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Queering Las Vegas: Personal Experience Stories of Gay Men

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With a focus on the personal experience stories of self-identified gay men, the purpose of this paper is to consider queer experience as we can deconstruct Las Vegas. By interpreting the stories shared by visitors to Las Vegas, the author raises themes of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity associated with recognition of primary relationships, and the celebratory experience of becoming a majority population during a discrete time period. It is hoped that the stories shared in this paper, along with the author's interpretations, will contribute to and foster additional discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In this particular issue, we are exploring Las Vegas. As a researcher, I am primarily interested in hearing the voices of those populations that are either silenced or ignored in organizations. My theoretical position is informed by queer theory. I am particularly concerned with the voices of the queer community. The purpose of this paper is to bring to *M@n@gement*, queer stories of Las Vegas. I use the word "queer" to refer to a broad assortment of individuals. Despite a range of political opinion/activism, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, sexual behavior, and gender identity (and lack thereof); these individuals all depart the societal norms of heterosexuality. I do not use the term "homosexual" as I find it to be a clinically produced identity that is steeped in a history of pathologizing and criminalizing people. Further, the term leaves out the possibility for bisexual or transgendered identities. Finally, homosexual—and related terms—are essentialist, ascribing identity and characteristics not valued by the individual. In this paper, I use the term "queer" or the phrase "queer community" to refer to the collective. I use the phrase "gay man" when the man has self-identified as such. I use the phrase "lesbian woman" to differentiate women's experience.

To begin with, I must confess. This is not the study that I had planned. Initially, I wanted to speak with queer residents of Las Vegas. In order to do this, I spent a great deal of time "cruising the net", posting messages on various boards that members of the queer community might frequent—hoping to engage people in virtual conversations about their experiences. I had hoped to follow-up these virtual chats with face-to-

face discussions once I visited the city. I received no responses to my postings. I reshaped my study after talking about my project to people outside of Las Vegas. I kept hearing stories from visitors to Las Vegas. I would like to bring those stories to *M@n@gement*. Unfortunately, I did not hear any stories from women so this paper reflects only stories told by gay men. Following the stories, I offer my interpretation. To conclude, I share one more story: that of academic discussing issues involving the queer community. Before I start to share the stories, I will review my method.

METHOD

These stories are personal experience stories, which refer to a particular category of analysis of folklore. The level of analysis is the story itself—as people tell stories about the experiences in their lives. Stahl (1983) pointed out that experiences could involve anything—from a specific event to an embarrassing *faux pas*. Stahl (1983: 268-269) defines personal experience stories in the following manner:

«Personal experience stories are first-person narratives usually composed by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives; the stories “belong” to the tellers because they are the ones responsible for recognizing in their own experiences something that is “story worthy” and for bringing their perception of those experiences with contexts and thus creating identifiable, self-contained narratives».

Personal experience stories are an effective method as the participants become involved in the data analysis. As stated by Stahl (1983: 274), «Existentially, the personal experience narrator not only acts or experiences but “thinks about” his action, evaluates it, learns from it, and tells the story—not to express his values, but to build them, to create them, to remake them each time he tells his stories». Previously, I used this method to explore the issues experienced by men who enacted forms of masculinity that conflicted with those norms of hegemonic masculinity (Sardy, 2000).

In the introduction, I noted that my theoretical orientation is informed by queer theory. Heavily influenced by Foucault (1976) and Derrida (1976), queer theory is an attempt to link gender and sexual orientation in order to demonstrate the reciprocal functions of each form of identity and to question the essentialism that has marked theories of identity (Butler, 1990; Halperin, 1995; Lagose, 1996). Queer theory differs from gay/lesbian studies by challenging the binary opposition (Derrida, 1976) of heterosexuality/homosexuality with the experiences of bisexuality and transgender experiences. It draws upon poststructuralist concepts to present a new perspective of gender and sexual orientation.

THE STORIES

I present these stories in the manner that they were told to me. I've corrected grammar and have excluded some of the sounds and

phrases of conversation in the interest of readability and understanding. I believe that I have maintained the spirit, humor, and character of the storyteller. The first story describes the experience of a man upon arriving in Las Vegas.

THE ARRIVAL

"When I first arrived at the Las Vegas airport, I went directly to the cab area. I did not want to deal with the frustration of waiting for one of those mini-vans, riding with a herd of other people throughout the city. Finally, I got a cab. I was barely in the car when the cabbie said that he was going to try and have me share the cab—with some "hot" woman. I didn't say anything. After a few minutes, he gave up—attempting to console me for not having the hot babe in the cab with me. During the ride, he tried to start up conversation. He let me know that there were many places in Las Vegas where I could get laid. Las Vegas was full of hot young babes."

I've included this story as it exemplifies compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1981), in which a person is considered to be straight until s/he discloses otherwise. Not only does this maintain a norm of heterosexuality, it presents a dilemma for the queer person. Should the assumption be allowed to stand or should the individual challenge the assumption by disclosing his or her true sexual orientation? In this instance, the storyteller could "go along" with the cabdriver's assumption that he was a straight man—in search of adult, straight fun—or he could make it clear that he was gay. What would result from the disclosure? Would the cabdriver be friendly and apologize for his mistake? Would the cabdriver offer information that would be of interest to the queer community? Would the cabdriver turn hostile? The storyteller needed to decide whether he should just play along with the cabdriver—acting as if he was interested in the shared information and/or joining in the discussion about the "hot, young babes." Should the storyteller expend the energy to carry on with this façade or take the risk of dealing with a homophobic person's ignorance? In the end, the storyteller decided to just play along. "It just wasn't worth the energy to explain, but it did annoy me—having to start my vacation with this situation."

FREQUENT FLYER CLUB

"I guess all of the casinos have this program in which they track how much money you spend. Its like the frequent flyer club that airlines have now—the more you spend, the more gifts that you receive. You can insert the card into another slot in the slot machine and it calculates all the money that you dump into it. Anyway, they let you combine the money—so if you are traveling with someone your money can be added together. I went with a female friend of mine. We asked about pooling our cards. We were told that you had to be married in order to pool the cards—and that you also had to have the same last name."

First, I find it interesting that Las Vegas, with its history of being a place for quickie marriages and divorce, would take such a traditional view of couples. A married couple must share the same last name? A

woman who has chosen to retain her surname would not be able to take advantage of this benefit?

Next, I am struck more deeply by the heteronormativity of such a policy. Members of the queer community encounter barriers to access of policy, discounts, and other benefits that are routinely enjoyed by straight people, married or not. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Nevada voters approved a ballot initiative that amends the state constitution to limit marriage to "a male and a female person." (Voters will need to approve the initiative again in 2002 in order for it to take effect.) Given Las Vegas's more progressive reputation with regard to marriage and divorce, I find such an amendment surprising. When reviewing websites about political action, I found no evidence of an organized effort in Las Vegas to fight for gay/lesbian or domestic partnerships. I did find several business websites advertising Las Vegas as a place to have a commitment ceremony. While political action groups may exist, my perception after my web search was that Las Vegas was a place that would be happy to accept the dollars associated with commitment ceremonies—but not a place that would help such citizens to gain equitable rights.

DAVID SINGS "I THINK I LOVE YOU"

"My friend and I went to see David Cassidy's show at the Rio. What cracked me up about that experience—other than the fact that David touched my friend's arm while singing 'I think I love you'—was that people assumed that we were a couple. A man and a (biological) woman together? In Las Vegas? We MUST be a couple. They had a photographer there who went among all the different tables before the show. She stopped at every couple and asked if they wanted their portrait taken. We said that we wanted ours taken. The photographer arranged us in this way... It looked like a typical engagement photo. All around us, people were talking. Some couples joked with us while we were being photographed. Of course we had to buy it—it's very funny. I also remember that there were two women who were seated by us. I'm sure that they were a lesbian couple—the gaydar was just too strong. Anyway, the photographer IGNORED them. She just walked right by. In fact, I didn't see people joking with the two women."

Again, the theme of compulsory heterosexuality emerges as the storyteller and his female friend are assumed to be a straight couple simply by appearing at a show together. When the two agree to have their photo taken, they are arranged in a style that the storyteller recognizes from engagement photos. It is interesting as gay men frequently need to pose as straight men in workplaces and society that are not open to lifestyle differences—that range from simple ignorance to outright hostility. Posing as a straight man requires him to redirect energy into creating and maintaining a façade, to censor language and constantly monitor oneself—ensuring that clues are not given away (Sardy, 2000.) By posing as one half of a straight couple, the storyteller is included—the photographer interacts with him and the couples joke with him. The photographer walks by the two women, assumed to be lesbian. Is this simply an assumption that the two are not interested in

purchasing the photographic services or is it something deeper? Does the photographer ignore the two women as she does not know how to interact with them? Is the photographer uncomfortable with two members of the queer community who have not chosen to pose as straight people?

JUST WALK ON BY

“Walking on the strip is really a pain in the ass. Every foot or so is another person thrusting paper at you. They have advertisements for topless shows and phone sex lines. Big ole bosomy women on the front. EVERY person tried to give me a card. They have this way of snapping the cards at you! I kept having to say ‘No thanks.’ They only seemed to give them to men.”

In many of the stories that I have heard about Las Vegas, sin is a central theme. People talk about drinking a great deal of alcohol, staying up all night long, dancing, and gambling. I’ve also heard a number of stories about sex. Las Vegas: an adult playground where sex is readily available. What strikes me about the previous story is that sex is part of the illusion of Las Vegas. People may come to Las Vegas expecting to be able to let their hair down and go wild sexually—but only in a way that doesn’t really challenge them. Much like people may want to participate in the illusion of Paris, without the problems of jet lag and people speaking a “foreign” language, people can engage in “wild” sexual behavior—in a very familiar way. Okay, so there are people who stand on the streets passing cards that advertise topless shows and “champagne rooms” that promise illicit sex; however, this illicit sex doesn’t seem to be all that illicit to me. What is so new about a woman being objectified? What is new about bare breasts being somehow risqué? The people thrusting these cards at passersby ONLY thrust them at men. It seems that women visitors are not expected to participate in the wild sex of Las Vegas—nor are they expected to want to participate. Of course, I’m also struck that the “wild sex” is the same male-female coupling that is promoted in virtually all aspects of society: television, songs, movies, plays, poems, commercials, even religion. If Las Vegas was truly “wild” sexually, I’d expect at least a hint that the city would not only tolerate but promote same-sex coupling, bisexuality, or—at the very least—assertive women who objectify men.

I am grouping the following three stories together before I offer my interpretation. All three stories were told to me by the same man. He was in Las Vegas for an annual gay event that takes place in Las Vegas. Called a circuit party, the event involves a series of themed parties over the course of a weekend. The storyteller describes the year 2000 event that took place at Mandalay Bay.

SPLASH: GAY DAY AT MANDALAY BAY, PART I

“I was in Las Vegas for a circuit party. There were gay men everywhere. We were at the pool at Mandalay Bay. There was this one lifeguard who kept watching all the cute guys—his eyes were popping out of his head. The other lifeguard kept blowing his whistle to get his attention and then point at the pool. He kept watching guys all after-

noon. The second lifeguard laughed a lot—but kept redirecting his coworker. Later in the day, I saw the first lifeguard making out with some cute guy behind one of the towel stands. I bet it was a fantasy come true for him.”

OH WAITRESS! GAY DAY AT MANDALAY BAY, PART II

“I talked to one of the cocktail waitresses at the pool about the hotel being filled with gay men. I was asking her what she thought about it. She said that the tips with us were much better than normal. She liked that. She also said that she got to see the room where the party was last night. She couldn’t believe how great it looked with all of the lights and such. She said that most of the staff were impressed. She thought that gay men were a lot of fun.”

ZOMBIES ON THE MONORAIL: GAY DAY AT MANDALAY BAY, PART III

“We had all been up all night dancing. Many of us took a lot of recreational drugs. It was already morning. We just got on the monorail, going home. There were some straight people on the train—they looked a bit taken back by us. I looked at some of the other people on the train. Their eyes were really wide—and not really adjusting to the sun yet. Their faces were a mess. And their outfits... Last night they looked good. In the light of day, after a night of partying, they were trashed. They looked like a bunch of zombies. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window. I looked like a zombie too. It was a frightening sight. While I was looking at my reflection, I caught the eye of another guy. We just started laughing. How we must have looked to those straight people. A whole train full of zombies heading home in the early hours of the morning.”

When large numbers of the queer community get together, there is this kinetic force that seems to work its way through the group. It’s almost as if that the collective is so excited to be in the majority that they cannot help themselves from celebrating. I believe that these three stories reflect that energetic celebration. In the first story, the lifeguard is at work. Not only is he surrounded by attractive men, but it is also okay to be attracted to other men on this day. I can imagine that he must feel liberated that such a change as taken place in his workplace. While redirecting his coworker, the second lifeguard was described as laughing—being amused. He did not appear to be angry about his coworkers behavior of watching other men. The storyteller also suggests that the first lifeguard’s experience is strong by saying that he bets that the lifeguard is living a fantasy. In previous research (Sardy, 2000), I heard some gay men talk about feeling isolated in their worklives. They expressed a longing to have a sense of community at work, to be able to let down their guard—and to demonstrate their sense of humor and play. To me, it sounds like a sense of community was created for this lifeguard.

I believe that queers experience strong emotions when they enter areas that are predominantly straight. The storyteller asks the waitress what it is like at the casino during a “normal weekend.” Just asking such a question implies the storyteller expects that there will be a

difference. The waitress describes the differences—that the tips are larger and that the dancefloor/party rooms are more lavishly decorated.

The final story—that of the zombies riding the monorail down the Strip—continues this theme of queers celebrating that they are the majority. The storyteller wonders how the straight people feel. Rather than wondering how he might hide his sexual orientation from the straight people, the storyteller seems to be relishing that the straight people are seeing this group of zombies dressed up in evening clothes, looking like “wrecks.” In conversation, he wondered if some of them were going to their jobs—while the gay men were just going home for the evening.

I also sense a more negative note. The circuit party being described takes place in Las Vegas during one weekend a year. Every other day, are there large numbers of the queer community together? What does Las Vegas feel like then? One person remarked that he didn’t care for Las Vegas. He said that he didn’t like the pretension, the greed, and the falseness of the city. He described the city as being “too het.” I wonder if, for many visitors and residents of Las Vegas, the presence of the queer community is a major distraction to the illusion that is created in Las Vegas. As one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S, the official City of Las Vegas website heralds it as the “Entertainment Capital of the World” (Official City of Las Vegas Website, 2000). In this place, illusion is important—and distractions are costly. Are elements of the queer community hidden from visitors so as not to distract the Las Vegas visitors who are uncomfortable, intolerant, or disdainful of queers?

I also wonder about Las Vegas as a possible glimpse of future U.S. culture (Block, 1999). Is the U.S. city of tomorrow a place in which visiting queers do not see themselves represented? Do they need to wait for special events in order to feel like that they do not need to worry about whether to conform to heterosexual norms?

While researching Las Vegas, I reviewed the official city web site. In April 2000, there was content about diversity in Las Vegas (the content has since been removed from the site). I saw no reference to the queer community. There was no discussion about the experiences of individuals, no official policies, and no links to resource sites. There was (and is) content about a study conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. The study determined that Las Vegas was the most “livable city” in the United States (Wall, 1999.) Howard J. Wall, the author of the study, asserted that «people make rational consumption choices in order to attain the highest possible level of satisfaction or utility» (Wall, 1999: 3). According to Wall, a choice is a revealed preference that results from this rational consumption. With regard to livability, people «vote with their feet» (Wall, 1999: 3)—choosing one metropolitan area over another. In Wall’s study, livability was determined by analyzing the rates that people have moved into and continued to live in a metropolitan area. This resulted in the claim that Las Vegas was the most livable city in the US. I wonder if Las Vegas is really “livable” for members of the queer community. And is this the city of the future?

CONCLUSION

I do not have a traditional conclusion to share with the readers of *M@n@gement* about the experience of queer visitors to the city of Las Vegas. It was my intention to bring queer voices to this journal—and to the broader discussion about organizational life—as I strongly feel that we must listen to all voices, not just the ones that are approved by society or that have power. I hope that the stories that have been shared in this paper, along with my interpretations, contribute to and foster additional discussions.

In closing, I would like to share one more story—the story of the queer academic. In this sense, I use the term “queer” broadly. Not only do I include individuals as discussed throughout this paper, I also include people who identify as straight yet disagree with the manner in which heterosexuality is constructed. To depart the norms of heterosexuality in academia is a blatant political action (Tierney, 1997). It requires a great deal of soul-searching, of thought with regard to one’s academic career, and of consideration that once a public declaration is made, others may interpret that declaration in any way they’d like—regardless of intent or spirit. Whether the departure is a disclosure of personal sexual orientation or a decision to research members of the queer community, departure is a difficult path to choose. Queer academics need a community that will help support them not only in their work but also in living their lives in the most rewarding way they know how. I appreciate the opportunity to publish this work and look forward to engaging in further discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity—with a critical postmodern organizational slant!

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