The politics of in/visibility: carving out queer space in Ul'ianovsk

Abstract

In spite of a growing interest within sexualities studies in the concept of queer space (Oswin 2008), existing literature focuses almost exclusively on its most visible and territorialised forms, such as the gay scene, thus privileging Western metropolitan areas as hubs of queer consumer culture (Binnie 2004). While the literature has emphasised the political significance of queer space as a site of resistance to hegemonic gender and sexual norms, it has again predominantly focused on overt claims to public space embodied in Pride events, neglecting other less open forms of resistance.

This article contributes new insights to current debates about the construction and meaning of queer space by considering how city space is appropriated by an informal queer network in Ul'ianovsk. The group routinely occupied very public locations meeting and socialising on the street or in mainstream cafés in central Ul'ianovsk, although claims to these spaces as queer were mostly contingent, precarious or invisible to outsiders. The article considers how provincial location affects tactics used to carve out communal space, foregrounding the importance of local context and collective agency in shaping specific forms of resistance, and questioning ethnocentric assumptions about the empowering potential of visibility.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest within sexualities studies in queer[1] space, understood as space appropriated by LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) individuals as an alternative to 'ordinary' urban space, which has been constructed and naturalised as heterosexual and heteronormative (Oswin 2008). However, existing literature mostly focuses on urban centres located in Anglo-American and Western European countries, while queer space in post-socialist Eastern Europe remains under-researched. This article engages critically with literature on queer space, interrogating its unspoken absences and ethnocentric assumptions by exploring the creation of queer space in the Russian city of Ul'ianovsk

Queer space is often equated in existing literature with the gay scene, understood as a loosely intertwined cluster of commercial venues and community organisations, or with residential neighbourhoods known to have a high concentration of LGBT residents (Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Valentine and Skelton 2003). Queer space has also been widely conceptualised as a site of resistance, since "the presence of queer bodies in particular locations forces people to realise [...] that the space around them [...], the city streets, the malls and the motels, have been produced as (ambivalently) heterosexual, heterosexist and heteronormative" (Bell and Valentine 1995, p. 18). It has been argued that the production of visible and territorialised queer space in the gentrified city centres of Western metropolitan areas has become invested with political meaning, since visibility and recognisability are seen as proof of the legitimisation of queer presence in public space (Skeggs 1999; Moran and Skeggs 2004). In this respect, the creation of queer space has become intertwined with LGBT identity politics, grounded in shared experiences of marginalisation, and based

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[1] Queer is a term commonly used in sexuality studies, which have developed across a variety of disciplines, including area studies (Malanansan 2003; Puar 2007). Originally a pejorative term referring to sexual deviants, the term was reclaimed by American and British LGBT activist groups in the 1990s, and it has also since become established in academic language. 'Queer' has specific antiessentialist connotations, since it was meant to capture the fluidity and indeterminacy of sexual and gender identities, and to critique the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality. While a detailed discussion of the political connotations of 'queer' is beyond the scope of this article, the term is here used as a synonym for non-heterosexual, and as an umbrella term encompassing the whole spectrum of LGBT sexualities. The gender neutral queer is used because the article discusses the practices of a mixed group, which included both men and women. Moreover, although the article draws on a study specifically focusing on women, not all research participants self-identified as lesbians: they various described themselves as bisexual, lesbian, ex-heterosexual and *tema* (a euphemistic term that can roughly be translated as 'a member of the family'). This variety is better captured by the term 'queer', although more specific terms such as lesbian and bisexual are also be used in the article. For a critical discussion of queer as a contested and culturally specific term, and the problematic aspects of using it in research about a non-English-speaking context, see Stella 2010.

on the articulation of difference and of a common identity in an attempt to challenge the stigmatising invisibility of non-heteonormative sexualities. The symbolic appropriation of city space embodied in 'gay villages' is closely related to sexual citizenship politics, which increasingly deploy strategies based on public recognition and visibility, embodied in Pride parades and marches, which are also based on the principle of reclaiming public space and making queerness visible. However, as Binnie (2004, p. 4) points out, existing literature usually locates queer space in the metropolitan West and "within the major urban centres of gay consumer culture", while the experiences of many gays and lesbians who live in social contexts that lack institutionalised and visible community spaces remain under-researched.

Shifting the focus from 'West' to 'East', and from the metropolitan to the provincial, this article explores the social and cultural practices of an informal 'lesbian/queer' network in Ul'ianovsk, and analyses the strategies utilised by this group to carve out communal space in a city that lacks any kind of institutionalised 'scene', be it commercial venues or communities organisations. The group routinely occupied very public locations meeting and socialising on the street or in mainstream cafés in central Ul'ianovsk, although claims to these spaces were mostly contingent, precarious or invisible to outsiders. While existing literature largely ignores provincial and rural areas, the article breaks new ground by mapping queer space in provincial Ul'ianovsk, and by employing a holistic notion of queer space, not limited to visible and territorialised appropriations of city space, but encompassing more transient and precarious ones (for a similar approach see e.g. Valentine 1995a).

This article explores how provincial location constrains and/or enables the Ul'ianovsk community's ability to appropriate urban space as 'lesbian/queer'. While mostly focusing on the Ul'ianovsk case study, the paper draws on ethnographic data collected in both Ul'ianovsk and Moscow, a global city with a lively gay scene. The comparison between Ul'ianovsk and Moscow throws into relief the link between place, collective agency and the production of queer space, and fractures unwarranted polarisations between the metropolitan and the provincial by highlighting similarities, as well as differences, between the two cities. The article then goes on to considers whether group strategies used to appropriate queer space can be seen as having a political dimension, even if these appropriations are neither overt nor visible. Research findings question ethnocentric assumptions about the empowering and transformative potential of visibility, and the article argues for the need to spatialise concepts of resistance.

Sexuality, urban space and the politics of visibility

This introductory section reviews existing literature, outlining key debates that will be engaged with in the remainder of the article. Debates about the production and meanings of queer space are fleshed out in more detail, and the section crucially explores the connections between queer space, identity politics, in/visibility and practices of resistance. The review highlights the gaps and biases in existing literature and provides an analytical framework that will be drawn upon in the sections discussing the empirical data that follow.

Locating queer space

Literature on sexuality and space has emphasised the importance of queer space in the lives of LGBT individuals. In a social context where homosexuality is often devalued, stigmatised and pathologised, queer space provides a safe environment for gay people to explore their sexuality, 'find themselves' and form a positive gay identity (Valentine and Skelton 2003; Holt and Griffin 2003). Beyond the 'coming out' stage, the personal networks and relations individuals form in queer space often remain an important reference point. In most gay people's everyday lives, their sexuality often has to be concealed or is misrecognised; queer space, therefore, represents a site where one's gay identity is validated and can be freely and safely expressed (Moran and Skeggs 2004). Queer space is most commonly discussed in the literature with reference to leisure space, and in particular to the gay scene, understood as a loose cluster of commercial venues and community organisations catering for LGBT individuals, usually located in the gentrified centres of big cities (Binnie 2004; Valentine and Skelton 2003). Even when not expressively focusing on the scene, research has tended to focus on the most visible expressions of queer space, for example on residential areas with a conspicuous and identifiable concentration of LGBT residents (Castells 1983; Adler and Brenner 1992), or on events such as gay pride parades, whereby urban space is temporarily appropriated as queer by the LGBT community (Browne 2007; Johnston 2007).

While the notion of 'queer space' is certainly relevant to this article, it should also be noted that the emphasis on the link between queer space, urban consumerism and sexual citizenship clearly reflects the Western bias of existing literature. For example, much of it explores how certain events and

spaces, such as Sydney's Mardi Gras parade and Manchester's gay village, are actively marketed as tourist attractions, and used to promote the cosmopolitan and multicultural image of the host cities (Kates 2003; Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Thus, the creation of visible queer space is a phenomenon linked to the gentrification of inner city areas, urban regeneration, and the emergence of policy agendas supporting equal rights, safety and protection from hate crimes for LGBT citizens (Moran and Skeggs 2004). Indeed, it has been argued that in advanced industrialised societies previously marginalised groups are co-opted into the mainstream through consumption, and that the partial normalisation and "fetishisation of difference" (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, p. 57) fits into the logic of late capitalism, that cynically and selectively accommodates the rights of 'respectable' and affluent queers (see also Evans 1993).

However, contextualising queer space as a phenomenon linked to multicultural citizenship and cosmopolitan consumerism is not particularly helpful when exploring the Russian context. Although the 1990s saw the opening of gay commercial venues and LGBT community organisations in the major Russian cities and queers living in metropolitan areas have been able to take advantage of new opportunities for consumption and association, sexual citizenship does not extend beyond privatised forms of consumption. Even in major cities such as Moscow, multiculturalism is rarely promoted as a value or a profitable asset, and "the existing multitude of different lifestyles and groups is tolerated rather than seen to actively constitute cultural capital" (Gdaniec 2010, p. 2). This is particularly true for LGBT communities, as homophobic rhetoric and widely documented episodes of discrimination, intimidation and violence, sometimes endorsed by local authorities and state institutions, indicate that homosexuality is still widely seen as a potential threat to the moral fabric of Russian society. In addition, Russia has no legislation to protect citizens from homophobic violence or discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation (Kon 2009; Stella 2007) and there is little evidence of a selective cooptation of 'respectable queers' into mainstream society. LGBT citizens are still by and large marginalised as a social group in Russia and homosexuality is mostly tolerated as long as it remains private (Stella 2007; Moscow Helsinki Group 2009).

Whilst privileging Western experiences, the literature also displays a marked metropolitan bias, as the very concept of queer space is often implicitly equated with (Western) metropolitan space. As Binnie (2004, pp. 4-5) argues:

The queer cosmopolitan is routinely located within the major centres of gay consumer culture. The other to this cosmopolitan is therefore the rural and provincial […] Commentaries on queer consumer culture commonly imagine that the world ends at the boundaries of the metropolis

Equating 'queer', 'metropolitan' and 'multicultural/cosmopolitan' space is problematic because visible spaces and communities are assumed to be the cornerstone of 'queer' lives, and queer subjectivities are posited as an urban and cosmopolitan phenomenon. Indeed, a common trope in the literature has been that of queer migration (Weston 1995; Fortier 2001), a phenomenon that sees non-heterosexuals move away from rural and provincial areas towards a bigger city and a gay-friendly neighbourhood in search of identity and community. Yet many non-heterosexuals do not migrate to metropolitan areas; they live and 'come out' in social contexts that lack institutionalised and visible community spaces. Neglect of provincial and rural locations in the literature on queer space means that the lives of queers living there remain unaccounted for.

This article offers new insights to critical debates on queer space by exploring its construction in a Russian provincial city, a geographical context which has so far received no attention in existing literature. The article's focus complements the small number of existing studies on Russian queer space, which have tended to privilege Moscow and Saint Petersburg, cities that, since the early 1990s, have developed relatively established gay scenes (Nartova 1999; Essig 1999; Sarajeva 2010; Zelenina 2006). At the time when fieldwork was conducted in 2005, Moscow hosted a variety of venues and community organisations catering for LGBT individuals; by contrast, Ul'ianovsk lacked queer space clearly signposted as such, either in the form of commercial venues or of community organisations. This does not mean, however, that Ul'ianovsk lacked queer space altogether, since certain locations within the city centre were routinely appropriated by the local queer *tusovka*.[2]

Tusovka is an especially useful concept here, because it captures the intimate link between place, group interaction, social practices and collective agency. It has been noted that "the term queer space implies coherence and heterogeneity that do not exist" (Rushbrook 2002, p. 203, quoted in

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[2] The term *tusovka* refers to an informal social network whose boundaries are relatively fluid and open, and whose social interaction is based on shared interests and the practice of socialising in certain areas (Voronkov and Zdravomyslova 2002; Pilkington 1994). As Pilkington notes, *tusovka* refers both to a gathering place (as in the expression "I have been going to the *tusovki* since I was 15") and to a group of people meeting in a specific location (as in the expression "our *tusovka* is very friendly") (Pilkington 1994, pp. 236-238).

Oswin 2008, p. 97), and that a rigid polarisation between metropolitan and provincial queer space, and indeed between heterosexual and queer space, is largely a fiction. By focusing on the practices through which the *tusovka* collectively constructs everyday space as queer, the article moves away from territorialised notions of queer space. The article also maps queer space in provincial Ul'ianovsk and metropolitan Moscow, thus examining the impact of location on the creation of queer space; however, similarities and continuities, alongside differences, are highlighted between the two locations, thus fracturing rigid juxtapositions between metropolitan and provincial areas.

Identity, visibility and the politics of making space queer

Besides exploring the influence of location on the creation of queer space, the article is more broadly concerned with its political significance as a site of resistance. This topic has been much debated within sexualities studies, since, as Bell and Binnie (2006, p. 869) point out, "debates about sexual citizenship have also been debates about space". The literature on sexual politics and space has highlighted the importance attached to visibility within LGBT identity politics, concerned with "making visible identities that are discriminated against" (Fraser 1999, p. 115). Indeed, invisibility, embodied by the gay 'closet', has been theorised as "the defining feature of gay oppression this century" (Sedgwick 1990, p. 71), and equated with the denial, symbolic erasure and forced concealment of non-heterosexuals (Brown 2000). Thus, becoming visible represents a way of resisting social norms that naturalise heterosexual presence in public space and make homosexuality stand out as 'out of place'. While the intimation to get 'out of the closet, into the streets' has long been central to Western LGBT identity politics, political strategies based on visibility and recognition have become even more prominent since the 1990s (Fraser 1999; Richardson 2000).

These new 'politics of visibility' are embodied in Pride events. Imagined as a collective 'coming out' (Valentine 2003), Prides entail the symbolic and visible appropriation of urban space by LGBT communities and posit visibility as a form of resistance and as a means to subvert heteronormativity (Fraser 1999). Pride events often also blur the boundaries between consumer practices and political claims since, while retaining a political message, they are increasingly conceived

of as colourful street parties, or as Browne (2007) puts it, "a party with politics"[3]. In this respect, they are an expression of the same desire for visibility and recognisability exemplified by the creation of 'gay villages' in gentrified inner city areas (Skeggs 1999; Moran and Skeggs 2004). Pride events are now a common occurrence in different parts of the world (Kates 2003; Luongo 2002), including post-socialist Eastern Europe (Renkin 2009; Gruszczynska 2009). Yet they embody a culturally specific symbolism as they were originally intended to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York city - an event which has gone down in history as the birth of the gay liberation movement (Duberman 1994). This invites a critical reflection on the global dimensions of the politics of visibility. For example, Manalansan, (1997, p. 498) argues that the importance attached to the "public avowal of one's identity" in global LGBT politics is deeply ethnocentric, and rooted in the "myth of Stonewall" as the birthplace of the LGBT movement. Indeed, the value placed on visibility betrays the ethnocentric assumption that certain political tactics are universally effective and easily exportable across geographic and cultural boundaries, and that the know-how in LGBT global politics is transferred from liberated West to the homophobic East. Consider, for example, the following passage from the booklet "Pride against Prejudice: a Toolkit for Pride Organising in a Hostile Environment", published by ILGA-Europe and expressly intended for East European activists:

> Pride events not only bring LGBT people together to form a public identity and to build a visible community in a difficult social context, but they also allow individuals to express this identity and provide hope for people who are still living in fear. Thus Pride events – the "coming out" of the community as a whole – are essential for the development and well-being both of the community and its individual members (ILGA-Europe 2006:10).

Although the booklet was intended to support the activities of Eastern European LGBT organisations[4], the passage above is underpinned by normative assumptions about what constitutes effective identity politics, as well as about the value of visibility and the meaning of community. The paradoxes of

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[3] As Chasin (2000, p. 23) notes, from the very beginning of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, a strong link was forged between political activism, the gay 'scene' and a specialised market, as participation in the community revolved around activities such as "attending house parties, drag balls, bathhouses, bars, buying physique magazines and/or reading certain literature".

[4] The booklet was published in the aftermath of a wave of homophobic hostility in Eastern Europe in Summer 2006, which saw the banning of several Prides, frequent episodes of violence and the use of homophobic rhetoric by leading politicians opposing the events across the region (ILGA-Europe 2006:8-10; Greenwood 2007).

international solidarity are well illustrated by the outcomes of attempts to organise a Pride event in Moscow[5]. Firstly, Pride events are assumed to be about solidarity and unity, and to be a fundamental aspect of community building. Yet the Moscow Pride shows that these events can also prove extremely divisive: the event were organised by a small group of activists with the backing of international human rights and LGBT organisations, but with little involvement from the rest of the Moscow LGBT community, whose representatives repeatedly criticised the event or distanced themselves from it (Stella 2007; Sarajeva 2010).[6] Unsurprisingly, the event received ample coverage internationally, but, as Sarajeva (2010:155-156) notes, it was remarkable above all for the "almost absolute invisibility of the people for whom this event was organised […]: Russian gays and lesbians and their supporters". Secondly, the public visibility enacted in Pride events is celebrated as empowering, even though, as Skeggs (1999) reminds us, visibility also has the potential unintended effect of attracting public scrutiny and violence. In 2006, when the march went ahead in spite of a ban from Moscow City Hall, participants were met by scores of protesters chanting homophobic slogans and abuse; as groups of right wing-extremists attacked and beat gay activists, unsympathetic law enforcement agencies stood by and did little to prevent the violence, and eventually proceeded to arrest both LGBT activists and their opponents (Lomovstev 2006; Magovedova 2006). The homophobic violence surrounding the Moscow Prides is certainly a very worrying trend, and it has rightly attracted considerable attention and condemnation internationally. Rarely, however, do these accounts question whether the politics of visibility embodied in Prides are always enabling in different national and local contexts. The common portrayal of East European LGBT communities as powerless victims of state-endorsed homophobic violence (see e.g. Greenwood 2006, Charles 2009) denies them of any forms of agency, while also overlooking forms of resistance that are not overtly political or heroic, and do not resonate with familiar forms of sexual citizenship politics.

This article therefore explores the less politically overt and visible practices through which space is collectively appropriated as queer by the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, and considers whether these can be seen as a form of resistance to heterosexualised spatial norms. Resistance is understood in this

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[5] Pride marches have been organised yearly since 2006 by the newly registered organisation GayRussia. However, the Moscow City Hall banned the events each consecutive year, and anti-gay violence marred unsanctioned demonstrations in 2006, 2007 and 2008 (Moscow Helsinki Group 2009). For a fuller account of the 2006 and 2007 marches, see Stella 2007, Sarajeva 2010; Human Rights Watch 2006; Human Rights Watch and ILGA Europe 2007; Moscow Helsinki Group 2009).

[6] It is estimated that about 3/4 of participants in the 2006 Pride were foreign supporters (often representatives of LGBT or human rights organisations) (Sarajeva 2010).

context not as publicly organised opposition to institutionalised power embodied in social movements, but as encompassing relatively unstructured and quotidian forms of defiance that nonetheless challenge hegemonic norms, elsewhere referred to as "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott 1986). This notion of resistance focuses on "the way people are understood to have the capacity to change things" by giving specific meanings to certain actions (Pile 1997, pp. 14-15). It is grounded in the Foucauldian concept of power as pervasive and multifocal (Ortner 1995, p. 175): thus, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978, p. 95). This means that overt opposition or internalisation of social norms are not the only possible responses to existing configurations of power; rather, accommodation and resistance are intertwined in complex ways, as certain acts can simultaneously challenge and uphold existing social norms. While questioning the inherently subversive and transformative potential of the politics of visibility, the article argues for the need to understand the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*'s practices as reflecting "the conditions and constraints in which they are generated" (Scott 1986, p. 12).

Mapping lesbian/queer space in Ul'ianovsk and Moscow

The ethnographic data discussed in this paper was collected for a study on lesbian identities and everyday space in contemporary urban Russia (Stella 2008b). The project was structured along two separate but intertwined lines of enquiry. The first explored women's identity narratives, their preferred terms of self-identification, and the meanings they ascribed to them, critically engaging with debates on assumed divisions between 'Western' and 'non-Western' constructions of sexual identities (Stella 2010). The second line of enquiry, on which this article is focussed, was designed to explore how non-heterosexual women negotiated their sexual selves across different everyday settings, such as the street, the workplace and the home[7]. It also examined how women socialised in community settings and informal queer networks and how they collectively appropriated certain locations as lesbian or queer.

Research was conducted in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk over two periods of fieldwork, from May to July 2004 and from April to October 2005. The decision to undertake multi-sited fieldwork reflected a desire to fracture reifying narratives of Russia as the sexual 'other' (Baer 2002) and Moscow and

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[7] For an account of women's negotiation of the parental home see Stella 2008a.

Ul'ianovsk were chosen because they represent very different settings in terms of size, living standards and the presence or absence of a gay scene.[8]

The study adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, whereby data is "created in and through the interaction that occur between the researcher and people in the field" (Brewer 2000, p. 81).[9] The study involved the triangulation of different sets of qualitative data,[10] chief among which were participant observation of community events and informal gatherings and semi-structured interviews with 61 non-heterosexual women. Access to community settings and informal networks was initially facilitated by activists from the Moscow-based LGBT organisation *Ia+Ia* and Gay and Lesbian Archive; the trusting relations established with Moscow-based groups and activists were crucial in establishing contact with women from Ul'ianovsk. Potential interviewees were contacted through snowballing, with the help of gatekeepers and, as my own social circle widened, through friends and acquaintances. 34 women were interviewed in Moscow and 27 in Ul'ianovsk.. The age of interviewees ranged between 18 and 65, and the majority of women in my sample identified as ethnically Russian (*russkii*). The semi-structured format of the interviews was informed by a feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002) and was intended to enable interviewees to talk about the issues important to them and to retain control of the conversation, which was loosely structured around key thematic areas.[11] Although the study has a strong comparative element, it should be noted

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[8] Moscow is a post-industrial metropolis with a population of over ten million; it has successfully managed economic restructuring in the 1990s, quickly establishing itself as Russia's economic capital and global financial and business hub. The city's general affluence is reflected in Muscovites' above-average income levels and spending power, which have fostered the growth of a burgeoning service and retail infrastructure, and of a lively leisure industry. The development of a relatively established gay scene has to be framed within the broader context of the city's size, national and international importance, and general affluence, characteristics that set it apart from most other Russian cities (Pilkington *et al.* 2002). Provincial Ul'ianovsk occupies a more peripheral position on the national and international map, and has struggled to cope with economic restructuring and diversification (Konitzer-Smirnov 2003, pp. 192-195). Living standards compare negatively to those of other cities in the region, such as Samara, Saratov and Kazan'; the leisure industry is not very well developed, and the lack of a commercial gay scene partly reflects a more general dearth of commercial leisure spaces.

[9] For a reflexive account of how issues around language, positionality and power relations were addressed, and of how they informed data collection and interpretation see Stella 2008b, 2010.

[10] These included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 61 non-heterosexual women; 8 expert interviews with Moscow-based community activists and individuals working on commercial projects targeting a 'lesbian' audience; fieldwork notes of the community events and social gatherings I attended; and discourse analysis of media sources from the Russian mainstream and gay and lesbian media. For a more detailed discussion see Stella 2008b.

[11] These were: family relations and social networks; negotiation of women's sexual identity in their everyday environs, particularly the home, the workplace and the street; relationship history and identifications; participation in community initiatives and informal queer/lesbian networks; and attitudes towards 'queer' spaces and cultural products.

that it focused on the ethnographic exploration of specific and rather distinct social networks in each city.

In Moscow most interviewees were women who habitually attended community events (discussion groups, concerts, festivals, weekly gatherings at the Gay and Lesbian Archive). Fieldwork conducted in Moscow involved only a marginal exploration of the commercial gay scene, and of a lesbian *tusovka* meeting on the central Tverskoi Boulevard known as the *Pushka*. The latter bears a strong resemblance to the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, but access to it was restricted by the difficulty of finding women willing to act as gatekeepers. In Moscow, most research participants were in their late 20s and early 30s, and, although coming from different socio-economic backgrounds, a high percentage of them had higher education. They tended to be employed in professional, managerial or white collar jobs, and most of them were not originally from Moscow or the Moscow area, a reflection of the fact that the capital's dynamic labour market and higher living standards have attracted significant levels of immigration in recent years[12].

In Ul'ianovsk, the women who participated in the study were linked to a local informal queer *tusovka*. The group was mixed, and included both men and women; however, within the broader *tusovka* men and women formed distinct groups, which interacted only intermittently, for example when participating in club nights for gay men and lesbians which were organised monthly at a local club. The average age of interviewees was significantly lower than among Moscow participants, as most women were in their early-to-mid-twenties, and only a handful of older women socialized with this group. The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* was also more diverse in terms of educational levels and employment: university students were particularly prominent in the *tusovka*, which also included women with higher education and vocational qualifications; occupations ranged from professional and managerial positions to vocational and manual jobs. Members of the *tusovka* often commented on its diversity and its 'democratic' character; as Alisa[13], a student at the local university in her early twenties, observed:

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[12] It is estimated that incomers from other parts of Russia and the former Soviet Union account for over half of the population of the Moscow region (White 2007, p. 892).

[13] Not her real name: in the interest of anonymity, all names have been changed; interviewees are identified by a pseudonym and their year of birth.

Well, it was just interesting to socialise in a *tusovka* where people are so different, and had

it not been for the *tema*[14] they would not hang out together. Because some people work,

some study, some have just finished school, and they all hang out together, it was very

interesting.

The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* met in specific sites, all located in the city centre. Crucial to the life of the *tusovka* was an informal hangout on one of the central thoroughfares; gatherings centred around a specific bench along its gardens, where members of the *tusovka* arranged to meet, or just casually dropped by, with no previous arrangement, as Lada, another university student in her early twenties and a very active member of the *tusovka* since its formation, explained:

We have our favourite alley on [xxx] Street, where there is our favourite bench where

everyone gathers. Sometimes you have nothing to do at home and you go there and hang

out. This is how everyone met.

Other popular hangouts in Ul'ianovsk were located nearby and included a couple of cafes not specifically targeting a gay clientele, but informally known to be frequented by local queers. As Marusia [b. 1964], a teacher in her early forties and one of the very few members of the *tusovka* aged over thirty, explained: "We also have a café, and it has a certain reputation of being a hangout for queers [*nashi*, lit. 'our people']". Moreover, a closed-doors event for members of the *tusovka* and their friends was organised monthly in a mainstream club.

A tale of two cities? Women's perceptions of metropolitan and provincial queer space

As Weston (1995) notes, the symbolic contrast between rural/provincial and urban/metropolitan life has long been central to the gay imagery, as big cities are imagined as more tolerant of diversity and as

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[14] The collective noun *tema* [literally 'the theme'] and the adjective *temnyi* are here translated with the shorthand 'queer'; however, this rendition is unsatisfactory, since the Russian expressions lacks the political connotations of the English queer, a derogatory term reclaimed as an expression loosely encompassing all non-heteronormative sexualities. The Russian *tema/temnyi* are neutral, euphemistic expressions that can be better translated as 'the family', and 'a member of the family' respectively. In order to highlight the discrepancy between the Russian original and the English translation, *tema* and *temnyi* are left in the original in the remainder of the article.

hosting hubs of gay consumer culture which enable individuals to find a community and fully live a gay life. However, Weston also points out that the symbolic contrast between metropolitan and provincial space seems to depend on "an idealised portrait of the two as separate, self-contained space" Weston (1995, p. 257), and that implicit in this contrast is the idea that queers from rural and provincial areas can only become fully 'gay' by moving to metropolitan areas and absorbing cosmopolitan gay culture. In this respect, it is interesting to note that it was common for Ul'ianovsk interviewees to contrast the lack of amenities in their hometown to the opportunities to socialise in queer space offered by bigger cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

The allure of bigger cities as hubs of queer consumer culture emerged clearly from interviews, while the limitations of Ul'ianovsk as a provincial city were constantly emphasised. However, the queer metropolitan was not always characterised as radically different from the queer provincial, and findings from my study point to important similarities and continuities, as well as differences, between queer space in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. Queer space in more affluent and 'civilised' cities, and particularly Moscow, was mentioned as a yardstick and a term of comparison. Lada and Tamara, two women in their mid-twenties working respectively as a shop assistant and as a barmaid, were somehow critical of the club nights organised by the local *tusovka*. Whilst their limited financial resources did not always allow them to attend, they also thought the events were monotonous, and had discussed the possibility of going into business with an acquaintance to open a commercial gay cub, modelled on one of the "classy" venues in the capital. Liza, a woman in her early forties working as a janitor who was well connected with lesbian tusovki in both Moscow and Saint Petersburg, noted that in Ul'ianovsk she had very limited opportunities to socialise with lesbian women of a similar age. She would have liked to organise a grassroots organisation modelled on Moscow's *Klub Svobodnogo Poseshcheniia*[15], which catered specifically for mature lesbians. Bigger cities were also seen as offering greater possibilities to consume lesbian-themed culture, and some women interviewed reported travelling to neighbouring cities such as Kazan' and Samara to attend concerts of the rock bands Zemfira and Butch, widely seen as lesbian icons in the *tusovka* but unlikely to perform in Ul'ianovsk. Others took advantage of leisure trips to Moscow and Saint Petersburg to purchase lesbian-themed films and books unavailable in Ul'ianovsk.

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[15] "Open Attendance Club", a recreational club for lesbian and bisexual women active at the time in Moscow, which organised activities such as film showings and discussion groups.

The most conspicuous difference between Moscow and Ul'ianovsk was the particularly invisible and contingent character of queer space in Ul'ianovsk where nothing identifies the hangouts popular with the *tusovka* as queer. While queer space in Moscow was far from being showcased to promote the cosmopolitan image of the capital, as has been the case in other Western cities (see for example Moran and Skeggs 2004 on Manchester and Kates 2003 on Sydney), commercial events were publicised in mainstream magazines, such as *TimeOut Moscow* and *Afisha*. However, Moscow lacked a distinctively gay district and the presence of gay clubs and cafes was not obvious from the outside as they merged discreetly in the city landscape. Moreover, the location of some venues was not widely publicised: for example, only the telephone number, but not the address of the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive was advertised in the local gay and lesbian press;, and its exact whereabouts, and instructions about how to get there were disclosed only over the phone (Sarajeva 2010). Nonetheless, Moscow hosted several venues and initiatives that were clearly signposted as lesbian or queer, unlike Ul'ianovsk, where queer space lacked any kind of institutional character, and attempts to claim certain sites by the local *tusovka* could only be partial and temporary.

A related important difference is that the Moscow *tusovki* tended to be more segregated along gender and generational lines, whereas the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* had a more diverse and spontaneous formation. For example, the Moscow scene was very clearly marked along gender lines, as venues and initiatives were usually defined as either gay or lesbian, a fact that seems to reflect the more institutionalised character of queer space and the more structured ways in which it was organised. In commercial venues, gender segregation was encouraged by the management: for example, the club *12 obezian'* [12 Monkeys] charged women more than men on most nights, and this resulted in a majority male patronage. Although occasionally joining forces on individual projects, community initiatives also targeted either men or women, and even on occasions when this was not the case a spontaneous divide seemed to emerge: for example, the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive was predominantly a hangout for lesbians, perhaps because it was based in a private flat owned by a lesbian woman.

Men and women also formed distinct subgroups within the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, but the *tusovka* itself had initially developed as a loose network of friends that included both genders. In the context of a small provincial city where spaces and opportunities for socialising with other queers were limited, the local network seemed more inclusive and less segregated along gender lines. The more spontaneous and casual character of the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, compared to the ones explored in the

capital, made it more tightly knit and inclusive, but also more volatile. The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* had originated in a small group of friends of similar age, and gradually expanded to include friends of friends, lovers and former lovers. The *tusovka* had gathered momentum when Kristina and Sveta, a very popular couple and part of the *tusovka*'s original core group, had started to organise club nights for gays and lesbians at a local venue. However, at the time of fieldwork, the extended *tusovka* had disintegrated into smaller circles, as new divisions between different age groups, as well as between men and women, had emerged. Several individuals who had been the life and soul of the *tusovka* had moved to other cities to study or work, and this was often quoted as the main reason for the diminished vitality of the group.

While differences between queer space in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk may be more noticeable, these findings also reveal interesting similarities, which suggest significant continuities between metropolitan and provincial queer spaces. Firstly, although Moscow offered a wider range of opportunities for socialising, not all queer space in the city was institutionalised and located in sheltered indoor venues, as the capital also hosted a street hangout popular with lesbians in their late teens and early twenties; this meeting place is known as the *Pushka* and located on a stretch of the central Tverskoi Bul'var, near the Esenin monument[16] (Sarajeva 2010). The *Pushka* attracted a similar age group as the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, although it was a women-only rather than a mixed group. Patterns of socialising were in many ways similar, and involved hanging out with friends, making new acquaintances, chatting, drinking, messing about and meeting potential partners in a very public city centre location.

A second significant similarity is that, in both cities, group interaction revolved around specific cultural practices which marked and constructed space as 'lesbian/queer'. For example, the appropriation of a particular kind of music, perceived to have a 'lesbian' sensibility, was common both in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. Nastia, a woman in her early twenties who had moved to Moscow from Ukraine and mainly socialised with young lesbians, explained the importance that music had in her circle of friends:

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[16] It should be noted that the term 'Pushka' assumed a particular meaning in the context of the lesbian *tusovka* (Sarajeva 2010). Muscovites generally use the term *Pushka* to refer to a broader area near Pushkin Square, comprising parts of Tverskoi and Strastnoi Boulevards, which very popular meeting place. My Moscow fieldwork included only a marginal exploration of the *Pushka*, as finding gatekeepers who could facilitate access to this network proved difficult.

Do you have any cult music in your circle?

Of course. Diana Arbenina, Surganova, Zemfira, among others, I don't know them all, well, Mara and Butch as well. […] I really like Mara, for example, it's very energetic music, music it's great to get up to, even if you didn't sleep much at night – it's still great to get up to it.

Do you listen to them especially because they are, in a way, queer [temnye]*?*

First of all, I like the music, secondly, it's something to talk about, because in the circle of friends I hang out with everyone listens to this music. For example, when a new album is released, we listen to it and then discuss it, whether we liked it or not; when we meet we listen to this music all together. There is music I listen to that is not queer [*tematicheskaia*], but I listen to this more often.

The names of Zemfira, Nochnye Snaipery, Svetlana Surganova, Mara and Butch kept cropping up both within and outside the interview context in both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, although in Ul'ianovsk a passion for 'lesbian' music was sometimes framed within a broader interest in rock music ("What we have in common – it's our sexual orientation, and secondly we listen to almost the same music, Zemfira, Nochnye Snaipery, Radiohead, Placebo" [Maia, Ul'ianovsk]). At the time of fieldwork, these female artists were generally popular with young mainstream audiences; they were not openly out as lesbian, or targeted specifically a lesbian audience, yet they were credited by both the mainstream and the gay and lesbian press to have a large following among young lesbians (Gurova 2003; Zelenina 2006).

Listening to a particular kind of music had a specific relevance and meaning in the context of lesbian/queer *tusovki* (for a similar point see Zelenina 2006). 'Lesbian' music emerged as part of a distinctive cultural code that circulated as common currency in both the Moscow and the Ul'ianovsk *tusovki* – at once a topic for conversation, a 'social' glue and a focus of group leisure activity. Thus, music not only facilitated the articulation of sexual identities and communities, buy also the production of everyday space as queer (Valentine 1995b). Together with other cultural practices, such as exchanging copies of the Moscow-based lesbian magazine *Ostrov*, 'lesbian' music emerged as part of a cultural code that performatively produced and reiterated lesbian/queer identities by creating a shared narrative. This shared narrative bridges the geographical and emotional distance between the metropolitan and the provincial.

Carving out lesbian/queer space in Ul'ianovsk

Having outlined the characteristics of queer space in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, this section focuses more specifically on Ul'ianovsk, and considers how provincial location influences the *tusovka*'s uses and appropriation of city space. Since the Ul'ianovsk network was essentially a street *tusovka*, it is important to explore how considerations about safety, privacy and personal comfort are reflected in the strategies collectively used to occupy public space. As Moran and Skeggs (2004) point out, urban space is associated with personal vulnerability and with the possibility of violence and danger, but this potential vulnerability has particular connotations for non-heterosexuals. Public space is implicitly imagined as heteronormative: thus, the visible display of homosexuality is likely to stand out as out of place, and it may elicit intimidation and violence (Skeggs 1999).

Perceptions of safety, comfort and privacy in Ul'ianovsk

In both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, women devised strategies of self-management in order to avoid the potential discomforts involved in navigating the public street; these involved, for example, avoiding certain areas perceived as dangerous or refraining from being affectionate with a partner in public. However, perceptions of safety, privacy and personal comfort seemed to markedly differ across the two cities, as illustrated by the experience of Kristina, a student and call centre worker in her early twenties who, with her partner Sveta, had been one of the main organisers of the club nights. Kristina had moved to Moscow with Sveta in search of opportunities for professional advancement two years earlier, and on her periodic visits to her native city often felt under intense scrutiny:

> I've been to Ul'ianovsk not long ago, and it was such a shock, really, I walked down the
>
> street and I caught everyone staring, especially *gopniki*.[17] I walked, and I felt physically

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[17] A pejorative label that can be roughly translated as 'yobs', the term *gopniki* is used to designate gangs of young people from deprived neighbourhoods feared for their involvement in petty crime and episodes of violence. *Gopniki* are known to target members of youth *tusovki*, because of their unusual

sick, I withered and twisted from the sheer number of prying eyes. They were hostile stares, and it is hard to understand what they are trying to demonstrate, whether it's their stupidity or what, what they are trying to express. I felt physically sick from this, and I understood that when I walk through Moscow I feel such a grey mouse, because I don't try to stand out, I just wear what I want, I don't try to impress. But when I come back to Ul'ianovsk I understand that I attract too much attention.

Did you change your style [since moving to Moscow]?

I wear what I want to wear and I feel comfortable with this style, and my behaviour doesn't change, it's just that in Moscow … […] I feel I can allow myself more in Moscow, but I restrain myself because it's a habit, a form of defence.

The danger of homophobic violence and intimidation is here embodied by *gopniki*, While Moscow interviewees rarely expressed concerns about their personal safety on the street,[18] in Ul'ianovsk the threatening presence of *gopniki* emerged as a pervasive narrative. During my Ul'ianovsk fieldwork, the poor attendance at the latest gay and lesbian club night, for example, was partly attributed to rumours that *gopniki* had been tipped about the event, and might target patrons, particularly gay men. The latter were reportedly more exposed and more concerned than women about episodes of homophobic violence, which had resulted in the death of a male member of the *tusovka*, targeted because of his sexuality. While women were less directly affected by episodes of gay bashing, the intimidating presence of *gopniki* still loomed in the background, as Kristina's experience indicates.

Kristina's story also highlights how *gopniki* are not the only potential source of intimidation and violence, as she was the victim of an attempted sexual attack at the hands of an older man. This episode, the only instance of attempted violence reported by women from the *tusovka*, highlights how 'acting gay' in public can make women no less vulnerable than men, although they may be more likely victims of a different kind of violence - sexual victimisation rather than physical aggression:

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looks or because they abandon traditional markers of femininity and masculinity (Pilkington et al. 2002; Omel'chenko 2005). Research also notes that the term *gopniki* has class connotations: *gopninki* are portrayed as 'brainless' and uneducated working-class 'louts' who display irrational violence towards *tusovki*, groups of young people who are characterised as 'trendy', cosmopolitan and upwardly mobile (Omel'chenko 2005).

[18] It should be pointed out that fieldwork was conducted in Moscow several months before the 2006 Gay Pride March. Several incidents of homophobic violence preceded, accompanied and followed the event, and perceptions of personal safety in the Moscow community may have been different, had interviews taken place closer to the event (Moscow Helsinki Group 2009; Human Rights Watch and ILGA Europe 2007).

I allowed myself the same things in Ul'ianovsk [*as in Moscow, where she had moved to*], until I came across some problems. When a man got out of a *marshrutka* [*a shared taxi*] and tried to follow me, with a very clear aim, you understand yourself what, I mean, with the clear suggestion that sooner or later he would have me [*menia poimet*], to put it bluntly. Because before this Sveta [*her girlfriend*] and I had been kissing on the *marshrutka*, and the guy was sitting there and you could see from his eyes, he had a maniacal look. His hands slipped where they shouldn't have, and when I got out at my stop he followed me, and I just ran away from him as fast as I could. Well, until then, I acted freely. As soon as this started, I began to restrain myself [*zazhimat'sia*].

It should be stressed that, unlike Kristina, most of the women interviewed in Ul'ianovsk had not directly experienced or witnessed episodes of homophobic intimidation or violence. Interviewees explained their unwillingness to signify their sexuality in public with concerns about personal comfort and privacy, rather than safety. Big cities like Moscow were seen as offering the advantage of anonymity and of passers-by's general indifference, while androgynous, butch or otherwise unconventional looks were more likely to be conspicuous in Ul'ianovsk. For example, in the first interview excerpt discussed in this section, Kristina makes clear that her appearance - short haircut, jeans, sporty top, no makeup – did not seem to raise eyebrows in Moscow: particularly in the city centre, the traditional meeting place of youth *tusovki*, the capital's more cosmopolitan atmosphere was apparent in the range of different styles, looks and clothing displayed by young people, and it was common for young women to wear casual and unisex clothing rather than conventionally 'girlish' styles. In central Ul'ianovsk, however, where young women usually exhibited the conventional attributes of femininity, such as high heels, skirts, skimpy tops and lots of make-up, Kristina's looks were more likely to stand out.

In Ul'ianovsk women were extremely conscious of the fact that, in a relatively small city where rumours spread quickly, the possibility of being exposed and outed was greater, and this translated in a pressure to conform and remain invisible as a lesbian or bisexual woman. Contrasting her views to those of young participants in a discussion group for lesbian women, which she attended

during a trip to the capital, Zoia, a teacher in her mid-twenties, thus explains different attitudes to 'coming out' in the capital and in her native Ul'ianovsk:

> I had a conversation with the Moscow girls, they tell their colleagues [*about their sexuality*]. Well, if that's what they want, if this makes them freer, bless you [*radi Boga*]. But we [*she and her girlfriend*] don't want to break our necks over this. They began to discuss in detail how they tell their colleagues. I told them: "Girls, come back to planet earth, for us in the provinces [*v glubinke*] it is all different". […] They are freer in Moscow because there are many of them, and they are all incomers, they don't care about what people say about them. Here, it is different: as one woman put it, she knows what their husband has been up to before he gets home, because her acquaintances will tell her. If someone learns anything about me, my parents, my acquaintances, everyone will know. Why make my life more difficult if I live in this city. If no one knew me I wouldn't care.

Zoia may be overstating Muscovites' willingness to be open about their sexuality, as evidence from my own research[19] and other studies suggests that 'outness' is not considered a positive core value in the Russian context, and visibility and authenticity *per se* are seldom prized. More importance is attached to preserving the boundaries between spheres where one's sexuality can be disclosed and contexts where this is seen as inappropriate, undesirable or dangerous (Stella 2008b; Nartova 2004; Omel'chenko 2002; Zelenina 2006). Like other Ul'ianovsk interviewees, Zoia emphasises the pervasive sense of being under surveillance from the wider community, in a place where "every second person is an acquaintance" (Zoia, b. 1978), and where "the long tail of one's reputation" (Sonia, b. 1973) could follow women in environments where they did not wish their sexuality to be known, or even come before them. Gossip could have very real consequences, as Sonia's experience at work illustrates. Sonia used to be a nurse and was well-respected in her old workplace, but suddenly found herself unemployed while awaiting written confirmation of a new job, as the offer was abruptly withdrawn. She was positive that this change of heart was linked to gossip that circulated about her after a colleague she had been romantically involved with started to attract undue attention by acting

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[19] Findings from my study indicate that, both in Moscow and in Ul'ianovsk, women were extremely wary to disclose their sexuality at work, as this may affect their career prospects and relationships with co-workers (Stella 2008b).

"demonstratively", in an attempt to win her back. Sonia was unable to find another job as a nurse in Ul'ianovsk because her "reputation" became known to all doctors in town, as they socialised together. She eventually decided that changing career altogether would afford better opportunities.

Like Zoia and Sonia, the overwhelming majority of women from the *tusovka*, irrespective of their age, still lived in the parental home. While full-time school and university students were still financially dependent on their family of origin, even women in full-time employment were rarely able to afford living on their own, or with a partner. Many women were not out to any family members as they thought disclosure would only create tensions and compromise their independence at home. Even when family members were aware of their sexuality, women were conscious of the fact that gossip about their sexual lives could negatively affect their family's reputation. Ul'ianovsk was repeatedly described as a small provincial city where not conforming to social expectations meant becoming the object of public scrutiny, which could be an extremely uncomfortable experience. In order to protect their privacy and avoid discomforts, women avoided gestures that may make them visible as lesbians in public or semi-public settings, such as holding hands or kissing a girlfriend on the street.

Publicly queer? Solidarity, resistance and the politics of in/visibility

Heightened levels and awareness of social surveillance from the wider community were reflected in the strategies used to inhabit and collectively appropriate public and semi-public space as queer/lesbian. The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* regularly met at a particular bench on one of the city's central thoroughfares; however, this place was not visibly marked as queer or lesbian, as passers-by seemed mostly unaware of the *tusovka* as a network of non-heterosexual young people, and oblivious to the sub-cultural meaning ascribed to this meeting place by the *tusovka*. Members of the *tusovka* were generally keen not to disrupt this blissful ignorance, and to remain unmarked as a queer/lesbian group: affectionate behaviour with partners was avoided even in the presence of the *tusovka*, and women often emphasised the importance of 'responsible' and 'respectable' behaviour on the street and in the cafes where the *tusovka* regularly met. 'Posing' or 'showing off' by overtly performing queerness was described as inappropriate, and seen as a deliberate attempt to attract attention, an attention that most women tried to

avoid[20]. Maia was a factory worker in her early twenties who had herself been the target of hostile comments from passers-by because of her androgynous looks ("are you a boy or a girl"?). Nonetheless emphasised that each individual member of the *tusovka* was responsible for their safety, and should therefore keep within the boundaries of what was considered socially acceptable, when commenting on some of the gay men from the *tusovka*:

> Well, if a guy pretends to be a girl... You shouldn't do that, you're a guy. Speak normally. Ok, he wants to show that this is what I am, and I have no intention to change. But he knows perfectly well how society is going to react, and then don't come and tell me that they beat you up. You live in this society, and you should be careful if you want to hold on to dear life.

While in Ul'ianovsk behaviour on the street and in the mainstream cafes where the *tusovka* habitually met was constrained by the awareness of inhabiting very public locations, the more secluded environment of the monthly club nights offered the possibility to express more freely one's sexuality. Klavdiia, an unemployed mother of two in her mid-thirties who was particularly weary of being affectionate with her partner in public, thus explained why she appreciated most about the club nights:

> Everyone is one of us [*vse svoi*], and no one judges you, and what you can't do on the street you can do it there.

Club nights offered welcome respite from public scrutiny and the company of other queers created a comfortable environment where members of the *tusovka* felt free to be affectionate with their partners or to look for new romance. However, once again carving out a safe and comfortable space for the *tusovka* to inhabit was conditional on sheltering it from public scrutiny, rather than making it visibly queer. The club nights were organised monthly in a mainstream club, with the help of sympathetic staff who were acquainted with members of the *tusovka*. However, unlike other events held at the same

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[20] A comparison with the Moscow *Pushka* again highlights how location and surveillance from the broader community affected strategies to carve out 'queer/lesbian' space in public locales. The *tusovka* gathering at the Esening monument was very much visible as a lesbian one, with girls sporting crew cuts and unisex clothing, kissing and making playful reference to lesbian sex, seemingly unconcerned by the reaction of passers-by (see also Krongauz 2005; Sarajeva 2010).

venues, they were advertised by word of mouth only, and not promoted in the local media or through fliers and posters. On the night, the organisers stood at the entrance and monitored potential patrons: access was granted to known members of the *tusovka* but other patrons were admitted only on production of a membership card or by personal introduction by a member of the group. This caution was partly dictated by considerations of personal safety, since gay men in particular were concerned about being targeted by groups of *gopniki*. However, many women also pointed out that advertising the event more widely could attract the attention of the local media and the general public and turn the event into a 'freak show', disrupting the comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of the club nights and possibly leading to unwanted exposure. Valia, a retail manager in her early twenties and a very active member of the *tusovka*, explained that when the local press had tried to infiltrate the club night, most patrons had not enjoyed the prospect of being under the spotlight.

> Some journalists showed up unexpectedly at the club, they tried to get in. We hold closed
> door events, they only admit people who have a membership card, and this sudden interest
> in us was unexpected. Everyone got a fright [*ispugalis'*]. No one wanted their sexuality to
> be known.

While the *tusovka* inhabited and appropriated public and semi-public locations, this appropriation was not overt or explicit. Visibility was not considered desirable or empowering: on the contrary, a sense of comfort and safety could only be maintained by actively sheltering the *tusovka*'s habitual hangouts from the prying eyes of the wider community. The existence of queer space in the city was, to some extent, an open secret: some women pointed out that one of the cafes where the *tusovka* regularly met were known in the city to attract a queer clientele, or that many young people were aware of the existence of the *tusovka*, either because they were personally acquainted with some of its members or from hearsay. Nonetheless, strategies to carve out queer space in the city were premised on the need to remain unmarked, in order to deflect unwanted attention and avoid potentially uncomfortable or intimidating situations.

The most obvious disadvantage of the deliberate invisibility of queer space in Ul'ianovsk was that they were potentially very difficult to access for isolated individuals. The lack of an established gay scene and limited availability of personal technology constrained opportunities to access queer

space, and access relied more heavily on personal contacts and gatekeepers. Alisa, a university student in her early twenties, noted:

> In Moscow they organize gatherings, festivals, concerts, they have cafes where you can meet people. Here even meeting someone is difficult, some people we met on the street, I mean, someone [*in the local* tusovka] approached them and asked them, are you *tema* or not? People still meet through newspapers, through personal ads, I mean, there are no places like in Kazan', Moscow, Piter, there you have venues where *temnye* gather, and you can make acquaintances. Not everyone has the possibility to surf the net, even among our *tema* there are people who have no internet and no mobile phone, and how can they meet anyone?

Indeed, findings from my study show that both the availability of LGBT commercial venues and organisations and the widespread use of the internet facilitated access to queer space in Moscow[21]. However, Alisa's comments highlight not only the limited opportunities available in Ul'ianovsk to make inroads into queer space, but also the importance of collective agency and group solidarity in breaking individuals' isolation. Originating in a rather narrow circle of friends, the *tusovka* made a very conscious effort to expand the original network and reach out to isolated individuals: some women had been introduced to the *tusovka* by new acquaintances met through personal ads published in a local paper, while others had been approached on the street by members of the group, and asked to join in the *tusovka*'s activities. The very organisation of the monthly gay and lesbian party was part of a conscious effort to broaden the local queer network beyond its original core, as Viktoriia, a university student in her early twenties who was in charge of the club nights at the time of fieldwork, explained:

> I just remember one of our first club nights, it was simply a masterpiece, because before us no one did anything of this kind, and suddenly everyone gathered, got together, and everyone relaxed; because there's no one [*else*], and you don't need to play any role, many

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[21] Internet use was much more widespread in Moscow, a fact that reflected the capital's higher living standards; online communities, such as the website lesbiru.com, were commonly used as an inroad to queer spaces and networks, as it provided a safe and anonymous environment to make contact with other lesbians and access information about community events (Zelenina 2006).

people hide it [*their sexual orientation*], but here you didn't need to hide anything. And it was so comfortable, I don't know, it was a good atmosphere, and there was an emotional and energetic upsurge, there was such a union.

For many patrons, attending the club nights had been a liberating experience: they represented a rare opportunity to meet other queers, while also providing recognition and validation of their sexuality, a recognition that may not be available or desirable in other settings, such as the parental home or the workplace. In this respect, the *tusovka*'s everyday practices resonated with familiar notions of identity politics: they were grounded in affinity and solidarity, and allowed the collective articulation of shared experiences and identities. Motivations and meanings ascribed to participation in the *tusovka*'s activity differed among its members, and some of them clearly saw the *tusovka* chiefly as an 'interest club', or as an opportunity to socialise and meet potential sexual partners. However, the most active members of the *tusovka* also saw it as a form of social mobilisation around a common identity, and clearly considered the organisation of the club nights as an attempt to unite in order to change the status quo.

Claiming certain public and semi-public locations as queer can be seen as conscious resistance to pressures to conform to dominant gender and sexual norm, pressures which ranged from being publicly humiliated for looking 'odd' or 'queer' to being pressurised to get married and start a 'normal' family. Queer space was perceived as empowering as it allowed members of the *tusovka* to explore their sexuality and be themselves. At the same time, the collective creation of queer space subtly challenged the heterosexualised landscape: as Viktoriia jokingly remarked, in its early days the *tusovka* originally met "under Lenin's nose" (i.e. in Lenin Square); in this joke, Lenin symbolises the homophobic and repressive sexual morals of the Soviet period. Unlike the sexual identity politics embodied in Pride parades, the *tusovka*'s politics are not premised on the notion of coming out as an empowering act, or based on the strategic occupation of public space through the visible display of stigmatised sexual identities. On the contrary, the *tusovka*'s occupation of public space was based on the understanding of invisibility as enabling: carving out queer space in the city landscape involved discreetly and unobtrusively inhabiting certain public locations, while at the same time actively sheltering this space from public view. The *tusovka*'s practices not only constructed public space as queer, but actively preserved the boundaries between queer and non-queer space.

At first glance, the idea of invisibility as resistance may seem counterintuitive, since the choice to remain invisible may collude with, rather than challenge, the marginalisation of non-heteronormative sexualities, and leave the heterosexual majority unmoved or unaware. However, it should be pointed out that the notion of visibility as empowering embodied in the notion of a collective coming out are value-laden and culturally specific (Brown 2000). Moreover, the celebration of visibility in global LGBT politics has been criticised for erasing from the picture other inequalities based on gender, class and ethnicity. Being 'out and proud' is not a choice that is equally available to individuals, and this poses serious questions about the subjects that LGBT politics aim to represent (Taylor 2005; Fraser 1999). In the case of the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* I argue, after Seidman et al. (1999, p. 10), that closetedness is an expression "of both accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of a society organised around normative heterosexuality". While the extent to which visibility per se can undermine heterosexism and homophobia is disputed (Seidman et al 1999; Taylor 2004; Binnie 2004), Skeggs (1999, p.220) points out that "there is a real power in remaining unmarked". Moreover, it should be noted that the boundaries between visibility and invisibility, and between heterosexualised and queer space, are porous and fluid, and this allows the *tusovka*'s appropriation of public space to subtly challenge the status quo. Consider, for example, this episode of verbal confrontation related by Zulia, a lawyer in her mid-twenties who earlier in the interview observed that her extremely feminine looks sheltered her from prying eyes, as she was assumed to he heterosexual:

Well, it happened, that we were sitting somewhere with our group of friends, strictly *temnye* girls only, and it happened, that some bloke said, look at those lesbians sitting there [*lesbiianki sidiat*]. I had a verbal skirmish with those blokes, because we were passing by and they said, "oh, the lesbians have come", I turned around and I told them what I thought of them.

What did you say?

I can't remember what I said, it was very emotional and those poor lads could not talk back. I also howled like a cat. There were shocked by the fact that I approached them and sorted them out.

On the one hand, the public street is learned and perceived as a heterosexual space, where 'other' sexualities stand out as out of place and unsightly; for this reason, it can be intimidating, as it harbours risks of violence (physical and verbal) and exposure. On the other hand, it turns into a familiar and relatively comfortable space when used as a meeting point and hangout by the local *tusovka*. Numbers guarantee a certain safety, and the very presence of a queer *tusovka* in public space challenges the heterosexualised landscape. However, in this instance, the challenge is also verbal, defying heterosexism and claiming a legitimate presence in public space.

Conclusions

This article contributes to critical debates on the construction and meaning of queer space by exploring how city space is appropriated as queer in post-Soviet Russia, comparing practices in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. The article's focus on Ul'ianovsk as a post-Soviet provincial location allows an interrogation of the unspoken absences and dominant perspectives in existing literature on queer space. The latter focuses almost exclusively on visible and territorialised forms of queer space, with the consequence of overexposing some sexual subjects, typically based in Western metropolitan areas, while making those located in more peripheral regions even more invisible. The overemphasis on visibility is also present in most analyses of global LGBT politics, which tend to focus on overt claims to public space embodied in Pride events. This narrow focus, however, betrays ethnocentric assumptions about the emancipatory potential of 'coming out' and about what counts as effective sexual politics, while overlooking forms of resistance to heteronormativity which are not overt or explicitly political.

The article has argued for the importance of embracing a holistic notion of queer space, able to account for transient and precarious appropriations of urban space as queer. This approach is useful in avoiding rigid polarisations between metropolitan queer space, embodied in territorialised hubs of queer consumer culture, and provincial queer space, often equated with absence or lack. By comparing Moscow to Ul'ianovsk, the article has highlighted striking similarities between queer space in the two cities, particularly similar patterns of socialising embodied by the Moscow *Pushka* and the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, and common cultural practices deployed to produce urban space as queer/lesbian, such as listening to 'lesbian' rock.

The comparative focus of the study the article is drawn from also throws into relief important differences between the experiences of metropolitan and provincial queers, particularly in terms of ease of access to queer space, perceptions of safety and comfort, and degree of scrutiny from the wider community. In Ul'ianovsk greater concern about intimidation and violence (particularly at the hands of *gopniki*), and awareness of intense scrutiny meant that members of the *tusovka* were particularly careful to protect their privacy, which was not sheltered by the anonymity granted by living in a big city. The general unwillingness to be publicly open about one's sexuality was reflected in individual practices to negotiate city space, but also in the collective practices used to carve out queer space. Thus, the *tusovka*'s presence in public and semi-public places was not obvious to outsiders, and it was deliberately camouflaged for fear of exposure and repercussions. Carving out queer space in the city landscape involved striking a difficult balance between the protective shadow of invisibility and the desire to lay claims to public space.

The *tusovka*'s unwillingness to be visibly queer in public, however, should not be equated to a passive acquiescence to existing social norms. Equating reluctance to be 'out and proud' with the internalisation of homophobic social norms would mean denying the *tusovka* any forms of agency to defy such norms. Instead, the article has emphasised the importance to understand the *tusovka*'s practices within the context in which they are produced, and has argued that, in the context of provincial Ul'ianovsk, invisibility is an expression of both accommodation and resistance to existing social norms. Resistance was expressed not through visibility, rarely considered empowering or desirable, but through collective action, which produced fluid boundaries between the *tusovka* and the outside world, and allowed the articulation of shared identities and experiences within these boundaries. The boundaries between non-queer and queer space remained porous, and thus the very presence of the *tusovka* in public space challenged its heteronormative character, although this challenge was not overt.

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