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"The greatest loss was a loss of our history": Natural disasters, marginalised identities and sites of memory

This paper examines intersections between space, materiality, memory and identity in relation to lesbian and gay experiences of recent disasters in Australia. Drawing on interviews with lesbians and gay men in two disaster sites, the paper argues that disaster impacts may include the loss of sites of memory that inform and underpin the formation and maintenance of marginalised identities. We explore the ways in which social marginality is experienced by sexual minorities during disasters as a result of threats to sites of lesbian and gay memory. The paper contributes to scholarship in geographies of memory by investigating the impacts of disasters on how memory is spatially located and experienced.

Keywords: Disasters; memory; gay; lesbian; marginality; materiality

Introduction

Memory and space are mutually constituted and intrinsically linked to both collective and personal identities. Whether the memories of a household embedded in everyday objects, or the memories of a nation sited in commemorative monuments, memory may take material and spatial form. French historian Pierre Nora has labelled such spaces "sites of memory" and argues that they are pivotal to the development of modern identities (Nora, 1989). This paper examines impacts on marginalised identity groups when sites of memory are threatened or destroyed by disasters. Drawing on findings from a broader project that investigates the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) populations in disasters in Australia and New Zealand, this paper specifically examines interview narratives from lesbians and gay men who have been significantly impacted by recent Australian

disasters. Our analysis considers the intersections of memory, space and identity and reveals how disasters may destabilise a sense of belonging that draws on sites of memory.

Our research builds on and contributes to a growing scholarship in geographies of memory (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Jones & Garde-Hansen 2012), and examines ways in which the loss of materialised memories may contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginality. Disaster impacts include the destruction of sites at which memory has been located or established. These sites comprise material objects and the environments that house them, as well as connections to wider communities embodied in these objects and environments. For sexual minority groups, this loss is often expressed as a threat to the lesbian and gay past and, by extension, the maintenance of minority identities in the present.

In disasters research, disasters are increasingly recognised as impacting on various sections of society in differing ways (Cianfarani 2012; Reid 2013). Indeed, disasters can best be understood as a social construct (Bankoff 2003). Social attributes including race, age, gender, ability and socioeconomic status each contributes to the experience of disaster, including vulnerability to its impacts and capacities to recover from those impacts (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2014). Our wider research aims to better understand how sexual and/or gender minority status may play a role in the experience of disasters, for example in interactions with emergency services, applications for government or charity-based assistance, access to emergency shelter accommodations and ensuring ongoing safety and security.

Early findings have indicated the significance of disasters in and as memory, and substantial connections between disaster impacts and threats to sites of memory. Our aim in this paper, therefore, is to examine how the damage caused by disasters is at times seen to threaten memories that are specifically linked to lesbian and gay identities. We contend that

the destruction of material possessions and physical (in this case, domestic) spaces in disasters can place at risk the memories and, by extension, identities connected to those possessions and spaces (Morrice 2013). As Nora argues, "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (Nora 1989: 13). To Nora, sites of memory are the "bastions" upon which "we buttress our identity" (Nora 1989: 12). While materialised memory may serve as a means of ensuring the continued life and meaning of the past in the present, we argue it is equally true that it is this very materiality that may make sites of memory vulnerable to disaster impacts and which may, in turn, exacerbate experiences of marginality for minority identity groups.

In what follows, we situate our research intellectually with respect to literatures on, first, disaster and LGBTI marginality and, second, geographies of sexualities. We then discuss our conceptual framework, examining geographies of memory and drawing on research into intersections between disasters, space, identity and memory. This is followed by an outline of our methods. We then present our results which are explored through the themes of gay histories; home; material objects; same-sex relationships; and HIV/AIDS. This is followed by a set of conclusions based on the implications of this research for understanding the role of memory, marginality and materiality in how disasters are experienced.

Disasters and LGBTI marginality

Rather than being seen as natural events occurring in isolation, disasters involving a natural hazard are best understood as a combination of a triggering agent and the vulnerabilities that exist within an impacted society (McEntire 2005). Socially oriented disasters research reveals that varying characteristics of vulnerability and resilience are exhibited across social groups during the impact and recovery phases of a disaster. As a result, disaster impacts are never uniformly experienced or evenly distributed. Specific

disparities are evidenced according to gender, ethnicity/race, class/income, age and disability (McEntire 2005).

Within disasters research, the experiences of sexual and gender minorities remain under-explored (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2014; Gorman-Murray 2014). Research at a number of global sites has, however, suggested the centrality of LGBTI identity or status in increasing vulnerability and reducing resilience. We do not propose to include a full summary of previous research in this paper, but provide three key indicative examples of research in this area to date.

In New Orleans in 2005, for example, same-sex couples impacted by Hurricane Katrina were left vulnerable by governmental and non-governmental support agencies that defined 'family' as comprising only an opposite-sex couple and their biological children (Caldwell 2006). This official definition meant those in same-sex relationships were unable to register as a couple or family for various forms of support, including temporary housing. Emergency management and disaster risk reduction policies and practices that assumed uniform heterosexuality therefore increased the vulnerability of sections of the local population.

In Tamil Nadu, India, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, members of a local third gender population known as *aravanis* were excluded from shelter and aid provided by domestic and international agencies (Pincha and Krishna 2008). *Aravanis* are born apparently male or intersex, dress in feminine attire and identify as neither male nor female. Because aid agencies provided support based on a binary gender model, *aravanis* could not be registered by or gain access to necessary care services. Some *aravanis* who did access shelters experienced abuse and harassment. Spaces established to provide safety and security were therefore experienced as places of risk and vulnerability.

In Australia, some LGBTI individuals reported a reluctance to engage with emergency support services following severe flooding in the state of Queensland in 2011 (Gorman-Murray, Morris, Keppel, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2014). Previous experiences of homophobia or transphobia in other circumstances, and resultant feelings of social marginality, left some LGBTI Queenslanders uncertain about their access to vital means of support and fearful that their identity would result in discrimination.

Marginality refers to the peripheralisation of certain people and groups within a society (Cullen and Pretes 2000). Within disasters research, there is acknowledgement that, although social marginality may result in vulnerability, marginalised groups may equally develop strategies of support and care within the group, thereby exhibiting resilience (Balgos, Gaillard and Sanz 2012). We take a novel approach within the study of LGBTI marginality by considering the impacts of a disaster on memory, arguing that one element of the impact of disasters on lesbian and gay Australians has been the threat disasters pose to sites of memory, including possessions, environments and material networks. The significance of this impact is exacerbated by feelings of social marginality and of exclusion from broader disaster narratives.

Geographies of sexualities

Since the 1990s a rich scholarship has developed in the field of geographies of sexualities, but attention has only recently turned to intersections of space, sexuality and memory (Brown and Knopp 2008; Brown, Knopp, Bettani and Childs 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2015; Podmore and Chamerland 2015). This paper extends this work, building on research into, firstly, the historical emergence of urban gay neighbourhoods and, secondly, into how sexuality is constructed in and through domestic spaces. We aim to

advance knowledge in these fields by contemplating the destabilisation of identity that may occur when lesbian and gay memory is placed under threat by disaster impacts.

The memories of many communities are handed down either through officially sanctioned means (for example, national memories taught in schools) or within families (for example, the memories of ethnic or migrant communities handed down from parent to child) (Cubbitt 2007). LGBTI memory, however, is rarely taught in these ways. This has led historian John D'Emilio to argue that lesbians and gay men:

> Have a special need for history. Raised as we were in heterosexual families, we grew up and discovered our gayness deprived of gay ancestors, without a sense of our roots. We need to create and carry with us a living awareness of gay generations. (1992: 55)

The importance of memory to identity can be seen in the search for a past and in the need to find or create a history to put to use in the present. Amid changing and fluid sexual identities, evidence is sought of longstanding histories which are temporally and spatially sited and which provide affirmation and assurance to marginalised groups in the present.

Over the last few decades, scholarship in the field of geographies of sexualities has emerged as a means of thinking through the pivotal role of space in the development of modern sexual identities. As argued by Johnston and Longhurst, "Space and sexuality are mutually constituted" (2010: 3). A substantial focus of study has been the uses of urban space by lesbians and gay men, including the importance of urban space to the historical development of minority sexual identities (Brown and Knopp 2008; Podmore and Chamberland 2015). Through processes of everyday inhabitation, recreation and consumption (Knopp 1998), as well as through more specifically political activisms (Podmore and Chamberland 2015), lesbians and gay men have resisted the normative

heterosexualisation of public space while benefiting, to varying degrees, from the political efficacy, safety and visibility provided by LGBT neighbourhoods.

More recently, questions have arisen about the transformation and potential demise of urban gay neighbourhoods (Doan and Higgins 2011; Brown 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014). Changes in modes of recreation, uses of space and shifting identities are among the factors that have signalled substantial change in the location and uses of the gayborhood. Such changes have been met with a degree of concern within fractions of lesbian and gay populations (Reynolds 2009; Ghaziani 2014). These neighbourhoods have arguably begun to operate as sites of memory that signal a longstanding place for non-heterosexual identities in the life of the city (Brown, Wang and Knopp 2011; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2015). If lesbian and gay claims to these spaces can be revealed as fragile or unstable, does this also reveal the fragility of marginalised sexual identities?

Our more specific interest in this paper is in how these issues have played out within domestic spaces, since residential homes are key sites impacted in disasters (Brun and Lund 2008; Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2014). The work of geographers has identified the space of the home as normatively heterosexed (e.g. Valentine 1993; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Indeed, house layout and design can be seen as reinforcing or responding to a particular vision of 'home' as a space for heterosexual couples and their biological children (Johnston and Longhurst 2010). In such circumstances, domestic spaces may prove alienating or marginalising for LGBTI individuals including, for example, lesbian and gay teenagers living with their heterosexual parents (Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003).

Although this may suggest that home is experienced as a negative space by lesbians and gay men, paradoxically it also continues to act as a space of identity formation and

affirmation (Gorman-Murray 2006; Gorman-Murray 2008). Lesbians and gay men have been found to use the home as a form of safe space into which the intrusion of potentially hostile heterosexuality can, within certain boundaries, be regulated or limited (Gorman-Murray 2012). The display of books, posters or other materials may be utilised as a form of identity performance, constructing the domestic space as one in which homosexual identity is placed on view and through which hegemonic heterosexuality is resisted (Johnston and Valentine 1995; Gorman-Murray 2012).

In this paper, we build on previous scholarship by examining how domestic spaces and the material objects stored within them have been positioned as sites of memory specifically linked to lesbian and gay identities. Just as the potential loss of gay urban neighbourhoods troubles a continued sense of connection to public identities, so does the loss of domestic sites of memory further impact on experiences of marginality for lesbians and gay men. Rather than ongoing processes of urban change that shift the meanings of space over longer time periods, our interest is in the sudden impact of a disaster that has the potential to destroy sites of memory within moments.

Conceptual framework: geographies of memory and materiality

Critical to the arguments of this paper is an understanding of memory as central to the development of identity; as intrinsically spatial; and as both individual and collective (Pile 2002). As argued by Hoelscher and Alderman in this journal, "Together, social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities – and the often-rigorous contestation of those identities" (2004: 348). Collective memory operates as a critical means of identity formation in which the individual develops a sense of belonging through shared memories. If those shared memories are inaccessible, suppressed or placed at risk, the related development of or connection to identity is also threatened.

The concept of collective memory was first posited by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that memory, far from purely individual, is reliant on social frameworks and interactions with material space (Halbwachs, 1992 [1950]). He argued:

> Every collective memory unfolds in a spatial framework. … since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings (1950: 6-7).

Halbwachs' theories have proved to be highly influential to the ways in which geographers have contemplated geographies of memory. Jones and Garde-Hansen argue that memory is geographic in two senses, "that of being of past spaces and places as well as past times, and in terms of the prompting and practice of memories by and in current spaces" (Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012:19). Physically returning to specific spaces can evoke memories of earlier experiences there, while memories of earlier experiences can evoke a sense of the space in which they occurred. Equally, a space may evoke collective memories of times we did not personally live through. A war memorial, for example, is a space designed to remember wars in which 'we' as a nation fought, even if those wars occurred long before our birth.

Memory, however, is contested terrain in which competing viewpoints, intentions and identities may collide. Karen Till has argued, "political struggles over who controls the past in the public arena are often intimately linked to competing interests over the production of power relations and political-economic space" (2003: 291). Memorial sites develop a particular vision of historical events that carries political resonance in the present (Leib 2002). A site such as a war memorial does not simply offer a spatial reflection of the past, but rather constructs the past within and through that space.

Materialised memory may equally factor within everyday spaces such as the home, tying the inhabitants of the home both to a sense of belonging as, say, a couple or family, as well as to identities at broader scales. Divya Tolia-Kelly has argued, for example, that many British Asian women living in the United Kingdom have created connections to past landscapes through domestic materiality, using objects in the home to signify patterns of migration. She states that for women, "marginalized from the national landscape of Britain, other landscapes and ecologies become sites of affirming individual and collective identities" (2004: 278).

Our interest is in how disasters may produce threats to materialised memory, destroying objects and spaces through which marginalised identity groups have developed a sense of belonging, collaboration and community. We acknowledge, however, that it is not only the memories of marginalised communities that are revealed as fragile during disasters. The protection of local heritage sites, for example, can be seen as a significant element of broader disaster management strategies. The preservation of important historical sites has been found to aid the emotional wellbeing of affected populations (Spennemann and Graham 2007). Within post-disaster rebuilding processes, however, lie questions as to the appropriate commemoration both of the event of the disaster and of a city or town as it stood before the disaster (Birch and Wachter 2006). What should be rebuilt and what should be replaced? Should the disaster be seen as an opportunity for revival and renewal or should the city be rebuilt as it was? How will the history of the city be acknowledged in its post-disaster form, and how will dominant and minority identities be reflected in or excluded from the history that is presented? These questions suggest the prominence of memory, space and identity as pivotal and interlinked issues raised by disaster events.

Memories of a disaster can also be seen as a means of learning from both the mistakes made and successes achieved during past disaster events. In the words of Arthur Neal,

"Collective memories may be thought of as a storehouse of information on how problems were confronted and solved in the past" (Neal 2005: 199). This form of memory can be seen as an important element of developing community resilience frameworks (Wilson 2013). Social memory of disasters can operate at various scales, from national or regional governments to neighbourhoods or households. In interviews for our project, for example, informants impacted by flooding in the Queensland city of Brisbane in 2011 have described their reliance on the memories of neighbours who had experienced earlier flood events. Uncertain of what actions to take or of the likely impacts of the approaching flood, seeking out memories of past experiences offered a sense of direction and was used to fill information gaps.

At a broader level, memories of disaster and other traumatic events can be enacted in service of the collective memories of communities, cities or nations (Simpson and Corbridge 2006; Neal 2005). Indeed, memories of disaster may buttress nation building, in which a celebration of how a society dealt with a disaster, or commemorations of 'our' loss as a result of disaster, enter the mythology of the nation. These collective memories involve a selective process of remembering and forgetting, in which acts of heroism are attributed to national characteristics while negative responses (for example, failed disaster management strategies, looting or violence) are deliberately excised (Neal 2005).

The enforcement of particular memory narratives or particular memory-making practices by governments can result in disputes over what it is that is remembered and may result in the marginalisation of the disaster memories of minority groups (Simpson and Corbridge 2006; David 2008). Contests over disaster memory frequently play out spatially, with rebuilding processes that assert a particular vision of the past enacted, not purely as a means of remembering pre-disaster spaces, but as a means of ensuring that specific social groups or identities continue to define the meanings of space. Just as disaster impacts vary

according to a range of social factors, memory and disaster will interact differently across social groups.

Indeed, the sites of memory of marginalised communities may be considered unseemly and inappropriate for 'official' commemoration. The destruction caused by a disaster has at times been framed as a cleansing process, through which uses of urban space deemed by some to be undesirable have been swept away. This was particularly notable in the destruction of public housing in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Browne-Dianis and Sihna 2008). In that instance, the complete devastation of neighbourhoods predominantly inhabited by poorer, African-American populations was seen by some politicians and developers as an opportunity for renewal and profit, no matter the consequences on those left homeless. The marginalised may have little voice in rebuilding or commemorative processes, leaving fear for the identities, communities and memories linked to lost spaces. Emmanuel David has argued, however, that community activist groups in New Orleans enacted creative memory-making strategies in order to make visible otherwise marginalised disaster memories and to resist dominant narratives (David 2008).

In this paper, we contribute to scholarship in geographies of memory by examining the experiences of a marginalised group whose sites of memory have been destroyed or placed at risk. Given that memory, space and identity are linked and intertwined, we contemplate the impacts on identity when both space and memory are suddenly changed. In doing so, we also contribute to research into disasters and marginality, revealing ways in which the loss of certain possessions may exacerbate feelings of social marginality and contribute to the trauma of impacted individuals and couples.

Methods and data

The research methods of our larger project include the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data through online surveys, in-person interviews and media analysis. To date, twelve interviews have been conducted with individuals who identify as LGBTI and have been impacted by a natural disaster. The interviews, which were conducted between November 2013 and December 2014, were semi-structured and highly conversational. Each interview has included discussion of the interviewee's home and neighbourhood, the disaster itself and the process of recovery and rebuilding in the time since that event. Full transcripts have been developed for each interview and transcripts were critically analysed to identify emergent themes. This has enabled the identification of key subjects and common narratives, as well as contemplation and analysis of deeper meanings expressed in individual memories of disaster and marginality.

In this paper, rather than use or represent the entire current sample, we have chosen to draw on analysis of three exemplary case studies of lesbian and gay post-disaster memory narratives, drawing on the work of several scholars who have similarly used a smaller number of in-depth case studies to examine uses of domestic space (Miller 2006; Walsh 2006; Gorman-Murray 2008). We believe this approach allows for a deeper, more nuanced analysis of particular experiences and identities, enabling contemplation of both the specificity of individual experiences and of how those experiences resist or conform to dominant disaster narratives.

Our analysis includes three case studies at two disaster sites: Brisbane, Queensland and the Blue Mountains, New South Wales. In January 2011, large sections of the Australian state of Queensland were subject to heavy flooding. In Queensland's capital city, Brisbane, the flood gauge exceeded its major flood level on 12 January (Queensland Flood

Commissions 2011: 27). The flood peaked at 2:43am local time on 13 January, at which point 14,100 properties were affected and 1,203 homes inundated. Although no lives were lost in Brisbane itself, the floodwaters caused substantial damage to homes, businesses and infrastructure, resulting in the most significant disaster to hit the flood-prone city since 1974.

In October 2013, bushfires struck several of the towns of the Blue Mountains region in New South Wales, destroying 196 homes and badly damaging 130 more (McDonald 2014). The Blue Mountains lie on the western border of the Sydney metropolitan area. Dominated by dry sclerophyll forest, the region is highly prone to bushfires. The 2013 fires were believed to be the most costly in terms of damage to property since 1968 (Bradstock 2013).

In interviews about their experiences, Mike and Harold of Brisbane and Helen of the Blue Mountains (all Anglo-Australian; all names are pseudonyms) recalled their losses in ways that highlighted the importance of memory and framed the destruction of their possessions not only in terms of financial cost, although in each case that cost was considerable, but also in terms of the loss of materialised memories in their possession.

Mnemonic possessions: losing collective gay histories in disasters

To Pierre Nora, the centrality of collective memory to identity has created a responsibility on the individual to remember. He writes, "For the individual, the discovery of roots, of 'belonging' to some group, becomes the source of identity, its true and hidden meaning. Belonging, in turn, becomes a total commitment" (1989: 11). Nora calls this "memory as an individual duty" (1989: 11). Our research suggests ways in which items stored in the home may be held in fulfilment of this duty. Particularly for some older gay men, there is a need to protect not just personal histories, but the history of their community

(see Gorman-Murray 2013). That history is stored as material objects in the home, objects potentially threatened by disaster.

Mike is a gay man in his sixties who formerly worked in the Queensland public service but is now retired. He lives with his partner Ian in an apartment overlooking the Brisbane River. When the floodwaters struck, Mike and Ian decided to stay in their apartment in part because it is situated on a higher floor and was unlikely to experience direct flooding and in part because they wanted to stay with their elderly cat who could not be moved. They subsequently spent several days trapped in the apartment, during which time they were without power as they watched the flood waters pass by beyond their balcony. Although the apartment itself was not flooded, once the waters subsided Mike and Ian found that their garage, on a lower floor of the building, had been inundated and that many of the belongings stored in that space had been ruined.

Significantly, the possessions Mike described as his greatest loss were materials relating to his time as a gay liberation activist and, later, as an advocate for HIV/AIDS issues. These included minutes of meetings, unpublished documents and other original materials that, as described by Mike, were unique and invaluable for the memories they carried. To Mike, they had become sites of memory for two eras of activism now past and at risk of being forgotten. Mike, who is writing a history of AIDS activism in Australia, described his stored archive both as evidence for his own work as an amateur historian, but also as memories of the gay community held in his care. The destruction of these materials is recalled as both a personal loss and a loss for that community.

According to Mike, "So, while we lost a lot of material things, what I felt the greatest loss was a loss of our history". Important to note is the use of "our" to describe this history, as well as the prioritisation of these documents above other lost belongings. Castiglia and

Reed argue, "For those marginalized from mainstream culture … memories on which to ground alternative social identities must be more self-consciously recognized, cultivated and shared" (2012: 127). The disaster destroyed the materials through which Mike was participating in this memory and identity-making process. Although his car was destroyed, along with furniture and other items stored in the garage, it is the loss of sites of memory that is most mourned and which, in Mike's words, "You can never replace".

Our interview with Mike also included the following exchange related to the Sydney Mardi Gras, an annual lesbian and gay festival that commemorates a pivotal moment in Australian queer history:

Mike: And, um, have you been to many Mardi Gras?

Interviewer: A few, but not - My time in Australia has been relatively recent. So I haven't really appreciated the power and the significance of many of the earlier marches.

Mike: OK, well, in 1988, there was a ten-year anniversary of the start of Mardi Gras. And they did a show called 'I Am What I Am' that basically had 200 drag queens on stage come out one by one. And they had drag queens from every state of the country. Like it was, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, everybody who was the famous drag queen for their local area came and built up to this giant climax and I had a photo this big [indicates size of photograph] of it, um, that had been reproduced, and that was ruined.

In this exchange, Mike is both describing material lost in the flood but also enacting a memory for the interviewer in order to suggest a sense of the extent of his loss. By asking first whether the interviewer (also a gay male) had been to "many Mardi Gras", Mike is perhaps enquiring as to the extent of their shared memory and, therefore, the degree to which

the interviewer will understand both the importance of the photograph Mike was about to describe and the significance of its loss. In describing the size of the event; its status as an anniversary; and the size of the photograph that was destroyed, Mike is suggesting the importance of the memory that was destroyed with it.

Divya Tolia-Kelly has argued, "Signification of identity, history and heritage, through … material cultures, depends on the continuing dependence on the past for sustenance in the present" (2004b: 315). Mike found sustenance in his connection to historical gay cultures developed through objects in his home. Mike's sadness in the loss of these material traces of memory reflects a feeling of regret or failure in his self-defined duty to remember. Again, these were not simply personal possessions but an archive of a community's memories. Mike's sense of belonging to a community was directly linked to his role in preserving those memories. Their loss suggests the potential fragility of gay memory and troubles the ongoing role of the past in current identity.

Unintended home invasions: challenges to memory and identity within the home

Mike also described the experience of having large numbers of volunteers – most of them strangers to him – who helped with cleaning away mud and debris and with the removal of destroyed possessions. In Brisbane, a massive outpouring of support for those impacted by the floods included brigades of volunteers, labelled the Mud Army, who helped flood victims to clean mud-filled homes and to throw out destroyed possessions. On the weekend of 15-16 January 2011, around 50,000 to 60,000 volunteers are believed to have participated, with significant numbers also volunteering the following weekend (Rafter 2013). Several of our interviewees have expressed their surprise and sincere gratitude at the level of support

provided by the Mud Army, while also noting the difficulty of having complete strangers in their homes and handling their personal possessions.

The popularly idealised vision of the home is as a private space from which the outside world can be excluded. In reality, the division between public and private is far less rigid and the home may operate as simultaneously public and private (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Due to the social marginality experienced by lesbians and gay men, the need to regulate or monitor public access to the home may take on heightened urgency (Gorman-Murray 2012). Many lesbians and gay men have been found to undertake a process of 'de-gaying' of the home, placing books, artworks and other obviously 'gay' materials out of sight during visits from tradespeople or other strangers (Gorman-Murray, 2012). As a result of the disaster, and with the arrival of volunteers, Mike's ability to manage the public/private balance of his home was removed.

To Mike, this intrusion into his space ultimately revealed his marginality as a gay man experiencing disaster differently from those around him. The volunteers seemed not to understand the importance of damaged materials to Mike's memory and his sense of gay identity. While entirely well-meaning and willing to assist without discrimination, the volunteers could not comprehend the true value of what simply appeared to be mud-ruined boxes of soggy books, photographs and documents. As a result, a great deal of material Mike now wishes he could perhaps have saved and attempted to clean was instead discarded. Mike stated:

Um, it was a bit like, um, they weren't being callous or clumsy, but, they were my memories, that was my life in lots of ways, and it just felt like it was being handled with pretty abrupt gloves (laughs). It was – they were trying to be caring and I really appreciate the fact these people stepped up out of nowhere, but to

know that what they might see as just papers and photos was actually a really essential part of who I was.

Central to this sense of loss was a feeling that the volunteers were mostly heterosexual people (or were perceived by Mike as being heterosexual people) who may not understand that these boxes were filled, not just with documents, but with materialised memory linked specifically to Mike's gay identity and to his sense of himself as belonging to a gay community. Lesbian and gay memory is often enacted to resist invisibility and the enforcement of heteronormativity (Castiglia and Reed 2009). For Mike, the volunteers could not understand that what they held "were my memories" and an "essential part of who I was". They were inadvertently and unwittingly participating in heteronormative destruction of gay memory and, despite the very best of intentions, adding to a sense of marginality.

Precious things and personal loss

The highlighting of materialised memory as the most significant loss was also an element of the experiences of Harold, a gay man in his fifties whose home in the Brisbane suburb of Rocklea was also flooded. Harold lived alone in a two-storey house, but had previously sublet the top storey to assist with rent, and had all of his belongings stored on the ground floor. In a moment of great misfortune, Harold fell ill and was rushed to hospital on the afternoon before the house was flooded. He was therefore unable to do anything to protect his belongings and the floodwaters destroyed almost everything he owned. When Harold's sister, along with other volunteers, came to clear out the muddy possessions, he was still in hospital and unable to supervise what was to be kept and what was to be thrown away. When he was released from hospital nine days later, Harold found that almost everything he owned had been discarded.

Harold described the loss in the following terms:

> So all my stuff got disposed of. And a friend of mine actually told me … that all my stuff had been taken away and he had actually taken photos of it and produced his mobile phone to show me the photos of my personal belongings all piled up on the footpath. Even some of my most precious items that I classed as very special to me, which was, um, the medals I won in Vancouver 1990 for the Gay Games, where I won Gold, Silver and Bronze medals. And those medals now can never be retrieved because they've been thrown out. And there were other items as well. And now I've had to make a whole new life for myself and starting from scratch all over again.

Significant in this memory story is the highlighting of the Gay Games medals. The Gay Games are an international LGBT sporting event held every four years since 1982 (Waitt 2003). While all of Harold's household belongings lay on the street, ready to be thrown away, the enormous value of medals won at the 1990 Games is represented by their naming. To Harold, these medals represented a time of achievement as well as a specific connection to gay memory. Evoked is a sense that "starting from scratch" does not only involve purchasing new possessions, but developing new memories and a new identity. If sites of memory are the objects on which we "buttress our identity" (Nora 1989: 12), what happens to that identity when the sites are lost?

The specific importance of these memories becomes increasingly clear in the context of Harold's life story. He has struggled for many years with physical and mental health issues and alcoholism. Although once very involved in the gay community, that involvement lessened over time and he has lost many of those connections. The Gay Games medals represented, therefore, a now unstable feeling of belonging and a link to the identity Harold enjoyed at the time of his sporting victory and participation in a gay community event. They

were materialised sites of memory stored within a domestic space and through which Harold was able to map a path back to an earlier time.

As with Mike, the sexual identity (or perceived sexual identity) of those assisting with the clean-up was also significant for Harold. His sexuality had not been entirely accepted by his family and his ongoing relationship with his sister, who is heterosexual, remains complex. The fact it was his sister who had disposed of these connections to gay memory – someone who could not be expected to either understand their importance or appreciate their value – added to a sense of loss and Harold's experience of marginality as a gay man impacted by a disaster.

Losing home, memory and self

Like Harold, Helen (a university lecturer in her 50s) and her partner Jennifer lost everything they owned in a disaster. Helen and Jennifer's belongings were not discarded following flood-damage, however, but were burnt in a bushfire that completely destroyed their home and almost all of its contents. Helen managed to save her laptop computer and Jennifer her mobile phone, but that was all. The couple have been together for over twenty years and had lived in the Blue Mountains region through that time. Both members of a local Community Fire Unit (a volunteer fire brigade), Helen and Jennifer had good knowledge of bushfire preparedness and had experienced threats to their home previously. They had not been able to save their home on this occasion, however, and were forced to flee at the last moment, as flames came through their windows.

Helen described their loss in ways that highlighted both the significance of materialised memories within a same-sex relationship and the sense that, as a lesbian couple, the

experiences of herself and Jennifer seemed not to be reflected in the broader memory narratives surrounding a disaster event. She stated:

> A lot of the things we had were, um, were the sort of ornamental things and things we'd bought overseas and I'd write the story of it on the back. You know, "This little print was bought when we were doing blah", so it is that concentrated reality of, "This is a 20 year relationship and here are the markers of that". And, maybe that's got a particular force that maybe heterosexual relationships don't have – I don't know – because if you don't see your relationship reflected much in the world, you can see it constantly, um, reflected in your home.

Objects purchased on overseas holidays thus carried with them memories, not only of places visited, but of the relationship that had carried through those times and spaces. To Helen, the marginality or invisibility that may be experienced in the outside world was dispelled within the home, in which sites of memory carried a special significance. The disaster destroyed those memories and thereby troubled both a sense of belonging in space, but also a sense of connection to the history of a lesbian relationship.

The space of the home itself could, in this sense, become a site of memory, which offered a constant sense of reassurance and continuance. As Gorman-Murray has argued, "An important way various elements of self are integrated in the home is through the accumulation and arrangement of personally meaningful objects" (Gorman-Murray 2007: 234). These objects can become an element of identity construction, through which normative heterosexuality is resisted and an alternative identity validated (Gorman-Murray 2007; Gorman-Murray 2008). The loss or destruction of home may then destabilise that identity.

The loss of the relatively safe space of the home as the result of a disaster has particular ramifications for sexual and gender minority populations (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2014). Negotiating emergency or temporary housing, for example, or

interactions with various support agencies may prove challenging for individuals, couples or families at risk of discrimination (Gorman-Murray et al 2014). Helen's disaster narrative encourages us to consider the implications of the loss of a home on memory and identity. She described a memory of, "feeling nurtured within the home" and a feeling that the destruction of both a home and its contents carried continual reminders of loss. She stated, "Like, it's not a specific thing. But, it's the randomness of it. It's such dispersed grief because you never know when you're going to find something that will set something off." She described herself as bursting into tears of both "anger and sadness" in the middle of a home-wares store, surrounded by kitchen equipment that was newer and shinier than what she and Jennifer had lost, but which carried none of the memories that had taken materialised form and become part of their shared identity as a lesbian couple in their now lost home.

A natural disaster and memories of HIV/AIDS

Questions around silencing and fears for the loss of gay memory were heightened by the crisis of HIV/AIDS, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s but continuing today. Cultural theorist Anne Cvetkovich has acknowledged, for example, her desire to, "keep the history of AIDS activism alive and part of the present" (2003: 6). As the crisis in the Western world subsided, with safe-sex practices lessening (for a time) the rate of infections and then medical treatments shifting infection from almost certainly fatal to manageable chronic illness, memory became an increasingly significant issue for those who survived.

Marita Sturken has argued, "The AIDS epidemic has produced an extraordinary discourse on memory and the problems of remembering and forgetting" (1997: 145). Along with AIDS memorials and parks of remembrance, established in a range of global locations, perhaps the most highly symbolic AIDS-related memory project is the AIDS memorial quilt.

First begun in San Francisco in the mid-1980s, this project encouraged lovers, family and friends of those who had died to contribute a quilt square in memory of the deceased (Sturken, 1997). The result is a materialised site of memory designed to ensure that the dead are not forgotten. Equally today, however, the quilt raises questions around its materiality. How, for example, is the quilt to be stored, maintained and displayed? Does its fragility as a material object impact on memories of the deceased and of the crisis of AIDS itself?

AIDS also highlighted battles over memory within the LGBTI community. Castiglia and Reed have argued that HIV/AIDS has been put to use in a neoliberal politics of disremembering designed to disconnect current gay culture from its sexually radical past (Castiglia and Reed 2012). Gay liberationist political activism, which asserted the centrality of sexual pleasure to a new reorganisation or, indeed, revolution of sexual and gender roles, was replaced by the prioritisation of monogamous marriage and conservative or normative values. Castiglia and Reed advocate for a form of "progressive remembering" in which "the values associated with the past promise a more just and pleasurable present" (2012: 215).

Highly significant in our interview with Mike were ways in which his memories of the floods of 2011 and his memories of HIV/AIDS have become linked and intertwined. Mike was deeply involved in AIDS activism from the early days of the crisis and had worked professionally in AIDS organisations. He stated:

> And that's one of the other things about the disaster for me is that I've been feeling since 1983 that we were living in a disaster. In terms of HIV/AIDs. Because, I mean, I lost a hundred of my closest friends. Or thereabouts. Round about that number – I stopped counting after about a hundred.

In comparison to this extraordinary loss, the destruction of material possessions seemed relatively insignificant to Mike. He drew, however, powerful comparisons between his

memories of the marginalised experiences of the gay community at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the broader experiences of Brisbane during the floods. To Mike, the floods were a disaster that the straight world could not ignore or avoid. He stated that during the AIDS crisis:

> …I could walk down the street and no-one around me would know I was living in the middle of it all. … As compared a physical disaster like this one, where suddenly we were all in it together. Like people that cleaned up our garage. Not one of them made any comment about what was in our garage. … They were there to do a job and they were there to help each other. And they did – they did a great job. But I often wonder what it would've been like if AIDS had of been more visible to the general community more often, um, than just the occasional media story, or the sight of a guy with a walking stick and a face, you know, drawn and wan, whether that would, um, have made a difference in terms of the response. Because it felt for so long that we were carrying the burden ourselves. And the irony of that private disaster versus the public disaster was really palpable.

In this memory narrative, Mike makes use of sites at a range of scales (of walking along the street, of his garage, of the body of a man living with AIDS) to shift between his memories of two different disasters. In this way, he highlights both connections and disjuncture between a gay man's memory of AIDS (defined as private) and the flood memories of the broader community (defined as public), a process made even more clear in the following exchange:

> Mike: I had real moments sitting on the balcony watching this river roar past me and seeing this flotsam and jetsam and having this metaphysical moment of saying they were almost like bodies.
>
> Interviewer: Like the lives of your friends and people you know?

Mike: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They were all swirling past and now suddenly everybody else can see what it is I've been babbling on about for the last twenty years. You know, this is what we've been talking about folks.

For Mike, the response of the Brisbane community as a whole to the 2011 floods served to reinforce a sense in which both his memories of AIDS and his experiences of the floods are marginalised. Drawing direct comparisons between his own memories of these two events serves to highlight ways in which those memories both define and are defined by his gay identity. In Mike's memory, heterosexual Australians had been able to ignore or deprioritise AIDS in a way that he, as a gay man, had not. If they had not been able to do so – if 'their' experience of and response to AIDS had not differed so sharply from 'their' experience of the floods – how would his memories of both AIDS and the floods be different?

Similar sentiments have been expressed by American AIDS activist and theorist Douglas Crimp who stated, "There's a sense of trauma in the difference between one's own experience and a sense of something like 'society's' experience which one gets in the daily assault of reading the *New York Times*" (Caruth and Keenan 1995: 261). Crimp noted that media reporting on AIDS addressed a mainstream readership from which the gay community that was more directly experiencing the crisis was generally excluded. This conforms with Mike's sense in which the trauma of AIDS was something that 'society' could ignore and which, ultimately, found little place in the collective memory of those around him experiencing the trauma of the Brisbane floods.

Marita Sturken has argued, "The debates over what counts as cultural memory are also debates about who gets to participate in creating national memory" (1997: 12). What this complex mixture of evocation and disjuncture in memories of AIDS and a natural disaster reveal is an ongoing marginalisation of gay memory and a sense in which the experiences central to the collective memories of a generation of gay men are excluded from 'mainstream'

collective memories, be that at the scale of the home, the city or the nation. Mike's experience of AIDS as marginalising and excluding has not ended in recent times, but is replayed through memory. The disaster's destruction of materials through which he was preserving memories of that time heightened a sense in which the trauma of the AIDS crisis and the trauma of the current disaster were intertwined. Although the efforts of volunteers served, in some ways, to evoke a feeling of shared experience with the mainstream – in which 'we' experience this trauma collectively – memories of an earlier trauma connected to gay identity were simultaneously evoked and replayed, leading to a sense of marginalisation from the mainstream.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have developed connections between scholarship in geographies of sexualities and geographies of memory, revealing the importance of sites of memory to the development and maintenance of lesbian and gay identities. Specifically, our aim has been to contribute to knowledge in how domestic spaces and the objects within them may be embedded with the memories of an individual or household and how those memories connect to identities within the home and at broader scales. Identity is produced through connections to memory and space. Be it an urban neighbourhood, a stored archive in the home or a seemingly inconsequential domestic object, the weight of memory is fixed in spaces and objects through which it is possible to imagine oneself as part of a community, a family or a couple. The pivotal importance attributed to these memories is revealed in the trauma caused by their loss in a disaster.

As we have shown, the fragility of materialised memory impacts on lesbian and gay experiences of disaster, exacerbating feelings of social marginality among potentially

vulnerable populations. Disasters have the potential to create a crisis of memory and identity, in which sites of memory are destroyed. This leaves impacted individuals without the ongoing sustenance provided by the past in the present. We argue that, for marginalised groups, this loss has particular potency. The marginality of the LGBTI community means that its memories may struggle to be included in broader narratives. Ongoing trauma may develop, therefore, around the loss of the memories through which both personal identities and a sense of belonging to home or community had been developed.

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