

How the pandemic has affected religious queer people's sense of place.

A disease is something simple. It infects, it mutates, it rages on but that's its only purpose. Faith and identity however are always changing, never fixed in time. What this pandemic really shifted in the religious realm was how one saw themselves in relation to place. This place could be a number of things from the mosque to even the living room in their own home. But, the pandemic did change more how queer people saw their sense of place. Firstly, it is important to define what is meant by a sense of place. In a geographical context, it is defined mostly using "sense of place is the feelings evoked among people as a result of the experiences and memories they associate with a place and the symbolism they attach to that place. It can also refer to the character of a place as seen by outsiders: its distinctive physical characteristics and/or its inhabitants".¹ Now the pandemic would have shifted anyone's sense of place in a number of ways, exogenous factors often cause a bigger shift to the perception of a place. If one felt safe going to the local shops or getting on the train to work. These simple daily activities would be transformed into acts of worry and anxiety thus leading to a shift in a sense of place into a negative perception. This would be especially true for faith. Many communal religious temples such as churches or mosques were shut down and the God that is only found in the cathedral was dissipated. However, when looking further at how queer religious people were affected by the covid pandemic and how this shifted their sense of place in both positive and negative ways.

Firstly, the removal of space as a physical barrier has been positive for some religious queer people. A positive example is Naomi, a gay Christian who had to self isolate due to being high risk found comfort in online church activities,² and what really shows a shift in her sense

¹ (p.144-145) Boulter, C., and Gannon, ., (2015) *A-Level Geography Exam Board: AQA*.

² HAGGER-HOLT, S., 2020. *LGBT people of faith share their experience of lockdown*. [online]

Stonewall. <<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/lgbt-people-faith-share-their-experience-lockdown>>

of place was that when she grew up as a queer disabled Christian and she often felt excluded but the lockdown shifted her sense of place into a positive one leading her to reevaluate the church and felt better about being a queer Christian, because the homophobic and ableist barriers were removed for her. Secondly, the use of social media during the pandemic led to a change in the sense of place for queer people in a positive way. This is as many queer people find communities online and are able to establish a queer identity based on interacting with other queer people. Gauntlett argues that people are able to construct an identity based on parts of the media they interact with.³ His theory is very valid when looking at how queer people are able to establish a whole new identity on social media that can be totally separate from real life. Queer people can also find what Jenkins calls “Fandoms”⁴ an online community where often there are discussions of queer interpretations of media texts such as a character being gay. This, therefore, was more important during the pandemic as more people went on social media but also affected queer people’s sense of place, if the physical space you are in is homophobic but in a digital space, one is able to create a positive sense of self. This could lead to a digital sense of place where negative emotions of a place exist as you are physically in a negative space but also a positive digital space underpinned by the pandemic and faith. In a way having a dual relationship to place is the same as having faith in Heaven and Hell.

However, the pandemic did not only lead to a positive sense of place. This, is can be seen with queer Muslims. The pandemic allowed people to think for the first time this is seen with one quote from a gay man who came out during the pandemic said "When you're alone, especially as alone as we were in lockdown, I think you start to slip into who you really are"⁵

³ Gauntlett, D., 2010. *Media, gender, and identity*. London: Routledge.

⁴ Jenkins, H., 1992. *Textual poachers*.

⁵ Baggs, M., 2021. 'Lockdown isolation helped me come out as LGBT'. [online] BBC News. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-56378617>>

So, then when looking at how this affected queer Muslims one can see how a negative impact could occur. As, predominately Muslims follow a conservative interpretation of the Quran that is queerphobic, over 50% of Muslims think that being gay should be illegal.⁶ Then, for many queer Muslims, the mosque is not a safe place or a place of devotion but a place of terror where islamophobia may stop but the homo/transphobia runs in the hearts of Muslims waiting to erupt out of their mouths. Therefore, the sense of place due to the isolation brought from the pandemic led to a negative shift in how one views their sense of place. The mosque is not just a place of faith. It is the hub of the community from where the mosque is located, is where prayer is, where Ramadan begins and where the Janazah is. Therefore, any type of exclusion or feelings of exclusion leads to a negative shift in the sense of place as the main hub of community spirit for Muslims is degraded for queer Muslims; And for many new queer Muslims, the beginning of their queer identity came from the pandemic.

in addition, it is also important to look at the shift between how queer BAME people's relationships to their homelands changed to the pandemic. Many BAME people according to Gilroy hold a dual consciousness to the land they came from and the land they live in.⁷ Therefore, BAME people have a connection to both places and the homeland seems to be more positive as factors like Racism make the land they live in negative. But when you are a queer BAME person the dual consciousness begins to crack in many places. If you had figured out you were queer during the pandemic like many religious people did, the relationship to place changes quickly. For queer BAME people who may have had a deep connection to their homeland could in a way lose that if that country is homophobic. The evoked memories of that place suddenly become tainted by the issues there. But in a sense

⁶ Perraudin, F., 2016. *Half of all British Muslims think homosexuality should be illegal, poll finds*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/apr/11/british-muslims-strong-sense-of-belonging-poll-homosexuality-sharia-law>>

⁷ Gilroy, P., 2010. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

what makes it more difficult is the stereotypes of things like Orientalism and imagined geography⁸ on those places by colonialist thinking that makes the sense of place as a queer BAME person worse as one has to navigate a minefield of fiction and reality in order to come what home means to you but, "Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition"-⁹ James Baldwin

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⁸ Said, E., 2019. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

⁹ Baldwin, J., 2001. *Giovanni's room*. London: Penguin Books.