number of public toilets (partly as an easy and frequently uncontested cost-cutting exercise by local government authorities), and their replacement with single occupancy 'super loos', has reduced the opportunities for public homosex and impacted on the ways in which local men negotiate the urban landscape:

I did go cottaging and cruising until they started closing them down. Two years ago there were a couple of good cottages in Sainsbury's and West Ham

Park. Now I don't feel as safe there and it is not really very clean now. (Interview with Dimitri).

Development on urban open space and empty brownfield sites has had a similar impact by enclosing spaces previously used for opportunist cruising. At the same time, gay entrepreneurs and others have recognised that there is big money to be made from (semi-)public homosex and the number of commercial bath-houses, saunas and sex clubs has once again increased dramatically (after the AIDS-inspired moral panics and public health crackdowns of the 1980s and early 1990s) (Andersson 2006). Of course, it costs to enter such venues, and so they are frequently inaccessible to many men on meagre incomes. For Bell and Binnie (2000: 95),

it is a paradox in many major cities that the increased visibility of sexual dissidents in the commercial heartland has served to reinforce the marginalization of public sex.

As they go on to highlight (2000: 145), “[t]he erosion of queer counter-publics has to be seen to have a class dimension to it.” Those cottages and cruising areas that survive are some of the “few social spaces that exist outside of the market,” (Bell and Binnie 2000: 81). As such, and as I elaborate towards the end of this chapter, they are politically significant sites that continue to foster forms of sociability and interaction between men that are not mediated by the market.

6.2 Site-specific encounters

In the previous section, I began to chart the complex choreography of gestures and glances that constitute the cruising encounter. As should be clear from

my descriptions (above) of the events in the toilet, the cemetery and the street, cruising is always site-specific. In this section, I shall examine how specific sites shape the potential for, and the form and pace of, the cruising that takes place within them. In doing so, I focus on two sets of spaces in which cruising and public homosex take place – public toilets and open spaces, such as cemeteries, parks and commons. For comparison, I also describe the architecture and uses of more commercial saunas and sex clubs. For each type of context, I shall examine a number of common themes in order to tease out the similarities and differences in the way that each set of sites operates. These themes include the range of time-spaces through which the sites are constituted as a cruising area. In other words, I am interested in how the type and number of cruisers using a given site changes over the course of the day and week, as well as how the pace, variety and visibility of cruising and homosex changes over time. This discussion ties in to a consideration of how the functioning and viability of a cruising site relates to its surrounding area. The location of a cruising site also impacts on how easily, and in what ways, men can access the site.

Having considered the location of each site, I then move inside, thinking about how the layout of the space and its fabric has an impact on how men use it. In thinking about the layout and construction of the site, I am also interested in drawing attention to how each site appeals to the senses of the men who use it. The combination of the floor-plan of each site, the materials from which it is constructed and its smells, relative illumination, touch and appearance, all have an impact on the extent to which men feel confident in using the site. The degree of privacy and

safety from intrusion in a site can significantly shape the forms and frequency of communication between users. It also shapes whether any homosex that takes place on site will be furtive and hidden from view, or blatant and exhibitionistic. To return to my earlier points, all of this is influenced by location and the time of day. As Turner (2003: 52) has suggested, it is “[t]he combination of an understanding of a specific place with an understanding of a specific urban practice [that] allows for – in fact, enables – cruising to take place.”

6.2.1 Toilets as publics

I begin the discussion with an examination of three toilets in the vicinity of Spitalfields and Liverpool Street. The main site that I discuss here and throughout the rest of the chapter is an older Victorian subterranean toilet [Fig. 6] in a mixed commercial and residential neighbourhood. Despite the fact that this toilet’s location and functioning as a cottage is widely documented on cruising websites, I have chosen to (lightly) mask its identity in order to reduce too much unwarranted attention from the site (even though its heyday appears now to be long gone – it has recently partially reopened after a closure of more than two years). I contrast this cottage with the toilets in Old Spitalfields Market and those found at Liverpool Street Station. When I was carrying out the research for this chapter, the toilets in the market were housed in a semi-permanent portable cabin in the centre of the covered market. Following extensive redevelopment of the market, they have now been relocated to a basement site in a secluded corner of the market and are now more heavily attended than ever before and I have never yet witnessed any cruising

(overt or otherwise) in the new toilets. The station toilets, which are also located underground, are heavily policed by a small army of attendants and cleaners. As a result, overt cruising takes place less frequently there now than was the case a decade ago.

Before its prolonged closure, The Toilet was frequently left open and unattended twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And, unattended was certainly a good word for its state of repair and general lack of cleanliness. It often seemed that the local council had forgotten about its existence – which was, on balance, not necessarily a bad thing for the men who cruised there whenever they were open, day or night. Consider the following field note from September 2002:

The cottage continued to be reasonably busy (on this Thursday night) until at least 3 a.m. There was lots of traffic back and forth between the gents' and the ladies' toilet (with initial cruising taking place in both spaces and the women's toilet not just being used as a quiet retreat for sex with a partner picked up next door. (Field note: The Toilet, 26 September 2002).

This note gives a good indication of both the length of the cottage's 'working day' and how its appropriation by cruising men varied over the course of the day and night. Certainly, men would not have dared intrude into the women's toilet during the daytime; although even after dark that space's appropriation was a rarity. However, my comment about cruising taking place in both toilets indicates that on previous occasions I was aware of men cruising and establishing contact with each other in the men's toilet and then quietly removing themselves to the women's toilet next door in search of a little privacy and the opportunity for a more leisurely, unhurried and uninterrupted sexual encounter. Of course, the fact that the cottage was still lively and being used by a critical mass of men at three on a weekday

morning indicates that it was used by more than just passing trade, and that men deliberately traveled to the site in search of sex. This is not to suggest that the toilet was not appropriated for cruising and public sex during daytime. In February 2004 I witnessed the following:

I popped into the cottage at about 4 p.m. on this Friday afternoon, to find a dozen men in there cruising and two men openly fucking at the back urinals. (Field note: The Toilet, 13 February 2004).

Although, on first reading, this might seem an incredibly blatant event to occur in the middle of a weekday afternoon, it should be noted that by four o'clock the market in the surrounding streets has largely closed down for the day, the streets are relatively deserted and there is a much reduced chance of a man simply popping in to urinate. Of course, by four o'clock on a February afternoon it is usually quite dark outside and this may well have contributed to the men's sense that they would not be interrupted. During the daytime, and certainly during market hours, such an assumption would be a reckless one.

In the introduction to this chapter, I commented on the social and ethnic diversity of the men who cruised each other in this cottage. In this context, it is worth noting that amongst the dozen men that I witnessed cruising on the occasion under discussion were a couple of Latino men in their twenties, a South Asian man in his late thirties, a West African man and a white man who both appeared to be in their sixties, and an assortment of other white men in their twenties and thirties. Several were wearing sharp business suits and a number of others were dressed in the fashionable apparel associated with the 'cosmopolitan' cultural producers that inhabit Spitalfields and Hoxton. The young man being fucked was of Mediterranean

appearance and his playmate was dressed as if he had just come off a building site (although I suspected at the time that this was a carefully crafted affectation, a form of hyper-masculine working-class drag).

Contrast the event I have just described with the following incident which I encountered in the toilets at Liverpool Street station a year earlier.

Tonight I witnessed a level of blatant sexual activity at the urinals that I have never seen here before – at one point, there were three of us standing near each other, exchanging sly glances, when the guy standing furthest from me attempted to go down on the man in the middle of the line. When this scared him off, he tried the same with me. It felt too exposed, though, and I didn't oblige. As I walked off to the sinks, he stood there between the two lines of facing urinals, his body turned towards the sinks, wanking vigorously and openly. This level of exhibitionism was impressive and a turn on, but also too out of place – it wouldn't have caused a stir at [The Toilet], but in the station toilets it was too much. (Field note: Liverpool Street Station, 21 February 2003).

The reasons this man's actions felt out of place in the station toilets are manifold. It certainly lies in more than just the fact that these toilets are more closely observed by their attendants (although the careful arrangement of the attendants' office and the large expanse of mirrors above the line of sinks, which can give a view of the urinal area, does inspire the panoptic effect). The steady flow of 'legitimate' users of the toilet produced by the human traffic through this busy rail terminal also has an impact, as it lessens the chances of exchanging glances with another cruiser, and amplifies the likelihood of interruption and confrontation. But more than this, the bright fluorescent lighting and the general cleanliness of the toilets also seem to inhibit cruising in the men who go there. Still, it was not unusual for men to make an initial visual exchange of mutual interest and recognition there and then to follow each other to The Toilet, five minutes walk

away, for a more intimate encounter (which is an important indication that cruising sites do not exist in isolation from each other, but are part of numerous circuits and networks of both cruising and other, quotidian, activities).

Although it would be easy to interpret the attraction to dark and dirty spaces (that I have identified above) as an expression of gay men's internalised self-hatred, Binnie (2001: 114) offers a more pragmatic assessment. He recognises that gay public sex sites have frequently been located in forgotten, down-at-heel areas of the city and that journeying to them can produce an erotic thrill of being where one is not supposed to be. For Hallam (1993: 45) dark corners hold mysterious potential.

I want to recount one final incident, for now, from the toilets, before I consider the functioning of open, outdoor cruising sites. In July 2004, before the former toilets in Old Spitalfields Market were finally closed, I recorded the following short note:

At about 2 p.m., I witnessed two men in (expensive) suits playing in the toilets in Spitalfields Market. There has been lots of action there on weekday afternoons throughout the summer – mostly suits, construction workers and fashionistas. (Field note: Spitalfields Market, 19 July 2004).

Again, this observation reiterates how cottages function through specific time-spaces and in relation to their surroundings. Like the 4 p.m. encounter in The Toilet cottage, the timing of these men's encounter is an intuitive one – just after 2 p.m. the lunchtime trade in the market has subsided, but the place is not yet deserted. At the cusp of this changing rhythm of the site, these two men could safely assume that their visit might coincide with that of other cruisers, and minimize their risk of being interrupted by anyone who might not be there for the same reason. That I

caught two men in expensive business suits at play is indicative of that toilet's location near to the merchant banks and office complexes on Bishopsgate and around Liverpool Street. Unlike The Toilet, which was no more than another two minute's walk away, the location of this cottage in the covered market, with its cosmopolitan mix of fast food outlets and stalls selling organic food, or clothes and craft items by emerging designers, offered a perfect cover of legitimacy ('normality', even) for the bankers and insurance brokers.

6.2.2 On common ground

My study of outdoor cruising sites relates to a large, overgrown Victorian cemetery and a partially wooded corner of a large expanse of common land. I have already given some indication of how cruising takes place in the cemetery (in the previous section of this chapter), but here I offer an extract from the notes I made after my first visit there, by way of further description.

I took my time to get the feel for the place: initially skirting round the outer paths, then strolling back and forth up the parallel paths in the centre, watching men moving in the opposite direction and exploring (by following other men) some of the narrower paths amongst the deeper undergrowth, where it is easier for the cruisers to have more prolonged encounters without fear of being seen by non-participants. In these sheltered areas the ground is littered with the detritus of cruising and sex – used condoms, condom wrappers, empty sachets of lube, soiled tissues and, here and there amongst it all, more unusual remnants, like a ripped and discarded jockstrap. (Field note: The Victorian Cemetery, 4 May 2002)

This note gives an indication of how the layout of the cemetery and the varying density of its vegetation are appropriated in order to serve the different moments in a cruising encounter [Fig. 3]. By slowly and deliberately zigzagging up

and down the parallel paths, some of which give a clear line of sight across to others (because the vegetation between them is quite low), men can appraise the desirability of the other men on the pitch. Some of the well-trodden, but unofficial, paths through the tombstones between the original paved corridors offer shortcuts that allow men to quickly move closer to and catch up with others that they find attractive on the paths nearby. Alternatively, men stand on the edge of these intervening paths and allow potential suitors to check them out as they amble past. Once mutual attraction has been established between two (or more) men, the denser, taller undergrowth provides space and some privacy for their sex-play. It is certainly very unlikely that anyone who is not also looking for sex or companionship will venture off the paved network of paths and into the cover of the overgrown shrubbery. If the slow, deliberate circulation of men around the paths was not enough of a clue as to the *detournement* of this space by cruisers, then the detritus of sex left discarded on the ground amongst the bushes would certainly alert any first-time, speculative cruiser that he had stumbled across a site where public homosex takes place. Despite my very real concerns about its detrimental environmental impact, it seems likely that this sex-rubbish serves to heighten the eroticism of the space for many of the men who cruise there and represents a form of gay territorialisation. The designation of certain objects (or people) as surplus, waste or rubbish is closely associated with broader social norms. What is normatively rejected as 'rubbish' according to the accepted wisdom of the majority in one moment can simultaneously have value for other marginalised (or ascendant) social groups (Venn 2006: 44; Thompson 1979).

Unlike the cemetery, which is locked at dusk, cruising on the common comes into its own at night (which is not to say that no cruising takes place there during the day). The cemetery is located in a densely populated inner city neighbourhood, off a road that is well-served by a large number of bus routes. As such, it is within easy reach of a large number of men. In contrast, the common is in outer east London. A single bus route passes along the nearest main road and it is more than twenty minutes walk from the nearest station. Although some men do travel there by public transport or on foot, most appear to drive there – there is a car park on the common nearby and there is also the opportunity to park discretely at night in a non-residential road opposite. Clearly the limitations on getting to (and, more importantly, from) the common late at night restricts access to this site. Nevertheless, on warm, dry summer nights the cruising zone on the common can still be buzzing with upwards of fifty men until well into the early hours of the morning.

The cruising area on the common covers a large area. Even with fifty or a hundred men on the pitch, this provides ample opportunities for men to find privacy and seclusion away from the core nodal points where men circle the paths, clearings and each other exchanging glances of mutual admiration and appraisal. However, at times, especially for a man who is not particularly familiar with the site, this dispersal of men over a large area of land can reduce the efficiency of the cruising, as men are less likely to encounter others who they find attractive. In the dark, the visual clues as to where the cruising takes place (like the sex detritus which, in places, is alarmingly obvious and visible during the day) are harder to find.

The occasion of my second visit to the common was a dark, cloudy night. As I approached the area, I realized that without the aid of moonlight, I didn't know my way around the site well enough to negotiate it in the dark. Luckily, just as I got to one of the paths leading off the road and into the cruising zone, a man crossed the road from the service road opposite. He seemed confident in where he was going and I followed. My notes on this visit recount the following:

The man led me straight through the woods to the more open, and therefore lighter, stretch of gorse that marks the boundary between the woods and the scrubland of the common proper. ... The main sex zone is located there inside the shelter of a large holly tree, with posing and cruising taking place in a small clearing adjacent to it. When men wanted a little more privacy or intimacy, they generally peeled off in pairs into the gorse where there are a number of small, hidden clearings. (Field note: The Common, 22 August 2003).

In this respect, the appropriation of this area of woodland and the neighbouring heath is similar to that found at the cemetery – a series of paths and open areas that allow the men to check out each other, a covered and partially secluded area for group sex and a host of more hidden dens and clearings facilitating greater privacy and intimacy for couples and smaller groups of men. The group sex area is largely a free-for-all, and it takes a great deal of confidence and competence in the use of (primarily) non-verbal communication (a subtle shaking of the head, or an open palm outstretched in a 'stop' gesture) in order to repel the unwanted attention of a man one does not find attractive. By peeling away from the throng and into one of the more secluded clearings, men can exercise greater choice over their partner(s). From his study of cruising and public homosex in a North American truck-stop, Hollister (1999: 60) has observed that,

communication takes place in relation to the space, and the likely possibilities for the use of that space. Participants reach conclusions as to a man's sexual availability based on how he approaches and occupies the space, and they use the space in ways that the other man might recognize. ... Ritualized understandings make it possible to attach meanings to those few gestures in particular sites that convey so large a piece of information as sexual desire and consent.

This is certainly the case in the cottages and cruising grounds where I undertook my research. Cruising is largely a silent, non-verbal activity even in those sites where one is unlikely to be overheard by anyone other than fellow cruisers. The primacy of gesture over speech is one of the ingrained, ritualized components of the practice. It adds to the erotic tension and allows men to be more generous in their appraisal of others. This is not to imply that conversations between friends and acquaintances never take place in (secure, well-established) cruising sites, but that these tend to take place away from the spaces of direct sexual contact or at those quiet times when no serious cruising is taking place.

There is one final observation about the cruising ground on the common that I need to recall here - the relative privacy and seclusion of the entire site after dark allows some men to display more exhibitionist or 'queer' performances than they might in other spaces. During my visits there it was certainly not unusual to see men walking through the woods naked except for their boots, or transvestites in full drag, amongst the majority of men wearing nondescript, everyday casual wear.

Taken together, the changing uses of these cottages and cruising sites at varying times of the day and night "stress the ephemeral nature of these spaces" (Binnie 2001: 113). This section has examined the ways in which cruising takes place in site-specific ways and how sites are shaped by their location and physical

construction. In the section that follows, I deepen this analysis by drawing on recent more-than-representational work by British geographers to consider how the body-performances of cruisers occur “in relation to the surrounding physical world of objects, and other people, amongst which the individual moves and acts, and enacts, responds,” (Crouch 2003: 1950).

6.2.3 Saunas: the enclosure of cruising?

The focus of this chapter is on cruising sites that exist outside of the commercial sphere. However, such sites are increasingly coming under competition from commercial sex-on-premises venues, such as saunas and sex clubs. Andersson (2006) has suggested that there has been a significant growth in the number of commercial sex-on-premises venues (especially saunas) in London since mid-1990s and that this growth has coincided with a heightened erasure of cottages and outdoor cruising sites from the city’s landscape. I concur with his analysis, but would caution against too linear a reading of this trend. The geography of public homosexual in London has certainly changed over the last decade, but these changes have been more uneven than Andersson suggests. While many new saunas have opened up in this ten-year period, in areas such as Waterloo and Vauxhall, some long-established sex-on-premises venues in East London (such as The Fetish Club and The Orgy Pub that I discuss in this dissertation) have also been closed down by the authorities, often on spurious grounds. The Orgy Pub lost its license not for allowing men to have sex in the ‘interactive games room’ upstairs, but because it was allegedly selling short measures and fell foul of trading standards regulations. The Fetish

Club, according to an off-the-record conversation I had with a senior police officer was closed at the request of local public health officials who were concerned about the number of cases of syphilis that they had traced through it.

If the number of saunas has significantly increased in the last decade, it would also be a mistake to imagine that few such venues existed in London before that time. Houlbrook (2005) has charted the importance of Turkish baths and saunas to London's emerging gay scene in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Very often these venues charged relatively high entrance fees and, as such, offered a secure venue for the homoerotic pleasures and sociality of middle class gay men. Working class men might occasionally treat themselves to a night at one of central London's Turkish baths, but could also find more precarious pleasures in the public baths. The municipal baths at West Ham and Bermondsey were particularly notorious and attracted many middle class men in search of 'rough trade' (Houlbrook 2005: 97).

I include a discussion of East London's saunas and sex clubs here partly in recognition of their important place in gay men's erotic geographies of the area, but more importantly as a comparison with cruising in the queer commons constituted by public toilets, cemeteries and parkland. If the owners of London's saunas in the early Twentieth century largely turned a blind eye to the fact that men were meeting there for casual sex, the owners of contemporary venues carefully and continually manipulate the infrastructure of these sites in order to facilitate the greatest number of erotic encounters. In doing so, they replicate within the design of these spaces many of the vernacular elements of the architecture of cottages and cruising

grounds, as they are appropriated for erotic means by the men who use those sites (Lindell 1996). To give some idea of the physical layout of some of East London's saunas it is necessary for me to go back to some field note that I wrote before commencing on my doctoral research, when I first attended these sites.

The entrance is via a small antechamber with a ticket window from which visitors are screened before being buzzed in. The main door opens onto a large open plan area with a reception desk and snack bar to the left and a reasonably sized lounge to the right. ... From the back of the lounge a large bannistered staircase leads to the first floor; there is a second stairwell to the left of the building, behind the reception desk. On the first floor are a single, twenty-man, triangular shaped sauna; a steam room; four individual showers; two urinals and a toilet. From here there are two staircases, at either side of the building, leading to the second floor, where the private cabins are located. There are about a dozen cabins on this level on either side of a single narrow corridor that runs from left to right across the building and a single, larger, 'orgy' room. The cabins are little more than enclosed rubber mattresses at a height of about three foot off the floor – they are not altogether easy to climb into elegantly! The orgy room is completely blacked out and separated from the rest of the space by a sheet of camouflage netting. This floor is ventilated by a large fan. There is a large stock of condoms and lube in a waist height container at the top of the left-hand stairwell. ... There was some cruising in the sauna, but what little sexual activity was in evidence was taking place mostly on the top floor. ... Those men who were cruising circulated quite rapidly between the first and second floors. (Field note: The Small Sauna, 4 September 1998).

This description concisely highlights several key features that are common to many saunas. There is a discrete, double, entrance that creates a secure barrier from the street. This allows the staff to screen visitors before they are admitted, to ensure they are aware of the space that they are about to enter and to prevent unwanted intrusion. The lounge area, although not always by the entrance of all saunas, is common to most spaces. It facilitates moments of relaxation, refreshment and sociability away from the more heavily sexualised spaces elsewhere in the building. This makes good commercial sense. It gives men somewhere to sit and relax

between sexual encounters, or if they momentarily do not find anyone they are attracted to in the cruising zones. By keeping men in the venue longer, without blocking the cabins when they are not actively cruising, the owners heighten the erotic potential of the space (a critical mass of cruisers is needed in order for the space to function to full effect), and ensure the greatest number of men find what they are looking for, thereby increasing the likelihood of them making a return visit. Of course, their consumption of over-priced snacks and soft drinks does no harm to the sauna's takings.

Similar elements can be found in the layout of the erstwhile Fetish Club:

The entrance is a large metal door on roadside. This enters into a small lobby area with the cash till where you pay before going in. The main bar area on the ground floor is a large open space sub-divided by leaning posts that appeared to have been made out of old forklift pallets. Also on the ground floor are the toilets – a small, old-style trough urinal in a room on its own and a couple of cubicles. Upstairs is a chill-out area, which is one of the few places you can sit down. Up here is also a changing area and the cloakroom. The basement is set out in a small maze, partly constructed by more chest-height wooden partitions, partly from sheets of camouflage netting. Down here is also a urinal in the centre of the main room and a sling in a small side-room. Most of the action took place either in the basement or the ground floor urinals, but some groups and couples occasionally played in front of the crowd upstairs or, a little more privately, in some of the darker corners on the ground floor. The lighting is subdued throughout, but it is not pitch black anywhere. (Field note: The Fetish Club, 31 March 2002).

Here there is the same separation of the interior of the venue from the outside world. The bar functions in much the same way as the lounge in the sauna, but there is also the provision of a separate chill out space. In both venues the interior is designed along similar principles in order to facilitate the circulation of men between distinct zones and spaces set out across several floors of the building, as well as the creation of vantage points from which men can stand and appraise those who wander

passed them. There is also a mix of spaces that allow men to choose between moments of intimacy in relative seclusion and privacy, or more public, exhibitionist excess, frequently with a large assemblage of other bodies. The relative spacing of these different zones can have a considerable impact on the functioning of the space, as well as the pace and manner in which cruisers move through it. I returned to The Fetish Club for a second time a month after my initial visit. In the intervening time both the sling and the urinal had been removed from the vented basement. This provoked several changes in men's use of the space – few went into the small room where the sling had been previously suspended, making it dead space, and men tended to move more rapidly through the open space where the urinal had been located. It no longer replicated the feel or function of a cottage. As such, men cruised each other through this space, but seldom stopped to play with each other there.

In the year after my first visit to The Small Sauna, the owners opened up the basement of the building for cruising and embarked upon a rapid succession of alterations to that space in order to maximise its use and enhance (rather than detract from) the functioning of the venue as a whole. Initially, a maze of narrow pathways and secluded cul-de-sacs was created from large sheets of corrugated plastic hanging from hooks in the ceiling (Field note: The Small Sauna, 19 September 1998). These were replaced over time by a mix of walk-in cabins about the size of a toilet cubicle and raised cabins containing mattresses that were separated by metal mesh 'cages' or camouflage netting rather than solid panelling (Field note: The Small Sauna, 29 December 1998). If the allusion to the architecture of a cottage was not obvious

enough in the creation of the walk-in cabins, eventually some purpose-built 'glory holes' were cut in the walls between a number of them, allowing men to spy, masturbate or fellate each other through the apertures. For a time, these seemed very popular with the sauna's customers. Other alterations to the design and infrastructure of the sauna were less successful and may actually have served to impede the erotics of the space. At one point the walls were painted a pistachio green – in the basement, where the lighting was very subdued, this gave men an unhealthy pallor that made few people look attractive; upstairs, if the lighting was set at too a high a level, the corridors looked too fresh and clean, and this seemed to deaden the sexualised atmosphere. Hallam (1993: 44) has suggested that cleanliness only gains erotic appeal when it takes an obsessive and fetishistic form. Again, despite these occasional mistakes, the on-going adaptation and development of these sites was motivated by a commercial imperative. If the layout stayed too similar for too long, men might become bored with the routine possibilities of the site and return less frequently. By instigating slow, incremental changes and experiments, the owners engaged with the curiosity of their customers and offered them the possibility of new encounters, whilst not erasing the familiarity (and, hence, safety) of the site in one go.

Despite the growth of gay saunas and other sex-on-premises venues in London over the last decade, there has still been a net loss of spaces where men can engage in public homosex in the city. In many ways, the owners of this new breed of venues have responded to this loss by replicating in the design of these commercial spaces key features of cottages and the type of spaces that men create

through their repeated appropriation of open spaces for cruising and sex. I do not want to deny the pleasures and the opportunities for socialising that such commercial venues provide to many gay and other non-heterosexual men. However, at the same time I mourn the loss of so many spaces that have facilitated this erotic communality for free. In commercial saunas and sex clubs the cruising spaces are largely provided ready formed. Men who use these spaces consume the space and the erotic possibilities that it provides. In cottages and cruising grounds there are more opportunities for *detournement* and collective participation in adapting those spaces to co-create new social and erotic possibilities. I believe it is the rapid reduction in the opportunities for these collective moments of queer communality and opportunist autonomy, as much as the monetary exchange involved in entering a sauna, that is contributing to the diminished range of social relations associated with queer urban life at the start of the twenty-first century.

6.3 Relational encounters

As I hope I have illustrated in the previous section, cruisers make and remake the sites they cruise, both for themselves and other non-cruising users of those sites, through their actions. They tread new paths through the undergrowth of cemeteries and common land. They leave sex-detritus behind, which marks the site relationally – for fellow cruisers this rubbish is enrolled for erotic effect; for other users, it potentially marks the site as unsafe or at least unsavoury. In this section, I intend to explore further the processes by which cruising is enacted and performed in relation to the environment in which it takes place, as well as the other human bodies and

non-human actors that are found there. I contend that these relational encounters ensure that cruising is less a result of the sexual identities claimed by the men who participate in this activity, and more about the interaction of bodies in place. As sexual identity categories dissolve in the cruising encounter, men open themselves up to difference. There is always a multiplicity of potential possibilities within a cruising encounter and these can serve to challenge and undermine identity further, such that cruising is a process of becoming.

To return to Turner's (2003: 54) writings on cruising, he poses the following question – "how does one distinguish a man cruising the streets in search of another man from any other stroller moving through the streets?" The answer that he proffers is that, "the urban encounter with the other is a fraught exchange, precisely because it breaks the rules of the city, forcing connection, rather than reinforcing separation," (Turner 2003: 95; emphasis in the original). What he seems to be grappling with here is what might be recognised within contemporary geography as a more-than-representational theorisation that views the potential of the cruiser's body through a 'mechanics of space' (Gil 1998: 126). In other words, there is something in the relationship of the cruisers' bodies to each other and objects in the urban environment that generates a 'moment of desire' that is "less about detachment than a longing to be with another," (Turner 2003: 96). This longing and desire is mobilised through the movements of the body (Thrift 2000c), as we saw in the first section of this chapter, and "other processes operating through our distracted, tactile 'knowing'." (Harrison 2000:497).

The challenge is to find an adequate means of writing about such processes. For, as Delany (1995: 32) reminds us, “the sexual experience is still largely outside language.” In attempting to think, theorise and write about cruising and public homosex, I have increasingly found more-than-representational theories to be a useful tool. It offers a means to “to excavate the empty space between the lines of representational meaning in order to see what is also possible,” (Dewsbury 2003: 1911). Clearly, as will be evident from reading the other chapters in this dissertation, I do not consider representational thinking to be lacking in all circumstances. It has offered a useful means for me to analyse many of the spaces discussed in this work. However, I also do not think that it offers complete understanding, either. Representations are an inadequate means of approaching the passions, emotions and desires inherent in the cruising encounters. I agree with Dewsbury (2003: 1908) that,

the call [of non-representational theory] is to stop separating the world out into meaningful representations on the one hand and ephemeral sensations on the other, and to become attentive instead to truths folded into the fabric of the world itself.

As I have written elsewhere (Brown 2004), public homosex is a deeply embodied and visceral experience. My turn towards a more-than-representational mode of theorising it, stems far more from my own encounters ‘in the field’ (and elsewhere) than from any purely intellectual endeavour, as the following extract from my field notes illustrates:

The night culminated with me and a young man I had been playing with throughout the evening alone in the back of the space... enjoying the sensuality of chilly night air tingling across naked flesh, and enjoying each other’s bodies. This encounter with ... throws up questions about enjoyment of all the senses, play and dare (especially with the final denouement) and an

understanding of self in space (and in relations to others) that is experienced more through the body than the mind. (Field note: The Toilet, 25 March 2003).

Without wanting to elaborate too much about the nature of our encounter, what is important to note here is that the full, embodied thrill of the moment stems not just from our mutual exploration and enjoyment of each other's bodies, but from being fully present in that space – enjoying the daring thrill of being naked in a public space; enjoying the 'tingling' sensation of chilly night air on our flesh, partly masked by the architecture and design of the space [Fig. 6], but knowing we would be unable to disengage and clothe ourselves in time to preserve our dignity in the unlikely event (at that time of the early morning) that someone else should enter the space. A whole set of affects and emotions were at play in this encounter, alongside the sensations of the touch, smell and sight of each other's body. I find a parallel here with some of Thrift's (2000c: 45) writing on body work therapies, such as yoga and the Alexander Technique – "these body practices again allow the present to be intensified since they produce both an intensified sense of body movement and, at the same time, focus and enhance that movement."

I want to continue this mode of analysis in relation to a few other encounters that I witnessed in that cottage around that time.

I visited the cottage at approximately 10.30 p.m. on this Wednesday evening and found a leather skin in his 40s fucking a skinny young lad in his 20s at the back urinals, being watched by a crowd of about eight other men (all of them wanking, of course). (Field note: The Toilet, 12 September 2001).

Inside I found two scruffily dressed men in early middle age spit-roasting a young black guy with a large Afro haircut and Hoxton retro clothing. Several men stood around watching and wanking. My arrival barely interrupted the flow of the action, and neither did the arrival of other men.

For 4 o'clock in the afternoon (even on a Saturday), it seemed very brazen. But, hot as hell!" (Field note: The Toilet, 15 November 2003)

I want to tease out several themes in relation to these incidents. First, they are group encounters where, although two or three men were at the centre of the action, a larger group of men were moving and feeling in relation to each other. Second, and closely related to this, I want to consider the role of affect in these encounters. Finally, I want to note the role of relationship to non-human objects in the events.

It seems to me that it is very apparent in relation to these group encounters, where a set of men stood around watching the sex-play of two or three others, that the sexual behaviour is not localised in 'individuals', instead it operates and is understood through a relational structure formed by the men's bodies in the space of the toilet. This structure, Thrift (2004a: 87) suggests, can be thought of as an 'extended organism', within which "becomings take place in terms of affects and capacities for affecting and being affected," (Thrift 2004a: 87-88). By being in this space at this time, each man establishes a diverse set of relationships with the objects that surround him – not just the other men's bodies, but the stained ceramics of the urinals and the floor tiles, the faded shine of the metal casing of the hand-dryers, the broken sinks, the air (heavy with the smells of stale urine, fresh sweat and amyl nitrate). In both instances, the sex-play took place behind the chest-height wall that separates the back row of urinals from the entrance to the toilet. The men at the centre of both events used the fabric of the space, and the bodies of the other men present to protect and shield them, for a few crucial moments at least, from the view of any potential non-participants on their arrival.

Between the body (and the organs in use) and the things is established a connection that immediately affects the form and space of the body; between the one and the other a privileged spatial relation emerges that defines the space. (Gil 1998: 127).

In this context, the space is defined as, 'hot' and 'horny', erotic and desiring.

I would suggest, through the appropriation of a public space for a set of socially disapproved of activities (anti-social, in the rhetoric of New Labour), the space also becomes tense, edgy, fearful and exciting. Just as the voyeurs enjoy the performances of the men having sex in the centre of their circle, feeling lust and desire, perhaps this enjoyment is also tinged with envy that they are not more centrally involved in the action – although, of course, they are, as it is unlikely that these men would be having sex in front of an audience if their presence did not enhance and intensify the experience for them.

How did these voyeurs know that they could watch, but not attempt to participate in a more direct and tactile manner in the scene? Why did my entrance into the space, and those of the men who followed me, barely disrupt the pace and flow of the second encounter? I would suggest that the answer to these questions lies in the small intricacies of the bodily movements of the men concerned. In the first instance, no subtle invitations or gestures giving consent to further participation must have been offered. In the second, something in the way myself and the other men entered the space must have indicated that we were familiar with the toilet (as a public sex space) and were unlikely to object to the sex-play taking place there. Perhaps our faces were recognised by some of the men from previous visits and through a flash of their eyes, a subtle nod or a thumbs-up, they indicated to the others that we were 'safe'? Perhaps something in the ways we scanned the space for

what was taking place there, as we entered, indicated that we were fellow cruisers? It seems to me that what is being utilised here is a set of embodied, sensate, semi-automatic knowledges that function “like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation” (Taussig 1992: 141). For Ingold (2000: 26), such forms of intuitive understanding reside in “the perceptual skills that emerge, for each and every being, through a process of development in a historically specific environment.” They form part of what he describes as ‘a poetics of dwelling’ (Ingold 2000: 26). Of course, the experienced, seasoned cruiser will have learned to perform, interpret and respond to a repertoire of such gestures, but I maintain that these basic cruising skills are developed and practised in relation to specific sites.

I have already commented at some length on how the men in these encounters related not just to each other, but to non-human objects in the toilet environment. What strikes me, in re-reading these extracts, is that the non-human objects that I chose to comment on in particular were the clothes that the men were wearing – the leather worn by the skinhead, the vintage, ‘retro’ clothing worn by the young Black man, or the evocative, but less precisely described ‘scruffy’ attire of the two middle-aged men having sex with him. It might be easy to appreciate the sensuous feel and appearance of the skinhead’s leather outfit, how it might be taken as a clue for the type of sex its wearer is interested in performing (Mains 1984; Thompson 2001), or the way tight trousers draw attention to and enhance the visual impact of a man’s genitals or his buttocks (Levine 1998; Cole 2000). Less obvious, perhaps is how the young men’s outfits might contribute to the scenes I witnessed. However, I would suggest that the very fact that I recorded these details indicates

that they were important clues in my appraisal of the men concerned and, for myself and the others involved in these events, contributed to how the men's desirability and potential to get involved in the action was assessed by the men around them. Certainly, to use a less everyday example, the young man I witnessed entering the cottage in October 2001 wearing only a long, camel hair overcoat over very tight fluorescent yellow lycra swimming briefs, was unlikely to be assessed as anything other than a cruiser, precisely because it was not an outfit that was likely to be worn incidentally on the streets. But more than this, the costume showed off his swimmer's physique and undoubtedly enhanced his desirability to the other men present in the toilet. He was dressed to thrill.

All of these encounters reinforce an important observation made by Hollister (1999: 63) in his study of public sex sites:

How a man conducts and understands himself in the rest of his life is less important than what strengths he brings to the site in terms of the extent to which he may fit others' profiles of a desirable or safe partner, his ability to socialize with others to the extent that he can rely on their support in a crisis, or on their knowledge to improve his ability to use the site.

There are three significant interpretations that can be extrapolated from Hollister's observation. First, actions and behaviour are more important to cruising encounters than the sexual identities men claim for themselves away from the public sex environment. Although, from my conversations with some of the men I met in these spaces, I know that many thought of themselves as gay or bisexual (even if they communicated this identity to no more than a select group of friends), this was far from being a universal truth.

Second, the way in which a man conducts himself in relation to a public sex space and the bodies of the other men within it, rather than more conventional judgements about how good-looking he is, or how well his body conforms to dominant societal models of attractiveness, can determine how desirable other men find him in that context. This can work both ways. On several occasions, I have witnessed conventionally very good-looking men approach others in an over-enthusiastic or needy manner that led to their advances being repelled – desperation is seldom attractive, and approaches that are too persistent and abrupt can be unsettling or invoke fear for one’s personal safety. This tends to have a knock-on effect, as it is often the case that once this has occurred in the presence of an audience, they are all likely to shift their stance in relation to him, such that his advances are likely to be turned down by one man after another in the vicinity. He is unlikely to find a play companion without leaving the site or waiting for the rest of the men present at that moment to do so.

Conversely, and this is my third point, the ability to operate skilfully in relation to a given public sex environment and the way a man moves, uses and utilises his body can greatly enhance his attractiveness within the space. Different rules of attraction and attractiveness apply here, compared to the outside world, and the dynamics of the action taking place in the space can take on a life of its own:

Amongst the 25 men packed into the space by the back line of urinals and engaged in a rolling orgy, my favourite voyeuristic sight was a 30-something skinny suedehead in a Fred Perry and combats on his knees sniffing and worshipping the very ample cock of a quite ordinary looking man in his late 60s.” (Field note: The Toilet, 17 November 2002).

As Dewsbury (2003: 1930) has commented, admittedly in relation to very different circumstances, “at the space of bodily connection, in the eventhood of the moment where the experiential and the referential is folded, there exists the potential for alternative worlds.” Public sex sites can serve to throw reified identities into confusion – a man doesn’t have to have adopted a gay identity in order to join in the action and these sites throw together a far greater diversity of men than the ever expanding assortment of more specialised niche markets on the commercial gay scene. They also create opportunities for men to assert and articulate their homoerotic desires in ways that may be impossible to achieve in other spaces of their everyday lives. Throughout my observations there, The Toilet was frequently visited by a trio of young Bengali men in their late teens. On the streets outside, they adopted a tough, ‘rude-boy’ swagger. The moment they stepped inside the cottage that posturing dissolved into swishy, camp and effeminate frivolity. The site-specific bodily performances of this trio serve as a reminder that the “borders between ‘being’ – as a state reached – and ‘becoming’ are indistinct and constantly in flow” (Crouch 2003: 1948).

Despite my emphasis on relationality and processes of becoming in this section, it would be a mistake to suggest that the mobilisation and assertion of (notionally) fixed identities never occurs in these spaces. Although men’s sexual identities were often assumed (as gay *or* straight) by the others around them, it was the assertion of ethnic identities and the occasional racist outbursts and assumptions of white men (or Black Caribbean men in relation to their Asian counterparts) that caused most tension within these cruising zones. These incidents varied from

ambiguous comments directed at men of colour that served to disrupt the functioning of the space, to more overtly violent outbursts. The following, is a good example of the former type of episode:

As the white guy pulled himself together, re-arranged his clothes and prepared to leave, he addressed the assembled crowd (perhaps eight men) and said, in a deep Welsh accent, "If I were you guys, I'd leave now as that Somali queen has a nasty habit of calling the cops 'cos no-one likes her." Over the next few minutes, many of the man present heeded his advice. (Field note: The Cottage, 6 July 2001)

At the time (and in hindsight, in incorporating this event into my analysis), I found it difficult to determine whether the Welshman's words of caution were motivated by a genuine desire to warn his fellow cruisers of the potential danger posed by the Somali man. Or the extent to which his targeting of this man also included an element of racial prejudice towards a clearly traumatised man whose dissociative behaviour frequently positioned him as 'Other' in that space. It certainly seems clear to me that the white man did not fear the Somali man's actions too much, as he waited until he had fulfilled his desires before issuing his warning.

The second example I want to offer here, due to the level of violence involved seems far less ambiguous, although there is still ultimately no way of knowing that this assault was entirely racially motivated.

At one point the four of us were standing directly outside the cottage when two (very queer, but hard-looking) skinheads and a third man arrived. Ajay mentioned that he thought they were trouble and that it was one of the skins who has badly beaten up an older Indian man in there a couple of weeks ago. Sure enough a few minutes later, a forty-something gay professional came out saying, "I don't know what's going on in there tonight, but some bloke's just punched another." At that point a middle aged, suited South Asian man left the cottage holding his nose and whimpering. To our shame, we did nothing to help him. In fact, Ajay, the Lithuanian lad and myself went off to the station for a coffee. The horticulturist we had been talking to said he

thought the Asian man who had been punched had been making a nuisance of himself in his desperation, but given that both the skins' known victims had been older Asian men there has to be some question as to whether this was a racially-motivated power trip. (Field note: The Cottage, 19 October 2001).

I acknowledge in this extract my shame at my failure to intervene in this incident or to offer assistance to the man who had been assaulted. I have repeatedly included this episode in earlier drafts of this chapter, only to edit it out again subsequently. Ultimately, I have decided to include it as it exposes the limits of my (generally) positive analysis of how these sites are inclusive of a wide range of non-heterosexual men. Although a diverse group of men participate and are included in these spaces, there are still those who find themselves excluded or on the fringes of this milieu.

Despite these incidents, I would still argue that how identities (sexual or otherwise) are mobilized occurs in relation to the sites themselves. For Hollister (1999: 69),

the 'gay' of a lesbian and gay social movement organisation, the 'gay' of a cruising ground, and the 'gay' of a gay bar are distinct entities. Indeed, speaking of cruising areas as 'gay' at all risks imposing the fantasies of outsiders, whether they be gay or heterosexual-identified. What it means to be gay is site-specific.

I would go further than this and suggest that the interaction of men's bodies in the context of a cruising site opens up new potential for ways of interacting with others that are not limited by the discursive boundaries of conventional identities. As such, these are most definitely queer spaces.

6.4 Spontaneous moments of care-taking

Delany (1999) has argued that the spontaneous, un-commodified erotic contact between strangers that takes place in public sex environments (and elsewhere) is the basis of urban queer life. Of course, as Amin (2002: 969) has highlighted, habitual contact is no guarantor of cultural exchange in itself and can often reinforce group identities. Although most of the evidence I enrol here highlights moments of erotic mixing across ethnic and class divisions, it is important to note that at least one (Spanish) man I interviewed consciously sought out sites where he was more likely to encounter other professional men in the course of his cruising.

Yes I do use cottages and cruising grounds in central London, close to work. I prefer the city to attract people who are of the same like-minded attitude. Professional people, not always gay men can be mixed sometimes. I enjoy being with other men, in the company of people who are after the same thing. (Interview with Agustin).

However, in the context of the cottages and cruising grounds discussed in this chapter, men regularly find themselves outside their quotidian routines and in 'moments of cultural destabilisation' (Amin 2002: 970) that offer the possibility of engaging in a common activity (primarily, the pursuit of sexual pleasure) with strangers in ways that challenge preconceived notions of 'self' and 'other.' Elements of this experience can be heard in the words of Patrick, a Black gay man with mental health problems, who spoke about how cruising not only satisfied his need for intimacy (albeit not unproblematically for him), and helped him feel temporarily more connected with a range of other gay men, from whom he often felt somewhat alienated.

Yes I go cruising and to cottages [including The Cemetery]. I feel comfortable because everyone knows why you are there, but also feel embarrassed because it's sad. There is a large mix of people there. I go there for sexual relief - I need to be touched, need to have company. I'm not a typical gay man in dress or looks. (Interview with Patrick).

In this final concluding section of the chapter, I shall consider events (other than sexual acts) that I have witnessed in these sites that suggest ways of relating to space and the environment that I have seldom observed in more commercial gay venues. By which I mean moments of caretaking and tending of both the space and each other. These are progressive means of relating to other human beings that are not necessarily associated with contemporary urban gay life. I suggest that these actions are a result of men feeling confident, safe and at home in these spaces. In the paragraphs that follow, I describe a number of pranks and celebrations that occurred in the (contextual) safety of these sites. I also examine some of the ways in which cruisers responded to the limits of this safety and the threats to the continued existence of these spaces. Before that, I want to recount an event that I observed, which I feel is evocative of how these spaces are claimed as their own by men who seldom engage in the mainstream institutions of urban gay life.

When I got there the lights were on and there were about eight men in the place – most of them Black or South Asian. Very soon after my arrival the lights were switched off – nothing unusual about that, at that time of night; however, on this occasion, the lights were switched off by an 'older' Bengali man in his mid-40s or older. This is the first time I can remember seeing a Bengali man of that age being so assertive in his use and occupation of that space. (Field note: The Cottage, 22 January 2002).

Drawing on Foucault's celebrated (1989: 225) description of New York and San Francisco's bath houses and sex clubs of the 1970s as 'laboratories of sexual experimentation', Bell and Binnie (2000: 132) have suggested that today public sex

environments also function as “laboratories of love and friendship” because, like Foucault before them, they recognise that there is more than just sex taking place within them. This resonates with my observations in sites in east London. In particular, the following note from a visit to the cemetery is evocative for the range of men it describes who were present in the site at the time of my visit and also for its primary concentration on social activities other than sex.

The cruising crowd during the afternoon was mostly white with a handful of Black Caribbean and Turkish men. The men ranged in age from their early 20s to a frail old chap who must have been in his 80s. The majority appeared to be gay-identified from their attire and in fact there were two couples cruising together and wandering around holding hands. There was also one extremely well-spoken bear in his 50s who was very friendly and chatty. In addition to these visibly gay ‘boyz’, there were also a few squat punks on the pitch. Amongst the crowd of cruisers, a lot of the men clearly knew each other and on a number of occasions, I noticed men greeting each other and standing around, or settled on the benches, chatting.” (Field note: The Cemetery, 4 May 2002).

Hollister (1999: 61) has noted that cruising sites vary significantly in their levels of conviviality. He considers that the “directness and openness of conversation is proportional to the security of the site,” with routine, casual conversation only taking place in the most secure of sites. If Hollister’s observation is correct (and can be translated across the Atlantic), then it confirms my earlier analysis of the cemetery and the cottage, in particular, as sites where cruisers feel relatively safe and secure. The levels of friendly chatter and banter found amongst regular cruisers in these two sites would not be found in most public toilets, where there are tighter levels of surveillance, men cannot wait around indefinitely, and any cruising or sexual contact is furtive and fleeting. Here is an episode from a quiet

night at The Toilet when, in the absence of any cruising, a small group of regular visitors were passing the time, engaged in light-hearted conversation:

Five of us were stood around chatting in front of the cubicles for a few minutes when a good-looking man in his early 30s walked in. Ajay greeted him with 'You're new here, aren't you? Well, welcome to the club.' The new arrival looked taken aback for a second, but obviously realizing that he was not in danger came over and started chatting. (Field note: The Toilet, 17 October 2001).

The surprise (and initial fear and apprehension) expressed by the late arrival to this event, is indicative of how uncommon such spontaneous geniality is in public sex sites (and perhaps, urban life more generally). For a man who was unfamiliar with the relative safety of this site and the self-confidence of its regular users, it must have come as something of a surprise. Once he relaxed into the scenario, he was hooked. He stayed and chatted to myself and the other men present for several hours that evening (some of it inside the cottage, some of it on the abandoned market stalls outside), and returned on many subsequent occasions over the following weeks – mostly to chat with these men and others.

I now want to recall an event from later the same month that illustrates this site-specific camaraderie and good humour taken to a different level.

It was another slow night. At one point a young Bengali man came into the cottage who Dee said he knew to be married. The guy had no sooner stepped up to the urinal than his mobile rang. As he chatted away in Sylheti, Dee and the other guys turned on all of the taps and the driers and flushed the toilet in every one of the stalls to make it very obvious where he was. Although I am suspicious that Dee might be a little racist towards Bengali Muslims, this was an amusing scenario and seemed quite a symbolic display of pride. A few minutes later, Dee's own phone rang and, having opened his conversation with 'No! I'm not in a cottage, honest,' the tables were turned on him. This time I joined in the prank, as did one of the older regulars (who usually keeps his distance from this group). (Field note: The Toilet, 27 October 2001).

There is a lot going on here, little of it straightforwardly 'positive' or 'negative'. This is certainly one of those occasions in the cottage when identity politics (with a very small 'p') comes into play –with a flamboyant white gay man making assumptions about the identity of a Bengali man. The argument goes: if a man is Asian and married, he must be 'in the closet' and ashamed of his 'real' sexuality. In part, it is assumptions like these that motivated the initial attempt to embarrass and 'out' the Bengali man by exaggerating the sounds of the toilet, so that his location was revealed to the person calling on his mobile. At the same time, there was no hint of outright malice in the prank and I felt, at the time, that as much as it was meant to shame the Bengali man, it was also an expression of pride (in the place and in their attitude towards their sexual behaviour) on behalf of the tricksters. That so many men could also take relish in so quickly turning the joke back on its initiator, Dee, reveals something about the interpersonal dynamics between the men in this space. The joke was enacted through the fabric of the toilet. It was an expression of the more-than-sexual forms of encounter that the site enabled between its regular users. In a sexual encounter, sexual identity matters less than how effectively a man can use the site and his body to maximize the pleasure of other men; in a non-sexual encounter, the negotiation of difference is more complex and tense. This practical joke eased that tension (albeit by way of initially raising the stakes somewhat).

This playful encounter is suggestive of what Thrift (2004b: 70) has identified as the possibilities for a politics of affect and a politics of 'tending' where the "political imperative is to widen the potential number of interactions a living thing

can enter into, [and] to widen the margin of 'play'." This is not a politics of demands or rights claims, but a politics of "giving a chance to encounters and interactions that are partially invisible in the dominant regime and are excluded from the definition of what counts as knowledge," (Thrift 2004a: 84).

Although I see glimmers of this impulse towards 'tending' in the practical joking I have just discussed, precisely because the event enacted a level of playfulness that is seldom witnessed between (relative) strangers, I believe it is even more in evidence in the incidents that follow. The first involves some of the same men who performed the practical joke, and occurred on another quiet night, when there was no cruising taking place.

After chatting for a while, and in the absence of any action (the lights were on), they broke into the attendant's room, brought out two large jugs of detergent and started cleaning the place. (Field note: The Toilet, 30 September 2001).

At the time, this 'housekeeping' of the site amused me. It was certainly performed for effect. However, in hindsight, this expression of care for a meaningful and strategic site by some of its users moved me in other ways. As Binnie (2001) and Hallam (1993) have argued, dirt and dereliction may contribute to the erotic appeal of such sites, but there are limits. At the time, the local council had effectively abandoned the toilet and it was falling into a state of grimy disrepair that had moved beyond erotic frisson. As a result, despite the constant availability of access to the site and little risk of official interruption, many of the users of the site were abandoning it. There were more quiet nights than not. For Venn (2006: 44) there is a tipping point beyond which the accumulation of rubbish becomes excessive and exposes the social processes that define certain products, places and

people as being without value. By taking it upon themselves to clean the site, this band of friends were performing an act of care for the site and ensuring its functional sustainability as a 'cottage' (as opposed to a semi-derelict public toilet). Their act of care-taking reveals an intuitive understanding of the importance of the fabric of the site to sustaining the potential for affective encounters between men. The cruiser knows, viscerally, just how much dirt is needed to sustain the erotic potential of a public sex environment.

Most of the incidents from that cottage that I have discussed in this section took place during the autumn of 2001. Towards the end of the autumn, the council suddenly attempted to take back control of the toilet. Initially, the toilet was closed for several weeks. When it eventually re-opened, although no permanent attendant was posted in the toilet, a janitor visited at regular intervals throughout the day – ostensibly to keep the toilet clean, but also as a visible presence to deter cruising. He also locked the toilet each evening. It is from this period that two further events occurred that highlight the affection of the site's regular cruisers for the toilet and their attempts to honour its long history as a cottage. Neither was a spontaneous happening - both were facilitated by mobile phone and internet technologies. In early December (and limited somewhat in their options by the recurrent early closure of the toilet), one group of men called on the networks of cruisers to gather in the cottage late one afternoon, as the market outside was shutting up, to celebrate the cottage's 'grand re-opening.' A few days later, the following posting appeared on a cruising website (www.cruisingground.co.uk):

100th Birthday party: On Tuesday 18th December 2001 [The Toilet] will be 100 years old (like some of its regulars). According to an engraved stone

outside the place, it was opened by the Mayor of Stepney on that day in 1901. 100 years of service to the community! So come and celebrate with us – you never know who you might meet. (Field note: 6 December 2001).

I visited the site early on the evening of the anniversary, and there were a large number of men waiting around with a certain degree of anticipation. I have no firm evidence that the promised centenary party actually happened (although I heard some rumours to suggest it did). Nevertheless, the fact that individuals got together to put the call out and the unusually large number of men in the toilet when I visited that evening suggests that many men felt called to celebrate the site's role in their own lives and those of their queer ancestors.

Although new technologies enabled the rapid communication of these events, the networks of friends and acquaintances who accumulated through the site, swapping mobile phone numbers and keeping each other posted on the state of the site, could not have developed if a critical mass of men didn't already feel relatively secure and safe there. That security, although heart-felt, was also precarious. From Autumn 2001 until the toilet's eventual long-term closure in 2004, there was a war of attrition between the cruisers, the police and council authorities, and some local residents who contested the increasing visibility of the site as a public sex environment. The council tried closing the site early or for long stretches of time. The police made the regular, visible patrols in front of the toilet at night, occasionally looking inside (if it was open), but seldom doing more than moving men on or temporarily disrupting the cruising. Some of the local residents took matters into their own hands and, when the council suspended the evening closures for a while, turned up with their own padlocks and intimidation. In response many

of the regular cruisers actively defended *their* site, by their continuing presence, a refusal to be shamed by the police and occasional verbal confrontations with the disapproving locals. When the toilet was locked shut, it was frequently reclaimed as a cottage:

As I walked down the steps, there was one very obvious change to the space. In addition to the horizontal shutter over the steps (that appeared some time last year, but which I have never seen shut over), there is now a very basic 'door' at the bottom of the stairs. This door is little more than a roughly trimmed sheet of plywood on a couple of hinges and with a padlock to seal it shut. This attempt to further prevent queer pleasure after dark appeared to have been as unsuccessful as all the other 'security' measures, as the door had obviously been forced open on a number of occasions and now looked only notionally secure. (Field note: The Toilet, 3 August 2002).

Of course, it is possible to argue that, at least to some extent, it was the cruisers' comfort and confidence in claiming the toilet as a public sex environment that ended up making it *too* visible, drawing unwanted attention to the site and accelerated its demise. That dialectic was certainly at work. However, something else of significance was definitely going on as well. In defending that space of multiple potentialities of pleasure, men were claiming a (temporary) autonomous space (Bey 1991) that was not necessarily coterminous with the identities they perform in other arenas of their everyday lives. Both their appropriation of (otherwise heteronormative) public space, and their tending for that space is evocative of a politics that is seldom seen in Britain today outside a limited set of activist networks. The men were asserting their autonomy to use a publicly owned space in a manner that asserted their right to difference. They were asserting their presence in the public realm *as a* public. For, as Sheller (2004: 49-50) has recently stated:

Publics are not only collective actors, emerging situationally as action gels around particular issues or debates, but also the slippery quality that allows for persons to slip from one identity to another in the first place. This is an interesting and indeed productive duality in the conceptualization of publics.”

This minor, low-key mobilization in defence of a politics of pleasure offers some hope in the face of increasing pessimism about the continuing viability of many public sex environments and the ‘laboratories of love and friendship’ that they sustain. Turner (2003: 177) has argued that the relocation of the cruiser from the streets, toilets and open ground of the city to an isolated existence surfing on-line chat rooms and websites has resulted in the loss of “the significance of the fleeting moment of reciprocal gaze, that backward glance, in which the possibility of a sudden radical alternative might be realized for the everyday man in the street.”

Although they are fewer and farther between now than they were in the past, cottages and outdoor cruising grounds are still strategically important non-commercial spaces that can foster communality across class and ethnic distinctions. In these places actions speak louder than words and they can serve to question and undermine rigid sexual identities and social norms. In the most secure and well-established of sites, this communality begins to take the form of autonomous modes of being. In discussing the more conscious forms of autonomous political organising (queer forms of which I shall examine in the next chapter), Chatterton (2005: 548) has suggested that “autonomy implies a different notion of self,” and self-belief. For him, “it is a radical imaginary, the urge to imagine an ‘other’ society,” based on the collective realisation that in so many ways we are already “co-authors of the world.” To work with, and towards, autonomy is to do politics

and life differently – it is about working consciously with respect, dignity and purpose with others and without hierarchies, to help our (individual and collective) selves. Autonomous spaces are made and remade in emergent, complex adaptive behaviours based upon participative self-organising and collective intelligence that can lead to higher order outcomes that are difficult to control and predict. There are echoes here of the playful, intuitive relational encounters that constitute public sex environments discussed in this chapter. In particular, the claiming of autonomous queer spaces (whether in the more-or-less spontaneous defence of cruising sites, of the more consciously political experiments that I discuss next) resonates with Thrift's call for a politics of 'emotional liberty' (2004b: 69) that broadens the realm of play and seeks pleasure rather than simply 'averting pain' (2004b: 70). It is a means of bringing enchantment back into urban space (Watson 2006).

CHAPTER SEVEN:

MUTINOUS ERUPTIONS: AUTONOMOUS SPACES OF
RADICAL QUEER ACTIVISM

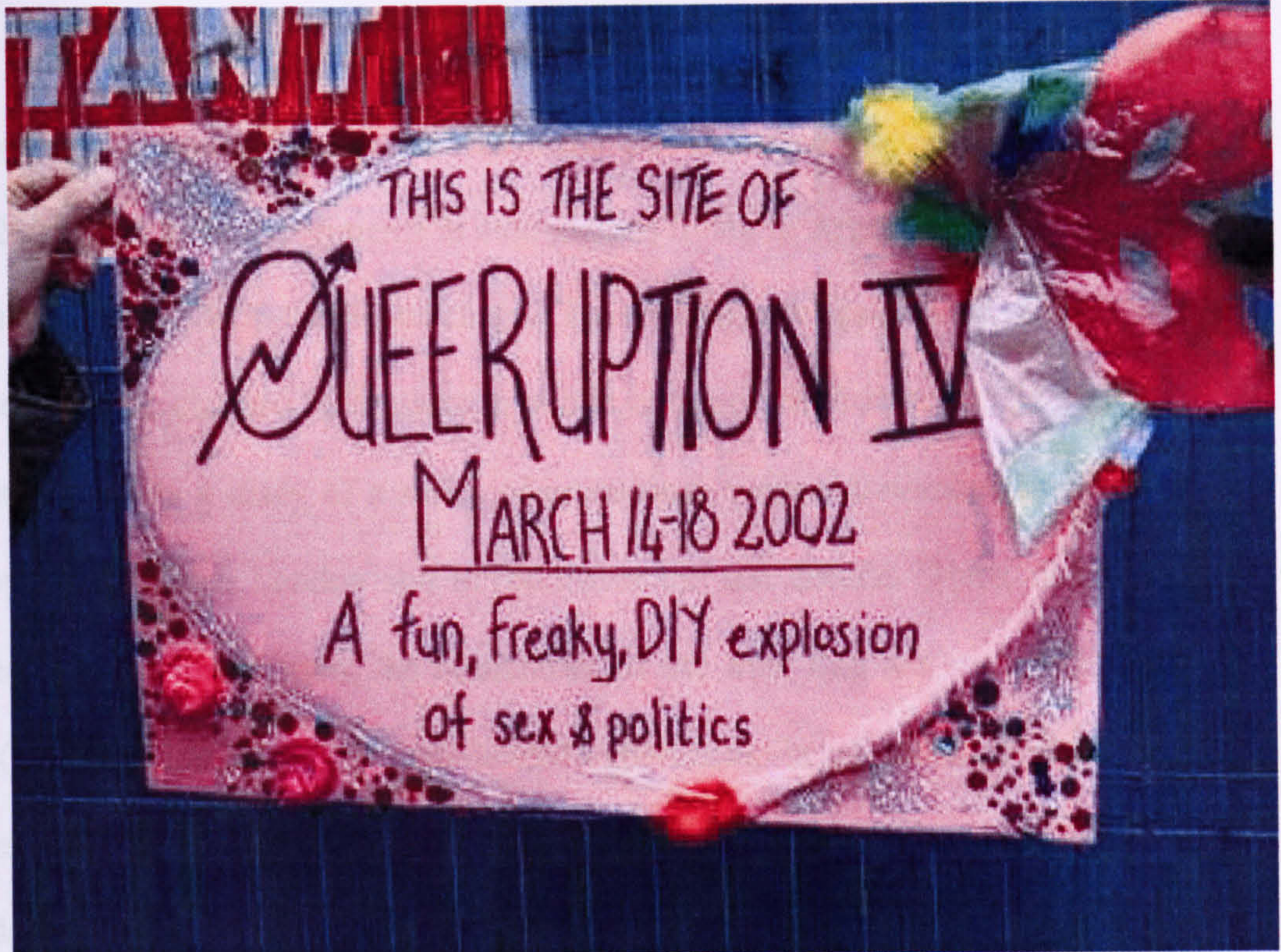


Figure 7: DIY pink plaque

CHAPTER SEVEN:

**MUTINOUS ERUPTIONS: AUTONOMOUS SPACES OF
RADICAL QUEER ACTIVISM**

Geographers have recently turned their attention to the construction and functioning of convergence spaces within the global justice movement (Routledge 2003; 2005) and local experiments in autonomous living in Argentina and elsewhere (Chatterton 2005). In the previous chapter I examined how opportunist moments of autonomy can be claimed by cruisers in public homosex environments. In contrast, this chapter offers a study of a series of intentional queer autonomous spaces that have operated in east London and beyond over the last decade. Here, more than elsewhere in the dissertation, the boundaries of the East End are stretched to the limits (and then some). I first experienced experiments in queer autonomy in east London, but these rhizomatic spaces have popped up across London and variations that adapt to local circumstances can be found in many British cities. Models for queer spatial interventions also circulate across national borders via the internet, self-published 'zines (Spencer 2005) and a highly mobile transnational network of queer bohemian nomads.

These spaces are considered as specifically queer examples of the many experiments in alternative ways of being that have been inspired by the anti-capitalist networks of the global justice movement. As such, this ethnography poses questions regarding the epistemological and ontological status of 'queer' within

'queer geography'. Although some critical queer geographers (Bell and Binnie 2000) have alluded to the need for alternatives to the dominant commercial gay scene, few have actually examined such alternative spaces and the processes that produce them. All of the events I describe in this chapter were consciously promoted as being "for queers of all sexualities and genders." While these activist spaces endeavour to be inclusive of bisexuals and transgendered people, 'queer' in this context is still more than simply an umbrella term for all those who are 'othered' by normative heterosexuality. Indeed, queer in these spaces is as opposed to homonormativity as it is to heteronormativity. Queer celebrates gender and sexual fluidity and consciously blurs binaries. It is more of a relational process than a simple identity category (Heckert 2004). It is infused with a creative, 'do-it-yourself' ethos (McKay 1998) that prefers charity shop costumes over the latest designer labels. Queer revels in its otherness, difference and distance from mainstream society (gay or straight), even as it recognises that this distance is always incomplete.

Furthermore, the functioning of these spaces and the activist networks that create them poses questions about what it means to be an activist. These networks operate under several different names depending on location and context, but they most frequently connect under the name of Queeruption (a compound of 'queer' and 'eruption'). At its most conventionally 'political', their activism re-articulates a politics of sexual liberation rather than equal rights. The actions and events they have organised fuse politics, culture and sex in a spirit of creative playfulness to question the rights claims made by more mainstream gay activists and create a 'do-

it-yourself' (DIY) alternative to a passive, a-political involvement in the commercial gay scene (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, Hennen 2004). However, more importantly to this chapter, they also engage in 'people-oriented constructive actions' that attempt to unleash the potential for sustainable ways of socialising as queer people that are not overly mediated by the commodity. These gatherings, parties and communal meals challenge many preconceptions about what it means to be actively engaged in political activism.

Finally, the chapter considers the importance of these autonomous queer spaces (as well as their limits and contradictions) in offering an alternative vision of queer urban life. However, I suggest that the process of collective experimentation to build autonomous (queer) spaces is ultimately more transformative and empowering than the resulting structures.

7.1 Autonomously queer

Whilst mainstream gay rights organisations seek to assert their 'normality' as the basis of equality claims, these diffuse anti-capitalist queer activist networks are avowedly anti-assimilationist and sex positive. For them, the diversity of people who are attempting to live outside the confines of heteronormativity is something to be celebrated. They are not interested in claiming 'equal rights' within the institutions that sustain heteronormativity. As well as critiquing current 'gay rights' discourses, the group is critical of the ways in which the mainstream gay scene has become saturated by the commodity and our sexual identities exploited as just another niche marketing opportunity. In many ways the network's critique is best

encapsulated in a slogan that has criss-crossed the Atlantic over the last couple of years – “Queer mutiny, not consumer unity!”

There is a more fundamental anti-capitalist analysis that underpins Queeruption’s critique of contemporary gay rights discourses and the commercialism of the gay scene. I would argue that more important than their critique of inequalities and exploitation is a concern with the negation of alienation and the means by which capitalist social relations separate people from their labour. On a gay scene that is saturated by the commodity, in which people consume products and experiences that confirm their identity as gay, people no longer relate to each other as active participants in the creation of society, but as the owners (or not) of things that are divorced from the processes by which they came into being. The social relations of production, of ‘doing’, are converted into ‘being’ (in this case, *being gay*). Here is the crux of Queeruption’s anti-capitalist critique of hegemonic gay identities, politics and culture. They are not interested in perpetuating a situation where sexuality is reduced to the acquisition of commodities separated from the conditions in which they were produced. They are not interested in engaging in a politics that is oriented towards the state which perpetuates other separations – the separating of leaders from led and “serious political activity from frivolous personal activity” (Holloway 2002). In contrast to this experience as the object of an anti-social ‘power-over’, the queeruptors are interested in small, modest attempts to re-engage their ‘power-to-do’, which is always part of a social process of doing with others. This brings me back to my earlier point that ‘queer’ within these networks functions more as a relational process, rather than a simple identity

category. A queer positionality, in this context, is produced through the very process of working collectively to create a less alienated and empowered space in which to explore a multiplicity of sexual and gendered potentialities.

From this perspective, as well as their interaction with broader post-anarchist networks (May 1994), these activists draw a commitment to non-hierarchical and participatory methods of organising. The (London) group has no executive or office-holders, decisions are reached by consensus whenever possible, and work gets done (or doesn't) depending solely on the energy, enthusiasm and creativity of the people active in the group at the time. The events they organise do not tend to work or retain the spirit in which they were conceived if too many people turn up as passive consumers, rather than chipping in with ideas and practical assistance, or bringing with them a skill or idea that they want to share. As Chatterton and Hollands (2003: 211) have emphasized, in networks that prioritise use values over exchange values, there tends to be a more fluid and non-hierarchical relationship between consumers and producers.

Queeruption's constructive direct actions represent experiments in autonomous modes of queer living. The appeal of autonomy operates on two inter-related levels – collective *and* individual – that is the 'conscious and explicitly free self-rule of a particular society' and 'the capacity of particular individuals to make choices in freedom' (Souza 2000: 188). On this basis, autonomy possesses both intrinsic and instrumental worth, in that it enables the enjoyment of liberty as a necessary basis for building self-esteem and it opens up a space in which to attempt collectively to overcome social problems (Chatterton 2005). As a result, the

queeruptors recognise the importance of consistency between their political ends and the means by which they attempt to achieve them (Heckert, 2004). Indeed, as the News from Nowhere collective (2003: 110) has optimistically suggested, the process of working collectively towards an alternative society can itself strengthen both that alternative vision and the means of achieving it.

Once we act purposefully ... we embark on a journey – a process of becoming which leads simultaneously towards freedom and connectedness, towards autonomy. We realise it through our connections to others, through interaction, negotiation, and communication. To be autonomous is not to be alone or to act in any way one chooses – a law unto oneself – but to act with regards for others, to feel responsibility for others. This is the crux of autonomy, an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity that comes through recognition that others both desire and are capable of autonomy too.

For all of these positive factors, there still remains a danger that these collective experiments in social autonomy can lose their direction and impetus, with participants slipping back into the atomised ‘autonomy’ of the consumer. There are many examples of radical collective experiments in autonomy becoming co-opted and revalorized within mainstream capitalist markets and social relations (Watts 2001). Nevertheless, as it is the process rather than the product of these experiments that I believe is important, these potential dangers should not be allowed to stifle the creative process of experimentation.

7.2 Who are these free-ques?

Having explored the basis of the Queeruption’s political critique, I now consider who participates in the network, before moving on to explore the queer autonomous spaces that they create.

One of the most striking facts that occurred to me when I first participated in the activities of the London group was how few people held down full-time jobs. The majority of core activists at the time were working part-time or engaged, precariously, in the informal economy. This led to a slight, but tangible, tension between those with full-time, 'legitimate' jobs and those without them. Too often, social events and excursions were organised during working hours on weekdays – thereby excluding several members of the group from participating in the full range of the group's activities.

The gender mix within the London group varied over time as activists came and went, but at most times at least half (and frequently many more) of the active participants identified as women. In a reversal of the gendered division of labour found in many activist circles, it was frequently the women who initiated political discussions and were keenest on participating in more confrontational direct actions, whilst the men organised fundraising parties and the social events that gel the wider network together. I return to issues of gender within the network later in the chapter.

Despite their many positive and refreshing aspects, the workings of this activist network are not without their problems. Indeed, they are riddled with (unintended) power imbalances and exclusions (Freeman 1972). For example, there is undoubtedly an unspoken leadership within the London group – even if this only consists of those activists with the greatest experience, who are most vocal in proposing new ideas for activities and who take responsibility for ensuring that these plans get put into practice. Still, the group is aware of these dangers and takes steps to minimise them by rotating tasks at meetings, encouraging new members to share

the responsibility for tasks so that they acquire new skills, and periodically taking time to reflect collectively on what inadvertent power dynamics are at work with the group (Starhawk 1982).

The London-based group is networked with other clusters of queer mutineers around the UK – in Brighton, Bristol, Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester and Cardiff, amongst other places. At present the groups in Brighton and Leeds are probably larger, more active and more innovative than the London group, which is largely going through a fallow period. The distribution of these groups has as much to do with a recent history of autonomous, horizontal DIY activism in those cities, as with the size of the resident lesbian and gay population.

Beyond the UK, this radical queer network is most concentrated in Western Europe and North America, although conscious attempts have been made to work with groups in Eastern Europe and the Majority World. They continue to develop links with radical queer groups in Argentina, Israel/Palestine, Serbia and Turkey. In most cases, the London group has responded to calls for solidarity and assistance from these Majority World organisations and has done so in a spirit of mutual learning and development. At times, it appears that ideas and advice seem to flow more from the more privileged Western European activists, rather than being a genuine and mutual exchange of queer tactics. However, this presumes that the activists concerned only participate in queer networks or engage in queer activism, and ignores that very real exchanges of information, ideas and tactics that many have enjoyed through broader anti-capitalist networks and convergence spaces in which they participate (Routledge 2003; 2005).

Despite this global networking and attempts to forge links with a gay Muslim group and networks of gay migrants and asylum-seekers in Britain and Europe, the core activists in the network (and most of those attending the events they organise) are predominantly 'white'. At times, this has caused tension with the minority of activists of colour in the network, and been the subject of much soul searching and debate. Whilst clearly this is an issue that the group needs to continue to address, there is a real danger that they end up fetishising skin colour and ignore the existing 'diversity' within the network. On several occasions, I attended meetings of the London group and was one of a tiny minority of those present that was actually born in the UK. Around the room were activists from Canada, France, Greece, Israel and Italy. On the other hand, although many of these activists find themselves living in a fairly precarious manner, they still enjoy the privilege of unproblematic transnational travel and migration. Consequently, they still inhabit a relatively privileged position within the international division of labour.

Most of the activists involved in the queeruption network (both within the UK and internationally) are in their twenties and there are very few people involved over the age of forty. However, this is not a phenomenon that is specific to alternative queer spaces, and in recent years there has been some debate of ways in which to prevent the 'burn out' of activists as they get older, so that activist networks can become more multi-generational (*Do or Die* 2003: 44; Starhawk 1982). Clearly, if the group is serious about creating a network of autonomous queer spaces and communities, then they must seek ways of engaging with earlier

generations of queer activists, learning from their skills and experiences and recognising that this is an important form of 'activism' in itself.

As I hope will be clear by now, the activism of the Queeruption network is not limited to sexual and gender politics. They offer an anti-capitalist perspective to queer activism and a queer edge to the anti-capitalist movement. Activists from within the network have participated in many of the larger mobilisations and convergences of the global justice movement and the grassroots anti-capitalist networks within it – sometimes working explicitly as a queer bloc, at others in affinity with other groups. For example, some of the key players in facilitating workshops on gender politics at recent People's Global Action conferences (Routledge 2005: 623) have been queeruptors.

7.3 Queer mutinies in spectacular gay space

One of the recurring activities of the London-based activists has been the subversion of mainstream Gay Pride events and the provision of free alternatives to these increasingly expensive, consumption-led and a-political spectacles.

After having graced London Pride parades for a few years with their own unique sense of style and politics, including processing in the 1997 parade accompanied by a giant puppet representing the spirit of queerness rising like a phoenix from the ashes of a rainbow flag, the group went for a larger scale intervention at London's gay pride event in 2001. Poking fun at the rebranding of

the festivities as 'Mardi Gras', they called their DIY affair 'LaDiDah.' A flier handed out at the parade that year explained the activists' motivation:

Our aim... to 'reclaim our pride' for these and many more reasons, we want Mardi Gras to be free and different from its current banality. Basically, Pride has been hijacked. What began as a free, community event has now become a commercial operation ('Mardi Gras') with a turnover of roughly £1,500,000. An expensive ticket system has been introduced, the political element has been dumbed down and the organisers have alienated the very people Pride was meant to exist for. Mardi Gras is now a sad reflection of the triumph of capitalism, just look at the overt sponsorship and the commodification of sexuality as an image. (Queeruption London 2003: 12).

While the ticketed festival took place behind tall fences in a north London park, the activists organised their own afternoon of free fun and frolics elsewhere outside the palisade. That year's parade also witnessed the first outing of the 'Pink Pauper', a spoof of the mainstream gay weekly, the Pink Paper, which subverted the obsessions of the assimilationist gay press, provided a critique of the limitations of the commercial gay scene, as well as offering pointers towards alternative ways of organising and having fun. It's not my intention here to offer a thorough description or analysis of the original LaDiDah event. Instead, this section will consider the planning and execution of the follow-up events that took place in subsequent years. This brief description of the original event is offered simply as context.

When I first got to know the group in May 2003, they were beginning to plan their intervention for that summer's Mardi Gras event. They chose a pirate theme for that summer's intervention, under the slogan of 'Queer Mutiny'. The early plans were for a pirate contingent on the parade accompanied by 'radical cheerleaders', dancers and a troupe 'bicycle ballerinas' weaving amongst the crowd. In the park, they envisaged a party complete with a small sound system, performances, a mobile

kissing booth, free vegan food and an assortment of games, including mud wrestling and 'British Bulldyke.'

As a prelude to the main Queer Mutiny event, and as a means of publicising it beyond activist networks, the queer anarchists paid a visit to the Soho Pink Weekend festival in early July to gently poke fun at the proceedings. Finding a nice spot on Old Compton Street, the symbolic centre of London's 'gay village', they constructed a small, pokey enclosure about six feet high out of lengths of wood and a long piece of purple cloth that they found on the street. The enclosure had a small opening and the floor inside was thick with litter. A small, tinny radio was playing inside. The outside of the enclosure was adorned with signs advertising the obligatory £25 entrance fee. They then started hawking the pleasures of this 'VIP enclosure' and the great opportunity it presented to gain a sneak preview of Mardi Gras – "We've got the fences, we've got the litter, we've even got the surly security!" Lots of people got the joke, but some missed the point entirely – it appeared that one or two people even thought they were selling official tickets for the main Mardi Gras event.

This parody of the fences enclosing the official Mardi Gras festivities drew on Situationist spatial interventions with its playful subversion of the enclosed, spectacular spaces of contemporary capitalism (Pinder 2004). Paradoxically, by critiquing the exclusionary, containing and limiting space of the Mardi Gras festival on the streets of Soho, the queer mutineers were also (re)claiming a space in which to perform an alternative to the commodified gay scene. This alternative was, in itself, exemplified by the playfulness and relative spontaneity of the action (no-one

knew for sure that they would be constructing this alternative VIP enclosure until that afternoon) as well as the recycling of urban detritus in the construction of the tent. The intervention in Soho Pride produced a space that was directly lived, imagined and reinvented through a process of active engagement in the (re)creation of urban space (Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Kohler and Wissen 2003). More practically, it served to invigorate the core group and involve more peripheral activists ahead of the main event.

On the morning of the main London Mardi Gras festival in 2003, about sixty radical queers gathered in Parliament Square and prepared to claim a strategic spot on the Pride Parade. Hampered by the group's chronic timekeeping, they failed in their objective of squeezing into the march in front of the uniformed members of the Lesbian and Gay Police Association (the group, dressed as a camp parody of an anarchist 'black bloc', succeeded in this objective on the 2004 Pride Parade, much to the irritation of the parade stewards). But, eventually, they took their place and marched along accompanied by a samba band. Dressed in homemade pirate drag, they carried a banner proclaiming "I'd rather be a pirate than join the navy." When the group reached Hyde Park, some of their number had already set up camp outside the fenced enclosure of the main Mardi Gras Festival, with its high entrance charge and sponsorship from transnational corporations.

In contrast, in our little corner of the park, hand-made banners and bunting hung from the trees. The samba band continued to play and a 12-volt mobile sound system blasted out dance tunes (and some Dolly Parton), whenever the drummers took a well-earned break. The crowd grew to over 300 people, despite the

intermittent torrential rain. Huge vats of vegan food arrived (a little late) on the back of bike trailers and were shared with the crowd for a small donation. Most of the crowd danced, others shared food with friends and a small group formed an impromptu knitting circle (an activity that, for a while, signified a slightly camp, DIY activity for some in the network).

These constructive direct actions both playfully satirised the commodification of gay pride events and demonstrated a practical example of DIY alternatives that engaged more than just the core activist group into active creation of these event-spaces. They demonstrated what a small group of people can achieve for next to no expense. In the process, many people learnt new skills and discovered new talents. Although it was hard work to create the events, they offered a space in which activists could rest, relax and play together – which is important for the sustainability of our resistance.

7.4 Queer gatherings and convergences

The idea for what became the first international Queeruption gathering grew out of the efforts of a loose network of queer anarchists who had been involved with the work of a squatted social centre in an ethnically diverse and rapidly gentrifying area of South London in the mid-1990s. The original Queeruption took place at that social centre in late September 1998. The second gathering took place in New York City in October 1999. Since 2001, gatherings have taken place more or less annually (in San Francisco, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney *and* Barcelona in 2005, and Tel Aviv in August 2006). Like ‘reclaim the streets’ and ‘food not

bombs', Queeruption events have become what Day (2004) has called 'non-branded tactics' – a model of activist work that can be adopted and adapted by anyone who chooses to work with it. Queeruption is a specifically queer tactic of constructive direct action – a space where radical queer activists from different countries can come together to share information, skills and community for a short period.

The fourth Queeruption gathering took place in a squatted tenement block in a predominantly working class area of east London for five days in March 2002 [Fig. 7]. The publicity for the event promised that it would be an opportunity for "forging anti-commercial queer community", "building alternatives and living our dreams" (Queeruption London, 2003: 7). In practice, as one participant reflected later, the highlights of the event were "nudity, naughtiness, nourishment [and] non-conformity" (Queeruption London, 2003: 100).

Nearly 500 people participated in this free gathering, with 150 of them staying for the duration in one of the sixty-four apartments situated around the central courtyard in the former hostel for the homeless. On entering the building, participants were greeted by one of the volunteer hosts, who informed them of how the gathering was expected to function, and showed them a map of the building, revealing which of the apartments were still vacant as accommodation. Once newcomers settled into their flats and became acquainted with the layout of the building, the tendency was for them to find somewhere to sit and chat with new and old friends. For much of the event, the small reception area, as much as the café, became a relaxed space in which people could gather to share news and stories.

Elsewhere in the building, space was found for a vegan café, the waste from which was composted. In other spaces, a wide range of discussions and skill-sharing workshops took place, covering everything from how to make your own sex toys to queer self-defence and healing with chocolate. Creativity was unleashed with life modelling, body painting and creative (erotic) writing workshops. There were also political discussions, many of them focusing around health-related issues, such as fertility rights and AIDS dissident theories (i.e. the suggestion that the link between HIV and AIDS has yet to be adequately proven and a plethora of other critiques of established medical orthodoxy). As Marinella, a Shiatzu practitioner and the main organiser of the health space, reflected afterwards:

The health space at Queeruption was my first attempt at combining issues of health, complimentary therapies, autonomy and radical politics. The radical queer space was perfect for this, because many people were already open to connections between health and politics, and the necessity to take our health – and maybe, the collective health of radical movements – into our own hands” (Queeruption London 2003: 18).

She continues,

The most important thing for me is that people used the [health] space in a very autonomous way. I was there some of the time – sometimes I just wanted to slob out in the caff, or cook, or go to a workshop even – and I did not feel territorial about the space at [all] (read: I needed lots of breaks), so it was great to walk back in and find folks chilling out, swapping treatments, doing their thing. That’s when I realised the space was really working after all. ... [F]rom the minute people started coming in, the health space, like all of Queeruption, became everybody’s work (and play), that’s why it turned out to be as good as it did. (Queeruption London 2003: 18).

For the most part, this claim to a lack of territoriality is genuine – my experience of these queer spaces is that a small group of people will take responsibility for ensuring that something they are interested in (or that they

recognise is essential) takes place. After that, the success or failure of the space largely relies on who turns up and the part they play in making the space 'work'.

Within the venue, there was also a room set aside as a dedicated dress-up space – drag, in all its many gender-fucking forms, is a central aspect of the spaces created by the queeruption network. But, as Hennen (2004) has argued, in the context of Radical Faerie gay men's spiritual gatherings in the United States (Thompson 1987), this is thrift shop drag. It also tends not to be a form of drag that is motivated by the desire to 'pass' as the opposite sex. For the biological men [as distinct from female-to-male transsexuals], at least, dragging up tends to involve a playful combination of traditional masculine and feminine signifiers, or the artful transcendence of the established gender categories towards the performance of some kind of trans-human entity [Fig. 2]. It is also a space where high femme performances by queer women are appreciated. Although these often take the form more of 'faux queen' performances that again blur gender roles, rather than more archetypal 'lipstick lesbian' performances.

The evenings at the gathering were filled with home-made entertainment – one night a drag king band played ska, another was filled with poetry and performance art, there were dance parties, and, perhaps inevitably, the gathering culminated in a sex party. The following review of the cabaret that opened the sex party gives a flavour not just of that evening, but of the entertainment throughout the gathering (and illustrates my earlier point about the deployment of drag within this milieu).

Picture this: a moustached girl in drag holds the microphone in front of a boy who is performing homoerotic poems in the nude; a female night nurse struggles with the temptations incited by a semi-unconscious bisexual female patient played by a boy in a skimpy miniskirt; an alluring singing lady turns into a butch boy, then becomes a woman again and performs a naked ritual of martial arts with a big wooden stick; two camp boys and a girl with a strap-on dildo enact on a chaise longue the logistics and troubles of executing double anal penetration during a gay male threesome; a girl wearing only a translucent sack of onions plays a clarinet (Queeruption London 2003: 52).

For me, this description also emphasises the point that this is very much a *queer* and not a (lesbian and) gay space – the boundaries between sexualities and gender identities are blurred, porous and, ultimately, not particularly important.

For many of the younger men attending the gathering and an even higher proportion of the women, participating in the sex party was a novel and slightly unnerving experience. But, like all Queeruption events, this was a participatory experience, not something put on by ‘experts’ for the passive consumption of others. The majority of those who were intending to attend the party were involved in discussions towards consensus on the form it should take and developing a set of safety guidelines and etiquette for the party (Queeruption London, 2003: 54 – 56). Many also participated in the physical transformation of the space. Together, those who were interested in making the sex party happen created separate men and women only rooms. There was a dark room and another, better lit, orgy room, although neither of these was particularly popular (largely because both rooms were unheated and unwelcoming in the cold March weather). A dungeon was (ironically) constructed at the top of the building for BDSM [bondage domination and sadomasochism] play, although this too was quite lightly used. Possibly the most popular play space that night was the so-called ‘vanilla’ room where, as the evening

progressed, the sex play evolved from fully clothed body massages to a polymorphously perverse, polysexual orgy. Although I am told, by those who were there, that the women-only room was also 'very hot.'

Some commentators have suggested that having a 'women-only' space was not particularly 'queer.' However, signs were prominently displayed around the venue reminding participants that gender identity is self-determined and that they should not assume that they would find the genitals on their playmates that they expected from external appearances, which to my mind *does* suggest a pragmatic queer understanding of the fluidity of gender performances.

The collective involvement of the many participants in shaping the party helped allay the fears of those attendees who had not previously been to a sex party. It also helped that ground rules for the party, that stressed the need to be 'considerate, respectful and kind' as well as addressing concerns about sexual negotiation, personal boundaries and sexual health were debated thoroughly over the preceding days and agreed by consensus. The guidelines also reminded party-goers that "like any other DIY event, it's what people who show up make of it" and encouraged them to 'be daring and delicious', 'take risks, enjoy them [and] have fun' (Queeruption London 2003: 46). These guidelines forced some of those (mostly older) activists with considerable experience on the fetish and kink scenes to re-evaluate how they operated in such a space. But still, for the majority of those present, the process of collectively defining an ethics of care was an important element of the gathering's experiment in queer social autonomy. As a result, the sex

party was a deeply cathartic and transformative event for many participants; and, I think, especially many women activists, as the following reflections suggest.

So anyway: actually I don't know shit about public sex etiquette and I'm going to a sex party. My only hope is that some sexy woman knows what to do and will obligingly seduce me...

But No! It's not going to happen, cos we're all girls! The handful of us that know what we're doing are keeping schtum [Cockney/Yiddish slang for 'silent'], and the rest of us are pretending we do. We are the partially sighted leading the blind. Before the party I felt uncomfortable about it, and almost considered not going because of this feeling of naïveté and inexperience. ... I spoke to other women about it, who voiced the same embarrassed cluelessness and doubts about going or not, which made me feel a lot better. The idea of going to this party with other hapless novices inexplicably made it more sexy, rather than less – it sounded so hot to work it all out with each other. (Queeruption London, 2003: 34–39).

This testimony highlights how, even for sexual dissidents, gender significantly differentiates the limits and possibilities for sexual freedom. If women's sexuality is still more heavily policed and curtailed than men's, then potentially these queer autonomous spaces have even more to offer to queer women. For me, Tomcat's excitement at the prospect of 'working it all out with each other' exemplifies the process of 'do it yourself' organising. She goes on, in the article, to discuss how her experiences at the Queeruption sex party transformed her sense of self, her (sexual) confidence and her sense of what was permissible behaviour for a young woman.

Despite these positive reflections on the sex party at Queeruption IV, the highly sexualised atmosphere of Queeruption gatherings has alienated some people and caused a degree of controversy within these activist networks. In 2004 a group of activists who were involved in organising the Berlin Queeruption gathering in 2003 circulated a paper raising concerns that these networks and their gatherings

might be 'overly sexualised' and that, amongst the general horniness, respect for personal limits and personal space had sometimes been compromised. It is certainly true that there is a tendency within these networks to associate what it means to be a 'radical queer' with a very specific brand of sex radicalism that includes a queering of gender roles and identities, a willingness to engage in public sex (often including BDSM) and an openness to polyamorous relationships (Easton and Liszt 1997). This repertoire of sex radicalism can be very off-putting (or even offensive) to those from other ethnic and religious cultures, as well as those with different sexual ethics or for whom sexual play itself is not a central aspect of their queer activism. With a sense of humour that is typical of the activists participating in this network, at London Queeruption, a group of young people who were uncomfortable about participating in the sex(y) party formed an affinity group called the Frigid Youth Alliance. Their intervention has provoked some on-going discussion concerning this axis of inclusion/exclusion, but the issues are far from being resolved. Nevertheless, it served as a reminder that celibacy and asexuality can serve to 'queer' queer itself.

Despite these tensions, for five days, the gathering pulsed with what one participant described as 'a functional anarchic system' (Lechat, 2002). Another conceded that although it had been fun 'queertopia was exhausting' (Lechat, 2002). These comments serve as a useful reminder that the gathering was a (playfully) serious experiment in putting autonomous ideals into practice in a queer context. There was plenty of time for political discussion in workshops and less structured discussions, but much of the politics was also expressed, practiced and learnt through the process of collectively taking over the space and making the gathering

function. If much of that felt, at the time, like play rather than hard work, then so much the better – that was the intention, as it challenged the common perception of activism as an either/or choice between slow drudgery and spectacular confrontations with the police (Brown *forthcoming*).

7.5 The Butt Plug Bar and other queer cafés

One of the staple activities of the queeruption network is organising events that help foster a sense of queer community outside the limitations of the commercial gay scene. A central aspect of this work occurs through the hosting of cafés, cabaret nights and parties – all of them organised on a shoestring and according to do-it-yourself principles. For the most part, these events have been held in squatted venues, but occasionally they take place in collectively owned and cooperatively run spaces.

Squatting is a form of direct action through which people gain an opportunity to re-assert a degree of self-determination within the city (Chatterton 2002a). The act of searching for an abandoned building to take over, transform and put back into use for a short while as a queer autonomous space poses questions about private property and the privatisation (in terms of both ownership and use) of public urban space (Ferrell 2001; Wright 2000). As urban development blurs into arid homogeneity, squatting revels in diversity, chance and unpredictability. It puts people before profits and escapes bureaucratic and corporate control of space. By its very nature, squatting is small-scale and local. As Chatterton and Hollands (2003:

224) have highlighted, squatting “illuminates a collective and creative use of urban space which sketches out possibilities for radical social change.”

The longest running of these café nights is the Women’s Anarchist Nuisance Café (WANC), although for obvious reasons, there is not much I can say about this women-only (but trans-inclusive) space. Over the years that I have been observing and participating in the queeruption network, the café has taken place more or less monthly, migrating around various venues in east London. Instead, in the paragraphs that follow, my discussion will focus on the creation and operation of an intentionally short-lived series of queer cafes, the Butt Plug Bars, which took place once a month in a squatted venue in Dalston between November 2003 and January 2004.

With the international Queeruption gatherings mostly taking place in the late Spring, and a concentration of work intervening around mainstream gay pride events later in the summer, the winter months can often be a quiet time for the queer mutineers. The Butt Plug Bar was largely the idea of a household of French activists who were living in London at the time and a handful of their friends. The project was always conceived as a short-term one with the specific intention of providing a regular focus for socialising that winter, as well as the opportunity to raise funds for three radical queer initiatives outside Western Europe. After the initial discussions between the small group who had initiated the project, a series of open planning meetings were held for anyone who was interested in helping to realise the events.

The venue consisted of two main ground floor rooms: the former takeaway was used as a bar and dining area, with a reasonable amount of seating (much of it

left over from the takeaway itself), a doorway had been knocked through into the building next door, where a larger room was situated in which a small stage had been built; beyond that was another smaller space that functioned as the entrance lobby to the venue. Above these 'public' areas, on the two upper floors of the building(s) were bedrooms of a number of people who lived in the squat. With the exception of the kitchen, most of the venue was quite poorly lit, with just a couple of overly bright halogen lamps lighting the main party room and stage. Most of the walls had been painted black and this exaggerated the gloom. To brighten up the space, the party organisers decorated the walls with banners and artwork, strung fairy lights across the walls and ceiling, placed coloured gels over the halogen lamps to soften the lighting and hung a wardrobe full of reclaimed drag (lacy housecoats, wedding dresses and ball-gowns) from the rafters. The space was transformed and looked suitably queer.

Entrance to the party was by donation, although it was agreed that, despite the event being a fundraiser, the organisers agreed that nobody should be turned away for lack of funds. People came in various waves: some came just for the food, in the early evening; others for a few drinks and an early departure so that they could catch the last train home; still more came along with the intention of partying all night. At least two groups of people arrived early to hold impromptu meetings before the party really got going – some of the Homocrime collective sat making arrangements for their next DIY-inspired queer punk club night (Spencer 2005), and a cluster of women activists made clandestine plans for a direct action. With these different waves of partygoers in attendance, it was difficult to judge how many

people came to the bar. There were, at least, sixty people present at the peak of the party, and more than a hundred people passed through the door over the course of the night.

In many ways, the second Butt Plug Bar followed a similar pattern. That evening the party filled up more slowly than it had on the previous occasion and really only got going after ten o'clock. It did, however, seem a lot more organised than the first event, with a greater number of people volunteering to help out and the rota filled (without too much arm-twisting) quite early in the evening. The crowd also seemed to encompass an even a broader mix of people reaching well beyond the queer anarchist milieu (although, it is probably fair to say that this diverse crowd still illustrates the broader friendship networks touched by the core group of activists). In particular, that second bar attracted a contingent of men from the more trendy, counter-cultural fringes of the commercial gay scene who had come along to support one of the four bands playing that evening. In amongst the crowd, two of the young French activists paraded in their uniquely not-quite-human drag outfits and a woman tottered about on stilts, dressed in a pink fluorescent daemon outfit.

Cheap and wholesome vegan food was served at all three of the Butt Plug Bar events, but it was the feast prepared for the third and final night that was most impressive. On the morning of that party, two of the organising team cycled down to New Covent Garden wholesale market in time for the close of business and raided the rubbish bins, as the market closed to reclaim the produce that was being thrown out. 'Skipping' for food is always an unpredictable affair (Ferrell 2001), but on this occasion they struck lucky and returned with their panniers bursting with an

impressive horde of fruit and vegetables that were perfectly ripe and ready for eating. From the bins they had rescued avocados, asparagus, pineapples, melons, peppers, mushrooms and much, much more that was being thrown out by the wholesalers because it would not have had a long enough shelf life by the time it reached local retailers. From these ingredients (and a few other supplementary supplies) a beautiful meal was conjured up – a spicy chickpea and potato casserole, couscous, guacamole, and a large salad, accompanied by a fine dressing.

Despite the best efforts of the kitchen crew, in contrast to the previous two events, those of us who turned up to prepare the space for the final Butt Plug Bar seemed a little uninspired and the resulting decoration of the venue appeared somewhat random and lacklustre. The only aspect of the transformation of the space that appeared to work better on this occasion (and it was hard won!) was the creation of the dress-up corner at the far end of the room where the bar was [Fig. 9]. The idea was to create a large and distinct space, but one that was not physically separated from the rest of the room, in order to encourage the partygoers to enter and use the dress-up space and its contents. In the end, we settled on using the remaining parachute material from the previous party to create large, sumptuously draped ‘stage curtains’ that framed and drew attention to the space. This manipulation of the space worked, and people were drawn to the dress-up area. That night the dress-up corner was well used throughout the evening – although more by women than men, from what I could ascertain. It seems that, at times, even in queer anarchist circles, there are limits to how much men are prepared to subvert (their)

masculinity in public – while some women are more than happy to experiment with their's (Halberstam 1998).

Once more, the party was slow to get started, but eventually it drew a larger crowd than either of the previous Butt Plug Bars. Significantly, there seemed to be a larger than normal turnout of local Hackney lesbians (although I understand that many of them had some connection to the WANC parties), as well as a group of older gay bears, several young gay men in fashionable clubwear, and a large number of the venue's regular punk clientele. Finally, towards the end of the evening, the party attracted several large, apparently heterosexual and very drunken groups of locals who appeared simply to be looking for somewhere to continue drinking after all the legitimate local bars had closed. As it turned out, and as I shall discuss shortly, this was an unsettling mix for many who were present.

While the entertainment at the first two Butt Plug Bars primarily consisted of live music and DJ sets, this final evening had a greater emphasis on cabaret performances. These included an acoustic set of witty and uplifting polyamorous, queer love songs and a 'trans(atlantic) radical feminist reverse strip'. The reverse strip (apparently, 'the first performed in Dalston for nearly six months...') was actually a humorous oral history of the life and activism of a fifty-year old American woman told through the political t-shirts she had bought over the last three decades. Coming from a woman with a reputation for being one of the least 'sex positive' members of the collective, and still holding onto unreconstructed 1970s-style radical feminist sexual ethics, this parody of a conventional striptease was poignant and amusing.

A week after the final party, a post-mortem was held for the Butt Plug Bars at the queer squat, where several of the core organisers were living at the time. Together, the three events raised just over £800, which was split and donated to a Turkish gay anarchist group, the grassroots organisers of Belgrade Pride, and the Israeli radical queer group, the Black Laundry.

At the post-mortem, several organisers expressed disquiet at the way in which the final party turned out. For them it felt too trendy, not DIY enough and generally less safe as a result. The consensus was that that evening had attracted far too many 'fashionistas' slumming it and looking for the 'next big thing', as well as too many straight folk from the Hackney punk scene. Although many of the 'straight' punks (especially the women) entered into the spirit of the parties, a minority of men performed an exaggerated 'macho' masculinity to create a barrier between themselves and the queer male partygoers, whilst also seemingly being titillated by the presence of so many queer women. Although this voyeurism in itself made many people feel uncomfortable, a handful of men overstepped even that boundary and physically assaulted some of the queer women. Clearly, these incidents reveal the limits of the network's stated inclusiveness for 'all sexualities' – overly visible expressions of heterosexuality (or, more accurately, overt expressions of hetero-masculinity) can undermine the 'safety' and comfort of these utopian queer spaces.

These incidents provoked lengthy discussions about sexual harassment in queer space, not just amongst the organisers of the Butt Plug Bars, but also in the broader London queerruption network. However, these discussions did not cripple

the group or prevent them from moving forward. Instead, they actively engaged in a process of exploring the contradictions inherent in these queer autonomous spaces and attempted to reflexively work together to strive to create spaces that could remain open, safe and supportive for the broadest possible range of users. It would be wrong to suggest that real solutions were found as a result of these discussions, but the intent and process of collective problem-solving was important nonetheless.

As planned, the Butt Plug Bar concept was killed off after these three events, although in the spring of 2004, after the Chinaman had been evicted by Hackney Council, it was partially resurrected under the stewardship of the French activists at a new venue, as Café-Bar PlugTonCul. That summer there was a one-off café night held in a cooperative restaurant to raise more funds for Belgrade Pride, and in the autumn a fortnightly queer tea dance began at a squatted social centre in Whitechapel.

7.6 Autonomous queer space: limits and possibilities

Tormey (2004: 116) has highlighted that the autonomist emphasis on the self-organisation of ordinary people leads many activists 'to accept, indeed, celebrate the idea of multiple "post-capitalisms",' each with their own utopian vision of how the world could be organised. This approach has created a space for the articulation of queer visions of how the world could be – visions that celebrate difference rather than neat identities, and a certain colourful, glittering exuberance. It has created space in which sexual and gender difference cease to be subordinated to other interests and social relations.

Like the more opportunistic moments of autonomy identified in Chapter Six, the creation of these autonomous queer spaces resonates with Thrift's call for a politics of 'emotional liberty' (2004: 69) that harnesses expanded forms of play and pleasure in order to develop political practices that do more than simply 'averting pain' (2004: 70). The approach to community building and conflict resolution within the queeruption network also has parallels with the emphasis McCormack (2003: 495) places on ethical attachments that 'emerge through the cultivation of the affective dimensions of sensibility.' I am increasingly of the opinion that one of the politically most important aspects of these events is the way that they increase the intensity of affective attachment, creativity and connectivity (Amin and Thrift 2005: 237). As one participant reflected after Queeruption IV,

having entered the premises through the green CEITEX™ door once, gravity was different. With every moment it got harder to believe that there was an outside world. Periods of recovery and regaining a sense for the outside world's reality took its time. However, things will never be the same again. (Queeruption London 2003: 109).

This should serve as a reminder that queer autonomous spaces are not limited simply to being play spaces that offer a certain degree of safety for sexual dissidents and gender outlaws. Freed from the sexual and gender constraints of the quotidian world, participants in these queer autonomous spaces often find themselves questioning the social relations that normally restrict the free expression of their sexuality. Of course, participants in these spaces are not totally 'free'. Although they may have sought out a temporary respite from the ravages of neoliberalism, it still limits the possibilities available to them. And, even in these autonomous spaces, a loose code of practice still applies – albeit one that stresses respect and

concern for others (Lees 2003). This can be seen specifically in the ethos of direct participation and skill sharing that is at the core of the processes that build the spaces discussed in the preceding pages.

In this chapter, I have considered a set of alternative, autonomous queer spaces that stand outside the mainstream commercial gay scene. These spaces and the networks that produce them are queer precisely because they do not see sexual identities as fixed and immutable. They celebrate gender and sexual fluidity and playfully subvert normative binaries. Participants in these spaces actively create them in order (temporarily) to revel in their otherness, difference and distance from mainstream society. By unsettling fixed identities in this way, the activists claim an autonomous space in which to *be* on their own terms.

While the invitation to liberate oneself through collective experimentation has inspired the activists involved in hosting and attending the international Queeruptation gatherings, there is a danger that with each gathering that takes place, the events become more formulaic and repetitive, failing to fully engage with the distinctiveness of the locations in which they occur. It is also certainly true that, for the most part, those people who have been inspired to experiment with queer autonomy are activists who are already in the orbit of the autonomist strands of the global justice movement of movements. As a result, the attendees at these events are still predominantly white, well-educated, relatively privileged and under thirty. Although there are many activists in their 30s, 40s and beyond within the network, several of them find themselves less than inspired to spend a week sleeping on the floor of cold and unsanitary squats. If the movement is to become sustainable across

the generations, and to inspire and involve broader layers of queer people who are open exploring alternative ways of being, then a broader range of experiments will need to be enacted.

In this vein, criticisms are beginning to arise from within these radical queer networks that the international gatherings are becoming little more than an annual circuit party for nomadic queer punks, with political content being increasingly marginalised within the events. My own reaction to this critique is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, it does seem that overt political discussions are becoming less central to the gatherings – and yet discussions about ‘no borders’ actions for the free-flow of migrants across national borders occurred at both the Sydney and Barcelona gatherings in 2005 and plans for the ‘queer barrio’ (encampment) at the rural convergence centre against the Gleneagles meeting of the G8 (in July 2005) were concretised as a result of discussions in Barcelona. Furthermore, I still maintain that the very process of non-hierarchical organising that takes place before and during the gatherings is inherently political – especially as it fosters networking between activists from different national cultures, encourages horizontal skill sharing (albeit, often in little more than mass vegan catering and knitting) and blurs the boundaries between work and play. As a result, I question whether those who are raising the claim of a lack of politics at the gatherings are stuck in an understanding of politics that sees it as a discursive activity that is in some ways quite distinct from other aspects of (social) life – politics as an event or a demand rather than a process.

Of course, the logic and ethics of participative self-organisation throws the onus for creating 'more political' gatherings back into the hands of those who raised the criticisms in the first place – these, so the argument goes, are participative, do-it-yourself events, so, if you think there is something missing or unaddressed, it is your duty to make it happen, or to work with others who have an affinity with your critique to create alternative events that address these issues. Although that might sound harsh to some, it is an integral aspect of the politics of affinity and autonomy from which these gatherings originate and the “new geographies of affect, obligation and commitment to distant others” (Amin and Thrift 2005: 234) that have been developing over the last dozen years or so.

These radical queer spaces are important because they provide a constructive and practical attempt to offer a non-hierarchical, participatory alternative to a gay scene that has become saturated by the commodity. They offer more than empty transgression. They are experimental spaces in which new forms of ethical relationships and encounters based on co-operation, respect and dignity can be developed. The queerness of these spaces is constituted as much through the process of building relationships on this basis, as it is from any attachment to specific sexual or gender identities.

And yet, it should be remembered that these spaces do not exist outside of capitalist social relations (any more than the networks of activists that comprise them can completely turn their backs on the commercial gay scene and infrastructure of mainstream service organisations serving gay communities). As a result, there is a danger that, like earlier experiments in autonomy they will be recuperated and

become just one more flexible lifestyle alternative that reinforces rather than challenges hegemonic ideas (Brown 2006).

Despite this danger, I think there is room for hope as these spaces stem from a desire to experiment with new forms of freedom (Lees 2004: 15). The creation of these spaces is infused with a spirit of autonomy, a practical and political attempt to create alternative forms of sociality and mutual support in the here and now. These events and spaces unleash a plethora of engaged, creative and communal activities that are seldom seen in contemporary society, and as such, when tied to an explicitly anti-capitalist politics, and celebrations of queer exuberance, they can be deeply empowering. Ultimately, I believe it is these processes, as much as (if not more than) the end product that is important.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REFLECTIONS ON THE GAY EAST END AND QUEER URBAN FUTURES



Figure 8: Queer banner

CHAPTER EIGHT:

REFLECTIONS ON THE GAY EAST END AND QUEER URBAN FUTURES

In the preceding chapters, I have recorded details of my observations and interactions with the gay East End of London. At this point, as I reach the end of this dissertation, I should once again acknowledge the incompleteness of this work. It reflects a very partial and partisan engagement with gay life in the area – it does not (and never could) offer a comprehensive analysis of the lives of gay men from every class and ethnic fraction resident in the area. The work is over-reliant on the experiences of liberal, educated, professional gay men in their thirties. The voices of more ‘corporate’ middle class gay men, working class men and non-white men are under-represented in the text. Nor does it offer a complete survey of every gay and queer site in this corner of London. As the work progressed, I became particularly interested in those spaces that exist on the fringes of, or outside of, the commercial gay scene. Consequently, my focus throughout this dissertation has been more on these spaces than the many mainstream gay bars in the area. The work is partisan, in that it is shaped by the influence of post-anarchist ideas on my thinking – ideas that have come to make more sense to me through the process of engaging with this research. Despite these caveats, this work outlines some important features of the distinctive geography of gay and queer life in East London.

I begin this concluding chapter by returning to the theme of autobiography and my place in this research, by reflecting on what I have learned about myself through the process of this work and how it has changed my ideas and beliefs. From there, this chapter draws together some of the main strands of my study and suggests ways forward for geographies of sexualities, as well as potential queer urban practices for the near future based upon some of my main findings. My aim is to stimulate debate and offer some possibilities, rather than a complete, fully worked out blueprint for the future.

8.1 A return to autobiography

In sitting down to write this concluding chapter, I have spent some time reflecting on events in my own life over the five years I have been conducting this research. Some events from 'outside' this research – mourning the death of a former lover, meeting a new partner, and the pressures of working in a demanding full-time job at the same time as undertaking this PhD – certainly impacted on the pace of the work, and possibly shifted the focus of my interest from time to time. But what I am really interested in exploring in this section are the ways in which incidents occurring through the research process had broader implications for my life and the ways in which I think about myself.

In re-reading my field notes during the final phase of editing this work, I was surprised to remember how many times I had recorded incidents in which men had either misread my sexuality or assessed my masculinity in ways that did not coincide with my own sense of self. On a couple of occasions, men made comments that

suggested they had initially assumed I was heterosexual. Similarly, a number of men related to me as if I was more hyper-masculine than I find feasible; one or two, by contrast have perceived me as more fey than I tend to think of myself. Very often these incidents threw me at the time and I never thought to ask the men concerned more about the basis upon which they made these assessments. At times, I think the assumption of my heterosexuality might actually have been a measure of how men perceived me to be distant from and ignorant of gay sub-cultural codes that they took for granted. More often, and particularly in sexualised public sex environments, I suspect an element of projection or fantasy was involved (both around my sexuality and relative masculinity), reading off my large stature and (not-particularly-gay) attire. These incidents reinforce for me an understanding of sexuality and gender as being relational and site specific. They have also made me more aware of the extent to which I present carefully constructed gender performances in different situations, often without stopping to think about them.

The final phase of editing has also made me realise how difficult I found Chapter Five to write, in comparison to most of the rest of this dissertation. Writing the second half of that chapter about cosmopolitan, bohemian spaces in Spitalfields was not the problem. In contrast, the opening sections of the chapter about transnational migration and the experiences of gay men from East London's South Asian diasporic communities were particularly hard-won. I have agonised over and over again about the veracity of the arguments and analysis that I present there. I could not write about gay life in East London without acknowledging the area's ethnic diversity. However, I found very few gay men of colour who were prepared

to commit their thoughts to tape in a 'formal' interview setting. Most of the data I have utilised for this section relies on my notes from less formal conversations or my observations in fieldwork settings. This inevitably means that the voices of these men are not as well represented in the text as their white peers. I am not entirely satisfied with this state of affairs. And yet, all of my efforts to persuade more men of colour to allow me to record interviews with them met a dead end. This has forced me to question whether there was something off-putting about the way in which I approached these men that meant they were less willing to trust me. I suspect it is a question of social distance. Certainly most of the men who readily offered themselves to be interviewed and whose stories and interpretations I found most useful for this study were white men from broadly similar class, educational and professional backgrounds to my own. This poses uncomfortable questions for me about the limits of my research practice, my empathy and my pretensions for producing socially engaged research that can inform progressive activism.

The challenge for me in the months after I submit this dissertation will be to find appropriate means of disseminating some of my thoughts and findings to 'non-academic' audiences. In particular, I feel obliged to find ways of taking my ideas back to the London Queer Mutiny group, offering constructive criticism and analysis, to see how they might get taken up there – either within the group's activism or through more 'activist' forms of sharing knowledge and information, such as a self-produced 'zine. Drawing on the analysis presented in the previous chapter, and elaborated later in this conclusion, I hope to re-open a dialogue about the importance of proliferating and enabling experiments in queer autonomy outside

of self-defined anarchist and activist networks. If such an endeavour comes to fruition, I hope that it will result in a more collective, participatory project involving the thoughts of more people than just myself. If I hesitate slightly from instigating this project, it will be because I am still smarting from finding myself caught up in a protracted email 'flame war' where I (alongside several others) was accused of being an 'academic parasite' by fellow activists. Both sides in that argument made the mistake, which I am in danger of perpetuating here, of constructing a binary between 'academics' and 'activists', suggesting that 'academics' engage purely in abstract theoretical thought and analysis, and 'activists' simply do (Fuller 1999; Chatterton 2006). This denies the many forms of activism in which myself and many other academics have engaged over the years, including 'activist' interventions within the academy (Castree 1999). It also overlooks the important theoretical developments and analysis produced, in the course of their activism, by people with no formal links to the academy. There is always a danger that activist-academics will utilise the experiences and learning they have shared with others in activist settings to advance their academic careers without giving much back. Nevertheless, there are many ways in which a state of 'betweenness' that straddles both academia and activism can serve the interests of the communities with which activist-academics engage (Routledge 1996). To do this often requires an active and on-going critical engagement with our multiple positionalities and a (re)negotiation of the artificial boundaries between them (Fuller 1999: 222-3). Even so, it is entirely understandable why those who most heavily invest their time and energy in activist endeavours might not understand why one of their collaborators would choose (or

need) to prioritise their academic work over activist engagements for a period. As this thesis comes to an end, I am looking forward to reconnecting with the queer mutiny network and finding ways to share my ideas with them, just as I hope I will pick up new skills and ideas from the others around me. Where appropriate, this might involve finding ways of dissolving the boundaries between academia and activism, at least for a short while, as I did when I co-wrote and co-presented a paper on queer autonomy at the recent RGS conference with another queer mutineer (Brown and Levin 2006).

Lest I sound too bruised by these accusations of academic parasitism, I want to re-emphasise that finding a personal and political connection with the queer mutineers has been one of the most personally important events from this research process. It has connected me with a whole new circuit of friends. It is probably not too hyperbolic to suggest that meeting the mutineers changed how I view the world in several subtle ways. It offered me a satisfactory (if incomplete) means of reconciling my sexuality with my politics. Here was a group of anti-capitalist queers who understood the many possible connections between the two elements of that label. Here was a group for whom the personal *was* political, without it being an excuse for endless navel-gazing, self-analysis and inaction. Here was a group of queers who understood that you could be politically radical and queer without completely denigrating the mainstream gay scene. A group of people who were experimenting with alternative means of being queer – prefiguring the type of social relations they wanted to see.

There is a danger that in the previous paragraph I have made my initial encounter with the queer mutineers sound like a moment of epiphany, in which everything suddenly made sense. Of course, it wasn't. But it did offer me a way of reconciling some of the tensions, gaps and contradictions between some of my political beliefs, activist praxis, academic theorising, and sense of identity that I had been grappling with for a number of years. In many ways it was an example of the processes of 'disidentification' (Hennessy 2000) that I have written about in this thesis. For me, one of the subtexts for embarking upon this research (even if it is not immediately obvious or transparent in the resulting empirical chapters) was as a means of reconciling (or at least working through) the increasingly tense relationship between my shifting engagement with different strands of Marxism, my interest in elements of Queer Theory and my everyday life. Before meeting the queer mutineers, I thought that I would find a satisfactory means of connecting these different theoretical tendencies either through the Marxist-Humanism articulated by Hennessy (2000) or the 'open', autonomist Marxism of Negri (1991) and Holloway (2002). Elements of those ideas are still present in my work, but they are far less central to it than I once anticipated. I certainly did not expect that through working and playing with the queer mutineers I would find myself entering into a productive engagement with post-anarchist theories (May 1994; Day 2005) that could easily encompass a queer perspective. Rather than seeking a new, all-encompassing meta-theory, I am now happier and more content with an eclectic theoretical approach that is open to many possibilities, perspectives and interpretations (Sedgwick 2003; Gibson-Graham 2006).

Working on this research has not significantly changed my attitude to the commercial gay scene. Before working on this project, I had not spent much time socialising on the gay scene. In carrying out my research I discovered some bars and clubs that I felt more comfortable in than I had anticipated I would. Those that are still open, I visit from time to time. But fundamentally, I do not spend any more time on the gay scene now than I did five years ago. And yet, five years on, I spend far more of my time socialising with gay and queer friends than I did before. That is a result of friendships I have made amongst the queer mutineers and in networks connected with them, but it is also the result of developing some close friendships with a number of other queer geographers that I have met as a result of presenting this work at numerous conferences.

I now tend to identify myself as 'queer' more often than I do as a 'gay man'. I do so to mark my distance from the mainstream gay scene and the values that it represents for me. I do so in recognition that my masculinity takes many forms and that my sexual desires are not located purely in the bodies of other biological men. And I call myself queer as means of identifying with a set of social and political possibilities for new means of ethically engaging with gender and sexual difference, as part of a broader reconfiguration of social relations. Yet I am fully aware that there are limits to my 'queerness' and that it is riddled with contradictions. I am sure that there are few contexts in which people look at me and my partner and do not understand us as a couple of professional, metropolitan gay men in their late thirties. It seems to me that such situations reinforce one of the central tenets of Queer Theory, namely that there is no easy way of correlating sexual identities with

the “whole range of sexual desires, dispositions, and practices that constitute sexuality,” (Valocchi 2005: 751). They also confirm what sexual geographers have been saying for nearly two decades: that our understandings of sexual identities and practices are site-specific and some identities are only intelligible in particular contexts. Maybe, after so many considerations of moments when lesbians and gay men ‘pass’ as straight (Bell *et al.* 1994) and genderqueer women are misread as men (Browne 2004b), it is time for sexual geographers to consider what happens when queers ‘pass’ as lesbian or gay, and the contexts in which that takes place?

8.2 Summary of observations and critiques

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined five aims of this work. The first and most central aim was to examine the differing formations of gay space in socially mixed inner city neighbourhoods other than the city-centre gay leisure zones that so dominated the attention of gay geographers in the 1990s. Additionally, I aimed to provide an exploration of the intersections of (homo)sexuality and class as they are mutually constituted in and through space; a consideration of the relationship between different spatial expressions of (homo)sexuality and different fractions of capital; and, to offer some very preliminary considerations of the intersections of ethnicity and sexuality in East London, with particular attention to how ethnicity is ‘classed’ in the area. A final aim was to sketch out potential forms of queer urbanism. In this section, I summarise key findings in relation to the first four aims. The fifth aim is touched upon here, but examined in more detail in the section that follows (which focuses on existing sites and processes in the area); and,

more prospectively, in the final section of this conclusion which considers queer urban futures.

In fulfillment of my first aim, I have identified a number of forms of gay and queer space which (at least in combination and close proximity) I believe are quite distinct to East London. In the three boroughs at the heart of my study there are large, visible gay populations. Although this resident gay population is particularly clustered in some neighbourhoods more than others, none of these clusters really constitute the kind of ghetto-like concentrations found in some North American cities (and which prompted the earliest work on gay geographies). Nevertheless, these gay populations are dense enough sustain a large number of diverse commercial gay venues. More to the point, some of these residential clusters can sustain small gay venues serving quite local populations. These venues tend to be quite basic and 'unsophisticated' – qualities that the customers of these venues put up with precisely because of the convenience of having a local gay bar. In addition to this range of mainstream gay venues, I have also described the development of a layer of bohemian post-gay spaces in areas such as Spitalfields and Hoxton. They serve to bolster the promotion of these areas as an open, inclusive cosmopolitan and bohemian zone in which sexuality is just one more register of difference to be negotiated and consumed. However, the reality is that within this 'cosmopolitan' zone there are limits to cross-class and inter-cultural social mixing. In contrast, the few remaining cottages and outdoor cruising grounds sustain a level of cultural mixing that I doubt would be found in similar sites outside metropolis. Finally, East London is home to a small network of radical queer activists who have experimented

with a range of queer autonomous social and political spaces in squatted and collectively owned venues over the last five years.

Throughout this dissertation, I have worked from a relational, non-essentialist understanding of sexuality, class and ethnicity. I do not understand the identities related to these categories as being fixed and unchanging across time and space. They are temporally and spatially specific and arise out of everyday day social relations. On this basis, it should come as no surprise that I have argued that there are many different homosexualities that men claim and practice in east London. What it means to be 'gay', 'bisexual' or 'queer' for one man is not likely to easily correspond to the meanings held by other men who adopt the same identities. These different homosexual identities and the meanings men invest in them result from the many ways in which their sexuality intersects with practices and beliefs that are shaped by social relations of class, gender, age, ethnicity and religion. Furthermore, these identities are shaped in, and by, the numerous sites where men encounter each other socially and erotically. Although the expression of these differing homosexualities relates specifically to the sites in East London where I have experienced their performance, few (if any) of them are restricted just to this corner of London, but are implicated in the wider social and spatial networks that shape these men's everyday lives.

These multiple homosexualities are shaped and understood in relation to equally local expressions of social class and ethnicity (as well as the ways in which, for example, age and relative masculinity are understood in relation to all of these categories). For example, in relation to social class, I observed a number of distinct

gay class fractions living in east London. The differential cultural capital of these class fractions shaped the location and type of housing these men inhabited in the East End, as well as the meaning they attached to the area. For example, gay welfare professionals (many of whom were politically on the Left and had grown up in working class families) tended to identify with the radical, working class and migrant histories of East London, and chose housing that symbolized these histories. In contrast, the men who were working in more corporate settings (such as Roger, the public relations executive, and Graham, who worked for a merchant bank) tended to view their residence in the East End as a shrewd investment opportunity that offered them the promise of maximum returns and a springboard into more 'desirable' neighbourhoods in the future. The more socially liberal welfare professionals were often at pains to distinguish and distance themselves from more corporate gay class fractions, denying that they were playing any part in the gentrification of the East End (which they located purely in the more high profile 'loft conversions' and new-build housing developments, rather than their occupation of former charitable buildings and small terraced houses).

The middle class men all conveyed the impression that they were 'out' about their sexuality. In contrast, some of the working class men had a more complex relationship to 'the closet' and negotiated intricate time-space geographies to keep different elements of their lives separate. They did not necessarily hide their sexuality from (straight) friends and family, but did find means of minimizing confrontation with less tolerant members of their social networks, especially where being too 'in-your-face' would disrupt homosocial friendships with other working

class men. In making this distinction, I do not mean to imply that no middle class men hide or deny their sexuality. This research has focused on the lives of gay and bisexual men who make their lives in the inner city. I suspect that ethnographic studies of gay life in the suburbs or non-metropolitan urban areas might reveal different classed dynamics of identity management and 'the closet.'

The working class gay men I had most contact with during this research worked in a range of economic sectors. Those who worked in supposedly 'feminized' areas of the health and service sectors, such as in care work or catering tended to adopt gay identities. In contrast, many of the men who were working in more 'masculine' manual jobs identified as bisexual. These trends highlight the spectrum of available non-heterosexual identities and the complexities of working class homosexualities.

Social class played some role in shaping how (and where) men related to the commercial gay scene. Although there were some bars in both central and east London that men perceived as being more middle class than others, age appeared to play a more obvious role in shaping men's use of the gay scene than class. Generally, the younger men were, the more likely it was that they would travel in to central London or beyond to visit gay bars. For the most part, men in their late thirties and older were more likely to settle for socializing locally. The major exception to this being men who used leather and fetish venues – who tended to be a little older and more prepared to travel to attend these and other specialist venues. Of course, to have a choice about whether to attend a local gay bar or travel to other areas of the city for variety is a privilege available largely only to men living in the

inner city; and the gay bars and clubs of east London serve a large 'hinterland' consisting of the outer east London suburbs, Essex and North Kent.

Even though social class alone did not seem to play a significant role in determining which venues local men used, the language of class permeated men's discussions of the bars in east London (and their comparisons of them to venues in central London). Several men identified the bars in Soho as being pretentious, status-driven and middle class, whilst implying (perhaps stereotypically) that the gay bars in inner east London were more 'down-to-earth', welcoming and lacking in 'attitude'. In contrast, several men who enjoyed the Soho bars dismissed the East London venues as being 'stuck in the 1980s.' Even so, these discourses of temporal and spatial distance from contemporary metropolitan gay life were also articulated by some men with a fond affinity for the East End bars, which they cheerfully acknowledged were 'old fashioned' and a little 'provincial.' These differences determined which friends some men would take to specific bars; how they would dress, speak and carry themselves in these venues; and what they considered to be legitimate topics of conversation in each.

The commercial gay scene continues to be the primary site in which gay men socialise (with) each other *as* gay men (although, I am sure a convincing argument could be made for the increasing role of the internet in this process (Turner 2003)). These bars, pubs, clubs and saunas are significant locations through which gay men maintain and delineate a sense of cultural distinction (from each other, as much as from the straight world). Through the scene, young gay men and other new-comers learn ways of *doing* gay, as well as access to friendship networks and support

services, which further consolidate and shape this identity work. However, many of the men I spoke to through the course of this research made little or infrequent use of these commercial venues. This finding suggests that the commercial gay scene only meets the social and cultural needs of a proportion of gay people. Equally it is important to stress that the social practices performed in these venues help socialize people only in a quite narrow range of possibilities for being *gay*. For those men who understand their homosexual desires through other frames of reference, it is hardly surprising that the gay scene can be a bewildering and alienating place. Throughout this research I found myself asking, how can we increase the opportunities to learn other ways of being (Gibson-Graham 2006)?

For example, within Bangladeshi Muslim cultures there are strong traditions of homosocial intimacy between men. Men who have been partly brought up in these traditions can find that they experience the lack of a 'shared terrain of knowledge' (Ahmed 1999: 344) with men who are not prepared to view the world through anything other than Anglo-American sexual ontologies. Many of the Bangladeshi and other South Asian men that I discussed in Chapter Five found it easier to pursue their homoerotic desires away from the commercial gay scene; often utilizing public sex environments as a means of meeting other men and sustaining friendships with other 'gay' men. Notions of privacy, home and belonging in this context are multiple, porous and slippery. By creating a discrete social network and finding locations in which to socialize away from both their ethnic communities and the (white) gay scene, these men are already actively building spaces where they can experiment with their sexuality on their own terms. This provides an opportunity for

them to enjoy their homoerotic desires and make sense of the relationship between their sexuality and other facets of their lives, without necessarily feeling obliged to 'come out' within a framework of reified sexual identities (Minwalla *et al* 2005). To do that could have implications for their personal safety, the social standing of their entire family, and on their ability to enjoy homosocial intimacy with other South Asian men.

Their experiences can be contrasted with those of Jaime, which I also discussed in Chapter Five. He had sacrificed much of the privilege he enjoyed in his home country in order to try and live a mode of gayness which he believed to be currently impossible in Central America. Jaime took every opportunity to engage with the commercial gay scene and held a romantic vision of the men and lifestyle he might find there. Despite his dreams and desires of a new metropolitan gay life, Jaime continued to hold on to complex and contradictory identifications with many of the places, people and networks that had shaped his life and journey to London. His optimistic search for a professional gay man to settle down with and 'marry' was continually destabilized by the material pressures of life as an 'illegal' immigrant working and the contradictory impulses of his many competing identities and affiliations. These pressures and beliefs distanced him from the sexual ethics and everyday assumptions of many British gay men. I suspect his search will end in disappointment.

Although this sense of not quite belonging can compound and exacerbate the embodied feelings of alienation experienced by some men in these circumstances, others have reclaimed playful and creative opportunities to make the most of this 'in

between-ness.’ For me, this poses important questions about whether it is actually desirable to extend the potential for a ‘shared terrain of knowledge’ between men (and women) who identify with differing homosexualities and ‘gay’ fractions. I am not interested in extending the reach of hegemonic gay identities. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that there are dangers and potentially negative consequences that might result from increasing levels of voluntary separation by different class, ethnic, religious and political networks of sexual dissidents who are dissatisfied with, and alienated from, mainstream gay life. After all, the forms of collective autonomy that I have advocated in this dissertation are only progressive if they are infused with an ethics of mutual aid and groundless solidarity between different social groups.

With the closure and erasure from the landscape of so many cottages and cruising sites over the last two decades, there are fewer and fewer gay spaces of any kind that exist outside of the market. Like Bell and Binnie (2000: 145), I see the erosion of these ‘queer counter-publics’ as having a class and racial politics to it, as it reduces the social, cultural and erotic opportunities for many men who are already marginalized along multiple lines. As I shall explain in greater detail in the final section of this chapter, I think it is important to experiment with alternative, amateur and autonomous models for renewing gay community networks. Many of these might cohere initially around specific needs, interests or shared beliefs amongst participants, as much as being locally based and geographically specific. This will, inevitably, involve some degree of voluntary separation by minority groups from the mainstream (although given that many *already feel excluded from it that is hardly a new phenomena*). This need not be seen as a problem, as long as in some ways

these new, experimental spaces do not become isolated, impenetrable kraals, but remain open to newcomers and new ideas.

More than this, I would suggest that attempting to work through the 'uncommon ground' (Chatterton 2006) of a lack of shared knowledge, although fraught and frustrating, might open up new possibilities for dialogue from which new solutions could emerge. Experiments on this basis might help bridge the gap between queer theory's celebration of the fluidity and uncertainty of identity categories and the lived experience of so many gay people who desire "certainty, structure, order and the attachment to specific localities where sexualities can be ... made public and legitimized," (Binnie 2004: 82).

I should reiterate that despite my critique of the commercial gay scene, I do recognize that it (and the specific gay identities produced through it) does provide meaning, enjoyment and hope to many men. By emphasizing the many intersecting homosexualities that are performed and practiced through east London, I am not seeking to completely denigrate the mainstream gay scene, but to highlight its limits, to identify some of those who feel excluded from it, and to offer pointers to alternative, potentially queerer, spaces, practice and modes of being. In the section that follows, I identify some existing alternatives and experiments that exist (or have existed in the recent past) in east London. In doing so, I highlight their failings as much as their potential.

8.3 Existing 'alternatives'

There are several ways in which non-heterosexual men and women in east London already engage in the process of perceiving and producing alternatives to mainstream gay spaces. I have already touched upon the inclusion of post-gay performances within the cosmopolitan and bohemian zone of Spitalfields, Hoxton and Shoreditch. These cultural events, concerts and club nights are often organized on an amateur basis, rather than by professional production companies. They have a tenuous relationship to the core commercial gay scene, and are often organized with a more inclusive approach to 'queers of all genders and sexualities.' These avant garde 'queer' cultural events are contradictory spaces. Very often they exist to satisfy needs that are not obviously met through the more conventional and established institutions of the lesbian and gay scene (whether those are specific musical tastes, dance clubs that celebrate the presence of 'unskinny' bodies on the dancefloor, or a festival of transgendered culture). However, by staging these events in Spitalfields and Bethnal Green, they further add to the bohemian, cosmopolitan coding of these areas and themselves become valorized, recuperated and removed from their amateur origins. There is much scope for future geographic studies of these amateur 'queer' events and venues that place themselves on the fringes of the gay scene and promote themselves to those who inhabit the borders of lesbian and gay identities.

Even beyond these specific events and venues, across this cosmopolitan and bohemian zone, openness to sexual difference is often incorporated within the practices of cosmopolitan urban life. This finds its expression in the predominance of

'metrosexual' performances of masculinity in which there is a convergence in fashion, deportment and grooming between some gay and straight men, such that the expected distinguishing clues to a man's sexuality that have accrued over recent decades become blurred and harder to read. Sometimes, reaction to the inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in these leisure spaces finds expression through a form of sexual indifference, in which boundaries of mainstream sexual identities become more ambiguous and open to reconfiguration. It is also possible to witness within this corner of east London the co-existence of differing 'post-gay identities' in close proximity. These identity performances playfully manipulate signifiers from many different gay (and straight) sub-cultural forms in combinations that complicate easy identification by those that they encounter. These performances can be read as a ludic refusal to identify (or be identified) with existing identity categories, rather than being motivated by shame, a 'closeted' desire to hide, or even complex time-space strategies that keep distinct aspects of one's life separated for others.

There are some spaces in the East End where the temporal distinctions between pre-gay, gay and post-gay homosexualities become folded together to the extent that such categorizations become tangled. Although they are fewer and farther between now than they were in the past, outdoor cruising grounds and cottages still serve as strategically important non-commercial spaces that can cultivate communality across age, class and ethnic distinctions. In these sites actions speak louder than words. Public sex sites can serve to throw reified identities into confusion – a man doesn't have to have adopted a gay identity in order to join in the

action and these sites throw together a far greater diversity of men than the ever-expanding collection of specific niche markets on the commercial gay scene. They also create opportunities for men to assert and articulate their homoerotic desires in ways that may be impossible to achieve in other spaces of their everyday lives. This spontaneous, un-commodified erotic contact between strangers has been interpreted as the basis of urban queer life (Delany 1999; Turner 2003). Although it is no guarantor of cultural exchange in itself, it can offer men the possibility of engaging in a common activity (primarily, the pursuit of sexual pleasure) with strangers in ways that challenge preconceived notions of 'self' and 'other.'

At times, although mostly in those sites that are well-established, secure and least prone to unwanted incursion, this communality begins to take the form of autonomous modes of being which hint at the possibilities for a wider reconfiguration of social relations. For all of these reasons, I consider most public sex environments to be queer spaces.

The seasoned cruiser observes how features of the urban landscape resonate with his desires. He is a "prodigious consumer of signs – of hidden meanings, hidden systems, hidden potentiality" (Beaver 1981, cited in Bridge 2005: 82). He can see the potential for adapting the derelict plot, the public toilet or the overgrown corner of a park, for purposes other than those for which they were designed. In Chapter Six I described how each man within a public sex site establishes a diverse set of relationships with the other man in the space, as well as other non-human actors. The material fabric of the site (the ceramic of the urinals in a toilet or the vegetation in an outdoor space), other non-human beings (for example, insects in an

outdoor site) and the evidence of previous sex acts (discarded condoms, tissues and packets of lubricant) are enrolled in the assessment of the erotic potential of the space, its relative danger or security, and the desirability of the other participants. Especially after dark, when sight becomes less reliable, all of a man's senses become fully engaged in experiencing and interpreting the site. Smell, touch, and hearing all offer clues about the site and its users (Bridge 2005: 82). Cruisers constantly (and almost intuitively) observe the physical environment of a public sex site, and the ways in which other men circulate through it, in order to gain clues about its use that will work to their sexual advantage. This is important because the ability to operate skillfully in relation to a given public sex environment, as well as how a man moves and utilizes his body can greatly augment his attractiveness within the space. Different rules of desirability, attractiveness and charisma apply here, compared to the outside world, and the dynamics of the resulting sex play and sociability proceed according to their own rules (Watson 2006: 160). As Bridge (2005; 152) has explained, "the latent potential of the city is built out of communicative exchanges of minute ritual courtesies that are the basis of civitas – city life."

There were times during my research when I witnessed men collectively take responsibility for tidying, cleaning and tending to their cherished cruising sites, as well as manipulating the infrastructure of the sites in order to make them more conducive to cruising. Similarly, groups of cruisers combined to defend and celebrated these sites against those who would curtail their pleasures. In appropriating (otherwise heteronormative) public space; and tending for it and its habitual users, the men were asserting their autonomy to use a publicly owned space

in a manner that asserted their right to difference. They were asserting their presence in the public realm *as a public*. Indeed, they could not have combined, even temporarily to do this, if public sex sites did not foster broader social affinities and engagement as well as offering the possibility of sexual release.

In Chapter Seven I charted some more (self-)conscious experiments with the creation of queer autonomous spaces. These were deliberate attempts to develop free or 'low cost' alternatives to the dominant commercial gay scene. The radical queer activists involved in building these largely temporary spaces do so as a means of engaging in people-oriented constructive actions that attempt to unleash the potential for sustainable ways of socialising as queer people that are not overly mediated by the commodity. These gatherings, parties and communal self-organised cafes challenge many preconceptions about what it means to be actively engaged in political activism. They offer, by example and practice, an anti-capitalist critique of the gay scene and a queer critique of the machismo that can accompany many of the more spectacular and confrontational expressions of grassroots, anti-capitalist protest.

This is not to say that macho posturing and one-upmanship never rears its ugly head within these queer activist networks. Bitter experience proves that a queer man in a pink sequined dress can be just as stubbornly macho as the most unreconstructed of heterosexuals. Of course, these activist networks do not pretend that they have eradicated all oppressive behaviours. These individuals have, however, mostly made personal commitments to try and undo and unlearn these behaviours and to reconstruct their social relations in new ways. And this, as I have

argued throughout this thesis, is the basis of what is queer within these networks. They are not queer just because they are comprised predominantly of gender warriors and sexual dissidents, but because they engage in playfully expressed, if seriously intended, experiments with alternative forms of social and sexual relations. 'Queer' within these networks functions more as a relational process of ethico-political encounters, rather than a simple identity category. A queer positionality, in this context, is produced through the very process of working collectively to create a less alienated and empowered space in which to explore a multiplicity of sexual and gendered potentialities.

Nevertheless, these are the experiments of a very specific group of people who are (mostly) already 'active' in broadly anarchistic and ecological direct action milieus. Many of the core organizers work part-time or only occasionally, mostly in relatively informal or precarious employment. This sometimes causes (bi-directional) tensions with their compatriots who enjoy the privileges (and stresses) of better paid, stable employment. Similarly, despite frequent attempts to network with queers of colour and networks of gay migrants and asylum-seekers in Britain and beyond, the core group remains predominantly 'white' and nationals of Western European countries. This in turn has caused tension with the minority of activists of colour in the network, and been the subject of much soul searching and debate. As I highlighted in Chapter Seven there are also potential axes of exclusion around age, sexual ethics, sub-cultural affiliation and other factors.

As I will elaborate further in the final section of this conclusion, I think these criticisms, although real (and, for some participants, quite painful), should be held in

perspective. They do not negate the important experiments that these activists have attempted, rather they highlight some of the dilemmas involved in autonomous modes of organizing and the pressing need for it to take multiple forms, drawing on the experiences, needs and aspirations of specific affinity groups, networks and clusters of individuals.

One of the queer squat parties I described in Chapter Seven serves as a useful illustration of the dilemmas involved in creating queer autonomous spaces of this kind. For many of the organizers and their friends, this particular event ended up feeling less than safe because it attracted groups of people they felt little affinity with and who had different expectations of what the party would entail. In some ways, their problems were less with who turned up than with their passive participation in the event, their expectation that other people would entertain them (without any reciprocal involvement in making the event a success) and, in a couple of cases, very different understandings of interpersonal respect. This discomfort was exaggerated by the fact that many of the ‘interlopers’ appeared to be very ‘scene-orientated.’ This is a real dilemma for the organizers of do-it-yourself, autonomous spaces. Should they try to keep those spaces ‘pure’, ‘uncontaminated’ by the mores of the commercial gay scene and keep resisting recuperation? Or, should they explore the possibilities for connection and common ground with those they feel uncomfortable with (at least, in those particular circumstance)? Clearly, when queer anarchists, trendy post-gay clubbers and straight beer-punks meet there are opportunities for transformative dialogue. But there is also a danger – not only of violence, misunderstandings and distrust – but the threat that what defined a once-

safe space will be diluted or abandoned, as a result of the inclusion of those from which one was seeking a safe haven.

At their best, the experience of being involved in creating these experimental autonomous spaces can be deeply moving and cathartic. I am increasingly of the opinion that one of the most important political aspects of these events and spaces is the way that they increase the intensity of affective attachment, creativity and connectivity between their participants (Amin and Thrift 2005: 237). This is as true of the opportunistic moments of spontaneous collective autonomy claimed in a cottage, as the more intentionally planned experiments of radical queer activists. I now turn my attention to the lessons my findings might offer for the future development of geographies of sexualities, before concluding by suggesting some possibilities for proliferating new experiments with queer urban autonomy in a non-hegemonic manner.

8.4 Future directions for geographies of sexualities

Like Browne (2006b), I think it is important to disentangle the growing sub-discipline of sexual geographies from an automatic assumption that it should be 'queer'. Whilst queer geography and sexual geographies continue to be elided it will not be possible to "further interrogate the possibilities and limitations of queer" (Browne 2006b: 885). In a recent appraisal of the current state of Queer Studies, Eng *et al.* (2005: 12-13) lamented:

Surely, queer studies promises more than a history of gay men, a sociology of gay male sex clubs, an anthropology of gay male tourism, a survey of gay

male aesthetics. The emergence of queer liberalism challenges us to reconsider some of the canonical ideas of the field – shame and intimacy, normal and antinormal, publics and counterpublics – for their contemporary liberal deployments. As crucial as these intellectual paradigms have been to the establishment of queer studies, it is important to insist on their continuing reevaluation in both their historical applications and their contemporary contexts.

Although the research I have outlined in this thesis has revisited many of the ‘classic’ sites of queer social scientific enquiry, it has done so in the pursuit of a distinctly post-anarchist interpretation of queer space and politics. In so doing, I believe my work has expanded the possibilities for future geographic work on sexualities. Like Eng and his co-authors I believe our repertoire of research sites and theoretical models must change, as we tackle the political and social implications of ‘homonormativity’ and the new inequalities that it has instigated.

There is a need for a greater exploration of the operation of power amongst those who are marginalized by ‘the new homonormativity’ (Duggan 2002), an emerging theme in gay geographies that I discussed at some length in Chapter Two. It seems we are all anti-homonormative now. Which either reinforces our collective ‘critical’ credentials or aptly demonstrates how far removed most of our analysis is from the everyday lives and aspirations of so many urban lesbians and gay men in the Global North. I may not choose to socialize much on the commercial gay scene, I may not choose the same consumer products as so many gay men of my generation and income levels, and I may not aspire to marriage (or even a civil partnership), but these things give real comfort and meaning to many.

In part, my discomfort with the potential overuse of the term ‘homonormativity,’ is that it suggests that it is in some way possible to be an

authentic queer whose life is untainted by homonormative social relations. As Oswin (2005) has recently reminded us, we cannot escape our complicity in these practices. Most of our lives are marked by compromise and contradiction. I believe there is a danger that in our rush to critically *queer* contemporary social relations, we make nothing more than an empty critique, unless we offer the prospect of alternative ways of being.

There are a huge number of sites and spaces of lesbian, gay and queer socialization that exist outside the commercial gay scene (and away from sites of public homosex) – for example, the queer autonomous experiments I have written about. There are countless other examples. I would like to see more work that analyses the social, economic and political geographies of post-capitalist (Gibson-Graham 2006) and ‘alternative’ lesbian, gay and queer spaces and practices. Taking Gibson-Graham’s recent work further, I believe there is a need to elaborate the diversity of the gay (and queer) economy, which I have begun in this thesis. This strand of work could consider the range of different gay enterprises that exist to serve local gay populations, as well as the various transactions and forms of labour that are practiced both within these sites and within broader gay social networks. Beyond the commercial gay scene, there is a need to engage with the spaces created by the various formal and informal organizations that constitute gay ‘civil society’ – gay sports clubs, religious groups, campaigning organizations, and support groups, amongst others. By engaging with these spaces and investigating further gay domestic spaces, it will be possible to develop work that truly encompasses the everyday lives of gay men and women. I also hope that such work might offer more

insights into the ways in which gay lives are mediated (not always in easily predictable ways) by social class. Ethnographic methods will be useful in pursuing this research agenda, but I also hope that this future work will provide an opportunity for the utilization of new research methods for sexual geographers. In particular, I can envisage considerable potential for the employment of more participatory research techniques, through which we might explore *with* gay men and women the extent to which the mainstream gay scene meets their emotional and material needs, as well as exploring the possibilities for alternative engagements with sexual and gender difference.

As I suggested earlier, in my personal reflections on this research (and incidents from it), I think there is a need for closer geographic attention to be paid to the full range of non-hegemonic performances of masculinity (Vanderbeck 2005). Despite the emblematic centrality of the drag queen to early queer explorations of performativity, little attention has recently been paid within geographic scholarship to the spatial expression of what we might call male femininities. Much as I like the hyper-masculine gay skinhead that appeared throughout much British sexual geographies in the 1990s (Bell *et al.* 1994; Bell 1997; Bell and Binnie 1998; Binnie 1995), maybe it's time to encounter his fey sister-brothers (Hennen 2004).

In addition to highlighting a need to deepen explorations of gay class fractions and the range of gay masculinities, my work has also highlighted (partly through my own failure to adequately address the issue) the need for greater ethnographic attention to be paid to the intersections of homosexuality and ethnic difference. I hope that in the near future British queer geographers can learn from

the 'queers of colour' critique emanating from the USA; although, I suspect that their findings in a British context, will be somewhat different.

There is another, increasingly important, trend in current (British) social and cultural geography that I think needs queering, or at least (re)connecting with some sense of the sexual. That is the 'non-representational turn'. This methodological turn was, in part, influenced by Butler's queer writings on performativity. And yet, somewhere in the process, non-representational theory rendered the body abstract and not particularly queer. Despite this criticism, I think that the 'more-than-representational' register (Lorimer 2005) has much potential for engaging with the messy materialities of the sexual body. It is time to move beyond non-representational writings on dance and yoga, and to get to grips with the more-than-representational geographies of sex/ual practices – cruising and caressing, flirting and fucking. I have started to explore this area of work through my discussion of the practices of cruising and the complex relations between assemblages of human and non-human actors in the sites where public homosex takes place, but there is much more to be done. I find myself contemplating what a sensuous, embodied geography of thinking, feeling and doing BDSM would read like? Geographers' attention to the material culture of non-human objects and the hybrid geographies (Whatmore 2003) of human and non-human relations could be extended into the sphere of sexual geographies. When will we read geographies of the dildo, the leather harness or more about the enrolment of the *ceramic of the urinal into a cruising scene* (that I alluded to in Chapter Six)? Similarly, it seems strange that so little of the

geographic work that is concerned with affect and emotion has, so far, considered the geographies of desire, lust, unrequited love or being jilted.

In these respects, I am optimistic that there is still much innovative work to be done within the sub-discipline of sexual geographies, without simply rehashing tried and tested themes in new combinations. And yet, we have certainly not exhausted the possibilities for expanding the knowledge-base in the areas that we already do well – there is still a need for subtle explorations of local gay vernaculars that pay greater attention to the regional, as well as national similarities and differences in sexual cultures. In focusing on gay life away from the main central London gay playgrounds, I hope this thesis demonstrates that potential.

8.5 Queer urban futures

In Chapter Two, I reviewed recent writing about utopianism that has critiqued urban geographers for their lack of imaginative critical engagements with alternative future possibilities (Pinder 2002, 2005; Baeten 2002). Pinder has sought to defend the value of utopian thought in the development of critical perspectives on the city and for alternative forms of urban life. He has highlighted that transformations of urban space cannot be separated from the transformations of everyday life in the city (Pinder 2005: 3). Bell (2001: 102) has suggested that the queer city can be found in the ‘creative and wild possibilities’ that are (barely) contained within the urban form. By exploiting these ‘wild possibilities’ and the gap between people’s desires and lived experience, modest alterations in the uses of the city in the here and now can reveal new forms of queer sociality, and *vice versa*.

The queer urbanism that I am proposing offers signposts towards a world in which we care for ourselves and others in diverse autonomous, self-organized ways. It is about ways of moving in the right direction, without necessarily having all of the answers or solutions of how to get from here to there. Indeed, it recognizes that there are no once and forever universal solutions, preferring instead an on-going process of experimentation, change and adaptation. The process of creating more queer space in the city would include, observing and interacting with what currently exists before changing anything and then attempting to make the least change for maximum effect. There should be greater recognition of the significance of relative location to these observations, critique and developments. For, what works in East London (or even one neighbourhood, or site within the sub-region) might not work in others. The functioning of any given site is affected by what surrounds it. I intend to suggest that there should be ways of extending queer's ethical commitment to engaging with difference and relating ethically with others to non-humans objects and entities, including the land upon which we build our experiments (Braun 2005).

So, what might a sustainable queer East End look like? I hope it would be based upon spaces that promote social relations that foster 'responsibility, reciprocity, collectivism and mutuality,' (Chatterton 2006: 261). Sustainability is about more than just reducing and recycling waste or using renewable energy sources and technologies, however important those practices are. Chatterton (2002b) has articulated a vision of a sustainable future that is not a cosmetic add-on to existing politics and ways of living, but that requires an 'ecology of change' that

transforms every sector of the economy and facet of everyday life as it moves towards a 'fair shares society.' As he has advocated (Chatterton 2002b: 555-6),

At the heart of the strong ecological model of sustainable development, then, is a shift in direction for economic activity from global dependence to local interdependence (Norberg-Hodge 1996) and the creation of meaningful, humane employment which revalues time and skills outside the global market place, especially those deployed in the household and voluntary economy. ... In this context, Douthwaite (1996), speaks of the need to build parallel, independent economies in which underused skills are directed towards meeting unmet needs, where key production processes are run with less dependency on inputs from the global market economy and where greater monetary independence and financial stability can act as a 'protective skin' against the instability of the market economy.

This definition and model poses some interesting questions about the place and value attached to 'queer skills' in the global market economy. Badgett (2001) has demonstrated, in a North American context, how workplace discrimination can have a negative impact on the income levels of lesbians and gay men. At the same time, Hennessy (2000) has contended that in some areas of the service sector and client-focused roles within transnational business corporations, gay men are deemed to be better able to perform and demonstrate certain interpersonal skills, and are assumed not to have the family commitments that might prevent them from utilising these skills in business networking opportunities outside normal office hours, when the distinctions between leisure and corporate entertaining become blurred. However there are also the emerging forms of a politics of tending for existing queer spaces and for each other that I witnessed in some of the cottages and cruising grounds charted in Chapter Seven. These are progressive means of relating to other human beings that are seldom recognized and acknowledged, let alone associated with contemporary urban gay life.

Certainly the activists who have constructed the queer autonomous spaces analysed in the previous chapter have attempted to begin the process of building 'parallel, independent economies in which underused skills are directed towards meeting unmet needs' (Chatterton 2002b) with minimal reliance on inputs from the market economy. The challenge ahead, for those of us who recognise the value and importance of those spaces is to resist imposing our vision on others, but instead inviting and encouraging them to experiment with the realisation of their own visions. First, there is need to find mechanisms for fostering the spread of something approaching the disposition of 'global reflexivity' (Savage *et al* 2005), such that more people are more consistently able to observe and interact with the world in recognition that there are many possible frames of reference from which to interpret and enact life. My second, related, illustration draws on my critique of an apparent weakness in the practices of the radical queer activist networks discussed in Chapter Six. There I questioned whether, for all of their very genuine attempts to build networks of solidarity and material aid with activists in the Majority World, the Western European activists still predominantly operate in 'transmit' mode only. Consequently, ideas and advice flow predominantly in one direction and the queerruption network has yet to succeed in fostering a genuine and mutual exchange of queer tactics. If this observation is true, then many real opportunities are being missed to adapt and learn from forms of 'queer' autonomous spaces and practices that have developed without necessarily drawing on the legacy of Anglo-American and North-West European models of homosexuality.

I feel it is important to encourage a proliferation of diverse queer spaces across the urban landscape, rather than concentrating them in some 'radical' replication of 'gay ghettos'. When difference is solidified into bounded identity communities, the potential for relationality, enchantment and productive encounters with difference are lost (Watson 2006: 9). Despite my anti-assimilationist critique, I do not think queer radicals should shy away from working outside self-defined queer networks, when and where there is a shared need with our non-queer neighbours and compatriots. At the same time, we should still reserve the right to claim queer space, when we need it.

This invitation to open forms of integration should be balanced or offset against an appreciation of the value and productivity of marginal spaces, identities and practices. Those who cultivate land according to permaculture principles (Whitefield 2002) recognise that the zone where different eco-systems meet (such as the edge of a forest or the rocky pools along the seashore) can often be highly fertile, innovative and productive places. Queer space does, and should continue to, harness this 'edge effect.' By encouraging the spread of a mosaic of queer spaces across the city, rather than concentrating and consolidating them in one space, we might be able to maximize the productive opportunities that arise from their interaction with other ways of living in the city.

Just as cruisers notice how the city's streets, buildings and open spaces resonate with particular states of mind and offer possibilities for the enactment of their erotic desires, so queer urban dwellers should extend their repertoire of ways to observe, interact with, and adapt the fabric of the city to better meet our unmet

needs. Through these processes of active engagement in the (re)creation of urban space (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), we can attempt to produce more spaces that can be directly experienced, imagined and reinvented for queer autonomous living.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that the interaction of men's bodies within public sex environments highlights the potential for alternative means of interacting with others that are not limited by the discursive boundaries of conventional (sexual) identities. These include the minor technologies for tending to and caretaking for both the site and its other participants that I have already mentioned. In the activist-inspired spaces, queer is produced through the process of working collectively to create a less alienated and empowered space in which to explore a multiplicity of sexual and gendered potentialities. But the process is not that dissimilar in public sex environments, even if the motivation is somewhat different. Both sets of spaces still hold the potential to serve as 'laboratories of love and friendship' (Bell and Binnie 2000: 132). And I think we need more of those.

I think more work still needs to be undertaken in order to more fully contemplate the consequences of thinking through the relationship of sexuality and space more in these relational terms, rather than locating it in 'identity.' It should, however, be recognized that to talk of sexuality in these terms can be very threatening for people, as it touches at the very core of how they think they know the world and themselves. Nevertheless, I think there is some merit in us collectively engaging in a process of asking ourselves how much we are prepared to acknowledge the contradictions and compromises in our lives. And to ask, ultimately, how we can withdraw our support from unequal and unsustainable

practices, pursuing instead alternative ways of living, and encouraging others to do the same (Chatterton 2006).

While the invitation to liberate oneself through collective experimentation has inspired the activists involved in hosting and attending the international Queeruption gatherings and similar autonomist events, there is a need to draw new imagination and energy into similar, parallel engagements. However, it is not possible to fully predict what these new experiments might look or feel like, and in this the words of Bonefeld (2004: 5-6) are salient:

Our struggle ... is the struggle against certainty, a struggle of uncertainty, but a struggle that anticipates in its organisational means a certain goal: human dignity. ... Uncertainty, then, is a determining element of social autonomy. Another is doubt. And then there is patience. If we think in categories of doubt, if we accept that the result of our struggles are uncertain, we have to accept patience as a revolutionary endeavour. Impatience seeks quick, certain, predictable results.

There are, though, some considerations, lessons from the failings and inconsistencies of earlier experiments, which I believe should be taken into account. It is not good enough to leave this work to self-identified 'activists' or to allow it to be perceived as 'activist-work' (although I am aware that there is a danger that in some ways I may have perpetuated that perception through my writing). One consequence of the relational ethics I believe is enacted through these queer autonomous spaces is that in dissolving the rigidity of social roles, the fixity of an activist identity should also be thrown into question (Chatterton 2006: 270). I have already suggested in Chapter Seven that contemporary anarcha-queers should seek ways of engaging with earlier generations of (proto-)queer activists. By learning from their skills and experiences, and recognising these dialogues as an important

form of 'activism' in itself, I hope that work can begin to be undertaken that can help to create and sustain multi-generational networks of autonomous queer spaces and communities. This relies on opening up and challenging pre-existing perceptions of what it means to be a 'radical queer', not making its politics too narrow. If the movement is to become sustainable across the generations, and to inspire and involve broader layers of queer people who are open to exploring alternative ways of being, then a broader range of experiments will need to be enacted.

If, as Pinder (2002: 237) has suggested, future utopian interventions in urban life should identify the "gaps and opportunities for struggle" within contemporary urban spaces and seek means to exploit these, whilst, "uncover[ing] the desires that remain embedded within the[se] developments," then I think the diverse range of gay and queer spaces that men engage with and create in East London have much to offer to the project of developing alternative modes of queer urban life.



Figure 9: Butt Plug Bar dress-up corner, December 2003

APPENDIX: KEY CHARACTERS

Agustin was interviewed in 2000, as part of the Newham Gay men's Survey. He moved to London from southern Spain in the late 1990s to undertake a professional qualification. At the time of the interview he was living in Plaistow with his male partner.

Ajay is a young man of Indian heritage in his early 20s who I met through my fieldwork for the current project during the period 2001 – 2003. He lives in Newham with his parents and attends university in Tower Hamlets. He meets men for sex in public sex environments in Tower Hamlets (never in Newham) when his parents think he is studying late in the library. When he thinks he can get away with it, he charges men for sex. Ajay identifies as bisexual (although he has only ever had sex with men) and claims that he will eventually settle down and get married.

Andy is a married, bisexual father of two working in the sex industry. He was interviewed for the Newham Gay Men's Survey in 2000.

Bill is a bisexual man in his early 60s with two adult sons. He was born in the north-west of England but has lived in East London for nearly forty years. At the time I interviewed him for the Newham Gay Men's Survey (in 2000) he was self-employed and working in the building trade, but was planning his retirement.

Chris is a man that I originally interviewed for my MA in 1999. A couple of years after I first met him, there was a period when I saw him socially with some

regularity (as he was a friend of the man I was going out with at the time) and got to know him a little better. He is in his early 40s, lives in Bethnal Green and works as a community development and advice worker.

Dee is a bit of a mystery. At times, Dee wished to be known by his male given name, at others by an adopted 'drag' name – hence the ambiguous pseudonym I have chosen. I met Dee through my fieldwork in a 'cottage' on the edge of the City of London, which s/he travelled across London to visit several times a week. We had regular conversations over a two year period (2001 – 2003) and then Dee abruptly disappeared. S/he claimed to be a senior occupational health nurse for the police – elements of that, and other stories s/he told me may be true, but I suspect a fair amount of it was fantasy.

Dimitri is a young gay man, originally from the Ukraine, who was interviewed for the Newham Gay Men's Survey in 2000. Dimitri came to the UK as a student three years prior to the interview. Both he and his partner are HIV positive.

Doug is a gay man in his mid-30s who was interviewed for the Newham Gay Men's Project in 2000. Formerly a monk, he now works in the voluntary sector but is still actively involved in a number of gay religious groups.

Ed was in his mid-40s when I interviewed him for my MA in 1999. Originally from Yorkshire, he had been living in London for a number of years. He worked as a catering manager for a large public sector organisation.

Gary was yet another welfare advice worker living in Bethnal Green that I interviewed for my MA in 1999. Originally from Essex, he had been living in Tower Hamlets since the early 1990s. When he first came to London he had immersed himself in the commercial scene, but by the time of our conversation he had largely withdrawn from it. He is was in his mid-30s.

Graham, an Oxbridge graduate, works as a translator for a major merchant bank in the City of London. When I interviewed him for my MA research in 1999 he was in his mid-20s and had recently bought a small flat in Bethnal Green.

Hywel was interviewed for the Newham Project in 2000. *Hywel* grew up in a military family in the late 1950s. By his teens the family had settled in South Wales, but he left there and moved to London in the early-1980s when rumours started to circulate about his sexuality. He had been diagnosed with HIV five years prior to his participation in the Newham Project.

Jaime grew up in an upper middle class family in Mexico and was privately educated in the United States. Returning to Latin America after university, he gained rapid promotion within the local branch of a transnational financial institution. In his early thirties, following the break-up of a long-term relationship, he moved to London on the pretence of undertaking postgraduate study. He has, however, now 'overstayed' his student visa and is working as a security guard in the informal economy. Despite this significant drop in status, he claims London affords him the opportunity to lead his life as a gay man in a way that is impossible in his home country. I had many extended conversations with Jaime in 2002 and 2003, but

(perhaps due to his precarious status in the country) he has been unwilling to commit his story to tape.

Jim was unemployed at the time I interviewed him for my MA (1999), having grown disillusioned with a career as a scientific researcher, but was in the process of retraining in the hope of finding employment as a computer programmer. When I interviewed him he was in his early 30s. Although he identified as gay, Jeremy had chosen not to reveal his sexuality to most of his close friends and family.

Joe is a man I met through my early fieldwork for this PhD (2001 – 2004). Joe is in his mid-30s and grew up in a second generation London Irish family. He identifies as bisexual. When I first met Joe he was living with the mother of his child, who he had been in a relationship with for more than a decade, but he was having an increasing number of affairs and one-night stands with men. They have since separated and Joe is spending more and more of his time in the company of gay men out on the gay scene. He works as an IT technician for a major high street bank, where he is an active union representative.

Nigel was a former hotel manager in his early 50s that I interviewed for the Newham Project in 2000. Whilst on his holiday four years previously, he had met his current partner, a younger Thai man. They had initially planned to settle in Thailand, but when they were both diagnosed with HIV, they decided to move (back) to London in order to take advantage of the better health services available here. His partner had recently been granted residency in the UK.

Patrick is a black gay man in his mid-40s who was interviewed for the Newham Project. He works as an electrician for a voluntary sector organisation.

Raj is a young British Asian gay man who was interviewed for the Newham Project. He had lived in Newham most of his life. At the time of the interview he was in his mid-20s and had recently found out that he was HIV+.

Roger is the managing director of a public relations company. I interviewed him in 1999 for my MA. In his early 50s, he was the most affluent man interviewed for this research.

Steve is in his mid-30s. I originally interviewed him for my MA research. We have continued to talk throughout my doctoral research. Steve is in his late-30s and currently lives in Plaistow with his long-term partner. When I first met him he was living in Bethnal Green, having grown up on a council estate in Poplar and lived in Tower Hamlets most of his life. At that time, he was working for Tower Hamlets Council but has since gone freelance as an equalities and regeneration consultant working for a range of public and voluntary sector clients.

Warren was interviewed for the Newham Project in 2000. He grew up in Hackney but had travelled widely around the world through his job in the tourist industry and had returned to London three years previously after more than a decade living in Brazil. His long-term Brazilian partner, who is HIV+, had accompanied him and now has leave to remain in the UK.

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