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Affective regimes on Wilton Drive: a multimodal analysis

Heiko Motschenbacher 

Department of Language, Literature, Mathematics and Interpreting, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on public signage on Wilton Drive in Wilton Manors, Florida – a homonormative space that privileges the representation of the experiences and needs of particular groups of gay men to the exclusion of other sexualities. I use a linguistic landscape methodology to conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis in which I identify prevalent affective regimes discursively surfacing in public signage on Wilton Drive. My research interest lies in the question of how affective regimes are produced through signage practices, and how they shape social representation in this homonormative space. After a theoretical outline of the concepts of linguistic landscape, affect and affective regimes, I illustrate and analyze the discursive construction of three types of affective regimes that are particularly common in this context: love, tolerance and homonationalism. The analysis shows how the three affective regimes contribute to making Wilton Drive a space in which specific social normativities prevail, but also takes a critical look at the downsides of such discursive constructions.



KEYWORDS

Linguistic landscape;
language and sexuality;
affective regime;
multimodality; critical
discourse studies

1. Introduction

Wilton Manors, Florida, is a suburban community on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale with one of the highest LGBT populations in the US. It has become a mecca for LGBT tourists and a safe space for LGBT people more generally (Little 2011; Rothaus 2011). Previous research (Motschenbacher 2020) has shown that public signage on its main street, Wilton Drive (2019), contributes to the effect of creating a homonormative space, where the identities, needs and desires of (particular groups of) gay men are constructed as the local norm, while other sexualities are marginalized or even silenced. The visibility and explicitness in the discursive construction of the experiences of gay men is remarkable, on one hand, because it clashes with the ubiquity of heteronormativity in public space (Valentine 1996), and, on another, because these signification practices occur in a suburban area as opposed to a metropolitan area, where an admixture of LGBT-related public signage would be expected.

This study aims to deepen the analysis of this homonormative space by focusing more specifically on affective regimes on Wilton Drive (commonly just called *the Drive* in the

CONTACT Heiko Motschenbacher  iuventiuss@yahoo.com / heim@hvl.no  Department of Language, Literature, Mathematics and Interpreting, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Postboks 7030, 5020 Bergen, Norway

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local community). A focus on affective regimes is essential, as the representational practices in this space are far from emotionally neutral. We rather find that they are embedded within specific affective regimes that inflect representation in certain ways. The overarching research questions of this study are, therefore: Which affective regimes are primarily produced through signage on Wilton Drive, and how do they shape social representation in this homonormative space? In the following theoretical section, I outline basic underpinnings of the concepts of “linguistic landscape,” “affect” and “affective regime” (Section 2). Section 3 presents the methodological considerations guiding my study. The actual multimodal analysis of the affective regimes of love, tolerance and homonationalism in public signage is carried out in Section 4. The concluding section (Section 5) recapitulates major findings and discusses the positive and negative representational effects of the discursive construction of affect in this homonormative space.

2. Linguistic landscape, affect and affective regime

A linguistic landscape analysis studies signage displayed in public spaces, such as on storefronts, road signs and billboards (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, and Barni 2010, xiv). It has traditionally been used to study the ethnolinguistic vitality of certain languages, varieties and, by extension, speech communities, thus documenting the multi- and translanguing practices that shape (often urban) public spaces (see Shohamy 2019 for an overview). In addition to that, syntactic and semantic aspects of linguistic features, their relative saliency, and their multimodal embeddedness can be studied. All these aspects contribute to the effect of making a public space socially, culturally, politically or economically meaningful, and thus lend themselves to critical discourse analysis. More recently, linguistic landscape research has paid greater attention to the meanings conveyed by non-linguistic signs in tandem with linguistic signs in public spaces (see Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Milani 2013, 2014; Lazar 2018), thus shedding light on how signage contributes to “spatialization” effects (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010, 7).

The make-up of a linguistic landscape is indicative of who occupies a position of power and of which ideologies prevail in a given context, and potentially constitutes evidence for social “conflict, exclusion and dissent” (Rubdy 2015, 1). Evidence for this includes the frequency with which features associated with a particular social group occur, and the occurrence and quality of top-down signage, that is, signs that are connected to official authorities (see Ben-Rafael 2008; Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, and Barni 2010, xvii). Representation of marginalized social groups, by contrast, is more likely to surface in bottom-up signage practices that are not backed by the state or an official policy.

Recent linguistic landscape research has discovered that sexuality can provide a useful entry point for the analysis of social spatialization (e.g. Piller 2010; Milani 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić 2016; Milani and Levon 2016; Baudinette 2017, 2018; de Vasconcelos Barboza and Borba 2018; Lazar 2018; Milani et al. 2018; Trinch and Snajdr 2018). This research has invariably focused on metropolitan areas, documenting heteronormativity or the co-presence of heterosexual and gay signage in urban public space. The present study complements earlier work on sexuality and linguistic landscapes by (a) analyzing the discursive construction of affective regimes, (b) investigating a suburban community, and (c) studying a context that is homonormative because gay male signage prevails.

The recently theorized concept of an “affective regime” (Wee 2016; Wee and Goh 2019) stands in the tradition of the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Besnier 1990; Wilce 2009; Ahmed 2014a). In the field of language and sexuality, more specifically, affect has previously been used as an entry point for ethnographic and discourse analytic studies (e.g. Milani and Wolff 2015; Milani 2017; Leap 2018; Rowlett 2018; Schoux Casey 2018). The term “affect” has been used in a myriad of ways in previous academic work across the disciplines (see Thrift 2004; McElhinny 2010 for detailed discussions). This necessitates that a working definition of affect be adduced for the purposes of this study.

The notion of “affect” relevant here is one that is fairly broad, namely “emotion, feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations” (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004, 352). Affect is a discursive formation and therefore can be traced in linguistic and non-linguistic signage. What distinguishes “affect” from other terms such as “emotion” or “feeling” is not just its broader coverage. The latter terms are generally used to describe the emotional experiences of an individual (feeling) subject, while “affect” is more strongly tied to collective experiences. As pointed out by Kulick and Schieffelin (2004), affect need not necessarily correspond to the actual feelings that the producers of signs have:

Many social groups do not [...] recognize, or they have different ideas about, the relationship between the display of an affective stance and the inner sensation that the stance conventionally indexes. In other words: many groups do not expect or demand sincerity. Whether or not a person “really means” what she or he says or does is not a topic for speculation. In true performative manner, the invocation of a conventionalized affective sign (laughing, or crying, or saying “I’m sorry”) is the doing of that emotion, and nobody cares much, or even considers, whether or not that doing corresponds with some privately felt sensation. (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004, 352)

Affect is thus not about the private, internal feelings of individuals, but a mechanism that publicly unites individuals through shared experience. It is “not [about] cognitive states lodged somewhere in people’s minds or body, but [about] social forces that are produced, circulate and ignite social action” (Milani 2017, 249). Affect is, therefore, a relational concept – a phenomenon that plays a role in the formation of group identities and belonging (Ahmed 2004, 2014a; Wetherell 2013; Kahl 2019). Affect-conveying features have been found to be commonly associated with social indexicalities (Besnier 1990, 438), making affect an ideal target for studying the discursive negotiation of public social representation.

Affective regimes have been shown to play a significant role in many types of linguistic landscape (see Wee 2016; Wee and Goh 2019). They become visible where public signage stipulates which kinds of affect are viewed as appropriate in a certain space. There is a strong normative element in such regimes, as recipients are discursively urged to display certain types of affect.

In my study, I will concentrate on three affective regimes prevalent on Wilton Drive: love, tolerance, and homonationalism. On the surface, these three affective regimes resemble discourses of empowerment and may therefore be viewed as positive. However, as the analysis will show, their discursive construction involves aspects that can be viewed more critically.

3. Methodological considerations

This study is a continuation of previous work (Motschenbacher 2020) that has also used a linguistic landscape methodology (see Barni and Bagna 2015; Lou 2017; Gorter 2019) to analyze public signage on Wilton Drive. I draw on multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin 2013) to unpack how linguistic and non-linguistic signage on Wilton Drive contribute to the local discursive construction of affective regimes in this homonormative space. The study thus stands in the tradition of discourse analytic work on affect (Berg et al. 2019).

The photo data for the present study were collected during a daytime walk on Wilton Drive on 27 August 2019 (for a more detailed outline of the methodology, see Motschenbacher 2020). During the day, the Drive is less populated, so it was easier to take photos of all public signs in this location. As part of my walk, I also entered two buildings on the Drive: the Stonewall Gallery (a branch of the National Stonewall Museum), and the thrift store Out of the Closet. These two places were selected because they form adequate entry points for a more detailed look at the culturally (museum) and commercially (store) shaped discourses that are prevalent on the Drive.

The 300 photos of the semioscape were screened for features that contribute to the discursive construction of affect. The three most prevalent affective regimes found in the data – love, tolerance and homonationalism – were then subjected to closer analysis. The analytic focus is on affect-related lexical choices (forms that denote or connote affect) and on how they are visually embedded within signs and next to other public signs.

4. Analysis: affective regimes on Wilton Drive

4.1. Affective regime of love

Love has a long history as “a sticky emotion that sticks people together, for example, in discourses of fraternity and patriotism” (Ahmed 2014a, 125). A basic distinction is often made between self-love, a matter of identification, and object love, a matter of desire. While the former is generally related to discourses of love as a matter of non-romantic bonding and kindness, the latter is more amenable to discursive constructions of romantic and/or sexual interpretations of love. It may be expected that, in a space where sexuality plays an important role, it is romantic love that is foregrounded. But this is not the case. The kind of love highlighted in this context can rather be described as social considerateness and care for others (“love and care”).

Discursive traces of this affective regime can be found in multiple locations on the Drive. For example, various shops display a sign commemorating the shooting of 49 victims by a terrorist in a gay nightclub in Orlando in 2016. The sign contains the slogan *LOVE ALWAYS WINS* as well as the hashtag *#WESTANDWITHORLANDO* and is framed by rainbow colors at top and bottom (Figure 1). The rainbow flag represents a classic symbol of LGBT empowerment, which makes LGBT people the targets of the love demanded by the sign. A similar representational strategy is illustrated by a painting displayed in the Stonewall Gallery. It depicts the simple sentence *LOVE WINS* across two lines, with a rainbow flag drawn in between the two words (Figure 1).

A more humorous evocation of love surfaces in the advertisement of a realtor of the name *Ryan Love*, who promotes his services by reactivating the literal meaning of his



Figure 1. Signs illustrating the affective regime of love and care on Wilton Drive (part 1).

surname in the slogan *For all your real estate needs, all you need is Love!*, which intertextually echoes the famous Beatles song *All you need is love* (Figure 2). The forms *needs* and *need* in the slogan suggest an atmosphere of caring, which can be assumed to be constructed here as a unique selling point in comparison to other professionals offering such real estate services. Note that, in this example, slippage from social care to romantic love is part of the meaning potential of the sign. In accordance with dominant representational practices at the visual level on the Drive (see Motschenbacher 2020), the ad features a photo of an attractive young man, who is suggested to be the agent of love (a “lover” so to speak). By means of this discursive strategy, the ad targets onlookers who would like to see themselves as the objects of (t)his love (addressed in the second person with the pronouns *your* and *you*). If a non-romantic reading of love is applied, the target group is maximally inclusive. However, if a romantic type of love is co-activated here, gay men are referentially privileged customers.



Figure 2. Signs illustrating the affective regime of love and care on Wilton Drive (part 2).

Some other examples of linguistic signage drawing on the love and care discourse are quoted in (1).

(1)

- (a). *Love ♥ OUR CUSTOMERS* (American Express sign)
- (b). *Kenny Silverman will guide you Home!* (headline of realtor advertisement; [Figure 2](#))
- (c). *LET US FEED YOU* (displayed on Bubbles & Pearls restaurant)
- (d). *INJURED? I Can Help You!* (advertisement for law offices)
- (e). *Be nice* (sticker at grocery store door)

In all these examples, the affective regime is constructed by key forms with positive emotional connotations (*love, stand with, guide, home, feed, help, nice*; the heart symbol). Note that most of these examples (1a–1e) address onlookers directly through second person pronouns and/or imperative verb forms, which creates a certain degree of immediacy and interpersonal closeness. Agents are constructed in various ways, with love described as an agentless universal phenomenon (examples in [Figure 1](#)), as emanating from service providers as agents (1a to 1d), or as being requested of customers (1e).

The love-and-care atmosphere on the Drive is further supported by the presence of advertising for charitable services, such as *FREE HIV TESTING* (see [Figure 4](#)), the *AIDS HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION*, the *Smart Ride Fundraiser Event*, or a help organization for Latinx LGBT people called *Latinos Salud* (slogan: *PRIDE, COMMUNITY, SUPPORT*).

The examples discussed in this section suggest that love, in the predominant sense of care for others, functions as a positive, community-building device on Wilton Drive. A more nuanced view on the subject, however, has to acknowledge that an exhortation to “act in the name of love can work to enforce a particular ideal onto others by requiring that they live up to an ideal to enter the community” (Ahmed 2014a, 139), while others who fail to meet this ideal are excluded or subjected to hate. In a similar vein, the all-inclusiveness of this love is compromised by the exclusion of lesbian, trans and heterosexual subjects at the representational level on the Drive, and therefore raises the question whether the application of love and care is a partial business in this context.

4.2. Affective regime of tolerance

Compared to love, which is characterized by a high degree of positive emotionality, tolerance is more neutral with respect to its emotional connotations. It is not about wholeheartedly embracing a certain social group, but rather about showing indifference and a lack of hostility towards that group. As an empowerment goal, tolerance is therefore clearly more modest, and many people would argue that, as an attitude towards LGBT people, it is nowadays an insufficient goal in Western societies (Walters 2014):

Tolerance is supposed to be a sign of openness and a wedge against hate; but in practice it is exclusionary, hierarchical, and ultimately nondemocratic. (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003, 45)

Today, tolerance is a self-ascribed attribute of Western cultures in general. It stipulates an acceptance of social diversity in its various shapes (ethnic, racial, sexual, and other minority-related types of diversity; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). The problem with “toleration” is that it is firmly connected to aspects that are widely viewed as negative

or problematic by society at large (otherwise they would not have to be “tolerated”). It is connected to a hierarchical relationship between a privileged in-group (*us*) and a tolerated out-group (*them*) (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003, 50). Proposing or promoting sexual tolerance, therefore, has the (counterintuitive) negative side effect of discursively stigmatizing minority sexualities.

Throughout the Drive, we find signage suggesting that the acceptance and inclusion of gay people is an ethical concern that visitors are expected to adhere to in this space. Such ethical references can remain fairly general and unobtrusive, as in a Greek restaurant being named *Ethos*. But they can also take the shape of explicit directives, as in the name of the neighboring restaurant, *Mind Your Manors*. The latter name plays on the homophony of the noun *manors* within the place name *Wilton Manors* and the noun *manners*, which is actually a more common collocate of the verb *mind* than the noun *manors*. The ethical appeal is strongest in the reading *mind your manners*, which implies that people on the Drive may not always behave in an appropriate (LGBT tolerant) fashion. When the minding is connected to (*Wilton*) *Manors* instead, the restaurant’s name turns into an invitation to come and see people from the local community, with the possessive pronoun *your* in *your Manors* creating an affective relationship between the addressee and the community.

The gay bar *Matty’s* displays two stickers in its window: a red-circled no-smoking sign that shows a picture of a fuming cigarette crossed out by a red line and, right above it, a similar sign in which the word *DRAMA* is crossed out in the same way (Figure 3). Like the *mind your manners* request, the no-drama sign can be read as asking customers to show a tolerant attitude towards gay men.

However, both these examples can also be read in alternative ways that are not tolerance-related. If we interpret the signs as targeting the gay male in-group, an exhortation to mind one’s manners and to show no drama can be understood as a policing of certain behaviors stereotypically connected to gay men that are deemed to have low prestige within the community (for example, the Western trope of the “gay diva”). As humorous as these signification practices may appear, they amount to a homonormative privileging of gay men who do not show these behaviors.

Other signs on the Drive create an innuendo that indexes secrecy as a central, and perhaps outdated, experience of LGBT people. This nostalgic playing with the past serves as a group-establishing device when viewed from the LGBT in-group perspective, but in relation to the out-group audience, it rather functions as a way of fostering tolerance towards LGBT people. *Rosie’s Bar & Grill*, for example, uses the motto *See ... and be seen* on its street sign, thus constructing the reader as both subject and object of the public gaze on the Drive. The sign is designed in pink as the dominant color, which indicates a connection to gay masculinity (compare the Nazi symbol of the pink triangle). Another bar is called *Rumors*, suggesting that people get together there to gossip about other people. While an encouragement of LGBT people to be seen can be viewed as suggestive of a tolerant space, seeing and gossiping are processes that play a role in the normative policing of social behaviors.

It is interesting to note that the Drive also hosts signage that constitutes a counter-discourse to the one just outlined. In various locations, we find messages that rather ask recipients either to close their eyes to what is going on on the Drive, or to not talk



Figure 3. Signs illustrating the affective regime of tolerance on Wilton Drive (part 1).

about it. This in turn suggests that what happens in this space may be deemed wrong or questionable by certain people, conveying anything but an empowering message.

For example, one gay bar on the Drive is called *Georgie's Alibi*, which conjures up associations of meeting gay men as an activity that needs to be hidden and covered up. The same bar also hosts a section called the *Monkey Bar*, which uses the three wise monkeys as mascots on its entrance door and advertisements (Figure 3). In folklore, the monkeys' motto is "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Transferred to this context, the signage can be read as a request to turn a blind eye and stay silent on the supposedly evil things that are going on in this bar. This reading is further supported by the informal idiom *monkey business*, which stands for "mischievous behavior." Also note that the bar sign displays two features that are indicative of a sexualized gay male space: a banana, which can be read as a phallic symbol, and the noun *monkey*, which is also a slang term for "penis" (Urban Dictionary 2019).

The imperative to stay silent is echoed in various other locations on the Drive. A men's spa and barbershop carries the name *Hush*, an onomatopoeic form commonly used for demanding secrecy or discretion. The rainbow colors framing the shop logo in the window make it clear that what we are supposed to stay silent about relates to gay men. Similarly, Shawn & Nick's Courtyard Café advertises itself with the phrase *Best Kept Secret in Town*, leaving it open what exactly is secret about this place and why it is kept secret. One straightforward reading that comes to mind is that the restaurant is constructed as a venue whose exquisiteness is only recognized by a small group of initiated people. This selling strategy is paradoxical. Viewed from a commercial perspective, it

would certainly be more productive if the good quality of a restaurant was widely known rather than kept secret. At the same time, the context of Wilton Drive facilitates an all-male reading of the couple name (*Shawn & Nick*) that invites alternative interpretations along sexual lines, which are more plausibly linked to normative silencing.

The name of a thrift store on the Drive, *OUT OF THE CLOSET* (Figure 4), draws on the semantic ambiguity of the noun *closet*. Read literally, the name acts as an exhortation to recipients to take their used clothes out of their wardrobes and donate them to the shop – a meaning supported by the clothes hanger that is dangling from the letter *O* of the word *CLOSET*. Metaphorically interpreted, the name encourages gay people to come out and be open about their sexual identification. In support of the latter reading, the slogan *The world's most fabulous thrift store* makes use of a hyperbolic adjective of appraisal (*fabulous*) that is connected to gay male speech stereotypes (Harvey 2000). A public encouragement to come out, which is seen to be in the interest of LGBT subjects, presupposes the existence of a safe space, where such a revelation is met with tolerance at least.

From the examples illustrating the affective regime of tolerance that we have seen so far, it becomes obvious that many signs draw on themes like the closet, hiding, and gossip in a playful manner. This may be thought to stand in stark contrast to the lives of many LGBT people, where these aspects are often connected to negative or unpleasant experiences. At the same time, the humorous handling of experiences that many LGBT people share can also serve as an in-group bonding mechanism and as a form of discursive empowerment: what you can make fun of is under your control.

Finally, a more serious and defensive attitude towards the protection of Wilton Drive as a gay space is conveyed by some of the notice stickers displayed. The plea for tolerance here exhibits a strong admixture of constructing the Drive in terms of security and demanding solidarity in the face of threat. The window of the Stonewall Gallery, for example, shows a sticker with the words *WEAPONS OF ANY KIND PROHIBITED* and an English-Spanish bilingual sign saying *SAFE SPACE / Espacio segura*. Similar messages are displayed at several other storefronts. They remind onlookers that LGBT populations are frequently victims of hate crimes. The Aids Healthcare Foundation addresses this issue



Figure 4. Signs illustrating the affective regime of tolerance on Wilton Drive (part 2).

explicitly through advertising its hashtag #*STAND AGAINST HATE* on the Drive (Figure 4). Various stores display a poster issued by the local police that contains the following text:

(2)

WELCOME

FOR YOUR PROTECTION ALL WILTON MANORS POLICE OFFICERS ARE DIRECTED TO ADVISE ANY UNAUTHORIZED PERSON TO LEAVE THESE PREMISES. FAILURE TO LEAVE AFTER BEING INSTRUCTED MAY RESULT IN ARREST FOR TRESPASS.

Note that the text does not specify why a person could be asked to leave the place by the police. However, as the greeting *WELCOME* and the second person possessive pronoun in the phrase *FOR YOUR PROTECTION* overwhelmingly address gay male onlookers, a reading in terms of LGBT-related hate crimes seems most plausible. This poster is the only sign on the Drive in which tolerance is also officially supported (and enforced) in a top-down fashion.

4.3. Affective regime of homonationalism

Homonationalism represents a discursive formation that, on the surface, supports LGBT people. This support is, however, connected to the nation and thus is not a fully altruistic phenomenon: LGBT people are supported in the service of the nation, not for their own sake.

Research exploring the interface between sexuality and the nation traditionally finds that heteronormative discourses (discourses according to which heterosexuality in general or certain types of heterosexuality are deemed normal, natural or preferable) are strongly intertwined with the concept of the nation (e.g. Mosse 1985; Berlant and Warner 1998; Peterson 1999; Puri 2006; Downing and Gillett 2011). Such work demonstrates that the discursive construction of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) is traditionally shaped by homogeneity thinking, not exclusively in relation to ethnicity but also in relation to sexuality, with heterosexual married couples with children enjoying a privileged position. Non-heteronormative subjects are unlikely to be protected to the same extent as normative heterosexualities by the nation state. Often it takes transnational institutions or contexts to grant this protection (see Motschenbacher 2012, 2013, 2016; Gluhovic 2013 on the Eurovision Song Contest).

One well documented cultural context in which homonationalism plays a role is Israel (Milani and Levon 2016, 2019). In that context, sexual liberalism and the tolerance of LGBT people are showcased to present Israel as a socially progressive country with Western values. This strategy is sometimes called “pinkwashing,” as it is adopted to direct public attention away from the ethically questionable and discriminatory ways in which Israel treats its Palestinian population. An additional motivation of such strategic nation branding is more commercial, namely the attraction of LGBT tourists from around the world. There are numerous other cultures where the public presentation of a liberal attitude towards sexual minorities is motivated by a desire to appear as a socially progressive, Western society (see Colpani and Habed 2014; Moss 2014; Lazar 2017 for further examples). In all these cases, it could be argued that LGBT people are used to support nationalist agendas.

It is remarkable how often gay signage co-occurs with national signage on Wilton Drive. This indicates that the Drive is a space at the intersection of two imagined communities (Anderson 1991): the US nation and – by analogy – the “rainbow nation,” i.e. the LGBT community. As nationalist structures have been found to favor heteronormative policies and to marginalize, silence, degrade, pathologize or even penalize non-heterosexually identified people, a juxtaposition of gay and national signage must therefore raise questions about compatibility and representational motivations.

As LGBT matters are generally not promoted by national institutions on the Drive, it is clear that gay (and homonationalist) signage is a bottom-up phenomenon here. In addition, the construction of homonationalist messages is subject to a spatial segregation between the national institutions and LGBT-related signage on the Drive. The city hall complex, with the adjacent police department and veterans’ memorial, forms the center of the national institutional realm on Wilton Drive. The public signage in this area can be described as top-down, and it is noteworthy that one finds no LGBT-related signage – and in fact no sexuality-related signage whatsoever – in this place, which makes it stand out from the rest of the Drive. At the veterans memorial, we find a group of seven flags: besides the US national flag in the middle, the other flags represent the State of Florida, Missing Prisoners of War, and the US Army, Navy, Airforce and Marine Corps. Judging from the ubiquity of rainbow flags in other sections of the Drive, the absence of the rainbow flag in this ensemble stands out as a marked gap. However, the nationally charged flags on one side of the Drive are confronted with an individual rainbow flag on the opposite side of the street, about 10 meters further up the Drive (Figure 5).

The confrontational positioning of the rainbow flag comes across as a bottom-up response to the national top-down signage. We see a similar spatial positioning next to the City Hall, where three containers are located, as depicted in Figure 6. Closest to the City Hall (which is located on the left side, outside the photo), are the mailboxes of the *FedEx Express Service* and the *United States Postal Service*. The red newsstand distributing gay-themed magazine publications for free is in a marginalized position, furthest away from the City Hall, even though there would in principle be enough space for it on the left side of the two mailboxes. This is significant, because it shows how the national



Figure 5. Nationalist and rainbow flags on the right and left side of Wilton Drive.



Figure 6. Spatial positioning of national official and LGBT-related containers on Wilton Drive.

official and the LGBT realms meet in this area, but they are arranged in a certain order that does not allow for overlaps (the gay newsstand is neither placed between the two mailboxes, nor is it placed closest to the City Hall).

Instances of national and gay co-signage on the Drive constitute bottom-up practices and are positioned outside the national institutional realm. There are four locations where the rainbow flag is placed right next to a US national flag. In all these cases, the US national flag is placed above the rainbow flag (Figure 7), which suggests a higher importance of national than of LGBT matters. Flags in general index territorial conquest and patriotism. The co-occurrence of the US national and gay pride flags, therefore, may be read as a



Figure 7. Conjoined US national and rainbow flags, and US-rainbow fusion flag on Wilton Drive.

competition for space between rivaling forms of belonging. A more integrative relationship between US and rainbow nation, by contrast, is signaled by flags in which national and rainbow symbolization are fused. Such flags are, for example found on top of the restaurant Rumors or inside the Stonewall Gallery (Figure 7). As the structure of the US flag provides the grid in which the rainbow colors are inserted, these fusion flags convey the message that the gay community is an integral part of the US nation.

The only instance I could find in which the rainbow flag was more prominent than the US national flag was inside a building, namely in the Out of the Closet thrift store (see Figure 8). It is perhaps not surprising to find signage that privileges gay over national issues inside a building rather than out on the street. This example takes a camp approach (Sontag 1964) to the staging of nationalism and could, therefore, even be said to undermine or question the nation. The flags here are attached to an athletic male dummy hanging from the ceiling of the store. The dummy assumes a flying position, with the arms spread wide apart and holding a rainbow flag in each hand. The predominance of the rainbow flag here is both quantitative and qualitative. We see two rainbow flags and a chain with beads in rainbow colors around the dummy's neck, but only one US national flag. The rainbow flags are in a higher position than the US national flag, which is tucked inside the front of the dummy's underpants, a sexualized position. The athletic male figure only wears underpants and a mask, which is reminiscent of the outfit people would wear at an anonymous sex party. As the flag peeps out of the bulged dummy's trunks, it can be read as an elongation of the penis, or as a phallic symbol. Next to the US flag, there is also a sticker attached to the top of the shorts which shows the words *TOTAL PACKAGE*. This phrase is normally used to describe a person who is desirable in many ways, including both looks and intelligence. In this context, the "total package" can be interpreted as a combination of gay and national identification, together with a sexy appearance.

Connections between the US nation and the gay community are also produced at the verbal level and with visual elements other than rainbow flags on the Drive. The Stonewall Gallery, for example, highlights LGBT people's *significant role in American society* in one of its windows. Inside the gallery, a t-shirt is exhibited on which the slogan *KEEP AMERICA GAY* is printed (Figure 9). The t-shirt can be purchased in the museum, which – in contrast to other items displayed in this venue – points to its contemporary rather than historical



Figure 8. Rainbow and US nation as depicted in a thrift store on Wilton Drive.

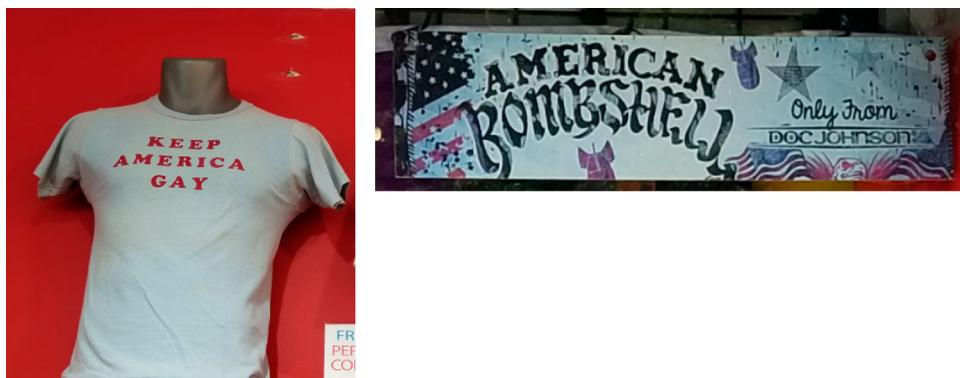


Figure 9. Connecting US and gay nation on Wilton Drive.

relevance. The sentence on the t-shirt can be read as an act of empowerment in the face of current US politics, as the slogan is an adaptation of President Trump's motto *Make America great again*. The intertextuality is created through a parallel imperative syntax (verb – direct object – object complement), the identity of the noun *America*, and the phonetic similarity between the adjectives *great* ([greɪt]) and *gay* ([geɪ]). Semantically, the intertextuality is transported through contrastive meanings. While the original motto demands changes in favor of the US nation, the adapted motto draws on a gay preservation discourse that is suggested to be in the interest of the nation.

Two further examples illustrate how national and gay realms meet on the Drive. One is a gay male bar of the name *Eagle*. The eagle is a national symbol of the United States which is appropriated here to represent an openly gay locality. As a bird of prey, the eagle can be taken to indicate the sexually more aggressive types of gay masculinity the bar is associated with (a discourse that also shines through in other bar names like *Hunters*). A sex shop on the Drive displays advertising for the company *American Bombshell*, which produces military-style sex toys for gay men (Figure 9). In its literal meaning, the noun *bombshell* creates a connection to the military, while metaphorically, a *bombshell* can be a term used to refer to a sexually highly attractive person, usually a woman. However, a female reading of *bombshell* is ruled out by the absence of female depiction and by other items in the co-text that index masculinity. The phrase *Only From DOC JOHNSON* in the ad can be viewed as a reference to male sexuality (*johnson* being a slang word for “penis,” Urban Dictionary 2019). This is also true of the depicted bombshells, which appear like phallic symbols. The advertisement also features several instances of the US national flag, stars (which also form part of the “stars and stripes” of the national flag), and, again, the eagle as a national symbol, thus building a bridge between the US nation and gay men through the military.

The homonationalist discourses we find on Wilton Drive are complex and differ from those identified by earlier research in terms of who the representational agent is. Here it is not the national institutions that appropriate same-sex sexualities for the purpose of posing as a progressive, tolerant society. It is rather the other way round: the LGBT community lays claim on the nation, constructing it on the one hand as a protector of its rights and, on the other hand, as a society to which LGBT people make a valuable contribution. We also saw that, from the official side, the relationship between the US and the rainbow

nation on the Drive is spatially and discursively constructed in terms of segregation. A deconstructionist, camp staging of the sexuality-nation interface could only be found inside a (public) building, even though an ironizing approach to the US nation can also be verified more generally in commercial signs that draw on an overt sexualization of the national. For gay men more specifically, nationalist masculinities are often presented as sexually desirable.

5. Conclusion

Public spaces are shared by various social groups that compete for authority, control and the local implementation of their norms. Public signage is a means of gaining control over a social space, and, as we have seen in the present study, can play an important role in the “active engineering of the affective register of cities” (Thrift 2004, 58). Moreover, it can contribute to the effect of establishing an “affective community” (Zink 2019) based on the experiential similarity and shared values of certain social groups.

The affective signage on Wilton Drive does not originate from top-down governance but rather presents itself as an in-group, community-based formation. In fact, private and official signs are highly discordant on the Drive. While the bottom-up, non-official signage is dominated by a gay male representation and the creation of affective regimes, the top-down, official signage is best described as asexual and unemotional.

The way affective regimes discursively surface on the Drive corresponds to Lefebvre’s (1991) approach to the production of space, which stipulates that a purely visual focus of analysis (“mapping”) is insufficient, because a space is never an objective phenomenon but created for and by people (Higgins 2017, 102). A mere description of what we see in a place ignores the fact that different groups of people are likely to make sense in different ways of the same linguistic landscape – it ignores the lived spatialities that invariably co-exist in a place. A central dimension of difference on Wilton Drive is between LGBT people as a (discursively dominant) in-group and other community members that do not belong to this group. The three affective regimes documented in this study tend to relate differently to these two groups. While the affective regime of love and care tends to be maximally inclusive in the sense that it addresses the entire community, tolerance is an affective regime that is primarily demanded of non-LGBT people, and homonationalism circulates within the local LGBT in-group exclusively. In other words, we see a range of affective regimes that speak to various social groups and have various spatialization effects, and thus “material places intersect with imagined and representational spaces” (Higgins 2017, 103).

Affect surfaces as a relational practice, whose efficiency increases through the co-presence of features stipulating the same type or similar types of affect. This creates a certain affective atmosphere. The three types of affective regimes illustrated in this study clearly speak against a conceptualization of affect as something natural or biological that exists independently of discourse. By contrast, they represent conscious efforts to counter negative discourses that LGBT people have commonly been subjected to. Love and care are meant to overcome hate and indifference. Tolerance counters intolerance and homophobia. And homonationalist pride counters the discrimination that LGBT subjects traditionally face at the national level, where heteronormativity prevails. As responses to negative experiences, these affective regimes are a form of local empowerment on

Wilton Drive, that is, they are meant to create feelings of strength, power, capability or agency for people who have traditionally operated from less privileged positions (Nissi and Dlaske 2020).

But at closer inspection, this romanticized view of the affective regimes displayed contrasts with the more questionable discursive effects they are associated with. Love is a partial business in a public space that sets gay men as the local norm and excludes other sexualities. Tolerance is an affective phenomenon that firmly rests on the notion of the inferiority of the tolerated population. And homonationalism can be viewed as a promotion of the nation rather than of LGBT people themselves.

Maybe the most harmful of these affective regimes is that of tolerance:

If “Americans” are asked to tolerate “homosexuals, it means that at some level homosexuals are not fully Americans. Being the object of tolerance does not represent full inclusion in American life, but rather a grudging form of acceptance in which the boundary between “us” and “them” remains clear, sometimes dangerously so. [...] To teach tolerance is to teach precisely the type of us-them-relationship upon which hate thrives. (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003)

On Wilton Drive, more specifically, drawing on the affective regime of tolerance creates the paradoxical situation that the group of “tolerators” is discursively constructed as the privileged in-group, while LGBT people are constructed as the to-be-tolerated out-group. This clearly clashes with the dominant discursive construction of the Drive as a gay male space.

As pointed out by Wee and Goh (2019, 180), “affective regimes can be stitched together to expand their coverage,” and this is what we witness on Wilton Drive. Even though Wilton Drive represents a commercial space, the affective regimes on the Drive seem less tied to economic considerations. They do important community-related identity work, which gives them a social, rather than commercial, kind of capital. They are a powerful means of inviting passers-by to join an affectively defined community, one that is constructed in opposition to other public spaces, where heteronormativity, homophobia and LGBT exclusion predominate. They set up community-based normative standards of social behavior that people on the Drive are expected to adhere to.

The representational practices surfacing in the signage on the Drive suggest that it is possible for outsiders to become part of the affective community if they adhere to the demanded affective regimes. In other words, displaying the “right” types of affect (love, tolerance, homonationalism) provides “affect aliens” (Ahmed 2014b, 26) with ways of attunement, ways to signal their belonging to the community. At the same time, this creates an out-group of “dangerous” people who do not share the affective norms stipulated on the Drive. Still, it is noteworthy from a queer theoretical point of view that a politics that is based on affect eschews the effect of strengthening well-entrenched identity discourses (Bargetz 2015, 583). It suggests that everybody can join the club if they share the same attitudes and feelings, with gender or sexual category identification being of secondary importance. However, the co-occurrence of signage that highlights gay men as the norm on the Drive compromises this effect.

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Notes on contributor

Heiko Motschenbacher is Full Professor for English as a Second/Foreign Language at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen. He is founder and co-editor of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* (with William L. Leap). Among his recent publications are the monographs *Language, Gender and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralist Perspectives* (2010), *An Interdisciplinary Bibliography on Language, Gender and Sexuality* (2012), *New Perspectives on English as a European Lingua Franca* (2013; all John Benjamins) and *Language, Normativity and Europeanisation* (2016; Palgrave Macmillan). He has (co-)edited a special issue of the journal *Discourse & Society on Queer Linguistic Approaches to Discourse* (2013, with Martin Stegu), the fourth volume of *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men* (2015, with Marlis Hellinger), and a special issue of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality on Corpus Linguistics in Language and Sexuality Studies*.

ORCID

Heiko Motschenbacher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3906-7109>

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