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# ***Heaven is a Place*: The politics and poetics of LGBT location in a community dance film**

**By Roberta Mock, Kayla Parker and Ruth Way**

This chapter draws upon a range of scholarly disciplines (including performance studies, film studies, somatics, queer studies, urban studies and human geography) from the perspective of artist-researchers in order to reflect upon the implications and potentials of a community filmmaking practice that is simultaneously aesthetic, political, spatial and social. By focusing on a movement-based performance for and through digital video, it considers how the process-driven triangulation of thinking bodies, sexual subjectivities and emplacement within such a practice might enable us to acknowledge, consolidate and reimagine a community that had been either erased or marginalized in dominant accounts of its city.

*Heaven is a Place* is a short dance film,[1] made in 2014 by the authors of this chapter in collaboration with members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) community in Plymouth in South West England. Filmed in some of Plymouth's most visually spectacular

[1] At the time of writing, *Heaven is a Place* (16 minutes 30 seconds) has been screened at Plymouth and Warwick Arts Centres, the Trans(m)it International Film Festival (Philadelphia, USA) and selected for the International Competition of Kino der Kunst 2015 (Munich and Nürnberg, Germany) and the Dances with Camera competition at the Short Waves Festival 2016 (Poznań, Poland), in addition to touring with the EU-funded programme, 'Heaven on Earth?', to Piraeus (Greece), Zaragoza (Spain) and Istanbul in 2014. It is also a Cornwall Film Festival Competition Winner (2014). Credits: Kayla Parker (director); Ruth Way (choreographer), assisted by Claire Summers; Roberta Mock (executive producer); Roberta Mock, Kayla Parker and Ruth Way (screenplay); Stuart Moore (cinematographer) and Siobhán Mckeown (editor). For further production details, please visit: http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/other_films/other_films/heaven_is_a_place.html

and evocative liminal waterside locations – its docksides, marinas, look-out points, cruising spots, clubs and bathing areas – it explores becoming, melancholy and the erotics of place through the human geography of an "ocean city".[2] In addition to choreography arising from site-responsive physical vocabularies, the film features scenarios and movement scores that reflect personal memories and queer histories of the city, developed in the first instance through a series of movement workshops that were co-organized with the LGBT advocacy organisation, Pride in Plymouth.

The project integrated a cast of seven emergent professional performers, working in a range of movement-based disciplines (including dance, physical theatre and aerial performance), and sixteen members of Plymouth's LGBT community to produce a film that was intended for moving image art and dance film audiences.[3] Although this dynamic produced a range of challenges (not least to terminology and categorisation), which will be discussed below, we consider *Heaven is a Place* to be community filmmaking because it was made with and for a community of non-professional performers who participated in its creative process and established their own roles and representation therein. However, it is probably more accurately described as a hybrid form of screendance, socially-engaged practice and documentary film: that is, as a moving image work in which motion and aesthetic movement are the primary expressive elements of that particular community. The film attempts to capture the development and moment of dance performance within a filmic

[2] Plymouth adopted the motto "Spirit of Discovery" in 1996, alluding to its rich heritage of naval exploration, Charles Darwin and Scott having both embarked on their global voyages from moorings close to its seaward border. However, signs welcoming visitors were frequently vandalised to read "Plymouth – Spirit of Disco," reflecting its lively club culture (*Plymouth Herald*, 2013). After a brief period as "Positively Plymouth" (2010-2013), the city rebranded itself as "Britain's Ocean City," its visual motif being Smeaton's decommissioned lighthouse on the Eddystone Rocks rebuilt on Plymouth Hoe.

[3] The professional performers were contracted and paid for thirty days (including training/rehearsals); community performers were required to commit for about three days in total (including at least two workshops), although some chose to participate more than this. For the latter, we reimbursed all direct expenditure incurred in their participation. The authors of this chapter, all of whom are full-time academics, were *not* remunerated, however all other members of the production team were.

portrait of an actual place recorded at a particular time. Although its loose storyline can certainly be read symbolically, the performances are primarily non-representational, adhering to Stella Bruzzi's (2006) central tenet of documentaries that they "are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable" (1), "whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming" (10).

*Heaven is a Place* arose from a EU-funded Cultural Co-operation programme (with partners in Greece, Spain and Turkey), the over-arching focus of which was the legacy of the French writer, playwright, filmmaker and activist, Jean Genet (1910-1986). Thirty years after his death, Genet continues to exert a huge influence on queer writing, theatre and film practices and yet, his position on homosexuality as an identity position was always complex. Originally our two creative "work packages" within this programme were meant to run parallel to, but separate from, each other; these were the making of a site-responsive dance film and delivering somatic movement workshops for non-performers from Plymouth's LGBT community. Each was to respond specifically, but in different ways, to Genet's insistence on actively recognising and confronting the oppression of minority cultures and the ways in which he made difficult, subtle and challenging political statements in the creative spaces that exist between actuality and illusion. It was only after we completed the first series of workshops with members of Plymouth's LGBT community that we extended the invitation to help us envisage and to participate in the film – in other words, transforming it into a community filmmaking project. In retrospect, this can only be described as an organic process, arising from both the vitality and creativity of the workshop participants and our increasing discomfort with representing – or worse, appropriating or simply using – the lived experience of others and of being othered.

Caoimhe McAvinchey (2013) has noted that there are a number of ways of framing the intersection of performance and community and that one of the most significant revolves

around *where* the work takes place. To these geographic (and often institutional) “communities of location” she suggests adding “communities of identity” and “communities of interest,” in order to reveal “a wide range of fluid, nuanced and responsive social processes” through performance-making. The non-professional performance community that came together to make *Heaven is a Place* with us – a community of “queer” Plymothians who were interested in an open-ended creative exploration – embraced all three framings.[4] This aligns with Kirsten Macleod’s observation that “community media” is often both a *form* of “participatory practice which allows people to mediate their own identities’ and also a *process* that ‘is deeply connected to ideas of place” (in Malik, Chapain and Comunian 2014, 24).

## Points of Departure

There were three co-determining and interrelated departure points for *Heaven is a Place*: the inspiration of Jean Genet as artist and activist; the experiences of Plymouth’s LGBT communities past and present; and the mythogeography of the city itself. These cohere conceptually and thematically on many levels. For instance, Genet’s 1947 novel, *Querelle de Brest*, revolves around the themes of doubling, homosexual desire and violence, its setting reflecting his adolescent fascination with ports (White 1994, 334). In Genet’s poems, such as “Le Pecheur du Suquet,” “La Parade” and “Un Chant d'Amour,” one finds malicious children who make water shiver, bodies hanging from a single foot by the mizzen-mast, and feet uncurling the sea. These are images that resonate deeply in Plymouth, a city – like Brest – defined by its maritime location, its status as a port, and the severe bombing during WWII

[4] The call to participate went out to over 2000 individuals who follow Pride in Plymouth on social media. The twenty-four people who eventually worked with us included lesbians, gay men, bisexual men and women, and trans women; the majority of them had engaged with the organisation in the past. As one participant noted: “It was the more activist/creative section of the community that took part so not perhaps the whole community but it included a wide variety of members from different generations.”

which destroyed most of its centre. It is the location from which the Pilgrim Fathers supposedly set sail to colonise America, and one still dominated by its dockyards and the Royal Navy.

The Plymouth of *Heaven is a Place* is at once generic, metaphoric, and specific in its materiality – a city in which it hasn't been, and still isn't, easy to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or trans. Much of our historical understanding was drawn from the work of Alan Butler, who – in addition to being co-director of Pride in Plymouth with his partner, Mark Ayres – was then completing his doctoral thesis, based on dozens of oral history interviews, about the performance of LGBT pride in Plymouth from the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century onward. These interviews form the basis of an award-winning LGBT Archive, deposited with the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, with much of the material now available online. Alan was our community liaison and dramaturg, in the European sense of the role, and we reflected many of his research findings in the film. One of these is the extent to which queer culture in Plymouth has been shaped historically by the sexual flexibility of sailors and matelots. Another is that many gay people paradoxically have felt less certain of their community and even less safe since homosexuality was legalised and openly gay people could serve in the military. As long as LGBT culture remained "hidden" in dockside bars and dancehalls, it was vibrant and silently accepted in the city at large.

Plymouth is often characterised as being "on the periphery," its massive granite walls and fortresses facing the sea built to stave off an invasion by Napoleon. Some, of course, were also built to stave off an invasion by the sea itself. Its strength and our vulnerability in the face of its power was made explicit less than two months before we began filming, when a storm cut the city off from the rest of the country for weeks on end and battered much of its seafront. We had to climb over barricades, erected during the long repair process, to film many of the scenes. Sometimes, however, it was simply not possible for our three points of

departure to coalesce as we might have hoped. Although we were welcomed on several site visits to HMS Drake, for instance, we were unable to secure permission to film within our schedule on either the military base or the adjacent dockyards controlled by the Ministry of Defence.[5]

Nonetheless, arising from Plymouth's specific historical and material landscape, *Heaven is a Place* embraces many of Genet's themes and tropes: the lonely youth full of longing; how the costume one wears allows a shift from one persona to another, leading to adventure with others; the performance of self in a continuing process of change; the juxtaposition of the transient physicality of the human body with the materiality of natural phenomena; the drifting of bodies through spaces of dynamic potential. The film's eventual narrative trajectory is a receptacle: a travelling woman – a vagabonde, performed by the aerialist, Laura Murphy – arrives at Plymouth's Bretonside bus station and, following the promise of encounter, journeys through various locations before setting sail through Plymouth Sound, and to the ocean beyond, with an older sailor she has met at one of the city's waterfront bars (who, it is hinted, might stand in for Genet himself).

Genet's last explicitly aesthetic work dealing with homosexuality was his only film, *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950, 25 minutes). Like many of his early works, it is set in the homoerotic environment of a prison where, prevented from speaking to each other, the prisoners use their bodies to communicate. Elizabeth Stephens (2006) suggests that, for Genet, dancing constitutes a "corporeography, a bodily writing through which erotic desire is expressed" (160) and that "[t]he body that writes itself through the language of dance in Genet's work is not a stable, essential one, secure within its own boundaries, but rather one

[5] Similarly, while three of our professional performers (including the two women) appear in naval uniforms at various points in the film, of all the participants, only our assistant choreographer was former military personnel.

that is both constituted and opened through the process of self-representation" (166). This describes our approach to both choreography and performing presence in *Heaven is a Place*.

Pre-production: Somatic Preparation for Contingency and Encounter

The film's creative research and development period with community participants started with a series of movement workshops, five months before filming began. Led by the film's choreographer, Ruth Way, and her assistant, Claire Summers, they were designed for people with no previous movement or performance experience and informed by the Shin Somatic® processes and principles of the Eastwest Somatics Institute.[6] As its founder Sondra Fraleigh (2015) has noted, "somatic movement events can build community interactively through playful, artful means (xxii). In accordance with many community dance practices, the workshop delivery focused on nurturing self-worth, building self-confidence and accepting difference in order to promote inclusion and trust between participants (Bartlett 2008, 41). Before starting the project, Mark Ayres told us that, "Many members of [Plymouth's] LGBT communities lack confidence as adults due to bad experiences at school and some have even been rejected by their own families." This awareness shaped our principal aims of these workshops for participants: to focus on resourcing their creativity; to develop opportunities to be in dialogue with others; and to enable them to contribute their distinctive voices to the overarching artistic project.

Exemplary of the processes explored in the workshop is "matching through touch." This develops tactile kinaesthetic rapport between participants, focusing on the quality of touch in order to support individuals through a movement pattern. As Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay (2004) note,

[6] For further information about Shin Somatics® bodywork methods: http://www.eastwestsomatics.com

> What touches us, and what we ourselves reach out to touch, shapes every aspect of who we are. We are formed by touch, our sense of ourselves growing from the feel of contact between our bodies and what is around us. (122)

The practice of touch, and the openness and empathy it can engender, was central to the movement and choreographic direction when filming on site, emphasising a heightened level of tactility through various modes contact with surfaces and structures. Other workshop exercises included witnessing each other's movement explorations, and either "dancing back" or else describing the images and how they made us feel. This practice resists the urge to claim to know or interpret someone else's experience. Rather, the aim is to open up the potential for bodily knowing and learning from each other, taking responsibility for what we see and feel, and supporting clarity in verbal and non-verbal communication. As a result, one of the emerging themes that arose from this practice in the workshops was the importance of visibility, of "being seen."

Community workshop participants who wanted to continue working with us (and almost all of them did if they were available to do so) were involved in further ensemble work in one of the pivotal scenes of the film; some (including Cornelius van Rijckvorsel, who is the only person seen speaking and sails the boat in the closing shots)[7] eventually performed in other scenes as well. Perhaps as significantly, however, the workshops inspired and taught us much more about the issues, themes and movement vocabularies that needed to be expressed and developed through choreographic processes on site. Evoking an imaginative interplay of oppositions which resonated closely with Genet's work, these included appearing and disappearing, ascending and descending, arriving and leaving, advancing and retreating, filling and emptying, expanding and contracting, including and excluding, imprisoned and released, grounded and airborne.

[7] Interestingly, Cornelius was the only participant who expressed dissatisfaction with the film to us. In particular, he was disappointed that it was not more like Genet's work.

Primarily, however, in preparation for filming, we concentrated on training both professional and community performers to be responsive, generous, empathic and as physically prepared as possible to encounter each other and the environment. As a conscious strategy focusing on the moment of such contingent encounters, we had no storyboard or synopsis or set choreography at the start of our three week production period. We had only our creative departure points and a shooting schedule, listing filming locations and which performers we wanted to be there and in what clothing.

Although we had chosen twelve sites in consultation with our dramaturg and community participants (only two of which it was possible to explore with the professional performers through guided improvisation over the previous month), more than half of them either had not yet been confirmed, or else were subject to last minute uncertainty due to structural damage, unexpected commercial development, insurance queries or access problems. Almost all our locations were weather dependent. As is the case for many community films made in the UK, the limited availability of a diverse group of non-professional performers within a specific filming window, meant that the principal scene featuring all of the community participants was firmly scheduled in our only indoor location: a gay club on Plymouth's Barbican (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1:* Cast and crew briefing meeting prior to filming at OMG on Plymouth's Barbican.

Production Strategies: Documenting the dérive through actualitié

Because our choreographic and filmmaking processes were inevitably conjoined through the availability and accessibility of people and places in a given moment, the journey of the performers is aligned to the moving image timeline; the sequences were shot almost entirely in the order in which they are seen in the film. The film therefore represents the organic development of its production process and documents the dialogical encounter between reality and image through screen performance. This chronology is entwined with a looping spatio-temporality, in that places are revisited and renewed, scenarios are replayed, and performances are re-enacted.

This mirrors the cinematic strategies found in both Genet's film and his writing: the use of parallel plotlines, close-ups of gestures, flashbacks and temporal disjunction. There are many other ways, however, in which Genet haunts our film. Hélène Cixous (2012) has

reflected upon his “erotic and nostalgic vagabondage, his wandering around cities,” noting that Genet is “one of those ghosts in search of a stage, a place to make an appearance. There’s a close relationship between the secret forces of a place and the likelihood of a spectral crystallisation” (33). As a revenant in *Heaven is a Place*, he puts words in mouths. He places phone calls. He is conjured by the performers, attracted by the secret forces of specific places.

Our vagabonde, played by the only performer in the film who did not live in Plymouth, guides and is guided by the spirit of Genet. She is lured to the sea, a sea that both delivers her beyond and is itself beyond, and finds her stage in the sky – as an aerialist who performs on a rope hanging from a crane, high above a Plymouth boatyard (See *Figure 2*). Her movement through the city can be best understood in terms of the situationist tactic known as the dérive. In his seminal 1958 text, Guy Debord described the dérive as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences” which is quite different from a journey or a stroll. Dérives involve “playful-constructive behaviour” and usually take place in urban environments. Their spatial fields depend on significant points of departure, like a bus station. From there, dérivistes disregard all the usual motives for movement and action, and instead let themselves be “drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.” This chimes uncannily with Genet’s (1983) understanding of community and identification: “You can select a particular community other than that of your birth, whereas you are born into a people; this selection is based on an irrational affinity, … an emotional – perhaps intuitive, sensual – attraction.” *Heaven is a Place* not only produces and is produced by such a community; it also documents the search for one.

*Figure 2:* Still from *Heaven is a Place* (2014) featuring Laura Murphy

The film draws on the *actualitié* style of early filmmakers such as the Lumière brothers, which depicted ordinary people and everyday events and led to genres of documentary, as well as special effects, staged narratives and fictional reconstructions. The principal camera acts as a reflective witness, observing and recording the semi-choreographed performance of dance unfolding in response to a specific location. Informed by "direct cinema," in which the audience participates in observing "reality" unfold on the screen, the cinematographer used a tripod to capture a wide viewpoint of the performers' bodies moving in a real environment. This creative documentation of *actualitié* – what occurred in front of the camera – also reflects the formal stylistic elements of Genet's work for stage and cinema.

The observational mode of filming created space on the screen for the dance sequences; framed by the camera, the viewer can see the performers' bodies moving in relation to place. Sometimes the camera was released from its fixed position and held in the hand, its lens moving gently in response to the action of the performers' bodies, allowing a

more subjective viewing experience through a dance between the camera and the performers-in-place. The second handheld camera was integrated within the choreographed visual dance as a "performer" in order to capture embodied views, responding to series of intimate encounters between the participants' bodies, as life's moments to be shared with "friends" on social media. The use of lightweight recording equipment and a small crew allowed us to be open to improvisation and to interweave chance elements, such as the performance by the two bar staff on-duty at our only indoor location who were keen to participate in the project.

## Moving in Place: Looking out and in

Our approach as a filmmaking team to working in a specific site was influenced by the geographer, Edward Relph (1976). As with Relph's research methodology – which he described as "a phenomenology of place" – we allowed each location to reveal itself to us over a series of visits, improvisations, rehearsals and the moment of filming itself. The development of the screenplay and the evolving processes of production were informed by the filmmakers' and performers' bodily experiences of these places, allowing our senses to connect with what lay unseen beneath the visible landscape. By framing selected areas of the visual field, the choice of shot and so on, our decisions in creating moving images can create audience awareness of a performer's "existential insideness," described by Relph as a deep unselfconscious immersion in place (55).

These production choices mirrored our choreographic processes in external locations, during which the movement vocabularies and themes developed in the community workshops acted as substrata. The act of producing space through the body and reclaiming self-agency informed how the professional performers began to generate choreographic material through the distinct architectural structures and material properties of specific sites. In this section,

due to space limitations, we will focus on the first location we explored and filmed in this way, although the method was the same for all. Its choice reflects the lure of the sea and evoked for us the diverse transient community of Plymouth's waterfront areas, comprising the homeless, asylum seekers, drug addicts, those seeking transgressive sexual liaisons, dog-walkers, fishermen and women, picnickers, ship-spotters, swimmers, beach-combers.

The scene involved all of the professional performers and, in moments such as these, working as an ensemble, we came to see them as the embodied spirits of a specific site, although they could just as easily be a group of clubbers avoiding home in the early morning. Because we see them from the vantage point of the vagabonde, who glimpses their bodies through one of the small windows in the WWII defensive structure, we named the location Vagabonde's Lookout East.

This site, at Devil's Point, comprised an upper space framed by a metal balcony, a place to lean on and look out to sea and beyond to the horizon. Later in the film, the dancers occupy these positions; the two women, in their military uniforms, dance romantically in the sunshine on the top level, as they emerge figuratively and literally from restrictions into the freedom to conform. But in this scene, they inhabit the neglected space beneath, one that, to us, smelled of suffering; dampness saturated the walls and ground. It felt devoid of human contact and warmth, lacking in purpose. A central supporting column dominated the space, which was dug into the earth with one side facing the sea, and a series of cold metal benches hugged the back wall.

The dancers explored its internal structures, surfaces and spatial dimensions, improvising on the theme of "appearing and disappearing." It was the moment when one unconsciously mimicked the central pillar that the space was suddenly imbued with a structurally integrative power and emotional resonance. He could barely sustain the contact with the floor, balancing on his toes and pressing the palm of his hand upwards into the

ceiling. In this moment we experienced the manifestation of the struggle to find a connection and the resolve to live through that difficulty. These oppositional forces became the anchoring points and spatial coordinates for a performance score. In contact with the surface of the ground – lying on it, crawling and touching its crevices and textures – the performers were able to support themselves and each other, finding their way to the portals through which they could potentially pass and be seen.

The camera captured and exposed the oppositional elements inherent in this unfolding score: the near and far proximities of bodies, individually and together, in space; the exploration of in and out, above and below, ground and ceiling, benches and walls. And on one of those walls was a small scrawl of graffiti, which never quite was in frame. It was only after the cameras were finally packed away that we realized what this graffiti was trying to communicate: No to Europe.

Financed by the European Union, in programme that aimed to foster cultural co-operation between European partners, we made *Heaven is a Place* against the backdrop of a European election in which the largest political gains in both England and France were made by nationalist parties that preyed on fear of difference, of invasion.[8] We deliberately made a European film – and this is one of the reasons why almost all of the (albeit limited) spoken text in the film is in French. Jean Genet reminded us that borders are always instruments of control, sites where inclusion and exclusion are made manifest; that the sea connects us to the world; and that we can be both on the margin and at the centre of a complex network of relations.

*Heaven is a Place* is an attempt to make meaning of and with and for a specific city that is more than itself – that is, it is also its passageways and its underground spaces; it is Europe and its sea. Suggested by Cixous (2012, 32) in her writing about Genet, we imagined

[8] Two years later, as this chapter was being revised for publication, Britain voted to leave the European Union, something that we wouldn't have believed when we were making the film.

a Plymouth that suddenly unfurled and turned itself out from a single vantage point: "Bienvenue à Bretonside," announces the voice from the bus station loudspeaker in the opening scene. It is a place that is constructed, dialectically, through what it has excluded, kept hidden, pushed to its borders, where the land drops away.

## Filming a Queer Counterpublic Cartography

The spaces connected through the vagabonde's journey in *Heaven is a Place* are those that Michel Foucault would describe as "heterotopic" (1967/1984). They are marginalised and yet paradoxically perform important and complex social and cultural roles. We might also understand them as "queer spaces" that exist in the shadows of heteronormative comings and goings. For the architectural historian Aaron Betsky, a "queer space" is "a space of difference," an arena of doubt, self-criticism, and "the possibility of liberation" (in Gandy 2012, 730).

Queer, like dérive, is both a verb and a noun. It is also an adjective that deliberately both means and doesn't mean the same thing, and so it is a word that many find both troublesome and slippery. Michael Gandy (2012), for instance, prefers the term "queering space," which seems to avoid theories of identity formation based on sexual difference as well as subsequent political action, but not quite. Gandy's formulation is based on the use or appropriation of space. As he notes, "Activities such as cruising" – that is, the practice of visiting public spaces for the purpose of meeting people for anonymous same sex encounters – are a "form of site-specific spatial insurgency," a socio-cultural practice in "which human creativity and the sexual imagination are radically combined" (734).

One of Plymouth's most enduring cruising spots (although less so now) is the Lion's Den cove on the Hoe. Reached via steep steps from the promenade above, it is a small curved, now dishevelled amphitheatre, facing the sea. The Lion's Den had been a men's only nude

bathing area throughout the 1950s. In the 1960s, its original glass roof was ruined in a storm and not replaced; as it became less acceptable to sunbathe nude during the day, the site became increasingly associated with the gay male community. It was suggested as a filming location through Alan Butler's research as well as by a number of project participants.

Choreographer Carol Brown (2010) draws our attention to how dancers produce "a set of relationships between body, space and architecture." The resulting matrixial field offers "a transgressive threshold of co-emergence for the dancing subject and the unfolding of spaces within choreography as encounter" (59). The Lion's Den featured in several scenes in *Heaven is a Place*; at the centre of the film is a duet between two of the professional performers (See *Figure 3*). The choreography, arising from the themes and movement vocabulary developed in the community workshops, as well as through the dancers' guided improvisations in this specific site, explored the dynamic opposition of ground and sky, dropping and falling, fullness and emptiness, expansion and contraction, power and vulnerability, hunting and being prey. Just beyond them, arms draped around each other's shoulders, their gaze shifting in unison from the sparkling sea to the two young men dancing together in and out of the shadows, are Alan Butler and Mark Ayres who co-direct Pride in Plymouth.

*Figure 3:* Still from *Heaven is a Place* (2014) featuring Adam Whiting and Erik Koky at the Lion's Den.

Something that became increasingly evident to us while making *Heaven is a Place* is that very few members of Plymouth's LGBT community then referred to themselves individually or collectively as "queer".[9] Rather, queer seems to be our way, as filmmakers, of understanding a scenario that embraces Genet, and Plymouth, and some of the members of its LGBT community, as well what the film is trying to represent and achieve aesthetically and politically. It is not possible in the space available here to rehearse the numerous intersecting theoretical formations, arguments and manoeuvres that have transformed this single word – queer – into such a rich terrain over the past two decades. However, the working definition that served as the backbone of the critical exploration in the film is that queer is the politics of the liberation of desire and is expressed in terms of erotic potential. It involves viewing the world and one's place in it through a previously neglected homosexual matrix with all the

[9] The use of the term "queer" has subsequently begun to emerge, for instance, in social media postings about the 2016 Plymouth Pride event.

historical awareness that entails. Pragmatically utopian – if we can ever describe the utopian as pragmatic – queer has built in its own obsolescence.

When we enter the public domain – in this case, through the making of an artwork – we are speaking both on behalf of and to a group of people we can barely imagine but whom we wish to affect. Indeed, this is at the heart of the constitution of such a group, what Michael Warner (2002) describes as "a public." Publics are always "mediated by cultural forms" and exist "only by virtue of address" (419). They are social spaces created through discourses which are temporal and reflexive. Indeed, for Warner, the "addressee of public discourse is always yet to be realized" and for this reason, such discourse involves "open-endedness, reflexive framing" and "accessibility" (416). These terms also describe our strategy for *Heaven is a Place*, a strategy that understands "publicness" as a form of embodied creativity and world-making.

There are some publics, however, that comprise those who have been excluded, or exclude themselves from, hegemonic norms or expectations. These, as Warner (2002) points out, are not simply subsets but are actually defined by "a conflictual relation to the dominant public" (423). Warner calls them counterpublics and they are always at "some level, conscious or not," aware of their "subordinate status." "Within a gay or queer counterpublic," he writes, "No one is in the closet" and "presumptive heterosexuality … is suspended" (424). As a result, the circulation of this counterpublic discourse always eventually meets intense resistance. Warner notes that "the expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier for a queer public, to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address" (424).

In August 2014, *Heaven is a Place* was shown on the big screen in the centre of Plymouth's shopping district during the city's first formal Pride Parade, which passed directly

under it. One of the film's participants told us that he felt the film offered the march's onlookers "a sense of our community." Mark Ayres believes that:

> Whilst most people that took part in the parade only saw a small piece of the film, it enhanced the sense of pride. Parading under the big screen with images of same sex couples dancing in iconic Plymouth locations was a very poignant moment. The imagery and video footage of the parade including the film on the big screen has been shared far and wide – creating a positive image of Plymouth.

As Barbara Abrash and David Whiteman (1999) observe, "the making and circulation of an independent film can create venues and platforms for the discussion of vital and controversial social issues, in environments that link personal and community experience and foster action" (97). The insistence on reflexive locatedness as guiding principle in *Heaven is a Place* begins to model how community film might celebrate and extend diversity through the construction of a collectively shared counterpublic cartography.

## Community Filmmaking as a Nexus of Located Relationships

Since the end of the 1960s, community filmmaking has "enabled groups and individuals to use the media often used to misrepresent them to engage in new forms of collective self-representation" (Webb-Ingall 2014). Whilst there was no opportunity in our project to provide the training necessary for the community to devise, film and edit the professionally realised moving image artwork the commission required, we tried to evolve strategies for ensuring the widest and most meaningful possible participation by LGB and T community members from the outset within the limited time most had available to work with us. There are, however, inevitably tensions that arise from making a community film that is simultaneously intended to be an art product, especially one that needed to be completed within a limited timeframe to fulfil the obligations of funding.

Among Plymouth's wider LGBT community, there were some who thought the film was too "arty"; without a conventional storyline or narrative positioning, they found it difficult to understand or to see "the point" (one audience member described it, we presume metaphorically, as a "porno flick but without the money shot"). On the other hand, many expressed surprise and delight that it was a "proper", "professional" film; they spoke of feeling part of something emerging, permeated by their own creativity and self agency. Pride in Plymouth, which originally became involved in the project as an activity with the potential to "bring members of the LGBTQ communities together," noted that they hadn't at first realized "what an immediate, tangible outcome a film can be for people. Participants can view it back and see it as the fruit of their labours and the fact that it looked so amazing made the process feel very worthwhile."

The making of *Heaven is a Place* required continual renegotiation in order to balance the shifting expectations of diverse organisations, individuals and groups of people. As a result, we came to understand our roles as community filmmakers in this situation as cultural and aesthetic intermediaries between the LGBT performers and the commissioning body, constantly weighing up both creative imperatives (for example, to be original, innovative, technically precise) and the ethical implications of socially engaged practice, each with varying degrees of success. Occupying a position of trust, we attempted to best interpret and mediate the visions of and communications between the various axes of the network of relationships.

Whilst *Heaven is a Place* does not set out to represent "LGBT Plymouth" as a single political entity or uniform collective – indeed, we would argue that a homogenous body such as this cannot exist – the LGBT community in Plymouth did consolidate through the process of developing, performing, making, and showing the film. The experiences and perspectives of the group who were actively involved in the film directly inform both its screenplay and

mise-en-scène, as do the documented lives of those individuals who had recently contributed to the Plymouth LGBT Archive. Alan Butler has noted that he sees "the film as now part of the archive and watching it provides a doorway into the stories that are in there." He has screened it within presentations and conferences about LGBT oral history and archives and feels it offers "a version of Plymouth that might not chime" with widespread assumptions about the city. When he watches it in these contexts, Alan says that "it always makes me feel strangely homesick but for the place that the film portrays. A place that is very much the Plymouth we all know but strangely not at the same time."

The community participants chose the locations of *Heaven is a Place* and it is their narratives that inform what we see on screen. The nightclub scene, which features all the performers as a cohesive community, is set in the gay club OMG, then newly opened on Plymouth's Barbican, and may be understood to represent the interior spaces of the city's pubs and bars where LGBT people could "be themselves." The choreographed duet at the heart of the film is performed at The Lion's Den, a site of personal significance to one of our key contributors: as a young teenager, alone and isolated in feeling and knowing he was gay, but not being able to make contact with anyone "like him," this place by the sea was where he could see others "like him." It was important to our contributors that these places be featured before they are effaced by gentrification and urban regeneration. To perform a politics of location, as we attempted to do in our film, is to create what Rosi Braidotti (2004) calls materially embedded, "embodied accounts" that "illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world" (133).

At the very heart of this process, for us, were the workshops grounded in somatic movement principles, the goals of which were to foster an inclusive and non-hierarchical working environment and to enable individual contributions to be seen and valued. Somatic bodywork is able to assist "people in experiencing and transforming the self through

awareness relative to the living world, the environment, and others" (Fraleigh 2015, 5) by suspending judgement, not fixing, finding pleasure in movement, exploring openings, evoking embodied memory and trusting in intuition. When participants refer to the "emotional" experience of film-making, the confidence they gained, or the "authenticity" engendered through it, they tend to refer specifically to these workshops. The moments of release and transgression these sessions produced began to reveal the unique qualities of each performer, their physicality and a renewed capacity to produce and reclaim space in the moment.

The transition, however, from workshop space to film location was not altogether smooth. Some participants expressed disappointment that the individual stories they explored and developed via movement were reduced to abstractions or group work in the film. One participant noted that while this was a "pragmatic and understandable" decision, he felt it was "sad that more of the material from the workshops could not have been translated into the film more fully." Paradoxically, although we discussed the daunting prospect of "not knowing" and dealing with ambiguity in a creative process, another participant would have preferred to have a firmer structure and sense of direction once the filming started. As community filmmakers, however, this was fundamental to our approach, practiced and rehearsed in the workshops. By sharing a collective sense of vulnerability and accruing value to performance and filming processes that were not mapped in advance, we hoped to inspire a more creative and open dialogue between all involved.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of *Heaven is a Place* is the strengthening of bonds between those who were involved in its making. Two years after its completion, participants continue to speak of the ensuing "comraderie," as well as long-lasting friendships and relationships that the film consolidated. There is a sense of collective ownership in the film, a feeling of pleasure in its professional aesthetic and technical realisation and the fact that it is

made in Plymouth, and about being in Plymouth. In the words of one of its community participants,

> The film looks beautiful and other worldly and feels like an enhanced snapshot into a subculture that had been kept out of sight. It shone a spotlight onto a previously unseen stage. It celebrates places and lives that have often been considered by some to be shameful and those of us who took part are proud of the film and our participation in it.

According to Mark Ayres, participating in the making of *Heaven is a Place* helped Pride in Plymouth "to build the 'Pride Family' and its social status" as an organisation, growing in confidence as a cultural and political force in the city and beyond.

The "heaven" of our collaborative filmed encounter is the dynamic, multiple, shifting intersection of the temporal, the spatial, and the experiential, combining emotional, corporeal, cognitive and memory registers. By focusing on embodied process and what Bruzzi (2006) describes as the "perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation" (13), we believe it went some way toward shedding light on the "personal and community histories that [give] people a new sense of themselves and the political and social realities which shape their lives" (Abrash and Whiteman 1999, 96). Importantly, for us, it is a film that could only emerge through collaborative interactions in which the bodies of the present were prepared to meet the places of Plymouth's queer past on their own terms.

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