

RESEARCH ARTICLES

In the Dark: Queer Male Social-Sexual Encounters in Dark Spaces

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Male-to-male social-sexual activity in the subaltern world of male sexual spaces is theoretically examined. Methods include hard copy and online content analysis and observational-participatory submergence in the subaltern world of queer male sexual spaces such as bathhouses, saunas, circuit clubs, fetish balls, sex clubs, dark rooms, and backrooms. Studied is a self-monitored subculture that creates its own tribal rituals at varying odds with mainstream societal and LGBTQ movement norms. Darkness is a common conceptual theme in such spaces serving multiple purposes from anonymity to atmospheric shrouding, from sensory deprivation to expanded imaginaries, from lowered inhibitions to sexual exploration. The importance of such spaces is examined regarding time-limited sexual expression for pleasure and affirmation. This contrasts greatly from normative societal expectations, partly due to sex and sexuality being core to queer culture and due to ongoing oppression towards queer men. Transgressive spaces designed as queer male social-sexual places serve several socio-cultural needs materially, allowing for perceptive liberation, figurative creative personas that symbolize one's authentic being. Public and private spheres are somewhat blurred, yet through social etiquette navigable. By deviating from and resisting social-sexual norms, this tribe demonstrates how it maintains a core drive of their liberated sexuality outside of mainstreamed sexual governance.

Introduction

The subaltern world of male sexual spaces is theoretically examined in this study regarding male-to-male social-sexual activity. The importance of such spaces is explored from historical and socio-politico-cultural perspectives of sexual expression between men through time-limited communal engagement of social-sexual activity for sexual pleasure and affirmation. This presents as a major contrast from normative societal expectations, partly as a result of sex and sexuality being a core premise of queer cultural being, and partly due to ongoing oppression faced by queer men. Establishing space designed as social-sexual places in which queer men can engage socially and sexually with each other serves several socio-cultural needs, creating experiences with local and global links. The public and private spheres of

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such spaces are somewhat blurred, yet are nevertheless navigable through social etiquette. A mixed methods approach is employed, including hard copy and online content analysis and immersive observational-participatory ethnography in the subaltern world of queer male sexual spaces such as bathhouses, saunas, circuit clubs, fetish balls, sex clubs, backrooms, and dark rooms. In many of these settings, darkness plays an essential role both literally and figuratively, with layers of metaphorical implications for queer male social-sexual culture. A self-monitored subculture that creates its own tribal rituals at various odds with both mainstream societal and LGBTQ+ community norms is thus studied. Via deviation from and resistance of such norms, this tribe demonstrates how it asseverates a core drive of their liberated sexuality outside of mainstreamed sexual governance. The article is underscored by both spatial theory and queer liberation theory, the former focusing on the deconstruction of space and place towards the creation and preservation of male-to-male social-sexual environments, the latter promulgating self-defined queer social-sexual expression from intimacy to hardcore sex.

The concept of subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990) is useful as they are alternative discursive spaces that subordinated social groups create, occupy, and live within as a means of sustaining their existence. Warner (2002) makes a direct link between this concept with a queer spatiality of counterpublics in which the progressive, sex-positive, liberationist segments of gay and bisexual male communities counter mainstreamed gay and bisexual males, the latter of whom aspire to monogamy, same-sex marriage, and possibly parenting (Garner, 2023; M. Warner, 1999). Society's repeated attempts at repressing same-sex sexuality spurs the creation of spaces that accommodate these very desires. As evidenced throughout history the drive for sexual release is hardwired and difficult to contain subjectively and systemically, inclusive of male-to-male sex (Lauritsen, 1998). This sexual drive also motivates the creation of sex on the premises (SOP) spaces that include, but are not limited to, the aforementioned bathhouses, saunas, circuit clubs, dark rooms, fetish balls, porn theaters, sex clubs, and shops. Many such spaces are created within capitalist societies and managed with a profit motive in serving a niche need as part of the macro architecture of liberalized cities (Chisholm, 2005). Hence, accessibility to such spaces is undergirded by class status, allowing those with economic means to afford visiting these venues either locally or globally in liberal international settings.

Spatial practices are understood to address activities carried out between actors (male-to-male) in a space formulated into a place for particular (social-sexual) activities. Such places allow for a break from the monotony of daily life by creating a permissive setting that gives space for one to uninhibitedly delve into their sexual core, hence a critical spatial practice (Elder et al., 2003; Johnston & Longhurst, 2010; Oswin, 2008; Sturlaugson, 2019). These spaces represent opportunity structures of a social-sexual nature, via their rules—some outlined, others unspoken. Judgment should be withheld

regarding the sexual proclivities and fetishes of the patrons, confidentiality respected, only consensual sexual play is permitted, all interactions are to be respectful (including gentle declinations), responses of “no” are honored, and engagement in safer sex practices whenever requested; otherwise, patrons need to take leave of the scene. To join an already underway scene, permission is to be sought. More involved scenarios requiring discussions of interests, limits, and risk-taking boundaries as well as safe words, should be engaged in. These non-conclusive etiquette behaviours (Jacques, 1993) are applicable regardless of what substances patrons are under the influence of, albeit many venues restrict substances, with some having staff/monitors to ensure rules are followed.

The structural elements venue managers put in place in these social-sexual spaces coalesce into a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990), queer male subculture (M. Warner, 1999). Some patrons will regularly balance their need for play, while others pursue deviant sexual tourism (Redmon, 2003; Uriely et al., 2011) to engage in a hedonic, cultural, tribal (Mains, 1984) critical spatial practice (Elder et al., 2003; Johnston & Longhurst, 2010; Oswin, 2008; Sturlaugson, 2019) of embracing their back selves (Goffman, 1959) and that of other men. Engagement in these social sexual places is a unique experience of being temporally ‘apart together’ (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 32). These spaces are transformed into social-sexual places by commonly orchestrating elements such as black ice, strategic lighting, sexually ambient music, pornographic videos, and sexual performances on the part of venue management, while some patrons will enhance their pleasure, and men who have sex with men (MSM) desire through unauthorized drugs, methamphetamine in particular (Vawters, 2023), to facilitate liminal atmospheres of sexual liberation. The combination of all these elements can create an intoxicating euphoria that, from the outset, frames this tribe as debauched (Redmon, 2003) yet is a deviational liminal opportunity from the mundane monotony of our everyday lives—an expression of queer sexual liberation starkly contrasting a world dominated by heterosexual spaces.

An integrated qualitative experience emerges when immersed in such settings that include concepts of identity and self, contingent upon interactions with others (Howard, 1994), within critical spatial practices influencing the patrons aligned with the temporal themes of the venues (Sørensen, 2003). What develops is a self-monitored subculture that creates its own tribal rituals at various odds with both mainstream societal and LGBTQ+ movement norms. An example of this is the queer male who travels to a foreign setting where they are not known to nor know the other patrons (Redmon, 2003), assisting with lowered inhibition while engaging in deviant tourism. By patronizing and engaging in social-sexual activities in these spaces, they are actively involved in critical spatial practices by exploring and expressing their back self (Goffman, 1959) through liminoid experiences (Redmon, 2003). Whether with international guests or the locals, such settings create a temporary social-sexual community to meet the core

sexual needs of the patrons. In turn, queer male social-sexual spaces become opportunity structures in which subaltern norms are created to form an ongoing underground tribalism. Recognizing and passing along the long history of same-sex male sexual spaces is a folklorist exercise that both combats erasure and empowers a form of sex positivity (Thorne & De Los Reyes, 2023).

With the ongoing development of queer male culture, social-sexual spaces are creatively varied regarding their established venues. These include bathhouses, saunas, circuit clubs, fetish balls, sex clubs, backrooms, and dark rooms. Commonalities among such spaces are that they are usually commercial, managed, each with a set of rules, and located indoors, providing a degree of privacy, safety, and anonymity—all important aspects to their patrons. Such indoor venues can also exist non-commercially through privately organized gatherings such as sex parties or orgies hosted by an organizer in their home or hotel room. Whether commercial or non-commercial, such sexual spaces intersect the private/public spheres (Duncan, 1996) in that the space is accessible to interested individuals in the public realm, provides for a level of privacy, yet the participant is interacting with other members of the public. Outdoor sexual spaces such as parks, washrooms, alleyways, subway stations, etc., which are more prominent in the public sphere, with higher levels of exposure, and risk ramifications are not examined in this study.

Internationally, queer men continue to face hostility, persecution, and oppression—61 nations criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts of which seven impose the death penalty (ILGA, 2025)—having these liminal social-sexual spaces for queer men holds great importance to their social-sexual culture. Society's repression of this sexuality spurs the creation of spaces that accommodate these desires. The existence of such spaces can be found in parts of the globe in which queer male sexual relations are not criminalized and the permissiveness of transgressive sexual activities can be engaged in. Darkness can be experienced by queer men in differing ways.

Methods

This being a work in progress, I share ongoing observations on a continuing exploratory mixed-methods qualitative study in which I examine social-sexual spaces that become defined places for men to engage in spatial practices of sexual activities with each other. Data is collected through both hard-copy and online advertisement content and analyzed as pathways to queer male social-sexual spaces. Hard-copy content is collected from queer male magazines, newspapers, and flyers at queer male venues, such as clothing stores and bars. Online content is gathered from queer male websites and social media platforms publicizing social-sexual venues. Given the observational method of this research in settings of anonymity, and that participants did not actively respond to research questions, ethical approval was not necessary. Themes were developed based on the content of the data (Krippendorff, 2018).

Additionally, an ethnographic approach in immersive, participatory research (Savin-Baden et al., 2010), is employed in which I immerse myself in queer male social-sexual spaces for this study. This methodological approach captures not only observing but also living phenomena from the researcher's perspective. Following each physical visit, entries are recorded in a research diary, outlining thoughts, reflections, and other noteworthy insights. This ongoing study has to date taken place in the following major urban centres that have male-to-male social-sexual spaces: Melbourne and Sydney in Australia; Amsterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, Budapest, Copenhagen, London, and Prague in Europe; and Chicago, Montreal, New York City, San Francisco, Toronto, and Vancouver in North America.

Contextualization and Definitions

It is important to contextualize the settings in which this study is being conducted and to define the various terminology used to identify participants and their social-sexual activities. This study's primary focus is on male-to-male social-sexual spaces. The pursuit of and engagement in sexual activities between men is about MSM. The sexual orientation of these men is not necessarily indicated nor defined. They may be gay, bisexual, straight, or trans. Regarding their gender identity, they could be cisgendered, transitioning, transgender, or gender neutral. For some men, their sexuality and/or gender could be essentialized, for others, fluid. The point being, the purpose of men who enter and participate in these spaces is to engage in sex with other men. This creates a flexible definition that allows for gender and sexual fluidity within the realms of maleness. Most MSM spaces for social-sexual purposes cater to those who identify as gay or bisexual, given the orientation of such clientele, with some now permitting transgender males. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'queer males' is an umbrella term that captures these sexual orientations as well as gender identities, all of whom identify as male.

Additionally, and of importance, is that 'queer' is also recognized politically as progressive, sex positive, and in resistance to heteronormativity. Pursuing and engaging in social-sexual behaviours in these social-sexual spaces infers queer behaviour quite extraordinary beyond usual day-to-day activities. Furthering the uniqueness of such spaces is that these venues will often offer places to indulge in fetishistic opportunities with themes tied to fetish attire and play (i.e., leather, rubber, sports, military, puppy play, furies, or a combination thereof). Engaging in this kind of progressive, sex positivity, countering heteronormativity represents being queer social sexually. Also, and of importance, is that the notion of inner core authenticity of sexual desires and activity is posited herein regarding the observation of the actors in such settings as contrasted to environments outside such settings. These sex on the premises (SOP) spaces, in essence, provide places for actors to express their core, inner authenticity of sexual desires in that moment. Hence, the emphasis is on temporality and less so on defining what that 'inner, core, authenticity of self' is. Relatedly, queer liberation theory rejects the

essentialism vs. fluidity debate allowing the individual to determine for themselves their gender and sexual expression for liberatory purposes, regardless of variability, if any (Mulé, 2019).

Analogously, the term ‘tribe’ is used to describe men who seek out social-sexual spaces and places to have sex with each other. A subset of theGBTQ and even mainstream communities, these men seek to explore, engage, and release their inner sexual desires. The notion of ‘tribe’ is not formalized by membership (although some sex clubs do require membership) or ongoing relations. Rather, this speaks to those who actively pursue their sexual desires in SOP spaces. Such pursuits can be quite fluid, crossing international borders to places where such spaces exist; temporal frequency (based on the sexual urges of the players and hours of SOP operations); and sexual activities themselves created by themed events or the players who enact them. Hence, ‘tribe’ and ‘Dark Tribe,’ in particular, are analogous terms that derive meaning from subcultural tribal social-sexual pursuits, a subject that mainstream society accords little explicit light (see below for a decontextualization of the role of darkness).

Often, this pursuit happens in the dark, whether timed after nightfall or in settings for which lighting is strategically dimmed or deliberately absent. As for the spaces and the concept of SOP, part or all their physicality permits sexual activity to take place on the premises. Many such venues or events are often time-limited and associated to an advertised theme, while others are continuous (i.e., twenty-four-hour bathhouses). Therefore, the ‘dark tribe’ knows where to head, when to gather, and engage with each other social-sexually to fulfill their own and each other’s sexual desires, a subversive activity that has a long history.

Historical Significance

A history that goes back centuries reveals sex-segregated communal spaces in which men gathered and, on varying occasions and through subtle gestures and flirtations, could lead to sexual activity. Bathhouses, a necessity for personal hygiene, at a time when bathing facilities did not exist in people’s homes, for example, offered spaces for men to gather, bathe, and potentially lead to homoerotic and sexual encounters. The tradition of public baths existed in the 6th century BCE and were prominently featured in the social culture of urban centres such as Athens and Sparta (Laconia), Greece (Miles, 2016). There are ancient Greek records of same-sex sexual activity in such settings (De Bonneville, 1998). The history of male same-sex relations in bathhouses is often uncovered through criminal offenses, highlighting the persecution of male-to-male sexual activity. Such documentation includes purges against what in 1492 Florence, Italy, called the “vice of sodomy” regarding illicit sexual activity between boys and men in taverns, baths, and casini (Rocke, 1998). In that same year, public baths in the Muslim city of Granada were shut down by Catholic Queen Isabel as a means of suppressing homosexual activity (Hammam, 2016).

Men seeking sexual relations with other men increasingly sought this out in bathhouses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1876, six men were charged with an “offense against public decency” (p. 14), and management and a couple of employees with “facilitating pederasty” (p. 25), as the charged were between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two (Higgs, 1999), after the Parisian Bains de Gymnase bathhouse was raided by police. New York police raided the Ariston Hotel Baths in 1903, arresting twenty-six men. Twelve were tried for sodomy charges, and seven received prison sentences between four and twenty years (Chauncey, 1994). What undergirds these activities is that of police repression of same-sex sexual activity between men, often motivated by morality-based discretionary powers to raid, humiliate, and discourage queers from congregating, whether to organize or to meet socially or for consensual sexual relations.

In the 20th century, such law enforcement impositions on queer spaces that culminated over the years led to major riots and historic scenes of resistance and mobilization of the LGBTQ+ movement. Yet, even in modern times, raids and arrests continue. In Canada, the infamous Toronto bathhouse raids of 1981 ignited a powerful gay liberation movement in response (McLeod et al., 2017). Police used different tactics and actions on gay bathhouses with continued raids in 1999 against the Bijou sex club in Toronto (Smith, 1999), in 2000 at a women’s night at the Club Toronto bathhouse (Pussy Palace, 2020), in 2002 at Goliath’s in Calgary (Perelle, 2002), and in 2004 the “inspection” of the Warehouse Spa and Bath in Hamilton (Gulliver, 2004). On the premise of health directives, the New York City Health Department ordered all gay bathhouses closed in 1985 due to the HIV/AIDS crisis (Golubski & Kappstatter, 1986), contrasting Toronto’s emphasis on safer sex practices in such spaces (McKenzie, 2016). A series of police raids took place at gay bathhouses and meeting spots in 2008 in Beijing, China (“Beijing: Police Raid Bathhouses,” 2008). The importance of these public institutions, the first to accept gay men, is not to be underestimated (Chauncey, 1994). Such raids can galvanize responses by LGBTQ+ communities, who in turn, demonstrate the value of queer social-sexual spaces as safe places for them to be their authentic selves and meet others like them.

Beyond bathhouses, since the 1960s, social gatherings have been organized in the United States by and for gay men to create sexual play environments. Examples of these include boy parties focused on young queers, circuit parties for those with the means to afford fly-in soirees, Radical Fairies-hosted retreats for the androgynous and nature-connected, and leather contests for those into leather/BDSM (Browning, 1994). A major role that the creation of male-to-male sexual spaces has played via their development by both management and patrons is that these space holders are counteracting and transforming attempts at sexually ordering people based on hegemonic normative sexual notions. These attempts at social ordering of sexuality and gender identity gave rise to radicals and revolutionaries, such as the LGBTQ+ movement which challenged society’s rigid codes of sexual ideations, desires, and

practices (Milligan, 1993). To this end, the gay liberation movement fought for and was exemplified by their response to the Toronto bathhouse raids (T. Warner, 2002). They called for sexual freedom for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, and thus contributed a key factor to a major principle of queer liberation theory (Mulé & Garang, 2025), further examined along with other theories below.

Theoretical Foundations

This research is informed by sociological spatial theory, and with the focus on venues of sexual pleasure, Simmel's work on the modern world's leisure spaces (Simmel, 1903/1971, 1908/1992), and the role of secrecy as part of complex human interactions involving mutually agreeable connections, yet in the absence of expectations of total revelations (Simmel, 1906/1950). Such spaces provide opportunities for human exploration and expression beyond humans' normative existence. Lefebvre (1974) takes an expansive view of the production of space, "we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias" (pp. 11-12), all elements that cover queer male social-sexual spaces. Foucault's (1984) concept of heterotopias describes places for those in crisis from or with normative utopias, for which queer men can easily fall. Building on Lefebvre (1974) and Foucault (1967) is Soja (1996) positing the 'thirdspace' that allows for a unique place of the coming together of diametrically opposed conceptions.

Described as 'backspaces' Goffman (1967), metaphorically uses theatre's backstage and frontstage as a means of individual expression. Individuals can express their 'back self' in contrast to their daily public 'front self' (Goffman, 1959), engaging in a form of self-expression without social repercussions. Spaces of intimate social-sexual encounters contextually represent backspaces and permit individuals to express their 'back self.' Although an audience exists in these backspaces, they are settings that create places for authentic social-sexual expression. Therefore, a queer male can transition in what Thrift (2003) refers to as creating, defining, interacting, and transforming from a conventional role in a corporate job to a sexual persona by entering and engaging in a place for male-to-male sexual interactions.

Once in such leisure spaces that are eroticized (Lefebvre, 1974), there are the interactional dynamics between individuals and spaces referred to as 'spatial configurations' (Schatzki, 2010; Stock, 2015), a bundling of spatial arrangements (that can take place in SOPs) and human practice (sexual activities). Turner (1974) defines liminal experiences as transitional, ambiguous periods in rituals or life events where participants are temporarily outside normal social structures, enabling transformation, creativity, and a sense of 'communitas.' Redmon (2003) indicates these physical liminoid spaces provide "a liminal license for people to transgress norms, participate in playful deviance, and present their secret self" (p. 28). Hence, the emotional context of backspaces, where according to Huizinga (1950) liminoid pursuits

represent opportunities to be “apart together (...) rejecting usual norms” (p. 12). These varying elements reference back to Lefebvre’s notion of the physical, mental, and social fields triad, creating social relations that are commodified (Schmid, 2022), in that SOP spaces provide places that meet the social-sexual needs of queer men, who, in turn, are prepared to pay for the use of such spaces for these purposes. This contrasts with outdoor queer male social-sexual spaces that are generally free but can come with socio-legal costs.

In the context of climates of hostility and discrimination and minimal existences of such spaces (Mulé, 2021b), for queer men, such backspaces allow them to explore and express their back selves (Tomazos et al., 2017), which can be sexually liberating. Queer liberation theory prioritizes equity over equality, is non-assimilationist, eschews mainstream society’s cis-heteronormativity, instead upholding its diversity by celebrating difference (Mulé, 2016). Male-to-male social-sexual activity links directly to queer liberation theory for these activities capture queer male sexual spaces and places and their role in facilitating sexual expression as part of our lives (sexual health) and societal existence (accommodations for normal human activity) (Kettelhack, 1996) for liberatory purposes. Such purposes counteract the constant crises queer men are held in by a hostile society by being in touch with our authentic core sexual beings within such spaces, even if seen as transgressions by those outside the dark tribe. Next, the role of darkness is examined within SOP spaces from historical, socio-cultural perspectives.

The Role of Darkness

Darkness is often seen as contributing to a form of sensory deprivation, particularly for the sighted. A form of disablement from our sensical perspectives. Yet darkness plays a crucial role in certain queer male spaces that become social-sexual places that is at once a backdrop and integral to the atmospheric environment. For the ‘Dark Tribe’ darkness plays a key role in entering an abyss of sexual exploration, opportunity, and experimentation. “The body, sex and pleasure are often accorded no existence, either mental or social, until after dark, when the prohibitions that obtain during the day, during ‘normal’ activity, are lifted” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 320). Under the cover of darkness, contained spaces become expanded places, inhibitions drop while hormonal sensations rise. In such spaces, a liberatory atmosphere takes hold, allowing for the embodiment of a self, outside of one’s normative being. Extant senses are heightened (Dewdney, 2004), hearing the tribal beats of pulsating music in rhythm with deep sighs, moans and groans, the smell of bodily excitement intermixed with poppers, the feeling of human flesh in heat, and the taste of the sweet sensuality of one’s sexual desires. Lefebvre (1974) refers to sex as a restoration of the body in “the sense of a sexual energy directed towards a specific discharge and flowing according to specific rhythms” (p. 363).

Even with the sense of sight being partialized in such settings, it mesmerizes between red lights, black ice, the accoutrements of sexual play, within darkness. In reference to the lure of darkness, Ricco (2002) writes, “Just as much as we might speak of a fear of the dark, we must also acknowledge the attraction of the dark. The nearly palpable uncertainty and obscurity of indefinite darkness (...) is often what lures one into the dark” (p. 10). Members of the ‘Dark Tribe’ enter, play, and exit these time-limited dark spaces as a release valve for social-sexual pleasure at the personal and comradeship levels. A unique experience found in few other settings. As expressed in the novel *In My Room*, Dustan (Clerc, 2021) writes:

Night people are the most civilized of all. The most difficult. They pay more attention to their behavior than aristocrats in a salon. At night you don’t talk about obvious things. You don’t talk about work, or money, or books, or records, or films. You only act. Speech is action. Always on the lookout. Gestures charged and meaning. (p. 122)

The role darkness provides in such spaces creates places of social-sexual encounters between men that allow us to exercise our core sexual being. Darkness contributes to an environment of social-sexual liberation that defies the ‘Dark Tribe’s’ mundane existences in the harsh light of day.

Taking up darkness through the cyclical return of the night, Dewdney (2004) states, “Night is also anonymous, and we sometimes venture by night what we are afraid of doing by day (. ...) Yet, for all our nocturnal privacy and seclusion, we humans are curious creatures and we wonder about the dark world around us” (p. 15). The pursuit of social-sexual encounters among queer men is often well accommodated in the darkness of night. As night falls over well-populated liberalized urban centres, the twinkling lights of cities emerge as beacons featuring dotted destinations on their landscapes for anonymous promiscuous sex (Chisholm, 2005). Queer male social-sexual venues often favour the night to host their, in many cases, theme-oriented events (albeit some operate 24/7). It offers a temporal period that accommodates most being outside their work hours, with weekend evenings being popular and the cover of darkness providing some degree of anonymity in attending and exiting such venues. Yet, engagement in social-sexual behaviour at such venues produces its own forms of transgressions.

Dark Transgressions

Apart from the protections darkness can offer, it can also bring its attendant dangers. From gay bashers to law enforcers, queer men can be easy targets of homophobic haters (Janoff, 2005) and the police. With regard to the latter, a pattern that has repeated itself over history is the encroachment of the police, usually driven by their morality-based discretionary powers to raid, humiliate, and discourage queer men from congregating (Adam, 1995; T. Warner, 2002), whether over drinks, dancing, or to engage in consensual

sexual relations. Reactions by LGBTQ communities to such raids indicate the importance of queer spaces as places for people to feel safe being themselves and meeting others similar to them. Examples of backlashes regarding queers gathering socially include the Compton Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco in 1966 (Boyd, 2004) and the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969 (Stein, 2019). Regarding social-sexual setting-based protests, the Bathhouse Raids in Toronto of 1981 is an example (McLeod et al., 2017). The LGBTQ+ communities have had to argue repeatedly for our legitimate right to social-sexual encounters, turning the notion of transgression on its head. Who are the transgressors?

Beyond heterosexist law enforcement, other incursions have negatively affected these social-sexual spaces and represent ongoing threats to their existence. These include real estate speculation, urban development, gentrification, regimes of 'normative' morality and coercion (Compton & Stone, 2024). Technologically, the growth and popularity of online/dating apps have provided an alternative in spaces to meet and possibly connect social-sexually ('hook up') (Johnson et al., 2017). These developments raise specters of socio-cultural values that intersect with urban planning and property, shaping notions of acceptable and respectable relations, online connections, all encompassed within capitalist profit-making. Further complicating this is that members of the LGBTQ+ communities may be complicit in these developments, further marginalizing segments therein who participate in dark tribal rituals in social-sexual spaces. A loss is felt with the demise of such spaces, especially by those who patronized them, but as Glass (2023) points out, such circumstances also provide the conditions for the pursuit of queer spatial justice.

How transgressions are read and projected can vary. Heterosexism and homophobia towards MSM frame the latter as engaging in sexual transgressions. The anonymous and promiscuous sexual activity that takes place in social-sexual venues can be the basis of other accusations against their queer male patrons. Spieldenner and Escoffier (2023) defend promiscuity and queer men:

We built our communities through our promiscuity; we made connections with people from difference social classes, races, and ethnicities. We learned our history from different generations through our sexual connections. And yes, we've even achieved intimacy through our sexual connections (. ...) It embodies an existential attitude of openness and engagement but also because the promiscuous literally create sexual opportunities. (pp. 2, 132)

Having those spaces within which social-sexual activities are permitted and encouraged, become places of play, in which willing participants meet other players for the purposes of creating mutual scenes of pleasure (Paasonen, 2018). Paasonen links sex and play "to the thrills and impossibilities of sexual

desire and to the interlacing of pleasure and pain involved in bodies opening up towards and impacting one another” (p. 23). Ricco (2002), drawing from queer theory in proffering queer sex space theory, paints a picture of insurgency and itinerancy regarding such spaces that I argue become options for members of the ‘Dark Tribe.’

As a minority with a history of being misunderstood by the majority, we have had to create our own culture. As a minority that has long lived within the fluctuations of society’s tolerance levels, we have had to navigate to sustain our safety and survival. From the darkness of the closet to the hidden enclaves of the darkened bars and meeting spots, the ‘Dark Tribe’ has found a way to live with and even embrace darkness. Reclamation is an important theme in gender and sexually diverse communities (i.e., the term ‘queer’), darkness too, has been reclaimed for social-sexual purposes. The dark atmospheric shrouding allows for anonymity, as well as creative, imaginative character development in varying ‘play scenes.’ Spaces have been transformed into places of sexual transgression occupied by the ‘Dark Tribe’ of males who engage in social-sexual encounters. Segments of both the heteronormative world and the mainstream LGBTQ+ communities may see such spaces and encounters as transgressions. Nevertheless, such spaces create an environment in which participants tap into their authentic sexual being. Even in the dark, social-sexual transgressions speak to the diversity of our sexuality via the affirming and liberating activities engaged in by the ‘Dark Tribe’, within such spaces.

Despite its history of repression, the LGBTQ+ communities are well known for our resiliency, probably most publicly exemplified by taking the events of the Stonewall riots (Stein, 2019) and transforming them into the annual pride festivities, albeit not without its ongoing internal debates regarding degrees of partying and protest (Conway, 2024). Similarly, members of the ‘Dark Tribe’ partake in SOP spaces, and in doing so, transform them into liberating experiences by creating emancipatory social-sexual encounters. Such engagement aligns with Foucault’s deconstruction of the repressive hypothesis (Foucault, 1978) in which the repression of sex is reversed, in this case by having social sexual spaces inhabited by players for these purposes. Such spaces of male-to-male social-sexual encounters create places for social-sexual expression among an oppressed group, countering historical repression, as a means of ongoing acts of liberation in line with queer liberation theory (Mulé, 2021a). Therefore, beyond repression, of great importance regarding these spaces is the ongoing pursuit and sustenance of social-sexual liberation among men with sexual desires for each other given the limited opportunities and places for such encounters.

Conclusions

What is emerging from this ongoing study are a series of interrelated aspects of importance to the queer male segment of the LGBTQ+ communities who pursue and engage in social-sexual spaces. Through a mixed methods qualitative research approach that draws from hardcopy

and online texts advertising such places to immersive participatory research within such settings, the latter of which has been the emphasis here, the relevance and value of social-sexual spaces as places for queer men to engage is increasingly evident. The backdrop to this study is the long history of the existence of such spaces and repeated attempts to shut them down and ongoing hostility towards male-to-male sexual activity. Navigating these hostilities highlight the counterpublics (Fraser, 1990) of the very existence of these queer men and the queer spatiality (M. Warner, 2002) they produce for critical spatial practices (Elder et al., 2003; Johnston & Longhurst, 2010; Oswin, 2008; Sturlaugson, 2019). Employed are sociological spatial theory (Simmel, 1908/1992) and its links to queer liberation theory (Mulé, 2016, 2019, 2021b; Mulé & Garang, 2025), currently in development, both assisting in contextualizing the study of queer male social-sexual spaces.

The concept of darkness factors in literally and metaphorically. Darkened or minimally and strategically lit social-sexual venues create an atmospheric ambience for the purposes of the activities therein. At the socio-cultural level, social-sexual events tend to be a time-limited, subaltern liminal (Cutler-Broyles, 2021) opportunity structure, which allows for spatial practices of core queer male sexual desires. The engagement in such desires may be perceived/judged as ‘dark’—perverse, debauched, debased—and can become threats to such spaces. By contrast, I argue the importance of such spaces against threats of closure as such threats are repressive attempts to suppress a marginalized group of queer men within the marginalized LGBTQI+ communities. For the men who partake, these tribalistic practices distinguish this group of men for exploring and indulging their same-sex sexual desires, both defining their sense of self and contributing to the diversity of society, in direct contrast to dominant socio-cultural norms. The study in progress is revealing the value and meaning making such social-sexual places provide the men who engage in them, the contribution these spaces make to queer male culture, and the opportunity that exists therein for the sexual expression of queer liberation.

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