

Gay New York  
 Chapter 7 by George Conway

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"PRIVACY COULD ONLY BE HAD IN PUBLIC":  
 FORGING A GAY WORLD IN THE STREETS



Figure 7.1. One fairy gets his man at the expense of his rival, a prostitute, while another tries to get the attention of a sailor. As these cartoons suggest, Riverside Drive was a well-known cruising avenue for gay men, prostitutes, and sailors. (From *Broadway Brevities*: "Little Accident," March 7, 1932; "Pickled Corned Beef," October 19, 1933.)

ALTHOUGH NEW YORKERS OCCASIONALLY SAW GAY MEN IN RESTAURANTS and cafeterias, they encountered them more frequently in the city's streets, parks, and beaches, where they seemed to some to be an almost ubiquitous presence. In 1904, the bodybuilding publisher Bernarr Macfadden denounced "the shoals of painted, perfumed, Kohl-eyed, lisping, mincing youths that at night swarm on Broadway in the Tenderloin section, or haunt the parks and 5th avenue, ogling every man that passes and—it is pleasant to relate—occasionally getting a sound thrashing or an emphatic kicking." In the following decade, another New Yorker declared that "our streets and beaches are overrun by . . . fairies," and in the 1920s and 1930s one of the city's tabloids regularly published cartoons that caricatured the supposed efforts of fairies to accost sailors and other men on Riverside Drive (see figure 7.1).<sup>1</sup>

As these comments of observers attest, gay men claimed their right to enjoy the city's public spaces. It was in such open spaces, less easily regulated than a residential or commercial venue, that much of the gay world took shape. The city's streets and parks served as vital meeting grounds for men who lived with their families or in cramped quarters with few amenities, and the vitality and diversity of the gay street scene attracted many other men as well. Streets and parks were where many men—"queer" and "normal" alike—went to find sexual partners, where many gay men went to socialize, and where many men went for sex and ended up being socialized into the gay world.

Part of the gay world taking shape in the streets was highly visible to outsiders, but even more of it was invisible. As Macfadden's comment makes clear, 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.

#### CRUISING THE CITY'S PARKS

The city's parks were among the most popular—and secure—of New York's gay meeting places, where men gathered regularly to meet their friends and to search (or "cruise," as they called it by the 1920s) for sexual partners.<sup>2</sup> One of the ostensible purposes of parks, after all, was to offer citizens respite from the tumult of city life, a place where citizens could wander aimlessly and enjoy nature. This provided a useful cover for men wandering in search of others.<sup>3</sup> Few gay men stood out among the other couples, families, and groups of friends and neighbors who thronged the parks, socializing, playing sports, and eating their picnic suppers.

Cruising parks and streets provided many young men and newcomers to the city with a point of entry into the rest of the gay world, which was sometimes hidden from men looking for it by the same codes and subterfuges that protected it from hostile straight intrusions. "It was quite a handicap to be a young guy in the 1920s," remembered one man, who had moved to New York from Michigan. "It took an awfully long time

<sup>2</sup>In a 1929 letter that also confirms Fifth Avenue's significance as a cruising area, Parker Tyler wrote: "Took a walk on Fifth Ave. last Sunday night, just to see what it was like after over a year of absence. . . . Some 'cruisers' but all pretty stiff except undesirables."<sup>2</sup>

to learn of a gay speakeasy."<sup>4</sup> The parks and streets were perhaps the most common place for newcomers to meet men more familiar with that world, and these men became their guides to it. A German Jew who immigrated to New York in 1927, for instance, recalled that within two or three weeks of his arrival, "I found my way to Riverside Drive and the Soldiers and Sailors Monument." He still knew almost no one in the city, but his cruising quickly remedied that. "It was 1927, about two or three days before the big reception parade for Lindbergh after he came back from his flight to Paris, and the bleachers were already up there. I met a man there and we started talking. He was a Harvard man and taught ethical culture. And that was the best contact I made; he and I had a wonderful affair." The affair lasted two years, the friendship many more, and his Riverside Park pickup became his most important guide to the new world.<sup>5</sup>

The German immigrant was not the only man to begin a relationship with someone he met while cruising. Many relationships began through such contacts, and many friendships as well. "E. is a very sentimental lad," Parker Tyler wrote to Charles Ford in the summer of 1929. "The darling faun almost wept to me because tonight is the anniversary of our first meeting: 42nd St. and 5th Ave. = Fate."<sup>6</sup> The novelist Glenway Wescott recorded in his diary the story of N., who upon hearing of the Central Park cruising strip for the first time "hastened to it the next night, and there encountered his great love."<sup>7</sup>

The streets and parks were social centers for groups as well as individuals. Many groups of youths who could afford no other recreation gathered in the parks, and young men just coming out could easily find other gay men in them. Sebastian Riscato, an eighteen-year-old Italian-American living with his parents in the Bronx in 1938, for instance, heard about Bronx Park from the gay crowd he spent time with outside an older gay man's beauty salon on Gladstone Square. He went to the park and quickly became part of the gang of young "painted queens" who gathered near the 180th Street bridge. It was a "big social scene" as well as a cruising ground, he recalled. "We met and we dished [gossiped] . . . I would meet [my best friend], and the other sisters, and we'd go for a soda, then we'd come back, and cruise down and see if a number came by." At the park he learned about other places where gay men gathered and also met several people who became lifelong friends.<sup>8</sup>

Because of its central location, Bryant Park, a small park adjoining the Public Library on Forty-second Street near Times Square, became well known to straight and gay men alike as a meeting place for young "fairies" in the 1920s and 1930s. Brooklyn's Prospect Park, although less well known to the general public, served the same social role for some-

what older and more conventional-looking gay men. One high school teacher recalled that although he went to Prospect Park primarily to cruise, he became friendly with several of the other "regulars" who frequented the park and often took breaks from cruising with them, sharing information and casual conversation. Battery Park, on the southwest tip of Manhattan, was a popular rendezvous for seafaring men. Riverside Park, stretching along the western shore of Manhattan, where ships of all sorts were moored, was also a major cruising area and social center, especially for seamen and their admirers. Two landmarks in the park, Grant's Tomb at 122nd Street and the Soldiers and Sailors Monument at 89th Street, were especially renowned as meeting places in the gay world.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, Central Park, because of its location, vast stretches of unsupervised, wooded land, and heavy patronage, was especially renowned within the gay world both as a social center and as a cruising ground. At the turn of the century, men met each other next to the Belvedere Castle, on the west lawn near Sixty-third Street, and in other "secluded spots," according to trial records, and by the 1910s the benches at the southwest corner of the park at Columbus Circle—across the street from Mother Childs—had become a major pickup site.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s so many men met on the open lawn at the north end of the Ramble that they nicknamed it the Fruited Plain. In the 1920s and 1930s, hundreds of gay men gathered every temperate evening in the park south of Seventy-second Street, on the benches at Columbus Circle, along the walk leading into the park from the Circle, and at the fountain and plaza by the lake. The greatest concentration of men could be found (packed "practically solidly," according to one account) on the unbroken row of benches that lined the quarter-mile-long walk from the southeastern corner of the park to the mall, a stretch nicknamed Vaseline Alley by some and Bitches' Walk by others. "You'd walk down and there'd be a lot of real obvious queens, and some closet queens, and sometimes guys would come down on their bikes," one man remembered; there was always lots of "socializing." "The nance element holds regular conventions in Paddies Lane," *Variety* reported in the fall of 1929. "'Tis their rendezvous!"<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1930s, particularly after Mayor Fiorello La Guardia had closed most of the city's gay bars in a pre-World's Fair crackdown, hundreds of gay men gathered at the band concerts offered at the Central Park Mall on summer nights, meeting friends, socializing, and cruising. "They are so thick in the crowd," declared one gay man at the time, "that if one were to walk through with a strikingly handsome male friend, one

would be conscious of creating something of a sensation—there would be whisperings, nods, suddenly turned heads, staring eyes."<sup>12</sup> Most nongay observers noticed only the most obvious "nance element" in the crowd and along the walks, but gay men themselves were fully aware of their numbers on such evenings and exulted in transforming Central Park into a gay park.

The enormous presence of gay men in the parks prompted a sharp response from the police. They regularly sent plainclothesmen to cruising areas to entrap men; in the grounds around the Central Park zoo in the first half of 1921 alone, they made thirty-three arrests. They periodically conducted sweeps and mass arrests of suspected homosexuals in the parks, either to increase their arrest statistics, to get some publicity, or to force men to remain more covert in their cruising. In 1943 the police arrested Donald Vining and several other men sitting on the benches by an entrance to Central Park simply because they were in a cruising area; a judge dismissed the charges, but only after the men had spent a night in jail. Four years later seventeen-year-old Harvey Milk was arrested in a similar sweep in a Central Park cruising area: the police arrested the shirtless men they found there whom they suspected were gay, charging them with indecent exposure. They ignored the family men standing nearby, with their shirts off but their children in tow.<sup>13</sup>

The parks endured as a locus of sexual and social activity for homosexual and heterosexual couples alike, despite police harassment, in part because the police found them challenging to regulate. They were physically more difficult to raid than an enclosed space, offered more hiding spaces than a street, and although La Guardia began closing Bryant Park at night in 1944 in order to "prevent undesirables from gathering," the larger parks, at least, were impossible to seal off.

Gay men also gathered on the city's beaches, which were enormously popular in the decades before air conditioning. More than a million people might crowd onto the Coney Island beach on a hot summer afternoon; photos of the scene portray a huge mass of bathers indiscriminately covering virtually every grain of sand, but the beach, too, had a more carefully delineated social geography. Different ethnic groups, sports groups, and other groups colonized sections of the beach and organized their use of its space in distinctive ways. While some gay men joined their ethnic compatriots, either individually or in groups, either blending in or making their gayness clear, other gay men claimed a certain section of the beach as their own and sometimes attracted notice for doing so. They sometimes put on for other beachgoers a "show" that outpaced even the shows at the Life and Mother Childs,

turning their towels into dresses and fancy hats, swishing down the beach, kicking up their heels. Groups of friends from a neighborhood, bar, or cafeteria sometimes congregated in a subsection of the gay section of the beach. A large group of deaf gay men, for instance, regularly gathered on one of the city's beaches in the 1940s, according to several hearing men who saw them. Other, less obvious men found the beaches a good place to mingle with the crowd in search of sexual partners, and the muscle beach section was often a prime target. In the years after World War II the police sometimes arrested men at Riis Beach, in particular, but gay men seem to have faced little opposition earlier in the century.<sup>14</sup>

The confidence that men gained from their numbers and campiness on the beach—and from the absence of a strong reaction to their openness—led them to become remarkably bold on occasion. A male beauty contest held at Coney Island's Washington Baths in the summer of 1929, for instance, took an unexpected turn. To the surprise of a *Variety* reporter who served as one of the judges, most of the people who gathered to watch the contest were men. And to her further surprise, most of the men participating in the contest wore paint and powder. "[One] pretty guy pranced before the camera and threw kisses to the audience," she wrote. "One man came in dressed as a woman." Others had mascara on their eyelashes. "The problem," as she put it tongue-in-cheek, "became that of picking a male beaut who wasn't a floosie no matter how he looked." The judges settled on a contestant they knew to be married (which *Variety* reported just in case any of its readers had not yet realized who the other "floosies" were). On a packed beach on a hot summer afternoon, gay men had taken over a male beauty contest, becoming its audience, its contestants, its stars.<sup>15</sup>

#### 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 famil-

ilarity 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 Twenty-second 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 lookout 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> As previously noted in chapter 6, 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 "frequent[ing] or loiter[ing] about any public place soliciting men for the purpose of committing a crime against nature or other lewdness."<sup>21</sup> (On the ideological basis of this association, see chapter 2.) 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 but 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 the men involved as "degenerates."

Although the law was used primarily to prosecute men for trying to pick another man up (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. (For an example, see the discussion in chapter 6 of the police raid on the Hotel Koenig.) 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 to a period of days or even months in 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 pool-room 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 threat-

<sup>23</sup>In most cases the policeman let the accused put his hand "on [the officer's] person," which, as we shall see, usually would have happened only if the plainclothesman had indicated his willingness for it to happen. A smaller number of men were convicted for degeneracy on the basis of having verbally (or in some cases nonverbally) offered to "commit" or "permit" sodomy.<sup>22</sup>

ened 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 way on the streets. Some of them boldly announced their sexual interests and created a visible gay presence by speaking, carrying themselves, and dressing in styles that the dominant culture associated with fairies, even though this could result in harassment from onlookers. In 1918 an agent witnessed the response of passersby to several fairies near Herald Square: they "mocked them and called in effeminate fashion after some of them and threw kisses at them." Agents witnessed groups of youths heckling fairies in Harlem as well, and Ralph Werther was attacked by several gangs near the Bowery, even though he was taken under the protection of others. In the 1920s, groups of family men who lived near Riverside Drive sometimes accosted men they thought to be gay and threatened them with violence if they did not leave the neighborhood. In 1930 Parker Tyler and a gay friend were chased by "quite a lot of sailors and civilians in their shirt sleeves" on Riverside Drive and were "saved" only by the sudden appearance of some policemen. When the police took one of the sailors and the two gay men to the station, Tyler felt he was in as much trouble as his assailant; as soon as he had a moment alone in the patrol car he spit on his handkerchief to wash off his telltale mascara. (The judge eventually dismissed the charges against all of them.)<sup>24</sup> Often fairies did not encounter such hostile reactions, but their willingness to risk them should be regarded as a form of defiance and resistance to a heterosexist cultural system. The intensity of the reaction their openness sometimes provoked indicates that many "normal" people regarded it as such.

Given the risks involved in asserting a visible presence in the streets, most gay people chose not to challenge the conventions of heterosexual society so directly. But they resisted and undermined them nonetheless by developing tactics that allowed them to identify and communicate with one another without alerting hostile outsiders to what they were doing. Such tactics kept them hidden from the dominant culture, but not from one another. Whereas fairies used codes that were intelligible to straights as well as to gays, such as flashy dress and an effeminate demeanor, other gay men (the "queers") developed codes that were intelligible only to other men familiar with the subculture, which allowed them to recognize one another without drawing the attention of the uninitiated, whether they were on the street, in a theater, or at a predominantly straight cock-



tail party or bar. They were so effective that medical researchers at the turn of the century repeatedly expressed their astonishment at gay men's ability to identify each other, attributing it to something akin to a sixth sense: "Sexual perverts readily recognize each other, although they may never have met before," one doctor wrote with some alarm in 1892, "and there exists a mysterious bond of psychological sympathy between them."<sup>25</sup>

The "mysterious bond" between gay men resulted in large part from their participation in the gay subculture and consequent knowledge of its codes and tactics, both almost wholly unfamiliar to the doctors. It resulted as well from their simple attentiveness to the signals that might identify like-minded men; most other city residents were preoccupied with other matters or remained deliberately oblivious to the surfeit of stimuli on the streets. Involvement in the gay world familiarized men with the styles of clothing and grooming, mannerisms, and conventions of speech that had become fashionable in that world but were not stereotypically associated with fairies. Those fashions served as signs, "neither masculine nor feminine, but specifically and peculiarly homosexual," observed the writer and gay activist Donald Webster Cory in the early 1950s; these were "difficult for [outsiders] to pinpoint," but enabled men to recognize one another even as they concealed their identities from others.<sup>26</sup>

Gay men also made tactical use of the gender conventions governing men's public interactions. They took full advantage of the cultural injunction against men looking at other men in the sexually assertive way they gazed at women; a "normal" man almost automatically averted his eyes if they happened to lock with those of a stranger, whereas a gay man interested in the man gazing at him returned his look. "The eyes, the eyes, they're a dead giveaway," recalled one man who was introduced to the gay world during World War II when he stumbled upon a major cruising area in London, Leicester Square. "If someone looks at you with a lingering look, and looks away, and then looks at you again. If you looked at a straight man he wouldn't stare back, he'd look immediately away."<sup>27</sup> In order to confirm the interest indicated by eye contact, or as a way of initiating contact, men made use of a number of utterly conventional gestures. Perhaps the most common simply involved asking for a match or for the time of day. Thomas Painter joked in 1941 that asking for a match in New York had become the equivalent of accosting, and the gay novelists of the thirties delighted in parodying the interaction. The technique was so well known within the gay world (and to the police) that Max Ewing, a young writer who moved in both the gay and high-society circles cen-

tered around Carl Van Vechten, could satirize it (along with police entrapment and gay actors and chorus boys), in his 1933 novel, *Going Somewhere*. In one scene an actor who needed to get to the theater by eight "went up to a man who was standing in front of a clothing shop window and asked him if he knew what time it was. This man was a plain-clothes detective, so the boy was arrested, and sent to Welfare Island for seven weeks. Nothing could be done about it. The cast of the show regretted the episode, for the boy was 'an awfully nice kid.'"<sup>28</sup> The man who made such a request could rest assured that anyone unaware of its coded significance would simply respond to it straightforwardly, since men often asked other men for such things, while a man interested in responding to its hidden meaning would start a conversation.

Gay men used such subcultural codes to make contact and communicate with one another throughout the city, but they also made tactical decisions about the safest places to meet. Like other marginalized groups seeking a public presence, gay men had to hone their sense of the social dynamics governing various neighborhoods and the possibilities each presented.<sup>29</sup> In constructing a gay map of the city, they had to consider the maps devised by other, sometimes hostile, groups, so a tactical logic governed the location of gay cruising areas. They tended to be clustered in theater and retail shopping districts, where many gay men worked and where heavy pedestrian traffic offered cover, such as Union Square, Herald Square, and Harlem's Seventh Avenue and 135th Street; along the socially less desirable avenues darkened by elevated trains thundering overhead, particularly Third and Sixth Avenues, where few powerful interests would notice them; close to the parks where men gathered, such as Fifth Avenue in the twenty blocks south of Central Park (and, in later years, Central Park West in the Seventies); along Riverside Drive and other parts of the waterfront, where many seamen and other unmarried or transient workers were to be found; and, in general, in the same "vice" areas where other forms of disreputable sexual behavior, particularly prostitution, were tacitly allowed to flourish, or that for one reason or another provided a measure of privacy and "cover" to gay men seeking to meet.

As the historian Susan Porter Benson has observed, the elaborate display windows that department stores began installing in the late nineteenth century quickly became the locus of one of the few acceptable street cultures for middle-class women, who could stroll down the street looking at them and conversing with other browsers, "their loitering in public space," as Benson notes, "legitimized by its association with consumption." As men, gay men had less need to justify their

presence on the streets, but they took advantage of the same legitimizing conventions. One man who had indicated his interest in meeting another might stop before a window and gaze at the display; the second could then join him at the window without attracting undue attention and strike up a conversation in which they could determine whether they wanted to spend more time together.<sup>30</sup> "Fairies hang out in the saloon opposite Bloomingdale's," a Macy's saleswoman claimed in 1913, and, she added, the blocks of Third Avenue in the East Fifties, a marginal retail strip under the El, were "their favorite beat."<sup>31</sup> A study of arrests for homosexual activity in 1921 provides further evidence of the extent to which cruising was concentrated in retail shopping districts, for it revealed that the subway stations at Lexington and Fifty-ninth Street (where Bloomingdale's stood), Union Square (the site of numerous cheap retail outlets), and Herald Square (where Macy's, Gimbels, and Saks—34th Street were located) each accounted for more arrests than any other station, and together accounted for three-quarters of the arrests reported in all subway stations.<sup>32</sup>

The evolution of East Fourteenth Street between Third Avenue and Union Square as one of the preeminent centers of working-class gay life and of homosexual street activity in the city from the 1890s into the 1920s illustrates the factors that encouraged the development of a cruising area. Known as the Rialto, Fourteenth Street had once been at the heart of a fashionable entertainment and residential district. But by the 1890s it had become an inexpensive retail strip and a center of ribald entertainment for working-class men, where "theatres, muse-ums for men only, drinking palaces, gambling joints, and worse abounded."<sup>33</sup> Its legitimate theaters had turned into vaudeville and burlesque houses, and its elegant restaurants had given way to workingmen's saloons. It was also a center of female street prostitution and, before the crackdowns of the early 1910s, of brothels. It was in this context that Fourteenth Street had become the "chief stamping-ground in the New York metropolitan district" of fairies and other gay men in the 1890s.<sup>34</sup> Ralph Werther spent many a night there, attracting the attention of young men as he promenaded up and down the street in the flashy clothes that proclaimed his identity as a fairy. Twenty years later, in 1914, the German homosexual emancipationist Magnus Hirschfeld (presumably on the word of his American informants) still described Union Square as a center of homosexual activity in New York.<sup>35</sup> Arrest records, novels, and diaries confirm that Fourteenth Street remained an important cruising area, especially for male prostitutes and for

less obvious gay men, until the 1930s, when it was eclipsed by Times Square.\*

The relationship between a neighborhood's changing social dynamics and its gay street scene can be seen even more clearly in Times Square, Union Square's successor. The shifting spatial and social organization of just one aspect of the Times Square's gay street culture—that of male prostitution—highlights the extent to which the apparent chaos of the most active street scenes masked a highly organized street culture, whose boundaries and conventions were well known to the initiated.

Times Square, already a busy center of female prostitution, became one of the city's most significant centers of male prostitution in the 1920s. Initially, two distinct groups of male prostitutes, whose interactions with customers were construed in entirely different ways, worked the Times Square area. Well-dressed, "mannered," and gay-identified hustlers serving a middle-class gay-identified clientele generally met their customers as the latter left the theater and walked home on the west side of Fifth Avenue from Forty-second to Fifty-ninth Streets. This was also a stretch where men who were not hustlers often met each other, and where hustlers could meet men walking to Central Park, another major cruising area (but not one where sexual contacts usually involved monetary exchange). Although a regular part of the Times Square scene, neither the hustlers nor their customers attracted much attention, since neither conformed to the era's dominant stereotypes of inverts. During the 1920s, a second group of male prostitutes came to dominate Forty-second Street itself between Fifth and Eighth Avenues: the effeminate (but not transvestite) "fairy prostitutes" who sold sexual services to other gay men and to men who identified themselves as "normal," including Italians and Greeks living to the west of the Square in Hell's Kitchen, as well as tourists from afar. The self-presentation of the prostitutes operating on the two streets differed markedly, as did the self-conception of their customers.<sup>36</sup> The proximity of the two groups points up the degree to which the Square's streets, like those in other parts of the city, were the site of multiple sexual systems, each with its own cultural dynamics, semiotic codes, and territories.

The transformation of Forty-second Street during the 1920s and early 1930s had enormous repercussions for the street's gay scene. Forty-second

\* Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's roman à clef, *The Young and Evil*, described Fourteenth Street as "a most vulgar street, invariably alive with the sex-starved," and included a scene in which a gay character makes eye contact with someone in a Fourteenth Street cafeteria and then follows him into Union Square in a taxi, ordering the cab to stop by the man so that he can pick him up (133-40).

Street was the site of the oldest theaters in the Times Square district, and the city's elite had regarded it as a distinguished address early in the century. By 1931, however, it had effectively become a working-class male domain. The conversion of two prominent Forty-second Street theaters, the Republic (later Victory) and Eltinge (later Empire), into burlesque houses in 1931 had both signified and contributed to the masculinization of the street. Not only the strippers inside but the large quasi-pornographic billboards and barkers announcing the shows outside intensified the image of the street as a male domain, threatening to women.<sup>37</sup> The masculinization of the street was confirmed by the conversion of the remaining theaters to a "grind" policy of showing male-oriented action films on a continuous basis and the opening of several men's bars and restaurants that catered to the increasing numbers of sailors, servicemen, and unemployed and transient men who frequented the street.

As the gender and class character of Forty-second Street changed, it became a major locus of a new kind of "rough" hustler and of interactions between straight-identified servicemen and homosexuals.<sup>38</sup> The deepening Depression of the 1930s led growing numbers of young men—many of them migrants from the economically devastated cities of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York, and the South—to support themselves or supplement their income by hustling.<sup>39</sup> Not gay-identified themselves, many became prostitutes for the same reason some women did: the work was available and supplied a needed income. "In the Depression the Square swarmed with boys," recalled one man who became a customer in 1933. "Poverty put them there."<sup>40</sup> According to another account, 1932 was a critical year, when growing numbers of "transient boys . . . went to Times Square to 'play the queers.'"<sup>41</sup> They were joined by many soldiers and sailors, long attracted to the Square, who began hustling as well. These new hustlers, aggressively masculine in their self-presentation and usually called "rough trade" by gay men, took over Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, forcing the fairy prostitutes to move east of Sixth Avenue, to Bryant Park.<sup>42</sup>

The precise locus of the hustlers' and gay men's activity on Forty-second Street shifted several times over the course of the 1930s. The details of the moves are unimportant in themselves, but they reveal something of the social organization of the streets in general, for they resulted largely from the changing geography of the gay bars and other commercial sites where men met. The corner of Broadway and Forty-second near the Times Building was popular in the late 1920s, when the building's basement arcade and the Liggett's drugstore upstairs functioned as meeting places.<sup>43</sup> Men gathered in the middle of the northern side of the block between

Seventh and Eighth Avenues in the mid-1930s, when it was the site of the Barrel House, the most famous sailor-prostitute-homosexual bar of the era. It was "wholly uninhibited . . . as to 'accosting,'" recalled one patron. "You could count a dozen [hustlers] lined up on the curb outside the Barrel House, in addition to the number inside who had the price of a beer to get in."<sup>44</sup> They moved to the south side of the street after the police closed the Barrel House and the Marine Bar & Grill took its place. During the war they settled near Sixth Avenue, where several cheap luncheonettes and sailor and hustler bars, such as the Pink Elephant, stood under the Elevated.<sup>45</sup>

The hustler scene followed the bars so closely in part because the bars attracted customers and offered shelter from the elements, but also because the streets and bars functioned as extensions of each other. Each site had particular advantages and posed particular dangers in men's constant territorial struggles with policing agents, as the men subject to that policing well knew. The purchase of a beer at a bar legitimized behavior involved in cruising that might have appeared more suspicious on the streets, including a man's simply standing about aimlessly or striking up conversations with strangers. But while the police periodically tried to clean up the streets by chasing hustlers and other undesirable loiterers away, they could not permanently close the streets in the way they could close a bar. In a heavily trafficked nonresidential area such as Forty-second Street, no one had the same interest in controlling pedestrians' behavior on behalf of the police that a bar owner threatened with the loss of his license had in controlling his customers. Whereas the police might harass men on the street simply for standing about with no apparent purpose, bars might evict them simply for touching, and plainclothesmen might arrest them for trying to pick up a man in either locale. The relative dangers of either site varied and depended on the momentary concerns of the police, and much of the talk on the streets was necessarily devoted to their shifting tactics. On more than one occasion in the 1930s and 1940s a man noted in his diary that all of the street's hustlers had suddenly disappeared, apparently aware of some danger their customers did not perceive.<sup>46</sup>

Although bars were the major gathering place for men after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the numerous cheap cafeterias, Automats, and lunchrooms that crowded the Times Square area had a similar symbiotic relationship with the "public" life of the street throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Thompson's Lunch Room on Sixth Avenue between Forty-second and Forty-third Streets was reputed to be a gay rendezvous in 1920, as was "a place on W 46 St [in 1921] where fairies [are] supposed to hang out and meet men."<sup>47</sup> Men also moved back and forth between the



streets and the large cafeterias located in the Square, and according to one 1931 account, during the winter the Automat across Forty-second Street from Bryant Park became a favorite haunt of the men who gathered in the park during the summer.<sup>48</sup>

Numerous movie and burlesque theaters, especially those in gay cruising areas, also became a part of the gay circuit. The small, dark, and unsupervised nickelodeons that began to appear in working-class neighborhoods in the 1890s had immediately aroused the concern of social purists, who feared they would become the site of illicit mingling of the sexes. The theaters also developed an unsavory reputation in middle-class society at large, which the nascent movie industry overcame only by building huge, elegant theaters (appropriately known as movie palaces) in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>49</sup> Even some of the palaces became known as trysting spots for heterosexual couples, however, and a few, particularly in less reputable areas, became places where gay men (as well as straight men simply interested in a homosexual encounter) could meet one another. Although men pursued other men in all sections of the theaters, the standing-room area and the balconies were particularly suitable as meeting places. Ushers, some of whom were gay themselves (and some of whom supplemented their income by introducing male patrons to female prostitutes working in the theaters), seem generally to have avoided the balconies (where heterosexual couples also often met) and left them free from surveillance.<sup>50</sup>

In the first six months of 1921, at least sixty-seven men were arrested for homosexual solicitation in movie theaters in Manhattan, including an astonishing forty-five men at a single theater at 683 Sixth Avenue, near Twenty-second Street. A city magistrate who had heard the cases of many of the men arrested there claimed that the theater had been "the resort of male degenerates" for the previous two or three years "to such an extent that from one to two policemen are detailed to sit in the audience almost constantly." The judge thought it had acquired a reputation among gay men "as a place where men of a certain class [that is, homosexual] will meet congenial spirits." He claimed to have tried the case of a tourist who had learned of the theater before visiting New York and gone there "within two hours of his arrival in the city."<sup>51</sup>

Since moviegoing was a perfectly legitimate way to spend the afternoon, theaters were places where young men could go to search out other gay men and begin to learn about the gay world. "I thought I was [the] only one like this until I reached High School," recalled one thirty-four-year-old black man in 1922. After learning a bit about the gay world from the other homosexuals he met in school, though, "I used to go to matinees, meet people like myself, get into conversation and [I]

learned that this is a quite common thing. They put me wise."<sup>52</sup> Another man who frequented the Forty-second Street theaters during World War II met several men there who became his friends. He and his friends shared stories of their adventures there, suggesting that such venues were not just sites for anonymous, furtive encounters but could also serve valued social (and socializing) functions.<sup>53</sup> The theaters, like other locales, were subject to periodic crackdowns, and gay men depended on the grapevine to protect themselves. On one occasion in 1945 the man mentioned above stopped going to the Forty-second Street theaters for several weeks because gay friends had warned him that they were infested with plainclothesmen.<sup>54</sup>

#### FINDING PRIVACY IN PUBLIC: THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF "PUBLIC SEX"

Men used public spaces to meet their friends and to find potential sexual partners. But they also used them for sex. Poorer men, especially, had few alternatives. Unable to bring male partners home to crowded tenement quarters, unable to afford even an hour's stay at a Raines Law hotel or flophouse, they were forced to find secluded spots in the city's streets and parks where they could, for a moment, be alone with their partners. But they were joined there by other men as well, including middle-class men with access to more private quarters who found "public sex" exciting, and a variety of men who were not gay-identified but nonetheless used such sites for various purposes. The encounters in such "public" spaces thus had different meanings for different men—and suggest the complexity of the city's sexual topographies.

Sodomy-trial depositions from the 1890s and early 1900s record the range of spaces used by workingmen for sexual encounters: an Irish laborer and a schoolboy discovered by a suspicious patrolman in a covered wagon standing on a lower Manhattan street one night in 1889; two laborers caught in an ice wagon in an Italian immigrant neighborhood in 1896; a German deli worker and an Irish waiter seen on a loading platform on a deserted industrial street at 3 A.M. one night the same year; an Irish porter and an Italian laborer discovered in a recessed doorway another night; and, throughout the period, couples apprehended in vacant lots and in the nooks and crannies of the tenements—the outhouse in the backyard, the roof, the cellar, the darkened stairway.<sup>55</sup> The absence of private quarters forced men constantly to improvise, in other words, to seize whatever relatively hidden space they could find, whenever they found a sexual partner.

But they also developed a more finely calibrated sexual map of the city: certain streets, sections of parks, and public washrooms where men regularly went for sex and knew they were likely to find other men. They shared many of those sites with young heterosexual men and women, who

sought privacy in them for the same reasons many gay men did. Both groups, for instance, found the city's parks particularly useful. They were dark at night, and the larger ones offered numerous secluded spots in the midst of bushes and trees where couples could find privacy in even so public a space. Police and anti-vice investigators regularly noted the troubling appearance of unsupervised heterosexual couples spooning on secluded benches and disappearing into the bushes in the city's numerous parks. "We didnt see anything else but couples laying on grass, or sitting on benches, kissing and hugging each other . . . especially [in] the dark sections which are poor lighted," an agent reported of Central Park in 1920.<sup>56</sup> Agents surveying the problem at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx late in the summer of 1917 observed a similar scene: soldiers met prostitutes and other women at the nearby subway station and walked into the park, where they hid in the bushes and near the boathouse. They also discovered that men interested in meeting other men took similar advantage of the park's hidden spaces, for they noticed "many soldiers in the dark spots on [the] way in [the] Park to the Inn, walking arm and arm hugging and kissing."<sup>57</sup> Police records suggest how common a practice it was for men to use the parks for sexual encounters. In the last five years of the nineteenth century, park police arrested men found having sex in the recesses of Central, Riverside, Mount Morris, City Hall, Tompkins Square, and Battery Parks, and by early in the twentieth century they had arrested men in Washington Square Park as well.<sup>58</sup>

Of all the spaces to which men had recourse for sexual encounters, none were more specific to gay men—or more highly contested, both within the gay world and without—than New York's public comfort stations and subway washrooms. The city had begun building the stations in the late nineteenth century in parks and at major intersections, partly in an effort to offer workingmen an alternative to the saloons, which until then had afforded virtually the only publicly accessible toilets in the city. By 1925, there were eighteen comfort stations in Manhattan.<sup>59</sup> A wave of arrests in 1896, shortly after the first stations opened, indicates that several of them, including the ones at Battery Park, City Hall Park, and Chatham Square, all near concentrations of cheap transient lodging houses, had quickly become regular homosexual rendezvous. The public comfort station at City Hall Park appears to have developed a particularly widespread reputation as a meeting ground, drawing men from throughout the city. A twenty-eight-year-old salesman from West Thirty-fourth Street met a twenty-four-year-old clerk from Brooklyn there one night in March 1896, for instance; later that year a porter living in a Bowery rooming house met a cook there who was visiting the city from Westport, Connecticut.<sup>60</sup>

As the city's subway system expanded in the early years of the century, its washrooms also became major sexual centers. Men who had met on the subway could retire to them easily, and men who wanted a quick sexual release on the way home from work learned that there were men at certain subway washrooms who would readily accommodate them. Encounters could take place at almost any station, but certain washrooms developed reputations for such activity. By the 1930s, the men's washroom in the Times Square subway station and the comfort station at Times Square were used so frequently for sexual encounters that they became widely known among gay men as the "Sunken Gardens" (possibly an allusion to the song by Beatrice Lillie about the fairies at the bottom of *her* garden), a name subsequently sometimes applied to other underground washrooms. Gay men dubbed all the restrooms (often called "t-rooms," short for "toilet-rooms," in early-twentieth-century slang) "tearooms," which allowed them to discuss their adventures surreptitiously in mixed company, and may also have been an arch comment on the rooms' significance as social centers. If "tearoom" normally referred to a gracious café where respectable ladies could meet without risk of encountering inebriated males, it could ironically name the less elegant locale where so many gay men met.<sup>61</sup>

Bourgeois ideology—and certainly the ideology that guided state regulation—regarded comfort stations as public spaces (of the most sordid sort, in fact, since they were associated with bodily functions even more stigmatized than sex), but the men who used them for sex succeeded in making them functionally quite private. As the sociologist Laud Humphreys's research in the 1960s revealed, public washrooms became a locus of homosexual encounters throughout the country not only because of their accessibility to men of little means, but also because it was easy to orchestrate sexual activity at even the most active of tearooms so that no one uninvolved in it would see it, thus providing the participants, as Humphreys put it, "privacy in public."<sup>\*</sup>

The vice squad and other policing agents were well aware of men's abil-

\* One man often served informally as a sentry who could warn the others about the approach of strangers, and, given the possible consequences of approaching the wrong man, even two strangers alone in an isolated washroom usually sought to confirm their mutual interest in an encounter through a series of nonverbal signs before overtly approaching each other. The most popular tearooms had elaborate and noisy entrances, which alerted men to the approach of another and gave them time to stop whatever they were doing. To reach one tearoom famous among gay men in the 1940s, located on the eighth floor of the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, for instance, those arriving had to pass through several doors in a long corridor, thus providing the men in the room ample warning of their approach.<sup>62</sup>

ity to conceal their encounters. By the 1910s they had developed ways to circumvent the men's tactics and keep the tearooms under surveillance. Most commonly, the vice squad hid policemen behind the grill facing the urinals so that they could observe and arrest men having sex there or in the stalls. In 1912, agents of the Pennsylvania Railroad even cut holes in the ceiling of the men's room at their Cortlandt Street ferry house in order to spy on men using the facilities. The observers' need to hide was significant; as even the police admitted, the men they observed would have stopped having sex as soon as they heard someone beginning to open the outer door. The police also periodically sent plainclothesmen into the public comfort stations and subway washrooms to entrap men. In the earliest recorded incident, in 1914, a plainclothesman stationed at the Chatham Square comfort station got into a conversation with another man there, agreed to go with him and a third man to a secluded part of Battery Park, and then arrested both of them.<sup>63</sup> A 1921 study confirmed the risks these police tactics posed to the men who met in such locales: fully 38 percent of the arrests of men for homosexual activity that year were made in subway washrooms.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, enforcement efforts were only sporadic. The police could hardly monitor every subway station's washroom every day, and the tearooms continued to be widely used for decades.

Arrests could have catastrophic consequences. Conviction often resulted in a sentence of thirty to sixty days in the workhouse, but the extralegal sanctions could be worse. An arrest could result in a man's homosexuality being revealed to family members, employer, and landlord, either because the police called to "confirm" a man's identity, employment, or residence or because the man himself had to explain his incarceration. Augustus Granville Dill, an activist in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the business manager of its magazine, *The Crisis*, was widely known and admired in Harlem circles. He had a reputation as a dandy, who always wore a bright chrysanthemum in his buttonhole and was known to engage in flamboyant behavior in public. In 1928 he was arrested in a subway washroom. W. E. B. Du Bois, the editor of *The Crisis*, promptly fired him.<sup>65</sup>

The men who used subway washrooms tended to be relatively poor and to have relatively little access to other kinds of private space, either because of their poverty or because their own homes were unavailable to them for homosexual trysts. Among other sources, two surveys in 1938 and 1940 of homosexual inmates at the city jail, many of whom would have been apprehended in the tearooms, suggest this. Almost half the inmates surveyed were laborers (another 13 percent had no job at all) and a third lived in tenement houses with families. Only 3 per-

cent to 5 percent were professionals or lived in "superior" housing.<sup>66</sup> "Subways were *the* meeting place for everyone," recalled one black man of his days as a poor youth in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. "Every station had a restroom then and you could always meet people there. People who didn't have a place to stay could take the train up to the Bronx and always find someone who'd give them a place to stay and some money."<sup>67</sup>

It would be wrong, though, to suppose that *only* poor men frequented the tearooms, for many other men visited them as well. Indeed, the constant sexual activity in the city's public restrooms involved thousands of men for whom the encounters had widely varying meanings. Even among gay men, views about the propriety of such visits varied enormously. Some men, particularly those who were professionally successful in jobs that required them to pass as straight, found it astonishing that anyone in their circles would *risk* going to a tearoom, given the threat of arrest and the availability of alternatives to men highly integrated into gay society. Others were as likely as the anti-vice societies to regard such encounters as shameful, for they expected the same level of romanticism, monogamy, and commitment to be involved in gay relationships that bourgeois ideology expected of marriage. (The painter Russell Cheney sought to forswear his visits to comfort stations after falling in love with the literary critic F. O. Matthiessen in 1925, for instance; such escapades, previously so important to him, seemed inconsistent with the life his newfound love made him wish to lead.)<sup>68</sup> As a result, even many of the men who visited the tearooms were ashamed of the practice and never revealed them to their friends.

A different and perhaps more dominant strain of gay male culture valued sexual adventurism, experimentation, and variety. Men who shared this perspective were likely to regard tearooms more positively because of the unparalleled access they provided to a large and varied group of men. Some men found the very anonymity, unpredictability, and danger of encounters in public places to be sexually exciting. They took such encounters as a matter of course and many regaled their friends with stories of their tearoom exploits. Some men involved in long-term nonmonogamous relationships even took their lovers to see the particularly active sites they had discovered.<sup>69</sup>

Tearoom encounters' very lack of romanticism and emotional involvement made them particularly attractive to another group of men. If some men used tearooms because police harassment and poverty left them nowhere else to go, others used them because anti-homosexual social attitudes left them unable, emotionally, to go elsewhere. Pervasive anti-homosexual social attitudes kept many men who were interested in other

men from fully acknowledging that interest to themselves, and many of them sought sexual encounters in spaces, such as public washrooms, that seemed to minimize the implications of the experiences by making them easy to isolate from the rest of their lives and identities. The association of tearooms with the most primal of bodily functions reinforced men's sense that the sexual experiences they had there were simply another form of release, a bodily function that implied nothing more about a man's character than those normally associated with the setting.

The same lack of commitment also made the tearooms attractive to straight men interested in a quick sexual release and to yet another group of men who acknowledged their homosexual interests to themselves, but dared not visit a bar or restaurant with a gay reputation because of their other public roles and identities. A brief stop at a subway tearoom did not seem to involve the risk of suffering the loss in status that identifying themselves as gay to their everyday associates would. Anonymous encounters with strangers were the only way some men conscious of distinctively homosexual desires felt safe satisfying them. The existence of places like the tearooms made it easier for men to move in and out of the gay world, and many who had sexual encounters there participated no further in that world. Indeed, some of them regularly returned from those encounters to their conventional lives as respected family men. A quarter of the men arrested for homosexual activity in 1920-21, for instance, were married and many of them had children—although for those family men, the illusion of security offered by the tearooms had been shattered.<sup>70</sup>

Men went to the tearooms for a variety of reasons, and their encounters could have radically different meanings for each participant. But the encounters often affected how even men little involved in other aspects of the gay world regarded that world. They reinforced the negative impressions of many men, for they seemed to offer vivid confirmation of the cultural association of homosexuality with degeneracy by putting homosexuality and homosexuals almost literally in the gutter. Even the men most attracted to the tearooms as sexual meeting grounds had to be influenced by a culture that regarded such locales and such practices with disgust.

But the tearooms also offered more positive insights into the character of the gay world. Even anonymous participation in the sexual underground could provide men with an enticing sense of the scope of the gay world and of its counterstereotypical diversity, which led some of them to decide to explore that world further. The sheer numbers of men they witnessed participating in tearoom sex reassured many who felt isolated and uncertain of their own "normality," especially since most of the participants were not "flaming queens" but "normal"-looking men of diverse

backgrounds.\* When a physician at the New York City Jail in the early 1920s asked gay prisoners, many of whom had been arrested for cruising tearooms and streets, to estimate the number of homosexuals in New York, some guessed there must be half a million, or at least a hundred thousand; even the more conservative put the figure at fifty thousand to a hundred thousand.<sup>72</sup> While such figures hardly constitute reliable estimates of the size of the city's gay population, they provide vivid evidence that men who frequented the streets and tearooms perceived themselves to be involved in an underworld of enormous dimensions. Such an impression could be particularly important to men just beginning to explore the gay world. "From the 'gay side' of the Astor Hotel bar to the bushes behind the Forty-second Street library [in Bryant Park]," recalled Martin Goodkin of his early forays into New York's gay underworld, "to the public tearoom right outside of Fordham University (where I was once arrested by entrapment . . .) to the eighth floor restroom in the RCA Building to the restroom across the street in the parking garage . . . and on and on and on, New York seemed to be one big cruising ground, especially to this teenager." It was an electrifying realization, he recalled, and a reassuring one, for it persuaded him that he had discovered and become part of a vast secret world, with its own territories and codes, whose existence would ensure he never felt isolated again.<sup>73</sup>

#### THE CONTESTED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE

The streets and parks had particular significance 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 venues for socializing and even for sexual encounters in the early twentieth century. Indeed, gay street culture was in many respects simply part of a much larger working-class street youth culture and was policed as part of the policing of that larger culture. Many of the same forces drawing working-class gay men into the streets drew other young working-class men and women as well. The pull of social ties was important to both groups, who were keen to create a communal life in the streets and other public spaces. There women bargained with peddlers or socialized with their neighbors on the stoop, men met in nearby saloons, children played and searched for rags and other useful items. But there were material reasons for street life as well. The most important, as noted previously, was that most working-class men and women, gay and straight alike, lived in crowded

\*Even the probation officers who investigated the backgrounds of some of the men arrested for homosexual solicitation in 1921 commented that "perhaps half did not impress [them] as [being] of the homo-sexual type," by which they presumably meant the men did not conform to the stereotypical image of the "pansy."<sup>71</sup>

tenements, boardinghouses, and lodging houses, which offered them few amenities and virtually no privacy. Young people in search of sex and romance discovered that "privacy could only be had in public," in the evocative phrase of Samuel Chotzinoff. As a result, recalled Chotzinoff, who was raised in a Jewish immigrant family on the Lower East Side, the streets of his neighborhood in the evening "were thick with promenading couples, and the benches around the fountain and in Jackson Street Park, and the empty trucks lined up at the river front, were filled with lovers who had no other place to meet."<sup>74</sup> Men interested in homosexual encounters were not the only people to make use of such so-called public spaces.

Nor were tenement-roof rendezvous the exclusive domain of gay men. A 1914 study of the working-class Irish and German youth of the Hell's Kitchen district west of Times Square found conditions there no different from those described by Chotzinoff. "The youth of the district and his girl" found "uses" for the "dark, narrow passages" of the tenement hallways, the report observed, and "certain roofs of the neighborhood [had] a name as a rendezvous for children and young couples for immoral practices."<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as noted previously, undercover agents surveying the sexual uses of the city's parks noted the presence of both same-sex and mixed-sex couples. Denied the privacy the home was ideally supposed to provide, in other words, young men and women throughout the tenement districts tried to construct some measure of privacy for themselves in spaces middle-class ideology regarded as "public."

The men who sought homosexual encounters in the streets, then, were participating in and expanding a street culture already developed by working-class youths seeking freedom from their families' supervision. 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.<sup>76</sup> The fact that these couples met in unsupervised public places and even had sex there was more shocking still 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 use of public spaces for sexual purposes was only one aspect of a more general pattern of class differentiation in the uses of the streets and in the norms of public sociability, a difference that troubled middle-class reformers deeply. Struggles over the proper social and sexual order were central to the process of class differentiation, constitution, and conflict in the Progressive Era. Those struggles were fueled by middle-class fears about the apparently pernicious social effects of urbanization, which were graphically represented by the disorderly, unregulated, and alien character of working-class street life. The 1914 Russell Sage Foundation study of the conditions of young people in Hell's Kitchen indicted the unruly culture of the streets as the source of the "lawlessness" of neighborhood boys, even as it painted a portrait of a working-class life starkly different from that of its readers. "Streets, roofs, docks, hallways,—these, then, are the West Side boy's playground, and will be for many years to come," observed the report, which warned that the boys' parents, "so long accustomed to the dangers of the streets, to the open flaunting of vice, drunkenness, and gambling on all sides . . . do not take into account the impression which these conditions are making upon young minds."<sup>77</sup> Although the dangers *these* conditions posed to the character of the young were not limited to the sexual, this was certainly a concern of the reformers. Appalled by the overt sexualization of public space and the public character of sexual interactions in working-class neighborhoods, the report observed that "children of both sexes indulge freely in conversation which is only carried on secretly by adults in other walks of life [middle-class adults]." And although it did not stress the point, it warned that the boys' unrestricted involvement in the life of the streets resulted in their becoming familiar with the "many sexual perverts" to be found in the neighborhood, whom they might otherwise have avoided, which led to "experimentation among the boys, and to the many forms of perversion which in the end make the degenerate. . . . Self-abuse is considered a common joke," it added, "and boys as young as seven or eight actually practice sodomy."<sup>78</sup>

The Progressive movement to construct parks, playgrounds, and after-school programs of organized recreation and education, which would "Americanize" immigrant children, reflected middle-class reformers' concerns about the corrupting influences of the street on working-class youth. So, too, did the escalation of campaigns by the forces of social



purity against working-class street culture and sexual culture, which resulted in an expansion of the vice squad and in the campaigns against the Raines Law hotels, saloons, cabarets, and other commercial amusements, already chronicled, which had a powerful effect on gay life.

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 hetero-normativity that ordinarily 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 entrée 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.