Village Life: Alienation, Ambivalence and Agency

So far I have covered midlife gay men’s practices with regard to the production of appearance. Appearance is inevitably contextual, such as in the home, when out shopping, in the workplace and in spaces of leisure. As a space of leisure, the village bar scene is central to Manchester’s gay culture and men’s stories of ageing, and, in Chapter 2, interviewees spoke of how they dressed for (or against) the sartorial norms of the village. I therefore now seek to locate men’s dressed and groomed body-selves in this particular cultural space.

As indicated in the previous chapter, and further evidenced in this one, gay (or queer) spaces are not homogeneous. Different individuals have different relationships with them given their diverse social positionings; notably, older, poorer, disabled, non-white and gender ambiguous/non-conforming individuals (see also Browne and Bakshi 2011). Also, most interviewees were clear that their subjectivities were not reducible to the bar scene or their sexualities (Matejskova 2007). As we have also seen in Chapter 2, and despite reports to the contrary of ‘dressing for comfort’, the socio-sexual norms of the village can exact from middle-aged gay men more effortful kinds of self-presentation. Whether interviewees loved, loathed or professed indifference towards it, and no matter how often men used this space, the village bar scene was a structuring presence in interview narratives. All interviewees described the village and gay life as part of their wider cultural experience, and visits there were often fitted around another cultural occasion – before or following a concert, film, theatre outing or a gay social/support group meeting. Interviewees defined themselves in relation to or, most commonly, differentiated themselves from the ‘superficial’ forms of self-presentation and relating thought typical of the youth-coded village, where middle-aged gay men could
experience a partial sense of belonging contingent on acceptance or otherwise by younger men. Despite its reported problems (for example, so-called degraded forms of relating, sexualization and exploitation of the ‘pink pound’), several informants took the pragmatic view that going to the village was preferable to total isolation from one’s kind, and that it offered opportunities to look at men and for ‘people-watching’. Some gay bars and venues, depending on time and context, can enable socializing away from heteronormative, hostile eyes (Matejskova 2007). For ‘mixed race’ informant, Alec (46), however, who was also obliged, through long-term illness, to rely on social security, the village registered as a site of risk and/or exclusion on both racial and economic grounds.

Substantively, this chapter explores middle-aged gay men’s ways of differentiating themselves through bodily expression, and what their situated, relational practices say about their responses to ageing and ageism. Specifically, I show how the forms of interaction within the village indicate the operation of various socio-sexual norms which result in spatialization of the bar scene largely along the lines of age and, to an extent, social class (Simpson 2013b). Men thought to represent the differences of race and disability also figured here, though as problematic presences or, more often, absences. The norms prevalent within these spaces sanction different choreographies of display, approach and touch at different times in different places. They are suggestive of Matejskova’s (2007) thinking in a gay Slovakian context about time-conditioned spaces subject to changes in clientele and what is permissible or expected at different times.

Substantively, and as a corollary, I contend that participant narratives and practices relating to the experience of being a middle-aged gay man on the bar scene are divisible into three kinds. These refer to: alienation, involving capitulation to gay ageism; ambivalence, involving negotiation with this process – a form of analysis characteristically absent from extant literature on gay male ageing; and agency or resistance to gay ageism through use of the resources of ageing (Simpson 2013b). All three accounts involve use of ‘ageing capital’ and/or age-related ‘technologies of the self’ to ageing and ageism. These concepts are not always mutually exclusive, nor do they correspond neatly with forms of social experience or difference such as class or race. The first kind of story, and the dominant one generated in interviews, offers a version of the village as divided and disenchanted, where men experience restrictions on their expression of identity and relations. The rules of the game here mean that midlife gay men experience the bar scene