

One-Handed Geographies: An Archaeology of Public Sex

David Bell

On the Heath someone choking in the dark giving a blow job, said loudly: “The ghost of Christmas Past.”

Picked up a tough looking skinhead who said: “Fuck me.”

“OK,” I said.

“That’s a bit risky,” he said, and had a good laugh.

“I was only thinking it,” I said.

“Fuck everything,” he said.

—“Derek”¹

I

In thinking about the shifting meaning of the “public” when twinned with that old devil called “sex,” we can begin to envision how erotic and eroticised topographies can be created, reworked, and reclaimed. Outdoor scenes, nudism, exhibitionism,

voyeurism, cruising—made by marking the erogenous zones of the city and the country, the bodies at play publicly map out new landscapes of desire.²

The spaces of sex in this context are an endless psychogeography of perverse possibilities:³ a sensuous geography of sadomasochism in deserted warehouses, circle-jerking in woodlands, the sewage worker’s birthday party, cruising the perfume counter, watching your suburban neighbours getting carpet burns, fucking in the school toilets, talking dirty on the phone, ladies’ nights at the health club—a sexscape of alleys, cars and carparks, the beach, the town hall steps, the mall. These are all locations



Hampstead Heath, London.

for polymorphous decentered exchanges in polymorphous decentered landscapes.⁴ By telling the stories of these encounters, we participate in the project of a “queer archaeology,” marking the traces of our erotic selves passing through the public spaces that surround us.⁵

II

The true picture of erotic spaces barred from what is structurally possible flits by. Such spaces are recognizable only as images which flash in an instant; fleeting gaps that defy words, left-overs from some unacknowledged sacrificial meal. These uncanny spaces involve the ghostly reappearance of what’s been made to disappear; hearing what’s been silenced; tasting what’s forbidden; touched by the smell of rotting fruit.

—“Stephen”⁶

I do like sex in the open. When I lived in Hammersmith there was a part of the river bank that was great. A lot of the student nurses from Charing Cross Hospital went there, among others. Also, the bushes in Brighton were a good place to meet. A lot of the time the guys wouldn’t bother going into the bushes, but would have sex on the path; the more daring under the lighting. I learned a lot from watching them.

—“Grant”⁷

III

The strategic (re)claiming of privacy remains part of the project of queer citizenship. In tension with calls “never to go underground,” the right to be private clashes with campaigns of outing, with the perverse parade of pride marches, and with the celebrations of public sex.⁸ Discussions about the propriety of place for sex acts and performances always tread a fine line between desiring a selective privacy and needing to confront a heterosexist public by “flaunting it.” “When once the gay good citizen comported him/herself with dignity and avoided public flamboyance,” a queer citizen must be aware of the strategic positioning of the sexed body in space as a site of resistance against the dead weight of heteronormativity.¹⁰

IV

After midnight and tyres burn at one hundred miles an hour down wet-dream streets as a Mazda Xedos 6SE screams past lighted shop-window

displays and performs a sudden turn (aided by power steering) into a dark, unlit back-street leading to a car-park, empty except for a handful of vehicles abandoned for the night. Very quietly, it proceeds to the roofless and carless top floor of the building and eases into position close to the small wall dividing car and eternity. A joyrider gets out and stares out at the twinkling city prostrate before the twelve-story car-park. After several transfixed seconds, the joyrider climbs up onto the windscreen of the Mazda and, after a rearrangement of clothing, begins a ritual of isolated relief for all the heavens to see, starting in a slow and delicate manner, rapidly rising to a faster, sharper handling. During the working day a car-park has only one possible function, and people have no desire to stay longer than is necessary, just park the car and get out of there. At night this rigid structure can yield itself to the sexual fantasy, but which, somehow, remains as limited as the car-park's day-job. But for the moment the joyrider is gripped by the insistency of sexual urges, the contrasting nature of the car-park's space through the twenty-four-hour cycle rather adding to the enjoyment.

—“Prof”¹¹

V

Within a portfolio of queer performativity,¹² transgressing public heteronormativity remains one of the most forceful and challenging tactics.¹³ Queer nights out to straight nightspots, kiss-ins in shopping malls, safer sex workshops, and forms of public sex all



perform a resonantly troubling political pleasure-praxis, which might articulate the disruptive potential which queer is said to embody.¹⁴ Casting aside the arguments about empty transgression,¹⁵ we can envision an erotically charged *detournement* of the heterosexist city into a flickering spectacle of sites for queer play.¹⁶ What might this city be like? We can only imagine the pleasure zones it might contain and then contrast that image with the reality of the cities we live in. The maps have yet to be drawn.¹⁷

VI

Arriving home with excellent fuel consumption in a Peugeot 309, seven joyriders charge into the three bedroomed, suburban semi and start fucking, rampaging through the house in every possible combination of twosomes, threesomes, foursomes, same and mixed gender sex, etc.; kitchen sex, lounge sex, bathroom sex, toilet sex, stairs sex, garden sex, etc. The geography of the family home echoes the developments in the control and surveillance of the city, in the way that space has been divided into specified areas of activity to control the activities that take place there. In the home, sex is invisible, masturbation is never mentioned, in keeping with the heterosexual agenda of normalisation, and not even seven joyriders engaging in loud sex can tear down the walls.

—“Prof”¹⁸

Lesbian identity is constructed in the temporal and linguistic mobilization of space, as we move through space we imprint utopian and dystopian moments upon urban life . . . In an instant, a freeze-frame, a lesbian is occupying space as it occupies her. Space teems with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, u-turns, dead-ends, and one-way streets; it is never still.

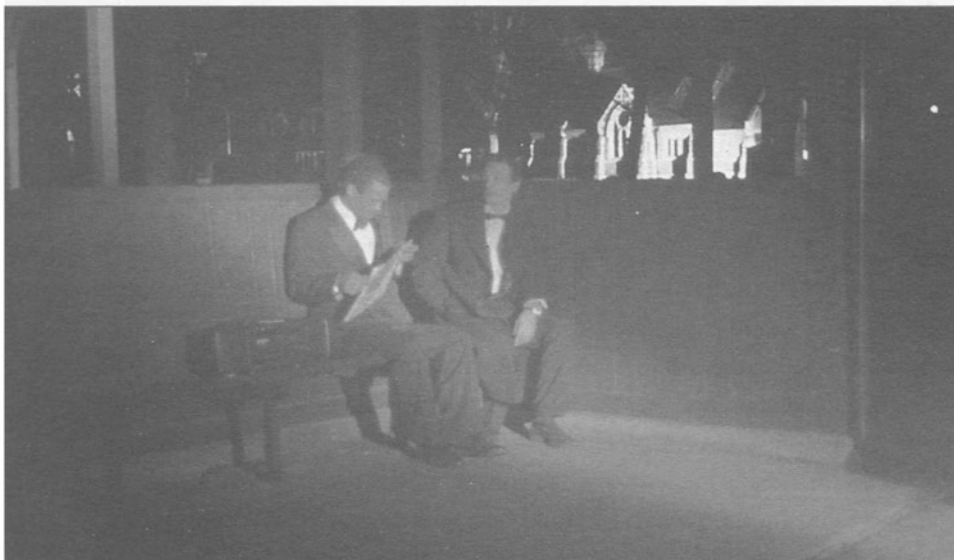
—“Sally”¹⁹

VII

If we are going to embark on revisioning the public as a future site of queer performativity freed from the pressures of heteronormativity, what will become of the private? While we might try to assert that a private sphere would be unnecessary in the kinky city of queer play, we must at the same time realise that the need for privacy remains a fundamental requirement for those whose erotic configurations and tastes pass into forbidden zones.²⁰ There must be a private realm into which the state and law cannot pry, a realm where—beyond the basic human rules of mutual consent, respect, and



Performance of *Undressing Icons: Looking for Langston*, directed by Isaac Julien, Kings Cross, London, 1990. Photograph by Peter Barker. Courtesy of Normal Films, London.



Performance of *Undressing Icons: Looking for Langston*, directed by Isaac Julien, Newcastle, 1992. Photograph by Peter Barker. Courtesy of Normal Films, London.

tolerance—anything can happen.²¹ For every loud ‘n’ proud queer guerilla there is someone for whom the closet is, at least in part, the chosen home. Demolishing all closets might be a politically desirable aim, but there must also be sensitivity shown towards those who freely choose a *private* life.²² Of course, we must constantly question freedom of choice in societies that routinely deny this basic freedom to sexual dissidents.²³

VIII

[L]et me just say that these words—dom, Master, bottom, whore-fem, butch, Daddy-boy, cruising, play, play-mate, and so on, have their place, or rather they take a place and make a place. They make an impossible place take place. They describe, circumscribe, inscribe a spectacular space, a spectacle of space: an invented, made-up, unreal, larger-than-life-and-certainly-more-interesting space that people like myself sniff out and crave and live in and want to call “Home;” a home I want to suggest that is entirely Urban; an urbanness I want to say that is entirely City and not at all—or not exactly—Community; a queer (kind of) city (or better yet, cities), that finally, not only privileges the Joke but has something to do with the cry: “Freedom.”

—“Sue”²⁴

For those in the know, the alfresco fuck is the original fuck.

—“Derek”²⁵

IX

The quest for sexual adventures in heteronormative environments is part of the mission to rearticulate both public and private spheres.²⁶ But equally important is the campaign for a queer private sphere that is out of sight and reach. By resisting the pressures that would place certain acts and actors firmly within a nonpublic space away from public gaze, while trying at the same time to deny the right to privacy by intruding and starting all that sex talk, the creative and wild possibilities for a new urban sex-political and sex-pleasure praxis are made manifest.²⁷ The closing come-shot is always already loaded with this contradiction: what we wish to remain private will be rendered public, what we would take into the public will be projected back into the private. Continuing to challenge such hegemonic narratives of the propriety of place for queer acts must be central to any activist queer project.²⁸

x

I cut my hair short, took off my earrings, put on a leather jacket and,
armed with KY and poppers, took off into the night . . .
I was happy.

—“Derek”²⁹

11. Orlean, *Differential cognition of urban residents, in Image and Environment*, 115–30.
12. *Ibid.*, 116. “They may be described as *lateralizations*, as semiorganized aggregates of individuals who participate in a way of life which is different from the various communities through which they pass.”
13. Appleyard, *Notes on urban perception and knowledge, in Image and Environment*, 110.
14. Hillier, *To boldly go where no planners have ever. . .*, 89–113.
15. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 147.
16. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, 10–11.
17. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 183–201.
18. Sadie Plant uses the term “radical subjectivity” in discussing Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life (The Most Radical Gesture)*, 38. “The radical subject demands the right to construct the situation in which it lives.”
19. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 194.

Restriction and Reclamation, pages 61–67

1. Nestle, *Restricted Country*.
2. In the 1950s and 1960s, women who acted out of line could be taken to the Women’s House of Detention, near The Sea Colony, on 6th Avenue (at 8th Street near the Jefferson Market Library). It was a common sight to see lovers calling to each other between the few tiny windows that looked toward the street.
3. Nestle, *Restricted Country*, 37–39.
4. The Sea Colony was a working-class lesbian bar in New York City. I was part of its world from 1958 until the mid-sixties.
5. Nestle, *Restricted Country*, 46–48.

The Interim Photographs, pages 69–76

1. Arbus, *diane arbus*.
2. Aukeman, Bill Jacobson, 95.
3. Part of the Interim Photographs series exhibited at Grey Art Gallery in New York City in 1993. See Watney, Bill Jacobson, 101.

People and Their Streets, Places, pages 77–80

1. The characters in this story were later developed into Schulman’s *Rat Bohemia*. The story in *Queers in Space*, as well as that in *Rat Bohemia*, focuses on an almost mythic, though increasingly gentrified, area of the Lower East Side of Manhattan—just west of the “renovated” Tompkins Square Park.

One-Handed Geographies, pages 81–87

1. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 98. As this quote immediately establishes, my discussion of sexscapes is site-specific: the “Heath” to which Jarman refers is Hampstead Heath, a famous London cruising ground. My entire discussion is focused on Britain, although I use material from elsewhere. Of course, this means that I take for granted certain configurations of sex in space that are founded at least in part on the British legal system’s construction of the public and private spaces of sex and sexual identity. We remain governed largely by a piece of legislation from the 1960s, the so-called Wolfenden Act, which decriminalised sex between two men of over 21 years of age and in private. In early 1994 the minimum age was reduced to 18. There was no mention of lesbians. Sex between more than two men, sex outside of a very narrowly defined “private” space—indeed any show of (homo)affection “in public”—is open to censure if not prosecution. Even winking at another man or holding hands can be arrestable offences. The rather vague charge of “promoting homosexuality” makes institutions think twice before showing gay art or publishing gay books. For example, one British university press used this ruling to deny publication to an academic text on gay men’s politics. Obscenity laws can deem even a leather jacket obscene, and sadomasochism is effectively outlawed—thanks to a test case involving a group of consenting same-sex sadomasochists. For a fuller discussion, see Bell, *Perverse dynamics, sexual citizenship and the transformation of intimacy, in Mapping Desire*, 304–17.
2. For examples, see Bell, *Erotic topographies*, 96–100; Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space*; Douglas and Rasmussen, *The Nude Beach*; Keogh, *Public sex: Spaces, acts, identities* (presented at the Sexuality and Space Network conference, London, 1992); Woodhead, “Surveillant gays,” in *Mapping Desire*, 231–44.
3. For a working example of sexual psychogeography, see Hallam, *The Book of Sodom*.
4. The phrase “polymorphous decentred exchange” is taken from Singer, *Erotic Welfare*, 122. I take it to mean sex acts freed from what she calls an “ejaculatory teleology”—sex with scripts that move beyond the standard scenarios of foreplay, penetration, orgasm. In S/M scenes, for example, the orgasm may not even be part of the script, which may instead involve fantasies, tit-torture, fisting, bondage, and so on. I appropriate the phrase “polymorphous decentred” to apply also to landscapes, since it seems to embody many of the tropes currently used to refer to what we might call the post-modern landscape. For work considering urban

- landscapes and sexualities, see, for example, Henning Bech, *Citysex: Representing lust in public* (presented at the Geographies of Desire conference, Amsterdam, 1993); Jon Binnie, *Fucking among the ruins: Postmodern sex in post-industrial places* (presented at the Sexuality and Space Network conference, London, 1992); Sue Golding, *The excess, 23–28*; and Quantum philosophy, impossible geographies and a few small points about life, liberty and the pursuit of sex (all in the name of democracy), in *Place and Politics*, 206–19; Knopp, *Sexuality and urban space*, in *Mapping Desire*, 149–61.
5. The oral histories that make up such a queer archaeology can be found in, among others, Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, *Inventing Ourselves*; Hall Carpenter Archives Gay Men's Oral History Group, *Walking After Midnight*; Hutchins and Ka'ahumanu, eds., *Bi Any Other Name*; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; National Lesbian and Gay Survey, *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and me; What a Lesbian Looks Like*; Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*; Off Pink Collective, *Bisexual Lives*.
 6. Pfohl, *Venus in Microsoft*, in *The Last Sex*, 189.
 7. National Lesbian and Gay Survey, Grant, in *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and me*, 114.
 8. For public sex, see Bell, *Citizenship and the politics of pleasure* (presented at the Institute of British Geographers annual conference, London, 1992); Perverse dynamics, sexual citizenship and the transformation of intimacy, in *Mapping Desire*, 304–17; and *Pleasure and danger*, 139–153; Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*; and *Changing sexual and personal values in the age of AIDS* (presented at the Forum on Sexuality conference, Amsterdam, 1992).
 9. It was in this language that the British *Sexual Offences Act* (1967) expressed its feelings about the decriminalisation of adult male homosexuality; see Wilson, *Which equality?*, in *Activating Theory*, 171–89.
 10. My use of the phrase “heteronormativity” is most influenced by Eadie, *Activating bisexuality*, in *Activating Theory*, 156; for the sexed body in space, see Bell, Binnie, Cream, and Valentine, *All hyped up and no place to go*, 31–48; Cream, *Out of place* (presented at the Association of American Geographers annual conference, San Francisco, 1994); and *Re-Solving riddles*, in *Mapping Desire*, 31–40; Geltmaker, *The Queer Nation acts up*, 609–50; Grosz, *Bodies-cities*, in *Sexuality and Space*, 241–54; Johnson, *Embodying geography: Some implications for considering the sexed body in space* (presented at the New Zealand Geographical Society conference, Dunedin); Longhurst, *The strange case of the missing body in geography* (presented at the Association of American Geographers annual conference, San Francisco, 1994); Rose, *On being* ambivalent, in *New Words, New Worlds*, 156–63; and Rose, *Feminism and Geography*.
 11. From Prof. Sturlason (pseud.), *Fatuouos Joyriders*, *Fatuouos Times* 3 (1993): 4. Joyriding was/is one in a series of moral panics centred on youth culture in the U.K.; teenage boys stealing fast cars to drive round the city, taunting the police, and sometimes crashing, killing or injuring themselves and others. Joyriding has been widely interpreted as signalling some kind of crisis in contemporary (working-class) masculinity; see Campbell, *Goliath*. The classic text on car fetishism and car sex remains Ballard, *Crash*.
 12. For queer performativity, see Butler, *Critically queer*, 17–32; Sedgwick, *Queer performativity*, 1–15; and Sedgwick, *Tendencies*.
 13. See Cresswell, *The geography of transgressions: Its limits and uses* (presented at the Association of American Geographers annual conference, San Francisco, 1994), for a discussion of ACT UP, among others. See also Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS demo graphics*.
 14. See Bell, *In bed with the state*, 445–52; Bell and Valentine, *The sexed self*, in *Mapping the Subject*, 143–57.
 15. For debates on transgression, see Bell, Binnie, Cream, and Valentine, *All hyped up and no place to go* (note 10); Wilson, *Is transgression transgressive?* in *Activating Theory*, 107–17.
 16. For definitions and explorations, see Debord and Wolman, *Methods of detournement*, in *Situationist International Anthology*, 8–14.
 17. For a way to draw these maps, see Ingram, *Queers in space* (presented at the Queer Sites conference, Toronto, 1993); for fictions that map out possible queer utopias, see, for example, Zimmerman, *Safe Sea of Women*.
 18. Sturlason (pseud.), note 11, p. 5.
 19. Munt, *The lesbian flâneur*, in *Mapping Desire*, 125.
 20. What place is there in the queer city, for example, for sadomasochism, bestiality, or paedophilia? See SAMOIS, ed., *Coming to Power*; Dekkers, *Dearest Pet*; O'Carroll, *Paedophilia*. For a crucial discussion of “sexual hierarchies” see Rubin, *Thinking sex*, in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 3–44.
 21. A recent British legal case around male same-sex sadomasochism, known as Operation Spanner, has brought these issues out into the open. Crucially, the defence of privacy and consent was ruled immaterial, and the men were convicted of assault charges, including “aiding and abetting assault on oneself.” The legal battle and public debate around Operation Spanner continues and has expanded. For the current status of the case see the Spanner Defense Group website: <http://www.skintwo.co.uk>. See Bibbings and Aldridge, *Sexual expression, body modification, and the defence of consent*, 356–70; Gange and Johnstone, *Believe me, everybody has*

- something pierced in California, 51–68; Stanley, Sins and passions, 207–26.
22. See, for example, the many debates from the early and mid-1990s on “outing,” such as Johansson and Percy, *Out*, and Mohr, *Gay Ideas*.
 23. This might be thought of as a central element of queer citizenship; see Cooper, An engaged state, in *Activating Theory*, 190–218.
 24. Golding, Sexual manners, in *Pleasure Principles*, 80.
 25. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 83.
 26. See Bell, Perverse dynamics, sexual citizenship, and the transformation of intimacy.
 27. The notion of “sex talk” as used here comes from Cooper (note 24), p. 208; the phrase “creative and wild possibilities” I borrow from Sue Golding, Quantum philosophy (note 4), p. 217.
 28. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (note 13), is among the most inspirational texts to encourage such a task.
 29. Jarman, *At Your Own Risk*, 80.

Surveying Territories and Landscapes, pages 91–94

1. For the more cultural and psychological aspects of the notion of the commons, see Thomashow, *Ecological Identity*, 67–102.
2. Francis, The making of democratic streets, in *Public Streets for Public Use*, 28–29.

“Open” Space as Strategic Queer Sites, pages 95–125

1. This research began in San Francisco in 1979 as an academic study, with nonvoyeuristic photographs, of gay male use of Buena Vista Park. I shared information and photographs, which a fellow Berkeley student and member of Gays and Lesbians of Wurster Hall worked into his own research (Immel, Gay urban open space in San Francisco, 33). Because of the hysteria around AIDS and gay male “promiscuity” in subsequent years, I did not publish on this topic and moved on to other questions of public space and lands, and “marginality.”
2. Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, 223.
3. Wilson, *Public Bodies—Private States*, 9–10. In her 1984 essay, *Bodies in public and private*, Elizabeth Wilson noted that the notion of the “open city,” with its large component of relatively egalitarian public space, always involved an element of surveillance, particularly by the state.
4. Crouch, The historical development of urban open space, in *Urban Open Space*, 7–8.
5. Boyer, *City of Collective Memory*, 133. Also relevant is the eighteenth-century work of Abbé Laugier whom Bernard Tschumi quoted as stating “Whoever

- knows how to design a park well will have no difficulty in tracing the plan for the building of a city according to its given area and situation.” (Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, 85; and Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 4.) Laugier was a central figure in the formation of modern design practice based on principles of eighteenth-century Enlightenment.
6. Boone, Queer sites in modernism, in *Geography of Identity*, 253.
 7. Boyer, *City of Collective Memory*, 183–84. Boyer suggests the key relationship between open space and communal and neighbourhood identities.
 8. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 1.
 9. Kenney, Strategic visibility.
 10. I use the term “essentialize” as a verb, derived from the school of essentialism that looks for fixed patterns of behaviour, relationships, and “nature”—particularly for social groups with some different biological manifestations as to gender, race, or interest in particular sex acts.
 11. For three discussions on the positions of bisexuals in relationship to queer identities, see Evans, Dual citizenship?, in *Sexual Citizenship*; George, Towards a definition of bisexuality, in *Women and Bisexuality*; and Hemmings, Locating bisexual identities, in *Mapping Desire*, 41–55, as well as Hemmings’s discussion in *Queers in Space*.
 12. Cream, Re-solving riddles, in *Mapping Desire*, 33–34.
 13. Architectural theorist Henry Urbach, once outlined the activist nature of architecture and noted that “Architecture not only represents a stage of social relations but is also a politicized protagonist.” (Panel discussion “Queer Space 1,” Storefront Art and Architecture/Cafe Architettura, New York City, June 19, 1994).
 14. In using this widely used phrase “open space,” one of the notions closest to my own is that of Iris Marion Young who said, “A public space is a place accessible to anyone, where people engage in activity as individuals or in small groups . . . The unoppressive city is thus defined as openness to unassimilated otherness.” See Nicholson, ed., *The ideal of community and the politics of difference*, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 319.
 15. In this way I reject the argument that the notion of public space provides the basis for a new normative theory of politics harking back to modernism, no matter how supple a framework informed by space. See Howell, Public space and the public sphere, 303–22.
 16. Weightman, Gay bars as private places, 10–13.
 17. One of the few case studies of the “use” of landscape architecture to minimize homoerotic contact was the work of Michael Immel on Buena Vista Park. See Immel, Gay urban open space in San Francisco, 37–44.