Imagining King Street in the gay/lesbian media

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Imagining King Street in the Gay/Lesbian Media

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Abstract:
The identities of places do not exist a priori, but are derived from various representations constructed through social and cultural processes. The media is a key producer and disseminator of place images and identities in contemporary society. This paper examines the way the gay/lesbian media have imagined the King Street precinct, one of Sydney’s ostensible gay/lesbian localities, between 2003 and 2005. Through textual analyses of these media commentaries, I argue that King Street is often represented in comparison with Sydney’s other notable gay/lesbian space, the Oxford Street precinct. I find, moreover, that this imagined binary relationship is shifting and changing: sometimes King Street is represented as Oxford Street’s ‘alternative’, and at other times as Oxford Street’s ‘successor’, the ‘new centre’ of gay/lesbian Sydney. In either case, however, King Street is made to rely on Oxford Street for its own place-identity in these media commentaries.

Representing place through the media

As a social and cultural geographer, I am interested in how the identities of places are imagined in popular culture. Places do not exist a priori, but are constructed through social and cultural processes (Anderson and Gale 1992). This does not simply refer to how built environments are materialised through planning and building, but rather elicits the way places are represented through maps, film, literature, art, and a range of media sources, including newspapers, websites and television (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Duncan and Ley 1993; May 2003). These representations are what give different localities their identities, and consequently places cannot be experienced and interpreted apart from their circulated images (Shurmer-Smith 2002; da Costa 2003).

The purpose of this brief paper is to explore the multiple ways in which Sydney’s King Street precinct is imagined in and through the local gay/lesbian media, especially, but not only, community periodicals. The various forms of media –
newspapers, television, websites, for example – comprise crucially important means of generating and disseminating place-identities in contemporary society. May (2003) and Hannam (2002a) argue that newspapers, for instance, through reporting both the day-to-day events of life and wider cultural debates, critically influence people’s knowledge of their world and sense(s) of place(s). They consequently call for social and cultural researchers to pay closer attention to the way places are represented through newspapers. Moreover, Hannam (2002a) and Miller (2005) contend that ‘local’ or ‘community’ newspapers provide particularly valuable information about the way places are imagined and experienced in everyday popular culture, since writers for these newspapers typically belong to the community or locality about which they are writing.

In this context, ‘community’ media, particularly print media, has been especially important within western gay/lesbian populations, providing key information about tolerant places and spaces (often in large cities) (Weston 1995; Streitmatter 1998). In doing so, ‘community’ media reporting itself has assisted in instilling these localities with a certain gay/lesbian identity (Streitmatter 1998; Miller 2005). Consequently, several researchers have used these sources to understand how certain places are invested with gay/lesbian identity. Forest (1995), for instance, has investigated how the local gay press narrates an idealised image of West Hollywood (US) as a ‘gay city’, while Miller (2005) has examined the central role of a gay/lesbian community newspaper, Xtra West!, in defining the Davie Street precinct of Vancouver (Canada) as a ‘gay space’. I subsequently follow this approach in the present paper, augmenting our understanding of how certain places are imbued with gay/lesbian identity by various gay/lesbian media publications.

(Re)imagining Sydney’s sexual geography through the gay/lesbian media

At the same time, I also seek to extend this approach by exploring how different ostensibly gay/lesbian places are infused with different sexual meanings and gay/lesbian identities by the gay/lesbian media. Sydney makes an interesting case study here. The city possesses two notable gay/lesbian precincts – and by notable I mean places which are acknowledged by wider society and mainstream media commentaries as incorporating highly visible concentrations of gay/lesbian businesses and residents (see Murphy and Watson 1997). One space is the iconic Oxford Street precinct located in the ‘inner east’, comprising Darlinghurst, Paddington and Surry
Hills – ‘iconic’ because it is the site of Sydney’s famous annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade which has played a key role in rendering Sydney the ‘gay capital’ of the South Pacific (Markwell 2002). The locality has had a visible concentration of gay/lesbian leisure venues, businesses and residents since at least the 1960s (Wotherspoon 1991). The other space is the King Street precinct, located in the ‘inner west’, encompassing Newtown, Erskineville and Enmore. This area is home to both a large number of gay/lesbian residents, and a growing number of gay/lesbian community organisations and businesses. In this paper, I examine how the gay/lesbian media represents the King Street precinct vis-à-vis the Oxford Street precinct, pointing out and seeking to understand how these two localities are imagined in different ways as gay/lesbian places.

While there is some research on the iconic Oxford Street precinct as gay/lesbian space (Wotherspoon 1991; Faro and Wotherspoon 2000; Murphy and Watson 1997), the academic literature is silent on the particular position of King Street in Sydney’s gay/lesbian geography. Studies by McInnes (2001), Hodge (1995), and Costello and Hodge (1999), for instance, bypass King Street, and instead examine the binary between ‘inner Sydney’ and the ‘western suburbs’ generated by the gay/lesbian media. While this work is important in demonstrating how Sydney’s gay/lesbian media imagines the city’s sexual geography – a ‘queer’ inner-city and ‘straight’ suburbia – these authors omit any consideration of differences within the inner-city, and instead focus on the similarities between the various gay/lesbian spaces of inner Sydney. For example, McInnes (2001: 167) simply states:

Sydney’s two gay spaces are considered to be the area centred on Oxford Street Darlinghurst…., and what is described as the inner west. This second space centres on King Street Newtown. These two places are gay spaces largely because of the presence of gay business, including venues, bookshops, sex shops, clothing stores and cafes, and because a large number of gay men and lesbians live in these two areas and the suburbs which surround them.

However, it is also possible to examine the differences between how these two discrete spaces are imagined in the gay/lesbian media. This is one of my aims in this paper. Through examining media representations of King Street specifically, rather than the inner-city generally, I seek to advance present understandings of Sydney’s gay/lesbian geography.
Interpreting media images of King Street

The commentaries analysed are taken from several gay/lesbian media sources widely circulated in Sydney – Sydney Star Observer (SSO), SX, Gay Australia Guide (GAG) and www.lesbian.com.au. They have been drawn from between 2003 and 2005. 2003 was selected as a suitable start date because of the closure of several gay/lesbian venues on and around Oxford Street during that year, prompting the publication of a number of articles in SSO (12/12/2002, 20/3/2003, 6/11/2003) and SX (16/10/2003, 15/7/2004) raising fears over the ‘de-gaying’ of Oxford Street. These reports signify heightened concern for the integrity of Sydney’s gay/lesbian geography by the gay/lesbian media and a concomitant anxiety over the place-identities of gay/lesbian precincts.

These commentaries were then subject to various textual analyses (see Hannam 2002b; Shurmer-Smith 2002). Manifest and latent content analyses were used to extract key themes about the media constructions of King Street’s gay/lesbian place-identity. Here, I looked for the descriptors applied to King Street to elicit particular representations. Diverse words, like ‘alternative’ and ‘centre’, recurred over and over again. Since there seemed to be multiple – and somewhat competing – images of King Street in these media commentaries, I then turned to discourse analysis to try to understand how such divergent representations might arise, and what they signify about King Street’s gay/lesbian place-identity and the precinct’s place in the gay/lesbian media’s imaginative sexual geography of Sydney (see Waitt 2005; Miller 2005). Here I paid close attention to the interpretive context of commentaries concerned with King Street, and the places (and identities) with which King Street was juxtaposed.

This closer discursive analysis suggested that where King Street is considered in the gay/lesbian media, it is often juxtaposed with Oxford Street. In other words, the gay/lesbian media seems to have constructed a binary relationship between Oxford and King Streets, so that King Street is typically identified, defined and imagined in relation to Oxford Street. However, the contours of this binary relationship are unstable and shifting, differing across the commentaries. Sometimes Oxford Street is seen as the ‘hub’ of Sydney’s gay/lesbian geography, the symbolic ‘heart’ of the gay/lesbian spatial imaginary, while King Street is perceived as its ‘alternative’. But at other times, Oxford Street is described as ‘old’, and King Street is presented as its
‘successor’, the ‘new centre’ of gay/lesbian Sydney. Either way, what is significant is the way King Street is often made to rely on the image of Oxford Street for its own definition and identity. In the following discussion, I examine each of these imagined place-identities in turn, citing selected examples from the gay/lesbian media. Only the most explicit examples are presented and discussed, but the gay/lesbian media includes various other references juxtaposing and comparing the two street-precincts.

**King Street as the ‘alternative’**

A number of commentaries represent Oxford Street as the ‘centre’ or ‘heart’ of gay/lesbian Sydney, while King Street is presented as its ‘alternative’ (eg. SX 29/1/2004). Take, for instance, the way they are juxtaposed in the following:

*Darlinghurst.* Welcome to the hub of Sydney’s gay and lesbian community. Darlinghurst is home for some of Sydney’s hottest gay and lesbian clubs, cafes, and bars, and it’s where many community groups are based. The main strip, Oxford Street, is queer central. …

*Newtown.* The edgier alternative to Darlinghurst. … The buzz here is on King Street, home to Sydney’s alternative and grunge crowd. (GAG’s *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Visitors’ Guide 2005*: 6, 15)

The heart of gay Sydney is Oxford Street. … [I]t’s loud, proud and colourful. … Want something a little more edgier and cosmopolitan? Rock into Newtown. Sydney’s most colourful characters gather around King Street and Enmore Road. (www.lesbian.com.au/lesbiansydney.htm)

In both commentaries, King Street is imagined in relation to Oxford Street. Oxford Street is presented first: the precinct can stand alone as ‘queer central’, ‘the heart of gay Sydney’, drawing on no other places for its definition as the centre of gay/lesbian Sydney. Oxford Street simply is gay/lesbian Sydney. Meanwhile, King Street is ‘second choice’ it seems. In both reports, descriptions of King Street appear immediately after Oxford Street, and are drawn in comparison, with King Street identified as Oxford Street’s ‘edger alternative’.

Since it is depicted as the ‘hub’ of gay/lesbian Sydney, Oxford Street is also imagined as Sydney’s ‘gay ghetto’, a uniformly gay/lesbian residential-and-commercial space. This is another representation against which King Street is defined in the gay/lesbian media:
Since moving from Taylor Square [Oxford Street] to the Newtown/St.Peters border [King Street]...I’ve celebrated being part of a mixed community. … Don’t get me wrong. I love living gay. … But a couple of years spent drowning in the ghetto has made me appreciate the simple things about not being a part of it. (SSO 20/1/2005)

Newtown is a culturally diverse suburb and fortunately it is gay-friendly, not a gay ghetto. People can be themselves in Newtown without fear of persecution. (SSO 27/1/2005)

I do not believe that Newtown [King Street] is a ‘gay ghetto’. Granted, it is one of the few places where I can walk hand in and with my (male) partner and feel relatively safe. However, there is a wide diversity of people here, and the LGBT community is only a part of it. (SSO 21/1/2005)

Although these commentators are clearly happy to represent King Street as a ‘gay-friendly’ locality rather than a ‘gay ghetto’, this identity is only attained in contrast with Oxford Street, the gay ghetto. Again King Street is depicted as Oxford Street’s alternative, its particular ‘gay-friendly’ place-identity bound to a comparative relationship with Oxford Street.

**King Street as the ‘new centre’**

But this centre/alternative binary is unstable. In other commentaries, King Street is not presented as the ‘alternative’, but as the ‘successor’ to Oxford Street, the ‘new centre’ of gay/lesbian Sydney. Take the following commentary from GAG (Summer 2003), which now promotes King Street the ‘best gay street in Australia’:

King Street, Newtown, is now the best GLBTI street in Sydney and, inevitably, in Oz – no argument. It’s book-ended by Victoria Park at its city end – site of the annual Mardi Gras fair day and poolside pashing all year round – and Sydney Park at its southern end – queer dog off-leash heaven. Without any of Oxford Street’s tackiness, here you’ll find the kissingest, handholdingest fags and dykes, along with hets who aren’t out to hoon or hurt. … Why? Because 24/7 it’s a lived-in street, not an after-hours entertainment strip for the desperate and dateless.

King Street’s claim to be the ‘best gay street in Australia’, however, is tellingly made in direct comparison with Oxford Street (and interestingly, not with ‘gay streets’ in other Australian cities): while Oxford Street is a ‘tacky entertainment strip’, King Street is ‘lived-in’. Oxford Street continues to haunt the place-identity of King Street: even in being imagined as the ‘top’ gay precinct, King Street is defined against and through Oxford Street.
In a similar vein, another article from SSO (21/10/2004) asserts that ‘Newtown’s King Street is set to overtake Darlinghurst’s Oxford Street as the epicentre of gay Sydney’. The report outlines evidence for the elevation of King Street to the centre of gay/lesbian Sydney, in terms of residential visibility and the number of gay/lesbian organisations moving to the area, which include the New Mardi Gras, Twenty10 (a gay/lesbian youth service), the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service, the Gender Centre and the Metropolitan Community Church. Yet even as King Street succeeds Oxford Street as the ‘epicentre of gay Sydney’, the precinct is imagined through Oxford Street: the article is entitled ‘King Street the new Darlo’. Here, King Street is not acknowledged as the centre of gay/lesbian Sydney in its own terms, by virtue of its own identity as a gay/lesbian place, but through replacing Oxford Street. Literally re-placing: King Street is not the ‘new centre’: it is the ‘new Darlo’. It is as if Oxford Street is inherently and synonymously ‘central’, and King Street can only be seen as central through being imagined as Oxford Street. In doing this, rather than asserting King Street’s gay/lesbian place-identity, Oxford Street’s identity as the symbolic ‘heart’ of Sydney’s gay/lesbian spatial imaginary is confirmed. It is not Oxford Street that has been dis-placed by King Street’s growing gay/lesbian community and identity. Rather, King Street’s identity has been dis-placed by the continued representation of Oxford Street as ‘queer central’.

**Conclusion**

The identities of different places are not ‘natural’, but constructed through social and cultural representations. In contemporary western society, the media – print, television, web-based – is a key producer and disseminator of place images and identities. This paper has sought to add to our understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, I have sought to explore how the gay/lesbian media can influence the gay/lesbian identities of certain places. Moreover, by exploring how King Street has been represented in and through the gay/lesbian media vis-à-vis Oxford Street, I have attempted to understand how different gay/lesbian places are imbued with different and multiple gay/lesbian identities in the gay/lesbian media. Consequently, this discussion also augments our understanding of Sydney’s particular gay/lesbian geography, providing a more nuanced understanding of the imaginative sexual identities of different places collectively imagined as gay/lesbian.
Several specific conclusions can be drawn here. First, King and Oxford Streets are imagined differently by the gay/lesbian media. Second, King Street is imagined in relation to Oxford Street. Third, these relational depictions shift between alternative to, and a successor of, Oxford Street. Finally, either way, King Street is often made to rely upon Oxford Street for its place-identity, infrequently imagined apart from Oxford Street. Yet, since place-identities are fluid and unstable, this may change in the future, especially as King Street continues to develop as a locality of gay/lesbian community and identity. And in looking to the future, I hope the claims made here stimulate further enquiry into the nuanced relationship between Sydney’s gay/lesbian precincts. More work remains to be done – not just of media representations – but in-depth interviews and participant observations to understand the experiences of King Street’s residents, and what this particular place means to them and their identities.

References


