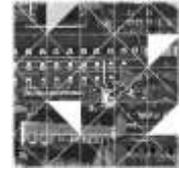

CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios



Village People: critical reflections on a gay-branded space of leisure in Rome

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Abstract

Gay Village is a three-month-long summertime festival, organised in the capital of Italy: Rome. It was created in 2002, after the success of the 2000 World Pride, and has quickly turned into a key event in Rome's summertime entertainment. Ethnographic work at the Gay Village 2017 edition revealed a significant presence of heteronormed cisgender young men among the festival crowd; their experience of and practices throughout the dancing nights often turned into forms of aggressive spatial appropriation, which easily produced a sense of discomfort and lack of safety among women and queer subjectivities. The case study aims at understanding how this form of heteronormed colonisation has come about, in an effort to revive the intellectual debate on gay-branded spaces of consumption. While scholarly work has thoroughly investigated the progressive 'straightening' of mainstream gay-connoted venues, Rome's Gay Village appears to be an urban artefact that not only does not convincingly challenge spatial heteronormativity, but to a certain extent also fails to successfully replicate a classic paradigm of 'urban gay-friendliness through consumption'. And this happens in a metropolitan context that is fully integrated within the common notion of 'West'. Consequently, Rome's Gay Village challenges, from within, assumptions on the uniformity of the geopolitical construct of 'West' in terms of gender and sexual matters, while also echoing the scholarly problematisation of urban models attempting to conjugate queer liberation with capital accumulation.

Keywords: Village; gay-branded consumption; heteronormativity; Rome; West.

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Introduction

“I gotta be a mucho mucho,

macho macho man.

I gotta be a macho.”

(*Macho Man*. Village People, 1977)

Gay Village is a summertime event, lasting approximately three months (June to September), which takes place in Rome. Every summer Gay Village manages to attract an audience of about 400,000 people, thanks to its impressive programme of events, shows and club nights. The event was created to retain and channel the legacy of Rome’s 2000 World Pride, the first World Pride in history. Such an event of unprecedented global reach and magnitude offered to the capital of Italy an invaluable chance of escalating its queer urban discourse, while also affecting national politics concerning matters of sexual citizenship. The significance of this moment of spatial appropriation was all the more heightened by the fact that the event took place in the very same year of the Catholic Jubilee, thus effectively creating a strong urban antagonism (McNeill, 2003; Mudu, 2002). Against this political backdrop, the success of the World Pride convinced its organisers that the time had finally arrived for the creation of a more stable and (semi)-permanent LGBTQ artefact in the urban space of the eternal city.

Since its inauguration in 2002, Gay Village has been itinerant, having been hosted, so far, in four different locations; from 2008 to 2017, year in which I developed my fieldwork, the festival continuously took place in Parco del Ninfeo, a public park in the EUR neighbourhood, in the Southern section of the city of Rome. After seventeen editions and an ever-increasing success, Gay Village has now established itself as a main event in the *Estate Romana*, the 44-year-old municipal initiative that fosters the organisation of leisure, entertainment and cultural events around Rome’s metropolitan area from June to September. Gay Village is sponsored and developed by DiGay Project, an LGBTQ activist association, whose founder and honorary president is interviewee Grazia, who has been a key political figure in the Italian LGBTQ activism for the past two decades; she was one of the main organisers of Rome’s 2000 World Pride.

The case study presented in this article focuses on the sixteenth edition of Gay Village, during the summer of 2017; it was called *Fantàsia*. Each and every year the Gay Village team picks up and develops a theme, ultimately creating a sort of ‘concept event’. *Fantàsia* is a reference to the novel by Michael Ende (1979) and homonymous 1984 West German film *The NeverEnding Story* (*Die unendliche Geschichte*); the theme of the 2017 edition was articulated around the story’s imagery. Gay Village *Fantàsia* opened on Thursday, June 8th and closed on Saturday, September 9th; it was open all weeks in between, on three nights: Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, from 7pm to 4am. Two extra dates were set up, respectively, on Wednesday, June 28th (Pride Day) and on Monday, August 14th (Foam Party on *Ferragosto*, an Italian national holiday). This article presents the data that I collected during my fieldwork, and aims at appreciating the specificities of a gay-branded artefact located in the very unique context of the city of Rome, and Italy in general; its ultimate goal is to attempt to revive and enrich the scholarly debate on gay-branded spaces of consumption, by reaffirming the political importance to keep on critically engaging with this kind of spaces, which are still significant urban tools in the production of mainstream discourses around queer subjectivities.

On the village model and gay-branded consumption

As the name suggests, Rome’s Gay Village was inspired by the Village model, which at the turn of the millennium started to be successfully applied in more and more cities, as the emblematic tool to foster and encourage gay-branded consumption (Boivin, 2011; 2013; Sibalis, 2004). Nowadays, there is a general agreement within the scholarly debate that the concept of ‘Village’ refers to an urban area, with a defined LGBTQ connotation, which is usually recognised by the public administration and inscribed within its long-term

strategies of branding and citymarketing. The Village represents the attempt to render gay consumption a social practice of emancipation: these urban artefacts visibly break the normalised heteronormativity of urban space. The term ‘Village’ inevitably recalls New York City’s Greenwich Village, one of the first urban areas in the Western World to emerge as a so-called ‘gaybourhood’ (Levine, 1979); the Village model is certainly inspired by urban LGBTQ neighbouring dynamics, even though nowadays queer residential clustering has become progressively less significant, and the Village model primarily emphasises gay-branded consumption, entertainment and leisure: some local administrations have even gone as far as planning the development of a Village from scratch, like in the case of Manchester’s Canal Street (Binnie and Skeggs, 2006), especially since the early 2000s, when someone ‘gurued’ to them that gays were among the most important factors for economic success.

With his theory of the creative class, Richard Florida (2002; 2005) provides a universally applicable recipe for outstanding economic performance; this is to be founded on the ‘3 Ts’: talent, tolerance and technology. While talent and technology are pretty much self-explanatory and point directly at the need to set up a knowledge-based economy, tolerance indicates that cities must become welcoming of difference. Tolerance is quintessentially exemplified by an open attitude towards the LGBTQ community, as sexual orientation and gender identity are regarded as the ultimate taboo challenging contemporary society. With the help of colleague Gary Gates, Florida constructs a specific Gay Index, showing a positive correlation between urban friendliness and economic growth. Therefore the success of the Village model must be interpreted in light of a compelling economic necessity: firstly, it fuels the pink economy, thus opening up new channels of capital accumulation; more importantly though, the Village is the reification of gay-friendliness, and it puts out the image of a tolerant and progressive city, which this way earns the right to compete in the international arena for the attraction of the creative and cosmopolitan class (Corbisiero and Monaco, 2017).

Scholarly debate has been prompt in identifying the many critical aspects emerging out of the Village model, in an effort to assess the extent to which this kind of urban phenomena could provide spaces of safety, freedom and emancipation for all queer subjects. As different authors have pointed out (Binnie, 1995; Valentine, 1995), the very notion of ‘pink economy’ revolves predominantly around the male homosexual: literature on other cohorts of the community, like lesbian women, shows how their socialisation has traditionally relied on alternative patterns (Valentine, 1995), while their position within gay-branded venues is way too often likely to be marginal. Petra Doan (2007) throws light on the complex positionality of transsexual people within this type of spaces; she finds that ‘although queer-identified spaces offer a certain degree of protection for gender variant people, such spaces are still highly gendered and produce high levels of harassment and violence towards this population’ (Doan, 2007: 57). Similarly, authors like Hemmings (2002) have highlighted the long-neglected space of bisexuality within gay-branded spaces.

Class and economic status are paramount issues in the context of the Village: since the Village is a main attraction in the city, it becomes pricy, thus less and less affordable for people who are not economically well established (Barrett and Pollack, 2005); accordingly, all the other traditional social stigmas are at play in shaping the desirable queer consumer: race, age, disability, illness, HIV status. Sex and eroticism are carefully regulated within neighbourhoods that become gay-branded: processes of purification of space (Bell and Binnie, 2004) tend to neutralise some traditional practices of the homosexual culture, like outside cruising, according to discourses of decorum and hygiene. The commodification of sex and its retrenchment in private venues (like saunas and playrooms) reproduce the social barriers that have already been highlighted, while also shaping the desirable queer body along straight-looking standards of beauty, which are likely to produce much anxiety and discomfort for the people who do not identify with them (Sibalis, 2004).

In light of this well articulated debate, one might legitimately wonder of what use is ‘yet another’ case study on an urban gay-branded space of consumption. As soon as I settled in Rome, whenever in a conversation I would hint at Gay Village, anyone, straight or queer, would promptly reply that Gay Village was ‘not for gays any longer’. Accordingly, it was striking to notice how the majority of the reviews in the Facebook page of Gay Village expressed negative opinions about the festival:

MALAVITA VILLAGE

“It is no longer what it used to be. They only care about cashing in. This year I went twice: there was no selection at the entrance and, once in, you could find the worst criminals of the entire city. During one single night I witnessed three fights!

And if you make a survey, out of 10 people, no more than 3 will be gay.”

(Facebook comment, August 25th 2016)

Therefore, I was curious to investigate the social dynamics of this gay-branded space that, at its sixteenth edition, seemed to have pretty much disillusioned the population it claimed to target, while still remaining successful. And this is why I think that conjugating the theoretical frameworks on gay-branded consumption with Robyn Longhurst’s emphasis on corporeality can be an exciting scholarly move. By appreciating the body, the corporeal experience as legitimate sites for the production of knowledge, Robyn Longhurst provides inspiring conceptual tools that treasure feminist geographic thinking, in an effort to move beyond a city of representations, and deconstruct the physical and spatial dynamics that constantly neglect and discriminate the queer body, even in gay-branded spaces.

Feminist thinking has already unveiled how, ‘in the absence of any particular body being specified, a white, masculine, self-contained body is presumed’ (Longhurst, 2001: 16). Rational space is far from neutral, but it (re)produces social mechanisms that automatically favour the most privileged subjectivities. The notion of ‘embodiment’ constitutes a consolidated conceptual tool in the social sciences nowadays, particularly in those disciplines that centre on a discussion on space and spatiality. Working on embodiments represents the attempt to rekindle the relationship between Mind and Body, by placing social categories into relational contexts that reveal how they are created, embraced or contested by the individuals. However, if embodiment does not appreciate how non-normative non-male bodies are constantly contained and controlled, it will never succeed in modifying the ways in which space is produced, and it will never be able to liberate those bodies that are most negatively affected by the rational space.

Bodies are codified and shaped by gender, class, race, sexuality, ability and the like; yet they also leak, seep, eat and expel, and this physicality is paramount to understand them as political spaces. Accordingly, Robyn Longhurst (2001; 2005) addresses the construction of space in light of traditional Cartesian notions of rationality, which are based on the hierarchical dichotomy between a superior Mind and a subaltern Body. Men have historically retained power over the production of knowledge, therefore the Mind has traditionally been constructed as the masculine term of the dichotomy; by contrast, women have been associated with corporeality because of their imposed mothering and caring roles and their forced detachment from intellectual work, a social condition that constructed them as ‘not fully rational’ selves. This gendered dichotomy inevitably favours the men.

In light of a full appreciation of corporeality as a legitimate site for knowledge production, I think it is time that scholarly attention goes back to look at what goes on in spaces of gay-branded consumption. Case studies on Villages around the world usually came out when these phenomena were either starting to develop or reaching their climax, as they represented a significant novelty within their urban contexts. Little is known about what happens in these artefacts when they reach more mature stages of their development. While some scholarly contributions have already argued for the demise of these urban artefacts (Brown, 2006; Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009), the Villages and all the other gay-branded spaces for consumption still exist, and often remain fundamental tools through which cities construct their LGBTQ agendas. These mainstream discourses are also the ones that most easily reach those sectors of the society that are less equipped to carry on a thorough reflection on sexual and gender identities and positionalities. The aim of this paper is to challenge the predominance of case studies and models coming from the hegemonic Western socio-cultural area, which are then exported all around the world, with a claim of universal applicability. A case study on Rome’s Gay Village presents a sound opportunity to appreciate how a consolidated urban model of gay-branded consumption was developed in the Italian context, which is integrated within the notion of West but also presents important specificities.

Methodology

Data was collected through participant observation (Cardano, 2011), which was then integrated with in-depth interviews with seven key informants, four cisgender lesbian women and three cisgender gay men, all in their forties to early fifties; in this text, their names have been changed so as to protect their privacy. Key informants were contacted through snowball techniques, which I was able to start thanks to some initial contacts that I had received from Roman LGBTQ associations, mainly Circolo Mario Mieli and DiGay Project. Interviews took place in spring 2018. The seven key informants are people who have been involved in the organisation of the festival: four interviewees (Lorenzo, Ugo, Alessandro, Lucilla) share an entrepreneurial background in Rome's gay clubbing scene; the remaining three (Grazia, Claudia, Antonella) are involved in LGBTQ activism. Lorenzo was the entrepreneur who first inspired Gay Village and put together the initial leadership team, together with Grazia, Lucilla and Claudia; Lorenzo abandoned the project seven years later. Grazia, Lucilla and Claudia continued on and, during the 2017 edition, were still involved in the organisation of Gay Village. Ugo, Alessandro and Antonella joined in the organisation in most recent years. The aim of the interviews was to deepen the knowledge on the philosophy that inspires Gay Village, and how it has changed over the course of the editions. Participant observation kicked off in mid-May and ended in mid-August 2017. From mid-May till June 8th I conducted a participant observation on the construction site of Gay Village, which had been officially opened on May 6th. Once Gay Village's sixteenth edition was inaugurated, I participated in nineteen club nights: four on Thursdays (including Opening night), seven on Fridays, and eight on Saturdays. I was accorded permission of entrance by the organisers, who provided me with two VIP Cards that allowed me access to the premises for all the regular nights.

I would usually arrive around 9.30pm, in time for the beginning of the *preserale*, the entertainment programme happening before the beginning of the clubnight. Over the course of the season, I was able to access the *privé* areas on three nights. With only three exceptions, I was not accompanied for the club nights. My participant observation was structured in two different ways: during the observation on the construction site, I was 'uncovered', and revealed my identity and purposes to the staff; this was necessary in order to gain access to the premises: I would follow the staff members around and, when possible, pose them questions on the activities they were carrying out. On the other hand, during the club nights I acted as if I were a regular client, as part of the crowd; I would wander around Gay Village and engage with whatever was going on, while taking notes on my mobile phone. I never revealed my identity to other customers, nor to other staff members whom I had not been introduced to during the period at the construction site. A prototypical Gay Village club night could be described as articulated in three moments: a quiet opening (from 7 to 9:30 pm approximately), *preserale*, and clubbing after midnight. The people populating the *preserale* and the clubbing night, respectively, often seemed to be very different from one another, or at least they seemed to be engaging in different activities, practices and forms of behaviour; this socio-spatial dynamic almost created two different places, during the same night, within the same location. Once *preserale* was over, the Gay Village staff would quickly remove the chairs from the floor, and in the semi-darkness clubbers would gradually start gathering while chatting and having their drinks. After a few minutes, an 'Intro' video narrating the story of Fantàsia would play in the led walls of both stages: the club night begins.

The geographies of the Gay Village clubnights

It is usually around midnight when clubbing begins. The club is composed of two dance floors, which are named, respectively, Horok and Amarganta, after two locations mentioned in *The NeverEnding Story*. Amarganta plays predominantly pop/commercial tunes, while Horok has a more defined electro-house flavour. The two floors are equally large and they are separated by a central bar, which houses a directing cabin on its rooftop. Amarganta's large stage welcomes the performances of the dance crew and of the drag queens, while Horok's is much tinier and, on its rear, features a big wall covered with ivy ornaments and a led wall showing a wide-open eye, symbolising a sort of awakening. During all the nights that I spent at Gay Village, a very

predominant trend was for the audience to first gather in Amarganta, probably attracted by the *preserale*: on many nights the deejays playing in Horok would start their gigs to an (almost) empty floor, which would often take a while before filling in. Nevertheless, none of the floors would start to congregate a significant amount of people in the first twenty to thirty minutes: club culture in Italy hardly ever starts earlier than midnight.

I thought extensively about how to introduce the findings related to the clubbing part of the nights and I came to the conclusion that the best way to discuss them was by following the one aspect that captured my attention from the very beginning, and consequently shaped my entire observation: the cis-heteronormed young male population. A few notes on how the observation came to take this turn: the space of the club hardly facilitates verbal communication, especially among strangers. In light of this context, my ethnography had to necessarily become more experiential, which rendered my positionality inevitably crucial. Summing up on some of the social categories that usually codify one's positionality – I am a white, able-normed, average healthy, middle class, well educated, self-defined gay, cisgender male young adult –there were also a couple of context-bound specific features that I identified as playing out in my fieldwork. First and foremost, I was alone most of the time in a place where people gather to socialise and have fun: this allowed me to wander around quite freely, but also required a lot of effort in the creation and maintenance of my own space of comfort. Secondly, I adore dancing, I am quite capable to do it and I particularly enjoy dancing to commercial pop music. This means that, every time I was not observing something specific, I would be pretty automatically driven towards the Amarganta floor. The music genre and the search for comfort significantly drove my positioning and moving around Gay Village. Pointing out these personal elements is important because it reveals the specific angle from which I got to experience the venue.

An important clarification ought to be made. While carrying out a participant observation with very limited room for verbal interaction with the population I was observing, I did often reflect upon the possible arbitrariness of my identification of and differentiation between queer and heteronormed people (especially cisgender men). Aside from overtly non-heterosexual practices (like a same-sex erotic exchange, which does not necessarily identify a specific orientation, but anyway shows an openness to non-straight possibilities), and with the acknowledgement that my personal 'gaydar' had to be problematized in its academic methodological effectiveness, I could not label people sexually simply according to how they looked or how I perceived them, so as not to run the risk of my argument being based merely on stereotypes. Certainly there were some features that appeared as 'belonging' to a supposed population, in terms of practices of socialisation, attire and body presentation, and levels and forms of sexualisation; however, the point was not to distinguish between gay and straight (men). Rather, the point was to single out a population that was overtly reproducing heteronormative and sexist practices in a gay-branded space, thus threatening the comfort and sense of safety of the others; whether this population was predominantly gay or straight, it was neither possible to determine, nor ultimately relevant to the scope of the research: Fantàsia, in fact, was not supposed to be a gay-controlled space, but rather a queer-liberated one.

Studies on male socialisation identify aggressiveness as one of its remarkable featuring aspects (Skeggs, 1999; Taylor and Jamieson, 1997); this does not indicate an essentialist vision of men as innately aggressive, but rather it underlines the naturalising process of certain forms of behaviour that, through reiteration, construct masculinity as socially dominant through coercive power. In their socialisation, men may tend to reproduce this aggressiveness in a playful way, especially among their peers and circles of friends; however, what is playful for some might not be so for others. The group of peers is a recurring feature that I found among the heteronormed young men attending Gay Village, who would often arrive in groups of more than five people; such practice was not so common among other types of population. This has two important implications: firstly, it becomes more likely for non-heteronormed people to get outnumbered; secondly, and more importantly, big groups occupy more space, and produce more significant effects in the geographies of the venue they are attending. I found spatial aggressiveness to be a characterising feature among the heteronormed groups of men at Gay Village: by 'spatial aggressiveness' I mainly refer to forms of self-imposition in the space, which provoked the moving away of other people: the most common example was the act of grabbing and dragging each other around the dance floor. Spatial aggressiveness was coupled by other forms of violent behaviour, from physical ones – for example,

I witnessed a fight – to verbal ones, which was mainly related to the use of vulgarity and swearing against somebody else.

Forms of aggressive behaviour emerged in the interaction of heteronormed men with both women and LGBTQ individuals. Expressions of sexual interests towards women could often happen in an intrusive way, mainly by making innuendoes to or by giving insisting looks at some girl's body parts. I did also witness some episodes of women trying to get away from annoying guys, and once also passing for lesbians as a quick way out. Forms of discomfort at the expenses of LGBTQ individuals usually revolved around mockery, especially through caricatures simulating erotic same-sex exchanges and the feminine way in which some guys would be dancing. Transgender and non-binary people would usually get stared at with ironic attitudes, which in some cases even turned into forms of inappropriate behaviour. A couple of times, when bumping into two girls making out, some guys would shout: 'This is heaven!' or other similar comments. Quite interestingly, young heteronormed guys would often end up taking off their shirts and tops while clubbing, which was extremely peculiar because every time this bodily show off drew unwanted attention (that is, male attention), the latter would be immediately sanctioned and repressed – careless of the fact that they were at Gay Village.

What is possibly the most interesting aspect of the consistent presence of heteronormed young men at Gay Village is dancing and its geographies. Dancing in a club is a practice that is codified by many social norms (Malbon, 1999), so much that only rarely turns out to be a liberating experience – or it becomes so through the consumption of alcohol or other substances. At Gay Village Fantàsia there was a neat difference between the two dance floors playing, respectively, commercial pop music (Amarganta) and electro-house (Horok). Dancing is usually not considered to be a social practice 'for (heteronormed) men' (Skeggs, 1999); yet, the music played on the Horok floor seemed to enjoy a sort of widespread positive recognition among the heteronormed young men attending Gay Village; consequently, this provided a sort of social legitimation for their dancing. The dance style that seemed to be very popular among them is called Melbourne Shuffle: it combines together elements of urban dance styles (like break dance) with revisited elements of more classic genres, like swing and Charleston. In Horok, heteronormed young men would dance the shuffle, engaging with the music and the movements, hence not in a caricature-like way; they would often also try to show off their dance expertise, which at times was actually impressive.

This was much less the case in the Amarganta floor, where the cheesy soundtrack usually restored dancing as an inadequate social practice 'for (heteronormed) men', and provoked an immediate return to forms of Goliardic male socialisation that involved pushing and pulling, mocking, and caricature-like types of dancing: in other words, potential aggressiveness again. Accordingly, showing expertise or full enjoyment while dancing to pop music was often negatively sanctioned: in the context of a gay club this becomes all the more evident because, for example, non-heteronormed men could tend to use commercial pop music to feminise their dance moves (Peterson, 2011), often stimulated by the 'icon factor': if *Single Ladies* comes up, I would immediately perform the worldwide famous routine. However, if the dance floor is dominated by a heteronormed male crowd, whose dancing is mainly based on (self)mocking and mimicking, a body that expresses pure enjoyment, expertise and hence a sense of freedom while dancing, gets more easily singled out and possibly exposed, especially if (s)he is alone, or worse, if (s)he overdoes it: this, again, produces discomfort.

Maintaining the differentiation between the two floors, throughout the Gay Village season I saw no homoerotic exchanges ever happening in the Horok dance floor; we could arguably go as far as affirming that sexual diversity was not very visible in there. Horok appeared to be just like a 'regular' (heteronormed) club, and yet it constantly seemed to serve as the 'cool' floor. In the words of the organisers, its stage was created by following a precise conceptual design: it was narrow and low, so as to accentuate the sense of proximity between the crowd and the deejays; it hosted the aerial acrobatic dances, which were clearly more eye-catching than the regular dance crew routines; it had a lesser presence of vocalists and drag queens, which toned down the gay element. All the most famous guest deejays performed on the Horok stage, the 'cool dance floor' at Gay Village, which heteronormed young men seemed to have colonised as theirs.

While attending the club nights at Gay Village I was extremely surprised to notice how very few expressions of homoeroticism and same-sex affection I could see around the premises: I would rarely see more than five episodes

per night. There was a significant discrepancy between the area around Giardino delle Delizie ('the Garden of Delights', the food and beverage ground floor area), and the dance floor itself: the former would seldom witness homoerotic and same-sex affectionate exchanges, which would concentrate predominantly around the Amarganta section. More precisely, the majority of the homoerotic expressions would usually manifest in the second part of the clubbing night, that is, after the show of the dance crew and the entrance of the vocalist. In my opinion, this is easily understandable in light of a set of factors: firstly, the show of the dance crew usually accompanied a shift in the genre of music played, going from mainly commercial, to a mixture of both charts and EDM/house: this inevitably toned down the singing along and dancing to the 'pop anthems', thus allowing the crowd more opportunities to look around, and hook up. Secondly, the sexy dance crew clearly augmented arousal, together with the vocalist's performance, which was often sexually teasing and filled with innuendoes. Thirdly, the beginning of the show would bring the people tight closer together, in an effort to get as near the stage as possible to watch: this finally created a proper club crowd, which seemed to act as a unitary collective body. These elements fostered and amplified a pre-linguistic, highly sensorial bodily communication, which in this context became immediately charged in sensuality (Cattan and Vanolo, 2014).

Male and female same-sex couples seemed to be equally present, contrary to what the literature on commercial gay venues might suggest (Binnie, 1995; Sibalis, 2004). The vast majority of the homoerotic exchanges seemed to be happening either at the two corners of the Amarganta floor (between the stage and the entrances to the *privé* areas), or in the very first rows of the dancing crowd, right in front of the stage. The first rows of the commercial/pop music stage were charged with a more neatly defined LGBTQ connotation, due to their proximity to the performing crew and their sexy presentation, which was queer in kind. As for the corners, they appeared to become homoeroticised for two reasons: firstly, they were situated right in front of the entrances to the *privé* areas, which were more significantly gay-connoted spaces. *Privé* areas were tinier than the main floors, hence more easily controlled by the Gay Village staff that was assigned to them. *Privé* areas were generally attended by a queer or friendly population: the dance crew and the drag queens, for example, would hang out in the *privé* areas while not performing, chilling in full make up and costumes, hence queering the visual impact of these spots. It follows that the people that would get in and out of the *privé* areas were usually friendlier, a factor that might have mitigated the heteronormative perception of the corners of the Amarganta floor. At the same time, security guards controlled the entrances to the *privé* areas, making sure that only the customers who had paid could gain access to them.

Discussion and conclusions

According to the interviewees, by the tenth edition it had become clear that Gay Village was failing to embark upon the trajectory of firmly establishing Rome within the LGBTQ global map and calendar. In Lucilla's words:

"At some point, the original philosophy got lost, and Gay Village started to become something different. (...) Gay Village is well known in Rome, and maybe at a national level, as the most important event during the *Estate Romana*. Do you think that this was what I had in mind? I had imagined Gay Village could become our window to the world, where the most famous DJs would dream to come. «The most important event during the *Estate Romana*?» Fuck that."

I was certainly very much inspired by material culture approaches (Miller, 1998) in my effort to make sense of how and why a gay-branded venue could become so popular among a heteronormed cohort of people, who is possibly less likely to make many openly queer encounters and experiences throughout their otherwise heteronormative life trajectories. On the one hand, the entertainment offer during the *preserale* could count on the participation of many TV personalities, especially from Silvio Berlusconi's Mediaset formats, and in particular from talent, gossip and reality shows. This type of programming is likely to attract a clientele with specific consumption tastes and practices, when it comes to entertainment and leisure (Ricci, 2014). Similarly, participant observation revealed how Gay Village was traditionally renowned as a clubbing venue for house music, which appeared to be very popular among the same population that was attracted by the entertainment programme. In the Findings I already reported the distinct separation between the Amarganta floor, playing commercial music and displaying all sorts of gay imagery (a bigger stage animated by drag queens, Go-go boys,

the dance crew and a vocalist filling the floor with sexual innuendo), and the Horok Floor, devoted to house music, where all the gay paraphernalia was dramatically toned down. Hence, Gay Village appeared to provide a commercial offer that appealed to a certain kind of population, while not reinforcing the gay connotation of the venue with adequate measures aimed at securing a comfortable and safe space for the queer subjects. I decided to turn to the organisers' political views on sexual and gender identities in order to grasp what discourse was shaping the space of the festival, and why it was not so effective.

A very interesting feature of Gay Village, in its final editions, was that the majority of the people at its leadership were cisgender lesbian women, something that seemed to contrast established views in the classic literature², which identify lesbians as a more marginal presence in gay-branded places of consumption, due to less spending power and different socialising practices (often to get away from highly male-dominated venues). However, what emerged from the interviews was a poorly articulated intention to exploit this opportunity to create a venue that could cater more specifically to a lesbian, and generally female clientele: throughout the summer of 2017 only one weekend was dedicated to an event with a more defined female connotation. Similarly, issues of safety and freedom, which are usually crucial when tackling the relationship between gender and space (Valentine, 1995), did not appear to have been thoroughly discussed, under the firm belief that Gay Village was a place that 'welcomed everybody':

"We don't have selection at the entrance, it's not like we don't allow straight people in: those who are not welcome are the ones that can cause trouble, and they can be straight as well as gay, men or women, those who are a little altered. We don't want to create ghettos, we want integration. This means that if a gay is dancing next to a straight person, the straight person realises that the gay is not a monster, he is not a pervert." (Interview with Claudia).

As the slogan of the first edition proclaimed, Gay Village is "the exclusive place that does not exclude anybody". (Interview with Grazia).

As depicted in the previous section, the philosophy shaping Gay Village was particularly keen on abandoning the social stereotype and stigma of the hyper-sexualised homosexual: accordingly, the venues were not equipped with any space or facility dedicated to sex and eroticism, like darkrooms, playrooms, labyrinths. Moreover, expressions of homoerotic PDA appeared to be extremely rare at Gay Village, and they would usually concentrate around those spots that were regarded as safest. The few homoerotic exchanges would happen pretty exclusively on the dance floor, and not on the rest of the space of Gay Village, which had a family-friendly, 'countryside fair' atmosphere. Accordingly, the few hidden, dark spots out of the dance floor were very rarely erotically connoted, and were used for other types of socially sanctioned activities, like doing drugs. This process of desexualisation appears to be intimately connected to the female organisers' shared vision of masculinity (and cisgender male homosexuality) as a highly sexualised and body-bound predatory gender, to which femininity is contrasted in its incorporeal and unworldly aspirations, as aesthetically pleasing and culturally fulfilling. In Grazia's words:

"I don't like to be in a space where the male hormonal drive is too strong and predominant. I like a space where people feel good, where there is a collective energy of cheerfulness, and not predominance, because it is clear that explicit male sexuality is too much for a woman, especially if she's a lesbian. (...) A man who has a passion for another man, and this strong masculinity, which is invasive, I mean I don't know what other term to use: I think it's ugly. I mean, for me aesthetics counts. The homosexuality I identify with is sophisticated, it's aesthetically neutral, it's genderless."

This gendered dichotomy contrasting a highly sexualised masculinity and an unworldly femininity appears to be the exact opposite of the Cartesian Mind versus Body distinction, which Robyn Longhurst (2001; 2005) challenges in her work on corporeality. However, if the Mind is associated with masculinity and the Body with femininity, when the Mind is conferred a hierarchical superiority, this inevitably entails that the normative male body will be privileged over all of the other bodies. Rational space favours the male body. Flamboyant types of dancing, forms of camp attitudes, homoerotic exchanges: at Gay Village all of these queer expressions were subjected to the presence of a heteronormed cis-male crowd that did not seem to abide by the gay connotation of the club, and way too often succeeded in establishing his spatial hegemony over the venue (Rinaldi, 2015). By

² However, this view has already been expanded; see Podmore, 2013.

interpreting these data in light of Robyn Longhurst's approach, it is possible to conclude that Gay Village did not provide a social and physical space that enhanced a liberated and liberating bodily experience for the queer subjects, thus inevitably falling back into traditional heteronormative dynamics. As expressed in the previous section, the *privé* areas seemed to be the only space retaining a more solid queer connotation, something that inevitably inserts an economic filter to the enjoyment of a more relaxed, friendlier space. This is also connected with the economic purpose of the establishment, which needs to make sure that the lucrative revenues are never compromised, and always increased. There was an economic necessity to attract as many customers as possible, even at the expenses of the population that Gay Village claimed to cater primarily to. The already weak political discourse succumbed to economic interest.

The investigation on Gay Village seems to indicate a subtle, yet extremely decisive difference from the urban model of the Village, which was integrated into the creativity paradigms: the latter materialises diversity into specific urban artefacts (like the gay commercial scenes) that straight or queer customers consume *because*, or *at least with a social awareness* of the fact that they are gay-connoted; regardless of its final outcomes, this type of consumption requires clients to acknowledge the specificity of the place they are in, and consequently to conform their behaviours, attitudes and open-mindedness. On the other hand, Rome's Gay Village, with the poor discourse on sexual and gender identity of its organisers, the consequent lack of services, activities or spaces with an overt homoerotic connotation, its house music dance floor with no gay imagery and entertainment (Go-go boys, drag queens), and a general mainstreaming trajectory seem to invite in a heteronormed crowd that can very easily consume Gay Village *in complete disregard* of its LGBTQ connotation. Such difference proves decisive at least for two reasons. Firstly, in light of everything we discussed, Rome's Gay Village is likely to witness much higher levels of male heteronormed aggressiveness, resulting in a profound violation of the comfort and safety of women and queer subjectivities. Secondly, by looking at the case of Gay Village, we could go as far as questioning the extent to which a gay-branding agenda has been successfully played out in Rome. And this is certainly more surprising, because it differentiates the Roman case from an established, generalised pattern that is at play in many metropolises and capital cities throughout North-Western Europe, and the West in general.

In this regard, it is helpful to refer to Donald McNeill's (2003) analysis of Rome as an 'alternative global city'. The author reflects upon the famous notion theorized by Saskia Sassen (1991), and then problematizes it with alternative approaches to globalisation and modernity that take into account different factors, other than the economic ones, in order to appreciate and acknowledge the equally global status of other cities, and their significance in the international arena. This is the case of Rome with Catholicism, just like all the other cities that hold a special significance for worldwide spread faiths and creeds (Mecca, Jerusalem). In this regard, the role of the Catholic Church, its power and manifold implications in the politics and all the other matters concerning the eternal city simply cannot be underestimated. In light of this cumbersome presence, one can certainly read the general reticence of Rome's public administration and mayors to carry on a consistent and ever-expanding LGBTQ urban agenda, starting with the very poor support that Rome's public administration had showed to the 2000 World Pride in light of the simultaneous celebrations of the Catholic Jubilee (Johnston, 2005; McNeill, 2003; Mudu, 2002). It is worth remarking that, for as much as it is economically successful, Gay Village is still an itinerant and seasonal festival: it has a summertime temporary nature for which it does not root itself more permanently into Rome's public space. This means that the organisation of every edition faces the possibility of encountering many problems and differences; in 2019, for the first time, it did not open.

If the political structure and the high powers of the eternal city certainly did not provide a welcoming background for a gay agenda, the case study shows profound intricacies within the activist networks in putting forward and supporting a sound political discourse, or at least an effective agenda. Gay Village was born as legacy of the World Pride, and it was the outcome of the encounter between activism and entrepreneurialism according to a classic model of gay branding that, at that time, was triumphing in different metropolitan areas around the Western world. As the seasons went by and Gay Village gained more and more success and popularity, the club crowd has progressively become more and more filled with a heteronormed population. The weakening of a sophisticated entrepreneurialism revealed, and possibly rendered even more vulnerable a very poor political vision on gender and sexuality, which did not hold a tight grip on the material space of the venue.

The work of Robyn Longhurst was inspiring to see how at Gay Village the bodily experience of the queer subject appears to be significantly limited, in light of the organisers' attempt to break away from the stereotype of the homosexual as a hypersexualised pervert. The normalisation of the homosexual happens mainly through a process of desexualisation of the space, on the count that Gay Village is a place that 'welcomes everyone' – a universal aspiration, which aims to go beyond gender identities and sexual orientations. Nevertheless, no entrepreneur must fail to appreciate that the need to gay-brand a venue stems fundamentally from the fact that the LGBTQ community occupies a socially subaltern position; if the queer subjects are neglected in their free enjoyment of a gay-branded space, traditional heterosexist dynamics are likely to resurface. In my opinion, this approach evokes specific features that traditionally appear to have shaped and affected the processes of identity building of many Italian queer subjects, especially cisgender male homosexuals. A societal structure based on strong familistic heteropatriarchal dynamics, and the multi-faceted presence of Catholicism within many aspects of society will certainly have to be more thoroughly investigated in order to make sense of certain configurations of queer identity in the Italian context.

In LGBTQ studies, the identification of a social enemy that overtly addresses and depicts non-conforming sexualities as a danger, a risk, a sin or a perversion, has often been regarded as the best way to foster forms of LGBTQ communitarianism, and develop socio-political trajectories of emancipation. In this regard, it is paramount to refer to the extraordinary work of Víctor Mora Gaspar (2016), who has been elaborating a history of the medical, social and legal discourse that shaped the image of the homosexual as a deviant criminal during Spain's Francoist regime, and the implications of this discourse at the beginning of the *Transición*. On the contrary, Italy's socio-legal history of homosexuality seems to have been based primarily on silencing, rather than punishing forms of sexually deviant behaviour, thus effectively idling the fight against an overt oppressor (Scurti, 2005). When this social setting started to perceive a more significant discourse of queer emancipation, which propagated from the US into all the Western country after Stonewall³, it seems likely that very specific configurations of non-conforming sexual identities started to come about: rather than closeted identities, these were fairly disclosed queer identities, which however did not seem to fully articulate their quintessentially political meaningfulness, thus also hindering forms of communitarianism and collective belonging. At least since the World Pride the situation has changed, even though I do wonder the extent to which the neoliberal quest for freedom, which ultimately pushes back sexuality into the private sphere, might have found too fertile a ground in a social context that was already struggling with the genuinely political status of a queer subjectivity; in the words of Lisa Duggan:

“There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture, or of an on-going engagement with contentious cantankerous queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military, then we go home and cook dinner, forever.” (Duggan, 2003: 62).

The literature has showed that it is not enough to gay-brand a place to make it queer; Rome's Gay Village proves how easily homonormalisation turns into blatant heterosexism when the political significance of the queer body is neglected. The literature has thoroughly highlighted how not all queer subjects are put in the same conditions to freely enjoy the exciting possibilities that an urban lifestyle can offer. I think that the Italian examples may add another level of complexity to our understanding of queer urban emancipation, because they highlight how, according to their socio-cultural backgrounds and personal upbringing, queer subjects may interpret and articulate their personal emancipation in different ways, which do not always acquire a collective, communitarian, political connotation. However, if the exploration and consolidation of queer identities develops predominantly in the private sphere, without fully appreciating their subaltern social positions and acting accordingly against oppression, is it still possible to speak about emancipation? Evoking Kath Weston (1995), perhaps it is not enough to 'get thee to a big city': the moves and actions of a queer subject constantly demand to be filled with a clear political meaning, if they want to turn from forms of private personal fulfilment and freedom, into trajectories of social liberation and justice.

³ The riots at New York City's Stonewall Inn, in June 1969, are universally regarded as the symbolic origin of the contemporary global LGBTQ movement.

Finally, the case of Rome appears in particular to disprove, yet again, the universal applicability of models of urban growth that operationalise gay-friendliness as a factor of success which do not take into account the specificities of the metropolitan contexts in which they are played out. This unmask the Anglo-Saxon (especially American) origins of specific urban phenomena, which are later theorised as universally applicable, and then applied onto metropolitan contexts presenting different social, political and cultural trajectories. Most importantly, Rome's Gay Village appears to challenge directly both a uniformed notion of the 'West' as a geopolitical cultural region of Neoliberal modernity and progress, and consequently also the divide between Global North and Global South. The notion of a metropolitan Global North, in which economic growth is accompanied by steady social progress, is inevitably questioned if one looks at Rome, a metropolitan area of a developed country, through queer lenses. And this provides an invaluable opportunity to defy, question, change and rework all the different global geographies through which we attempt to make sense of the world we live in.

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