Exploratory Notes on the Geography of Black Gay Leisure Spaces in Bloemfontein, South Africa

Gustav Visser

Abstract Gay leisure space development has of late been an important area of investigation in geography. Generally, these investigations have primarily concerned white gay men in Western countries. Most of these debates have not been considered in the developing world context, particularly in Africa. This investigation explores the leisure geography of black gay men in the city of Bloemfontein. It is shown that differences in race and class positions explain a gay leisure geography which stands totally separate from that of white gay men. The investigation argues that differences in class position, linked to race, explain these separate geographies. However, it is also revealed that the black gay men of this investigation do not see exclusively gay leisure spaces as desirable and would rather seek leisure spaces that are inclusive of different sexual orientations.

Keywords Black · Gay · Men · Leisure · Bloemfontein · South Africa

Introduction and Context

Linkages between space and sexual identity are well documented (Bell and Binnie 2006; Gorman-Murray 2006). The spatialities of white gay male life, in particular, have received considerable attention with much research being focused on gay leisure space[1] development (Collins 2006; Puar 2006). From a geographical perspective, gay male leisure space development in the south has not been included

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[1]Leisure is "free time"—time spent out of work and essential domestic activity. It is the period of discretionary time before or after compulsory activities such as eating and sleeping, going to work and doing homework. For an experience to qualify as leisure, it must be an experience that is a state of mind, entered into voluntarily and must moreover be intrinsically motivating of its own merits. Leisure space merely refers to those spaces in which leisure time is spent.

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to any significant degree in these debates (Lim 2006). Although aspects of white gay male leisure (mostly Western tourists) spaces have received some attention in countries such as the Caribbean (Sanchez Taylor 2000; Waitt and Markwell 2006), South Africa (Elder 2005; Visser 2003a, b) and Thailand (Jackson and Sullivan 1999), the leisure geographies of black gay African men has remained invisible to the geographical scholarly gaze. Other disciplines, although not focusing on gay male leisure per se have, however, indicated that same-gender sexual activity is common in most cultures of the developing south (Harper et al. 2004; Herdt 1990).

Anthropologists have been very active in researching same-gender sexual behaviour in "the southern context" and have demonstrated that the perceived intolerance towards homosexuality is largely incorrect. For example, work in Mexico (Carrier 1985) and Brazil (Parker 1985) has demonstrated that participation in same-gender sexual behaviour is generally not (as) stigmatized—as long as the individual maintains her or his culturally appropriate gender role. Caceres and Sosaco (1997) found similar conceptualisations of gender and sexual orientation subcultures organised around social class, sexual identity, gender and self-presentation, degree of participation in the gay scene and participation in commercial sex (Harper et al. 2004, 188). Even within the African context, where popular political discourse has suggested that "gays are from Europe" (Graziano 2004, 302), both historical and contemporary reflections (cf. Murray and Roscoe 1998; Sibuyi 1993; Patron 2000) refute the claim that same-gender sexuality and gay and lesbian identification among black Africans are "un-African" (Graziano 2004).

In the African context, South Africa has seen the most sustained research into the broad investigatory cohort of homosexuality (e.g. Gevisser and Cameron 1995; Potgieter 2003, 2005; Reid and Dirsuweit 2002; Van Zyl and Steyn 2005; Leap 2004 2005; Oswin 2005; Visser 2002, 2003a, b, 2007; 2008). This growing literature suggests, on the one hand, the increased integration of white gay men into "mainstream" heterosexual society, and certainly so in terms of leisure space interaction. On the other hand, such integration is not as extensive for black homosexual[2] South Africans, with even the most casual glance at its media highlighting physical and emotional assaults on black homosexuals on a very frequent basis (e.g. Mnisi 2007; Nombembe and Makwabe 2007). Indeed, there remains a major schism between South African homosexuals'—much praised constitutional rights (Lind 2005) and the lived reality, particularly for black homosexual cohorts.

It has, however, to be acknowledged that despite all manner of oppression and discrimination, black gay men, as well as men who mainly engage same-gender sexual activity in South Africa and Africa more generally, do lead some sort of homosexual lives, with one aspect being that of gay leisure activity. From a geographical perspective it is curious, that although Western gay leisure spaces and places have been mapped in great detail, geographers have not been as interested in mapping black gay leisure spaces in Africa. It is the intention of this investigation to start to remedy that oversight by providing an exploratory geography of young black

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[2] It has to be admitted that some of this neglect can be explained by the idea that gay, lesbian or bisexual are conceptual categories that have a particular Western genealogy (Graziano 2004).

gay men in the city of Bloemfontein, South Africa. It is argued that, despite homophobia, black gay men do generate gay leisure geographies.

Black Gay Leisure Geographies in South Africa

Sexuality entwines closely with geography in the contemporary cultures of South Africa (Leap 2005: 235). This discourse, spanning the codification and shaping of all South Africans' (hetero)sexuality during colonial and apartheid eras, enumerated locations where sexual privacy could, or could not be claimed, and it also regulated the conditions that granted or restricted people's access to those locations. Whilst contemporary constitutional provisions aim to eliminate this complex history, it has not as yet entirely dismantled those legacies, nor has it entirely erased its effects on the social and personal landscape (Elder 2005). This point is perhaps best reflected in Van Zyl and Steyn's (2005) collection of essays brought together in *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994–2004*. On the whole, Van Zyl and Steyn's findings highlight experiences seen internationally. It is shown that black gay and lesbian people often experience multiple layers of oppression, as they not only contend with the negative societal reactions to their sexual orientation, or gender nonconformity, but also may experience racial prejudice, limited economic resources and limited acceptance within their own cultural community (see for a review of these issues Harper et al. (2004)). Importantly, it is highlighted that black gays and lesbians are not demonstrating particularly extensive integration among different homosexual cohorts or into heterosexual society. Indeed, heterosexual hegemony remains all pervasive (Reid and Dirsuweit 2002; Visser 2003a). A further issue is the notion that gay and lesbian imply same-sex-related desires and identities not indigenous to (South) African sexual cultures (Leap 2005). These identity markers are seen as constructs that have been imposed on local sexual cultures through the workings of colonialism, "gay globalisation" and other transnational flows (Leap 2005).

It is perhaps the very suggestion of "Western imperialism" that has lead to the different manner in which white gay men, in particular, have experienced post-apartheid constitutional freedom (Phillips 2005; Reid and Dirsuweit 2002; Visser 2003a). The fact that many "white developed northern" countries are "more tolerant" of differences in sexuality has opened a discursive space for white gay men to resist and negotiate white heterosexual hegemony (Phillips 2005). Whilst this position might be interpreted as progress from a number of white perspectives, the same notion simultaneously implies societal regression from many black perspectives. As a consequence, this underlying perception has very different outcomes as far as acceptance of gay men into heterosexual society is concerned, while it also impacts on the types of lives different homosexual cohorts can live (Phillips 2005). The spatial outcome is that it has been decidedly easier to see greater freedom and acceptance of white gay male lives than that of black gay men—if not at all levels, then certainly in terms of white gay leisure space consumption.

Research directly focused on gay male leisure space development has registered this racially differentiated progress primarily through the lens of Cape Town's gay leisure geographies. Visser (2003a, b, 2007, 2008) has provided insight into the leisure geographies of white middle-class gay men in cities, whilst the anthropolog-

ical investigations of Leap (2005) and the geographical examination of Oswin (2005) have included black gay men. Perhaps the most useful approach to black gay leisure space experiences in South Africa generally, is provided in the work of Leap (2005) and Oswin (2005). Both investigators demonstrate that Cape Town's "gay city" is not physically situated within any single metropolitan gay ghetto, or village, nor has an international gay understanding of male homosexual identity become pervasive. In fact, various gay-related locations are patterned along divisions of race, ethnicity, gender and class. Whilst tourist maps focus on the formal, exclusive white gay spaces of bars, clubs and saunas in the central city that Visser has investigated, other gay and lesbian cohorts (re)configure leisure spaces around relatively inclusive public spaces, but seldom, if ever, exclusively gay leisure spaces (Leap 2005). Perhaps most important is the lack of any real overlap or engagement with these different leisure geographies. Whilst black homosexual men and women might have a vague notion of distantly located formal white gay male spaces, they, and the leisure geographies they generate, are themselves invisible to the white gay male cohorts. Interaction between different homosexual racial cohorts appears to be minimal.

As will be demonstrated in the sections to follow, these trends appear equally true for gay black men in Bloemfontein.

Methodology and Survey Participants

Investigations into gay lives generally deploy a range of ethnographic techniques and draw on the experiences of relatively small samples (Graziano 2004). This investigation is no different in this respect. The results communicated in this paper form part of a larger, ongoing investigation in which the primary source of data comprises in-depth, as well as semi-structured interviews and spatial matrixes of leisure movement during a typical week. To date, 40 white gay men, 16 white lesbian women, 15 black gay men and five black lesbian women have participated in the investigation.

In terms of the survey generally, participants were identified using a snowball technique with the starting point always deliberately being young homosexuals. As the investigation is about leisure spaces it could be argued that this would be the appropriate starting point. Indeed, this approach is seen in many similar investigations elsewhere. In addition, gay men under the age of 30 years were preferred as they would have become gay adults after the fall of apartheid and its many restrictions. They would have grown up at least knowing that their sexual orientation was recognised in the Constitution and be aware of a larger gay reality in which leisure spaces are demonstrated to impact on gay identity formation, development and reinforcement (Bell and Binnie 2006). As a consequence, the survey group is youthful and many of them are still students with limited financial resources (Table 1). In this context it is not surprising that they mainly engage active leisure pursuits over the weekend when they generally visit bars, taverns and nightclubs on Saturday evenings. The overwhelming majority of the survey participants reside in former black township areas although they work or study in the CBD and other formerly white group area locations.

Table 1 Biographical outline of survey participants

Biographical outline					
Age	<25 54%	25–30 13%	31–35 13%	36–40 7%	>40 13%
Education	High school certificate 69%	Bachelor's degree or equivalent 33%	Postgraduate degree 7%		
Employment	Professions 20%	Services 26	Students 54%	Business owner 0%	
Relationship status	In a relationship 60%		Not in a relationship 40%		
Monthly income	<R5,000 67%	R5,000–R10, 000 20%	R10,001–R15,000 13%	R15,001–R20,000 0%	>R20,000 0%
Neighbourhood status	Low 54%	Middle–Low 40%	Middle 6%	High	
Monthly leisure budget	<R500 54%	R500–R999 46%	R1,000–R1,499 0%	R1,500–R2,000 0%	>R2,000 0%
Weekly leisure frequency	1/week 54%	2/week 33%	3/week 13%	4/week 0%	>4/week 0%

Black Gay Leisure Geographies in Bloemfontein

Figure 1 outlines a general geography of where black gay men spend their leisure time in a range of taverns, bars and nightclubs. As a reference point to a broader gay leisure geography, Fig. 2 reveals the general leisure geography of their white gay male counterparts and the location of the only two venues that are exclusively gay/lesbian coded. On the whole it is clear that there are marked differences between these geographies. When one approaches the idea of black gay leisure space in Bloemfontein, it is important to note that dedicated leisure spaces—such as those found in many Western cities and from which our particular understanding of gay leisure spaces emanates—is absent. No survey participants were aware of the existence of any dedicated black gay-only leisure spaces in Bloemfontein. However, that is not to say there are no places that have at least some sort of gay-coding, or in which heterosexual hegemony is not so pervasive as to wholly suppress—or exclude—gay leisure engagement.

Leisure Places and Spaces that Black Gay Men Seek Out

Figure 1 reveals that black gay leisure spaces are clustered in two areas of the city. These clusters depict a range of venues located in both the former black and the white group areas respectively. An important observation is that the two main places of leisure are found in the former "township" areas. This is not surprising in that most of the survey participants live in that general area. Given that the taverns, shebeens and bars in these areas are mainly informal businesses and thus unregulated, a comprehensive geography of such leisure spaces is not possible. However, the survey participants suggest that there is no physical separation of these venues supported by them from other similar heterosexual leisure spaces.

The specific leisure venues that undoubtedly figure most prominently among the survey participants is those of the bar Press and the nightclub Ekhayeni towards the
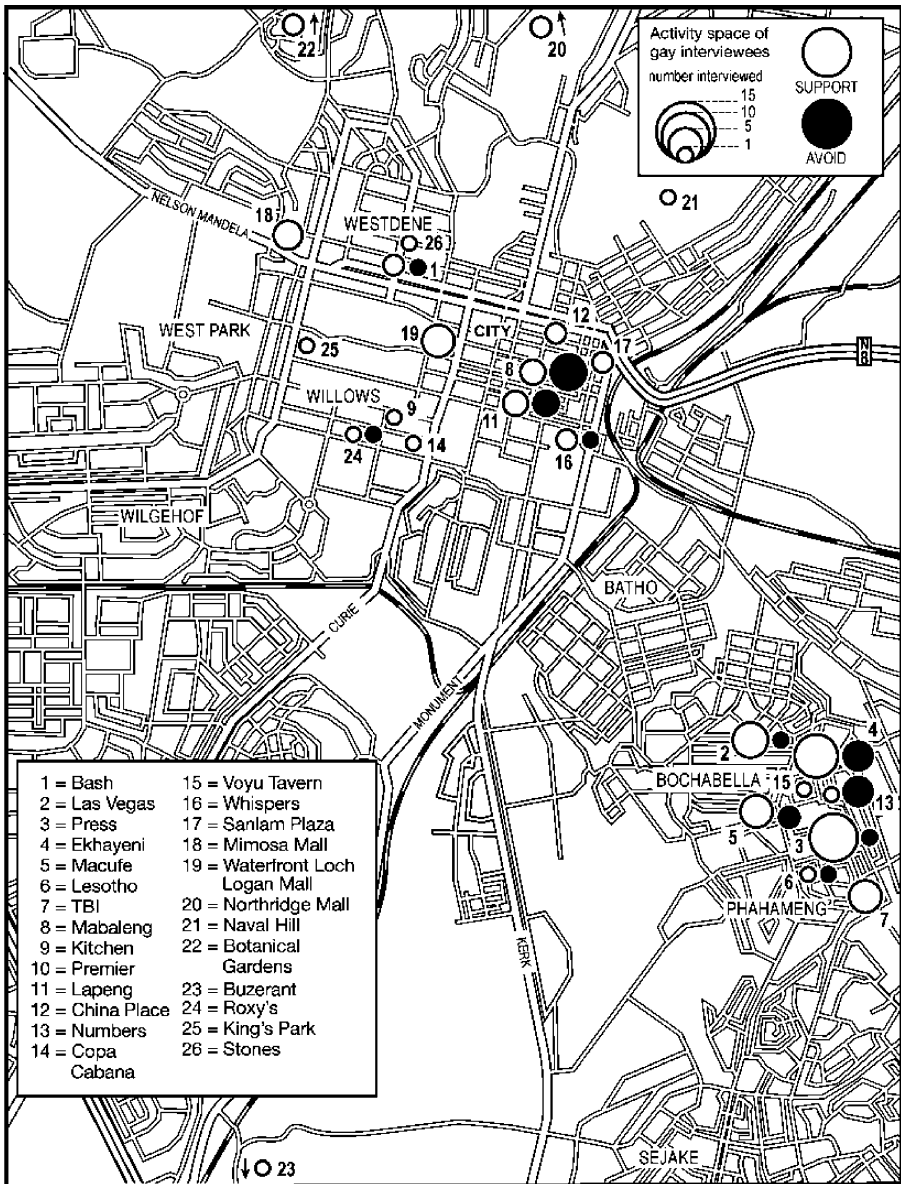
Fig. 1 Black gay leisure spaces in Bloemfontein

south of the city and thus centrally located in the former black township area. Neither of these venues is exclusively gay coded; rather, as Lebo observes "Press is very gay friendly, nice vibe and easily accessible." The high level of support is explained by the fact that Press did not charge an entrance fee and that the beverages where relatively inexpensive. Even so, not all the survey participants supported this venue, or they did so only infrequently, because of the much higher cost of visiting this venue relative to other
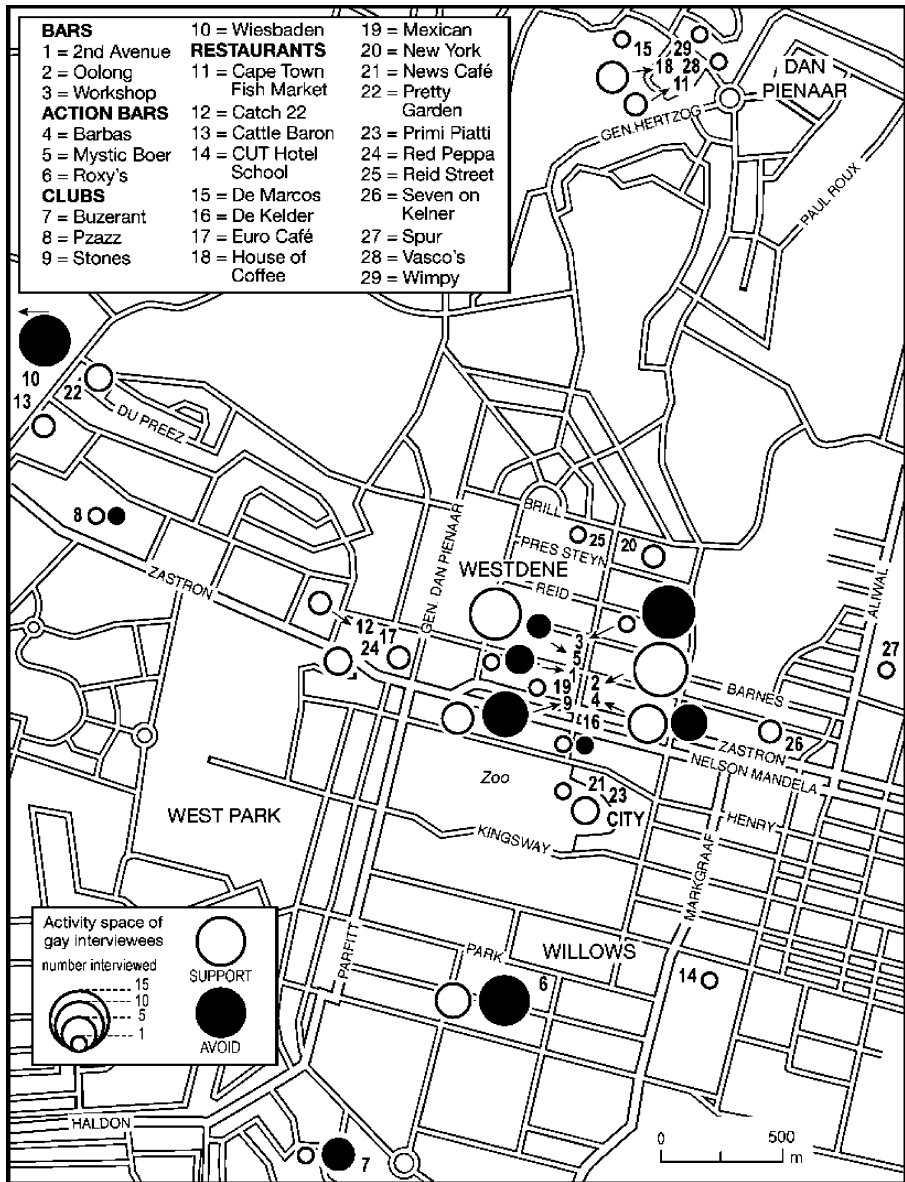
Fig. 2 White gay leisure spaces in Bloemfontein

venues that are principally the more informal taverns/shebeens dotted throughout the former black township areas. Moreover, heterosexual acceptance of gay identities was also at play. Ekhayeni is patronised by "nice people" .... All the guys are open-minded. You can hold hands and kiss other guys there ... it's really gay friendly." In both cases support for these venues was, however, mainly linked to their spatial proximity to where these gay men reside and the experience of inclusion irrespective of sexuality.

A very important claim made by all the survey participants was that there was no desire for dedicated gay leisure spaces. Interestingly, the same claim has also been made by white gay men in Bloemfontein (see Visser 2008), although this is not the case for white lesbians (Visser 2006). Similar to white gay men, the survey participants sought leisure spaces that were inclusive of different sexualities.

Figure 1 also reveals that, in terms of leisure space, a secondary leisure cluster exists. These are venues and spaces found in the formerly white group area neighbourhoods of Brandwag and Westdene. In the main, these venues are restaurants, shops and cinemas. In this respect there is some overlap in terms of shared areas of leisure-seeking, with key retail and shoppertainment spaces being supported by both black and white gay men. However, the Loch Logan Waterfront and Mimosa Mall are the only spaces where both white and black gay men appear to "integrate" in any detectable manner.

Leisure Places and Spaces that Black Gay Men Avoid

The survey participants also identified spaces of active avoidance. It is noteworthy that these spaces were not in the black township area, although it was clear that their knowledge of that area probably precluded their engaging dangerous places in the first instance. Mabaleng, along with a range of other venues in the former white CBD, is avoided. A number of issues ranging fear of crime, homophobia and relative inaccessibility relative to their permanent places of residence explain much of this behaviour. Tebogo states that Mabaleng, and the CBD generally, is populated with drug dealers and street robbers. Tebatso notes the presence of "Nigerians and lots of drug dealers." Thabong feels that "people there discriminate against gay people", whilst Motse noted that "the bouncers in these clubs don't like gay people." This avoidance is not unique to the survey group but is likewise echoed by white gays and lesbians' use of leisure space. Indeed, in another study of the leisure geographies of university students currently in progress it is shown that leisure spaces in the CBD are mostly avoided.

There are also leisure spaces that do not register at all among the survey group. Such spaces include those of the city's main leisure node in Westdene, where two popular gay-friendly bars are located (i.e. Oolong and Mystic Boer, see Fig. 2). While white gays and lesbians, and indeed, the majority of university students of all races generally frequent this popular leisure area, black gay men, unlike their heterosexual peers, are not to be found there. In the main, the lack of financial resources plays the key role. Generally, survey participants noted that it was far less expensive to support leisure venues in the township areas than those in Westdene. Also, reliable evening transport was an issue in that most of the participants did not own private transport.

Perhaps most interesting is the lack of support of the two formal gay venues. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, issues of racial difference were of paramount importance to all the survey participants. The two formal gay leisure venues in the former white group areas of the city are also avoided because "they are for white people". Moreover, there are also differences in social constructs concerning ideal leisure spaces. Motse, for example, once went to a white gay club (Buzerant) and found it "uninteresting", whilst Nico simply claims that "white gay

clubs are totally boring" and that "there are only white people there". In terms of the little interaction there was with white gay men, race certainly played a role. Lebo went to Roxy's and it was not a pleasant experience for him. "The crowd is white and the music was awful" and "white men just want to get their pants down." The overwhelming "whiteness" of these venues makes them feel unwelcome and, given a lack of black support, remain largely unknown spaces of leisure. As Papi notes, "I usually hear about white gay clubs, but they are not for people like myself".

Moreover, Motse points to significant differences in taste in music, something that was frequently highlighted—the gay venues' music was simply "too white", and Nico feels that "they only play boermusiek". However, this lack of support is not only explained by differences in what black gay men interpret as desirable leisure spaces: It is also fundamentally linked to their class position and where they reside in Bloemfontein. Most of the survey participants do not have the resources to own motorised transport and are reliant on public transport—typically "minibus taxis". This mode of transportation is problematic in terms of linking the gay clubs in that their routes do not link the peripherally located white gay club to the areas in which the survey participants mainly reside. Moreover, the issue of the cost of entering these venues, along with the cost of the beverages, puts these places beyond the financial means of black gay men.

These sentiments were echoed in terms of the gay and lesbian bar, Roxy's. In this case the venue is far closer to the townships areas than either Westdene, or the gay dance club, Buzerant, which they did not support. In addition, the venue is located in close proximity to the main taxi routes to the township area and is moreover located in an area popular among black students and young black professionals. However, the whiteness of the venue, the style of music and the general "vibe" linked to those white patrons once again acted as barriers to using this gay-coded leisure venue.

The repeated reference to music styles and vibe is perhaps most revealing in terms of a lack of integration between black and white gay leisure spaces. Race, in terms of explaining this gay leisure geography requires nuanced treatment. More than just a class/race nexus is at stake in explaining black gay exclusion and separation in leisure space. There are racialised differences in what is viewed as a desirable leisure environment. In this respect, music choice which can be conflated with race or ethnicity, depending on locational context, was indicated to play a role in why black gay men avoided the formal gay and gay-friendly venues. Such avoidance can be explained in terms of what types of music people are socialised into enjoying. Indeed, even if these gay men were of the same class position as their white peers and even if experiences of racial difference were less problematic, these gay men would, in all likelihood, still not have supported the gay, or gay-friendly venues of Bloemfontein—racial identity at a far deeper level is indeed an important explanatory variable.

Conclusion

This brief investigation has produced a markedly idiosyncratic depiction of gay leisure geographies in Bloemfontein. The city's black gay space is not physically situated within any single location and can certainly not be meaningfully described

in terms of totalising references to gay neighbourhoods, a gay community or a gay village. The investigation reconfirms a number of Leap's findings in Cape Town, in demonstrating that Bloemfontein's "gay city" is not physically situated within any single metropolitan locale. Various gay-related locations are patterned along divisions of race and class. The historical imprint of race and class also explains the lack of any significant overlap or integration with, for example, white gay leisure geographies. Indeed, there is a total lack of any shared experiences or solidarity between black gay men and white gay men in terms of leisure space utilisation. The important point highlighted in this miniature leisure geography of black gay men is that despite a relentless onslaught on the humanity of black gay men, they nevertheless generate leisure spaces in relatively inclusive heterosexual public spaces, but with no evidence suggesting the development of, or desire for, exclusively black gay leisure spaces. In addition, it is suggested that the manner in which gay men are socialised in terms of what constitutes desirable leisure contexts, such as music, or the manner in which people engage particular types of leisure requires closer scrutiny in explaining the lack of integration between black gay male leisure and white gay male leisure.

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