

**Out of Soho, Back into the Closet:  
Re-Thinking the London Gay Community**

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### **Declaration**

'I, Marco Venturi, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis'.

Date: 09/04/18

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### **Abstract**

Over the past three decades, Soho has become known, both nationally and internationally, as London's gay district, functioning as a place where gay men could openly interact and express their sexual identities while also developing a sense of community. At the same time, Soho also worked as a bridge between these men and British society, laying the ground for those legal and social changes that contributed to a shift in attitudes towards homosexuality at the start of the millennium. However, many gay-targeted venues in the district have recently gone out of business or are struggling to stay open. Even though this tendency is often described as a direct result of the relentless process of gentrification that is swiftly changing the image of Soho, it does not explain why so many gay men seem to be almost complicit in the district's seeming disappearance. While it is impossible to ignore the part that gentrification is playing in the transformation of the district and the changing face of its gay scene, it is not the only element contributing to the process. Academic research has often concentrated on similar examples of gay districts around the world, but not much attention has been given to Soho. The aim of this work is to reconsider current views on Soho and to try to understand if and how other social, economic, and cultural factors may be playing a part in the dismissal of the area as London's gay district. In particular, through the use of qualitative

interviews, the thesis concentrates on the personal experience of gay men in London and their relationship with Soho, bringing new insights to the study of the district and expanding academic literature around gay spaces and communities.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

ACT UP — AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power

AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ART — Antiretroviral Therapy

BME — Black and Minority Ethnic

CHE — Campaign for Homosexual Equality

GBF — Gay Best Friend

GBL — Gamma-Butyrolactone Acid

GHB — Gamma-Hydroxybutyric Acid

GLA — Greater London Authority

GLC — Greater London Council

GLF — Gay Liberation Front

GMFA — Gay Men Fighting AIDS

GRID — Gay-Related Immune Deficiency

HIV — Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HPA — Health Protection Agency

ILGA — International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association

IVF — In Vitro Fertilisation

LGBTQ — Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

LTGSD — Lets Talk About Gay Sex and Drugs

MET — London Metropolitan Police

NAT — National AIDS Trust

NBS — New Bloomsbury Set

NHS — National Health Service

PEP — Post-Exposure Prophylaxis

PHE — Public Health England

PrEP — Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis

RVT — Royal Vauxhall Tavern

STI — Sexually Transmitted Infection

THT — Terrence Higgins Trust

UCL — University College London

WCC — Westminster City Council

WWII — World War Two

## **Introduction**

## **0.1 — Questions, Methods, Structure**

### **0.1.1 — Aims and Objectives**

In the last few years, a discernible body of literature has developed around the world in relation to gay spaces and their (dis)appearance. However, not much attention has been given to the district of Soho. This clashes with a boom in printed and online articles that have recently concentrated on the disappearance of gay spaces from the district. These articles are often constructed on general assumptions that gay Soho is now disappearing because of a relentless process of gentrification that is affecting London on a more general level. Nonetheless, they often fail to recognise other important elements that are specific to the district's situation but that play a key role in understanding the problem. These elements can provide insights on other important issues regarding both Soho and gay men in London. The aim of this research is to reconsider the current role of Soho in the identity and community-making process for gay men in London. For over three decades Soho has been regarded as a place where gay identities were formed and as a place made by the performance of these identities. Recent changes in social and political attitudes towards homosexuality require a reconsideration of the area's function and its influence on more general ideas of gay community. Not only can this thesis provide new meanings for both Soho and the gay male community of

London but it can also contribute to the international discussion over gay spaces and gay communities more broadly. The overall question that is proposed is: What is the current function of Soho in the urban gay panorama? Far from providing a response that presents itself as an indisputable truth, the thesis concentrates on what research participants personally think of Soho and how they perceive the numerous changes that are affecting the area and its communities. At the same time, their answers represent a chance to understand how such changes relate to gay men's experiences of both the district and their own sexual identities. The research had the following objectives:

- Investigate the area's history to understand why Soho came to be identified as the gay district of London.
- Study how gay relations have been understood, defined, and controlled over time in a British context.
- Understand how the case of Soho fits within a broader discourse around the (dis)appearance of other gay areas in different cities/countries.
- Analyse the different meanings that have been given to the idea of gay community and how they have evolved in British society.
- Consider the part that the construction of gay identities has played in the process and the circumstances that have allowed the performance of gay identities in Soho in the first place.
- Understand if and in what ways Soho is changing and how this reflects on



the social life of gay men in London.

- Use all the background research to define a present scenario and understand current positions on the topics considered.
- Conduct interviews in order to validate/disprove previous research and assumptions made on the subject by other critics and publications.
- Create a new discussion on Soho by connecting historical and empirical research to the findings derived from the interviews conducted.

### **0.1.2 — Methodology**

The first step was to find out what had already been written on the topics examined in this thesis. Four concepts were fundamental for the analysis: community, space, identity, and consumption. The examination of any of these four concepts could not prescind from a deep analysis of the others.

Communities and spaces are so closely related that they have often been considered the same when, in fact, they are mutually constituted. So, too, are identities and consumption, always influencing each other. However, the binomials of community/space and identity/consumption should not deceive.

Community is as much linked to space as it is to identity and consumption, and vice versa. Considering these concepts as separate entities would not only represent a skewed analysis but it would also undermine the effectiveness of this research. The findings of the preliminary research are drawn together and explored further in the second part of this *Introduction* (see 0.2).

On completing the preliminary research, empirical evidence to validate the study was collected. Given that the four concepts mentioned above are experienced in different ways by each individual, the main procedure employed was the gathering of qualitative data from interviews. Permission from UCL Ethics Committee was necessary to conduct research involving living human participants and to make sure that the study would comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 which regulates the processing of personal data in the UK. Consequently, a personal web page (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/multidisciplinary-and-intercultural-inquiry/research/current-research-projects/marco-venturi>) was set up to create a space where potential interviewees could find information about the project. Here, it was announced that participants of any age (18 and over), nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic background, education, and profession, were being recruited for the study, as long as they had or had had some kind of personal experience in relation to Soho — as residents, visitors, tourists — and identified themselves as other than heterosexual. Information regarding the study was sent to institutions and venues around London, asking them to publicise it via their e-mail distribution lists or web pages. The research was mainly advertised through online resources and snowballing so that personal involvement in the choice of participants could be minimised given that it was necessary to wait for participants to get in touch rather than actively look for them. For practical reasons, the research concentrates on gay men. Other sexualities performed in Soho have not been thoroughly analysed, nor did they represent a target for interviews and focus groups. While the inclusion of bisexual and queer women, lesbians, and transgender people would have expanded the research, it would not have been feasible given the restrictions of

time and contents of the study. Nonetheless, Soho being a gay space traditionally oriented towards gay men, as demonstrated throughout the thesis, it would have been interesting to analyse how this space is lived and understood by other LGBTQ groups. Their inclusion will, hopefully, represent the next step for the research and the direction that it may take in the future. Another group that this thesis does not take into account is that of male minors given that Soho is an area characterised by the presence of gay bars and venues which require customers to be over 18 years old by law to enter the premises. Consequently, the presence of minors in Soho and their participation in the gay life of the district is obviously restricted. Their inclusion in the study, then, may not have been of much relevance. However, as in the case of other LGBTQ groups, it would be worth considering their point of view in a different project given that teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality today are those who, in just a few years time, might make the difference and give new insights in the study of gay spaces. Exploring their current ideas on the topic would afford an opportunity to develop hypotheses with an eye on the future and would provide valuable material for future analysis.

Once suitable respondents had answered the call for participants, individual interviews and focus groups were arranged. Participants were asked to indicate if they had any specific preference in terms of the way they were going to be interviewed. A third of them preferred an individual interview, the rest were happy either way. One specifically requested to be in a focus group as he was curious to experience the dynamics of a group discussion. To find suitable dates, a poll on Doodle.com was set up. Groups of no more than four

people and no less than three were formed. Availability was the main criteria but, when feasible, participants were matched in order to have as mixed a focus group as possible. The location in which interviews and focus groups took place was determined by participants' availability to travel. Whenever possible, they were arranged on campus. When people could not travel to UCL, other locations of their choice were used, mainly in Soho. Individual interviews lasted about 50 minutes each whereas focus groups took up to 75 minutes. All discussions were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Everyone present was made aware of this beforehand and was required to give their consent. Before starting, the aims and objectives of the research were explained in detail. Each participant was provided with an Information Sheet and Consent Form to be read, understood and signed. They were also asked to fill in a Demographic Information Sheet. The latter included closed-end and semi-closed-end questions regarding demographic information. This was necessary to construct a table (see *Table 1*) where the variety of participants could be showcased and that worked as a constant tool that could be used during the recruitment process in order to determine if too many responses from a particular group and not enough from another were being received. This was the only time that the recruiting process was interfered with and participants who fit specific characteristics were actively recruited in order to provide as wide a range of contributions as possible. The fact that the interviewing process stopped once the number of thirty-five participants was reached is not due to any specific pre-set limit but simply indicates that the material collected turned out to be very substantial. This is not to say that interviewing thirty-five participants was enough to provide a complete description of what gay men in London think of

Soho, nor to reach definite answers on the matter given that this number is too exiguous as a basis for generalisations. Still, common trends can already be found in their answers, offering a worthwhile overview and suggesting themes and issues that must be analysed in order to address the case study.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format, meaning that even though participants were allowed full freedom of expression, a set of questions was nonetheless formulated in advance and used whenever the discussion diverted towards topics that were less relevant for the study or participants spent too much time on a specific aspect. Questions included — but were not limited to:

- What do you think of when you think of Soho?
- Where would you place Soho on an imaginary map of London?
- How often do you go to Soho? At what time of the day/night?
- When was the first/last time you went to Soho? Why?
- What is the gay community? Do you feel part of it?
- Is there a gay community in Soho?
- Is Soho a welcoming space? Have you ever felt excluded when in Soho?
- Do you think Soho is changing? If yes, in what ways?
- Are there alternatives to Soho?
- Do you use any online-dating application? What considerations can you

make about these apps?

— What reflections, if any, do you think online apps may have on Soho?

— What is your personal opinion of Soho?

— Do you feel the need for a specific gay space?

After each interview or focus group, the conversation was typed into a Word document and the original audio file deleted. All names were immediately changed so that none of the participants could be identified. Once all interviews and focus groups were completed and transcribed, common themes and positions that had arisen in response to the questions were sought. Consequently, personal contributions were initially compared to official data resulting from previous research and current studies or articles on the subject and then included in the thesis.

### **0.1.3 — Thesis Structure**

The thesis is divided into four chapters. *Chapter 1* tries to answer the question: Why is Soho considered the gay district of London? The history of Soho is retraced, with a particular focus on the role that the district played in the formation of homosexual identities and communities during the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. At the same time, a more general overview of how homosexual relations have been understood, defined, and regulated throughout this period in Britain offers a useful background in order to

understand social and cultural changes towards homosexuality and why Soho, in particular, emerged as a centre of gay life. The personal experience of some of the most well-known homosexual characters of Soho is used to show that notions of sexual identity and community are historically specific but also linked through the overlapping of these same identities and communities within a specific area and the uses that are made of its space. The aim of the chapter is to convey a sense of the changing texture of the district and that of the notion of homosexuality in British society, showing how different characters and generations have populated the area and helped construct the contemporary narrative that sees Soho as the centre of London's gay life even though its role as a gay district must today be called into question.

*Chapter II* concentrates on the question: What do participants really think of Soho and what does this tell us about gay men's relationship with the district? Drawing from the interviews conducted, participants' personal relationship with the district of Soho, and their ideas of community more broadly, are explored. The chapter starts with an analysis of the answers received when interviewees were asked to reflect on Soho as a gay space and what attracted them to the area. It then goes on to consider their descriptions of what constitutes the gay community and if the latter can be found in Soho. Consequently, those factors that nowadays may be contributing to a personal detachment of interviewees from Soho are discussed, such as the fragmentation of the community, the presence of straight people and tourists in the area, the feeling of safety that many gay men experience outside Soho, the lack of political activism, and the feeling of shame resulting from the promotion of a normative ideal of gay life.

The aim of the chapter is to give voice to gay men themselves and find out if their attitudes towards both Soho and the gay community may be contributing to the disappearance of gay venues from the district.

*Chapter III* tries to answer the question: Are there alternatives to the view of Soho as London's first and only gay district? A historical overview of other urban spaces that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attracted high numbers of gay men is offered in the first part of the chapter. These include Soho's surroundings, other urban districts, and major cruising spaces. The second part of the chapter aims at understanding, through the analysis of contemporary urban areas that were mentioned by interviewees, if these can be seen as new gay districts or if they play a different role compared to Soho. More fluid spaces that move around the city and may, therefore, constitute an alternative model to the concentration of gay venues particular to Soho, are also analysed. The final aim of the chapter is to challenge the image of Soho as London's first and only gay district that is often promoted and to show how the area relates to other urban spaces, both past and present, that may have carried out a similar function for gay men.

*Chapter IV* concentrates on the question: Are new kinds of gay space replacing Soho? In the first part of the chapter, online spaces, and the ways in which they have changed the geography of the city as well as those in which gay men connect and interact, are considered. In particular, I explore if online applications could represent a new space for identity and community-making processes among gay men. Consequently, the rise in popularity of chemsex is discussed. The widespread use of recreational drugs for sex represents for



many gay men a temporary space where they can seek refuge from society's norms. Still, the role of both online spaces and chemsex in their life must be carefully analysed now that the number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among gay men in London has exponentially increased. This also raises questions about the future of Soho as a gay district and its function in the urban gay panorama of the city. The final aim of the chapter is to consider alternatives to the traditional gay village model of Soho and understand if the district, as a gay space, has now reached its apogee.

In the *Conclusions*, a more autobiographical perspective is offered in order to provide a new dimension to the analysis of gay community, and Soho more specifically. Far from identifying unquestionable answers, the thesis aims to provide an overview and analysis of what participants thought of the issues discussed and therefore present a picture that is indicative of gay men's current relationship with Soho.

## **0.2 — Literature Review**

The remainder of this Introduction consists of a literature review, which situates the project with reference to four main concepts: space, community, identity and consumption.

### **0.2.1 — Defining Communities**

The word *community* is extremely controversial. Various disciplines have

proposed several definitions over time, with differences arising even from within the same branch of knowledge. Sociologists often compared community to a small group of people, like a village; anthropologists defined it as a group sharing the same culture; in political studies, it was linked to ideas of citizenship and collectivity; whereas in geography it has related groups of people to specific locations like a neighbourhood. In 1887, Tönnies (1988) identified two fundamental concepts in the study of community: the *Gemeinschaft* and the *Gesellschaft*. The first refers to personal face-to-face interactions, as those that characterise family ties or small groups. The second defines impersonal relations that go beyond the immediate surrounding of an individual. The progression from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* was seen as an inevitable process of modernity. The transition of power into the hands of nations and states led to the idea of a loss of community and political autonomy. As a reaction, with the advent of mass society and urbanisation, community became synonymous with rurality and tradition. A similar distinction was accepted by the Chicago School, a group of scholars at the University of Chicago who focused on the urban space and its consequent human alienation. During the 1920s and 1930s, they too sustained a thesis of crisis and decline of community. Nonetheless, they saw in small urban groups, such as neighbourhoods, a hope for its survival. However, by the 1960s this view started to be challenged. In the 1980s, with the advent of deindustrialisation and globalisation, even urban neighbourhoods could not provide a space for community anymore. Postmodernity meant the end of community: urban space was reorganised; communities were displaced; people became mobile; cities became global (Blackshaw 2010: 1-5; Delanty 2003: 2, 8-15, 51-7; Hubbard 2012: 5; Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 61-3;

Webber 1963: 23).

Consequently, Anderson (1983: 6-15) argued that 'all communities larger than primordial villages (and perhaps even these) are imagined'. Thanks to the advent of modern technology, people no longer needed to know each other to form a community. Cohen (1985) seemed to confirm this position, concluding that communities could not exist without imagination. Symbols, rituals, celebrations, not only described community but they sustained its existence. Today, community is going through its postmodern phase in which individuals are both agents of consumption and the product that is being consumed. Being divided by tastes and lifestyles, the new consumer-based society makes it possible to imagine a plurality of communities. Women, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, are only some of the possible examples. Postmodern communities also include those groups whose members share a common interest or need, such as a community of football supporters. These communities can be defined as networks and their membership is always optional and temporary. Because their boundaries are more malleable and porous, members can enter or leave according to their own needs. This is possible because individual freedom, in this context, is more important than any membership. Postmodern communities do not depend on previous structures, such as family, nor do they oblige members to strict rules. They are composed by the self-identification of different individuals who share a commonality. Therefore, the sense of belonging to these communities will only be a consequence of processes of identification, not the base on which identity is formed. However, given that identity and community are now often based on consumption, they also become exclusive,

as not every individual will have the possibilities, or the will, to purchase access into them (Amit 2002: 8; Bauman 1992: 136, 2001: 144, 2004: 66, 2008: 120-1; Blackshaw 2010: 1-35, 106-21; Delanty 2003: 170-83; Hobsbawm 1995: 428).

Over the last few decades, the multiplicity of perspectives seems to have undermined the concept of community, to the point that its usefulness as a descriptive term is now being questioned. Still, even though its definition has constantly been challenged, the active discussion around it demonstrates that community is still important for our understanding of the world. Today, the idea of community has gained new multiple meanings and its understanding will always depend on the context in which the term is used. In his article 'The Idea of a Sexual Community', Weeks (1996: 72-6) argues that the concept of community can introduce a 'vocabulary of values' useful for the creation of a gay identity. Even recognising internal differences among gay men, Weeks affirms that their shared experiences of stigma and oppression may work in the construction of a common feeling of solidarity. Throughout the thesis, a reference to the idea of *gay community* is often made. Starting from Weeks' definition of a sexual community, the gay community is understood in its postmodern sense as a vocabulary of values that can help gay men identify as a collectivity sharing common experiences (both positive and negative), interests, and goals. In this context, the gay community must be understood as a fluid concept. It does not try to include a specific number of people who personally know each other or who share a common space on a daily basis. Nor does it require people to officially become members, participate in specific activities, or give up their belonging to other communities (ethnic, social, etc.).

Instead, it describes a network of people who, whenever they find it convenient for their own interests and for as long as they please, identify with others in a similar situation. People who identify with the gay community see their sexual identities as a common ground on which a more general idea of belonging can be based. The gay community, understood in postmodern terms, is composed of different races/ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, nationalities, etc. Moreover, it may be better understood if considered in its plurality. There exist, in fact, many gay communities, from local to global communities, from communities defined by a specific preference, such as the BDSM community, to communities encompassing a plurality of others. Understood in these terms, the gay community becomes a useful means in the fight for social and legal recognition, the development of services for gay people, the creation of safe spaces, and for a more general change in attitudes towards sexual minorities.

The concept of gay community should be seen as an empowering tool, not as an imposition. While generalisation is avoided and there is no intention to force anyone under a specific category that would feel imposed from the outside, for this study the gay community is understood in its postmodern sense as a very productive concept. When the gay community is mentioned, it is to describe a feeling, an ideal, more than a specific group of people. The gay community of Soho, for example, represents the communal feeling of solidarity and similarity that many gay men, like those interviewed for this research, may share when they are in the district, and that is played out in collective spaces such as bars and clubs, or simply in the streets. Even though only twenty-seven respondents self-identified as gay (five as bisexual and three as queer), during

the interviews and focus groups every participant kept making reference to the gay community, gay spaces, or gay men more broadly, showing some sort of connection between the three identities that they had self-identified with. This is the reason why, for the purposes of this thesis, they are often all grouped under the definition of gay men. As already mentioned, the use of the term gay, and gay community more precisely, should be seen as a way to stimulate a discussion around its meanings and potentialities, not as a fixed category.

Throughout the thesis this concept is sometimes celebrated, sometimes criticised. Even interviewees, as shown in 2.1, had contrasting positions on the matter, with some refusing the concept, others embracing it, and many criticising it but, nonetheless, using it as a tool in order to describe a shared identity. It should also be highlighted that, even though categories such as gay/homosexual or straight/heterosexual are often used in opposition (this is the way most participants understood them), both the idea of identity and that of community are, instead, fluid and historic-specific categories. In other words, more than representing fixed and binary ideas, they are always subjected to the space and time in which they develop, and always depending on the personal factors and characteristics of the people who identify with them.

### **0.2.2 — Occupying Spaces**

Any discussion around the concept of gay community must include a close analysis of the spaces in which gay communities are constituted. Identity, and consequently community, is always constructed in space but only specific spaces allow the expression of sexual identities which do not belong to

heteronormative society. In community studies and urban geography, the city is seen as the main actor in the construction of gay identities and communities. Gay men have traditionally occupied a mobile and transitory space in the city. These 'eroticised topographies — both real and imagined — in which sexual acts and identities are performed and consummated' have been given much attention in the last decades, with studies concentrating on cruising and public sex (Bell and Valentine 1995a: 1). Central to this discussion is the figure of the *flâneur*. A recurrent subject of Baudelaire's writings in the nineteenth century and an expression of the capitalist commodification of urban spaces, the *flâneur* strolls around the city as an act of independence. His voyeuristic nature sets him both inside and outside the crowd. To him, he is an outsider who can walk the streets without being seen. To other *flâneurs*, he becomes part of that same crowd. This idea of seeing and being seen, of returning the gaze, is at the base of the modern figure of the *flâneur*, especially in its appropriation by gay men cruising the streets. The experience is only possible within the city because it is both the anonymity and the size of the urban space which allow its performance. The presence of gay spaces, despite their temporary and unofficial nature, helped the creation of a gay consciousness. Concurrently, it also represented a threat to the heteronormative system. In fact, space is often regarded as an empty and politically neutral background that can be filled with meanings by any sexual identity. This conception ignores the fact that space has previously been sexualised by the sexual majority and, therefore, has already become heteronormative and homophobic. Space, both public and private, although asexual to heterosexuals, is always political and problematic for sexual minorities. In other words, heterosexuality has become invisible

because it is too visible, placeless because it is present in every place. Given that heterosexuality is defined as normal, any other sexuality will be considered abnormal and dangerous, creating a hierarchy of sexualities in which the state becomes a panoptic authority. Therefore, concepts of space must always be criticised and challenged by sexual minorities who constantly have to make claims of ownership, through the performance of alternative sexual identities, if they want to subvert the heteronormativity of space and give it new meanings (Bell et al. 1994: 32; Binnie 1997a: 159; de Certeau 1984: 97; Higgs 1999a: 9; Hubbard 2012: 12, 124-5; Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 3-4, 79-80; Lefebvre 1998: 39-44; Munt 1995: 115-7; Myslik 1996; Turner 2003; Valentine 2001: 5).

Envisioning sexual minorities as ethnic minorities, Levine (1979) described those urban areas that presented a high concentration of gay men as *gay ghettos*. The term *ghetto* was originally used in sixteenth-century Venice to define an urban area in which Jews were forced to live. In the 1920s, sociologists of the Chicago School expanded its definition to include ethnic minorities. During the second half of the 1960s, social protests and riots exploded all over the American panorama as a consequence of the Civil Rights movement. Because most Black revolts started from the ghettos, Castells (1983: 49-54) advanced the idea that it was in these specific enclaves that alternative social, cultural and political ideas had incubated. In his essay 'The Gay Ghetto', Levine (1979: 363-7) recognised a similarity between these enclaves and the spatial concentrations of gay men in the largest American cities. These areas presented institutions and commercial establishments, a physical presence of the minority, social isolation, and residential concentration.



A similar approach was taken by Murray (1979) and Loyd and Rowntree (1978), who further argued that a need to defend themselves from the rest of society was the actual reason for the creation of both ethnic and gay neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, the comparison with ethnic ghettos perpetuated the idea that ethnic and gay minorities shared the same history and the same socio-economic characteristics. Castells (1983) saw this association as problematic given that gay spaces are usually formed by gay men themselves (although the choice of the area is often the product of historical and social factors), whereas ethnic ghettos are produced to segregate a minority. The first important attempt to develop a geographical perspective was that of Castells and Murphy (1982) and Castells (1983). Using a combination of maps recording various factors such as residential concentration, multiple male households in the area, spatial distribution of voting patterns, bar listings, and commercial venues targeting gay men in San Francisco, they showed the existence of a well-defined area with a high concentration of gay men. However, even though they included the contribution of gay men interviewed during their research and did not just assume the presence of a sexual minority in a specific and circumscribed area as Levine (1979) had previously done, the methodology used of mapping space simply defined the physical position of gay men. They contributed little to the understanding of the phenomenon as well as to the specificities of the case, ignoring the relation between sex, class and space and relying on inflexible notions of identity. A closer look, but one still restricted to a certain stereotype of middle-class gay men, came from Lauria and Knopp (1985) and Knopp (1987, 1990b, 1992, 1995). Following Castells' work, they showed how gay men were pivotal actors in the gentrification of specific urban areas and tried to identify

both the causes and the consequences of such a phenomenon. Limits aside, all these earlier works contributed to the definition of urban areas with a strong presence of sexual minorities while promoting their visibility. Still, the term ghetto carries too heavy a racial connotation to be adapted to gay spaces. The repression that many ethnic ghettos endured shows that ghettos in themselves were not liberated zones. Only since the 1990s have sociologists and geographers finally overcome the ethnic/sexual binomial and started to consider different factors in their studies of gay spaces, such as consumption, performance, sexual citizenship, and nationalism (Almgren 1994: 48-9; Binnie 1995; Bell 1995a, 1995b; Bell and Binnie 2000; Davis 2004: 286-7; Evans 1993; Hindle 1994: 13-4; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Puar 2002: 112).

### **0.2.3 — Making Spaces and Identities**

Once gay areas started to be seen as urban spaces characterised by increasing independence, more positive terms than ghetto were used by social scientists to describe them, often helping their promotion to a national and international level. New York, for instance, was described as 'an international mecca, a symbol of gay liberation' (Span 1994). Similarly, Boyd (1997: 75) depicts nineteenth-century San Francisco as a 'gay haven', a place of sexual nonconformity. He then goes on to portray the city not only as a 'gay mecca' but also as a 'gay capital', given its unique role in attracting gay migrants and tourists during the late 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, San Francisco is probably the most well-known and referenced case of how the residential concentration of gay men in a specific area managed to create both a political consciousness

and a sense of community. Even though a large number of venues welcoming a homosexual clientele were already present in the city, a specific gay area did not appear until the 1970s, when gay men took over the Eureka Valley area, then renamed The Castro, that was being vacated by the Irish working class. Old Victorian houses were rented or bought for a modest price and consequently repaired by gay men. Property values improved, gay businesses and venues appeared, and the area as a whole was upgraded. Residential concentration was fundamental in shaping the following social and political history of the city. It was the concentration of gay voters (25% of registered voters) that, in 1977, secured the election and consequent support of the city government, as well as many other victories such as that against Senator Briggs' 1978 proposition to ban homosexual teachers in Californian schools. According to Castells (1983: 305), gay men in San Francisco, between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1970s, represented an 'urban social movement: a collective conscious action aimed at the transformation of the institutionalized urban meaning against the logic, interest, and values of the dominant class' (Boyd 2011: 240-1; Castells 1983: 101, 138-58; D'Emilio 1989: 459, 1992b: 78-85; Hindle 1994: 14-6; Roberts 2013: 105; Wright 1999: 176).

Since the late 1970s, gentrification had become a major process, all over North America and Europe, in the redevelopment and repopulation by the middle class of those urban areas that were once destined to contain the working class and ethnic minorities. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida (2002: 256) notes that those American cities with a higher number of gay men are also the most economically developed. He even argues that 'to some

extent, homosexuality represents the last frontier of diversity in our society, and thus a place that welcomes the gay community welcomes all kinds of people'. However, gentrification was rapidly extended to those areas where the presence of class and ethnic minorities was still strong, forcing them to relocate to other parts of the city that were of no interest to gentrifiers. Their displacement became a consequence of gentrification instead of being its primary cause. The advancement of a minority (in this case gay men), then, was based on the displacement of another (class and ethnic minorities). Furthermore, Florida (2002) mainly offers a middle-class version of gay men based on their economic power, without considering those gay men who are born in different economic situations. Gentrification seems to have become, in time, a victim of its own success. The creation of highly commodified residential spaces upgraded the look and the reputation of these areas. However, by the end of the 1990s, even for many middle-class gay men gentrified neighbourhoods had become unaffordable. Gay districts were gradually transformed into spending zones, expressing the new capitalism and commodification of the city. The examples of Paris and Manchester can help better understand this turn. Similarly to London and San Francisco, Paris had numerous cruising sites. However, until the beginning of the 1980s, a specific gay neighbourhood was not present. This is because of the French republican tradition that pushes gay men not to recognise themselves as a distinct minority but only as a collection of equal citizens sharing a common taste. Only after a governmental campaign aimed at redeveloping the degraded neighbourhood of Le Marais, did gay men start to populate the area, attracted by its central location in the city. By the mid-1990s, at least forty gay businesses were

present around Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie. Still, many gay men chose not to live in the area. This, in fact, seems to contradict previous ideas of gay spaces as formed around a visible residential population. In the case of Paris, Le Marais has come to represent a space of gay consumption more than a space of gay residence. The same could be said for Manchester's Gay Village. In the 1990s, after the redevelopment of the area and the pedestrianisation of Canal Street, the presence of gay businesses in the area increased. European style bars and their depiction in popular TV series such as *Queer as Folk* (1999) and *Bob and Rose* (2001) transformed the area into a worldwide attraction, but one that bore little resemblance to gay residential neighbourhoods like The Castro. Even though Le Marais and Manchester's Gay Village still represent the successful results of gay politics, their creation is tightly related to a capitalist process of city branding aimed at transforming the urban panorama into a series of well-recognisable areas that attract specific consumers, more than at creating safe spaces for gay residents. According to Mort (2009: 6-11, 151, 165), each space corresponds to particular 'taste communities' and develops around the idea of 'a geographically concentrated site of consumption' (Binnie et al. 2006: 221; Boyd 2011: 242-3; Castells 1983: 104, 138-67; Delanty 2003: 58-60; Hindle 1994: 17-9; Provencher 2007: 37-40; Sibalís 1999: 19-34; Skeggs 1999: 219; Whittle 1994a: 36-7; Wright 1999: 189).

#### **0.2.4 — Consuming Spaces and Identities**

In this context, ethnic and gay spaces became central to the process of transformation of the city into a cosmopolitan space. In the urban economy,

these spaces represented both a symbol of tolerance and a destination for curious tourists wanting to consume difference. With globalisation and the consequent request for new markets, the state invested in both ethnic and gay areas and promoted them as cultural capital. Many definitions have been given to the term *cosmopolitanism*. For Hannerz (1996: 103), cosmopolitanism should be primarily conceived in terms of 'a willingness to engage with the Other', implying the possession of adequate knowledge and skills to relate with cultural diversity in different spaces and situations. The possession of this cultural capital is the result of what Urry (1995: 167) defines as the 'right' to travel and consume difference. Traditionally, cosmopolitanism represented a straight White middle-class experience given that only those who could afford to consume the other were allowed to enter and leave ethnic and gay ghettos, as opposed to the consumed others for whom these spaces had more impermeable boundaries. Gradually, however, consumerism as a practice to gain cultural capital was adopted by those same minorities who were trying to claim their right as consumers more than as consumed others. Consumerism, in the case of gay men, may represent the connection between the adoption of visible signs and practices and the constitution of a sense of identity and community. This is why, whereas in the 1980s American corporations tended to avoid homosexuals, in the 1990s they started to explore the possibilities offered by gay consumers, finally establishing a gay market in the 2000s. Gay spaces attracted cultural and economic capital, what came to be defined as the *pink pound* (gay men's buying power). The promotion of cosmopolitan spaces advertised not only a specific area but the city as a whole to a national and an international level. The term *global cities* is a useful tool to understand the

relation between urban spaces and the idea of sexual and consumer citizenship that they produce and attract. As a matter of fact, through the promotion of a consumer citizenship based on specific urban spaces, that of sexual citizenship can develop as the consumption of sexualised urban spaces. Throughout modernity, nations were regarded as the main focus of identification but their boundaries have been made less important with the advent of postmodernity. As previously considered, citizenship may be seen as less of a matter of national identity than of identification with global corporate giants or social groups based on factors such as ethnicity, gender, etc. Being excluded by their nations from a full sense of citizenship, these minorities can finally see their rights recognised on a more global level to the point that, today, the idea of sexual citizenship seems to be challenging traditional forms of national identity (Barrett and Pollack 2005: 439; Bell and Binnie 2000; Binnie 1997a: 88, 2004b: 122-7; Binnie et al. 2006: 4, 18; Evans 1993: 113; Hubbard 2012: 177; Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 5, 86-7, 113-6; Rushbrook 2002: 185-9).

Events such as Prides, although transitory, played a key role in the promotion of global cities as gay destinations and helped official tourism boards to chase gay consumers. These cities became 'event cities', often competing with each other in attracting the pink pound (Tschumi 1994). Although in the past the relationship between city governments and Pride parades was not always easy, today a change in attitudes has turned the promotion of such events into part of the city's own marketing strategy in order to attract tourists and support local economies. Sydney's Mardi Gras is an excellent example. The first Mardi Gras took place in 1978 as a commemoration of the Stonewall

Inn riots. Tensions between the demonstrators and the local police transformed the pacific protest into a civil riot. Since then, Mardi Gras has taken place every year even though, for the first decade, it always provoked a certain embarrassment within the city government. During the 1980s, gay people managed to attract increasing support from private associations and organisations, enlarging their activities and promoting their image. This economic success was welcomed in the 1990s by those same institutions that were once trying to stop the events. Throughout the late 1990s and the whole 2000s, Mardi Gras attracted millions of dollars a year. It now lasts 3 weeks and is aimed at a global, more than a national, audience. However, most of the events are not free, and although Mardi Gras is still controlled by gay associations of Sydney, the involvement of the government and corporations has been fundamental, at the cost of much of its independence. Ultimately, no matter how helpful gay events and businesses might be in the creation of gay identities and communities, they still function as businesses. Woods (1995: 41) sees consumerism as something 'sold as a tool of empowerment' but that, in truth, represents a way of taking advantage of 'the need of most homosexuals for a sense of community by packaging and then selling to gay men and lesbians real or imagined aspects of their identity or lifestyle'. In his opinion, 'the commodification of homosexuality has less to do with the politics of liberation or community than with the cynical creation and maintenance of a gullible niche market' (Altman 1997: 420; Formby 2012: 3-9; Hubbard 2012: 110, 184; Hughes 2003; Markwell 2002: 82-90; Mules 2000: 312-27; Puar 2002: 105; Rushbrook 2002: 192-3).



Moreover, the gay market has been too often presumed to be White and middle-class but not all gay men have the economic possibilities to participate in consumer culture, nor are all gay men White. What we define as the gay community is often the representation of only its western White middle-class members. Therefore, even after the reinvention of gay spaces as cosmopolitan spaces, only some gay men could participate. Gay men of colour and other ethnic minorities (BME) are often neglected as consumers in the industry literature only to become the most consumed. This 'complicity in exoticism, voyeurism and colonization' by White middle-class gay men reinforces internal divisions and ignores the consequences of the 'eroticization of the exotic other' (Rushbrook 2002: 199). The commodification of gay spaces and identities also means a homogenisation and domestication of spatial difference. The same difference has started to be reproduced in series, with 'cloned, cosmopolitan collections of stores, restaurants, and nightlife venues that cater to the most privileged and assimilable sectors of gay communities' popping out in most global cities around the world (Lewis 2013: 239). These spaces claim originality but the process of commodification is making it difficult to distinguish one space from the other. They might actually represent a new form of normativity according to which only those gay spaces and events that follow a cosmopolitan discourse can be supported and tolerated by the state. Therefore, even though a global gay identity is recognisable, it also represents a 'false consciousness on the part of those who passively consume it', making it increasingly difficult to distinguish the consumer from the consumed (Binnie 1997a: 6. See also Almgren 1994: 45-6; Bell and Binnie 2004: 1807-8; Binnie 1995: 186, 1997a: 69-76, 2004b: 10-8, 134; Binnie et al. 2006: 17; Duggan 2002; Puar 2002: 113;

Rofe 2003: 2521).

As previously noted, space is always heterosexualised unless a sexual minority manages to give a specific space new meanings. However, to what extent are they ever free from the heterosexual gaze? Since the nineteenth century, the organisation of urban space meant that every sexuality was supposed to occupy a specific space. Sexual acts that took place in the right space represented stability, those that did not caused moral panic. As long as gay identities were performed inside the gay ghetto, they were tolerated by both society and the state. This is because of what Whittle (1994a: 30-1) identifies through the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony'. The ruling class manages to control the dominated class by granting concessions or reforms that, in fact, leave unaltered the privileges of the dominant class. For gay men, this means the opportunity to occupy urban space and be recognised as a minority entitled to the state's protection (as long as they follow the state's rules of behaviour). However, once gay men have transformed these areas into gentrified and safe neighbourhoods, heterosexuals often seem to reclaim them, supporting the idea that gay space is just borrowed or, more exactly, just lent. The high presence of heterosexuals might then transform gay space into straight space again. Here, straight men and women can consume the (safe) exotic other and feel cosmopolitan. Heterosexual tourism, in the form of hen nights and stag parties, has become a common presence in most gay neighbourhoods, to the point that gay spaces might have become safe for heterosexuals but unsafe for gay men and lesbians themselves. Cosmopolitanism may then still be seen as a predominantly middle-class attitude given that it is based on the possession of

cultural and economic capital that can only be obtained and maintained by certain groups. It is as much about excluding others as it is about embracing difference. Tourism can then be seen as either bringing economic advantages for the advertised spaces of consumption or as causing their dismissal (Bell and Valentine 1997: 117; Binnie 2004b: 127; Binnie and Skeggs 2006; Binnie et al. 2006: 10-31; Holt and Griffin 2003; Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 86-9; Matejskova 2007; Rushbrook 2002: 184-94; Skeggs 1999: 214-26).

### **0.2.5 — Leaving Spaces and Identities**

In recent years, media and critics have started advancing the idea that recognisable urban gay spaces are changing, to the point that the decline, de-gaying, or the death of the *gaybourhood* is often theorised. The main understanding is that urban gay spaces are not a fundamental part of gay life anymore. The decline of gay spaces is often seen as a natural consequence of the processes of commercialisation and normalisation that render all space safe and overthrow old boundaries. The death of the gay village has also come to represent the death of gay culture and gay identities as a whole. The distinction between gay and straight culture has become increasingly blurred to the point that many critics identify the current era as *post-gay*. The term post-gay is attributed to the British journalist Paul Burston who introduced it in 1994. In 1998, it started to appear among American critics but it is Aguirre-Livingston's (2011) article that promoted it to a worldwide audience. This controversial opinion piece appeared in *The Grid*, a local Toronto weekly news magazine. The author, 21 years old at the time, entitled his piece 'Dawn of a New Gay:

Why You Won't Find the Younger Generation Partying in the Village or Plastering Rainbow Flags on Their Bumpers'. He argues that some 'twentysomething' gay men have left gay villages (he refers explicitly to the Village Church Wellesley, in the South Midtown area of Toronto, which has been recognised as the *Church Street Area of Special Identity*) and Pride events as well as any kind of political activism, and have rejected the idea that their sexual orientation should define their identity. Moreover, as explained by Aguirre-Livingston (2011), many gay men now oppose stereotypes of effeminacy and camp and foster a new idea of straight-acting homosexuality as a new normative masculinity:

for my generation, the big question has shifted from the *right* to be gay to the struggle over the *right* way to be gay. Within the community, we battle each other over questions like, how gay is too gay? How masculine is masculine enough? Are we really expected to get married just because we can? [emphasis in the original].

The new postmodern homosexual, or *post-mo*, is the result of a generational divide. Past generations' fights — over political, social, and health issues — are now seen as useless: 'by the time we were ready to take the reins, the post-mo had a different agenda: no agenda at all. We simply arrived at the end of the fight to reap the fruits of another generation's labour' (2011). Today, new

generations can see openly-gay characters on TV, gay icons, and anti-bullying campaigns. Aguirre-Livingston (2011) argues:

a defining feature of the post-mo is that we are digital natives, raised in the Internet era. While gay men were once relegated to sexual encounters in dark parks or in the hidden comforts of a bathhouse, we came of age on our computers, from the safety of our bedrooms.

For post-mos, physical space does not need to be reclaimed as gay to be safe. On the contrary, all space is now safe because all space is now indifferent to their sexuality (Ghaziani 2011, 2014: 23-4; Ruting 2008; Sullivan 2005: 16).

Aguirre-Livingston's article provoked a rapid and intense response, to the point that *The Grid* (2011) editors felt obliged to further explain their choice of publishing the article. The main criticism concerns the apparent lack of awareness of the author's own racial and class privilege as well as a manifest parochialism that has taken Aguirre-Livingston to see the case of Toronto's Church Wellesley as the expression of a worldwide phenomenon. Moreover, Aguirre-Livingston does not consider the experience of other groups such as women, ethnic groups, and working-class gay men for whom the post-mo identity might not be possible for gender, social, and economic reasons. Many critics also notice how the diminishing of past generations' fights, especially against AIDS, not only ignores the fact that the freedom experienced by

Aguirre-Livingston's generation would not have been possible today without these fights, but also that many young people might be induced to see AIDS as a concern of the past. Seidman (2002: 189) notes that the post-gay identity seems to favour those gay men who follow a normative pattern. The fact that all gay men pictured in the front-page photo of Aguirre-Livingston's article wear the same kind of outfit (skinny jeans, button-down shirts, ties or bow ties) might show that this is a new identity not that different from previous ones such as the 1970s *clone* and the 1980s *skinhead*. The American clone was a highly sexualised style made of plaid check shirts, tight Levi 501 jeans, tight t-shirt, boots, earring and moustache. This 'gay male archetype' became the symbol of the pre-AIDS generation, one that was 'assertively proud and aggressively sexual' (Wright 1999: 183). However, with the advent of HIV, the clone look came to be a synonym of AIDS. Many gay men adopted a different look that celebrated muscles, health, and youth instead. In Britain, the reaction to AIDS promoted a new hyper-masculine look that, even advertising practices of safer sex, still put sexual practices on the line. The gay skinhead, wearing drainpipe jeans, braces, Dr. Martens boots, a bomber jacket and shaven head, appropriated a homophobic image and transformed it into a gay uniform. Gay men could then both pass as straight and create a gay space invisible to heterosexuals but empowering for homosexuals. Today, post-gays are not only unconsciously creating a new identity, but they seem to be following the same pattern of past identities based on a homogenisation of their look. Still, whereas in the past these identities were created to allow the formation of (invisible) gay space as an alternative to heterosexual (visible) space, post-mos seem to be creating both invisible space and invisible identities through assimilation to

mainstream society. What is debatable is the degree of involvement of post-gays in this process. Their rejection might actually be the result of market-based strategies of consumption aimed, once again, at eliminating difference while making a distinction between those who can afford to purchase the new identity and those who cannot (Bell et al. 1994: 33-7; Binnie 1997a; Duggan 2002; Ghaziani 2011; Nash 2013: 243-7).

Traditional definitions of gay identities and communities, often thought as fixed, must be reconsidered now that many post-gays feel culturally similar to heterosexuals and try to avoid any connection with specific gay spaces. Gay shops, bars, and clubs are moving beyond the borders of traditional gay areas and gay spaces are increasingly becoming *anti-ghettos* unable to create a shared gay identity. This return to a negative connotation of the word shows that the idea of a safe space or a liberated zone might actually be unsustainable. A recent US Census considering the zip codes of same-sex households in traditional gay areas has shown that their concentration is reducing (fewer in 2010 than in 2000 or 1990) whereas that of heterosexual residents in the same areas is increasing. Post-gays do not feel tied to the village anymore in their choice of residence. This is because many of them feel safe outside the traditional boundaries of gay spaces. The same census, however, shows that the disappearing of same-sex households in gay areas is actually the expression of a simple spatial reorganisation. Same-sex households are not disappearing, they are relocating, becoming more scattered. These new areas are defined *cultural archipelagos* because they present some sort of residential concentration but are not defined by specific boundaries.

Moreover, Ghaziani (2014) recognises a domino effect according to which, as gay men leave traditional villages, so will those gay institutions and businesses that helped define these area in the first place (Binnie 1997a: 109; Ghaziani 2014: 24, 47-61, 109-11, 137-48; Nash 2013: 250-1; Pritchard et al. 1998: 280).

The decline of gay spaces seems to be following an already written pattern. Ghaziani (2014: 8-9) recognises three fundamental moments of this progressive history. The first one, before WWII, is identified as the closet, a time when the only possibility for encounters would come from cruising sites throughout the city. The coming out era, from the end of the war to the end of the 1990s, represents a moment of freedom and identification with the gay neighbourhood. The post-gay era, on the contrary, is based on a refusal of any kind of identification with both a gay identity and a gay area. Even more meticulous is the historical description made by Reuter (2008). In his opinion, the evolution of gay areas can be split into six different periods. From 1946 to 1958 urban areas destined to sexual pleasure mushroomed in every big American city. From 1959 to 1968, although still invisible, groups of gay men started to identify with each other and to make claims within the city. The Stonewall Inn riots became a symbolic watershed that separates the previous moment from the following period of visibility defined as a *golden age*. Between 1979 and 1988, however, the advent of AIDS corresponded to a radical transformation of the newly-born neighbourhoods, with many people starting to move away from them and settling in areas such as Chelsea (New York), West Hollywood (Los Angeles) and Lakeview (Chicago). Reuter sees almost the entire 1990s as a time in which gay neighbourhoods turned into anonymous



areas that had little to do with their previous functions. This gives way to the last period, from the end of the 1990s to the present, in which many critics have started forecasting the death of gay neighbourhoods. Collins (2004: 1802), for his part, traces a more market-driven history and notices that gay villages progressively form in marginal urban areas where sexual behaviour is less scrutinised; they then expand through political and social activity; they build solid services and businesses inside the area; they become assimilated into the city-market; and finally lose their particular identity as gay areas. All these models seem to identify a common linearity, and the histories of many gay spaces such as Boystown in Chicago, Greenwich Village in New York, South End in Boston, Silverlake in Los Angeles, Capitol Hill in Seattle, Georgetown in Washington D.C., Canal Street in Manchester, and Kemp-town in Brighton, seem to confirm it. Nonetheless, this generalisation might lead to the idea that every gay neighbourhood should or will follow the same pattern, suggesting a clear starting point and a clear ending. As previously seen, not all gay spaces are born around the physical concentration of gay residents. Therefore, the fact that many gay men are moving away from gay neighbourhoods, even altering the composition of its inhabitants, does not provide a convincing explanation. At the end of the day, gay men can live and socialise in different areas. Sure enough, gay businesses and institutions still play a big part in the life of many gay districts and are still dependent on the spatial concentration provided by these spaces in attracting consumers. The fact that post-gay men do not need gay spaces anymore does not mean that they are culturally insignificant for other gay men and tourists alike. Proclaiming the death of gay neighbourhoods implies a privileged position: only those who have already exhausted the

possibilities that these spaces had to offer now affirm their decline (Barrett and Pollack 2005: 438; Lewis 2013: 235-40).

### 0.2.6 — Alternatives

Every space is different, especially non-urban or non-bounded areas. Different geographies mean that the peculiarities of each space considered might not correspond to those of other spaces, given that factors such as time, politics, and culture cannot be ignored. The globalisation of gay space has led many to consider the gay village as being shaped globally around western ideas of activism first, and commercialisation after. This 'subtle elitism' has privileged traditional meccas to the detriment of those gay spaces that did not tick all the boxes thought necessary to be considered a gay neighbourhood (Beemyn 1997: 1). However, these *other* spaces are not, nor do they want to be, like traditional gay villages. Many critics are now taking into consideration these *new* spaces and are contributing to a fresh understanding of gay spaces. In South Africa, for example, 'differently constructed gay identities are differently spatialised relative to context' (Visser 2013: 123, 268-73). Individuals might express their sexualities in ways that overstep the closet/coming out dichotomy and, therefore, they might not need a well-defined space to form their identities. According to Visser (2013), a gay village was never created in South Africa. Even De Waterkant, located in the Cape Town periphery and promoted as a gay village, does not function as a place where gay identities and communities are made. It is the result of a forced globalisation of gay spaces which has created a space for wealthy White gay men in an area still affected by post-

apartheid inequalities. Nowadays, peripheral experiences might be pointing towards new kinds of spaces that call for a greater integration of gay minorities and that might regard the death of the village as a positive factor contributing to this creation. Similarly, Lewis (2013: 233-40) shows how the death of gay neighbourhoods is 'more a discursive trend than a foregone conclusion' and that its demise will depend on 'the historical and cultural particularities of cities and the intersecting subjectivities of those who encounter the village'. Basing his analysis on Le/The Village in Ottawa, Canada, Lewis suggests that smaller cities and peripheral spaces outside traditional gay centres might accommodate a more democratic idea of gay space that has little to do with capitalistic privilege and might challenge the evolution/decline model. Le/The Village was unusually created in 2011 by the municipal government around Bank Street. Not only was the space born in an area that was just marginally related to Ottawa's gay community history, but it also saw the light in a time when the death of the village was an already established theme. This is a consequence of the long tradition of invisibility in Canadian culture. Gay groups had mainly remained private, with little political territoriality and little gentrification. Even after municipal recognition, the village remains a culturally and socially mixed place, with only a few street signs celebrating the presence of gay people (Bell 1991: 328; Ghaziani 2014: 4-7; Elder 2004, 2005; Tucker 2009).

The change in space is tied to a fundamental change in how gay communities are conceived. Many researchers have tried to give new insights in the last few years. Peacock et al. (2001: 183-97) interviewed gay men in San Francisco. Even though most interviewees expressed their belonging to the gay

community as a given, many others also identified in a subgroup (based on tastes, needs, etc.). Given that belonging to the subgroup is formed around a personal choice or identification, sometimes these men felt a stronger connection to the latter than to the community as a whole. Some of the subgroups are so developed that Peacock et al. identified them as *sub-communities* or *communities within communities*. This shows that, while the gay community is often defined as one, it is actually very diverse. Formby's (2012: 3-9) research seems to prove this hypothesis. Most interviewees felt that the word community has become an umbrella term to include many different subgroups and refused to be positioned within it. Only the attachment to subgroups was seen as the right expression of community. 'Solidarity' does not mean 'similarity', and although the gay community is still seen as an important entity, especially in relation to social change, it is also criticised for its exclusivity. Moreover, only half of them recognised the community as tied to a specific space, calling into question the importance of a gay neighbourhood. Rosser et al. (2008: 588-91) enlarged their focus to include informants from seventeen cities in fourteen countries. A general trend in the decline of gay communities was present even though the size of gay populations was seen as increasing. This is because it is only the gay neighbourhood (both as a residential area and as a scene) that was felt to be declining due to an increased commercialisation and a lack of political activism, not gay identities in general. Lebeau and Jellison (2009: 61-6) explored the psychological aspect of community. Although 63.2% of interviewees identified advantages in their involvement in the community, such as a higher personal self-esteem and group identity, a high percentage also underlined limits to this identification due to the

exclusiveness and the shallowness of the community (its emphasis on youth and beauty), external prejudice, and institutional oppression. However, only a small percentage understood the community as local, both as a scene or as a network, whereas the majority saw it as global. Woolwine (2000: 8-23), for his part, noticed that community can be understood as *experienced*. Even though a sense of global community is often present (either to praise it or to criticise it), it is the attachment to local organisations and networks that creates gay men's understanding of community. Kelly et al. (2014: 23-9, 41-2), following Wellman and Leighton's (1979) community lost, saved, and liberated model, defined the gay community as liberated. Today, the gay community is not tied to local institutions and a general assimilation has led to the decline of gay spaces (community lost framework). However, it is also true that their cultural and social significance is still alive (community saved framework). Kelly et al., therefore, position gay communities within the framework of community liberated, given that gay neighbourhoods are not the foundation of gay communities anymore but these same communities still exist under different forms. Gay communities today are unbounded, based on social networks that are not limited to a specific area. Kelly et al., similar to Woolwine (2000), sustained the idea of gay communities as *experienced*, therefore not spatially concentrated. Understood in this sense, the idea of gay community becomes more democratic and available to a wider number of gay men.

Considering the idea of the decline of gay neighbourhoods and communities, and adding to that the increasing importance given to the Internet in the construction of an imagined identity, it seems that community as an

experience might be a good compromise for a better understanding of this concept and its relation to space, identity and consumption. Although a universal definition is not possible given the plurality of experiences, it is now clear that any consideration of gay communities cannot prescind from an analysis of the characteristics of each space in which these communities develop. Making use of the literature considered, the next chapters concentrate on the specificities of Soho and try to answer the research question: What is the current function of Soho in the urban gay panorama? This way, the thesis aims to not only give new meanings to both Soho and the gay community of London but also to contribute to the discourse around gay communities and spaces that was analysed in this *Introduction*.

## **Chapter I**

### **Soho and Sohoites**

## 1.0 — Introduction

This chapter explores the history of Soho, with a particular attention to its relevance for homosexual men during the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. This represents a period of profound changes for homosexual relations in Britain and its analysis can help understand the evolution of the district from an underground space for homosexual encounters in the first half of the century to a widely publicised gay space in the 1990s. Considering changes in society and attitudes towards homosexuality, and taking in related discourses around prostitution, bohemianism, cosmopolitanism, and consumption as other dimensions to life in Soho in this period, the history of the district is retraced and set within a wider social and economic context. This history also draws on the personal experience of some of the most well-known homosexual characters of Soho. Each one of them represents a different Soho, tied to a very specific time in the district's history, and to a different definition of both homosexual identity and community.

The inclusion of biographical and autobiographical material also introduces an element of imagination. How can we be sure that what these characters describe corresponds to the reality of historical facts? How much of it is, instead, filtered and altered by their own imagination or their own point of view? The short answer is: it does not really matter. In fact, as discussed in this chapter, 'throughout its modern history Soho was always envisaged as both a



real and an imagined space, where complex economic and social relationships intersected with the equally rich resources of urban fantasy' (Mort 2010: 202). In other words, the history of Soho must be understood as a co-dependent mix of both historical facts and personal images built upon or in response to these same facts. The imagined aspect of Soho, the myth, becomes as important as its reality and, at times, the reality itself. This element is essential not only for the outlining of Soho's history but also and foremost for the understanding of the relationship that participants in this study have with the district.

The aim of the chapter is to convey a sense of the changing texture of the district and that of the understanding of homosexuality in British society, showing how different characters and generations have populated the area and helped construct the narrative that sees Soho as the centre of London's gay life. Given that Soho has recently gone through a process of modernisation that has changed, and is constantly changing, both its look and its role as a centre of gay life in the 2010s, the latter must be called into question. This chapter will provide a useful backdrop for the exploration of current ideas of identity and community in Soho and British society more broadly that are analysed in the rest of the thesis. The questions on which it concentrates are: What elements of Soho's history contributed to the development of homosexual identities and communities in the area throughout the twentieth century?; In what ways have homosexuals used the area and transformed it into a recognisable gay space?; How has the presence of homosexuals in Soho influenced contemporary understandings of homosexuality?; What is the current state of Soho?

## 1.1 — Becoming (In)Visible in Soho

After the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1541, the land that belonged to Westminster Abbey passed into the hands of Henry VIII. From 1582, the Crown prohibited the construction of any building within 3 miles of the City of London, therefore only a few buildings were present along Colman Hedge Lane (now Wardour Street) until 1650. Two major events forced the Crown to withdraw the prohibition almost a century later: the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666. Between 70,000 and 100,000 Londoners died of the disease and 7 months later the Great Fire burned approximately 13,000 houses and left 100,000 people homeless. Consequently, many inhabitants moved towards the surrounding unpopulated areas, including those of the Soho area, which had been used as a hunting field since the middle ages. The name of the district itself derived from an Anglo-French hunting call used to indicate that a prey had been discovered: 'Sohoe, the hare ys founde' (Summers 1989: 1). Nowadays, the district is identified as the area between Piccadilly, Oxford, St. Giles and Cambridge circuses, bounded by Oxford Street to the north, Regent Street to the west, Coventry Street and Leicester Square to the south and Charing Cross Road to the east. A 'small island land-locked in London's West End', Soho covers a ground of almost half a square mile (1989: 1). Inhabitants of Charlotte Street and Fitzrovia, on the other side of Oxford Street (initially Uxbridge Road), have often described their area as North Soho; yet Soho residents have hastily resisted their neighbours' identification asserting that only someone born in Soho can be described as a real Sohoite (even though, as explored throughout the thesis, many people who were not born in

Soho eventually *earned* their title of Sohoites and are now seen as the district's most popular exponents). Two different worlds were also initially divided by Regent Street (once Swallow Street) which, in the 1890s, established a clear frontier between the areas occupied by the nobility on the Mayfair side and those occupied by the working class on the Soho side. Similarly, Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, both dating from the 1870s-1880s, were created to facilitate the capital's traffic flow but, at the same time, they also helped eliminate some of the city's seediest parts. The first followed the line of Hog Lane in the north then cut through the slums in the south, creating a clearer division between Soho and Covent Garden. The second was created *ex novo* separating the district from its previous southern border. These thoroughfares represent well-defined boundaries that have managed to protect 'Soho's village atmosphere from invasion ever since' (Tames 1994: 9. See also Hutton 2012: 15; Farson 1987: 4; Mort 2010: 207-9; *Soho Clarion* 1973: n.1; Summers 1989: 14-31, 169; Walkowitz 2012: 17-22).

In fact, the process of modernisation that characterised London from the nineteenth century onwards and that transformed its architectural layout, access, and infrastructures seemed to neglect the area. No buses run through Soho apart from those along Shaftesbury Avenue. Moreover, the underground stations of Oxford Circus and Tottenham Court Road (both dating from 1900 as part of the Central London Railway from Shepherd's Bush to Bank — now Central Line), Piccadilly Circus (created in 1906 for the Baker Street & Waterloo Railway connecting Baker Street to Kennington Road — now Bakerloo Line), and Leicester Square (from 1906 for the Great Northern, Piccadilly & Brompton

Railway — now Piccadilly Line) are situated at the four corners of the district and serve other adjacent areas such as Marylebone, Fitzrovia, Bloomsbury, Covent Garden, St. James and Mayfair (from 1907 the Charing Cross, Euston & Hampstead Railway — now Northern Line — also linked Charing Cross to Golders Green and Highgate). Apart from taxis and residents' private cars, the district is still more people than vehicle oriented. Summers (1989: 1-2) explains that Soho is 'a place to linger in' because it is built 'on a human scale. There is no grandeur to live up to and (...) there is nothing to look up to, either, for the average Soho building is a mere five or six storeys high'. Most streets are dark and narrow, often emerging into side alleyways and dead-ends. Still, the streets that nowadays appear to us cramped and stifling compared with the big industrial thoroughfares that surround the area seemed, initially, vast and modern to the many aristocrats that decided to move there from the start. When the titled classes moved towards Mayfair between the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, ambassadors and political exponents moved in, together with small industries and traders. However, once the majority of its prestigious inhabitants had moved out, many properties were subdivided and rented to the poorer classes and foreigners alike. The first foreigners to settle in Soho were the Greeks escaping from the Turks at the end of the 1670s. They were soon followed by the French Huguenots who were, in turn, escaping the religious discrimination of Louis XIV. During the French Revolution and the years of Napoleon III's reign even more French arrived, transforming the area into a sort of Quartier Latin. For others, instead, Soho became Little Italy. From the political refugees of the 1860s to the economic migrants of the end of the century, many Italians settled in Soho and made a living in the catering industry.

Other communities followed, from the Irish escaping the Potato Famine between 1845 and 1852 to Polish and Russian Jews escaping pogroms and anti-Semitism in the 1880s-1890s; but also Germans, Swiss, Belgians, Swedes, Austrians, Dutch, etc. All these people had one thing in common: they were escaping from somewhere. Still, they also rejected 'the ghetto role of strangers in a strange land' (Farson 1987: 3), forming with the British inhabitants of the district, according to Summers' (1989: 159) personal opinion, 'as diverse, as culturally rich and as cosmopolitan a group of individuals as have ever lived together in any part of London, at any time', finding ways to get along and cooperate more than just coexist (Hutton 2012: 15-7; Jackson n.d.: 24; Mort 2009: 11, 156; Summers 1989: 38-9, 159-65; Tames 1994: 35-41; TFL 2017; Tietjen 1956: 1).

The area, however, quickly degenerated and became an incubator for diseases and illicit activities. The idea of Soho as a slum was permanently fixed in popular imagination after the Asiatic Cholera spread in its streets in 1854, causing the death of more than 10,000 people. Prostitution also increased, especially around the new fountain commemorating the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury — created in 1893 in Piccadilly Circus — and its Angel of Christian Charity that was, appropriately, renamed Eros after the Greek god of love. At the turn of the century, in fact, Piccadilly and the surrounding areas were renown for what came to be defined as the *trade*. This included male prostitutes, also known as Dilly boys from the name of the circus, 'existing on the unstable boundary between visibility and invisibility' (Reed 2014: 13). They had to be visible to attract punters, with youth, camp mannerism, and the use of camp slang

working as representative and alluring tools. Equally, they had to be invisible to avoid the risk of being arrested and convicted by the police. At the time, in fact, homosexuality was still considered a crime. Since the creation of the Buggery Statute in 1533 by Henry VIII, every non-procreative act — being committed by two men or by a man and a woman — was theoretically condemned as a crime punishable by death, a sentence which was going to stay in place until 1861, when it was replaced by penal servitude between 10 years and life. During the Victorian era, however, the 'medical, pedagogical, religious, and familial authorities' were working together to create 'normative proscriptions' that identified 'a non masturbating, married, industrious, and (re)productive body as the "healthy" standard for middle-class masculinity' (Cohen 1993: 69).

Consequently, in 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act introduced Section 11 — also known as the Labouchère Amendment or as the Blackmailers' Charter due to the amount of blackmail that it produced — which instituted the criminalisation of all acts of gross indecency with another male person, both in public and private, and prescribed imprisonment for any term up to 2 years, with or without hard labour. This was the first time that the secular law had specifically prescribed the crime on the basis of the biological sex of the person rather than the acts that were committed, censoring homosexual relations while, at the same time, silently legitimising non-procreative acts between people of the opposite sex. However, even though sex was officially being confined to the institution of marriage, the spread of prostitution during the period — and male trade even more so — demonstrates that, because of censorship, the demand for prostitution increased rather than declining (Cook 2003: 42-3; Foucault 1998: 101; Frantzen 1998: 10, 111-38; Hammond 1996: 174-5; Katz 1994: 46-50;

Jordan 1997: 45-66; Mills 2007: 16, 24-38; Reed 2014: 37-8; Smith 1991: 45; Summers 1989: 31, 155; Surber 2010: 179; Tames 1994: 66).

The 1889 Cleveland Street scandal — involving telegraph boys, aristocrats, and a male brothel in Fitzrovia — had all the elements to become a huge national scandal under the new law but the involvement of noble men resulted in the episode being covered up. It was not until 1895 that the first and most famous public figure became a victim of this amendment. Oscar Wilde was a regular presence in the male brothels of the West End (especially those around Piccadilly Circus), often spoiling his rent boys with gifts or dinners and drinks at local cafés and restaurants such as Kettner's, The Florence, Café Royal, The Lyric Club, or The Savoy. After his arrest, a campaign with no precedent in British history was set in motion to create the image of 'a new "type" of male sexual actor: "the homosexual"' (Cohen 1993: 1). This term was already in use among medical circles by the end of the century, but it did not immediately become common knowledge among society at large. What Wilde represented, initially, was still unspeakable. Wilde became the representative of a subculture that had, until that moment, been invisible. Or perhaps it was a subculture that had just been ignored. Bartlett (1988: 128) explains that 'we can assert that it wasn't because it didn't exist that the homosexual culture of London was "invisible". A city is full of cultures that "don't exist". This evidence places any insistence that our lives had to be "revealed"'. According to the critic, in fact, 'the "discovery" of homosexuality in London in 1895 was a contrived spectacle. Then, as now, the fiction that we are hidden must first be constructed, so that when it is opportune or politically expedient to do so, we

can be discovered' (1998: 128). What was being created was not just the juxtaposition of two different types or identities (the homosexual and the heterosexual), it was also the definition of their hierarchy in the urban space. What Wilde and the Dilly boys represented for mainstream society, even though they can both, in turn, be seen as two distinct types of homosexual actors based on their economic disposability (as explored further in this section), was

the mapping of homosexual urban social inequality in a way that alerted the public to the fact that sexual difference as a subcultural genre was the more offensive for territorially invading the public domain by quite openly establishing meeting-points on the street (Reed 2014: 17-8).

Not only were homosexuals undermining the moral superiority of heterosexual society by simply being, they were also threatening their physical presence by visibly being there. In so doing, 'by making their bodies public' and becoming the 'physical extension of the place', rent boys functioned as visible signs of resistance that gave Piccadilly and its surrounding areas a (homo)sexual connotation for many years to come (Reed 2014: 54. See also Bristow 1995: 19; Cocks 2007: 112-44; Cook 2007b: 190-1; Mills 2007: 32).

Quentin Crisp (1985: 25-6), one of Soho's most iconic personalities, recalls how, by walking through the West End in 1926, he learnt that homosexuality was much more present than he had initially thought: 'as I



wandered along Piccadilly or Shaftesbury Avenue, I passed young men standing at the street corners who said, "Isn't it terrible tonight, dear? No men about. The Dilly's not what it used to be". In his opinion, anyone walking past the rent boys could not overlook 'the meaning of the mannequin walk and the stance in which the hip was only prevented from total dislocation by the hand placed upon it' (1985: 25-6). These encounters with the Dilly boys helped Crisp accept his own sexuality to the point that he decided not only to embrace it but also 'to represent it', transforming the 'burden' of homosexuality into a 'cause' (1985: 33) and wearing his difference like a uniform: 'I became not merely a self-confessed homosexual but a self-evident one. (...) This was not difficult to do. I wore make-up at a time when even on women eye-shadow was sinful' (1985: 5). Clothes, hairstyle, and make-up were to play a fundamental role in the way Crisp would present himself to the world and in the way he was consequently perceived. By playing along the lines of what was morally acceptable, Crisp managed to visibly promote his homosexuality while, at the same time, hiding it behind the facade of artistic creation. Even today, when reading his autobiography, it is hard to evaluate to what degree Crisp the person can be separated from Crisp the persona. What often saved Crisp from being condemned and arrested as a homosexual was precisely the fact that he had transformed his body into a work of art:

As I stood pressed against the railings of some dim London square with a stranger's hand at my throat or my crutch or both, another member of the gang would whisper, 'But he's an artist. I

seen [sic] him in Chelsea'. Immediately the grip on my person would loosen and, in a shaken voice, my aggressor would say, 'I didn't know' (1985: 61).

However, as mentioned in 1.0, separating the person from the persona may not be worthy as the image that we now have of Crisp is precisely a result of the two working together to create the myth. The latter becomes itself historical and provides both an example of how homosexuality was manifested and regarded at the time and a character that has helped cement the idea of Soho as a space where homosexual men could express their sexual identities.

Crisp's crusade had obvious repercussions on every aspect of his life. Looking like he did, it was not easy to find a respectable job, forcing him to work as a rent boy throughout the first half of his life: 'the poverty from which I have suffered could be diagnosed as "Soho" poverty. It comes from having the airs and graces of a genius and no talent' (1985: 49). Some Dilly boys did have another job and took rent only as a way to increase their income. Many of these were not even necessarily homosexual, attracted by trade as an easy way to rob or blackmail wealthy homosexual punters. However, the large majority of them were coming from a poor background, often runaways, and were therefore forced to be visibly homosexual — as they could not hide behind money or titles as did many of their wealthy punters like Wilde — and to put themselves at risk, often being abused, sexually assaulted, even killed, or quite simply not paid for their services. Class, in fact, was a crucial factor in determining someone's degree of visibility and, consequently, the way they were seen and defined by

society: 'among the people that I was now getting to know, there were only two classes. They never mingled except in bed. There was "them", who acted refined and spoke nice and whose people had pots of money, and there was "us"' (Crisp 1985: 27). Still, far from seeing themselves as being exploited, many Dilly boys managed to often find in other rent boys and punters some sort of understanding community that would provide them with protection and acceptance. Crisp and his friends, for example, gravitated around the West End, frequenting those few cafés and restaurants that would allow them in, including the Black Cat, a café on Old Compton Street. Here they would sit 'buying each other cups of tea, combing each other's hair and trying on each other's lipsticks' (1985: 28). While the owner of the café tolerated their presence, he also occasionally threw them out, annoyed by the fact that they would make their cups of tea last for hours on end: 'when this happened we waltzed round the neighbouring streets in search of love or money or both. If we didn't find either, we returned to the café and put on more lipstick'. As Crisp (1985: 29) explains, 'the perpetual danger in which we lived bound us together'. This close kinship can also be seen in the way Crisp and his friends would often react when targeted by the police: 'we treated the police as it is said you should treat wild animals. As we passed them, we never ran but, if they were already running, we spread out so that only one of our number would die' (1985: 29. See also Reed 2014: 11-23, 152, 191; Walkowitz 2012: 203).

It is around this time that 'the cry went up that England was going to the bitches' (Crisp: 1985: 81). Since the turn of the twentieth century, urbanisation and capitalism had been attracting a huge number of people to the capital. With

the development of an immense transport network, people had started to experience the urban space on a whole new level. According to Cook (2003: 1-2), to all those men who were searching for same-sex relations, 'the mass of diverse strangers — hurrying or waiting — and the sense of transition and flux promised new erotic experiences'. Cruising grounds had been reshaping the map of sexual London and it had not taken long for the establishment to understand the dangerous potential of the new city as a space for homosexual cruising and connection. Following the Vagrancy Law Amendment Act of 1898 and the Criminal Law Amendment Act (White Slave Traffic Act) of 1912, not only were acts of gross indecency prohibited in both public and private, but also the mere solicitation of these acts was to be considered a crime. What exactly constituted a solicitation, however, was not clear, leaving the police in charge to decide it and consequently increasing the use of the law as both a political weapon and as a tool to extort money from the people involved. Arrests were not made by the police on the basis of the sexual act being committed, but 'on the basis of a judgement they had made about the propensity of an individual to commit them' (Cook 2003: 44). This attitude would lead the London Metropolitan Police (MET) to establish, in 1930, a special force directed to the patrolling of London's lavatories, in a sort of witch hunt that would characterise and shape the capital's cruising underworld for many decades to come. The West End, and the areas around Soho in particular, came under attentive scrutiny. Here — in places such as the Dansey Place urinal (off Wardour Street), the Broadwick Street toilets, or the lavatories present in the underground stations (see 3.1) — a policeman in plain clothes would intentionally exhibit his penis while another one would patiently wait outside. A simple look or a word and the agent in plain

clothes would call his accomplice in and arrest the unfortunate person who dared look or speak to him. While the patrolling of public lavatories required at least two agents for each man arrested, a small team of policemen could easily arrest tens of them by simply bursting into one of the many drag balls that were being secretly organised, or in the private members' clubs like The Caravan Club in Endell Street (where over a hundred people were arrested following a raid by the police in 1934), or by ambushing them in those public spaces that were being used as cruising grounds, like the towpath at Putney, a 'riverside brothel', or Whitstone Pond on Hampstead Heath where 'more foliage abounded', providing 'a certain sylvan charm and some useful escape routes' (Crisp 1985: 159. See also Cook 2007c: 148-50; Reed 2014: 52-77).

However, as Crisp notices, those cruising grounds that had become known by both homosexuals and the police in the interwar years, suddenly lost their appeal when WWII started. This is because everywhere in the city, and the West End in particular, became a cruising ground. Connections were formed both inside the military camps — despite a policy directed to 'maximize supervision and minimize privacy' — and in an outside world that was ready and available to be explored when soldiers were off-duty (Bérubé 1990: 50). A whole set of romantic images formed around the figure of the countryside soldier cruising the city, especially American soldiers. Crisp (1985: 160), who was given exemption papers for 'suffering' from sexual perversion, was particularly attracted by the presence of soldiers in the city:

Mr Roosevelt began, with Olympian hands, to shower the

American forces. This brand new army of (no) occupation flowed through the streets of London like cream on strawberries (...). Labelled 'with love from Uncle Sam' and packaged in uniforms so tight that in them their owners could fight for nothing but their honour, these 'bundles for Britain' leaned against the lamp-posts of Shaftesbury Avenue or lolled on the steps of thin-lipped statues of dead English statesmen. As they sat in the cafés or stood in the pubs, their bodies bulged through every straining khaki fibre towards our feverish hands. (...) Above all it was the liberty of their natures that was so marvellous. Never in the history of sex was so much offered to so many by so few. At the first gesture of acceptance from a stranger, words of love began to ooze from their lips, sexuality from their bodies and pound notes from their pockets like juice from a peeled peach.

Sure enough, the interwar years were a period of great contradictions in Soho. On the one hand, the tragedies of war and xenophobia condemned many inhabitants of German and Italian origin to be deported or interned as enemies even though they had little to do with the politics of their countries of origin. Of equal force were the bombs that scarred the district in Old Compton Street, Newport Place, Shaftesbury Avenue and those that destroyed St. Anne's Church (all but its clock tower). On the other hand, never before had Soho benefitted from so much attention from the outside as during this period. In fact, the presence of many cheap restaurants, pubs and nightclubs — such as

L'Escargot, Wheelers, Quo Vadis, Café de Paris, The Gargoyle Club, and Lyons Corner Houses — drew in a young crowd made of off-duty soldiers and war-workers who were willing to spend their money in exchange for entertainment and sexual experimentation. Soho soon became the epicentre of London's nightlife, with the many theatres that had been built along its boundaries — from The Empire and The Prince of Wales to The Criterion and The Windmill Theatre (where the manager Vivian Van Damm showed nude tableaux vivants at a time when performers could not strip naked by law but could nonetheless appear naked as long as they did not move) — constantly attracting a huge number of people. The war was a traumatic experience, but the need for distractions from war struggles, together with Soho's permissiveness on all matters from licensing hours to gambling, drugs, and sex, created the image of the district as a place where one could forget everything else. Most importantly, it created a more democratic space where class was not the main social factor regulating homosexual relations anymore. Ironically, for many homosexuals, the war had represented a very liberating experience (Hutton 2012: 13-31, 66-8; Reed 2014: 53; Summers 1989: 183-7; Walkowitz 2012: 216-21).

## **1.2 — We Are Here, We Are Queer**

If the first half of the century was characterised by an ecstatic feeling of opportunity and can be seen as a fundamental period for the creation of homosexual networks, the period that followed saw a worsening in attitudes and control at the official level. In effect, with WWII coming to an end, another sort of reconstruction, different from that of the city and its infrastructures, was on the

agenda. The family, understood in capitalist terms as the centre of national production and reproduction and shaped once again around Victorian values, came back to be the main concern of British politics. In this context, the heterosexual man was seen as a 'national hero doing his bit for his country' whereas the homosexual was regarded as 'a major challenge to this system' (Higgins 1996: 30). Therefore, the sexual excitement of the interwar years and the collapse of social and moral boundaries had to ultimately be controlled and policed. Various Conservative governments discussed sex in the following years. The arrest and consequent trial of Lord Montagu, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood in 1954 for committing acts of gross indecency caused a national scandal and the Profumo affair, a decade later, almost caused the demise of Macmillan's administration. In 1954, the Vice-Chancellor of Reading University, Jack Wolfenden, was appointed as the chairman of the Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences and Prostitution. The aim of the committee was to find a solution to the exponential increase in the presence of prostitutes in the streets of the capital (around 10,000 prostitutes worked in the West End) and to understand the extension and consequences of homosexuality in British society. Sexology and psychoanalysis, by now becoming well-known disciplines, were used by many experts as instruments to legitimise the idea of homosexuality in terms of illness and mental insanity, even though neither discipline advanced a definition of homosexuality as such. The committee published the report on 4 September 1957. Even suggesting an ever-present concern, the report advocated a partial decriminalisation of homosexual acts and defined heterosexual prostitution as not illegal, as long as both activities were carried out behind closed doors. The Macmillan government



decided to act on the committee's suggestions on prostitution, approving the Street Offences Act in 1959, but not to act on homosexuality (Cook 2007c: 167-73; Davidson 2001a: 81; Evans 1993; Higgins 1996: 267; Mort 2010: 2-8, 168; Weeks 1990: 5, 164-73).

During its investigations, the committee had given great attention to the West End where the high concentration of theatres, clubs, and of nightlife in general, also meant a high presence of prostitution and homosexual cruising (see 1.1). In fact, even though the 1950s were being shaped by post-war austerity, the West End — and Soho in particular — seemed to be representing once again an escape for all those people who did not want to comply. Those people who are now considered the best representatives of their generation would have been regarded by many of their contemporaries as drunks and gamblers. They are often identified as *bohemians*, as people selling their art for little or no money but enough to get drunk by the end of the night. Still, what was taking place in Soho was to define a whole new image of the district as a melting pot of artistic creation. The most famous place where bohemians used to gather was The Colony Room, in Dean Street. Opened in 1948, this private members' club would stay open from 3pm to 11pm, at a time when licensing laws demanded pubs to close from 3pm to 5.30pm. Its owner Muriel Belcher managed to attract 'the liveliest artistic talent in England in the fifties' (Farson 1987: 41). As Parkin (2012: ii) puts it, 'the club's membership was a Who's Who of the Arts in the post-war period': Francis Bacon (a painter with a passion for masochism); Lucian Freud (Bacon's best friend and Sigmund Freud's grandson); George Dyer (Bacon's partner and one of Freud's models); the

improbable triangle of painters John Minton, Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde; Vogue photographer John Deakin (according to jazz singer George Melly, 'a vicious little drunk of such inventive malice and implacable bitchiness that it's surprising he didn't choke on his own venom'); novelist and journalist Colin MacInnes; and also artists Nina Hamnett (famous for her art as well as her stories about the people she slept with, from Modigliani to Matisse and Picasso), Henrietta Moraes; and writers E.M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood, Dylan Thomas (Fryer 1998: 36). These people gravitated around The Colony Room and what photographer and writer Daniel Farson (1987: 40-1) defines as the 'grandeur personified' of Belcher, who 'knew nothing about painting but (...) liked painters because they created fun and if they were unable to pay for their drinks they charmed others into doing so'. Farson (1987: 40-1) recalls his first times at The Colony Room: 'I was astounded when she greeted Deakin, "And how are you, girl?". But I grew to relish her habit of greeting middle-aged men as "Miss" and noticed that they seemed to welcome such attention'. In fact, what is especially noteworthy about this group is that most of these artists were homosexuals, aware of each other, and often in some kind of sexual or sentimental relation. Even the Bernard brothers, all three good-looking heterosexuals and regulars of the club, 'would "put out" if drunk enough, for the right person at the right time' (Maybury, in Parkin 2012: 135. See also Farson 1987: xiii; Hutton 2012: 157-63; Reed 2014: 61-2; Summers 1989: 190).

The Colony Room was not the only club frequented by homosexuals in Soho and its surroundings. Other places hosted a homosexual clientele, such as The Rockingham Club, The Caves de France, The York Minster (The French

House from 1984), The Golden Lion, The Coach and Horses, A&B (Arts & Battledress), The Mandrake; not to mention The Bricklayers Arms, The Marquis of Granby and The Wheatsheaf around Charlotte Street, that area of Fitzrovia that is often considered North Soho. For instance, Crisp, who was now in his 40s, could often be found here, where he felt even more welcome than he had previously felt in Soho:

It marked the discovery of a new self. (...) I was moving among people to whom my homosexuality was of no consequence whatsoever. (...) In appearance these cafés were just like those from which I had been barred fifteen years before in Old Compton Street. In all other respects they were very different. Many homosexuals were present but there was no element of camp. (...) Despite the variety of classes, sexes, nationalities and callings represented in the cafés of Charlotte Street, there prevailed an effortless acceptance of the other person's identity (1985: 140-2).

While the presence of so many places frequented by homosexuals in and around Soho proves the on-going centrality of the district as a meeting place for men looking for other men, it should be stressed that these pubs, restaurants and clubs were not strictly for homosexuals, but also for bohemians and ethnic minorities alike. A specifically homosexual club was rare to find and known only to the few in order to keep its existence a secret from the police. Belcher, for

example, was often advised to welcome more heterosexual people in her club, as the large number of homosexuals present was arousing suspicion (Hutton 2012: 157-63; Parkin 2012: 13-9, 71; Reed 2014: 78-89).

The *vie de bohème*, with its acceptance of diversity, had laid the foundations for what, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, came to be defined as the *counterculture*, which was born in Soho's streets, in its shop windows and in its new Italian-style coffee bars and music clubs. This bloodless revolution, which attracted many young people, was not strictly a nighttime experience anymore, nor was it hidden in private members' clubs: it was carried out in broad daylight. Coffee bars, 'whose function was far more social than nutritional', spread all over Soho and its surroundings: The Moka Bar, Act One Scene One, Pollo, Amalfi, Heaven and Hell, The Stockpot, Le Macabre, to name a few (Tames 1994: 46). Soho was reacting to the conservative agenda of the 1950s at the sound of jazz, that had gone from an underground American innovation available in Gerrard Street's clubs during the interwar years to a particular British experience. Ronnie Scott's first opened in 1958 in Gerrard Street, then found its current location at 47 Frith Street in 1965; Club Eleven opened in Great Windmill Street and The 100 Club in Oxford Street. Music became a common language for people in Soho and jazz, in particular, represented a new consciousness and lifestyle that welcomed everyone beyond differences of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Not only was Soho the birthplace of British jazz, it was also — as a green plaque now commemorates on the walls of what once was the 2i's Coffee Bar in Old Compton Street — *the birthplace of British Rock'n'Roll and the popular music industry*. The Rolling

Stones performed for the first time at the Marquee Club, which opened in Wardour Street in 1958. Moreover, the many jukeboxes that could be found everywhere in the district made sure that throughout the 1950s and 1960s 'there were always places to jam in Soho' (Farson 1987: vii), like The Flamingo Club, Whisky a Go Go, La Discothèque, The Coffee Pot, Take Five, The Huntsmen, The Phoenix Club, and La Duce, defined by artist and film-maker Derek Jarman (1993: 53) as 'the most exciting club of the sixties (...) where the "hip" hung out — dressed in John Stevens (the difference between clothes then and now was cost — Carnaby Street, which set the style, was cheap)'. In fact, if music represented a new common language, so did fashion. Carnaby Street, from the mid-1950s onwards, had transformed from a narrow and dirty street to the place of the clothing revolution, rapidly expanding everywhere else in the district and, gradually, to the rest of the city. The mods — the young urban fashion-aware crowd that was filling up Soho's coffee bars — personified this new style and transformed the *made in Soho* into a must-have. Their look, however, was not just pop and trendy, it also blurred the lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality, making everyone look more feminine and, consequently, sexually ambivalent. Reed (2014: 82) notices that

for a brief period between 1960 and 1965 London's sexual axis was radically transformed by narcissistic clothes-obsessed Mods, an essentially Soho-based collective with distinct homoerotic propensities, and also sold on the feminine occupation of recreational shopping.

Moreover, the absence of alcohol often meant that many young people ended up using speed as a way to 'free up sexual frontiers and encourage same-sex attraction' (2014: 83-4). According to Jarman (1993: 52), 'that's why drugs came along; you couldn't go out for a weekend on Nescafé'. The walls that had been built in the post-war reconstruction of British masculinity and heterosexuality were finally being torn down, offering a new democratic look and sexual experience available to all, including homosexuals (Farson 1987: 72; Hutton 2012: 164-7; Reed 2014: 86-94; Summers 1989: 195; Walkowitz 2012: 216-21).

Things were changing on the legal front too. In July 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was approved, decriminalising homosexual activities. This, however, was a partial decriminalisation given that they became legal only in private — meaning that no more than two men were allowed to be present behind closed doors — and just for males over 21. The law also only applied to England and Wales and excluded the merchant navy and the armed forces. The hostility towards the act was blatant and exemplified in Lord Arran's words: 'I ask those who have, as it were, been in bondage and for whom the prison doors are now open to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity' (in Weeks 1990: 176). It was not over, as the increase in the number of prosecutions during the 1970s — that actually tripled compared with that of the 1950s — shows. The Sexual Offences Act represented a first step in the right direction, but one that also left many problems unsolved. Many homosexuals, in fact, struggled to come to terms with their new position in society. Among them was Jarman (1993: 56), who explains:

I remember the TV cameras coming down to Le Duce in 1967 when the law had been changed. Everyone afraid to be filmed and, at the same time, desperate the film should be made. I was one of those who didn't go out that night, worried that my parents might see me on the television.

Scarred for life by some traumatic episodes experienced in boarding school and during his early adulthood, as well as by society's attitudes towards homosexuality, Jarman (1993: 43) had been left feeling ashamed:

I was another young man corrupted and co-opted by heterosexuality, my mind still swimming about in the cesspit which is known as family life, subjected to a Christian love whose ugliness would shatter a mirror. I had to destroy my inheritance to face you and love you.

Still, even though many homosexuals continued leading secretive lives, the 1960s represent a moment of sexual liberation: 'when the lights were out the boys dropped their pants (...). It's no wonder that a generation in reaction should generate an orgy, it came as an antidote to repression' (1993: 65-6). Parks, saunas, clubs' backrooms, and other cruising spaces became a

fundamental part of this liberating experience (Higgins 1996; Jarman 1992: 50, 1993: 20-7, 77; Peake 1999: 30-1, 53, 77; Reed 2014: 65-9).

Sexual liberation went hand in hand with social and political awareness. Homosexuals took the American Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement as models and started to oppose society's attitudes towards homosexuality. The fuse had been lit and it exploded with much uproar in June 1969 when the New York Police raided the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street. It was the beginning of a new era that saw gay rights becoming increasingly visible thanks to the political activism of many homosexuals who had taken to the streets to protest. In the aftermath of the riot, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed. A few months later, in October 1970, after nine students met at the London School of Economics, the London GLF was also born. The members met on a weekly basis and were soon joined by hundreds of people. Following the American example, and rejecting traditional organisational hierarchies, the GLF demanded formal equality through the use of political action. Activists wore badges with slogans such as *Gay Liberation Front*, *Gay Power*, *Gay is Good*, and held public demonstrations on a small scale (holding hands, kissing, dancing), as well as on a larger scale (marching, protesting). Jarman (1993: 64-5) notices that 'what was so exciting was meeting new people with new ideas while Heterosoc [heterosexual society] felt that all we were doing was putting cocks in each other's mouths. Before those cocks got into our mouths we were exchanging ideas'. Homosexuality was once again seen as a political issue, but this time it was seen as such by homosexuals themselves, ready to put shame and guilt aside and to act 'openly



and together' to subvert the homosexual taboo 'so deeply embodied in Western civilization' (Weeks 1990: 185-6). These years also saw the birth of another important organisation for the British gay movement. In 1969, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) was formed out of the North-Western Committee for Homosexual Reform. In contrast to the GLF, the CHE had a more institutionalised and organised approach, focusing on lobbying political parties and organisations rather than planning radical direct action. This is the reason why the CHE was less clamorous and publicity-seeking, working more from behind the scenes than on the streets. At the same time, it is also the reason why it gained more respectability and managed to last for longer. In fact, by 1972 the revolutionary momentum of the GLF was already over. The so-called extremism of the GLF was exactly what caused its downfall and prevented it from achieving its goals while isolating its politics from the gay community that it helped shape. Not every homosexual man, in fact, was ready or willing to share such a drastic experience that could mean sacrificing family and community of origin for the militancy of the movement. In addition, other identities were struggling to find their own voices. Women and ethnic minorities, for example, although a central part of the movement and fighting for the same rights, found themselves isolated when they came to claim more specific needs that did not concern the White middle-class male majority of the activists. What was taking the form of an organised collectivity was revealing a fragile nature (Carter 2010; Cook 2007b: 182-4; Jarman 1993: 71-3; Sinfield 1998: 19).

That being said, the sexual experimentation of the 1960s and the political awareness of the early 1970s had nonetheless created a new consciousness

that kept growing throughout the decade and the early 1980s, coming to define a new lifestyle that put hedonism and club culture at its core. Jarman, for example, spent most of the 1980s in Soho and its surroundings, having moved to Phoenix House in 1979, a block of flats in Charing Cross Road overlooking St. Martin's School of Art. He was often to be found in restaurants and cafés such as Maison Bertaux, Jimmy's, Bianchi's, Bar Italia, Patisserie Valerie, Pollo, and the Algerian Coffee Store. He also frequented pubs and clubs such as The Salisbury, The Pink Panther, The Mineshaft (a fetish club similar to The Chaguaramas in Neal Street), The Subway (a sex disco opened in 1981 with a functioning dark room) and the other American-style clubs, on the model of Studio One in Los Angeles or Studio 54 in New York, that had been opened in and around the district. The most famous were the Sundown Club in the basement of the Astoria Theatre in Charing Cross Road, which opened in 1976 and offered three main nights — *Bang!*, on Mondays and Saturdays, and *Propaganda*, on Thursdays — and Heaven, which opened in 1980 under the Arches in Villiers Street. These clubs were nothing like previous venues: 'they were dark; they played very loud, fast disco music; they had good light shows on the floor; and above all they felt like sexually charged environments', and represented 'a new hedonism, where sexual pleasure was placed at the heart of the new gay identity' (Shiers 1988: 240). However, the commercialisation of Soho also meant an increasing sanitisation. While cruising was still a major part of the West End experience inside bars and clubs, spaces for sexual activities in the district became increasingly hard to find, though not impossible. Given that at the beginning of the 1980s the number of runaways had increased exponentially, and services like Centrepoint at St. Anne's Church — which

provided shelter for many of them — could not cope with the request anymore, authorities started to clean up Piccadilly and its surrounding areas. Soho was becoming increasingly and visibly gay. Still, 'the viral ghettoization of Soho into a politicized gay clubland' meant that, for the most part, the experience was to be taken away from its streets and limited to its bars and clubs (Reed 2014: 175). It is not a coincidence that Jarman, while living in Charing Cross Road and therefore having numerous bars and clubs to choose from within walking distance, was also a regular punter at Hampstead Heath:

I'm shivering with cold. Whatever keeps me here it's not the promise of blowing the boy in the baseball hat. What is it? It can't be the danger, it's safer here than Soho on a weekend evening. The dark (...) certainly doesn't frighten me. I know all the paths and beaten tracks through the night above the ancient beeches. Ours is a separate and parallel world, under the stars. Here you can fade away into the dark. On any other night there must be two hundred others here, beside the good-looking jogger, who I've seen dancing alone on the street outside Comptons (1992: 172-3).

While Soho's establishments represented a way to affirm visibility (indoor) within a heteronormative context, cruising grounds like Hampstead Heath (see 3.1) represented as much a way to remain invisible and avoid censorship as to reclaim that particular (outdoor) space (Jarman 1992: 121, 147, 241; Kemp

2011; Peake 1999: 281-2; Reed 2014: 151, 191).

However, just as homosexuality was becoming more acceptable, another big challenge hit the gay movement that had been formed around political activism in the 1970s and that was cemented through the more hedonistic club experience of the early 1980s. As most of the infections occurred among gay men during the first phase of the epidemic between 1981 and 1982, AIDS was initially identified as a gay disease, a gay cancer, or as a Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID). The spread among gay men of HIV, finally identified between 1983 and 1984, was seen as partly connected to the sexual liberation that between the 1970s and the 1980s facilitated and promoted sexual contact. Homosexuals themselves had to renegotiate their position. White (1995: 215), for example, states that 'to have been oppressed in the fifties, freed in the sixties, exalted in the seventies, and wiped out in the eighties is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow'. In his opinion, AIDS was not just taking away the lives of many gay men, but it was also compromising the existence of a gay culture on a more general level. Bartlett (1988: 220-1), however, explains:

what has happened is we have let ourselves believe (...) that the seventies' transformation of our culture was in fact our apotheosis. We thought, for a moment, that We had finally arrived (...) (Not for nothing was our biggest discotheque opened under the name of Heaven). [For many homosexuals] the image of a gay city became a reality: El Dorado. Since we persuaded ourselves that all our previous history had served to usher in the golden age, we now

see the challenge that AIDS presents as a very particular kind of disaster: the end of the golden age.

Jarman was among the most prominent exponents of the community to die of AIDS. He had tried to delay getting tested for HIV for as long as possible. During the heights of the epidemic, he would still frequent cruising grounds and have unprotected sex as he struggled to accept the reality of the threat that HIV was representing and that would have taken away his newly-found freedom. When he finally did test in December 1986, the results materialised his deepest fears. The doctor suggested him not to tell, but he decided to be open about it and told most of his friends that same day. The only solution, in his opinion, was 'discussion rather than censure' (1993: 28). Until that point, in fact, the government had been silent about the matter and had made no official plans to cope with the epidemic. Furthermore, British media was advancing a political agenda based on fear and rejection that sustained the homophobic idea that gay sex, and gay men themselves, were synonyms of AIDS. The initial confusion around the ways of transmission of the virus created even more panic and alarm. This climate had obvious repercussions on gay men, both psychological, with many letting media influence their wellbeing, and physical, with others becoming the target of gay bashing. In 1985, some politicians started advocating the closure of gay bars and clubs to stop the spread of HIV, even though it was quite clear that the virus was just an excuse to censor homosexuals and force them back into the closet. Still, even if it is undeniable that the sexual liberation experienced by many gay men was partly responsible

for how quickly HIV had gone viral, the subculture in which it had emerged also provided the 'social infrastructure for coping with the epidemic' (Weeks 1990: 246). The gay community, 'a term which was finally felt by many to have some sort of resonance and meaning' (Cook 2007b: 197), was ready to fight. Gay organisations and lobbies managed to work together once again, protesting, marching, but most of all assisting those who had become infected and educating those who were more likely so to become. Whitehead (1989: 4) notes that:

the gay community's achievement in pioneering education and support groups, its generosity to AIDS work and the adoption of safer sex may be responses to the epidemic but they owe nothing to the virus. They have grown out of the kind of community we were long before anyone had heard of AIDS.

As a result, around 1986, the number of infections among gay men dropped. Reacting against the slowness of the official response, and following the American example, ACT UP London (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was formed (Jarman 1992: 123-7, 1993: 88-108; Peake 1999: 324, 377-84).

Only when the numbers of infections among heterosexuals rose did it become clear that the virus was not a strictly homosexual issue. Another phase of the epidemic started in which the government could not ignore the problem anymore and was forced to intervene. As no cure had yet been found, the

government finally understood that prevention was the only possible answer and therefore started a health education campaign. Still, towards the end of the decade, most governmental committees and special divisions regarding AIDS were dismantled on the instructions of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose conservative programme sought to reaffirm traditional social and moral values. This was not the only controversial decision taken by the Iron Lady during her mandate between 1979 and 1990, and definitely not the only one that affected homosexuals. At a party conference in October 1987, following her third victory, Thatcher launched her attack on local authorities supposedly promoting homosexuality, which led to the (in)famous Clause 28 to be added to the Local Government Bill 1988 (Section 28 after the Bill became an Act). According to the clause, a local authority would not be allowed to promote or publish material promoting homosexuality and homosexual relations as pretended family relationships. This was in order to protect children from adult homosexuals and to avoid the promotion of a kind of identity and family different from that of the traditional British family. The whole matter seemed quite confused from the outset given that the power to engage in sex education was not in the hands of local authorities but in those of school governing bodies. What Clause 28 really represented was a political weapon 'as significant for lesbian and gay history as the 1885 Labouchère Amendment and the 1967 reform act': it was not really used to persecute but it did function as a symbolic threat, promoting 'caution, self-censorship, a "return to the closet"' (Weeks 1990: 238). Still, the clause only succeeded in once again uniting gay people, with 20,000 protesting against it in Manchester on 20 February 1988 and 30,000 doing the same in June at the London Gay Pride march. Many other direct actions took place all around

Britain, and important groups, such as Stonewall and Outrage!, were born from the protests. Yet, if everybody agreed on the need for government intervention regarding the AIDS crisis, and on the necessity to repeal Section 28, internal divisions and disagreements amongst gay activists did not take long to emerge. The differences in approach of Stonewall and Outrage! were 'a muted echo of those between the GLF and CHE', with Stonewall following a lobbying 'legal rights and equality agenda' aimed at 'assimilation and respectability', and Outrage! following a more direct action-oriented policy (Cook 2007b: 204-8. See also Jarman 1993: 96, 127; Rotello 1997: 3; Weeks 1990: 240-6).

Moreover, undermining the already fragile balance of the gay community was a new distinction between the *gay* and the *queer movement*: 'by the late 1980s, the radical edge that initially surrounded "gay" had softened, and it had become a standard descriptive term. Using "queer" was a way of regaining this radical impetus' (Cook 2007b: 207). Gay sought legitimation, queer affirmation. Vaid (1995: 37) distinguishes between the two explaining that 'gay and lesbian legitimation seeks straight tolerance and acceptance of gay people', while 'gay and lesbian liberation seeks nothing less than affirmation, represented in the acknowledgement that queer sexuality is morally equivalent to straight sexuality'. For self-identified queer people, being gay was just another side of the same coin of being heterosexual, the two identities were mutually constituted. Soho's gay bars, and the gay publications and associations that were born in that period (see 1.3), were all seen as products of mainstream society made to control non-heterosexual people while also taking advantage of their buying power. Assimilation, in their opinion, meant that gay people would



sacrifice their culture to be accepted by the heterosexual majority that was trying to control them. Queer, instead, sought liberation from the 'gay mafia', 'gay censors', 'political parties', 'oppressors', and, most of all, from 'a GHETTO of our own making' and from 'the myth of the "gay community"'. By rejecting a gay identity, queer people were rejecting the heterosexual identity and the concept of identity itself. However, even if queer initially wanted to 'reject all labels' and liberate queer people from 'the lie that we are all lesbians and gay men', it ended up becoming itself an identity used in opposition to both straight and gay (Jarman 1993: 143-4). Consequently, it did not take long for many people to start seeing queer as too extreme a position to identify with. Whatever the chosen identity, the great achievement of the time was that homosexuality had become visible and discussed by society at large, including homosexuals themselves. Sinfield (1998: 39), for instance, observes,

we used to say that we were silenced, invisible, secret. Now, though our subcultures are still censored, there is intense mainstream investment in everything that we do, or are imagined as doing. We are spoken of, written of, and filmed everywhere, though rarely in terms that we can entirely welcome.

Gay groups were created in most major political parties, trade unions and professions, revealing a shift in public opinion towards inclusion and diversity. However, homophobia was far from disappearing and even though

homosexuality became 'increasingly acceptable', it did so on the tacit understanding that it would not cross 'certain unmarked frontiers' of social behaviour implicit in British culture (Weeks 1990: 224). In fact, as considered in the following section, even though homosexuality was *out*, it was so only *in* restricted spaces ('restricted' in both abstract and physical terms).

### 1.3 — London's Gay District

At the beginning of the 1990s, Soho underwent a major transformation. Many local businesses started to cater for gay men — or at least they started to be openly promoted as gay businesses, given that some had already unofficially welcomed a homosexual clientele in the past. The latter included traditional pubs like The Admiral Duncan, Comptons, The Golden Lion, The Duke of Wellington, The Kings Arms, The City of Quebec, and Halfway II Heaven (See *Table 2* for more information about these and other venues). However, it was the opening in 1991 of Village Soho (now renamed The Village), at the west end of Old Compton Street, that revolutionised the area. The blacked-out windows of older venues were substituted with plate-glass windows at street level characteristic of European-style cafés, new visible neon signs took the place of hidden doorways, and the bright and stylish interiors reflected a new idea of cleanliness and openness. In just a few years, and all through the following decade, over thirty new openly-gay bars with a similar style appeared in Soho, concentrating, for the first time, in its eastern half between Charing Cross Road and Rupert Street (mostly around Old Compton Street), such as 79 CXR, Candy Bar, The Edge, Freedom, Ku Bar, Ghetto, etc. (see *Table 2*), not to

mention the take over of Heaven by the G-A-Y company in 2008, after running successful gay nights at the Astoria since 1993, or the many other gay bars and clubs that appeared in Soho's surrounding areas such as First Out Café, Kudos (then Blitz), The End, Retro Bar (see 3.1). Clothes and underwear shops targeting gay men also multiplied — such as Dirty White Boy, Boy Zone, Clone Zone, Paradiso, American Retro, Prowler — as well as cafés and restaurants like Balans on Old Compton Street (Andersson 2007, 2009: 55-71; Binnie 1995; *Out Magazine* 2007: n.3, n.8-12, 2008: n.13, n.17-24, 2009: n.27-32, 2010: n.40, 2011: n.54).

There are two main reasons for the appearance of all these businesses in and around Soho between the 1990s and 2000s. The first one is the district's atmosphere. In the 1980s, the expanding market of pornography had found a goldmine in the area. Already by the end of the 1970s, around 164 sex-trade establishments were present in Soho. Premises such as sex shops and sauna & massage parlours had appeared at every corner creating what was to be defined as 'the plastic vice' (Summers 1989: 217) or 'sexploitation' (*Soho Clarion* 1977: n.14), given its connection to money laundering activities. Sex had always represented a fundamental aspect of Soho's life and prostitutes had been a constant presence in the area (see 1.1). However, if in the past sex had mainly been confined to the areas around Piccadilly Circus, between the 1970s and 1980s it expanded all over the district. The economic monopoly that the sex industry had acquired over Soho — thanks also to the tacit support of Westminster City Council (WCC) which would often close an eye on the matter and let sex premises operate outside the law — and the effects that it had over

the look and composition of its streets, created much discontent among its residents, to the point that a sort of *good trade vs bad trade* started to appear. Thanks to the intervention of the Soho Society — a residents' association created 'to preserve the character of Soho, and to protect the interests of Soho's residents, its traders and craftsmen, and of the visitors who come here from home and overseas' (*Soho Clarion* 1973: n.1) — WCC was soon forced to take action. A year after its launch, the Soho Society had already been recognised by WCC for consultation purposes regarding planning matters within the area. Furthermore, in 1982 The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and the Licensing Bill allowed the council to impose licences and restrict the number of sex venues to a minimum. Still, to avoid a most likely unsuccessful application to WCC for sex shop licences, many venues applied to the Greater London Council (GLC) for cinematograph licences. Sex shops were now being regulated, but the problem was taking the form of strip clubs, peep shows, nude entertainment, and hardcore cinemas. By 1985, the number of sex premises was still at a high eighty-seven, mostly operating within the law. This is because places like clip joints, which had planning consent to operate as restaurants or cafés, did not have to undergo a change of use and, if they closed by 11pm, they did not need a late-night licence (De Peyer and Richman 2015; *Soho Clarion* 1977: n.14-7; 1978: n.23, 1979: n.25, 1980: n.29-33, 1981: n.34-5, 1982: n.38-41, 1983: n.44-46, 1985: n.52, 1991: n.75, 1993: n.83, 1999: n.136; Summers 1989: 208-17; Sutherland 1982: 6).

The presence of the sex industry, while undoubtedly representing a big threat for Soho's residents and businesses, had also enhanced the sexual

atmosphere of the district, to the point that for many people Soho came to be recognised as the red light district of London. The sexual atmosphere of the area and its apparent permissiveness led the way to the development of a series of gay-targeted infrastructures. Whereas in the past the homosexual presence in the area, with the few exceptions previously considered in this chapter, was limited to the male prostitution around Piccadilly Circus, during the 1990s it took the form of openly-gay bars and clubs. With CCTV rapidly expanding all over the West End, taking the police surveillance that had characterised the trade in previous decades to a whole new level, and with most male prostitutes leaving the streets and starting to advertise their services through gay magazines or through online private agencies, the face of male prostitution had completely changed. Trade was transformed into a profitable job, with most sex workers earning huge amounts of money compared to what previous Dilly boys used to. Moreover, following the sexual liberation experienced between the 1960s and 1970s, male prostitution was now seen as a marginal activity limited to a small part of the community, with most gay people living openly-gay lives and engaging in sexual activities for pleasure more than money (Reed 2012: 175, 201-4).

The second reason for the development of gay-targeted activities in Soho is the fact that rents had increased exponentially given that the landlords of those premises that had been illegally transformed into sex venues, with a consequent increase in market value, were not likely to lower rents to previous standards. Moreover, the abolition of Light Industrial Use as a separate class (Use Classes Order 1987) meant that property speculators could get vacant

possession of light industrial spaces and replace them with more profitable offices without having to apply to the council for a change of use. In Soho, for example, rents for crafts premises in 1987 were around £8-10 a square foot. Those for office use were instead £25-30. Even when landlords were willing to renew leases to craftsmen, rents were escalating and reaching unaffordable levels, following a similar process to the one that had concerned sex venues a few years earlier. Office spaces also had shorter leases (around 3-5 years) compared to those of light industrial spaces (around 20 years), which guaranteed developers a constant increase in rent demanded. In less than a year, 50,000 square feet of light industrial space in Soho was transformed into offices, pressuring tailors, craft traders and other small businesses out of the district, while welcoming those big businesses and media companies that could instead afford to pay the high rents. It is in this context that the new male-oriented culture of the yuppies — the young successful businessmen or media employees working in the West End or in the newly-built Soho offices — invaded the district and transformed it into an open-air mall where goods, style and, to some extent, identity could be purchased. The growth in the number of office premises in Soho meant an increase of all forms of infrastructure that were catering to the new consumers, from new shops where they could buy tailored suits and branded clothes, to the new bars and clubs. Newspapers and magazines started to advertise the district as the new home of British fashion and entertainment industry. Still, even though the yuppie may have been the original target of Soho's fashion revival, gay men soon became the most consistent and profitable target group (Mort 2009: 164-9; *Soho Clarion* 1980 n.33, 1985: n.52, 1987: n.61-2, 1988: n.64-6, 1989: n.67-9, 1991: n.75;

Summers 1989: 228-30).

Indeed, the commercialisation of masculine identities in Soho represented a huge attraction for those gay men who were, at the time, still on the lookout for a more personal and distinctive identity. The setback caused by the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s, and the constant censorship that the Thatcher years had brought along, made gay men even more eager to set their own rules and create their own meanings. Style and clothes worked as representational tools and helped shape gay identities in the district. Gay men in the 1990s became fashion aware and, most importantly, they became aware of the power of fashion in bringing them together as a group. Images of healthy and clean bodies replaced those of illness and dirt that had previously been promoted by mainstream society in the midst of the epidemic. Gay men were now able to live out and proud lives, showing that they did not differ much from their heterosexual counterparts when it came to buying power. Identification, in fact, was not limited to their physical image. It was in the new clubs and bars of Soho that gay men built up their networks and created communities through the expression of their newly-found identities. These places, too, promoted a new image of homosexuality through the use of bright and clean interiors, as well as putting consumption at the centre of the gay experience in the district. Soho was becoming increasingly gay thanks to the presence of gay-targeted activities and gay men openly performing their identities in the streets. Most importantly, it seemed that they had finally found a space of their own (Cook 2007b: 188-9; Weeks 1990: 232).

At this point, a few considerations seem necessary. First, it is true that

the geography of Soho allowed gay people who had come together in the district to define their own space in the urban panorama, identifying their own landmarks, such as bars and clubs, and building up their own networks within a contained safe space. Sexual minorities, as considered in 0.2.2, constantly have to make claims of ownership in order to subvert the assumed heteronormativity of space. Soho acquired new meanings as a visibly gay space while, at the same time, helping the formation of gay identities and a feeling of communality. As Summers (1989: 38) notices, 'persecution comes in many shapes and forms, and in whatever incarnation it appears — political, religious, social or sexual — Soho has always seemed to provide the persecuted with shelter and with the freedom to be themselves'. Still, even though identity, and consequently community, in postmodern terms is always constructed in space, only specific spaces allow the expression and performance of those identities that do not belong to the heteronormative majority. It can be argued, in fact, that Soho's boundaries also functioned as a way for mainstream society to stem and control the development of a never-before-seen phenomenon that was impossible to halt but that had to be somehow monitored. Concentration was, at this stage, a necessary tool for creating a sense of community among gay men but also, and foremost, for its external control. It should also be highlighted that not every gay venue that had appeared was actually owned by gay people. While the gay presence in the area was increasing and independent gay bars and clubs owned or run by gay people were opening up, the majority were, in fact, part of bigger companies that owned other (straight) venues all over London and the UK, and that saw gay men as just another specific target group for increasing their earnings. All of



these establishments understood the gay market as a major source of profit and transformed the area into the hub of London's commercial gay life.

Consequently, even if the opening of gay venues at the time seemed like a liberating phenomenon, as a direct result of the many battles fought in previous years, it may as well be seen in merely economic terms as an operation to expand consumption to a newly-emerging target group. In Soho, gay men became consumers of a lifestyle that had been tailored to their own aspirations and needs. The focus on style, youth, consumption and body image that was typical of the new male-oriented gay culture and that had become the main feature of the newly-born community that was shaping in the district, was also shifting many gay people away from the political activism that had characterised the previous decade. Many gay people, in fact, started to feel excluded from this ideal of gay life because they could not afford it or they simply did not want it (Mort 2009: 165-6).

Already at the end of the decade, Alan Sinfield (1998: 196) observed that even though 'Old Compton Street has given London its gay village (...) it has only done so for a short eight years'. When on 30 April 1999, at 6.37pm, three people were killed (two gay men and a heterosexual pregnant woman), and at least seventy were wounded in the bombing of The Admiral Duncan pub, in Old Compton Street, by former British National Party member David Copeland — who also targeted ethnic and religious communities in Brick Lane and Brixton — it became clear that Soho was not what many thought it was. What had initially been envisioned by many gay men as a safe space where they could express and live their sexual identities with total freedom, turned out to be as vulnerable

to anti-gay violence as any other part of London. In a way, the dream of a newly-found land of opportunities had been broken. Still, even though the bomber, with his hate campaign, seemed to be targeting those who were different, 'in Soho where being "different" has been the norm since the 18th century', he did not manage to achieve his purpose of instilling fear and division (*Soho Clarion* 1999: n.100). On the contrary, the bombing almost seemed to bring together all the different communities of the area. Talking about the district, Soho Society Chair David Evans (in *Soho Clarion* 2015: n.161) explains that Soho has always welcomed different communities because of its tolerance. In his opinion, instead of tolerating these communities, Soho is now 'defined by them'. As in the case of foreign minorities or sex workers, gay people gradually became an integral part of the district. An attack on a gay business of Soho was, quite simply, an attack on Soho. Hundreds of people visited the site in the following weeks and many gathered for a vigil to commemorate the victims in St. Anne's Gardens, where, the following year, three cherry trees were planted and, in 2003, a triangular Suffolk oak bench — to represent both the three bombings and the three victims of the Admiral Duncan — was unveiled by Mayor Ken Livingstone. London's gay village was not dead. On the contrary, it was about to be born again, only this time on a global level (Cook 2007b: 213; *Soho Clarion* 2003: n.115).

The gay market that was established in the 1990s developed throughout the 2000s on an international scale. In line with the ethos of the day that saw the creation of identifiable urban spaces where diversity was promoted as cultural capital, Soho during the 2000s was transformed into an international

destination for anyone, gay or straight, who wanted to experience the lifestyle that was being promoted in connection to the gay community, understood by now almost as a consumption good, an experience that could be bought. Soho was not only a space where gay people could finally feel comfortable while being out and proud but also a space where anyone could feel cosmopolitan. The promotion of Soho as a gay space highlighted the tolerance of the city and transformed it into a cosmopolitan space where difference could be safely consumed. The richness of the district in terms of cultural capital, its different cuisines, its variety of shops and, most importantly, its numerous ethnic and sexual communities, started to attract a large number of visitors who would go to Soho on the lookout for a specific experience and encounter with the *other* (or with the *same*, in the case of gay people). To many, Soho was still the red light district and the few sex bookstores and peep shows left in the area constituted the main attraction. To others, Soho was the place to get in touch with the Chinese community of Gerrard Street, or to go to for its record shops and jazz clubs, or to experience what was left of its *vie de bohème*. The Colony Room, for example, continued to attract a large crowd of actors, musicians, and artists, who wanted to experience what had, by that time, become a mythological place. For the majority, however, there was a new reason to go to Soho, and that was to visit the gay district of London.

Gay businesses like bars, clubs, and shops, were not the only elements that helped Soho's success as a gay district and promoted London as a cosmopolitan city. Pride marches also played a major role (see 0.2.4). The first Pride march in London can be traced back to 1970, smaller in number of

participants but with a clear political stake. Throughout the years, Pride marches became increasingly popular to the point that, in the 1980s, many parallel activities and shows were organised and Pride marches were transformed into carnival events. In the past few years, the ending point of all demonstrations has been Trafalgar Square. Soho, being just around the corner and having become London's official gay district, has represented a convenient gathering point for any further celebration, with most bars and clubs organising special parties and events. Moreover, throughout the 2000s, Pride marches have become global events that attract people worldwide. London, for example, also hosted bigger events such as EuroPride and World Pride. EuroPride was launched in 1992 in London and takes place each year in a different European city with a consolidated gay scene. It was supposed to return to London in 1999 but, due to financial problems, the event was cancelled. When it finally did, in 2006, it encountered the support of the city and it was attended by Mayor Ken Livingstone and many celebrities, politicians and activists such as Ian McKellen and Peter Tatchell. Participants were, for the first time, allowed to parade down Oxford Street and three big stages were placed in and around Soho (Soho Square, Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square). Moreover, many afterparty events were organised by private venues and sold thousands of tickets. For a short 2 weeks, and especially during the weekend of the main parade, London was literally invaded by thousands of gay men and women from all over Europe. The economic benefits for the city, Soho and its gay venues were astonishing, and so were the benefits for the visibility of gay people. In 2012, London also hosted the third-ever World Pride. Unfortunately, public and private funds were cut back only a few days before the parade and many events had to be

cancelled or downgraded. The case of World Pride 2012 may be used to support the claim, made by many critics of Pride events, that sponsors are always misleading as it is hard to tell if they are supporting gay people or simply exploiting an economic opportunity. An alternative to this commercialisation of gay events was initially represented by Soho Pride. This annual celebration, started in 2003, was aimed at supporting and promoting local gay businesses within the area while highlighting the centrality of Soho to the gay community. Smaller in size, and contained within the boundaries of the district, Soho Pride was also a chance to create bridges between gay people and other communities of the area. However, it should be noted that Soho Pride was also receiving funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA). In 2008 the authorities decided to withdraw their support and concentrate just on funding London Pride. Consequently, Soho's institutions on their own were not able to support the event anymore. The quick rise and fall of Soho Pride, instead of offering an alternative to the commercialisation of gay events may, on the contrary, sustain the idea that contemporary Pride events really are shaped by economic needs more than political activism and community feelings as it may have been in the past (Grew 2008; *Soho Clarion* 2005: n.121, 2006: n.125).

Seeing gay men as only one big target group for external money-making investors can, however, be misleading. It is true that places like Soho and events like Pride have attracted much interest because of their economic potential and that gay people have often been taken advantage of because of their financial status, but it is also true that this constituted a two-way process. By spending money, opening venues, and by simply *being* in Soho and at

events like Prides, gay people were becoming visible to each other and forcing those who had until then ignored them to recognise their presence in the urban space. In fact, the 2000s and early 2010s will most certainly be remembered for a shift in public opinion towards inclusion and diversity. Within a decade, all those goals that, even after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, had seemed unattainable, were finally achieved, transforming the UK into one of the most advanced countries in the world in terms of both human and legal rights for gay people. According to the 2015 Rainbow Europe Index drafted by the international human rights association ILGA-Europe (European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), the UK scored a total of 86% over a series of criteria to determine a country's progress in the promotion of equality legislation. This represented the highest score in Europe, with an incredible 92% conferred to Scotland alone. In 2016, the UK was exceeded by Malta, which scored an outstanding 88%, and Belgium, with 82%, but still scored a remarkable 81% placing it third. The fundamental rights that have been achieved include, for example, the fact that in 2000 LGBTQ people were finally allowed to serve openly in the Armed Forces. The following year, the age of consent was changed to 16 for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people (2009 in Northern Ireland). In 2005 transgender people were allowed to change their legal gender. The same year, civil partnership was introduced nationwide (Civil Partnership Act 2004) — granting same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as civil marriage, such as property rights, benefits, pension and next of kin status — and joint and step-child adoption was authorised in England and Wales (2009 in Scotland and 2013 in Northern Ireland). Within just over a year since the first civil partnership was registered in

December 2005, 16,800 couples in England and Wales had already entered one. Even though numbers have decreased in the following years, they have nonetheless kept a constant average of between 7,929 (2007) and 5,646 (2013) partnerships per year. By the end of 2013, 60,938 civil partnerships had been celebrated in England and Wales. Of these, 9,675 were contracted in London alone between 2008 and 2013. Following the introduction of same-sex marriage — Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 — the number of civil partnerships dropped by 70% from the previous year to 1,683 in 2014. Between 29 March 2014, when the first same-sex marriage was celebrated, and 30 June 2014, a total of 1,409 same-sex marriages were formed, ninety-five of which took place within the first 3 days. These numbers are far lower than those of civil partnership in 2005/2006, but it must be kept in mind that civil partnership was the first and only way to recognise a same-sex union up until 2014, and consequently it encountered a much greater response at the time. Those who want to, can now convert their civil partnership into marriage. In addition, with the Equality Act 2010 LGBTQ people must now be treated equally when it comes to employment and services (both private and public). According to the act, sexual orientation is considered as important as other characteristics such as age, gender, race, religion and disability (ILGA-Europe 2015, 2016; Office for National Statistics 2014; Press Association 2015).

Far from identifying Soho as the only reason why political, social, and cultural mores have changed, its contribution is nonetheless undeniable. Political activism, marches, and protests in the previous decades had made gay people visible in specific contexts and times. Soho had given them a crossroads

to meet each other and society at large on a more constant and global basis. This is the Soho that features in the works of Clayton Littlewood, owner — between 2006 and 2008 — of a male clothes shop called Dirty White Boy at 50 Old Compton Street, and probably the most attentive and honest observer of the district in the last decade. Sitting on a red chair behind his shop window, Littlewood initially started to record the life of the district for his personal blog, but soon went on to publish some extracts for the Soho Stories column in *The London Paper* and, at a later stage, completed two autobiographical novels called *Dirty White Boy: Tales of Soho* and *Goodbye to Soho*. His writing, rich with camp humour and wit, describes the life down Old Compton Street and the many colourful characters who enter his shop, from celebrities like Graham Norton, Kathy Griffin, and Janice Dickinson to less known people like Angela Pasquale, 'a tour de force of tranny energy, humour and anecdote' (2012: 4) whose first words to Littlewood were 'Girl, where can I get a good butt plug round here? It's for the fanny, luv. I've just had the cock chopped off and I need to dilate' (2012: 7); or like Chico, an Afro-Caribbean American who used to work as a Diana Ross impersonator; Rabiq Shaw, an 'Anglo-Indian Quentin Crisp' whose works have been exhibited in major museums and art galleries; Sebastian Horsley, a dandy who, just like Crisp before him, 'has made it the object of his life to become a work of art' (2012: 59), sleeping with more than a thousand prostitutes and becoming himself a Soho legend; Pam the Fag Lady, a homeless woman who always asks Littlewood for some change or, if he cannot spare some, a cuddle; Sue and Maggie, the madams from the brothel above Littlewood's shop; and also all those people who are not named but who can be found in Soho at any time such as the Brazilian male prostitutes who sit



outside Costa looking for trade, while Littlewood browses *QX* or *Boyz* magazines 'trying to match the cock pix' with their faces (2008: 42); the 'business gays', with their manbags and frappuccinos to go, 'no time to chat, darling. Love you too. Air kisses. See you at Barcode!' (2008: 6); 'the drunken hen night and "we love the gays" girls' brigade' (2008: 6); the flyer boys, 'always happy, always sparkling in glitter and makeup (...), flirting, laughing, and gossiping' (2008: 26); the curious straight lads who make fun of gay couples, 'unconsciously deflecting the curiosity that draws them here. Patting each other on the back with each comment. Hugging. Whispering in each other's ears. Lips touching skin. (...) Ironically, the most homoerotic presence on the street' (2012: 45); the Big Issue seller; the baffled tourists; 'the crowd flooding the street. Young and old. All nationalities and sexualities, backgrounds and classes (...). A melting pot of London life, thrown together on one street. Like a modern-day Hogarth painting' (2008: 30). What Littlewood (2008: 13) describes are 'the real faces of Soho', those who never appear in the documentaries on the district but who, nonetheless, are precisely what makes Soho so appealing and diverse (Horsley 2008).

Among them is also Leslie, an old gentleman who speaks in Polari — a secret language used by homosexuals up until the 1960s — and who keeps returning to the shop because it is the place where, when it was still an Italian restaurant called Torino's in the first half of the twentieth century, he met his former lover. As Littlewood explains, 'although the street's predominantly youth oriented, the old return, often unnoticed, to remember, to reflect. They see a different Soho. The ghosts' (2012: 9). This idea of a different Soho and its

ghosts is particularly helpful for the understanding of how different people experience and define the area. What Leslie is looking for by going back to Soho, and Littlewood's shop in particular, is a Soho that is no more, a memory of the district that is very much different from the reality of the area but that is, nonetheless, just as real for him. The fact that the restaurant has been transformed into a clothes shop does not seem to put Leslie off. Instead, he can still see the ghosts of Soho's past and he keeps going back to the area precisely to remember and re-experience his own memory of it. Leslie's story is not too far from that of all those people who, as previously considered, go to Soho to relive a specific time or atmosphere, helped by the constant creation and promotion of the Soho myth and their desire to become themselves part of it (see 3.2). As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Mort (2010: 202) explains that:

throughout its modern history Soho was always envisaged as both a real and an imagined space, where complex economic and social relationships intersected with the equally rich resources of urban fantasy. Writing about Greenwich Village (...) Christine Stansell has argued that such areas were usually understood by their devotees to be socially and geographically permeable rather than fixed, because the notion of fluid boundaries served the varied agendas of different interest communities. Like Greenwich Village, Soho was projected as part of the geographies of the imagination and as an intensely compressed but mutable social

environment. These interrelated factors positioned the district as a major site for cultural and sexual experimentation throughout the twentieth century.

In other words, Soho became so important for gay men not only for the presence of gay venues but also, and most importantly, for what it represented. More than the district itself, what made Soho a gay destination was the idea of Soho. Its real boundaries had the function of creating a defined space where gay networks could be established and developed, while also allowing both gay and straight people to enter or leave at any given time thanks to their fluid aspect. What is particularly interesting, from this point of view, is the imagined aspect of these boundaries, and consequently the imagined aspect of Soho as a whole. Soho represents different things to different people. More than a physical gay district, Soho's imagined boundaries created a feeling, a sense of home and community which may not always correspond to the reality of the place but that is nonetheless important for those who experience it.

Consequently, figures such as Wilde, Crisp, Bacon, Belcher, Jarman, Horsley, are not just ghosts of the past, they become essential in the construction of the Soho myth, influencing the image that people have of the district, their expectations, and the ways in which they define and experience the area.

#### **1.4 — Soho Is Changing**

In the last few years, titles such as 'Goodbye, Soho, Hello Mini-Mayfair?', 'So

Long, Soho?', 'The Slow Death of Soho', 'The Battle for Soho's Soul', 'In-depth: Is Soho Over?', have appeared both online and in national newspapers and magazines such as *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Evening Standard* and *Attitude*, to mention a few. All these articles suggest that the district of Soho may be currently under threat and that, unless something will be done about it, it will soon disappear. Gentrification is identified as the main factor contributing to a reorganisation of both spaces and people within the area. Far from being a strictly local phenomenon, gentrification seems to be the keyword in contemporary discussions around urban space in London. Many areas, from Shoreditch to Elephant and Castle, have experienced an intense process of redevelopment and renovation that has transformed both their image and their reputation. Mostly working-class areas of London, in the last few years they have been transformed into upmarket areas that appeal to contractors and property developers first, and to wealthy consumers and new residents second. The term gentrification was coined by sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) while describing the urban changes that were taking place in the inner neighbourhoods of the capital between the 1950s and 1960s. In her opinion, when working-class areas are taken over by the middle class, the process of gentrification does not stop until the working class is pushed out of the district and the social constitution of the area is modified. Displacement can happen for various reasons: old residents can be forced out, for instance, by eviction or they can be put in the position of leaving because of a huge increase in rent or because the character of the district they had been living in has changed and they do not feel at home anymore. Once their dwellings have been made vacant, developers buy them for a low price, upgrade them, and consequently

sell or rent the dwellings to the middle class — in Soho's case, to overseas investors — for a much higher price. As Wakeman (*Soho Clarion* 2000: n.104) warns, 'developers are like sharks. When one makes a killing, others smell blood and in seconds a circling shoal is on the prowl, hunting, sniffing out other victims'. Considering that this process happens in quick succession in a concentrated and defined area, it is clear that the socio-economic and cultural character of the district will be subjected to drastic changes. In fact, even though gentrification usually means that an area will go upmarket and become much richer, modern and safer, it also means that it will tend to lose its independent character, its history, and its original residents (*Attitude Magazine* 2015; Bird 2014; Chester 2014; Clark 2014; *Soho Clarion* 2013: n.152).

The trope of the death of Soho, and its possible rebirth, is nothing new in the narrative of the district. Already from the 1950s, some private companies and property developers had been advocating a redevelopment of the area, mainly with the idea of replacing most of Soho's buildings with high-rise glass towers, each housing hundreds of residents. Fortunately, Soho was partly declared a conservation area in 1969 (the eastern half from Wardour Street to Charing Cross Road) and its transformation remained 'piecemeal and ad hoc' (Mort 2010: 151). Moreover, the borders of the conservation area were constantly expanded and, by 1977, they included most of the district, limiting the possibilities for future drastic changes in its physical structure. Still, as previously considered, what has often changed in Soho is its internal composition. The first number of the *Soho Clarion*, published in December 1973, opened with the headline 'Must Soho Die?'. The article was divided into

different sections such as 'The End of Soho?' and 'Communities In Danger', discussing the threat that redevelopment represented to Soho and speculating that, unless a higher level of control was set up, the district could have been 'developed out of existence', with its commercial and residential communities 'destroyed for ever' to make way for offices and luxury apartments. In the 1980 Christmas issue (n.33), the same headline 'Must Soho Die?' reappeared. The editors highlighted that, after 7 years, the same question was still current but this time traditional crafts and restaurants were being substituted with sex venues. A few years later, in 1988, the n.66 issue opened with the article 'Soho — Going, Going, Gone?' describing the effects of the abolition of Light Industrial Use as a separate class and the consequent office threat that derived from it. The following year, in the n.69 issue, some even stronger words were used to describe this change: 'as long as property speculators can get vacant possession or can demand office rents for small workshops the rape of Soho will continue'. The theme of the death of the area also featured in 'A Black Day For Soho' and its subsection 'Gone Forever', published in 1990 (n.70), and reporting on the rejection of a clause proposed by WCC to stop the loss of light industrial space from the district by declaring Soho a Special Industry Area. As the previous examples show, the Soho Society, through its publication, has often resorted to ideas of invasion, destruction, disappearance, and even rape and death, to sustain the need to safeguard the district, its residents and its businesses. While the language used may sometimes seem bellicose and exaggerated, obviously reflecting a partisan stance aimed at raising consensus among the readers and uniting them in the fight, it is nonetheless indicative of the constant interest of external groups over Soho, and the consequent anxiety

of the society to keep it (almost) unchanged (*Soho Clarion* 1998: n.98, 2000: n.102, 2001: n.105, 2006: n.124).

Still, the fact that 'a familiar sense of doom' is currently experienced and revived not only by publications within Soho but by national newspapers and magazines calls for the need to ask questions about whether Soho disappearing is only a convenient narrative trope to stop change from happening within the district or a real possibility (Clark 2014). Most of all, it is important to understand to what degree these claims can be sustained. Soho is almost certainly not disappearing from the map of London, nor is it actually dying. The fact that it was declared a conservation area already suggests that Soho will not be completely demolished and replaced with something else. What needs to be explored is what factors, if any, are changing the internal economic, social, and cultural composition of Soho and, most importantly, the idea that people have of the district. Sure enough, the property market is now extremely prolific, counting for a huge part of Britain's gross domestic product. A third of property transactions are carried out in London and Soho has proved to be one of the major hot spots, with an increase in rents of about 10% a year. This does not include residential dwellings only but also commercial spaces. Yet, whereas in the past shops and flats in Soho were being transformed into office space, nowadays the opposite process is happening, with 180,000 square metres of office space in the West End being converted into luxury apartments since 2003. Studios are currently on sale for £600,000 to 700,000, whereas one or two bedroom flats go from £1,471 to £2,163 per square foot, with some flats on the market for as much as £3,985,000. A new development called Soho13,

in Ingestre Place, is now selling apartments from £2,995,000 for a two bedroom flat. With such prices, it becomes clear that, whenever possible, developers are trying to invest in luxury housing more than office or commercial space and, even when they do invest in the latter, rents are only affordable to a handful of large companies or multinational corporations (Arlidge 2015; Foxtons 2016; Mort 2009: 11, 156; PrimeLocation 2016; *Soho Clarion* 1985: n.52, 1987: n.61-2, 1988: n. 64-6, 1989: n.67-9, 1990: n.70, 1991: n.73-5, 1992: n.77-8; SohoThirteen 2016; Summers 1989: 228-30).

This is true for one gay company that, even if threatened by gentrification, was able to save itself thanks to the influence that it has gained throughout the years and to a great marketing strategy. G-A-Y started as a radio programme presented by Jeremy Joseph on Spectrum Radio. In 1993, when Joseph bought the rights, G-A-Y took over the already established night *Bang!* at The Astoria, where it stayed for over 15 years filling the venue 4 nights a week and attracting internationally famous singers and bands. Nonetheless, in June 2006, The Astoria was sold for £24 million to Derwent Valley Central developers, who were planning to convert the building into offices and shops. The loss of such an important live music venue for the London scene pushed many people to sign a petition to save the theatre ([www.petitiononline.com/savethea/](http://www.petitiononline.com/savethea/)). However successful the petition was, developers' plans were halted by parliamentary approval of a new CrossRail station at Tottenham Court Road (a £5.5 billion scheme that, by 2019, will directly connect Heathrow Airport with the City of London and Canary Wharf). The site was bought using compulsory purchase orders and finally closed in



2009 when the engineering works started. With The Astoria now closed, G-A-Y club nights like Popcorn, Work!, Camp Attack, Porn Idol, and the regular Saturday night sessions, had to find a new home. In 2008, G-A-Y moved to Heaven, 'a bold and seamless move which solidified and secured Soho's gay pop scene' (Ryder 2015). As Joseph himself put it, 'together it is 44 years of gay history (...) after years of being competition to each other, the world's best known gay club becomes the home to the world's most famous gay club night' (Charman 2008). Moreover, in January 2013, Joseph managed to buy out all shares of the G-A-Y brand, becoming the sole owner of both the brand and the venues. He wrote on his Facebook page:

what the future holds I don't know, we have a huge loan to pay back, but I will say, my goal is that once the loans are paid back, G-A-Y will do more for our community, at this stage not sure how, but the brand will hopefully grow and become more than just a business but a gay brand that gives back and helps each new generation of lesbians and gay men with challenges that they face like G-A-Y has had to over the last 20 years to be where it is today (in McCormick 2013).

G-A-Y is now 'the world's most enduring and famous gay brand' (Ryder 2015), owning G-A-Y Bar, G-A-Y Late, Heaven, and G-A-Y Manchester — a branch bar in Manchester's gay village (*Attitude Magazine* 2015; Grew 2007;

McCormick 2013; Shoffman 2006).

Ku Bar also shares a similar story. It was opened in 1995 in Charing Cross Road as a small bar that mainly attracted a young clientele. However, in 2007 Ku Bar moved to a new location in Lisle Street. This is because owner Gary Henshaw could not get a longer lease for the Charing Cross Road venue and WCC had refused to extend their opening hours (apart from an extra hour during the weekend) even though in 2005 the new Licensing Act had introduced 24-hour licensing. In fact, WCC, with the support of both the Soho Society and the police, had decided not to extend licences for most bars and clubs in the area. Around 120 late-night premises were present in Soho before 2005, with ninety-five of these already having an extension beyond 1am (3am or later). The major problem was not the presence of bars and clubs but their direct consequences such as excessive night noise, rubbish and street crime. This is the reason why, of the over 750 premises that applied for a licence (under the new Act even those venues that already had a licence had to re-apply), 280 applied for extended hours but the majority of them were not given permission. Still, the change in location of Ku Bar turned out to be a smart choice anyhow. The new premises are formed by a fairly big ground floor used as a bar area, an upstairs room now called The Light Lounge, and a basement used as a club area called Ku Klub and opened till 3am. Famous nights have included Shinky Shonky on Wednesday, with classic pop, indie, and dance music, and Ruby Tuesday for women. In 2009, Ku Soho was opened on the premises of former lesbian bar Rush in Frith Street, although the three-floor bar could also be accessed by another entrance on Old Compton Street. As Henshaw explains,

after years of successful business on the margins of Soho, the new venue was opened there to have more of a presence on Old Compton Street and what is often recognised as the epicentre of the gay area. Furthermore, in 2011 the company also bought long-running lesbian Candy Bar in Carlisle Street and organised *exchanges* between the Lisle Street venue and the new acquisition, with boys leaving the three-floor Ku Bar in Lisle Street (now often called Ku Leicester due to its proximity to Leicester Square) for Ruby Tuesdays and taking over Candy Bar for the weekly Candy Boys night. Still, Candy Bar was definitively closed in 2014 due to an increase in rent. Around the same time, Henshaw decided to transform the Ku Soho basement into a women-priority bar called She Soho, the first of its kind on Old Compton Street. Ku Bar remains one of the few independent companies, owned and run by gay staff. However, Ku Bar and G-A-Y may be seen as rare exceptions given that not all gay companies and venues had the economic means to confront the pressure caused by gentrification in the area nor encountered the same happy ending (*Out Magazine* 2007: n.3, n.12, 2008: n.21, 2009: n.26, 2011: n.49-50; *Soho Clarion* 2006: n.124)

The most notorious case is that of Madame Jojo's, a world-famous venue operating since 1958 when it was bought by Paul Raymond, who transformed it into his Raymond Revue Strip Club, London's first of its kind. At the time nude dancing was still not allowed. Therefore Raymond excogitated the stratagem of having naked women posing on a mobile platform — like Vivian Van Damm had done during WWII — but that would move around the venue instead of staying still. Soon after, the venue developed into a cabaret and burlesque

establishment and, during the 1980s and 1990s, it hosted internationally-known DJs, bands, and singers. In the 2000s, it went back to host cabaret nights, comedians, and drag acts, as well as continuing with its musical tradition. Some of the most famous nights included White Heat, Electrogogo, Deep Funk, Circus and Tranny Shack UK. Throughout the years, the venue was known under different names, from Raymond Revue Bar, Pink Flamingo and Too2Much to Madame Jojo's, to reflect the turns that Raymond himself and other owners planned for both the place and its adjacent venue called Piano Bar — then Escape. Madame Jojo's was closed on 20 November 2014 after its security, together with security from Escape and a taxi driver, attacked, on 24 October, a disorderly customer with a baseball bat following a verbal altercation. The police report promptly recommended the suspension of the venue's licence. After a first appeal was rejected, its licence — and that of Escape — were withdrawn. However, it is worth noticing that plans for a £10 million redevelopment of the venue and the surrounding area of Walkers Court into offices, glass-fronted restaurants, and luxury apartments, presented by landlord Soho Estates in September 2013, had already been approved by WCC in December 2013 (13/09185/FULL) (Blundy 2014; Duffy 2014c; Ellis-Petersen 2014a, 2014b; McLennan 2014; *Soho Clarion* 1997: n.96, 2004: n.118, 2009: n.136).

Ironically, Soho Estates — the empire founded by Raymond and run by himself until his death in 2008 aged 82 — is now run by John James, who was married to Raymond's daughter Debbie (who died in 1992), and their daughters Fawn and India Rose. Soho Estates owns over 60 acres of Soho and Central London, with an estimated value of between £370 and £500 million. Officially,

Soho Estates is planning a reincarnation of Madame Jojo's as a 150 seat theatre. Still, given that Madame Jojo's was one of the few places left with a 3am licence 7 nights a week and that no major incident had ever happened before, many people found WCC's decision of closing it down as quite drastic and not at all fair. Marcus Harris, a promoter at Madame Jojo's, expressed his concern:

in my opinion, it seems that the council just used the incident as a good excuse to take away the licence. If you look at the way the area is changing, they clearly don't want a late-night drinking presence anywhere in Soho any more. They want to make Soho about families — shopping, going out to eat, going to the theatre. The bars shut at 11 and you're home by midnight (in Clark 2014).

In Westminster there has been, since 2003, a rise of 30% in the number of children under 16 moving to the area and Madame Jojo's episode shows a particular approach taken by WCC regarding the redevelopment of the district and its transformation into a 'Disney-Style Westfield-esque centre', child and family-friendly (Bird 2015). This may also have something to do with the fact that, in 2014, dozens of police raids broke into flats used by prostitutes in Soho and arrested many sex-workers. Given that it was one of the oldest professions practised in the area and being hidden in upstairs flats more than being visible in the streets, many saw this war on prostitution as excessive and unnecessary.

Alex Proud (2014a), similarly, sees a connection between WCC's 'aggressive process of gentrification' and the support of 'the usual cohort of property developers and money men' who do not want venues to be open till late as they would depreciate the value of the surrounding properties. With a nighttime economy of £66 billion a year — almost 6% of Britain's gross domestic product — and 1.3 million people working in the industry — 10% of the total — WCC's support of developers seems controversial. For Proud (2014a), we are now:

in the grip of new profit-driven puritanism. An unpleasant cocktail of councils too dozy to see what really makes cities great; developers who use legal muscle, bad planning laws and cosy relationships to bulldoze anything in their way; and rich dullards who think they've bought themselves cool, then promptly start complaining about noise.

The Saturday morning after the closure, a funeral march, complete with a coffin to represent the death of Madame Jojo's, was organised in the streets of Soho and a petition, which reached over 10,000 signatures, was also started by Alexander Personage, who ran a cabaret night for 8 years at the venue (<http://www.change.org/p/cllr-tim-mitchell-save-madame-jojo-s>). Moreover, an open letter published in *The Times* by Tim Arnold, singer and songwriter who regularly played at Madame Jojo's at the beginning of his career, and signed by Benedict Cumberbatch, Stephen Fry, Idris Elba, Rupert Everett, Paul O'Grady,

and many others, asked Mayor Boris Johnson to save Madame Jojo's and to preserve Soho. Johnson adhered to the Save Soho Campaign and was filmed with Arnold, a few days later, singing an original tune called 'Don't Go Changing Soho' just outside Madame Jojo's. The campaign aimed to work with WCC and developers to be included in planning decisions. Eventually, the council agreed to meet with some representatives and to include the performing arts community in a discussion around Soho's future for the first time. Still, adding to the now recurrent trope of the death of the district, many others saw the closure of Madame Jojo's as 'the first nail in the coffin for Soho' (Ryder 2015. See also Arlidge 2015; Associated Press 2014; Bird 2015; Chester 2014; Ellis-Petersen 2014a, 2014b; Malvern 2014; McCormick 2015f; McLennan 2014; Rucki 2015; Ryder 2015; Simpson 2015; *Soho Clarion* 2008: n.132).

Another campaign became extremely relevant between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015: the SaveTheYard Campaign (<http://www.yardbar.co.uk/savetheyard>). Built in the 1880s, The Yard is the last remaining Victorian carriage yard in Soho. However, towards the end of 2014, the landlord presented two applications to WCC to close off the yard with a glass covering and build three luxury flats that would cause the loss of a historic timber pitched roof and an original Imperial brick wall. With only a week notice given to the venue, WCC's Planning Committee met on 27 January 2015 to discuss the proposals. Even though the council had initially planned to support the applications, the final decision was postponed in order to allow a proper evaluation of the venue's historical features. In the meantime, hundreds of e-mails, promoted by the campaign launched by the owner Andy Jones, were

received by the council to object the application (14/04624/FULL) and around 2,700 signatures were collected. After consultations with Historic England, in March 2015 the building was declared by WCC an unlisted building of merit for its historical characteristics and the relevance to the local community. Still, before the council had the chance to refuse planning permission, the landlord withdrew the application in May 2015, only to resubmit it again in September (15/06867/FULL). In August 2016 The Yard was finally saved and all planning applications have now been rejected (Bullen 2016; Duffy 2015f, 2015h, 2015i; McCormick 2015d; Prynn 2015; *Soho Clarion* 1993: n.83, 2015: n.160-2).

One thing to highlight, however, is that none of these campaigns were directly connected to gay men. Even though both Madame Jojo's and The Yard had developed as gay venues, their relevance for gay men in Soho was never a major element in the advertising of the campaigns. The Save Soho Campaign concentrated on saving Madame Jojo's because of its relevance to the artistic community of Soho more broadly, not to gay people exclusively. It is true that some aspects of this campaign coincided with the interests of many gay people, such as the preservation of a space where artistic forms of drag performances could happen, but the stress was always on their artistic relevance more than on their importance for gay people and their sexual expression. In other words, the whole narrative of the campaign was constructed around the idea of art more than sexuality or sexual identity. What the Save Soho Campaign proposes to protect is not a safe space for gay men but a space for artistic expression (which may sometimes coincide, as in the case of gay people doing drag in Madame Jojo's, but not necessarily). This can be seen in the way the campaign



has been presented and advertised through media and social media, and the fact that its supporters never really make a clear connection to gay people. WCC included Save Soho Campaign's members as representatives of the artistic community of Soho, not as gay people. Similarly, the SaveTheYard Campaign is focusing on the architectural value of the venue that would be compromised by the redevelopment of the site. This is not to say that gay people are not among the supporters of the campaign but to stress the lack of a gay element from the discourse around its preservation. In fact, there has not been, so far, any major organised action on the parts of gay people, which implies that the terms of any negotiation for the survival of Soho's gay venues will be set by other groups that may not have a gay agenda at their core.

Other gay venues going through the same process of redevelopment, for example, did not receive the same degree of attention as Madame Jojo's and The Yard. The Green Carnation, a bohemian-style bar on Greek Street inspired by the work and life of Oscar Wilde and named after the flower blossom that he used to wear in his buttonhole, closed in January 2015 for refurbishment after years of activity. According to the owners, this is only the end of a chapter and soon a new 'identity that matches with the aspirations of Soho clientele' will be revealed (Duffy 2015g). Uncertain, however, is the nature of the clientele that the owners are hoping to attract after the make-over. The same month, Chris Amos, owner of Manbar — a gay venue in Charing Cross Road that was opened in 2012 on the site of 79 CXR, and famous for its diverse nights such as Spotlight (a live variety night) on Tuesday, Babylon (a house party) on Thursday, Spunk (with resident DJs) on Friday, and Hombre (the official Beyond

pre-party) on Saturday — announced on the bar's Facebook page the imminent closure due to a significant drop in revenue and a previous dispute with WCC over complaints about noise that cost the business a considerable amount of money to keep their entertainment licence. Neither the Green Carnation nor Manbar had a community value in terms of architectural or artistic heritage, and their closure did not spark the same reaction from Soho residents or regular visitors. Their community value for gay people in Soho was, once again, not considered. Madame Jojo's, Escape, Candy Bar, The Green Carnation and Manbar are not the only bars and clubs that have been closed in the last few years or that have been forced to relocate in other areas of London. Others include Bar Titania, Barcode, The Edge, Enclave, Shadow Lounge, Trash Palace, Lo-Profile, Molly Mogg's (suddenly reopened in June 2017 after two months closure), Ghetto, Profile, The Colony Room (see *Table 2*), as well as many other bars and clubs in the surrounding areas such as First Out Café, Kudos, The Box, Bar Aquada, Vault 139 (see 3.1). Redevelopment has also affected other activities such as restaurants like the Stockpot, and shops like American Retro and Dirty White Boy. Most importantly, with a few rare exceptions, none of these venues have been replaced with another of the same kind, causing a significant drop in the number of gay-targeted businesses in the area. Soho is far from dying but the direction that it is currently taking seems to suggest that its relevance and centrality in the urban gay panorama may be changing, consequently affecting the personal experience of gay men and their idea of the district, as the next chapters examine (McCormick 2014c; Roberts 2015; Stroude 2015; QX 2014: n.92).

## 1.5 — Conclusion

This chapter explored how the district of Soho welcomed and helped shape different expressions of homosexual identities and communities throughout the twentieth century. Legal and cultural changes around the idea of homosexual relations in British society influenced the ways homosexuals understood and defined their own identities in time, as well as their position and role in society. Still, it is the use that they made of the area that allowed them to create networks and communities that would sustain or often anticipate and call for these same changes.

As analysed in this chapter, it is not possible to single out one specific homosexual identity or community in Soho, given that the development of each one of these is closely tied to a specific time and situation. Instead, a gay history of the area should be seen as a flux, as a series of identities and communities that have influenced each other, sometimes following one another, sometimes overlapping, but each one contributing to the current idea of Soho as a gay space. What becomes clear, in fact, is that Soho physically being the gay district of London is not really the point. Soho represents different things to different people, and its gay element is only one out of many. What is important, however, is the use that gay people make of this idea to legitimise their existence within the area, and within British society more broadly.

In the next chapters, the personal experiences of thirty-five gay, queer, and bisexual men are considered. Similar to those Soho characters who have

been mentioned in this chapter, the men who appear in the rest of the thesis contribute to the discussion around the district's role in the creation of identities and communities. The way they describe their relationship with Soho speaks volumes in terms of how they understand and express their sexual identities and how they reproduce a sense of belonging to a gay community. Most importantly, they can help understand what fundamental changes Soho is currently undergoing and how these are likely to affect not only their own ideas of the district, gay identities, and communities, but also the direction that all these elements may be taking in the future.

## **Chapter II**

### **Re-Thinking Soho**

## 2.0 — Introduction

Between March and June 2015, thirty-five men were interviewed for this research (see 0.1.2). Their age ranged from 18 to late 60s. More than half identified as White or White British, five as Black or Black British, three as Asian or Asian British, one as Hispanic, and four as Mixed-race. In terms of nationality, they came from a variety of places, although, again more than half were from Britain. However, a few had a dual nationality, meaning that they were born — and sometimes grew up — abroad, lowering the number of people who were born in the UK to eighteen. Of the others, five were European, three from North America, one from South America, two from Asia, and one from Africa. The large majority lived in London, while the rest were tourists. Only a few, however, were born in London. The rest had spent varying amounts of time in the city ranging from 6 months to 48 years. Finally, twenty-seven of them self-identified as gay, five as bisexual, three as queer (see *Table 1*).

The variety of nationalities, ethnicities, ages, and sexual identities, even if just a sample and far from being representative of every non-heterosexual man in London, can give an idea of how diverse the composition of gay men in the urban area actually is and provides a useful insight in the study of the relationship between gay men in London and the district of Soho. Undoubtedly, much more should be said about the experience of each of these participants given that, as shown in this chapter, their understandings of Soho and the gay

community varied greatly across different age groups, ethnicities, etc., and were always the result of the intersections created by all these elements working together to create unique experiences. Their responses should not be taken as final or as consistently accurate but as an expression of general trends that help reconsider current ideas and positions on both Soho and the gay community more broadly.

Specifically, the first section of this chapter concentrates on their ideas of Soho: What is Soho? Where is it located? What does it represent? What are the uses that participants make of Soho? Consequently, the changing face of Soho and the factors that are contributing to this transformation are considered in the following sections, such as divisions among gay men (2.2); the presence of straight people and tourists in the area, and the feeling of safety that many gay men experience outside Soho (2.3); the lack of political action and the feeling of shame attached to the promotion of a normative ideal of gay identities and relations following a broader acceptance of homosexuality in British society (2.4). The final aim of this chapter is to answer the following question: What do participants really think of Soho and what does this tell us about gay men's relationship with the district and its community?

## **2.1 — Experiences of Soho**

The large majority of interviewees identified Soho as a gay area. While this had to be expected given the sample of participants and the prerequisites that had been established to take part in the research (non-heterosexual men with some

kind of relation with Soho), it is worth analysing what, in their opinions, gave Soho this specific connotation. When interviewees were asked 'What do you think of when you think of Soho?', a large number immediately mentioned Old Compton Street. Others listed different locations, such as Soho Square, Wardour Street, Dean Street, and Frith Street, which represent the area where the highest number of gay-targeted businesses are concentrated. Some participants specifically named gay-targeted venues such as The Admiral Duncan, The Village, Balans, G-A-Y Bar, G-A-Y Late, Ku Bar, The Yard, Comptons. A few included Heaven in the list, demonstrating that the latter, even if situated outside the district, represents a major reference point and an integral part of Soho's gay scene. The presence of 'the gay community' or 'other gay men' was also highlighted (see 2.2), and Soho was described as a gay area, a gay district, a gay destination, a gay playground, a safe haven, a gay paradise, and a gay centre. It is worth pointing out that the large majority also seemed to think of Soho as an area that had *always* been 'the centre of the gay community' and did not make any explicit connection to the district's previous history nor, for that matter, to other areas of the city that in the past have hosted an equally important gay scene (see 3.2). In other words, most participants appeared to take Soho's *gayness* — and consequently the presence of gay venues and people in the area — for granted, as something that has traditionally been, and will probably always be, a gay space.

Participants were furthermore asked to locate Soho on an imaginary map of London. Many envisioned it as central, as 'the heart of London geographically' (Matthew). The most precise description was given by Carl, who



enclosed the district within Oxford Street, Regent Street, Charing Cross Road, and Shaftesbury Avenue leaving, however, Chinatown out of the picture, as he considered that to be 'more of an extension of Leicester Square'. It is noteworthy is that the majority of participants envisioned Soho as the area around Old Compton Street (seen as the centre of Soho itself) and did not go any further than Wardour Street to the west, Soho Square to the north, and Shaftesbury Avenue to the south: in total, only a fourth of the district's area. When reference was made to the west part of Soho, participants identified it as a posh and expensive shopping area and said that 'it does not feel like Soho' (Owen). The area around Old Compton Street, instead, was seen as 'the visible gay area' (Matt), endowing the aforementioned association of Soho with the idea of a gay space, even though this connection was based on the consideration of a specific, and considerably smaller and marginal, section of the district itself. Participants' idea of Soho seemed to be based more on what they thought Soho represented than what Soho actually is. The dismissal of its western part, for example, shows that, while recognising it as part of the district per se, they did not consider it to be gay enough to be part of what they envisioned as Soho.

The imagined aspect of Soho, analysed in *Chapter I*, was confirmed by the answers received when participants were asked if, on entering Soho, they could recognise landmarks or characteristics peculiar to the district. Daniel agreed that Soho becomes 'visibly gay' once you have crossed its boundaries. He pointed out that the first thing that stands out once you have entered the area from Charing Cross Road is 'a huge sign saying G-A-Y in capital bright

letters. If that doesn't give you a hint...'. On the contrary, Jude seemed to be uncertain about the visibility of the district. He recalled that, when he first went to The Yard, he walked from Piccadilly Circus. He said, referring to Shaftesbury Avenue, that he was not sure if that already constituted part of Soho: 'when you start walking from there, there is like a straight strip club, so I was like, does it count as Soho if it's not gay? It makes you think which part is actually Soho if you can't see anything gay'. While Daniel had entered the district directly into Old Compton Street, Jude had done so from its south-western part. This shows the way, for some participants, visibly gay venues transform Soho into a gay space, whereas the absence of such venues detracts this element and renders Soho not Soho, at least not the Soho they appeared to have in mind. From the first couple of questions, it became clear that, when talking about Soho, participants were not only referring to a specific area of the district, but they were also implying a distinctive idea or image associated with it.

This image of Soho as a gay space seemed to be connected, for the most part, to two main factors that, for some participants, actually coincided: the role that the district played in participants' coming out and identity-formation processes, and the way the area functioned as a reference point for their new lives in London. Only a few were not aware of Soho's gay connotation before going there. Cristiano, for instance, moved from Brazil in 1993 and it was not until his gay friends took him there that he discovered the area. He explained that, coming from what he defined as a homophobic environment, Soho represented a freedom that he had never experienced before: 'when you [are] disconnected from your culture, your social constraints, and when you are an

alien in a new place, you simply feel free. That feeling' — continued Cristiano — 'I still try to hang on to it, even after more than 20 years'. In fact, before moving to the UK, Cristiano was married to a woman. In hindsight, he now realises how, at the time, he thought that that was the only way possible: 'Coming to London, I realised that I could have a life as a gay man that I had never thought I could have in Brazil. Being in Soho and seeing that freedom, it wrecked my marriage but I remember thinking, this is what I want'. The encounter with Soho somehow triggered a sense of possibility in Cristiano who, consequently, envisioned the place as a space of freedom. The fact that after 20 years he still tries to 'hang on' to that feeling shows that, more than the place itself, what Cristiano is trying to cherish is the initial image of Soho that he experienced when he first went to the district, the memory of it, an element that was shared by many interviewees and that keeps coming up throughout the thesis.

Other participants, mainly in their 20s, grew up hearing stories about the place but only got to experience *gay Soho* during their first year at university. Students, coming from smaller cities and towns, and supposedly from quite a steady economic background given their access to London institutions, saw in Soho the chance to experience their newly-found independence away from home. Ben, for example, said that the first time he went there, it was so 'exciting and amazing' that, since then, he has not been able to replicate that experience. Jonathan highlighted how, at the time, he felt 'a huge sense of possibility'. Russell, for his part, recalled going to an event at UCL, in 2011, called Icebreaker, a way for first-year students to meet people and make new friends:

we went to Heaven, and it was like: you're all gonna come and get drunk at UCL then you'll all go out in Soho and that will be like your welcome to the gay life of London, and I think I knew about it [Soho] a bit. I think I thought it was somewhere I should go rather than a place I wanted to go to, you had high expectations about meeting a guy there and the world would be great.

While these expectations may be seen as common to any first-year student moving to London, they also assume extra meanings for those gay students who found themselves in a new space that was characterised by a gay element. This was, for many, the first time they had actually had the chance to feel free to experiment with and express their sexualities. Even Luke, who tried to avoid Soho for a while during his first year in London because he had not yet come out, remembered thinking 'wow, there is a place for me there' and felt that, once he had come out, it would have been inevitable for him to go.

A few others travelled there for the first time because, in Ashley's words, 'it was a gay mecca'. After arriving in London from Milwaukee in 2010, Ashley recollected going there every single night for the first week: 'It was more than I expected. I would just have a couple of drinks and tell one person that I had just moved here and all of a sudden they would be like, oh my gosh, a newbie. (...) They made me feel like I didn't want to leave anymore'. For many, in fact, Soho had become a new home, even if only broadly speaking, as analysed later in

this section. This experience was also shared by those interviewees who were visiting London, some for the first time, others on a regular basis. To them, Soho represented a home base, it was the place to look for a hotel or the place where they could spend their time in London. They were aware of Soho's gay reputation in advance and had decided to visit the district precisely because of that. With London being a fairly new space, Soho seemed the only place to somehow feel safe and at home.

Only a few participants, who had mainly grown up in London, did not feel a sense of shock when they first went to gay Soho, as the area had already represented part of their upbringing. Some of them remembered the time Soho became a gay area in the late 80s and early 90s. Others recalled their first time in a gay venue or institution outside Soho, such as The Salisbury's and Brief Encounter in Covent Garden, the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in Farringdon, or the many venues in Earls Court (see 3.1 and 3.2). Michael, nonetheless, explained that Soho, as opposed to other spaces in London, gave him a sense of identity. Particularly interesting, from this point of view, is William's story. Now in his late 60s, he nevertheless shares a similar path to some of the younger interviewees. While married to a woman, William had always avoided Soho knowing what it represented and not wanting to be associated with it. However, when he finally came out a few years ago, his counsellor suggested that he go to Soho as part of his coming out as a gay man: 'it was like a rite of passage, (...) it seemed like stepping out of what I was regarding as normal London and stepping into something that was immediately very obviously different'. William's example shows that, withholding a divide of

pre- and post-Soho generations of gay men, going to the district appeared connected to the process of coming out, no matter their age. It represented a starting point for the exploration of participants' sexuality and their sexual identities. William shared with younger participants the same sense of possibility, even if he is much older. It can then be theorised that what was most important for participants was not the district per se but its function. The idea of a golden age of the gay district (see 0.2.5) may consequently be connected to the idea of a golden age in the participants' life. Soho was important because, at the time of their coming out, be that 20 years ago or last year, it represented a space where they could form and express their sexual identities. Similarly, for many it also represented a starting point for their new life as gay Londoners, an element that very often coincided with the previous one.

Another element that came up in the interviews is the different use that participants make, or have made, of Soho according to different times of the day, week or even year. As previously mentioned, all interviewees shared a common understanding of the area as a gay space, and as a nightspot in particular. Soho was described as a place where the proximity of gay-targeted venues represented a huge attraction for those gay men who want to spend a night out in a gay-majority environment. However, not all participants agreed on the district's function during the daytime. For some of them, the gay element of Soho is watered-down during the day. Jude, for example, recalled seeing a Spanish family in The Yard during the afternoon. In his opinion, they were probably unaware of the fact that they were in a gay venue and concluded that this family-friendly feature of Soho is very much linked to the daytime, when

even the most in-your-face gay venues seem to become somehow less gay. Given that most gay venues in Soho do not fly a rainbow flag following a WCC ordinance, and that, probably with the exception of G-A-Y and Manbar, their names do not evoke anything that could be directly connected to the gay scene, during the daytime most gay venues in Soho could be easily mistaken for straight venues and go almost unnoticed to the eyes of an unaware visitor. What really makes them stand out at night is the crowd that they attract: 'you can tell that the crowd changes between day and night. It becomes a gay crowd at night' (Jude). This may be due to the fact that bars and clubs become much busier at night and the constant stream of gay men that can be found in and outside these venues works as an active element in the construction of their image as gay venues. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that many of these venues do not open until the early afternoon, sometimes not until 4 or 5pm, which may explain why, to some people, Soho feels a completely different place during the daytime.

Does this mean that Soho during the day is not gay only because most gay venues are not opened? Rupert, for example, is a regular at Patisserie Valerie on Old Compton Street, whereas Jude used to go for lunch at Café Bohème on the same street (now closed). Here he would sit outside with a friend and 'people-watch', an activity that, since the time of Crisp, seems to have been very popular in this part of Soho. This was confirmed by Ashley, who explained that to be part of Soho 'you don't have to go to a gay bar, you can sit down at a coffee shop or a restaurant and just watch people'. Others mentioned going to Soho during the daytime because of work, or to visit its gay shops, or

because of their attendance at 56 Dean Street (see 4.4). Some interviewees made reference to St. Anne's Churchyard and Soho Square as part of their usual daytime itinerary around Soho. When the weather allows for it, they enjoy sitting on the grass for a quick lunch while also peering at the people around them. Owen explained that, especially during the summertime, Soho Square comes to life and is always busy with people buying drinks and food in one of the local shops and then consuming them in the square. Even recognising that different people use this space, Owen seemed to imply that Soho Square is a vital part of gay Soho and that gay men are among those who use the square more often during the day. The fact that Soho Square is one of the main attractions during Pride may also have contributed to this image of the square as a daytime gay space within the district. It should however be clarified that Soho Square is a fenced-in yard and its gates close between 8:30pm and 8am, an element that seems to somehow exclude this space from the map of nighttime Soho in the first place. Far from becoming less gay, daytime Soho seems to be characterised by a different experience. In fact, while at night gay venues (which are characterised by factors such as commercial music, dancing, and alcohol consumption) become the centre of the gay scene, during the daytime gay men benefit from all those other venues and spaces (such as cafés, squares, gardens, restaurants and shops) that are not specifically gay-targeted but that welcome nonetheless gay consumers. In particular, those who said they were going to Soho at any time of the day are also those who are in a more flexible occupation, such as students or pensioners, or those who work locally. Those who live and work further out, instead, had experienced Soho mainly at nighttime, or at least they had done so during the week.



A difference, in fact, was also made between weekdays and weekends, with all interviewees envisioning the district as a much busier area from Friday to Sunday. Participants, however, took different positions, with Carl, Matthew, and Michael explaining that, while they tend to go to Soho more often at night during the week, at the weekend they prefer to go during the day to avoid the big crowds, especially those composed of straight visitors that, in their opinion, seem to invade the district on weekend nights (see 2.3). Others, instead, would go to Soho during the daytime on a weekend precisely because they think it is busier than usual and they hope to meet people in an environment that feels extremely different, with other gay men less likely to be drinking alcohol (or at least to be drunk) and more open to a conversation without the constant limit presented at night by loud music. However, some interviewees explained that they either avoid Soho completely during the day or they just see it as an area to pass through. Russell, for example, would only walk through the district during the day, without really stopping anywhere as, in his opinion, during the day Soho has nothing to offer him. The time of the day, as well as the day of the week, may therefore influence the itineraries that gay men follow within the district. John admitted that upon his visits to Soho, he usually tends to avoid Old Compton Street at night: 'it's too busy and too many people that I find annoying'. Donald, instead, revealed that if he was to go anywhere in Soho, he would say 'oh, let's stroll down Old Compton Street first' in order to check people out, therefore going there on purpose even if his final destination may actually be somewhere else. Matt, for his part, sees Soho as an 'after work' space. He does not go there during the day or during the weekend, nor does he plan to go there at night. For him, Soho is the most convenient place to stop for a drink during

the week before heading back home. Sometimes early evening drinks in Soho may lead to him spending part of his night there, but he clarified that that is never his intention. Luciano found himself in a similar position when he was a student:

I went to Imperial, and I lived in Camden, so on my way home from college I would go through Soho and almost every single day I would stop there and have a drink, or do something before going home. I wasn't into the clubbing thing, just occasionally. But I was very into Soho.

Pavlo, instead, explained that even though he and his partner live quite far from Soho, they do try to visit as often as possible, but because of how busy Soho has become during weekend nights, they also feel the need to book a table if they decide to go for dinner in the area. To him, this is quite off-putting as it involves some sort of advance planning and takes away the chance to freely move within the district.

While Soho was thought to be a busy area throughout the year, a few participants suggested that the atmosphere of the district, and therefore the way they experience it, changes quite radically based on the season. Gay venues in Soho were described as 'packed' during winter, characterised at night by 'infinite queues to get in, if you get in at all', and constituting the centre of gay life in the area. Even those venues that are not specifically aimed at a gay clientele seem

to be very busy during the colder months:

this is the season when the coffee shops thrive. Customers sip on their mochas and cappuccinos to keep warm, sitting firmly inside, guarding their seats, (...) every now and again looking up to peer through the window (...) EuroPride, Soho Pride, (...) distant memories (Littlewood 2008: 93-4).

Summer, instead, allows for a different experience that sees open spaces, more than gay venues, as the real core of the gay scene. People stop queuing to get into bars and clubs and queue to grab an al fresco seat, reviving the ever-present request for that European experience that has traditionally characterised this part of London (see 1.1). While the time of the year did not seem to make a difference for most interviewees, some of them did express a preference for the summer months and the kind of experience that is connected to what feels like 'a more liberated' Soho. Then, as part of a never-ending cycle, summer ends again:

the Flyer Boys are losing their sparkle. Covered up for the first time (...). The drag queens, like exotic birds that fly to warmer climes to roost, their grand entrances are not so common now. (...) Even the weather-defying, cap-sleeved muscle boys are hiding their buffed bodies behind looser-fitting Abercrombie

sweatshirts. Their underdeveloped legs, encased in big break G-Star once again. Their pecs, hibernating after a long active summer of pumping and partying. (...) Like an old soul in front of a gas fire, Old Compton Street prepares for winter (Littlewood 2008: 44-5).

The various ways in which participants experience Soho at different times of the day, week, and even year, show that Soho can have as many meanings as the people who experience the area.

However, even though participants were coming from different walks of life, and had experienced Soho at different times of both their lives and its history, many seemed to agree on the fact that, at some point, they had gone through a gradual detachment from the area. A clear trend associated with those interviewees who had moved to London from other cities or countries (the large majority) and with those who had started going to Soho as part of their coming out, was that of going to the district on a regular basis in the first few days, months, or even years, and to gradually detach themselves from it when their experience of both London and the gay scene had expanded. Roger, for example, said:

I did go a bit wild and I thought that [Soho] was what gay culture was. And then you start distancing yourself from Soho a bit more and you get a much deeper and more meaningful understanding

of your sexuality. Coming out in London and going straight to Soho gives you a very superficial idea of what your sexuality is. It took me about a year after that to say, maybe it's not just that.

A visible gay space with a concentration of gay venues represents a major attraction for someone who is coming out or who may be new to London. Still, once its functions have been exhausted, at least from the point of view of those who initially envisioned that space as a reference point, it will also become less necessary to go there. Most interviewees acknowledged still going to Soho to a certain extent, a few on a regular basis, the majority just occasionally. Some participants admitted that they go to Soho only when friends from out of town come to visit and specifically request to go there due to the district's fame.

Furthermore, apart from a few people who had not been in London long enough to notice, such as tourists, most participants were aware, as Felipe put it, of 'the local narrative of how Soho is disappearing', and conceded to seeing the changes themselves (see 1.4). Jude, for instance, said that whenever he wants to go to The Yard he always wonders 'is it still there this week?', whereas Donald would sometimes take a walk in Soho just to check which places are still open and which have instead closed down. Reflecting on Soho, Russell explained: 'it should be like a space where people go to feel themselves and go to feel safe to experiment, and that's what it has been for a lot of its history, and for a lot of us, and I feel like it's not that anymore'. Soho was described as a victim of its own success, due to the fact that the area has been increasingly gentrified and gay venues are now being priced out and redeveloped as more

profitable residential properties. For Charles, this seems to follow an already written story, with a rough area where 'the gays come along, they do it up, the prices go up, and then they are priced out and it becomes a straight chi-chi area' (see 0.2.3). Luke supported this idea by recounting the following episode:

now people in my office talk about how they go to Soho all the time, (...) and my straight friends asked me where is a good cocktail bar to go, and my first reaction was, I don't think you're going to find what you want, and then I looked and realised, actually it is all there.

In other words, Soho may nowadays be considered as popular as ever, but only for straight and wealthy gentrifiers. Michael, in fact, noticed how the gay area is shrinking back to just Old Compton Street and Soho is gradually being 'de-gayed', becoming 'much more of a tourist mecca than a gay mecca'.

While gentrification can be seen as the main factor contributing to the current disappearance of gay venues from Soho (see 1.4), it is not sufficient to explain why so many gay men have distanced themselves from the district or are not fighting to keep its venues open. In fact, with the exception of tourists who explicitly said that they enjoyed what the area has to offer, all interviewees seemed, on the contrary, critical of the district. Still, they did not single out the closing of gay spaces in Soho as the reason why they have stopped going there. Instead, as suggested, participants' refusal of Soho may be due to the

exhaustion of what the district has to offer on a more personal level. Seeing Soho as a starting point implies that, eventually, gay men will *move* somewhere else. Yet, if Soho really fulfilled such an important role in participants' coming out and in their new life as gay men in London, why are they not only avoiding it but also rejecting it altogether? This tendency can be explained through the analysis of a few factors that are often interconnected and that are now calling for a reconsideration of the area in relation to gay men's needs. Five of these are explored in this chapter: the fragmentation of the community in Soho (2.2), the dilution of Soho's gay spaces (2.3), the increased sense of safety outside the area (2.3), the promotion of a normative ideal of gay life and the consequent gay shame attached to it (2.4), and the lack in political action following advances in British society (2.4). A further one is analysed in the following chapter: alternative urban spaces (3.3 and 3.4). Finally, three more are considered in *Chapter IV*: online spaces (4.1), chemsex (4.2), and how their interrelations are causing a major rise of STIs, with serious consequences for gay men's physical and mental health (4.3).

## **2.2 — A Fragmented Community**

As some interviewees had mentioned the presence of other gay men and the gay community in the district when describing what Soho was, they were asked to further reflect on this idea and whether they thought some sort of gay community was really present in the area. Most participants took their belonging to the gay community as a given, like Arjun, who thought that simply being gay makes him part of the gay community by default. Jonathan, too, thought that

'just the fact that gay culture exists is evidence of a gay community'. Others, however, were highly negative about it. Cristiano, for example, revealed that when he mentioned the interview to his boyfriend and the fact that the research was on Soho and the gay community of London, his boyfriend answered: 'why the gay community? I have no idea what that is'. Vince was also talking to his boyfriend about the interview and, like Cristiano's, his partner seemed to think that such a thing did not exist. Vince, for his part, admitted that he feels some kind of connection with other gay men on the basis of a communality of experiences, such as oppression and homophobia, and that he enjoys being in a gay majority environment. Still, when questioned about Soho specifically, he called that a *scene*, more than a community as, to him, the idea of community implies a group of people that one personally knows: 'there's a sense of something greater than the individual there. But to call it a community, I think it implies a sense of homogeneity that doesn't really exist'. Similarly, Jude, even acknowledging the existence of a gay community, seemed to struggle to define it in connection to Soho: 'I feel part of the community but I don't feel the sense of community in Soho. You know the community is there, and you feel part of it, but I don't think it feels like an actual community until something big happens, like Pride'. Ben, too, noticed that community in Soho 'has nothing to do with politics or community in any proper sense of the word, as much as people who are out and together and gay': 'I feel a sense of community but it is not a proper community'. In other words, for many interviewees, gay men go to Soho, but that is not enough to make Soho a gay community. It could then be said that, while Soho was initially identified by some interviewees as the place where the gay community could be found, the area may in truth represent only an



expression of this community, and not the community as a whole or a community per se. Therefore, more than the gay community, what can be found in Soho is the presence of members of this community.

It becomes clear by the answers received that, when thinking of the gay community of Soho specifically, some participants were still envisioning it in premodern terms as a group of people who personally know each other and engage in face-to-face interactions (see 0.2.1). Consequently, they felt that such a community was not present in the district. The reality that Soho is not a gay residential area appeared to be a fundamental factor in shaping their positions. During its history, Soho has developed from an overcrowded place where the working class and many immigrants lived, clumped into unfit dwellings reaching, at times, tens of people per building, to a place where the residential population has struggled to survive due to the increasing advance of urban redevelopment in the past 50 years. Sure enough, one of the main problems in modern Soho has been that of rehousing, to the point that, in 1973, the district was defined a Housing Problem Area. Given that WCC was struggling to rehouse Soho's residents in Soho, forcing them to accept new homes in different areas of London, not much room was left for new residents, including many gay people, unless they were able to afford the high prices that new developments demanded. Consequently, since the 1990s, 'the absence of an accompanying residential [gay] population in Soho' — explains Mort (2009: 165) — 'made it unlikely that the area would foster the type of ethnically centred gay communities which had emerged in San Francisco's Castro district, or in New York's Greenwich Village' (see 0.2.3). None of the participants, in fact,

lived or had ever lived in the area. Still, as shown in 0.2.1, critics abandoned the idea of a community shaped around day to day interaction with the advent of mass society and urbanisation and, even more, when urban spaces became global and communities displaced. In the case of Soho, residency does not constitute a fundamental element for the discussion around community, at least not for gay men. Instead, community becomes more useful if understood in its postmodern sense, what Vince described as a *scene*: 'a connection based on a communality of experiences'. This is precisely what Weeks (1996: 72-6) defines as a sexual community — a group of people whose shared negative experiences can help the construction of a common feeling of solidarity (see 0.2.1). Understood in this sense, the gay community becomes a fluid concept that does not tie gay men to a specific membership, nor to a specific place. They can choose when they want to identify with the community and when they do not, because their sexual identities are not formed as a result of their belonging to the community but quite the contrary, with gay communities being formed by the coming together of their sexual identities. Even if most participants seemed to struggle with the term community (especially in connection to Soho), their answers nonetheless gave away the presence of a shared feeling of solidarity on which the idea of gay community, in its postmodern sense, can be based, at both a global and a local level. It is worth noticing how many participants, while explicitly rejecting the term community, would somehow end up unconsciously using it throughout the interviews, in particular when referring to shared experiences such as homophobia or social discrimination, or when describing gay men as a collectivity. This suggests that some kind of longing for community may still be present. However, as Carl

noticed, the idea of a gay community may be 'more of a wish that many of us have', a social as well as a discursive construct rather than a real entity. In fact, the community of Soho that participants described, as shown in the rest of this section, turned out to be a very fragmented one, suggesting that their initial rejection of the term community in connection to the district may, indeed, be the expression of profound internal divisions experienced within the area that directly affect their relationship with Soho (*Soho Clarion* 1975: vol.2 n.2, 1977: n.17, 1978: n.18, 1982: n.38, 1986: n.57; Summers 1989: 113).

Charles, for example, recognised the presence of many different gay communities or groups in Soho and highlighted how quickly we talk about one type of gay man, rather than others, when mentioning a gay venue. He saw something tribal in this. G-A-Y, for example, was often seen by participants as hosting a crowd of *twinks*, usually in their early 20s, and described as more camp; Comptons for *bears*, 40 and over; The Duke of Wellington for young, more masculine, men; Rupert Street for businessmen; Ku Bar as Asian and Black; The Village as Chinese and for tourists. This may be explained by the fact that postmodern communities (and identities) are often based on consumption, and places of consumption in Soho will therefore target specific identities and communities that are based on particular characteristics. However, this fragmentation is not as clear-cut as it might at first seem. Sure enough, even though it is possible to link a specific type of gay man to each one of these venues, it would be an oversimplification to reduce each gay man to only one characteristic and, therefore, to only one venue. On the contrary, their presence in (or absence from) specific venues may reveal a much more

complex identity created by the intersection and interplay of different characteristics that call into question their own (and others') perceived belonging to a particular type/venue and, therefore, to a particular group within Soho. Five main elements contributing to this fragmentation of the community of Soho and, simultaneously, of Soho as a gay space, came up in the interviews: economic disposability, age, race/ethnicity, image and body type, and masculinity.

Economic disposability is the first of these five interconnected elements. Many thought that, to be in Soho, people need to buy into a precise kind of lifestyle but this cuts off many gay men. Michael, for example, revealed that, while being unemployed and on a very low income, he would self-exclude because he could not afford to go to Soho with his friends. Russell, for his part, recalled an episode that happened a few weeks before the meeting: 'I felt very excluded when I tried to get into Heaven and they didn't let me in because I was too drunk. Yes, I was drunk, but I wasn't that drunk. They knew that I was drunk enough not to need lots of drinks in there'. To him, the choice of not letting him in was due to the fact that he was already drunk and, therefore, he was less likely to spend money at the bar. As Roger noticed, Soho remains one of the most expensive areas for gay consumers: 'if you meet your friends in Soho you know what you're going for. You're just going for mainstream, relaxed, sort of super-comfort almost'. While the success of Soho may have been initially associated with the rise of a gay community in London, gay men seem to be increasingly aware of its consumeristic connotations and the fact that, to feel part of that community, they have to pay a price, assuming that they can

actually afford it in the first place. Particularly interesting, from this point of view, is Roger's comment: 'on a night out I would go to G-A-Y, then Comptons, then Village, then Rupert Street and have a little bit of everything, I think it is a positive side to the area'. Roger said that he feels comfortable in moving from venue to venue and explained that, to him, Soho is a space that can 'reduce a sort of class distinction'. What Roger fails to notice, however, is that while this movement between venues may be giving gay men a chance to meet each other and create intersections, the consumeristic aspect of the district is what is excluding those who cannot afford that lifestyle, not what is bringing them together. Vlad recalled an episode that seems to explain this further: 'a few months ago a friend of mine took me to the Duke of Wellington, and it was a whole new world, even though I'm often in Rupert Street which is just next door'. The new world that Vlad described is not due to a breakdown of class distinctions. The fact that Vlad was often in Rupert Street means that he was already able to consume one of the identities offered in Soho, and therefore in a similar social and economic position as those other men who were socialising in the Duke of Wellington. This is precisely what allows Roger to move from venue to venue on a night out, the fact that he is able to afford and consume any of those spaces and identities from the start. It is also worth pointing out that both Vlad and Roger are young White gay men, a characteristic that, as shown in this section, places them in a privileged position when it comes to choosing the places that they want to attend.

Another element that was identified as contributing to divisions among gay men is age. Many participants admitted that they only go to certain venues

and avoid others knowing that they would not fit in because of the age gap. In their opinion, a 20-year-old man would probably go out in Soho on 'a completely different itinerary' (Donald) that would include different venues and crowds and, consequently, changing their experience of the district compared with that of someone older. As William told me, 'if you're my age, nobody looks at you, the same way I probably didn't look at older people when I was your age'. Exclusion based on age is not, however, limited to participants in their 50s and 60s only. It is interesting to note that even though older participants often felt invisible and excluded, younger participants seemed to be aware of the generational divide too. Matt, for instance, even being conscious of his privileged position — being young and White — disclosed that, at 27, the last time he had gone to Heaven he had already felt slightly old, as everyone else, in his opinion, seemed to be 18. Similarly, when he went to Comptons, he felt like everyone was looking at him because he was too young. Age was not seen as a problem limited to older people, but as a widespread concern that affects different age groups. It is undeniable, however, that older participants encountered the biggest difficulties given that, for the most part, they are not catered for in Soho 'unless you want to pay for it', as Rupert suggested with reference to male prostitution. He seemed to be very surprised by the fact that in such a commodified society, investors do not see the chance for a profitable market in older gay men who, in his opinion, are those with more disposable income. He further explained:

In 15 years, I will probably be in a carer's home. What are the chances to meet someone like me? Close to nothing. And that

must be very isolating. I feel it already. The exclusion is more of an experience than inclusion, you sense the community by the fact that you're not in it.

Rupert was very much aware of his exclusion from Soho's venues due to his age. At the same time, he also revealed that he still goes to Soho during the daytime, especially to Patisserie Valerie, to find some sort of community in a space that is not specifically gay but that seems to welcome a gay clientele (see 2.1). However, this sort of community turns out to be, once again, a very isolating experience for Rupert, given that the people in the café acknowledge each other's presence but do not interact: 'you go in there and you almost always see the same people. It's a sort of community but no one really talks to anyone, you're just aware of each other's presence'. Although exclusion based on age is not particular to Soho, nor to gay men, it nonetheless shows that the fragmentation of gay venues in Soho based on targeted age groups may contribute to a wider sense of exclusion among those gay men who do not fit the requirements of a specific venue and who may not be adequately catered for in other places. Particularly interesting, from this point of view, is William's contribution:

The only place in the gay world where I've been, and there's very much a congregation of older men, is the sauna. I was quite pleased, because I had this image in my mind that it would have

been full of young men, whereas the average age was 50 plus. It's an interesting dynamic. Most people go there for sex but there is a social dimension too, it's a social milieu without deliberately setting up to cater for older gay men and practice, although by definition is hidden from view. Interestingly, most young people I've met in a sauna were people from ethnic minorities, like this guy from Pakistani heritage who came down from Birmingham to go to a sauna because he said Birmingham is too much of a small place.

Quite a few elements stand out from William's account. First of all, the fact that, as a gay man in his 60s, William had taken for granted that he would not have fitted in given that gay venues, including saunas, are usually targeted to a younger clientele. Second, even though saunas are usually characterised by a strong sexual element, upon his visits William also experienced a social element, demonstrating that not only are gay men over 50 sexually active and should therefore be catered for from that point of view (and not just on a 'pay for it' basis as suggested by Rupert), but also and foremost that saunas can provide a social environment, especially for those people who usually feel excluded from other gay venues. Among them, not just older gay men but also ethnic minorities, like the young Pakistani man who William spoke to and whose presence in the sauna may have been due to the fact that in his hometown he was not able to find adequate facilities where he could feel safe to be both Pakistani and gay. Finally, one more element to highlight is that saunas are seen as spaces that need to be hidden from view. This implies that the social



element experienced by William will also be hidden, consequently rendering invisible those gay men — in this case older gay men and ethnic minorities — who go to a sauna (also) for its social dimension. It is not a coincidence that most gay venues on Old Compton Street — with maybe the exception of Comptons — are targeted to a younger clientele, whereas those that do welcome a more mature group of gay men, like The Kings Arms or The City of Quebec are located at the edges of what participants considered gay Soho.

Race/ethnicity was also identified as contributing to internal divisions. Some participants, like Roger, acknowledged that the district is dominated by the presence of White gay men and somehow criticised it for its lack of diversity. Vlad took a similar stance explaining: 'we are all White. What about ethnic diversity there? You've got some bars that are more diverse, but if you go to G-A-Y Bar, the Black guys always sit in a corner, they are always in one place, so it [Soho] naturally divides people'. It is unclear if this division really depends on Soho per se or if it is the expression of an internalised categorisation based on racial and ethnic groups. The majority, however, did not seem to notice any problem with it in terms of race/ethnicity and just described it as a cosmopolitan and diverse area. It is worth reminding that more than half of all interviewees were White, and therefore less likely to have experienced race as a limiting element. Roger, for example, even recognising that Soho is a White dominated area, also explained: 'I don't tell my friends, you know, I want a mainstream White dominated area. You know what you're getting with Soho. It is what it is'. This sort of acquiescence, however, seemed to have a big impact on all those participants who identified as other than White. Lewis, for instance, said that he

feels very uncomfortable in some bars in Soho because he does not feel welcome: 'that's why I avoid certain spaces, because I go there and I feel visibly Black, and I don't like to go to a place where I'm constantly reminded of my skin colour'. He explained that he often goes to Ku Bar as it is 'very Black and Asian friendly' but he also clarified that this would not be his first choice: 'I still go there because I feel comfortable, I have fun, but it's not really where I would want to be. And the spaces where I would want to be I don't feel comfortable in'. A survey conducted by GMFA (Gay Men Fighting AIDS) of 850 BMEs (Black and Minority Ethnic) seems to confirm Lewis' position. It shows that the large majority of Black, Asian, South Asian, Latin, Mixed-race and Arab gay men who responded have experienced some kind of discrimination from other (mainly White, but not only) gay men. For many of them, racism represented a much bigger issue than homophobia as they can pretend to be straight in a homophobic environment but they cannot pretend to be of a different race or ethnicity in a racist environment. A common experience seemed to be that of feeling sexualised and objectified for their race or ethnicity or, on the contrary, of being completely ignored (Haggas 2015).

Participants in this study were asked if they, too, had ever felt sexualised, objectified, or *exoticised*. Most White participants had not experienced any sense of objectification in connection with their race. Like Jude put it, 'I'm just a White male with brown hair, kind of a cookie-cut kind of...I don't know, I just blend in'. The only difference that emerged was in terms of ethnicity, and nationality more specifically. Ben, for example, thought that in Soho it is often possible to identify a Eurocentric type of gay man. Sure enough, White gay men

in Soho are not just British but come from a variety of countries from all around the world, as in the case of Rod and Donald (US), Matthew (Canada), Nick and Colm (Ireland), Vlad (Poland), some of whom thought that their nationality, often given away by their accent more than by any physical feature, did somehow work as an element of attraction or, at times, rejection. This, however, was also true for those non-British participants who identified as other than White, the only difference being that the latter's ethnicity represented an extra layer to be added to their already visible non-Whiteness. In fact, it was participants from both different racial and ethnic backgrounds who offered more thoughtful responses. Arjun, even having felt exoticised, saw this in positive terms: 'people ask me where I'm from, it's good'. Ashley seemed to agree and found that, in Soho, he usually gets a positive reaction to his Blackness: 'I walk in a bar and everyone acknowledges me at least once, I think it is a huge benefit for myself'. Cristiano, for his part, recalled how, at the time he started going to Soho, the fact that he is Brazilian represented both an opportunity and a limit:

nowadays everyone has a Brazilian friend but not then. I was very popular, I was quite good looking and exotic, so people did look at me. But then it also came with all the stereotypes. People always assumed, and I'm not exaggerating, that I was a prostitute.

Lewis, too, receives lots of attention in Soho: 'there's a whole questionnaire for me'. He then added that, being African, people often 'assume things', and he

laughed. It is noteworthy that, even though he did not specifically say what he meant by that, other participants in his focus group, including me, laughed too. It is hard to say if we were simply responding to his laugh in a polite manner, or if we, all White, had previously assumed 'things' too and were therefore able to understand the meaning of his words. Even if this was not the case with Lewis specifically — in other words, even if none of us had assumed 'things' (supposedly in connection to the size of his penis) before he had laughed — it seems that everyone in the room had at least made a connection between his visible Blackness and those 'things' once he made us notice, therefore proving his point. He also recalled how, every time he goes out, he is asked for ID: 'even [White] friends that are and look younger than me don't get asked. It's like, I've been to this bar 300 times, and you still ask for my identification card'. In his opinion, this request depends on his skin colour more than the age he looks. This is obviously hard to demonstrate given that it is not possible to know what pushes the security staff who work in those venues to ask for Lewis' ID specifically. Nonetheless, it is worth wondering why other (White) people who, in Lewis' opinion, looked younger than him were not asked for ID.

While White British participants had not experienced any form of objectification or sexualisation in terms of race and ethnicity, they had nonetheless done so in terms of both age and image. Junior, for example, revealed that, in hindsight, he was probably objectified and sexualised in Soho for his age and look:

Junior: I hooked up with some old guys, not old but like, late 30s?,

and I was 15. First of all, it's not legal. I got more attention then than I do now. But I also think that twink culture was celebrated much more in Soho, and I guess, I grew a beard eventually.

Interviewer: Did you welcome this attention?

Junior: I guess so, and also, at that time, I felt like I had power in a way.

Interviewer: So, you never felt exploited or in danger?

Junior: No, never, which is surprising because I was so young. And I would honestly put myself into quite precarious situations (...). But I never felt exploited.

Interviewer: Would people realise how young you were? Would they ask for your age?

Junior: Yeah, I used to lie at the beginning, and then, interestingly, I started to be open and honest about it as a point of attraction I guess, to know your own power. But I mean, a lot of the guys in Soho today, they must be around 16 or so, I mean, you can see them.

Junior seemed convinced that his story is actually quite common but, given that underage gay men are not included in this research (see 0.1.2), it is not possible to verify or contradict his statement. The only thing that can be said is that he represented an exception in this study, as no other participant recalled a

similar experience. He was, however, not an exception in terms of how his image had shaped his experience of Soho. Image and the consequent sexual identity attached to each body type, in fact, represent important elements contributing to divisions and exclusion among gay men. Luke, as previously mentioned, noticed that his body image encourages people to identify him as a twink, especially if he is in the presence of more muscular men. In his opinion, this gives people the idea that he is 'harmless' to talk to. When he was asked if this constituted a problem for him, he replied: 'I'm 23, I mean, probably that is what I am. But I suppose if someone called me a bear that would be a joke. So, you know, I think sometimes gay guys can tend to label a bit too much'. What did seem to bother Luke in particular was a more aggressive kind of labelling connected to his sexual preferences, the assumption that, because he looks like a twink, then he will probably be the receptive partner in sexual relations: 'sometimes people would come up to me and say, oh yeah, I'm gonna do that to you and stuff like that (...). I don't like that, the assumption that because someone is bigger than me, he can dominate me not only physically but mentally'. Pavlo further explained that:

in spite of a move away from labelling, there is still the need to create a tag for everyone, which allows people to not only identify others but to also self-identify, which creates communities of desire, reciprocal desire. What am I? What is this person? Are they attracted to me as a category or as a person? Inevitably, people always will categorise someone based on the scheme that

they've drawn, and it will change as well, not quite fluid but moving, and people change as well.

Unfortunately, however, not every 'category' can be so fluid to be changed at any given time. Adam supported this idea: 'people assume I am a bottom because I'm Asian. I am a bottom, but that is not the point. Why can't I choose what I want to be? I can't choose to be Asian, but can I at least choose how I like to fuck?'. While race and ethnicity, in Adam's case, cannot be chosen, he seems to imply that sexual preference can instead be the product of his personal choice. Still, even refusing the connection between being Asian and being a bottom, he ends up taking up that label himself to describe his sexual preference and therefore contributing to that same mechanism that created the stereotype in the first place. This shows how labelling, while being the cause of many stereotypes and of much stress for many gay men, has nonetheless become a fundamental factor in processes of identification and, most importantly, of self-identification. It would be interesting to know if Adam, when picturing a sexual partner, imagined him as being a top. In that case, Adam himself would be once again participating in the construction of a label and in what Pavlo had defined as a community of desire.

The accounts provided by Junior, Luke, and Adam also bring up another important element that was not explicitly discussed by participants but that represents, nonetheless, a constant presence in their stories: masculinity. According to Roger, many people 'conflate Soho with essentially G-A-Y and the twink image that it promotes'. Sure enough, companies such as G-A-Y and Ku

attract a younger clientele into commercial pop music and promote a specific image of gay men, through their advertising, characterised by a more camp and fashionable look. However, this is not the only type promoted in Soho. As already seen, venues such as the Duke of Wellington and Comptons were often described as targeting a slightly older clientele, defined by a more masculine and mature look. This difference in the degree of masculinity is linked to many factors including age (the younger the person, the more likely he is to be identified as a twink, therefore more camp and feminine; the older instead, the more likely he is to be seen as masculine, assuming that younger people cannot be masculine and older people cannot be camp); body type (smaller, thinner, hairless in the case of the twink; bigger, hairier, more muscular in the other, meaning that twinks cannot be tall, bigger, and hairier — or if they are they cannot be identified as twinks — and older gay men cannot be smaller, thinner and hairless — or if they are they cannot be identified as masculine); sexual preference (twinks often thought to be the receptive partners whereas older muscular men seen as the active partners, ignoring both the fact that someone perceived to be more masculine may be the receptive partner and someone more camp may be the active partner, or that they could be both); race/ethnicity (Lewis, for example, ticked all the boxes that seemed necessary to be identified as a twink, being young, not very tall, and lean, but he was often seen as the active partner due to the stereotypes attached to his Blackness, which equate his masculinity to the presumed large size of his penis. Similarly, Adam was often seen as the receptive partner due to the fact that he is Asian, even though, being in his 30s, he would not be identified as a twink).



There are two final elements that need to be considered when discussing the perceived fragmentation of the community. The first one is something that did not come up in the interviews but that needs to be addressed nonetheless: disability. While no participant self-identified as disabled, nor did any mention (dis)ability as an important element for the shaping of their own identities, their silence concerning the matter is all the same particularly significant, as it suggests the exclusion and erasure of disabled gay men from the discourse around gay spaces and communities in Soho. LGBTQ activists recently visited eleven gay-targeted venues in Soho to discuss their accessibility in terms of disabled toilets, wheelchair access, and how to ask for assistance if needed. One of the protesters told his interviewer that, being 'Black, gay, disabled and HIV positive (...) his identity's got more intersections than most', but he also highlighted how difficult it is for him to feel a sense of belonging in a place that does not cater for him and that excludes him altogether. Venues' accessibility is not a problem specific to Soho, nor to LGBTQ people. However, the fact that gay venues already represent a minority in the urban panorama also means that the number of those that will be accessible to disabled people will be even lower compared to the total number of commercial venues in London. As in the case of older gay men, protesters did not understand why gay businesses are not catering for disabled people given that they, too, can spend money and bring their friends to the area. Disabilities can be both visible and invisible, they can affect people's freedom of movement or their capacities to relate to other people. Still, no matter its form, disability is often rendered invisible, as the absence of it in participants' responses seems to demonstrate (Abraham 2017).

The final element that came up in the interviews in connection to the perceived fragmentation of the community helps provide a fuller and deeper picture of both gay men and their spaces in Soho, as it follows a similar pattern to those other elements analysed in this section. Apart from a couple of interviewees who saw Soho as welcoming of all genders and sexual identities, most participants recognised the misogynistic and homophobic aspect of the district and, in particular, of what they had described as the gay community of Soho. Roger admitted that Soho does not cater for 'lesbians or trans people'. Luke, too, described Soho as 'very closed, and very defined as for gay men'. Rod, for his part, explained: 'I think of this very male-dominated gay space, I think there are very few female spaces, very few alternative Black spaces. So when I think of it [Soho] I picture a lot of White gay men, especially Old Compton Street'. Similarly, Ben revealed that when he thinks of the gay community he automatically thinks of the male community: 'I think there is a lot bound up in the labels that you give yourself and people trying to achieve some kind of equity by saying the queer community, or the LGBTQ community. But I don't think Soho is a particularly female-friendly area'. Russell agreed and clarified: 'there are lots of people within the LGBTQ community that don't feel like they have a space in Soho. Take Candy Bar shutting down, the only lesbian bar left in Soho now is She Bar which is a tiny little basement'. So did Vlad, who described Soho as 'very male-orientated': 'I think, if you were to ask lesbians here they would say that they are pushed aside a bit'. Luke, for his part, reflected:

A lot of gay men don't like lesbians, they're terrified of them, just the abuse or some of the things my friends say about lesbian women it's awful (...). So within this minority, you have discrimination and prejudices (...). We often think of us as a homogeneous group but we are still a heterogeneous group and I guess every single group goes through this thing where you realise that there's this sort of intersectional sort of thing. (...) I don't think you would ever be turned away from a club in Soho for your race or gender or anything like that, but definitely there's this thing that it is predominantly White male, that's clear.

Roger, instead, reflected on a queer dimension:

in terms of has it [Soho] ever been queer, queer in a radical political sense yes, in the 80s particularly, I think it was a kind of radical queer space. In terms of queer in the twenty-first century sense of a broad term which is inclusive of every sexuality then no. But then my challenge would be, name me a single area around the world which is a queer space in that sense.

According to Michael, however, this sort of homophobia has always been part of the community and recalled that, with his group of friends, they would initially avoid the Black Cat, in Camden, because it was full of drag queens': 'we do

judge each other in that way. That is part of trying to come to terms with your sexuality, what a good gay looks like, and I think we are still battling with that'. Lesbians, transgender people, queer people, and — as discussed in 2.3 — even bisexuals, are often excluded from experiencing Soho as both a gay space and a gay community. Undoubtedly, this is because they are not catered for in the area, and even those few spaces that do welcome them in are usually venues that have gay men as their main target. However, gay men's complicity may be as important and influential a reason for their exclusion as the lack of physical LGBTQ spaces in Soho. It is not surprising that, already struggling to define and experience a gay male community in Soho, most interviewees were also sceptical of the idea of an LGBTQ community within the district.

The elements analysed so far demonstrate that, even though many participants seemed to implicitly or explicitly hold on to an idea of gay community, the large majority were also aware of its limitations and extremely critical about it. They recognised economic disposability, age, race/ethnicity, image and body type, masculinity (and to some degree disability and gender/sexual identity), as elements contributing to the fragmentation of the community of Soho, and the consequent formation of a plurality of communities of desire based on the consumption of these same characteristics. John wondered if this fragmentation means that gay identities are also getting fragmented. Sure enough, even though Soho can provide gay men with a space where intersections can happen and where people coming from different walks of life and backgrounds can somehow build a sense of community, the creation of specific and exclusive venues within this space also implies that gay men will

be encouraged to identify with a particular type in order to get access to them. This means that unless their identity corresponds to the one that is promoted in Soho, those aspects that are seen as different will have to be downplayed, when possible, in order to fit in. However, as previously discussed, identity cannot be confined to only one of the elements so far considered. Instead, it is the result of their intersections. Not only does this create a plurality of identities, but also a plurality of experiences in connection to Soho as a gay community and as a gay space more broadly. In other words, the more gay venues in Soho target specific types, the more people who do not, or cannot, identify with that specific type feel excluded. While on coming out, or on coming to London (or both), the fact of being surrounded by other gay people in a space that feels gay may have been enough to make participants feel a sense of belonging to the area and its community, the development of all other aspects of someone's identity, as well as the discovery of other possibilities within the urban panorama (see 3.3 and 3.4), seem to have driven them away from Soho and what it had initially represented. Mostly disillusioned and let down by the myth of the gay village as a safe haven, participants seemed to equate the disappearance of gay spaces from the area to the lack of necessity for gay community in their lives. Matthew's comment can be seen, beyond its funny anecdotal essence, as a demonstration of this sense of disillusionment with both the community and its space: 'coming from Toronto, I think my guard is up more in London. Last week, someone tried to pick-pocket me and I thought, really? We are in a gay bar!'.

## 2.3 — A Space to Share

Elements of division among gay men were not the only social factors that were playing a key role in participants' detachment from Soho. The presence of straight visitors in the area and an increasingly strong feeling of safety felt by many gay men outside Soho seemed to be equally important. London welcomes millions of visitors every year. Soho never constituted a tourist attraction until the 1990s, when the area started to be advertised at a global level as London's gay district, becoming one of Europe's favourite destinations among gay men (see 0.2.4). Gradually, however, Soho's fame began to attract heterosexual tourists willing to experience what was being promoted as *the gay lifestyle*. Consequently, the need to make Soho as safe and welcoming as possible for straight visitors also meant that much of its gay element came to be diluted, with major consequences for those gay networks that had developed in the area. As analysed in the first part of this section, interviewees had contrasting opinions on the presence of straight people in Soho, with some welcoming them and others condemning their presence. The dilution of gay spaces in Soho led many to reconsider the function of the district and to suggest that there may not be the need for such a space anymore, especially now that gay men are, supposedly, free to express their sexual identities anywhere else in the city, as explored in the second part of the section.

If considered on an individual level, straight women did not represent a threat for participants. Especially if allies, not only were they welcome in Soho, but they were also seen as an important presence given their role in helping gay men overcome particular barriers. Some participants, for example, highlighted

that, especially when gay men are new to the area, they always tend to go with a female friend. Luke even stated that 'sometimes you can't have a gay club without having your female friends there'. Lewis, for his part, saw women as 'gifts' and explained that every time he had met someone in Soho, it was because a female friend was there to help him socialise with other gay men. Russell agreed and said that a room full of men, to him, is quite intimidating, whereas the presence of women helps attenuate that feeling of insecurity and makes the space more welcoming. Others felt safer when accompanied by a woman because, in their opinion, a female presence makes it less likely to receive unwanted homophobic reactions. The problem seemed to arise when considering groups of straight women, especially if not in the company of gay friends, such as hen parties. Many participants were worried about the risk of becoming 'the background to their [straight women's] good time' (Charles). What they seemed to despise, in particular, was the change in atmosphere created once a large number of straight women, whether allies or not, entered a gay space to consume both the space and the people inside it. Rod was quite clear on this:

it feels like an invasion, in the same way that for me, as a White gay male, to go to a Black lesbian night. They might regard me as an ally, but if I came with a group of White gay men, they may feel the same. A big hen do is there for the fun, not necessarily to engage with the community.

Various participants recalled being objectified by these women on multiple occasions. Some loathed the way many straight women express their appreciation with set phrases such as 'it's such a waste that you're gay' (Russell), as if they were somehow minimising gay identities and suggesting that being gay is something negative. Likewise, others speculated that many women think it is alright to touch and kiss men because they are gay, and noticed how this creates odd double-standards. Charles, for example, recalled the anecdote of a straight woman who asked his gay friend to open up his top and show her his tattoos. Clearly irritated, the friend replied: 'that would be the equivalent of me asking you to get your tits out for me'. Some interviewees felt as though women were trying to either turn them straight or force them into being 'their new GBF [Gay Best Friend]' (Luke). Roger supported this by explaining that predominantly middle-class straight White women want a gay man as the ultimate accessory: 'it's like you've got your handbag and you've got your gay. The stupid things they say to you when they're out on a hen night in Soho, it's infuriating. It's blind ignorant homophobia'. Vlad, instead, thought that 'just like for gay men it's challenging to turn a straight guy, so for some straight girls it's a challenge to turn a gay guy'. What most participants highlighted, apart from the feeling of being 'fetishised' and 'dehumanised', is the complacency with which most women seem to interact with them, as if, instead of objectifying gay men, they were instead expressing their appreciation. In most cases, however, this complacency may be due to lack of awareness more than rudeness. In other words, women may become disruptive by simply trying too hard to be cosmopolitan (see 0.2.4).



Straight men, similar to straight women, did not seem to represent a threat when they visit Soho's gay venues on their own or with their gay friends. A few participants even suggested that some of them may actually enjoy the attention of gay men, although Luke also warned of how quickly that could turn into 'hey, look, we are straight in a gay club, you're going to fancy us'. For some, instead, the presence of straight men, whether allies or not, did represent a concern. In their opinion, knowing that some men are not gay would completely change the cruising atmosphere of the venues and create some tensions, given that gay men would struggle to know who is gay and who is not. Ashley, however, suggested that, even in the event that a gay man expressed interest in another man who turned out to be straight, the latter should be open to the idea of other men flirting with him as he has consciously entered a gay space. More significantly, the presence of straight men, even in small numbers, was regarded as problematic when connected to the presence of women. Brian, for instance, recalled seeing some straight men harassing women in G-A-Y Bar until the security staff forced them to leave: 'maybe they thought they could get away with it because they were in a gay bar'. In fact, as opposed to those interviewees who expressed their disdain at straight women inappropriately touching gay men, others recalled seeing gay men often do the same to women, playing with their breasts and lifting up their skirts. Matthew recalled seeing this happen many times and said that gay men feel like they are allowed to do that. Russell revealed that he used to do it himself with his female friends. Seeing this kind of behaviour on the part of gay men, and some women's complicity in it, straight men may then feel entitled to follow the same steps and use gay spaces to engage in sexually-charged behaviours with women who

may be unaware of their intentions. The presence of straight people in a gay space seems to automatically reproduce the heteronormative hierarchy that sees women as objects of the male gaze (straight or gay) and gay men as objects of both female and male straight gaze, sustaining the idea of straight people going to Soho, and gay spaces more broadly, to consume the gay *other* and feel cosmopolitan. Consequently, the presence of straight people in gay spaces (either women or men — or both) completely changes not only their atmosphere but also their internal power relations. Michael, for example, said that today he sometimes feels excluded even when walking down Old Compton Street due to the presence of hen parties or drunken straight guys 'who would do best friends [sic] for five minutes': 'I'm like, piss off, I see you every day of my life, I don't want you to be around me now. It's not an obvious exclusion, but I feel in some ways pushed out'. So did Russell and Matt, who reminded: 'they've got millions of bars and clubs in where they could be so why are they coming to this one?'.

Almost all participants expressed the need to keep a balance so that gay people would always represent the majority inside Soho's gay venues. Luke saw this as a sense of protectionism and noticed that many gay places may be disappearing from Soho because straight people are allowed in. Russell also commented that there is a more historical function of gay bars, that is allowing someone who is not out to go there and feel comfortable in being a different person. Once this safe space is invaded, the sense of freedom is also compromised and some gay men who would otherwise 'let their hair down', may feel the need to police their behaviour in order to fit heteronormative

expectations. Carl supported this position saying that 'if you have a minority who is attracted just to its own minority and you're trying to maximise your opportunities by getting together in a way that you're not the minority but the majority, that does seem to matter quite a bit'. Many participants, however, admitted that the issue is very problematic, especially when it comes down to regulating entrance to gay venues in Soho. Roger, for example, mentioned Heaven's policy of turning away groups of 'obviously straight men and women' to make sure that a gay majority is maintained in the club. Donald, for his part, highlighted that, because of this line of reasoning, a group of lesbian friends of his were denied entrance in a gay bar, as they were mistaken for a hen party. Russell himself was turned away for looking 'too straight', and so was Owen, who was kicked out of G-A-Y Late for kissing a female friend: 'we were just kidding but...'. These episodes not only show the controversy in establishing who is gay or not simply based on someone's look and the difficulty in keeping a gay majority inside a gay venue, but they also suggest the presence of a 'homonormative way of being gay' (Russell). Owen's example, in particular, demonstrates that straight behaviour (no matter the sexuality of those engaging in it) was not accepted inside that particular space. This has obvious repercussions not only on straight people visiting a gay venue, but also and foremost on the experience of bisexual men who may be automatically seen as straight, by gay men, if found expressing attention for a woman, and may therefore be forced to censor their behaviour in gay venues in order to fit in with the homonormative majority. However, it is worth highlighting that those participants who identified as bisexual and who may have had an interest in the mixed turn that gay venues in Soho seem to have taken, were, on the contrary,

aligning themselves with other interviewees. Gil, for example, said that if he wanted to pick up a girl, he could do that anywhere. The reason he goes to Soho is that he knows he can pick up men instead.

Regardless, while recognising that gay venues should 'protect the community' (Luke), participants also thought that gay men should avoid segregation and self-segregation. William, for instance, concluded that it would be wrong to make straight people feel unwelcome even though, consequently, the gay identity of the space might be diluted. Ben added that 'it doesn't look good for us as a minority if we are selective of who can be in that space'. Matthew, for his part, believed that 'if you try to make those spaces exclusionary, not many people can discover about the gay community, you can educate people, a family member can come with you'. Owen, for instance, explained how taking his straight friends to G-A-Y Late really opened their minds and helped them experience what life as a gay man is like. Some participants also suggested that, being aware that the space they are in is a gay space, people would not do something to make gay people feel uncomfortable, and recalled seeing signs such as 'remember you're in a gay bar, respect it' or 'this is a gay bar, everybody's welcome but please leave your prejudices at the door'. Michael thought that some sort of selective exclusion will automatically happen anyway, with people avoiding certain spaces knowing that they would not like them. He said that, given the 'voyeuristic element' of Soho, he tends to go to The Duke of Wellington or The Kings Arms as they represent gay male-dominated environments that deter both heterosexual men and women from going in. It is not unusual, in fact, to see a large crowd of gay men standing

close alongside The Duke of Wellington. While some of them may be outside the premises to smoke, many others may find themselves forced to stand outside because of the limited space inside the pub which, on a busy night, often reaches full capacity. The visual impact of a male-dominated, closely-knit group inside the pub and its surroundings may therefore automatically put off those people interested in experiencing a safe, *straight-friendly*, gay venue. On one hand, the display of a certain type of gay man (in this case a more masculine and mature looking man who may intimidate visitors more than attracting them in) works as a way of securing the gay atmosphere of the venue, creating a barrier between the pub's clientele and the curious visitors (usually on the lookout for a more camp experience). On the other hand, the manifest presence of a specific type of gay man may also automatically exclude other gay men who do not recognise themselves in that particular type (see 2.2). Moreover, while this sort of selective exclusion may hold true for a specific gay venue, it is less manageable if we consider an entire gay district, its streets, and public spaces. In the case of Soho, for instance, people may go to the area for completely different reasons, not just for its gay element. This may consequently create tensions between the different groups that go through the district but, at the same time, it can also create possibilities for intersections and meetings with each other. As Luke put it, 'we are more than just our sexuality. Sexuality is a big part of who we are and we should definitely hold on to it, but we are more than that'.

Some participants, however, suggested that this whole discussion around the protection of Soho and its gay spaces may, as it happens, not be

worth it, given that an increasing number of gay men feel safe outside the area. Many interviewees, in fact, stated feeling safe *almost* everywhere in London and feeling free to show affection towards another man in *any* situation. Cristiano, for example, said: 'I go to the movies with my boyfriend and we kiss and cuddle and we don't care. Obviously, *it depends* on *where* we go, but *generally*, and *obviously we always go to those same places*, we feel completely comfortable' [my emphasis]. Even if Cristiano does feel safe everywhere in London, his statement suggests, at times, hesitation. He feels comfortable in showing affection in public and he does not care about his surroundings, but *only* 'generally' and *only* in 'those same places'. Like him, many other participants were, in truth, trying to convince themselves of a supposed safety. In fact, when they were given the example of a couple holding hands in Soho, but automatically ceasing to hold hands once outside the area, the majority admitted that, in Soho, they too experience a freedom that they do not experience anywhere else. For Charles and Pavlo, for example, Soho represents the only place where they would dare to hold hands with their partners. Similarly, Owen recalled that, in past relationships, if he was outside Soho he would wonder if it was safe to hold hands; in Soho 'it is always like, oh, fuck it'. Even Cristiano reassessed his statement, saying that 'in Soho there is still that freedom that you think: I could do anything here, I don't have to be worried about anything here'. He was echoed by Vince, who concluded: 'I think it's good for your soul. To go to those spaces on occasion to spend time and be in a space where the constraints of normal society don't necessarily apply'. Ashley, for his part, commented how, 'as a foreigner who has no experience in other areas', Soho represented a space where he felt safe to hold hands

because he knew it was allowed. Other participants highlighted how, when seeing couples holding hands in Soho, they do not really pay attention to them, whereas outside Soho they quickly notice them among the crowd. This is because, in Soho, people are used to it and do not turn around whereas, outside the area, it still feels like a novelty. Michael described the unique feeling of safety that he and other people felt when Soho became a gay area:

People started feeling safe holding hands in the street or kissing, that's what people did not feel comfortable doing anywhere else in London. You might if you were inside a nightclub, but not down the street. Probably not in the whole of Soho but definitely down Old Compton Street and Brewer Street (...). The idea of Soho as a safe space, there was community there in that sense, that sort of understanding that we were not a minority anymore because the balance shifted in those streets, so the people who became a minority didn't even want to or dared to spit at you or bash you. That feeling that you can actually hold hands without feeling uncomfortable or making other people feel uncomfortable or attracting hostility (...) I think Soho was probably the first place with enough acreage that you could walk around for at least 10 minutes and do it, you couldn't in Brixton! It was like a little bubble, almost like an escape for a couple of hours before going back to the real world. And I think Soho historically, especially between the 50s and 60s, it's always been a very bohemian area so, it is a

much more tolerant part of London anyway. So I think we were just able to build upon that tolerance.

Surely, safety appeared to be an important issue for all participants.

According to the MET (2015), homophobic crimes in London have increased by almost a third between July 2014 and July 2015, from 1,289 to 1,667. Numbers continued rising by 20.9% between January 2015 and January 2016, from 1,506 to 1,821. Of these, an increase of 27.3% is visible in Westminster alone, from 161 in the 12 months up to January 2015 to 205 in the year ending January 2016. More people are reporting hate crimes but, as the Home Office highlighted, this may also be due to better procedures in the recording of the crimes themselves. These advancements have, in fact, been put into practice by the MET and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime following the publication of *Homophobic Hate Crime: The Gay British Crime Survey 2013* and have improved the ways in which these crimes are both recorded and monitored. The survey, conducted by YouGov and commissioned by Stonewall, found that one in six LGB people, of the 2,500 interviewed across Britain, had experienced a homophobic hate crime in the previous 3 years. This decreased to 19% in the 3 years and 12% in the 12 months up to March 2013 for LGB people living in London. One in ten was physically assaulted, one in five threatened with violence, one in eight experienced sexual harassment and the same number had their home or property vandalised. Verbal harassment was by far the most common complaint, with more than eight out of ten reporting it. 13% of LGB people from Black and minority backgrounds are more likely to see



homophobic attacks as a problem specific to their neighbourhood, compared with the 6% of White LGB people. They are also two and a half times more likely to get physically assaulted. The same happens for disabled LGB people compared with those who are not. Men were also twice as likely to have been threatened compared with gay and bisexual women. Younger LGB people (18 to 24) were also more than twice as likely to have experienced physical violence than people aged 55 and over. Perpetrators are usually males under 25. In more than half the cases, the victims did not know the perpetrators. Interesting from the point of view of this research is that more than a quarter thought their location, or the people they were with, gave away their sexual orientation, whereas one in five thought this was due to the way they looked or were dressed. Finally, a quarter felt the need to alter their behaviour in order not to be perceived as gay. In other words, to act straight or, at least, less gay (Duffy 2014b, 2015e; Guasp et al. 2013; McCormick 2014a; Roberts 2014a, 2014c; Williams 2015).

In this respect, it is worth mentioning an episode that happened in June 2014 when Walter Adrian and his partner were attacked by a gang of Bangladeshi teens on Whitechapel Road, in East London. The group stopped the couple and asked them questions such as 'Who is sucking who off?' and 'Are you fags?' (Churchill 2014). They intimidated the young gay men by saying that Adrian and his partner were on the gang's turf, before repeatedly punching and kicking them. The event is interesting on at least two levels: on the one hand, the way the group referred to Whitechapel Road as 'our street, our area'. Even though the Whitechapel area has a strong Asian population, it does not

represent a specifically Asian district. Still, the group of teens claimed an ownership over that street and saw the presence of the gay couple as an invasion. Their position represents a challenge to Roger's words:

there is this kind of element that if someone was being homophobic with me in other areas of London, I would be upset and angry, but if that happened on Old Compton Street, I would just go like — why are you here? You know it's the gay area, if you don't like it go away — and again that feeling of, maybe not safety but social empowerment and entitlement. This is our area. Without Soho, there aren't many places where you can experience this freedom. I feel ok to hold hands wherever I am but I do feel more self-conscious. You relax a lot more in Soho.

Michael, too, sustained this idea: 'I was very conscious with my boyfriend not holding hands on the bus but since we got to Soho (...), and if someone was giving us the hassle, it was a case of fuck you, this is our space, get out'. Luke added, referring to Soho: 'I feel safe because I feel it is my area and I feel almost rightfully so'. As evident, both groups (Bangladeshi teens and gay men) make a stake over *their* area and see external visitors who challenge that stake, or are perceived to be challenging that stake, as a threat — homophobic visitors by challenging gay men's stake over Soho as a safe area and gay men by challenging, simply with their being gay, the displayed masculinity of the teens

who seem to be setting themselves as the guardians of Whitechapel's ethnicity/heterosexuality. Consequently, both groups think that these visitors should not be in the area at all. With obvious differences in connection to the violence expressed — gratuitous and homophobic in the case of the Asian gang, defensive in that of gay men being called out in Soho — the similarities between the two points of view are clearly problematic. On the other hand, this episode is interesting because of the comment made by Adrian to the *Evening Standard*: 'we weren't even holding hands or kissing or anything, but all the comments were based on us being gay. (...) We weren't even acting gay and that's what's upsetting' (Churchill 2014). First, the comment shows how holding hands and showing affection in public for gay men is still automatically seen as a dangerous activity outside Soho that implies the possibility of attracting unwanted attention and gay bashing. Second, important to note is the way Adrian specifies that he was not 'holding hands or kissing or anything' with his partner. He finds the fact that they 'weren't even acting gay' the most 'upsetting' element of the episode. In other words, he implies that acting gay may lead to undesirable consequences, whereas acting straight is a way to keep safe. This, in turn, challenges the answers received from many participants who initially claimed feeling safe and free anywhere in London. Does this safeness and freedom imply that gay men also have to stop expressing their gayness and start acting straight in different areas of the city? Why does Roger almost condone, or at least expect, homophobic behaviour in other parts of London while not tolerating that in Soho? Would Adrian's comment have been different if the episode had taken place in Soho? However, speculations aside, as Rod discerned, Soho is not immune from violence: 'I've been on the receiving end of

homophobia in all parts of London, including in Soho, a number of times. And I know people who have been subject to attacks on Old Compton Street'. He explained:

I think safe is not quite the right word, I think it's knowing that you're gonna have other gays around, it's more liberating than safe. Because I would say that no place in London is truly safe, and I had all sorts of things thrown at me on Old Compton Street, from straight guys, straight couples who actually come through. Because that's the thing, it is not a village, it is actually very permeable, it's just a few streets. I go there to feel liberated but not to feel safe. And I go and I feel relieved that there are other gays like me, but there's always a sort of suspicion that there might be someone behind my back making a comment or...

In effect, in March 2014, after an increasing number of incidents regarding gay men who had been befriended and consequently assaulted in Soho were registered, the MET appealed to other possible victims to come forward and report the attacks. Not only did many interviewees report not feeling safe everywhere in London, as they previously stated when talking about holding hands and expressing affection towards other men, but they also admitted that, sometimes, they may not even feel safe in Soho, at least not anymore (Roberts 2014c).

## 2.4 — The Right Way to Be Gay

Advances in British society and politics (see 1.3) were also referred to by participants as factors contributing to a detachment from Soho and the idea of a gay identity and community more broadly. In particular, with the inclusion of gay people into mainstream society, many participants thought that a normative lifestyle is now being promoted to the detriment of alternative expressions of sexuality. The promotion of a normative model was understood by some participants as a way of heterosexualising gay relationships which are, instead, very diverse. Making reference to those gay men who want, in his own words, '2.2 children, a dog, and a white picket fence', Michael speculated that recent social and political changes may have advanced 'a Disney ideal of what a gay relationship should look like', with a happily ever after ending that sees the two main characters falling in love and creating a family. However, gay marriage, especially by older participants, was seen as a young-oriented and young-promoted opportunity that would exclude older people even more, as well as marginalising all those gay men who cannot afford or do not want to achieve that kind of lifestyle for a variety of reasons, from economic disposability to social preconceptions of their communities of origin. As some interviewees highlighted, gay men do not have to follow heterosexual rules but can rely on their own culture and norms. Michael gave the example of a gay couple in an open relationship, and explained that, because they have chosen that particular relationship on their own terms, they should not be made to apologise for it or to change their behaviour to follow a 'puritanical wave' that forces them to behave

in a certain way in order to be seen as 'the right sort of gay'.

Even if monogamous homosexual relations have somehow been promoted to a new level of respectability and have entered the discourse around the British family (see 1.1 and 1.2), all those that do not fit such stereotypes may end up being excluded. Rupert thought that, because of this process, 'invisibility is appearing again, people tend to disappear from the visible world and suddenly, where are they again? There should be different models, you should not have to follow this particular lifestyle'. In his opinion, while normative gay couples are becoming increasingly visible in British society and media, those that do not adhere to that image are instead silenced. It is unclear whether many gay men may be following normative trends because they are trying to gain acceptance from mainstream society or because they are doing it for themselves, despite what society may think. Interesting, from this point of view, is Junior's story, who felt an internal conflict between his interests and beliefs, and the heritage that he was brought up with. While trying to liberate himself from social constrictions, he admitted that, to a certain extent, he still subconsciously subscribes to normative ideologies:

We shouldn't have to subscribe to the idea of marriage because it just comes with the same problems that straight people have, divorce, and cheating, and stuff. I thought that the opportunity that gay men had to not go down that route of forced unhappiness just for mere expectation, it's something that we can really celebrate and enjoy and it's something that I have personally experienced. I

have been in relationships and I have been unhappy, have cheated, and felt so guilty. And at some point I was like, why am I forcing myself, why can't that be an option for me? As I come more to terms with these things, I mean, fuck the respectable homosexual. He says, who is probably the most respectable homosexual ever [sic].

As Junior's comment shows, a constant clash between right and wrong, between what is considered to be respectable or not, continues to be a concern, affecting personal processes of identification for many gay men. Cristiano, for example, explained that:

The battle for gay rights is double-edged, as we gain certain rights we seem to be losing others within the community itself and outside. You can get married and have kids and it's ok to be gay if you do that. But if you don't then maybe it's not ok. I think you should have the right to get married. I would never get married but as I'm getting older, I'm beginning to think about that, surprisingly. What if we get ill? It's not just about marriage. You earn certain rights when you get married and maybe I'm beginning to think that I want those rights. But I really worry about losing that queer edge. I think everyone would be poorer if that really happened. Not just the gays. And that worries me.

This internal conflict came up in many interviews and some participants seemed to particularly struggle in defining their own positions. Roger, for instance, found it hard to picture himself at 80 with another man because he did not have any sort of role model in that sense. In his opinion, while media often depict young gay couples in a monogamous relationship, possibly with children, it is still rare to see older gay men living *their* happily ever after ending. He was echoed by Michael, who revealed that when his partner of 21 years had passed away, he found that the only grieving process he could identify with was in connection to the heterosexual world: 'there was no organisation or contact I could speak to in terms of what it meant for me as a gay man'. Luke, however, explained that, for him, gay marriage was more about 'a legal technicality' and highlighted that, in any case, to both him and many of his straight friends, marriage per se does not seem that important anymore. Carl agreed, saying that this is now going to open up new ways of being married for both gay and straight people. Ben, however, wished straight people would stop ignoring, and maybe even embrace, other aspects of gay life like cruising or polysexuality, 'something less vanilla of gay life'. On the contrary, for a few interviewees, heteronormativity only seemed to expand gay culture, not to erase it, and to work as a way to overcome systematic prejudice towards gay people. Matt highlighted that, if gay men decide to get married and have children, they can still do 'traditionally gay things': 'I think it's more of a choice, I don't see that just because I'm now married, I have to act like a straight person and do straight things'. In his opinion, 'heteronormative opportunities' may be giving gay men even more



visibility. Lewis, similarly, explained that a long-term relationship would help him challenge all the stereotypes that he had to deal with throughout his life. This is why he is aspiring to heteronormativity, to show his family that he, too, can be in a socially recognised relationship.

The perceived threat of a standardisation of gay life forced many participants to wonder if, now that formal equality is being approached, we are somehow getting to 'the end of the rainbow' (Vince). Two elements were seen as contributing to this trend. First of all, as suggested by many participants, gay shame. The example of openly-gay HBO *Looking* star Russell Tovey and his remarks about masculinity/effeminacy can help understand this idea. In an interview with *The Guardian* (Lamont 2015), Tovey recalled his father's decision not to send him to theatre school when he was younger: 'He thought I'd become some tapdancing freak without qualifications. And he was right in a way. I'm glad I didn't go'. The actor continued:

I feel like I could have been really effeminate, if I hadn't gone to the school I went to. Where I felt like I had to toughen up. If I'd have been able to relax, prance around, sing in the street, I might be a different person now. I thank my dad for that, for not allowing me to go down that path.

In the same interview, Tovey also discussed his body image and explained how being attacked on a train, when he was 18, made him want to become more

muscular. Tovey's statements caused a public outcry, with many gay men taking to Twitter and Facebook to express their discontent. Mainly, they called the actor out for promoting negative stereotypes attached to the image of an effeminate man, and for suggesting that being effeminate is a problem that requires toughening up as a solution. The remarks on his newly-found masculine body image were also an added factor that fed the controversy. Given that, at the time of the meetings, Tovey's interview had recently been released, many participants mentioned it to highlight how this *camp vs straight-acting* debate is destructive for both gay identities and communities (see 0.2.5). They found this symptomatic of the way gay people have been marginalised for so long and been boxed as gay, to the point that they have now started to box themselves. Some blamed Tovey's statements on internalised homophobia and explained that many gay men are now rejecting this camp image and, consequently, its association with Soho and gay culture because they feel ashamed to express their sexuality. In other words, as many gay men are rejecting that identity, they are also rejecting that geography. Still, more than the space itself, what many gay men seem to be avoiding is what Soho represents in wider society and the risk of being associated with that idea (see 3.3). Junior, however, was surprised at the reaction to Tovey's comments. Even though he agreed with the general outrage, he also thought that the actor's words only represented 'the state of the community today, highly categorised and quite brutal'. Cristiano tried to be more diplomatic and specified that, sometimes, people say stupid things without really meaning it, but he also expressed his concern for the fact that many gay men today advocate against other gay men instead of relating to them. He also gave an interesting insight when he

mentioned an episode that had happened to a couple of lesbian friends of his:

They are very...lesbian, very gay rights, and one of them was telling me, you know, I'm not a lesbian anymore, I'm a mum. I go to parents' evenings and no one acknowledges that I'm a lesbian. I'm a mum. On the one hand, you feel accepted because no one has a problem with the fact that you're a lesbian, but on the other hand, they don't really acknowledge that. For someone who grew up within gay rights, she found it hard to think that the moment she became a mum, she also stopped being a lesbian. I think the fact that she's just a mum is great. She does not have to be acknowledged as a lesbian. She's a mum, no matter her sexuality. But it's all a bit confusing.

It becomes clear, then, that what many participants were concerned about was not just the way gay relationships were being normalised, but also how gay identities were, consequently, going through the same process of normalisation and becoming once again invisible. Even so, some participants suggested that the normative image that is created as a consequence of this detachment from gay spaces may only be a temporary ideal similar to past *gay identities* such as the clone (see 0.2.5).

The second element contributing to a detachment from Soho and gay culture more broadly, together with the feeling of shame as a result of the

promotion of a normative lifestyle, is the lack of political union. Some interviewees thought that, as gay people become more accepted in British society, the gay community has lost its momentum, to the point that, nowadays, many of them do not feel part of a gay community or, at least, do not see it as an integral part of their life. The progression of gay marriage in the last 10 years, for example, may have more to do with party politics than with any kind of political organising on the part of the gay cohort. While a few people proposed that political action today may only be more grassroots, with associations promoting gay life and community without people even realising, almost everyone recognised an opposition between the visible political action in the 1980s and the current approach of many gay men. Some suggested that nowadays gay men simply take to Facebook and Twitter to express their political views but do not go any further than that:

because of assimilation politics, people do not think of themselves as being particularly gay in any area of their lives. But I guess we could advocate on behalf of people in other countries, or teenagers, or trans people. Do I do that? No, I should do it more. But I am aware of those kinds of debates, although none of the communities I identify with actually deals with them (Ben).

Political apathy, in fact, is not just about gay men but also about the influence that their detachment from political activism has on other groups. Roger, for

instance, explained that 'if you look at some of the more vocal lesbian and trans groups at the moment, they are very angry towards gay men, because they think we are the problem'. William reminded that, in terms of issues left to fight for, they are only a few if you are male, White and educated: 'there are still communities in Britain where you would hesitate to come out. What we can do to help them is quite a political issue and it's not much talked about'. Russell, similarly, wondered: 'why are we fighting for gay marriage when 50% of homeless youth in London are LGBTQ? Adoptions can be so expensive, IVF is so expensive, it has become a marketable nuclear family. We should be focusing on other things'. Michael agreed and, making reference to the Christian pushback in relation to the equal marriage legislation passed in the US, noticed how easy it is to take a step backwards. According to Roger, gay men are particularly 'apolitical' in Soho: 'it has that function where you can be socially gay without having any politics attachment'. He also noticed that hardly any gay people live in Soho and therefore they are not able to vote for the council and make a difference, as in the case of San Francisco's Castro (see 0.2.3, 1.4, and 2.2). In his opinion, the best someone can do is sign a petition: 'there is the Soho Society, and there is the SaveSoho group which is a bunch of celebrities who are sort of fighting the fight for us. As long as the bars are still there, not many people care about what is happening to the area'. John, for his part, thought that Soho had never been political at all and that, even in the past, those who were politically involved would go to different places such as the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in Farringdon or The Bell in King's Cross. Others did recognise a political intent in its formation, but also agreed on how spaces in Soho transitioned from being mixed and accepting of all LGBTQ

people to narrow venues targeting specific groups, and mainly White middle-class gay men. Brian wondered if gay men would be slightly more political if Soho was to disappear, and suggested that, maybe, only getting to that point would finally generate some kind of reaction. Vlad, however, thought that the degree of involvement in political activism depended on someone's background: 'I come from a small town in Poland, so when I came here I felt I didn't have to be political because there was already so much here that I couldn't have there. So some people may think that they have enough freedom'. This is a position that was shared by most interviewees who were visiting London or who had come from different countries with less advanced legislation on gay rights, and who thought that a place like Soho, and Britain more broadly, already represented a step forward compared to their places of origin.

As the previous examples show, analysing the current socio-political situation in connection to ideas of gay identity and assimilation into mainstream society is necessary in order to understand why so many gay men seem to be detaching themselves from Soho and ideas of gay community more broadly. Sure enough, for many participants political apathy and the refusal of a gay identity in favour of a normative ideal of gay relationships were consequences of a broader acceptance of gay people in society. In other words, because they felt more integrated, they also felt less of a need to celebrate their differences and advocate for social change. Consequently, these factors seemed to have a major influence on the way many interviewees were envisioning Soho as a gay space, given that it now represents everything they are trying to remove themselves from. These factors contribute, together with the interrelation of

others such as the fragmentation of the community (seen as highly hierarchical and exclusive), the dilution of Soho's gay spaces (seen as welcoming of a greater number of straight people) and the seeming sense of safety felt by many participants outside Soho (but not necessarily in Soho), to challenge the initial idea of the district as a safe haven that many interviewees promoted when recalling their first encounters with the area.

## **2.5 — Conclusion**

As this chapter showed, the correlation between Soho and the gay community should not be taken for granted. Even though participants recognised Soho as a gay area, a further analysis demonstrates that their position is also highly critical of both Soho and the idea of gay community that is often attached to it. It is undeniable that Soho represented a reference point for most participants' coming out process and their discovery of the urban space. Nonetheless, a progressive detachment from the area, and what it represents, constitutes an equally important part of this experience. What is often defined as a united community is, admittedly, a fragmented reality that not only challenges the view of a broader LGBTQ community that can include all sexual minorities, but a reality that also breaks the 'G' itself into many different sections divided by economic disposability, age, race/ethnicity, image and body type, masculinity, (dis)ability. Consequently, for many participants, exclusion from the community, and from Soho, seems to be a much more real experience than inclusion.

The transformation of Soho into a tourist attraction that draws the

interests of many straight people represents another big threat to the idea of Soho as a gay space. The presence of straight men and women, especially when in groups, was seen as having negative consequences on the atmosphere of the district and its image of a safe space for gay men. Even though many participants were trying to convince themselves of a supposed safety everywhere else in London, some also realised that, somehow, the idea of a safe haven was still important. At the same time, they struggled with finding a way to keep a balance between the presence of gay and straight people in the area.

Another threat is represented by a normative ideal of gay life. Ironically, while advances in British society and politics have meant a wider acceptance of LGBTQ people, they have also set a new standard that many gay men now feel they have to achieve and maintain. The new image of the monogamous gay couple with children that every gay man should aspire to was seen by many interviewees as problematic given that it subsequently erases other forms of gay relationships and identities. Furthermore, the rejection of Soho and what it represents, together with a widespread conception that most battles have been won and most rights have been gained, has somehow distanced gay men from any sort of political activism. In this context, the fast advance of gentrification in the area has found open doors and almost no resistance. Whilst Soho, and gay men's relationship with it, can still offer fundamental insights in the discussion, new alternatives must now be considered in order to redefine the urban scenario and the presence of gay subjectivities in London.



## **Chapter III**

### **Intersections with Soho**

### **3.0 — Introduction**

This chapter explores the intersections between Soho and other gay spaces in London. Even though interviews focused on Soho and its relevance for gay men, participants often mentioned other areas of the city where they thought gay spaces, and consequently identities and communities, had developed. The majority of interviewees concentrated on contemporary gay spaces in London, such as Vauxhall and East London, which were often introduced as alternatives to the more mainstream gay space of Soho and seen as contributing to its seeming downfall (see 1.4). A few others, mostly older participants, recalled areas that, despite having been erased from the contemporary map of gay London, represented well-known gay spaces when these participants were younger, such as Earls Court, Notting Hill, and Brixton. Not only does the analysis of these spaces call into question Soho's status as London's gay district but also the idea that it was the first district of its kind in London.

A historical overview of the intersections between Soho and its neighbouring areas is also proposed in order to challenge the idea of Soho as a ready-made and independent gay district that appeared out of the blue at the beginning of the 1990s. Socio-economic factors made possible the rapid transformation of Soho into a gay-targeted commercial area that, for the first time in British history, was widely promoted as a gay district. Still, as discussed in 1.1 and 1.2, different gay spaces, as well as identities and communities, are

retraceable in Soho from a much earlier time, often transcending the district's modern boundaries and extending, instead, to its surroundings and the West End more broadly. The understanding of Soho as a space historically connected to its neighbouring areas can help overcome the modern image of gay spaces as recognisable and circumscribed urban areas created ad hoc for commercial purposes and, consequently, the idea that to each one of these spaces will correspond an equally set and specific identity and community.

This notion is particularly important for the analysis of another kind of space that some interviewees recognised as an alternative to Soho and that is represented by more fluid spaces, such as queer nights and parties, that do not occupy a specific location but move within the urban space, hence helping the formation of equally fluid identities and communities. The aim of the chapter is to understand how Soho intersects with other gay spaces and to show how the district may only be part of — rather than *the* — community that many gay men experience in London. Answers to the following questions are explored: What are the intersections between Soho and other gay spaces in London?; How were these intersections experienced in the past, and what consequences did they have for the formation of gay identities and communities?; How are they understood and experienced today in connection to other urban gay areas?; What can the analysis of urban gay spaces other than Soho tell us about the district's current situation and gay men's relationship with it?

### 3.1 — Beyond Soho

As explored in 2.1, when talking about Soho participants often referred to a very specific section of the district that includes Old Compton Street and its surroundings, that is the area with the largest concentration of gay-targeted commercial venues. For many gay men, the idea of Soho (its gay character) has become synonymous with Soho as a whole. The contrast between Soho as a district and the idea of Soho that many gay men have highlights the limits of envisioning a whole district as the gay district (and consequently taking for granted that all gay men will want to be part of it), but it also shows that Soho's boundaries are far from being fixed and impermeable. It is true that the area was left almost untouched by modernisation for quite a long time while the surrounding districts kept changing and adapting to the demands of a modern metropolis (this way contributing to the idea of Soho as a village-like oasis within London, as explored in 1.1), but gay Soho, and Soho as a district more broadly, cannot be considered as an independent and disconnected space. On the contrary, it is the intersections between Soho and its surroundings that influenced and shaped what Soho is today, both as a physical and as an imagined space. In this section, Soho's surroundings are considered. Some of these areas have already been explored in *Chapter 1*. For instance, Fitzrovia was mentioned in connection to Crisp and how, from the 1940s on, he found the district to be a much more interesting and welcoming space compared to Soho. Charlotte Street, in particular, developed as a diverse and vibrant part of Fitzrovia and still today represents a space where many restaurants, bars, and pubs can be found. This part of Fitzrovia, as previously noticed, is also often

advertised as North Soho due to a similar European-style atmosphere, showing the tight connection between the two areas and how, throughout time, they have somehow managed to constantly influence and intersect each other. Nowadays, however, very few people would make a clear connection between the two. While bohemian Soho had spread over the boundaries of the district and reached Charlotte Street, the same cannot be said for gay Soho. The only gay spaces currently present in the district are cruising bar Vault 139 in Whitfield Street (which relocated here from its original location in Soho), and club night Desi Boyz at 229 The Venue in Great Portland Street. Even so, Fitzrovia presents some important connections with the past. For example, it is in a male brothel in Cleveland Street that one of the biggest scandals around homosexuality in British history unfolded in 1889 (see 1.1); 25 Fitzroy Square was raided in 1927 by the police due to the homosexual parties that took place in its basement; and both The Carlton Cinema and The Majestic Cinema in Tottenham Court Road were used, in the early twentieth century, as cruising grounds for homosexual men (Houlbrook 2005; *Pride of Place: England's LGBTQ Heritage* 2017).

Intersections between Fitzrovia, Soho, and Bloomsbury can also be highlighted, in the first half of the twentieth century, in connection to what is defined as The Bloomsbury Set (or Group). Members of the group lived between Fitzrovia and Bloomsbury, and often met between the latter and Soho. These included artists, writers, and intellectuals, such as Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, Quentin Bell, Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant, and John Maynard Keynes, who were either homosexuals or often in an extramarital same-sex

relation. Still, many other connections can be made. On the Bloomsbury side of Tottenham Court Road, between Store Street and Chenies Street, a molly house was present in the 1720s, while much homosexual cruising was experienced both at a public urinal in Euston Road in the 1930s and at the old YMCA building in Tottenham Court Road up until the 1970s, when it was demolished. Turkish baths were also present under the Imperial Hotel in Russell Square from the 1910s to the 1960s, and the square itself became particularly popular among homosexual men cruising in the second half of the twentieth century. Turner (2006) defined the square as 'the queerest patch until they began locking it up at night'. In fact, despite plans to transform part of the square into an official cruising area at the end of the 1990s, complaints by local residents forced Camden Council to build up fences. Upon its nighttime closure, the young crowd of cruisers made of students and academics from Bloomsbury's colleges and universities, office workers, and Soho goers, moved to nearby Bloomsbury Square, but the latter soon experienced the same fate. Even so, the presence of an academic crowd in the district is something that should not pass unnoticed. First of all, academia has always played an important role in the discussion around homosexuality. Jeremy Bentham, considered to be one of the spiritual founders of UCL (one of Bloomsbury's major academic institutions), was attracted to other men and a supporter of a total decriminalisation of the crime of buggery — he especially disapproved of the fact that buggery constituted a crime based on 'mere dislike to his [the bugger] Taste', without proof that it really caused 'social harm' (Crompton 1998: 27). Still today, the discussion around sexuality is very much alive in the district, both within programmes of studies and groups such as qUCL and Birkbeck

Pride, which provide spaces for LGBTQ students, academics, and members of staff to meet, connect, and organise LGBTQ-oriented events. Second, as discussed by some interviewees (see 2.1), from the 1990s onwards Soho has often represented a fundamental destination for many students who would find themselves in London for the first time and who would, in most cases, experience for the first time such a developed and concentrated gay space. The proximity of their academic institutions in Bloomsbury to Soho provided an extremely important intersection for the development of their own sexual identities (Houlbrook 2000, 2005; Pride of Place 2017).

Covent Garden, too, often came up in the interviews as a district where some participants, especially the older ones, spent time and socialised. John, for example, recalled: 'as a Londoner, when I came out, Soho wasn't this renowned centre of gay life (...). The only central London gay pub was The Salisbury, and then Brief Encounter which opened opposite it'. The latter, in St. Martin's Lane, was a bar and club on two levels that became particularly popular among gay men in the 1990s but was closed in the early 2000s to make way for a different bar first, then for a hotel. The Salisbury, in the same street, has been a well-known homosexual pub from the beginning of the twentieth century up until the 1980s, and raised to international fame when it was depicted in the British film *Victim* (Dearden: 1961), the first to mention the word homosexual and to have a homosexual main character. Carl, however, had mixed feelings about this venue and recalled:

there was one dreadful pub called the Salisbury. Derek Jarman

has written about that place in one or two of his books. He used to like going there. He would now be a bit older than me so he would have a more 1960s kind of connection to the place. I went once or twice there in the early 1970s and what I realised is that the staff there actually totally despised their customers, they were really homophobic, and people put up with it because, what else was there?

Other relatively recent gay venues, even though they, too, have by now disappeared, include the 1970s Premier Sauna in St. Martin's Lane; Sauna Bar in Endell Street; gay bar The Box in Monmouth Street; gay bar Kudos in Adelaide Street; and Vespa Bar in St. Giles High Street. Victim of the Crossrail redevelopment, like The Astoria and Ghetto on the Soho side of Tottenham Court Road (see 1.4), was also First Out Café Bar, on St. Giles High Street, closed in 2011 after 25 years of activity due to lease changes and soaring rent costs. It had been the first daytime venue of its kind that offered an alternative to the nighttime scene of Soho and worked as a community space where people could advertise events and shows or quite simply socialise (Pride of Place 2017).

Evidence of a homosexual presence in Covent Garden can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when many molly houses appeared in the area, like The Rose and Crown in St. Martin's Lane (raided in 1827); the one in Hart Lane, now Floral Street (raided in 1725); The Three Tobacco Rolls in Drury Lane and the one in King Street (both raided in 1726). The men arrested often



ended up at the numerous pillories that were scattered all over the district. In the first half of the twentieth century, instead, most of the cruising seemed to concentrate in private members' clubs, like the previously mentioned Caravan Club (see 1.1); or Billie's Club in Little Denmark Street, opened in 1935 and raided by the police the following year. Much activity also took place inside the public urinals that, especially in the 1930s, were used by many homosexuals as cruising grounds, like the ones in Wellington Street; on St. Martin's Lane near the Coliseum; on Charing Cross Road by the Garrick Theatre; on Garrick Street opposite the Garrick Club; or those by Covent Garden market (see 1.1). Moreover, it should be highlighted how the presence of so many cruising spaces in Covent Garden was also closely tied to the development of the entertainment industry in the district (which consequently expanded to Soho). The presence of many theatres (see 1.1), and all their related industries — artistic, music, clothing, food — also meant a high homosexual presence in terms of artists and workers within the sector, spectators, and of homosexuals employed in different, but strictly related, fields such as hospitality (waiters, cooks, etc.). It is not a coincidence that this part of London has in time become known as Theatreland, in the same way it is not a coincidence that most of the cruising between the eighteenth and the twentieth century happened here (Brown 2017; Girling 2012; Houlbrook 2005; Norton 2006; Pride of Place 2017; Walkowitz 2012).

On the other side of The Strand, towards Embankment, more urinals and molly houses made their appearance, like the Charing Cross Station urinals (1930s) or the molly house in Durham Yard, now Durham House Street (1720s).

The Strand, in fact, functioned as both an intersection between Covent Garden and Embankment and as a major cruising area itself, with men walking up and down the pavements before making their way in one of the molly houses or, at a later stage, urinals and theatres. The same could be said for the area connecting Leicester Square to Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square. Urinals in Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square were used for cruising in the 1930s, and so were the colonnades at the sides of Trafalgar Square and the many theatres and cinemas around Leicester Square, like *The Cyril*, *The Cinema de Paris*, and *The Cupid*. In Leicester Square was also nightclub *Subway*, a Jarman favourite in the early 1980s, and further down, behind Charing Cross Station, there is *Heaven* which, as previously seen, still represents a major attraction for gay men in Soho. The Trafalgar Studios, just off Trafalgar Square, are also the place where Littlewood's show, based on the novel *Dirty White Boy: Tales of Soho*, debuted in 2009, and Trafalgar Square itself is where most Gay Pride celebrations are nowadays held (see 1.3). Much has also already been said about Piccadilly and its surroundings (see 1.1), especially in connection to the trade and the Dilly boys, an essential presence in the cruising panorama of the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Houlbrook 2000, 2005; Parkin 2012; *Pride of Place* 2017; Reed 2014; Turner 2003; 2006).

A few considerations seem necessary at this point. As suggested, neighbouring districts have constantly intersected with and influenced Soho, providing spaces for homosexuals outside of what is now often considered the gay district of London. Sure enough, in the past it was the West End as a whole

which attracted a homosexual presence, not Soho specifically. Interwar cafés, restaurants, and theatres had definitely placed Soho on the map of cosmopolitan London but it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Soho started to develop a more consistent gay presence (see 1.2 and 1.3). This opening of the district corresponded with the increasing redevelopment of its surrounding areas. While post-war London was being rebuilt and, especially from the 1960s onwards, central districts were being transformed from more deprived areas, where a homosexual presence could somehow thrive, to cleaned up versions of themselves, Soho still represented a fairly unexplored space. However, modernisation soon knocked on Soho's doors and, even though this contributed to a much higher level of visibility for homosexuals in the area, it did so at the expense of all those elements and experiences that had characterised its neighbouring districts. In fact, similar to what had happened in places like Covent Garden, the increasing commercialisation of Soho and its newly-formed gay scene in the 1990s, also meant a sanitisation of that space, and the disappearance (or increasing monitoring) of many of those spaces used for cruising and sexual relations such as streets, squares, urinals, brothels, theatres, and cinemas (see 1.2 and 1.4). In 1990s Soho, the stress was put on Italian-style coffee shops, alfresco dining, fashionable bars with plate glass windows at street level, all elements contributing to a new idea of gay life in late twentieth century Britain that had visibility and pride at its core (see 1.3). What was visible in Soho was the safe and marketable aspect of gay life, meaning that all those spaces that had been used for cruising and that had characterised the homosexual experience of neighbouring districts in previous decades could not find a place in the new

version of Soho. This is not to say that cruising does not happen in Soho and the West End anymore. A Saturday afternoon trip to Topman, next to Oxford Circus, or a stroll down Old Compton Street would be enough to disclose a very active universe made of eye contacts, smiles, symbols, performances, and innuendos. Still, this kind of cruising will only rarely end up in immediate, in loco, sexual contact, as might have been in the past. Only one sauna (SweatBox), for example, is present in Soho in Ramillies Street. Moreover, the advent of CCTV; the presence of laws to discourage public sex; a quite radically different approach to gay life in British society; the fact that Soho is not a gay residential area; and now the influence of online technologies (see 4.1); have all contributed to a redefinition of gay cruising, its rules, and its spaces.

Furthermore, the idea of cruising in the West End was also dependent on the idea of movement between different spaces and districts, of cruising the streets. With the concentration of gay-targeted venues in one district, and their gradual disappearance from others, that movement has somehow been reduced to the specific area of Old Compton Street and its surroundings. Given that this area is now commonly recognised and advertised as the gay centre of London, people share a series of images and ideas in relation to it, meaning that, whenever they are in the district, they are also aware of the gay connotation of the space around them. This seems to clash with, and simultaneously to confirm, the definition of cruising that Turner (2003: 9) proposes:

Cruising is the moment of visual exchange that occurs on the

streets and in other places in the city, which constitutes an act of mutual recognition amid the otherwise alienating effects of the anonymous crowd. It is a practice that exploits the fluidity and multiplicity of the modern city to its advantage. But cruising is not transhistorical — like everything else, it is circumscribed by any number of social determinants and cultural and social specificities. And the cruising is always site-specific.

It is true that the practice of cruising is not transhistorical and that is influenced by social and cultural characteristics tied to a specific space, but it is also true that the moment of visual exchange that occurs on the streets or in other places in the city — and that constitutes an act of mutual recognition among the crowd — takes on a whole different meaning in a space that is already commonly understood, defined, and experienced as gay, confirming that the whole experience of cruising has, in fact, changed in time. The anonymity of both the city and the crowd helped men interested in other men, between at least the eighteenth and the twentieth century, to recognise each other and to use heterosexual space to their advantage. However, once both the space and the crowd are understood as other than heterosexual, there will be less need to recognise each other. This means that the sexual aspect of cruising may be substituted by a more social aspect, an element around which Soho as a gay district has developed (still, as seen in 1.3, the recent increase in the presence of straight people in the area may now somehow challenge this position).

The (hetero)normalisation of gay spaces in Soho, and consequently the

(homo)normalisation of gay identities and relations within it, did not correspond to a total disappearance of cruising grounds from London. In the second half of the twentieth century alone, they had developed all over the city, in places such as Hyde Park, Clapham Common, Primrose Hill, or Bromptons Cemetery. According to Turner (2006), however, it is Hampstead Heath that represents 'the daddy of all cruising grounds'. Howard (2006), too, explains that 'going "up the Heath" is a bit of a rite of passage for many gay men, often the first time you've done the anonymous sex thing, and it's something you are usually initiated into by a friend who already goes up there'. Jarman, for example, was often to be found at the Heath, a space that exercised a major and constant influence on the artist throughout his life and until his very last days in 1994: 'I always went to the Heath from the moment my friend Michael told me about it in the sixties. It's completely Queer, rooted in sex — a completely Queer space' (1993: 126). In his opinion, the dark and anonymous feature of the Heath means that 'for a brief moment age, class, wealth, all the barriers are down' (1992: 83-4). Throughout the 1980s, and even more between the 1990s and early 2000s, the Heath became such an important space precisely because it set itself in opposition to the sanitised and commercialised space of Soho. Turner (2006), in fact, explains that 'these cruising spaces endure in part because they exist outside the gay scene. They are beyond the grip of the commercial, corporate gay world that trades so heavily on those ancient Grecian virtues: youth and beauty'.

This, however, created a juxtaposition between *good* gay space and *bad* gay space. As previously explored, cruising grounds had always been subject to

bashing and police control. Jarman (1992: 83), too, explains that the Heath was not immune from this. While he regards the woods and bushes as a safe space, he also admits that the most danger lies in the fringes, especially around the car park behind Jack Straw's castle, and that those who should be protecting them, the police, are also those who are instead condoning and encouraging this behaviour against homosexuals:

Julian says he was hemmed in this car park by a gang, armed with scaffolding poles, who drove him down shouting abuse; he narrowly escaped being hurt. Someone was murdered here last year, and for several months the police staked out the place taking names and addresses, and one of my friends into the bushes for a blow job before they let him go. Singly the police are often friendly. (...) However, en masse they quickly turn menacing; Richard said he was certain that a gang with torches and nightsticks he narrowly evaded were young, off-duty policemen. He said they were beating people savagely, until a police car in the car park sounded its siren calling them back to base.

Jarman (1992: 123, 1993: 88) himself experienced gay bashing at the Heath from both strangers and the police, with six young men shouting 'fuckin' puff' and throwing a piece of concrete at him from a moving car in the 1970s, to 'an energetic police raid' which almost got him arrested in the 1980s. While the

artist never expressed surprise at these manifestations of violence, he seemed astonished by the way many homosexuals themselves seemed to have a moralistic view of the Heath, both 'as a symbol of the dark into which the gay world has been driven by heterosexual censure' and 'as a reinforcement of the critics' respectability', even though, in his opinion, the same sexual activity often went on in places such as Heaven that were seen as more respectable. He thought that 'location is the key to respectability': visible gay spaces in Soho had in time become, for mainstream society and many gay men alike, a symbol of gay liberation, whereas hidden cruising grounds like the Heath remained the symbol of gay oppression (Jarman 1992: 83).

Neither gay bashing nor fear of losing respectability ever managed to keep Jarman away for long:

after a week's absence I have visited the Heath several times recently (...). The place has changed, there was a time when any number of friends were out on a warm weekend. Sometimes it almost resembled a garden party, joints were rolled, hip flasks produced. People laughing and shouting, like a midnight swim. In the seventies it became even less inhibited, but, as always, once you are over the invisible border your heart beats faster and the world seems a better place (1992: 84).

Jarman recognises that the Heath has changed since he first went there in the



1960s but he also highlights how the feeling of excitement that he experiences on entering that space is always the same. The cruising ground became particularly important for Jarman after he was diagnosed with HIV. In a way, going to the Heath was his reaction to the virus and, most importantly, to the way the virus had been stigmatised and pictured in mainstream society: 'picked up a tough looking skinhead who said: "Fuck me". "OK", I said. "That's a bit risky" he said, and had a good laugh. "I was only thinking it" I said. "Fuck everything" he said' (Jarman 1992: 98). As seen in 1.2, Jarman thought that gay men had to be left to make their own choices without being constantly censored and policed by the government: 'if you decide to fuck me without a condom and I consent, where does responsibility lie?' (Jarman 1993: 126). It should not surprise that, even though towards the end of his life Jarman was not able to have sexual intercourse at the Heath anymore, he kept on going as this was essential for his mental wellbeing. In fact, as Peake (1999: 481-2) notices:

his trips to the Heath were no longer about sex, or very rarely, and most certainly not about being sensible. They were a way of seeking companionship and validating a queer existence; of celebrating his differences from straight society. Where other people chose to stay at home, or in the light, he went in purposeful search of the dark. He wanted an arena beyond the reach of respectability; (...) to meet his own kind; to prove himself that he was still alive.

The Heath became such an important part of his life that he even considered getting his ashes dispersed all over the cruising ground or, alternatively, flushed down the toilet in Heaven (Peake 1999: 518).

Sure enough, the advent of HIV gave critics of the Heath, and cruising grounds more broadly, even more excuses to seek their elimination while automatically praising Soho for its perceived cleanliness. Mostly, however, these spaces are left in the dark and never talked about until something comes up and forces critics to draw from 'age-old homophobic stereotypes' those same puritanical and sensationalist discourses that keep being proposed over and over again (Howard 2006). Especially since the mid-1980s, for example, many Hampstead residents started to complain because of the litter left in the woods at night, made of tissues and condoms, which sparked numerous campaigns to clean up the park not just from litter but from homosexuals altogether. Another big scandal arose when British pop singer George Michael was photographed in 2006 cruising at the Heath. Similar to Jarman, however, Michael seemed to embrace 'cruising as part of his queer heritage': 'George Michael rather triumphantly said "Fuck off! This is my culture" (...). Cruising is nothing new. It's been going on for hundreds of years, and its history is a part of the history of our cities and public spaces' (Turner 2006; see also 0.2.2). Jarman (1993: 23), however, explains that despite a seeming reluctance on the part of mainstream society to say too much about these spaces given that their discussion would somehow promote them to a larger audience, spaces like the Heath constitute a constant concern for the authorities:

Heterosoc is cutting down trees. Clapham Common has been destroyed to stop us cruising. Friends are arrested in Russell Square and Holland Park. I was put up against the wall there many years ago by a violent gang who I thought were out queerbashing. I was walking back home to Earls Court (...) when I was jumped on. Only the fact that I was middle-class, white and had a film on at The Gate stopped a verbal assault — 'You fucking queer' — becoming physical. This gang were the police. Now Heterosoc, if it can't destroy you, will destroy nature. They've cut down the glades of holly and cleared the undergrowth in Hampstead so that spring looked like a desert. Nature abhors Heterosoc. The wounded glades are healing. Nature is queer.

Jarman's recollection of his assault brings back familiar stories, such as those considered in *Chapter I* in connection to Crisp and the Dilly boys, or in this section through the experiences of Jarman's friends, or that of singer George Michael. Two elements are particularly noteworthy. First, the constant connection between bashing and the police, as if they were two sides of the same coin. Second, the almost obsessive need of mainstream society to reclaim space as heterosexual, be that Piccadilly Circus (through the removal of railings and the installation of CCTV cameras), the West End cinemas and theatres (through better lighting), or parks such as Hampstead Heath (through a change in landscaping).

While the personal experiences of participants described in *Chapter II* in

connection to Soho can help understand the influence that such a gay space had on the formation of their sexual identities and the role that the district has played in the urban economy of the city for gay men, so does that of Jarman and the other figures considered in connection to the Heath and other cruising grounds. The development of Soho, even representing a major social and cultural advancement for many gay men in London, somehow jeopardised different kinds of gay space that were previously scattered all over the West End and London more broadly, therefore compromising the formation of different experiences of gay life. This created a sort of hierarchy of gay spaces, with visible gay villages like Soho seen as the right space to inhabit for gay men, and cruising grounds seen as heterosexual spaces threatened by unwanted homosexual presence that needed to be controlled and, eventually, eliminated. The hierarchy of gay spaces also contributed to the hierarchy of gay experiences and identities, with those gay men sticking to their assigned, visible, spaces like Soho seen as the respectable homosexuals, and those venturing outside of them and engaging in hidden sexual activities seen as dangerous for the urban social order. As mentioned in 0.2.4 and 1.2, designated gay spaces often carried out a double function, that of creating a community space for gay men, but also that of making it easier for society to control them. It is true that most participants recognised Soho as a fundamental place for their coming out process, but it is also true that many of them have grown up at a time when gay spaces were already promoted as the right space to be for gay men. Only older participants were able to identify other gay spaces within the West End, and among them, only a couple did make reference to cruising spaces around London such as saunas or parks (therefore the need to include

a more historical overview of Soho's surroundings as well as Jarman's accounts of his experiences at the Heath). According to Turner (2006), nowadays there is 'a political difference emerging between those young men who have grown up in a more assimilationist, tolerant but highly normalising world and those of a certain age for whom cruising still represents resistance'. Interesting, from this point of view, is the turn that this discussion is taking today, with Soho increasingly seen by younger participants themselves as a place to avoid (see 1.1), and cruising coming back under different but familiar forms (through online technologies and private parties, as explored in *Chapter IV*). Before moving on to this, however, it is necessary to take another step back and consider all those spaces that, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century and sometimes up until the gay takeover of Soho in the 1990s, have functioned as centres for gay life in London. In fact, even though Soho is often considered London's first gay village, other districts had previously welcomed a more consistent gay scene, albeit under different circumstances and with different results. Not only can their analysis offer insights in the discussion of Soho as a gay district, but it can also help explain Soho's current relationship with other urban areas that have recently become popular among gay men (see 3.3).

### **3.2 — Forgotten Gay Spaces**

In his 1960 study *A Minority*, in line with other studies that had developed at the time (see 0.2.2), Westwood (1960: 180-1) recognises that 'the tendency for homosexuals to concentrate in certain areas is a typical minority-group reaction' and reveals that many interviewees in his research mentioned Chelsea, Notting

Hill, and Earls Court as areas with a high number of homosexuals in London.

One participant, for example, told Westwood:

I expect you know there is a huge homosexual kingdom just below the surface of ordinary life, with its own morals and code of behaviour. In Notting Hill Gate this kingdom within a kingdom seems to have come to the surface. That's why I live there. (...)  
When I walk through Notting Hill Gate I feel I'm at a gigantic homosexual party.

Another also explained that 'picking up queers in Notting Hill Gate is like shooting birds in a game reserve'. Despite these accounts, at the time of writing Westwood seemed reluctant to recognise such areas as homosexual centres. This may be due to two main factors. First, as Westwood himself admits, during the process of selection he tried to recruit participants from all over London, therefore recording a variety of different testimonies in connection to different parts of the city where participants lived, more than concentrating on specific urban areas. Second, while Chelsea, Notting Hill, and Earls Court were already well-known cruising grounds among homosexuals at the time, they had not yet completely developed that series of infrastructures that would, in the following years, make them more visible to the heterosexual majority. In other words, Westwood struggled to decide whether these areas 'really had an unusually large number of homosexuals or whether it was merely the subject for

homosexual jests'. Still, far from being pure speculations, participants in Westwood's study were soon going to be proven right.

Chelsea, a district within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, had become a centre for the arts since Victorian times. Crisp, when not in Soho, was often to be found in this part of the city and even lived in the area for part of his life. As mentioned in 1.1, it was precisely this connection to the artistic world of Chelsea that often saved him from being harassed for his looks and sexuality in other parts of London. Even during WWII Chelsea distinguished itself for its peculiar character: 'while other districts of the trembling city were busy fire-watching, learning first aid and digging incomprehensible trenches in London squares, Chelsea was occupied exclusively with amateur theatricals' (Crisp 1985: 114). This connection with the arts and bohemianism paved the way for the development of venues such as restaurants and private members' clubs, around King's Road in particular, that attracted a homosexual clientele for the following decades up until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Jarman, for example, was a regular presence in Chelsea in the 1960s. He would often visit local friends and felt particularly comfortable expressing his artistic side in the district, walking down King's Road with dyed orange hair and sometimes also wearing a cloak. Even though, from the late 1960s, many artists started moving towards other areas, some venues remained quite popular among homosexuals. These included The Colville; The Queen's Head; The Casserole (a Jarman favourite) and its downstairs nightclub The Gigolo (also known as Les Tombeaux); The Hustler (a small basement next to The Casserole); and The Place. According to Jarman (1993: 57), 'none of them [the bars] would pass muster these days;

apart from the lack of alcohol, sound systems were in their infancy so dance floors were an afterthought'. Moreover, he also recalls the constant raids by the police, which continued all through the 1970s. In his opinion, these raids 'were designed to frighten us, stop the less adventurous leaving their homes' (Jarman 1992: 96). Still, in spite of the lack of alcohol, or big dance spaces, and regardless of police intimidation, Chelsea managed to attract many homosexuals to the area and to lay the foundations for the development of West London's gay scene (Stradivarius 2017).

It is during this period that Notting Hill, too, became very popular among homosexuals. Situated a bit further north, but still within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, it had developed in the nineteenth century as an upper-middle-class area. During the twentieth century, buildings were divided into multiple dwellings that could be afforded by the working class. After WWII, in particular, the area became overcrowded and went into decline. This led, at the end of August 1958, to the Notting Hill riots, with White residents attacking the homes of West Indian residents. Before the area started to be repopulated by the middle class in the 1980s, undergoing like Chelsea a process of gentrification that transformed it into an upmarket area and pushed out many of those artistic and ethnic groups that had settled there in previous decades, homosexuals managed to form those underground networks that interviewees in Westwood's study had described in connection to the area around Notting Hill Gate. According to Carl, for any young gay man at the time, 'the main attraction was really Notting Hill and Soho was like, what's that?':



Notting Hill was the kind of comfort zone. I guess things are always going to move around in the city. Now in Notting Hill there's nothing, I mean, you could say that there was something like a gay community at that time, because people were really trying to make community, but it didn't last more than a couple of years because then people dissolved and went to other places.

Even though Carl recognised the presence of a sort of community in the area, he thought that the latter only lasted a couple of years. This perceived short lifespan of Notting Hill as a gay space, however, may be due to the use that he personally made of the area. The presence of a series of restaurants, members' clubs and pubs in the district, in fact, can be retraced for a much longer period and even though it is undeniable that Notting Hill, like Chelsea, eventually lost its appeal and many homosexuals moved to other areas, a minor homosexual presence endured all through the following decades. The Chepstow Pub was often used for political meetings by homosexuals during the 1970s. El Sombrero (then Yours or Mine) attracted a young crowd between the 1970s and 1980s, including Jarman, David Bowie, and Mick Jagger. There were also The Duke of Cornwall; the more recent The Champion, which only closed in 2004; or The Lainster Pub, gay between 1998 and 2005 (Stradivarius 2017).

Another area that participants in both Westwood's and my own study identified as gay is Earls Court, in the Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, and approximately located between Chelsea and Notting Hill. Following a similar process to the other two districts, after WWII many Victorian properties

in Earls Court were subdivided into bedsits or transformed into cheap hotels and hostels. Many Polish immigrants found refuge here and were joined in the 1960s by immigrants from Australia and New Zealand, as well as many homosexuals who were able to find affordable accommodation but also to eventually purchase some of these buildings and to convert them back into apartments and houses during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In just two decades, the area had almost doubled its population and consequently developed a series of infrastructures, from bars and cafés to restaurants and clubs, to cater for the new homosexual residents, especially along Earls Court Road. The Lord Renelagh Pub was the centre, between 1964 and 1965, of a cross-dressing scene. The pub was reopened many times, most notably as Bromptons (with its upstairs bar Stiffy's), from 1984 to 2008, then as Infinity, from 2009 to 2014, when it was finally demolished. The Boltons, instead, opened in 1892 and became a gay venue between the 1960s and the early 1990s. It attracted various types of men, especially those into the leather scene. Nightclub Copacabana (later named Copa) opened in the late 1970s, with its upstairs bar called Harpoon Louie's (also known as Harpo's and Banana Max). The place drew in many gay men thanks to its modern style all through the 1990s, when the increasing competition of Soho forced the venue to undergo major changes first (becoming Earls) and consequently to open its doors to a more mixed clientele (Brougham 2014; Fanzine 2014; Stradivarius 2017).

The most notorious venue in the area was The Coleherne Arms (later The Pembroke) in Old Brompton Road. This pub opened in 1866 and traditionally hosted a bohemian clientele. Initially, the pub was divided into two

bars, one for a straight clientele (downstairs) and one for a homosexual clientele (upstairs). In the mid-1950s, and all through the 1980s, it became more gay-oriented, with a particular focus on the leather scene. Among its clientele, there were many celebrities such as Freddie Mercury, Rudolph Nureyev, Ian McKellen, and, of course, Jarman. The Coleherne became famous at a national and international level also due to its connection with three different serial killers (Dennis Nilsen, Colin Ireland, and Michael Lupo — the latter had previously been an occasional lover of Jarman) who, between the 1970s and the 1990s, met their victims in the pub. Large crowds of gay men could also be found outside the pub or down Wharfdale Street, a back alleyway where many customers would end up cruising. The police often arrested individuals with an excuse such as obstruction and produced made up evidence and stories to get them convicted. With the advent of the gay rights movement, however, many gay men started to gain confidence and became more willing to react against this abuse of power by the police. In one instance, some plainclothes police tried to arrest someone but found themselves surrounded by tens of men and had to eventually release the person, in what former illustrator of *Gay News* Tony Reeves (in Brougham 2014) described as 'a mini polite British Stonewall'. At this time, however, gay liberation was still a very controversial issue, as demonstrated by a small Pride march that started in Sloane Square and passed through Earls Court at the beginning of the 1980s. When the demonstrators walked past The Coleherne, they received abuse from the pub's customers standing on the pavement. Not many, in fact, were willing to share a more politically active approach. In 2008, the venue was sold and, after a major refurbishment, it reopened as a gastropub, meaning that a very important part

of London's gay history was irremediably lost (Brougham 2014; Stradivarius 2017).

Other venues that appeared in Fulham Road, King's Road and Old Brompton Road between the 1950s and 1970s are worth a mention, like The Masquerade, Country Cousin (also known as Rod's Club), The Markham Arms; the many restaurants such as Roy's, Carlos Place, Twenties, Chaps, Albertross, La Cassarole; the art gallery The Adonis; bookshops like Pepys and Man to Man; or the many hotels such as The George, The Halifax, The New York, The Redcliffe, and The Philbeach Hotel, at 30-31 Philbeach Gardens, which gained international fame as a gay-owned hotel used for cruising that closed in 2008 after 27 years of activity. Central to the experience of Earls Court as a gay area was also Brompton Cemetery. Opened in 1840, the cemetery features tens of thousands of monuments and even catacombs, the latter placed below the distinctive colonnades that enclose part of its south-east half where most of the cruising took place. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the cemetery was already a well-known cruising spot among homosexuals, a characteristic that lasted up until recent years. Similar to Notting Hill, a gay presence continued to exist within Earls Court throughout the 1990s and 2000s, in places such as Infinity, as already mentioned; Coco Latte SW5, which opened in 2007 in what used to be Copacabana; or Ted's Place, a members' club in North End Road. Nonetheless, Earls Court seems to have now somehow disappeared from the map of gay London, both because of the closure of most of its gay venues and because of the rise of other urban areas in London, which is the reason why only older participants, and among them only those who had been living in

London for decades, were able to recall Earls Court, as well as Chelsea and Notting Hill, as gay spaces (Brougham 2014; Fanzine 2014; Stradivarius 2017).

Tarun, for example, explained that when he first came to London 'it was good to be able to go to a place like Earls Court':

I even had a flat there. I got to know lots of people around there because there was such a large number of gay men, so having that place it made me feel...it was an easy place to explore and find people who had things in common with me. It was useful to have a place to go and I didn't have to disguise myself, I didn't have to pretend I wasn't gay. I think that was important at that age. I don't know about now, I just want different things so it doesn't have the same appeal. I did feel safe, although it was a little bit foolish maybe, it gave a false sense of confidence in a way. (...) I don't think I cared that much because there were enough places there to make me feel safe.

While Tarun's words show the influence that Earls Court had on the development of his sexuality and a seeming feeling of safety within the district, they also confirm what has been analysed in 2.1, and in this section through Carl's words on Notting Hill, that is the connection between a golden age of gay spaces and that of a golden age in participants' lives. In fact, even though Tarun is referring to Earls Court, it is easy to see an analogy with what many

participants had said about Soho in relation to their own experiences. This highlights, once again, how more than the place itself, it is the experience lived within that space that influences participants' positions on gay spaces and communities. Tarun himself rejects the need for such a place at this moment of his life and throughout the interview was extremely critical about Soho, explaining that he tries to avoid it completely. Still, the fact that Soho is not important for him does not mean that it may not be for others, in the same way Earls Court was important for him when he first moved to London but did not get any mention by younger interviewees in this study. In Michael's opinion, however, the move from Earls Court to Soho happened quite gradually: 'you had parts of Soho developing, but at the same time you had Earls Court, which attracted a different crowd. So you had two centres of London: Soho and Earls Court, two big meccas'. He was asked if, at the time, Earls Court could be defined as a gay district like Soho or if it was more of a gay scene and he replied:

it felt very much like a district. When I first came to London, if you wanted to move to a gay area, you moved to Earls Court, it had very much that reputation. I used to live near there years ago. So that's how I went to the venues. (...) I think Soho's venues were very much more around social environment whereas in Earls Court they were very much about sex. You went there to pick somebody up. On Old Compton Street there was a sexual element, but it was much more social.

Michael seems to confirm what Carl had also said in relation to Notting Hill about gay spaces eventually moving around the city, but he also suggests the possibility of multiple gay spaces being present in the urban space at the same time, as in the case of Chelsea, Notting Hill, and Earls Court.

There is one final area that was sometimes mentioned by older participants and that developed an important gay presence alongside the West London districts considered so far: Brixton, within the Borough of Lambeth in South London. In the nineteenth century, Brixton was an area for the middle class but, from the twentieth century, most buildings were subdivided into flats, making way for a more working-class population. Between the 1940s and 1950s, many immigrants arrived, especially from the West Indies. In April 1981, Brixton rose to international fame for the riots that erupted in the area. Given that the district was characterised by high levels of street crime, police forces were given the go-ahead to arbitrarily stop and search people. However, the large majority of the people searched were from African-Caribbean origin, an element that provoked much discontent among that community. Throughout the riots, there were hundreds of injuries, tens of arrests, and considerable damages to properties. More riots and protests happened again in 1985 and throughout the 1990s, mostly due to suspicious deaths in police custody. As if the 1980s had not brought enough violence to the area, on 17 April 1999, just a few days before the attack on the Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane and The Admiral Duncan in Soho (see 1.3), the Black population of Brixton also became the target of Copeland's hate campaign, with a nail bomb exploding

outside a supermarket in Electric Avenue.

Whereas gay communities in West London developed around the presence of artists and bohemians, as well as social and cruising environments, it is the politically charged dimension of Brixton that allowed, in the 1970s, the formation of a more politically-aware and action-oriented gay scene. This is not to say that both social and cruising environments in West London could not work as politically-charged spaces. There is definitely a political element in congregating in a space, like The Coloherne, that at the time was still seen by society at large as obscene and immoral. Equally, however, there was also a more commercial aspect to these spaces, something not as developed as in post-1990s Soho, but enough to push away the more politically-active. As Townson (in Hassan 2014) highlights, gay men in Brixton wanted to be recognised as a social group like all those others that were forming in the area between the late 1960s and early 1970s (such as alternative newsgroups, women centres, and food co-operatives): 'we want to create our own space and we want to demand that as a right, not something that is provided by someone else on a sort of a grace and favour, we say we want our own self-identified gay space'. In March 1974 The South London Gay Community Centre opened at 78 Railton Road. The centre worked as a social and political hub, attracting gay people from all over London. Some of those involved in the centre also squatted in a few houses with a common back garden between Railton Road and Mayall Road. Here they lived sharing everything, including sex partners, and organised various activities, from dance and knitting classes to weekly discos and political action. They participated in the 1974 local and general elections in order to gain



publicity, organised the Gay Pride event in 1976, and showed support to local minorities during the Brixton riots in 1981. The South London Gay Liberation Theatre Group, then renamed Brixton Fairies, produced plays and street performances all through the 1970s, criticising patriarchy, religion, and the abuse of power by the police, and presenting cottaging and communal living as positive alternatives. However, lack of public and private funding led to the eviction of the centre in April 1976 and, at the beginning of the 1980s, to the transformation of the squats into individual dwellings. Some of these are still occupied by gay residents, but much of the political action that characterised the mid and late 1970s has irremediably been lost (Townson 2012).

When discussing the idea of community, Tarun explained that he is 'slightly part of one [community] around Brixton'. He lived in the area for a while and had the chance to get to know some people who were involved in the Brixton Fairies:

some of the places they've squatted they've managed to take over the tenancies. I feel part of that and I like it because I like the people, they're a bit older, and they are more established, (...) and it's more than just bars. They managed to create a community.

Tarun, however, also thought that, in truth, he 'will never be a full part of it' given that, as opposed to the people he had got to know in Brixton, he had not been involved in that community from the beginning: 'I didn't start it. It's something

there that I like and I go to sometimes, it's like visiting relatives. I feel welcome there, it's a nice place to be. I'm aware of the history and I know them, it's an easy enough place to be'. While the squats and the gay centre in Brixton might have functioned as a safe space for those people who were actually involved in them at the time, or that still have some connections in the area, like Earls Court and the other districts considered, Brixton too seems to have somehow been crossed out from the gay urban map of London. For both Michael and Tarun, Earls Court was the place to be when they first moved to London. Still, as previously seen, for Carl it was Notting Hill instead. It is also possible to see how, for someone older than the participants who took part in my research (such as those in Westwood's), Chelsea might have represented exactly the same. Even Brixton was somehow identified as a gay area by Tarun. However, the large majority of interviewees seemed to be completely oblivious to the gay character of these areas, even though they quickly recognised the gay character of Soho.

Undoubtedly, Chelsea, Notting Hill, Earls Court, and Brixton were characterised, at one point or another, by a gay element, as both participants in this study and in others have recognised. Still, there are some fundamental differences between these districts and Soho. First of all, all these districts developed a gay scene before or soon after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. This means that most activities and spaces were either underground or lacked that *in your face* element that has, instead, propelled Soho to fame in the 1990s: blacked-out windows; restaurants and cafés that were not advertised as gay but that, nonetheless, welcomed enclosed circles of

homosexuals; open-air cruising spots as well as hotels and private members' clubs. In fact, even though a large homosexual presence was experienced in these areas, gay men were still living and socialising alongside other residents in spaces that were not understood by mainstream society to be gay. Carl, with reference to Notting Hill's pubs, commented:

at the time, if we didn't want to get drunk in public, we would occasionally get in these places but mostly it was to stir things up, and we would get thrown out because we didn't look right, too alternative with long hair and sometimes bare feet and all these kind of things. And the other thing we were trying to do as a sort of political statement, we would go to a place like that and we would hold hands and we would try some kissing. That was, oh my God, out of here immediately! But we would do it, just to kind of test people a bit and stir things up.

Soho, instead, provided a visible space where gay men could socialise, cruise, and establish networks in plain daylight. This change, however, came at a cost. What was lost in Soho is the residential aspect that characterised previous areas. The fact that all these districts had been conceived for the middle class but had, throughout the first half of the twentieth century and up until the 1970s, become a refuge for the working class, immigrants from many different countries and ethnic backgrounds, artists and bohemians, made the

development of gay networks possible. At the same time, it was the presence of cheap accommodation resulting from the division of old Victorian houses into bedsits and flats that gave gay men the chance to settle in these areas. This was not possible in 1990s Soho due to the lack of residential accommodation and an already advanced process of gentrification that only allowed for the development of a commercial, more than residential, gay area (see 2.2).

While recognising that previous gay areas have somehow disappeared 'in a tidal wave of mortgage that has throttled the life out of London', Jarman (1992: 177) asks his readers:

How can you describe what has been lost to those who've never known different? As I approach 50 London is foreign — all the nooks and corners of my student days sanitised, scrubbed, like the buildings, and overwhelmed with rubbish from the convenience food industry.

This question is particularly relevant for this research, especially now that previously popular gay areas have been considered and the myth of Soho as the first gay district of London has somehow been challenged. At the beginning of the 1990s, after spending over 30 years in London, the artist was not able to recognise the city anymore given that places like Earls Court and the West End were being redeveloped and their gay character erased. There is a sense of loss in Jarman's words, a feeling that he seems to share with many others, as

often suggested so far. It surfaces in Crisp's rejection of post-war Soho (see 1.2) and his description of the Dilly boys complaining about the area not being the same anymore (see 1.1); in older participants' recollection of places like Notting Hill, Earls Court, and Brixton (as explored in this section); but also in younger participants' descriptions of how Soho helped them come to terms with their sexuality (see 2.1); and, of course, in the trope of the death of Soho that is often proposed today (see 2.4). All the spaces discussed so far, and consequently the identities and communities that developed in these spaces, are linked by this idea of a lost past. Without falling into the stereotype of *things were better before*, and acknowledging the social, legal, and cultural progresses made between the twentieth and twenty-first century, it is undeniable that the change in how gay space is created, experienced, and lived, has brought up feelings of nostalgia for a past that is no more. These should not, however, come as a surprise. What comes up from the evidence offered so far is that urban spaces, as well as specific places and venues, are constantly changing, and so are the people who inhabit them.

So, as Jarman asks, 'How can you describe what has been lost to those who've never known different?'. Can younger generations of gay men understand what it meant to cruise in Hampstead Heath; or to have sexual relations at a time when other gay men were dying because of what was defined as a gay disease; or what it meant to live in a space that was identified as gay not because of the presence of a commercial gay scene but because of the personal bonds created among gay residents? At the same time, if younger generations do not experience what older generations did, does that make them

any less gay? Equally, can older generations of gay men understand what it meant to grow up in a society that, supposedly, celebrates your sexual identity, that offers you spaces to feel safe, and that tells you that you should not be ashamed to live your life in plain sight? To echo Jarman's question, how can you describe what it is now to those who have known different and who are somehow still tied to that specific experience? The danger in idealising and romanticising both spaces and personal experiences connected to the past is that of understanding both things as static, that of expecting them to always be the same. This is problematic because it limits the potential for intersections with the present (and the future) and because it can also create disappointment and disillusion, with people looking for something that is just not there. This is not just a pre- and post-Soho issue. Older generations of gay men alive today would probably not feel nostalgic of Covent Garden's urinals, in the same way younger participants did not feel nostalgic of places like Earls Court, and gay teenagers today may not one day feel nostalgic of a space like Soho, should it follow the same pattern as other urban districts analysed in this section.

Moreover, it needs to be highlighted that even though it is possible to identify common trends based on generations of gay men who experienced the city at specific times in history, we should always think of the intersections between and within generations. Jarman, for example, was often to be found at the Heath and in other cruising grounds, but he was also a regular in Soho's venue, and those in West London, somehow crossing spaces, experiences, and generations. Saying that he belonged to one place or the other would be reductive. Furthermore, within a specific generation, it is necessary to consider all those factors analysed in 2.2 in relation to Soho, such as age, economic

disposability, etc., that influence the way gay men personally experience the city.

At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction between nostalgia and memory. The latter constitutes an essential element for the preservation and transmission of a gay culture and works as a sort of transhistorical theme that can connect different generations and experiences, as well as keeping alive a historical geography of gay spaces within the city. Nostalgia, on the other hand, refers to the feeling of pleasure experienced in relation to the recollection of a lost past which is, for a variety of reasons, seen as better than the present. In the context of this research, memory is what tells us that gay spaces have constantly appeared and disappeared from the map of London and what therefore warns us that the same could be happening to gay Soho; nostalgia is the understanding that something has been lost, or will be lost, the idea that Soho will not be Soho anymore, at least not the Soho we thought we knew (in this case, the gay district of London). Memory and nostalgia can be used not only as a framework to analyse how gay men's experiences of the urban space have changed through time, but also to understand the present situation and to explore possibilities for the future. In the case of Soho, they can work together in order to interfere with that same process that triggered the change in the first place. If we feel nostalgia because we think that the Soho of the future will not be as good as that of the past, based on the memory that we have about other urban spaces that have gone in and out of focus as gay areas and acknowledging how little was done to avoid it, we can also mobilise to make sure that such a change does not happen, or at least we can try to contain it.

However, as explored in 3.3, the situation is much more complicated. To really understand what is happening in Soho today, contemplating the past is not enough. The analysis must also stretch to what is currently happening in London more broadly. As previously explained, the development of a new gay area does not necessarily imply the disappearance of another. It is then important to understand what other options are available to those gay men who may not identify Soho as the centre of their experience in London and how their detachment from the area may be contributing to the idea of Soho shifting out of focus as a gay district of London more broadly.

That being said, if Soho is really disappearing, where are gay spaces moving to? Charles explained:

Soho is probably already 20 years past its being hot, being the place to go. I'm amazed that gay bars are still there, I would have thought that they would have turned straight by now. I think that maybe bars have a certain lifespan, quite often, about 10 years, probably less, when they are the place to go and then they either need to reinvent themselves or they just become quite boring and eventually people stop going there. I wonder if Soho can keep reinventing itself as a gay space or whether it will reinvent itself as a specific something else. Because it has got to the point of real maturity as a gay place, and it has already been overtaken. I suspect that lots of those bars will disappear. There will be one or two that will remain as the vestiges of what it used to be. Look at



Earls Court, all those bars that run for ages you would have never thought that they would close and now they are all gone.

Other participants seemed surprised by this revelation, as they had no idea that Earls Court had that function in the past. Therefore, they also predicted that, in the near future, the same may happen to Soho and gay spaces may move somewhere else. Tarun also noticed that, if the gay area does move to other parts of the city, given that Earls Court was not that central compared to Soho, it may be somewhere peripheral again, especially in the light of changes in society, and proposed that a new gay area may be Hackney. Other people sustained this idea of new gay areas around London. According to Michael, for example, 'you now have alternatives starting to develop, the Vauxhall scene has emerged, Hoxton (...). So if I can get the same closer to home, why should I go to Soho?'. The next two sections explore new urban geographies that are now redefining both London's gay spaces and communities more broadly and, consequently, influencing the future of Soho itself.

### **3.3 — A New Soho?**

The majority of participants in this research identified two main areas as fundamental for the discussion around alternative gay spaces in contemporary London: Vauxhall and East London. Even though the former represents quite a specific area enclosed in the Borough of Lambeth — similar to the way Soho is part of the City of Westminster — the latter defines quite a broad geographical

area given that, in theory, everything east of central London could be seen as being part of East London. It should then be specified that, for a Londoner — by birth or adoption — the expression *East London* usually represents quite an extended area, but also one that is pretty confined to particular areas such as Shoreditch, Hackney, Dalston, and Hoxton — which are officially part of the Borough of Hackney — and to certain parts of the Borough of Tower Hamlets, such as Spitalfields and Bethnal Green. In other words, the expression East London has nowadays unofficially become synonymous with a spatially broad but also well-defined geographical area that corresponds to the Borough of Hackney and its surroundings. This part of London has, in the past decade, seen a major rise in both popularity and investments, becoming for quite some time, as explained in this section, the trendiest place in the urban panorama.

The type of crowd and the lifestyle connected with both Vauxhall and East London were a constant in the interviews. Most participants described Vauxhall as a place for an older audience compared with Soho, mainly in their 30s, and characterised by a more middle-class, masculine, intense and heavy scene that includes big clubs open till the late morning or early afternoon, techno music, darkrooms, muscles, and drug use. Roger, for example, defined Vauxhall as a place for 'drug-addicted bears'; Luke as a district where 'all the muscle guys go'; whereas Junior as something that 'always exists as an after-hours space. Once everything closes in Soho, once Heaven finishes at 5, if you still want to go out, you go to Vauxhall'. To him, the area was always 'a kind of intimidating space for a much more aggressive crowd'. Even if many participants tended to generalise and to see Vauxhall as one big nightclub for muscle men with a drug addiction, it was interesting to see how the same stereotypes kept coming up in

the discussions (the connection between Vauxhall and drug use is further explored in 4.2). Their description, in fact, can be partly validated by a simple look at the kind of gay spaces that have developed in the district from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s.

Most gay venues in Vauxhall were born as clubs offering hard dance and electronic music, as opposed to the more commercial and pop scene of Soho's bars, and promoted a very specific sexual element that did not only take the form of cruising but also that of sexual interaction within the premises. This was specifically intended for those people who did not fit, or did not want to fit, in the sanitised and morally-approved space of Soho and who, instead, were looking for a more edgy experience. It is in this context that a kink scene developed, with leather and rubber as constant expressions of this experience. The image promoted in Vauxhall was that of a hyper-masculine gay man, mostly older than Soho goers, either a bear/cub or a muscle man, and very openminded in terms of sexual experimentation, with clubs offering spaces to act out sexual fantasies, from role play to BDSM, from spanking and pissing to pup play, and from leather and rubber to sportswear and denim. In time, these venues started to accommodate an increasing number of after-hours parties, opening their doors to a more mixed but also still very much hyper-masculine clientele wanting to continue partying until the late morning and, very often, the ensuing afternoon. Famous clubs that have shaped Vauxhall's scene (many of which have now closed) include Area, with a mix of nights like international brand *Matinée*, *Evolve*, *Bootylicious*, and historic after hour night *Beyond*; *The Eagle* (formerly *South Central*), with famous nights such as *Horse Meat Disco*,

Bootcamp, Dirty Little Fuckers, and Tonker; Fire, which has changed London's club scene opening 24/7 at a time when most venues would close at 3am and open only Thursday to Sunday; and other venues like Hidden, Crash (later Depot), Club Colosseum, Union, Factory, The Hoist, and Protocol (now LightBox). Even though smaller and more socially-oriented venues have opened, like Barcode Soho's sister gay bar Barcode Vauxhall (launched in 2006 but now closed), as well as places like Paris Gym (at the time of its opening, the only exclusively gay gym in London) and, to some extent, Chariots Vauxhall sauna, the stress was increasingly placed, and still is, on the big clubs and their after hours experience, with some gay men partying for hours on end, often helped by the use of recreational drugs (*Out Magazine* 2006: n.1, 2007: n.2-6, 2008: n.13-21, 2009: n.26-35, 2010: n.46-7, 2011: n.49-60; *QX Magazine* 2012: n.68-74, 2013: n.86, 2014: n.92-100, 2015: n.105-13, 2016: n.115-25, 2017: n.127-8).

Participants' descriptions of Vauxhall's scene are particularly fascinating if connected to the way Vauxhall was described, already a decade ago, in the *Soho Clarion* (2006: n.126) which proclaimed that 'the direct challenge to Soho's natural superiority for all-things-gay in Britain is now complete'. At the time, the publication seemed quite critical of this somehow new gay area:

Vauxhall's challenge to Soho is that south of the river they are creating a ghetto for gayness, back to the days of Earls Court, but more open, brash, scary, elitist and body-fascist. Driven by a clubbing and drug culture rather than that of a simple 'community'.

(...) Just close enough to the centre of London, with maybe now a critical mass of businesses, to turn Vauxhall into a 'destination venue' for gays. A 'destination venue' being one that people will travel to, rather than one they would naturally 'fall into', such as Soho.

The article described the movement of investments from Soho to Vauxhall as 'a return to the world of the ghetto' and warned that 'we [gay men] leave the Soho community at our own peril'. Even if Vauxhall's description in negative terms can be seen as a matter of rivalry between the two districts, and as a result of different economic and social policies followed by their corresponding boroughs (Westminster and Lambeth respectively), these predictions seem to have, at least partially, become a reality. Vauxhall has gradually been added to the urban map of gay spaces in London. Moreover, its links to an 'elitist and body fascist' scene 'driven by a clubbing and drug culture' only seem to demonstrate this idea of Vauxhall as 'a destination venue' that does not leave much room for the creation of a sense of community. What is also interesting to consider is how similar the description of Vauxhall made by the *Soho Clarion* in the mid 2000s is to the one that participants made of Soho today, with the area described as a ghetto, more than a liberated zone, characterised by a hierarchical structure that focuses on consumption more than community and that transforms the district into a tourist destination (see 2.2). This highlights, once again, how the image of Soho as a safe haven has, in time, been rejected and its contradictions increasingly made visible.

Vauxhall, however, did not represent a real substitute of Soho for most interviewees. Even recognising its gay element and having themselves mentioned the area as an alternative to Soho, none of the participants wanted to be identified with or expressed a strong attachment to the district. Some interviewees, for example, admitted to never having been there before. Others had been to Vauxhall and enjoyed some of the venues but were also critical of them. Brian explained that 'to be a regular in Vauxhall you need to invest in a specific lifestyle that is not for everyone. I couldn't afford to stay out till 9 in the morning and then go straight to work. I mean, how do they do that?'. Jude did think of Vauxhall as a gay space but he also explained that he hates the area. The last time he had been there, it was for Pride in the Park (a follow-up celebration of London Pride that takes place in Vauxhall Park the day after the main parade) and that was, in his opinion, the only time he had ever experienced 'a sense of community there'. It is also noteworthy that Jude was the only interviewee who mentioned a space in Vauxhall that had, for him, a gay connotation without being a commercial venue (as opposed to Soho where participants had recognised non-commercial spaces such as Soho Square). Matthew, for his part, advanced the idea that 'you don't really go for drinks to Vauxhall, unless you go to the RVT [Royal Vauxhall Tavern], I think you have to go for big dance parties' (more is said about the RVT in the following pages). The district was then seen as a space that undoubtedly had some kind of connection to gay men in London and that was, itself, identified as a gay space. Unlike Soho, however, which had represented a rite of passage for most interviewees, Vauxhall was seen as a space targeted to a specific type of gay man and to a specific experience, therefore, only as another option more than

its replacement.

At the same time, as opposed to Soho, and in slight contradiction with their description of Vauxhall's gay scene, some interviewees also defined the district as a gay residential area. Already in 2007, Nathanson (in *Out Magazine* 2007: n.2) had defined Vauxhall as 'the Place to Be' and dubbed it 'the New Soho'. She explained that Vauxhall was becoming 'hot property' and quoted the words of Mark Oakley, owner of South Central:

The village attracts over 20,000 gay men every weekend and in the last year I've seen a definite growth in gay bars, clubs, saunas and cafés. (...) There are four or five super clubs as well as the many cutting-edge underground bars; it's overtaking Soho as the place to be and be seen.

She also interviewed an estate agent from Daniel Cobb, who declared:

'Vauxhall is an excellent investment area. (...) We get lots of gay people coming to look at properties, who say that they go out in the area a lot. It's a superb spot to be and the value of properties is quite sensible for the London market'. For Jonathan, too, Vauxhall is still an area where people can actually afford to live because rents are much cheaper compared with Soho, even though he would not define it as a village or a ghetto because he thought that the way the area has been developed is in opposition to what Soho has to offer. Michael agreed with this position and compared Vauxhall with what Earls Court used to

be. In his opinion, in fact, the presence of a residential cluster is what distinguishes Vauxhall from Soho and what many gay men actually look for today when they want to buy a house. Thus, two different images of Vauxhall came out of the interviews: one that sees the area as an early-morning party ground and one that sees it as a gay residential area. In both cases, Vauxhall seems to be presenting its visitors and residents with something that Soho cannot provide for, given that, apart from Heaven (which, as previously explained, is situated just outside Soho but still represents an integral part of the district's nightlife), no major clubs are present and opened till late, nor is there present a gay residential population (see 2.2).

The other area that constantly came up in the interviews was East London. Participants described it as more alternative, hipster, and queer and trans-friendly. Carl revealed that East London reminded him of what Notting Hill was in the early 70s:

the first identification was like, this is a cool area, and sort of my tribe lives here, with people who are a little bit more edgy and creative, and then, because a lot of gay people would feel at ease in that kind of milieu, they would also feel more accepted. We were alternative hippies, there was a fluidity and sexuality was one more thing that in the mix of what hippy was all about, changing society.



Jude seemed to agree and said that, to him, the area does not feel like a gay space but only as young and trendy. Equally, he thought that that did not make it any less gay-friendly. Junior, too, acknowledged that, even though East London has a diversity of nights, it is not predominantly gay. At the same time, he did recognise that the area 'has probably the highest concentration of gay men in London'. Michael, for his part, explained that the cross-over that happens in East London is the actual key to its success. Because it is not seen as a strictly gay space, those men who are not out in their lives but who are nonetheless looking to create connections with other men, may think of the area as a space that does not force them 'to make a statement'. He took Chariot's sauna (now closed to make room for luxury apartments), in Shoreditch, as an example and said that the majority of people who frequented the venue, would not identify as gay. In his opinion, in case they met someone they know just around the corner from the sauna, they would not necessarily be associated with that venue, as opposed to Soho, where people may tend to identify the person with the place. Absent from East London, for example, is a street with a concentration of gay venues. For most interviewees, in fact, East London is an area that is not explicitly gay but that allows them to be gay without having to 'wave a rainbow flag' (Daniel), a more alternative space where it is not necessary to express any particular sexual identity as gay, straight, and anyone in between just mix and play along the lines of queerness. Participants mentioned venues like Dalston Superstore, a two-floor mixed venue that opened in 2009 which works as a café by day and club and performance space by night; or Vogue Fabrics (VFD), which also features a mixed crowd. Consequently, without a specific gay type to dominate the scene, participants

felt like they had a much higher degree of freedom. The absence of such a type, however, must be considered carefully. Because gay men are less visible in East London, does not mean that they are not present, as Junior suggested when he said that East London has the highest concentration of gay men in London. On the contrary, the refusal to wave a rainbow flag, as Daniel put it, may be the expression of a dominant gay type in the area, only one that does not *look* gay and that follows normative ideals (*Out Magazine* 2011: n.53).

In any case, the seeming fluidity of the area may represent one of the reasons why East London has gradually become not only one of the trendiest places in London to go out to but also one to live in. It is not a coincidence that Shoreditch was taken as an example of a precise kind of *hip* gentrification. In an article published in *The Telegraph*, Alex Proud (2014b), founder and owner of gay venue Proud Camden, in Camden Town, states a hatred of Shoreditch or, at least, of '*the idea* of Shoreditch and the way so many of London's neighbourhoods have been Shoreditched, are being Shoreditched or will be Shoreditched' [emphasis in the original]. In his opinion, 'Shoreditch is a formula, a brand. It's as much a part of mainstream consumer culture as iPhones and Sky TV and as global as Starbucks'. He explains that an area gets Shoreditched when 'pioneer hipsters' start tweeting about it. Consequently, mainstream media start advertising it as cool, property prices rise, bankers move in, Foxtons estate agent opens a branch and the New York Times writes a column about it. The fact that Proud defines Shoreditch as an *idea*, recalls what has previously been said about the idea or the image of Soho. In other words, more than the district itself, what seems to be important here is the set of

images or ideas that are connected to that area and the ways in which the consumption of such elements shapes understandings of the urban area (see 0.2.4 and 1.4). However, Proud (2014b) continues, whereas in the past the move from one gentrified area to the other would take up to 10 years, nowadays there seems to be a much shorter cycle: 'its [Shoreditch's] alternative crown was lost years ago to Dalston which, in turn, had it snatched by Peckham', in South London. The latter, in his opinion, 'was declared pretty much over before the first Korean taco van had a chance to park. Now, the bearded seers of gentrification are turning their gaze to Crystal Palace and Streatham, Walthamstow and Tottenham'. What is left behind is only a weak reminder of what these places had become for a few months and increased housing prices. For both Owen and Matthew, however, the main problem with Vauxhall and East London seemed to be exactly their location. Living in Camden, Soho represented the closest gay area for Owen: 'I've been to South London a few times but things happen and you end up even more south and it takes you hours at 3am to get home'. Matthew agreed and explained that, if he stays central, he can always take a bus home after the tube closes instead of having to pay for a taxi (it should be recalled that interviews took place before the night tube started running during the weekend in August 2016, an element that will now reshape the uses that gay men make of the urban space during weekend nights). Distance was then seen as a negative and off-putting factor for both the time that it takes to get to other areas — or go back home from there — and for the economic cost that the journey implies. Other areas may become temporarily trendy all around London but Soho's centrality seems to remain its stronger point.

As a result, the idea of gay spaces currently moving from Soho to Vauxhall and East London is controversial for at least two reasons. First, even though most participants referred to Vauxhall and East London as new gay areas in opposition to Soho, some were also aware that these areas were not born out of the blue as a response to Soho's gentrification but had been gradually developing a gay network throughout the years. In other words, the fact that their popularity has boomed in the last few years, even expressing the recent willingness of many people to leave Soho and discover new gay areas in London as well as that of investors to advertise them as gay, does not mean that some gay venues were not present in these areas beforehand. Second, and supporting the first point, gay spaces in East London and Vauxhall are now, themselves, closing down. Gentrification, then, is not a problem that concerns Soho alone. Luke, for instance, noticed that many areas in Vauxhall are now being pedestrianised and that the district is being redeveloped for young middle-class families: 'you see schools being built and big tower blocks. I don't think Vauxhall will ever become this sort of gay area as Soho is'. The presence of gay residential clusters in both Vauxhall and East London may then be due to the gentrification of these areas much more than to the creation of new urban gay areas. The fact that these residential clusters are developing there is, in itself, a direct result of gay venues closing down to make room for a more general gentrification of the districts.

Examples of gentrification in both Vauxhall and East London, that were also mentioned by some interviewees, include places such as The George and Dragon, The Joiners Arms, and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern. The George and

Dragon opened in 2002 on Hackney Road (a former Victorian pub then transformed into a shoe shop) and quickly became one of East London's busiest and more popular spots among gay and queer men. Unfortunately, in August 2015 the cost of the lease of the pub was substantially increased and forced its owner to sell it ahead of its time. The Joiners Arms, on Hackney Road, was established in 1997 as a direct response to Soho's mainstreaming, soon becoming another of East London's favourite venues among gay men. However, in January 2015, the venue was closed to make room for new housing. Following the decision, The Friends of The Joiners Arms Campaign was established. Dan Glass (in Godfrey 2015), one of the founders of the campaign, told *The Daily Beast*:

The value that venues like the Joiners contribute to the wider community cannot be monetised or measured (...). The biggest challenge lies in the reality of where power lies...the communities who use and value spaces socially do not have control over them.

In his opinion, given that nowadays only rarely are gay venues owned by LGBTQ people, these spaces are subject to economic forces and speculation: 'Any chance of escaping the implacable spread of gentrification will involve a level of cooperation and dedication not seen in the LGBT community since the early Pride marches'. Michael seemed to be on the same wavelength and said: 'I think the pushback you see is to make a community-type of approach. So it

shows the need for something like that, a community to hang on to. The RVT in Vauxhall is a similar example of people trying to hold on to this idea'.

Built in 1863, the RVT became popular among gay men since WWII and it is considered to be the oldest gay venue in London. Throughout its history, it has regularly hosted drag shows which have attracted constant waves of customers, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s, however, Soho's competition and various redevelopment plans put the venue at risk of closure. Still, successful nights such as Duckie, which has been running for 23 years every Saturday night, and the more recent Tuesday night Bar Wotever (from 2005), managed to get the venue through its darkest times, also thanks to a recent revival in drag and cabaret entertainment. However, in November 2014, after years of financial struggles, the RVT was sold in a multimillion-pound deal. Many fought to push Lambeth Council to recognise the RVT with Asset of Community Value status, which means that, if sold again, the local LGBTQ community will be offered the chance to buy it before anyone else. To halt a complete redevelopment of the venue, The RVT Future Campaign that was born as a reaction to the closure campaigned to transform it into a Listed Building of Merit with English Heritage, given its historical and cultural value to LGBTQ people. Thanks to their efforts, the RVT became the first LGBTQ venue to be included in the list and has gained support from the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, who has urged Lambeth Council to do everything in their power to make sure that the venue remains a space for LGBTQ people. The RVT's use class has now been changed to *sui generis*, meaning that its use cannot be changed without permission. Uncertain, however, is what could happen if

permission to change the use class was actually given (Duffy 2014d; Godfrey 2015; McCormick 2016g; *Out Magazine* 2007: n.3-8, 2008: n.13, 2009: n.28, 2010: n.45, 2011: n.59; Payton 2015; Roberts 2014c).

Ben Walters (in Godfrey 2015), from The RVT Future Campaign, similarly to what Michael told me, highlights:

there's a growing awareness that this is a problem that goes beyond consumer choices of how and where we prefer to socialise (...). I think it's dangerous to think of gay pubs and bars only as commercial operations and consumer choices (...). They're also pretty much all we have when it comes to safe spaces, dedicated performance venues and repositories of our community history, culture and collective knowledge. Those are things that have enormous value in themselves and their loss shouldn't be shrugged off as inconsequential or merely a sign of changing times. These aspects of LGBTQ venues actually do a lot of work in keeping members of our communities safe and sane, and losing them has serious implications in terms of the human cost and indeed the economic cost: the more of them we lose, the greater the costs will be to health, law enforcement and social services. Our spaces matter.

In other words, people seem to be now becoming more conscious of the fact

that, once these venues are gone, they are gone forever, as only rarely will they open up again in a different location. Fighting the closure of gay venues a posteriori may then not be enough anymore. Matthew, for example, admitted that he did not even know these places were closing down until he went there one day and found the doors closed. Similarly, Charles thought that only now that major venues have closed down are some gay men finally starting to give attention to the issue and wondered if this could perhaps be a necessary loss in order to 'wake people up'. In Vlad's opinion, 'gay men need to pull their heads out of their asses (...). How are these places supposed to survive if gay men don't go there and spend their money? They can't avoid them and then complain that they are disappearing!'. Some participants, however, seemed quite oblivious to this process of gentrification that is affecting those other areas that they had identified as new gay alternatives. Jonathan, for example, told me: 'we see places closing in Soho because the rent is too high, but then we see that they're moving to Vauxhall and East London, and they are doing really well, and there are large communities there'.

Interesting, from this point of view, is the contribution of the tourists who were interviewed. When they were asked the same question about other gay areas in London, all but one seemed to be uncertain of the answer. Maurice, who had gone to a club in Vauxhall on his previous trip to London, had a general understanding of the area as gay-friendly but he could not recollect much as he was taken there by a friend for an after party during the early morning. He explained that, because they took a cab there, he would not be able to point out the area on a map, nor to recognise it if he was to go again



apart, maybe, from the club itself and the fact that they had to cross the river to get there. He also timidly added that, having partied all night, at the time he was under the effects of alcohol and drugs, which rendered his memories somehow blurred. He was asked if he could remember where his night had started and he said Soho, first, and then Heaven. Diego, instead, seemed surprised when East London came up in the conversation as an example of other possible gay areas in London. At the time of the interview, Diego was staying at a friend's place in Dalston and he had already gone out in East London a couple of times that week. However, he did not identify the area as gay at all: 'Soho is gay, I can see it. There are gay bars, the people is gay [sic] (...). But Dalston doesn't look gay. I always ask my friend to go to Soho because I think [it] is the gay area, no?'. Daniel, who was born in London but moved up north when he was 14, was the only visitor to have really experienced both Soho and East London. He did initially answer the question making reference to Hackney, where some of his 'queer friends' live. After thinking about it, he also specified that, to him, East London feels more 'queer', compared with Soho: 'Soho is fun, but I definitely prefer the bars my friends and I went to in Hackney and Shoreditch. They are less "in your face", kind of'. Apart from Daniel, and Maurice to a certain extent, none of the other three tourists that were interviewed could indicate other gay areas in London. All of them, however, had somehow experienced Soho and revealed that the district was, in Javan's words, 'on the list of things to do in London, like Buckingham Palace and The British Museum'. When they were asked if they would be willing to explore other areas, Diego seemed pretty inclined to, whereas both Javan and Adam did not see it as a necessity given that their time in London was limited and thought that there was already enough

to explore in Soho. Adam, for example, explained that in his hometown there is nothing like Soho, only a small gay bar instead. When he comes to London, he looks for a hotel close to Soho and tends to stay there as much as possible: 'I don't have a car, so it's good to stay central. And it's good if you meet someone, because we can go back to my room'.

The evidence offered by these tourists seems to fit closely with what was described by other participants. Most interviewees, in fact, shared the understanding that if someone is new to London, like many of them once were, they may be more likely to go to Soho given the fame of the district and thanks to the concentration of gay venues within walking distance. Even for those who do not have a specific destination in mind, it will be easy to locate a gay venue, but also to move from one to the other. On the contrary, places like Vauxhall and East London were usually perceived as less concentrated, which implies that visitors will have to know their way around or to have specific venues in mind. For Rod, this is a step that someone takes only once they have been living in London for a while and have become familiar with less central areas. Luke was one of the few interviewees who thought that in Vauxhall everything is close when it comes down to gay venues. However, he clarified that it is nothing like a gay street as it feels like 'you're in the middle of the highway'. John, too, saw a lack of recognisable borders, as opposed to Soho, and stated that 'Vauxhall is just a roundabout'. Truth is, most gay venues in Vauxhall are, or were, within walking distance and distributed around Vauxhall tube station. All the venues previously mentioned, in fact, were opened under the railway arches along Albert Embankment on one side or Goding Street on the other, and

nearby Tinworth Street, Kennington Lane, South Lambeth Road, Parry Street and Nine Elms Lane. Even if the urban layout differs quite drastically from the neat grid of Old Compton Street and its surroundings, with the railway and major thoroughfares disrupting what could be otherwise a more uniform space, the extension of the area in which Vauxhall's gay venues developed is not that different from that of Soho. Undeniable, however, is the fact that the concentration of gay venues in just one street and its immediate surroundings has a major appeal on those people who are new to the area, even more if this, as in the case of Soho, is situated in the centre of the city and within a stone's throw away from all major tourist attractions. While this is understandable in the case of gay tourists, it does also raise questions in the case of gay men living in London. In other words, if Vauxhall and East London cannot be considered as substitutes for Soho but only as alternatives, and if we accept the idea that all three districts may be undergoing a process of transformation that is increasingly undermining a gay presence in their spaces, what other options are there for gay men wanting to meet and socialise?

### **3.4 — Alternatives to Soho**

Some interviewees felt a much stronger sense of belonging in their local areas, like Bloomsbury and Clapham, more than in Soho, Vauxhall, or East London. Even recognising these are not specifically gay (or not as they used to be in the past, as in the case of Bloomsbury), nor do they present a high number of gay venues, they thought that the presence of a residential gay population also meant a much stronger sense of community. Charles, for example, mentioned

The Two Brewers, in Clapham High Street, and explained that the fact that customers are mainly locals means that when you meet people, you also know that they live in the area and that you are likely to see them again, as opposed to Soho, where they may only be passing through: 'I don't know many people who go to Soho and have a stake on Soho. It's a convenient place because it's central and it's a transit place, but it doesn't have that homely feeling'. Rod, for his part, took New Bloomsbury Set (NBS), in Marchmont Street, as an example of his local pub and agreed that he feels a much stronger sense of belonging there because a village-like atmosphere is reproduced. Referring to Clapham, Roger admitted that 'there is something nice about that, of both the classic British having the local and also being in a gay venue. And that's much nicer than any other place in Soho, because you can chat to the barman'. He recalled trying to organise a birthday party in Soho and found it stressful: 'Can you get everyone in that bar? Can you get into Heaven? You queue up for ages'. In 2014, he decided to have the party at NBS, close to his workplace: 'I went there and it was all like, oh, we'll give you a table, you can put some food out, don't worry about it, a free bottle of Prosecco, and they would come over and make sure that you're ok, it was a much more different experience'. He was echoed by Charles who explained that in Soho it is difficult to see the same barman twice: 'they are picked for their look, obviously, but that doesn't mean that they can provide a good customer service. And they really treat you badly. It is high priced and they treat you like shit sometimes'. In his opinion, there is a difference between 'the bars set up by gay guys who want to create this sense of community' and 'bars set up by large corporations who want to make money and see the gays as a good way to do that', and thought that those venues that

appear outside of traditional gay areas are more likely to be independent businesses owned by other gay people. Michael, for his part, even acknowledging the relevance of more local venues, was not willing to dismiss bigger gay areas in toto:

You need a combination of both. I think what's happened is that you've created gay ghettos [Soho, Vauxhall and East London], which means that gays who have access to money and transports go there, but it actually cuts out lots of men who can't go there. There are almost like gay-free zones all over London, so if you go to Brent, for example, there is nothing there. I think you do need a cluster to help with identity issues. But you also need something close to home, otherwise you go back to a bubble mentality. I think, for gay men, you still need somewhere that is our space because we live in a world which is not our space. We need a space to be, that's why we still have community centres.

The risk with peripheral clusters, however, is that, by becoming increasingly popular among their locals, they may also attract lots of interest from the *outside* and therefore follow an already written path of gentrification (see 1.4 and 2.3).

From this point of view, it is worth mentioning Junior and Russell's position. Both interviewees defined the spaces they usually go to as *queer*

*parties* which do not really have a permanent location but that are fluid in geographical terms and move around the city under the form of temporary spaces, such as themed nights hosted by different bars and clubs. According to Junior, the proliferation of these nights is quite a recent phenomenon due to the closure of many gay spaces that previously used to host them. In other words, even if physical gay venues are closing, many events seem to be resumed whenever and wherever possible, even if just temporarily and often on an irregular basis. The movement of the nights may then contribute to the movement of gay spaces and subjectivities within the urban context. Far from defining a physical area, or to be defined by the area in which they take place, not only do these events overcome the contemporary struggle experienced by many gay venues in keeping the business open daily, but they also most truly represent, as indicated by the vocabulary used by both Junior and Russell, the idea of *queerness* itself. In fact, the constant displacement of these nights, their elusive and provisional nature, and the fact that they are a result of and a reaction to the (dis)appearance of gay venues, represented for these participants a new form of expression that would break with the gay bar tradition and would shift the focus on the fluidity of both places and sexual identities. These spaces are queer because they seemingly escape any form of definition as well as any form of physical containment. Consequently, the people who do attend these events will also be more prone to identify with a more fluid sexual identity that could not have flourished and be cultivated in a more rigid, spatially circumscribed, gay venue or area defined by specific identities.

Sure enough, as Abraham (2017b) puts it, even though in the last few

years many gay spaces have disappeared from London's urban map, they are also 'leaving an underground queer culture to materialise in place of what had become a stagnant, homogenised scene'. Mentioning Sarah Schulman's *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Abraham explains that 'gentrification doesn't just happen to cities, but to people', making us want to assimilate. She asks herself if she, too, has played a role in the disappearance of gay spaces given that, like many participants in this study, she has gradually moved from Soho to East London and finally rejected gay bars altogether:

I felt a sense of complicity; maybe I had selfishly taken what I needed from these spaces and then abandoned them in their time of need. Or as a queerer Carrie Bradshaw might put it: Was I going to gay bars less because there were less of them, or were there less of gay bars because I'd stopped going to them?

She concludes that what we should be focusing on is the city's 'ability to reinvent itself. (...) No matter how many bars have been swallowed up by the annals of history, or how many club nights have come to an end, there's always something else'. In fact, like Junior and Russell, she too thought that the disappearance of gay venues has given way to a spike in the creation of queer nights that aim at creating 'safe and inclusive space' that could not be found somewhere else while also bringing back a political element, and mentioned spaces such as *Is the Gay Bar a Grave?* in Peckham, *Kontinuum*, and *BBZ* in

Deptford, all nights that are more mixed in terms of both race/ethnicity and gender. As Abraham highlights, not only are these nights 'about filling a void that had been left by the closures of the pink and purple interiorised bars of central London', but also 'about creating a better vision of LGBT clubbing'. Dalston Superstore owner and queer night Chapter 10 founder Dan Beaumont told Abraham (2017b):

I think as activism infiltrates pockets of gay culture like clubbing, commercial models are being disrupted. Horizontal, noncommercial groupings of people will only become more influential in gay nightlife. You can see that in the explosion of the illegal party scene in London — in Hackney Marshes, Tottenham, warehouses in south London — it's definitely a response to the lack of legal venues. It's a necessary step to be taken.

While recognising, similar to what Michael said, that more permanent gay venues still represent important spaces for LGBTQ people, Abraham also suggests:

perhaps it's time to acknowledge that some pockets of LGBT nightlife of yesteryear might have succumbed to gentrified ways of thinking themselves, alienating queer people of colour, pushing out female or non-binary bodies, charging expensive door fees



that queer people can't afford. If history tells us London's queer nightlife will always move in cycles, I would argue that right now a renaissance of underground queer culture has materialised in defiance to the city's closures, and it's anything but the boring, sanctified or commercialised gay bar model that dominated 10 years ago. The cycle gives me hope that our LGBT spaces will return, but when they do, they should take a lesson from what's replaced them: something queerer, more resistant.

Her position seems to confirm what Charles had said about gay bars, and Soho specifically, reaching real maturity and needing to somehow reinvent themselves (see 3.2).

At the same time, Abraham also hints at the cyclical nature of gay spaces in London. This has been explored, on a more general level, in *Chapter 1* in connection to the ever-changing nature of Soho as an urban space and again in this chapter in connection to other urban areas in London that have, throughout the twentieth century, accommodated different identities and communities. Specifically, all these areas have also, at a certain point in time, allowed the formation of spaces where men interested in other men could meet each other, socialise, and often engage in sexual interaction. Even though the gay character of some of these spaces often coexisted meaning that the development of a new gay area did not necessarily imply the total disappearance of another (nor did some gay spaces lack from these areas both before and after their identification as gay areas), a clear trend can be seen in

the way gay spaces became both increasingly visible and concentrated. In other words, it is true that a recurring pattern in the formation of gay spaces can be identified, and that, if history is to teach us something, it might be that gay spaces, once threatened by external or internal forces (or quite simply by exhaustion of their possibilities) will constantly reappear somewhere else. Still, what the contemporary re-emergence of queer nights shows is that the trend that has characterised the formation of gay spaces in the twentieth and early twenty-first century might have somehow been inverted, with gay spaces becoming both increasingly invisible and scattered, and with obvious consequences for the formation of both gay identities and communities.

At this point, in fact, it is necessary to make some considerations. First, even promoting the development of queer spaces in the contemporary urban panorama, of the two, only Russell identified as queer when filling up the Demographic Sheet, whereas Junior identified as gay. So, are queer nights and spaces a substitute or simply another option for Junior? Moreover, Junior identified the closure of gay spaces as the reason why so many queer nights are appearing and regarded this as a recent phenomenon. Sure enough, queer nights and spaces, and the identities that they help produce, have constantly represented an alternative to more mainstream gay spaces and identities since the late 1980s. Defining them as a recent phenomenon may then be misleading. Possibly, as discussed in this section, there may have been a rise in popularity of queer spaces and identities, almost a revival, due to the need of many gay men to get away from gay spaces like Soho and what they represent. Still, gay spaces and identities, as seen in *Chapter 1* and 3.1, were not

traditionally situated in space but have, until relatively recently and with few exceptions, appropriated other spaces, often remaining invisible to mainstream society and to other men themselves. In historical terms, seeing gay and queer spaces as opposed to one another will offer a limited reading that can only be applied to the most recent past. Considering previous experiences where homosexual relations were involved, from molly houses to cruising grounds, it becomes clear that the visible concentration of venues catering for men interested in other men is more of a recent phenomenon than the proliferation of the kind of fluid spaces that Junior was describing. The risk with the latter is that they may lose their visibility and become, once again, closed underground circles. In addition, Junior and Russell seemed to imply that these nights take place in venues that are not specifically gay, suggesting that the nights work as a way to queer an otherwise straight space. While their promotion of queer spaces may represent a response to the saturation (or disappearance) of gay spaces, it may also entail the creation of temporary spaces that rest upon the presence of straight spaces to exist. It is true that queer nights are more fluid, but they also often take place and depend upon the accessibility of straight spaces, as opposed to specifically gay venues. Consequently, even though queer spaces may be seen as a substitute of Soho and other gay areas, they also present a set of contradictions. Finally, even though much attention has been given to queer nights and parties moving around the city, it should be remembered that these mainly constitute nighttime spaces. What Soho had helped create was the presence of a daytime space where gay men could openly meet, socialise and express their sexual identities within the urban context more broadly and not just within specific commercial venues. The

importance of spaces like Old Compton Street, Soho Square, and their surrounding streets should not be completely dismissed. It is true that, nowadays, gay men are more accepted in British society and that many of them may feel as if a gay district may not be necessary anymore, consequently favouring more fluid spaces such as queer nights, but as seen in 2.3 when discussing feeling free and safe to hold hands outside of Soho, for many gay men visible gay spaces in the city still represent a very important element.

Undeniable, however, is the fact that gay spaces are currently on the move. The answers provided by interviewees, together with a more historical overview of other gay areas in London, show that, far from being a simple matter of one gay space falling into decay and a new one flourishing (as might have been in the twentieth century), urban gay spaces are, indistinctly, undergoing a process of transformation, be they an official gay area, a gay-friendly area, or a more spatially and temporally fluid space. At the base of this change, there seems to be gentrification and the constant remapping of urban spaces (see 1.4). Still, as both *Chapter II* and *III* show, gentrification is not the only factor contributing to such a change — others include divisions among gay men (2.2); the presence of straight people and tourists in the area, and the feeling of safety that many gay men experience outside Soho (2.3); the lack of political action and the promotion of a normative ideal of gay identities and relations following a broader acceptance of homosexuality in British society (2.4); and the development of different gay areas in the urban panorama (3.3). In *Chapter IV*, three more factors that must be considered in the analysis of urban gay spaces, identities, and communities are explored: online spaces

(4.1), chemsex (4.2), and how their interrelations are causing a major rise of STIs, with serious consequences for gay men's physical and mental health (4.3).

### **3.5 — Conclusion**

This chapter explored the intersections between Soho and other urban areas that, between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth century, have also experienced a concentration of gay spaces and identities, even if often under different (but still related) forms. Specifically, Soho's neighbouring districts have been considered, showing how the areas that form what is often described as London's West End have constantly influenced each other and allowed for the development of spaces where homosexual men could meet, socialise, and engage in sexual relations. Other urban districts that do not border with Soho but that managed, nonetheless, to become well-known areas with a concentration of gay spaces between the 1960s and 1980s were also considered, including Notting Hill, Earls Court, and Brixton. These represented more consistent and geographically defined areas, but still lacked that commercial element that characterised Soho from the 1990s.

Even though Soho is still often regarded as London's gay district, other urban areas have started to attract large numbers of gay men. In particular, interviewees identified Vauxhall and East London. Participants recognised a gay element in both areas, but they did not describe them as specific gay districts with a concentration of gay venues, as they had instead done with

Soho. Moreover, most participants also noticed how the process of gentrification that is affecting Soho is, in fact, affecting these areas too. They suggested that gay venues may today appear all over the urban panorama without the need for physical concentration or that they may take the form of queer parties that move around London creating a less rigid map of the city and a more fluid understanding of sexual identities and communities.

While the analysis of these spaces helps overcome the image of Soho as the first and only gay district of London, challenging the idea that gay identities and communities in the city can only be formed in relation to it, it also raises questions about both the future of the district and that of other urban gay spaces more broadly. It is undeniable that gay spaces, and consequently gay identities and communities, have constantly changed in time, with different kinds and expressions following one another or even coexisting at the same time and in the same space. However, the turn that these spaces are taking today (see *Chapter IV*) may not only completely change the ways in which we understand and experience the urban panorama, as well as gay identities and communities, but they may also question their existence in the first place.

## **Chapter IV**

### **New Spaces, New Communities**

## 4.0 — Introduction

This chapter explores different kinds of gay spaces and communities that have become increasingly popular in the last few years and that set themselves as potential alternatives to the traditional gay district model. Since the development of online applications such as Grindr (2009), many gay men have found in the Internet a new space where it is possible to create connections. Online apps help their users find other gay people nearby and exchange messages and pictures before meeting. However, as argued in 4.1, even if their use may represent a much easier and faster way to find friends or a possible sexual partner, it is not immune from the same divisions and prejudices that many interviewees have experienced in Soho. Moreover, a special feature that allows users to block people from their screens is creating a private and individual experience which is calling for a reconsideration of how gay identities and communities might be created in such an environment.

The use that gay men make of online apps becomes particularly important if considered within the context of chemsex. This practice has become increasingly popular among gay men in London, who are now often turning to recreational drugs to facilitate sexual contacts and to recreate some sort of communal feeling, as explored in 4.2. Most gay men who engage in chemsex do it for fun, but many others become addicted to both the drugs and the lifestyle that they enable, with major consequences for their physical and



mental health.

In recent years, as discussed in 4.3, sexual health clinics in London have registered a significant rise in the number of STIs among gay men. While it is easy to blame the widespread use of online apps and chemsex for this trend, other factors must be considered, such as the reasons why gay men decide to engage in risky sexual behaviours in the first place and why they may prefer to look for connections online or through chemsex instead of trying to establish them in more traditional gay spaces such as Soho. Specifically, this chapter aims to answer the following questions: Can the Internet play the same role as physical gay spaces in the formation of gay identities and communities?; What are the consequences of the use of online spaces for Soho?; What happens when online technologies are coupled with the use of recreational drugs in what is often defined as chemsex?; Why do so many gay men decide to engage in such activity?; What are the consequences of chemsex for Soho and the gay community of London more broadly?

#### **4.1 — Dropping the Mask: Online Spaces**

When considering the relocation of gay spaces, merely concentrating the investigation on other physical urban spaces in London and connecting their development to the gentrification of Soho, would produce a skewed analysis. It is impossible to avoid, by now, a manifest connection with another kind of space that is less visible but in which we have come to spend most of our daily life. For many LGBTQ people, the Internet represents 'a direct space of representation,

one created from the bottom up as opposed to trying to reclaim spaces of representation in others' discourses' (Rambukkana 2007: 74). Gay men were quick to realise the potential of the Internet and to become both consumers and producers. From community-oriented websites and chat rooms to coming out videos and porn movies, a variety of online gay spaces have been created. The anonymity of the Internet and the protection of the screen have offered many people who are struggling to come to terms with their sexuality a safer way to experiment and make connections. Similarly, gay men who are already aware of their identity can try to negotiate new aspects of their sexuality without feeling the pressure to fit a precise stereotype. This section explores the ways gay men have managed to use the Internet as a new space for connection and how this may contribute to their detachment from physical gay spaces and Soho in particular. After drawing comparisons between physical and virtual spaces, some specific characteristics are analysed, such as the role that both the visual and the textual play in the promotion of online identities, the presence of an online community, widespread sexual racism and the use of the block button, and the consequences that the use of online apps may have on gay men. All these elements are particularly important in order to understand why online spaces may be contributing to gay men's detachment from Soho (Gross 2007: ix).

Websites like Gaydar or GayRomeo (now PlanetRomeo) have been in use for two decades and have become increasingly popular among gay men. Even though these online spaces have created new ways of connection, they have never represented a real threat to physical gay spaces given that people

had to be in one space or the other but could not, usually, be in both at the same time. It was not until the Apple Revolution that online gay spaces really took off in the form of online applications. Thanks to the use of GPS programmes, users do not need a computer and a desk but can access online spaces any time a mobile connection is detectable, even when they are moving in physical space. Apps, in fact, are altering the living experience of space, giving new meanings to spatiality and how we interact with each other. Not only do they offer a new means of creating sexual identities online but they may also provide an alternative space for cruising and community-making for gay men. On these premises, in fact, applications like Grindr were set to become major game changers and, consequently, an integral part of gay life. Grindr, specifically, was launched by Joel Simkhai on 25 March 2009 for the Apple iPhone 3G — the first of its kind to include GPS programmes — and it was soon extended to BlackBerries and Androids. Started on less than \$5,000, Grindr rapidly became the world's biggest mobile network, with more than 5 million men in 192 countries. In 2011, London topped the list of the cities with most users with an astonishing 400,000 subscriptions, and numbers have increased exponentially since then. The simple mention of Grindr by Stephen Fry on BBC's *Top Gear* (Series 13, Episode 2, 2009) caused a massive reaction with about 10,000 downloads overnight and up to 40,000 within a week. Globally, over a million people use Grindr on a daily basis, sending more than 7 million messages and 2 million pictures. They do so for an average of 1.5 hours every day and it is estimated that almost 200,000 users are logged on at any given moment (Ashenden 2013; O'Riordan and Phillips 2007; Pullen and Cooper 2010; Watts 2012).

The popularity of Grindr may also be due to its simple and appealing design. Grindr's logo, made of a black mask over an orange background (then changed into an orange mask over a black background), was inspired by African and Polynesian tribal art and was conceived as a symbol of masculinity. The name, instead, came from the idea of 'grinding people together sort of like a coffee grinder' (Watts 2012). As Sharif Mowlabocus (2010a: 195) highlights:

in what is perhaps the most direct digital interaction of the term 'Gaydar' — the original use of the term as opposed to the website — these applications 'scan' the local area and allow the user to not only see who else nearby is subscribed to the service, but also provide the means for instant communication.

The app shows small square thumbnail images of hundreds of gay men available in the surrounding areas, often within walking distance, ordered by proximity and without the limit of the physical boundaries that a bar or a club would imply. Grindr is not officially described as a space devoted to sexual pursuit and explicit reference to any sexual content is strictly prohibited in the public area. Its creators describe it as a way to find 'a new date, buddy, or friend' but they also highlight another implicit goal:

0 feet away: Our mission for you. Grindr's different because it's uncomplicated and meant to help you meet guys while you're on

the go. It's not your average dating site — you know, the ones that make you sit in front of a faraway computer filling out complex, detailed profiles and answering invasive psychological questions. We'd rather you were zero feet away. With Grindr, '0 Feet Away' isn't just a cute slogan we print on our T-shirts. It's a state of mind, a way of life — a new kind of dating experience. Turning Grindr off and being there in-person [sic] with that guy you were chatting with is the final goal of using the app. Being 0 feet away is our mission for you (Grindr 2014).

In other words, Grindr markets itself as a quick and easy way to meet other gay men. In theory, it could represent a new and safer way to cruise the city given that it sets itself as a space that is protected from the heterosexual/mainstream judgment and presence, where the whole process of trying to understand if someone is gay is eliminated by the fact that, supposedly, everybody using the application is looking for a connection with another man. Moreover, the immediacy and facility of this encounter imply that, on one level, the effort put into getting to know each other beforehand will be pretty low and, on the other, it also entails that as quickly and easily as the first date, a second one can be found. The whole communal experience that could be lived in a physical gay space like Soho, such as going out for a drink or a meal and socialising with the people around you, no matter what your intentions, is then replaced by the centrality of the cruising and the immediacy of the meeting. Grindr represents a private experience that takes place in the privacy of one's own screen and

under one's own rules. Consequently, it does not take long to understand that cruising and sexual encounters are actually the real driving force of this application. Whereas meeting someone demands not only interest but a considerable amount of time — and often money — users of the app can find a possible match by only scrolling down the screen and, in this way, reducing both the effort and the money invested while increasing the possible choice. When discussing the use of Grindr, Vlad noticed: 'if they are not going to have sex with me, they are going to have sex with someone 2 metres away from me'. In this sense, the 'urgency' of Grindr 'works to bring down the investment' while also representing 'the epitome of instant gratification' (Woo 2013: 14-22, 45).

Most participants seemed to agree on the fact that today gay men do not have to travel to Soho and spend money there in order to meet other gay people. Carl, for example, quickly enquired: 'hasn't Grindr become a gay area, basically? Physical geographical zones actually don't matter so much. You could be anywhere'. For Vince, online apps represent a threat to Soho, forcing gay venues to close down because gay men feel that they can find what they need online. Charles, too, highlighted that this has hugely transformed the gay scene given that 'in the 1990s, if you wanted to meet someone, you had to go out to a bar, which meant that all through the week those Soho bars were very busy, and buzzing'. In his opinion, this is not the case anymore, because 'people are now at home on their laptop or their phones'. Still, a few interviewees thought that Grindr should not be seen as completely separate from physical gay spaces. According to Rod, it is even possible to define a physical geographical scene through Grindr because it allows users to see the

kind of people around them, what they look like, and what they are looking for. If common characteristics are found, users will then automatically associate that group of people to the area in which the search is taking place. Using the app in Soho, as opposed to Vauxhall or Shoreditch, may in fact present a completely different set of characteristics connected to the users that appear on the screen. Grindr could then be seen as a means to explore the urban panorama and the people who inhabit it. Ben noticed that, instead of de-concentrating these areas, online technologies may, in fact, intensify them: 'people are like, well any street can now be a gay street'. Although his point may support what Rod said about Grindr working in conjunction with physical gay areas, according to their line of reasoning the fact that any street can be a gay street also means that online technologies may intensify any urban area in general, not only those that are already somehow identified as gay. It is true that the concentration of gay men in specific areas may result in a busier traffic online from those same areas, but it is also true that users will be able to use Grindr anywhere else in the city, therefore intensifying the whole urban space and creating a completely new map of gay spaces that may not see neighbourhood concentration as a major factor. While this can create more opportunities for connection outside physical gay areas, it also makes it more problematic, for those people who do not use online technologies, to find gay spaces in the urban panorama.

Jonathan, however, even recognising that many gay spaces have moved online and that the method of communication may have changed the demographics and the geography as well as what people want from Soho, also highlighted the ever-present necessity of physical spaces to meet once the

online connection has been established. What is unclear, though, is the nature of these physical spaces. In his opinion, gay acceptance has somehow made it 'less necessary for people to find communities of others, so they've been seeking less friendship from a gay community, and rather looking for a partner online and go to straight venues with their friends'. In other words, while the connection may originate on Grindr, nothing guarantees that the physical encounter will happen in Soho or any other gay space. Similarly, Michael thought that, as we have now changed the way we communicate, face to face interaction has increasingly become less important than the virtual world. Still, he also underlined the importance of finding the right balance between the two spaces:

I think there is in some people's mind a virtual community. (...) I use apps like Scruff, Recon, Gaydar, and Manhunt, sometimes because it's easier to chat online with someone than to actually make the effort to go out and speak to people. Sometimes it's a self-confidence issue, (...) there are still elements of self-dislike or internalised homophobia, so using the app world allows me to ignore that aspect of myself and get over it. We have created a community, it's in our minds and what I've noticed is the inability of some people I work with to disconnect from that, and so that becomes their real world. But this way there are greater chances of disappointment because you project lots of your fantasies into the app or the profile, and suddenly, when real life hits you, it's



very different.

Jonathan and Michael, as well as other participants, often mentioned the idea of *online communities* when talking about online apps. However, apart from a few exceptions, most participants seemed to agree on the fact that even if they automatically called apps like Grindr online communities, these are not communities at all. Similar to the answers received when discussing Soho, some interviewees explained that they do not like the word community as they think of people who personally know each other. Matthew, too, saw Grindr as a network, or a 'social construct' that connects people, whereas he thought of community in more physical terms. Owen, instead, recognised a community in Grindr, but he would not identify with it, even though he would easily identify with a gay community in Soho. For Matt, Grindr is just a way to know that there are similar people around: 'I think it kind of becomes like when you go to a gay area and you see people who are gay around you but you don't really engage with them, it's just that kind of feeling of knowing that there's someone like you around'. Finally, Junior suggested that those men who are on Grindr often do not want to be in a community in the first place, and that is precisely why they use such an application, because it is not able to create community. In other words, if participants struggled to identify with a gay community in Soho, they seemed to struggle even more with the idea of an online community (even if, as previously mentioned, many of them often kept referring to online apps in such terms). Rod, however, seemed to have a more positive approach to Grindr. He recognised that Grindr is not a community but he also explained that it allows

him to meet people in his area that he would not otherwise meet because they do not go to the same bars that he goes to. In that sense, Grindr can help create a community or, at least, his belonging to a community. He also revealed that he often uses Grindr when travelling, to meet new people: 'I wouldn't be able to use it the same way in Soho because no one really lives there, so Grindr does help me feel more of a belonging where I live now, or where I visit, but in Soho it would simply be a hook-up app'. Roger, for his part, recognised a feeling of community in the sense that it is now common to recognise users in their everyday life, down the street or at the supermarket, as it may also happen with people that met in a gay venue. However, according to Daniel, in the latter case you are less likely to have seen naked pictures of them beforehand: 'sometimes I see someone in the street and I already know what his cock looks like but have no idea what his name is'. He thought that this was the exact opposite of community given that any kind of connection between two people is based on specific information that would less likely be exchanged if the connection happened in a gay venue. To him, online apps are actually 'killing community'.

Sure enough, as Daniel seemed to imply, on Grindr a great deal of emphasis is placed on the visual. The image not only reflects the way one wants to represent oneself, but it also allows an authentication from other users. Digital images 'appear as a stabilizing force for identity formation and cultural legibility, offering a structuring device for the proliferation of specific ideas as to what it is to be a gay man in contemporary Western culture' (Mowlabocus 2010b: 201). The pictures uploaded on Grindr and similar applications become

a currency used in what Mowlabocus (2010a: 104-5) defines as 'the Gaydar economy', and work in the same way identities such as the clone and the skinhead had done in physical spaces (see 0.2.5). Users are required to find the best way to promote their profile and to get the attention of others: 'the profile is as much a mechanism for self-identification as it is one of self-promotion' (2010a: 92). Users can also send pictures through private chats. Considering the necessity to economise on time, if the intent is that of finding a sexual partner, many people will often go straight to the point and send naked pictures of themselves, as suggested by Daniel. This visual emphasis is combined with a brief but clear textual message. In just a few words, users often manage not only to describe themselves but also what, or who, they are looking for on Grindr. The textual and the visual function to create new standards and requirements which must be fulfilled in order to promote one's own profile successfully. However, it is astonishing how many users express their racial, age, body, and sexual preferences. Far from being politically correct, Grindr texts often display stipulations such as 'White men only', 'no Asians', 'no fatties', 'not into older guys', 'no twinks', 'only for tops', 'Brits only'. Moreover, users often stress and praise a straight-acting identity. Requests like 'straight-acting lads only', 'be masculine', 'only real men', 'no camp' or 'act straight' appear on many profiles. It is worth noticing how, on an app for gay men, the word straight is used much more frequently than the word gay itself.

The concept of sexual racism can help understand the phenomenon (see Goleman 2011: 12). This widespread practice, or tendency, involves people who will only have sex with their race, people who will have sex with everyone

but their race, and people who will only have sex with specific races and not with others. This is not to say that these people will also necessarily be or see themselves as racist in their everyday life, but that they will mainly discriminate racially when it comes to sexual relations. Similarly, people can also sexually discriminate based on their physical preferences, their age preferences, the degree of masculinity, sexual role, perceived beauty, and all other characteristics that they identify as being necessary for drawing their sexual attraction. As seen in 2.2, identities are formed by the intersections of all these elements. A person's identity, in fact, is not based only on their age, race/ethnicity, masculinity, etc., but it encompasses the coming together of different factors and experiences which, consequently, create a variety of different identities. Online, however, intersections are often prevented from happening because users express their personal preferences on the base of bound and determined elements that are seen as independent from one another. In other words, the more requirements will be listed by a user, the more other users will feel excluded from contacting him or feel like something is wrong with their own characteristics.

Of great significance, in this sense, is the use that many make of the *block button*, a feature of Grindr that allows users to delete from their view those people who do not fit their particular standards of sexual attractiveness and deny these same people the chance to contact them again. In Woo's (2013: 22) opinion, 'the beauty of Grindr is that it decoupled hooking up from the specific places, away from the bars, bathhouses, parks, and washrooms'. Yet, whereas no client in a Soho bar can decide who should be allowed in the premises, or

what age, ethnic or other specific groups he wants to be surrounded by, on Grindr users can block and eliminate other people to their liking, consequently creating their own private networks based on the exclusion of others. Sexual racism, understood in this case as a practice that is not limited to race but that incorporates other characteristics, is enacted on Grindr and disguised as personal preferences legitimated by the private nature of the application itself. In his opinion piece 'I'm a Sexual Racist', Matheson (2012) challenges this idea by saying that 'if you're not sexually attracted to someone based on the way they look, (...) then that is just exercising your right to sexual choice'. While acknowledging the necessity to find more 'articulate' ways to express one's own preferences on Grindr, Matheson nonetheless thinks that those who perpetrate the idea of sexual racism undermine everyone's right 'to choose who we sleep with without having to feel bad about it'. Participants, too, seemed to be divided in their positions on sexual racism, the use of the block button, and if people would discriminate in the same way in a Soho bar. William, for example, thought that if you do not want to talk to someone in Soho, you simply do not, or you end the conversation politely, whereas online you are effectively exercising a form of racial discrimination. Matt, instead, even acknowledging that it is not particularly nice, also noticed that, in a medium like Grindr, people have to be more explicit about their preferences because of the two-dimensional nature of the app which allows for neither proper conversations nor body language.

From this point of view, it is worth mentioning the conversation that took place between Owen, Lewis, Russell and Matthew during their focus group, which does not differ much from that of other focus groups/interviews

conducted. Participants were asked what they thought of people writing discriminatory messages on their profiles:

Owen: I know it's not politically correct but, in a way, it's like saying that you're not interested in women, you're just not. Same thing with saying I'm not gonna date someone who's 90. I think it's probably fine, because they don't know you've blocked them or they've blocked you so, that's it, next! I think it's your preference, chocolate or strawberry. Obviously, if you're racist, that's not ok, but...

Lewis: That is sexual racism!

Owen: ...Maybe you're just not attracted to Asian guys...

Russell: (to Owen) I think the idea of race is so built in [inside us] that the idea that every Asian person is the same is what you're saying. 'I don't like every Asian person'. That's racist.

Matthew: (to Lewis and Russell) And it's not just about race, it's about age, weight, body type (...). But if you go to a bar you're gonna do that filtering anyway, so if you do it systematically, I don't think it's not appropriate to say not into Asians.

Russell: I think the difference between filtering in a bar and filtering on Grindr is because of this block button so, whereas in a bar an Asian person could come up to you and break the stereotype and

talk to you and engage with you, on Grindr people would just block him. Grindr makes it easier to narrow down, there's a big difference between age and body type and race, there are issues with them both but they are very different.

Two different positions came up from this conversation. Owen and Matthew did not seem to perceive the expression of sexual preferences as racist whereas Lewis and Russell seemed against any form of sexual racism. The latter, however, also specified that race represents a much bigger issue than other factors such as age or body type, suggesting that sexual racism may be seen as negative only in connection to the first element and not to the others. It should be noticed that all those who did not see the block button or sexually racist messages as a major issue, like Owen and Matthew, were all young White gay men. In a different focus group, for example, Vlad, another young White gay man, wondered: 'what if I block someone not because they are Asian but because they are not my type, would they think that I am racist?'. Luke, himself White and young, agreed with him and explained: 'there is sometimes this anxiety, looking like we do, White, and so on, that people might interpret what you do as you having some sort of prejudice. Grindr has confused the maths so much more'. Although it is difficult to say if some of them were being intentionally racist, their personal characteristics may say a lot about their statements and the way they almost felt as if they were the ones being discriminated against due to the fact that, being White, they cannot block someone without being seen as racist and, consequently, without feeling guilty.

On the contrary, almost every participant who did not identify as White or young or masculine, did admit to having received or read some kind of discriminatory comment or having been blocked. Ashley, for example, while thinking that the fact that he is Black helped him socialise in a bar (see 2.2), on Grindr he lives his race as a limit. John thought that for him it is a matter of age whereas Ben saw his campness as the problem and admitted to having blocked people who say 'no camp' or 'only masculine guys' in their profiles. Lewis, however, brought up another interesting point:

the fetish about being a Black person in central London, being central London so White, I had so many White people approaching me because of the exoticisation [sic] that I'm a Black person. I'm like the closest Black person on the app and, of course, the first thing they ask is, are you hung? To me the block button is essential for that reason.

For Lewis, racism was not as much expressed by racist messages as it was by messages of appreciation. In his opinion, people were not getting in touch because they were interested in him, but because they were looking for a Black man, no matter who the Black man was. To him, this was as sexually racist as someone saying 'no Black' in their profile. Rupert, like Russell before, thought that until someone discriminates on the basis of age, masculinity or body type, it could still be seen as a matter of preference, but once the discrimination



includes a racial aspect, that is where it starts to be difficult to negotiate:

you learn to react to people that turn you on, and it just so happens for some people that some of those aspects are race-orientated, or age or whatever, it becomes problematic to entangle 'this is just what I feel for this person' from general social constructs.

Carl agreed that with the added racial element it becomes socially unacceptable, but he also noticed that few people are that inclusive in their sexual attraction. For him, the preferences that are expressed by Grindr users have much more to do with time-saving than with discrimination per se: 'if you know that something or someone is not going to work for you, then in a way, isn't it slightly better to let people know?'. Roger, too, thought people discriminate at all times, online and offline: 'I have friends who say, I'm not racist but my penis is'. Jonathan, for his part, explained:

I don't think it [Grindr] is creating an internalised homophobia or racism, I think it is exposing them, and one of the scariest things is that it is revealing that a community you would expect, having been excluded and persecuted, is itself exclusionary, and bigoted, and discriminatory. I realise that to some extent some people are only sexually attracted to some things...but I think to be so

shamelessly aggressive in the way they exclude someone or by stating those things make them feel lesser.

Not only does the anonymity of Grindr facilitate expressive license, but it also increases prejudices given that what often stops people from being prejudiced is, as Luke put it, 'the feeling of being a horrible human being'. By doing it on your phone, at home, in the privacy of your room, other people become simply pictures on a screen.

Michael supported this by saying that the virtual world is 'the ultimate individualism' because it is possible to be anyone you want to be and 'you can allow all your demons to come out, or you can act out your racist or ageist beliefs quite easily. It gives us the ultimate chance to, if we have those traits. None of us are saints. What we do with that is the problem'. For Jude, we would instinctively do the same in a Soho bar but we would not go up to someone and say it. Junior agreed and explained that 'we all have personal block buttons, [the one on Grindr] is just one that actually works so immediately'. He saw Grindr as an expression of the commodification of technologies: 'when they say, oh, it's all based on looks, well yes, in real life too. (...) So the block button is weird but I don't think it is a million miles away from selecting processes that people engage with anyway'. Some participants revealed that they almost expect to see discriminatory comments online, and blamed it on the way websites and apps are designed, pushing people to be racist and judgemental in order to promote their profiles. Charles noted that, if someone met another man in a Soho bar, he may not say things like 'how old are you? Are you active

or passive?', leaving instead more room for deeper conversation. In his opinion, the demand for this information has somehow become necessary online. For Jude, the expression of such preferences demonstrates that most people do use Grindr only for sex. If this was not the case, people would allow more space for interaction and race, age, etc., would not constitute a limitation. Some people, however, may just be following trends and they may be expressing such preferences because they see others doing it. Tarun, in fact, blamed it on ignorance, saying that people are 'sheepish' sometimes, and if someone says something racist then everyone else will think that it is ok for them to say it too. He also suggested that maybe 'people need educating' in order to continue to use online technologies.

The picture of online spaces that participants described is not generally optimistic. As in the case of other physical gay spaces in London, online spaces were seen as an extra tool for gay men to meet, but far from promoting any real sense of community. Moreover, like physical gay spaces, they were also often seen as exclusionary, divisive, and problematic, far from the more democratic description made by critics and creators of such spaces. However, someone did recognise some positive sides. In Luke's opinion, for example, people can 'feel a sense of belonging and identity' as well as see that there is 'a whole range of different men out there' with different characteristics. Ben thought that the difference with online spaces is that it is possible to 'skim through' all the profiles to find someone 'who actually likes you'. Junior also explained that Grindr can benefit those gay men who do not live in London and may feel isolated. Still, he admitted that there are pros and cons. He thought that the

main challenge was represented by the use that younger generations 'who grew up with Grindr' make of the app:

my younger [gay] cousin was really surprised that I was in a monogamous relationship, because he didn't know that was a possibility. I feel like Grindr has limited the options for a lot of people and it has defined one way of life really, which is this disposability and this accessibility. But at the same time, who are we to criticise? It's there, and cruising has always existed and, in a way, it has just made it a lot easier and accessible for people to do what they were already going to do in the first place. I think, as we all fall to social media, it creates an epidemic of loneliness, if you never know the number of people that are available to you then you don't really care. But if all of a sudden you know, and you know that they don't want you, that you are not part of that, that's very dangerous.

He seemed particularly interested in the ways in which Grindr will 'change the community for the future' given that it is difficult to predict what the next generation of gay men growing up in an online world will be like in terms of sociality, if they will still see online technologies as problematic or if they will just take them for granted. Cristiano thought that, for younger users who grew up with Internet access, cyberspace feels much more real and therefore they may

get to experience a sense of community online which, in a way, replaces that same experience that older users had in Soho. Still, added Cristiano, 'it would be sad if they wouldn't have some kind of physical space to feel the freedom that we felt at the time. Because for me it was what changed me as a gay man really'.

Undeniable, however, is that the whole dating experience for both younger and older gay men has now changed. Online spaces are cheaper, available anywhere an Internet connection is present, and the possible choice of other men to chat with seems almost endless. Gay men may still use physical spaces like Soho, but almost every participant who was interviewed used a combination of both, depending on their time, location, and what they are looking for. In other words, online spaces have now been normalised, they have entered gay men's daily life. Still, if this is the case, why are so many gay men ashamed of admitting their use of such spaces? William, for instance, revealed that he met his partner online but he also admitted that, if you asked his partner about it, he would say that they had been introduced to each other by a friend. Vlad, for his part, noticed how many people say on their Grindr profile something like 'I'm happy to lie about how we met'. For him, people use Grindr only for hookups and therefore they do not want their relationship to be associated with it. Luke noticed how Tinder, instead, is considered to be slightly more respectable because straight people use it too, even though, as Vlad reminded, the final goal is always the same. Luke concluded that 'straight men, gay men, if they had the option they would all be the same when it comes to how seedy they can be'. The sexual aspect of Grindr seemed to be the main

reason why some interviewees expressed some reticence when it came down to being open about the use they make of online spaces. Whereas being in Soho implies being there in person, being visible, and surrounded by other people, online spaces set themselves as a merely private experience. Like a modern-day flâneur, the Grindr user is both inside and outside the crowd, looking (or browsing) without necessarily being seen thanks to the anonymity of the app, in the same way he is just another square picture to other users until a gaze is finally returned and a connection is made (see 0.2.2).

However that may be, as Ashley highlighted, 'you get out of them [online spaces] what you want, based on the way you use them'. Matthew, too, noticed that Grindr serves different purposes for different people: 'I don't know if Grindr is the problem or the culture of texting. You can get all dressed up and go to a gay bar and not meet anyone and be disappointed, and there's the fear of rejection, being rejected on Grindr is much easier'. Lewis, for example, found it interesting to see how some people may be using Grindr while they are inside a gay venue: 'you're hitting on someone who is 2 metres away, just go over and talk to them!'. Simkhai himself, the designer of the app, stated:

the application can only reflect its users. There are guys out there looking for love and there are those looking for sex. Often that can be the same guy, just at different times in his life or day. (...) Do we encourage promiscuity? Not at all, the platform we provide is neutral in that sense. We simply make it easier to meet people, be that for friendship, dating or otherwise (Watts 2012).

Consequently, the promoted image of the Internet as a new space for sexual freedom becomes, in truth, a narrow one. All those stereotypes, commonplaces, and power relations analysed in 2.2 in connection to Soho, are recreated in the online world. Users of online apps carry with them their previously-acquired cultural baggage and they impose it over other users through the celebration of specific images and identities as well as the exclusion of others. From this point of view, online spaces do not differ that much from their physical counterparts. The promise of a new-found land seems, once again, to have been breached. Undeniable, however, is that the widespread use of online technologies is now transforming the way gay men connect, meet, and socialise. Visible gay spaces such as Soho seem to be going through a process of dilution, with many gay men distancing themselves from these spaces and what they represent. As seen in 2.1, for many gay men going to Soho was considered a rite of passage. Today, however, gay men do not need Soho to meet each other but can use online apps from everywhere in the city. As Michael puts it, 'why go to Soho when you can go on Grindr and see who is 5 metres from you?'. While mobile apps like Grindr should not be regarded as the (only) reason why this process is taking place, they are nonetheless contributing to the shift from more public to more private spaces and, consequently, from more public to more private identities. Still, before reaching any conclusions, it is necessary to include two more factors that are often overlooked but that represent a fundamental key for the understanding of the situation as they are symptomatic of a wider malaise that is affecting gay men in London (and Soho more directly), and that are a

direct result of the use that many gay men make of online technologies: chemsex and the consequent rise in sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

## **4.2 — Inside Chemsex Culture**

The use of recreational drugs is nothing new to the gay scene. Especially since the flourishing of music venues between the late 1950s and early 1960s, and even more since the opening of big dance clubs between the late 1970s and early 1980s, drugs have represented an escape from reality which helped many gay men socialise and overcome those personal as well as social, cultural, and sexual boundaries that, until then, were still very much part of their everyday life. This is not to say that drugs were limited to the gay scene but to highlight the major impact that they had on the lives of many gay men. Jarman, for instance, made use of substances such as ecstasy, acid, or opium when in clubs like Subway and Heaven. According to the artist (1992: 78), the fact that until the 1960s it was illegal to sell alcohol in bars and clubs made drugs extremely popular, giving them 'a social value' for many gay men:

drugs and liberation were connected; (...) it was not possible to avoid them. Now I find myself neutral towards them; I don't think they damaged me and I can't believe they 'liberated' me — except for the moment. I had to distance myself from Heterosoc and this was another weapon.



While drugs were seldom a long-term solution, they nonetheless gave many gay men the chance to temporarily break free from society's judgement and expectations. Jarman explains that bars and clubs were often used by drug dealers taking advantage of this need. At the same time, he also highlights the economic advantages that venues received when they started selling alcohol: 'is alcohol the best drug for controlling us? Certainly our lives revolved around the bars. The bars are so profitable; there is money to be made hand over fist' (1992: 78). Sure enough, drugs and alcohol soon became a constant presence on the scene, to the point that many music venues started revolving around them as integral parts of the experience that they were offering. However, even though alcohol took off as the dominant substance sold and advertised within commercial venues (with increasingly assorted and expensive drink lists to choose from), drugs — which were usually traded under the counter — were subjected to a soaring supervision and an eventual legal crackdown in both their sale and consumption. Truth is that despite an increasing commercialisation of alcohol and a cut down on drugs, many gay men did not stop using either. Still today, alcohol is a fundamental element of the gay scene and while the types of drugs might have changed through time following needs and fashions, they have nonetheless remained a constant underground (but not so secret) presence, as explored in this section (Peake 1999: 281-2; Roberts 2014a; Wharton 2017).

In the last few years, for many gay men drugs have increasingly acquired a sexual as well as a social function, moving past the previous boundaries of commercial gay venues and taking over more secluded spaces such as gay

saunas and, once these venues started to adopt a zero-tolerance policy following a series of deaths related to drug use on their premises, gay men's own houses. Chemsex is a term that has recently become particularly well-known on the gay scene. It denotes the sexual interaction that takes place between two or more people who are under the effects of drugs. The drugs used for chemsex have changed compared to the ones used in the past to socialise in bars and clubs. James Wharton (2017: 24), a London-based journalist and writer who became addicted to chemsex and who shared his story in a pioneering book called *Something for the Weekend: Life in the Chemsex Underworld*, recognises three main drugs that in the chemsex culture, as the author himself defines it, are often referred to as 'the unholy trinity of chemsex drugs': GBL (gamma-butyrolactone acid)/GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyric acid), a Class C water-like liquid drug which is usually mixed with a soft drink to cover up its bitter taste (GBL is actually a prodrug, meaning that only after being absorbed by the body does it become a pharmacologically active drug, GHB); mephedrone, a Class B drug that is usually inhaled; and crystal methamphetamine, a Class A drug which is usually smoked through a glass pipe when in the form of crystal-like rocks that vaporise once heated up. There are, of course, other drugs that are used on the chemsex scene and that have been around for much longer, such as ketamine, cocaine, and MDMA, although none of them is now as popular as the previous three. Moreover, even though the effects of cocaine and MDMA are very similar to mephedrone, the latter is much cheaper and therefore preferred for chemsex (Cain 2015; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Faye 2015; Wharton 2017: 3-5, 24-37).

Wharton (2017: 3) explains that today 'the using community' refers to drugs as *chems* (hence the word chemsex when connected to sexual interaction) because the word drugs is 'packed to the brim with judgement. When you think "drugs", you think *Trainspotting* [a reference to heroin addiction]. "Chems" is easier off the tongue and, although explicit, it doesn't feel quite as bad. At least to us'. The same is done for each individual chem: GBL/GHB, for example, is also known as G, Gina, or liquid ecstasy; mephedrone as M, meph, meow meow; crystal methamphetamine as crystal meth, Tina, meth, ice, glass; cocaine as Coke, crack, Charlie; MDMA as Molly, Mandy, ecstasy; Ketamine as K. Two things are particularly noteworthy about this process of renaming drugs. The first one is the way users want to tear down stereotypes connected to drugs by renaming and redefining what it is that they are doing. The word drugs recalls images of addiction. Most gay men who use chems do not see themselves as addicts, only as users. An interviewee in the groundbreaking *Vice* documentary *Chemsex* (Fairman and Gogarty 2015), for example, when discussing his continuous use of chems is quick to notice: 'I'm not a proper drug addict'. However, when he is asked what a proper drug addict is, he thinks about it and concludes: 'I don't know, yeah, probably me'. Sure enough, there is a difference between users and addicts but, as explored further in this section, there is often a fine line between the two which many users struggle to see. The second thing worthy of attention is the use that Wharton makes of words such as *community* and *us*, implying the presence of a tight group of gay men who share something in common and who can understand each others' actions and needs. For instance, he describes the feeling of comradeship that is formed among chems users in connection to his first time

trying these drugs:

instead of just leaving an amateur like me to get my own fix of G  
(...) what those boys did — and don't forget they were strangers to  
me — was give me a valuable lesson on how to do G safely. They  
made no bones about the risks involved with taking the drug, and  
it's a lesson I have passed on to others a couple of times myself  
(2017: 62).

To an external observer, the change in names may appear as an excuse to  
make drugs sound more appealing and less threatening. At the same time, for  
many gay men, their use represents a communal experience, something that  
they are probably not able to find in other, more traditional gay spaces like  
Soho, and that they regard as equally valid (Cash 2015b; Wharton 2017: 25-  
37).

To understand why chems have become so popular in the last few years,  
but also why they may represent a major threat for gay men's physical and  
mental health, it is important to discuss both their positive and negative effects.  
Once again, Wharton's (2017: 8-9) recollection of his personal experience can  
help disclose what life under chems must be like for many gay men:

I feel popular, an ecstasy in itself: my body is being validated and

people like me. This is of course wholly the effect of the drugs on my mind. I look terrible, I can't think straight and I smell a bit. I haven't eaten anything, I look gaunt, and although I'm only midway through this debauchery, I've already had sexual contact with at least ten different guys. I'm a fucking mess. A day later, having spent another £100 on supplies [£70 to start with], I am eventually done. I order an Uber and I return to my flat ten miles away in south London. I am exhausted, yet not tired. I am hungry, but without an appetite. My mind is full of faces and encounters of the past two days, but I am unfulfilled. I need to shower, to brush my teeth, to get something, anything, into my stomach. But I don't. I walk through the door, I glance at the many messages on Facebook from friends and family worried about why I've been so silent all weekend, again, and I collapse onto my bed. I drop the Valium and become numb. I close my eyes and, in an instant, it's time to go to work. That double-decker bus of a Monday morning, and reality, has arrived. I will feel like shit until about lunchtime on Wednesday, and then I'll start to think about the weekend again. It's a cycle I can't stop.

Wharton's words hint at many elements that need to be analysed further such as the short- and long-term effects (both positive and negative) of chems on his body and mind, the number of sexual partners, the economic cost of a weekend on chems, the auto-exclusion from his closest networks, and his struggle to end

what he describes as a cycle he cannot stop. First of all, the immediate effects of chems on the users: chems, especially when jointly used, help relax, boost confidence, make people feel euphoric and affectionate towards others, as well as increasing sexual excitement and enhancing sexual stamina while lowering inhibitions and pain threshold. In other words, chems seem to free people from their personal and social constraints, often connected to the way they look, the way they see themselves or think others see them, or what they believe is expected from them. This is particularly relevant if we consider the social stigma that has traditionally been attached to gay sex and the difficult relationship that many gay men consequently have with it. David Stuart (in Cash 2014a), substance use lead at sexual health clinic 56 Dean Street in Soho (see 4.3 and 4.4), explains that:

gay sex is about death, it's about disease, it's the naughty sex, it's historically the sort of sex that is done in dark places like Hampstead Heath or cottages. Historically it was illegal, historically it was a mental health disorder; it's been a crime; (...) it's the sex you don't want your Mum and Dad imagining (...). Sex is really complicated for a lot of people, so to find a tool or a drug that taps into that, makes you feel 'ah, yes, I'm horny and I'm allowed to be, I like getting fucked and I'm not afraid to say it, I like being a bottom, I'm a pig fucker'...it's a real relief. We've got these gay lives where there's the 'real world', where you *act* for your parents, and you *act* straight (...); you're one of the *good gay*

*guys*, you're not slutty or promiscuous. And it's the same when you're going to school or to work; you're *acting* straight and performing, performing, performing; and when you're at home as a child you're performing, fearing being 'found out'; and so then you grow up and you're a real person, respectable and responsible with your job and trying to be a nice gay, except that you like dirty kinky sex and you know it (...). It's hard reconciling these two things; so they split and disappear into this little bubble of a world where they can be the 'real me', where they can pretend that this acting out doesn't exist and there are no consequences; but of course on Tuesday there *are* consequences from that behaviour. So when they're down there thinking 'this is not the real me, I'm doing what I really, really like, it's secret, and I don't need to use condoms, it doesn't count, it's separate', it's a psychological coping tool — it's called splitting. So the job for a worker would be to integrate those two personalities, and give gay men the permission to be horny, to put dildos up their arse; but that those things are okay, rather than needing drugs to give themselves permission to enjoy these things [emphasis in the original].

In Stuart's opinion, the use of chemsex represents for many gay men an escape from the rules of a normative world where they constantly have to pretend to be what they are not, that is asexual beings who must comply to and respect the censure that is imposed over their lives. His words recall many issues that have

been discussed in previous chapters, from the underground character of gay sex to the need to act straight in order to be regarded as *the good gay*. This way, however, gay men grow up thinking that they are not allowed to experience intimacy:

we're trying to negotiate a world where sex is normalised with no frame for intimacy, and that might be directly responsible for the harm that we're seeing with people using drugs as a tool because they disinhibit [sic] us, they take away that hypervigilance, they take away that fear of being rejected (Stuart in Cash 2013b).

In other words, the use of recreational drugs, especially in connection to sex, may be a way for many gay men to escape a sense of shame connected to both their actions and their identities, highlighting an ever-present (self)censorship in connection to homosexual relations, low self-esteem, and internalised homophobia. The point of chemsex is not that of having sex on drugs but that of creating connections with others in a space that, for the first time, feels free from heterosexual *and* homosexual judgment and presence, and where gay men can simply (not) be (Cain 2015; Cash 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Faye 2015; Gilet 2014; Goldstein 2015; Patrick Cash 2017).

While the lowering of their boundaries can help gay men socialise and feel more at ease with themselves and their surroundings, it also makes them



less aware of what they are doing, with who and, most importantly, how they are doing it, encouraging them to engage in risky behaviours such as having multiple sexual partners, engaging in unprotected sex, or sharing needles. All these chems can, in fact, also be injected or, to use a popular jargon among users, slammed, providing a much quicker and stronger effect given that the chems hit the bloodstream within seconds (see 4.3). Chems also help people stay awake for days on end. While this can be seen as a plus from the point of view of someone who wants to have a good time, it also means that both their bodies and their minds will be pushed to the extreme. To do so, users need to take chems on a constant basis until they finally decide to stop or until their body decides to shut down, 'the dreaded "going under" effect' (Wharton 2017: 3). The problem is that most users will not be totally aware of both their physical and mental state while under the effects of chems. Comedowns from chems are an unavoidable reaction. They can happen in a more controlled way, often mitigated by other drugs such as Valium to alleviate the symptoms, or they can come without warnings, making people unconscious. The second option is particularly risky in an environment where the large majority of people (if not all) are using chems, to the point that GBL/GHB is often described as a date-rape drug. What is also important to notice is that, even though some people are definitely taking advantage of vulnerable others while on drugs (serial killer Stephen Port, who consciously drugged and killed his victims after connecting with them on Grindr, is the most notorious example), most people do so while high themselves and are not able to remember committing the crime once the effects of the drugs are over. These represent more extreme cases, but it is undeniable that the use of chems makes people less aware of their own

actions. GBL/GHB, for example, is an extremely powerful chem which needs to be carefully administered, often using a medical syringe and with regular frequency, as only an extra millilitre can be lethal. It is not a coincidence that GBL/GHB overdose has become the most common reason why gay men are admitted to A&E. Between 2011 and 2015, 61 people died of GBL/GHB overdose in London, with an increase of 119% between 2014 and 2015 (an average of one death every 12 days). In all but one case the victims were men, in their 30s, and mostly died in private houses. These numbers, however, may only represent the tip of the iceberg. GBL/GHB is not usually included in the standard toxicology screen that is carried out after drug-related deaths, even though some other 300 drugs are. This means that the total number of deaths may, in truth, be much higher. Furthermore, all these chems, when taken for too long, can make users smell bad and affect brain activities, causing paranoia, exhaustion, depression, and, of course, addiction (Bourne et al. 2015; Cain 2015; Cash 2014b, 2015a, 2016a; Gilet 2014; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Faye 2015; Frankis et al. 2016: 1-11; Halkitis et al. 2005: 1-8; Patrick Cash 2017; Shernoff 2006: 106-13; Strudwick 2017a; Wharton 2017: 4, 40, 72-89).

A difference between use and addiction should now be made. According to Greg Owen (2015b), founder of IWantPrEPNow (see 4.3), the difference between the two is the same as between 'having a drink and being an alcoholic'. Not every chems user becomes addicted to chemsex. Most people, in fact, while running the same short-term risks, also manage to engage in chemsex on a more occasional basis or to make sure that chemsex does not overcome other aspects of their lives, mostly seeing it as a weekend activity.

Many others who try chemsex, however, then struggle to go back to having sex without chems, or to use chems without having sex. Sure enough, the number of gay men engaging in chemsex compared to the total number of gay men in London is still relatively small, but as statistics from sexual health clinics show (see 4.3), it is growing exponentially. Even though many gay men may engage in chemsex to establish connections with others, when they become addicted they often also become alienated from the people they share this experience with:

the thing about systematic sex parties is that everything becomes so soulless. For the briefest of moments (...) it can feel exciting and sexy, but for the most part, we just fuck each other without any feeling or compassion. (...) The process of just fucking people because they are in the same room as you, naked and willing, becomes robotic. There is no emotion, and this is perhaps the most depressing afterthought about spending days on end having emotionless sex with dozens of people (Wharton 2017: 208-9).

The same thing often happens in connection to their families and friends. Outside of the chemsex scene, many gay men are not as willing to discuss their activities, being aware of the stereotypes that other people would probably connect chemsex with. Consequently, when chemsex becomes more than just a weekend diversion, many struggle to find the adequate support to deal with

the situation. At the same time, Wharton's words reveal that chemsex may only be a temporary illusion. While the idea of spending days on end having sex with other men while feeling high, attractive, and welcomed, may represent an alluring option for many gay men, Wharton (2017: 149) explains that 'the happiness you get from all this is nothing more than a side effect'. Chemsex, in fact, 'does not remove the internal struggles and conflicts; it can only offer a temporary relief' (2017: 248). In other words, while many gay men are 'vulnerable men self-medicating their way through a complicated sexual identity and practice', currently trying to fill a void in their lives, they may be doing so the wrong way (2017: 252). It is noteworthy, for example, that many people need to resort to Viagra in order to be able to remain sexually active. This is because chems lead to impotence, meaning that those same substances that are taken to feel high and sexually uninhibited, are also those that prevent users from having spontaneous intercourse with others (Cain 2015; Cash 2015a, 2016a; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Faye 2015; Gilet 2014; Guilteneane 2016; Hayes 2015; Wharton 2017: 40, 68-75, 139, 240).

Two further elements must be analysed to understand why chemsex has become so popular and why many gay men may prefer to engage in this activity more than frequenting gay spaces such as Soho. The first one is its relationship (if not dependency) with online apps. Chemsex culture is very much tied to the world of the Internet. Whereas in the past drug dealers depended on commercial venues to maintain and expand their businesses, today they can be contacted via mobile apps such as WhatsApp or Grindr. Many of them accept payments via money transfer also done from a mobile phone, meaning that

users will not need to carry cash with them and will be able to make a transaction at any point. Most importantly, the Internet plays a fundamental role in the way online apps like Grindr help people find each other. Among the many requests and preferences that appear on users' profiles (see 4.1), there are often messages such as 'chem friendly', 'into chems', 'H'n'H' (High'n'Horny), or 'P'n'P' (Party'n'Play). Not only can gay men connect and find other gay men online without the need to go out to gay venues, they can also connect with other gay men who are into chemsex, find out about parties that are happening around London, or organise a party themselves. This, however, can reach extreme levels, with people becoming addicted not just to chems, or chemsex, but to mobile apps as well, and the experience that the conjunction of these three elements offer:

the grimmest picture I can paint in your imagination is this: picture someone getting fucked, really getting fucked by a hot guy. And then imagine the guy, at the same time this is happening to him, busily swiping his iPhone screen as he frantically surfs Grindr in a quest to find the next guy to come around and fuck him. That's how dead the sex is (Wharton 2017: 208-9).

While Grindr becomes extremely helpful for those people who want to engage in chemsex, it can also work as a way to promote this activity and attract people who would have not actively looked for it otherwise, or people who are not

completely aware of what chemsex implies and who feel like they should go along with it in order to meet someone or to feel accepted by certain groups. That being said, as Goldstein (2015) notices, 'apps like Grindr are a platform, but Grindr didn't invent chemsex'. In line with what has already been said in 4.1, while it is easy to blame mobile apps for the spread of chemsex, it is gay men who are responsible for the way they decide to use them (Cain 2015; Cash 2016a; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Faye 2015; Wharton 2017: 51-70, 235-6).

The final element to consider is the economic cost of chemsex.

According to Wharton (2017: 66), 'the cost of a night out is a key reason why people now choose to forgo clubs and bars, and instead order in a shit-load of gear and throw a house party — no transport costs, no expensive bar bills and no hassle of dealing with a crowd'. He compares the cost of a weekend spent going out in Soho to that of a weekend spent having chemsex:

a night out with a few mates in central London today costs a bomb. Seriously, it's a fucking fortune! Bars are closing all over the place because people are opting to do other things instead of shelling out a king's ransom for a night in a London bar or club. And as well as the costs, you also have to deal with all the drunks. Central London is full of dickheads looking to give someone a hard time for no reason at all. I've lost count of the number of times some pissed-up out-of-towner has had a pop at me and a guy when we've been holding hands while walking along Charing Cross Road. Ask yourself the question: why would you voluntarily

cough up hundreds of pounds for a night in Soho, where you'll encounter scene-queens overflowing with attitude, power-hungry security staff and bar bills that anyone not based in London would label 'stupid'? (Wharton 2017: 237).

It should also be added that, even though some people may decide to begin their weekends in a bar or club, in Soho or elsewhere, once they start to take chems they must stop drinking, given that the combination of chems and alcohol can be fatal. So, if in the past Soho's gay venues represented the main attraction also thanks to the sale of alcohol, nowadays many gay men are looking for a different experience that does not have alcohol, and therefore Soho's gay venues, at its core. Moreover, as seen in 4.1, going out in Soho implies time and effort but does not necessarily mean that people will have a good time or will find what they are looking for. This is particularly important if we consider the cost and opportunities of a chemsex party:

G is paramount to chemsex and you will normally pay £30 for 50 millilitres, but if you are sly (...) then you can get through an entire weekend (and into the week) with that much shoved down your pants. We all prefer to pay £20 for meph, but it's more likely to cost you £25 a gram these days; you'll probably need two bags for the weekend, and if you need more then you can easily buy a third bag later. So if you had initially bought two bags of meph, you will

now have spent a total of £80. You can go halves on half a gram of Tina with someone, or just share the bill with a small group, which will probably cost you about another £30. And there you have it: a grand total of £110. And for that amount of cash you can be happy to your heart's content for days. You won't have to go looking for a shag, either; there'll be ample opportunities all around you — hell, it's why you're there at the party (Wharton 2017: 238).

In Wharton's opinion, a weekend of chemsex is much cheaper than a weekend spent in Soho. He sees this as one of the reasons why many gay men now opt for private parties instead. However, at other points in his book he also highlights how inevitable it has become for him to end up buying more chems throughout the weekend, meaning that the initial cost will consequently rise. To this, the cost of Viagra and Valium should be added even if minimal, as well as that of transport. It is very rare, in fact, that chems users will spend their weekend in just one place. Very often, they start at a club or at a chill-out party where chems are consumed but not much sex occurs. To move around the city and reach chemsex parties, as Wharton points out, gay men often rely on apps like Uber, the cheapest non-public transport service that can be used at any time of the day and night from anywhere in London (it will be interesting to see how things may change if Uber's licence will be definitively revoked by TFL, as announced in September 2017). While Uber may be cheaper than normal taxis and its costs may be split between passengers, it does nonetheless represent an extra expense to include in the total. It is undeniable, then, that even if we



wanted to consider the same budget for both experiences, a weekend in Soho and a weekend of chemsex, what could keep you going for days in the latter experience would only keep you going for a few hours in the other. As Gilet (2014) puts it, 'the fact that our social scene is basically dying because a bag of mephedrone is the same price as a few drinks speaks volumes' (Cain 2015; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Guilteneane 2016; Wharton 2017: 1-4, 30-40).

At this point, it is necessary to explain why less specific attention has been given to Soho in this section. This is not a coincidence, nor an oversight. In a way, it could be argued that chemsex is somehow unrelated to Soho. As mentioned in 3.3, some interviewees in this research automatically connected drug use to Vauxhall's big dance clubs and the lifestyle that they promote. While their position was mainly due to general stereotypes and, sometimes, personal experiences, it has nonetheless been supported by Bourne et al. (2014: 22-3, 37), who show that in 2010, 4.9% of gay men in Lambeth (where Vauxhall is situated), Southwark and Lewisham (the three areas with most adult gay male residents in the country) had used methamphetamine in the previous month, compared with 2.9% of the rest of London. Similarly, 10.2% and 10.5% had used mephedrone and GBL/GHB respectively compared with 5.2% and 5.5% of other boroughs. It is also worth noticing that the age group that consumed more drugs were men between 30 and 39 (the same age group that most participants had identified as regular in Vauxhall, as seen in 3.3), followed in order by 40 to 49, under 30s, and over 50s. Participants in Bourne et al.'s study, similar to those in this research, saw Vauxhall as the epicentre of drug use and chemsex due to the presence of big clubs (often with sex-on-premises facilities — even

though the use of drugs is, supposedly, prohibited) and a sauna opened almost 24-hours a day. Still, while a connection between Vauxhall and drug use is undeniable, some interviewees in this study seemed to take a less drastic position. Jude, for example, recognised that the problem is actually quite spread out and includes places like East London and Soho. Junior agreed and said that 'the drug culture, and the intensity, and the aggression' that were once specific of Vauxhall and 'that type of gay culture within the community', are now a widespread phenomenon. He blamed mephedrone and GBL/GHB:

I'm not on my pedestal, I'm as bad as everyone else, but that has changed the community irrevocably for the foreseeable future. It's shocking. And the fact that it wasn't big on the gay scene when it was legal [until 2010]. Because when it was legal I was in university, I was on my first year of university, and every single first-year student at UCL was taking mephedrone. Because it was £8 and free, and it was legal, and it was fun, it was a very straight thing to do on students' nights to be very silly and then it stopped and it just got adopted by the gay community. I suppose because you can still have sex on it. Everyone I had this conversation with, from casual conversation to the activist from ACT UP, have all seen or been like, yes, it does objectively seem like the gay scene is going down the shit hole, but everyone is like, oh, but it's so much fun.

Even if Junior's words may be seen as extreme given that not every first-year student at UCL that year will have been taking drugs, it does anyhow highlight the accessibility to these drugs and how widespread the phenomenon has become, in particular among gay men. It should also be highlighted that Junior was the only interviewee (apart from Maurice) to openly discuss his personal use of chems, even if only with reference to the past. No direct question around chemsex was asked to participants, as this could have caused tension and embarrassment, especially during focus groups. The topic did nonetheless come up a few times, with participants talking quite generally about gay men taking drugs, especially in connection to Vauxhall, but never including themselves within that group. As previously mentioned, interviews and focus groups were conducted between March and June 2015, at a time when chemsex was an already widespread activity but also still very much hidden and not much talked about. Wharton had not yet published his book; Patrick Cash's *The Chemsex Monologues* (2016a), about five fictional characters who experience chemsex either as users or as witnesses, had not yet premiered at the King's Head Theatre (Cash's articles have often been mentioned in this section but more about him and his work is said in 4.4), nor had Peter Darney's 5 *Guys Chillin'* (2015); Mitchell Marion's short film *G O' Clock* (2016), about a chemsex session in London, and Leon Lopez's short film *Let's Talk About Gay Sex and Drugs* (2016), based on the namesake night organised monthly in Soho by Cash (see 4.4), had not yet been screened at the BFI Flare Festival, nor had William Fairman and Max Gogarty's pioneering film *Chemsex* (2015). To this, my own ignorance on the subject should be factored in, probably not pushing me far enough to ask more specific questions on the use of drugs

during sex. In this context, it is not hard to understand why, even if it is possible that some interviewees had known what chemsex was and had been involved in chemsex themselves, the large majority did not bring it up in our discussions, or simply regarded it as an issue that involved *other* gay men or that had not much to do with the main subject of our conversation, that is Soho (Guiltenane 2016; Owen 2015c; Segalov 2016).

As previously analysed, with the exception of Heaven and SweatBox sauna, big nightclubs and sex venues are not present in Soho, nor is there a significant residential population whose accommodations could be used for chill-outs and chemsex sessions. This is not to say that drugs cannot be found in Soho. Nor is it true that those people who use chems do not visit the district and its gay venues at all. Still, it is important to highlight that a space like Soho does not meet their needs as opposed to other urban areas. Given the popularity that chemsex sessions have gained in the last few years, it should not surprise that many people have now distanced themselves from Soho, where a more visible, commercial, sanitised, straight- and tourist-friendly scene is present. In other words, Soho has come to represent the good and safe aspects of the gay community, what can be advertised to both a national and international audience. Consequently, this image leaves little room for other experiences that, as in the case of chemsex, are based on two elements that have always encountered much resistance and censorship from mainstream society: gay sex and drugs. At the same time, it could be said that chemsex has everything to do with Soho, because it is precisely in Soho, as explored in the next sections, that a first response to chemsex, and the rise of STIs that it is

causing, has developed.

### **4.3 — The Rise of STIs: A New Epidemic?**

As shown in 1.2, the AIDS crisis changed the gay scene forever. Just as gay men were finally coming together and building a sense of community in broad daylight, thousands of lives were lost and entire generations of gay men were wiped out. Michael, who works for a sexual health charity that specialises in people living with HIV, recalled that the AIDS crisis, in terms of the human costs, was massive, but within that, 'there's a sort of grey area, and we have to recognise, as horrible as it is, some of the good actually came along with it'. He explained that, for example, the crisis 'unified' gay men and lesbians and made them work together 'as a community', even if just temporarily. Throughout the years, gay men have often been praised for their positive response to the crisis and their adoption of safer-sex practices that allowed the number of HIV infections to drop, to the point that infections among gay men became fewer than those among heterosexuals. Nonetheless, the recent rise in the number of infections among gay men has once again brought HIV to the front line.

According to the Health Protection Agency (HPA) — part of Public Health England (PHE) since 2013 — in 2011, 3,010 gay and bisexual men, nationally, tested positive, with almost one in four having been infected within the previous 6 months. This was not only the first time since 1999 that the number of infections for gay men was higher than those for heterosexuals, but also the highest annual figure ever recorded at the time. Moreover, a fifth of them had also contracted other STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, hepatitis B and

C. PHE, specifically, reports that the same year gay men in London counted for 54% of new HIV diagnoses, 57% of gonorrhoea cases and 81% of syphilis. This data is in line with national trends according to which gay men in 2014 accounted for 86% of syphilis and 68% of gonorrhoea new diagnoses. Moreover, even though London hosted almost half of HIV-positive gay men in the UK, only three-quarters of them were aware of their status. Since then, numbers of infections have kept rising: nationally, 38,400 gay men were living with HIV — diagnosed or undiagnosed — in 2010, 43,000 in 2013, 45,000 in 2014, with new diagnoses going from 2,860 in 2010, to 3,270 in 2013 and 3,360 in 2014 — the largest number ever recorded at the time and representing more than half of all new diagnoses. That same year, two-thirds of gay men who had been diagnosed positive were between 25 and 44, 81% were White, 2% Black African, and 14% identified as Other/Mixed. 51% of new diagnoses were made in London, with 5 gay men diagnosed with HIV every day. At that point, one out of eleven gay men in London between 15 and 44 were positive. It must, however, be said that the number of people who become aware of their status has also steadily increased. There is a significant difference, in fact, between diagnoses and infections. If the number of diagnoses increases, it is not necessarily bad. Instead, it means that more and more people are becoming aware of their HIV status and can therefore act upon it seeking medications and making sure not to pass the virus on to someone else. Gay men are those who, generally, get tested the most. Antiretroviral agents to reduce transmission from HIV-positive people (ART) and the use of HIV-Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) and HIV-Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), have also contributed to decrease the number of premature deaths and infections, consequently increasing the

total number of gay men living with HIV. Thanks to the medications now available, many HIV-positive men have managed to reach undetectable viral load, meaning that even carrying the HIV virus, they will not risk passing it on to someone else (Bolding et al. 2006: 1622-30; Carballo-Diequez and Bauermeister 2004: 1-15; Cash 2013b, 2015a; Ferrand et al. 2008: 711-2; Hegazi et al. 2016: 1-5; Public Health England 2015a, 2015b; Roberts 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014a; Wharton 2017: 31).

PrEP has become particularly popular in the last few years. It is an antiretroviral drug that, if taken daily, can reduce the chances of contracting HIV by 90%. This should not be confused with PEP, which is instead taken within 72 hours of a possible exposure to HIV and whose side effects may last for up to a month. In other words, because PrEP is taken in advance, it manages to build a higher level of protection in a less invasive way than PEP. Initially, PrEP was only available through private prescription (the commercial name of the official drug being Truvada). In the summer of 2015, Greg Owen, a former sex-worker and part-time barman, had decided to go on PrEP by enrolling in a major study funded by NHS England called PROUD, which was aimed at testing the drug with a view to eventually making it available to a larger population. Around the same time, he found out that he was already HIV-positive. Consequently, he decided to share his story on Facebook. To his surprise, the story went viral, with people getting in touch to congratulate him on making his status public and to ask for more information about PrEP. Even though at the time Owen was not an expert on the subject, he decided nonetheless to set up a website called *IWantPrEPNow*, launched in October 2015, where people could find answers to

their questions. Thanks to his collaboration with sexual health experts and clinics who were, unofficially, already monitoring patients who were buying the drug from overseas, Owen provided information on how and where to buy cheaper versions of it (£50 instead of £500). In just a few months, a major drop in the number of HIV diagnosis was experienced by most sexual health clinics in London, 40% in the space of 12 months. When the results of PROUD came in showing that the drug was working, it was widely expected that NHS England would finally fund the drug. In March 2016, however, after a year and a half of discussions, NHS England halted the commissioning of the drug declaring that it was local councils' responsibility to provide PrEP. Consequently, all major HIV charities joined Owen's cause, by now renamed Mr PrEP, starting a legal battle which eventually saw NHS England losing in the High Court in August 2016. NHS England appealed the ruling but lost again in November of the same year. In December 2016, NHS England stated that they would provide PrEP to 10,000 people for the following 3 years (starting summer 2017) and then they would extend it to a much larger population. NHS England's decision to postpone the distribution of the drug to a larger population is often seen as a waste of time and an excuse, given that the validity of the drug has already been proved. Nonetheless, the whole case brought much attention to the drug, to the point that many gay men have taken the matter into their own hands and are now buying PrEP from overseas. Still, an important element that many gay men may have misunderstood given the rise in high-risk behaviours registered, such as unprotected anal intercourse, is that PrEP, PEP, and ART only work in relation to HIV and do nothing to protect against other STIs. In the last few years, for example, a new type of gonorrhoea has been registered. This



infection has proved particularly hard to treat and many in the public health sector are concerned that it may keep building up resistance, becoming untreatable. In other words, PrEP should not represent a substitute to the use of condoms, but a parallel preventative measure to be used alongside (Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Strudwick 2017b; Wharton 2017: 119-28).

What is particularly noteworthy about the rise of STIs that has been experienced since the early 2010s is the time frame in which it happened, which corresponds to the rise of both chemsex culture and online apps. Cash (2013b) sees the relation between drug use and the increase in the number of HIV and other STIs in London as an example of a *syndemic*, 'defined as two or more societal problems that work together to create a bigger negative impact on a community's health than if there was just one'. In his opinion, while both unprotected sex and the use of drugs have been common practices among gay men in the past, the fact that today they are increasingly coupled shows that many gay men are following a dangerous trend looking for hedonism that may lead to their self-destruction. Hegazi et al. (2016: 1-5) demonstrate these interconnections between chemsex and a rise in the number of HIV infections and STIs by considering 818 gay men attending two clinics in South London between June 2015 and January 2016. Of these, 655 admitted to having engaged in chemsex in the past, 113 of which were still engaging in it. 52% experienced negative consequences such as overdose, hospitalisation, being forced to take time off work, and more general repercussions on their mental health. Chemsex was associated with multiple 'sexual partners, transactional sex, group sex, fisting, sharing sex toys, injecting drug use, higher alcohol

consumption and the use of "bareback" sexual networking applications' (See also Roberts 2014a). As considered in 4.2, the availability of sex through mobile apps like Grindr makes it much easier for gay men to engage in chemsex and unprotected sexual relations with one or more partners, sometimes even on the same day and with multiple partners at the same time. According to Greenhouse (in Adams 2015) from the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV, 'thanks to Grindr and Tinder, you can acquire chlamydia in five minutes'. Frankis et al. (2016: 2), too, identify the outbreak of STIs as a result of chemsex and the use of geospatial social apps. Owen (in Lytton 2016) recalls his own experience with chemsex and online apps before his HIV diagnosis:

there were times when I'd be on them for five days solid with no sleep, just partying and scrolling. (...) I was doing a lot of drugs at the time and they heightened the use of that — for two-and-a-half years I only ever had sex while high, including with people who I hadn't even spoken to. When you're being driven by drugs and have an app in front of you and see endless profiles, they go hand in hand. (...) It's the perfect storm.

Among participants in this study, Jonathan explained that, because only so little information is required online, that may contribute to a new epidemic. He even suggested that we may already be going through a new crisis, as sustained by the data previously analysed. In other words, the availability of sex, thanks to

the use of online apps and coupled with an increase in the use of recreational drugs and the rise of unprotected sexual practices, contributes to the 'overlapping populations of dense sexual networks of HIV-positive [and STI-positive] gay men and populations of men at high risk who are currently HIV-uninfected [or STI-uninfected] or undiagnosed', and may be one of the reasons why London is witnessing such a major growth of gay men diagnosed with HIV and other STIs (Frankis et al. 2016: 2). Still, as already noticed, while the use of online apps is facilitating the introduction of many gay men to chemsex, and consequently exposing them to a higher risk of contracting STIs, it is very often the willingness of these same men to turn a blind eye in favour of sexual pleasure that represents the main concern and that needs to be addressed (Blackwell 2008: 306-13; Duffy 2015d; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Frankis et al. 2016: 1-11; Lytton 2016).

For Jonathan, 'people take their lives in their hands when they go on Grindr' as it is impossible to know who is on the other side. Michael, too, highlighted how people are more willing to lie in their apps: 'we are creating a false sense of self and who we are'. In his opinion, this is exactly the reason why users should not trust profiles when they say that they are STI-free or when they offer to use drugs and engage in chemsex. Adam, for example, recalled that he always asked about the other partner's status before having sex. He usually has safe sex but he admitted to having also had unprotected sex when he felt like he could trust the other person. Still, he continued, he has now been treated for gonorrhoea twice in the past 18 months. According to Stuart (in Lytton 2016), whereas in a pre-app world people had to meet face to face

beforehand and were therefore able to bond and create some sort of intimacy, now they just sell themselves 'as a superhero porn star avatar on an app', being then forced 'to live up to that when they're in the sexual situation', and therefore putting themselves at risk. Luke, however, said that, to him, that may explain why people like Grindr so much:

the risk factor adds excitement to it because you don't know what you're going to get until they knock on your door. I see that with a lot of my friends, they feel they're quite bored with their lifestyle and what they do is to up the risk in sort of how they meet people but also sexual practices and if they take drugs or not (...). I think, sometimes, it is the people who had the most protected lives, especially when they get to London, it is often the first time they are away from home, and then there's like a two years cycle when they settle down but then realise they need something more not to feel so precious and protected.

Vlad agreed with Luke's position and said:

if you are a White middle-class male who had a privileged life, you go to a good university, you go to a good school, by the age of 25 you've achieved everything you could have dreamt of achieving, you need some kind of adrenaline boost, so maybe that's why you

go and do drugs or some sexual behaviour maybe.

Boredom was seen by some participants as a major factor contributing to the adoption of risky behaviours. This may also explain why, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, 81% of gay men diagnosed with HIV in 2014 were White, as opposed to recurrent statistics that see ethnic minorities as more vulnerable to HIV and STIs. Adding this element to the economic cost of chemsex, as explored in 4.2, suggests that chemsex may, in truth, be a mainly White middle-class experience. Throughout the years, drug use has become a common experience for many gay men, a way to break free from both a normative world and its authority over their lives, and to follow that hedonistic ideal of gay life that has been common since the 1980s (see 2.2). Sex, quite similarly, while representing an issue for gay men during and after the AIDS crisis, has nonetheless offered an escape from such authority and a way to challenge mainstream conventions. The combination of the two in chemsex does however represent the expression of a wider malaise that is affecting gay identities on an individual level as well as gay communities more broadly.

Michael explained that since the closure of many gay venues, from saunas to bars and clubs, where the sexual health charity he works for had traditionally campaigned to promote safer-sex, and the rise in popularity of apps like Grindr, his team had to re-think the way they get out and speak to gay men about prevention and testing. In recent years, the Internet has worked as a new space for this, giving gay men access to information, especially those groups who do not attend physical gay spaces, such as minority groups, gay men

outside urban areas and younger/older people. Still, Michael explained, with reference to safe-sex ads that sometimes appear on the screen while using the apps, that even though these have increased in recent years, it is also easy to just press delete and ignore the messages. According to him, most users, when logging in on Grindr, do not want to read about prevention, or they think that they already know enough, and therefore they just skip that step and return to the app. Many gay men, in fact, have not gone through the AIDS crisis and may not totally understand the threat that HIV represents. Others may think that, because HIV prevention is not advertised as much as in the past and pre- and post-exposure medications are becoming available, people with HIV live longer lives and HIV is now something that can be cured (see 0.2.5). Jonathan noticed:

I think it [increase in infections] will definitely affect the way technologies were opening things up. It's a horrible irony that now that access to education and information is becoming so much easier, the community only uses technologies to connect but not to educate or protect themselves. The availability of information nowadays is kind of no excuse.

Frankis et al. (2016: 2) see 'this failure in disease prevention' as clashing with those major social changes that are analysed in *Chapter I* and *II*, such as the passing of equality laws and a widespread acceptance of homosexuality. This complacency, together with the rise of chemsex and the use of mobile apps,

represented for Michael the three major factors, each related to the other, that are currently reshaping discourses around AIDS in London. Wharton (2017: 256) even argues that 'chemsex is the AIDS of our generation. It might not be killing gay men in such high numbers, but it's killing gay men nonetheless'. In his opinion, education is the only way for gay men to become aware of their own actions and to make aware and responsible choices for themselves. To reach this goal, as explored in 4.4, the role of Soho has become fundamental (Blackwell 2008: 306-13; Frankis et al. 2016: 1-11).

#### **4.4 — Starting Back from Soho**

According to Stuart (in Cash 2014a), one of the reasons why we are now facing a syndemic is because gay men have always been forced to attend their local drug clinics whenever they wanted to discuss their drug-related issues, meaning that they were not always able to find services that would specifically target their needs as gay men taking drugs. As previously analysed, many gay men addicted to chems do not identify as drug addicts, and therefore they are automatically put off from attending local drug clinics due to the stigma attached to drug use (see 4.2). Nowadays, the use that gay men make of chems is almost always subjected to the sexual experience in which they are participating. Local boroughs, however, have traditionally seen drug use and sexual health as two separate issues. This created an imbalance between gay men being able to ask for professional help in connection to their sexual health (accessing pan-London clinics where their sexual identities and needs are usually acknowledged) but not to their drug use. Stuart (in Cash 2013b)

explains that someone who has been having chemsex for 3 days in a row will not feel comfortable going to their local drug clinic to talk about what is happening to them with someone who is probably straight and does not know how to handle the situation because they can only help in connection to one aspect of the problem but not the other. In addition, local drug clinics often focus on certain drugs and not on those that most gay men use for chemsex. While many gay men may feel uncomfortable sharing their chemsex-related stories and issues with GPs and drug services, they seem much more comfortable doing so with their sexual health clinics, even when it comes down to their chems use. This is the reason why 56 Dean Street, Soho's sexual health clinic, created the new role of full-time in-house drug advisor for Stuart, providing patients with the chance to discuss both issues in the same place and creating a sort of sexual wellbeing centre for gay men: 'it's brand new, it hasn't really been done before. I'm one of the first persons to do this job within sexual health in the UK. The idea is to create a model here that can be rolled out to other sexual health clinics' (Fairman and Gogarty 2015. See also Cash 2014a; Hegazi et al. 2016: 1-2).

56 Dean Street opened on 2 March 2009 following the high demand placed upon the already existing Chelsea and Westminster Hospital's Victoria Clinic based at the South Westminster Centre in Vincent Square, which between 2007 and 2008 dealt with more than 66,000 people. Publicising the opening of the new Soho clinic, *Out Magazine* (2009: n.27) published an interview with clinic manager Leigh Chislett, who explained that his team was hoping that 'being located in the heart of London's gay community' would



represent a huge advantage: 'providing easy access to services means people are more likely to use them'. He went on to describe the new clinic and how it differed from previous sexual health centres:

our aim, with 56 Dean Street, is to create a space that will stand the test of time and one that moves firmly away from the sterile and dull environments that are all too often associated with sexual health clinics and services. The colours, finishes and quality of materials and furnishings have created an inviting, comfortable, reassuring and stylish environment.

Sure enough, a simple visit to the clinic's reception area and waiting room is enough to notice that its atmosphere differs strongly from that of standard NHS clinics. Its stylish interiors, together with its friendly staff and its background pop music, make visitors' experience, as much as possible, more similar to the one that they would have in one of Soho's gay bars. In other words, not only was the clinic designed as a space where gay men could go and get tested when worried about a possible transmission, but as a space that would attract them in advance as part of the whole Soho experience, removing the stigma attached to STIs and promoting a culture of prevention and wellbeing that could be integrated with their daily life in the district. Many gay men, in fact, become aware of the presence of 56 Dean Street long before they find themselves in need of attending the clinic, to the point that visiting this space on a regular

basis is now often seen as a sign of good health and sexual awareness more than as a sign of sexual irresponsibility. This is due to both its central location at a stone's throw from Old Compton Street and Soho's most popular gay bars and pubs, and to 56 Dean Street's own marketing strategy which aims at working together with Soho's venues to publicise the clinic and sexual health more broadly. For instance, when, in 2012, Terrence Higgins Trust (THT), the UK's biggest sexual health charity, launched a National HIV Testing Week from 23 to 30 November to mark its 30th anniversary (just a few days before international World AIDS Day on 1 December), 56 Dean Street collaborated with G-A-Y to create a pop-up testing space inside G-A-Y Bar, on Old Compton Street. They tested 467 people, raising almost £13,000 for the Elton John AIDS Foundation and establishing a World Record for the number of people tested in one day. The following year, G-A-Y and 56 Dean Street broke their own record with an astonishing 745 people tested in 8 hours (Cash 2014b).

In the last few years, 56 Dean Street has become a major reference point for many gay men in Soho and London more broadly. Its flexible hours, as well as evening and Saturday opening, have given them the chance to walk in at any time for an express HIV test, hepatitis B vaccinations, being treated for STIs, or quite simply to talk to someone about their sexual health. An average of 13,000 patients attend the clinic each month, making it Europe's busiest sexual health clinic. 56 Dean Street was the only clinic that interviewees in this study specifically mentioned when discussing testing and prevention. William recalled that, while coming out, his counsellor suggested to get tested if he wanted to start having sexual relations with other men. Even though there are closer

sexual health clinics to his home, he immediately decided to go to 56 Dean Street because it is in Soho, an area that he was already familiar with and that he identified as welcoming of his sexual identity. He found the clinic to be non-judgmental: 'once I went there and they asked me if I had unprotected sex, and I said yes, and I was expecting a lecture, and they just said, oh well, you know, it happens'. Vlad explained that, in his opinion, staff at 56 Dean Street seem to be really proud of 'serving the gay community' and to be realistic about gay life: 'anywhere else I've been in and outside London, they are giving you sexual advice which is not very applicable, like oral sex through a condom which maybe 0.01% of people would do'. Luke, too, thought of Soho as supporting 'the gay lifestyle' precisely because of the clinic: 'other areas like Vauxhall, you don't go there in the daytime to do gay things, and same with Shoreditch, those are night places, whereas Soho supports that kind of lifestyle'. Even though other clinics are present in London, 56 Dean Street is the only one within a popular gay space, which may be the reason why so many gay men get to know about its presence and decide to go there and get tested. Noteworthy, from this point of view, is Michael's position. As mentioned in 4.3, Michael works for a sexual health charity that specialises in people living with HIV. Even though he recognised the 'immense work' done by 56 Dean Street, and being regularly in touch with them due to his job, he also highlighted:

I work with lots of African men who do not even identify as gay (...) and I see Asians in forced marriages, and I've seen that for them Old Compton Street would actually isolate them because it's very

White. We have a lot to do within our own community to create safe spaces for everyone.

These words recall what Michael had also said in connection to men who do not identify as gay (but who seek sexual relations with other men nonetheless) preferring to use a sauna in East London more than the one in Soho because if someone they know sees them in the area they can get away with it without being associated with the stereotypes connected to that space (see 3.3). In his opinion, the fact that these men avoid going to Soho to visit its gay bars and sauna means that they will be even more unlikely to visit its sexual health clinic. While Michael's remarks shed new light on issues around the social, economic, and cultural accessibility of Soho, as discussed in 2.2, and call for the use of an intersectional approach when considering all aspects connected to the idea of a communal gay space, it is undeniable that 56 Dean Street is now understood by many gay men in London as the first reference point when it comes to their sexual health (Cain 2015; Cash 2014a, 2014b, 2015a; Roberts 2014a; Wharton 2017: 22, 53).

More recently, around 3,000 gay men have started visiting 56 Dean Street every month for chemo-related issues specifically. Of these, only a hundred, however, directly ask for help in connection to their chemsex addiction. Even before the appointment of Stuart as substance use lead, 56 Dean Street was already hosting CODE, a weekly walk-in clinic in partnership with Antidote (an LGBTQ pan-London drug and alcohol service) for gay men who engage in chemsex, where they could get vaccinations, PEP, take tests,

speak to drug workers, and find the support they needed when they decided to come to terms with their addiction. During this time Stuart, who was working at the CODE clinic, understood that chemo use and sexual health could not be considered as two separate issues anymore. He drew from his own experience as a young escort in 1990s London. After sleeping with over 2,000 men in the course of two years, and after becoming HIV positive at the age of 23, he tried to take comfort in drugs, crystal meth in particular, until he was eventually arrested for dealing cocaine. This traumatic experience pushed him to change path and, consequently, to begin volunteering for a drug service in order to help others in a similar situation. Around this time, new online technologies were becoming extremely popular, making sex readily available while, at the same time, new drugs were emerging on the gay scene, making way for chemsex. Stuart (in Lytton 2016) explains:

we noticed people presenting issues around their sex lives and sexual behaviour that were relating to their online experiences, particularly with gay men, who favour geo-sexual networking apps. (...) It's become very much the norm for how people pursue dating or sex, and we felt that our job is not just to prescribe medicine but to support them in their sexual wellbeing. That means exploring all the ways in which they experience sex, love, dating and romance. (...) Sexual health clinics in England need to think outside the biomedical response of just testing and treating people. We cannot ignore the role that technology and apps are playing in our

patients' lives. (...) We've found that if we provide a space in clinics for people to explore these issues, quite often they say they haven't told lovers, friends or families. What they're saying is this is the only place they can explore these issues, and we have to honour that and acknowledge the responsibility that comes with that.

More than telling people not to engage in chemsex, most sexual health and drug experts seem to be pushing for gay men to know their limits and to make sure that they do it safely. Even when it comes to injecting drugs, the general advice and what experts want to teach gay men is how to do it in a way that does not put their health, and that of others, at risk. This is why they often offer advice on how to inject safely, how to use tools such as glass pipes, and how to recognise when enough is enough. Stuart believes that complete and sudden abstinence from chemsex is not the answer given that, in some cases, withdrawal from chems requires medical assistance. Instead, a gradual reduction in both their chems and apps use represents a more feasible goal that can help users reconnect with themselves and their lives in the long run. This means dealing with the issue in a more practical and compassionate way than just censoring drug use altogether as it might have been in the past. At the base is the understanding that many gay men are engaging in chemsex not because it is fun, or at least not only because of that, but because, as seen in 4.2 and 4.3, they are trying to negotiate their sexual identities in a world that very often does not give them the opportunity to be themselves or that, instead, forces

them to be themselves even when they do not want to (Cain 2015; Cash 2014a, 2014b, 2015a; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Guilteneane 2016; Moloney 2016; Roberts 2014a; Wharton 2017: 22, 53, 170).

While clinics like 56 Dean Street are doing an amazing job, there is a need for other spaces where gay men can find both information and support. Reflecting on how chemsex culture has somehow transformed the gay urban geography of the city, Faye (2015) notices:

the chill-out is a shifting scene, without a fixed locus. Manifesting temporarily in private homes, it resides invisibly in the desires and anxieties of the men who participate in it — in their minds and their dicks and their smartphones. But to try and map out all of our own and each others' desires in the city's polluted darkness is no easy task.

Sure enough, as explored in 4.2, the proliferation of chill-out and chemsex parties has somehow shifted the focus of the gay scene from the gay bar to the gay club first, and consequently from the gay club to gay men's private homes. The use of online apps and chems has contributed to the fragmentation of traditional gay spaces and communities in favour of more fluid and temporary experiences. This is not to say that online apps like Grindr or that the use of chems among gay men are directly responsible for the closing down of gay spaces in Soho but it is undeniable that these two factors, especially if

combined, are contributing to the process. Does this mean that, as many critics often maintain (see 1.4), Soho is now doomed and that we are just witnessing the unfolding of its disappearance as a gay space that can provide a safe environment for gay men? Once again, as in the case of 56 Dean Street, the answer seems to come from Soho itself. One example of how Soho is coping with the current situation is Let's Talk About Gay Sex & Drugs (LTGSD), a monthly event organised by Cash (see 4.2) where people can take it in turns to discuss their relationship with chemsex and other aspects of gay life through stand-up poetry and music. Every month a different theme is tackled, such as sex, love, mental health, pride, porn, PrEP. The night started in March 2014 due to Cash's own need to find a space where he could talk about his own experience with chemsex and where he could help others do the same. It was first organised at Manbar in Charing Cross Road then, when the venue closed in early 2015, it moved to Ku Klub in Lisle Street: 'what this trendy literary night in the heart of London's gay community does is provide peer-led support (...) that, arguably, is far more effective than any lectures from doctors, drug counsellors, or traditional support groups' (Wharton 2017: 167). LTGSD is supported by 56 Dean Street, sponsored by *Boyz*, *QX* and *Attitude* magazines, and represents a great opportunity to circulate information about the work of drug and sexual health charities such as Antidote and GMFA. The night has increasingly grown in popularity and now represents for many gay men a non-judgmental space where they can freely discuss their chemsex habits. According to Stuart, LTGSD has now turned into 'a cultural safe space for the community' (Lopez 2016). Monty Moncrieff (in Cash 2015a), chief executive at LGBTQ charity London Friend, also agrees and explains that spaces like



LTGSD are 'a great opportunity for the community to shape our own responses and talk to our peers, and not stigmatise others' drug use and sexual choices'. In his opinion, given that chemsex is not just about chems and sex but about 'belonging, identity, relationships and intimacy (...), our confidence to navigate all of this improves when we understand and support each other' (Cash 2013a, 2015a, 2015b, 2016b; Let's Talk About Gay Sex and Drugs 2014).

What is particularly interesting about the spaces, the works, and the people mentioned in this chapter when discussing chemsex, is that they are all somehow connected to both Soho and each other. For instance, Cash organises a night in Soho and has written extensively about people like Stuart and spaces like 56 Dean Street, both in his articles and in his theatrical pieces. Stuart works at 56 Dean Street, is a regular at LTGSD, and is now the main reference point in the UK in connection to chemsex, often giving interviews or appearing, together with Cash, in films such as Fairman and Gogarty's *Chemsex* (largely shot in Soho, 56 Dean Street, and Manbar) and Lopez's *Let's Talk About Gay Sex and Drugs*. Both Stuart and Cash also contributed to Marion's *G O'Clock* short film, and have formed part of discussion panels such as *The Rise of Chemsex*, at the Soho Theatre in November 2015, together with Fairman and Gogarty. Owen, for his part, collaborated with 56 Dean Street to set up his website and has also taken part in LTGSD. Moreover, many of them, including Wharton, Stuart, Cash, and Owen, have started their works around chemsex because they were directly involved in it. This is important from the point of view of this research because their personal experiences fill the gap that was left by the lack of discussion around chemsex in the interviews that I

conducted, as acknowledged in 4.2. At the same time, the fact that much of the work on chemsex that is analysed in this section revolves around Soho even though, as suggested in other sections of this chapter, the use of online apps and that of chemo (or the use of both for chemsex) seem to have somehow pushed many gay men away from visible gay spaces, and Soho in particular, means that Soho as a gay space may still have a role to play in the urban gay panorama and in the life of many gay men in London.

#### **4.5 — Conclusion**

This chapter explored different kinds of gay spaces and communities that set themselves as potential alternatives to the traditional gay district model. The first space analysed is that of the Internet. In the last few years, online apps that use GPS programmes have become incredibly popular among gay men. These apps represent quicker and cheaper ways for gay men to meet each other, increasing the number of possible connections and allowing them to experiment with their sexual identities from the privacy of their homes. While online spaces may offer new possibilities for the creation of gay spaces and communities, the same social and cultural dynamics that are present in offline spaces are often reproduced online, with many users discriminating in terms of race/ethnicity, age, perceived masculinity, etc., showing that online spaces may not differ much from their offline counterparts.

Thanks to online apps, sex has become readily available to most gay men. At the same time, the array of options and possible sexual partners that

online users are presented with has also given way to the development of a widespread practice that sees sex increasingly coupled with the use of recreational drugs in what is often now called chemsex. Many gay men engage in chemsex to feel a connection with others and break away from society's norms and constrictions. Chemsex parties, which are usually organised via online apps, take place everywhere in the city and are now redefining London's urban gay panorama. However, even though most gay men manage to control their use of chems for sex, many others end up becoming addicted to chemsex, with major consequences for both their physical and mental health.

The practice of chemsex has also contributed to a significant rise in the number of STIs registered in London. Some of the drugs used during chemsex lower people's inhibitions while also making them feel more affectionate towards others. As a result, many gay men find themselves having sexual relations with numerous partners, including unprotected intercourse. For a community that has spent the past 30 years trying to fight stigma connected to HIV and even longer to fight prejudices connected to gay sex more broadly, chemsex represents a very difficult aspect of gay life to negotiate but an aspect of gay life nonetheless. All these elements have had a major impact on the understanding of Soho as a gay space, with many people suggesting that there is no need for it now that connections can be made online, and others preferring to attend a chemsex party more than spending money in the district. Still, signs of resistance can be found in the area, with spaces such as health clinic 56 Dean Street and open-mic night LTGSD providing much-needed support for those people who are struggling to navigate their lives as gay men in London.

## Conclusions

## 5.1 — Do We Still Need Soho?

In 2007, at the age of 21, I moved to London to spend 9 months studying at UCL. I was finding myself in a different country, speaking a different language, and living a different life. It was not, however, my first time in London. When I was 15 I spent a week in Canterbury as part of a school trip. One day our teachers took us to London. At the time I did not think much of it. It rained the whole time and the only part of the day that I enjoyed was our visit to The British Museum. When years later I was faced with the decision of choosing a destination for my year abroad, either London or Madrid, the latter seemed the most obvious choice. I had never been to Madrid before but on another school trip, an exchange with some students from Seville when I was 17, I had fallen in love with the language, the country, and a Spanish boy called Carlos.

I had always known I was different. I hated playing football in a country where football is sacred, but I loved playing with dolls. Even though my family never told me that *that* was wrong, I learnt, from a young age, that *that* was not what I was supposed to do either. I never really fitted in, at least not with the other boys. In middle school, these boys would spend our daily breaks in the toilets or the changing rooms measuring the length of their dicks and playing with each other. Still, I was the one they called gay. As it turned out, they were right. They knew before I did, which is probably the reason why I was never invited to their sausage parties. A few years later, I discovered the power of

online pornography. There had always been images of naked women circulating among my friends but never images of naked men. Finally, thanks to the Internet, I was able to look at them, and they all looked so irresistibly handsome. I was gay, no doubt. A couple of years later, all it took me was a glance to fall in love with him.

Carlos and I were together for 18 months. Being both underage and living in different countries, we only managed to actually see each other a few times, the rest of our relationship being made of Skype calls and Messenger chats. He stayed at mine in Bologna a few times and I stayed at his in Seville. Neither of us, however, were out to our families and friends. Everyone could see that I was walking on cloud nine but he made me promise that I would not tell and I did not, although the secrecy was somehow killing me. This is why, as soon as he decided to break up with me, I told my friends the whole story. I was heartbroken, but I also felt free. Gradually, I also told my family. While from the very first night my mum told me that nothing could have ever changed the love both my parents felt for me, it did take me a while to somehow guide them through the situation, to make them understand what it meant to be gay, and I know they must have struggled to negotiate their unconditional love for me with their Christian values and, most of all, the constant fear that someone would want to hurt me because of who I am.

My friends, on the other hand, could not have been happier to hear the news. We were all starting our first year at university and Il Cassero, the only LGBTQ space in Bologna at the time, soon became our second home. Il Cassero is situated at the margin of the city centre, inside an old fort. I had just

got my driving licence, so I would borrow my sister's car to drive there. My friends and I would meet at the club every Wednesday around 11:30pm, and we would party until the early morning to the sound of pop music and evergreen diva classics. To get in, you needed to get an annual membership card. This meant that, at the time, Il Cassero was almost completely gay. The only straight people in the club were those women who would come along with their gay friends. Straight men seemed to be less willing to sign up for membership at a gay club. After all, going to Il Cassero still carried some sort of stigma. Our nights would end up at a 24h café to fill up on pizza or pastries or, if I got lucky, in some parking lot around town or somewhere around the Colli Bolognesi, the hills surrounding the city. During the summer, a seasonal LGBTQ night was also held every Friday night in the city's biggest park, I Giardini Margherita, doubling our weekly fun. Needless to say, the darkest corners of the park became alive at night. I remember the summer of 2007 as a particularly special one. I was about to leave for my year abroad and every night spent at Il Cassero or at the Chalet dei Giardini was a night to remember.

By this time, I had decided that going to Madrid was probably not the wisest choice. My Spanish was already fluent whereas my English was not. Even though London did not really appeal to me, I knew it was the right call. Before leaving, however, I took advantage of the fact that one of my best friends was spending her year abroad in Swansea to go back to the UK one more time and familiarise myself with London a bit further. In particular, I explored the area around Bloomsbury, as I knew that UCL would soon become my main reference point and I had applied for accommodation within the district. Given that my

hostel was conveniently situated behind Piccadilly Circus, it was with great excitement that one night I decided to visit Soho. At the time, I was not quite sure of what Soho really was. I probably heard or read about it and I knew that it was considered the gay area of London. Still, I had no idea of what to expect. Perhaps I would have found male sex workers entertaining tourists from behind their windows like girls in Amsterdam? Would I have been able to spot the gay bars or were they going to be hidden underground spaces? Would they have let me in? Would it have been safe to go there by myself?

I entered Soho from its south-west side, somewhere behind Piccadilly Circus. It did not take me long to get lost. I had a map with me but I did not want to look like the tourist I was. So I kept walking in the dark and semi-empty streets hoping to spot something that would look like a gay bar but I struggled to see any bar at all. When I saw a man in his 40s coming out of a building I decided to ask for help. He seemed harmless and, most importantly, he looked at me the way only a gay man would look at another gay man. I recognised that universal language and I felt safe. I stopped him and asked with my broken English: 'Where is Soho?'. The man looked at me with a puzzled expression and then smiled. Obviously, I was already in Soho. I did not know that for sure, but he did, and he also knew that a young gay man with a foreign accent walking in the dark and looking for Soho while already being in Soho could only be looking for *that* Soho. He asked me where I was from and what I was doing there. I told him. He looked at me for a few seconds, looked around, then said: 'I'm going to Soho too, I can take you there'. I could not believe my luck. In my mind, I had already made a friend who could have showed me around. 'I live



here' — said the man pointing at the door he had just come out from — 'why don't you come upstairs for a cup of tea and then we can go to Soho together?'. I panicked. All I could think of was my mother's face when they told her that her son had disappeared, or been found dead somewhere in Soho. I thanked the man and walked away. 'Soho is not that way mate' — said the man. I kept walking until I saw the lights of Piccadilly Circus. I guess I was not ready for Soho after all.

September came, and I was off to London once again. Within the first week at UCL I met Emanuel, who was soon to become my best friend. He was an Erasmus student from Rome. With a couple of girls, we formed an inseparable group and it did not take long for us to end up in Soho, this time from the front door. I just could not believe my eyes. Everything I had hoped for and more was there. I finally understood why it was called the gay district. I had never seen so many gay bars, and so many gay men, all in one place. In Bologna, I was allowed to be gay every Wednesday night. In Soho, I could be gay 24/7. We spent more nights in G-A-Y bar, G-A-Y Late, Heaven, The Astoria, Freedom, Ku Bar, than I will ever be able to remember. For the first time in my life, I could also take a boy home with me. The 9 months in London felt as if I only had so much time left to live and therefore had to live it to the fullest. I was not scared of Soho anymore, I was not scared of London either. Quite simply, I had fallen in love with the city (and its men). This was a life that neither Emanuel nor I could have ever lived in our hometowns. This is why we promised each other that after our graduations we would come back to London, no matter what.

In March 2009, I returned to the city to start an MA in American Studies at King's College London. I got a part-time job as a waiter in Covent Garden and a room close to Grey's Inn Road. When the following year Emanuel joined me, we moved in together with his friend Stella in a flat in Borough. All of us were studying and also working part-time in the West End. For a while, Emanuel and Stella worked at The Golden Lion, in Dean Street. As a waiter, I usually got to finish earlier at night, and I would walk up to the pub where my friends were working to go for a drink in Soho. Even though we had regular wages, tips were usually pretty good, especially for me. We would always go for dinner at Balans or some other new restaurant in the area, and then jump from bar to bar down Old Compton Street. When Stella started a relationship with one of the barmen in G-A-Y Bar, our nights could only end up in one place, often waiting for her boyfriend to finish work at 2am, dancing and drinking and having the time of our lives. We almost felt like V.I.P.s in there, jumping the queue outside and getting served first. People knew us and we knew people. We had become part of Soho.

One night, in Heaven, I met a guy from Trinidad and Tobago called Liam. He was fairly new to London and mentioned that he had never seen Tower Bridge. I offered to take him there. He insisted on walking instead of taking a cab. It was 3 or 4am and even though it sounded like a crazy idea, I was drunk enough to go along with it. We made our way towards the Southbank but when we reached The National Theatre, we realised that five young men had appeared from nowhere and were coming towards us. We instantly knew what was happening but we had nowhere to run and decided to walk past them

anyway. Eventually, I realised that Liam was not by my side anymore. I turned around and noticed that he had been surrounded by the young men who were each pushing him and asking for money. I did not hesitate to break the pack and pull Liam out of the circle, only to find myself in the middle, with someone holding my arms up and pushing my head down, while another was kicking my face. I think Liam must have helped me in turn, and I also guess the gang somehow just tried their luck to see if they could get something out of it but did not really insist much once they saw that we were fighting back. I had bought my first smartphone the previous week and I remember thinking: 'Fuck you! I worked hard for this, I'm not going to give it to you!'. It all happened really quickly. We managed to escape and run along the Southbank until we turned right and saw a security guard inside what I later found out to be ITV studios. We knocked on the door visibly shaken until we were finally let in. I never forgave myself for how stupid and carefree I was that night. I had felt so free and safe in Soho that I almost forgot I was not in Soho anymore.

That same night, before the attack, Liam had told me about this app that you could use to find other gay men around you called Grindr. I had previously used a couple of websites to meet people but, given that I was new to the smartphone world, I had never used Grindr before. It was not until a few weeks later that someone brought up the app in a conversation again and I finally decided to download it. A new phase started in both my life as a gay man and my life as a gay man in London more specifically. Whereas before that my spare time was mainly spent in Soho (occasionally in East London), and it is there where I would meet other gay men for the most part, once I started using

Grindr my understanding of the city completely changed. I found myself chatting with tens of guys, sometimes at the same time, day and night, and travelling to areas I had not even heard of before. In the past, I had only rarely spent the night at someone else's place after a night out. Usually, we would go back to mine, where I knew my flatmates also were. That made me feel safer. With Grindr, however, I became much more adventurous and started to explore the city and its possibilities, often putting myself in situations that, now, I deem as extremely risky given that I only barely knew the person I was going to meet. I did not stop going to Soho, but given that Stella broke up with her boyfriend, and both Emanuel and I were increasingly busy with university and work, Grindr represented a much easier and quicker way to meet people. Still today I walk past buildings or streets, or I go to areas I do not usually go to and I find myself thinking 'I had sex here once'. Soho was my shell, Grindr became my key to the sea full of fish that is London.

While the description that I have provided so far makes me look like a party animal who only thought about going out and meeting new guys, the reality was quite the opposite. I was working hard to start my PhD and even though I had no background in Sexuality Studies or LGBTQ Studies, I knew that I wanted to work on something to do with those fields, and with Soho more specifically. I had started to hear people saying bad things about Soho, saying that it was too gay and too camp, as if that was something to be ashamed of. I was going around with purple trousers and a scarf with all the colours of the rainbow and, to me, Soho was still a magical place where everyone could be free to be themselves. I wanted to understand why these people were so

negative about it. At the same time, I was also desperately trying to find a boyfriend. My last relationship had ended in 2007, at the beginning of the summer. My then boyfriend had the bad idea of asking me to choose between my year abroad in London and him. I egoistically chose London. As some sort of apt punishment for my decision, I spent the following 6 years on my own. Initially, it was fun and I could not have asked for more. After a few years, however, I started believing that every single night I was going to spend out with my friends was going to be the night I would have met my Mr Right. Needless to say, the more I tried to look for him, the more frustrated I got for not finding him, with only some random Mr Right Now contacted on Grindr to fill the void. All I wanted was to find someone I could introduce to my family and build a future with. The endless options of Grindr had left me disillusioned and tired. Going on a date had become some sort of robotic experience and even when I did meet guys who could potentially work, there was always someone else messaging and the cycle would start all over again. None was ever as good as the next one.

Eventually, I started my PhD at UCL and concentrated most of my attention on my studies. Money increasingly became an issue and nights in became much more frequent than nights out. One day, I went on a date with a guy I had met online and who I had been chatting with for a couple of weeks. Ironically enough, it did not happen on Grindr but on a different website. Will is currently my partner and biggest supporter. In the past 5 years, we have been through yet another phase together. We live together, go places together, we do the shop, we buy furniture and plants, we plan holidays, we spend time with my

family, we dream about the future, we (constantly) bicker, we are a couple. I guess we live a very *normal* life and, who knows, we may even consider taking a step further and create a family of our own. Due to work commitments and to the fact that I could only work part-time during my PhD, Netflix has been much more of a night activity for us than Soho or any other place in London. Still, when we do manage to afford a dinner out or we want to go for a (non-alcoholic — how do people change!) drink, we always somehow end up in Soho. We love Soho and even though that might have something to do with my research, it always feels like going back home for us who are both originally from outside the UK.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had not met Will. Would I be on Grindr? Would I be going out in Soho or somewhere else? Would I have met someone else? Would I be waiting for Friday to go to the next chill-out party? Would I be putting myself in dangerous situations for my physical and mental health? At the same time, being in a monogamous relationship, are we precluding ourselves from something? Are we doing it because we want to or because we think it is the right thing to do? Does this make us any better than other gay men who find themselves in a different situation because they did not have the opportunity to meet a partner or because they quite simply do not want to? While it is impossible to answer the first set of questions, I like to believe that the fact that this research was produced shows that, far from considering ourselves as holding some sort of higher ground, Will and I are only one expression of many different realities gay men are going through today, none better than the other and all just as valid.

I decided to share my own story here to highlight how, throughout the process of research, I could very often relate to many of my interviewees while, other times, I could only listen and try to understand their points of view, their decisions, and the stories behind them. For instance, with some participants like Cristiano and Jonathan, I share that sense of possibility that we all felt when we went to Soho for the first time. Similarly, like Luke and Michael, I do feel a sense of ownership and 'social empowerment' (Roger) whenever I find myself in Soho, the idea that not only am I allowed to be gay in that space but also that 'if someone was being homophobic with me (...) on Old Compton Street, I would just go like — why are you here? You know it's the gay area, if you don't like it go away' (Roger). At the same time, my own standpoint as both a researcher and a gay man living in London was often challenged by the stories that some participants shared, as in the case of Lewis or Rupert, who both felt somehow excluded from Soho because of their race or age. This forced me to undergo a personal reconsideration of my privileges and to think about issues that, probably too often in the past, I may have overlooked because they did not apply to the specificities of my own case.

Sure enough, this thesis is not aimed at defining the right way to be gay or at describing a sort of ideal of gay life every gay man should aspire to. The fact that I went through different experiences in my life, and I thought that each one was valid at the time, means that the phase I am going through at the moment may really be just a phase. Maybe one day I will get married, or maybe Will and I will decide not to, or we will break up and I will be dancing the night away in Soho, or Vauxhall, or I will be travelling to a stranger's place in Zone 4.

Maybe I will be in a polyamorous relationship, or I will be using chems, or I will be taking PrEP, or PEP. There are endless possibilities for my future because there are endless possibilities already happening for gay men in London. As shown in this thesis, all experiences are just as valid and worth considering.

Wharton (2017: 255) explains:

too many gay people spend their time throwing shade at other gay people; I did it once: I made comments I regret about people choosing to have sex in saunas. I'm a dick. But we can all of us change: I changed. And the community must change now.

In his opinion it is necessary to recognise that what we define as the gay community is a mix of many different identities:

we are all incredibly different. Take me, for instance. I've been a fresh-faced young man on the scene, trying to cram everything and everybody into my nights out; a married twenty-something in a committed relationship; a country boy who likes walks on a Sunday with his dog; an inner-city single; a party boy; a scene queen and a chemsex addict, all by the age of thirty. Life for all of us in our so-called community is different. When you look at things in this way, it's perhaps easier to understand why some people refuse to label themselves as anything at all, something which is



becoming more common among millennials. Equality has progressed, but it hasn't accounted for individualism; instead it's grouped us all together as 'one', when we are actually anything but. We simply are not as similar as we are told to believe (Wharton 2017: 14-5).

This seems to support what has already been advanced throughout the thesis regarding the shifting nature of gay identities which constantly change and evolve in connection to time and space, making it impossible to identify a specific gay type given that even just one person, as in the case of Wharton or as in my own case, can identify with different types throughout their life according to their own personal experiences. It also problematises once again the idea of community that is often used to group gay men under one big definition. Even understanding community in its postmodern terms, as has been proposed in this thesis, presents limitations. The life that I live as a gay man in London today is very different from that of another gay man who spends his weekends at chemsex parties, or that of someone who only attends queer parties, or who only meets people online. Moreover, I am aware of the fact that I am White, I had access to higher education, I am healthy, I have a supportive family, and even though my life has not always been easy having known economic difficulties, gay bashing, and being constantly reminded that I am a foreigner in a country that is not my own no matter how much at home I feel (see Brexit), I am also aware that I probably come from a privileged position compared to others. How can we think of ourselves as a community if we never

intersect? We might share a similar sexual identity, and we may be seen by society at large as one big group, but is that enough to be one? How can we feel as one when we do not even want to be in the same space? Are we really just individuals unable to understand each other and feel for each other?

Once again, as in the case of the response to the rise of STIs in London, one possible answer seems to come from Soho. In the early hours of Sunday, 12 June 2016, 29-year-old Omar Mateen entered Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, with a legally obtained assault rifle and a handgun, and started firing on the crowd of party-goers, killing forty-nine and injuring fifty-three people. Not only was this the most deadly mass shooting in recent US history, but also 'the worst targeted mass killing of LGBT people in the Western world since the Holocaust' and a direct attack towards LGBTQ Latinos in particular, with 90% of the victims being of Puerto Rican, Colombian, Venezuelan, and Mexican origin (Jones 2016). Opened in 2004, the venue was a community centre that held numerous LGBTQ initiatives and events throughout the years and had become a sort of reference point for many LGBTQ people in Orlando. It is not a coincidence that many people, in the aftermath of the attack, referred to Pulse as a safe haven, a home, and a sanctuary. The shooter was not targeting people indiscriminately, he was targeting a specific group and a specific place. This is probably the reason why the shooting 'resonates so strongly with LGBT people' worldwide (Abraham 2016), because 'every town, every city has its Pulse' (Aldarondo 2016). Many popular LGBTQ people described the shooting as an attack on the LGBTQ community as a whole, with the victims being identified as *brothers* and *sisters* and the Orlando LGBTQ community as *our*

*community and our family* (Ackerman 2016; Agren 2016; Alvarez 2016; Beckett 2016; Behan 2016; Caught 2016; CBS 2016b; City of Orlando 2016a; Esclad 2016; Hinckley 2016; Huriash 2016; Pulse 2016; Pulse of Orlando 2016; Robertson 2016; Rothaus 2016; Thrasher 2016; Timm 2016; Twocock 2016).

Just over 36 hours after the massacre, thousands of people (up to 20,000 according to City Hall officials) gathered in Soho for a vigil organised by local bars and groups and publicised through the Facebook page London Stands With Orlando Vigil (2016). Even though Old Compton Street, and the Admiral Duncan pub in particular, had become the meeting point for the event, it soon became clear that Soho's main street could not accommodate all the people that had shown up to demonstrate their support, forcing many to fill up its side streets. People were holding banners with slogans such as 'Love Always Wins', 'London Stands with Orlando', and pictures of the victims. A bipartisan group of British politicians showed up at the vigil, including Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Scottish Conservative Leader Ruth Davidson and former Education Secretary Nicky Morgan. Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, was also present:

this hideous and cowardly attack on LGBT+ people in Orlando is an attack on our freedoms and values (...). London's LGBT+ community knows what it's like to face a murderous attack — the lives lost in the bombing of the Admiral Duncan here in our own city will never be forgotten. But no one should be frightened away from being who they are by this attack and we must carry on

proudly celebrating our differences as a city (Withey 2016).

I was there too. The news of the attack had left me in tears. I somehow expected something like this to happen eventually. I did not know where, I did not know when, but I knew that, as LGBTQ people, we were obviously a target. After all, when have we not been? I remember spending hours in front of my laptop right after the attack, watching those images, slowly finding out about stories, names, and faces. All I could think of was how beautiful all the victims looked, how young they were, and how unfair the whole thing was. Having spent years researching on Soho as a safe space for gay men, and having felt safe myself in the district, I felt sick to my stomach. This should not have happened, not there. When I saw people sharing a message on Facebook advertising the vigil, I knew I had to go. I met my friend Josh there around 6:30pm. Old Compton Street was already busy and even though we wanted to reach the banners that we could see in front of the Admiral Duncan, we only managed to get as far as the intersection between Old Compton Street and Dean Street. We stood right in the middle. In a matter of minutes more people arrived. When I eventually turned around, I could not see the end of it in any direction. I have seen many Pride celebrations in Soho, but I had never witnessed so many people all at once. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. In a way, I felt as if that was my first real Gay Pride (Amrani and Quinn 2016; Chandler 2016; Collier 2016; Greig 2016; Hitchens 2016; Horton 2016; Hudson 2016; Lusher 2016; Mandell 2016; McCormick 2016h; Reuters 2016b; Sunnucks 2016; Worley 2016).

At 7pm two minutes of silence were observed by the crowd. Not a single pin drop could be heard in Soho apart from distant traffic noise and some disrespectful journalists who did not stop their live coverage, even though they were quickly hushed by people standing by. A young girl was sobbing behind me. It broke my heart. I was standing silent recording everything with my phone. I felt like a jerk for doing that, I could imagine people thinking that I was being disrespectful too, or that I only wanted to record that moment to share it on Facebook and get some easy *likes*. I was not. I was doing it because it felt as if the answer to my research question (What is the current function of Soho in the urban gay panorama?) was standing right in front of my eyes, the answer that I had been looking for for the past few years. The emotional moment was interrupted by a bell ringing and the silence was broken by a long applause, while forty-nine balloons were released in the air, one for each person killed. People started singing: 'We are here, we are queer, we will not live in fear'. The London Gay Men Choir sang Simon and Garfunkel's 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'. I turned around and hugged the young girl. We did not know each other, yet it felt as if she was not a stranger. After the choir's performance, the crowd started to disperse but many people, including my friend Josh and I, only moved to St. Anne's Church courtyard, where we laid flowers over the oak bench in memory of the victims of the Admiral Duncan bombing, and lit candles in memory of the Orlando victims. When the vigil was over, some remained in Soho, dancing, singing, and celebrating in the face of terror and hate.

The vigil worked as a sort of 'collective therapy', as a place where everyone could face the horrific events of Orlando together with other people

(Greig 2016). This was confirmed by many attendees, including Ku Bar owner Gary Henshaw, who described the event as:

one of *pure and organic unity*. Soho, and all that joined, felt every emotion possible; from the heartbreak of the Orlando attack, to respect for the victims, and yet a wave of *absolute pride and solidarity for standing as one, as an LGBT community* and showing Pride. There were tears, cheers, and pure love. In light of the attack at Orlando's Pulse club, *it was critical to show a community that will not stand down to terror or hate*, that we will continue to fight for equal rights, continue to stand for what we believe, continue to be proud of who we are, and who we love. *This vigil showed the London LGBT community at its best; united as one against hate* (QX Magazine 2016 — my emphasis).

He was echoed by G-A-Y owner Jeremy Joseph, who admitted:

as Old Compton Street got busier and busier, the atmosphere became more and more emotional. *Seeing thousands coming together became the true definition of community*. The vigil was important for several reasons. The attack on Pulse wasn't just an attack on Orlando, *it was an attack on every LGBT venue in the world*. We needed to show solidarity with the LGBT community in

Orlando. *It was important for people to have somewhere to come together. I think what has happened humanises us. (...) We are seen now as a community, especially in the way we've all come together. This attack has strengthened our place in the world'* (QX Magazine 2016 — my emphasis).

What happened in Orlando and the way it was perceived became extremely important elements in the analysis of the relationship between Soho and gay men in London. With so many resemblances to the Admiral Duncan bombing that killed three and wounded seventy on 30 April 1999, Orlando felt very close to home. Copeland, who planned the Soho attack, had sexual, ethnic, and religious communities as a target. He too carried out the attack in a gay venue that was considered, by most gay people, a safe space. Still, while connections with the Soho bombing were almost automatic for many LGBTQ people, it is quite unlikely that all people present at the Soho vigil (both LGBTQ and straight) were aware of what had happened in the district over 17 years ago. As explained in 2.1, apart from a few older people who had been living in London for over 30 years, most participants thought of Soho as a space that had always been gay and were not really aware of its history. Considering that the vigil was organised in just over 24 hours and that it was mainly advertised through a Facebook page, the turn out was impressive. Even though the presence of many politicians, famous activists and celebrities helped give prominence to the event, the number of people who attended spoke for itself. If we consider the register used to describe the vigil, however, we see a slight contradiction with

the findings of the research. Words like *we* and *our* kept coming up in people's interviews and statements. Moreover, what everyone seemed to highlight is how the attack on Pulse was an attack on every LGBTQ venue in the world. People from many countries identified with the victims, calling them *brothers* and *sisters* and defining the Orlando LGBTQ community as *our* community. It is not a coincidence that so many cities all around the world joined in vigils and acts of remembrance. Community, both in the aftermath of the shooting and during the vigil, was the word on everyone's lips. As opposed to the individualistic and fragmented image of the London gay community that participants and critics had portrayed, what seemed to be proposed at the vigil was one of 'pure and organic unity' (Chandler 2016; Greig 2016; Hartley 2016; Hitchens 2016; Horton 2016; *ITV News* 2016; Jones and Sich 2016; *Londonist* 2016; Lusher 2016; Mandell 2016; McCormick 2016h; Polaris 2016; Slawson 2016; Sunnucks 2016; Woolf et al. 2016).

Far from declaring a sudden rebirth of the gay community, the change in positions is nonetheless noteworthy. The Orlando shooting, of course, represented a dramatic event that shocked and upset many LGBTQ people. As often happens in the aftermath of an inexplicable and unpredicted tragedy, people come together to grieve. This may explain the register used and the stress on unity and togetherness. Still, set phrases aside and removing a layer of conformism, the vigil did show the willingness of many LGBTQ people to identify with something bigger than the self, with not only a community in London but one that overcomes national boundaries. Even though the reasons behind their presence may be dismissed as solidarity more than a declaration of



belonging to the gay community, what cannot be underestimated is how 'it was important for people to have somewhere to come together'. If Soho cannot be considered a gay district anymore, and people are trying to get away from what it represents, why was it chosen as the obvious location for the vigil? Why did so many people automatically congregate in its streets? The memory of the Admiral Duncan bombing was still very much alive for some, but not for all. Can the parallel between Pulse and Soho as gay spaces be enough to explain the choice? Why was the vigil organised in Soho and not in Vauxhall, or East London, or in different urban clusters or — why not — online? Is it true that Soho is not able to (re)create a sense of community? Is it really true that it does not have a space anymore in the life of gay men in London?

Most interviewees did think of Soho as a gay space, even though they were extremely critical about it. This is demonstrated by the fact that, when asked to place Soho on a map, the large majority identified the district as a very limited area that corresponds only to the main streets where gay venues are concentrated. In other words, even though Soho extends itself for half a square mile, they only identified Soho with its visibly gay part, with the idea that they had of Soho. In addition, most participants seemed to think of Soho in nostalgic terms, highlighting its limits but also expressing their emotional attachment to the area and how its venues and sense of community that could be experienced in its streets had somehow defined their own experience and helped them come to terms with their sexuality in the past. For many, in fact, Soho represented a fundamental factor in their coming out process, a rite of passage. More than being connected to a specific type or a specific age group, Soho was connected

to a specific experience. In this sense, many expressed their disappointment at the possibility that Soho might completely disappear, given the important role that it had played in their lives. This means that even if participants had exhausted the possibilities that Soho had to offer them, other people still in the process of coming out may find in the area the same support participants themselves found in the past. Finally, most participants, even distancing themselves from a definition of community, did end up using the terminology throughout the interviews, which may give away their longing for a community after all and reveal their current attitude towards Soho more as part of a trend than stemming from real detachment.

Sure enough, while many gay men may be trying to get away from the area, Soho still represents, to the eyes of many others, a gay space. However, because its function and relevance for gay men in London is constantly being redefined and has never before been so much in transition given the disappearance of many gay venues, it is necessary to somehow mark the space and make sure that some kind of memory will always be preserved. As Jude explained, advances often make people forgetful: 'if there was some sort of big flip, would we be able to start again without Soho? The community would be dispersed, we wouldn't have a centre point'. For him, Soho is important 'for the preservation of our culture and history'. He noticed that, at the moment, there is no statue or monument to commemorate any sort of gay activism. Pavlo agreed with him, saying that it is good to have 'a nostalgic, kind of historical place to remember' and he proposed to create a walk of fame, similar to the one in Hollywood, to remember famous gay people who contributed to gay culture.

Luke, for his part, said that 'Soho is like a memorial, you need it almost'. Finally, Michael said: 'I do think Soho has a place, we need to keep the history and the memory of it, and also the presence there. We have a duty to teach younger generations our history and culture and how we got to this particular space'.

In truth, a similar memorial already exists. The Spirit of Soho (see *Figure 3*) is a mural that has been sitting at the junction between Broadwick Street and Carnaby Street since 1991. It represents a community memorial not only because many residents and traders of Soho actively participated in its creation, but also because many famous exponents and landmarks of the district are depicted in the mural. In the centre, a woman, representing the Parish of St. Anne's, holds up her skirt on which an illustrated map of Soho is reproduced. From the fruit and vegetable market in Berwick Street to the Italian and French restaurants and flags around Frith and Greek Street, and from the theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue to the lanterns of Chinatown, most of the district's attractions feature in the artwork. At the bottom of her skirt, a crowd of famous (and less famous) Soho residents is gathered around a clock. Four characters, in particular, catch the eye of the observer: Mozart, Marx, Theresa Cornelys and Casanova. At the turn of the hour, three of them animate: Theresa winks at Casanova who blows her kisses, while Karl Marx sips on a bottle of Coke that comes out from behind his book. On the two sides of the central panel, six squares depict moments of Soho's life: the shopping in Carnaby Street; the shows at The Palladium Theatre; the work in media studios and tailoring workshops; the international cuisine of Soho's restaurants; and the drinking crowds of Soho's clubs. What is missing from this memorial, however, is any

reference to Soho as a specifically gay space. The artwork was obviously created before the gay takeover of the area but it also raises a very important question: how can gay people leave their own mark on the map and the history of the district? In June 2016, President Obama designated the Stonewall Inn as the first national monument to gay rights. Even Pulse's owners declared their intention to reopen the club as a sort of memorial, 'Stonewall South', as Gray (2016) suggests. Whether Soho will just become a memorial or if it will rise again as a gay space is still uncertain. What is sure, however, is that without the active participation of gay men in the process, the narrative of the district will be written by people who may have no interest in preserving its gay history and atmosphere. At stake are not just the gay venues of the district, but its own memory and a sense of community among gay men in London (*CBS News* 2016a; Huriash 2016; *Soho Clarion* 1991: n.76, 2006: n.126).

While this thesis contributes to previous academic research on the development and disappearance of gay neighbourhoods around the world by exploring the relationship between Soho and gay men in London, it can only suggest general trends more than definite answers. Far from characterising the findings of the thesis as an indisputable truth, they can nonetheless provide useful insights on the study of both gay spaces and gay identities/communities in London. Participants in this research identified a series of factors that are contributing to their detachment from Soho as a gay space and therefore facilitating the process of gentrification that is happening in the area (see 1.4): the fragmentation based on economic disposability, age, race/ethnicity, image and body type, masculinity, (dis)ability (etc.), among gay men (2.2); the dilution

of gay spaces due to the increasing presence of straight people in the area (2.3); the lack of political union among gay men, and LGBTQ people more broadly, now that many goals have already been achieved (2.4); the seeming sense of safety that many gay men feel outside Soho (2.3); the normative image of gay life that is often promoted as a model for all gay men and the feeling of shame attached to different models (2.4); the development of other gay spaces in the urban gay panorama (3.3 and 3.4); the use of mobile apps for meeting other gay men (4.1); the use of chemsex as an alternative to the gay bar model (4.2); and the rise in the number of STIs among gay men in London (4.3). These factors are all somehow interconnected and are the expression of a wider malaise that is affecting gay men in London and that is reflecting on the use that they make of Soho. At the same time, it has also been shown how the district, while often being disregarded by many gay men themselves, can somehow still function as a place where gay identities and communities are formed (see 4.4 and 5.1). Its future as a gay space, however, is as much in the hands of developers and big corporations as it is in those of gay men themselves. Within the next few years, the whole district will go through a process of spatial reorganisation, with huge consequences for its residents, traders, and communities. If gay men, and LGBTQ people more broadly, will manage to come together and fight for their place in the district, Soho will still represent a reference point in the urban gay panorama. If not, they will be forced to find new spaces and give them new meanings. While this does not necessarily represent a negative process given that it implies the expansion of gay identities and spaces in the urban panorama, it would also lead to an erasure of any sort of gay stake in Soho.

**Tables and Figures**

Table 1

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Nationality	Profession	Live in London	Zone	Born in London	How long in London	Identity
<b>Cristiano</b>	41-45	White - South American	British/Brazilian	Lecturer	yes	2	no	22Y	G
<b>Vince</b>	31-35	White - Welsh	British	PhD Student	yes	2	no	15Y	G
<b>Felipe</b>	31-35	Other - Hispanic	Peruvian	Student	yes	2	no	6M	G
<b>Rod</b>	31-35	White - American	US	Film-maker	yes	1	no	7Y	G
<b>Charles</b>	41-45	White - English	British	Administrator	yes	3	yes	n/a	G
<b>Roger</b>	26-30	White - English	British	Teaching fellow	yes	3	no	4Y	G
<b>Tarun</b>	46-50	Mixed - White and Indian	British	Tutor in higher education	yes	1	yes	n/a	G
<b>Donald</b>	41-45	White - American	British/US	Lecturer	yes	1	no	13Y	B
<b>Ashley</b>	31-35	Black - American	US	Consultant	yes	1	no	5Y	G
<b>Brian</b>	36-40	White - English	British	Doctor	yes	2	no	2Y	G
<b>John</b>	51-55	White - English	British	Unemployed	yes	1	no	48Y	Q

<b>Pavlo</b>	46-50	White - Ukrainian	British	Nurse	yes	6	no	17Y	G
<b>Ben</b>	26-30	White - English	British	Student	yes	2	no	4Y	G
<b>Jonathan</b>	26-30	Mixed - White and Asian	British	Student/ Film-maker	yes	2	yes	n/a	G
<b>Arjun</b>	21-25	Asian - Indian	Indian	Town planner	yes	1	no	6M	G
<b>William</b>	66-70	White - English	British	Historian	yes	4	no	47Y	G
<b>Luke</b>	21-25	White - Irish	British/Irish	Behavioural insight analyst	yes	1	no	4Y	G
<b>Vlad</b>	31-35	White - Polish	Polish	Manager at university	yes	1	no	1Y	G
<b>Rupert</b>	61-65	White - English	British	Software developer	yes	3	no	30Y	G
<b>Matt</b>	26-30	White - English	British	Manager at university	yes	3	no	5Y	G
<b>Carl</b>	61-65	White - Irish	Irish	Academic	yes	x	no	x	G
<b>Owen</b>	21-25	White - English	British/ French	Student	yes	2	no	8Y	G
<b>Russell</b>	21-25	White - English	British	Student	yes	2	no	3Y	Q
<b>Lewis</b>	26-30	Black - African	Kenyan	Student	yes	1	no	7M	G
<b>Matthew</b>	26-30	White - English	Canadian	Student	yes	2	no	7M	G
<b>Junior</b>	21-25	White - English	British	Student/ Architectural assistant	yes	3	yes	n/a	G
<b>Jude</b>	21-25	White - English	British	Bar staff	yes	2	no	3Y	G
<b>Diego</b>	18-20	Mixed - White and Hispanic	Italian/ Colombian	Shop assistant	no	n/a	no	T	G
<b>Maurice</b>	36-40	Black - Caribbean	French	Electrician	no	n/a	no	T	B
<b>Michael</b>	51-	White -	British	Senior	yes	3	no	27Y	B



	55	English		manager in charity sector					
<b>Adam</b>	36-40	Asian - Chinese	British	Hairdresser	no	n/a	no	T	G
<b>Gil</b>	18-20	Asian - Thai	Thai	Waiter	yes	1	no	10M	B
<b>Daniel</b>	18-20	Black - Caribbean	British	Performance artist/dancer	no	n/a	yes	14Y (T)	Q
<b>Max</b>	56-60	Black - African	British	Accountant	yes	4	no	5Y	B
<b>Javan</b>	41-45	Mixed - White and Black	Portuguese	Travel agent	no	n/a	no	T	G

x = participant did not specify

n/a = not applicable

Y = Years

M = Months

T = Tourist

G = Gay

B = Bisexual

Q = Queer

Table 2

Venue	Location	Opening Year (as a gay venue)	Closing Year (as a gay venue)	Description
<b>Admiral Duncan</b>	54 Old Compton Street	n/a	present	Traditional pub since 1832 (see 1.3). Now part of Stonegate Pub Company
<b>Astoria</b>	157 Charing Cross Road	1976	2009	(see 1.3)
<b>Barcode</b>	3-4 Archer Street	1996	2011	Dance bar on two floors with a club- style basement
<b>Candy Bar</b>	4 Carlisle Street	1996	2014	Soho's only long running lesbian bar. Part of <b>Ku Bar</b> group since 2011
<b>Circa</b>	62 Frith Street	2011	present	Stylish bar with

				pop and R'n'B music
<b>Colony Room</b>	41 Dean Street	1948	2008	(see 1.3)
<b>Comptons of Soho</b>	51-53 Old Compton Street	1986	present	Previously known as The Swiss Tavern. Now part of Stonegate Pub Company
<b>Duke of Wellington</b>	77 Wardour Street	2001	present	Traditional pub. Now part of Stonegate Pub Company
<b>Edge</b>	11 Soho Square	1993	2015	Hip bar over four floors
<b>Enclave</b>	25-27 Brewer Street	2007	2009	Intimate lounge bar and basement
<b>Escape</b>	10a Brewer Street	1998	2014	Late-night video dance bar, previously <b>Piano Bar</b> (see 1.4)
<b>Freedom</b>	66 Wardour Street	1993	present	Bar and late-nightclub
<b>Friendly Society</b>	79 Wardour Street	2000	present	Trendy basement bar
<b>G-A-Y Bar</b>	30 Old Compton Street	2002	present	Bar with video screens and pop tunes (see 1.4)

<b>G-A-Y Late</b>	5 Goslett Yard	2006	present	Club with a 4am licence (see 1.4)
<b>Geisha</b>	75 Charing Cross Road	2007	2012	Formerly known as <b>Ku Bar</b> (1995-2006). Later became lesbian <b>Bar Titania</b> (2012-2016)
<b>Ghetto</b>	5-6 Falconberg Mews	2001	2008	Known as <b>Stallions</b> and <b>Substation</b> in the 1990s. Small alternative underground club that later moved to East London
<b>Green Carnation</b>	5 Greek Street	2008	2015	Previously known as <b>Element</b> (see 1.4)
<b>Heaven</b>	Under The Arches, Villier Street	1979	present	(see 1.3 and 1.4)
<b>Kings Arms</b>	23 Poland Street	1981	present	Bar targeting bears and their admirers. Now part of Stonegate

				Pub Company
<b>Ku Bar (Leicester)/ Ku Klub/ The Light Lounge</b>	30 Lisle Street	2007	present	Formerly known as <b>West Central</b> and <b>Polar Bear</b> (see 1.4)
<b>Ku (Bar) Soho</b>	25 Frith Street	2009	present	Late-night dance bar on three floors. Previously lesbian bar <b>Rush</b> . The basement now hosts lesbian bar <b>She Soho</b> (see 1.4)
<b>Lo-Profile</b>	84-86 Wardour Street	2007	2013	Large late-night basement bar and club with an American-style diner above ground (see 1.4)
<b>Madame Jojo's</b>	8-10 Brewer Street	1986	2014	
<b>Manbar</b>	79 Charing Cross Road	2012	2015	Previously known as <b>79 CXR</b> (1994-2012). It hosted a variety of music and cabaret

				nights (see 1.4)
<b>Molly Mogg's</b>	2 Old Compton Street	2001	2017 (now reopened)	Cosy pub with regular drag shows
<b>Profile</b>	56-57 Frith Street	2007	2013	Previously known as <b>Pendulum</b>
<b>Rupert Street</b>	50 Rupert Street	1995	present	Large bar popular among young professionals. Now part of Stonegate Pub Company
<b>Shadow Lounge</b>	5 Brewer Street	2001	2016	Big members' dance club
<b>Trash Palace</b>	11 Wardour Street	2004	2008	<b>Ghetto's</b> sister club with indie, rock, and alternative music over two floors. It moved to East London above the new Ghetto
<b>Village</b>	81 Wardour Street	1991	present	Bar on three floors (see 1.3)
<b>Yard</b>	57 Rupert Street	1992	present	(see 1.4)

**Figure 1**

**The Spirit of Soho**



The Spirit of Soho, mural, 1991, at the junction of Broadwick Street and Carnaby Street, Soho, London (picture originally featured in the *Soho Spirit: Our Space or a Space in Our Minds?* booklet, 2016).

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