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Public Space and a Knot of Visibility: Genders and Sexualities Exposed

Abstract: The notion of visibility and *visible* appears concentrated around a specific knot, which includes the complexity of an intersection of a presence and visibility. In other words, in order for a visibility to be achieved, the simple *presence* should be underlined by a specific function, a place that marks its relation to the sociocultural system it exists in. In the cases of gender and sexual minority identities the question of public space and visibility becomes crucial, since minorities are being exposed as otherness in relation to the dominant, heteropatriarchal system that labels them as such. This paper works with the issues of *problematic* visibilities, using the Pride parade in Belgrade 2009 as a case study, which is directly related to gender and sexual identity positions within the dominant majority-governed system.

Keywords: public space, visibility, presence, otherness, abjection, Belgrade Pride parade

The notions of public and private space within the dominant heteropatriarchal system are imagined as a binary opposition within which the public space is connected to the domain of action of the masculine subject, the domain of the rational and cultural. It is associated with activity, production, paid work, political activity, state and civil society. Unlike public space, private space is associated with the domain of the female subject activity. The private is within this discourse associated with nature, passivity, the intimate, sexuality, unpaid work, home and family. These two areas of human activity are conceived in such a way as to reflect the divisions based on the constructed gender and sex differences.¹ This way of coding the public and private space as well as the policy of creating difference between them most often purports and includes various manners of limitation, control and prohibition especially when discussing practices whose performance is considered socially unacceptable in the public sphere. As already mentioned, sexuality is placed in the domain of the private sphere within this division. However, Gill Valentine emphasizes “[b]ut this cultural dichotomy (sic) locating sexuality in private rather than public space, is based on the false premise that heterosexuality is also defined by private sexual acts and is

¹ Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004).

not expressed in the public arena. Yet, heterosexuality is institutionalized in marriage and in the law, tax, and welfare systems, and is celebrated in public rituals such as weddings and christenings.”² Furthermore, this type of sexuality is represented in the public sphere through media which represent emotional relations, with expressions of sympathy and love between man and woman as a usual occurrence. Public spaces such as streets, squares, city parks, shopping malls and others also represent the places where the emotional expressions between heterosexual couples are an everyday occurrence. Of course, society draws the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior and the law also regulates in what measure the public display of emotion is allowed hence the (hetero)sexual relationships in public space are limited to those activities which are considered socially acceptable. On the other hand, homosexuality is represented in the public sphere to a much lesser degree. In a number of countries it is legally forbidden – criminalized, and its phenomenon is unimaginable in public space, while in countries which decriminalized this type of sexuality, the expression of same sex affection in a public place is a very rare occurrence in everyday life. When it comes to the representation of this phenomenon in media, an identical situation occurs, and the themes related to homosexuality are rarely represented, or this phenomenon is presented in a negative and/or derogatory context. This relation of unequal representation of these two types of sexuality shows to what extent and in what way heterosexuality is socially accepted as a common practice and considered as a universal model of “normal” behavior that is not necessary to limit in a public space.³ Actually, this can be formulated as *heterosexualization of space* or special monopolization of space by the dominant heterosexual majority. Gill Valentine, in the study (*Hetero*) *sexing space: lesbian perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces* that deals with the experiences of lesbians, writes about *heterosexual hegemony* which is, to a large extent, in everyday space expressed and reproduced through exclusion, negation and other forms of discrimination of this sexual minority. Valentine’s research shows that, starting from home as a private space through work, in social spaces such as hospitality establishments up to service industries and public services like banks and health care institutions, both lesbians as individuals and lesbians as couples are discriminated against in various ways which deny them the equal right of usage of private and public space which is guaranteed to the heterosexual majority.⁴ The *heterosexual matrix*,⁵ as it influences the production of heterosexual identities and subjects, influences also the

² Gill Valentine, “(Hetero)sexing space: lesbian perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11 (1993): 396.

³ Chris Brickell, “Heroes and Invaders: gay and lesbian pride parades and the public/private distinction in New Zealand media accounts,” *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 7, 2 (2000): 163–78.

⁴ Valentine, “(Hetero)sexing space.”

⁵ Explaining the dominant cultural model of understanding, reading and production and establishment of meanings according to which only heterosexually directed and constructed desire which are performed and embodied by the clearly binary structured – male or female – sex/gender bodies are seen as intelligible, while all other variants or alternations of gender, corporeality and sexuality are rejected, Judith Butler introduces the term *heterosexual matrix* which actually represents the grid within which the bodies, genders, desires and sexualities are indicated as ‘naturally’ heterosexual.

construction and the *production* of heterosexual space whose existence is regulated and maintained through simple repetitive performances of the same, normative and dominant model of sexuality.⁶ However, it is interesting how often the majority of the population most often does not even notice in which measure (hetero)sexuality is actually present and represented in public spaces because “[n]aturalized heterosexuality makes sexuality in public spaces nearly invisible to the straight population.”⁷

Who Owns the Public Space?

The primary meaning of public is what is open and accessible. The public is in principle not exclusionary. While general in that sense, this conception of a public does not imply homogeneity or the adoption of some general or universal standpoint. Indeed, in open and accessible public spaces and forums, one should expect to encounter and hear from those who are different, whose social perspectives, experience, and affiliations are different.⁸

Sexual minorities suffer discrimination due to institutional as well as general social homophobia which, among other things, is reflected in practices of exclusion of subjects of homosexual orientation from the domains of public life and public space. As mentioned above, homosexuality is a phenomenon that the majority of the population rarely encounters in the public space. The reason for this is certainly the existence of constant danger from physical and verbal violence as well as other types of risks which the individual who is not trying to hide their sexual orientation takes upon themselves. Above all, that could be – loss of job and/or rejection by their family and friends as well as other negative consequences which can impact life quality. Consequently, a large number of people are not prepared to take these risks and under the pressure of homophobic discourse decide to hide their sexual orientation and perform cancelation/masking of homosexual identity within the public space. These individuals are trying to fit into the population and hence support the thesis by Adrienne Rich on heterosexuality as a political institution and *compulsory heterosexuality*⁹ which is produced by the dominant heteropatriarchal discourse with the purpose of imposing the heterosexual model of behaviour, thinking and action. However, what happens when sexual minorities reject abiding by the rules and demands made by the social majority which does not approve and encourage their sexual identity and its public expression?

⁶ Gill Valentine, “(Re)negotiating the ‘heterosexual street’: lesbian productions of space,” in *BodySpace: destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (New York, London: Routledge 1996), 145–155.

⁷ Nancy Duncan, “Renegotiating gender and sexuality in public and private spaces,” in *BodySpace: destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (New York, London: Routledge 1996), 137.

⁸ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990): 119.

⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton Paperback, 1994).

In such cases, the repression and prohibition mechanism which, even though is present at all times, now actively works through institutionally and socially-organized activities which as a purpose seek to prevent the display of different non-normative ways of sexuality in public space. For example, the legal system of most countries, through the legal framework, either directly prohibits or does not acknowledge other forms of sexuality apart from heterosexual, hence making them invisible. Medical discourse pathologizes homosexuality declaring it unnatural, a disease and a condition that requires treatment, correction and eradication¹⁰ Besides that, the occurrence of AIDS in the eighties and the connections made between this illness and homosexual practices¹¹ caused a big wave of homophobia in United States and later in the rest of the world. AIDS became the excuse for homophobia, the construction of a myth about homosexuality as potential danger which threatens the survival of humankind and another reason for insisting that this sexual minority should be put under control.¹²

Hence, institutional homophobia is established with the purpose to prevent the phenomenon and visibility of homosexuality in public spaces, consequently creating that space as exclusively heterosexual. Gay men and lesbians are perceived as the Other, who are necessary to isolate from the rest of the world. The construct of otherness includes the creation of differences which become the key element in the process of construction of meanings and the constitution of subjectivities in relation to otherness, as well as the construction of the specific relation of a subject toward the Other. At the same time, within all the possible interpretations, the difference is analysed and defined from the position of one-same/subject in relation to Other, whose otherness comes down to that difference which is accented as a negative quality since the relationship between the subject and the Other is perceived as a dichotomy. Understanding the economy of subjectivity performance in relation to the phenomenon of the Other also enables the understanding of functioning of practices which exclude otherness from the domain of public space. David Sibley, in the book *Geographies of exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, stresses that “[a] study of exclusion, however, is necessarily concerned with inclusion, with the ‘normal’ as much as the ‘deviant’, the ‘same’ as well as the ‘other’, and with the credentials required to gain entry to the dominant groups in society.”¹³ He thinks that “[r]epulsion and desire, fear and attraction, attach both to people and to places in complex ways. Central to this

¹⁰ In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, which was done by the World Health Organization in 1990 as well, however this decision was not accepted and adopted by all countries and in some of them homosexuality is still considered a mental disorder.

¹¹ Some of the temporary names for AIDS were GRID – gay related immunodeficiency and even WOGS – wrath of God syndrome, which indicated the social understanding of an epidemic as God’s punishment for homosexuality. Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.” *October* 43 (1987): 31–70.

¹² “One panic response in western societies was to advocate quarantine, the physical isolation of homosexuals with AIDS.” David Sibley, *Geographies of exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 42.

¹³ *Ibid*, xv.

question is the construction of the self, the way in which individual identity relates to social, cultural and spatial contexts”¹⁴, and in accordance with that he analyses the issue of social and space exclusion using knowledge acquired by psychoanalyses and psychoanalytical theories.

Construction of Otherness and Homosexuality in the Field of Abjection

Establishing a relation towards the Other is a part of the process through which the subject constitutes its identity. In order to differentiate itself from that which it is not, the subject needs to reject otherness as something foreign to it – it needs to find a difference between itself and the Other, fix that difference and declare it essential in the semantic sense. The hierarchical system of evaluation within identity categories, set by the dominant heteropatriarchal discourse through the creation of binary oppositions which are based on the relation of good and bad, positive and negative, healthy and sick, is especially emphasised in the case of sexual identity. During the process of self-identification within the category of sexual identity, the subject is faced with the choice through which it will position itself as right or wrong, healthy or sick. Self-identification is conditioned by established societal apprehensions that privilege one form of sexuality while stigmatizing and ascribing negative meaning to the Other. In order to establish itself as a privileged, proper and healthy subject, it needs to dissociate from the identity which would make that establishment impossible and by which it would be classified as deviant and sick. Thus, the subject needs to demarcate between desirable and unacceptable in order to remain a valid subject. In this respect, rejection of homosexual identity implies a relation to it as to *otherness* which can potentially endanger the subject's endeavour to be accepted within the society which cherishes heteropatriarchal values.¹⁵ According to Iris Marion Young, dominant and privileged “groups project their own values, experience, and perspective as normative and universal. Victims of cultural imperialism are thereby rendered invisible as subjects, as persons with their own perspective and group-specific experience and interests. At the same time, they are marked out, frozen into a being marked as Other, deviant in relation to the dominant norm.”¹⁶ The Other, which the subject rejects during the creation of its identity, is actually constitutive to the subject; the subject needs otherness in order to distance itself and affirm its difference.

In order to explain the process of construction of subjectivity, Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of *abject* and defines it from the point of theoretical psychoanalysis. According to Kristeva, in order to become aware of itself as a separate entity, in order to recognize its own *I* which is separated/isolated from others, the individual needs to develop a specific relation to the body of a mother with whom it was

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁶ Young, *Justice and the politics of difference*, 123.

connected before and after its birth and with whom it identified as a whole. The body of the mother thus becomes the first object of abjection. “The ‘subject’ discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can’t be free of it. That body, the body without borders, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible.”¹⁷ However, the subject does not achieve stability by rejecting the mother’s body because its boundaries are constructed and thus unstable. According to Kristeva, the subject is always the *subject in process*, and repeatedly needs to affirm its boundaries. That which threatens to collapse the boundaries the subject perceives as *abject* – that which is at the same time appealing and repulsive – but always rejected due to its potentially subversive effect on stability of the subject. “It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”¹⁸ Bodily fluids, nail pairings, hair clippings and everything that once belonged to the subject but now no longer does is considered abject – it indicates the materiality of the subject’s body which is decayable, abjective and affirms the unstable character of the subject’s boundaries. In order to confirm itself as *clean and proper*, the subject needs to reject the abject, it needs to get sickened over it and repudiate it as something disgusting, filthy and unclean.

Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young have used Kristeva’s concept of abjection in order to explain the mechanisms of oppression directed toward minorities – homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, ageism and other forms of irrational fear and repulsion towards those who society marks as *Other*. Using the concept of abject, Judith Butler presents a thesis by which heterosexuality positions homosexuality as abject in order to constitute itself, and in order to establish itself as its opposite.¹⁹ Iris Marion Young considers abject to be the cause of a majority of social phobias directed toward minorities and therefore also the cause of homophobia. “The abject provokes fear and loathing because it exposes the border between self and Other as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border. Phobia is the name of this fear.”²⁰ In other words, the need to maintain stability of the privileged identity category is followed by the fear of its collapse due to which marginalised groups are marked as dangerous, which further provokes various types of phobias to arise. Accordingly, abject is the key to understanding the process of social and spatial exclusion of all those who provoke fear and discomfort to the dominant social majority embedded in norms.²¹

¹⁷ Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 60.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993).

²⁰ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 144.

²¹ Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*.

Case Study: *It's Time for Equality* – Pride Parade in Belgrade, 2009

Public and private spaces are the products of dominant discourse which places subjects using force and coercion into previously defined categories according to sex/gender and sexuality, and at the same time defines which type of space the given subjects (do not) belong to. A heteronormative society also tries to create and keep public space as a site free from all those subjects who do not fit into the prescribed normative so as not to disturb and/or question the stability of the set limitations by their presence. That is how the subjects participate in (re)creating a certain type of space, while simultaneously the space itself influences the (re)creation of the subject who within that space performs their identity.²² That is especially visible in the example of segregation of public toilets based on sex/gender which consequently results in discrimination against trans and gender-variant persons. The separation of public toilets into categories 'male' and 'female' actually represents the pressure put on the subjects to establish themselves through sex/gender, thus insisting on accepting the gender binary as the only valid model of reading sex/gender.²³ People who do not wish their gender to be defined in such a manner are left with a choice of either abstaining from using public toilets or supporting the binary sex/gender division by using the facilities. Furthermore, persons who visually do not fit into societally-imposed and accepted sex/gender standards can face violence while using public toilets in cases when their identity and gender presentation is read as inappropriate for the space they are occupying at that moment. In other words, visibility of one's affiliation to the LGBT domain is followed by prohibitions and violence whose purpose is the policing of space from everything that is not socially acceptable.

A need for visibility as well as the rejection to hide one's identity in a public space represents direct opposition to mechanisms of disciplinary power and an attempt of remaking the space in order for it to be open and available for everybody. One of the goals of the Pride parade is to remind that the public space is not available in the same manner to everybody; hence at gatherings of such type the significance of the visibility of the LGBT community is especially stressed. Since I am trying to point out the issues faced by gender and sexual minorities as well as mechanisms of their exclusion from the domain of public space I shall refer to the organization and subsequent cancellation of the Pride parade in Belgrade in 2009 and present it as a short case study which in a colorful way speaks about the attitude the majority of the population has toward the issue of the LGBT population using public space in Serbia.

²² "It is contended that sites, locales, regions and nations come into being through sociospatial relations and enactments. Thus, socio-spatial relations do not simply differ between places (sites, locales and locations); performances, spatial relations and interactions (re)produce places. Moreover, socio-spatial power relations (re)form sexed sites and, in turn, the (re)constitution of places sexes bodies. Therefore, it can be argued that just as place is (re)making (and sexing) us, it is being (re)made (and sexed)." Kath Browne, "Genderism and the Bathroom Problem: (re)materialising sexed sites, (re)creating sexed bodies," *Gender, Place and Culture* 11, 3 (2004): 335.

²³ "The physical sexed segregation of bathrooms reproduces the illusion of a natural, biological binary separation of sex and physically (re)places bodies within dichotomous sexes ordering these sites." *Ibid*, 338.

In Serbia, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1994, and the same year Arkadija – the first organization that dealt with the issues faced by the sexual minorities in Serbia – was registered. Seven years later, and shortly after political changes in the state, the first Pride parade was scheduled to take place in Belgrade. Efforts to hold the Pride parade were disrupted by members of right-wing organizations and hooligans who induced a riot and beat up the majority of the people who came to support the scheduled gathering.²⁴ In the following few years the intention to schedule a new Pride parade existed but was abandoned due to safety issues and political instability in the State.

The adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Law in 2009, which banned discrimination against LGBT people, encouraged non-governmental organizations which dealt with rights of sexual minorities to schedule another Pride parade in Belgrade, this time under the slogan *It's Time for Equality*. However, this gathering also did not take place, because the organizers received the decision from the Ministry of Internal Affairs one day before the scheduled gathering to relocate from the city centre to the plateau in front of the Palace of Serbia.²⁵ The announcement of the Government of Serbia contained the following: “The Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated that gathering on that location would secure the full safety of participants and other citizens, ensure public peace and order and protect the properties of citizens, properties of the City of Belgrade and diplomatic missions and consular posts.”²⁶ Hence, the state did not directly ban the gathering but it did cancel the original permit to hold Pride at a specific location by replacing it with another location and justifying that decision using the safety risk assessment. Pride organizers considered the decision to relocate the gathering unacceptable and that it was in practice a ban of the gathering since it excluded the possibility for the meeting to take place at the originally-scheduled location in the city centre. Consequently, organizers refused to change the location of the gathering and the Pride was not held.²⁷

In the weeks preceding the scheduled gathering, the media reported threats made by right-wing organizations, calls for lynching and violence while Belgrade was plastered with posters with homophobic contents.²⁸ Messages which can be qualified as hate speech could be heard from public figures, politicians and representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The judgment of the idea for the Parade to take place was justified by the theory of violation of family values and attack against the family as an institution which is threatened by the mere existence of homosexuality. Graffiti

²⁴ Veran Matic, “Saopštenje ANEM-a: silom prekinuta gej parada u Beogradu,” *B92 specijal*, June 30, 2001, <http://www.b92.net/specijal/gay-parada/gay-saop.phtml>, accessed June 20, 2015.

²⁵ “Povorka ponosa se neće održati,” *B92*, September 19, 2009, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?nav_id=382249&dd=19&mm=09&yyyy=2009, accessed June 22, 2015.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Some of the strongest messages where: “There will be no Parade, blood will flow through Belgrade”, “Faggots will not walk”, “We are waiting for you”.

containing lynching and threats multiplied as the day of the gathering drew near. All these messages had the purpose to prevent and discourage gay men and lesbians to go out on the streets and participate in the announced gathering. Support from the state authorities for the Parade was also missing. Former mayor of Belgrade Dragan Đilas declared that “sexual orientation needs to stay within the four walls”²⁹, and on a later date, addressing his previous declaration, explained his stance: “I only said that in my opinion, maybe I was raised in the patriarchal spirit, sexual orientation is a private matter and I don’t know why should one go public with it, whether he is homosexual or heterosexual.”³⁰

All the mentioned events and announcements support the claim that public space in Serbia does not represent a safe place for all nor is its use guaranteed to everyone equally. Gathering of sexual minorities in the public space, even once a year, presents a challenge and risk for the organizers as well as for those who want to support it with their presence, since there is a legitimate fear of physical violence and discrimination. The reaction of the majority of the population could be described as *moral panic* which occurs as a response to an event which is considered threatening to the established social order. As in this case, that kind of reaction is usually followed by requests to prevent/ban everything that is identified as a threat to social order and moral values which the given society has adopted.³¹

The first successful Pride Parade in Belgrade was held on the 10th of October 2010 under the slogan *Let’s Walk Together*. About one thousand people supported the Parade with their presence, and were shielded by a great number of police officers. Although the gathering itself was held without any incidents, outside the safe space, which was protected by the police, six thousand hooligans participated in riots and tried to prevent the gathering from taking place.³²

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²⁹ “Đilas o Povorci ponosa, iskreno,” *B92*, August 8, 2009, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=08&nav_id=375372, accessed June 22, 2015.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*.

³² “Demoliranje Beograda, još jednom,” *B92*, October 10, 2010, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?d=10&mm=10&nav_category=16&nav_id=464314&yyyy=2010, accessed June 20, 2015.

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Article received: June 3, 2017
Article accepted: June 12, 2017
Original scholarly paper