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"One of the most fascinating works of American social history I've ever read."
—Frank Rich, New York Times

# Gay New York

## Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940

George Chauncey

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—CHRISTINE STANSELL, *The New Republic*

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—*U.S. News & World Report*

"Well and clearly written, based on extensive research and chock-full of riveting incidents and wonderful illustrations, this indispensable book deserves a place in every gay library."
—*Genre*

"Compellingly readable. . . . electrifying . . . essential reading."
—*Lambda Book Report*

# Gay New York

*Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*

GEORGE CHAUNCEY

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*To My Parents*

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Drag balls were the largest communal events of prewar gay society, and the drag queens and other "fairies" spotlighted at them were its most visible representatives. In a sign of how gay life was integrated into African-American life, Harlem's leading photographer, James VanDerZee, produced this formal portrait of a drag queen, "Beau of the Ball," in 1927. *(Copyright © 1985 by Donna Mussenden-VanDerZee.)*

# INTRODUCTION

I

IN THE HALF-CENTURY BETWEEN 1890 AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND World War, a highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing gay male world took shape in New York City. That world included several gay neighborhood enclaves, widely publicized dances and other social events, and a host of commercial establishments where gay men gathered, ranging from saloons, speakeasies, and bars to cheap cafeterias and elegant restaurants. The men who participated in that world forged a distinctive culture with its own language and customs, its own traditions and folk histories, its own heroes and heroines. They organized male beauty contests at Coney Island and drag balls in Harlem; they performed at gay clubs in the Village and at tourist traps in Times Square. Gay writers and performers produced a flurry of gay literature and theater in the 1920s and early 1930s; gay impresarios organized cultural events that sustained and enhanced gay men's communal ties and group identity. Some gay men were involved in long-term monogamous relationships they called marriages; others participated in an extensive sexual underground that by the beginning of the century included well-known cruising areas in the city's parks and streets, gay bathhouses, and saloons with back rooms where men met for sex.

The gay world that flourished before World War II has been almost entirely forgotten in popular memory and overlooked by professional historians; it is not supposed to have existed. This book seeks to restore that world to history, to chart its geography, and to recapture its culture and politics. In doing so, it challenges three widespread myths about the

history of gay life before the rise of the gay movement, which I call the myths of isolation, invisibility, and internalization.

*The myth of isolation* holds that anti-gay hostility prevented the development of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead solitary lives in the decades before the rise of the gay liberation movement. As one exceptionally well informed writer and critic recently put it, the 1969 Stonewall rebellion not only marked the beginning of the militant gay movement but was

> the critical . . . event that unleashed a vast reconstitution of gay society: gay bars, baths, bookstores, and restaurants opened, gay softball teams, newspapers, political organizations, and choruses proliferated. Gay groups of all sorts popped up while gay neighborhoods emerged in our larger, and many of our smaller cities. This was and is a vast social revolution . . . a new community came into being in an astonishingly short period of time.[1]

This has become the common wisdom for understandable reasons, for the policing of the gay world before Stonewall was even more extensive and draconian than is generally realized. A battery of laws criminalized not only gay men's narrowly "sexual" behavior, but also their association with one another, their cultural styles, and their efforts to organize and speak on their own behalf. Their social marginalization gave the police and popular vigilantes even broader informal authority to harass them; anyone discovered to be homosexual was threatened with loss of livelihood and loss of social respect. Hundreds of men were arrested each year in New York City alone for violating such laws.

But the laws were enforced only irregularly, and indifference or curiosity—rather than hostility or fear—characterized many New Yorkers' response to the gay world for much of the half-century before the war. Gay men had to take precautions, but, like other marginalized peoples, they were able to construct spheres of relative cultural autonomy in the interstices of a city governed by hostile powers. They forged an immense gay world of overlapping social networks in the city's streets, private apartments, bathhouses, cafeterias, and saloons, and they celebrated that world's existence at regularly held communal events such as the massive drag (or transvestite) balls that attracted thousands of participants and spectators in the 1920s. By the 1890s, gay men had made the Bowery a center of gay life, and by the 1920s they had created three distinct gay neighborhood enclaves in Greenwich Village, Harlem, and Times Square, each with a differ-

ent class and ethnic character, gay cultural style, and public reputation.*

Some men rejected the dominant culture of the gay world and others passed through it only fleetingly, but it played a central role in the lives of many others. Along with sexual camaraderie, it offered them practical support in negotiating the demands of urban life, for many people used their gay social circles to find jobs, apartments, romance, and their closest friendships. Their regular association and ties of mutual dependence fostered their allegiance to one another, but gay culture was even more important to them for the emotional support it provided as they developed values and identities significantly different from those prescribed by the dominant culture. Indeed, two New Yorkers who conducted research on imprisoned working-class homosexuals in the 1930s expressed concern about the effects of gay men's participation in homosexual society precisely because it made it possible for them to reject the prescriptions of the dominant culture and to forge an alternative culture of their own. "The homosexual's withdrawal, enforced or voluntary, into a world of his own tends to remove him from touch with reality," they warned in 1941, almost thirty years before the birth of the gay liberation movement at Stonewall. "It promotes the feeling of homosexual solidarity, and withdraws this group more and more from conventional folkways . . . and confirms them in their feeling that they compose a community within the community, with a special and artificial life of their own."[2] Once men discovered the gay world, they knew they were not alone.

*The myth of invisibility* holds that, even if a gay world existed, it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find. But gay men were highly visible figures in early-twentieth-century New York, in part because gay life was more integrated into the everyday life of the city in the prewar decades than it would be after World War II—in part because so many gay men boldly announced their presence by wearing red ties, bleached hair, and the era's other insignia of homosexuality. Gay men gathered on the same street corners and in many of the same saloons and dance halls that other working-class men did, they participated in the same salons that other bohemians did, and they rented the same halls for

*The "gay world" actually consisted of multiple social worlds, or social networks, many of them overlapping but some quite distinct and segregated from others along lines of race, ethnicity, class, gay cultural style, and/or sexual practices. I have nonetheless referred to the making of "a" gay world because almost all the men in those networks conceived of themselves as linked to the others in their common "queerness" and their membership in a single gay world, no matter how much they regretted it. The relationship different groups of men imagined themselves to have to one another is discussed at greater length later in the book.

parties, fancy balls, and theatrical events that other youths did. "Our streets and beaches are overrun by . . . fairies," declared one New Yorker in 1918,[3] and nongay people encountered them in speakeasies, shops, and rooming houses as well. They read about them in the newspapers, watched them perform in clubs, and saw them portrayed on almost every vaudeville and burlesque stage as well as in many films. Indeed, many New Yorkers viewed the gay subculture's most dramatic manifestations as part of the spectacle that defined the distinctive character of their city. Tourists visited the Bowery, the Village, and Harlem in part to view gay men's haunts. In the early 1930s, at the height of popular fascination with gay culture, literally thousands of them attended the city's drag balls to gawk at the drag queens on display there, while newspapers filled their pages with sketches of the most sensational gowns.

The drag queens on parade at the balls and the effeminate homosexual men, usually called "fairies," who managed to be flamboyant even in a suit were the most visible representatives of gay life and played a more central role in the gay world in the prewar years than they do now. But while they made parts of the gay world highly visible to outsiders, even more of that world remained invisible to outsiders. Given the risks gay men faced, most of them hid their homosexuality from their straight workmates, relatives, and neighbors as well as the police. But being forced to hide from the dominant culture did not keep them hidden from each other. Gay men developed a highly sophisticated system of subcultural codes—codes of dress, speech, and style—that enabled them to recognize one another on the streets, at work, and at parties and bars, and to carry on intricate conversations whose coded meaning was unintelligible to potentially hostile people around them. The very need for such codes, it is usually (and rightly) argued, is evidence of the degree to which gay men had to hide. But the elaboration of such codes also indicates the extraordinary resilience of the men who lived under such constraints and their success in communicating with each other despite them. Even those parts of the gay world that were invisible to the dominant society were visible to gay men themselves.

*The myth of internalization* holds that gay men uncritically internalized the dominant culture's view of them as sick, perverted, and immoral, and that their self-hatred led them to accept the policing of their lives rather than resist it. As one of the most perceptive gay social critics has put it, "When we hid our homosexuality in the past, it was not only because of fear of social pressure but even more because of deeply internalized self-hatred . . . [which was] very pervasive. . . . Homosexuals themselves long resisted the idea of being somehow distinct from other people."[4] But many gay men celebrated their difference from the norm, and some of them organized to resist anti-gay policing.

From the late nineteenth century on, a handful of gay New Yorkers wrote polemical articles and books, sent letters to hostile newspapers and published their own, and urged jurists and doctors to change their views. In the 1930s, gay bars challenged their prohibition in the courts, and gay men and lesbians organized groups to advocate the homosexual cause. A larger number of men dressed and carried themselves in the streets in ways that proclaimed their homosexuality as boldly as any political button would, even though they risked violence and arrest for doing so.

Most gay men did not speak out against anti-gay policing so openly, but to take this as evidence that they had internalized anti-gay attitudes is to ignore the strength of the forces arrayed against them, to misinterpret silence as acquiescence, and to construe resistance in the narrowest of terms—as the organization of formal political groups and petitions. The history of gay resistance must be understood to extend beyond formal political organizing to include the strategies of everyday resistance that men devised in order to claim space for themselves in the midst of a hostile society. Given the effective prohibition of gay sociability and the swift and certain consequences that most men could expect if their homosexuality were revealed, both the willingness of some men to carry themselves openly *and* the ability of other gay men to create and hide an extensive gay social world need to be considered forms of resistance to overwhelming social pressure. The full panoply of tactics gay men devised for communicating, claiming space, and affirming themselves—the kind of resistant social practices that the political theorist James Scott has called the tactics of the weak—proved to be remarkably successful in the generations before a more formal gay political movement developed.[5] Such tactics did not directly challenge anti-gay policing in the way that the movement would, but in the face of that policing they allowed many gay men not just to survive but to flourish—to build happy, self-confident, and loving lives.

One striking sign of the strength of the gay male subculture was its ability to provide its members with the resources necessary to reject the dominant culture's definition of them as sick, criminal, and unworthy. Some gay men internalized the anti-homosexual attitudes pervasive in their society. Many others bitterly resented the dominant culture's insistence that their homosexuality rendered them virtual women and despised the men among them who seemed to embrace an "effeminate" style. But the "unconventional folkways" of gay culture noted by the two 1930s researchers were more successful in helping men counteract the hostile attitudes of their society than we usually imagine. Many gay men resisted the medical judgment that they were mentally ill and needed treatment, despite the fact that medical discourse was one of the most powerful anti-gay forces in American culture (and one to which some recent social theories have

attributed almost limitless cultural power). Numerous doctors reported their astonishment at discovering in their clinical interviews with "inverts" that their subjects rejected the efforts of science, religion, popular opinion, and the law to condemn them as moral degenerates. One doctor lamented that the working-class "fags" he interviewed in New York's city jail in the early 1920s actually claimed they were "*proud* to be degenerates, [and] do not want nor care to be cured."[6] Indeed, it became the reluctant consensus among doctors that most inverts saw nothing wrong with their homosexuality; it was this attitude, they repeatedly noted, that threatened to make the "problem" of homosexuality so intractable.

All three myths about prewar gay history are represented in the image of the closet, the spatial metaphor people typically use to characterize gay life before the advent of gay liberation as well as their own lives before they "came out." Before Stonewall (let alone before World War II), it is often said, gay people lived in a closet that kept them isolated, invisible, and vulnerable to anti-gay ideology. While it is hard to imagine the closet as anything other than a prison, we often blame people in the past for not having had the courage to break out of it (as if a powerful system were not at work to keep them in), or we condescendingly assume they had internalized the prevalent hatred of homosexuality and thought they deserved to be there. Even at our most charitable, we often imagine that people in the closet kept their gayness hidden not only from hostile straight people but from other gay people as well, and, possibly, even from themselves.

Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of the closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it is bracing—and instructive—to note that it was never used by gay people themselves before then. Nowhere does it appear before the 1960s in the records of the gay movement or in the novels, diaries, or letters of gay men and lesbians.[7] The fact that gay people in the past did not speak of or conceive of themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from using the term retrospectively as an analytic category, but it does suggest that we need to use it more cautiously and precisely, and to pay attention to the very different terms people used to describe themselves and their social worlds.

Many gay men, for instance, described negotiating their presence in an often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and taking it off.[8] Each image has a valence different from "closet," for each suggests not gay men's isolation, but their ability—as well as their need—to move between different personas and different lives, one straight, the other gay, to wear their hair up, as another common phrase put it, or let their hair down.[9] Many men kept their gay lives hidden

from potentially hostile straight observers (by "putting their hair up"), in other words, but that did not mean they were hidden or isolated from each other—they often, as they said, "dropped hairpins" that only other gay men would notice. Leading a double life in which they often passed as straight (and sometimes married) allowed them to have jobs and status a queer would have been denied while still participating in what they called "homosexual society" or "the life." For some, the personal cost of "passing" was great. But for others it was minimal, and many men positively enjoyed having a "secret life" more complex and extensive than outsiders could imagine. Indeed, the gay life of many men was so full and wide-ranging that by the 1930s they used another—but more expansive—spatial metaphor to describe it: not the gay closet, but the *gay world.*

The expansiveness and communal character of the gay world before World War II can also be discerned in the way people used another familiar term, "coming out." Like much of campy gay terminology, "coming out" was an arch play on the language of women's culture—in this case the expression used to refer to the ritual of a debutante's being formally introduced to, or "coming out" into, the society of her cultural peers. (This is often remembered as exclusively a ritual of WASP high society, but it was also common in the social worlds of African-Americans and other groups.) A gay man's coming out originally referred to his being formally presented to the largest collective manifestation of prewar gay society, the enormous drag balls that were patterned on the debutante and masquerade balls of the dominant culture and were regularly held in New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Baltimore, and other cities. An article published in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in the spring of 1931 under the headline "1931 DEBUTANTES BOW AT LOCAL 'PANSY' BALL" drew the parallel explicitly and unselfconsciously: "The coming out of new debutantes into homosexual society," its first sentence announced, "was the outstanding feature of Baltimore's eighth annual frolic of the pansies when the Art Club was host to the neuter gender at the Elks' Hall, Friday night."[10]

Gay people in the prewar years, then, did not speak of *coming out of* what we call the "gay closet" but rather of *coming out into* what they called "homosexual society" or the "gay world," a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as "closet" implies. The Baltimore debutantes, after all, came out in the presence of hundreds of straight as well as gay and lesbian spectators at the public hall of the fraternal order of Elks. Their sisters in New York were likely to be presented to thousands of spectators, many of whom had traveled from other cities, in some of the best-known ballrooms of the city, including the Savoy and Rockland Palace in Harlem and the Astor Hotel and Madison Square Garden in midtown.

Although only a small fraction of gay men actually "came out" at such a ball or in the presence of straight onlookers, this kind of initiation into gay society served as a model for the initiation—and integration—into the gay world for other men as well.*

## II

How did we lose sight of a world so visible and extensive in its own time that its major communal events garnered newspaper headlines and the attendance of thousands?

We lost sight of that world in part because it was forced into hiding in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. The very growth and visibility of the gay subculture during the Prohibition years of the 1920s and early 1930s precipitated a powerful cultural reaction in the 1930s. A new anxiety about homosexuals and hostility toward them began to develop, which soon became part of the more general reaction to the cultural experimentation of the Prohibition era that developed in the anxious early years of the Depression. A host of laws and regulations were enacted or newly enforced in the 1930s that suppressed the largest of the drag balls, censored lesbian and gay images in plays and films, and prohibited restaurants, bars, and clubs from employing homosexuals or even serving them. Anti-gay policing intensified during the Cold War, when Senator Joseph McCarthy warned that homosexuals in the State Department threatened the nation's security, and the police warned that homosexuals in the streets threatened the nation's children. Federal, state, and local

*The meaning of coming out has changed several times over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1920s it referred to initiation into the gay world, and even when "coming out" was used in a narrower sense, to refer to the process by which someone came to recognize his sexual interest in other men, it referred to something other than a solitary experience. Indeed, before the war this process was more commonly described by saying that someone was "brought out," which necessarily implied he had been initiated into homosexual practices by someone else, than by saying he "came out," something he could, at least grammatically, have done on his own. Writing in 1941, Gershon Legman noted that "this locution is losing its original connotation of initiation by another person, and circumstances or fate are coming to be considered the initiatory agents."[11] The meaning of the phrase continued to change. By the 1950s, gay men usually used "coming out" in a narrower sense to refer exclusively to their first sexual experience with another man. "I remember someone who was a total virgin but ran to the bars every weekend with makeup and screamed and shrieked and camped like crazy," one man recalled, "and everybody would ask, 'For God's sake, when is he going to come out?'" By the 1970s, its meaning had changed again. It could still be used to refer to a person's first homosexual experience, but it more commonly referred to announcing one's homosexuality to straight friends and family. The critical audience to which one came out had shifted from the gay world to the straight world.

governments deployed a barrage of new techniques for the surveillance and control of homosexuals, and the number of arrests and dismissals escalated sharply.[12] Hundreds of gay men were arrested in New York City every year in the 1920s and 1930s for cruising or visiting gay locales; thousands were arrested every year in the postwar decade.

The primary purpose of this new wave of policing was not to eradicate homosexuality altogether, a task the authorities considered all but impossible, but to contain it by prohibiting its presence in the public sphere, the city's cafés, bars, streets, theaters, and newspapers, where authorities feared it threatened to disrupt public order and the reproduction of normative gender and sexual arrangements.[13] The effort was unsuccessful in many respects, for the gay world continued to thrive and became even more extensive in the 1940s and 1950s than it had been before the war. But gay life did become less visible in the streets and newspapers of New York, gay meeting places did become more segregated and carefully hidden, and the risks of visiting them increased. To use the modern idiom, the state built a closet in the 1930s and forced gay people to hide in it.

The periodization I propose here is counterintuitive, for despite the cautionary work of historians such as John D'Emilio, Allan Berube, and Lillian Faderman, and the events of recent memory (such as the anti-gay backlash that began in the late 1970s and intensified in the wake of AIDS), the Whiggish notion that change is always "progressive" and that gay history in particular consists of a steady movement toward freedom continues to have appeal.[14] This book argues instead that gay life in New York was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first, and that the very severity of the postwar reaction has tended to blind us to the relative tolerance of the prewar years.

A second reason the prewar gay subculture disappeared from historical memory is that, until recently, nobody looked for it. One of the most enduring legacies of the intellectual and social retrenchment precipitated by the Cold War was its censorship of inquiry into gay culture.[15] For decades, the general prejudice against gay people deterred research by effectively stigmatizing and trivializing historians of homosexuality as well as homosexuals themselves. Even professional historians with an interest in such inquiry dared not undertake it and warned their graduate students away from it; it is not surprising that some of the earliest, groundbreaking works of gay and lesbian history were written by nonacademic historians such as Jonathan Katz and Joan Nestle.[16] In recent years there has been a dramatic decline in prejudice and an equally dramatic increase in interest in gay culture outside the academy, as well as an explosion of work within it on the social history of other subaltern groups: women and workers, African-Americans and immigrants. Even now, though, any historian writing about

homosexuality cannot help being cognizant of the potential professional consequences of working on a subject that continues to be marginalized within the discipline. Still, a door has been opened, and the gay world is beginning to be seen through it.

A third reason we have failed to see the prewar gay world is that it took shape in such unexpected places and was so different from our own that we have often not even known where to look or what to look for. As in any new field of study, historians first turned to the more easily accessible records of the elite before grappling with the more elusive evidence of the ordinary. This sometimes meant they looked in relatively unrevealing places: the *New York Times* instead of the African-American press and the tabloids, white middle-class culture instead of working-class culture, elite medical or juridical discourse instead of popular culture. The old dogma that the gay male world originated as an essentially middle-class phenomenon, which only white middle-class men had the resources to create, and the newer dogma that it was created in the pages of elite medical journals, have had continuing influence.[17] But the most visible gay world of the early twentieth century, as the headlines in the *Baltimore Afro-American* suggest, was a working-class world, centered in African-American and Irish and Italian immigrant neighborhoods and along the city's busy waterfront, and drawing on the social forms of working-class culture. Even the gay and lesbian enclave that developed in Greenwich Village in the 1910s and 1920s, which constituted the first visible middle-class gay subculture in the city, sprang up in the midst of a working-class Italian immigrant neighborhood and was populated largely by poorer youths from the outer boroughs, even though its middle-class and bohemian members are better remembered. The fact that the working-class gay world took different forms and defined itself in different terms from those of middle-class culture and from those that would develop in the postwar years should lead us not to exclude it from our inquiry, but to redefine the very boundaries of that inquiry.

A final reason we have failed to see the gay subculture that existed before World War II is that it has been obscured by the dramatic growth of the gay subculture *after* the war. As the groundbreaking work of Allan Berube and John D'Emilio has shown, the war "created something of a nationwide coming out experience." By freeing men from the supervision of their families and small-town neighborhoods and placing them in a single-sex environment, military mobilization increased the chances that they would meet gay men and explore their homosexual interests. Many recruits saw the sort of gay life they could lead in large cities and chose to stay in those cities after the war. Some women who joined the military, as well as those on the homefront who shared housing and worked in defense industries with other women, had similar experiences.

As a result, the war made it possible for gay bars and restaurants to proliferate and for many new gay social networks to form.[18]

The recognition of the significance of the war has shattered the myth that the gay movement and the gay world alike were invented virtually overnight after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969; historians have shown that a political movement preceded Stonewall by two decades and had its origins in a gay subculture that expanded during the war. But the massive evidence that a generation of men constructed gay identities and communities during the war does not in itself demonstrate that the war generation was the first generation to do so. The war was an epochal event for its generation: almost every gay man who was young during the war (like almost every heterosexual man) remembers it as a critical turning point in his life, and given their age, it was almost inevitable that the war should serve as the backdrop to their first sexual experiences and efforts to live outside the family nexus. Moreover, it is clear that the war enabled many men to participate in the gay world who otherwise would not have done so and led many more to have the only homosexual experiences of their lives. But this does not mean that the war generation was the *first* generation to leave the constraints of family life and watchful neighbors, nor that it was first during the war that an urban gay subculture took shape.

Although the war did precipitate an immense social upheaval, prewar American society had hardly been stable or immobile. The United States has always been a nation of transients. The nineteenth century witnessed the mass migration of Europeans to the United States, of newly freed African-Americans throughout the South, and of people of every sort from the East to the West. Every nineteenth-century city and town studied by historians, from Eastern metropolis to frontier trading post, saw at least half its adult residents move away during any given decade.[19] Forty percent of New York City's residents in 1910 had immigrated to the city from foreign lands, and although restrictive federal legislation severely curtailed immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the 1920s, internal migration continued apace as rural depression, agricultural mechanization, and environmental catastrophe pushed millions of farmers off the land and the Great Depression forced millions of urban families and single men alike to leave their homes in search of work. Throughout the half-century before World War II, New York was full of single men and women who had left their families in southern Europe or the American South or whose work on the seas made New York one of their many temporary home ports. Countless men had moved to New York in order to participate in the relatively open gay life available there, and the waterfront, the Bowery, Times Square, and other centers of transient workers had become major centers of gay life.

Thus the many soldiers who discovered a gay world while passing through New York during the war had been preceded by at least two generations of men (and possibly more, as future research may show).[20] That subculture did grow immensely after the war, and its character also changed in significant ways. But it did not begin then. Moreover, while New York's prewar gay subculture may have been unusually large, its existence was hardly unique. Paris and Berlin hosted gay and lesbian subcultures even larger than New York's in the early twentieth century.[21] While little research has been conducted yet on other American cities, scattered evidence nonetheless indicates that Chicago, Los Angeles, and at least a handful of other cities hosted gay subcultures of considerable size and complexity before the war, and that many small towns also sustained gay social networks of some scope.[22]

Moreover, the work of Randolph Trumbach, Michel Rey, Alan Bray, Theo Van Der Meer, and a host of other historians has demonstrated that "sodomitical subcultures" had emerged in major European cities by the eighteenth century, and it is possible that similar subcultures took root in the ports of the American colonies, although their appearance may well have depended on the later growth of those cities. (In either case, the precise terms by which men involved in such subcultures understood themselves and distinguished themselves from others must be analyzed with care; threads of historical continuity may link the "molly houses" Alan Bray and Randolph Trumbach have located in eighteenth-century London with the Bowery resorts in late-nineteenth-century New York, but much more work will need to be undertaken before we can establish their existence or analyze their significance.)[23] As one American observer noted as early as 1889, there was "in every community of any size a colony of male sexual perverts . . . [who] are usually known to each other and are likely to congregate together."[24] It will take another generation of research before we will understand much about those "colonies," or be able to judge the distinctiveness of New York's gay world or develop a more comprehensive view of the development of American sexual subcultures. But we should never presume the absence of something before we have looked for it.

## III

Although the gay male world of the prewar years was remarkably visible and integrated into the straight world, it was, as the centrality of the drag balls suggests, a world very different from our own. Above all, it was not a world in which men were divided into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals." This is, on the face of it, a startling claim, since it is almost impossible today to think about sexuality without imagining that

it is organized along an axis of homosexuality and heterosexuality; a person is either one or the other, or possibly both—but even the third category of "bisexuality" depends for its meaning on its intermediate position on the axis defined by those two poles. The belief that one's sexuality is centrally defined by one's homosexuality or heterosexuality is hegemonic in contemporary culture: it is so fundamental to the way people think about the world that it is taken for granted, assumed to be natural and timeless, and needs no defense.[25] Whether homosexuality is good or bad, chosen or determined, natural or unnatural, healthy or sick is debated, for such opinions are in the realm of ideology and thus subject to contestation, and we are living at a time when a previously dominant ideological position, that homosexuality is immoral or pathological, faces a powerful and increasingly successful challenge from an alternative ideology, which regards homosexuality as neutral, healthy, or even good. But the underlying premise of that debate—that some people are homosexuals, and that all people are either homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals—is hardly questioned.

This book argues that in important respects the hetero–homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation. Particularly in working-class culture, homosexual behavior per se became the primary basis for the labeling and self-identification of men as "queer" only around the middle of the twentieth century; before then, most men were so labeled only if they displayed a much broader inversion of their ascribed gender status by assuming the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women. The abnormality (or "queerness") of the "fairy," that is, was defined as much by his "woman-like" character or "effeminacy" as his solicitation of male sexual partners; the "man" who responded to his solicitations—no matter how often—was not considered abnormal, a "homosexual," so long as he abided by masculine gender conventions. Indeed, the centrality of effeminacy to the representation of the "fairy" allowed many conventionally masculine men, especially unmarried men living in sex-segregated immigrant communities, to engage in extensive sexual activity with other men without risking stigmatization and the loss of their status as "normal men."

Only in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did the now-conventional division of men into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," based on the sex of their sexual partners, replace the division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" on the basis of their imaginary gender status as the hegemonic way of understanding sexuality. Moreover, the transition from one sexual regime to the next was an uneven process, marked by significant class and ethnic differences. Multiple systems of sexual classification coexisted throughout the period in New York's divergent neighborhood

cultures: men socialized into different class and ethnic systems of gender, family life, and sexual mores tended to understand and organize their homosexual practices in different ways. Most significantly, exclusive heterosexuality became a precondition for a man's identification as "normal" in middle-class culture at least two generations before it did so in much of Euro-American and African-American working-class culture.

One way to introduce the differences between the conceptual schemas by which male sexual relations and identities were organized in the first and second halves of the twentieth century (as well as this book's use of terminology) is to review the changes in the vernacular terms used for homosexually active men, and, in particular, the way in which *gay* came to mean "homosexual". This does not mean reconstructing a lineage of static meanings—simply noting, for instance, that *gay* meant "prostitute" before it meant "homosexual." In keeping with the methodology of the study as a whole, it means instead reconstructing how men *used* the different terms *tactically* in diverse cultural settings to position themselves and negotiate their relations with other men, gay and straight alike.

Although many individuals at any given time, as one might expect, used the available terms interchangeably and imprecisely, the broad contours of lexical evolution reveal much about the changes in the organization of male sexual practices and identities. For many of the terms used in the early twentieth century were not synonymous with *homosexual* or *heterosexual,* but represent a different conceptual mapping of male sexual practices, predicated on assumptions about the character of men engaging in those practices that are no longer widely shared or credible. *Queer, fairy, trade, gay,* and other terms each had a specific connotation and signified specific subjectivities, and the ascendancy of *gay* as the preeminent term (for gay men among gay men) in the 1940s reflected a major reconceptualization of homosexual behavior and of "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals." Demonstrating that such terms signified distinct social categories not equivalent to "homosexual" and that men used many of them for themselves will also explain why I have employed them throughout this study, even though some of them now have pejorative connotations that may initially cause the reader to recoil.

*Gay* emerged as a coded homosexual term and as a widely known term for homosexuals in the context of the complex relationship between men known as "fairies" and those known as "queers." According to Gershon Legman, who published a lexicon of homosexual argot in 1941, *fairy* (as a noun) and *queer* (as an adjective) were the terms most commonly used by "queer" and "normal" people alike to refer to "homosexuals" before World War II.[26] Regulatory agents—police, doctors, and private investigators alike—generally used technical terms such as *invert, pervert, degener-*

*ate*, or, less commonly, *homosexual* (or *homosexualist*, or simply *homo*), but they also knew and frequently used the vernacular *fairy* as well. In 1917, for instance, an agent of an anti-vice society reported to his supervisor on a "crowd of homosexualists, commonly known as 'fairies.'"[27] Another agent of the society reported ten years later that he had noticed a "colored pervert" in a subway washroom, but added that in identifying the "pervert" to another man in the washroom he had used the more commonplace term: "I said, 'He is a fairy.'"[28]

While most gay men would have understood most of the terms in use for homosexual matters, some terms were more likely to be used in certain social milieus than others. *Fag* was widely used in the 1930s, but almost exclusively by "normals" (the usual word then for those who were not queers); gay men used the word *faggot* instead, but it was used more commonly by blacks than whites. An investigator who visited a "woman's party" at a 137th Street tenement in Harlem in 1928, for instance, reported that one of the women there told him "'Everybody here is either a bull dagger [lesbian] or faggot.'"[29] The investigator, a black man working for an anti-vice society, appears to have believed that the term was less well known than *fairy* to the "normal" white population. When he mentioned in another report that two men at a Harlem restaurant were "said to be 'noted faggots,'" he quickly explained to his white supervisor this meant they were "fairies."[30] While gay white men also used the term *faggot* (although less often than blacks), they rarely referred to themselves as being "in the life," a phrase commonly used by black men and women.[31]

Most of the vernacular terms used by "normal" observers for fairies, such as *she-man*, *nance*, and *sissy*, as well as *fairy* itself, emphasized the centrality of effeminacy to their character. In the 1920s and 1930s, especially, such men were also often called *pansies*, and the names of other flowers such as daisy and buttercup were applied so commonly to gay men that they were sometimes simply called "horticultural lads." ("Ship me home," said a "nance" to a florist in a joke told in 1932. "I'm a pansy.")[32] The flamboyant style adopted by "flaming faggots" or "fairies," as well as its consistency with outsiders' stereotypes, made them highly visible figures on the streets of New York and the predominant image of *all* queers in the straight mind.

Not all homosexual men in the prewar era thought of themselves as "flaming faggots," though. While the terms *queer*, *fairy*, and *faggot* were often used interchangeably by outside observers (and sometimes even by the men they observed), each term also had a more precise meaning among gay men that could be invoked to distinguish its object from other homosexually active men. By the 1910s and 1920s, the men who identified themselves as part of a distinct category of men primarily on the

basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves *queer.* Essentially synonymous with "homosexual," *queer* presupposed the statistical normalcy—and normative character—of men's sexual interest in women; tellingly, queers referred to their counterparts as "normal men" (or "straight men") rather than as "heterosexuals." But *queer* did not presume that the men it denoted were effeminate, for many queers were repelled by the style of the fairy and his loss of manly status, and almost all were careful to distinguish themselves from such men. They might use *queer* to refer to any man who was not "normal," but they usually applied terms such as *fairy, faggot,* and *queen* only to those men who dressed or behaved in what they considered to be a flamboyantly effeminate manner. They were so careful to draw such distinctions in part because the dominant culture failed to do so.[33]

Many fairies and queers socialized into the dominant prewar homosexual culture considered the ideal sexual partner to be "trade," a "real man," that is, ideally a sailor, a soldier, or some other embodiment of the aggressive masculine ideal, who was neither homosexually interested nor effeminately gendered himself but who would accept the sexual advances of a queer. While some gay men used the term *trade* to refer only to men who insisted on payment for a sexual encounter, others applied it more broadly to any "normal" man who accepted a queer's sexual advances. The centrality of effeminacy to the definition of the fairy in the dominant culture enabled trade to have sex with both the queers and fairies without risking being labeled queer themselves, so long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and sexual role. Just as significantly, even those queers who had little interest in trade recognized that trade constituted a widely admired ideal type in the subculture and accepted the premise that trade were the "normal men" they claimed to be.

Ultimately men who detested the word *fairy* and the social category it signified were the ones to embrace *gay* as an alternative label for themselves. But they did not initiate its usage in gay culture. The complexity of the emergence of the term's homosexual meanings is illustrated by a story told by a gay hairdresser, Dick Addison, about an incident in 1937 when he was a fourteen-year-old "flaming faggot" in a Jewish working-class section of New York:

> A group of us hung out at a park in the Bronx where older boys would come and pick us up. One boy who'd been hanging out with us for a while came back once, crying, saying the boy he'd left with wanted him to suck his thing. "I don't want to do *that!*" he cried. "But why are you hanging out with us if you aren't gay?" we asked

> him. "Oh, I'm *gay*," he exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air like an hysterical queen, "but I don't want to do *that*." This boy liked the gay life—the clothes, the way people talked and walked and held themselves—but, if you can believe it, he didn't realize there was more to being gay than that![34]

*Gay*, as the story indicates, was a code word. Gay men could use it to identify themselves to other gays without revealing their identity to those not in the wise, for not everyone—certainly not the boy in this story (unless he was simply using the word's protean character to joke with the group)—knew that it implied a specifically sexual preference. But it did not simply mean "homosexual," either. For all the boys, the "gay life" referred as well to the flamboyance in dress and speech associated with the fairies. Indeed, it was the fairies (the especially flamboyant gay men), such as the ones Addison associated with, who used the word most in the 1920s and 1930s. Will Finch, a social worker who began to identify himself as "queer" while in New York in the early 1930s, recalled in 1951 that the word *gay* "originated with the flaming faggots as a 'camp' word, used to apply to absolutely everything in any way pleasant or desirable (not as 'homosexual'), . . . [and only began] to mean 'homosexual' later on."[35]

The earliest such uses of *gay* are unknown, but the "flaming faggots" Finch remembered doubtless used the word because of the host of apposite connotations it had acquired over the years. Originally referring simply to things pleasurable, by the seventeenth century *gay* had come to refer more specifically to a life of *immoral* pleasures and dissipation (and by the nineteenth century to prostitution, when applied to women), a meaning that the "faggots" could easily have drawn on to refer to the homosexual life. *Gay* also referred to something brightly colored or someone showily dressed—and thus could easily be used to describe the flamboyant costumes adopted by many fairies, as well as things at once brilliant and specious, the epitome of camp.[36] One can hear these meanings echo through the decades in Finch's comment in 1963 that he still "associate[d] the word with the hand waving, limp-wristed faggot, squealing 'Oh, it's *gay*!'"[37] One hears them as well in the dialogue in several novels written in the late 1920s and early 1930s by gay men with a camp sensibility and an intimate knowledge of the homosexual scene. "I say," said Osbert to Harold in *The Young and Evil*, perhaps the campiest novel of all, "you look positively gay in the new clothes. Oh, said Harold, you're lovely *too*, dear, and gave him a big kiss on the forehead, much to Osbert's dismay."[38] A chorus boy gushed to his friend in another, rather more overwritten 1934 novel, "'I'm lush. I'm gay. I'm wicked. I'm every-

thing that flames.'"[39] And Cary Grant's famous line in the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby* played on several of these meanings: he leapt into the air, flounced his arms, and shrieked "I just went gay all of a sudden," *not* because he had fallen in love with a man, but because he was asked why he had put on a woman's nightgown. The possibility of a more precisely sexual meaning would not have been lost on anyone familiar with fairy stereotypes.*

The word's use by the "flaming faggots" (or "fairies"), the most prominent figures in homosexual society, led to its adoption as a code word by "queers" who rejected the effeminacy and overtness of the fairy but nonetheless identified themselves as homosexual. Because the word's use in gay environments had given it homosexual associations that were unknown to people not involved in the gay world, more circumspect gay men could use it to identify themselves secretly to each other in a straight setting. A properly intoned reference or two to a "gay bar" or to "having a gay time" served to alert the listener familiar with homosexual culture. As one gay writer explained in 1941,

> Supposing one met a stranger on a train from Boston to New York and wanted to find out whether he was "wise" or even homosexual. One might ask: "Are there any gay spots in Boston?" And by slight accent put on the word "gay" the stranger, if wise, would understand that homosexual resorts were meant. The uninitiated stranger would never suspect, inasmuch as "gay" is also a perfectly normal and natural word to apply to places where one has a good time. . . . The continued use of such *double entendre* terms will make it obvious to the initiated that he is speaking with another person acquainted with the homosexual argot.[41]

Will Finch provided a similar example in 1946, when he described how a young man tried to determine whether Finch's friend Edward,

*This line has been noted by several historians.[40] It has not been noted, however, that Grant followed the quip (which apparently he made up on the spur of the moment) with an equally significant line: "I'm just sitting in the middle of Forty-second Street waiting for a bus." The line has doubtless not been noticed because its homosexual connotations have now been forgotten, but it seems likely that Grant used it precisely because those connotations amplified the homosexual meaning of his first line. In the late 1930s, when the film was made, Forty-second Street, as chapter 7 shows, was the primary cruising strip for the city's male prostitutes, including transvestite prostitutes, as Grant almost surely would have known. One of the reasons it acquired this status was that it was a heavily trafficked street and transportation hub, where men loitering would not draw particular notice—it was, in other words, the sort of place where a man who was cruising could quip that he was just waiting for a bus to anyone who inquired about his purpose.

whom he had just met, was also homosexual. The youth, obviously very interested in Edward, "acts all right," Finch reported, by which he meant the youth did not act like a fairy and make it clear he was homosexual by camping, "but throws in a few words like 'gay' for Edward to follow the lead on, but Edward plays dumb."[42] And in the early 1930s a speakeasy on East Twenty-eighth Street seeking gay patronage noted suggestively that it was located "in the Gay 20's." Similarly, in 1951 the Cyrano Restaurant let gay men know they were welcome while revealing nothing to others by advertising itself as the place "Where the Gay Set Meet for Dinner."[43]

While such men spoke of "gay bars" more than of "gay people" in the 1920s and 1930s, the late 1930s and especially World War II marked a turning point in its usage and in their culture. Before the war, many men had been content to call themselves "queer" because they regarded themselves as self-evidently different from the men they usually called "normal." Some of them were unhappy with this state of affairs, but others saw themselves as "special"—more sophisticated, more knowing—and took pleasure in being different from the mass. The term *gay* began to catch on in the 1930s, and its primacy was consolidated during the war. By the late 1940s, younger gay men were chastising older men who still used *queer,* which the younger men now regarded as demeaning. As Will Finch, who came out into the gay world of Times Square in the 1930s, noted in his diary in 1951, "The word 'queer' is becoming [or coming to be regarded as] more and more derogatory and [is] less and less used by hustlers and trade and the homosexual, especially the younger ones, and the term 'gay' [is] taking its place. I loathe the word, and stick to 'queer,' but am constantly being reproved, especially in so denominating myself."[44]

Younger men rejected *queer* as a pejorative name that others had given them, which highlighted their difference from other men. Even though many "queers" had also rejected the effeminacy of the fairies, younger men were well aware that in the eyes of straight men their "queerness" hinged on their supposed gender deviance. In the 1930s and 1940s, a series of press campaigns claiming that murderous "sex deviates" threatened the nation's women and children gave "queerness" an even more sinister and undesirable set of connotations. In calling themselves *gay,* a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. Some men, especially older ones like Finch, continued to prefer *queer* to *gay,* in part because of *gay*'s initial association with the fairies. Younger men found it easier to forget the origins of *gay* in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject.

Testimony given at hearings held by the State Liquor Authority (SLA) from the 1930s to the 1960s to review the closing of bars accused of

serving homosexuals provides striking evidence of the growing use of the word *gay*. At none of the hearings held before the war did an SLA agent or bar patron use the word to refer to the patrons. At a hearing held in 1939, for instance, one of the Authority's undercover investigators testified that the bar in question was patronized by "homosexuals or fairies, fags commonly called." Another investigator also called the bar's patrons "fags," but noted that the "fags" preferred to call themselves "fairies." A few moments later he referred to a group of "normal" people having a good time at a party as "people that were gay," indicating that the term, in his mind, still had no homosexual connotations.[45] Twenty years later, however, SLA agents casually used *gay* to mean homosexual, as did the *gay* men they were investigating. One agent testified in 1960 that he had simply asked a man at a suspected bar whether he was "straight or gay." "I am as gay as the Pope" came the knowing reply. ("Which Pope?" asked the startled investigator. "Any Pope," he was assured.)[46]

Once the word was widely diffused within the gay world, it was introduced to people outside that world by writers who specialized in familiarizing their readers with New York's seamier side. Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, for instance, confided to the readers of their 1948 *Confidential* guide to the city that "not all New York's queer (or, as they say it, 'gay') people live in Greenwich Village."[47] In 1956, the scandal magazine *Tip-Off* played on the expectation that some of its readers would understand the term—and others would want to—by putting a report on homosexuals' supposed "strangle-hold on the theatre" under the headline, "WHY THEY CALL BROADWAY THE 'GAY' WHITE WAY."[48] By 1960, liquor authority attorneys prosecuting a gay bar were so certain a bartender in a heavily gay neighborhood such as Greenwich Village could be expected to understand the word that they used one bartender's claim that he was unsure of its meaning as a basis for questioning his candor. "You live only a few blocks from . . . the heart of Greenwich Village," an attorney demanded incredulously, "and you are not familiar with the meaning of the word gay?"[49] The word had become familiar to hip New Yorkers and others fully a decade before the gay liberation movement introduced it to the rest of the nation, and parts of the "respectable" press began using it in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The ascendancy of *gay* as the primary self-referential term used within the gay world reflected the subtle shifting occurring in the boundaries drawn among male sexual actors in the middle decades of the century. Earlier terms—*fairy*, *queer*, and *trade* most commonly—had distinguished various *types* of homosexually active men: effeminate homosexuals, more conventional homosexuals, and masculine heterosexuals who would accept homosexual advances, to use today's nomenclature. *Gay*

tended to group all these types together, to deemphasize their differences by emphasizing the *similarity* in character they had presumably demonstrated by their choice of male sexual partners. This reconfiguration of sexual categories occurred in two stages.

First, gay men, like the prewar queers but unlike the fairies, defined themselves as gay primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than effeminacy, and many of them, in a break with older homosexual cultural norms, adopted a new, self-consciously "masculine" style. Nonetheless, they did not regard all men who had sex with men as gay; men could still be trade, but they were defined as trade primarily on the basis of their purported heterosexuality rather than their masculinity (though modified as "rough" trade, the term still emphasized a man's masculine character). A new dichotomous system of classification, based now on sexual object choice rather than gender status, had begun to supersede the old.

In the second stage of cultural redefinition, trade virtually disappeared as a sexual identity (if not as a sexual role) within the gay world, as men began to regard *anyone* who participated in a homosexual encounter as "gay," and, conversely, to insist that men could be defined as "straight" only on the basis of a total absence of homosexual interest and behavior. Alfred Gross, publicly a leader in psychological research and social work related to homosexuals in New York from the 1930s through the 1960s and secretly a gay man himself, derided the distinction between homosexuals and trade in a speech he gave in 1947. Fairies, he contended, "are preoccupied with getting and holding their 'man.'" But, he remonstrated, they refuse "to recognize that the male, no matter how roughly he might be attired, how coarse his manners, how brutal or sadistic he may be, if he be willing to submit regularly to homosexual attentions, is every whit as homosexual as the man who plays what is considered the female role in the sex act."[50]

A growing number of gay men subscribed to this more limited view of the behavior allowed men if they were to be labeled "straight"; by the 1970s, most regarded a self-proclaimed "piece of trade" who regularly let homosexuals have sex with him not as heterosexual but as someone unable to recognize, or accept, or admit his "true nature" as a homosexual. A complaint voiced by Dick Addison, who had come out in the 1930s, about the rejection of the trade–gay distinction by subsequent generations reflects the conflict between the two interpretive systems:

> Most of my crowd [in the 1930s and 1940s] wanted to have sex with a straight man. There was something very hot about a married man! And a lot of straight boys let us have sex with them. People don't believe it now. People say now that they must have been gay. But they

> weren't. They were straight. They wouldn't look for [it] or suck a guy's thing, but they'd let you suck theirs. If you want to say they were gay because they had sex with a man, go ahead, but I say only a man who *wants* to have sex with a man is gay.[51]

Addison's complaint also suggests that "trade," as a practical matter, had become harder to find in the 1960s, a change in sexual practice that suggests "straight" men as well as gay had redefined the boundaries of normalcy. It had become more difficult for men to consider themselves "straight" if they had *any* sexual contact with other men, no matter how carefully they restricted their behavior to the "masculine" role, or sought to configure that contact as a relationship between cultural opposites, between masculine men and effeminate fairies. This narrowing of the limits "straight" men placed on their behavior was also noted by another man, since 1940 a bartender at gay bars, who observed in 1983 that he and his friends had for some years found it "a lot harder to find straight guys to do it with."[52] The bartender himself suggested one reason for the shift: he bitterly criticized the "gay lib movement" for having made straight guys "afraid" to have sex with him—afraid, that is, they would be labeled gay themselves. But whether we attribute this change in attitude to the success of the movement's ideological offensive, as the bartender complained, or regard the gay movement as simply the symbol—or embodiment—of a generational rejection of his view of the sexual world, the cultural potency of the change it represented for him is clear. Over the course of a generation, the lines had been drawn between the heterosexual and homosexual so sharply and publicly that men were no longer able to participate in a homosexual encounter without suspecting it meant (to the outside world, and to themselves) that they were gay. The change the bartender had noticed was not just in the way people "thought" about sexuality but in the way that ideology was manifest in the rules that governed their everyday erotic practices.

The ascendancy of *gay* reflected, then, a reorganization of sexual categories and the transition from an early twentieth-century culture divided into "queers" and "men" on the basis of gender status to a late-twentieth-century culture divided into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" on the basis of sexual object choice. Each set of terms represented a way of defining, constituting, and containing male "sexuality," by labeling, differentiating, and explaining the character of (homo)sexually active men. Any such taxonomy is necessarily inadequate as a measure of sexual behavior, but its construction is itself a significant social practice. It provides a means of defining the deviant, whose existence serves both to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behavior for all men and

to contain the threat of deviance, at once stigmatizing it and suggesting that it is confined to a "deviant" minority.[53]

IV

This book reconstructs the gay world that existed before the hetero–homosexual binarism was consolidated as the hegemonic sexual regime in American culture—before, that is, the decline of the fairy and the rise of the closet. It ends around 1940, when the boundaries between the straight and gay worlds and between "normal" and "abnormal" men were beginning to change. Cultural transformations as fundamental as these occurred neither suddenly nor definitively, of course, and traces of the prewar sexual regime and gay world persisted in the postwar years and into our own era (in the continuing association of effeminacy with male homosexuality, for instance).* But the centrality of the fairy in gay culture and in the dominant culture's representation of gay men, the visibility of the gay world and its integration into the straight world, and, most significantly, the different configuration of the boundaries between the normal and abnormal made the prewar gay world this book describes a world distinctly different from the one existing today. A second volume, currently in preparation, will chart the making of the modern gay world—the rise of the modern sexual regime and the rise and fall of the closet—from the 1940s to the 1970s.

This book maps two distinct but interrelated aspects of what I call the sexual topography of the gay world in the half-century before the Second World War: the spatial and social organization of that world in a culture that often sought to suppress it, and the boundaries that distinguished the men of that world from other men in a culture in which many more men engaged in homosexual practices than identified themselves as queer. The first project of the book, then, is to reconstruct the topography of gay meeting places, from streets to saloons to bathhouses to elegant restaurants, and to explore the significance of that topography for the social organization of the gay world and homosexual relations generally. It analyzes the cultural conditions that made it possible for some gay meeting places to become well known to outsiders and still survive, but it pays more attention to the tactics by which gay men appropriated public spaces not identified as gay—how they, in effect, reterritorialized the city in order to construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city.[54] Indeed, while the book analyzes the complex interaction of social conventions and government policies that endeavored to sup-

*Given these continuities, I have occasionally used illustrative material from the postwar decade in this book when it is consistent with prewar evidence.

press the gay world, it focuses even more on the everyday tactics gay men developed to forge a collective social world in the face of that opposition. Gay men's tactical use of the term *gay* to secretly identify gay places, events, and people to each other in the 1920s and 1930s is indicative of the linguistic and cultural stratagems they used to keep the gay world hidden from the straight while rendering it visible to the gay. By describing this book as a study of *gay* New York, I seek to evoke those tactical considerations and that different cultural and political context, even though the homosexual meaning of the term is now widely recognized, and to signal my intention to map the prewar gay city that gay men themselves would have known.

The second project of the book is to map the boundaries of the gay world under a sexual regime in which many homosexually active men did not identify themselves as a part of it.* Many men who identified themselves as queer lived double lives and participated in the gay world only irregularly, even if it was quite important to them when they did so. Given the centrality of the fairy to gay New York, many more homosexually active men refused (or saw no reason) to identify themselves as queer at all. This book charts the shifting boundaries drawn between queers and normal men, as well as among queers themselves, in the decades before the meaning of *gay* had broadened to incorporate almost all homosexually active men under its rubric. It does not offer a theory of the formation of sexual subjectivities or of the constitution of sexual desire, theoretical projects in which others are engaged. Instead, it develops an ethnographic account of the social organization and cultural meaning of sexual practices and of the dominant cultural categories by which sexually active men had to measure themselves as they constructed their identities.[55]

Although the boundaries between the highly visible fairies and the more covert queers were permeable and both distinguished themselves from "normal" men, the strategies they adopted for negotiating their presence in the city and their relations with "normal" men often clashed. Because the highly contested relationship between them was central to the experience of each group and reveals much about the organization of the gay world more generally, it is one of the central concerns of this book. While I identify and distinguish men as queers or fairies when it is analytically appropriate to do so, I also often refer to them as gay men, since they did perceive themselves to be related to each other as queers and to be part of the same world (different from the straight world),

*I do not use "homosexually active" to refer to men who played the so-called active (or "masculine") role in homosexual relations, but to men who engaged in sexual relations of any sort with other men.

even if they contested the terms and significance of that relationship. It is a usage they would have understood by the 1920s and 1930s. I do not, however, use *gay* to refer to men who merely engaged in sexual activity with other men, even if they did so on a regular basis, if they did not consider themselves to be "queer."

This book is not, however, about the making of the gay male world alone, for in mapping the boundaries of the gay world it necessarily maps the boundaries of the "normal world" as well. The prewar gay world was a subculture whose character reveals much about the dominant culture in which it took shape. To call it a "subculture" is not to minimize its vibrancy, but simply to acknowledge that it developed in relationship to a more powerful culture that defined the parameters of its existence in manifold implicit and explicit ways.[56] The men who organized the massive drag balls of the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, were appropriating rituals of the dominant culture—debutante and masquerade balls—and investing them with new meaning. Much of gay culture consisted of this sort of *bricolage*: the manipulation and revaluation of the signs and practices available to gay men in the historically specific parameters of their culture. As this suggests, the relationship between the gay subculture and the dominant culture was neither static nor passive: they did not merely coexist but constantly created and re-created themselves in relation to each other in a dynamic, interactive, and contested process. Not only did the "queer folk" of the gay subculture define themselves by their difference from the dominant culture, but the "normal people" of the dominant culture defined *themselves* by their difference from the gay subculture: they constituted themselves as "normal" only by eschewing anything that might mark them as "queer."[57]

The process by which the normal world defined itself in opposition to the queer world was manifest in countless social interactions, for in its policing of the gay subculture the dominant culture sought above all to police its own boundaries. Given the centrality of gender nonconformity to the definition of the queer, the excoriation of queers served primarily to set the boundaries for how normal men could dress, walk, talk, and relate to women and to each other. At times this took official and precise form, as when the state's ban on gay bars and other sites of gay public sociability produced a set of gender regulations that, as we shall see, literally codified the permissible speech patterns, dress, and demeanor of men and women who wished to socialize in public. But the threat of extralegal sanctions—of ostracism and the loss of jobs, family, and social respect—was a much more potent threat than the threat of judicial sanctions. Indeed, the policing of queer ways, and thus of normal ways, was most commonly effected through the informal policing of the streets, in gossip and in the jeers and manhandling visited on men whom other men

regarded as queer. In defining the queer's transgressions against gender and sexual conventions, "normal" men defined the boundaries of acceptable behavior for anyone who would be normal; in attacking the queer they enforced those boundaries by reminding everyone of the penalties for violating them. While most people did not encounter such policing directly or even take special note of it, it effectively served as a warning to all.

This book is not just about the making of the gay male world, then, but also about the making of the normal world: about how the normal world constituted itself and established its boundaries by creating the gay world as a stigmatized other. Examining the boundaries drawn between queers and normal men in the early twentieth century illuminates with unusual clarity—and startling effect—the degree to which the social definition of a "normal man" has changed in the last century. For the erotic behavior allowed "normal" men three generations ago simply would not be allowed "heterosexual" men today. Heterosexuality, no less than homosexuality, is a historically specific social category and identity.

As my focus on the street-level policing of gender suggests, another of the underlying arguments of this book is that histories of homosexuality—and of sex and sexuality more generally—have suffered from their overreliance on the discourse of the elite. The most powerful elements of American society devised the official maps of the culture: inscribing meaning in each part of the body, designating some bodily practices as sexual and others as asexual, some as acceptable and others as not; designating some urban spaces as public and others as private. Many histories of sex and sexuality have focused on those official maps, the ones drawn up by doctors, municipal authorities, the police, religious figures, and legislators, the ones announced at city council meetings and in medical journals. Those maps require attention because they had real social power, but they did not guide the practices or self-understanding of everyone who saw them.[58] While this book pays those maps their due, it is more interested in reconstructing the maps etched in the city streets by daily habit, the paths that guided men's practices even if they were never published or otherwise formalized.[59] It argues that maps of meaning not only guide social practices but inhere in and constitute those practices, and it argues for the significance of such socially structured and socially meaningful everyday practices in the construction of identities.

Moreover, a periodization of sexual practices and meanings based on those announced by the elite seriously misrepresents their historical development.[60] This book challenges the assumption, for instance, that nineteenth-century medical discourse constructed the "homosexual" as a personality type, and that the appearance of the homosexual in medical discourse should be taken as indicative of or synonymous with the

homosexual's appearance in the culture as a whole. I have argued in previous work that the medical literature was more complex than this and represented simply one of several powerful (and competing) sexual ideologies.[61] This book seeks to analyze the power of medical discourse by situating it in the context of the changing representation of homosexuality in popular culture and the street-level social practices and dynamics that shaped the ways homosexually active men were labeled, understood themselves, and interacted with others. It argues that the invert and the normal man, the homosexual and the heterosexual, were not inventions of the elite but were popular discursive categories before they became elite discursive categories.

Similarly, while the study's ethnography of sexual subcultures confirms several of Michel Foucault's most speculative and brilliant insights, it modifies the periodization based on those insights by giving equal weight to working-class culture. Most significantly, it shows that the "modern homosexual," whose preeminence is usually thought to have been established in the nineteenth century, did not dominate Western urban industrial culture until well into the twentieth century, at least in one of the world capitals of that culture. The homosexual displaced the "fairy" in middle-class culture several generations earlier than in working-class culture; but in each class culture each category persisted, standing in uneasy, contested, and disruptive relation to the other.[62]

Two other parameters of the study need explanation. The book focuses on men because the differences between gay male and lesbian history and the complexity of each made it seem virtually impossible to write a book about both that did justice to each and avoided making one history an appendage to the other.[63] The differences between men's and women's power and the qualities ascribed to them in a male-dominated culture were so significant that the social and spatial organization of gay male and lesbian life inevitably took very different forms. As in many societies, for instance, gay men in New York developed a more extensive and visible subculture than lesbians did, in large part because men had access to higher wages and greater independence from family life. Gay men as men also enjoyed greater freedom of movement than lesbians did as women, since many of the public spaces where gay men met, from street corners to bars, were culturally defined as male spaces. Moreover, the different sexual and emotional characters ascribed to men and women meant that the boundaries between "normal" and "abnormal" intimacies, both physical and affective, were also drawn differently for men and women. Given the centrality of gender inversion to the culture and representation of both lesbians and gay men, it will ultimately prove important to theorize their historical development in conjunction, but it may take another generation of research on each before an adequate basis for such theories exists.

Even though this study focuses on men, however, it ignores neither women nor gender, but seeks instead to build on the insights of women's historians into the social construction of gender by examining the construction of masculinity, sexual identities, and patterns of male sociability. It argues that the construction of male homosexual identities can be understood only in the context of the broader social organization and representation of gender, that relations *among* men were construed in gendered terms, and that the policing of gay men was part of a more general policing of the gender order. This book is centrally concerned with the shifting boundaries between sex, gender, and sexuality, and demonstrates that sexual desire itself was regarded as fundamentally gendered in the early twentieth century.

The book focuses on New York, which homosexuals regarded as the "gay capital" of the nation for nearly a century, for several reasons. Focusing on a single city makes it possible to study broad questions with a greater degree of precision and specificity than would otherwise be possible: questions about changes in sexual practices, the interaction between men across lines of class, ethnicity, and neighborhood, the changing uses of urban space, the logic of the territorial organization of the gay world, and the changing focus and character of policing and resistance. It has been necessary to situate the history of the gay world in the context of the broadest social and cultural history of New York City, for the history of that world—from the development of gay enclaves in particular neighborhoods at particular times to the emergence of gay speakeasies and drag balls—can be understood only in the context of more general changes in the social geography of the city, the shifting sites and conventions of commercial culture and urban sociability, and the cultural organization of urban space. The complexity of New York's social structure makes it an ideal subject (if one also fraught with difficulties, as any historian of New York will know) because it facilitates the investigation of a wide range of questions concerning the history of sexuality, such as the extent of class and ethnic differences in the social organization and cultural meaning of sexual practices. Moreover, the city's historic role as a national center of intellectual, cultural, and political ferment has meant that its artists, journalists, physicians, jurists, prison reformers, critics, and activists have had a disproportionate influence on national culture.

I do not claim that New York was *typical*, because the city's immense size and complexity set it apart from all other urban areas. It is particularly important that readers not assume that the periodization I have developed for the gay history of New York is necessarily applicable to the rest of the country. Nonetheless, New York may well have been *prototypical*, for the urban conditions and cultural changes that allowed a

gay world to take shape there, as well as the strategies used to construct that world, were almost surely duplicated elsewhere. Only future studies will allow us to determine the representativeness of New York's experience with any certainty, and to test the analysis and periodization proposed here.

# PART I

## *Male (Homo)sexual Practices and Identities in the Early Twentieth Century*

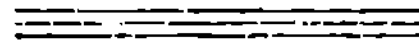


Figure 1.1. Fairies were already fixtures in the streets of New York City's working-class neighborhoods by the late nineteenth century. This map appeared in a book published in the 1870s to familiarize visiting Latin American businessmen with New York's neighborhoods. The social figures it shows populating the section of lower Manhattan now known as Soho include the prostitute (upper left), the shoeshine boy, the beggar, the cop on the beat—and the fairy (upper right). *(From the private collection of David Kahn, Executive Director, Brooklyn Historical Society.)*

*Chapter 1*

# THE BOWERY AS HAVEN AND SPECTACLE

AT THE END OF THE 1890S, COLUMBIA HALL (BETTER KNOWN AS PARESIS Hall), on the Bowery at Fifth Street, was, by all accounts, the "principal resort in New York for degenerates" and well known as such to the public.[1] An investigator who visited the place several times in 1899 noted that he had "heard of it constantly" and that it made no attempt to disguise its "well-known" character as a "resort for male prostitutes." Like other men, he found it easy to gain admittance to the Hall, despite the spectacle to be found within:

> These men . . . act effeminately; most of them are painted and powdered; they are called Princess this and Lady So and So and the Duchess of Marlboro, and get up and sing as women, and dance; ape the female character; call each other sisters and take people out for immoral purposes. I have had these propositions made to me, and made repeatedly.[2]

An officer of the Reverend Charles Parkhurst's City Vigilance League, who had visited the place fully half a dozen times in April and May, added that the "male degenerates" there worked the tables in the same manner female prostitutes did: "[They] solicit men at the tables, and I believe they get a commission on all drinks that are purchased there."[3]

But if Paresis Hall was the principal such establishment in the red-light district centered in the working-class neighborhoods south of the Rialto (Fourteenth Street) at the turn of the century, it was hardly the only one. One well-informed investigator claimed in 1899 that there were at least six such "resorts" (saloons or dance halls) on the Bowery alone, includ-

ing one called Little Bucks located across the street from Paresis. New York's chief of police added Manilla Hall, the Palm Club of Chrystie Street, and the Black Rabbit at 183 Bleecker Street to the list. North of the Rialto, on West Thirtieth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, stood Samuel Bickard's Artistic Club, whose patrons were summarily arrested and fined for disorderly conduct on several occasions.[4] Five years later, just before a crackdown closed most of the resorts, the Jumbo and several other halls on the Bowery still functioned as "notorious degenerate resorts," according to the men who organized the crackdown, while the "chief attraction" of several places on Bleecker and Cornelia Streets was said to be "perversion."[5]

This chapter sets the stage for our investigation of male (homo)sexual practices, cultures, and identities in the early twentieth century by offering a brief tour of the Bowery fairy resorts, an introduction to the neighborhood in which they developed, and an overview of the different places occupied by queer life in working- and middle-class culture. As the anti-vice crusaders who sought to reform the moral order of turn-of-the-century American cities discovered, gay male society was a highly visible part of the urban sexual underworld and was much more fully and publicly integrated into working-class than middle-class culture. The subculture of the flamboyantly effeminate "fairies" (or "male degenerates") who gathered at Paresis Hall and other Bowery resorts was not the only gay subculture in the city, but it established the dominant public images of male sexual abnormality. Other men from different social milieus crafted different kinds of homosexual identities, as we shall see. But the prominence of the Bowery fairies and their consistency with the gender ideology of the turn of the century meant their image influenced the manner in which all homosexually active men understood their behavior.

It is not surprising that the Bowery was the center of the city's best-known sites of homosexual rendezvous at the turn of the century, for it was a center of other "commercialized vice" as well. Since early in the nineteenth century the Bowery, a wide boulevard cutting diagonally through the center of Manhattan's Lower East Side, had been the epicenter of a distinct working-class public culture, with its own codes of behavior, dress, and public sociability. When Italians, Jews, and other new immigrant groups replaced the Irish, Germans, and native-born white "Americans" as the largest working-class communities in that area of New York near the end of the century, the Bowery continued to play that role. The boulevard and surrounding streets were alive with theaters, dime museums, saloons, and dance halls, where men and women found relief from their jobs and crowded tenement homes.

To the horror of respectable but politically powerless Jews and Italians living nearby, the Bowery (along with an area known as the Tenderloin,

which stretched up Broadway and Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third Street to Fortieth) was also a center of the city's institutions of "commercialized" sex.[6] Next to the theaters and amusement halls stood the tenement brothels and assignation hotels that served the sexual interests of the large numbers of unmarried workingmen and married immigrants, unaccompanied by their wives, who lived in the neighborhood during their sojourn in this country. Along Broadway, Allen Street, Second Avenue, Fourteenth Street, and the Bowery itself, female prostitutes congregated to ply their trade. They made no effort to disguise their purpose, and the children who grew up on the Lower East Side quickly learned to identify them. The left-wing Jewish writer Mike Gold recalled of his street that "on sunshiny days the whores sat on chairs along the sidewalks. . . . [They] winked and jeered, made lascivious gestures at passing males . . . call[ing] their wares like pushcart peddlers. At five years I knew what it was they sold."

He and his contemporaries also learned to recognize the fairies (as they were called) who congregated on many of the same streets. As one man complained in 1899, not only were there "male degenerates upon the Bowery in sufficient number to be noticeable," but "boys and girls get into these dance halls on the East Side [referring to Paresis and Manilla Halls], . . . [and] watch these horrible things." In 1908, when he was fifteen, Jimmy Durante got a job as a pianist at a Coney Island dive, where the customers included "the usual number of girls," by which he meant prostitutes, and the "entertainers were all boys who danced together and lisped." He insisted that none of this bothered him. On "the Bowery, where I was brought up," he boasted, "I had seen enough to get acclimated to almost anything."[7]

But if the Bowery, like the Tenderloin, was an area where working-class men and women could engage in sexually charged encounters in public, it also took on particular significance in bourgeois ideology and life in the late nineteenth century as a so-called red-light district. Sociability was, in most respects, more privatized and ritualized in the city's middle-class neighborhoods. Higher incomes bought apartments or townhouses that provided greater privacy than was imaginable in the tenements, and socializing tended to take place at home, in restaurants, or in private clubs rather than on the stoop or in saloons open to the street.[8] Indeed, men and women of the urban middle class increasingly defined themselves as a class by the boundaries they established between the "private life" of the home and the rough-and-tumble of the city streets, between the quiet order of their neighborhoods and the noisy, overcrowded character of the working-class districts. The privacy and order of their sexual lives also became a way of defining their difference from the lower classes. Sexual reticence and devotion to family became hallmarks of the middle-class gentleman in bourgeois ideology, which

presumed that middle-class men conserved their sexual energy along with their other resources. The poor and working classes, by contrast, were characterized in that ideology by their lack of such control; the apparent licentiousness of the poor, as well as their poverty, was taken as a sign of the degeneracy of the class as a whole.[9] Middle-class ideology frequently interpreted actual differences in sexual values and in the social organization of middle-class versus working-class family life that grew out of their quite different material circumstances and cultural traditions as evidence of working-class depravity. It also tended to interpret even those working-class strategies adopted to sustain the integrity of the family as evidence of flagrant disregard for family values. Working-class families often took in boarders as a way to help preserve the family household by allowing women to stay at home with their children while also contributing to the family income, for instance. But middle-class observers condemned the practice as invasive of the privacy of the home and as a threat to the mother's sexual purity.[10]

In this ideological context, the red-light district provided the middle class with a graphic representation of the difference between bourgeois reticence and working-class degeneracy. The spatial segregation of openly displayed "vice" in the slums had both practical and ideological consequences: it kept the most obvious streetwalkers out of middle-class neighborhoods, and it reinforced the association of such immorality with the poor. If the Bowery resorts served the interests of some working-class men and women and also appalled others of the same class who felt powerless to eliminate them, the red-light district also came to represent the sexual immorality of the working class as a whole in bourgeois ideology. This representation could take quite tangible form. Going slumming in the resorts of the Bowery and the Tenderloin was a popular activity among middle-class men (and even among some women), in part as a way to witness working-class "depravity" and to confirm their sense of superiority. Mary Casal, a woman who took the tour, recalled years later that "it was considered very smart to go slumming in New York" in the 1890s, and many of her friends "were anxious to go again and again." But she went only once, she said, for she was stunned by "the ugliness of the displays we saw as we hurried from one horrid but famous resort to another in and about the Bowery," many of them full of male "inverts."[11]

But if most slummers were suitably scandalized by what they saw, many were also titillated. Slumming gave men, in particular, a chance to cultivate and explore sexual fantasies by opening up to them a subordinate social world in which they felt fewer constraints on their behavior. It allowed them to escape the norms of middle-class propriety and, in particular, to shed the constraints they felt imposed on their conduct by the presence of respectable women of their own families or class. Resorts

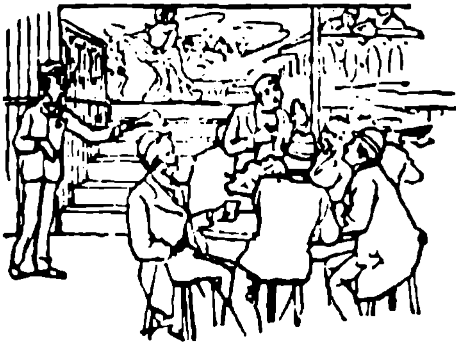
competed to offer them the most scandalous shows as well as music, drink, dancing, and, for a price, access to women and fairies of the lower classes with whom they could engage in ribald behavior inconceivable in their own social worlds.[12]

At a time when New York was famous for being a "wide-open town," some clubs went so far as to stage live sexual performances, some of them designed to startle and engage their audiences by their transgression of normal racial and gender boundaries. In 1904, for instance, three hundred men, most of them apparently middle class, paid $2.50 (a fee high enough to exclude most laborers) to crowd into the back room of a saloon on Thirty-third Street between First and Second Avenues known as Tecumseh Hall & Hotel, which unions hired for their meetings on other nights. The lure was a live sex show that included sex between a black man and a white woman, between two women, and between a woman and a man in women's clothes.[13] The employees arrested in 1900 in a raid on another club, the Black Rabbit on Bleecker Street, included the French floorman, known as the "Jarbean Fairy"; a twenty-year-old woman called a "sodomite for pay" by the anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock (she had apparently engaged in sodomy with two men as part of the floor show); and a third person Comstock called a hermaphrodite, who had displayed her/his genitalia as part of the show.[14]

A number of resorts made "male degenerates" pivotal figures in their portrayal of working-class "depravity." Billy McGlory had realized as early as the late 1870s that he could further the infamy of Armory Hall, his enormous dance hall on Hester Street at the corner of Elizabeth, by hiring fairies—powdered, rouged, and sometimes even dressed in women's clothes—as entertainers. Circulating through the crowd, they sang, danced, and sometimes joined the best-paying customers in their curtained booths to thrill or disgust them with the sort of private sexual exhibitions (or "circuses") normally offered only by female prostitutes.[15] By 1890, several more halls had added fairies as attractions, and the Slide, Frank Stevenson's resort at 157 Bleecker Street, had taken Armory Hall's place as New York's "worst dive" because of the fairies he gathered there (see figure 1.2).

The fairies' presence made such clubs a mandatory stop for New Yorkers out slumming and for the urban entrepreneurs who had made a business out of whetting and then satisfying the urge of men visiting the city to see the spectacle of the Sodom and Gomorrah that New York seemed to have become. As a *New York Herald* reporter observed in 1892:

> It is a fact that the Slide and the unspeakable nature of the orgies practised there are a matter of common talk among men who are bent on



AT MIDNIGHT IN "THE SLIDE."

# HERE, MR. NICOLL, IS A PLACE TO PROSECUTE.

**Witness the Scenes in "the Slide" as the Herald Describes Them to You, and Straightway Begin Your Work of Reform.**

## MOST INFAMOUS OF ALL "DIVES."

**Depravity of a Depth Unknown in the Lowest Slums of London or Paris Can Here Be Found.**

## ORGIES BEYOND DESCRIPTION.

**The Police Profess Ignorance of Its Existence, but They Can Easily Secure the Evidence Necessary for a Conviction.**

Figure 1.2. When the *New York Herald* launched a campaign against a "degenerate resort" called the Slide, it published this drawing of limp-wristed young men entertaining the resort's other customers. *(From the* New York Herald, *January 5, 1892.)*

> taking in the town, making a night of it. . . . Let a detective be opportuned by people from a distance to show them something *outre* in the way of fast life, the first place he thinks of is the Slide, if he believes the out-of-towner can stand it.[16]

A retrospective account of slumming agreed. In 1915 a lawyer recalled the "Famous Old Time Dives [whose] Nation-Wide Evil Reputation Nightly Drew Throngs of 'Spenders'": "No visitor ever left New York feeling satisfied unless he had inspected the mysteries of [Chinatown]," the heart of any city's red-light district, he claimed, but on his way back uptown the visitor almost always stopped on Bleecker Street to visit the Slide,

> one of the most vile, vulgar resorts in the city, where no man of decent inclinations would remain for five minutes without being nauseated. Here men of degenerate type were the waiters, some of them going to the extent of rouging their necks. In falsetto voices they sang filthy ditties, and when not otherwise busy would drop into a chair at the table of any visitor who would brook their awful presence.[17]

As the *Herald* story suggests, New Yorkers did not need to leave their armchairs to go slumming in the Bowery, for a new kind of metropolitan press had emerged in the city in the 1880s and 1890s that constructed a mass audience by focusing the public's attention on precisely such manifestations of urban culture. Joseph Pulitzer's *World* and William Randolph Hearst's *Journal* pioneered in those years a new style of journalism that portrayed itself as the nonpartisan defender (and definer) of the "public interest," waged campaigns on behalf of moral and municipal reform, and paid extravagant attention to local crimes, high-society scandals, and the most "sensational" aspects of the urban underworld. Their low prices and nonpartisan character allowed these newspapers to build a mass market to which advertisers could sell products; their journalistic voyeurism turned urban life itself into a commodity to be hawked at a penny a copy and helped mark the boundaries of acceptable public sociability. Fairies were not a staple of the new journalism's press campaigns, but they appeared regularly enough in the pages of New York's newspapers to alert any reader to their existence. The 1892 *Herald* story about the Slide, to take one example, included an extensive description of the resort, which must be regarded as an effort to titillate readers by supplying them with fulsome detail even as the paper asserted its own respectability by adopting a tone of reproach. "Here, Mr. Nicoll, Is a Place to Prosecute," the paper announced to the district attorney and the public in the headline it placed over the story.[18]

But what the *Herald* reporter identified as evidence of depravity also points to the importance of the Bowery resorts to men who were fairies, for he made it clear that the Slide was a place where they felt free to socialize with their friends and to entertain not only the tourists but also the saloon's regulars and one another with their campy banter and antics. The night the reporter visited, he saw a group of men "bandying unspeakable jests with other fashionably dressed young fellows, whose cheeks were rouged and whose manner," he noted, using an expression normally reserved for describing female prostitutes, "suggested the infamy to which they had fallen." He later saw "half a score of the rouged and powdered men" sitting at a table on a raised dais in the center of the barroom, where they normally ensconced themselves to "amuse the company with their songs and simpering requests for drinks." One of them, either suspicious of the reporter's motives or interested in including him in the merriment, actually approached him (or "minced up to me and lisped," as the reporter put it) and asked for a drink.[19]

While the reporter at least feigned outrage at the request, the other men present, as his account suggests, did not. Moreover, the record of another man's conversation with a "degenerate type" at the Slide also indicates that the men who were made part of the spectacle at such resorts nonetheless managed to turn them into something of a haven, where they could gather and find support. Charles Nesbitt, a medical student from North Carolina who visited the city around 1890, took the slummer's tour with a friend. As he later recalled, he visited several beer gardens on the Bowery where "male perverts, dressed in elaborate feminine evening costumes, 'sat for company' and received a commission on all the drinks served by the house to them and their customers." Such men dressed in male attire at the Slide, he discovered, but still sat for company as their transvestite counterparts did elsewhere. Intrigued, Nesbitt asked one of the men, known as "Princess Toto," to join his table; to his surprise, he found the fellow "unusually intelligent" and sophisticated. Princess Toto, he quickly decided, was "the social queen of this group" and "had pretty clear cut ideas about his own mental state and that of his fellows." Nature had made him this way, Toto assured the young medical student, and there were many men such as he. He indicated his pride in the openness of "my kind" at places like the Slide, calling them "superior" to the "perverts in artistic, professional and other circles who practice perversion surreptitiously." "Believe me," the student remembered him commenting, "there are plenty of them and they are good customers of ours."[20]

Sensing the medical student's interest, Toto invited him to attend a ball at Walhalla Hall, one of the most prominent of the many Lower East

Side halls that neighborhood social clubs rented to hold their affairs. Nesbitt went and discovered some five hundred same-sex male and female couples in attendance, "waltzing sedately to the music of a good band." Along with the male couples there were "quite a few . . . masculine looking women in male evening dress" dancing with other women, many of whom seem to have impressed the student as being of "good" background. "One could quite easily imagine oneself," he recalled with amused incredulity, "in a formal evening ball room among respectable people."[21]

As the medical student discovered, the Bowery resorts were only the most famous element of an extensive, organized, and highly visible gay world. The men who sat for company at the Slide were part of a subculture that planned its own social events, such as the Walhalla ball, and had its own regular meeting places, institutions, argot, norms and traditions, and neighborhood enclaves. To worried anti-vice investigators and newspaper reporters, the Slide was an egregious manifestation of urban disorder and degeneracy. But to the men who gathered there, it served as a crucial institution in which to forge an alternative social order. Although middle-class gay men participated in the gay world, its public sites were restricted at the turn of the century to the working-class neighborhoods of the Bowery and waterfront, their very existence contingent on the ambivalent tolerance afforded them by working-class men.

The institutions and social forms of the gay subculture were patterned in many respects on those of the working-class culture in which it took shape: the saloons, small social clubs, and large fancy-dress balls around which fairy life revolved were all typical elements of working-class life. The core institutions of the gay subculture were a number of Lower East Side saloons, a few of them famous among slummers as "resorts" but most of them not on the slummers' map.

The role of the saloons is hardly surprising, since they were central to the social life of most working-class men, although their precise character varied among immigrant and other cultural groups. Located on every block in some tenement districts, saloons served as informal labor exchanges, where men could learn of jobs and union activities. Saloons cashed paychecks and made loans to men who had little access to banks, and they provided such basic amenities as drinking water and toilet facilities to men who lived in tenements without plumbing. Above all, they became virtual "workingmen's clubs," where poor men could escape crowded tenements, get a cheap meal, discuss politics and other affairs of the day, and in a variety of ways sustain their native cultural traditions of male sociability. Saloons were often attached to large public halls, which saloonkeepers made available for meetings of unions or social clubs, whose members returned the favor by patron-

izing the bar. Most saloons also had smaller, more private back rooms, behind the public front barroom, where unmarried women and prostitutes sometimes were allowed to meet men and where patrons could engage in more intimate behavior than would be possible in the front.[22]

Although saloons of varying degrees of affluence could be found throughout the city, they played a particularly critical role in those neighborhoods where social life was likely to be conducted on a sex-segregated basis and where housing was so crowded and inadequate that men had no alternative but to seek out such public spaces in which to socialize. In such neighborhoods these most public of establishments also afforded a degree of privacy unattainable in the patrons' own flophouses and tenements; many of the saloons even rented private rooms on an hourly basis to prostitutes and their customers and to other couples.

"Normal" men and "fairies" intermingled casually at many saloons, some of which were well known as "fairy places" in their neighborhoods. At some of them, fairies and their partners used the back rooms for sexual encounters, just as mixed-sex couples did. The Sharon Hotel, on Third Avenue just above Fourteenth Street, for instance, was known in the neighborhood as "Cock Suckers Hall," and investigators found a room behind the first-floor saloon where a dozen or more youths waited on male customers. "The boys have powder on their faces like girls and talk to you like disorderly girls talk to men," one investigator reported in the summer of 1901. He even observed several men having sex in the back room. On one occasion two of the fairies sat at a stout man's table, had him buy them drinks, and then unbuttoned his trousers and masturbated him "in front of everybody who was in the place."[23] Five blocks north on Third Avenue at Twentieth Street stood Billy's Hotel, which investigators called "without a doubt . . . one of the worst houses of perverts in NYC." Seventy-five "Fairies" were found in the back room one evening in the spring of 1901, "dressed as women, [with] low neck dresses, short skirts, [and] blond wigs." Fairies who met men in the saloon could take them to rooms upstairs or to the basement, where they had keys to a row of bathhouse-like closets in which they could "carry on their business."[24]

Although anti-vice investigators focused on the saloons' role as a site for sexual assignations, the saloons also functioned as important social centers for gay men, just as they did for other working-class men. They provided a place for gay men to meet, socialize, and enjoy one another's company. At Paresis Hall, for instance, Ralph Werther, a student living in New York in the 1890s and 1900s who later wrote an account of his experiences, discovered a whole society of "men of my type," for whom the hall was not the degenerate resort seen by slummers but a center of community and source of support.[25] The fairies' appropriation of the resources available at

Paresis Hall was emblematic of the way gay men appropriated and transformed the practices and institutions of their natal cultures as they forged their own. Many youths in the tenement districts, for instance, organized informal social clubs that rented rooms, often connected to saloons, as places for unsupervised gatherings, and that periodically sponsored larger parties or dances serving both to entertain the club's members and to raise funds for other outings.[26] The Cercle Hermaphroditis, which Werther learned some of the men at Paresis Hall had organized, was such a club. It permanently rented a room above the bar, where members could gather by themselves and store their personal effects, since the laws against transvestism and the hostility of some men made it dangerous for them to be seen on the Bowery in women's attire. A "small colony of pederasts" said to exist on the Lower East Side in 1902 may have been another such social club, whose members organized social events and entertained other men at a saloon. "The members of this band," a surgeon reported having been told, "have a *théâtre comique*, where they perform and have their exclusive dances; they also 'pair off,' living together as husband and wife."[27]

Such loosely constituted clubs and other gay social networks fostered and sustained a distinctive gay culture in a variety of ways. In addition to organizing dances and other social activities, the men who gathered at saloons and dance halls shared topical information about developments affecting them, ranging from police activity to upcoming cultural events. They assimilated into the gay world men just beginning to identify themselves as fairies, teaching them subcultural styles of dress, speech, and behavior. The clubs also strengthened the sense of kinship such men felt toward one another, which they expressed by calling themselves "sisters." Perhaps most important, they provided support to men ostracized by much of society, helping their members reject some of the harsh judgments rendered against them by many of their contemporaries. According to Ralph Werther, many of the fairies at Paresis Hall disparaged the implications of the slang name the slummers had given their meeting place, officially named Columbia Hall; *paresis* was a medical term for insanity, which outsiders thought men might acquire at the hall from syphilis or simply from associating with the fairies. Werther and his associates, by contrast, defended the hall as "the headquarters for avocational female-impersonators of the upper and middle classes." "Culturally and ethically," he emphasized in his account of the place, "its distinctive clientele ranked high." Werther also recorded numerous conversations among club members about the humiliations and harassment they had suffered at the hands of slummers, the police, and young toughs, but his reports also suggested that the conversations helped the men resist internalizing such hostility.[28]

While the Bowery resorts and other saloons served as meeting places primarily for working-class men, gay and "normal" alike, they were also vis-

ited by middle-class men, and not only by uptown "sporting men" keen to spend an uninhibited night out on the town. Many uptown gay men visited them as well in order to escape the restrictions imposed on their conduct in their own social circles. Werther lived such a "double life," as he called it. At least once a week he left his respectable routine as a student at an uptown university (probably Columbia) in order to visit the streets and resorts of the Lower East Side, exchanging his normal gentleman's garb for more feminine attire. He took extravagant precautions to avoid being seen by his everyday acquaintances on the train or on the Bowery, for fear that "even my best friend would be likely to get me thrown out of my economic and social position" if he learned of Werther's life as a fairy.[29] Werther and the other middle-class men he met on the Bowery went there because they found working-class men to be more tolerant of their kind than their middle-class colleagues and acquaintances were. Since "the 'classy,' hypocritical, and bigoted Overworld considers a bisexual [by which he meant an "intermediate type" or fairy] as monster and outcast," Werther claimed, "I was *driven* to a career in the democratic, frank, and liberal-minded Underworld." Drawing on the same imagery of heights and depths and light and shadow that many middle-class writers used to characterize the different class worlds and moral orders coexisting in the city, he added: "While my male soul was a leader in scholarship at the university uptown, my female soul, one evening a week, flaunted itself as a French doll-baby in the shadowy haunts of night life downtown."[30] He quoted another middle-class man who claimed that he revealed his character only on the Bowery, and not in his own social circles, because "the world [by which he meant his own, middle-class world] thinks female-impersonation disgraceful, [and] I had to spare my family all risk."[31]

As even this brief tour suggests, the gay world had become part of the spectacle of the Bowery by the 1890s. At a time when New York was a notoriously "wide-open" city, "degenerate resorts" and "fairy back room saloons" were a highly visible feature of the city's sexual underworld, spotlighted by the press and frequented by out-of-town businessmen and uptown slummers alike. The gay world was, moreover, remarkably integrated into the life of the working-class neighborhoods in which it took shape. Gay men not only modeled their own social clubs and events on those of other working-class men, but socialized extensively and overtly with "normal" workingmen as well. Most of the saloons they frequented were patronized by a mixed crowd of gay and straight men. This was not because there were too few gay men to support a separate gay saloon culture. One investigator reported seeing some seventy-five fairies at a single saloon in 1901, after all, and a decade earlier a medical student had seen hundreds of same-sex couples dancing at a masquerade ball. The number

of "mixed" saloons reveals instead the degree to which gay culture was tolerated by—and integrated into—working-class culture and the degree to which social and sexual interactions between "queer" and "normal" men were central to gay life. Gay men, as we shall see, sometimes had to fight to claim their place in working-class neighborhoods, but there was room for them in working-class culture to claim such a place.

Indeed, the saloons and other resorts where gay and straight men interacted were a highly revealing part of male sexual culture at the turn of the century, complex institutions playing varying roles for different constituencies and capable of multiple cultural meanings. In keeping with their working-class origins, they were the most commercialized and visible sites of gay sociability in the city; middle-class gay culture, as we shall see, tended to be more circumspect, as was middle-class culture generally at the turn of the century. A source of scandal and titillation for uptown slummers, the resorts were also a source of support and communal ties for middle- and working-class fairies alike. And to the horror of middle-class reformers—and the great curiosity of latter-day historians—they were a central site of a distinctly working-class male culture in which "fairies" and "normal" men publicly—and sexually—interacted with remarkable ease.

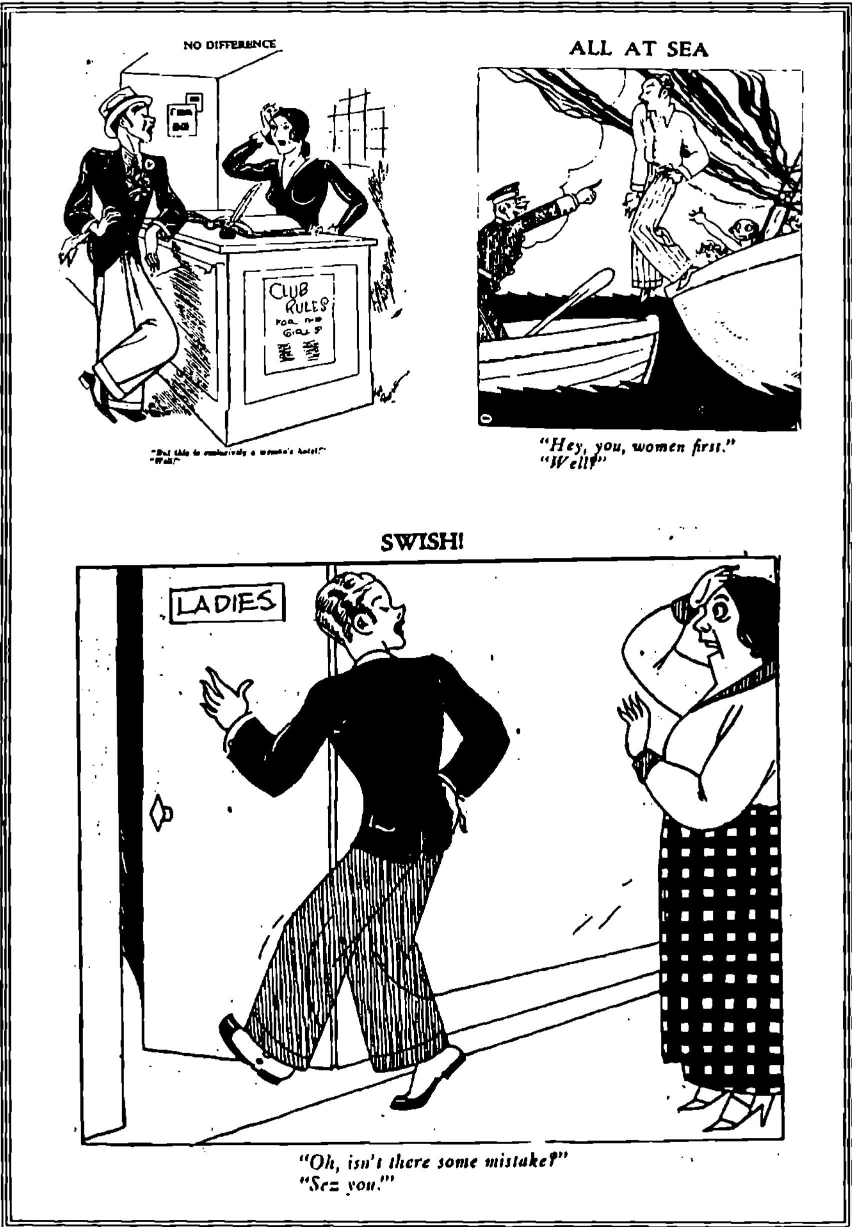



Figure 2.1. Three cartoons published in a New York tabloid in the early 1930s illustrate the prevailing conception of fairies as men who thought they were women. *(From* Broadway Brevities: *"No Difference," December 14, 1931; "All at Sea," February 29, 1932; "Swish!" June 6, 1932.)*

## Chapter 2

# THE FAIRY AS AN INTERMEDIATE SEX

THE STRIKING IMAGE OF THE "MALE DEGENERATES" OR "FAIRIES" CONGREGATING at Paresis Hall and the other Bowery resorts forcefully undermines the familiar presumption that homosexuals were isolated from one another and that homosexuality itself was all but invisible in turn-of-the-century New York. But it also presents us with a picture of male sexual identities and practices different from the one predominant at our end of the century. The "female impersonators" on display at the Bowery resorts were the most famous symbols of gay life, and the impression of that life they conveyed was reinforced by the countless other effeminate men who were visible in the streets of the city's working-class and amusement districts in the early decades of the century. As Mary Casal recalled of her tour of the Bowery resorts, "Seeing hundreds of male inverts . . . gathered together in a group made it easy to recognize them on any occasion where we might meet or see them, and so avoid any contact."[1] They were not the only homosexually active men in New York, but they constituted the primary image of the "invert" in popular and elite discourse alike and stood at the center of the cultural system by which male–male sexual relations were interpreted. As the dominant pejorative category in opposition to which male sexual "normality" was defined, the fairy influenced the culture and self-understanding of *all* sexually active men. The fairy thus offers a key to the cultural archaeology of male sexual practices and mentalities in this era and to the configuration of sex, gender, and sexuality in the early twentieth century.[2]

The determinative criterion in the identification of men as fairies was not the extent of their same-sex desire or activity (their "sexuality"), but rather the gender persona and status they assumed.[3] It was only the men

who assumed the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women who identified themselves—and were identified by others—as fairies. The fairies' sexual desire for men was not regarded as the singular characteristic that distinguished them from other men, as is generally the case for gay men today. That desire was seen as simply one aspect of a much more comprehensive gender role inversion (or reversal), which they were also expected to manifest through the adoption of effeminate dress and mannerisms; they were thus often called *inverts* (who had "inverted" their gender) rather than *homosexuals* in technical language. In the dominant turn-of-the-century cultural system governing the interpretation of homosexual behavior, especially in working-class milieus, one had a *gender* identity rather than a *sexual* identity or even a "sexuality"; one's sexual behavior was thought to be necessarily determined by one's gender identity. (Or, to put it in other words, since the language is notoriously ambiguous here, one had an identity based on one's gender rather than on one's "sexuality," which was not regarded as a distinct domain of personhood but as a pattern of practices and desires that followed inevitably from one's masculinity or femininity.) Sexual desire for men was held to be inescapably a woman's desire, and the inverts' desire for men was not seen as an indication of their "homosexuality" but as simply one more manifestation of their fundamentally womanlike character. The fundamental division of male sexual actors in much of turn-of-the-century working-class thought, then, was not between "heterosexual" and "homosexual" *men*, but between conventionally masculine males, who were regarded as men, and effeminate males, known as fairies or pansies, who were regarded as virtual women, or, more precisely, as members of a "third sex" that combined elements of the male and female. The heterosexual–homosexual binarism that governs our thinking about sexuality today, and that, as we shall see, was already becoming hegemonic in middle-class sexual ideology, did not yet constitute the common sense of working-class sexual ideology.

The numerous treatises on sexual inversion prepared by doctors and gay intellectuals at the turn of the century help explicate (even if they did not determine) the terms of the cultural system by which homosexual behavior was understood. The centrality of gender inversion to the culture's understanding of what we would now term homosexual desire is evident in the explanations they offered for men who sexually desired other men. For instance, Dr. William Lee Howard argued in 1904 that the inverts' "sexual desire for their—apparent—own sex" was "really a *normal* sexual feeling," because the inverts were actually *women* (who naturally desired men) even though they *appeared* to be men (for whom

such desire would have been perverted). He explained this apparent paradox by asserting that although the inverts had male bodies, they had female brains, and by reminding his readers that the brain, rather than the anatomy, was "the primary factor" in classifying the sex of a person.[4] Most of the other doctors writing about inversion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adopted a related approach by conceptualizing fairies (as well as lesbians or "lady lovers") as a "third sex" or an "intermediate sex" between men and women, rather than as men or women who were also "homosexuals."[5]

Most gay intellectuals writing in Europe and the United States shared this perspective. In the 1860s, Karl Ulrichs, the first German writer (and for decades the only openly "inverted" man) to discuss inversion in a public forum, did not define it in the same terms now used for homosexuality, but characterized the *Urning* (his term for an invert) as representing a "woman's spirit in a man's body." At the turn of the century, many of the next generation of gay intellectuals, including Edward Carpenter in Britain and Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany, adopted a version of this theory, claiming that they were best characterized as a "third sex" or an "intermediate sex" (the loose but popular translation of *sexuelle Zwischenstufe*), hermaphroditically combining psychic qualities of both the male and female. This was also the distinction made by Marcel Proust in his classic account of inversion, the *Sodom and Gomorrah* volume of *Remembrance of Things Past.*[6]

This mode of conceptualizing the character of inverts was strikingly indicated by the meaning such writers gave the term *bisexual.* By the mid-twentieth century, when a system categorizing people on the basis of their sexual object-choice had largely replaced one categorizing them on the basis of gender style, the word referred to individuals sexually attracted to both men and women. At the turn of the century, however, *bisexual* referred to individuals who combined the physical and/or psychic attributes of both men and women. A bisexual was not *attracted* to both males and females; a bisexual *was* both male and female.[7]

The prominence of the fairy in turn-of-the-century New York and his consistency with the hegemonic gender ideology of the era made him the dominant—and most plausible—role model available to boys and men trying to make sense of vague feelings of sexual and gender difference. The model of the fairy offered many men a means of constructing public personas they considered more congruent with their "inner natures" than conventional masculine ones, but that were also consistent with the terms of the dominant gender culture in which they had been socialized and that had, therefore, helped constitute those "inner natures." Taking on

the role of the fairy, that is, allowed them to reject the kind of masculinity prescribed for them by the dominant culture, but to do so without rejecting the hegemonic tenets of their culture concerning the gender order. As we shall see, many men rejected the role of the fairy as inconsistent with their male identities (or as too dangerous to their status as men), or only identified themselves as fairies before discovering there were alternative ways of being gay. But many other men embraced the identity because it embodied a way of understanding how they, as men, could have the feelings their culture ascribed exclusively to women.

## The Semiotics of Inversion: Effeminacy as a Cultural Strategy

The feminine character ascribed to the fairies is shown most clearly by the highly gendered—and engendering—signs that others used to identify them. When an anti-vice agent who investigated Paresis Hall in 1899 wished to illustrate the effeminacy of the "degenerates" he had seen there, he cited a wide range of womanlike characteristics as particularly revealing: not only did the men there solicit normal men—such as the investigator himself—for "immoral purposes," but they were "painted and powdered," used women's names, and displayed feminine mannerisms (or "aped the female character").[8] The adoption of these signs was critical to the process whereby many men transformed their self-identity—or at least their public persona—into that of a fairy. Some men embraced such styles as more "natural" to them than conventional masculine styles, so they help explain how men who had been raised to be "normal" used the role of the fairy to come to terms with their sense of sexual difference from other men. Other men adopted such signs as part of a cultural strategy that allowed them to negotiate the terms of their relationships with other men, and they highlight the dynamics of that strategy. Their centrality to gay culture and their utility as a means of identifying "fairies" suggests they provide an unexpected prism for viewing the cultural construction of gender in the era.

Like the men at Paresis Hall who called themselves "Princess this and Lady So and So and the Duchess of Marlboro," most fairies adopted women's names as part of the process by which they constructed a gay persona. Many men chose campy, flamboyant women's names or nicknames (such as Queen Mary, Salome, Cinderella, Violet, Blossom, Edna May, and Big Tess), feminine nicknames that highlighted a personal characteristic (such as Dixie, Gaby, Chuckles), names that played on their own names (Max might become Maxine), or the names of well-known women performers. By the 1910s and 1920s, they often borrowed the names of movie stars whose images resonated in some way with gay culture, each name evoking the partic-

ular feminine persona associated with the actress. Some men, for instance, adopted the name of Theda Bara, the classic vamp in the films of the mid-1910s, who portrayed erotically aggressive women capable of enervating the strongest of men. In the succeeding two decades, Gloria Swanson, an actress known for both her numerous marriages and her wardrobe, was perhaps the most popular of drag personas, and was taken as the *nom de drag* by the best-known African-American drag queen of the 1930s (see chapter 9). Mae West was a popular drag name by the early thirties.[9]

Adopting a woman's name not only announced a man's gay identity and perhaps something about the persona he sought to cultivate, but marked his transition from the straight world to the gay as well. Some men who permanently joined the sexual underworld, such as entertainers and full-time prostitutes, left their masculine birthnames behind and became known exclusively by their women's names (or camp names). Others, who moved back and forth between the gay world and the straight, used their feminine names only in gay circles, as a way of marking their temporary transition into the gay world; having two names emblematized their participation in a double life. Some of them adopted such pseudonyms when they ventured into the sexual underworld for the same reason many prostitutes did, to conceal and protect their identities in the straight world.[10] For fear of blackmail if his status in the straight world were discovered, "Ralph Werther" (a part-time fairy who later wrote about his experiences) was as careful to hide his straight life from his Bowery associates as he was his gay life from his university colleagues, even giving a false name when asked on the Bowery what his masculine name was. He went by "Jennie June" there (using the pen name of one of the nineteenth century's most famous female journalists), telling his working-class associates that Werther was his legal name, and he authored his first book under yet another pseudonym, Earl Lind.[11] Even in later decades, many men went by "bar names" or "camp names" at gay bars or parties, some using them only occasionally and in jest, others using them constantly in order to conceal their straight identities.[12]

Although fairies were known as "female impersonators," transvestism was not central to their self-representation. Relatively few men wore women's clothes, and, given the laws against transvestism (see chapter 10), even most men who wished to don a woman's full wardrobe dared do so only in relatively secure settings, such as a few of the Bowery resorts.[13] But dressing entirely as a woman was hardly necessary to indicate that one was a fairy. In the right context, appropriating even a single feminine—or at least unconventional—style or article of clothing might signify a man's identity as a fairy. Thus a much larger number of men adopted more subtle, but

still telling, clothing cues; the essential ingredient of a fairy's dress, as Ralph Werther explained, was that it be "as fancy and flashy as a youth dare adopt." He recalled that he "proclaimed myself" as a fairy to working-class youth on Fourteenth Street in the 1890s simply by wearing "white kids [gloves] and [a] large red neck-bow with fringed ends hanging down over my lapels."[14]

Writing in the late 1930s or around 1940, a gay man named Thomas Painter described a system guided by similar principles, although adapted in its particulars to contemporary male fashions. He counted "green suits, tight-cuffed trousers, flowered bathing trunks, and half-lengthed flaring top-coats" as distinctively homosexual attire, along with such accessories as "excessively bright feathers in their hat-bands." Dark brown and gray suede shoes were "practically a homosexual monopoly."[15] Writing at about the same time, another gay man, Gershon Legman, included "cosmetics ... flamboyant clothes and suede or high-heeled shoes" as the insignia of the "flaming queen ... who attempts thus to attract attention and drum up trade."[16]

Some clothes, such as a green suit, were so bold that few dared wear them. Other items of apparel, which sent the same message more subtly, were worn more commonly. Perhaps the most famous of these in the early years of the century was the red tie. By 1916 a physician in Chicago had heard that "male perverts in New York ... are known as 'fairies' and wear a red necktie," even though, he added, "inverts are generally said to prefer green."[17] Still, the red tie was famous only in certain circles; it was a subtle signal likely to be understood in some contexts more than others. A man wearing a red necktie on a well-known New York cruising street such as Riverside Drive or Fourteenth Street, for instance, was likely to be labeled a fairy. In the early 1910s a New York "invert" explained that "to wear a red necktie on the street is to invite remarks from newsboys and others. ... A friend told me once that when a group of street boys caught sight of the red necktie he was wearing they sucked their fingers in imitation of *fellatio.*"[18] But a man wearing the same tie in a social setting in which people were less alert to such signs might just be considered odd. An unconventional choice in an era of conservative colors, a red tie announced unorthodox tastes of another sort only to those in the know.

Styles of dress, demeanor, and physicality varied among ethnic cultures at any given time. Behavior or attire that signified sexual abnormality in one group might well signify normality—and even affiliation with the group—in another. One man might further the impression of effeminacy by wearing a "necklace"; another might signify his status as a "rough," highly masculine working-class youth by wearing a chain with a cross around his neck. Styles also changed over time. One man

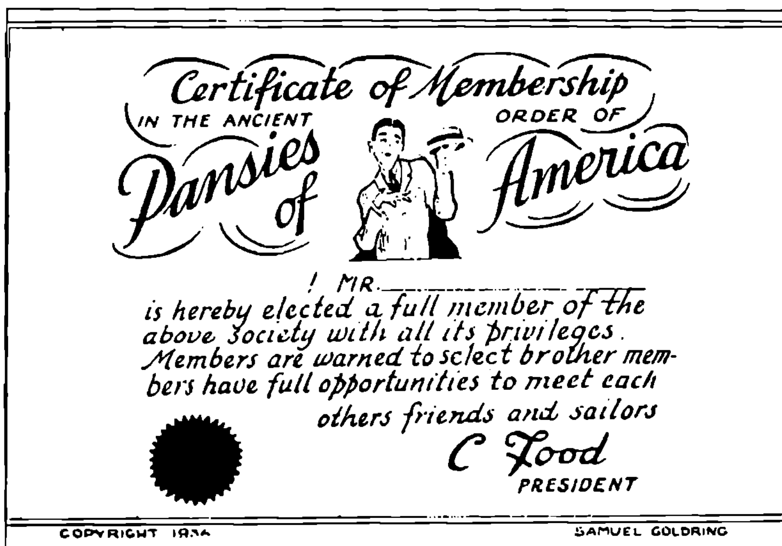



Figure 2.2. This "certificate" circulated among gay men in the 1930s. It can be read as a spoof of pansies or as an assertion *by* those pansies of their membership in a social group—or both. The "C Food" signature draws on gay slang ("seafood" referred to sailors as sex objects) to make an insider's joke about the desirability—and availability—of sailors. *(From Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.)*

active in New York's gay world since the 1930s noted in the summer of 1951 that the straight white working-class youths from South Brooklyn with whom he associated had suddenly started wearing chartreuse and fuchsia shirts, "for which they would have been hooted off the street and the shirt off their backs, with comments like 'pansy,' years ago." In the meantime, gay men had adopted other styles. Choice in color was not just a marker of gender or sexuality, however. According to the same man, such colors were embraced only by men from certain ethnic backgrounds in the early 1950s. Many Irish youth, he noted a year later, rejected color in male attire in part because "they considered it Latin, or, more to the point, Negro, to effect color." Whatever the actual patterns of dress, the presumed differences in attitudes toward color in dress became a way Irish and German youths distinguished themselves from Italians, African-Americans, and Puerto Ricans as well as from gay men.[19]

Observers often considered the unusual—even fairylike—dress of entertainers, artists, and other professionally colorful personalities to be just another sign of their special status rather than a sign of their sexual

deviance. As a result, however, describing someone as "artistic" could be a coded way of calling him homosexual, and observers often played on the ambiguity in their criticisms of artists. A 1933 *Daily News* profile of the entertainer Harry Richman, full of innuendo that Richman was sexually eccentric, furthered the impression by remarking that Richman had "gone in for gay colored suits recently. He even owns and wears a green suit . . . likes bright underwear and wears only silk . . . [and] likes sapphires and odd-shaped jewelry."[20]

Gay men, like most men and women, also sought to engender their bodies by molding them in ways that approximated the ideal gender types of their cultural group. Like other people, in other words, they undertook artificial means to cultivate the shape, density, carriage, and texture of their bodies, which they nonetheless continued to regard as the natural repository and signifier of their "sex."[21] Every aspect of their bodies' appearance was densely gendered, but they paid particular attention—like their "normal" counterparts, but with different goals in mind—to the ways they cut, styled, and colored their hair, painted and scented their faces, and grew, shaved, penciled, or tore out their eyebrows and other facial hair, as well as to the ways they walked, sat, spoke, moved their eyes, and carried their heads, hands, arms, and legs.

Perhaps most commonly, men used unconventional styles in personal grooming to signal their anomalous gender status. "Plucked eyebrows, rouged lips, powdered face, and marcelled, blondined hair" were the essential attributes of the fairy, one straight observer noted in 1933, succinctly summarizing the characteristics at least two generations of New Yorkers had used to identify such men.[22] In his 1934 painting *The Fleet's In*, the gay painter Paul Cadmus signaled the sexual character of a male civilian offering a cigarette to a sailor by giving him precisely such features—as well as a red tie (as shown in figure 3.1). The fairies' "painted and powdered" faces were usually the first thing visitors to the Bowery resorts commented on in the 1890s, and Ralph Werther identified several "low class fairies" in a Bowery saloon in the same period partly on the basis of their "hair a la mode de Oscar Wilde (that is, hanging down in ringlets over the ears and collar)."[23] In 1922 a seventeen-year-old Italian boy told of being arrested with a friend in Prospect Park when a detective "took off our hats and saw that our eyebrows were tweezed [and] said, 'You are fairies.'"[24] That the detective's surmise about the meaning of tweezed eyebrows was widely shared was confirmed not only by the boys' efforts to hide their telltale eyebrows with hats but also by an eighteen-year-old's assertion, a few years later, that it was "common knowledge" among the boys in his Italian Harlem neighborhood that "men with full faces, long delicate fingers, tweezed eyebrows and well shaped lips are inverts."[25]

As investigators' descriptions of Paresis Hall and other gay resorts suggest, some gay men reinforced the image conveyed by their grooming by using a variety of other gender codes in their carriage, demeanor, and speech, which identified them as gay to straight and gay men alike. In explaining how he identified homosexuals at the bars he investigated, one government agent noted in the 1930s that "the most striking feature [of homosexuals] would be the fact that although they represent and are dressed as one sex they act and impersonate the opposite sex . . . by gesture, voice inflection, manner or mode of speech, or walk, and in general [they] impersonate all of the other characteristics of a female that they can possibly assume."[26]

While his use of such stereotypical signs to identify homosexuals might seem incredible to the present reader, gay men used them as well. Ralph Werther immediately discerned that a group of men he met in 1895 were fairies on the basis of "the timbre of their voices . . . and their feminesque mannerisms."[27] The way men walked and carried their arms and hands were also taken as clues to their sexual identities. A limp wrist or an exaggerated swivel-hipped, mincing walk—known as "swishing" in the gay world—was regularly caricatured on the vaudeville stage and occasionally seen on the street as a sign of the "true" fairy. But more subtle stances were also read as gender-specific. Whereas a "normal" man rarely stood with his hands on his hips, according to a gay writer in 1941, when he did so it was "with his thumbs back and his fingers forward, his elbows straight out or somewhat backward." By contrast, he thought, a "very effeminate homosexual" was more likely to adopt such a pose, and to place "his thumbs *forward* and his fingers back, his shoulders hunched somewhat forward, and his head facing to one side."[28] A gay sailor, pressed in 1919 to explain how he identified someone as "queer," pointed to less precise but similarly subtle indications of effeminacy: "He acted sort of peculiar; walking around with his hands on his hips. . . . [His] manner was not masculine. . . . The expression with the eyes and the gestures. . . . "[29]

To dismiss such signs as mere stereotypes is to misapprehend their significance. They *were* stereotypes, to be sure. But the fact that men were identified as fairies on the basis of such minimal and "stereotypical" deviations from the conventions of masculine demeanor and dress indicates the narrow range of deviation from normative gender styles allowed *most* men. It also suggests the extraordinary sensitivity of men to subtle markers of gender status, thus highlighting the pervasive character of gender surveillance in working-class street culture. Furthermore, it confirms what I have already suggested about the articulation of the boundaries of gender and sexuality in the era, for it indicates that an inversion of any one aspect of one's prescribed gender persona was presumed to be sympto-

matic of a much more comprehensive inversion, which inevitably would manifest itself in abnormal sexual object-choice as well.

More significant, in this context, is that the effectiveness of such signs suggests the extraordinary plasticity of gender assignment in the culture in which the fairies operated, and the remarkable ease with which men could construct a public persona as a quasi-woman or fairy. Many more gay men adopted such effeminate mannerisms then than do today because they were so central to the dominant role model available to them as they formed a gay identity. But many men switched the mannerisms on and off as easily as they changed from feminine to more masculine attire, and were able to manipulate such symbols to avoid being labeled fairies. By wearing conventional masculine attire and carrying themselves with a "masculine" demeanor, most men could pass as straight, even if they chose to camp it up when in a secure gay environment.

Perhaps more unexpectedly, many men deliberately *used* such markers in order to signal their sexual character to other gay men and to straight men in public contexts. Effeminacy was one of the few sure means they had to identify themselves to others. As a man who moved to New York from Michigan in the 1920s recalled, "Back in the early twenties, people had to be quite effeminate to be identified, at least that was true in my case."[30] His statement implied that he could avoid being identified by avoiding any sign of effeminacy, but his point was that he *chose* to be effeminate precisely because he wanted to identify himself to other men. Another gay man made the same point with a somewhat different emphasis when he commented in the 1920s that the men he knew "talk and act like women, have feminine ways . . . [and] use rouge and powder . . . *in order to attract men.*"[31]

For many men, then, adopting effeminate mannerisms represented a deliberate cultural strategy, as well as a way of making sense of their sense of sexual difference. It was a way to declare a gay identity publicly and to negotiate their relationship with other men. The fairies' effeminacy helped them attract men not only by signaling their interest but also by establishing the cultural script that would govern their social and sexual interactions and reaffirm the cultural distance between them and the men they sought.[32] By taking on the role of women and making their violation of gender conventions consistent—by insisting, for instance, that men refer to them with women's names and pronouns—they reaffirmed those conventions in a way that allowed men to interact with them as if they *were* women, even though all parties understood that anatomically they were males. An agent investigating an African-American speakeasy in the basement of a Harlem brownstone in 1928 was approached by a man using

just this strategy. "[He] said to me in a very high pitched voice 'Oh come, let's dance, I am a B[itch] like those others sitting over there,' indicating a group of women."[33]

One indication of the extent to which men became accustomed to thinking of fairies as pseudo-women was provided in 1939 by a State Liquor Authority investigator who casually referred to a fairy (who went by a woman's name but dressed in conventional male attire) as "she," even though he was testifying at a formal hearing of the Authority. "We did get in a conversation with Beverly," he testified, "and she stated she liked us very much." When asked by an attorney whether he meant "she" or "he," he explained that the fairies "address themselves by these effeminate names and refer to one another in the effeminate terms," and promptly continued: "She [the fairy] made a date with Mr. Van Wagner and myself for Saturday night."[34]

Much evidence suggests that the fairy, so long as he abided by the conventions of this cultural script, was tolerated in much of working-class society—regarded as an anomaly, certainly, but as more amusing than abhorrent, and only rarely as a threat to the gender order. He was so obviously a "third-sexer," a different species of human being, that his very effeminacy served to confirm rather than threaten the masculinity of other men, particularly since it often exaggerated the conventions of deference and gender difference between men and women. The fairies reaffirmed the conventions of gender even as they violated them: they behaved as no man should, but as any man might wish a woman would.[35] Their representation of themselves as "intermediate types" made it easier for men to interact with them (and even have sex with them) by making it clear who would play the "man's part" in the interaction.

The conventions governing such interactions were so well established and their meaning so well understood that gay men did not always need to engage in an elaborate performance to signal their character and establish the terms of their interaction with other men. A 1929 account by the young writer Parker Tyler in a letter to a gay friend of his encounter with several men one evening in the Village suggests both the extraordinary effectiveness of these conventions in structuring such interactions and gay men's ability to play with them:

> [A friend] and I were in a speakeasy and four young [men] (I think they were newsreel cameramen) tried to make me, asking to be taken to my apartment. But they were frightfully vulgar; they called me Grace or something, until I insisted on Miss Tyler. It was really amusing, for one made a date with me quite anxiously and quite seriously,

> just as though I were a girl. You know the type he is: W - o - l - f. But I stood him up, of course—the little prick!

The young men's interaction with one of Tyler's friends indicates the degree to which the fairy's reconstruction of his gender through his gay cultural style outweighed the physical evidence of his body in determining the men's response to him. "Jules, being drunk, camped with them too, and they tried to date him—even after feeling his muscle: he could have laid them all low: really it's as wide as this paper."[36]

The presence of fairies at the Bowery resorts in the late nineteenth century provides one sign that they were tolerated by and integrated into working-class culture. Even more significant is the fact that fairies were also tolerated at many working-class dance halls and other meeting places where they were not made an official part of the "show," but interacted more casually with other patrons, albeit often still serving as an informal source of entertainment. At a dance hall opposite Jackson Avenue Park in Brooklyn in 1912, an anti-vice agent witnessed two fairies known as Elsie and Daisy carrying on with a group of young women, borrowing their powder puffs and acting in a "conspicuous way." When many of the men and women moved to the saloon next door after the hall closed at midnight, Elsie and Daisy entertained them with songs "which were obscene to the farthest limit," according to the agent, and later danced together, imitating "the action of committing sodomy," much to the delight of the other youths, who engaged in their own suggestive styles of dancing.[37]

To say that fairies were tolerated in much of working-class society, however, is not to say that they were respected. The men who became fairies did so at the cost of forfeiting their privileged status as men. Indeed, if working-class gender culture created an opening for fairies, it was a highly contested one, and men had to struggle to claim their place as fairies in the neighborhood. While some men, like Elsie and Daisy, managed to establish a place for themselves in their own neighborhoods, many others sought to minimize the risks involved in carrying themselves as fairies by doing so only in parts of town distant from their homes, where being brutalized or mocked would at least have fewer long-term consequences. The seventeen-year-old Italian mentioned previously, for instance, adopted a conventional persona in his own neighborhood, carrying himself as a fairy (by taking off his hat to reveal his tweezed eyebrows) only in another part of town.

Mockery and contempt often colored the public interactions between men and fairies in the streets and Bowery resorts, although gay men sometimes contested the conventions of ridicule. A 1928 report by an

undercover investigator illustrates this, while also revealing how visible gay men were in working-class neighborhoods and how casually other men interacted with them. In the course of a conversation with the agent, the proprietor of a speakeasy on West Seventeenth Street mentioned the fairies who frequented an Italian restaurant down the street, and the agent asked to see them. The proprietor readily agreed to take him to the restaurant. "It's fun," he declared. "I've been up there lots of times and kidded them along." But he also indicated that the fairies were willing to let the kidding go only so far; "some sure can fight," he added, indicating his respectful recognition that the fairies were prepared to defend themselves if the kidding got out of hand.[38] Jimmy Durante's recollection of the "queer entertainers" at the Bowery and Coney Island saloons where he got his start at the turn of the century indicates they had adopted a similar stance: "Some of them were six feet tall and built like Dempsey," he later noted, "so it was never very healthy to make nasty cracks."[39]

Not all fairies were built like Dempsey, though, and the threat of physical assaults on them was an abiding one. If fairies and other homosexuals were widely recognized as social types in the streets of working-class neighborhoods, they were also regarded as easy marks by the gangs of youths who controlled much of the traffic on those streets. "Go[ing] after fags" was an easy way to make money, observed one nineteen-year-old in an Italian Harlem gang in the early 1930s. The "fags" sometimes paid the boys and young men they met for quick sexual encounters in the parks and movie theaters; even better, they sometimes took the young men home to their apartments. Once they "bring you to an apartment," the nineteen-year-old added, "you just clean it out." The social researcher who interviewed him while studying East Harlem considered "the common practice of exploiting homosexuals" to be as characteristic of such boys' lives as the poolroom and petty thievery.[40] Even Ralph Werther, who waxed rhapsodic in his memoirs about his playful relationships with Irish and Italian youths in the 1890s and 1900s, repeatedly deplored the fact that such youths felt justified in brutalizing fairies. "The thievishly inclined regularly prey on androgynes," he noted, because they knew the latter were considered "outlaws" by the authorities and thus would not dare complain to the police for fear of drawing attention to themselves. Werther blamed the boys' behavior on the hatred preached against his kind by clergymen and doctors, the professional men to whom his memoir was addressed. Charles Nesbitt also noted the "peculiar type of savage violence to which [such men] were subjected by the non-sympathetic in their own social stratum," in his memoir concerning his trip to New York around

1890.[41] The fairies' conventionally feminine behavior also led thieves to expect little resistance from them. Two undercover agents discovered this in 1920 when three thieves tried to rob them "because they thought we were a couple fairies" and that it would thus be "a soft job."[42]

Such violence often served a more instrumental purpose in reinforcing the boundaries between fairies and other men. Some men beat or robbed their effeminate male sexual partners after sex as if to emphasize that they felt no connection to them and had simply "used" them for sexual release. Although not a regular phenomenon, this happened often enough that many gay men interested in sex with straight men sought to avoid the situations in which it could happen most easily.[43]

In some cases the violence directed against fairies may have represented an intersection of gender and class hostilities. Werther reported that he had been subjected to gang rapes by several of the Irish and Italian youth gangs he approached.[44] In this his fate was no different from that of women whom men considered sexually available; if fairies were tolerated because they were regarded as women, they were also subject to the contempt and violence regularly directed against women. Fairies, like women who crossed certain lines (even such narrow ones as daring to walk down certain streets alone, without male guardianship), were considered fair game by many gangs. Werther's situation was complicated by the fact that it must have been obvious to such gangs that he was not a "fairy of the slums," but an uptown gentleman out slumming. One suspects that he became a convenient target for working-class men's resentment of the upper-class gentlemen who visited their neighborhood for purposes of slumming and using "their" women. If working-class men often tried to claim a certain gender superiority over effete gentlemen on the basis of their supposed greater masculinity, they could ritually enact and enhance that sense of superiority by their sexual subjection and brutalization of the homosexual gentlemen who came their way.[45]

The mixture of tolerance, desire, and contempt with which men regarded fairies also resulted from the particular *kind* of feminine role they adopted. Although I have argued that fairies were considered womanlike in their behavior and self-representation, that is really too imprecise a formulation. For no single norm governing "feminine" (or "masculine") behavior existed at the turn of the century; such normative injunctions varied along class lines and among immigrant groups and, indeed, became one of the standards by which such groups constituted themselves and distinguished themselves from others. In crucial

respects the fairies' style was comparable not so much to that of some ideal category of womanhood as to that of a particular subgroup of women or cultural type: prostitutes and other so-called "tough girls."[46] The fairy's sexual aggressiveness in his solicitation of men was certainly inconsistent with the sexual passivity expected of a respectable woman, but it was entirely in keeping with the sexual character ascribed to tough girls and prostitutes. That gay men themselves shared this identification accounts, in part, for the popularity of "strong" or "tough" women, such as Mae West, as gay icons and drag personas: they were regarded as women who disdained convention, were determinedly and overtly sexual in character, and did what they needed to get what they wanted.

Moreover, both fairies and prostitutes congregated in many of the same locales and used some of the same techniques to attract attention; the fairy's most obvious attribute, his painted face, was the quintessential marker of the prostitute.[47] And while fairies, like prostitutes, played the so-called woman's part in sexual relations with men, both groups engaged in certain forms of sexual behavior, particularly oral sex, which many working-class and middle-class women alike rejected as unbecoming to a woman, "dirty," and "perverted."[48] (Anti-vice investigators called prostitutes who performed fellation "perverts," the same term they applied to the men who performed it.)[49] The fairies' style, then, was not so much an imitation of women as a group but a provocative exaggeration of the appearance and demeanor ascribed more specifically to prostitutes. As a result, many men seem to have regarded fairies in the same terms they regarded prostitutes. This conflation may have made it easier for them to distance themselves from fairies and to use them for sexual purposes in the same way they used female prostitutes.[50]

The men who adopted the styles of the fairy boldly announced to the world that they were sexually different from other men and that they sexually desired other men. They made their existence obvious to everyone in the city and provoked a range of responses from "normal" men: desire, contempt, fascination, abuse. Becoming a fairy offered men a way to make sense of their feeling sexually different from other men and to structure their relations with other men. Because the fairy was the central pejorative category against which men had to measure themselves as they developed their gender and sexual style, all men had to position themselves in relation to it. Some men who desired other men, as we shall see, rejected the style and identity of the fairy alto-

gether, but that style and identity had numerous meanings even to the men who embraced it. Some men, like Ralph Werther, identified with the image of the fairy completely; becoming a fairy seemed a "natural" way to express their "true" feminine natures. Many other men had a more complicated and distant relation to the persona of the fairy, adopting it in a more calculated and strategic manner in order to negotiate their relations with other men. Using the style of the fairy allowed them to announce their identities to gay and straight men alike in the settings in which they wished to do so. It also allowed them to attract "normal" men who would interact with them publicly only if they behaved in a manner that was appealing and that made it clear to onlookers who would play the "woman's part" in their sexual relations.

Gay men themselves believed that such effeminacy was more natural to some men than others. "If not naturally, we tried to walk very effeminately, talk very effeminately, look effeminate, use rouge and make-up, etc., to impersonate a female," commented one man, to whom such effeminacy did not come so "naturally" as it did to others, in the early 1920s.[51] Parker Tyler noted the strategic purposes served by such styles more directly: as he wrote to a gay friend in 1931, he only adopted them in order to avoid "insulting" a group of "inferior males all dying except certain ones to believe i am dying for them."[52]

The very ability of gay men to act this way—to transform themselves into fairies or quasi-women by changing their dress or demeanor—both highlights and can only be understood in the context of the plasticity of gender assignment in the rough working-class culture in which the fairies operated. As one gay man explained in the mid-1920s: "It is well known fact"—widely believed, apparently, in his circles, at least—

> that the secret of a woman's appeal to man is not so much her sex as her effeminacy. . . . The attitude of the average man to the homosexual is determined by the degree of effeminacy in the homosexual. Your writer has observed that nine out of ten [men] take favorably to the homosexual. Of course, they seek the eternal feminine in the homosexual . . . [and] feminine homosexuals naturally have the greater number of admirers.[53]

He, in other words, not only imagined that cultural gender could be dissociated from anatomical sex, but that the former was more significant in erotic attraction and in everyday social interactions than the latter. His comment, which is echoed by many others, also suggests that the working-class men with whom he interacted were more capable of distinguishing cultural gender from anatomical sex than their middle-class

contemporaries were; the latter were more likely to object to homosexual men of any sort. To explain why workingmen found it easier to interact with fairies than middle-class men did, we need to explore the distinctive sexual cultures of working-class and middle-class men in the early twentieth century.

Figure 3.1 *The Fleet's In* (1934), a painting by the gay artist Paul Cadmus, depicts the efforts of women and gay men alike to seduce sailors. The man offering a cigarette to the sailor has the typical markers of a fairy: bleached hair, tweezed eyebrows, rouged cheeks, and red tie. The sailor's eyes suggest he knows exactly what is being offered along with the smoke. *(Courtesy of Navy Art Collection; detail from painting shown.)*

## Chapter 6

# LOTS OF FRIENDS AT THE YMCA: ROOMING HOUSES, CAFETERIAS, AND OTHER GAY SOCIAL CENTERS

WHEN WILLY W. ARRIVED IN NEW YORK CITY IN THE 1940S, HE DID WHAT many newcomers did: he took a room at the Sixty-third Street YMCA. As was true for many other young men, the friends he made at the Y remained important to him for years and helped him find his way through the city. Most of those friends were gay, and the gay world was a significant part of what they showed him. He soon moved on, though, to the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn, which offered more substantial accommodations. The St. George, it seemed to him, was "almost entirely gay," and the friends he met there introduced him to yet other parts of the gay world. After living briefly in a rooming house on Fiftieth Street near Second Avenue, he finally took a small apartment of his own, a railroad flat on East Forty-ninth Street near First Avenue, where he stayed for years. He moved there at the invitation of a friend he had met at Red's, a popular bar on Third Avenue at Fiftieth Street that had attracted gay men since its days as a speakeasy in the 1920s. The friend had an apartment in the building and wanted Willy to take the apartment next to his. An elderly couple had occupied it for years, and, since the walls were rather thin, the friend had never stopped worrying that they heard him late at night with gay friends and had grown suspicious of the company he kept. When they moved out he wanted to make sure that someone more understanding would take their place. Willy was happy to do so, and as other apartments opened up in the building he invited other friends to move in. Several friends did, and some of the newcomers encouraged their own friends to join them. The building's narrow railroad flats, if not luxurious, were adequate and cheap; the location, near the gay bar circuit on Third Avenue in the East Fifties, was convenient;

and, most important, the other inhabitants were friendly and supportive. Within a few years, Willy remembered, "we took over." Gay men occupied fourteen of the sixteen apartments in the building.* Willy not only lived in a gay house, but in a growing gay neighborhood enclave, whose streets provided him with regular contact with other gay men. Although Willy's success in creating an almost completely gay apartment building was unusual, his determination to find housing that maximized his autonomy and his access to the gay world was not. In his movement from one dwelling to the next, Willy traced a path followed by many gay men in the first half of the century as they built a gay world in the city's hotels, rooming houses, and apartment buildings, and in its cafeterias, restaurants, and speakeasies. Gay men took full advantage of the city's resources to create zones of gay camaraderie and security.

## BACHELOR HOUSING

Although living with one's family, even in a crowded tenement, did not prevent a man from participating in the gay world that was taking shape in the city's streets, many gay men, like Willy, sought to secure housing that would maximize their freedom from supervision. For many, this meant joining the large number of unmarried workers living in the furnished-room houses (also called lodging or rooming houses) clustered in certain neighborhoods of the city. No census data exist that could firmly establish the residential patterns of gay men, but two studies of gay men incarcerated in the New York City Jail, conducted in 1938 and 1940, are suggestive. Sixty-one percent of the men investigated in 1940 lived in rooming houses, three-quarters of them alone and another quarter with a lover or other roommates; only a third lived in tenement houses with their own families or boarded with others.[2] Court records from the first three decades of the century provide relatively few accounts of men apprehended for sexual encounters in rooming houses (itself indirect evidence of the relative security of such encounters), but they do abound in anecdotal evidence of men who lived together in rooming houses or took other men to their rooms, and whose relationships or rendezvous came to the attention of the police only because of a mishap.†

*This was not the only predominantly gay apartment building Willy remembered. In the 1950s a major apartment house at Number 405 in a street in the East Fifties was so heavily gay that gay men nicknamed it the "Four out of Five."[1]

†Such information most frequently came to the attention of the police when a man who had been brought home assaulted or tried to blackmail his host, when parents discovered that a man had invited their son home, when the police followed men to a furnished room from some other, more public locale, or when one of the tenants sharing a room with his lover was arrested on another charge.[3]

Usually situated in rowhouses previously occupied by single families, rooming houses provided tenants with a small room, a bed, minimal furniture, and no kitchen facilities; residents were expected to take their meals elsewhere. Such housing had qualities that made it particularly useful to gay men as well as to transient workers of various sorts. The rooms were cheap, they were minimally supervised, and the fact that they were usually furnished and were rented by the week made them easy to leave if a lodger got a job elsewhere—or needed to disappear because of legal troubles.[4] Rooming houses also offered tenants a remarkable amount of privacy. Not only could they easily move out if trouble developed, the tenants at most houses compensated for the lack of physical privacy by maintaining a degree of respectful social distance. (Inclined to dislike anything they saw in the rooming houses, housing reformers, somewhat contradictorily, were as distressed by the lack of interest roomers took in one another's affairs as by the lack of privacy the houses afforded.) One study conducted in Boston in 1906 reported that in addition to taking their meals outside their cramped quarters, most roomers also developed their primary social ties elsewhere, at cheap neighborhood restaurants, at their workplaces, and in saloons.[5] Moreover, the absence of a parlor (which usually had been converted into a bedroom) in most rooming houses, the respect many landladies had for their tenants' privacy, and, perhaps most important, the competition among rooming houses for lodgers led many landladies to tolerate men and women visiting each other's rooms and bringing in guests of the other sex. Numerous landladies in the 1920s, when queried by male investigators posing as potential tenants, said straightforwardly that they could have women in their rooms: "Why certainly, this is your home" was the reassuring reply of one.[6]

Some landladies doubtless tolerated known homosexual lodgers for the same economic reasons they tolerated lodgers who engaged in heterosexual affairs, and others simply did not care about their tenants' homosexual affairs. But most expected their tenants at least to maintain a decorous fiction about their social lives. The boundaries of acceptable behavior were, as a result, often unclear, and in many houses men felt constrained to try to conceal the gay aspects of their lives. The story of one black gay man who lived in the basement of a rooming house on West Fiftieth Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in 1919 suggests the latitude—and limitations—of rooming-house life. The tenant felt free to invite men whom he met on the street into his room. One summer evening, for instance, he invited an undercover investigator he had met while sitting on the basement stairs. But, as he later explained to his guest, while three "young fellows" had been visiting him in his room on a regular basis, he had finally decided to stop seeing the youths because they made too much noise, and he did not want the landlady "to get wise." Not only might he lose his room, he

feared, but also his job as the house's chambermaid.[7] The consequences of discovery could be even more severe. In 1900 a suspicious boardinghouse keeper on East Thirteenth Street barged into the room taken only a few days earlier by two waiters, a twenty-year-old German and seventeen-year-old American. She caught them having sex, had them arrested, and eventually had the German sent to prison for a year.[8]

In general, though, the same lack of supervision in the rooming houses that so concerned moral reformers made the houses particularly attractive to gay men, who were able to use their landladies' and fellow tenants' presumption that they were straight in order to disguise their liaisons with men. A male lodger attracted less attention when a man, rather than a woman, visited his room, and a male couple could usually take a room together without generating suspicion.[9] Moreover, the privacy and flexibility such accommodations provided often helped men develop gay social networks. Young men new to New York or the gay life often met other gay men in their rooming houses, and these men sometimes served as their guides as they explored gay society. The ease with which men could move from one rooming house to another also allowed them to pursue and strengthen new social ties by moving in with new friends (or lovers) or moving closer to restaurants or bars where their friends gathered.[10]

Moral reformers expressed concern that the casual intermingling of strangers in furnished-room houses could "assume a dangerous aspect," especially when it introduced young men and women to people of ill repute. In response to this threat, some sought to offer more secure environments to young migrants to the city.[11] Various groups established special hotels at the turn of the century in order to provide men with moral alternatives to the city's flophouses, transient hotels, and rooming houses. Ironically, though, such hotels often became major centers for the gay world and served to introduce men to gay life. In an all-male living situation, in which numerous men already shared rooms, it was virtually impossible for management to detect gay couples. The Seamen's Church Institute, for instance, had been established as a residential and social facility by a consortium of churches in order to protect seamen from the moral dangers the churchmen believed threatened them in the lodging houses of the waterfront areas. But, as we have already seen, gay seamen and other gay men interested in seamen could usually be found in the Institute's lobby. Men involved in relationships also had no difficulty taking rooms together: one seaman told an investigator in 1931 that he had lived with a youth at the Institute "for quite some time," and he had apparently encountered no censure there.[12] Similarly, the two massive Mills Houses, built by the philanthropist Darius O. Mills, were intended to offer unmarried workingmen moral

accommodation in thousands of small but sanitary rooms. (The first one was built in 1896 directly across Bleecker Street from the building that had housed the notorious fairy resort, the Slide, just a few years earlier, as if to symbolize the reestablishment of moral order on the block; the second was built on Rivington Street in 1897.) Its attractiveness as a residence for working-class gay men is suggested by the frequency with which its residents appeared in the magistrate's courts. In March 1920, for instance, at least three residents of the two Mills Houses were arrested on homosexual charges (not on the premises): a forty-three-year-old Irish laborer, a forty-two-year-old Italian barber, and a thirty-eight-year-old French cook.[13]

The residential hotels built by the Young Men's Christian Association provide the most striking example of housing designed to reform men's behavior that gay men managed to appropriate for their own purposes. The YMCA movement had begun in the 1840s and 1850s with the intention of supplying young, unmarried migrants to the city with an urban counterpart to the rural family they had left behind. Its founders had expressed special concern about the moral dangers facing such men in the isolation of rooming-house life. The Y organized libraries, reading groups, and gymnasiums for such men, and in some cities established residential facilities, despite some organizers' fear that they might become as depraved and degrading as the lodging houses.[14] The New York YMCA began building dormitories in 1896, and by the 1920s the seven YMCA residential hotels in New York housed more than a thousand young men, whose profiles resembled those of most rooming-house residents: primarily in their twenties and thirties, nearly half of them were clerks, office workers, and salesmen, while smaller numbers were "professional men," artisans, mechanics, skilled workers, and, especially in the Harlem branch, hotel, restaurant, and domestic-service employees.[15]

The fears of the early YMCA organizers were realized. By World War I, the YMCAs in New York and elsewhere had developed a reputation among gay men as centers of sex and social life. Sailors at Newport, Rhode Island, reported that "everyone" knew the Y was "the headquarters" for gay men, and the sailor's line in Irving Berlin's World War I show, *Yip, Yip, Yaphank*, about having lots of friends at the YMCA is said to have drawn a knowing laugh.[16] The reputation only increased in the Depression with the construction, in 1930, of two huge new YMCA hotels, which soon became famous within the gay world as gay residential centers. The enormous Sloane House, on West Thirty-fourth Street at Ninth Avenue, offered short-term accommodations to "transient young men" in almost 1,500 rooms, and the West Side Y, on Sixty-third Street at Central Park West, offered longer-term residential facilities as well. A man interviewed in the mid-1930s recalled of his stay at Sloane House:

> One night when I was coming in at 11:30 P.M. a stranger asked me to go to his room. They just live in one another's rooms although it's strictly forbidden. . . . This Y.M.C.A. is for transients but one further uptown [the West Side Y] is a more elegant brothel, for those who like to live in their ivory towers with Greek gods. If you go to a shower there is always someone waiting to have an affair. It doesn't take long.[17]

Such observations became a part of gay folklore in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when the extent of sexual activity at the Ys—particularly the "never ending sex" in the showers—became legendary within the gay world. A man living in New Jersey remembered that he stayed at Sloane House "many times, every chance I got . . . [because] it was very gay"; another man called it a "gay colony." Indeed, the Y had such a reputation for sexual adventure that some New Yorkers took rooms at Sloane House for the weekend, giving fake out-of-town addresses. "It was just a free for all," one man who did so several times recalled, "more fun than the baths."[18]

While the sexual ambience of the Ys became a part of gay folklore, the role of the Ys as gay social centers was also celebrated. Many gay New Yorkers rented rooms in the hotels, used the gym and swimming pool (where men swam naked), took their meals there, or gathered there to meet their friends. Just as important—and more ironic, given reformers' intentions—was the crucial role the hotels often played in introducing young men to the gay world. It was at the Y that many newcomers to the city made their first contacts with other gay men. Grant McGree arrived in the city in 1941, not knowing anyone, intimidated by the size of the city, and full of questions about his sexuality. But on his first night at the Y as he gazed glumly from his room into the windows of other men's rooms he suddenly realized that many of the men he saw sharing rooms were couples; within a week he had met many of them and begun to build a network of gay friends. As gay men used to put it, the letters Y-M-C-A stood for "Why I'm So Gay."[19]

Donald Vining's diary of his move to New York in search of work in the fall of 1942 provides a particularly detailed account of how the Y and similar residential hotels could serve to introduce men to the gay world. Upon arriving in New York, Vining took a room at Sloane House, and within a week was startled to have someone approach him in the shower room. Nothing happened that time, but, intrigued and emboldened, he initiated contact with someone else in the shower room a few days later. Within a week he had moved to the Men's Residence Club (formerly a YMCA hotel), on West Fifty-sixth Street, which he later wryly described as "a combination old men's home and whorehouse," where he continued to meet men. He soon took a job back at

Sloane House, where he worked with several other gay men at the front desk. Within weeks of his arrival in the city, his contacts at the Y and the Club had supplied him with a large circle of friends, with whom he took his meals, went to the theater, and explored the gay life of the city. Although he eschewed the dominant institutions of the gay world, particularly bars and private parties, he created an extensive gay social circle based on the contacts he made at work and at home.[20]

The response of the YMCA's managers to such activity was ambiguous. At some residences they took steps to restrict contact between certain groups of men (and thus, in effect, to restrict the possibilities for liaisons), such as assigning servicemen to certain floors, segregating the floors by age or by other criteria, and prohibiting residents from taking outsiders to their rooms. It is not clear why the management developed such regulations; many gay men believed they had been designed precisely in order to hamper their socializing, but this, of course, reveals more about the extent to which they viewed the Y as a gay arena than it does about the actual concerns of management. The upper echelon of the Y's management occasionally indicated its concern about the situation by ordering crackdowns on homosexual activity. In general, however, the fate of gay residents depended on the personal predilections of the lower-level security staff and desk clerks. Some of them were gay themselves; as one man recalled, "The job was considered a plum—[the] fox guarding the hen house!"[21] Many of them, whatever their own inclinations, appear to have had little interest in spending their time ferreting out homosexual activity or in punishing the occasional homosexual liaisons of which they became aware, so long as the participants observed certain rules of decorum.

While working as a desk clerk at Sloane House in June 1943, for instance (at a time, admittedly, when the pressure of wartime mobilization relaxed many standards), Donald Vining recorded in his diary that "a note was left [tonight] for 417, a vacated room, and when the new occupant read the note, he [laughed and] handed it to us. It was asking for a return assignation with 424." The head clerk simply threw it away, "without setting the house man to check on the guy who wrote it," which "gladdened my heart." On another occasion, when a man went far beyond the boundaries of discretion expected by the staff—several residents complained that he had entered their rooms while they were sleeping and attempted to initiate sexual contacts—he was asked to leave, but, significantly, he was not reported to the police.[22]

As in most housing situations, then, gay men at the Y constantly ran the risk of being discovered and penalized for their homosexual liaisons or simply for their status as homosexuals. But so long as they regulated their own behavior in accordance with the restrictions unofficially imposed on them, the risk of discovery and retribution was slight.

While both the YMCA and rooming houses offered a modicum of privacy to men of moderate means, the development of apartment hotels and houses in the last quarter of the nineteenth century made it possible for men with greater financial resources to acquire accommodations with greater privacy and respectability. Apartment hotels, originally introduced in the 1870s and built primarily in the late 1890s and 1900s, created new possibilities for independent living among unmarried men. A number of the earliest apartment hotels, such as the Bachelor Apartments, built at 15 East Forty-eighth Street in 1900, and the Hermitage Hotel, built in 1907 on Seventh Avenue just south of Forty-second Street, were specifically designed for well-off bachelors: they offered small but comfortable living quarters (without cooking facilities), a public restaurant, and communal lounging and writing rooms designed to resemble those of a gentlemen's club.

Although the superior social status of apartment *hotels* over rooming houses quickly allowed them to become respectable accommodations for middle-class bachelors, apartment *houses*, whose kitchen facilities made them more suitable for families, were initially eschewed by middle-class families. For most of the nineteenth century, a private rowhouse had been the mark of a successful family in a city whose immigrant masses were herded together in tenements, and most bourgeois families initially regarded the apartment house as little more than a better sort of tenement. The respectability and popularity of apartments grew in the last decade of the century, however, as the skyrocketing cost of land in desirable neighborhoods made individual home ownership unobtainable for all but the wealthy and as apartments became known for their size, convenience, and elegance. Middle-class New Yorkers began to accept them as the only way to live in desirable neighborhoods, and at the end of the depression of the mid-1890s, apartment construction commenced in earnest. By the 1920s, New York was well on its way to becoming a city of apartment dwellers.[23]

The increasing number and respectability of apartment houses and hotels helped make it possible for a middle-class gay male world to develop. At a minimum, they offered gay men greater privacy, space, and prestige than rooming houses. An employee-doorman, rather than an owner-landlady, observed their comings and goings, and residents generally sought to reproduce the privacy of an individual home by remaining aloof from the activities of their neighbors.* Such privacy allowed men

*One account of urban life in 1932 pointed to the still notable anonymity of life in the big midtown apartment buildings, "where your neighbor is just a number on the door." It illustrated its point with a description of an expensive building on West Fifty-sixth Street, whose two hundred apartments included not only the homes of "quiet families [who] know little or nothing about the activities of their neighbors," but also, it claimed, three flats on the ninth floor where lesbians lived, and another on the tenth occupied by a gay man.[24]

to bring gay friends home and allowed couples to live together. More important, the ample space of an apartment allowed gay men to entertain friends on a large scale, a resource of inestimable value at a time when police harassment restricted their ability to gather in more public spaces.[25] Finally, the apartment offered middle-class gay men the unquestioned aura of respectability that eluded residents of rooming houses and flophouses. The "bachelor flat" became an established form of accommodation, and this made it easier for men whose backgrounds and occupations would not have allowed them to live at the Y to live outside the family system.

As apartment living became more financially accessible and commonplace in New York in the early decades of the century, it became the accommodation of choice for gay men as for other New Yorkers. In the 1920s and 1930s, growing numbers of tenements and railroad flats, which previously had been occupied by entire families (or even several families), were turned into apartments occupied by a single resident or a couple. A middle-class gay residential enclave developed on the Upper East Side in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Many gay men moved into the railroad flats in the East Fifties and Sixties east of the Third Avenue elevated train, which allowed them to live close to the elegance of Park Avenue (as well as the gay bars of Third Avenue) at a fraction of the cost. At the same time, a less wealthy gay enclave developed in the Forties west of Eighth Avenue, as large groups of poorer gay men, often youths, crowded into flats in the old tenements of Hell's Kitchen (see chapters 11 and 12).

While some men were able to secure relatively private accommodations, many others had little space to themselves at home. This problem was hardly unique to gay men, for most poor people in the city, whether they rented a cot in one of the city's flophouses or lived with a dozen or more people in a tiny three-room tenement flat, had little access to the privacy that bourgeois ideology ascribed to the home. Couples living in the cramped quarters of working-class neighborhoods needed private space for sexual encounters, as did the prostitutes offering sexual services to the city's enormous population of single men; thus hotel and saloon proprietors found it profitable to rent their rooms by the hour to unmarried couples. The struggle between entrepreneurs and moral reformers over the provision of such accommodations in the early decades of the century was a key component in the campaign over the moral and spatial order of the city (see chapter 5). But if the provision of respectable residential accommodations for single men did little to prevent gay men from meeting, the more coercive campaigns aimed at closing the assignation hotels had even less effect on them.

The number of assignation hotels in New York grew dramatically after

the state legislature enacted the Raines Law in 1896. Billed as a temperance measure, it required saloons to close on Sundays, one of their busiest days. That the law was designed to control working-class male sociability more than to encourage temperance was made clear by a provision that allowed bars attached to hotels, which generally served a class of male drinkers considered more respectable by the legislators, to remain open. Sunday was the only day off for many workingmen, however, and many liked to spend it relaxing with their friends in a saloon. In order to avoid losing the vitally important Sunday trade, more than a thousand saloons managed to convert themselves into "hotels" by renting ten adjoining rooms (the minimum number required for certification as a hotel) or, even more commonly, by renting a smaller number of rooms and partitioning them into ten spaces, each large enough for little more than a bed or cot. By 1906, officials estimated that fully 1,200 of the 1,400 hotels registered in Manhattan and the Bronx were such "Raines Law hotels," and that in the great majority of them the saloon proprietors had found it most profitable to rent each room several times a night to successive unmarried couples or to prostitutes and their customers.[26] They also discovered that several resorts forced to close in the crackdown following the revelations of the Parkhurst campaign in 1894, including Paresis Hall, had been able to reopen under the auspices of the Raines Law.[27]

Transforming a saloon into a Raines Law hotel became a common—and successful—business practice not only because it allowed proprietors to circumvent the Sunday closing law, but also because it allowed them to profit from the need for private quarters on the part of many unmarried men and women. Many saloons not only became assignation hotels for unmarried sweethearts, but also, in a bid to attract new customers and increase profitability, made sure that prostitutes were always available in the back room of the saloon itself. As a result, the law inadvertently encouraged the dispersion of prostitution into new neighborhoods of the city, and in certain quarters streetwalkers could be found outside saloons, soliciting men to accompany them inside.

It was in response to the appearance of the Raines Law hotels that moral reformers and shocked city businessmen founded the Committees of Fifteen and Fourteen. The Committee of Fifteen, founded in 1900, sent investigators to saloons throughout the city and published a study, *The Social Evil*, in 1902 that deplored the Raines Law hotels as dens of prostitution that had spread the vice throughout the city. Spurred on by its findings, a meeting in 1905 at the City Club, an elite businessmen's club, established the Committee of Fourteen for the Suppression of Raines Law Hotels in New York City, which launched a campaign against the hotels. In 1912 the Committee concluded that its efforts had been successful. But, asserting that cabarets and other centers of "commercialized amuse-

ments" had simply replaced the hotels as the sites of prostitution and unrestrained socializing between men and women, it reorganized itself as a general anti-prostitution society, which continued to be a major force in the city's anti-vice campaigns until it disbanded in 1932.[28]

Although the Committee's campaign led to the closing of the best-known Bowery resorts where "fairies" were on display, such as the Jumbo, its efforts had less effect on the use of the Raines Law hotels for sexual trysts by male couples than by heterosexual couples, precisely because of their focus on female prostitution. The Committee's main strategy was to close as many of the hotels as possible, with the cooperation of the brewers, and to prevent those it could not close from being used for assignations by prohibiting them from admitting women. By 1909, it had reduced the number of such hotels by half and had forced almost three-quarters of the remaining 690 hotels to agree to admit men only.[29] This forced a wholesale movement of prostitution out of such hotels and back into tenements and furnished-room houses, but it had little effect on male couples seeking accommodation.

The history of a hotel-saloon at 36 Myrtle Avenue, near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, illustrates the range of tactics used by the Committee as well as the unanticipated effects they could have for gay men. When the Committee's agents first investigated the hotel in 1910 or 1911, they determined that it was "a resort for prostitutes and their customers . . . a typical Raines Law hotel." The Committee persuaded the brewer backing the saloon to withdraw its support. This was the Committee's usual ploy and resulted in the closing of most offending saloons, since most proprietors were dependent on a brewer's financial support. The Myrtle Avenue saloon was able to stay open, however, by securing the backing of another brewer less susceptible to Committee pressure. Not to be outmaneuvered, the Committee and police counterattacked by sending plainclothesmen to the hotel to gather evidence of the hotel's hosting assignations, which they used in 1912 to secure the conviction of the hotel clerk for keeping a disorderly house. As a result of the conviction, the hotel's saloon lost its liquor license for a year, and after it reopened it was prohibited from admitting women. The proprietor, like hundreds of others, abided by this restriction. But, as the Committee subsequently learned, the exclusion of women from his hotel simply resulted in his developing an alternative market. In 1917, four years after the hotel had reopened, the police discovered that it regularly permitted known "male perverts" to take sailors and other men to their rooms for "immoral purposes."[30]

Even after the suppression of the Raines Law hotels, larger, more conventional hotels unconnected to saloons, some with as many as a hundred rooms, continued to serve the needs of those couples with no place else to meet. By one estimate forty such assignation hotels were operating

in the city in 1915, and even after a concerted campaign to close them, twelve of them remained in 1918. They flourished again after the Committee's demise in the early thirties. Many of the hotels did not cater to prostitutes and their customers, which seemed too dangerous, but simply provided rooms to couples who had nowhere else to go.[31] Some of them, as well as a larger number of cheap lodging houses, made their rooms available on an hourly basis to male couples, about whose purposes they could have had no doubt. Most were clustered near streets and parks that served as meeting places for gay and straight couples alike. The young male prostitute (or "punk") who met a prospective customer in Battery Park in 1931, it will be recalled, explained they could easily rent a room for a dollar at one of the many Chatham Square lodging houses that served the Bowery's transient male population.[32] By the 1910s, assignation hotels and cheap transient lodging houses renting rooms to male couples existed near Union Square, Battery Park, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and by the 1930s—and possibly earlier—they could be found near Times Square and in the West Seventies near Central Park, as well as in Chatham Square.[33]

The Committee's campaign was remarkably successful. As its investigators repeatedly discovered, hotels wishing to retain a respectable reputation refused to allow men to take women other than their wives to their rooms, for fear that the Committee's agents would denounce them for colluding in the "immoral" use of their facilities. Wealthier gay men nonetheless had access to more respectable hotels that did not offer rooms by the hour and would not have allowed an unmarried heterosexual couple to rent one for the night. A male couple sharing a room, or a respectable-looking male hotel guest taking another man to his room for a few hours, aroused less suspicion on the part of desk clerks than a mixed couple, from whom he might require some proof of marriage. A few hotels, such as the St. George in Brooklyn, developed a reputation for their willingness to accommodate gay men on a short- or long-term basis, but gay men could use a larger number of them surreptitiously. On his visits into the city in the 1910s, for instance, Charles Tomlinson Griffes frequently stayed at the Hotel Longacre in the Times Square district, and he had no trouble taking the men he had met on the streets or in the baths back to his room there.[34] Similarly, a thirty-five-year-old man from Kentucky regularly invited men to his rooms at the Hotel Shelton on Lexington Avenue at Forty-ninth Street, where he resided for several months in 1929. He even felt free to give his hotel address to casual pickups. When he met an investigator at Grand Central Station one evening, he invited the man to visit him the next day at the nearby hotel, where he tried to seduce him and spoke of "quite a number of [other] friends who come to see me [in the hotel]."[35] The presumption

that all "normal"-looking men were heterosexual and the related focus by the vice squad on suppressing female prostitution granted gay men an astonishing degree of mobility and freedom, which, nonetheless, they always had to exercise with great caution.

The campaigns to control assignation hotels illustrate the degree to which the anti-vice societies often neglected homosexuality because of their preoccupation with controlling female prostitution, as well as the ability of "normal"-looking gay men to manipulate observers' presumption that they were straight to their own advantage. But many of the hotels were available only to men of means, and, in any case, offered only temporary refuge to men who had met elsewhere. To participate in a collective gay life, men needed to visit other, more public spaces, and in many such locales investigators were more likely to notice male couples and to harass them as much—or more—than heterosexual couples.

### Cafeteria Society

Like most young, single residents of rooming houses, gay men took most of their meals at the cheap restaurants, cafeterias, and lunch counters that dotted the city's commercial and furnished-room districts. But such facilities took on special significance for many gay men. Most such men needed to manage multiple public identities and to present themselves as straight—or, at least, not gay—at work, at home, and in other consequential social settings. Numerous restaurants and cafeterias became important to them because they could "let their hair down" there and meet other gay people who accepted them as gay, even if they needed to guard against drawing the potentially hostile attention of other diners. Gay men turned many restaurants into places where they could gather with gay friends, gossip, ridicule the dominant culture that ridiculed them, and construct an alternative culture. They turned them into places where it did not seem queer to discuss opera or the latest Broadway show, to talk about an art show or a favorite torch singer, to laugh collectively about the morning paper's picture of the sailor with his arms wrapped around the cannon he was cleaning.[36] Restaurants became places, in short, where men branded as outsiders turned themselves into insiders by creating and sharing a gay reading of the world, a distinctive ironic, camp perspective that affirmed them and challenged the normativity of the world that branded them abnormal (a process discussed at length in chapter 10).

Particular restaurants served as the locus of particular gay social networks; overlapping groups of friends would meet regularly for dinner and camaraderie. The role of restaurants as social centers meant they often functioned as a crucial point of entry into the gay world for men just beginning to identify themselves as gay; for men already deeply

involved in the gay world, they were a vital source of information about the gay scene, police activity, cultural events, and the like. The determination of gay men to claim space for themselves in the city's eating places—which they did boldly enough at some cafeterias to give them citywide reputations as "fairy hangouts," and surreptitiously enough at other places that they remained known only to other gay men—occasionally provoked a sharp reaction from social-purity forces. But gay men developed elaborate stratagems to protect such places, precisely because they played such an important role in their lives.

The number of cheap dining facilities increased rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in response to the growing number of unmarried clerks and shop workers living in the city. As more and more boardinghouses, whose landladies had provided meals for roomers, were converted into rooming houses, which served no meals and had no kitchen facilities, residents were forced to take meals elsewhere. The number of restaurants surged even further in the 1920s as Prohibition devastated their major sources of competition, closing both the saloons that had offered workingmen a free lunch and the businessmen's clubs that had offered more elegant fare, and making numerous suitable commercial spaces available for conversion into restaurants.[37]

The growth of such facilities is exemplified by the history of two of New York's most famous cafeteria chains, Childs and Horn & Hardart, both of which came to play major roles in the gay world. William and Samuel Childs opened the first of their many restaurants in 1889. Enormous, relatively inexpensive, and sparkling clean, they quickly became popular spots for white-collar workers to take their lunches, dinners, and after-theater suppers, and by 1898 there were nine Childs restaurants serving fifteen thousand to twenty thousand people a day. Childs sought to broaden its appeal further that year by introducing cafeteria-style eating to New York in a restaurant situated to pick up the lunch-hour business of Wall Street clerks. Following its success, the chain opened additional cafeterias throughout the city. By 1939, there were forty-four Childs cafeterias and restaurants in Manhattan, and several other chains, such as Bickford's, Schrafft's, Longchamps, and Caruso, had joined them in appealing to the ever-growing number of unmarried office workers and young families in which the wife continued to work before having children.[38] Following Childs' lead, Horn & Hardart opened its first Automat in New York in 1903. Quickly growing in number, the Automats reached the height of their popularity during the Depression, when more than forty of them could be found in Manhattan alone.[39]

The cafeterias and Automats were not just cheap places to take meals. Many people also used them as meeting places, where they gathered on an almost nightly basis. In the 1930s they were known as the salons of

the poorer bohemians of the Village, who wryly called their social world "Cafeteria Society Downtown," in contrast to the wealthier "Café Society Uptown."[40] The Automats appealed primarily to working people and the unemployed, but a cafeteria's clientele could vary enormously. It "all depends on where the restaurant is located," observed one guide in 1925, and, it might have added, on the time of day. Most of the Childs cafeterias were "the feeding ground of obscure and lowly folk" during the day, as the guide put it, but some also attracted a more affluent trade late at night, after the theater and supper clubs had closed.[41] Similarly, restaurants that served lunch to businessmen and dinner to families or theatergoers could cater to a less respectable clientele later at night. Investigators repeatedly warned during World War I and the postwar years that prostitutes and their customers were gathering at two and three in the morning at the Childs restaurants near Union Square, Penn Station, Columbus Circle, and 125th Street.[42]

Some of these cafeterias, Automats, and lunchrooms catered to a gay clientele, while others were simply taken over by gay men, who were allowed to remain so long as they increased business without drawing the attention of the police. Many gay men also had jobs in the city's restaurants,* and some tested the limits of managerial tolerance in the boldness with which they welcomed gay customers. Parker Tyler described the scene in the fall of 1929 when he visited a Childs in Brooklyn with several friends: "Well my dear considering that I was in a huge fur coat of Clairmont's [one of his women companions] and must have looked very gorgeous, it isn't a surprise but that waiter started right in camping just as though there were *no law*!! And everybody in our party started camping after the waiter asked me: 'What will you have, gorgeous?', and I replied bitterly: 'Nothing you've got, dearie,' which really did upset everyone. And you can imagine how things went from bad to worse. So I concluded Brooklyn is wide open and N.Y. should be notified of its existence."[44]

Automats were among the safest refuges available to poorer gay men. They became even more secure during the Depression, when their rock-bottom prices and lack of supervision gave them a reputation as a sanctuary for social outcasts and the unemployed. The Automat on Forty-second Street across from Bryant Park became particularly well known as the site of raucous gatherings.[45]

*Of the two hundred men arrested on homosexual charges by the police in cooperation with the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1920–21, thirty-nine were restaurant employees, by far the largest single occupational category represented. Frederick Whitin, general secretary of the Committee of Fourteen, surmised in 1921 that this might be related to the apparent move by homosexuals, like prostitutes, to turn restaurants into their major "resorts" after the closing of the saloons.[43]

While the Automats' clientele were particularly famous for their lack of inhibition, the atmosphere at even the large cafeterias in the very well established Childs chain could become astonishingly freewheeling, as Tyler's vignette suggests, particularly late at night, after the dinner hour, when managers tolerated a wide spectrum of customers and behavior in order to generate trade. Gay men quickly spread the word about which restaurants and cafeterias would let them gather without guarding their behavior. Several Childs cafeterias and restaurants located in heavily gay neighborhoods became known among gay men as meeting places; indeed, the campy antics of the more flamboyant among them became part of the draw for other customers. One gay man who lived in the city in the late 1920s recalled that the Childs restaurant in the Paramount Theater Building on Broadway at Forty-third Street was regularly "taken over" by "hundreds" of gay men after midnight. Even if his recollection exaggerates the situation, it suggests his sense of the extent to which gay men felt comfortable there; in any case, *Vanity Fair*'s 1931 guide to New York informed its readers that the Paramount Childs was particularly interesting because it "features a dash of lavender."[46]

The Paramount Childs was not the only restaurant in the chain to earn such a reputation. Two Childs located in the blocks of Fifth Avenue south of Central Park, which served as a major gay cruising area in the 1920s—one in the Falkenhayn apartment building on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-eighth and Fifty-ninth Streets and another on the Avenue near Forty-ninth Street—were also patronized by so many gay men that they became known in the gay world as meeting places.[47] But perhaps the most famous such rendezvous, christened "Mother Childs" by some, was the one on Fifty-ninth Street at Columbus Circle, close to Central Park cruising areas as well as to Broadway theaters. Numerous investigators in the early 1920s reported seeing "prostitutes, charity girls . . . cabaret performers [and] fairies" carrying on there, telling stories, camping, and moving from table to table to greet old friends and meet new ones.[48] A man who had moved to New York from a small town in North Dakota in 1922 recalled:

> After hours—you might say after the theater, [which brought] hordes of people together—Childs was a meeting place for gays and they would congregate and sit and have coffee and yak-yak and talk til three and four and five o'clock in the morning. . . . I was always there with friends, that was the social thing to do.[49]

The history of two cafeterias in the Village in the 1920s and 1930s, Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria, both located on Christopher Street at Sheridan Square, demonstrates even more clearly the extent to which gay

men could be made part of the spectacle of an establishment, even as they turned it into a haven. Both cafeterias, like the turn-of-the-century Bowery resorts before them, seem to have premised their late-night operations on the assumption that by allowing lesbians and gay men to gather there they would attract sight-seers out to gawk at a late-night "fairy hangout." The 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City* almost surely described the Life when it delicately explained that "a cafeteria [at Sheridan Square], curiously enough, is one of the few obviously Bohemian spots [left] in the Village, and evenings the more conventional occupy tables in one section of the room and watch the 'show' of the eccentrics on the other side."[50] Several other guidebooks made the same (and usually equally coded) point about both Stewart's and the Life,* but in 1936 one man, outraged by the situation, described the "show" more explicitly. One of the largest cafeterias in town, "brilliantly lighted, [and] fully exposed to two streets [in the Village]," he charged in a medical journal, was the meeting ground for "exhibitionists and degenerates of all types":

> The Park Avenue deb with the Wall Street boy friend nibbles cheap pastry and stares and jibes at the "show."... Wide-eyed school girls and boys from neighboring parts of the city gape at the unbelievable sight—boys with rouge on!—and drunken parties end their carousing here.... Once I heard one [gay man] say: "That queen over there is camping for jam" [that is, for straights].[52]

Although gay men served as a tourist attraction at the Life, they were still able to make it their own, turning it into one of the few public spaces where their culture predominated and where they could anticipate meeting their friends. The openness of gay men at the Life also made it a point of entry into the gay world for young men just coming out. Because of its reputation as a "fairy hangout," it was easily found by isolated men searching for others like themselves as well as by tourists. Dick Addison, who first visited the Life Cafeteria in 1939

*The varying levels of explicitness with which other guides made the same point—as well as the longevity of Stewart's and the Life as gay rendezvous—are illustrated by two accounts from the 1930s. In 1935 a restaurant guide explained that Stewart's, an "innocent-enough looking cafeteria," was "the current hangout of Bohemia . . . [where] you may take a peek at the local crop of would-be Villons." In a coded (but easily understood) reference to the gay men and lesbians whom the tourist could see there, the author went on to compare the "heterogeneous crowd that infest Stewart's" to "the lillies of the field." Characteristically, *Broadway Brevities* was more explicit; in late 1933 it reported that a restaurant at Sheridan Square had become "a gathering spot for that nocturnal clan, the third sexers. Dykes, fags, pansies, lesbians, and others of that unfortunate ilk convene there nightly, parading their petty jealousies and affairs of the heart."[51]

when he was a sixteen-year-old from the Bronx, remembered its significance when he came out:

> The Life Cafeteria was a big hangout. Faggots from all over the country would gather there. They'd just sit in the window, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes and carrying on. It had huge plate glass windows so people on the street could see in, and tourists would pass by to see them, because they wore heavy makeup—blue eye shadow, rouge, mascara—and had long hair. It attracted young people coming out, like me. They would go there because they didn't know anywhere else to go. They'd go to the Village because they'd heard that was where the action was, and then see this cafeteria and go there. They could go in there and have a cup of coffee for a nickel, sit and occupy a table and laugh and talk all night long. It was a place where they could meet people.[53]

The dramaturgical language widely used to describe the "show" at such cafeterias signals how unusual and noteworthy such public expressions of gay culture were considered, since "normal" people's antics were rarely noticed as unusual. But it also points again to one of the central strategies deployed by gay men for claiming space in the city. They regularly sought to emphasize the theatricality of everyday interactions and to use their style to turn the Life and other such locales into the equivalent of a stage, where their flouting of gender conventions seemed less objectionable because it was less threatening. It let slummers experience the thrill of seeing the "perverts," while letting gay men themselves adopt a style that mocked the conventions of heterosexuality. Nonetheless, gay men and lesbians who put on such "shows" always ran the risk of harassment from other patrons, eviction by the management, or arrest by the police, particularly when they did not limit their openness to locales where they were clearly tolerated.

Many gay men and lesbians, in fact, especially younger people who felt they had less social position to lose, regularly tested the limits on their openness at restaurants, speakeasies, and other establishments, by dancing together, speaking loudly about their affairs, and camping for others. While at the Round Table in Greenwich Village one night in 1929, Parker Tyler was invited to join a group of lesbians and gay men who were clearly unwilling to brook any restrictions on their evening's fun: "Someone—Lesbian—rushed up and asked me to join their drinking party," Tyler wrote a gay friend, "and I did and someone who said he had just been brought out began making drunken love to me but he wasn't much and then someone—officially male—asked me to dance." The management had tolerated the gay flirtation at Tyler's table, but

drew the line at same-sex dancing and promptly "ordered [them] off the floor." The woman who had invited him to join them dismissed the management's action by commenting curtly that "THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND OUR TYPE," as Tyler recalled in full capitals. Although Tyler sometimes declined invitations to dance for fear of such reprimands, he often tested the limits in precisely this way—and was almost as often told to stop dancing with men.[54]

Even Tyler, hardly reticent, was occasionally taken aback by how relentlessly some of his friends challenged hetero-normativity in their Village haunts—and by how insistently they demanded that he not present himself as anything other than gay. At a neighborhood speakeasy one night he found himself, somewhat to his surprise, beginning to neck with a woman he had just met. After a brief flirtation and "some drinks," he reported to a gay friend (in a reversal of the usual attempt to blame *homosexual* escapades on drink), "I found myself . . . kissing her madly." The fact that he was "kissing her madly" suggests the casual atmosphere of the place, though casual heterosexual interactions were usually treated more casually than homosexual. But his friends would have nothing of it, and turned his brief heterosexual flirtation into an occasion for asserting a gay presence in the speakeasy. "Who should come in about then," Tyler continued, "but Paula who exclaimed, 'What! Parker kissing a female!'" Tyler quieted his friend, but when he returned to the first woman and "started to kiss her again," a second friend, a gay man, "exclaimed in a booming voice: 'Parker! Why don't you tell this girl you're homosexual?'" Before Tyler could recover from his embarrassment, "who should positively BLOW in at that moment but a bitch named—(artist) who shouted at the top of his voice O HELLO MISS TYLER!" "And this was in a speakeasy," Tyler added immediately, as if even he found it astonishing that someone should be so overtly—and loudly—gay in such a space.[55] He had a similar reaction to the waiter at the Brooklyn Childs who "started right in camping just as though there were *no law*!!" For all his boldness, Tyler never forgot there *was* a law—informal as well as formal—against public expressions of gay culture, and it is doubtful that any other gay man did either. Nonetheless, many of them regularly tested the boundaries that law established.

Most managers, like the ones who stopped Tyler from dancing, never let matters get "out of hand." But when the informal injunction against gay visibility was successfully challenged by gay men and lesbians or gave way to public fascination with gay visibility, the formal agencies of the law—the police and social-purity organizations—sometimes stepped in to reestablish (the social) order. They sometimes did this with the connivance of skittish managers, who realized they had let things go "too far" by letting their gay clientele become too "obvious," as difficult as it

might be to judge when that line had been crossed. In February 1927, for instance, after gay men had been congregating at the Forty-second Street Liggett's drugstore for some time, the management, perhaps sensing a temporary hardening of police attitudes or simply fearing for its reputation, suddenly called on the police to drive the men from its premises. The police raided the store and arrested enough men to fill two police vans.[56]

The state and social-purity groups intervened most commonly, though, against the wishes of managers who saw no harm and much profit in tolerating a gay presence. Some of those managers devised elaborate schemes to protect their businesses. The background to a raid on a Lower East Side cabaret in 1920 illustrates the strategies such establishments used to protect themselves and highlights the complex relationship between the social-purity societies, the police, the courts, and the entrepreneurs they sought to control, as well as the constraints affecting gay men who wished to socialize in public.

The Hotel Koenig, a small hotel and cabaret run by the German-born George Koenig on East Fourth Street near First Avenue, had developed a citywide reputation among gay men. Police records show that few of the men arrested there in a raid one night in 1920 were from the immediate neighborhood; most lived more than twenty blocks away, near Madison Square, in the midtown theater district, or in even more distant parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, and two were visiting from Philadelphia. All were white and, like most of the city's bachelors, young: three-quarters were in their twenties, only a few were even in their thirties, and none was older. They seem to have taken care in choosing their housing and meeting places to ensure they could be openly gay, for about a quarter of them had come with roommates or live-in lovers. And they were quite open at Koenig's. One Committee of Fourteen investigator, who learned that fairies had begun to gather at the Koenig in the spring of 1920, reported that "most of the patrons paid more attention to the action of the fairies than to the cabaret performance." Koenig's tolerance of the men's flagrant campiness was consistent with his decision to permit prostitutes and other women to drink with the male patrons, "using vile language," according to the investigator, "and [not] behav[ing]." Koenig had clearly decided to cater to a rough crowd.[57]

While the Hotel Koenig was well known as a "fairy resort" to the cabaret's gay and straight patrons alike, court officials expressed surprise after the raid that such a place existed in the neighborhood at all, especially "without the knowledge of it being more general." As the Committee of Fourteen discovered in the course of its investigation, George Koenig had made arrangements to ensure that "knowledge of it" would be kept from the court, primarily by making his facilities freely available to a social club

whose members included numerous patrolmen from the local precinct. On one occasion, for instance, the members, after taking in a burlesque show on West 125th Street, brought several female prostitutes and some of the "burlesque girls" down to the cabaret, where they drank and partied all night.

Such arrangements might have protected Koenig's indefinitely, had the Committee of Fourteen not become involved during its postwar anti-gay campaign. The precautions Koenig had taken certainly made the Committee's job more difficult, requiring it to bypass the local precinct and persuade the chief inspector of the First Inspection District, a division of the police department independent of the precincts, to send four plainclothesmen to investigate the cabaret. Once it had prevailed upon the inspector to raid the place, the Committee needed to investigate the court schedule to ensure that the raid would be conducted on a night when a sympathetic judge would hear the case; "by all means we want to stay away from [certain judges]," the committee cautioned the inspector. On the last Saturday night in July 1920, when the judge they wanted to hear the case was sitting, the inspector's officers raided the cabaret and arrested thirty patrons, the manager, and the waitress. Koenig was charged with "keeping a disorderly house," a "resort for degenerates," and all of the arrested patrons were charged with degenerate disorderly conduct. Gay men appear to have been the only customers arrested.

No law specifically prohibited gay men from assembling in a public place at the time of the raid in 1920, but the police charged the men at Koenig's with "degenerate disorderly conduct." Indeed, the sentences the men received suggest how dangerous it could be to assert a gay presence at any public establishment. Twenty-three of the men were sentenced to ten days in the workhouse, and the remaining seven were fined fifty dollars. These sentences were unusually severe for men charged with disorderly conduct; sixteen men with similar backgrounds who appeared in court just before the Koenig group on the same charge, but with no implication of "degeneracy," were fined only one or two dollars apiece. Both the judge and the Committee nonetheless lamented that the penalties were relatively light for men charged with "degenerate" disorderly conduct. They considered them the harshest they dare impose, however, since their case was so weak, dependent on a sympathetic judge for successful prosecution. "As individual complaints had not been drawn and the defendants were all tried together," the judge confided to the Committee, he "was afraid the record would not stand on an appeal." No one had been charged with engaging in sexual acts or with any other particular incidents of disorderly conduct, in other words; as the judge well knew, he had convicted them simply for being members of a group of gay men congregating in a public place. Both the judge and the committee settled on

relatively light sentences because they feared that, with so many men involved, at least some would be provoked by a heavier sentence to make a successful appeal. None of the men did file an appeal, though, either because they realized they had gotten off *relatively* lightly—"only" ten days in the workhouse, compared to the sixty days often served by men convicted of degeneracy—or because they were simply too intimidated.

"Degenerate disorderly conduct," the offense for which the men at Koenig's were convicted, was the charge usually brought against gay men or lesbians found gathering on the streets or in public accommodations, or gay men trying to pick up other men. The use of the disorderly-conduct law against gay people was consistent with the intent of the law, which effectively criminalized a wide range of non-normative behavior in public spaces, as defined by the dominant culture, be it loitering, gambling, failure to hire oneself out to an employer, failure to remain sober, or behaving in a public space in any other manner perceived as threatening the social order. The disorderly-conduct law was one of the omnibus legal measures used by the state to try to impose a certain conception of public order on the city's streets, and, in particular, to control the large numbers of immigrants from Ireland and southern and eastern Europe, as well as African-American migrants from the South—the so-called "dangerous classes" many bourgeois Anglo-Americans found frightening. Its purview was so general and ill defined, especially before the statute's revision in 1923, that the interpretation of its scope was left largely in the hands of the police, and it gave them a rationale for arresting people for a wide range of behavior, even though the charges ultimately might be (and regularly were) dismissed by the courts in any particular case.

In the course of its general revision of the statute in 1923, the New York state legislature, for the first time, specified homosexual solicitation (a person "frequent[ing] or loiter[ing] about any public place soliciting men for the purpose of committing a crime against nature or other lewdness") as a form of disorderly conduct. In specifying the solicitation of men and a wide but unspecified range of "lewd" behavior, the new disorderly-conduct statute became the first law in the state's history to verge on specifying male homosexual conduct as a criminal offense. Even the statutes against sodomy and the crime against nature, which dated from the colonial era, had criminalized a wide range of nonprocreative sexual behavior between people of the same or different genders, without specifying male homosexual conduct or even recognizing it as a discrete sexual category. The criminalization of male homosexual conduct implicit in the wording of the law was made explicit in its enforcement, for Penal Law 722, section 8, "degenerate disorderly conduct," was used exclusively against men the police regarded as "degenerates." Although

little evidence remains concerning the history of the legislature's decision, its timing surely reflects the degree to which the social-purity societies and the police had identified homosexuality as a distinct social problem during World War I.[58] The statute became one of the underpinnings of new state regulations after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 that, for the first time, specifically and formally banned the assembly of gay people in a public space.

As the 1920 Koenig case and numerous other cases to be related in this book demonstrate, however, New York City's police and courts construed the disorderly-conduct statute to mandate a much broader ban on gay cultural practices than a narrow reading of its wording might suggest, both before and after its revision in 1923. They regularly used the statute to criminalize the assembly of gay men in a public place or their adoption of distinctive cultural styles, from camp behavior to dancing with people of the same gender or wearing clothes assigned to the other gender. The police and local courts construed such forms of "degenerate" conduct as *disorderly* conduct posing so dangerous a challenge to the social order that they merited imprisonment and fines, and for more than a decade before the law's revision in 1923, the authorities specified in their own records which disorderly-conduct arrests were for "degeneracy." Gay men managed to claim considerable space for themselves in the city's streets, cafeterias, and restaurants despite this policy, and the number of men actually arrested remained relatively small before the 1940s. But they had always to contend with the possibility of such penalties.*

Given both the lack of a specific legal prohibition against gay assembly before 1933 and the tolerant attitude toward gay men in certain quarters of the city, the use of the disorderly-conduct statute to arrest men gathering in a restaurant was episodic and depended to a large degree on the location of the restaurant and the strength of its political connections. Some smaller speakeasies, restaurants, and clubs that tolerated the open presence of lesbians and gay men flourished, but they were subject to the constant threat of harassment. An insider's review of the history of gay and lesbian meeting places in the 1920s, published in 1931, concluded that "it was not long before all the places were either raided or given up."[59]

*Lesbians arrested for assembling in a public place, dancing together, and the like were also often charged with disorderly conduct (although not with degenerate disorderly conduct). The revised 1923 statute did not specify lesbian conduct (by criminalizing the solicitation of women, for instance), but, as in the case of gay men before 1923, the police and courts did not need such a specific ban to construe lesbian visibility as a kind of disorderliness. The history of the police's enforcement of the degenerate-disorderly-conduct statute is documented in greater detail in the following chapter.

A cafeteria in a well-established chain with a citywide reputation, such as Childs, on the other hand, had greater political clout and was less susceptible to police interference and raids than a smaller establishment run by a solitary entrepreneur. Large cafeterias in certain neighborhoods could maintain gay reputations for years, as the extraordinary resilience of Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria—which together served as well-known gay meeting places in the Village for almost two decades—demonstrates. Nonetheless, the police did occasionally raid the large cafeterias and Automats where gay people gathered, when they or the anti-vice societies thought the places had become too uproarious or the management, perhaps fearing the authorities were about to reach that conclusion, decided it was time to use the police to eliminate their "fairy" trade. On such occasions, the police might arrest every gay customer at the cafeteria on disorderly-conduct charges. In the summer of 1926, for instance, many lesbians and gay men started gathering at the Childs restaurant on Forty-eighth Street, where they enjoyed "peace and quietude," according to one contemporary account, "until one bright August night, when the place was packed with Lesbians and Pansies, two patrol wagons drove up and arrested every one in the place."[60] On at least one occasion in the mid-1930s the police even raided Stewart's, arresting the "degenerates" who "loiter[ed]" there, after the normally tolerant manager, apparently sensing a temporary hardening in police opinion, had filed a complaint about their presence.[61]

Restaurants—and gay men—developed a variety of strategies for eluding police detection. Many, like Koenig's, simply bribed the police or made other arrangements to mollify them; in the early twentieth century, many small entrepreneurs considered this a regular part of doing business. Other restaurants sought to protect themselves while still retaining the patronage that a covert gay reputation could generate by permitting gay men to gather openly only in certain sections of the restaurant, where they would not be seen by other diners. Jack's Restaurant on Sixth Avenue at the corner of Twenty-sixth Street appears to have adopted such a policy in the early 1920s. More elegant than a cafeteria and drawing a more affluent (and circumspect) clientele, including numerous single men and women living in the area, Jack's had three dining rooms. "Unescorted women" (as women seen in public without men were usually called) and numerous mixed-gender couples sat in the first two rooms, but the management seated most male couples and unaccompanied men in the rear room. Late one night in 1921, just after Christmas, an investigator saw ten or fifteen men he identified as homosexuals (or, in his words, "degenerates") "of a better class or type" sitting at the tables in this room. The agent thought they "were acting and talking like

fairys [sic] and anybody could tell who they were simply [by] looking at their actions": among other things, the men felt free to make eye contact and strike up conversations with strangers and to call them over to their tables. The management's collusion with the arrangement was confirmed when a waiter, upon questioning, admitted he knew the men were "fairys," although he protested that he personally "didnt [have] any use for them."[62]

More commonly, restaurants permitted the patronage of gay men only so long as they eschewed behavior that might mark them as gay. Most men were not directly affected by such regulations, it should be noted, because nothing in their demeanor would have signaled their homosexuality to outsiders. Indeed, most gay men mingled unobtrusively with other customers in restaurants that did not cultivate a gay crowd, eating alone or with small groups of gay friends. Charles Tomlinson Griffes and his gay friends regularly patronized Louis', Jouberts, and Rosini's in the mid-1910s without drawing attention to themselves.[63] One man who moved in the gay, artistic, and theater circles around the novelist Carl Van Vechten in the early twenties recalled that he "went very often with my friends [to] . . . a restaurant at Forty-third and Sixth Avenue, called Jack's [different from the Jack's mentioned above]. It was very well known. Mostly theater people went there, though they were very discreet."[64]

While gay men mixed unobtrusively with other customers at many of the city's restaurants, a number of restaurants attracted a predominantly gay clientele and developed a muted gay ambience without attracting much attention from outsiders. Louis' Restaurant on West Forty-ninth Street, and then Louis's second venture, the Jewel Restaurant on West Forty-eighth, both between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, were popular meeting places for successful gay men and women who lived and worked in the Times Square theater district. The restaurants became as well known in gay circles in the 1920s as the most famous Village spots. Several lesbian motion-picture stars and authors were said to patronize Louis' Restaurant, and a decade later, when it had moved to West Forty-fifth Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, it continued to be known as a major theatrical rendezvous, where people came to relax, get a cheap meal, and "see and be seen."[65]

Louis's restaurants eventually became known to anti-vice investigators as "hang-outs for fairies and lady lovers" and even received a 1924 mention in a Broadway gossip sheet as a rendezvous of "the queer smart trade," but they never achieved the notoriety of the city's other gay haunts. Even hostile observers acknowledged differences between the behavior of the gay patrons of Louis' and other quiet restaurants with a largely gay clientele, and those who frequented the more boisterous

Village spots. In 1924 one man described the scene at Louis' as a "far cry" from that at the Columbus Circle Childs, even though he still regarded its patrons with contempt. "It is orderly, for one thing, because the fairies who frequent it are a better type than the Village and Columbus Circle fags. . . . It is a place where aberrants dine before going to theatre or mayhap some other evening function. . . . The fairies dish the dirt there the same as they would if they were in a hovel in the Village or in Gertrude Stein's bizarre salon. But they seldom raise their voices."[66] A year later an investigator reported that while he had heard that "wild parties [are] suppose[d] to go on on [the restaurant's] upper floors," the behavior of the patrons in the main dining room on the first floor was unremarkable.[67] Indeed, Louis' hid its role as a major gay rendezvous from casual straight observers so successfully that a sedate 1925 restaurant guide recommended it to its readers, describing it—clearly without apprehending the full significance of its observation—as "one of the institutions of the neighborhood."[68]

Gay men pursued a variety of strategies as they negotiated their presence in the city's restaurants, cafeterias, and speakeasies. Some of them boldly claimed their right to gather in public, speaking loudly about gay matters, dancing with their friends, even putting on a "show" for the other customers. Most men did not make themselves so noticeable, but they nonetheless claimed space in a large number of restaurants on a regular basis, meeting friends, talking about whatever they wanted, and noticing—and sometimes trying to gain the notice of—the other gay men around them. The latter group of men could meet in small, intimate restaurants and huge, impersonal cafeterias alike. The former group of men were more likely to be branded as "fairies" and restricted to the cafeterias or to restaurants located in sections of town with large concentrations of gay residents, such as the Village, Times Square, and Harlem. Although such men made their presence known throughout the early decades of the century, their numbers and boldness grew in the 1920s during Prohibition.

Both groups were protected, in part, by the preoccupation of the social-purity forces with female prostitution, which usually kept them from paying as much attention to gay meeting places as the Committee of Fourteen did in the case of Koenig's. They were also protected by the absence of a formal ban on gay assembly, the laissez-faire attitude of many New Yorkers and, often enough, of the police, and the complex system of bribes and political connections in which most small businessmen, ward politicians, and policemen were enmeshed. Above all, they were protected by the dominant popular image of the fairy, which was more likely to provoke fascination than outrage on the part of many

New Yorkers, and, in any case, rendered most other gay men invisible to outsiders. The very brilliance of the fairy left most men safely in the shadows, and made it easier for them to meet their friends in restaurants throughout the city without provoking the attention of outsiders. Gay men seized the opportunities this portended.

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.)*

*Chapter 7*

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

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).[1]

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.* 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.[3] 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

*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."[2]

to learn of a gay speakeasy."[4] 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.[5]

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."[6] 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."[7]

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 Risicato, 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.[8]

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.[9]

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.[10] 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!"[11]

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."[12] 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.[13]

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.[14]

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.[15]

### 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-

iarity 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.[16]

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.[17] 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.[18]

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.[19] 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."[20] 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."[21] (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.[23]

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

*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.[22]

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.)[24] 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."[25]

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.[26]

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."[27] 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.'"[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] "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."[31] 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.[32]

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."[33] 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.[34] 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.[35] 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.[16] 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.[37] 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.[38] 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.[39] 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."[40] According to another account, 1932 was a critical year, when growing numbers of "transient boys . . . went to Times Square to 'play the queers.'"[41] 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.[42]

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.[43] 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."[44] 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.[45]

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.[46]

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."[47] 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.[48]

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.[49] 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.[50]

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."[51]

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."[52] 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.[53] 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.[54]

### 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.[55] 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.[56] 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."[57] 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.[58]

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.[59] 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.[60]

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.[61]

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."*

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.[62]

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.[63] 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.[64] 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.[65]

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.[66] "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."[67]

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.)[68] 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.[69]

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.[70]

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.[72] 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.[73]

### 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."[71]

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."[74] 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."[75] 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.[76] 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."[77] 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."[78]

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.

Figure 8.1. Charles Demuth's painting *Turkish Bath* (1916) most likely depicts the Lafayette Baths, New York City's most popular gay bathhouse at the time. As his image of this relaxed and happy couple suggests, gay bathhouses offered men secure environments in which to find friendship and romance as well as sex. *(From a private collection, on loan to the Harvard University Art Museums. By permission of The Harvard University Art Museums.)*

*Chapter 8*

# THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE BATHS

THE SAFEST, MOST ENDURING, AND ONE OF THE MOST AFFIRMATIVE OF THE settings in which gay men gathered in the first half of the twentieth century was the baths. None of the other open spaces or commercial establishments appropriated by gay men—streets, parks, speakeasies, restaurants—were theirs alone. In each of them, gay men had to contend with outsiders, who might ignore them, accept them, attack them, or turn them into a spectacle, but in any case had a direct and powerful influence on the way they carried and saw themselves. As a result, many gay men sought to gather in more private spaces, such as apartment parties, where they felt more secure and could relax their guard. It was only in the late 1930s and 1940s that bars patronized exclusively by gay men began to appear in New York, their development, as we shall see, in part an inadvertent consequence of the new state policing of commercial spaces introduced after the repeal of Prohibition. But decades earlier, gay men had begun to appropriate one traditional male space as their own: the city's bathhouses.

Gay bathhouses had appeared in New York by the turn of the century, and by World War I several of them had become institutions in the city, their addresses and distinctive social and sexual character known to almost every gay New Yorker and to many gay Europeans as well. The baths were a singular phenomenon, but their development and character were also emblematic of the development and character of the gay world more generally. They deserve scrutiny, therefore, for they reveal much about the evolution of gay commercial institutions in general and about the patterns of gay sociability. The transition from "mixed" (straight and gay) to exclusively gay bathhouses foreshadowed the arrival of other exclusively gay establishments. Moreover, analysis of the ways men used

the bathhouses reveals much about the general character of the gay world: the permeability of its boundaries and the density of the social networks it sustained. For while the baths attracted men in the first instance because of the sexual possibilities they offered—and, indeed, fostered a distinctive sexual culture—they encouraged the cultivation of broader social ties as well. The baths exemplify the manner in which men built a social world on the basis of a shared marginalized sexuality.[1]

## THE EVOLUTION OF GAY BATHHOUSES

There were three major categories of bathhouses in the city in the early twentieth century, each with a different purpose and serving a different constituency. Public baths were established by reformers to encourage cleanliness in the tenement districts; religious baths were established by Jewish authorities for purposes of ritual cleansing; and elegant Turkish, Roman, and Electric baths were established by entrepreneurs as virtual temples to the body for wealthier New Yorkers. They varied markedly in the quality and range of their facilities, the social class of patrons they attracted, and the social and sexual possibilities they offered gay men.

The New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor had opened the first public bath in 1852, but it closed a few years later because of insufficient patronage. In the 1890s the Association began a new campaign for the construction of baths in New York's most densely populated tenement districts, where only one in forty families lived in a house or tenement with a bathroom. It opened a bath on the Lower East Side in 1891 and succeeded in making the need for such facilities an issue in the 1894 mayoral campaign that defeated Tammany Hall. In response to continuing pressure, the city built eleven public baths in Manhattan in the 1900s, and by 1915 there were sixteen. Such baths offered individual shower rooms connected to private changing booths, and could accommodate hundreds of bathers (male and female) a day. The last five baths to be built were more elaborate, including indoor swimming pools, gymnasiums, and laundry services among their facilities.[2]

The social organization of both the Jewish ritual bath (*mikvah*) and the public baths discouraged sexual activity, for they kept bathers under close supervision. The Jewish baths were community institutions, which offered no escape from one's neighbors.* The public baths, in contrast,

*The number of Jewish baths in the city grew sharply in the late nineteenth century as the number of Jewish immigrants increased. A 1902 survey found that only 8 percent of the city's Jewish families, who lived largely in the tenement wards, had private baths. The resulting practical need for communal baths in Jewish neighborhoods was reinforced by Jewish ritual requirements for cleanliness. Only one or two of the twenty-two bathhouses in the city in 1880 were Jewish; by 1897 over half of the city's sixty-two bathhouses were Jewish.[3]

were more impersonal, but they imposed a more formal regime of surveillance on their patrons. Men who met in the public baths could make appointments to meet again elsewhere and sometimes managed to have sex at the bath itself. But such baths offered only limited spaces for sexual encounters and discouraged lengthy stays (most limited showers to twenty minutes), and thus remained relatively unattractive to men seeking sexual partners. Moreover, the staff at the baths kept a sharp eye on their wards. One summer evening in 1910 at the Public Baths on Avenue A at East Twenty-third Street, which had been in business just two years, a bathhouse attendant noticed a sixteen-year-old errand boy from the neighborhood and a thirty-eight-year-old porter from Brooklyn enter a booth together. His suspicions aroused, the attendant entered the booth and found the men having sex. He not only interrupted them but held them for the police and had them charged with sodomy. Both men pleaded guilty, and less than two weeks after the encounter the older man found himself sentenced to three to five years in the state penitentiary.[4]

More amenable to the interests of gay men were the private Russian and Turkish baths that dotted Manhattan. As the middle class's preoccupation with the body intensified at the turn of the century, such baths became highly respectable and fashionable resorts by offering a wide range of services. By the 1920s there were fifty-seven of them in Manhattan, some located in the basements of hotels, others in their own, often lavishly decorated buildings. It is likely that sexual encounters occurred occasionally at most private bathhouses, and that men who met at them more often made arrangements to go elsewhere. But gay patronage and sexual activity were concentrated at two kinds of baths: baths visited by straight as well as gay men but whose management tolerated limited homosexual activity (which I have termed "mixed" or "gay-tolerant" baths), and those that catered to gay men by excluding nonhomosexual patrons and creating an environment in which homosexual activity was encouraged and safeguarded (which are properly termed "gay baths").

At gay-tolerant baths, men could and often did have sexual encounters, but only if they could do so without drawing the attention of other bathers. They usually did this only in the privacy of their dressing rooms or, possibly, in the steam room, if it were sufficiently dark or hazy. The management at such baths chose not to stop such sexual activity unless it became too obvious. "Not a few of the places which cater to the public demand for steam baths are glad to enjoy the patronage of pansies provided their actions do not result in police proceedings," stated one 1933 account, which pointed to the "fat tips" a manager supposedly could receive from "his degenerate patrons."[5] Some of these mixed baths had a

reputation for being particularly homosexual in character at certain times of day or on certain days of the week. One gay man who had apparently visited New York in the early 1910s reported that "among the many Turkish baths in New York, one is frequently visited by homosexuals in the afternoon and one in the evening."[6] One gay man remembered a quite respectable hotel whose swimming pool and steam room were notoriously cruisy in the 1930s. He had friends from out of town who chose to stay there on visits to New York in order to make its facilities and sexual ambience part of their holiday. Because homosexual activity was tolerated but restricted at such establishments, their sexual ambience resembled that of the YMCAs on West Thirty-fourth and Sixty-third Streets, described in chapter 6. The degree of management regulation varied and depended on a variety of factors, ranging from the amenability of the staff in charge on a given night to the intensity of the concern expressed by external authorities such as the police. The Committee of Fourteen and the Society for the Suppression of Vice occasionally sent investigators into baths to monitor the extent to which management acquiesced in such behavior.[7]

The varying degrees of management regulation at the numerous baths at Coney Island epitomized the dynamics of a mixed and ambiguously gay-tolerant bath. Homosexuals frequented and occasionally made sexual contacts at most of the baths at Coney Island, including one where professional male models, bodybuilders, and their admirers gathered in the 1930s, and another where gay men could do little more than enjoy the company of "tough" working-class boys and young men. But two baths, Stauch's and Claridge's, achieved special fame as homosexual rendezvous. Stauch's three stories and its rooftop sundeck, originally part of a much larger entertainment complex, occupied a prominent place at the center of the amusement park, standing at the corner of the boardwalk and Stillwell Avenue, the main thoroughfare leading to the beach from the subway station. The gay scene at Stauch's—as in much of New York—was particularly unabashed during the Depression. Both Thomas Painter and a man who worked briefly at Coney Island in the 1930s recalled that gay men felt free to camp it up on the sundeck, and the latter man even recalled seeing men in drag there.[8] Painter described Stauch's in 1939–40:

> Coney Island [has] one truly amazing bath. . . . It gives the visitor the impression of being exclusively homosexual. If one visits the roof there is the spectacle of at least a hundred naked males practically all of them homosexuals, with a few hustlers and kept boys

> about, lying around in the sun. . . . The more direct homosexual expression is reserved for the steam rooms. There, in an atmosphere murky with steam—so murky, indeed, that one cannot see more than a few feet ahead—with benches around the walls, fellation and pedication are not at all uncommon. . . . If one stumbles over a pair in the act, one mutters a hasty apology and goes on quickly in another direction.[9]

After the Second World War, when the police stepped up their anti-gay activity, Stauch's management took greater care to control its patrons' behavior, but with only limited success. Will Finch spent many Sunday afternoons in the 1950s soaking up the sun and the sights on the roofdeck, while other men pursued sexual partners in the cubicles below. "They had a private detective, and he would come in an old shirt and a bathing suit, and would sneak around the corners, trying to see two people going in the same little cubicle," one man recalled. If he saw something, he "would pound on the door, telling you 'Only one person in the booth!'" "He couldn't do it fast enough, though," another man remembered, laughing. "There were too many of us, it was a big place, and everybody knew who he was." As the result of management's efforts, Stauch's took on more of the appearance of a straight bath, but the gay presence persisted. As one of its patrons recalled, "All the old Jewish men would sit around taking steam, and the queens would sit around the bathhouse itself."[10]

More significant to the development of New York's gay society than the mixed baths were the gay baths, whose management excluded non-gay customers and safeguarded—rather than merely tolerated—homosexual activity. There was considerable financial incentive to do so, since developing a reputation as a gay bath increased patronage and lent a competitive edge, particularly as use of the baths began to wane in the general population.

It is not clear when the management of a New York bath first decided to cater to homosexuals. Edward Prime Stevenson, an expatriate American writing about the international homosexual scene around 1900, thought New York had several baths that served as "homosexual rendezvous" but at which men could do no more than make appointments to meet elsewhere.[11] He was either misinformed or the situation changed very quickly, for by no later than 1902 at least one bath in the city, the Ariston Baths, located in the basement of the twelve-story Ariston apartment hotel at the northeast corner of Broadway and West Fifty-fifth Street, had begun to cultivate a homosexual clientele. By early 1903, the bath's "very bad" reputation had reached the police, who discovered that it had served for at

least a year (and possibly much longer) as "the resort of persons for the purpose of sodomy and that sodomy was regularly practiced there."[12] The police sent several undercover inspectors into the baths over a period of days to investigate the situation. On the basis of their reports, the police decided to raid the baths on a busy Saturday night, sending the agents back into the baths several hours before the raid to secure evidence against individuals engaged in sodomy. Their subsequent testimony depicted the spatial and social organization of an early gay bathhouse in unparalleled detail.[13]

The layout and organization of the Ariston were typical. A man entered the baths through a basement entrance on Fifty-fifth Street and, after paying a dollar and checking his valuables, was assigned a private dressing room and given a sheet to drape over his shoulders after he had undressed. The Ariston, like the other grand private baths of the era, offered a variety of services that made it much more luxurious than the gay baths of the 1940s and 1950s. On its staff were masseurs, a manicurist, and a chiropodist, and its facilities included a café where cigars and cool drinks were sold, a parlor with chairs and cots, a swimming pool, and a small gymnasium with dumbbells and other equipment, as well as a steam room and sauna, four cooling rooms with cots where men could rest after taking a steam bath, showers, and numerous private dressing rooms with cots.[14]

It should not be surprising that in an era of fairy resorts and backroom saloons, men were quite open in their sexual activity in those settings where it was permitted. The extent of the overt homosexual activity witnessed by the police at the Ariston makes it clear that the activity must have been countenanced by the management and that everyone who bathed there must have been aware of it. Men felt free to approach other men in the common rooms and hallways and to invite them back to their private dressing rooms (marked as A on the diagram of the Ariston Baths, figure 8.2).[15] But the homosexual character of the baths was made clearest by the amount of sexual activity that took place publicly in the dormitory and cooling rooms. The most active room was the southeast cooling room (B). In this long and narrow room, seven cots stood against one wall and only a two-foot-wide passageway separated them from the opposite wall. Men crowded into the room looking for partners, and one investigator testified that he saw almost two dozen sexual encounters in the room over the course of two hours, with at least one involving more than two men. Although there were no lights in the room, it was partially illuminated by the light of the gaslights in the next-door parlor (C), which streamed in through an open door. Voyeurism and exhibitionism were an important part of the sexual excitement in the resulting light and shadow: one officer testified that

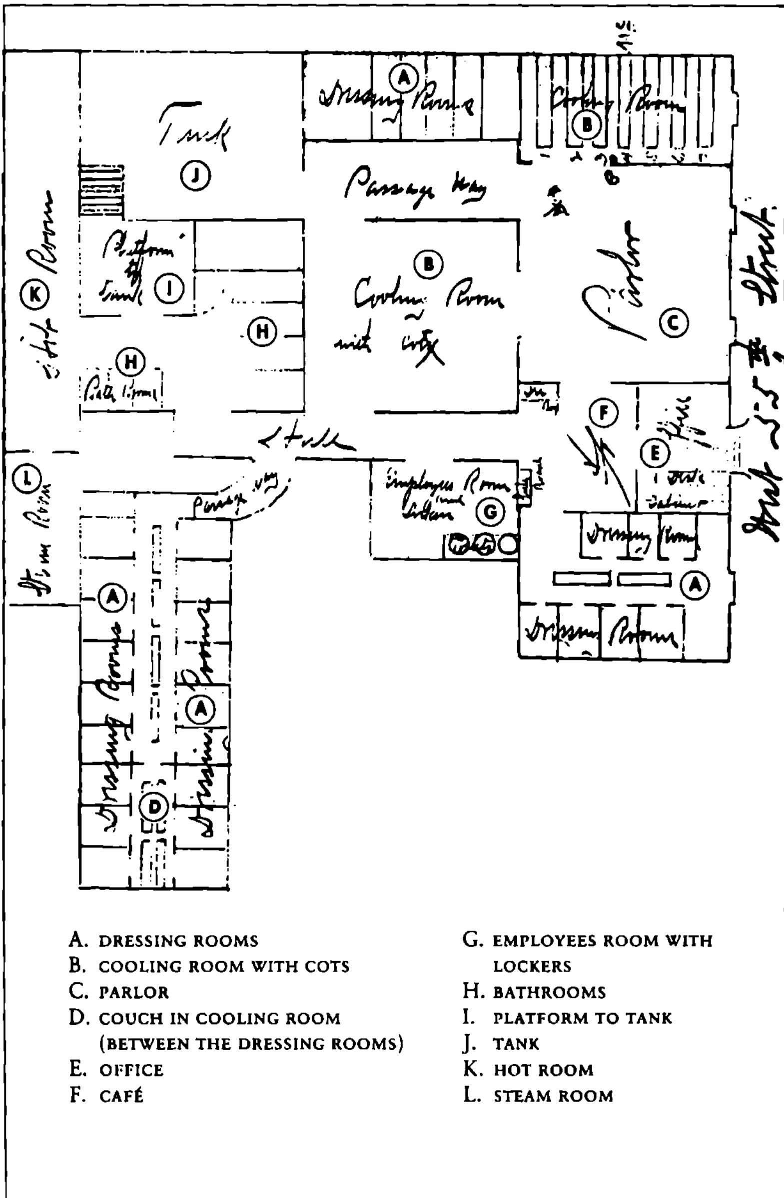



Figure 8.2. This diagram of the Ariston Bathhouse, drawn by a policeman after a raid in 1903, shows the private dressing rooms (marked A) where men could take partners, and the larger common rooms (B and D) where men openly had sexual encounters. *(From Court of General Sessions, New York City, Records in the Case of People v. Kregal, 1903.)*

two men had sex while he stood less than a foot away from them, and that another eight or so men observed the pair while standing against the walls or lying on cots.[16] Widely understood (and therefore unspoken) conventions of conduct governed the men's sexual interactions. The officers observed a fifty-three-year-old Irish pantryman have sex with nine different men, most of whom indicated their interests with gestures.[17] This was not the only public sexual space; in another cooling room (D) officers saw two men have sex on a couch in the presence of ten or fifteen other men.[18]

The police raided the Ariston after midnight on Saturday night, February 21, 1903, several hours after the four investigators had entered the bath to gather evidence against individual bathers. When the raiding squad entered the baths, they blocked the exit and rounded up the staff and the seventy-eight patrons scattered through the facilities. The police denigrated the patrons as fairies; one man recalled them shouting, "Come out here, Maude," as they pounded on his dressing room door, and "Oh, here is the indignant lady," when he swung the door open.[19] The police had the men get dressed and assemble in the parlor (C), before leading them one by one into the café (F), where the four investigators who had been at the baths that night identified the ones against whom they had direct evidence of homosexual activity. The twenty-six men they identified were bundled into two paddy wagons and hustled down to the 22nd Precinct station, where they were locked up for the night before being arraigned. The other fifty-two men were let go with a warning. But before being released, the *New York Sun* reported, "each was required to furnish a full account of himself and to show some credentials proving the truth of his assertions." They were then "passed out at the door one at a time," and forced to walk through the crowd that had gathered outside, which "hooted and jeered" at them.[20]

The police were careful to arrest only the men against whom they had specific evidence of homosexual activity, because a series of scandals had recently diminished their credibility. Public mistrust of the police was so pervasive that the judge in one of the Ariston trials felt obliged to warn the jury not to presume that *every* police witness was "unworthy of belief and liable to commit perjury."[21] But the arresting officers were rewarded for their care. The results have been lost of the trials of the manager, who was charged with running a disorderly house and selling liquor without a license, and of the four bath attendants charged with violating the liquor laws. But the consequences of the raid for the baths' patrons can be ascertained. Six of them were charged only with disorderly conduct and fined five or ten dollars; the other sixteen were held on the more serious charge of sodomy, and twelve eventually faced trial. After a series of sensational trials held through the spring, the Irish

pantryman who had been seen with nine sexual partners was sentenced to twenty years in the state penitentiary, two of his partners to seven years and two months, and a third to four years. Five of his partners escaped punishment (three because they forfeited bail), but two of the other defendants received prison terms of seven years and two months.[22]

None of the men arrested in subsequent raids on gay bathhouses were penalized as severely as those apprehended at the Ariston (like most men arrested for gay activity by the 1910s, they were usually charged with degenerate disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor, rather than sodomy, a felony). But some of the subsequent raids were more brutal. A man caught in 1929 in a raid on the Lafayette Baths (described below) bitterly recalled:

> [The] brutality [of the arresting officers] was simply indescribable. . . . Various people were struck, kicked down, kicked. . . . A Swede standing next to me was struck on the eye with a bunch of keys, and then he got hit in the back so [hard] that two of his ribs broke.[23]

Some of the raids also had more devastating effects. The manager of the Lafayette caught in an earlier raid in 1916 committed suicide before the conclusion of his trial, apparently because of his distress at the public revelation that he managed a homosexual rendezvous.[24]

But while raids could have tragic consequences, the police generally ignored the baths (presumably they were paid to do so). Three of the five raids on record from 1900 to 1930 involved (and were probably initiated by) the same private social-purity societies that were generally behind the police's periodic endeavors to enforce moral regulations. Even these organizations paid little attention to the baths, however, most likely because they did not constitute a particularly visible form of "public disorder"; at the baths, as elsewhere, men who made an effort to keep themselves hidden were relatively safe. The Society for the Prevention of Crime was involved in the raid on the Ariston in 1903, when reformers briefly controlled the mayor's office and the Society's influence was at its peak, but it expressed no further interest in eradicating homosexuality from the city's baths. When the Society's superintendent reported to the board of directors in 1917 that one of its agents had been solicited by a man near its offices on Union Square, he pointed out that the "Turkish baths are frequented considerably by this type of degenerate," but, as already noted, the board did not authorize him to "enter upon [a] campaign against such vice."[25] The only reason the board even considered such a campaign was that the Society for the Suppression of Vice had recently organized the raid on the Lafayette Baths as part of its wartime

campaign against homosexual activity in the city, but not even the SSV expressed further interest in the baths after the war emergency had passed.

Because of their relative security, gay baths grew in number. It is not clear whether the Ariston continued to be a homosexual rendezvous after being raided, although this seems doubtful, given the notoriety of the trials and the severity of the sentences imposed on the patrons. Nor is it clear precisely which other baths took its place in the 1900s or already were (and continued to be) homosexual in character, although several accounts indicate that such baths existed.[26] But a decade later, the evidence becomes more precise, and shows that by the mid-teens several establishments functioned as gay bathhouses.

The most famous—and enduring—of the gay baths was the Everard, which provided gay men a refuge for more than half a century before a fire destroyed it in 1977. (A new Everard took its place until 1985, when the city closed it and other gay bathhouses as an anti-AIDS measure.) The Everard, originally a church, was converted into a bathhouse in 1888 by James Everard, a prominent financier, brewer, and politician. Its location at 28 West Twenty-eighth Street, just west of Broadway, put it in the heart of the Tenderloin entertainment district, where it was surrounded by famous theaters and restaurants and by infamous resorts such as the Haymarket and the French Madam's, as well as some of the city's largest brothels. In its early years it was known for its wealthy and middle-class clientele, and in the 1920s it was still considered one of the eight major Turkish bathhouses in Manhattan, offering well-appointed facilities and a variety of steam baths.[27]

It is not certain when gay men began patronizing the Everard, but they clearly had begun to do so by World War I. On January 5, 1919, the Society for the Suppression of Vice organized a raid on the Everard in which the manager and nine customers were arrested, and a year later the police raided the bath again, this time arresting fifteen men. The identities of those arrested tell us much about the clientele of the Everard. They were not all so well off as its reputation might suggest: they included two clerks, an unemployed butler, a sailor, and an art student, as well as a contractor and a journalist. But the one-dollar admission fee was sufficiently high to preclude visits by the great mass of workingmen, such as the errand boy and porter arrested at the public baths on Avenue A in 1910. None of the men arrested at the Everard in 1919 were manual laborers, and almost all of those convicted for degenerate disorderly conduct after the 1920 raid were able to pay a $25 fine in order to avoid a five-day jail term. All the men were white, and most were in their thirties (although a few were in their twenties or forties), which suggests that younger men found the place difficult to afford and

older men found it inhospitable. The Everard's reputation apparently extended throughout the city and beyond. Men had come in from New Jersey on both nights, and in 1920 the customers hailed not only from Greenwich Village, Harlem, and midtown Manhattan, but also from Brooklyn, New Jersey, and even Philadelphia and Dayton, Ohio.[28] By 1927, the British actor and playwright Emlyn Williams recalled, the Everard's fame had extended to Europe's gay world; he visited it on a trip to New York that year after hearing from a French friend that "London, mon cher, is *nothing* compared to it. . . "[29]

In addition to the Everard, New York's gay bathhouses in the 1910s included the Produce Exchange Baths at 6 Broadway and the Lafayette Baths at 403–405 Lafayette Street, just south of Cooper Union.[30] The Lafayette was the more important, a favorite of the early modernist composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes and the painter Charles Demuth, and the victim of police raids in 1916 and 1929. The Lafayette drew men from the same social strata as the Everard, although its patrons were somewhat more diverse in background. On the night of the 1916 raid, they included four house servants, two clerks, two drivers, a watchman, a detective, a tailor, a milliner, a jeweler, a weaver, a teacher, a bartender, a cook—and sixteen men who refused to reveal their occupations. In both the 1916 and 1929 raids, about 70 percent of the customers were in their twenties or thirties, but a few were in their forties or fifties, and in 1929 two were in their sixties. All the men were white, but they were of disparate ethnic backgrounds, with native-born Protestants the single largest group but a third of the patrons foreign-born, and both foreign- and native-born Jews, Italians, Irish, and Scandinavians moderately represented.

Like the Everard, the Lafayette was part of a well-developed and self-conscious subculture, which facilitated the spread of its reputation. A German patron reported in 1929 that it was "very well-known . . . especially as a place where like-minded people meet (a quee[r']s place)." A fifth of the men arrested with the German in 1929 had come in from New Jersey, and several more from Long Island and the boroughs; Manhattanites accounted for only half the patrons. On the fateful night of the 1916 raid, almost three-quarters of the customers were from various Manhattan neighborhoods, but two visitors from Boston and Pittsburgh were also present.[31]

By the 1930s and 1940s, baths that did not cater to gay men had begun to decline in number and popularity as indoor plumbing and private bathing facilities became more widely available and as the elegance and social cachet previously associated with private bathhouses began to wane. The Ariston and Lafayette had closed by then, but several other baths, acutely aware of the need to develop a steady patronage in

the face of a diminishing market, had taken their place as gay rendezvous. Most of them would survive, if in changed form, through the 1970s. Although the baths—whose customers were, after all, literally stripped of most class signifiers—continued to be more egalitarian in style than most other gay institutions and their clientele became more diverse, their customers continued to be differentiated along lines of race and increasingly along lines of sexual style. One man might enjoy visiting several different baths, as the mood struck him, but each of the baths established a reputation for catering to particular tastes and kinds of men.

The Everard, for example, had established itself by the 1930s as the "classiest," safest, and best known of the baths. Its efforts to exclude men not interested in homosexual encounters contributed to the security its patrons felt there. Persistent rumors that it was owned by the Police Athletic League enhanced its reputation as being safe from police harassment, making it the first choice of professional men concerned about the consequences of an arrest.[32]

Beginning in the 1920s, the Penn Post Baths, located only a few blocks away in the basement of a seedy assignation hotel on West Thirty-first Street near Eighth Avenue, offered a strikingly different sexual scene.[33] Like the Everard, it was busiest in the evening, especially after the bars closed, during lunch, and right after work, when it drew men from the many offices and depots in the neighborhood and from among the commuters who passed through Penn Station, just across the street. But because it was so cheap, its clientele was more diverse than the Everard's, and included poorer office and manual workers. It had none of the privacy or the elegance of the Everard, for its facilities consisted of little more than one large room, which held a dozen or so bunks and a few benches, plus a shower room and a tiny steam room, and its exhibitionistic sexual scene, as well as its "low-class" clientele, gave it a somewhat unsavory reputation among middle-class gay men.[34]

The Mount Morris Baths, located in Harlem on Madison Avenue at 125th Street, was the only gay bath in the city to admit African-American men. It had opened by 1893, but it is unclear when it became a gay bathhouse, since it escaped being raided before World War II (and thus left no records). Most of the other baths overtly excluded blacks until the 1960s. The Mount Morris was also visited by whites and, like the Penn Post, was known for its "rough trade." The St. Mark's Bath, in the East Village on St. Mark's Place near Third Avenue, had opened as a Jewish bathhouse by 1915. It continued to function as such during the day until the mid-1970s, but it had begun attracting gay men (though not an exclusively gay clientele) in the evenings by World War II.[35]

THE BATHHOUSE AS SEXUAL AND SOCIAL CENTER

As a sexual arena, the baths had distinct advantages over some of the other venues used by gay men, such as parks and washrooms. Perhaps most important, they were safer. As one man explained in 1913, "In general one can say that the Turkish baths of America are a very safe place for homosexuals. . . . The people one meets there have not come there to blackmail."[36] There was always the danger, as he implied, that a man taken home from the streets would try to rob or blackmail his host, or that a sexual encounter in a park would end in violence. Men who went to the baths avoided such dangers, for they were able to leave their valuables and identification papers stored safely in a locker and were surrounded by other gay men who could come to their assistance in the event of trouble. The baths' management realized that it was in its own interest to prevent incidents from occurring on the premises, so its staff kept each floor under surveillance and was ready to intervene to prevent fights or thefts. Just as important, men were relatively safe in the baths from the police; although plainclothesmen as well as thieves threatened them on the streets, they rarely entered the baths, nor did they raid them nearly as often as they raided the city's bars and other commercial venues.[37]

The baths were also more secure because the management sought to exclude straight men who might react angrily to a homosexual advance. As a result of this policy, the sexual climate of the gay baths was different from that of certain streets—and even of many Bowery resorts and waterfront dives—in several significant ways. First, it made it possible for men to disabuse themselves of negative feelings about their homosexuality, for although some of the other men at the baths might reject them as sexual partners, none would reject them simply for being homosexuals. It also meant that the baths became a rendezvous for those gay men who wished to have mutually satisfying sex with other gay men rather than to service "normal" men (the possibility of "servicing trade" was part of the appeal of mixed baths). The investigators at the Ariston Baths in 1903, for instance, observed a scene that would have been almost inconceivable to the fairies and "normal" men at the Bowery resorts: two men spent a considerable amount of time lying on a couch, embracing and kissing, and each played both "active" and "passive" roles.[38]

Although many interactions were more one-sided than this, the sexual culture of the baths—unlike that of certain streets—presumed that both (or more) partners desired whatever contact they had and to play whatever role they took. In sharp contrast to most social situations, which negated the body and homosexual desire, the baths affirmed them by facilitating public interactions, group encounters (or "mass sex," as it

was usually called), and, at the least, overt expressions of homosexual interest. When a friend with "little experience but great desire" confided his homosexual longings to Charles Griffes in 1916, Griffes took him to the Lafayette so that he could meet other gay men and explore his sexual interests in a supportive environment; the friend was "astounded and fascinated" by what he saw there. The baths also encouraged more advanced forms of sexual experimentation. Griffes himself had had his first encounter with a man interested in sadomasochism at the Lafayette two years earlier (he found the man "interesting" but the experience unappealing), and several men interviewed in the mid-1930s referred to experimenting in the baths and learning of new pleasures.[39]

The homosexual character of the baths was reflected in the virtual absence of prostitution. Casual prostitution sometimes occurred, particularly at the mixed baths at Coney Island, where a youth might ask for carfare home, but the organization and layout of exclusively gay baths discouraged professional hustlers. The admission fee alone proved a disincentive—and sometimes an insurmountable barrier—to hustlers, especially since they could meet men on the streets at no expense and might even be treated to a drink at the bars. Moreover, it was difficult to enforce a financial agreement in a bath. As Thomas Painter wryly observed in 1941, "It is not convenient to try to collect a fee from a naked man," and it was virtually impossible for the hustler to get to a man's wallet held at the office. The man could easily call for help if a hustler followed him to his cubicle to demand payment, and it would have been foolhardy for a hustler to try to follow his customer to the office. Such practical obstacles might have been surmounted, however, but for the even greater impediment to the hustler's success posed by the sexual culture of the baths. Most men who visited the baths were more interested in sex with other gay men than with hustlers or "trade."[40]

For some men, the baths served as a refuge where they could pursue homosexual interests they had to hide in other settings. Some married men, for instance, found them a relatively safe and anonymous setting in which to satisfy their need for homosexual contact. Of the seventeen men arrested at the Lafayette in 1916 whose marital status was indicated, three were married, as were three of the nine men arrested at the Everard in 1919.[41] They were also a convenient rendezvous for men who dared not be seen at a cafeteria, a bar, or other more public gay establishments, which a nongay person was more likely to enter than a bathhouse. Charles Tomlinson Griffes, rather bold himself, attested to the baths' crucial role in such men's lives when he bitterly complained in 1914: "It always angers me that one cannot meet these people anywhere except there, but they always seem to be afraid."[42] Emlyn Williams's description of a man doffing his togalike bathsheet, getting dressed, and leaving the baths in 1927 captured the distance between

the gay world and the straight—and how easily that distance was bridged: "Roman apparition transformed into business-man—hat, overcoat with velvet collar, spats, brief-case—to be seen on weekday evenings in his hundreds on the sidewalks, hailing a taxi to take him to Grand Central and home to his wife in Westchester County."[43]

But the baths should not be regarded as simply the scene of furtive encounters between men who had disguised their identities, for they also served to introduce gay men to one another and foster their sense of allegiance to other gay men. Some married men leading otherwise conventional lives patronized the baths not only for sexual encounters but also to visit with gay friends in a gay environment, and the baths became the center of their gay social lives. The baths also played an important role in the social lives of many men more fully integrated into the gay world, both in the early decades of the century, when relatively few other gay institutions existed, and in later years, when the streets and bars grew more dangerous because of increased police activity.

Some men made a particular bath their own and developed ties with its other regular patrons and staff. Charles Griffes, for instance, visited the Lafayette on a regular basis in the mid-teens, frequently running into men he had previously met there as well as friends from the outside; once he even complained that "there are almost always the same people there." After the police raid that closed the Lafayette in October 1916, Griffes started frequenting the Produce Exchange Baths in its stead, but he stopped by to talk with the Lafayette's new manager when the bath reopened in late December and subsequently began patronizing it again. (Though Griffes did not say so in his diary, they must have had an interesting conversation. The new manager was Ira Gershwin.)* An

*Griffes met the Lafayette's new manager on December 29, 1916, but did not name him in his diary. This was, however, the month the Gershwins took over the management of the Lafayette Baths. The possibility of a meeting between the two musical-giants-to-be is intriguing, but Griffes left no record of the conversation, which seems to have been a courtesy call and may have been designed to elicit information about the status of the bath in its new incarnation. Unfortunately it is impossible to determine precisely when he began frequenting the Lafayette again after his meeting with the new manager at the end of 1916, because he made virtually no reference to homosexual matters in his 1917 diary. Indeed, he wrote nothing at all in the 1917 diary until April 11 and subsequently made only occasional entries, most of which were short notes concerning his professional activities. We know that the Lafayette continued to function as a gay bath and that he continued to patronize it because he mentioned visiting it (and meeting another gay friend there) on October 27, 1917, the date of his diary's last entry, but it is possible that the Gershwins tried to keep it relatively quiet for a short while after reopening.

attendant at the Ariston testified that one man arrested there in 1903 had visited the bath once or twice a week for at least a year, often on the same night as a second man with whom the police had seen him in a passionate embrace, and the man himself later admitted he had been patronizing the bath since 1897.[44] A man arrested at the Lafayette in 1929 had already been there ten times since moving to New York, and several men interviewed about the 1930s, '40s, and '50s recalled having a favorite bath they regularly visited and to which they developed some loyalty. This loyalty was fostered by the bathhouse's staff, for whom it made good business sense to encourage regular patronage: an employee at the St. Mark's recalled getting to know dozens of regular customers by name and spending hours with them in the restaurant, as well as reserving rooms and performing other favors for them.[45] That the staff at the baths was relatively successful at screening out heterosexuals who unwittingly tried to visit is a testimony to their familiarity both with their regular customers and with the subcultural codes men used to signal their homosexuality.

Charles Griffes's diary record of his bathhouse visits provides a rich portrait of the baths' role as social centers. Griffes patronized the baths frequently on his trips to the city from the private boarding school in Tarrytown, New York, where he taught music. Although his first interest in the baths was always sexual, he met many men there who became good friends and with whom he visited outside the baths as well.[46] The seven hours he spent at the Lafayette one day in the summer of 1916 illustrates the range of contacts he made there. He met two men, apparently a couple, and arranged to spend the following day with both of them and for one of them to see him on a more intimate basis a few days later. (The couple kept the date and listened to Griffes perform several of his piano pieces in his apartment before joining him on an excursion to Coney Island, and in the following weeks he made several appointments to go to the baths with each of them separately.) He also made an appointment for later that evening to see "the new Andrew," someone new to the baths who apparently had become a subject of conversation among his friends there; although Andrew accepted the invitation, he failed to show up. "Other than that," Griffes commented, "I was quite satisfied with the afternoon."[47] He frequently took men he met at the baths to Luchow's or some other restaurant so they could have a meal and get to know each other, and the men he met there entered into the web of his life in a variety of ways. On one occasion he met someone who called him the next day with information about an apartment he might rent for the summer. He eventually had something of a social circle based at the baths, and

his visits there sometimes led to long conversations with old friends. One afternoon at the Lafayette in January 1916, he not only caught up with a friend he had not seen since the summer but also had a long, intimate discussion with a former lover "about myself and my character."[48]

The experiences of Griffes and of subsequent generations of gay men demonstrate that the baths were not only a venue for fleeting encounters but also an important setting for the development of social relationships among gay men. Thirty years after Griffes, for instance, Martin Goodkin also found that the baths facilitated the development of relationships, some confined to the baths and others assuming a life beyond their walls. He recalled having "steady sex partners over a period of three years [in the early 1950s] at the Everard baths. We came to know everything about each other [even though we] never did socialize outside." After leaving New York he corresponded with two of them for more than thirty years.[49]

Although some men were ashamed of their visits to the baths and refused to identify themselves when there or to talk about them when elsewhere, many others valued them highly and discussed them unabashedly in other gay settings. A fixture in gay life and culture, the baths became a part of gay folklore—hardly a likely development if all their patrons had remained isolated from one another and done no more than use the baths surreptitiously, never mentioning them. In an article published in *Broadway Brevities* in December 1924, a columnist recalled that "the Everard Baths were once raided, and—years before that—the Lafayette Baths (where Robt. L---K--- used to go) and, still other years before, the Ariston Baths, where Lillian Russell lived upstairs. The latter more than twenty years ago."[50] The fact that a columnist writing in 1924 knew of the raids on the Everard in 1919–20, the Lafayette in 1916, and the Ariston in 1903—and something as well of the lore of the baths, such as the putative Lillian Russell connection—is remarkable testimony both to his familiarity with the gay world and to the historical self-consciousness of the men in that world. Even in the first quarter of the century, they had created a subculture that sustained a collective memory and made the history of the baths a significant part of its folklore.

Gay baths were few in number and served a more limited—and generally more affluent—clientele than most of the other spaces gay men appropriated in the early twentieth century. But they constituted a singular gay environment. They were some of the first exclusively gay commercial spaces in the city. The most stable of gay institutions, they

outlasted every gay bar and restaurant in the city and provided a place safe from police and vigilantes alike in which to meet other gay men. Forthrightly sexual in character, the baths were also important social centers, where gay men could meet openly, discuss their lives, and build a circle of friends. Their distinctive character fostered a sense of community among their patrons.

Although the baths were singular institutions, their development as social—as well as strictly sexual—spaces points to certain fundamental characteristics of the gay world in general. The experience of men at the baths highlights the way gay men built social ties on the basis of their sexual ties and created a social world on the basis of a shared and marginalized sexuality. For while many men used the baths simply as a convenient site for quick sexual encounters, others, who had also initially been drawn to them by their sexual interests, soon formed more elaborate social relationships with the men they met there, and came to depend on them in a variety of ways. Charles Tomlinson Griffes was drawn into the gay world by the baths not just because he had sex there, but because he met men there who helped him find apartments and otherwise make his way through the city, who appreciated his music, who gave him new insights into his character, and who became his good friends. The gay world became a central part of his everyday world, even though he kept it hidden from his nongay associates.

The different ways that different men used the baths also reveal the variety of ways men negotiated their involvement in the gay world as a whole. Some of the men who visited them were highly integrated into the larger gay world, for they frequented as well the cafeterias, restaurants, and streets where gay men gathered. But the baths also served as a haven for men who dared not risk being seen in such more easily accessible locales because they were married or had jobs that required enormous caution. Despite the fact that they limited their involvement in gay society to the highly circumscribed social arena offered by the baths, many of them made gay friends and developed extensive gay social ties within those limits.

The sharp division the latter group of men made between their gay lives at the baths and their straight lives outside was not typical for gay men, but in one respect it may be regarded as prototypical. For if the limits they imposed on their involvement in the gay world were more extreme than those most men imposed, their experience nonetheless exemplified the extent to which men could participate in gay life—and identify themselves with it—even as they hid any trace of that participation from their everyday associates. If the baths served as a kind of

"closet" for those men, protecting them from the knowledge and hostility of outsiders, it was a very large closet indeed, filled with other people, with doors the police occasionally pried open but which, more often, they themselves opened and closed at strategic moments. In such closets, a gay world was built.

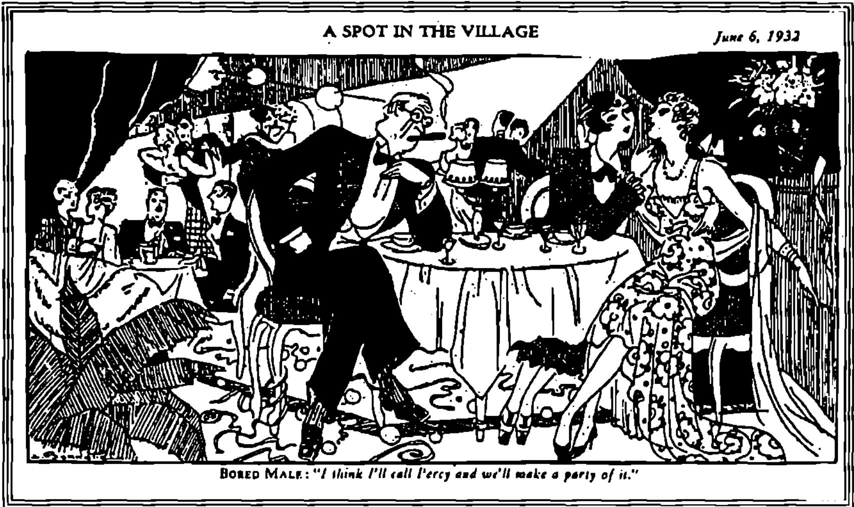



Figure 9.1. This 1932 cartoon plays on Greenwich Village's reputation as a center of lesbian and gay life by showing a bored male being ignored by the women at a club. A close look reveals that almost all of the couples depicted are same-sex, usually including one woman in a suit. (*From* Broadway Brevities, *June 6, 1932.*)

*Chapter 9*

# BUILDING GAY NEIGHBORHOOD ENCLAVES: THE VILLAGE AND HARLEM

THE GAY WORLD EVOLVED THROUGHOUT THE CITY, BUT IT TOOK ITS MOST developed and visible form in just a few neighborhoods. The Bowery had been a center of fairy life at the turn of the century; by the 1910s and 1920s, two other neighborhoods had become gay centers, attracting disproportionate numbers of gay residents and commercial establishments where gay men and lesbians set the tone. In the 1920s, Greenwich Village hosted the best-known gay enclave in both the city and the nation—and the first to take shape in a predominantly middle-class (albeit bohemian) milieu. By the late 1910s, a Village song included the line "Fairyland's not far from Washington Square," and by the early 1930s, the Village's gay reputation was so firmly established that a New York tabloid could quip that while a doctor had learned how to "switch the sex of animals, turning males into females, they beat the scientist to it in Greenwich Village!"[1] Gay men and women had to fight for space even in the Village, but its reputation for flouting bourgeois convention made it seem an inviting place and did in fact let them create a haven for homosexuals.

If the Village was considered the city's most infamous gay neighborhood by outsiders, many gay men themselves regarded Harlem as the most exciting center of gay life. In a segregated city, it was the *only* place where black gay men could congregate in commercial establishments, and they were centrally involved in many of the currents of Harlem culture, from the creative literary circles that constituted the Harlem Renaissance to the blues clubs and basement speakeasies where the poorest of Harlem's residents gathered. African-Americans organized the largest annual communal event of New York's gay society, the Hamilton

Lodge Ball, which attracted thousands of white as well as black participants and spectators. Nonetheless, the men and women who built Harlem's gay world confronted the same challenges their white counterparts did elsewhere. While the "faggots" who were highly visible in the neighborhood's streets and nightspots might earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they had no hope of respectability. Most middle-class gay Harlemites struggled to keep news of their homosexuality from spreading, lest it cause their social downfall.

New York's first substantial lesbian enclaves developed in the Village and Harlem at the same time gay male enclaves did. Although lesbians and gay men continued to move in largely separate social worlds, they both gathered at some of the same speakeasies, including several particularly prominent ones run by lesbians or featuring lesbian performers, and lesbians attended some of the drag balls organized by gay men. The limited convergence of lesbian and gay life in the 1920s, particularly through the appearance of commercial establishments attracting both men and women on the basis of their shared participation in the gay life, marked an important stage in the emergence of the social category of the homosexual.

Neither the Village nor Harlem could be said to have been a gay neighborhood in the 1920s, for in neither did homosexuals set the tone. But each neighborhood, for different reasons, allowed a gay enclave to take shape, and the differences between those enclaves highlight the degree to which particular gay subcultures were shaped by the dominant neighborhood (or parent) cultures in which they developed.

## Long-Haired Men and Short-Haired Women: The Gay World of Village Bohemia

The emergence of Greenwich Village as a gay center was closely linked to the development of the bohemian community there. Although the Village had originally been north of the city's borders, a refuge for the rich from urban disorder and disease, by 1900 most of its elite residents had departed and the Village itself had been physically incorporated into a city whose borders had long since pushed far beyond it to the north. At the turn of the century the area was known simply as the Ninth Ward, dominated by working-class Italian immigrants. Only when native-born bohemian writers, artists, and radicals began to move into the neighborhood in the 1900s did it begin to be called "the Village" again—and then only by the self-styled bohemian "Villagers" who moved there, not the Italian "Ninth Warders."

The newcomers to the Village were attracted by its winding streets and Old World charm, by its relative isolation from the rest of the city, and above all by the social life its cheap apartments and services

made possible. "After college and the war," the writer Malcolm Cowley recalled of his generation of writers, "most of us drifted to Manhattan, to the crooked streets south of Fourteenth, where you could rent a furnished hall-bedroom for two or three dollars weekly or the top floor of a rickety house for thirty dollars a month. We came to the Village . . . because living was cheap."[2] Although the Village became the most famous bohemian community in the country in the 1910s and 1920s, subject to searching examination in the national press, similar residential districts were developing in large cities throughout the country. In many respects the Village was a prototypical furnished-room district, for it offered cheap rooms to unmarried men and women who wished to develop social lives unencumbered by family obligations and to engage in work likely to be more creative than remunerative.

Lesbians and gay men also found the cheap rents and cheap restaurants appealing, but greater attractions were the Village's reputation for tolerating nonconformity (or "eccentricity") and the impetus for social experimentation engendered in the district by the bohemians who originally settled there, for these held out the promise of making the Village a safe and even congenial place for homosexuals to live. Moreover, the particular forms of eccentricity allowed the "artistic types" made it unusually easy for gay men and lesbians to fit into Village society and also provided a cover to those who adopted flamboyant styles in their dress and demeanor.

Not only were many Villagers unmarried, but by becoming artists, free-lovers, and anti-materialists (if not always anti-capitalists), they had forsaken many of the other social roles and characteristics prescribed for their class and gender in ways stereotypically associated with homosexuals.[3] Indeed, the unconventional behavior of many bohemian men—ranging from their long hair, colorful dress, and interest in art to their decided lack of interest in the manly pursuits of getting married and making money—often led outsiders to consider all of them queer. Although not everyone thought their queer tastes extended to sexual matters, the bohemian men of the Village were often regarded as unmanly as well as un-American, and in some contexts calling men "artistic" became code for calling them homosexual.

The frequent references by critics to the "long-haired men" and "short-haired women" of the Village sometimes constituted precisely such accusations of perversity, only slightly veiled, since the gender reversal implied by such images directly evoked the semiotic codes that denoted sexual perversion. In 1929, for instance, a conservative Village paper attacked bohemian women for being "so ashamed of their sex that they do their best to appear like men, claiming, however, the privileges of

womanhood just the same." It went on to charge that "the majority of that type manifestly endeavor to create a third sex."[4]

This overlapping of homosexual and bohemian characteristics threatened some straight members of the avant-garde, who often were not so tolerant of homosexuals as their reputation might suggest. Indeed, a considerable gap often existed between the *representation* and the *actuality* of Village life and mores. As the historians Ellen Kay Trimberger and Leslie Fishbein have shown, many of the leading self-identified male feminists of the Village remained deeply troubled or ambivalent about the independence of women and strove to protect their prerogatives and identities as men from the demands made by the ideologies of feminism and bohemianism.[5] In this context it is not surprising that many of them were also troubled by the insinuation that their unorthodox behavior meant they were "queer" in a specifically sexual sense. In his 1934 memoir, Malcolm Cowley acknowledged his fear that he and his fellow writers, intellectuals, and artists were being slandered as perverts. He recalled that *Broom*, the little magazine he worked on in the early 1920s, received letters at its 45 King Street office addressed to "45 Queer Street," and "mention[ing] Oscar Wilde." He added, "I came to believe that a general offensive was about to be made against modern art, an offensive based on the theory that all modern writers, painters and musicians were homosexual. . . . I began to feel harried and combative, like Aubrey Beardsley forced to defend his masculinity against whispers." His reaction, as he frankly admitted, was to "hate . . . pansipoetical poets." He claimed to have had drunken dreams of a writers' revolution in the Village, when "you would set about hanging policemen from the lamp posts, . . . and beside each policeman would be hanged a Methodist preacher, and beside each preacher a pansy poet."[6]

The artistic and political bohemian men of the Village discussed sex more explicitly than their middle-class contemporaries deemed proper, and their "modern," scientific views of homosexuality sometimes disturbed the guardians of the old order. But their "frank" consideration of homosexuality was not necessarily positive, and it often simply condemned homosexuality in scientific rather than more overtly moralistic terms. John Sumner, Anthony Comstock's successor as head of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, attacked *The Masses*, a radical magazine published by Villagers in the 1910s, for addressing the question of homosexuality, but its coverage was hardly always positive.

*The Masses* had long mocked the Society's censorious moralism. In one issue, it published a caricature of Comstock dragging a woman by her hair before a judge and charging, "Your Honor, this woman gave birth to a naked child!" Sumner retaliated in the summer of 1916, shortly after Comstock's death and just a year before the Post Office

closed *The Masses* for good for circulating anti-war propaganda, by targeting the bookshop the magazine ran in the Village. The shop sold such classics of the new sexual thought as *Love's Coming of Age* by the British gay socialist Edward Carpenter and *The Sexual Question* by the Swiss sexologist Auguste Forel, and the magazine regularly filled its pages with ads for them. Sumner, charging that *The Sexual Question* was an "indecent book," raided the shop on August 31, arrested the circulation manager, and seized the magazine's September issue, which contained an advertisement for the book.

A few days before the raid, when Floyd Dell, the magazine's managing editor, happened to be minding the shop, Sumner had visited it to secure proof that it carried the book. As Dell later recalled, he had inquired as to why Sumner found the book so objectionable. "It was," Dell remembered, "because Forel expressed sympathy for homosexuals—or, as Sumner put it, 'approval,' which, as I remembered the book, was not true." Dell himself was hardly sympathetic to homosexuals. In his own book, *Love in the Machine Age*, he argued that homosexuality was characteristic of patriarchal societies in which women were subordinated to men, and, in the modern age of free love, was a social anachronism and sign of personal regression. He considered Forel's treatise "a very wise and good book," one of "the most enlightened books that existed upon the subject of sex," and, tellingly, he was correct in noting that it did not approve of homosexuality. It attacked the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Magnus Hirschfeld, and other German homosexual crusaders as the work of "apologists," and argued that homosexuality was a perversion.[7] Sumner, it is clear, was disturbed that Forel considered homosexuality a medical rather than a moral problem, properly in the domain of physicians rather than clergymen and moral crusaders, a perspective Dell lauded as enlightened. But it seemed unobjectionable to Dell that, in contrast to the studies of Hirschfeld, Forel's enlightened approach to homosexuality should simply condemn it as evidence of biological rather than moral degeneration. A report on the raid in the November 1916 issue of *The Masses* recorded Sumner's claim that Forel's book "advocates sodomy!" before reassuring its readers that "it does, of course, nothing of the sort." If anything, the magazine suggested in an anti-homosexual aside, it was the minds of "our prominent vice-experts" that "really do not seem to us to be normal."[8]

Dell's critique and Cowley's anxiety hardly represented the entire range of bohemian opinion on the subject of homosexuality, however, and other bohemians—especially bohemian women—accepted the gay people in their midst with greater equanimity. The anarchist Emma Goldman, for one, defended the rights of homosexuals in some of her speeches. According to the historian Judith Schwarz, not only were numerous lesbians involved in the feminist club Heterodoxy, but the club's other mem-

bers accorded lesbian relationships the same respect they granted marriages.[9]

Even a cursory review of the intellectual and political ferment of the 1910s demonstrates that numerous homosexuals participated in the bohemian milieu and that several played an important role in the construction of Village bohemia itself. Carl Van Vechten was a gay married man and a leading white critic and novelist of the 1910s and 1920s who helped introduce the white public to the Harlem Renaissance. He played a key role in the 1910s in organizing Mabel Dodge Luhan's famous salons on lower Fifth Avenue, at which socialists and anarchists, Freudians and free-lovers, artists and activists debated the issues of the day. The lesbians in Heterodoxy were open with heterosexual friends. Eugene O'Neill's companions in the Village and Provincetown included the noted gay painters Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley, and, according to O'Neill's biographer Louis Sheaffer, the playwright based Charles Marsden, the effete, implicitly homosexual character in *Strange Interlude*, on them.[10] Margaret Anderson and her masculinely attired lover, Jane Heap, published the influential *Little Review* from the Village, gathering gay and nongay writers around them.

As these few examples suggest, individual homosexuals were accepted as friends by many Villagers in the 1910s, although they were scorned by others. But gay people were initially drawn to the Village primarily as bohemians rather than as homosexuals and had little apparent interest in developing distinctively gay institutions. The development of a gay enclave resulted from the expansion and reorganization of the Village community during World War I and the postwar years, the loss of the intimacy and small scale of the Village as it was integrated into the city as a whole, and the development of a speakeasy demimonde in which gay locales might develop.

### *The Changing Character of the Postwar Village*

The rapid commercialization of the Village during and after World War I altered its character. The construction of the subway routes along Seventh Avenue in 1917 and along Sixth Avenue in 1927–30 and the simultaneous widening and extension of both avenues transformed the Village from a remote, self-contained backwater into one of the most central and easily reached of the city's neighborhoods. Because the opening of the subway lines made the Village a more convenient place to live, growing numbers of businessmen, attracted by the Village's Old World charm, began to move there. They pushed rents up and some of the struggling artists out, real estate developers began building new apartment complexes in prime locations, and newly established taxpayers'

associations launched campaigns to clean up some of the more disreputable aspects of the Village.[11]

Just as the Village became more accessible, the advent of Prohibition in 1920 made it a particularly attractive destination to men and women out on the town. The Italian restaurants, grocers, drugstores, and other shops that lined its streets were the city's major sources of homemade Italian wine, and people flocked to the Village for their liquor supplies.[12] The Village's national reputation as a center of "free love" and other unconventional behavior was just as intriguing to tourists. The tearooms to the west and south of Washington Square had already enjoyed a boom during the war, when they became a major attraction to the soldiers and sailors passing through the city. In the years following Prohibition, the area's speakeasies and clubs lured growing numbers of middle-class men and women out slumming, as well as men out to find the women known as "free-lovers of the Greenwich Village type."

Villagers complained that their less scrupulous compatriots had begun to cater to the tourist trade, decking themselves out in the costumes visitors expected of bohemians, selling their verse and etchings to the unsophisticated, and offering tours of a fabricated "Bohemia" to the gullible. Sheridan Square became known for the outlandish theatricality of its establishments. Don Dickerman's Pirate's Den featured "clanking chains, clashing cutlasses, ship's lanterns, and patch-eyed buccaneer waiters"; jazz clubs proliferated; and Julius', a particularly successful speakeasy at Waverly Place and Tenth Street, became known as the rendezvous of college men and "flappers."[13]

Most of the original Villagers, the political radicals and bohemian artists who self-consciously identified themselves as members of a small-scale experimental community, lamented these changes. In their eyes, the postwar Village seemed to have lost the intimacy, intellectual ferment, and genuinely bohemian aspect of its halcyon prewar days. The Village's incorporation into the city in the 1920s had turned it into another Coney Island, a cheap amusement center and playground for rich uptown slummers and poorer youths from the boroughs alike. The sociologist Caroline Ware, who published a study of the Village in 1935, reflected such misgivings when she dismissed the postwar generation of Villagers as "pseudo-Bohemians," interested less in intellectual creativity than in a mindless escape from the conventions of bourgeois society.[14]

Nonetheless, the condescension of contemporary observers toward the newcomers should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the Village's reputation as a center of unconventional behavior—particularly of unconventional sexual behavior—had made it a beacon not only for rich slummers but also for increasing numbers of disaffected youths from the city's outer boroughs who wished to escape the con-

straints of family and neighborhood supervision. The Village became an even more visible national symbol over the course of the twenties, as the cultural gap between Prohibition America and Jazz Age New York seemed to widen, with rural politicians pandering to prohibitionist and nativist constituencies by denouncing New York as the nation's Sodom and Gomorrah.

In this context the Village took on special significance for lesbians and gay men around the country, and disaffected New Yorkers were joined in the Village by waves of refugees from the nation's less tolerant small towns.[15] As one gay man wrote in 1924: "I have for the longest time tr[ied] so hard to make people understand me, and [it] was so very hard; my friends that I know don't care for people of that kind and I left them because I always thought they would find [me] out, then I went down to the Village and [met] plenty [of gay people]."[16] A hostile newspaper reporter made the same point when he asserted in 1931 that the people who flocked to Greenwich Village were "men and women taunted by their biologically normal companions in the small towns that ostracize those who neither eat nor sleep nor love in the fashion of the hundred percenters."[17] They fled to the Village, and in the 1920s they built an extensive gay world there.

If the Village's reputation for unconventional sexuality attracted lesbians and gay men, their growing visibility in the district soon made homosexuality almost as much a part of the Village's reputation as free love. The presence of "fairies" and "lady lovers" in the Village was already sufficiently well known to have elicited press comment and attracted slummers by the beginning of World War I, and the Village's reputation as a gay neighborhood solidified throughout the 1920s. One 1927 account of New York nightlife noted that two women dancing together in a Times Square club elicited no comment, while in the Village it would be taken as a sign of their lesbianism.[18] The "exposés" of the Village periodically published by the city's newspapers increasingly focused on the homosexual aspects of the neighborhood's "depravity." In 1931 one series spotlighted gay meeting places in its "initial [tour] of the innermost stations of Greenwich Village's sex, pollution, and human decay."[19] In 1936 even the staid medical journal *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* published an article on the "Degenerates of Greenwich Village," which announced that the Village, "once the home of art, [is] now the Mecca for exhibitionists and perverts of all kinds."[20]

The gay scene in the Village became so prominent that it even turned up in the movies. In the 1932 Clara Bow vehicle *Call Her Savage*, Bow's escort took her to a Greenwich Village dive patronized by artists, revolutionaries, and pairs of neatly dressed male and female couples, sitting in

booths with their arms around each other. The waiters were two young men in frilly white aprons and maid's caps, each sashaying about holding a feather duster and singing: "If a sailor in pajamas I should see / I know he'll scare the life out of me / But on a great big battleship / We'd like to be / Working as chamber maids!"[21]

Caroline Ware noted the growing prominence of homosexual circles in the Village over the course of the twenties, although she dismissed it as a fad: "As sex taboos broke down all over the country and sex experimentation found its way to the suburbs, the Village's exoticism could no longer rest on so commonplace a foundation." The Jazz Age public's growing curiosity about homosexuality, she thought, simply provided the Village with a new angle: "The Village became noted as the home of 'pansies' and 'Lesbians,' and dives of all sorts featured this type." Villagers "pass[ed] on from free love to homosexuality . . . to mark the outposts of revolt."[22]

Throughout her study Ware regarded homosexual behavior and identity, particularly that of women, as nothing more than something that "normal" people experimented with as part of a general "revolt," rather than as part of a significant effort to shape a personal and collective identity. Indeed, she suggested that in the late 1920s, homosexuality, and especially lesbianism, had become chic among Villagers, including numerous heterosexual women (whom she derisively termed "pseudo-Lesbians," as though they were a subcategory of "pseudo-Bohemians") who behaved like lesbians simply because it seemed the thing to do. "By 1930, promiscuity was tame and homosexuality had become the expected thing. One girl who came nightly [to a speakeasy noted for its gay patronage] was the joke of the place because she was trying so hard to be a Lesbian, but when she got drunk she forgot and let the men dance with her."[23] Despite Ware's cynicism, however, her observations suggest that by the 1920s, homosexuality had become more acceptable in Village circles and that lesbians and gay men had seized the opportunities provided by the general bohemian rebellion to construct a sphere of relative cultural autonomy for themselves.

The history of the dances, or balls, held at Webster Hall on East Eleventh Street near Third Avenue illustrates how gay people used the openings created by bohemian culture to expand their public presence; it also points up the commercialization and homosexualization of the Village's reputation. The first and most prominent of the balls were thrown in the mid-teens by the Liberal Club to finance its operations. But the financial rewards of organizing a ball had soon become so evident that entrepreneurs unaffiliated with any community group began to sponsor them, competing to produce the most outlandish balls and

attract the largest audiences.[24] Floyd Dell, one of the organizers of the Liberal Club's first ball, lamented that the club's success had "shown the more commercially enterprising among us another way to make money out of the bourgeoisie." The balls had "finished the process [of betraying the Village's original ideals] which the restaurants [that drew slummers] had begun."[25]

Reports submitted by Committee of Fourteen agents investigating "vice conditions" in the wartime Village confirm Dell's recollection that as the reputation of the Village as a bohemian enclave grew, increasing numbers of slummers from throughout the city visited the balls in order to get a taste of the unconventional life. As one agent reported in 1917: "Many of the people are advertising their dances as Greenwich Village dances in order to get the crowd, and it works."[26] In a later report he noted, "These dances are getting quite popular." The reason was obvious: "Most of those present at these dances being liberals and radicals, one is not surprised when he finds a young lady who will talk freely with him on Birth Control or sex psychology."[27]

"Free love" was an important part of the attraction of the Village balls, but so, too, was homosexuality. In 1918 the same investigator reported that an increasingly "prominent feature of these dances is the number of male perverts who attend them. These phenomenal men . . . wear expensive gowns, employ rouge[,] use wigs[,] and in short make up an appearance which looks for everything like a young lady."[28] In another report he confirmed how essential such "phenomenal men" were to the allure of the Village balls when he commented that a ball had attracted "the *usual crowd* who go expecting to find ['Homosexualists'] there. Some of the latter mocking [the 'Homosexualists'], others actually patronizing them, associating with them during the night and dancing with them. . . . I mean," he added, "*men* with *men*."[29]

Part of the attraction of an amusement district such as Greenwich Village, like that of Harlem, was that it constituted a liminal space where visitors were encouraged to disregard some of the social injunctions that normally constrained their behavior, where they could observe and vicariously experience behavior that in other settings—particularly their own neighborhoods—they might consider objectionable enough to suppress. The organizers of the balls were well aware of this phenomenon and welcomed the presence of flamboyant gay men—sometimes making them a part of the pageants they staged—precisely because they knew they enhanced the reputation and appeal of such events. At the Liberal Club's Golden Ball of Isis, attended by two thousand people in February 1917, Horace Mann (well known to the audience, apparently, as a "noted homosexualist") took the major role of the slave in love with the

Egyptian goddess Isis in the 1 A.M. pageant.[30] Some Villagers expressed reservations about the presence of such men—in 1922 one Villager worried publicly that "the golden goose of Village ball promotion was slowly being strangled by the admission of stags and certain mincing undesirables from uptown who love to exhibit themselves in dainty effulgence"[31]—but bohemian ideology encouraged the toleration of unconventional forms of sexual expression and identity. Gay people clearly capitalized on this tolerance to claim their right to participate in Village affairs.

### *A Visible Gay Presence*

By the early 1920s, the presence of gay men and lesbians in the Village was firmly established. No longer were they simply visitors to the Liberal Club's masquerade balls. They organized their *own* balls at Webster Hall and appropriated as their own many of the other social spaces created by the bohemians of the 1910s. Chief among these were the cheap Italian restaurants, cafeterias, and tearooms that crowded the Village and served as the meeting grounds for its bohemians. Gay men and lesbians seem to have become noticeable in such locales during World War I, at about the same time they began attracting attention at the Liberal Club's balls.[32] By the end of the war, the gay presence seemed to some worried observers to have become ubiquitous: an anti-vice agent investigating a MacDougal Street restaurant in 1919 commented that "in this restaurant, *as in all other Greenwich Village places*, there are all sorts of people among [the customers], many obviously prostitutes and perverts, especially the latter."[33]

The gay presence became even more noticeable after the war, when lesbians and gay men began opening their own speakeasies and tearooms. In the early 1920s at least twenty restaurants and tearooms "catering to the 'temperamental' element" were said to exist in the Village. Some were a few blocks west of Washington Square Park on Christopher and Charles Streets; others were located in the heart of the Village's bohemian commercial district just south and west of the Square, along MacDougal Street to the south and along West Third and Fourth Streets as far west as Sixth Avenue and Sheridan Square. The Flower Pot, run by Dolly Judge, was described as a "gay and impromptu place where excitement reigned from nine in the evening until the wee hours of the morning." Located at the corner of Christopher and Gay Streets, it was not far from the Pirate's Den, a straight tourist trap, and just around the corner from Trilby's, another gay rendezvous. Charles Street was the home of the Red Mask, a club run by the well-known gay impresario Jackie Mason, and a third "ultra-ultra speak," which, one account noted, "isn't Ireland even if the fairies may be seen there."[34]

The arrangements made for the Fourth of July party held in 1922 at the Jungle, a "hangout for fairies" at Cornelia Street and Sixth Avenue, indicate how secure gay men and lesbians felt in the area. The club advertised its party by distributing a handbill promising souvenirs, refreshments, a jazz band, and entertainment by "Rosebud" and the "Countess." Rosebud and the Countess were men—not female impersonators, but gay men, or "degenerates," as an investigator who had attended the event after seeing the notice described them—apparently with a local reputation big enough to draw a crowd. Their audience consisted primarily of unattached men and women, the investigator reported, most of them apparently "fairies," many of them seemingly wealthy, "lady lovers of [the] Greenwich Village type," and, apparently, a few interested heterosexuals. The club had obviously made arrangements to ensure police protection—and protection from the police. The investigator noted that "a uniformed patrolman who is stationed in here was sitting with some of these fairies at one table and conversing with them and also entertained by them. . . . It appeared that he took a great interest [in] this performance [by Rosebud and the Countess] and clapped his hands after [the] performance was over."[35]

Such arrangements could stave off the police for only so long, however. After receiving numerous complaints from real estate interests trying to "upgrade" the Village and from parents who had discovered their sons were frequenting the places surreptitiously, the police launched a series of crackdowns in 1924 and 1925. In the spring of 1925 they succeeded in having two of the proprietors convicted of keeping disorderly houses; one was sent to the penitentiary. By one account, they had closed all but three of the clubs by May. But several more soon opened.[36]

Many of the gay and lesbian clubs were modeled on the "personality clubs" that had played an important role in building the original Village community. The original clubs were run by gregarious men and women whose personalities set the tone for their establishments and attracted a following. Their restaurants and tearooms served as the salons of the Village intelligentsia. The proprietors made sure that new patrons were welcomed and introduced to regulars, they sponsored poetry readings, musicales, and discussion groups, and, above all else, they offered a congenial environment in which regulars could maintain ties with their friends and meet other like-minded people. The best known of such locales in the 1910s was Polly's Restaurant on MacDougal Street. Run by Paula Holladay with the assistance of her husband, the restaurant served as the unofficial dining club of the Liberal Club, which met in the rooms above it.[37]

When several gay men and lesbians such as Dolly Judge followed Holladay's lead by opening similar places in the 1920s, they quickly

became leading centers of gay social life. Gay residents of the Village formed the core of their patronage, but these restaurants also provided a home-away-from-home for gay visitors from other parts of town, a place where people who had no private space of their own in the neighborhood could gather nightly and construct a social world for themselves. This function was especially important for poorer men and women; Caroline Ware noted that many would-be Villagers forced by high rents to live with their relatives or crowded with other youths in the outer boroughs had succeeded in making the Village their social center by spending their evenings in its restaurants and cafeterias, and their number surely included gay men and women. Although gay people were not the only patrons of the gay-run restaurants, they predominated and set the tone. By the late twenties, as Ware discovered, most of the personality clubs had closed, making it more difficult for newcomers to meet others and become a part of the Village community. But lesbian and gay clubs represented a notable exception to this trend; homosexuals, especially lesbians, found it easier than most other newcomers to find an entrée into the Village community.[38]

One of the best-known gay personality clubs in the Village in the 1920s was Paul and Joe's. It had opened as an Italian restaurant at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Ninth Street in 1912, and during the war years, when the Village was thronged with soldiers on leave, it was considered a "tough place," reputed to attract prostitutes who robbed their customers. Although some gay men and lesbians may have patronized it then, it did not have a gay reputation and seems to have begun cultivating a gay following only after the war, when it began hosting impromptu drag performances. The club gave several female impersonators their start, including Jackie Law, who opened his own place, the Studio Club on Fifteenth Street near Fifth Avenue, in the late twenties, and Gene Malin, whose nightclub act played a prominent role in the pansy craze of the early thirties (see chapter 11). By the early twenties, the restaurant had established itself as a major gay locale in the Village.

In an effort to escape the police crackdown in the Village in 1924, Paul and Joe moved their restaurant up Sixth Avenue to a building on the corner of Nineteenth Street, thus removing it from the Village proper. There they controlled the rooms upstairs, which patrons could rent for the evening for private parties. With the move, Paul and Joe consolidated their position, quickly becoming, by one account, the "headquarters for every well-known Lesbian and Queen in town," who felt no need to hide their homosexuality there and who were joined by numerous stage and screen celebrities, opera divas, and underworld figures. The restaurant also became identified publicly as a gay rendezvous. One gossip sheet

mentioned its homosexual patrons several times in 1924, and in 1925 the writer and Village booster Bobby Edwards described it as the "hangout of dainty elves and stern women" in the pages of his magazine, the *Greenwich Village Quill*. It closed around 1927, possibly due to the efforts of the Committee of Fourteen.[39]

After the 1925 crackdown, the block of MacDougal Street south of Washington Square—the site of the Provincetown Playhouse and numerous bohemian restaurants, gift shops, and speakeasies—became the busiest, and certainly the best known, locus of gay and lesbian commercial establishments. Lesbians managed several of the speakeasies there in the twenties. The most famous of the lesbian proprietors was Eva Kotchever, a Polish Jewish émigré who went by the name Eve Addams (also spelled Adams), an androgynous pseudonym whose biblical origins her Protestant persecutors might well have found blasphemous. Called the "queen of the third sex" by one paper and a "man-hater" by another, after the police crackdown of 1925 she opened a tearoom at 129 MacDougal Street that quickly became popular with the after-theater crowd. A sign at the door announced "Men are admitted but not welcome."[40]

Addams's place soon aroused the ire of some of the neighborhood's bohemians, including Bobby Edwards, who ran a regular commentary on Village events and personalities in his *Greenwich Village Quill*. Although Eve's place stood directly across the street from his office, he failed to mention it or its weekly poetry readings, musicales, and discussions until the summer of 1926. In the June issue that year he listed the club in his Village guide. "Eve's Hangout," it announced, "Where ladies prefer each other. Not very healthy for she-adolescents, nor comfortable for he-men." Despite the ad, Edwards participated in a poetry reading at Eve's on June 15, which drew a number of other locally prominent poets, and he provided an unusually long account of it in his July issue, which noted that "the place [was] jammed." Two nights after the poetry reading, however, the police raided the club. Addams, charged with writing an "obscene" book, *Lesbian Love* (reportedly a collection of short stories about "the lesbian element"), as well as with disorderly conduct, was sentenced to a year in the workhouse and was deported the following December. (Upon her arrival in Paris, she was said to have opened a lesbian club in Montmartre.)

Edwards published no comment on the raid, noting in his September 1926 issue only that "Eve's place is gone," and that she had been replaced by a new, more commendable proprietor. Five years later, however, the raid on Eve Addams's place was still recalled bitterly by many Villagers, and at least one commentator contended that the police had been led to act by a campaign orchestrated by Edwards against the visibility of lesbians in the Village. Edwards seems to have

been sensitive to such charges, for in the *Quill* published around the time of the raid he contended that while he had often "longed to cast out [from the Village] all radicals, Freudians, androgynes, narcissi, etc., . . . I was no Mussolini or Savonarola." But he concluded hopefully that "now it looks like we're going to have a real Village again," and in the following issue he reiterated his disdain for lesbians by commenting in an essay on the Village that "boys must be boys. But girls mustn't."

Addams was remembered fondly by many Villagers. In 1929, three years after her deportation, a Village theatrical group surreptitiously presented a play based on her *Lesbian Love* stories at the Play Mart, a cellar theater on Christopher Street. *Variety* reported that the two-week run drew "mainly an audience of queers," who asserted that recent lesbian- and gay-themed plays on Broadway, including *The Captive* and *Pleasure Man* (see chapter 11), seemed like "kindergarten stuff in comparison." The performers, who billed themselves as the Scientific Players and called the play *Modernity*, had planned a four-week run. But they abruptly closed the show after being tipped off that the police planned to raid it.[41]

In the late twenties and early thirties, Addams's tearoom was succeeded by several other ventures on the blocks of MacDougal just south of Washington Square. The Black Rabbit on MacDougal at the corner of Minetta, "one of the Village's gay stamping grounds," was as well known for its lesbians in overalls as for its rum concoctions before the police closed it around 1929. Louis' Luncheon, at 116 MacDougal, which attracted a varied crowd of writers and Ziegfeld Follies chorus girls, had a reputation as a lesbian and gay hangout in the early 1930s.[42] The Bungalow, a speakeasy run by a former prizefighter who called himself Battling Thompson, attracted some of the Black Rabbit's old customers—nothing but "lisping boys and deep-voiced girls," according to one scornful account in 1931. Next door stood Julian's, a cheap and popular "whole-in-the-wall [sic] lunch counter" run by "a mannishly attired lady." Julian, one of the major gay entrepreneurs of the period, subsequently opened the Left Bank, a restaurant on Wooster Street just south of the Square, whose announcement card sported a drawing of a sexually ambiguous couple (most likely two women, one femininely and the other mannishly attired) and the promise of entertainment by Eric, formerly the pianist at Tillie's, a Harlem restaurant patronized by homosexuals. Julian and a partner also organized a dinner dance and rumba revue on Sunday evenings at the Fullhouse Restaurant on West Fourth Street at Cornelia, near the old site of the Jungle.[43]

The unprecedented success of lesbians and gay men in claiming space in the Village was signaled by several developments in the Village press

in the late twenties and early thirties. The underemployed writers and artists of the Village produced a number of small and usually short-lived neighborhood journals, particularly in the early years of the Depression. Most of them devoted attention to the gay scene. Some of them, like Bobby Edwards's *Quill*, were hostile. In its inaugural issue in 1929, *Greenwich Village: A Local Review*, one of the more conservative and overtly boosterish of the papers, ran a long diatribe against the bohemian women of the Village stigmatizing their behavior as lesbian-like.[44]

But other papers adopted a more benign perspective, and by the early thirties several columnists were presenting an unprecedentedly positive view of the gay presence in the Village. The *Greenwich Villager*, published weekly in 1933–34, included a reference to the "short-haired women and long-haired men [who] filled the streets" in its description of the changes brought about in the Village by the war, and casually included gay references in its gossip column and articles.[45] Billy Scully, a columnist for the *Greenwich Village Weekly News*, went further, supporting gay clubs and including complimentary references to prominent lesbian and gay personalities in his gossip column, "Village on Parade." His background is obscure, but he displayed an insider's knowledge of the history of the Village's gay community. In a 1931 column he praised the "brilliance" of the customers at Billie Champion's "lesbian hang-out" of the early 1920s, and he described Eve Addams's club, closed five years earlier by the police, as "one of the most delightful hang-outs the Village ever had."[46] He openly defended a lesbian musician (who remained unnamed, but presumably would have been known to those who followed the Village club scene or the newspapers' reviews) by attacking a "Broadway columnist" who criticized the musician's playing "because she prefers the attention of a certain girl to the unwanted affection showered on her by the writer and his brother."[47]

Scully and other pro-gay columnists assumed their readers were sophisticated in their knowledge of gay matters. Four years after Eva Kotchever was deported (and five years after her MacDougal Street tearoom was padlocked), a second columnist for the *Greenwich Village Weekly News* alluded to her famous pseudonym by noting that the gay novel Parker Tyler was "working like mad on" was "to be called something like 'Eve's Adam.'"[48] (It was finally called *The Young and Evil*, and, given its gay content and surrealist style, had to be published in Paris.) The papers these columnists wrote for were as short-lived as the others of their genre, but the fact that some of them were prepared to publish pro-gay comments by pro-gay writers, many of which seemed designed for a sophisticated gay audience with a sense of its history, indi-

cates the extent to which lesbians and gay men had established themselves in the Village.

The opposition that Addams's tearoom and the other gay-run clubs that succeeded it on MacDougal Street encountered should not obscure the more important fact that the very existence of such clubs in a middle-class milieu was unprecedented. Before the development of the bohemian community in the Village, middle-class gay life had always been conducted covertly, and commercial establishments publicly identified as gay had been restricted to working-class entertainment districts such as the Bowery. In the 1890s, when the notorious "degenerate resort" the Slide stood on Bleecker Street, just two blocks south of Washington Square and two blocks east of MacDougal, the neighborhood was occupied largely by poor African-Americans and Italians. That gay life was more open in working-class than middle-class society should not be surprising, given the findings of other recent historical studies. Although historians long assumed that change in attitudes concerning sexuality had begun in the middle class in the 1910s and 1920s, and only later percolated down to the more "rigid" working class, recent work has suggested that much of the new "freedom in manners and morals" among middle-class youths in the twenties was modeled on that of working-class youths, who were generally more direct about sexual matters than bourgeois reticence allowed.[49]

But the growing toleration of homosexuality within the bohemian elements of middle-class society did not simply replicate older working-class attitudes. Homosexually active men in the working class had hardly been "free," as we have seen; rather, their behavior had simply been circumscribed by a different pattern of social regulation, which shaped them as firmly as bourgeois propriety shaped their middle-class brethren. The gay clubs of the bohemian Village seem to have tolerated a wider range of gender behavior on the part of gay men than the Slide; to use the terminology of the era, they were open resorts for "queers" (who did not clearly demarcate their difference from "normal men" by their inversion of gender norms) as well as for "fairies" (who did). Their clientele was "mixed," in that, like the Slide, they attracted queer and straight men alike, but also because, unlike the Slide, they attracted non-prostitute women as well as men and were often *run* by women.

Moreover, the straight and queer men who interacted in the MacDougal Street clubs, unlike those at the Slide, did not, as a rule, do so as potential sexual partners. Some bohemian men might be willing to experiment, but most of them, unlike the "normal" men at the Slide, had begun to think of themselves as heterosexuals properly interested only in the women they socialized with at the clubs. Queer and straight men thus thought of themselves as sexually incompatible as well as sex-

ually different. They also often thought of themselves in other terms altogether, as bohemians united by their rejection of bourgeois convention. By the 1930s there were still relatively few commercial institutions where queers or fairies could openly socialize (with or without the presence of heterosexuals). The appearance of clubs in the Village patronized openly by queers and straights alike thus represented an unprecedented expansion in the possibilities for gay sociability and marked a decisive change from earlier patterns in both working-class and middle-class society.

The gay history of Greenwich Village suggests the extent to which the Village in the teens and twenties came to represent to the rest of the city what New York as a whole represented to the rest of the nation: a peculiar social territory in which the normal social constraints on behavior seemed to have been suspended and where men and women built unconventional lives outside the family nexus. Attracted by the Village's bohemian reputation, gay men and lesbians soon played a distinctive role in shaping both the image and reality of the Village, for they became part of the spectacle that defined the neighborhood's colorful character, even as they used the cultural space made available by that character to turn it into a haven. Although their numbers remained small and their fellow Villagers did not always live up to their reputation for open-mindedness, gay people in the 1920s seized the opportunity provided by Village culture to begin building the city's most famous gay enclave.

### "In the Life" in Harlem

Although Greenwich Village's gay enclave was the most famous in the city, even most white gay men thought gay life was livelier and more open in Harlem than in the Village—"Oh, much more! Much more!" the artist Edouard Roditi declared.[50] "Harlem was wide open," a white female impersonator recalled. The clubs would "be open all night long. Some of them didn't *open* until midnight."[51] It was easier for white interlopers to be openly gay during their brief visits to Harlem than for the black men who lived there round the clock. But black gay men nonetheless turned Harlem into a homosexual mecca. Denied access to most of the segregated restaurants and speakeasies white gay men patronized elsewhere in New York, they built an extensive gay world in their own community, which in many respects surpassed the Village's in scope, visibility, and boldness. The Village's most flamboyant homosexuals wore long hair; Harlem's wore long dresses. The Village had cafés where poets read their verse and drag queens performed; Harlem had speakeasies where men danced together and drag queens were regular customers. The Village's Liberal Club ball was attended by scores of drag queens

and hundreds of spectators; Harlem's Hamilton Lodge ball drew *hundreds* of drag queens and *thousands* of spectators. Among outsiders, Greenwich Village's reputation as a gay mecca eclipsed Harlem's only because it was a white, middle-class world—and because Harlem's singular reputation as a black metropolis took precedence over everything else.

Harlem had become Manhattan's major black neighborhood in the 1900s and 1910s. Most of the community's rowhouses had been built by speculative builders in the last years of the nineteenth century. A collapse in the area's real estate market around 1904—and the aggressive tactics of a handful of realtors—made those houses available to blacks just as they were being forced out of their old neighborhood in the West Thirties by the construction of Pennsylvania Station. By the mid-teens, more than 80 percent of Manhattan's African-Americans lived there, and by the early 1920s, Harlem was home to most of the city's major black churches and social organizations.[52]

Harlem consolidated its status as New York's leading black neighborhood just as World War I led tens of thousands of Southern blacks to migrate to New York and other Northern cities. The Great Migration, as historians have called it, was precipitated by the sudden availability of thousands of well-paying jobs in Northern industry due to the military mobilization of white workers and the cutoff of European immigration. Many blacks also viewed moving North as an act of political self-determination, tied to the elevation of the race as well as to individual improvement. To many southern migrants, the North seemed a land of freedom, where they could escape the grinding poverty, political powerlessness, and daily indignities to which they seemed forever condemned in the Jim Crow South. African-American newspapers, published in Northern cities and smuggled by Pullman car porters to blacks in Southern towns where the papers were banned by white officials, trumpeted the good wages and free life to be found outside the secessionist states. Some barbershop proprietors, small shopkeepers, churchwomen, and other local leaders organized the move North of whole communities, which re-created themselves on the blocks of Harlem and Chicago's South Side. The ferment of the Great Migration, the heated debate among blacks about whether they should support a racist government's war to "preserve democracy," and the bitter disappointment that resulted when scores of anti-black race riots broke out in the year following the war produced an unprecedented level of militancy in the immense new black neighborhoods spread across the North.[53]

The largest and most significant of these neighborhoods was Harlem. In the 1920s, Harlem became to black America what Greenwich Village

became to bohemian white America: the symbolic—and in many respects, practical—center of a vast cultural experiment. A huge black metropolis unlike anything America had seen before, it was home to soaring black cathedrals, thriving businesses, a wide array of social clubs, and Marcus Garvey's militant black nationalist movement, to dozens of elegant nightclubs and hundreds of basement jazz clubs and speakeasies, and to the poets, artists, and novelists whose work produced the Harlem Renaissance. Above all, it was home to what African-Americans themselves called the New Negro, self-assured and determined to control his or her own destiny. Seventh Avenue from 110th to 148th Streets was "the crossroad of the Negro world," one Harlemite wrote in the 1930s, "where Black people from Africa, our own southern states, the West Indies, South America, parts of Asia and many of the half forgotten Islands of the East Indies meet."[54]

Harlem's elegant and lively nightlife also made it the Paris of New York, one of the city's most popular entertainment districts.[55] "Harlem was really jumpin'" in the 1920s, the singer Bricktop recalled. It "was the 'in' place to go for music and booze, and it seemed like every other building on or near Seventh Avenue from 130th Street to 140th was a club or a speakeasy. . . . Every night the limousines pulled up . . . and the rich whites would get out, all dolled up in their furs and jewels."[56] Pointing to its "sizzling cafes, 'speaks,' night clubs and spiritual seances," *Variety* declared in 1929 that Harlem's "night life now surpasses that of Broadway itself."[57]

The liquor and the sensational floor shows available at Harlem's clubs attracted white visitors. But so, too, did their growing curiosity about the vibrant African-American society taking shape in Harlem. The production of several musicals featuring black performers, especially *Shuffle Along*, which opened on Broadway in 1921, helped further the new interest in black culture. The publication in 1926 of *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten provoked a storm of outrage among black intellectuals, who criticized its depiction of Harlem life as well as its title, but its very caricature of black lasciviousness only whetted white New Yorkers' interest in the neighborhood and reinforced their sexualized—and condescending—attitude toward the neighborhood's people.

Some whites went "slumming" to cabarets and small after-hours clubs in Harlem where blacks predominated. But most slummers felt safer visiting the enormous white-owned clubs that excluded blacks from the audience. There they could experience a highly contrived version of black culture by listening to jazz bands and watching elaborate (but "primitive" and sometimes salacious) floor shows. "One of the New York evening pastimes," a typical New York guidebook noted in 1925, "is to observe the antics of members of its enormous negro pop-

ulation, many of whom show great ability in song, dance and comedy performance. . . . Their unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements," the guide explained in a stunning summary of the era's racist construction of blacks as primitive other, "combine to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds." As the guide pointed out, "Most of these shows . . . try to establish a Southern illusion"; the Cotton Club, the Everglades, and other clubs adopted Southern names and motifs to evoke the history of black subordination and to emphasize the subordination of the African-American performers. The clubs thus played on their customers' desire to feel they were transgressing the conventional boundaries of race while resolutely confirming them.[58]

The ascendancy of Harlem's nightlife—particularly its speakeasies and brothels—also owed much to the willingness of city authorities to look the other way as a largely white-controlled "vice industry" took shape in a poor black neighborhood. Even the Committee of Fourteen devoted less effort to the moral regulation of Harlem than of white neighborhoods.[59] Although it advocated the eradication rather than the segregation of vice, it effectively colluded in the concentration of "vice" in Harlem by virtually ignoring the neighborhood. Only in 1928, at the height of the white invasion of Harlem, did the Committee temporarily hire an African-American investigator to study prostitution there. But after publishing a report indicting the district as a den of immorality, it turned its attention back to neighborhoods it cared about more.[60]

As the historian Eric Garber has shown, an extensive gay and lesbian social world developed in this complex cultural context.[61] Among the thousands of young men and women who flocked to the land of freedom were people who hoped Harlem would liberate them from the conformity imposed in small Southern communities. Although some evidence suggests that gay men were more accepted in rural black communities than in comparable white communities, moving to the city made it possible for them to participate in a gay world organized on a scale unimaginable in a Southern town. In 1930 three times as many African-American men aged thirty-five to forty-four were unmarried in Harlem as in South Carolina, one of the major sources of Harlem's migrants, and almost twice as many as in the nation as a whole.[62]

Harlem's gay world was perhaps the most complex in the city because segregation forced such a wide range of people to live side by side: successful professionals and wealthy businesspeople occupied the immaculate townhouses and apartment buildings of Sugar Hill and the elegant Italianate brownstones of Striver's Row (138th and 139th Streets), while the poorest of new migrants crowded into tenements

and subdivided rowhouses nearby. Gay life suffused the district, but the class and stylistic conflicts that divided the white gay world elsewhere in the city took on special force in Harlem, simply because so many people from such varied backgrounds were gathered together. Black gay life was also complicated by the number of white gay men visiting Harlem, who enjoyed a kind of freedom unavailable to their black hosts. Like the straight white slummers who made Harlem's jazz clubs and speakeasies their playground, gay white men visiting Harlem were leaving behind the communities and families who enforced the social imperatives that normally constrained their behavior. But unlike the white visitors, black gay men and lesbians had to negotiate their presence in the shops and churches of Harlem as well as its clubs.

### Sissy Men in Working-Class Harlem

Although Harlem was best known to outsiders for its glamorous clubs, most Harlemites socialized at corner cabaret saloons, basement speakeasies, and tenement parties thrown to raise money for the rent.[63] There Harlem's poorest residents danced, drank, saw their friends, and claimed stature and respect in a cultural zone governed by their own social codes rather than those of white employers or the black bourgeoisie. Many of those locales attracted prostitutes, gamblers, and other "disreputable" folk who participated in what they called the "sporting life" or simply "the life." Lesbians and gay men were "in the life" as well, and they mixed easily with the other guests at many such gatherings.

At speakeasies where men and women engaged in sexually charged behavior, lesbians, gay men, and sometimes the latter's "normal" male friends were likely to do the same in the full view of the other patrons. Late one night in May 1928 the black investigator hired by the Committee of Fourteen was taken to a speakeasy in the basement of a building on West 136th Street, where he witnessed lesbians and gay men socializing with a larger number of straight people. In the front room men and women sat around drinking, talking, and laughing, but in a back room a larger group of people were dancing:

> Another woman was dancing indecently with a man. . . . Several of the men were dancing among themselves. Two of the women were dancing with one another going through the motions of copulation. One of the men [invited me to dance]. I declined to dance. I also observed two men who were dancing with one another kiss each other, and one sucked the other's tongue.[64]

Gay men were a fixture at many quieter places as well, recognized and accepted by other patrons. When the investigator visited the Blue Ribbon Chile Parlor in the basement of 72 West 131st Street, at two in the morning, he found a handful of men and women drinking. The women were prostitutes trying to make connections, and one of the patrons casually pointed out two of the men as "noted faggots."[65]

Some men carried themselves openly as fairies in the streets of other working-class neighborhoods, but perhaps nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public in drag than in Harlem. Drag queens appeared regularly in Harlem's streets and clubs. When Cyril Lightbody opened a café on Seventh Avenue in December 1930, its informal atmosphere immediately attracted "the artistic group, freethinkers, communists and thrill-seeking youths from downtown," according to Baltimore's *Afro-American*. "Sunday afternoon was its opening and we saw erotics, neuretics [sic], perverts, inverts and other types of abnormalities, cavorting with wild and Wilde abandon to the patent gratification of the manager and owner. . . . About two A.M., five horticultural gents came in 'in drag' as the custom of appearing in feminine finery is known."[66]

The casual acceptance of the drag queens at Cyril's Café and the frequency of their appearance in Harlem's streets suggest a high degree of tolerance for them in the neighborhood as a whole. Still, it took considerable courage for men to appear in drag, since they risked harassment by other youths and arrest by the Irish policemen who patrolled their neighborhood. Over the course of two weeks in February 1928 the police arrested thirty men for wearing drag at a single club, Lulu Belle at 341 Lenox Avenue near 127th Street. Five men dressed in "silk stockings, sleeveless evening gowns of soft-tinted crepe de chine and light fur wraps" were arrested on a single night.[67]

Some drag queens refused to cower before the police and defied them all the way to the courthouse. Two "eagle-eyed" detectives patrolling Seventh Avenue early one Sunday morning in 1928 enjoyed watching the amusing antics of four young women who "seemed well lit up and out for a glorious morning promenade" until they realized the "girls" were "pansies on parade." They quickly arrested the quartet and marched them to the 123rd Street police station; the next morning the men were sentenced to sixty days in the workhouse. Still defiant, the drag queens, aged eighteen to twenty-one, mocked the officers by shouting "Goodbye dearie, thanks for the trip as we'll have the time of our lives" as they were led out of the courtroom.[68]

Not all drag queens were so defiant. After a policeman casually looked at a twenty-one-year-old "woman" as they passed each other on 117th Street late one night in 1928, the "woman," fearful that the policeman

had realized he was a female impersonator, began to run. Keen to learn what the "woman" had to hide, the patrolman chased her down the street, up some stairs, and across the rooftops until cornering her. Although later commenting that "'she' could run faster than any 'woman' he had ever chased," the policeman realized he had arrested a drag queen only when they got to the station. The queen had good reason to fear arrest. He had already been arrested twice, once for degenerate disorderly conduct and once for masquerading as a woman, and had served three months in the workhouse on the latter charge.[69] When in 1932 the police raided a Seventh Avenue apartment, perhaps a buffet flat, and arrested the twenty-seven men they found gambling and drinking there, one of them, a forty-two-year-old in women's clothes, leapt from the second-floor window, fracturing his skull and spine.[70]

Although "faggots" were casually integrated into many lower-class social settings, they also became part of the spectacle at some of the local resorts. They played a particularly prominent role in some of the neighborhood's buffet flats. As Eric Garber has explained, the flats were private apartments whose tenants made their rooms available to paying guests. They had originally developed to meet the needs of black travelers denied space at white hotels, but developed a wilder reputation in the 1920s, functioning as virtual speakeasies, where drinking, gambling, and other illegal activities could take place. The most notorious offered their customers live sex shows as well as prostitutes. The gay sex shows became part of the entertainment for Harlem's "lower" elements, much as the fairies and sex shows of the Bowery had been to an earlier generation of immigrants. It was "an open house, everything goes on in that house," recalled Ruby Smith of a Detroit-based flat she had visited with her aunt Bessie Smith.

> They had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act.

A buffet flat featuring an immense female impersonator on 140th Street in Harlem was known as "The Daisy Chain" or the "101 Ranch."[71]

The place of gay men in the culture of black working-class migrants was captured by the blues, the primary expressive musical form of poorer blacks. The blues reflected the everyday experiences, disappointments, conflicts, and resolve of these migrant men and women in a racist society. Most blues singers were migrants themselves, who had joined

touring vaudeville troupes to escape the South or had taken jobs in cellar speakeasies as an alternative to domestic service, and who identified more with the prostitutes and poor people who patronized their clubs than with respectable Harlemites. Many of them were lesbian or bisexual: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, and, above all, Gladys Bentley, who performed in a tuxedo and top hat and married her white lesbian lover in a much discussed ceremony.[72] Some of their songs offered pungent critiques of the injustices migrants faced, while others evoked the personalities and everyday events of the "lowlife" milieu. Along with their songs about lonely separations from loved ones gone North and the need to put up with violent husbands and petty employers, they sang about "sissies" and "bulldaggers"—and about men who turned to sissies in place of their wives. Ma Rainey complained about her husband leaving her for a sissy man named "Miss Kate." Several male blues singers recorded "Sissy Man Blues," in which they demanded "If you can't bring me a woman, bring me a sissy man." The songs typically represented the sissy man as a fairy—a "lisping, swishing, womanish-acting man," in one of Bessie Smith's songs, which also referred to "a mannish-acting woman."[73] They did not celebrate such people, but they recognized them as a part of black working-class culture and acknowledged their potential sexual desirability to "normal" men.

A select group of "noted faggots" became famous in Harlem. Most famous of all, perhaps, was "Gloria Swanson" (nee Winston), a female impersonator who had already won a clutch of prizes at Chicago's drag balls and had run his own club there before moving to New York around 1930. He quickly found employment in New York as hostess at a popular cellar club on West 134th Street. "Here he reigned regally," one gay Harlemite noted, "entertaining with his 'hail-fellow-well-met' freedom, so perfect a woman that frequently clients came and left never suspecting his true sex." He sang "bawdy parodies," danced a bit, and appeared constantly in "net and sequins, velvet-trimmed evening-gown-skirts displaying with professional coyness a length of silk-clad limb." The press took note of his appearances at the neighborhood drag balls and clubs. "Gangsters and hoodlums, pimps and gamblers, whores and entertainers showered him with feminine gee-gaws and trappings; spoke of him as 'her,' and quite relegated him to the female's functions of supplying good times and entertainment."[74]

Swanson had moved to New York at an opportune moment. The late 1920s and early 1930s were the heyday of lesbian and gay clubs and performers in Harlem, as in much of the city (see chapter 11). As Bruce Nugent, a gay African-American writer explained, it was a time when

> "male" and "female" impersonation was at its peak as night club entertainment. . . . The Ubangi Club had a chorus of singing, dancing, be-ribboned and be-rouged "pansies," and Gladys Bentley who dressed in male evening attire, sang and accompanied herself on the piano; the well-liked Jackie Mab[ley] was one of Harlem's favorite black-faced comediennes and wore men's street attire habitually; the famous Hamilton Lodge "drag" balls were becoming more and more notorious and gender was becoming more and more conjectural.[75]

Many of the gay-oriented clubs were located in the area between Fifth and Seventh Avenues, from 130th to 138th Street, where most of Harlem's best-known clubs were clustered. The Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, Barron's, the Lenox, and other clubs that attracted a large (and sometimes exclusively) white trade were in this district, along with the Savoy Ballroom, Small's Paradise, and other clubs welcoming a largely black or interracial audience. Many of the district's most notorious speakeasies and clubs lined a strip on 133rd Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues known as "The Jungle." Gay entertainers with large gay followings were featured at several of the district's clubs, including the Hot Cha at 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue, where the well-known entertainer and host Jimmie Daniels sang sophisticated tunes. A handful of clubs catered to lesbians and gay men, including the Hobby Horse, Tillie's Kitchen, and the Dishpan, and other well-known clubs, including Small's Paradise, welcomed their presence.[76]

Although many gay entertainers included songs with sophisticated double-entendre in their repertoire, few were open to outsiders about their homosexuality. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, though, several gay hosts and entertainers moved out of basement saloons and into some of the district's better nightclubs. Gloria Swanson was perhaps the most prominent gay club host; Gladys Bentley was the most visible lesbian. "Huge, voluptuous [and] chocolate colored," according to one fan, Bentley was as famous for her tuxedo, top hat, and girlfriends as for her singing. Although she sang the blues, she was best known for ad-libbing popular ballads, show tunes, and the like, to give them a salacious edge—and for encouraging her audience to join in singing the now "filthy lyrics." As Eric Garber reports, she turned two Broadway tunes, "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Alice Blue Gown," into an "ode to the joys of anal intercourse":

> And he said, "Dearie, please turn around"
> And he shoved that big thing up my brown.
> He tore it. I bored it. Lord, how I adored it.
> My sweet little Alice Blue Gown.

After a series of one-night stands at rent parties, buffet flats, and cellar clubs, Bentley landed steady jobs at two clubs in "Jungle Alley" on 133rd Street, including Hansberry's Clam House, which attracted an interracial audience of literati and entertainers, including many gay men and lesbians. She made her lesbianism and "bulldagger" looks part of her show-business persona at each of these clubs. When she finally moved on to the Ubangi Club, she toned down her lyrics to the merely risqué, wore "flashy men's attire," and headed a revue that included a pansy chorus line composed entirely of female impersonators.[77]

The visibility of bulldaggers and faggots in the streets and clubs of Harlem during the late 1920s and early 1930s does not mean they enjoyed unqualified toleration throughout Harlem society. Although they were casually accepted by many poor Harlemites and managed to earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they were excoriated by the district's moral guardians. Many middle-class and churchgoing African-Americans grouped them with prostitutes, salacious entertainers, and "uncultured" rural migrants as part of an undesirable and all-too-visible black "lowlife" that brought disrepute to the neighborhood and "the race." Like other black Northern communities—and like white New York—Harlem was rent by deep class and cultural divisions. An old elite of merchants, entrepreneurs, and professionals and an emerging middle class of teachers, artisans, and salaried employees struggled to steer the destiny of their neighborhoods and to exert control over the huge numbers of poor southern migrants flooding in. As the cultural historian Hazel Carby has shown, they organized homes to protect—and police—young single migrant women, called on the police to close brothels and buffet flats, and denounced dance halls and cabarets as a threat to the advance of the race and to their position as a respectable class of blacks.[78]

Sexuality became one of the critical measures by which the black middle class differentiated itself from the working class and constituted itself as a class. As Carby shows, the figure of the sexually irresponsible woman became one of the defining tropes of middle-class African-American discourse, a symbol of the dangerous social disintegration that urbanization could bring. Many white middle-class New Yorkers regarded the single woman in similar terms, but black middle-class women found it particularly crucial to attack—and distinguish themselves from—images of black female sensuality because racist ideology used those images so effectively to stigmatize all black women as morally debased.[79] Similarly, the "womanish-acting man" became a special threat

to middle-class black men because their masculinity was under constant challenge by the dominant white ideology. As in white middle-class discourse, the attacks on homosexuals were usually but a part of a wider attack on men and women who threatened the social order by standing outside the family system.

Harlem's leading churchmen periodically railed against the homosexual "vice" growing in the neighborhood. Churches were major political forces and centers of social life in Harlem, their ministers' statements commanding close attention from the press and political leaders. The visibility of gay people and the tolerance afforded them in Harlem—even in some of its churches—was a particular concern of Harlem's most powerful minister, Adam Clayton Powell, the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church from 1908 to 1937 and perhaps the most famous African-American clergyman in the nation. A champion of civil rights and an early leader of the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Powell was also a tireless campaigner against "immorality" in African-American society. As the influential leader of one of the city's most prestigious black congregations, he used his political ties to drive prostitutes and gambling dens from the streets around his church. By his own account, he developed a close relationship with the African-American press after an editor of Harlem's *New York Age* supplied him with information about buffet flats run by churchwomen in his own congregation and promised to publish any sermon he gave denouncing them. "I have not known a more helpful ally than the Negro press," Powell later claimed, and through the years it magnified the power of his anti-vice crusades by giving them extensive publicity.[80]

The press outdid itself, however, when Powell launched a sensational attack on homosexuality in the African-American community—and particularly in the rectory. "DR. A. C. POWELL SCORES PULPIT EVILS" a banner headline across the front page of the *New York Age* proclaimed on November 16, 1929. The pastor "delivered a scathing and bitter denunciation of perversion as practised by many moral degenerates who not only are men and women of prominence in the secular world, white and colored, but many of whom fill the pulpits of some of the leading churches of the country," the paper announced. Charging that sexual perversion was "steadily increasing" in large American cities, Powell claimed that perversion among women "has grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization, and is . . . prevalent to an unbelievable degree."[81]

A week later, Powell claimed his office had been inundated with information revealing that the problem was even more extensive than he had believed. He implicitly blamed much of the problem on young people's

"contact and association" with homosexuals in the world of dance halls, cabarets, and rent parties when he warned that "the seeking for thrills of an unusual character by the modern youth" led many to experiment with homosexuality. Homosexuality, he seemed to say, was simply the last step down the road to ruin for morally weak youth. Moreover, personal degeneration had wider social consequences, for the spread of homosexuality threatened the Negro family, the bedrock of social stability, "causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying."[82] The homosexual, like the heterosexual single woman, was a sign of the social disorganization that accompanied urbanization. Powell's emphasis on the dangerous extent of lesbianism in the black community suggests that he saw women's refusal to marry as posing the most insidious threat to the black family.

Other ministers joined the assault in the following weeks, preaching sermons or writing letters to the papers in support of Powell's denunciation of homosexual vice. A white philanthropist who funded programs for the moral reformation of African-American life signaled his approval of the campaign, condescendingly calling it "one of the most cheerful signs we have respecting the great advance that has been made among this ten per cent of our population, who have had every conceivable drag put upon their efforts to be . . . Christians in spirit and in truth."[83]

Powell took special umbrage at the ministers who continued to preach despite being publicly accused of homosexual assaults on boys in their churches, and even more at the congregations that supported them despite full knowledge of such charges. He was particularly concerned, he later explained, about preachers "who had been publicly accused of abnormal sex practices" and about the churches that "with a full knowledge of [their] sins called [them] to its pulpit."[84] Although neither Powell nor the other ministers publicly named the offenders they had in mind, they described some of the cases in sufficient detail that knowledgeable parishioners would have been able to recognize the targets. Powell presumably hoped to hound such ministers from their posts, and it is likely that rumors about the identities of the offenders began to spread at the social hour following the service and washed through Harlem for weeks thereafter.

The results of such whisper campaigns are uncertain. Nonetheless, the intensity of Powell's denunciation suggests the lack of a consensus supporting his position within the black church. Although no one spoke up publicly to defend gay pastors from Powell's attack, some congregations appear to have been willing to accept gay pastors and choirmen so long as they observed a degree of discretion—and even, in some cases, when their homosexuality was well known or had resulted in legal trouble.

"The only reason a church keeps a rotten minister is because it is rotten," Powell charged. The very vehemence of his attack suggests how "rotten"—or tolerant—certain churches may have been.

Many African-American newspapers joined church leaders in attacking homosexuals, as Powell's press coverage shows. This was consistent with their general editorial policy, for many papers took on the role of policing their community as well as boosting it. In the wake of the Great Migration, black newspapers regularly exhorted Southern newcomers to assimilate into Northern society by leaving their "uneducated" rural ways behind. They lectured migrants on how to carry themselves properly on buses, what to wear, and how to behave in public, all for fear that disreputable behavior would bring disgrace to the whole community.[85] Some of them policed the lives of Harlem's working people by reporting on arrests—and policed the lives of middle-class men and women as well by publishing gossip columns. Gossip about purported homosexuality posed one of the gravest threats to a man's reputation; the press magnified that threat immensely by taking it into the public sphere. The *Amsterdam News* often published the names, addresses, ages, and occupations of men arrested for female impersonation or homosexual solicitation, thus multiplying the consequences of the arrest. The *Inter-State Tattler*, an East Coast black society and gossip sheet, lived up to its name by including news of gay relationships in its gossip columns. Along with engagement announcements, rumors of love triangles, and reports of divorces, the paper included accounts of gay romances and broken hearts such as this:

> Louis W—, who is so temperamental that he changes friends as often as Peggy Joyce changes husband, has secretly leased an apartment in 141st Street with Kenneth S—. They have a not too bad "joint" with soft lights, incense, and everything. And poor William is singing "How about me?" [Full names appeared in the original.]

The next item announced: "Theodore H—, you don't act like yourself nowadays. Do tell us who the lucky man is!"[86] It is possible that these men were already well known as gay in the community and enjoyed seeing their names in the paper. The light-hearted tone suggests this interpretation. But the paper had a negative reputation among gay men. "The *Tattler* went after people who were arrested," one black gay man recalled. "Anyone who was important, anyone who was gay."[87] Such items were not that common, but they were common enough to serve as a warning. In 1932 one of the paper's columnists launched a broadside against Harlem as a whole in the course of explaining why he had been unable to attend the previous weekend's social affairs. He had briefly

"deserted Harlem where men are 'that way,' to spend a week in the wide open spaces where men ARE men."[88]

### *The Hamilton Lodge Ball*

Nothing reveals the complexity—and ambivalence—of the attitudes of the black press and Harlem as a whole toward gay men and lesbians more than the Hamilton Lodge ball, the largest annual gathering of lesbians and gay men in Harlem—and the city. (A more thorough discussion of the internal organization and cultural significance of the city's drag balls appears in chapter 10.) The organizers of the ball, Hamilton Lodge No. 710 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, officially called it the Masquerade and Civic Ball, but by the late 1920s everyone in Harlem knew it as the Faggots Ball. Precisely when it acquired that name is not certain. Some observers writing in the late 1930s, when its reputation was well established, thought the ball, held annually since 1869, had always been a female impersonators' event. Somewhat more reliable sources, however, suggest the gay element became prominent only in the 1920s, perhaps after a new group of organizers within the lodge took charge of the ball in 1923. Although some drag queens had almost certainly attended the ball before 1926, a newspaper report that year was the first to note the presence of a sizable number of "fairies"—about half of all those present. "Many people who attend dances generally declare that the . . . ball was the most unusual spectacle they ever witnessed," the paper noted with some understatement.[89] A decade later, one observer summarized the common wisdom when he explained matter-of-factly that the ball drew together "effeminate men, sissies, 'wolves,' 'ferries' [sic], 'faggots,' the third sex, 'ladies of the night,' and male prostitutes . . . for a grand jamboree of dancing, love making, display, rivalry, drinking and advertisement."[90]

Although whites attended the ball as both dancers and spectators, most of the guests were black. Lesbian "male impersonators" and straight masqueraders attended as well as gay men, but the latter constituted the vast majority of dancers and the focal point of attention. Although some upper-middle-class men showed up in drag, most of the drag queens—like the majority of "flaming faggots"—were young workingmen. The seventeen men arrested for homosexual solicitation at the 1938 ball included two laborers, two unemployed men, a dishwasher, a domestic servant, an elevator operator, a counterman, a handyman, an attendant, a clerk, and a nurse, along with a musician, an artist, and an entertainer. More than half were under thirty, and only one was over forty years old.[91]

The ball's popularity grew steadily in the late 1920s and peaked in the early 1930s, when a "pansy craze" (discussed in chapter 11) seized

the city. About eight hundred guests attended the 1925 ball and fifteen hundred in 1926. But as the event became known as the Faggots Ball, growing numbers of spectators attended not to dance but just to gawk at "Harlem's yearly extravaganza—'The Dance of the Fairies.'" "Four thousand citizens, numbering some of Harlem's best, elbowed and shoved each other aside and squirmed and stepped on one another's toes and snapped at each other to obtain a better eyeful," the *Amsterdam News* reported in 1934.[92] Three thousand spectators gathered to watch two thousand "fairies" dance in 1929, and during the following three years, at the height of the ball's popularity, up to seven thousand dancers and spectators attended. Attendance hovered around four thousand for the rest of the decade, but leapt to eight thousand in 1937.[93]

Harlemites turning out to see the balls included celebrities, avant-garde writers, society matrons, prostitutes, and whole families who sometimes brought their suppers.[94] At the beginning of her career, the singer Ethel Waters not only attended the balls but boasted about the prizes won by drag queens (fans from a local club) to whom she had loaned her gowns. The singer Taylor Gordon "call[ed] up everyone I thought hadn't been to one" to urge them to attend a ball where he would serve as a judge. "That night the hall was packed with people from bootblacks to New York's rarest bluebloods," he recalled.[95] In February 1930 the young white writer Max Ewing attended the ball, where "all the men who danced . . . were dressed as women, wearing plumes and jewels and decorations of every kind." He observed several wealthy spectators, black as well as white, who had taken boxes to view the display, and watched the dancers do "special exhibition dances" in front of the boxes of the two most prominent black women present, the heiress A'Leila Walker and the singer Nora Holt.[96] Two years later an alderman served as a judge at the costume contest.[97]

Those who did not attend the Hamilton Lodge ball could read about it every year from the mid-1920s until the end of the 1930s in Harlem's largest paper, the *Amsterdam News*, and often in the *New York Age*, Baltimore's *Afro-American*, and the *Inter-State Tattler*. In the 1930s the black press paid more attention to the Hamilton Lodge ball than to any other ball held in Harlem, regularly publishing photographs or drawings of the winning contestants, interviewing them and describing their costumes, and listing the dozens of society people in attendance—almost all in the news section on the first or second page, not buried in the society pages where the balls thrown by other social clubs got briefer notices. Its coverage reflected the growing interest of straight Harlemites in these affairs in the late 1920s and 1930s—and the ambivalence with which they viewed them.

In the 1920s the papers were likely to deride the dancers as "subnormal, or, in the language of the street, 'fairies.'"[98] By the early 1930s, though, as the number of society people and ordinary Harlemites attending the ball approached seven thousand, most papers adopted the more positive (or at least bemused) attitude of those spectators. Some accounts delighted in parodying the camp tone of the dancers. "GRACIOUS ME! DEAR, 'TWAS TO-OO DIVINE," ran the 1936 *Amsterdam News* headline, in imitation of the dancers' arch chatter; the following year its headline reported familiarly: "PANSIES CAVORT IN MOST DELOVELY MANNER AT THAT ANNUAL HAMILTON LODGE 'BAWL.'" All the reporters expressed genuine admiration for—and astonishment at—the extravagance and creativity of the costumes. Even the sneering 1929 reference to subnormal fairies appeared under a headline citing the "GORGEOUS COSTUMES."

Even the relatively conservative *New York Age* changed its tune as the ball's popularity grew. "Clubs would do well to ask this body for the secret of their success," its 1932 account began.

> To one of the largest gatherings that has ever graced this hall [Rockland Palace] came the all-conquering Hamilton Lodge, resplendent in all the panoply of pomp and splendor, to give to Harlemites who stood in wide-eyed astonishment at this lavish display a treat that shall never be forgotten. The usual grand march eclipsed in splendor all heretofore given by them, and women screamed full-throated ovation as the bizarre and the seeming impossible paraded for their approval. . . . [We] say 'All Hail, Hamilton.'"[99]

Another column reporting on the weekend's social events reluctantly admitted that "All those who were missing from Friday night's club affairs were located . . . up at the Rockland Palace at the 'Fairies' ball. Oh, yeah!," it added. "We will never understand that."[100] But where their readers went, the papers followed.

The complex spectacle of the drag balls allowed observers to position themselves in a variety of ways. They were all careful, though, to distinguish themselves from the queers who organized and participated in the affairs, often by casting aspersions on the Hamilton Lodge itself. "Say, Jack, in case you didn't know, this function was given by the Odd Fellows," a 1936 account reminded its readers in the most common and most obvious pun. A 1933 account made it even more obvious by referring to "The Grand United Order of (Very) Odd Fellows," and in 1937, an unusually mean-spirited promotional piece for the ball called the lodge a "society of strange fellows," a "wigged fraternity," and a "famed, effete and ubiquitous society of . . . Odd Fellows."[101]

While many black middle-class men—like white middle-class men—found the drag queen a disquieting figure, he also served as a foil whose utter effeminacy confirmed the manliness of other black men. Male columnists sometimes used jocular, man-to-man terms to describe the affairs. "Jack, the chicks were ready at the Hamilton Lodge toe-warming ball at Rockland Palace last Friday night," one columnist reported in 1936. He described the drag queens in the same dismissive terms he might have used for other "chicks": "The 'girls' proved to be a temperamental lot. They fussed and squabbled all over the joint. . . . When one of the 'girls' had her train stepped on she promptly cussed out the other 'girl' . . . and accused the 'low-down huzzy' of trying to steal the show." But he also evinced a remarkable degree of manly interest in the "girls": "Some of the contestants were luscious looking wenches. . . . Others were gloriously clad. . . . Many pranced like thoroughbred women. . . . Every one of them was notoriously effeminate."[102] A typical 1929 account used the "notorious effeminacy" of the female impersonators—their near-perfect rendition of stereotypical feminine demeanor—to ridicule women who did not perform the role of women as successfully. "One could learn a great deal (meaning the female of the species) on how to deport one's self when on parade" by observing the impersonators, it advised.[103]

The interracial character of the ball provoked varying responses. In the 1920s some black observers openly expressed hostility toward the whites who attended and virtually blamed the presence of homosexuals and female impersonators in Harlem on bohemian whites from Greenwich Village. The issue exploded in April 1926 when the well-known party impresario James Harris organized a benefit for the Fort Valley Industrial School, a school in Georgia that often received the support of respectable black charitable organizations. Advertised as a "Benefit Costume Ball . . . [where] The Village and Harlem . . . Will Meet," it drew attention from the black press around the country when dozens of female and male impersonators showed up. The *Chicago Defender* described it as "one of the gayest affairs that the night life of New York has yet been able to furnish . . . weirdly and grotesquely dressed men and women of both races revelled till the wee hours of morn."[104] But another paper denounced the "disgraceful antics of the male women and female men who are said to have attended the benefit by the scores" for sullying the name of the "splendid" school, which "stood for the making of manly men and womenly women, for thrift, industry and christian [sic] character among the colored people." Homosexual whites were the last people to whom blacks seeking respectability should turn, it argued, warning: "The discarded froth of Caucasian society cannot lift them or their

race in the respect and confidence of the Caucasian world."[105] In 1929 the *Amsterdam News*'s report on the Hamilton Lodge ball still took umbrage at the presence of "some of the most notoriously degenerate white men in the city" who "seized the opportunity of a masquerade to get off some of their abnormality in public." The *New York Age* seems to have found the dancers' willingness to cross racial lines in their coupling at the 1926 ball no less disquieting than their cross-dressing.[106]

Many Harlemites found the participation of whites to be intriguing rather than disturbing, however, and the press began to reflect this perspective in the 1930s. The presence of white drag queens at the balls reversed the racial dynamic usually at work in interracial encounters in Harlem, presenting whites as an object of spectacle for blacks. An *Amsterdam News* cartoonist drew attention to this reversal in his 1936 depiction of black men in the audience watching a white drag queen on stage (see figure 9.2). Some spectators also took delight in watching the transgression of racial boundaries that seemed to accompany the transgression of gender and sexual boundaries—and in watching white gay men forced to transgress them by their entry into a space controlled by black gay men. As one bemused Harlem observer, Abram Will, noted of the Hamilton Lodge ball:

> There were corn fed "pansies" from the deep South breaking traditional folds by mixing irrespective of race. There were the sophisticated "things" from Park Avenue and Broadway. There were the big black strapping "darlings" from the heart of Harlem. The Continent, Africa and even Asia had their due share of "ambassadors." The ball was a melting pot, different, exotic and unorthodox, but acceptable.[107]

For a moment, moreover, the *racial* differences between black and white spectators, although hardly forgotten, were overshadowed by their common positioning as "normal" bystanders who were different from the queer folk on the ballroom floor. In a city where racial boundaries were inscribed in the segregation of most public accommodations (integrated buses notwithstanding), the difference between normal spectators and abnormal dancers was inscribed in the differentiation of the balcony and other viewing areas from the dance floor. Each zone was racially integrated, but marked as sexually different from the other.

Racial divisions were hardly erased at the balls, however. Drag queens mixed across racial lines but never forgot them, as Abram Will's careful delineation of European- , African- , and Asian-American participants made clear. Moreover, racial iconography was central to many of

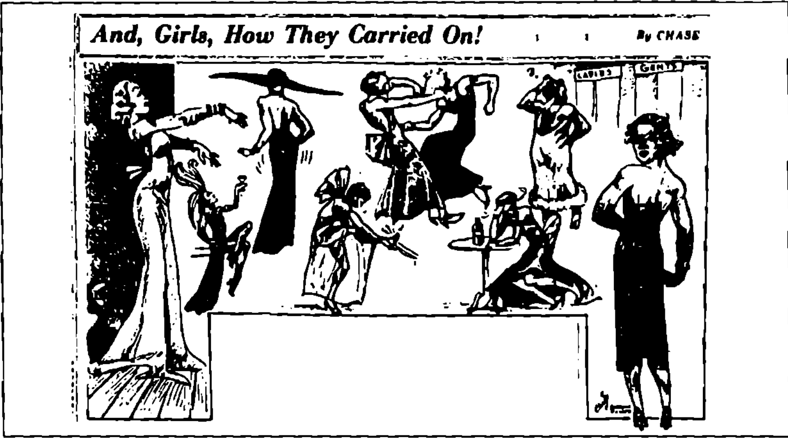


Figure 9.2 Harlem's leading newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, regularly carried pictures of the winning contestants in the costume competition at the Hamilton Lodge ball, New York's biggest drag ball. In 1932, the paper's illustrator pictured the "girls," and in 1936 he poked gentle fun at the rivalry, glamour, drunkenness, and gender ambiguity of the annual affair. He also poked fun at straight Harlem's response: note the expressions of desire and confusion on the faces of the two black men looking at the white drag queen. (*From the* Amsterdam News: *"The Artist Pictures the 'Girls,'" March 2, 1932; "And, Girls, How They Carried On!" March 7, 1936.)*

the dancers' costumes. "Among the outstanding costumes" at the 1932 ball, according to the *Inter-State Tattler*,

> were a pair of Flora Dora girls in sweeping Empire gowns of red velvet trimmed in black velvet . . . an African chieftain, his tribal marks in gold, the sacred bull's horn on his head and ropes of wooden beads around his neck; . . . an oriental dancer with long hair; a belle of the gay '90's—parasol and all; . . . a bare foot east Indian in colorful flowing robes; a black and red be-ruffled Spanish senorita; . . . [and] no end of . . . Colonial dames."[108]

The balls became a site for the projection and inversion of racial as well as gender identities. Significantly, though, white drag queens were not prepared to reverse their racial identity. Many accounts refer to African-American queens appearing as white celebrities, but none refer to whites appearing as well-known black women. As one black observer noted, "The vogue was to develop a 'personality' like some outstanding woman," but the only women he listed, Jean Harlow, Gloria Swanson, Mae West, and Greta Garbo, were white.[109]

The pageantry of the balls sometimes exacerbated the racial divisions in the gay world. The costume competition became a highly charged affair, with all sides watching to see whether a black or white queen would be crowned. The Harlem press took considerable interest in the racial aspect of the competition, taking special note in 1931 when a black contestant, Bonnie Clark, was awarded the grand prize for the first time.[110] He won again in 1932, but after losing in 1933 he denounced the racial injustice of the city's drag competitions. "There is a conspiracy afoot," he told the black press. "I participated in seven of these masquerades last year and except for the one here [sponsored by the Hamilton Lodge], they are always arranged for the white girls to win. They never had no Negro judges."[111] "Considerable rivalry exists between the ofay chicks and the Mose broods," a columnist for the *Amsterdam News* declared after attending the ball in 1936. "Last year an ofay won the costume prize. This year a Mose 'girl,' Jean La Marr, won the $50."[112] While much of the black press used a mocking tone to distance itself from both the black and white contestants, it nonetheless often took the side of black contestants, regarding them as Harlem's representatives in the competition and thus granting them a place in black society.

### *The Price of Respectability*

As the response of Harlem's press and public to the drag balls suggests, drag queens and other gay men could earn the grudging respect

—and even the awe—of many Harlemites. But they could not achieve respectability. "While youth will have its fling," the newspaper attack on the 1926 Fort Valley Industrial School Benefit had warned, "there is a special need for the colored graduates of northern Universities to emulate the solid and substantial characters of their forefathers." Harlem's social elite and intelligentsia made it clear that the open expression of one's homosexuality precluded participation in respectable society. As noted in chapter 7, W. E. B. Du Bois fired the managing editor of *The Crisis* upon learning that he had been arrested for homosexual solicitation in a public washroom. Whatever Du Bois's personal response to the revelation of the man's homosexual interests, it seems clear he believed it necessary to dismiss the man to safeguard the reputation of the journal.[113]

Gay members of Harlem's middle class were well aware of this injunction and felt obliged to exercise greater discretion than many workingmen did. This was the case even among the most avant-garde of Harlem's middle class, the writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of black literary arts in the 1920s that transformed the American literary landscape. Indeed, the contours and constraints of middle-class gay life are exemplified by the problems faced by this group of avant-garde writers. (A full survey of the role of lesbians and gay men in the Harlem Renaissance is beyond the scope of this social history.)

Gay social networks played a key role in fostering the Renaissance. Two of its major patrons, Howard University professor Alain Locke and Carl Van Vechten, were gay men who took more than a purely literary interest in the young writers they championed and brought to the attention of publishers and benefactors. As cultural historians such as Eric Garber, David Levering Lewis, Amitai Avi-ram, and Alden Reimonenq have begun to show, many of the leading male poets and novelists of the Renaissance were gay-identified or sexually active with men as well as women, including Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, and possibly Langston Hughes. They regularly socialized with each other in gay settings and discussed the affairs they were having with other men. A gay artist from France who was immediately drawn into their circle when he visited New York in the late 1920s recalled that "there was a whole small crowd of rather nice gay blacks around Countee Cullen. They used to meet practically every evening at Caska Bonds' and sit by the hour playing cards there." They were also involved in broader gay social circles, attending the gay parties thrown by Bonds, Clinton Moore, Eddie Manchester, and other black gay men, and the extravagant "mixed" parties thrown by the millionaire heiress A'Leila Walker and Van Vechten.[114]

Several of their novels depicting the Harlem scene included gay and lesbian characters, including Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1927) and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932). As Avi-Ram, Reimonenq, and other critics have noted, the poetry of Countee Cullen and possibly other Renaissance figures can be read as offering critiques of heterosexism as well as racism and odes to homosexual love as well as to black solidarity.[115] In their boldest collective move, in 1926 they published *Fire!!*, an avant-garde literary journal that included Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lillies, and Jade," an extraordinary homoerotic story (or prose poem) celebrating his cruising and consummating an affair with a Latin "Adonis."[116] Their flamboyance was instantly denounced by Harlem's leading intellectuals and social figures, including Alain Locke, who considered such flamboyance unacceptable.

Although these gay social networks played an important role in the construction of the Harlem Renaissance, they were carefully hidden. Most of its writers, like most other middle-class African-Americans, endeavored to keep their homosexuality a secret from the straight world. Even Bruce Nugent, the most audacious of the circle, published his story under the name Richard Bruce to avoid embarrassing his parents. Countee Cullen, who had begun to identify himself as gay before he turned twenty and was involved in several long-term relationships with men, twice married women in search of respectability. His first wedding, to Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, was one of the major social events of 1928, but their marriage quickly foundered. Yolande appears to have cooperated in making sure that the Harlem press reported Cullen was infatuated with another woman, but she confided to her father that Cullen's homosexuality was the problem. Cullen married again twelve years later, even though he was romantically involved with another man. As Reimonenq has shown, Cullen became increasingly concerned in the 1930s and 1940s to hide his homosexual liaisons, using codes to refer to them in his letters to friends and signing letters to his beloved with a pseudonym. Cullen had quickly become one of the most celebrated poets of the Harlem Renaissance and had no illusions about what the revelation of his homosexuality could do to his career.[117]

Another bright star of the Renaissance, the novelist Wallace Thurman, also spent years worrying that his homosexuality would be used against him. He had been arrested within weeks of arriving in the city for having sex with a white hairdresser in a 135th Street subway washroom. Although he gave police a false name and address and a minister bailed him out, word of the arrest began to spread. Four years later, having established himself as an editor and leader of young black writers, he still felt dogged by rumors of the arrest and wondered anxiously

whether others had heard of it. His fears were exacerbated when his wife, after a short and unsuccessful marriage, threatened to use his homosexuality as grounds for divorce. "You can imagine with what relish a certain group of Negroes in Harlem received and relayed the news that I was a homo. No evidence is needed of course beyond the initial rumor," he wrote a friend in 1929, denying that the rumor was true.[118]

The organization of the Hamilton Lodge ball codified the differences between the public styles of middle-class and working-class gay men. Middle-class men passing as straight sat in the balcony with other members of Harlem's social elite looking down on the spectacle of workingmen in drag. Although the newspapers regularly noted the appearance of Caska Bonds, Harold Jackman, Edward G. Perry, Clinton Moore, Eddie Manchester, Jimmie Daniels, and other middle-class gay men at the balls, they simply included them in the lists of other celebrities and society people in attendance, all presumed to be straight.[119] Some of the society people they joined to watch the queers must have known of their involvement in the gay life, and undoubtedly some of the reporters and readers of the papers knew as well. But all concerned seem to have agreed not to say anything.

The differences between the social worlds and public styles of middle- and working-class gay men should not be exaggerated, however. Men often interacted across class lines, gathering at the same speakeasies and sharing some of the same pleasures. And they negotiated their way through the neighborhood in not altogether dissimilar ways. Workingmen and men who had migrated to Harlem without their families were more likely than middle-class men to present themselves as gay men in the public sphere, but even they might choose to keep their participation "in the life" distinct from their family life. Many workingmen moved between two worlds, appearing as drag queens at the balls and as dutiful sons in their parents' apartments. Adopting a camp name helped them keep the two lives separate. "John Smith" could become "the sepia Mae West" at a drag ball, and even be quoted in the papers as Mae West, without drawing attention to John Smith. One man who had attended the Hamilton Lodge ball in drag recalled his panic when a neighbor asked him about it at a family dinner the next day. His brother and a friend, who were wise to the situation, immediately covered for him to protect his parents from the embarrassment of learning—or seeing a guest learn—that their son was a drag queen. "Nobody wanted their parents to know," he insisted.[120] Another man participated actively in the gay life for years without telling his sister, even though he shared an apartment with her. When he brought a man home, he simply told her that it was a friend who couldn't get home that

night. She probably knew the score, but she never asked, and he never told. It seemed a fine arrangement to him, since it allowed him to take part in gay life while also continuing an important family relationship.[121] The "open secret," widely known but never spoken, governed many workingmen's relations with their families, just as it governed some middle-class men's relations with the larger social world.