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PINKWASH THIS:

Resisting the mainstreaming management of queer cultural heritage

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Abstract

As Pride festivals around the world in 2019 celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the word pinkwashing is on the tip of many tongues. The question of whether or not political parties, business enterprises and authoritative institutions should have an obvious place in the celebrations is frequently discussed, considering Pride, at the start, was a demonstration for the rights of lgbtqia+ people. This study aims to explore how lgbtqia+ people view the riots, and by extension Pride, as part of their cultural heritage, and how it is put in relation to what they consider to be queer culture. Furthermore, it examines attempts to resist a perceived mainstreaming of this culture and the problems brought by doing so, as well as the growing need for separatist queer spaces as a place for organisation and recuperation.

The study takes inspiration from discussions on power/knowledge, discourse and agency as a wider framework to examine cultural heritage issues, resistance and space, through empiric material gathered via interviews and participant observation.

Keywords: queer culture, cultural heritage, lgbtqia+, pinkwashing, resistance, space.

Preface

My biggest gratitude, first and foremost, to the people who agreed to share with me their time, thoughts and experiences – without them, this study wouldn't have been possible in the first place. I value our conversations greatly, and I'd like to think they have made me to grow.

A big thanks, also, to my supervisor, whose guidance and (sometimes brutal, but always brilliant) advise helped me untangle the jumble of my thoughts enough to write them down in a somewhat orderly manner.

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Introduction

It's an early evening in December, a thin layer of snow illuminated by streetlights and the thick sliver of the moon outside in the cold, but inside the kitchen the atmosphere is warm and homely, the table laded with cups of mulled wine, tea and a plate of home-made pastries. Through the window facing the balcony a rainbow flag is visible, swaying gently in the wind. I sit at the table with Lovis, Ronja, Majken and Freja; four women two decades my seniors, and with considerably more Pride events under their belt than myself.

"But the whole Pride thing, that is what actually pisses me of the most." Lovis has the beginnings of a frown on her face, elbows placed on the edge of the table while she gestures with the pastry in her right hand in an encompassing circle. "Because all of a sudden everyone wants to wave a rainbow flag, and a bunch of corporate sponsors wants to participate, and I have no idea what kind of work they do in their everyday lives. I think… I think that is where it all goes wrong".

They all agree this is not what the Pride festivals, and in particular the parades, that they attended only a decade or so ago used to look like. Many political parties and business corporations who frequent the parade today where glaringly absent in the early 2000's, as were the presence of rainbow flags above the doors of nearby stores, cafés and restaurants. That the police and the armed forces would want to participate was unthinkable. These are all instances that have since increased rapidly in later years – the general interpretation is that the underlying reason for this has to do with a desire to be seen, to gather goodwill and/or financial gains. A marketing hot-spot, if you will. Since the parade holds gravity for many as a tribute to the history of the struggles queers have faced, the transition from uprising to folk festival evokes conflicting emotions. One might on one hand appreciate that queer culture is being made visible (and by extension, hopefully made more accepted), but on the other hand, one might simultaneously feel frustrated and upset that this practice of cultural heritage is being used as a billboard.

"I think [the parade] has been edulcorated, the way it looks today." Freja leans back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, and says with finality: "I'd much rather walk in a protest march than an 'let's advertise' march". The rest of us sit quietly for a while and ponder this, the gentle tinkling of spoons stirring in porcelain cups the only sound until Ronja speaks, breaking the contemplating silence;

"You say you'd rather walk in a protest march than an advertising march, and I agree with you, but… How do can we change that? Do we reclaim it?".

The question of whether marketing participation has a place in Pride or not is frequently debated. We live, whether we like it or not, in a capitalistic society, and as such market economy is something we all have to relate to. In order to even arrange a Pride event to begin with, money is needed. To get money, sponsors are needed. And for sponsors to get involved, there are usually conditions to be met. But the involvement of outside actors on its own doesn't necessarily have to be bad thing: an increase of visibility could lead to a more general acceptance, and the more participants that get involved, the more knowledge is shared, leading to a bigger chance of a change for the better actually happening. What my respondents think becomes problematic, though, is when the focus of Pride is experienced to shift from an event intended to lift queer legal issues and life situations, and instead becomes a once-a-year marketing stunt by actors who, during the rest of the year, either does not lift a finger for these causes or even actively work against them.

Background

The first Pride was a riot. 1969, New York: a police raid of the gay club Stonewall Inn marks the beginning of a several days long violent resistance, in the form of demonstrations, from a group consisting mostly of transgendered women of colour aided by other lgbtqia+[1] people. Though not the first of its kind, the militancy and ferociousness of this particular uprising was up to that point unparalleled, and would for years to come lead to the creation of a number of activist groups (such as the Gay Liberation Front, ACT-UP and Queer Nation) that formed the beginnings of the gay liberation movement by urging the queer community to speak up and act up against oppression – a legacy still very much present in the queer community. The riots are commemorated through annual Pride festivals because of their historic and symbolic importance, and are considered by many (my respondents included) as the catalysator of the

[1] Umbrella-terms describing communities and/or identities consisting of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, queers, intersex, asexuals, as well as many other sexual/gender identities. In this study, *lgbtqia+* and *queer* are used interchangeably.

queer movement we see today in Western society (Ambjörnsson 2016: 18, 21-22; Carter 2011: 538-539; Grinberg 2019; Lugowski 2011: 238).

The first Pride parade held in Sweden was organised by Gay Power Club in the city of Örebro in 1971, and consisted of around 20 participants – in 2017, that number had increased to over 7 000. In Stockholm and Gothenburg, the 2019 parades consisted of over 50 000 and 15 00 respectively (Bengtsson 2019; Lindsten 2019; Näslund 2016; Thorén & Öhrman 2018). Large Pride celebrations in Sweden such as Stockholm Pride and West Pride (who offers several days of lectures, seminars, workshops, panel discussions, performances, and cumulating in a Pride parade with thousands of participants) have both received criticism for being excluding to some lgbtqia+ people, for commercializing Pride and for allowing police to attend the parade despite the violent history between police forces and the queer community (Norbergh 2018; Risenfors 2018). In response to this alternative pride festivals, such as Reclaim Pride in Gothenburg, has risen, initiated and driven "for queers by queers", to offer an anti-capitalist festival with intersectional analysis and without pinkwashing[2] (Reclaim Pride 2019). They question the disconnection between West Pride and the liberation struggle Pride originally represented, claiming that with the involvement of authorities, parliamentary parties and profit-driven enterprises, as well as the desire to cater to a wider public, Pride has been turned into a folk festival where everyone is welcome regardless of political ideologies or ulterior motives, and that such institutionalisation and commercialisation of the event is done at the expense of the very community it is intended for (Reclaim Pride 2018).

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how people who identify as lgbtqia+ use resistance, that has become such an integral part of their cultural heritage, to counteract the pinkwashing they experience in order to protect their identity and their human rights. The rise of alternative Pride festivals could be argued to be a discursive moment in the history of this social movement – it is a form of historiography. It challenges the current configuration of queer culture and cultural heritage by aiming to reclaim it and reconfigure its rendition. I hope to shed light on what people who either have been or are currently active in the organisation

[2] Using queer culture (for example, the rainbow flag) as a marketing tool and/or political strategy to be perceived as progressive or to make financial profit, without working to improve the lives/rights of lgbtqia+ people.

and/or participation of Pride events view queer culture and queer cultural heritage – how present is it in their lives, and how do they relate to the historical aspects of this movement? To achieve this, two fundamental research questions are used a starting point;

- In what ways do historical act of resistance play a part in their ideas of what a Pride festival should entail, and how do they define queer culture?
- In what ways have they attempted to counteract the perceived mainstreaming and subsequent pinkwashing of the queer movement, and what problems have they faced while doing so?

Theoretical framework and previous research

As a general source of inspiration, I am using theories regarding power, knowledge, discourse and agency to build a framework that is relevant to this study when looking at issues related to cultural heritage, resistance and spaces.

Michel Foucault suggests that power is not something only a few can wield, but rather a network we are all a part of. It involves oppression and limitations, but is also a productive force – his power/knowledge concept states that power and knowledge are closely intertwined, and that by taking control of the knowledge one also decide which knowledge is deemed as appropriate, valid and allowed (Börjesson & Rehn 2009: 45-46). Language also plays an important part in this; what we do and do not speak about, and how we speak about it, is part of the process of power, and the creation and recreation of discourses (Foucault 2002: 44). Foucault further proposes that gender, sex and sexuality is spoken of in terms of analysis, statistics and classification, as something to be administrated and controlled (Foucault 2002: 48-49). If one, then, speaks about it outside of the predetermined framework, it becomes a transgression, and thus a deliberate attempt to oppose the exercise of power and the discourse that power has created (Rabinow 1984: 295).

The discourse thusly creates boundaries of what is considered by a society as appropriate behaviour, which in turn affects peoples' acting space and their agency. Saba Mahmood suggests we think of agency as a person's autonomy or capacity for action, and that it depends on surrounding cultural structures and contexts. The freedom to act can be understood in terms of being positive or negative; positive as in the freedom *to do* something, and negative as in the freedom *from* something, and maintains that in both instances

individual autonomy is central (Mahmood 2001: 203-204, 207). It is a concept that becomes relevant here when used to look into expressions of queer identity and culture, examining who is allowed to take up visible space, and under which conditions they are allowed to do so.

Through heritage, people understand who they are both as individuals and as a collective, and through it they shape not only their ideas of their past, but of their present and their future as well (Harrison 2010: 9). It exists in both tangible and intangible forms, and can include anything from buildings or objects to practices, language and places – anything that is considered important enough to be passed down through generations, and that helps people understand who they are as a collective (ibid.). For the lgbtqia+ community, the Stonewall riots are one such thing, a historic dividing line describing a time before and after queer rights were acknowledged on a wider scale, and have come to signify the queer resistance against oppression and homophobia (Carter 2011: 541). Jeffrey Alexander proposes the use of the concept cultural trauma to explain how a collective, when feeling that they have been subjected to atrocious circumstances, recognises that the future of their identity is consequently changed – this creates a solidarity within which the suffering caused by these circumstances is shared (2004: 1). According to Alexander, trauma emerges within the collective in the form of a cultural crisis that threatens the collectives' sense of identity. The construction of cultural trauma begins with a claim: major suffering inflicted upon them or social processes that are destructive to the community, for example, that in turn raises a demand for reparation and reconstitution on an emotional, institutional and symbolic level (ibid.: 10-11).

Denis Byrne argues that due to a long history of suppression, the nature of queer heritage is an underground one, built on secrecy by necessity. Because of this, the question of whether to record and curate queer places and practices is debated; on one hand, if heritage is not recorded its legitimacy in the present can more easily be ignored, and recognizing it equals visibility, in the present as well as in the past; on the other hand, by recognizing it there is a risk of it being absorbed into mainstream culture to be consumed, and thereby losing the aspect of it that makes it queer in the first place (Byrne 2005: 5-6). 'Allowing' others outside of the queer community to take part of queer culture and spaces might therefore have both positive and negative consequences, and these consequences are frequently debated.

Pride festivals are often quite colourful affairs; attendants can be seen dressed up in extravagant clothing and elaborate make-up, rainbow flags and political statements on shirts and bags. It might seem exaggerated, but the carnivalized body transgress heteronormative order through performance, and the exaggeration becomes the reason that within the liminal space, it is authentic. By normalising queer cultural expressions, such as the drag scene[3] for example, attendants can express themselves in a way that makes them feel truer to themselves, which in turn creates feelings of belonging and solidarity within the community (Kaygalak-Celebi, Kaya, Ozeren & Gunlu-Kucukaltan 2019). The exaggeration is intentional and the Pride events are 'too much' by design, where "political resistance is conceptualized as participation in the spectacle of the event itself" (Kates & Belk 2001: 404-405).

There is, however, a rising concern amongst many within the queer community that the more Pride events move towards becoming a folk festival, and by such grows to a point where it has to start catering to an audience that are not part of the queer community, the further it away it drifts from its original purpose. Facture in, also, the commercialisation that has started to take place in recent years, and the purpose becomes even more diluted. The commercialisation is viewed as a problem for other reasons, too. When queer culture is made into a product of consumption, something that can be bought and therefore made profitable, it risks becoming exclusionary and losing its purpose (Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos 2004: 137, 146; Greenwood 1989: 130-131). Lgbtqia+ people with limited income might become bereft of their culture because they cannot afford to keep up, due to queerness being expected to be expressed through the purchase of specific goods. There is also the concern that the consumerist search for an 'authentic' queer identity violates the 'sacredness' of the festival and undermining its true purpose, instead turning it into a platform for expressions of power, both economic or otherwise (Kates & Belk 2001: 412-414; Sears 2005: 93, 105, 108).

Jane Ward points out in her research that the question of who 'owns' Pride is not an uncommon one (2003: 88-89). She purposes that the mainstreaming of Pride events, to make it less 'threatening' to those who are not queer by being "predictable, contained, bureaucratic… and produced in cooperation with police and other symbols of power and authority" might result in queer activists becoming decreasingly likely to attend as they feel

[3] A diverse phenomenon lacking a single definition, but that in most cases is understood as a performance act, where people dress up in exaggerated versions of binary gender roles and by doing so challenging stereotypes of masculinity/femininity (Baroni 2011: 191).

those events are no longer representative of their needs (ibid.). Depending on who is organising the event, the level of separatism fluctuates as well; some wants it to be an event open for everyone and where the presence of political parties/businesses/institutions is strong, some welcomes non-queers and/or organisations if they meet a certain criteria, and some want it to be solely for those who identify as lgbtqia+.

A festival, such as Pride, exists within a specific timeframe, and as such presents as a liminal space where occurrences of daily life activities are temporarily disbanded and where heteronormative structures are challenged (Taylor 2014: 27-28). They exist both as a physical place as in the spaces in which they are held, but also in a metaphorical form in terms of what they represent – an opportunity to explore and experiment with alternative forms of identity or to form connections with like-minded people, allowing a collective representation of lifestyles and to serve as a manifestation of an important milestone in a movement (Bennett & Woodward 2014: 11-14; Carter 2011: 541). There is a need for more permanent spaces, though. Queer spaces exists as a form of counter public space where lgbtqia+ people are allowed to exist on their own terms without the boundaries imposed by the heteronormative society, and are therefore vital in offering an opportunity to socialise with like-minded people and discuss strategies to change their environments to improve their qualities of life. But it is also a space where reprieve is offered, protecting an individual from everyday occurrences of harassment and alienation (Ambjörnsson 2016: 160-161; Ambjörnsson & Bromseth 2013: 21-22; Brown 2007: 2696).

Methodology

I've gathered the empirical material through qualitative interviews and participant observation. The interviews consisted of six individual meetings, and one focus group of four people (in the ages of early twenties to early thirties, and mid-forties), with people who identify as lgbtqia+. Their level of activism and/or involvement in Pride celebrations varies – some are currently active, or have been active previously but aren't any longer, in the organisation of such events, and some have not been active in organisation but have been visitors at them. Geographically, they are from or are currently living in western and middle parts of Sweden, in cities of sizes varying from small town to major city. Most of them I was able to reach out to through an already existing network of contacts, some of them were contacted through email, and two reached out to me through snowballing. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and have since then been translated into English. The participant observation was done on two occasions and lasted approximately two hours each; a visit to a well-known queer club in Gothenburg, and an open hearing held by Gothenburg's lgbtq-council[4].

Limitations

Queer movements in different parts of the world can differ greatly from one another, and the movement in the West is often criticized for excluding people who are not white and able bodied, and only catering to the interest of those who are. Other factors such as religion and class are also continuously overlooked. Intersectional perspectives such as these are important, but due to temporal and practical reasons I had to put restrictions on the width of this study – this restriction has in addition been an effect of getting in touch with respondents through previously established connections. The collection of material was done in urban Swedish cities, and all of the people I've interviewed grew up there or in nearby areas. Since I've reached out to the majority of my respondents through previously established connections, it is worth to take note that this will be reflected in the opinions voiced here. Out of the ten of them, eight identify as cis-gendered[5] women, one as a trans man and one as non-

[4] A forum for consultation and exchange of knowledge and experiences between the LGBTQIA+ community and the Gothenburg city council.
[5] A term for people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.

binary[6], and although this was not intentional on my part when reaching out for informants for this study, it still has an impact on the results. What I found when I initially reached out was a reluctance to take part, perhaps based on mistrust of me in the role of a researcher or out of concern for the possible consequences of participating, and those who I finally did end up interviewing most likely only agreed to talk to be in the first place either because they had met me before (however briefly), because they knew someone who knew me and that could vouch for me, or because I'm open about being queer myself therefore by extension deemed trustworthy. I also made a choice regarding whom I talked to, and focused on people I knew had dabbled at least a little bit in activism, or that I got the impression were quite passionate about the subject I wanted to discuss – I believe that in a time where the significance of Pride is experienced as diminished, listening to what they have to say is crucial.

Ethical considerations

One of the main reasons behind my choice of subject is that as a person who themselves identify as queer, this has personal relevance for me that stretches beyond an academical curiosity. I believe this to be a strength: I have both prior knowledge of the matter at hand, as well as access to informants due to already existing connections. However, it is also a specific form of positioning that requires a critical awareness; as a white cis-gendered woman, I have privileges and experiences that might differ in varying degrees from others. Just because there are a lot of us who identify in a similar way or believe ourselves to belong to a specific group, it does not mean that we are homogenous. The opinions that are voiced in this study might ring true to a lot of people, but in no ways to everyone. It is vital to keep this in mind.

While Sweden today in many ways might be considered a safe place for people who identity as lgbtqia+ compared to other countries, the fact remains that the queer community is still a marginalized group and some of the people I've interviewed live under precarious circumstances where, if their opinions were voiced out loud, they might risk their current job or their chances of finding one in the future, or even their physical and/or mental safety. For this reason, all names and places connected to the interviews have been fabricated and/or undisclosed.

[6] Umbrella-term covering gender identities and expressions outside the gender binary (man/woman).

An analytical discussion on the mainstreaming of queer culture

The significance of Pride (or: resistance as heritage)

Digging for roots

"Being devoid of history is fatal," Tilde says. "Our history is everything – without Stonewall there would be no Pride. We have to remember where we come from". It is a statement that is continuously repeated throughout my interviews, and while the wording might differ the message remains the same: for the queer community, history is vital. Unfortunately, history doesn't always paint a pretty picture. For queers, it is wrought with discrimination, persecution and erasure, and this has over time become closely intertwined with the collective identity.

"It's our origin story!", Linnea proclaims, chortling into her coffee cup. "It's part of who we are, of our culture. How we have been treated… It lies in the periphery all the time. And it should! We need to see what the struggle used to look like in order to know how we are going to carry it out today".

While said with fond humour, there is considerable weight in her statement. The queer struggle is intimately tied with resistance against systematic repression. As stated earlier, the events unfolding at Stonewall were riots, and in the years that followed they were commemorated and continued as demonstrations to mark their anniversary (Taylor 2014: 29). Pride celebrations exists because the significance of those riots has not diminished and that connection with history is still relevant to this day, and although none of my informants use cultural heritage as a concept, the way they speak about the history of queers and queer practices clearly classifies it as such – the importance of remembering their history and connecting with it, the struggle and the organisation upon which the queer community is continuing to build the movement, the need for spaces where these matters can be discussed and shared partly to others but most importantly within their own community. The trauma of persecution, violence and erasure has become a part of the collective identity of queers and created solidarity where the suffering is shared (Alexander 2004: 1-2). Tilde describes it as listening to the stories of harassment and ignorance that others have experienced, and relating to them to the point where they become a part of you – uncomfortable rocks you pluck from the hands of your friends and place behind the bones of your chest, invisible weights whose

edges bleed into those of your own until they too are a part of your story. Pride becomes even more important, perhaps, in the light of how much of queer culture that has been lost. With Elias, a considerable amount of our conversation was spent discussing the erasure of queer lives and relations throughout history – from Nazis burning down the Institute of Sexual Sciences in Berlin in 1933 or the colonialization of North America and the subsequent erasure of the indigenous populations' perceptions of gender, to love letters between same-sex couples being interpreted only as close friendships in order to coincide with a heteronormative view of history.

It does not do to simply look backwards, though. Majken points out that she can still see the connection to Stonewall in Pride celebrations today, but that it's a much bigger spectacle today than it used to be because of the involvement of actors outside of the queer community and the much higher number of attendants.

"It used to be a protest, but now… It's a little different now. At the same time, we should be damn happy we can walk in the parade without risking our lives. We need to allow ourselves to have a good time while it's happening."

Defining queer culture

When asked to define queer culture, my respondents all agree on two things. First, that it is a broad spectrum, including an abundance of differencing variables and is therefore hard to pin down. Secondly, that a lot of it is tied to community. A big part of queer culture for them is simply the way they live their lives: going about everyday situations, forming family constellations, existing both in interaction with and in contrast to heteronormativity, as well as the language they use and the practices they perform. Noomi states that while the performance of culture is an important part, such as presenting queer life stories in books or paintings or standing on stage, it is equally important that aspects of daily life is considered a part of it as well;

"I think it's important for future generation of queers to know how we lived our lives in the early 2000's. Our stories are connected to so many social structures. Like, if you are successful even if you have this 'thing' about you that deviates, your story is what is reflected in media. But if you aren't, if your sexuality or gender identity subjects you to a structural oppression… People don't want to be confronted with that."

We are sitting in an unassuming café, tucked away from prying ears in a little alcove, shoes on the floor and our socked feet resting against the rough wall. She tells me that on several occasions, the network she is a part of have made timelines – strings between walls upon which people could contribute their stories in chronological order to remember what queer lives have looked like over the years. She says it helps to create a physical manifestation of the past, when so much of it has only existed orally. Secrets people carry with them, where they met in a specific place in a park, how they organised themselves, how they got in touch. "Stuff like that, that feels so exciting and important. I think a big part of our heritage is the resistance in itself, like, I think a lot about what our queer elders were thinking in the 1930's and 40's – what did they do, what did the resistance look like locally?"

In Sweden, homosexual acts were illegal until 1944, and homosexuality wasn't removed from the National Board of Health and Welfare's list of diseases until 1979, after queers preformed a protest and called in sick to work saying they 'felt a little gay' (Sveriges Radio 2017). This vilification and stigmatisation have left marks on the queer community that to this day are still difficult to wash off. Pride, as a symbolisation of this struggle, has therefore become an important staple of queer culture.

"I feel like Pride preprocess a big part of it," Freja muses. "There is an opportunity there to display and engage with a lot of activities connected to queer culture, like music or theater with queer themes."

Thwarting the rainbow explosion

Taking a stand on exploitation

Pinkwashing, in queer spheres, is usually understood as the usage of queer cultural aspects (such as the rainbow flag, or trends from the drag scene) to increase profits or popularity, like when businesses releasing products that are rainbow-themed or containing catchphrases like *LOVE IS LOVE*, or when political parties clamour for visibility during Pride celebrations despite being strangely quiet regarding matters of queer lives and rights during the rest of the year. Its usage has increased in popular speech after being used as an analytical tool, for example by Jasbir Puar to illustrate how the Israeli state in the 1990's sought to 're-brand' themselves through improving the rights of its lgbtqia+ people, and by doing so brought focus

away from its occupation and repression of Palestine (Puar 2011: 135, 137-139). Among the younger of my respondents, it is a source of aggrievance – they see it as an attempt to commercialise the oppression of a marginalised group, and struggle to see how it can bring any sort of positive impact. Visibility alone, they claim, has no value for the queer movement, as it on its own brings no form of support or normalisation.

"It takes more than waving a rainbow flag and shouting that you stand for human rights," Linnea explains. "The intention might be good, but it's nowhere near enough."

However, it should be noted that pinkwashing is a relatively new concept, and the respondents in my focus group were initially unsure about its meaning (a few weeks after our interview Lovis sent me a text, good-naturedly scolding me for 'introducing' her to it because now she "cant's stop seeing it, it's everywhere!"). They say that while it does induce feelings of frustration and, to an extent resentment, they also concede that maybe the ulterior motives don't matter as much if it results in something good. For them, the very fact that politicians and businesses want to get involved is a sign of progress, and while they might feel bitter at times about how things have been in the past, they think the visibility their participation brings has positive effects – more acceptance and a reduced controversy means more people feel comfortable walking in the parade, and that growth in numbers brings more attention to the purpose of the parade in terms of striving for improving the life and rights of the queer community.

There is also the question of who is 'allowed' to take part of queer culture – is, or should it, be open for those who don't identify as part of the lgbtqia+ spectrum? With the popularity of TV-shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* continuously rising, parts of queer culture are easily accessible and reproduced amongst many. It isn't feasible to contain it to the queer community alone, nor is it desirable, but it does raise some concerns when there is a lack of afterthought;

"I mean, of course everyone can take part of it. But it gets weird when it's being hijacked, when cis-hets[7] use queer slang and visit queer clubs without thinking about whether these things are intended for them," Tilde sums it up.

She draws parallels to cultural appropriation – adopting part of a culture that isn't your own, getting to pick out the pieces you like and disregard those you don't, and

[7] Cis-gendered heterosexuals.

being free to use them without fearing repercussion. Like the examples Tilde mentioned; using slang and adopting stereotypical queer aesthetics, or frequent gay bars or night clubs, without having to worry if it might get you harassed, beaten up or murdered – a very real threat lgbtqia+ people have to be conscious of.

Whether cultural appropriation is an applicable term or not in this scenario, the fact remains that it certainly isn't an example of cultural exchange either – lgbtqia+ people have very little to gain when non-queers pick and choose expressions or aesthetics that intrigues them and leave behind what doesn't, while having the ability to do so without consequences. Ultimately, what my respondents wish for is for non-queers to engage with queer culture with respect – to recognise their privileged positions, and to take a moment to ask themselves if it's reasonable for them to take up space in a queer context.

The struggles of organising a Pride free of pinkwashing

The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL) have published a manual of sorts, as a guide for those who wish to organise a Pride event. According to this manual, Pride can be organised by pretty much anyone, from divisions within RFSL, to non-profit organisations, independents networks or one or more associations banding together. Content and form may vary depending on who the organiser is, it can be anything between a party, a fair, a health expo, an educational forum, a place of mourning or of protest – only imagination sets the boundaries, really (RFSL 2017: 6; Ward 2003: 88-89). Out of the ten people interviewed, four of them are currently or have recently been involved in organising Pride events on a smaller scale, either as an alternative for a bigger event in a large city, or smaller events in smaller cities where Pride festivals are a relatively new phenomenon that have only existed for a handful of years. Pinkwashing, in this context relating to the involvement of political parties and business enterprises, is something they all have actively taken into consideration, and their approaches have differed somewhat.

Tilde's group wanted both businesses and political parties to attend, so long as they agreed to participate under certain premises. "As long as we can see that they work actively to improve the lives of lgbtqia+ people, we welcome them," she tells me. The first year she helped organise Pride in her hometown, they aimed towards a general level of education;

“Since it was so new, and our town is so small, we realised that we would not be able to reach out to the queer community here. Especially the younger ones, they don’t trust that this is a good thing yet. So we focused on education, to battle the idea that there are no queers here.”

The arranged panel discussions and forums within which people could ask questions. On the backdrop of the stage, when no one was schedule to speak, they put up a rolling banner containing a dictionary of sorts, with words and abbreviations connected to queer identity. “It was ‘Pride for dummies’, kind of,” she says, laughing. For the 2019 event, she involved the political party she’s active in to organise it – something she in hindsight regrets. By involving a political party in an event partly sponsored by the municipality, it quickly became an issue when they announced they did not intend to invite all of the parties in town, choosing to exclude two of them whose programs and ideologies they did not believe matched with the basic values they wanted the event to represent.

“They [the municipality] basically told us to play nice, and that if we wanted the money we either had to invite everyone, or no one. I wanted to cry when I got that email.” In the end, the invitations they had sent out were withdrawn. She says it seemed to be the least shitty option;

“The attendance of those parties would have alienated those the festival is meant for and turned it into a pinkwashing gala. If they had been there, there are a lot of people who wouldn’t have shown up. Hell, I wouldn’t have shown up – the person organising the whole thing!”

Linnea and Elias’ organising group have refused the involvement of businesses, but have allowed political parties if they adhere to a list of criteria. They wanted to focus on whom they wanted the event to exist for (namely queers), maintaining that Pride is open for the public but that they want to see commitment.

“You say you want to support queers? Then show it. Support us, but do it on our terms. If we tell you that this is how we feel safe with you attending, listen!” Linnea shakes her head. “If you don’t, you’re not supporting us at all.”

For this year’s Pride event, they doubled down and informed participants of the parade that corporate and party logos could be worn on clothing, but that no banners were allowed since they felt they took too much focus during the parade. This was meet with

reactions to the point of outrage, and they were accused of being discriminating, excluding and offensive. To sort it out, they invited those who had voiced these opinions to a meeting, so that they could explain their reasoning further and hopefully come to an agreement – only one person showed up.

"It was a shitshow. She was disrespectful, launched into absurd tirades and belittled us. She claimed that by 'excluding' them we subjected them to the same structural oppression that lgbtqia+ people face. We weren't even excluding them – we just set boundaries they didn't approve of."

Elias wasn't present at that meeting, but tells me that the problems didn't end there. An article was written in the local newspaper condemning their restrictions just a few weeks before the festival was taking place, and in the midst of last-minute preparations they had to make a decision on whether or not to send in a response to it – something that would have taken time and resources they did not have. He's has a snuffbox between his thumb and middle finger as he tells me this, the plastic case spinning spinning spinning, resignation carving a furrow between his eyebrows.

Noomi's group have flat out refused all involvement of businesses and political parties. For them, Pride is a demonstration and a place for lgbtqia+ people to gather in an environment where they can feel safe, and as such outside actors have no place there. Their event doesn't exist in opposition to other Pride celebrations – Noomi thinks bigger events like those in Stockholm and Gothenburg do a good job as far as education goes, but for them it's important to provide an option for those who might feel excluded there, people of colour or people identifying as transgendered or non-binary for example. A year or so back, they had planned a panel discussion where one of the participants was a Muslim that had been accused of extremism, and they were asked to cancel. The accusations were said to be based on documented evidence – this was never showed to them and, not wanting to silence Muslim voices based on hearsay, they refused to cancel – condoning the censoring this person based on islamophobia and racism would have severely gone against the values of their group. Because of this, they too were labelled as extremists;

"We were painted as professional activist who had deceived the city's representatives and tried to corrupt young people, they discredited us completely. A lot of people aren't open with their involvement in our group, because they're scared it will reduce

their chances of getting a job they might apply for in the future, or even cause them to lose the job they have now. And having to constantly trying to counteract this kind of thwarting is exhausting."

Although they differ slightly in their approaches, all three of these festivals have one common goal: to produce a Pride event where the queer community is the focal point, and offer a place where the voices of lgbtqia+ people can be heard. What does become clear is that while in theory, the organisation and content of a Pride festival is open to decide by those arranging it, in reality it isn't that simple; there's a palpable frustration present within all of them, feeling as if though their hands are tied and their mouths gagged, wanting to keep building on an important part of their heritage but being held back. When political parties and businesses are adamant to be a part of the events but only seem willing to do so on their own terms, it is perceived as problematic by many – they are in a position of power that makes it possible for them to impede the agency of these groups who, while dedicated, are usually run by volunteers and are therefore limited in terms of financial means and opportunities to counteract in way that won't cause a backlash. By being described with terms like 'exclusionist', 'extremists' and 'activists', it makes it easier to disregard them and turn a deaf ear to the points they're trying to make. Linnea describes how she, during the meeting, sat with her fists clenched in her lap, biting her tongue to not allow her anger to get the best of her and lash out – to do so would only have cemented the picture of them as provocative and irrational, and would have caused further damage. They are persistent, though, and hopeful. While their groups might not always exist in the forms they do today, there will always be queers who resists, who find that the mainstreamed Pride that is offered doesn't match with their worldview and identity, and who will create alternative places: "Our voices won't be silenced until politicians and companies understand their place in Pride".

Creating queer spaces

The purpose of occupying public space

The lgbtq-council is holding meeting in the auditorium of one of the city's many libraries. The lightning is muted, barring the spotlights illuminating the stage, and the seats are a deep red, soft but terrible on your lower back. Roughly 20 people are in attendance, some of them

spectators like me and some of them are currently holding positions within the council. The meeting is a hearing open to the public, to discuss the plan of action the city of Gothenburg established in 2017 to improve the living conditions of lgbtqia+ people under a four-year period (Göteborgs Stad n.d.: 4). Some of the measurements the plan contains have been fulfilled, and others are currently in the works of being started, but a member of the audience points out that some of the measures, the ones that were deemed as the most pressing by the queer community in Gothenburg, has yet to be initiated. This leads to a flurry of discussion and voiced concerns, in some places expressed by the members of the council themselves. The council isn't a decision-making organ – they have no say in political proceedings, and some of them seem frustrated when speaking about the proceedings of the plan. One of those measures includes the creation of a Rainbow House: a meeting place for lgbtqia+ people as part of the preventative work for the community's health, focused particularly on transgendered youth (ibid.: 18). We are told it's because there is no budget for it due to economic cuts. Several of the spectators seem doubtful that this is the truth, questioning whether it instead might have to do with an unwillingness to make it happen, either out of ignorance for its necessity or out of outright malice.

One of the biggest concerns raised during the meeting is the fear that simply by having established the lgbtq-council, the city feels as if though enough has been done, and that rather than listening to the councils recommendations, it is instead used as a marketing tool to advertise queer-friendliness. To counteract this, a member of the audience implores and encourages all of us in attendance to "make noise" – contacting administrative authorities and political representatives and demand action, as well as reach out to people and networks around us to see what we, as civilians, can do. One such thing, as another spectator suggests, is to be active during Pride.

Pride celebrations offers a physical space within which lgbtqia+ people can create a collective sense of belonging, as well as being an opportunity for self-expression (Kaygalak-Celebi et al. 2019). For Hillevi, the parade is a unique opportunity to make a statement;

"Queers are constantly trying to escape 'straightness'. We have a dark history, and the parade is important to highlight lgbtqia+ peoples' vulnerability and to show support

for the movement. We must be given a distinct place in society, and the parade is the only way we can express ourselves in a public environment."

Pride blurs the lines between the private and the public, creating an opportunity for lgbtqia+ people to express themselves and their culture in a way that generally is not allowed *(*Kaygalak-Celebi et al. 2019; Markwell & Waitt 2009: 145; Taylor 2014: 27). The festivals themselves becomes manifestations of a demand for visibility and acceptance that to this day is still often denied the queer community, through occupation of the very public spaces which fails to provide it, and are therefore strategic tools in which protest carries vital weight. Furthermore, they hold importance as a space in which a collective identity is both formed and represented (Bennett & Woodward 2014: 11-12; Kaygalak-Celebi et al. 2019; Taylor 2014: 27, 31). It is essential when organising Pride to bear in mind for whose benefit the event is taking place and what they need it to be, and by extension who then is invited to take part or attend so that they aren't alienated – a big part of Pride revolves around establishing safe, queer space. Noomi explains that a space like this is crucial not only for the movement seeking to secure the rights of lgbtqia+ people, but for the very wellbeing of the people themselves;

"We need this –a space, a moment in time, a physical place made for queers by queers where we can connect– so we create it. It's a performative act which goal is accomplished simply by taking place."

Safe spaces

The ongoing discussions regarding Pride (who it exists for, who's welcome there, who defines the boundaries) can also be seen as a struggle regarding queer spaces on a more general level. It becomes visible in club settings, like Gretas for example – it's the oldest gay club in Sweden, and with the rainbow flag above the entrance and the extravagant interior design, it certainly looks the part. What seems to be lacking, though, are queer patrons.

"Do you know how you can tell it's a queer party?" my friend asked me while we stood on the balcony looking out over the dancefloor on a late Saturday night in November, grinning around the rim of her glass. "It's when you know the people who are there."

None of us recognised anyone we knew at any point during the night, and from what we could tell, the majority of the patrons didn't appear as queer in any way at all, and

while my friend's statement was a little simplified it isn't far from the truth. But more than that, and this is echoed by my respondents when I told them about this experience, it has to do with the *vibe* of the place. It's difficult to articulate exactly what it is, but they're all of the agreement that there is something that happens to the atmosphere or the energy in the room that they as queers claim to sense, that has nothing to do with how you look but rather how you behave. None of them really visit Gretas, choosing instead to frequent smaller and more underground venues since they don't feel as if this is a place that exist for them anymore.

"It's just rich, upper class straights there," Juno complains, after having groaned out loud at the mere mention of the club's name. "Just a bunch of homosafarians[8] wanting to creep at queers – it's like I'm paying to become a monkey in a cage!"

This feeling of having been pushed aside in favour of non-queers results in an expressed need for separatist environments ("We [queers] constantly have to move. We create a space, cis-hets takes it over, rinse and repeat. It's a never-ending loop."). All of my respondents at some point during our conversations mentioned the necessity of *queera rum*; a concept that in English literary translates to 'queer rooms', but that is more accurately understood as spaces (both physical and virtual) existing solely for queers.

"Queer spaces sums up what queer culture is, for me, at least," Linnea says. "They are the places where we operate and where we are allowed to exist on our own terms."

Both Noomi and Linnea have been, and still are to a degree, very active in queer virtual spaces such as social media, email threads and forums. For them, moving in virtual spaces provides great opportunities for networking and organisation, and they believe that there is an advantage here – when queers see other queers making demands (regarding the pinkwashing of Pride, representation in media, or legal rights or health care, for example) they see that it's *possible* to make demands, and thus the movement will grow. Queer spaces are needed for the continuance of the queer movement, and for their creation and sustainment to take place, the pinkwashing of Pride (which is a big platform for lifting the problems the community still faces) needs to be disrupted.

[8] Emic term used by several of my respondents to describe people (who don't identify as lgbtqia+) who go to queer bars/clubs for the sole purpose of watching queers as though they're an endangered species.

Virtual places are important, Elias agrees, but argues that physical places are even more so – he says that being able to meet like-minded people, to share experiences and thoughts and concerns with someone who has lived through something similar is an absolute necessity for the exploration and development of one's own queer identity. The town he lives in is small and as such the number of queer spaces are limited, and on top of that the ones that do exist are under threat of being closed down.

"The recreation center, which is pretty much the only queer space we have, is being shut down. It's a big blow for us. For young queers in particular – where else will they go?"

He says that in the town where he lives Nazi activity is large; about six months ago, they put up stickers with their logo and barrier tape all over the recreation center. He has on several occasions seen people following and taking pictures of him, and tells me that late one night after having been to a panel discussion on hate crime where he stayed behind afterwards to talk to spectators and encourage them to come to him if they needed someone to talk to, that he lives on a central street and is therefore not far away, he heard a car jam the breaks outside of his home and someone getting out of it, screaming Nazi salutes and then driving off again.

Queer spaces provide a safe place for lgbtqia+ people where they can find comfort, acceptance and freedom – an escape from heteronormativity. They create opportunities for organising resistance or to discuss how to lift important questions raised by the queer community but also a reprieve from alienation, and simply sharing a meal together can offer a much-needed recuperation (Ambjörnsson 2016: 160; Brown 2007: 2695-2697; Taylor 2014: 31). For people like Elias and Juno, whose appearances somewhat transgress binary gender assumptions, it's a relief to walk into a room where their identity isn't questioned, and they aren't asked what they 'have between their legs'.

"It can be so frustrating finding yourself in a mainstreamed space, having to explain your identity or how certain social structures affect your life, and you never have to do that in a queer scape," Noomi says, her head leaned back against the wall and her feet resting on the wall opposite in the little alcove. "Everyone is already on the same page here, and then we can focus on other things. Like, where do we go from here, how do we organise ourselves, or just… Just living, really."

Conclusion

The Stonewall riots were not the first of their kind, nor where they the last. Still, they have come to be established as an important milestone and therefore a part of queer heritage because of what they represent: a dividing line between pre- and post-acknowledgement of lgbtqia+ peoples' rights, commemorated annually through Pride festivals and/or Pride parades. The queer movement and its history are closely intertwined with resistance against systematic repression, and for my respondents it is important to remember that Pride initially was a demonstration. The increased participation of political parties, business corporations and institutional authorities in recent years is met by mixed reactions, as research by Ward, Kates and Belk, and Bennett and Woodward has shown – some feel they have no place there at all as they are considered to be a part of the problems Pride illuminates, that they turn the festivals/parades into pinkwashing galas on the expense of the queer community, while others welcome their participation as long as they can see that there is a point of them being there (meaning, not simply to make money or to gain popularity, but to actually make a difference and support the movement). For some, the visibility that is gained through their attendance is enough, reasoning that if it leads to a greater acceptance the ulterior motives might not be very important in the end.

Organisers of smaller-scale Pride celebrations, often driven by volunteers, have received backlash when trying to create an event that either limits or completely removes the involvement of these actors outside of the queer community – from sponsors threatening to withdraw, to aggressive questioning of their decisions and vilification they don't have the means to counteract. The inability to freely create an event they feel is representative of their community and their needs results in a lot of frustration and, at times, resignation. This might be a reason why the cries for separatist queer spaces keep getting louder – when Pride becomes a place within which lgbtqia+ people feel their voices are not being heard nor their needs prioritised, they look elsewhere to find contexts where they are. Queer spaces, both physical and virtual, become a necessity for networking and organisation, as well as safe spaces where their sexuality and/or gender isn't questioned, and where they find the freedom and acceptance they might be denied in public spaces. As Ambjörnsson and Brown points out, being able to interact with others who understand what they are going through and can be there for them as support or to share experiences and knowledge with are seen as absolutely crucial in the development and exploration of their queer identity.

Furthermore, the queer community (which can often be found in these spaces) in and of itself is viewed as a big part of queer culture. Practices and performances depicting queer lifestyles are of course a big part as well, but even more so are aspects of their everyday lives; the relationships they form, the contexts they create and their very existence both beside of and apart from the heteronormative society. The resistance, too, holds an important place, as do the attempts to reconnect with their historical roots, by trying to gather in physical form the stories and experiences that have previously only existed in secretive, oral forms, which is attested to by Byrne and Harrison.

To the question regarding if people who don't identify as part of the lgbtqia+ community can take part of queer culture, the answer is yes, though my respondents voices a desire for it to be done so respectfully. Simply berry picking, adopting the parts that are deemed as exciting or fun and disregarding those that aren't, doesn't sit well with them – instead, they wish for non-queers to recognise and accept that while they are welcome in many places, there are others that simply does not exist for their consumption and within which they need to take a step back.

I think this is one of the reasons why pinkwashing has caused the debate that it has; Pride exists as a manifestation of the demand for acceptance from the lgbtqia+ community, and is one of the few opportunities they have to publicly display queer identities and lifestyles in a way that under 'normal' circumstances isn't allowed. It becomes concerning, then, when this purpose is pushed aside in favour of marketing for financial gains or popularity scores, where only a bare minimum is being done to present a queer-friendly image which in turn might alienate or even exclude the people Pride originally was created by and for. By organising alternative festivals where pinkwashing is resisted by making it as close to non-existent as possible, the groups who make them happen are attempting to thwart the mainstreaming they experience, and are instead creating a narrative revolving their history and culture in a way they feel is more representative of their community.

I think there are plenty of opportunities for continued research on this topic. Applying an intersectional perspective and expanding the number and demographics of respondents would be very valuable, both in terms of Pride and pinkwashing, but also concerning the creation and maintenance of queer spaces, and representations of queer culture and heritage in general.

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