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# Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public

## Gay Uses of the Streets (1995)

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There is no queer space; there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use. Space has no natural character, no inherent meaning, no intrinsic status as public or private. As Michel de Certeau has argued, it is always invested with meaning by its users as well as its creators, and even when its creators have the power to define its official and dominant meaning, its users are usually able to develop tactics that allow them to use the space in alternative, even oppositional ways that confound the designs of its creators.[1]

Nothing illustrates this general principle more clearly than the tactics developed by generations of gay men and lesbians to put the spaces of the dominant culture to queer purposes. Struggles over the control of space have been central to gay culture and politics throughout the twentieth century. In the 1930s, after the upheavals and urban cultural experimentation sparked by Prohibition (1920–33) had allowed gay life to become remarkably integrated into the broader cultural life of New York (and other cities) and visible in its "public" spaces, a series of measures were enacted to exclude homosexuality from the public sphere—the city's cafés, bars, streets, and theaters—where authorities feared it threatened to disrupt public order and the reproduction of normative gender and sexual arrangements. For the next thirty years, many of the most important sites of public sociability, including bars, restaurants, and cabarets, were threatened with closure if they allowed lesbians or gay men to gather openly on their premises; and men and women risked arrest if they carried themselves openly as homosexuals on the streets of the city or even at gay parties held in "private" apartments. Even before formal anti-gay regulations were enacted in the 1920s and 1930s, the social marginalization of homosexuals had given the police and popular vigilantes even broader informal authority to harass them. The formal and informal prohibition of gay visibility in the spaces of the city had a fundamental influence on the development of gay cultural practices.[2]

This essay examines the tactics used by gay men in early twentieth-century New York City to claim space for themselves in the face of the battery of laws and informal practices designed to exclude them from urban space altogether. One of my purposes is to challenge the myths that govern most thinking about gay life before Stonewall, particularly the myths that gay people before the 1960s inevitably remained isolated from one another, invisible to straight people and to other gay people alike, or confined to the most marginalized and hidden of urban spaces. But analyzing the queer uses of urban space also highlights the degree to which struggles over the production and control of space played a central role in shaping gay cultural practices more generally—and the degree to which the struggles over queer uses of the city were shaped by and influenced broader class, gender, and racial/ethnic struggles over urban space. Analyzing the role of the production and contestation of queer space in the everyday life of gay men with a high degree of historical specificity also has implications for the theorization of urban space in general. Most importantly, it demonstrates the degree to which the boundaries between spaces defined as "public" and "private" are socially constructed, contingent, and contested; and it illuminates

the range of forces—informal as well as official, oppositional as well as dominant—seeking to exert definitional and regulatory power over the production of urban space.

Part of the gay world taking shape in the streets was highly visible to outsiders, but even more of it was invisible. Gay men had to contend with the threat of vigilante anti-gay violence as well as with the police. In response to this challenge, gay men devised a variety of tactics that allowed them to move freely about the city, to appropriate for themselves spaces that were not marked as gay, and to construct a gay city in the midst of, yet invisible to, the dominant city. They were aided in this effort, as always, by the disinclination of most people to believe that any "normal"-looking man could be anything other than "normal," and by their access, as men, to public space.

Although gay street culture was in certain respects an unusual and distinctive phenomenon, it was also part of and shaped by a larger street culture that was primarily working class in character and origin. Given the crowded conditions in which most working people lived, much of their social life took place in streets and parks. The gay presence in the streets was thus masked, in part, by the bustle of street life in working-class neighborhoods. Gay uses of the streets, like other working-class uses, also came under attack, however, because they challenged bourgeois conceptions of public order, the proper boundaries between public and private space, and the social practices appropriate to each.

## THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE STREETS

Along with the parks and beaches, the streets themselves served as a social center, cruising area, and assignation spot. Gay men interacted on streets throughout the city, but just as various immigrant groups predominated in certain neighborhoods and on certain streets, so, too, gay men had their own streets and corners, often where gay-oriented saloons and restaurants could be found and along which men strolled, looking for other men to pick up.

The streets could be dangerous, though, for men faced there the threat of arrest or harassment from the police and from anti-gay vigilantes. The police regularly dispatched plainclothes officers to the most popular cruising areas, and the results of their surveillance could be devastating. An arrest made in 1910 illustrates both the police's familiarity with gay haunts and the hazards the police could pose. At midnight on December 15 a forty-four-year-old clerk from Long Island had gone to Union Square, one of the city's best-known cruising areas at the time, and met a seventeen-year-old German baker who had walked over from his Park Row lodging house. They agreed to spend the night together and walked to a hotel on East 22nd Street at Third Avenue where they could rent a room. Both men had evidently known that the Square was a place where they could meet other men. So, too, had the police. Two detectives, apparently on the look-out for such things, saw them meet, followed them to the hotel, spied on them from the adjoining room through a transom, and arrested them after watching them have sex. The older man was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to a year in prison.[3]

The police action at Union Square was not an isolated event. Around 1910 the police department added the surveillance of homosexuals (whom they often labeled "male prostitutes") to the responsibilities of the vice squad, which already handled the investigations of female prostitutes. Around 1915, the squad assigned one of its plainclothes officers, Terence Harvey, to "specialize in perversion cases." He patrolled the parks, theaters, and subway restrooms known as centers of homosexual and heterosexual rendezvous alike; he arrested some men after seeing them meet in gay cruising areas and following them home, and he entrapped others. He appears to have been quite effective, for he won the praise of the anti-vice societies and was responsible for almost a third of the arrests of men charged with homosexual activity in the first half of 1921.

Most of the men he and the other members of the vice squad arrested were charged not with sodomy, a felony, but with disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor that was much easier to prove and did not require a trial by jury. By the early 1910s the police had begun to specify in their own records which of the men arrested for disorderly conduct had been arrested for "degeneracy." The state legislature formalized this categorization in 1923 as part of its general revision of the disorderly conduct statute. The statute, like the use of the vice squad to pursue homosexual

cases, reflected the manner in which the authorities associated homosexual behavior with female prostitution, for it used wording strikingly similar to that used to prosecute female prostitutes in its definition of the crime as the "frequenting or loitering about any public place soliciting men for the purpose of committing a crime against nature or other lewdness." As a practical matter, the authorities generally interpreted this statute to apply only to the "degenerates" who solicited "normal men" for sex and not to the men who responded to such solicitations, just as prostitutes were charged while their customers' behavior remained uncensured. In most cases this was because the "normal" man was a plainclothes policeman (who, presumably, had responded only to the degree necessary to confirm the "degenerate's" intentions), but it also applied to some cases in which the police had observed "fairies" solicit men they regarded as "normal." In other cases, the police labeled and arrested both of the men involved as "degenerates."

Although the law was used primarily to prosecute men for trying to pick up another man (cruising), the police and sympathetic judges sometimes interpreted it loosely enough to encompass the prosecution of men who simply behaved in a campy, openly gay way, as in the case of men arrested when the police raided a cafeteria or bar homosexuals frequented. An exceptionally high percentage of the arrests on such charges resulted in convictions—roughly 89 percent in one 1921 study. Although different judges were likely to impose different sentences, the same study found that in general they were unusually harsh in such cases. Less than a quarter of the men convicted had their sentences suspended, while more than a third of them were sentenced for a period of days or even months to the workhouse, and a similar number were fined. An average of 650 men were convicted for degeneracy each year in Manhattan in the 1920s and 1930s.

The police and the social purity groups were not the only forces to threaten gay men's use of the streets. A variety of other groups also sought to ensure the maintenance of moral order in the city's streets on a more informal—but nonetheless more pervasive, and, often, more effective—basis. The men who gathered at the corner saloon or poolroom often kept an eye on the street and discussed the events unfolding there, shopkeepers took an interest in the activities outside their stores, and mothers watched the movements of their children and neighbors from their stoops and windows. On most blocks in the tenement neighborhoods, gangs of youths kept "their" street under near-constant surveillance from their street corner outposts. Although the first concern of such gangs was to protect their territory from the incursions of rival gangs, they also kept a close watch over other strangers who threatened the moral order of the block. These groups often disagreed among themselves about what that moral order properly was, but gay men had to contend with the threat of the popular sanctions any of them might impose against "inverts" and homosexuals, from gossip to catcalls to violence.

Gay men responded to the threat of both formal and informal sanctions by developing a variety of strategies for negotiating their presence on the streets. Perhaps nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public in drag than in Harlem. Drag queens regularly appeared in the neighborhood's streets and clubs, where they tended to be more casually tolerated than in most of the city's other neighborhoods.

Still, it took considerable courage for men to appear in drag even in Harlem, since they risked harassment by other youths and arrest by the Irish policemen who patrolled their neighborhood. Over the course of two weeks in February 1928 the police arrested thirty men for wearing drag at a single club, Lulu Belle at 341 Lenox Avenue near 127th Street. Five men dressed in "silk stockings, sleeveless evening gowns of soft-tinted crepe de chine and light fur wraps" were arrested on a single night.[4]

## THE CONTESTED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE

The streets and parks had particular significance for gay men as meeting places for gay men because of the special constraints they faced as homosexuals, but they were hardly the only people to use these culturally contested spaces. That culture sustained a set of sexual values and a way of conceptualizing the boundaries between public and private space that paralleled those governing many aspects of gay men's behavior—and that middle-class ideology found almost as shocking in the case of heterosexual

couples as in homosexual. The purposes and tactics of gay men out cruising resembled those of young men and women out looking for a date in many respects. The casual pickups men made on the streets were hardly unique to male couples in this era, for many young women depended on being picked up by men to finance their excursions to music halls and amusement parks, as the historians Kathy Peiss and Joanne Meyerowitz have shown. It was common on the streets for men to approach women with whom they were unacquainted to make a date. This distressed middle-class moral reformers, who considered casual pickups almost as undesirable as professional prostitution, if they distinguished the two at all.[5] The fact that these couples met in unsupervised public places and even had sex there was even more shocking to middle-class reformers, in part because it challenged the careful delineation between public and private space that was so central to bourgeois conceptions of public order.

The efforts of the police to control gay men's use of "public" space, then, were part of a much broader effort by the state to (quite literally) police the boundaries between public and private space, and, in particular, to impose a bourgeois definition of such distinctions on working-class communities. Gay men's strategies for using urban space came under attack not just because they challenged the heteronormativity that normally governed men and women's use of public space, but also because they were part of a more general challenge to dominant cultural conceptions of those boundaries and of the social practices appropriate to each sphere. The inability of the police and reformers to stop such activity reflects their failure to impose a single, hegemonic map of the city's public and private spaces on its diverse communities.

Gay men developed a gay map of the city and named its landmarks: the Fruited Plain, Vaseline Alley, Bitches' Walk. Even outsiders were familiar with sections of that map, for the "shoals of painted, perfumed, ... mincing youths that at night swarm on Broadway in the Tenderloin section, ... the parks and 5th avenue" made the gay territorialization of the city inescapable to Bernarr Macfadden and many others. But even more of that map was unknown to the dominant culture. Gay men met throughout the city, their meetings invisible to all but the initiated and carefully orchestrated to remain so. Certain subway stations and public comfort stations, as well as more open locales such as parks and streets, were the sites of almost constant social and even sexual interactions between men, but most men carefully structured their interactions so that no outsiders would recognize them as such.

The boundaries of the gay world were thus highly permeable, and different men participated in it to different degrees and in different ways. Some passed in and out of it quickly, making no more than occasional stops at a subway tearoom for a quick sexual encounter that had little significance for their self-identity or the other parts of their life. Even those men who were most isolated from the organized gay world got a glimpse of its size and diversity through their anonymous encounters in washrooms and recessed doorways, however, and those encounters provided other men with an entree into a world much larger and more highly organized than they could have imagined. The streets and parks served them as social centers as well as sites of sexual rendezvous, places where they could meet others like themselves and find collective support for their rejection of the sexual and gender roles prescribed them. The "mysterious bond" between gay men that allowed them to locate and communicate with one another even in the settings potentially most hostile to them attests to the resiliency of their world and to the resources their subculture had made available to them.

## NOTES

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), esp. pp. xviii–xx, pp. 29–42.

2 For a more fully developed analysis of the changing regulation of gay life in the early twentieth century, see my *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), from which this essay is drawn.

3 *People v. Williams.* DAP 80,706 (CGS 1910). The fate of the younger man is uncertain.

4 *Amsterdam News* (15 February 1928), p. 1.

5 Kathy Peiss, *Cheep Amusements,* pp. 54–55; 106; idem. "'Charity Girls' and City

Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880–1920," in *Passion and Power; Sexuality in History.* ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 57–69; Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 101–106.