

LAST WORDS

On cruising, cops, and the queering of public space

I was shocked to see Debbie Nathan's investigation of the police crackdown on gay sex in San Antonio's public parks ["Cruising cops," *Current*, January 27 - February 2]. Reading her thorough portrait of the men, activities, and covert operations, I couldn't help but wonder why and how a heterosexual woman with a family came to investigate an activity so clandestine that one San Antonian has described it as "socially unrecoverable." Most people are loathe to engage the topic or simply clueless about it. Even among gay men, public sexual cruising is so veiled in dissembling and secrecy that a frank discussion of it is often met with disapproval or disgust. Depending on where you stand as a gay man, public sex is either "our best kept secret" or "our dirty little secret." That a straight woman has blown the lid off a gay issue is both surprising and encouraging, and compels further discussion.

Why do gay men cruise? Before an arrest for public sexual activity takes place, even before a homosexual man takes his first step into a park, the complex circumstances that give rise to public sex are already in place. From a homosexual's point of view, there are as many reasons for cruising — and types of men who cruise — as there are opportunities. For some young men, a chance encounter in a campus restroom or locker room may be the initial act that forces recognition of their sexual orientation. For closeted men or those who realize their orientation later in life (i.e. married, divorced, widowed), cruising fills the gap created by a popular gay culture that has passed them by. Other men look for sexual activity in public places because they fall outside the narrowly defined categories of gay desire that exclude along the lines of age, size, class, or race.

But gay sex in public places is only one piece of the cruising phenomenon. It is the sensationalized — and criminalized — tip of an iceberg of collective denial sunk deep in heterosexual culture.

JOHN EWING

When I was coming of age in East Texas, "behind the Pine Curtain" as they say, I had my first conversation about homosexuality with a man I met at Sears, where I worked part-time as a high-school student. We conducted our first heart-thumping encounters by mail; I secured a post-office box for that sole purpose and shrouded my activities in a duplicity equal to any Cold War, secret agent. In retrospect, I realize that the lies were necessary to protect my secret, awakening self. I can also see that, from the very beginning, my sexual experiences were linked with public spaces and the thrill of secret encounters. My life is mine to shoulder, but if I were a parent, would I want my child to meet adulthood in this fashion? Would I want my child to reach beyond the family or safe social circle for his or her first sex education?

Out of five children, two of us are gay, which is not unusual for large families. Ours has reckoned with this knowledge in fits and starts, gradually achieving communication and mutual support. Of course, the process didn't begin until all of us were adults. How much gender might we have transitioned had there been the slightest awareness that some of us might not fall within the sexual norm? Today, parents are extremely concerned about the welfare of their children, and rightfully so. What goes unnoticed, however, is the need gay and lesbian children have for the same recognition, understanding, and education that are already implicit in the culture for straight children.

As a society, we are beginning to understand the negative effects on children of growing up as ethnic minorities who do not see themselves mirrored in the culture. Meanwhile, the arenas where such mirroring can take place for homo-

sexual children are under scurrilous attack; openly gay teachers, clergy, scout leaders, and gay student groups on high-school campuses are, for the most part, taboo. In fact, describing individuals as homosexual before they reach adulthood is itself considered sexually abusive. Because homosexuality is understood in the wider culture as a "deviant" condition of adults only, the old chestnut that adult homosexuals "recruit" innocent children is a stereotype resistant to change. Yet, the fact that we are recognizing the need for such a discussion shows how far we've come.

But let's go back to the park, the place where homosexual resistance and heterosexual outrage seem to come to a head. It is unclear what most troubles the wider society and motivates police intervention. Understandably, carving messages into restroom stalls or making a mess with toilet paper are public nuisances, despite their expediency to cruisers. Surprisingly, this doesn't seem to be an aspect focused on by public officials or the media who cover park arrests. As Nathan noted in her article, what appears to be most upsetting is the visible traffic and gathering of homosexual men in public parks. Indeed, it is this public visibility that first tips off the police and determines the locations where sting operations are to be conducted. But if sexual activity is occurring "undercover" (i.e. in the bushes and restrooms), what crime are the men committing who sit in their cars or gather at picnic tables to chat? These activities also draw police attention as men are routinely warned to disperse, even while parks are officially open. Clearly, if a society chooses to criminalize some of its citizens, it won't split hairs over legalities.

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