

ORGANIZING COLLECTIVE INTIMACY:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF NEW YORK CITY'S CLANDESTINE SEX CLUBS

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Organizing Collective Intimacy:

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In the years after the onset of the AIDS pandemic, New York State outlawed sexual activity in commercial venues, leading to the gradual closure of most of the bathhouses, sex clubs, and adult theaters where gay men had been having sex in New York City (NYC) for decades. Indirectly, these restrictive interventions led to the proliferation of underground sex clubs, which have become the main institution for gay group sex in NYC today. This study wants to understand what type of social and sexual practices take shape in the context of clandestine sex clubs. To do so, this dissertation provides a history of gay cruising, a review of the empirical literature on gay public sex, ethnographic data describing the organization of NYC's private sex clubs and their norms of interaction, and data from in-depth interviews with sex-party-goers. Past research on gay cruising emphasized its anonymous and impersonal aspects, but this study found private sex clubs to be the site of what I call

collective intimacy. By practicing collective intimacy, sex-party-goers break the traditional boundaries between sex, intimacy, and sociability. The organization and environment of private sex clubs foster collective intimacy by putting groups of gay men together in places where they must share close physical intimacy and where repeat encounters are likely. Instead of disrupting sexual networks, restrictive interventions had instead created a context of clandestinity in which sex-party-goers are more closely connected to one another. Practices of collective intimacy are likely to be present in the future because they answer a growing need for sexual recreation and for flexible intimate and social relations.

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## INTRODUCTION

By 1980, in New York City (NYC), gay men—and, to a lesser extent, everyone else—could find sex in a wide array of public and commercial places. After a loosening of traditional sexual norms and the migration of gay men and lesbian women to large urban centers, the commercial sex venues that appeared throughout the twentieth century could blossom and become an integral part of the gay urban landscape. Gay bars with backrooms, sex clubs, and dance clubs created a gay nightlife culture that blended sexuality with sociability. Gay bathhouses offered spa and fitness facilities and a place for sexual activity. Adult theaters, product of the booming pornographic film industry, allowed men to play with one another while watching the most recent gay porn movies, many of them shot in some of the city's sex venues. Gay men also sought sex in public toilets and parks, and some areas of the city, like the disaffected West Side Piers, were informally reserved for gay men who wanted to sunbathe in the nude and find sex. Whether gay men chose to patronize these venues or not, spaces of group sex were widely available and well integrated into the fabric of urban gay communities. Thirty years later, as I undertook this research project, very few of these venues remained and gay men looking for sex venues had to turn to clandestine sex clubs called, within the current gay culture in NYC, “private sex parties.”

The disappearance of commercial sex venues in NYC was the result of two direct interventions: public health policies in response to the onset of the AIDS epidemic and zoning policies aiming to improve the quality of life in the city. In 1981, gay men started being diagnosed at an alarming rate with chronic immune system deficiency, which, a few years later, was attributed to a virus that was transmitted through sexual intercourse. The places where gay men went to have sex with multiple partners in the course of a visit (bathhouses, sex clubs, adult theaters, etc.) were held responsible for the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS within the community and targeted as threat to the public health. The response, in many jurisdictions, was to close them down. In 1985, New York State added a clause to its Public Health Code that made it illegal for any commercial establishment to allow sexual activity on its premises and gave license to local health officers to shut down those that did. Although not every sex venue had to close down in the years following the passing of the law, those that remained got targeted by another wave of policy. In the 1990s, the “quality of life” campaign of NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani included zoning measures aimed at dispersing all types of adult businesses, including those aforementioned but also sex shops, strip clubs, and so forth. Sex businesses were not only perceived as a threat to the public health, but also to the quality of life because areas where they concentrated tended to have higher crime rates and lower real estate value. These policies led to the closure of most commercial sex venues in NYC and still determine the rules of the game today.

Because both interventions are exclusively concerned with commercial establishments, they were not able to prevent practices of group sex from moving to

other types of places. As authorities started closing down commercial sex venues, the people involved in them started looking for new places to pursue their activities. In the 1990s and early 2000s, sex venue organizers played hide and seek with authorities and experimented with different venue formats, trying to comply with or hide from the law. What is now known as “private sex parties” has become the somewhat tolerated format for group sex. Private sex parties are not licensed commercial establishments because they are held in residential buildings and are “by invite only.” Yet, private sex parties function a lot like commercial sex venues because they charge an entry fee, invite a large public of gay men interested in group sex, and are run like businesses (they are for-profit, hire staff, and so forth). Private sex parties operate in a gray area of the law, and authorities have come to tolerate them as long as they do not gather complaints or break other laws (e.g., liquor or prostitution laws). These parties have become the main venue for group sex in NYC, replacing bathhouses and commercial clubs. Looking through gay sex party listings online revealed that, during the time of my study, about 40 to 50 different sex parties were held on any given week with events every day of the week. The vast majority of events cater to gay men, but private sex parties are also the site for anyone else looking for group sex: heterosexual or bisexual “swingers,” lesbians, and transgender people. Private sex parties have become the main institution of group sex in NYC and a key site for understanding the local sexual culture.

As gay group sex has moved from public places (e.g., parks and bathrooms) and commercial venues (e.g., bathhouses) to clandestine private venues, it is not

only the setting for sex that changes; the ways in which gay cruisers interact and relate to one another are affected. Historical accounts and past empirical research on gay cruising demonstrate that the meaning of cruising has changed with time and always varied with the setting. Bathrooms, for example, served as places to have sex anonymously when homosexuality was illegal, while early gay bathhouses in the mid-twentieth century were some of the first places where gay men would socialize and form networks that led to the creation of gay communities. The private sex clubs studied here are the indirect result of early public health responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis that have pushed gay cruising further into clandestinity. One aim of this study is to understand how private sex clubs have taken shape from the legal, material, political, and cultural context of the past few decades and how these venues further shape the practices of the gay men who frequent them. The second aim is to understand how the contemporary practice of cruising compares to previous forms of cruising and to other modes of sexuality, intimacy, and sociability. The resilience of practices of gay group sex in a context that tries to eliminate them shows that cruising plays an important part in the personal lives of gay men, and the second seeks to clarify this drive.

This introduction is in four parts. First, I describe public health interventions on gay sex venues and the criticism that they have received from authors in the field of queer studies who thought authorities had overlooked gay public sex as an important part of gay men's intimate and social lives. To better understand how gay cruising can be an intimate or social practice, the second part turns to sociological arguments about the recent changes of sexuality, intimacy, and community. The

third part covers different social scientific frameworks to understand how different sexual practices take shape. Finally, I look at different methodological approaches that have been used to study gay cruising and explain my choice of ethnographic methods.

### *1. The problem*

When municipal authorities were actively closing down commercial sex venues in the 1980s and 1990s, some public health workers and people in LGBT movements worried that such prohibitive measures would not fix anything but instead create new issues for the public health and for LGBT communities. HIV prevention workers thought that closing down commercial sex venues would merely move group sex practices to different places—the proliferation of private sex parties has proved them right. There was no reason to believe that sexual practices would become safer in such places and the concern was that HIV-prevention outreach would be much more difficult as group sex moved into the underground. Besides the public health concerns, queer activists thought that the ban on commercial sex venues would further stigmatize nontraditional forms of sexuality. Throughout the twentieth century, sex venues had been the sites where a lot of gay men could experiment with their sexuality, and closing them down was taking away some of the practices that made gay people truly “queer.” People thus foresaw that the crackdown on commercial sex venues could have two types of consequences for gay communities: on one side, public health consequences, making it harder to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections

(STIs); on the other, sociocultural consequences, limiting the freedom of people (and especially gay men) to live their sexual and intimate lives as they wish to.

This dissertation focuses on the latter, explaining how gay men's sexual, social, and intimate lifestyles changed as the practice of group sex moved into clandestinity. The public health problem around commercial sex venues has been looked at by several studies and programs and the growing consensus is that doing prevention work in these places is more beneficial than shutting them down. Despite this knowledge, the continued ban on commercial sex venues shows—as queer theorists have been saying for a long time—that they pose a problem for sexual morality more than for the public health. A closer look at how the culture of gay group sex is affected by interventions could thus help determining the next steps in this ongoing debate. I now turn to a discussion of the problems and solutions proposed from the field of Public Health and then to a discussion of the issues discussed by queer theorists.

### *1.1. The public health problem*

Closing down commercial sex venues in NYC was done as a public health intervention, in order to curtail the rapid transmission of HIV/AIDS among men people who frequented them. These prohibitive measures never generated a consensus among health professionals, and research from the past 30 years concluded that it is better to use these venues for public health interventions than to shut them down. Nevertheless, because practices of group sex in commercial sex venues go against sexual mores, working against them seems more warranted than working with them.



Early on in the AIDS epidemic, the rapid spread of a lethal disease among gay men was attributed to the excessive sexual lifestyle typical among those who patronized commercial sex venues. As doctors started observing a pattern of gay men suffering from immune system failure, they quickly hypothesized that promiscuity—in and of itself—could be the cause of the illness (Epstein 1996; Seidman 1988). A few years into the epidemic, the discovery of the HIV virus and its mode of transmission seemed to support the belief that gay men's sexual lifestyle was the cause of AIDS. HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is transmitted through sexual contact, and anal sex is more likely to result in transmission than vaginal or oral intercourse. The more sex partners an individual has, the more he or she is likely to have sex with someone who carries HIV; the more sexual acts one engages in, the greater the odds of the virus being transmitted between partners. In gay commercial sex venues, it was known that men performed multiple sex acts—often anal—with several partners in the course of one night, so these places were seen as an explanation of why HIV/AIDS spread so quickly among urban gay communities. It thus became a priority of public health authorities to intervene and find ways to change the sexual behavior of urban gay men who frequented these venues.

In NYC, like in several other locales in the United States, the strategy was to close down the venues where gay men sought promiscuous sex, assuming that this would change their sexual norms. Public health authorities thought that commercial sex venues normalized the behavior that was associated with HIV transmission. In the words of Thomas Farley, former commissioner of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), bathhouses and sex clubs posed risks of HIV

transmission by “promoting a social norm among men who have sex with men of large number of sex partners,” and “promoting greater opportunity for anonymous sex, which could . . . increase the likelihood that partners do not know each other’s HIV status” (2007:1). Because commercial sex venues had a negative influence on gay men’s behavior, some public health professionals assumed that closing them down would make things better. There was a concern that gay men might take the same norms to new places with the same norms, but the DOHMH believed the situation would still be better without commercial sex venues around. They presumed that the underground counterparts to commercial sex venues “probably would not result in the densely connected sexual networks that are facilitated by bathhouses” (5). Epidemiologically, a dense network of people having sex with one another is the quickest way for a virus to transmit through a population, so taking away the venues where these networks form could only slow down the epidemic. Public health authorities did not have a clear understanding of how gay men’s behavior would change from closing down commercial sex venues, but, from their perspective, it could only help lower the rates of new HIV infections.

While some public health professionals supported the closure of commercial sex venues, others believed it was the wrong strategy. One aspect of the regulations that people disagreed with was that they forbade all sexual activity, whether safe or unsafe. The NY State Public Health Law’s section that forbids sex in commercial venues states, “No establishment shall make facilities available for the purpose of sexual activities where anal intercourse, vaginal intercourse or fellatio take place” (New York State 2000:Section 225(4), (5)(a), Subpart 24-2 – Prohibited Facilities).

Using condoms for intercourse in these circumstances did not make things more acceptable. After the passing of the law in 1985, the DOHMH began sending undercover inspectors to gay bars, bathhouses, porn theaters, and video peep shows and ordered the closure of the venues where they witnessed sexual activity. Even though the written reports left behind by those inspectors show that many of them only saw safer sex, they ordered the closure of these venues on the grounds that they facilitated the transmission of HIV (Elovitz and Edwards 1996). The law, passed early on in the epidemic, is also based on outdated knowledge about HIV transmission. The bulk of the inspections and closures happened after it was established that fellatio and sex with condoms hardly led to the transmission of HIV. Nevertheless, because the text of the law does not differentiate between safe and unsafe behavior, any type of sexual activity is grounds for closing down a commercial venue.

Gay activists criticized public health authorities for simply wanting to eliminate sex in commercial venues rather than trying to promote safer sexual behavior. Some of the establishments targeted by the law had made efforts to promote safer sex among the gay community, but these were undermined by the regulations. For example, gay bars that had been giving out free condoms (which were not meant to be used on premise) had to stop doing so because they could now be perceived as facilitating sex in their venue. Prohibiting sex in commercial venues could thus end up increasing the prevalence of unsafe sex in the gay community. For the people who were used to seeking out sex in commercial establishments, the prohibition of all sexual activity in these venues led them to search for places where

they could have any form of sex, regardless of whether it was safe or not. As one author put it: “A game develops where patrons do their best not to be caught, and the focus shifts away from what is safe or unsafe, to what one can get away with” (Gendin 1996:113). Safer sex is facilitated when the people involved have time to communicate and establish safety; the illegality created by repressive measures favored quick sexual interaction, which is more likely to be unsafe.

Contrary to the logic used by policymakers, some HIV-prevention workers argued that commercial sex venues were beneficial in preventing the transmission of HIV, one reason being that they played a role in shaping gay male sexual culture. More than preventing people from having sex in certain places, what would be helpful to halt the AIDS pandemic was to educate people about the virus and how to prevent its transmission. Early on in the epidemic, when health agencies were telling people to have less sexual activity and fewer partners, it was LGBT organizations that developed safer sex guidelines and disseminated them to the community (Epstein 1996; Escoffier 1998b; Patton 1990, 1996). Commercial sex venues were strategic places to educate gay men about safer sex and to change the sexual mores of the community. Owners and managers of these venues supported the efforts of early HIV prevention workers and tried to create a norm of safer sex among their clientele (Rubin 1997, 1998, 2000). Commercial sex venues could offer information and documentation about safer sex and referrals to local medical services. They could also adapt their premises to encourage safer sex, for example, by making condoms and lubricants easily accessible. Contrary to restrictive regulations, HIV prevention strategies developed with the management commercial

sex venues actually intended to change the sexual behavior of gay men to promote safer practices; unfortunately, these efforts would be undermined by the laws forbidding these establishments.

Commercial sex venues offer an entryway into the sexual culture of gay men, which could be helpful in implementing strategies to change their behavior. The benefits of doing interventions in commercial sex venues can also be from the epidemiological side of the HIV/AIDS problem. Sex venues are strategic places to offer HIV and STI tests and diagnose people before they transmit infections. Data has shown that HIV is most often transmitted by people who did not know they were HIV-positive. We also know that during the acute phase of HIV infection—two to three months after infection—people are more contagious than later, and that HIV-positive people who are treated with highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) are much less likely to transmit the virus. The new priority to curtail the AIDS epidemic has been to diagnose new HIV infections as early as possible so HIV-positive people can be referred to care and start treatment quickly. The elapsed time between the moment of infection and that at which a person will go get tested at a conventional clinic can be very long. Therefore, bringing the testing at places frequented by at-risk populations has made it easier to diagnose new infections early. Programs offering HIV testing in commercial sex venues have documented a much higher rate of diagnoses of acute HIV infection than in traditional clinics, and the benefits of offering HIV testing in commercial sex venues in curtailing the epidemic are now well documented (Daskalakis et al. 2009; Silvera et al. 2010; Woods and Binson 2003). These programs are now widely supported, even in NYC.

However, in the context of clandestinity in which private sex clubs operate, it can be difficult to access sex venues to implement such testing programs. Some private party organizers have allowed such harm reduction programs to conduct HIV testing at their events but others refuse to participate in these incentives. The laws forbidding commercial sex venues in New York thus pose an obstacle in implementing HIV prevention strategies based on current epidemiological knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

As soon as they were implemented, interventions against commercial sex venues raised skepticism from many public health professionals. Today, most HIV/AIDS prevention workers would agree that interventions that work with sex venues are more efficient than those that try to eliminate them. Nevertheless, restrictive laws are still in place in New York today. According to queer theorists, the implementation and upholding of such restrictive measures have always been motivated by sexual morality more than by the public health (Colter et al. 1996).

### *1.2. An issue of social justice*

In the mid-1990s, it was becoming clear that commercial sex venues in NYC and many other cities were slowly losing the battle against public health and zoning reforms. The case of commercial sex venues was also losing support from LGBT social movements, except from certain factions. The defense of “public sex,” as it was labeled within the field, was examined by queer scholars in the mid-1990s and in some texts that are now seen as the foundation of queer theory (Berlant and Warner 1998; Bersani 1995, 2002; Califia 2000; Colter et al. 1996; Delany 1999; Warner

1999). The case of NYC's crackdown on commercial sex venues was often used in this literature to show the workings of heteronormativity in our culture.

According to queer theorists, sex venues were less a threat to the public health than they were to hegemonic forms of sexuality, intimacy, and sociability. Public sex poses a problem because it challenges the forms of relations that are seen as natural and normal in a heteronormative culture. Under heteronormative ideology, sex and intimacy can only happen in a committed couple of opposite sex, which should be the nucleus of a family. Sex, intimacy, and family are relegated to the private sphere and the domestic space of the home, bounded from the public realm where sociability, work, politics, and commerce may take place. Public sex challenges heteronormativity by blurring the boundaries between the private and public spheres, and between sex, intimacy, and sociability. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner put it, sex venues are places where queer people have developed "kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (1998:558). Groups of men blending sexuality and sociability and finding intimacy in public and commercial places challenges the naturalness of heteronormative relations. Many queer theorists believed that interventions against sex venues were reactions to the challenge posed to heteronormative values.

For queer scholars and activists, AIDS was being used by heteronormative ideology to make nontraditional forms of sexuality look wrong. The joined forces of public health and sexual morality made it very difficult to take the defense of commercial sex venues, and a lot of people—even within gay circles—let authorities

take the reins on closing them down. Queer theorists and activists, who understood how sexuality was used by the groups in power to exert control over marginalized sexual groups (Rubin 2007), saw the defense of public sex as a matter of social justice. It was all types of non-normative sexualities and intimacies that were at stake with the defense of public sex, and queer theorists made several arguments to explain its relevance. (Chapter 1 will look further at how the history of commercial sex venues and gay social movements are intertwined; I focus here on the arguments made by queer theorists to justify the relevance of public sex.)

Queer scholars reminded us that public and commercial sex venues had an important role to play in the emergence of gay communities and social movements, and that they were still relevant. Men had been meeting in cruising places as early as the late 1800s, at a time when homosexuality was illegal and considered a mental illness (again, a history further told in Chapter 1). In those more oppressive times, sex venues were “primary sites of communal queer worldmaking, where men could learn from and support other men, exchange ideas, build community structures, and raise a political ruckus” (Hoffman 1996:339). Although men might have been driven to cruising places to satisfy their sexual desires, they also found a social world that enabled a sexual minority to organize and become what it is today. However, as homosexuality becomes less marginalized within mainstream society, sex venues could be losing their relevance for the formation of sexual communities. Also, as gay people try to gain access to more traditional forms of intimate arrangements (marriage and raising children), cruising becomes an embarrassing legacy to homonormative gay social movements. As Michael Warner puts it: “the history of



queer public activity is now repudiated on the theory that its purpose has been served" (1999:164). However, some queer activists defended sex venues because they "deserve continued recognition not only for their important place in gay and lesbian history, but also for their continued potential as venues for organizing to fight the AIDS crisis" (Colter et al. 1996:185). Queer theorists saw public sex as a site for the organization of queer communities, and also for the continued experimentation with different forms of sexuality.

An argument mostly developed by Michael Warner was that an entire "public culture of sex" was at stake with the closure of sex venues. As he said, "there is very little sense in this country that a public culture of sex might be something to value, something whose accessibility is to be protected" (1999:171). The dominant culture wants us to feel like the sexuality we express in private is something natural that happens without any process of learning. What public sex practices show, however, is that sexual knowledges can circulate and that new practices can be developed. Participating in public sex cultures can change the way we experience intimate sexual pleasures. There is a "corporeal publicness" in gay and lesbian sexuality that is simultaneously public and extremely intimate (178). What could be lost along with the culture of public sex is the possibility for sexualities that do not simply take shape as the "expression of privilege and conformity" (179).

As places of public sex came under attack and as gay people turned towards more traditional forms of sexuality and relationships, queer forms of sex and intimacy became assimilated under heteronormative ones. The "sexual assimilation" of gay people means to make homosexuality merely a difference of gender

preference of partner, with no difference from heterosexuality in the way sex is practiced. Queer theory insists that being gay is not only about gender preference, but also about sexual difference. The freedom to be gay is not only the freedom to be in a committed relationship with someone of the same gender, but also to be free to practice sex in ways that do not fit dominant cultural norms. For Samuel Delany, closing down sex venues is an attack on the freedom to be gay:

The freedom to “be” “gay” without the freedom to choose to partake of these institutions is just as meaningless as the freedom to “be” “Jewish” when, say, any given Jewish ritual, text, or cultural practice is outlawed; it is as meaningless as the “freedom” to “be” “black” in a world where black music, literature, culture, language, foods, and churches and all the social practices that have been generated through the process of black historical exclusion were suddenly suppressed. (1999:194)

Scholars like Delany go against an essentialist conceptualization of sex and homosexuality. Being gay is not simply a natural attraction to the same sex, but a set of practices and identities that took shape through the history of gay culture. Where some would say that being gay has nothing to do with cruising, Delany would say that forbidding gay men to partake in that culture is denying them of doing what makes them gay. Protecting places of cruising is an issue of freedom.

Finally, public sex is a practice where LGBT people have not only experimented with sexuality, but with sociability. If sexual moralists would say that promiscuous sex in public places was wrong because it disconnected sex from an intimate relationship, queer theorists said that it connected sex to sociable interaction. Leo Bersani proposed that cruising was “sexual sociability.” Borrowing “sociability” from the sociology of Georg Simmel (1971), which was social interaction disconnected from special needs and interests, cruising was sexual

interaction disconnected from our interest in a committed relationship. Cruising required “to block our interest in others, to prevent our connection to them from degenerating into a ‘relationship’” (2002:18). Cruising, however, did not require blocking the pleasure in (nonsexual) sociable interaction, and others remarked the pleasure of sociability in places of public sex. Warner, for example, said there was a “special kind of sociability” in places of public sex, “where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy” (1999:35). People of different ages, ethnoracial groups, and social class went to places of public sex, and sexual sociability created contacts across groups that otherwise have little opportunities to mesh. The heterogeneity of people involved in public sex was what made cruising so powerful for queer theorists interested in social justice.

Samuel Delany carried the argument about the importance of practices like gay public sex to social justice the furthest. He saw in the sexual-sociability of gay sex venues a form of interclass contact that was necessary for life in our current political economy:

The primary thesis underlying my several arguments here is that, given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will. (Delany 1999:111)

“Contact,” for Delany, is the type of random interaction that occurs in public spaces, between two people in the line at a store, walking in the park, in public transportation, or having casual sex in public spaces. Because of its randomness, contact often cuts across social categories. These interactions are done with no specific interest in mind, and may happen only once and be forgotten, or they can

lead to longer friendly, professional, or romantic relationships. Delany opposes contact to “networking,” which is social interaction that happens with a clear motive, and usually within a more delineated social group. For Delany, contact is what makes life pleasant in today’s society, and is also the only form of interaction that provides chances for people to move between classes: “there is no way people can move comfortably between classes if the classes themselves do not have repeated, pleasant social interactions with one another” (1999:173). For Delany, sex venues and the practices in them had powerful potential to promote social justice, and instead of being closed down, they should have been made more accessible to more people, suggesting that heterosexual culture had something to learn from them.

For queer theorists, the regulation of public sex was not only about heteronormativity or sexual morality, but also about the regulation of class relations. They saw interventions against public sex as part of a general trend to reduce the amount of public space and to create more privatized, commercial space. More recent accounts in queer theory have suggested that public sex has been privatized and made accessible only to the most privileged classes. José Esteban Muñoz suggested that queer places of interclass contact had been replaced by upscale gay establishments accessible only to the most fortunate LGBT and straight people (Muñoz 2009). Tim Dean claimed that private sex parties were exclusionary by nature and did not provide the same opportunities for interclass contact that places of public sex did (Dean 2009). These authors claimed that, in a near future, if things kept going the way they had been, what would remain of queer public sexual

culture would only be a commoditized version with none of the possibilities for creative exploration of sexuality-intimacy-sociability that previous spaces had, and with no potential for social justice.

The debate around commercial sex venues has been around issues of sexual behavior, sexual freedom, and social justice. Arguments on the side of public health have focused on the sexual behavior happening in sex venues, whether they argue for a need to eliminate risky behavior by closing down these places or for using them as a place to instigate changes in the sexual norms of gay culture. Queer theorists look past the sexual behavior in sex venues and see them as places where queer people can find personal relationships and connect to a larger community, and as places that can counter dominant sexual, political, and economical values. In the end, what separates the different sides on the issue is the possibility of separating sex from intimate and social relations. Public health authorities see the sexual behavior in commercial sex venues as something separated from intimate relations, whereas queer theorists argue for the impossibility of disconnecting sexual interactions from people's broader intimate and social lives. The connection or disconnection of sexuality and intimacy has been at the crux of debates on controversial issues of sexuality in recent times. Sociologists have made several claims about changes in the notions of sexuality and intimacy, to which I now turn.

## *2. The interconnections between sex, intimacy, and sociability*

### *2.1. The debate about sex and intimacy*

Gay promiscuous sex is only one of many phenomena that have sparked debates in popular media and academia about the connection between sexuality and

intimacy. Teenage hookup culture (Bogle 2008), sexual promiscuity at Spring Break resorts (Levy 2006), heterosexual “swingers” (Bergstrand and Sinski 2009; Frank 2013), or prostitution and escorting (Bernstein 2007) are topics that have garnered a lot of attention in popular discourse and sociology. The common denominator in these phenomena is the concern about the disconnection of sexuality from intimacy, and the entry of sex into the realms of entertainment, leisure, sociability, tourism, or consumption. The traditional values that reserved sex to a connubial act intended for procreation have been loosening since at least the second half of the twentieth century, which has provoked reactions ranging from the most pessimistic to most celebratory. Sociologists have, on one side, raised concerns about how the disconnection of sexuality and intimacy could destroy the fabric of society and human relations or, on the other, welcomed the potential for these cultural changes to improve social justice. The sociological work of Zygmunt Bauman (1998, 2003) exemplifies the dystopian side, while that of Anthony Giddens (1992) represents the optimistic one.

Both authors explain the recent changes to intimacy in relation to an increase of individualism caused by the forces of late modernity, which have been shaking the stable social arrangements of the past. Social relations used to revolve around stable families and communities, and sex and intimacy had its place in the nucleus of family. For Giddens, late modernity is characterized by constant rapid change that breaks the stability of past social arrangements. In a global, postindustrial world, nothing is settled to last: local communities and personal relationships are constantly disrupted by the movement of people, and even self-identity is hardly

stable. As people cannot find stability in social relationships anymore, they look for it within themselves, what Giddens calls the search for “ontological security” (Giddens 1991). This constant search for oneself is the motor of intimate and sexual relations. If Bauman and Giddens agree that late modernity (and, for Baumann, especially capitalism) has led to an increase in individualism that informs today’s interpersonal relations, they diverge on the consequences of this broad change.

For Bauman, the disintegration of traditional social relations by late capitalism has transformed love and sex into objects of consumption. Late modernity has created self-obsessed individuals, and the market forces of late capitalism have made consumption the activity in which people find the semblance of a self-identity. Compulsively seeking themselves through consumption, people have lost all skills for sustained human relationships. The search for love has been co-opted by consumer culture, and people on the dating “market” can “shop” for partners that will satisfy their individual desires. As with any other goods, satisfaction in partners is always challenged by the appearance of the latest “state-of-the-art models,” making people incapable of sustained intimate relationships. Sex, having been disconnected from intimate relationships, has become a commodity of its own. The “purely sexual encounter,” Bauman suggests, is the sexual practice most adapted to “advanced shopping/hiring patterns.” A “no-strings-attached” agreement is to human relations what a “money-back guarantee” is to shopping, it reassures people that they can keep changing partners, just as they can return a product that does not entirely satisfy them (2003:50). Intimacy and sexuality have been separated and both made into commodities governed by

consumer expectations of cost and benefit, obliterating their function as a motor of social cohesion.

Giddens would agree with Bauman that, in late modernity, individuals keep searching for their self-identity in series of intimate and sexual relationships, but he believes that these new relations are more intimate and egalitarian than traditional ones. As relationships are less determined by the traditional value of lifelong commitment, they are increasingly based on mutual understanding. People used to get into relationships to build a household, to further family lines, and to become part of the fabric of society; they now do so to find personal satisfaction. Giddens calls the new standard the “pure relationship,” a relationship whose only purpose is its own appreciation (Giddens 1992). People find self-affirmation in the pure relationship, and it becomes meaningless once any one of the partners stops finding it individually relevant. Giddens agrees with Bauman that this new form of relationship is more fragile than traditional ones, but he also thinks it is more deeply intimate because it is based on mutual understanding rather than practical arrangements. He also thinks the pure relationship is more egalitarian because both partners must find it self-affirming, whereas traditional relationships were built with differential gender roles and expectations. Although relationships are less stable than they were in the past, Giddens would say they are better in that they allow individuals to find freedom from traditional molds.

Giddens also has a more positive outlook on how sexuality has changed than Bauman. Freeing sexuality from the burden or imperative of reproduction has made place for what he called “plastic sexuality,” a form of sexuality that is self-affirming



and free from predetermined notions about what sex should be. Through sex, people now shape their own sexual identity, another way to cope with the ontological security of late modernity.

‘Sexuality’ today has been discovered, opened up and made accessible to the development of varying life-styles. It is something each of us ‘has’, or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms. (Giddens 1992:15)

According to Giddens, gays and lesbians have been at the forefront of a lot of the recent changes in intimacy and sexuality. Having been left out of the traditional models of marriage and procreation, they had to be more creative with their relationship arrangements and sexuality. Although the notion of an intimate relationship as something based on the mutual satisfaction of both partners is commonplace today, gays and lesbians had been in such relationships before their heterosexual counterparts who lived their intimacy through the more contractual relation of traditional marriage. The gay identity was also one of the first iterations of plastic sexuality. “Being gay” was one of the first examples of sexuality as something someone “has.” This notion has now extended to everyone and even a heterosexual sexual identity—which used to be understood as a given, granted upon the individual by nature—is now a feature of the self. As Giddens says, the plethora of different sexual identities within gay culture—“the macho gay, the leather queen, the denim groupie”—are examples of plastic sexuality at play; they affirm “that, in modern social life, self-identity, including sexual identity, is a reflexive achievement” (147).

Bauman sees “purely sexual encounters” as commodified and depersonalized, but Giddens sees in them a potential for self-affirmation and seeds for a pure relationship. Giddens agrees that what he calls “episodic encounters” are a way for individuals to navigate through different partners without the burden and risk of commitment; however, where Bauman sees, in these encounters, objectification of people created by consumer culture, Giddens sees a tool of self-affirmation. Episodic encounters, in Giddens’ words, “are in effect explorations of the possibilities offered by plastic sexuality” (147). Plastic sexuality is a place of exploration of the self in the absence of differential power, so short-lived sexual encounters where all partners are equal are quicker ways to navigate through relations based on mutual agreement and satisfaction. Referring to the example of gay promiscuous sex in bathhouses, Giddens says, “even in the shape of impersonal, fleeting contacts, episodic sexuality may be a positive form of everyday experiment” (147).

The way Giddens sees plastic sexuality as a possible foundation of the pure relationship makes a case for the potential of promiscuous sex to provide some features of intimacy. He claims that gay bathhouses have generally been anonymous: “The men who went there usually had no social contact with each other save for the most casual of conversations” (145). However, he does not completely agree with arguments that would say that promiscuous sex is a deficiency of intimacy:

Episodic sexuality may usually be a way of avoiding intimacy, but it also offers a means of furthering or elaborating upon it. For sexual exclusiveness is only one way in which commitment to another is protected and integrity

achieved. . . . [I]t is not at all clear that episodic sexuality is inherently incompatible with emergent norms of the pure relationship. (147)

Giddens recognizes that forms of sexuality that look completely impersonal may actually have some components of intimacy and are part of the culture of the pure relationship.

Bauman and Giddens present two explanations of what happened with sexuality and intimacy in recent times, which diverge on the possibility to separate the two notions or not. According to Bauman's thought, sex can (but should not) be completely separated from intimacy. Sex is an activity that be done without any of the relational skills required for sustained intimate relationships, like in the case of "no-strings-attached" or "purely sexual" encounters. Late capitalism has turned sex acts and partners into objects of consumption that people can cycle through like any other form of commodity. Sex and intimacy have completely lost their role as a tool of social cohesion. On the other hand, Giddens believes that even acts that seem purely sexual ("episodic sexuality") may not be completely disconnected from intimacy. Because sexuality has become a strong feature of identity, sexual encounters have become means of exploring the self. This exploration contributes to intimacy in that relationships now have to be self-affirming. Although the traditional forms of social cohesion that Bauman mourns may be going away, Giddens thinks that relationships based on personal satisfaction are more egalitarian and benefit society in the long run. Sex—even in its seemingly completely isolated form—is thus never completely disconnected from self-affirming relationships and intimacy.

These diverging views on sex and intimacy can be applied to gay sex in commercial venues. On one side, the way in which people cycle through different

sex partners in a sex venue could give proof to claims that “purely sexual encounters” have triumphed over sustained relationships and romantic love. That commercial venues now cater to those practices would evidence that sex has become a commodity to be paid for and consumed outside of the home, ensuring that it stays separate from one’s personal life. On the other hand, sex venues can be laboratory of sexual experimentation celebrating the possibility of enjoying sex outside of the boundaries traditionally prescribed. Even the briefest encounter in such establishments can be a practice in self-affirmation that is at the root of modern intimacy. The opposing views of Bauman and Giddens on promiscuous sex exemplify how the phenomenon of gay cruising can be perceived in both scientific and lay discourse.

This divide in opinions about the modern separation of sex and intimacy is at the core of several debates around sexuality today. Several sociologists writing about intimacy have noted this cleavage between what they either called the “utopian” and “dystopian” or the “optimistic” and “pessimistic” viewpoints on how late modernity has affected intimate relations and sexuality (Goodwin 2009; Heaphy 2004; Jamieson 1998; Plummer 2003; Seymour and Bagguley 1999; Stacey 2011). As these authors explain, optimistic commentators will say that globalization and technological development gave people the means and opportunities to make their own choices about their lifestyle and relationships; negative views only see new forms of sexual exploitation and blame growing individualism for the loss of tradition and community. These divided point of views come up in debates around same-sex marriage, teenage sexuality, increasing rates of divorce, reproductive

rights, or sexual commerce, and can be applied to the topic of gay promiscuous sex in commercial venues. Sociologists note that these views, on one side of the other, are usually too extreme. Pessimistic thinkers tend to glorify a past of social unity and tradition that may not have existed in the way they imagine it; optimistic writers tend to praise the newfound freedoms but overlook new forms of power relations. Instead of generalizing about these changes, many sociologists propose to look at how different types of intimacies take shape for different groups of people. They ask us to pay attention to the different dimensions of intimacy and how they are at play at varying degrees in diverse models of intimacy.

## *2.2. The relation between sex, intimacy, and sociability*

Before arguing whether a practice like gay cruising is intimate or not, it is helpful to have a detailed definition of intimacy. Lynn Jamieson seems to be the sociologist who has scrutinized the notion most closely, offering an outline of the different dimensions of intimacy (1998:7–8). Basically, intimacy is any form of *close association* that involves *shared detailed knowledge* about the other. Sharing a home, raising a child, growing up with siblings, or aging with someone all involve the acquisition of *privileged knowledge* about the other that no one else has. This privileged bond with the person can be attained by simply living in proximity; spatial closeness can create emotional closeness. On top of *knowing* someone, *understanding* someone is another layer of intimacy, which involves communication and a more active attempt at connecting with the other. Being intimate with someone often involves deeply knowing the person and having detailed knowledge about his or her desires, emotions, and most private thoughts. Understanding

others, having empathy, feeling with them, and supporting them in their struggles can also be a requirement of intimacy. This privileged emotional connection then also involves *trust*, or the confidence that the other will respect this privileged connection and not use this private knowledge against him or her.

Intimacy also involves *loving*, *caring*, and *sharing*. Love is also a notion that means very different things to various people. Love between parent and child, between spouses, or between friends, for example, can represent different forms or degrees of love. Romantic love is an infatuation for a person, a desire to be with him or her, usually extending to physical connection through gestures of affection or sex (i.e., “lovemaking”). But *loving* can also mean caring for a person and being ready to put his or her interest above one’s own. Intimacy can thus also mean the assurance that someone will be there for you, *care* for you, and help you through the hardships of life. This dimension of intimacy can involve some form of commitment, which can also imply *sharing* in a more practical or material manner, like forming a household, providing for the family and children, and so forth.

Any one of these dimensions of intimacy varies in importance for different cultural models of intimacy. For example, deep understanding has become more important in modern relationships as practical sharing has become less relevant. In our not-too-distant past, intimacy revolved almost exclusively around the family. Intimate relations were more about the practical sharing and caring required to form a household and family than knowing and understanding the other. As long as both partners were comfortable enough with each other in the shared goal of creating a family, there was no need to pursue intimacy as a deep knowing of the

person's feelings and desires. Intimacy was about private life and relations, not so much about a deep connection between people fostered through communication. This model does not look like intimacy to most people today, as what Giddens called the "pure relationship" or Jamieson calls "disclosing intimacy" has become the dominant model.

In a culture that favors "disclosing intimacy," deeply knowing and understanding someone is the yardstick of intimacy. Being able to bond at an emotional level is a prerequisite before a couple can think about forming a household and family. Unions based on practical aspects rather than an emotional bond are now frowned upon—for example, arranged marriages, dating someone for the money, or parents staying together "for the kids." Displays of affection have become an important way to communicate intimacy and it extends beyond the couple. In the past, children were unlikely to see their parents display affection or receive it from them; nowadays, couples who are distant are suspected to not love each other, and parents who do not hug their children or tell them they love them are possibly bad parents. Disclosing intimacy also extends to friendship: close friends should develop knowledge of every facet of each other's inner selves through communication. People who prefer silent companionship or who are secretive are thought to have troubles with intimacy. (An important point in Jamieson's explanation of disclosing intimacy is that there is no evidence that a majority of people live their relationships according to that model, but only that it has become the standard or ideal of what intimacy should look like.)

The meaning of sex has changed along with models of intimacy. Sex-as-procreation was the norm among models of intimacy based on family building. Victorian values, for example, forbade the pursuit of sex for pleasure and frowned upon any sex act that could not lead to reproduction. Since then, the culture of disclosing intimacy has promoted the notion of sex-as-intimacy, but this one is now being challenged, as Bauman suggested, by the one of sex-as-recreation.

The connection of physicality and intimacy is, at the basic level, a side effect of close association. The boundaries between bodies normative in public interaction almost inevitably come down in the intimate space of the home. For example, if nudity and touching may be frowned upon in public life, they may be acceptable within a household, and even unavoidable for some aspects of intimate life, like caring for young children or ill family members. Intimacy thus involves privileged knowledge not only about others' psychology but about their physicality as well. Physical closeness—in and of itself—can thus also be a sign of intimacy or an entry into emotional closeness.

In the realm of disclosing intimacy, the degree of physical closeness between two individuals represents their level of intimacy. In the public realm, physical touching beyond a handshake is rare and often inappropriate or criminal. Hugs and accolades are more normative the closer you are with friends and family. Sexual relations are reserved for the most intimate relationship in one's life. Under the disclosing intimacy model, sex—breaking all the boundaries around bodies—is (or should be) the ultimate act of sharing personal knowledge, desires, emotions, and fantasies. Disclosing intimacy also favors monogamy, suggesting people should only



have sex with the person they are the most intimate with. Sex should not be about individual gratification but about connecting with the other at an emotional level. This model promotes sex-as-intimacy but also intimacy-as-sex, meaning that couples who are sexually active share a great intimacy, while those who do not have sex have obstacles to their intimate connection. Although sex is a powerful way to create intimacy in the couple, it is inappropriate in other forms of close relations: sex between friends, for example, can ruin a friendship; and, of course, sex with family members is the ultimate taboo. The fusion of sex-intimacy has made sex acts that are not for intimacy either wrong or just lesser forms of sexuality.

Although disclosing intimacy (and its inherent valuation of sex-as-intimacy) is becoming the dominant view of intimacy, sex-as-recreation has been a competing notion. People used to get married in early adulthood, often with partners they had little say in choosing, but nowadays youth is a phase of romantic exploration. It has become accepted and almost a norm to try dating different people before settling down with one partner. These romantic explorations have led to the rise, in the mid-twentieth century, of a culture of recreational dating connected with consumption and the entertainment industry (D'Emilio and Estelle 1997). Later in the twentieth century, sexual exploration has also become increasingly accepted, and it is tolerated for young adults to experiment with their sexuality before becoming monogamous. Although it may worry a lot of people in their parent's generation, having a "hooking up" phase is normal among younger cohorts (Bogle 2008). Even within the connubial tie, sex is not only a means of procreation or of intimacy building, but an activity for pleasure and fun. Sex has become "recreational" for a lot

of adults (Laumann et al. 1994); it is a pleasurable aspect of life, which is also tied to consumption of goods (e.g., lingerie, adult toys, etc.) or entertainment and services (e.g., pornography, erotic shows, prostitution, and so forth). Being able to fulfill various sexual desires through experiences and adventures has become one factor of personal satisfaction and happiness.

Recreational sex is often seen as not intimate, but this is not necessarily the case. Intimacy has also been co-opted by commerce and the service industry. For example, going on dates has become a practice that blends leisure and intimacy, and different industries have capitalized on that. According to Elizabeth Bernstein, the recreational ethic of sex and intimacy has allowed the escort industry to blossom. This industry replaces older models of prostitution that exchanged money for sex acts by now offering the “girlfriend/boyfriend experience” by the hour. Such services cater to a need for “bounded intimacy” (Bernstein 2007). This type of intimate arrangement is modeled after disclosing intimacy and involves a feeling of deep connection between client and partner and sex-as-intimacy; however, it is bounded by a transaction agreement instead of being part of a personal commitment. “Bounded” intimate relationships can be short-lived but can also last a long time, as long as it is clearly delineated from certain dimensions of people’s lives (e.g., partners may enjoy their intimacy during their shared leisure time, but otherwise live separate lives). Recreational forms of sex are thus not necessarily devoid of intimacy but part of intimate arrangements that do not permeate all aspects of the individuals’ lives.

Recreational sex and bounded intimacy may replace more stable forms of disclosing intimacy because they are better adapted to our current neoliberal, post-industrial, globalized world (Bernstein 2007). For a lot of people today, the demands of professional work require them to be able to move, change jobs, and reorganize their personal lives constantly, which favors an individually centered lifestyle. As long-term relationships, stable nuclear families, and local communities may become difficult to maintain, people turn to temporary and flexible forms of intimacy and sociability. These trends explain why several men—according to Bernstein—turned to the companionship services of escorts. In Chapter 1, I explain how the new gay commercial sex venues also increasingly cater to the specific needs of intimacy and sociability created by our current political economy.

We are at a moment where the cultural models of sex-as-intimacy and sex-as-recreation are competing, leaving individuals with contradictory messages about how to go about their private lives. Although adults are encouraged to explore their sexuality, and although an area of popular culture presents sexual adventurousness and prowess as achievements, other forms of discourse promote intimate relationships as the only appropriate context for sex. Men are split between, on the one side, following the masculine or “macho” stereotype of sexuality and seek sexual gratification without letting their emotions get in the way or, on the other, a discourse that tells them to avoid this superficial or abusive form of sexuality and learn to nurture deeper intimacy with partners. It is not only moralists who frown on recreational sex, but also the therapeutic field that diagnoses sex addiction as a trouble of intimacy (Bernstein 2007; Giddens 1992; Irvine 1993; Jamieson 1998).

The possibility of seeking sex in itself for pleasure has also created the possibility that sex becomes a compulsion. Therapy groups for sexual addiction and compulsion have been multiplying in recent times and their cure is disclosing intimacy: to nurture relationships based on deep knowledge of oneself and the other. Stories of gay men leaving a promiscuous lifestyle and learning to foster sustained intimate relationships have been a trend (Plummer 1994), and gay cruisers are often labeled as sex addicts. Although recreational sex practices can occur at places to find bounded intimacy, few people recognized the possibility to be intimate outside of a stable relationship and disclosing intimacy in the form of a committed relationship remains the norm.

Changes in the dominant model of intimacy are also changes in the purpose of sociability and community. In past models where intimacy was a building block of family and almost equated to privacy, local communities were the place for socialization. The increase in individualism (and the same forces that brought the rise of disclosing intimacy) has led to the loss of traditional community (Bellah et al. 2007). People prefer close relationships that are based on deep, self-affirming connections. Groups of close friends replaced extended families, and local communities have been replaced by social networks based on specialized interests (Jamieson 1998). The model of disclosing intimacy, however, limits the number of people one can be close to. In a model where ties were based on social conventions, people could feel close to almost everyone in their extended family and community because these bonds did not require deep intimate knowledge of the other. In a model where the quality of a relationship is based on the amount of privileged

knowledge you have of the other, relationships become more exclusive and take more time to foster. In the realm of disclosing intimacy, relationships are ranked and individuals usually have only a few people to whom they are closely connected, and then a larger network of acquaintances who are interchangeable and not very close. The rising model of bounded intimacy could, by taking intimacy outside of the domestic cocoon, create new forms of social relations that mix sociability and intimacy.

Gays and lesbians have been known to challenge the boundaries between sex, intimacy, and sociability more typical of disclosing intimacy. First, gay people have fostered different kinds of familial relations. Because gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people have often had to leave their home communities and birth families because of homophobia, they have created new forms of kinship relations in urban LGBT communities, what some have called “chosen families” (Weston 1997). LGBT people have also not maintained strict boundaries between romantic relationships and friendships. Among gays and lesbians, close friendships often arose from a past sexual or romantic relation, and sometimes many people in a clique of friends share a sexual past. The shift from a sexual relationship to a platonic friendship or vice versa is less of a problem for gays and lesbians than in the heterosexual population (Jamieson 1998). Gay men (who have been less likely to raise children) have also been more likely to have longer, more enduring friendships with one another, which have been the building blocks of community and social movements (Nardi 1999). LGBT people have thus been used to being in

communities where they share more intimate bonds with one another than what is typical among the heterosexual population.

Gay men have also been better able to disconnect sex from a closely intimate relationship. They have put less importance in sexual monogamy in a romantic relationship and have experimented with several kinds of “open” relationships where partners are free, to various degrees, to sexually explore outside a core relationship. Research shows that some gay men in relationships are able to explore the places of sexual recreation offered by urban environments without compromising their commitment to intimate partners (Adam 2010). Gay men often make a distinction between sex-as-love and sex-as-play, and are able to enjoy both while in a relationship. Their evaluation of a committed relationship is often based on integrity and responsibility rather than a strict insistence on sexual exclusivity (Stacey 2011). Finally, gay culture has seen the development of several highly specialized sexual subcultures (e.g., Leather/BDSM, Bears, Radical Faeries) that create networks of people who share a specific sexual interest or identity. These subcultures often have large community gatherings and participants interact with each other in ways that blend sex, intimacy, and sociability (Hennen 2008; Rubin 1991). Although the literature above tells us that gay men have had creative ways to blend sex, intimacy, and sociability, there has not been a systematic account of the specific ways in which they do so, and gay men’s intimate models remain somewhat confounding.

Looking back at the literature reviewed in this section, we are left with different hypothetical models of how a practice like gay cruising can merge sex, intimacy, and sociability, or not.

1. Cruising is neither intimate nor sociable. Cruising is a purely sexual practice that is completely alienated from any form of intimate or sociable relation.
2. Cruising can be intimate but not sociable. Cruising is a predominantly sexual practice, but it can lead to the emergence of an intimate relationship that will evolve outside of cruising (e.g., cruisers can find an intimate partner in sex venues and develop a relationship outside).
3. Cruising is a sociable but not intimate practice. Gay cruisers can have sexual friendships in sexual communities, but they mostly find intimacy in relationships that are lived outside of cruising.
4. Cruising is a sociable and intimate practice. Gay cruisers form intimate communities that could make private intimate relationships obsolete.

One goal of this study is to find what model of sex-intimacy-sociability is typical among people who frequent private sex parties in NYC today. The other question is how do specific models of sex-intimacy-sociability take shape and what makes people adopt one or another model as their own?

### 3. *Why do gay men cruise?*

Cruising provides gay men with different ways of mixing sex, intimacy, and sociability. The ways in which gay men have had sexuality in community has posed problems to the public health, and authorities have tried to implement interventions

with the goal of directing gay men towards more traditional models of sex and intimacy. As the popularity of underground private sex parties in NYC today shows, these interventions have been unsuccessful and gay cruising has remained popular in the face of forces that tried to discourage it. The resilience of gay cruising brings us to the simple question of, “why do gay men cruise?” More specifically, why do more gay men seek out collective forms of sexuality than people of other gender or sexual identity? Why are gay men more likely to live along different models of sex-intimacy-sociability than the majority of the population? Scholars have had different theories to explain gay men’s sexual behavior, and Arlene Stein’s models of drives, identities, and desires (Stein 1989) provide a helpful categorization of these responses.

### *3.1. Because they are wired to do so*

The drive model of sexuality has been popular because of its great explanatory power, especially in the face of sexual behavior that seems irrational. It may be hard to understand why gay men keep engaging in group sex behavior with strangers in the age of HIV/AIDS; that they are “wired to do so” is probably the simplest explanation. The idea that sexual behavior is simple obedience to deeply rooted impulses is supported by biological explanations of sexual instincts or by the psychoanalytic view of sexual drives ingrained into the human psyche.

Naturalist explanations would say that gay men cruise because biology pushes them to do so. Evolutionary theories claim that males seek to have as much sex as they can with as many partners as they can in order to ensure that the species line keeps going. On the other hand, females look for mates that will be able to



provide for their offspring and stick around with them (Buss 1989; Saad 2011; Symons 1987). Under this model, it is in men's nature to seek out promiscuous sex, and gay men having group sex are only following their instincts. This idea of the animalistic aspect of male sexuality is often deployed to explain why gay men have a hard time avoiding risky sexual behavior. Evolutionary explanations have been extremely popular in lay discourse to explain human sexual behavior (Lancaster 2003) and people often explain their sexuality along those lines (some of the participants of this study included, as we will see later). However, they do not account for the diversity in sexual behavior or the possibility for change throughout one's life; evolutionary psychology cannot explain why some gay men are not interested in group sex or may be interested in the practice only at some point in their life. Evolutionary explanations of sexual behavior are, as sociologists have said, "an example of an unwillingness to live with the existential and changing nature of men and women at an individual and collective level" (Gagnon and Simon 2011:2).

Psychoanalytic theory has been better able at accounting for the great diversity of human sexual behavior while also presenting it as a deeply-rooted drive. Although psychoanalysts like Freud also believed in the existence of a natural sexual instinct, he saw it to be much less defined than evolutionary theorists do. Society and culture had the power to shape the sexual drive, especially in early childhood, by inculcating in the individual norms and values about sexuality (Freud 2000). For Freud, the natural sexual instinct had no boundaries, was antisocial, and could even be dangerous or destructive; society was responsible for determining the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Freud 1989). Also,

because the innate sex drive is antisocial and not relational, it is in society's advantage to shape desires of intimacy to establish relations that will be the building blocks of society. Because it is shaped in early childhood, the sexual drive feels as though it is natural and innate, although it is acquired. What is common among biological, psychoanalytic, and also some early functionalist sociological explanation of sexuality is that sexual drives preexist society, and society then "shapes, structures, and constrains" sexuality (Stein 1989:5).

Drives theory of sexuality justify the kind of top-down interventions on sexual behavior like those in New York. In this view, gay men who keep seeking out group sex in the heights of the AIDS epidemic simply obey natural sexual drives that are hard to resist and that have not yet been properly channeled by society. It is, therefore, society's responsibility to redirect this sexual drive toward safer outlets. By taking away the places where gay men have promiscuous sex, the logic would be that these men would simply be constrained to seek out sex in safer places, that is, at home where they are less likely to engage with multiple unknown partners. Top-down interventions on sexuality have, however, rarely been successful (other cases than the closing of commercial sex venues are anti-prostitution laws or neo-Malthusian interventions to control the reproduction of certain social groups). Based on sexual drive models of sexuality, they fail to account for individuals' agency to shape their own sexual identity and for the possibility of sexual desires to be constantly reshaped throughout the life course.

### *3.2. Because they were socialized to do so*

Sociologists from the symbolic interactionist tradition, by showing how sexuality is shaped through human interaction, have given us better ways to explain the diverse and changing nature of sexual practices. Sociologists like John Gagnon and William Simon have worked to “describe and theorize the processes by which sexual meanings are negotiated through interaction” (Stein 1989:6). According to their model, “cultural scenarios” provide a template for acceptable sexual behavior, which can then be applied or negotiated in interaction. Continued interaction leads to “interpersonal scripts” along which people base their routine behavior. Although patterns of sexual behavior are learned through culture and interaction, they are internalized by individuals as “intrapsychic scripts” that determine their feelings of attraction or arousal in specific situations (Simon and Gagnon 1987). These intrapsychic scripts explain why sexuality feels instinctual despite being a result of socialization. Simon and Gagnon also suggest that evolutionary explanations reinforce this “blindness” to the scripted nature of sexuality “because the notion of such a biological mandate is a common element within the sexual scripts of Western societies” (Gagnon and Simon 2011:13).

Through daily experiences throughout their lives, people learn sexual scripts that inform behavior. As they navigate different constraints in daily life, people take part in creating new scripts, modifying old ones, and adapting their lifestyle and identities along them.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, gay men cruise because they are socialized into doing so before and after their entry into homosexual culture.

Although gay cruising is not the result of some natural aspect of human male sexuality, it partly takes its roots in dominant cultural messages about the nature of male sexuality: “For Gagnon and Simon, the cult of casual sexual encounters in gay culture is the legacy of men’s socialization into obsession with sex without the modifying influence of women seeking romantic relationships” (Jamieson 1998:121). Yet, as sociologists of deviance, Simon and Gagnon put more importance into what gay people learn after they have begun their “career” as homosexuals:

“[T]he kind of life led after entering a career of deviance may be more influential in shaping the person’s behavior than any of the etiological characteristics that brought him to the point of committing the act or acts in the first place.” (Gagnon and Simon 1967:6)

The kind of life they refer to does not only refer to learning about gay sexual scripts by interacting in the gay community. Gagnon and Simon suggest that the gay sexual lifestyle is largely determined by how homosexual men cater to the problems resulting from “being a member of society” and navigate work, social life, or family relations. For example, the fear of legal or moral reprisal for being a homosexual is what led many gay men to develop sexual scripts involving public and commercial places: “This sense of fear and anxiety about the consequence of exposure penetrates very deeply into homosexual lifestyles, with about 30 percent reporting that they have never had sex in their own homes” (Gagnon and Simon 2011:106). Gagnon and Simon also thought that anonymous sex had been a strategy for homosexual and bisexual men to protect their privacy by maintaining boundaries between their personal life and their sexual behavior:

In an attempt to show a basically conventional façade to the world, some homosexual men become overconformists in all other aspects of life. But at the same time, their sexual activities are performed in bus stations, public

toilets, and public parks. In this sense, the sexual life remains unsocialized and invulnerable to the emotional attachments and affections that serve as stabilizing forces for the personality of the individual. (Gagnon and Simon 2011:121)

Although Simon and Gagnon initially saw anonymous cruising as a way for non-gay-identified men to resist being socialized into the gay world, they later understood that it could also be a means of socialization into gay culture. In the 2005 supplement to *Sexual Conduct*, they suggested that many gay men, after taking on the label or coming out as gay, went through “a period of heightened sexual activity” (2011:251) in the process of learning the ways of the gay community. Sex venues provided a space where gay men could quickly acquire practical knowledge of local sexual scripts by having a large number of sexual partners. Simon and Gagnon also pointed out that men who wanted to join the gay lifestyle had little choice but to patronize urban gay neighborhoods and establishments like gay bars and sex venues where they would learn some of the scripts about group sex in public. According to this perspective, gay men are thus led into cruising as they try to navigate their social life.

Contrary to “drive” models of sexuality that thought the overarching force of society could shape individual behavior, symbolic interactionism thinks individuals have some agency in shaping their sexual lifestyle. Accordingly, Simon and Gagnon critiqued the “control-repression” model of sexuality (1973:216). They also observed that many of the “top-down” interventions following the onset of the AIDS epidemic had been “ineffective,” if not “entirely misguided” (267). They thought that any observed change in gay men’s sexual behavior after the onset of AIDS happened from the ground up, as gay men had to find solutions around their concern about

STIs. Gagnon and Simon were criticized, however, for giving too much agency to the individual and not accounting more for the macro-determination of sexual scripts and the unconscious development of individual sexual desire (Stein 1989:8). These aspects of sexuality would be developed by Foucault and queer theory.

### *3.3. Because the practice has been overdetermined by history*

The post-structuralist theory of sexuality proposed by Foucault emphasized the connection of sexuality with broad historical factors and ideology. For Foucault, there is no sexuality that exists outside of culture. Social norms do not keep sexual drives in check; rather, “sexuality is constructed through the operation of social norms” (Stein 1989:9). Because sexuality is created through discourse, it is a product of power, and the group in power at any one point will try to shape sexual meanings along its interests (which explains, for example, the marginalization of certain forms of sexuality). Because power is diffuse and exists in all forms of discourse, it cannot be controlled by anyone, leaving little possibility for individuals to make choices with complete freedom (Foucault 1993). For Foucault, a pattern of sexual behavior is best explained through an historical analysis of the multiple factors that shaped it (Foucault 1976). Although the connection of sexuality with history, power relations, and ideology has been extremely influential in studies of sexuality (Berlant and Warner 1998; Rubin 2007; Warner 1999), the post-structuralist model of sexuality has not been highly influential in lay discourse because it cannot easily explain individual behavior.

Foucault’s explanation of gay cruising is not entirely different from Simon and Gagnon’s but he looks further back into history than the sociologists do, these

ones paying more attention to the contemporary context in which gay men evolved. Foucault also makes it clear that the reason why gay men have more opportunities for sex is not a natural condition of homosexuality. Yet, men are assumed to have a greater need for sex than women because they have historically had more freedom to seek out sex. Institutions like brothels and Roman baths appeared long ago to cater to this sexual demand from men. Homosexuals “benefited” from these institutions and eventually could create their own, to the point where gay men could have even more sexual freedom than straight people (O’Higgins and Foucault 1982:15). Foucault said that gay men’s practice of sex outside an intimate relationship takes root in the establishment of Christian culture. Because homosexuality was forbidden, homosexuals could not develop a courtship system like heterosexuals did. Homosexual acts had to be negotiated through small gestures and agreed to in a split-second decision. The speed at which homosexual sexual relations often happen is thus rooted in this history.

The development of gay sexual subcultures and establishments catering to them is the result of this historical focus of gay men on the sexual act. Because gay men did not have a culture of courtship, all the focus was put on the sexual act itself, motivating a need to explore all the possibilities of sexual conduct. Foucault thinks sex clubs have been created as laboratories of sexual experimentation in order to create variety in a culture strictly based on sex devoid of courtship (O’Higgins and Foucault 1982:20). An important aspect of Foucault’s perspective is that sexual subcultures do not uncover a “pure” sexual instinct hidden under layers of social

norms, but create new practices and desires (Foucault, Gallagher, and Wilson 1998:165).

Foucault's perspective on sexuality is the basis of the queer studies' critiques discussed earlier in this Introduction. He thought that practices like gay cruising disturbed non-gay people because it showed ways of loving and relating that posed a threat to normative codes on which many contemporary institutions are based. He says that what disturbed straight people was:

[T]he common fear that gays will develop relationships that are intense and satisfying even though they do not at all conform to the ideas of relationship held by others. It is the prospect that gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate. (O'Higgins and Foucault 1982:22)

Foucault would thus agree that interventions aimed at stopping gay cruising are a result of the interconnections of sexuality and power. He would agree with Simon and Gagnon that interventions can do little to change sexual behavior; however, he would also would not believe that individuals have control over practices. Foucault suggested that the only way to resist sexual power was to constantly explore and invent relations without a program other than showing the arbitrariness of conventions (Foucault et al. 1981).

The symbolic interactionist and post-structuralist perspectives on sexualities are not incompatible and come together in a social constructionist view of sexuality. Foucault and Simon and Gagnon all see gay cruising as a practice that is not determined by some biological aspect of male homosexuality but as something that took shape along social and cultural factors. Their approach differs on the level of their analysis. Foucault puts the emphasis on larger historical factors, for example,



when he traces the contemporary practice of cruising back to the establishment of Christianity. Simon and Gagnon prefer to look at the daily struggles of gay men, for example, showing how the fear of being publically known as gay directs some men toward anonymous sexual encounters. The two approaches come together if we look at the chain of connection between history, culture, institutions, laws, organizations, interaction, and intra-individual aspects in order to understand a practice.

This study looks at a large range of factors that inform the contemporary practice of gay male private sex parties in NYC. Chapter 1 looks at the history of gay cruising culture and its spaces in order to explain how today's laws and attitudes took shape. Chapter 2 reviews empirical research in places of gay cruising and makes a typology of cruising venues and of their norms of interaction. Chapter 3 looks at how laws and other material constraints have given shape to the current landscape of gay group sex in NYC, and Chapter 4 further explains how this context influences the work of organizers of commercial sex venues. Chapter 4 looks at how the organization of today's commercial sex venues in NYC shape specific patterns of interaction within them. Finally, Chapter 6 looks at how patrons of these venues understand their behavior and how participating in these events responds to their desires for sexuality, intimacy, and sociability.

Foucault	{	History	Chapter 1
		Culture	Chapter 2
		Institutions	Chapter 3
Gagnon & Simon	{	Laws	Chapter 4
		Organizations	Chapter 5
		Interaction	Chapter 6
		Subjectivity	

Figure 1. Levels of analysis and plan of the study.

#### 4. *How have we studied cruising?*

Methodologies to study gay cruising have varied along with the perspectives on sexuality of the discipline. Public health studies have generally use quantitative methods to come up with generalizable arguments about the sexual behavior of “men who have sex with men.” Symbolic interactionist studies have preferred ethnographic methods to describe the norms of interactions of cruisers. Queer studies approaches have analyzed the culture of gay cruising looking at a broad range of discourse.

The Chicago School tradition of sociology made place for ethnographic studies of sexualities. Sociologists of deviance in the mid-twentieth century were among the first to break from naturalistic or psychoanalytic approaches that were mainly concerned about discovering the etiology of homosexuality. Instead, they interacted with sexual communities in large cities to understand how their norms and identities took shape through interaction. Earlier studies were about gay and lesbians communities (Heap 2003; Rubin 2002), but the tradition eventually also led to ethnographic studies of homosexual sex in public environments and commercial places. Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, several sociologists turned their

look to sexual activity in public toilets, parking lots or highway rest areas, gay bathhouses, and sex clubs (Corzine and Kirby 1977; Delph 1978; Humphreys 1975; Ponte 1974; Troiden 1974; Weinberg and Williams 1975). Laud Humphreys' study of public toilets created a huge controversy because he had collected private identifiable information about the men he saw having sex in bathrooms without their informed consent. His study is now referred to as an example of unethical methods in training about research using human subjects, and although the problematic aspects of his study were not about the observation but about the illegal collection of identifiers, it has led to increased scrutiny of studies of sexuality using qualitative methods. Since the 1970s, the requirements of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) have increased and made it difficult for sociological studies of sexuality to be approved (Irvine 2012). Consequently, the study of sexuality has moved either to the side of public health surveys (which make it easier to preserve anonymity) or to the field of queer studies (which uses texts more often than data collected from people).

The AIDS epidemic has called for research to understand the sexual behavior of gay men in order to create public health interventions aimed at reducing the risks taken by this population. With the goal of finding generalizable knowledge about sexual behavior, public health research on gay sex has tended to decontextualize sex from its cultural meanings and the broader structural factors shaping them (Dowsett 2009). The outcome of most of these studies is to find out whether people have protected sex or not, how often, and with how many people, and to find out what individual, demographic, or psychosocial factors are associated with such

behavior. In concordance with a simplistic “drive” model of sexuality, people’s desires are seen as naturally uniform but modified by psychological or social circumstances, which interventions could rectify. As Gary W. Dowsett (2009) suggests, the positivist proclivity of such research is exemplified by its choice to use the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM) to include every such man regardless of his subjective identity as gay, bisexual, queer, straight, and so forth. Working towards generalizability, studies of MSM’s behavior overlook how sexual practices could be informed by self-identity and subjective belonging to cultural or subcultural groups. The sexual behavior public health researchers look at is also too often limited to a simply binary distinction between protected and unprotected sex, overlooking the multitude of acts people engage in and the diverse meanings they can attach to those. Intervention-based studies could benefit from a greater attention to local context and cultures: “Local assessments of how epidemics shift are needed rather than universalizing frameworks” (Dowsett 2009:221). For example, the context that led to the proliferation of private sex parties in NYC is unique to this locale, and trying to abstract the behavior of their participants from the local context is unlikely to yield relevant interventions. The nomothetic approaches to sexuality studies are thus very limited when looking at non-normative practices that do not easily fall into measurable categories and when studying marginal, hard-to-find populations.

At the other end of the spectrum, sexuality studies have gone to the field of queer studies. Following Foucault who proposed that sexuality was the product of diffuse forms of power present in multiple layers of discourse, queer scholars have

explained sexual cultures, practices, and identities in connection with a broad range of historical, political, and cultural factors. Because power makes its way into individual behavior in usually unexpected ways, queer scholars have preferred to analyze a broad range of texts (e.g., literature, media, popular culture, etc.) rather than using the typical methods of data collection of the social sciences.

Although queer studies texts provide a thorough discussion of the different forms of discourse that inform the practice of gay cruising (Dean 2009; Gove 2000; Muñoz 2009), they do not tell us about how people navigate the practice, and even risk ascribing meanings to cruisers' behaviors. A tendency has been to see broad political implications in queer sexual subcultures where, in fact, participants seem to act along much more mundane intentions. For example, even though scholars had talked about the gay Bear subculture as a radical engagement with naturalistic views on sex and gender, Peter Hennen, by studying this subculture ethnographically, found out that these men understood themselves as "responding to nonpolitical cues" and had a very essentialist view of sex and gender (2005, 2008:23). Closer to the topic of this study, Tim Dean, looking at the phenomenon of bareback sex parties, suggested that gay men had created kinship relations based on transmitting the virus (2008, 2009). However, there is no evidence that gay men who chose to have condomless sex do so to form familial relations, and my conversations with such men in the field revealed that they had much more practical reasons to prefer bareback sex. Queer studies approaches to sexuality are helpful to identify the broad factors that may overdetermine sexual practices, but they leave

too little space to account for how practices take shape at the ground level of individuals interacting along structural constraints.

Working somewhere between the positivist empirical approaches of public health and sexology on one side and the overdeterminism of queer studies on the other, sociologists of sexuality have had a hard time finding an audience from either side. Queer scholars have been especially critical of any type of sex research that wants to argue for the importance of collecting empirical data from people. This suspicion is partly motivated by the need to move studies of LGBT people away from the scientists who have seen homosexuality as a problem that needed to be fixed. However, queer scholars' reluctance to studying people has led to "a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore 'real' queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of texts" (Stein and Plummer 1994:184). In response, sociologists who have proposed we pay more attention to the lived experiences of people have been accused of empiricism:

In an effort to restore sociology to its proper place within the study of sexuality, Stein and Plummer have reinvested here in a clear and verifiable difference between the real and the textual, and they designate textual analysis as a totally insular activity with no referent, no material consequences, and no intellectual gain. (Halberstam 1998:12, quoted in Hennen 2008:15)

Empirical studies of sexuality trying to provide an idiographic explanation of sexual practices have thus not been popular among either fields of public health or queer studies.

Understanding how the specific context surrounding gay cruising in NYC has affected the ways in which private sex party participants conceive of sex, intimacy,

and sociability requires a methodology that will pay close attention to the lived experiences of the people concerned. A survey study would require to predetermine hypotheses about what we would find instead of truly learning from the field. Textual analysis would not give us a reliable insight into what participants truly do and think. A return to the ethnographic methods used by sociologists of deviance in the past is called for. However, past ethnographers of cruising had only explained sexual interaction in their contemporary context, and since then, we have learned from Foucault that it is relevant to situate that context within broader history and other forms of cultural discourse that inform it. The following chapter does that by situating today's private sex parties in NYC within the history of gay cruising, and within other contemporary social, cultural, political, and economical factors that create the context in which they take place.

## CHAPTER 1 – Contextualizing Gay Cruising: The Trajectory of Gay Group Sex in NYC from the Late 1800s to Today

The practice of gay cruising blends sex, intimacy, and sociability in ways that go against normative models of relating in the dominant culture. Different forms of gay cruising have used different configurations of sex-intimacy-sociability that have made it difficult for observers to understand what the practice is. For example, gay cruising is often interpreted as one of two extremes: completely anonymous sex that has no components of intimacy or sociability, or group sex where all participants share some bond like communal love. The fact is that the practice of gay cruising has taken very different shapes at different points in time and in different places. Gay cruising as it is done in today's private sex parties in NYC is thus highly contingent, and the ways in which NYC sex-party-goers mix sex, intimacy, and sociability is specific to this place and time. Nevertheless, contemporary practices of cruising have taken shape through the long history of gay cruising, a trajectory I trace in this chapter. One goal of this dissertation is to understand the practices of sex-intimacy-sociability of today's gay cruisers; this chapter will look at practices of the past, leaving the extensive description of today's practices for later.

The other goal of this study is to explain how a practice like gay cruising takes shape and changes. This chapter explains the evolution of gay cruising by looking at broad societal factors that have influenced the practice in the past and



still do today. In a Foucauldian manner, this explanation makes it clear that there is no natural form of sex-intimacy-sociability and no definite path towards which the practice is evolving. Some people would say that gay group sex is a natural expression of male sexuality liberated from societal constraints that repressed desires. Others would say that cruising is only a temporary phase in gay culture that should become irrelevant now that gays and lesbians have access to more normative forms of sex-intimacy. However, there is no clear path toward which practices of sex-intimacy-sociality are evolving (for gay men and everyone else). Practices adapt to constantly changing constraints in ways that are hardly predictable. As I go through this short history of gay cruising, I identify a series of factors that have been most influential in giving shape to different forms of gay cruising in the past and today. They are:

1. Legal factors: anti-sodomy laws, marriage law, and the laws and regulations about sex in public and commercial establishments.
2. Material and economic factors: urbanization, the creation and dismantlement of public space and commercial venues, gentrification of post-industrial cities, development of the entertainment and service industries.
3. Political factors, especially the evolution of gay social movements.
4. Sociocultural: attitudinal changes towards sexuality and homosexuality.
5. Biomedical: changing perspectives on homosexuality in the medical fields; appearance of new sexually transmitted infections (STI), mainly HIV/AIDS, and the development of their treatment.

Changes along these factors have taken the practice of gay cruising through different phases. The first one is when gay cruising was a way to find privacy in public. When homosexuality was illegal, gay men could not live their sexuality in the privacy of the home, so they had to seek each other out in the clandestine gay places that were appearing in growing urban areas. This phase could be loosely bounded between the late nineteenth century and the emergence of gay liberations movements in the late 1960s. Then, and especially after the Stonewall riots of 1969, gay cruising enters a second phase by coming out of the underground and becoming a form of gay publicity—a way to challenge the status quo by bringing public awareness to non-normative sexualities. This period ends sharply with the onset of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. In the third phase, gay cruising becomes a public health problem and the practice becomes marginalized by a growing number of gay people who choose to turn to more traditional models of sex-intimacy. As we are getting near the end of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and as LGBT people are enjoying increased tolerance, gay cruising is entering a fourth phase. The rise of the commercialized sex entertainment industry is starting the privatization of gay cruising. The private sex parties of NYC today are a product of the third phase of gay cruising as a public health problem and are part of a shift to the fourth phase of the privatization of cruising.

Table 1 shows how different factors have been at play during these four phases. Although this history centers on NYC, its main points can be extended to North America, Western Europe, or other so-called Western societies, and the last phase includes some global trends. Also, these phases are not as discrete as it may

seem from the way I present them, which is for the sake of clarity. Indeed, there may still be forms of cruising as “privacy in public” occurring concurrently with commercialized forms of sexual recreation.

1. *Sodomy and the city: gay cruising at the turn of the twentieth century*

The illegality of homosexuality was a driving factor in the formation of the gay cruising culture.<sup>1</sup> In the Victorian era and during the largest part of the twentieth century, sodomy laws were in place and enforced in most European and North-American legislatures. Homosexual relations—either in private or public—were considered a felony and punishable by imprisonment. Sharing your bed with a partner of the same sex was extremely risky because neighbors or family could—and often did—report people they knew or suspected to be homosexual to authorities (Bérubé 2003; Chauncey 1994). The home was not a safe space for

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<sup>1</sup> I use “gay cruising” throughout this chapter and dissertation to refer to the practice of men looking for male sex partners in public or commercial places. Today, the term is commonly understood and still used by gay and straight people to refer to any form of looking for sex partners; online cruising, for example, is a popular term to refer to the use of websites and phone applications to look for casual hookups. This chapter, however, focuses on cruising in places where men physically encounter one another and where sex is often done in groups or in the co-presence of others. This practice has often been referred to as “public sex,” but the term is misleading since a lot of it is not actually done in public places, but in commercial and private spaces.

Initially, “gay” was also a code word to inconspicuously designate men who were exclusively attracted to men and the places they gathered, but since the 1940s, it took its current meaning as an umbrella term for most things relating to homosexuality. My discussion of the *gay* cruising culture below certainly includes a lot of men who were not or did not identify as gay; however, the sites and practices described have been widely connected to gay culture by observers and by gay men.

sexualities that deviated from the Victorian values of marriage and procreation, so people looking for other types of sex had to turn to public environments in growing cities, like alleys, public parks, or public toilets.

Public places were also the only available and affordable places for a lot of people to find a moment of privacy. Few people had access to a truly private space: women and young men typically lived with family, and single men often lived in cramped quarters. Public environments were also the only affordable place to a lot of men who did not have the means to go to bars, to rent a hotel room, or to rent or own their own living space. Male streetwalking became a common practice; if “flaneurs” walked the streets aimlessly, “cruisers” did so to connect with strangers (Turner 2003). According to Chauncey (1994), “to cruise” was commonly used by gay men by at least the 1920s to refer to the act of looking for male sex partners in public or commercial grounds. The term was used as a code word by men so that if they asked “where’s a good place to cruise” to someone who was not in the know, this person would not notice the phrase’s sexual meaning. Public spaces were thus easily accessible and relatively safe and inconspicuous places for men to meet one another.

With the rapid urbanization of the late nineteenth century, many types of “deviants” (as sociologists then called them) were able to take advantage of certain areas of the city. Early urban ethnographers documented how the nature of the city and the routine activities of people allowed for zones to emerge where marginal cultures could take shape (Heap 2003; Rubin 2002). For example, areas close to piers were often frequented by female prostitutes and gay men looking for the

attention of sailors passing through the city. Sexual zones like red-light districts or certain parks at night were often shared by homosexual cruisers and prostitutes, the two almost competing for the attention of transient men looking for sex (Chauncey 1994). The gendered aspect of these sexual zones stemmed from Victorian values, which reserved the public sphere to men and relegated women to the private sphere (Mumford 1997). A woman roaming the streets alone, without the company of a husband or father, was considered morally corrupt and a prostitute. Although both prostitutes and male sodomites were social evils of the times, social reformers were putting more effort into combating prostitution (Gilfoyle 1994). With greater access to the city, men were better able to use urban areas in creative ways to find one another for sex, explaining how cruising culture originated as a predominantly gay male phenomenon.

Urban development created new public places that ended up being sites where the gay cruising culture could flourish. One of these places was the public park, created by city organizers to offer residents a place to relax and enjoy a respite from the tumult of city life. Providing places to sit down or wandering around, alone or in groups, parks were a good place for gay men to congregate or inconspicuously look for sex partners. In New York City, by the 1920s, the largest parks of Manhattan and Brooklyn were all popular gay spots (Chauncey 1994). These parks were important places of sociability for the emergent gay community: very large crowds of men could gather in specific areas and times of the day. They were also commonly used for cruising: strolling in the park, men could find sex partners to take to another place or, especially after dark, to a secluded area of the park. Parks were

often a point of entry into the clandestine gay world; a newcomer to the city could not easily find a clandestine gay establishment, but going to the parks was an easy way to find gay men to connect with.

The development of commercial areas and transportation hubs also provided spaces that gay men used for cruising. Commercial centers and malls and the shopping culture that appeared with them made it acceptable to roam around in certain neighborhoods, and the streets became a place for gay men to find one another. Also, in the late nineteenth century, large cities began building “comfort stations” (public bathrooms) in parks and major intersections in order to provide a place for people to relieve themselves other than bars and saloons. In NYC, the development of the subway system in the early 1900s also added public bathrooms in busy commuting areas. Public bathrooms, known as “tearooms” by gay men, provided an inconspicuous place for furtive homosexual activity. Records of a large wave of police arrests in NYC’s public bathrooms in 1896 show that they were a popular place of homosexual sex early on (Chauncey 1994).

Urbanization also brought new types of establishments that would become meeting grounds for gay men, like men’s housing and gymnasiums. In response to the depravation they saw in hotels and temporary residences, the founders of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) began building, in the late nineteenth century, dormitories and gymnasiums in large cities for single men traveling for work or immigrating. Contrary to what their organizers had in mind, by World War I, YMCAs were widely known by gay men to be a center of sex and social life (Chauncey 1994). Young men could socialize in the cafeteria or reading rooms and

have sex around the swimming pool or communal showers, where full nudity was the norm. In most of NYC's YMCAs, the management had to turn a blind eye on this activity as the "Y" was becoming a symbol of gay culture.

Another type of establishment that gay men made their own was the bathhouse. Different waves of immigrants to U.S. cities brought the traditional institutions of the Turkish or Roman baths. These facilities are meant for cleaning oneself and relaxing, but the open nudity and all-male context of most bathhouses made them interesting to men looking for homosexual activity. In some bathhouses, gay men had to keep their activity concealed from other patrons, but others were more popular among a gay clientele and their owners turned a blind eye on the sexual activity going on. Eventually, people opened exclusively gay baths, which screened patrons to ensure that only those looking for homosexual activity came in. This type of gay bathhouse has existed since at least the early 1900s, as evidenced by the records of a police raid in New York City in 1903 (Chauncey 1994). Undercover policemen had infiltrated the establishment and observed that group homosexual activity was happening everywhere in the bathhouse, including the common areas. Before bars, gay bathhouses were the first commercial venues to cater exclusively to gay men (Bérubé 2003). Despite the infrequent raids, they were probably the safest place for men to have sex with one another. Within their walls, they created a world where homosexuality was the norm, and where patrons could let their guard down and express their desires freely.

In their uses of public space and commercial establishments, gay men were creating a sense of privacy in public. Like anyone deviating from the Victorian

bourgeois sexual standard, they could not live their sexual lives in the truly private space of the home. They had to seek out intimacy in secluded areas within the space of the city—in alleys, behind bushes, in restrooms, and clandestine establishments. The aggregation of their activities created bounded spaces in public grounds within which it was relatively safe to have homosexual activity. Because gay men needed each other to create these designated spaces for cruising, they could only enjoy sexual intimacy in the co-presence of others. Therefore, in the early years of gay culture, sexual privacy did not mean secluding yourself with a loved one in a closed space like a bedroom; privacy meant creating a space where homosexuality was momentarily the norm, away from the eyes of the general, non-gay public, and from the intrusion of the police and public authorities.

The gay cruising grounds of this period were the site for a formation of a gay world. Men meeting there were of a wide range of demographics and had different sexual identities: some lived a predominantly heterosexual life, some understood themselves as gay but preferred to remain discreet, and some expressed a more visible gay identity. Their involvement in the emergent gay community also varied: some preferred to have quick, anonymous sex, while others developed more lasting relations. Regardless of how they identified or participated, these people could get a sense that there was a huge network of men attracted to other men out there; they could see that there was a gay male world hidden within a culture that tried to forbid it. By seeking out sex partners in public and commercial places, many men “ended up being socialized into the gay male world” (Chauncey 1994:179). Social interaction in these places would lead to the formation of gay social movements and



the collective sexual practices that would become a means of political affirmation in the years of gay liberation.

## *2. The “golden age” of gay sex: gay liberation and the gay 1970s*

The 1960s and 1970s have been, in the United States and most other “Western” nations, a period of increased visibility for issues about sexuality and homosexuality. The general sexual culture changed considerably during the so-called “sexual revolution.” Although behavior and attitudes in themselves have not—despite claims to the contrary—changed much over the two decades, new knowledge and values about sexuality took an important place in popular discourse (Escoffier 2014). The wider availability of the birth control pill was thought to give women greater sexual freedom; younger generations were thought to have their first sexual experiences at a younger age and to marry at an older age; sexuality was becoming less tied with marriage, monogamy, and procreation and more with pleasure and recreation. The countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s challenged sexual values along with political issues and explored intimate lifestyles like “free love,” communal living, and group sex. The development of the pornographic film industry also brought sex into popular culture. In this context, non-normative sexualities, which had mostly lived in clandestinity in the past, could come out into public view.

Starting in the 1960s, gay social movements sought to increase their visibility to the public in order to achieve legal and institutional changes (Escoffier 1998a). With rallies and gay pride marches, the tactic was no more to maintain privacy in public spaces, but to use public spaces for publicity. For some organized movements

like the Gay Liberation Front, coming out as gay or “outing” other people was a political strategy to raise awareness to the issues of gays and lesbians and incite change. Protests against the American Psychiatric Association led the organization to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1974, gradually ending the notion of homosexuality as an illness in the health disciplines and in the popular opinion. Also, in the late 1960s and 1970s, several jurisdictions in the world and some U.S. states repealed their anti-sodomy laws, ending the criminal prosecution of homosexual sex. The visibility of gay communities and culture was a means to change a society that had been intolerant of homosexuality and sexual diversity.

For a section of the gay and lesbian social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, sexual exploration was a political tool. Although some groups defended that gays and lesbians were just like heterosexual people, more radical movements refused this “integrationist” stance, and actively rejected traditional sexual values. Heterosexual institutions like marriage and the family had been the basis of the oppression of homosexuals and had to be challenged along with values like monogamy, modesty, and sexual privacy (Moore 2004). For these groups, breaking with repressive Victorian sexual values was the way to achieve “sexual liberation.” Promiscuity was political: if sex—especially gay sex—was something positive and pleasurable, then the more the better (Crossley 2004; Gove 2000). Group sex was a way to explore new configurations of sexuality and intimacy. Sexual experimentation was central to many emerging subcultures that explored bondage-discipline-sadomasochism (BDSM), Leather, fisting, and different fetishes. In this

context, sex venues were sites of this sexual experimentation that challenged normative values.

Sex clubs appeared as venues for this radical sexual experimentation. In some places, like San Francisco in the 1960s (D'Emilio 1998), these clubs were places where gay social movements and sexual subcultures converged. Because of the specific history of sexual policing in the city, sexual subcultures like the Leather subculture were particularly involved in activism and community organizing (Rubin 1998). Semi-private sex clubs like the Catacombs were established by members of the subculture to provide a space that would foster community formation and sexual exploration (Rubin 1991). In NYC, sex clubs like the Mineshaft were communal spaces for people into these liminal forms of sexuality (Brodsky 1993). Before the 1960s, sex venues like bathhouses allowed men to explore their homosexual desires and to connect with an emergent gay world; the radical sex clubs of the 1960s and 1970s allowed more organized sexual subcultures to push the boundaries of sexuality.

The increasing legitimacy and visibility of gay sexualities and communities would affect the urban landscape. As gay social movements used public grounds to raise awareness, the urban enclaves where gay people had been meeting for a long time made their presence more obvious. In gay neighborhoods, restaurants, bars, and shops catering to a gay clientele made themselves visible. In these areas, gays and lesbians could feel safer to express their sexual and gender identities in public. Secluded beach towns like Cherry Grove and the Pines on Fire Island, NY, were becoming small gay worlds visited by large numbers of gays and lesbians in the

warm months (Newton 1995). In large cities, certain areas became almost exclusively used for gay public cruising, like the West Side Piers in NYC, which brought together crowds of gay men sunbathing naked and having sex in large open spaces on the waterfront. Sexual establishments, previously operating in clandestinity, could also bloom into larger, more visible legitimate businesses. In the public spaces and neighborhoods that they appropriated, gays and lesbians did not fear the eyes of the non-gay public as they used to.

Another development contributed to the increasing visibility of sex both in the general culture and in urban landscape: the pornographic film industry and the adult movie theater. Before the 1970s, small clandestine theaters and peep shows were showing short pornographic stag films, but changes in obscenity laws allowed the development of the porn film industry in the early 1970s (Williams 1999). In 1971, *Boys in the Sand*—a gay porn film shot on Fire Island—was the first feature-length hardcore film projected in a theater and reviewed in newspapers (Escoffier 2014; Stevenson 1997). Straight porn films started showing shortly after (notably *Deep Throat* in 1972) and started the “porno chic” trend. Crowds of middle-class men and women would fill the theaters to watch the new hardcore movies. Rapidly, however, adult theaters began showing movies all day on loop to accommodate the masturbatory needs of single men, and for men looking for quick homosexual sex. In neighborhoods like Times Square in NYC, adult theaters were closely grouped, their neon lights advertising sex shows becoming a part of the visible sexual landscape of the city (Delany 1999). Several porn theaters showed gay films exclusively and were part of the cruising landscape of big cities like NYC. Many of these theaters showed

gay porn films that were shot in local gay cruising areas, creating a genre of “homo-realist porn” (Escoffier, in press).

Through the 1970s, commercialized sexual recreation became a profitable business. With the steady migration of gay men to urban gay enclaves, a wide range of gay establishments were becoming economically viable, and commercial sex venues could grow into large entertainment complexes. Bathhouses now tried to cater to as many needs as possible: besides providing a space for sex, some of them had gyms, restaurants or snack bars, dancefloors, or stages for shows with popular singers. The Continental Baths in NYC was famous for showcasing several upcoming stars, like Bette Midler (Bérubé 2003). Sex venues were an integral part of urban gay entertainment, often closely connected with the nightlife industry. Some gay entrepreneurs rose to prominence by developing large-scale venues and events bridging dance clubs and sex clubs. An example is Bruce Mailman who opened the New St. Marks Baths in NYC in 1979—claiming to be the largest gay bathhouse in the world—and the Saint in 1980, a multimillion-dollar nightclub that attracted large crowds of gay men from the city and beyond to dance to the trendiest DJs, watch famous performers, and have sex in the darker sections of the club (Moore 2004). This trend was also visible in straight nightlife: after the closure of the Continental Baths in the mid-1970s, Plato’s Retreat opened on the site and became a legendary sex club for heterosexual swingers. Group sex was no more a clandestine affair, it was now a profitable business that nightlife entrepreneurs advertised and promoted and which was tied to urban club culture.

From the early gay bathhouses of the first half of the twentieth century to the radical sex clubs of the 1970s and finally to the large-scale sex clubs of the early 1980s, gay group sex shifted between affirmation, experimentation, and commodification. For some sections of urban gay communities, group sex had become normalized and less political and exploratory. For the gay “clone” in NYC, described in Martin Levine’s ethnography (1998), group sex venues were just one part of the gay “circuit.” Gay men visited bathhouses, backrooms, adult theaters, or sex clubs just as routinely as they did bars, restaurants, gyms, and discos. Cruising and group sex were part of the sexual script of the subculture, no longer an experimentation. The Clone subculture, characterized by an emphasis on masculinity, did not value experimentation with new forms of sexuality, but rather followed a strict conception of male sexuality, prizing an overabundance of sex with multiple partners, and rough genital acts disconnected from displays of affection or emotional attachment. Within this culture, group sex practices were somewhat normalized and banal, and no longer radical. This “standardization” of gay group sex was supported by the development of sexual entertainment businesses like sex clubs, but also by pornography and live erotic shows. The commercialized gay sexual entertainment industry that was taking shape and growing in importance at the turn of the 1980s had, however, to experience a hiatus because of the onset of the AIDS epidemic.

### *3. The AIDS epidemic and the rise of gay domesticity*

The AIDS epidemic quickly changed views on sexuality, group sex, and commercial sex venues. In 1981, doctors started publishing reports of gay men

dying of illnesses related to immune deficiency. Rapidly, the death tolls of gay men rose to alarming levels and health authorities had to deal with an epidemic of an unknown disease. In this state of urgency, people were quick to blame the gay cruising culture—which had gained visibility in the recent years—as a cause. The sexual culture of gay men, which had been a means of sexual affirmation in the past decades, became a public health problem. The AIDS crisis heightened debates around sexual behavior, sexual values, and social responsibility within scientific circles, gay communities and social movements, and public authorities. The relation between group sex culture and the transmission of HIV/AIDS became, and remains, a contested one, and still affects today's gay cruising culture.

Before scientists discovered the HIV virus and understood the mechanism of AIDS, they speculated that the illness was some sort of gay cancer caused by aspects of the homosexual lifestyle. Early on, the “overload theory” hypothesized that the “life in the fast lane” style of gay men caused this immune system deficiency (Epstein 1996; Seidman 1988). Epidemiologists also noted that the rapid spread of the disease in urban gay communities was probably a result of their sexual promiscuity. Most of these theories were abandoned in scientific and medical circles as new knowledge about HIV/AIDS was learned, but they had already garnered a lot of attention in the media and in lay circles. The idea that HIV/AIDS was related to the general sexual lifestyle of gay men tainted discourse about the illness. Although homosexuality had been removed from the list of mental disorders in the past decade, gay sexuality found itself again to be problem-laden and something that

needed to be intervened on and fixed. Group sex venues seemed like a good place to begin that intervention.

Early in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, public health authorities saw commercial sex venues as the site of transmission of the disease, and targeted them as a threat. During the 1980s, several jurisdictions in the United States took some measures to close down sexual establishments. In 1984, New York State added a clause under its sanitary code that forbids any commercial establishment from allowing “sexual activities where anal intercourse, vaginal intercourse or fellatio take place” on the ground that they “constitute a threat to the public health.” The law stipulates that local health officers “may close any such facilities or establishments as constituting a public nuisance” (New York State 2000:Section 225(4), (5)(a), Subpart 24-2 – Prohibited Facilities). In NYC, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) routinely sent inspectors—sometimes undercover—to investigate gay clubs, bathhouses, and adult theaters and ordered the closure of those where they witnessed oral sex or intercourse, with a condom or not. The large commercial venues like the New St. Marks baths, the Saint, and Plato’s Retreat were promptly ordered to close by 1985 (Moore 2004). Between then and the late 1990s, the DOHMH was instrumental in closing most bathhouses, adult theaters, sex clubs, and gay bars where sexual activity happened, and in making sure that those that remained enforce a no-sexual-activity-allowed policy (Elovitz and Edwards 1996). Woods, Tracy, and Binson (2003), reported a great decrease of the number of gay bathhouses in the three U.S. cities that had the most of them (NYC, Los Angeles, and San Francisco) between 1985 and 1995. The gay cruising culture, which had



benefited from a climate of permissiveness for a time, had to deal once again with illegality and move back to clandestinity.

Although, as I will describe below, groups of gay activists protested against the authoritative solutions adopted by health authorities, these incentives were supported by a large number of gays and lesbians. Several gay men had been wanting to dissociate themselves from the culture of group sex that was very visible in the 1970s, and AIDS was one more reason to do so. Because the epidemic was putting a negative light on the gay cruising culture that sparked homophobic discourse, the more “gay friendly” media wanted to bring attention to those gay men who were not part of it. A notable article in the *New York Times* featured “respectable” gay couples to show that many gay men lived discreet, monogamous lives that were more legitimate in the context of AIDS than a promiscuous lifestyle (Seidman 1988). Some gay journalists and activists took stances against the gay cruising culture, saying that AIDS was a positive catalyst to encourage gay men to “mature” into more socially responsible lifestyles. Early in the epidemic, such writers said that “the party of the ’70s was over,” and called on gay men to understand that the promiscuous lifestyle of the past decade was irresponsible and unhealthy (Epstein 1996). Similar opinions were the topics of essays in the 1990s by gay writers like Gabriel Rotello (1997) and Michelangelo Signorile (1998). AIDS thus stigmatized cruising culture both in the eyes of the general population and within gay circles. An increasing number of gay people thought that the radical experimentations in sexuality and intimacy during the past decades had to be replaced by traditional sexual values of monogamy and sexual privacy.

Not everyone in scientific or medical circles and in gay communities endorsed this connection between AIDS and gay lifestyle. Eventually, scientists discovered the HIV virus and understood how it caused AIDS. The means of transmission of the virus became clearer: one could get HIV through blood (e.g., by exchanging needles) or with specific, high-risk sexual acts. Therefore, AIDS was not caused by a lifestyle, and it did not matter if one was monogamous or promiscuous, as long as he or she avoided high-risk behavior or used protection. With this knowledge, gay grassroots organizations developed safer sex guidelines and started promoting them in the gay community by 1983 (Epstein 1996). So, while sections of health providers and the gay community blamed promiscuity and sex venues for AIDS and recommended monogamy or abstinence, others said that there was nothing wrong with the gay cruising culture, as long as one practiced safer sex.

For proponents of safer sex, commercial sex venues had an important role to play in HIV prevention. Being central sites of the gay cruising culture, sex clubs and bathhouses were a good place to reach out to men at risk for HIV and to educate them about safer practices. Managers of sex venues quickly took measures to protect their clientele by posting information and distributing pamphlets about safer sex guidelines, handing out condoms, and encouraging their patrons to use them. Within a few years, these efforts resulted in “shifts in sexual practice unprecedented in their scope, speed, and efficacy” (Rubin 1997:116). More recently, studies have shown that offering HIV/AIDS testing in these venues influences patrons to adopt safer behavior (Woods and Binson 2003). According to these HIV prevention workers and activists, commercial sex venues are crucial in creating a

safer sex culture, and closing them down would actually make prevention more difficult. Nevertheless, the notion that promiscuity leads to AIDS prevailed in the United States, and the sex venues' efforts at creating a safer sex culture were cut short, as they were forced to close.

The prevention workers and activists that defended sex venues feared that authoritative measures like those in NYC would only move the gay cruising culture back into clandestinity, where it would be less safe. They emphasized that there was no logical reason to believe that shutting down the places where high-risk behavior happened would actually reduce the incidence of such behavior; so-called "high-risk" populations would simply meet in other places, where prevention outreach would be harder to conduct. In this climate of illegality and clandestinity, the concern becomes how to avoid authorities, not high-risk behavior; as a queer activist put it: "the focus shifts away from what is safe or unsafe, to what one can get away with" (Gendin 1996:113). Queer scholars criticized this top-down strategy of trying to outlaw risky behavior; HIV prevention should mean "not taking opportunities away, but giving people the resources to clarify their own motives and to keep themselves safe rather than relying on the health department to do it for them" (Warner 1999:211). These activists were mostly right in that NYC's culture of group sex widely moved to underground venues.

Because of regulations against commercial sex venues, fixed and legal sexual establishments closed down and their clientele had to turn to temporary and underground venues. Owners and managers of sex venues started looking for noncommercial places to direct their clientele, like disaffected lofts or apartments.

These underground clubs typically remained opened briefly, until the authorities found out about them and shut them down. The hardships of having a fixed club gave prominence to the concept of roaming parties. Known party promoters could take their specific “brand” of event to different spaces every time they hosted it, sometimes revealing the exact location to patrons only the day of events. In order to survive, the gay cruising culture thus had to be adaptable and flexible (Colter et al. 1996). The sex parties that emerged in this period gave shape to the private sex parties that I describe in this study. Although the policing of sex venues has greatly diminished in the past 10 years or so, the context of clandestinity that was in place between 1985 and 2005 is still palpable in NYC’s cruising culture.

It was unclear if and how shutting down commercial sex venues would prevent HIV transmission, but the crackdown served other economic purposes. Sex venues are often located in urban areas with high levels of crime and low real estate value, which swept up by a new wave of urban renewal and gentrification in the 1990s. Adult establishments (which include sex-on-premise venues, but also sex shops and strip clubs) are one of many undesirable elements that city reformers and community organizations want to get rid of in neighborhoods where they long to attract middle- and upper-class residents, families, and tourists. The 1990s “quality of life” campaign of NYC Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, for example, adopted zoning resolutions for adult establishments, forbidding them to be closer than 500 feet from one another, and from schools, churches, day care centers, and residential districts (City of New York 2012). In combination with the public health law from 1984, these zoning resolutions were the last blow to the sex venues that were still

holding on. Within a decade, Times Square went from a “red light” district with numerous adult theaters, porno stores, strip clubs, and street hustlers to a family-friendly tourist destination with expensive stores and Disney shows (Delany 1999). In these years, the city also renovated the public grounds where gay men used to cruise, most notably the West Side Piers in the West Village, making them more open-spaced, removing places where people could seclude themselves, and closing them at night. The zoning resolutions make it clear that closing down sex venues is not done to benefit the public health but to make the city attractive as a place to live and a touristic destination for the middle classes. Following this idea, group sex moving down into clandestinity does not pose problems as long as it remains invisible to the eyes of the public. As many queer critics expressed, the changes in NYC in the late 1980s and 1990s had little to do with the public health and more to do with a neoliberal ideology that favors private life and consumption at the expense of truly public space.

As the spaces of the gay cruising culture were under attack through the 1990s, several queer scholars and activists voiced critiques connecting the neoliberal political-economy to heteronormativity. By replacing public spaces with expensive residences and stores, late capitalism favors private life and consumption at the expense of public life. By the same token, close-knit forms of intimacy like marriage and nuclear family are favored over the relationship experiments of the 1970s, and these values are reflected in the transformation of public grounds. Times Square used to be a place where individual men could seek out intimate contact in public or commercial spaces; it is now a place where families can go to shop in

flagship stores of popular brands, watch mainstream Broadway shows, and eat in chain restaurants before heading back to the private space of their homes (Delany 1999). According to these commentaries, the neoliberal political-economy benefits from institutions like marriage and the family, so its ideology supports these types of relations as the only natural and logical ones. Public sex bothers because, as Berlant and Warner put it, it is about “kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to the domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (1998:175). As changes were happening in the political-economy, a growing section of gay social movements also shifted from a public orientation to a private one.

With the general shift toward neoliberalism, upper-class sections of gay and lesbian movements have been growing and getting more attention. If past gay and lesbian movements were generally tied to the New Left, the new movements of the 1990s are more closely connected to neoliberal political-economic values. The “new homonormative movement,” as Lisa Duggan (2004) suggests, believes that attaining equality does not mean changing institutions to make them fairer for everyone; it means for gays and lesbians to have access to the same institutions as heterosexual people. Following the trend of gay people wanting to dissociate themselves from the cruising culture at the onset of AIDS, homonormative groups mainly work to support same-sex marriage and adoption rights. For homonormative groups, reaching “full equality” is the final step of gay and lesbian movements: once gay people will have full access to private life, there will be no need to defend “privacy in public,” like in the first half of the twentieth century, and no need for the public

protest of the 1970s and of the AIDS crisis. The logic of the homonormative movement claims that once gays and lesbians will be able to live the same lives as that of their straight counterpart, radical gay movements and practices that aimed to raise awareness to their communities' issues will have served their purpose and no longer be needed. Although it is unclear how influential or widespread homonormative movements have been for gay people, they have changed the general representation and opinion about gays and lesbians.

The homonormative movement is closely connected to the rise of "domestinatority" in LGBT communities and the general population. Katherine Franke coined the term in her analysis of the *Lawrence v. Texas* court case, which in 2003, overturned sodomy laws in all the U.S. states (2004). Although gays and lesbians widely celebrated this decriminalization of homosexual acts, queer critics like Franke believe the ruling protects only a limited form of sex. The language of the case says that adults in relationships have a right to sexual privacy, and thus only protects homosexual acts as long as they conform to the dominant view of sex as an extension of love, as part of a long-term relationship, and done in the privacy of the bedroom. Forms of sexuality that do not follow traditional notions of intimacy, coupling, and privacy are not mentioned by the ruling, so group sex, anonymous sex, and sex outside the home are still not legitimized. The court case is only one sign of the general valuation of domestinatority in our culture, a trend that could not only be a problem to gay people, but also to others who do not live their sexuality strictly as an extension of a romantic relationship. LGBT social movements that focus narrowly on marriage and family support domestinatority

values and risk further stigmatizing the gay cruising culture. Sodomy laws, because they gave gay people no right to privacy, were a factor in the appearance of the gay cruising culture; their overturn created an imperative for gays to have sex only in privacy, and delegitimized their cruising culture.

The onset of the AIDS pandemic turned gay cruising into a public health problem which could be co-opted by neoliberal forces to further stigmatized the practice. In the 1980s and 1990s, public and commercial places for sex were either being removed or abandoned by gay men who chose to turn to domestic normative models of sexuality and intimacy. Cruising went back into clandestinity like it had been before the gay liberation era. The difference was that gay cruisers were now not only hiding from the straight world, but from the rising group of gay people who wanted to dissociate gay culture from cruising. The development of HIV/AIDS treatment in the late 1990s allowed the gay cruising culture to get back to where it had left off in the early 1980s.

#### *4. Post-AIDS and the privatization of gay cruising*

The AIDS pandemic and the rise of ideologies like homonormativity and domestic normativity made it seem like gay cruising was to become a thing of the past; however, the development of the global, postindustrial economy and the rise of the homonational gay consumer are giving new life to the gay sexual recreation industry that had been hit by the onset of the AIDS epidemic.

Queer scholars may have been too quick in concluding that the forces of neoliberalism supported a general shift towards domestic normative and homonormative lifestyles. Indeed, recent changes in the political economy actually



made place for a culture of sexual recreation. Although queer scholars predicted a future where gays and lesbians—just like anybody else—would be compelled to buy houses, get married, and have children, the current global, post-industrial economy supports sexual and intimate relations that are more about pleasure in the moment than long-term commitment. As Elizabeth Bernstein explained in her study of prostitution, because of increased business travel, labor migration, and temporary work, contemporary economic life requires individuals to be mobile and flexible (2007). The development of the global information economy, of the service industry, and of postindustrial cities creates conditions that challenge domesticated lifestyles based on intimate commitment, stable home, and family. Intimate relations that are temporary and efficient are better suited to the demands of the modern corporation. In this culture, sexuality and intimacy become one area of the leisure industry, connected to entertainment, tourism, and the service sector. Today's escorting industry—to use Bernstein's example—has evolved to provide bounded intimacy to middle- and upper-class men; similarly, the gay sexual recreation industry is taking shape to fulfill the needs for fleeting intimacy of the gay men of late modernity.

Although homonormative movements have put middle- and upper-class gays and lesbians who seek more traditional, domesticated lifestyles to the forefront of gay activism, many industries prefer to cater to LGBT people with other lifestyles. Indeed, gays and lesbians without children and with a lot of discretionary income are coveted by the leisure industry and progressive politicians looking for donations. Since the mid-1990s, several sectors of commerce have been competing for the niche gay market, especially that of gay men with a lifestyle based on

consumption and recreation (Gluckman and Reed 1997). Alcohol and tobacco companies benefit from a gay culture revolving around gay bars and have been among the first businesses to market directly to gay people. Airlines and vacation companies have also been fighting for the gay market because middle-class gay people without children tend to travel more. The majority of advertisements in the pages of a gay magazine are from entertainment and tourism businesses. Even though a section of gay people gear towards home, marriage, and family, an important sector of the economy supports a private life based on consumption and commercialized recreation (Buford 2000). These trends allow the gay cruising culture to flourish again within the realm of commercialized recreation.

Catering to middle-class, white, and affluent gay consumers has even become the measure of a nation's tolerance towards homosexuality and of its progress into modernity. Nowadays, societies who accept gays and lesbians see themselves as modern, shunning those who do not as backwards; this use of LGBT rights as the yardstick of a nation's progress has been called "homonationalism" by Jasbir Puar (2007). Israel stands as the example of an homonationalist nation, flaunting its tolerance of gay people while labeling Palestinians and Muslim people as homophobic and a threat to modernity. The type of gay people who are favored under homonationalism are usually of a specific demographic: White, affluent, educated, law-abiding citizens, and most importantly, good spenders. Gays and lesbians who are great contributors to the economy and to the campaigns of progressive politicians see their issues prioritized at the expense of those of LGBT people from poorer demographics. The "homonational gay consumer," as Puar

coined it, has been at the center of gay rights discourse for a while, at the expense of a diversity of queer people from less privileged classes, nationalities, and ethnoracial groups. Because he must be an active participant in the global postindustrial economy, the homonational's lifestyle is not quite compatible with domestic normativity and can veer toward less traditional models of sex-intimacy.

Catering to the homonational gay consumer is a means for a nation to demonstrate its place in the modern world, so institutions catering to them must be set up. These include giving rights to same-sex partners and parents, but also allowing the development of a local gay businesses and participating in the global gay tourism industry. At the local level, enabling the development of existing gay neighborhoods shows support for LGBT people. In the past decades, several cities have supported their gay districts by integrating rainbow colors in their street signs, public buildings, or other permanent structures built to mark these neighborhoods. In so doing, local governments show that they value their gay residents and tell gay visitors they are welcome. In these neighborhoods, gay establishments abound: restaurants, bars, nightclubs, strip clubs, sex shops, adult video stores, peep shows, sex clubs, and bathhouses. Another way that homonationalist nations can demonstrate their acceptance of gay people and prove it to the rest of the world is by inviting gay people from all over the world to come visit and experience its gay life and witness these visible efforts and the institutions that were put in place. The gay tourism industry has thus become a tool for homonationalism and not only a profitable industry. Neoliberalism and homonationalism have thus come together not to promote domestic normativity, but to give new strength to the industry of

commercialized gay sexual recreation that appeared in the late 1970s but was halted because of the AIDS epidemic.

Sexual businesses have been able to flourish again because of improvements in the treatment of HIV that have changed the risks around group sex. If early antiretroviral treatments were highly toxic and limited in their ability to prevent the development of AIDS in HIV-infected individuals, the newer highly active antiretroviral treatments (HAART), which became available in 1996, can now prevent the development of AIDS with little to no side effects. HIV-positive people on treatment are now able to live full lives—with life expectancy now almost the same as HIV-negative individuals—and with no symptoms and little inconveniences. What is more, recent studies now show that HIV-positive people that consistently adhere to their treatment almost never transmit the virus to their sexual partners. This has led to new treatment as prevention (TasP) strategies, following the logic that if every HIV-infected individual was taking HAART, the rates of new HIV infections could decrease tremendously, theoretically to the point where no one would be infected anymore. HAART used as prophylaxis can also prevent new infections in HIV-negative people. Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which has been offered in sexual health clinics for several years, consists of giving one month of HIV medications to people who have been exposed to the virus in the past two days, and has a high success rate in preventing permanent seroconversion. Secondly, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has recently been accepted as an efficient way to prevent at-risk HIV-negative people of contracting the virus by having them take HAART before exposure. The new pharmaceutical treatments and prevention

methods of HIV have changed the notions of what is safe and unsafe sex. Up until recently, unsafe sex and condomless sex were synonyms, but this is no more the case. In 2014, the CDC revised its use of the terms “unprotected sex” and “sex without condoms” in accordance with new knowledge showing that condomless sex does not necessarily present a high risk of HIV transmission. These new prevention methods have changed the risks of group sex behavior for people with access to HAART medications.

As the notions of what is safe and unsafe change, the groups that are considered “at risk” by health professionals also change. In the years following the onset of AIDS, public health issues were centered on sexual behavior: the number of partners, the types of acts, or the use of condoms defined who was safe or unsafe. Today, risk is increasingly evaluated on biomedical terms. People acting safely are those who take their HIV medications as prescribed and who regularly get their blood tested, with less concern for their sexual practices. HIV-positive men who take their medication every day and have attained an undetectable viral load, along with HIV-negative men on PrEP, form a new class of responsible sexual citizens and are given more freedom in their sexual behavior. People who have untreated HIV infections—or who could potentially have one—are the ones who pose problem to the public health. The biomedicalization of sexual safety creates new inequalities among sexual minorities, opposing people who have access to comprehensive healthcare and prescription medications to the populations who do not have medical insurance, cannot afford very costly HIV medications, or have other structural barriers keeping them from engaging in care. The middle-class gay man

with access to healthcare can thus enjoy more freedom in his sexual lifestyle. Therefore, forms of gay cruising that cater to the class of men who use the new forms of treatment and prevention will be more acceptable, supporting more exclusive and privatized types of sex venues at the expense of truly public ones.

The new globalized commercial sexual recreation industry centers on upscale sex venues catering to the post-AIDS, homonational gay consumer. Middle- and upper-class gay men do not want to roam public places in search of sex or try to find clandestine places anymore; they demand sexual recreation that is safe, reliable, efficient, satisfying, and worth their money. Also, modern gay travelers want to have easy access to sexual recreation to make their vacation or business travel times more profitable, and the industry is responding to that demand. Chains of bathhouses have started to open branches in different cities, all offering the same type of upscale facilities. The eminent example is *Steamworks*, a chain of gay bathhouses with branches in several U.S. and Canadian cities. Like a *Starbucks* of gay bathhouses, the chain replicates its upscale design at every franchise, with the aim of providing patrons with a consistent bathhouse experience as they travel through North America. In warmer climates, “all-male, clothing-optional resorts” have become a trend, offering vacation facilities where full nudity and open sexual activity are tolerated. These places are secure and reliable for gay travelers looking for a sexual vacation, provided they have the means to afford it. Gay retreats and cruises also become increasingly popular, sometimes catering to specific subgroups or sexual subcultures. Gay men also travel for circuit parties, which are large dance parties that can host several thousand people and often offer a sexual play space.

Sex parties—like some of the ones that are the subject of this study—have also become international franchises or brands. *CumUnion*, for example, calls itself “an international sex party,” and claims to host more than 30 parties every month, over four different countries, again offering a standardized experience to the gay traveler looking for sex. As gay cruising moves further into the twenty-first century, public forms of sexuality become privatized and sex venues become expensive and exclusionary, making sexual sociability acceptable among only a certain class of gay men.

AIDS, neoliberalism, homonormative movements, and homonationalism have not, as queer theorists foresaw, promoted domestic normative lifestyles at the expense of the gay culture of group sex; however, they are transforming it into a commercialized phenomenon accessible to an elite class of gay men that is out of the radar of public health reformers and on the good side of politicians. Gay cruising is no more about using public space to foster gay community. Gay cruising in the new millennium is becoming an efficient mean of sexual satisfaction offered by entertainment businesses and the global tourism industry, who are targeting affluent gay consumers in a postindustrial economy.

The following table summarizes the four phases of gay cruising.

<i>Period</i>	<b>Privacy in public: Late 1800s to late 1960s</b>	<b>Cruising as gay publicity: Late 1960s to Early 1980s</b>	<b>Cruising as public health problem: Early 1980s to late 1990s</b>	<b>Privatization of cruising: 2000s</b>
<i>Legal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Anti-sodomy laws</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Gradual legalization of homosexuality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Outlawing of commercial sex venues (public health laws)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Increasing legal recognition of domestic forms of homosexual relations (Lawrence v. Texas; same-sex marriage and parenting rights)</li> </ul>
<i>Material</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Urbanization</li> <li>•Development of public space</li> <li>•Development of commercial venues (bars, Turkish baths, YMCA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Development of nightlife industry</li> <li>•Gay urban migration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Urban renewal and gentrification</li> <li>•Zoning regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Postindustrial, global economy</li> <li>•Homonational gay consumer</li> </ul>
<i>Biomedical</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Homosexuality is a mental illness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Removal of homosexuality from DSM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•HIV/AIDS</li> </ul>	<p>Improvement of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•HAART</li> <li>•Treatment as prevention</li> <li>•PrEP and PEP</li> </ul>



<i>Political</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Emergence of gay communities</li> <li>•Fight for privacy in public</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Growing importance of gay social movements</li> <li>•Link between radical sexuality and politics</li> <li>•Public visibility and publicity of gay people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•AIDS activism</li> <li>•Gradual shift from publicity to privacy</li> <li>•Homonormative movements (private rights over public ones)</li> <li>•Queer Studies and queer movements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Homonormative movements</li> <li>•Homonationalism</li> </ul>
<i>Cultural</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Victorian sexual values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•"Sexual revolution": general loosening of traditional sexual norms</li> <li>•Development of gay culture and subcultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Domestinormativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Domestinormativity</li> <li>•Recreational sex culture</li> </ul>
<i>Sex Venues</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Alleys</li> <li>•Parks</li> <li>•Public toilets</li> <li>•YMCA</li> <li>•Roman baths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Public environments</li> <li>•Gay bathhouses</li> <li>•Sex clubs</li> <li>•Night clubs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Underground sex clubs</li> <li>•Roaming parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private sex parties</li> <li>•Resorts, retreats</li> <li>•International events</li> <li>•Bathhouse chains</li> <li>•Large sex clubs</li> </ul>
<i>Cruising</i>	Cruising in public places anonymously or in clandestine communities.	Cruising to create gay public places for affirmation and experimentation.	Cruising is stigmatized and problematic; back in the underground.	Cruising is part of a commercialized culture of recreational sex.

Table 1. Phases of gay cruising.

### 5. *Conclusion: between clandestinity and commercialization*

The practice of gay cruising and its spaces have changed along with other societal factors. Early forms of cruising found their shape from the behavior of men trying to find one another in public places in a time when homosexuality was illegal. Public and commercial places allowed gay men in the first part of the twentieth century to connect with one another and form the more organized gay community that would push for legal changes starting in the 1960s. In the post-Stonewall period of the 1970s, gay cruising became a means of affirmation for the gay community and the development of gay neighborhoods in large cities allowed for the proliferation of gay businesses catering to the sexual lives of gay men. The AIDS pandemic put the flourishing of gay sexual businesses to a halt in the early 1980s. For about twenty years, gay cruising was stigmatized in mainstream and gay circles for its connection with the public health problem of HIV/AIDS, and it went back into the underground. With the recent development of HIV treatment and prevention methods, gay cruising is becoming less of a public health problem. In conjunction with the development of the commercialized sexual recreation industry, sex venues are finding a place in the global postindustrial economy.

The private sex clubs of NYC today are very much a product of the third phase of gay cruising, but their solid grounding in contemporary sexual culture is made possible by the fourth phase. Private sex parties and underground sex clubs became more popular in NYC through the 1980s and 1990s, as the city was shutting down the commercial sex venues that had been popular in the 1970s. As Chapters 3 and 4 will describe, private sex parties emerged from the activities of sex venue

patrons and promoters as they tried to navigate around new zoning and public health regulations. Although the third-phase regulations that forbid sex venues are still in place in New York today, the diminishing concerns around gay group sex have led to a loosening of the policing of these venues. The fourth-phase demand of today's gay consumers for sexual recreation has brought clientele to these underground sex venues. Private sex parties respond to the desire of the fourth-phase gay cruiser because they are a privatized and exclusionary form of sexual recreation where a gay consumer can satisfy specific desires. However, their clandestine status keeps them from flourishing into the upscale gay businesses that are becoming prevalent in other parts of the world.

As cruising moves to different places, it changes as a practice. It can be, for example, an individual and anonymous practice or a social and communal one. Ethnographic research in different places of gay cruising—which the next chapter reviews—has shown that norms of interaction vary greatly from one type of venue to another. The societal factors that affect the landscape of gay cruising—law, economy, politics, culture, and biomedicine—thus change the practice and its meaning to gay cruisers. As this dissertation will conclude, the particular context of private sex parties in NYC has favored cruising as a practice of collective intimacy.

## CHAPTER 2 – The Geography of Gay Cruising: A Typological Review of Ethnographic Studies of Places of Gay Group Sex

The previous chapter discussed how group sex venues have been affected by legal, material, cultural, and political factors. Changing constraints have made gay cruising travel through public places, commercial venues, and private spaces. The practice of gay cruising changes as it moves from one type of place to another. Therefore, when certain types of venues are closed down and make place for others, the ways in which gay cruisers interact with one another changes. Before I explain, in Chapter 3 and 4, how the changing landscape of gay cruising in NYC has affected the practice, this chapter turns to past ethnographic research on a range of cruising places to show how the practice is shaped by the space in which it is done.

From the mid-1960s up to today, social scientists have observed a variety of places of gay cruising: public parks, highway rest areas, public bathrooms, gay bathhouses, adult pornographic theaters, and sex clubs. What this body of work taken together reveals is that the environment in which gay cruising is practiced shapes the patterns of social and sexual interaction within it. Some places preclude social interaction and almost require silence and anonymity; others favor the social over the sexual.

Past research has looked at public environments of sex (park, bathrooms) or commercial sex venues (bathhouses, sex clubs). As explained above, the current

context in NYC has moved gay cruising into private venues, which have not been documented as much. Looking at the patterns of interaction in public and commercial places of cruising is thus necessary before understanding how constraining the practice to private venues can have affected the culture.

### *1. Public environments*

The defining characteristic of public places of cruising is that they can be accessed by non-cruisers from whom the sexual activity needs to remain concealed (Frankis and Flowers 2005). Gay cruising is often called “public sex” because a lot of it happens in public spaces, though much of what is included in “public sex” happens in places that are not entirely accessible to the public. The only truly public places where gay cruisers have sex with one another are parks, beaches, highway rest areas (or truck stops), streets and alleys, and subway cars and platforms. Men’s restrooms are also understood as public places, although their publicness can be limited depending on the type of establishment in which the communal toilets are located. Men’s locker rooms in gyms are more likely to be in commercial establishments, but they are still frequented by non-cruisers and their cruising interaction is similar to public toilets.

#### *1.1. Parks, beaches, and highway rest areas*

Public parks and beaches have been important to gay men living in large cities since at least the early twentieth century. As Chauncey’s research of New York City shows, by the 1920s, Battery Park, Bryant Park, Riverside Park, and Central Park in Manhattan, and Prospect Park and Coney Island beach in Brooklyn were all popular gay spots. Public places were often the point of entry into the clandestine

gay world; since a newcomer to the city could not easily find a gay speakeasy, going to the parks was an easier way to connect with other gay men. These public places were also the only affordable place to a large number of men. Parks and beaches were an important place of sociability and community for gay men; very large crowds of men could gather in specific areas at certain times of the day. They were also popular places for “cruising” or looking for sex partners, as records of undercover police investigations evidence. Public environments continued to be important places for gay group sex and sociability and still are today. Works of ethnographic observations were published in the 1970s about parks (Delph 1978), highway rest areas (Corzine and Kirby 1977; Troiden 1974), and parking lots (Ponte 1974). Then, ethnographic research in public cruising areas was done in the 1990s on parks (Keogh and Holland 1999; Moore 1995; Somlai, Kalichman, and Bagnall 2001) and rest areas (Hollister 1999; van Lieshout 1995). Although European research has shown that public environments are also popular among heterosexual swingers (Welzer-Lang 2005), U.S.-based data only documents them as place for homosexual activity.

Public outdoor environments are inconspicuous places for sex, so communicating with potential partners needs to be very subtle. Being at a park does not mean one is looking for homosexual activity, and it is normal to linger around for extended periods of time. Men cruising in the parks have to be able to distinguish nonsexual users without attracting their attention by using a series of codes and signals. Although, as I will describe below, restroom interaction needs to be silent because it is generally inappropriate to verbally engage there, it is fine to

approach someone verbally at a park or rest area. Cruisers thus use phrases that are recognizable by other people looking for sex but not by nonsexual users of the space; for example, "Do you have the time?", "Got a match?", or "Anything happening tonight?" (Troiden 1974:214) Men looking for sex respond differently to these questions than nonsexual users. Once they have found each other, two men may also discuss what they want to do sexually, a practice uncommon in the more enclosed space of a public bathroom (Corzine and Kirby 1977). Some of the cruising is done in complete silence with recourse to subtly coded gestures (Delph 1978), but this is not a requirement. Compared to bathrooms, the different norms of usage of parks, rest stops, and beaches allow men to have longer conversations.

Interaction in outdoor public sex environments is influenced by their temporal and spatial organization. Areas near parking lots and facilities like public bathrooms or picnic tables are more populated, especially by non-sexual users, while more secluded areas behind bushes, or deeper into woods or dunes, tend to be little attended. Similarly, some times of the day see high traffic, while later at night, after dark, few people venture into outdoor public spaces. Consequently, different times and places in parks, beaches, and rest stops allow for very different types of interaction. More crowded times of the day are more likely to attract men who are inconspicuously looking for quick, anonymous sex. Times of the day that are little attended by nonsexual users and secluded areas of public environments will allow for more prolonged sexual activity and for more social interaction. Indeed, certain places even remove the need for participants to sort out cruisers from non-cruisers, because the simple fact of being in a secluded area of a park after

dark means that one is looking for sex (Keogh and Holland 1999). Highly attended public environments are reserved for quick, silent, and impersonal oral activity or mutual masturbation. In more secluded areas, however, there is longer and more varied sexual activity: anal sex, group sex, full nudity, and displays of affection like kissing and caressing (Corzine and Kirby 1977; Troiden 1974). Troiden argued that the setting of the woods area around a rest stop made the sexual encounters not as anonymous and impersonal as others described:

The shelter provided by the woods allows the players to create their own, private social worlds, within which, through shows of warmth and affection, they can invest their sexual encounters with great meaning and importance—however brief these episodes might be. (Troiden 1974:227)

Public environments attract a lot of people who seek out anonymous or impersonal sex. Although it is common to have a little conversation around the sexual activity, some observers say there is a norm against questions on personal information, such as about where one lives or one's professional occupation (Corzine and Kirby 1977). Yet, this was not necessarily widespread because, in their conversations with participants, other scholars have found that some people knew bits of personal information about almost all the other men cruising in the place (Troiden 1974). Although some people wanted to avoid personal information to minimize the risks of public disclosure, many cruisers also wanted to avoid "relationship escalation" (Corzine and Kirby 1977:174). Highway rest areas, particularly, are used by many commuters, truckers, and travelers—gay and not—who want to limit themselves to short intimate encounters. But local men also use these places because they are attracted by the transients who use them, making it easy to avoid lasting attachments and to walk out of the "relationship" when desired



(189). These authors noted that rest areas were institutions serving the sexual and intimacy needs of travelers in a society where traveling away from home was increasingly conventional. Studies about gay cruising in the 1970s thus started seeing how the sex-intimacy model of cruising made sense in a society moving towards post-industrialization and globalization.

Outdoor environments are not only used by individuals looking for brief encounters, but also by local groups of gay men. Parks, beaches, and rest areas are used by men who do not identify as gay and are looking for inconspicuous places to have homosexual sex but also by gay people who wish to linger at the space and socialize (Moore 1995). In his observation of a parking lot at a beach in the 1970s, Ponte saw that, beside the silent cruisers, there were also what he called “society” guys, typically younger and overtly gay men who gathered in more social ways (Ponte 1974:15). In smaller towns that do not have many commercial establishments catering to gay men, outdoor meeting grounds have more importance. In his observation of a rest area in a small city in New York state, Hollister saw that, although many users were men seeking sex individually, there were several groups of local gay men or “cliques of queens” that spent a lot of time socializing at night around the picnic tables (Hollister 1999:62). The rest stop played a role similar to a gay bar in a small city with no such establishments. About 20 years after Delph (1978) made the argument that cruisers formed a “silent community,” others have been saying that this is no longer the case. Van Lieshout, who observed a rest area in the Netherlands that was used by the local Leather community on a certain night of the week, said that it was not necessary to remain

silent and anonymous and to conceal your identity. Although some participants enjoyed the darker areas of the park where they could have impersonal group sex, they also used the more sociable areas. Besides the sexual activity, “visiting a park or rest area can also be a social event to talk with acquaintances and friends and to be introduced to others” (van Lieshout 1995:22). Outdoor public environments are, like public bathrooms and locker rooms, places that are not designated for sex, and thus lead to a lot of furtive, discreet, anonymous sex. They allow, however, for some sustained relations, both social and sexual, because they allow for lingering and have more private space.

### *1.2. Public bathrooms*

Public bathrooms have been places of homosexual activity for probably as long as they have existed. Large cities began building “comfort stations” in parks and at major intersections in the late nineteenth century, with the goal of providing another place for people to urinate than businesses like bars. In NYC, the development of the subway system in the early 1900s also added many public washrooms to busy areas of the city. Police records prove that these places were, early on, a popular homosexual rendezvous: a large wave of arrests in public washrooms in NYC dates back to 1896 (Chauncey 1994). Chauncey’s oral history shows that public washrooms remained a popular place for homosexual sex through the mid-twentieth century. Two studies documented sex in public washrooms through observation: Laud Humphreys’ (1975) famous ethnography in the Chicago area in the late 1960s and Edward William Delph’s (1978) work in NYC in the 1970s. Two studies from the 1990s include some documentation about bathroom

sex (Keogh and Holland 1999; Moore 1995), and websites that list gay cruising spots reveal that bathroom cruising is still practiced today in several parts of the world.

The sources above all make the case that the appeal of public washrooms for sex is their inconspicuousness. Their location allows cruisers to unseemingly find a sex partner during a commute or stroll. They are particularly interesting to the categories of men who would not patronize establishments with a gay reputation or who would not take the risk of bringing a male partner home: often straight-identified men or closeted gay men. For these people, washrooms provide a place to have homosexual sex without too much risk of being identified as a gay man. Yet, washrooms are also used by many openly gay men who seek out quick sexual gratification, or enjoy the thrill of sex in public places. For everyone, however, preserving anonymity is important, which is apparent in the norms of silent interaction. It is also important for the sexual interaction to be discreet and silent so that nonsexual users of the space and authorities do not notice it.

The norms of sexual interaction in public washrooms aim at making sure that it remains unnoticeable, and the ideal washrooms will be the ones that make it easy to conceal the sexual activity from nonsexual users and authorities. Rows of urinals close to each other and without partitions make it easy to send discreet glances at another user, which if returned, usually mean mutual interest. They also allow easy contact for mutual masturbation or oral sex. In contiguous stalls, people might communicate by tapping a foot, again a gesture that, when reciprocated, means the other is also looking for sex. In stalls that have high space between the floor and the partition, a man can kneel down to slide his genitals under the partition for the

person in the next stall to fellate him. In the most frequented washrooms, people have drilled “glory holes” in stall partitions to allow peeping through or inserting one’s penis to receive oral sex. Both Humphreys and Delph describe an elaborate set of nonverbal cues and gestures to distinguish who is a “player” and who is not, and to communicate specific sexual preferences. People have to limit sexual activity to what can easily be interrupted when someone enters the premise: usually men will engage in mutual masturbation and oral sex without taking any clothes off. Popular washrooms have doors that make a lot of noise and that do not open directly onto the place where people have sexual activity and thus provide enough warning time to interrupt, before being caught in the act. Sometimes, a participant will help as “watchqueen” and be a voyeur while also warning others when someone else is coming in, which was Humphreys role in his participant observation. When someone new comes in, people engaged in sexual activity will quickly stand back up at the urinal, or sit at the toilet, and pretend they are using the place for its intended purpose until the new entrant is also identified as a player, or finishes his business and leaves. The toilets that are more easily protected will allow for more elaborate sexual activity. For example, Delph observed a bathroom where you could hear someone coming from a long enough distance as warning, and where he observed two fully naked men fellating in a sixty-nine position under the stalls partition, while five other men were exchanging oral sex at the urinals. Most of the time, however, activities have to be limited to what can easily be interrupted without being noticed.

The group characteristic of bathroom sex takes multiple shapes. Humphreys’ and Delph’s observations show that a large part of it is done in pairs, but a lot of

activity is done in “threesomes,” or larger groups, or many participants seek to have multiple one-on-one encounters. Regardless of the configuration of the sexual act, it is most often performed in the co-presence of others, which is inevitable in such a publicly accessible space. The only way for two partners to ensure some privacy in a public bathroom would be to lock themselves in a toilet stall, but participants view this as much too risky; a policeman or a security guard patrolling the place could apprehend the pair for lewd conduct. Therefore, even if participants will not engage in sexual activity with everyone present, they have to tolerate the presence of others who may be watching them. This is also inevitable because, to be appealing, a particular bathroom has to offer a good “volume and variety” of potential participants, as Humpheys put it (10). The openness of public bathrooms make them a sexual space for men of a wide range of demographic characteristics and of different sexual identities. As Chauncey says, men who frequented these spaces could get a sense that there was a very large population of men interested in homosexual relations with variegated sexual identities.

### *1.3. Locker rooms*

A space similar to public bathrooms is the men’s locker room. These places can range in their public access: the locker rooms of municipal pools and recreation centers being open to all, while those in private gyms and health clubs can be cost-prohibitive and limited to paying members. Only William L. Leap (1999) has published ethnographic observation of sex in men’s locker rooms, but the practice seems widespread, as evidenced in popular culture, on cruising websites, and from conversations with my interview respondents. Leap explains that—like for public

bathrooms—sex in locker rooms also requires a physical setting that protects from unanticipated disruptions. Most of the sexual activity happens in saunas and steam rooms, and the gyms that are most popular for cruising will have a layout that give participants warnings of imminent disruptions—for example, noisy doors to warn when someone approaches or windows to watch out for people coming. Similarly to cruising in bathrooms, people will use a set of nonverbal signs to evaluate if one is a player or not, and to communicate mutual interest. The sexual activity in the space is, of course, facilitated by the norm of nudity in these places. Nevertheless, participants have to remain wary of potential intrusions and so the acts and positions are limited to those that allow one to quickly move away, sit down, and cover himself with a towel. Sex is thus mostly limited to fellatio and mutual masturbation. Also, as in bathrooms, Leap concludes that locker rooms are very popular among non-gay-identified men who often do not even regard these activities as gay, but simply as some form of easy release and relaxation after a workout and before returning to the stresses of daily life. Although Leap argues that locker room sex is mostly appealing to non-gay-identified men, my interviewees mention that the locker rooms of gyms in gay neighborhoods sometimes almost resemble gay bathhouses for the ubiquitous sexual activity.

## *2. Commercial sex venues*

The main difference between public places of sex and commercial ones is that the latter are made for sexual activity. What distinguishes them from private venues is that they are accessible to anyone who is willing to pay their fee, thus maintaining some form of publicness.

### *2.1. Bathhouses*

Gay bathhouses are probably the first commercial venues to provide a space dedicated to homosexual sex. As mentioned in Chapter 1, they evolved from traditional Turkish or Roman baths, which provided their patrons with a place to clean themselves, relax, and sometimes socialize. Some of these places were mixed, others gender-segregated, with the majority being for men only (Chauncey 1994). The normative display of nudity in such establishments made them suitable for homosexual activity. As Chauncey explains, the traditional baths did not allow sexual activity on their premise so, if it happened, it had to be concealed as in the locker rooms described above. Some of the bath owners, however, turned a blind eye on sexual activity at certain times of the day, and eventually, some bathhouses dedicated specifically to a homosexual clientele opened. As mentioned in Chapter 1, records of a police arrest in an all-gay sauna in New York City date back to 1902. Gay bathhouses continued to evolve and became important places for the formation of gay communities in the second half of the twentieth century (Bérubé 2003), and they are still popular institutions in several places around the world today. In the 1970s and early 1980s, some gay bathhouses grew into larger entertainment complexes, also offering bars, dancefloors, and music shows. However, the majority of gay bathhouses seem to focus on providing a place for sex. Indeed, all the ethnographic research in gay bathhouses describe how these venues work to bound the experience of their patrons to a sexual one. Several authors have published observational research on gay bathhouses from the 1970s up to recently and the following description of its organization is derived from this literature (Delph 1978;

Holmes, O'Byrne, and Gastaldo 2007; Tattelman 1999; Tewksbury 2002; Weinberg and Williams 1975).

The sexual environment of gay bathhouses is carefully separated from the outside world. In large gay neighborhoods, some bathhouses have large signs and outdoor advertisements to attract passersby, but in other locales, they are generally much more inconspicuous and only potential users will know of their location. Upon entering from the street, there is usually a small lobby area that is separated from the main space by a locked door. An attendant behind a counter will offer different options to the patron (for example, a small room, a double room, or a locker only) and the entry fee will vary accordingly (some contemporary bathhouses, like the upscale *Steamworks* chain, also require patrons to pay a yearly membership besides their room rental). Upon paying his entry fee, the patron will be buzzed through the door so he can enter the bathhouse. Once inside, he will be given a white towel and the key to his locker or room, and sometimes a condom and packet of lube. The patron is expected to head right away to his locker or room and to undress completely, using only the provided towel to cover himself. This whole procedure separates the erotic space of the baths from the outside, protects it from unwanted presence, and ensures that everyone inside is there for homosexual activity.

Gay bathhouses provide various areas and facilities for different types of interaction. Near the entrance, there is typically a snack bar area and a lounge area with a TV, playing a mainstream channel, and newspapers and magazines. This is a space to relax, take a break from the sexual activity, and maybe socialize casually, and usually not an erotically charged area. The wet area comprises communal



showers, Jacuzzis, pool, dry sauna, or steam room, and is generally used to clean oneself and relax. Some cruising and sexual activity will happen in this area, but will typically move to the more sexual spaces of the bathhouse. Some bathhouses also offer health club facilities, like a gym room with weight lifting equipment or rooms for therapeutic massage for an extra fee. The largest and busiest section of bathhouses will be the bedroom area. Gay bathhouses typically have long and sometimes tortuous corridors of small bedrooms, where people lose themselves wandering around. The lighting in this area is usually much dimmer than in the ones above, and naked or towel-clad men walk in the near-dark looking for partners in the corridors and open-door rooms. Although closed bedrooms can offer visual privacy, the thin walls usually do not reach up to the ceiling, and the sound of sexual activity traverses the space. The bedroom section often also offers communal areas like orgy rooms, which are often pitch black and have no furniture or a few benches. There can also be glory hole rooms, or a series of small cubicles interconnected by holes. More elaborate bathhouses might have communal rooms featuring specialized furniture like a sling, or BDSM equipment like a Saint Andrew's Cross to tie someone to. Many bathhouses also have a room for showing gay porn videos. These areas are carefully designed to bound them to sexual activity only, creating an erotic visual and auditory atmosphere.

Interaction and communication leading to sexual activity in gay bathhouses is highly coded and formalized; people rarely resort to verbal communication. In the sexual areas of the bathhouse, there is a constant movement of patrons walking through the corridors of bedrooms and communal areas looking for sex partners.

There are towel codes, where people wear their towel so to attract attention to certain areas of their body, for example, folding it very short to reveal the buttocks, or centering the opening in the front to ease access to the genitals. Men waiting in their bedrooms with the door open will also choose their posture strategically. Men lying naked on their stomach communicate that they want to be the bottom in anal sex; men sitting on their back and fondling their penis show that they want to be the top in oral or anal sex. Some people also bring props to the baths and display them in their rooms to demonstrate that they want to use them. Displaying dildos or butt plugs usually means that one wants them used on himself. A jar of Crisco or specialized lube means that one is interested in fisting. People walk through the corridors peeping through open bedrooms until they see someone that interests them. The man in the room usually maintains the right to accept or reject anyone coming in; this can be done by a gentle word of refusal, or by ignoring the other and looking away. If the bedroom door is kept open during sexual activity, this usually means that more partners might be welcome. When people start sexual activity in open bedrooms or communal rooms, others tend to start flocking around, trying to join in. In the orgy rooms, the partner selection tends to be less specific and more continuous, as people navigate different partners at a time.

Most patrons of bathhouses are looking for multiple sexual encounters, something supported by the organization of the venue. Because gay bathhouses are typically open 24 hours a day, there can be new patrons coming in at any moment, encouraging people to keep looking around for a new partner or a more exciting experience. The steep price of admission also encourages patrons to stay at the

venue as long as they can. Most men do not leave the facility upon reaching orgasm, which is typical in public environments. Patrons can take a nap in their bedrooms, have a bite or drink at the snack bar, or enjoy the spa area while they are recovering from sexual activity or waiting for clientele to turn. Because they have no windows and are separated from the outside world, bathhouses create a sense of timelessness, and patrons can spend entire days or nights in there, alternating between cruising and resting.

Although some gay bathhouses were larger entertainment complexes that offered opportunities for men to socialize, the ones observed are mostly limited to impersonal sex. In the lounge, snack bar, or wet areas, there can be light conversation, but people are careful not to disrupt the erotic atmosphere of the place (Tattelman 1999). Conversation typically remains superficial and avoids private information and personal details. This is true not only for non-gay-identified patrons who want to protect their anonymity, but also for gay patrons; at least since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, having sex at bathhouses has carried some stigma in the gay community, and so even gay patrons want to remain discreet about their visits to the baths. In most bathhouses today, “interactions are focused and based on the pursuit of individual not social goals” (Tewksbury 2002:101).

Every researcher of gay bathhouses observed that these venues are specifically designed to frame the whole experience of a patron around sex. The pervasiveness of naked bodies and sexual activity give the message that one should not expect anything else than sex from the men he meets there (Holmes et al. 2007; Tewksbury 2002). The organization of the setting is dedicated to immediate sexual

gratification (Delph 1978) or “easy sex,” sex without commitment, obligation, or a long-term relationship (Weinberg and Williams 1975:125). Indeed, Weinberg and Williams go as far as suggesting that gay bathhouses aim at providing easy sex just like shopping malls provide easy shopping (134). Despite the impersonality of many bathhouse encounters, however, men sometimes attach meaningful feelings and emotional attachments to their experiences (Tattelman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975).

## *2.2. Adult theaters*

Porno theaters and showrooms date back to the early mid-twentieth century with the apparition of the stag film. Early porno viewing venues might also have been places for men to cruise but there does not seem to be documentation regarding that. With the first feature-length porn movies in 1971 (notably *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door*), porno movie theaters appeared as legitimate commercial establishments. The “porno chic” phenomenon of the early 1970s brought a lot of different people to adult theaters—men, women, couples going together—who were curious about watching sex on the big screen. However, adult theaters rapidly became places largely attended by men alone. Several of these men might be looking only for a visual stimulation for masturbatory activity, but many patrons engage in different forms of homosexual contact. In large cities like NYC, gay movie theaters presented male-only porn and were known as cruising places; nevertheless, straight theaters also offered opportunities for male cruising. These “heterosexual” theaters provided a convenient cover for men who did not want to be seen entering a gay establishment but still wanted to have homosexual sex.

Samuel Delany's memoir of his experiences in NYC's adult theaters in the 1970s and 1980s provides the bulk of what we know about the patterns of interaction in them. Sexual contact was usually quite limited: a lot of people only wanted to masturbate in the company of others, some did mutual masturbation or oral sex. Delany observed anal intercourse very rarely. Some people went to the theater for quick impersonal sex, but patrons could also linger and watch several movies, sometimes going out and reentering several times over a day. In a recent study of gay porn theaters in Argentina, researchers have found that interaction was mostly furtive and anonymous, partly because of the stigma attached to frequenting such a venue (Balán et al. 2014).

Because Delany was a frequent user of these theaters and spent extended periods of time there, he was able to describe thoroughly the types of interactions people had. His position as a full participant also allowed him to tell about extended relationships he had developed with other men using the theaters. The furtive sexual interaction often led to social interaction where friendships could emerge. Even if some people would not tell their names and personal information during these casual conversations, Delany said they still got to know each other a little. Easy sex meant that the interaction focused on the mutual exchange of pleasure, which did not completely exclude the possibility to relate intimately. Delany also saw a lot of regulars at the place, whom he got to know more through the years. With some people he had romantic relationships, others were just acquaintances. He wrote about helping a young man applying to college, showing that patrons could care for one another and provide mutual assistance. The fact that Delany could

describe longer relationships developing in the space of adult theaters may not be due to specific characteristics of the venue but because he was a full user whereas other ethnographers maintained boundaries between themselves and participants.

### *2.3. Video stores/peep shows*

Similar to adult theaters, video peep shows are venues providing a place to watch pornographic movies. Peep shows may date back to the first half of the twentieth century, when, in adult arcades, coin operated machines allowed one to watch stag film playing on loop (Williams 1999). Leap (1999) seems to have been the only researcher to do ethnographic observation in adult video stores. Compared to adult theaters, today's video peep shows offer private cubicles instead of one communal viewing room. In these viewing booths, TV screens are activated by inserting money, one dollar providing a short moment of viewing. Contemporary peep shows provide a wide range of "channels" that viewers can operate to find the movie they want to see. Several men also go to these video stores for the "buddy booths", which are booths connected to each other by an open hole or slit in the wall separating them. Through this opening, men can watch each other masturbate, engage in mutual masturbation, oral sex, and even, but more rarely, anal sex. The viewing areas of these stores are usually in the back or in the basement of sex shops or porno stores. In the space in front or between the rows of viewing booths, men stand or sit and look at people entering the store. When stares of interest are reciprocated, two men move to adjacent booths and put money in to have a few minutes of action. Employees of the store usually monitor the place and make sure that everyone inside them is a paying customer (a light outside the booth indicates

whether the person inside has purchased viewing time). Sexual activity in peep show booths can be as cheap as a dollar or quickly become very expensive if people take their time; for that reason, sexual activity tends to be very quick. The communal spaces are only used to find someone to have sex with and remain silent.

#### *2.4. Sex clubs & backroom bars*

A large variety of establishments exist that people call sex clubs. Some are just regular gay bars or nightclubs where sexual activity happens in the dark corners or bathrooms (Clatts 1999); these are not advertised or labeled by the management as sex clubs, but when a particular place has a reputation as a place where one can reliably find sex, people start calling them sex clubs. The sex clubs that have a more stated intent at providing a space for sex also vary in design. A typical configuration is called the backroom bar: a bar or nightclub that looks like just any other, but that has a specific area—usually in the back—designed for sexual activity (Balán et al. 2014). These areas are also often called “darkrooms,” since they often have very dim lighting or are even pitch black. In the nonsexual area of backroom bars, people can socialize like in any other bar, and sexual activity is usually forbidden. In the area designated for sex, people are expected to not talk loudly and focus on sexual activity. People might go to the backroom with someone with whom they have flirted at the bar, and perhaps have discussed the activities they want to do, or they can go alone and seek out anonymous sex in the darkness of the backroom. Other types of sex clubs allow sexual activity on the entire premise (Balán et al. 2014; Brodsky 1993; Delph 1978; Rubin 1991). They still often have spaces loosely designated for socialization (around the bar) and others for sex, but

the boundaries might be more fluid than in backroom bars. Sex clubs can provide a wide range of facilities for sex: communal rooms, private cubicles, mazes, glory holes, cages, slings, sofas, or beds. These places can have different dress codes: some sex clubs have people keep their clothes on (definitely the case for backrooms); some require partial or full nudity and provide clothes check.

Different sex clubs create different norms for social and sexual interaction. The consensus seems to be that the spaces designated for sex should not be the place for socialization. Although the clubs allowed for social interaction, Delph observed that these exchanges were only instrumental: conversations were for finding out what the other wanted to do sexually, or to do an erotic performance to attract partners. Regular users thought that conversations that went into other topics or aimed to know the other personally broke the erotic mood (Brodsky 1993).

Socialization was very important in other sex clubs, like in the case of the San Francisco Leather bar that Gayle Rubin observed in the early 1980s. This semiprivate club did not have a norm of anonymity and discussing personal topics was not inappropriate. There was a frank camaraderie among the men (and some nights, women) who came to the space. People did not come there expecting to find long-term or romantic relationships, but it was not uncommon for enduring friendships or love affairs to begin at the club. The place also acted as some form of “community center” for the Leather subculture, where one could relate to others and find support (1991:21). Going to the space meant connecting to a local and international network of people into Leather and BDSM sexuality.



### *2.5. Resorts and retreats*

Some sexual subcultures have local, national, or international organizations that organize gatherings like retreats in the woods, resorts, or cruises. When sexual events are set up by such organizations, the social and communal dimensions are definitely prominent. Peter Hennen observed three weekend retreats, one organized by a Leather club, another by a Bear association, and the other by a group of Radical Faeries. The events of the first two groups brought together hundreds of men for a few days for “greeting old friends and meeting new ones, eating, drinking, fellowship, swimming, and sex” (2008:3). These retreats included the typical camping activities like bonfires, dinners, walks in the woods, but also had spaces delineated for group sexual activity. Like in the places described above, sex remained casual and did not require commitment, but it also did not need to be anonymous. Sexual activity was definitely a part of these events, but Hennen concluded that participants were mostly driven to these retreats for the social aspect and to be initiated into a homosocial community.

Commercial sex venues have been important sites of gay cruising for over a century and are likely to grow even more in importance as cruising is integrated by the recreation and tourism industry. New venues might become increasingly popular like, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the all-male gay resorts with a “clothing optional” policy. Commercial sex venues are distinguished from public cruising environments in that they offer a place that is not accessible to the general public. Yet, they are usually accessible to any adult man who can pay the entry fee whereas, as we will see below, private venues can have arbitrary admission criteria.

Depending on their configuration, commercial sex venues can promote impersonal sex (like in the dark areas of bathhouses) or encourage sociability (like in specialized sex clubs catering to a sexual subculture). Table 2 summarizes the differences between public and commercial venues described in this chapter and shows this study's findings about private venues, which will be described in the following chapters.

	References	Time	Access	Sexual behavior	Contact	Sociability
public	<b>Parks</b> (Delph 1978; Moore 1995; Keogh & Holland 1999; Somlai et al. 2001)	Always accessible	Anyone can access	Must remain hidden from public. Furtive, silent acts. Can be interrupted anytime.	Diverse crowd. Open access and times make it unlikely to meet the same people repeatedly. Favors random encounters.	Must remain silent. Must respect anonymity of others.
	<b>Highway rest areas</b> (Troiden 1974; Ponte 1974; Corzine & Kirby 1977; van Lieshout 1995; Hollister 1999)					
	<b>Toilets</b> (Humphreys 1975; Delph 1978; Moore 1995; Keogh & Holland 1999)	Long opening hours	Anyone of same gender can access			

	References	Time	Access	Sexual behavior	Contact	Sociability
commercial	<b>Gym locker rooms</b> (Leap 1999)	Long opening hours	Restricted by membership and gender	Furtive, silent acts. Can be interrupted anytime.	Open access and times make it unlikely to meet the same people repeatedly. Favors random encounters.	Must remain silent.
	<b>Bathhouses</b> (Weinberg & Williams 1975; Delph 1978; Tattelman 1999; Tewksbury 2002; Holmes et al. 2007)	Open 24/7	Accessible to all adult men	Sex allowed and pervasive. Private rooms or collective rooms.		Mostly silent and anonymous but some opportunities to socialize.
	<b>Adult theater &amp; video stores</b> (Leap 1999; Balán et al. 2014)					
	<b>Backroom bars &amp; cruisy bars</b> (Clatts 1999; Balán et al. 2014)	Regular opening hours, usually evenings only or weekends only	Adult men, can be formally or informally restricted to specific subcultures or dress codes	Open access but regular users might connect.	Support sociability and might form local sexual communities.	
	<b>Sex clubs</b> (Delph 1978; Rubin 1991; Brodsky 1993)					

	References	Time	Access	Sexual behavior	Contact	Sociability
private	<b>Resorts &amp; retreats</b> (Hennen 2008)	Seasonal	Adult men, sexual subculture	Sex allowed to different degrees in collective areas.	Very likely to meet same people from one event to another.	Support sociability, sometimes organized around subculture.
	<b>Private sex clubs</b> (Meunier 2014)	Occasional, specific opening hours	Arbitrary admission criteria	Shared open space for group collective sex.		Encourages sociability among regular users.
	<b>Private parties</b>	Unpredictable	Exclusive, requires personal connection			Based on personal connections.
	<b>Private sex clubs</b> (Meunier 2014)	Occasional, specific opening hours	Arbitrary admission criteria	Shared open space for group collective sex.		Encourages sociability among regular users.
	<b>Private parties</b>	Unpredictable	Exclusive, requires personal connection			Based on personal connections.

Table 2 (pages 113–115). Typology of places of gay cruising.

### *3. Conclusion: the diminishing variety of cruising places in NYC*

Ethnographic research in a variety of gay cruising places shows that the practices there vary greatly. Different places allow for different degrees of sexual activity and of social interaction. Cruisers have to adapt their behavior to the norms of interaction that are specific to the cruising venue they use. In a locale that offers a variety of cruising venues, men can experiment with different spaces and use the ones that best suits their personal desires. However, in places where only a certain type of cruising venue is available, cruisers might have to adapt their desires to the ones supported by the interactional norms of the space available. New York City used to provide gay cruisers with a wide variety of cruising places: parks and outdoor areas by the piers, bathrooms in subway and train stations, gyms, bathhouses, adult theaters, peep shows, cruisy bars, backroom bars, sex clubs, and resorts (e.g., on Fire Island). As commercial sex venues have been closed down and public spaces renovated, the landscape of gay cruising places in NYC has become much less varied. Indeed, private sex clubs and private sex parties have taken over as the most available type of space.

Private sex parties have their own way of structuring sexual and social interaction, which will be described in detail in Chapter 5. Then, Chapter 6 will show how gay cruisers in NYC who had been used to different types of gay cruising (for example, in public places) have had to adapt their own desires now that they must either go to sex parties or leave the city when they want to cruise. The next chapter

explains further how the landscape of gay cruising has been getting smaller in recent years and what participants and sex clubs have been doing to adapt.

### CHAPTER 3 – The Current Landscape of Collective Sex in NYC

The landscape of commercial sex venues in NYC has greatly changed in the past 30 years. In the years before the AIDS crisis, NYC was a big sexual playground for gay men: piers and parks were places of public cruising; bathhouses were spaces of ubiquitous sex; sex clubs provided a space to drink, socialize, and experiment with various sexual practices; adult theaters allowed a place to watch porn and masturbate in groups. However, the onset of the AIDS epidemic marked the beginning of the end of what some have called “the Golden Age of gay sex.” Two waves of policies targeted places of gay cruising in NYC after the discovery of AIDS. First, in 1985, NY State Public Health Law outlawed sexual activity in all commercial establishments. Then, in the mid-1990s, the zoning policies of NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani aimed to remove adult businesses to improve “quality of life” and real estate in desirable neighborhoods. The implementation of the public health code and zoning policies led to the closure of most commercial sex venues that existed in the 1970s and to the renovation of public places where gay men cruised. However, restrictive policies have not completely eliminated the culture of group sex, but have limited it and moved it to new spaces. In this chapter, I show how—because sex is forbidden in them—today’s commercial sex venues in NYC do not satisfy their clientele, leading these people to turn to private sex clubs that try to operate invisibly from authorities, and which present new forms of risk.



In this chapter, I use data from my work of ethnographic observation and from interviews with sex party organizers and participants. I have worked at 40 individual events in three different venues. Nights of observation lasted between 5 and 10 hours, for a total of nearly 300 hours of observation. About half of these events were attended by 100 to 150 men, and the other half by more than 150 men, up to nearly 200 (only two events were “flops” and had between 20 and 30 guests). I have had unstructured conversations with a few hundred men in the field, have conducted in-depth interviews outside of parties with 20 regular attendees of the events I observed, four of which were also active organizers of sex parties at the venues observed or other places. (There was an added set of questions to the interview schedule to participants who also organized parties.) Interviews lasted between 28 and 112 minutes, for an average of 72 minutes. Respondents’ ages ranged from 23 to 61 years old, with an average of 39 and a median of 32 years old (ages were clustered around 30 and around 50 years old, as shown in Table 4 in Chapter 6).

This chapter is divided in two parts. In the first, I describe what is left of the commercial sex venues of the past and what my respondents thought of them. Although many establishments have been able to change their space and regulate the activity of their patrons to comply with the law, policing sex in these venues goes against the value of sexual freedom that participants look for in places of group sex. Because of the limitations of current commercial sex venues in NYC, people have largely turned to private events for group sex, which use strategies of privacy, invisibility, or mobility to avoid the law. The second part of this chapter describes

the broad spectrum of what people call sex parties, from the small, informal gathering to the widely publicized event attracting thousands. Participants see pros and cons with different types of parties because of their reliability, accessibility, cost, and availability. The midrange, private sex club—which is the main focus of this study—has become the main institution of group sex because it offers a place where sex is unpoliced and because it is safe and reliable. Chapter 4 will then describe how sex-party organizers elaborated private sex clubs as a way to navigate the legal and material constraints explained below.

1. *“By order of the NYC dept of health: no sexual activity allowed”*

NYC’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH; formerly only Department of Health) has been the main agent in closing commercial sex venues after the onset of the AIDS epidemic. In 1985, the NY State Public Health Law added a clause against sex in commercial establishments, stating that “no establishment shall make facilities available for the purpose of sexual activities where anal intercourse, vaginal intercourse<sup>2</sup> or fellatio take place,” where “establishment” is defined as “any place in which entry, membership, goods or services are purchased” (New York State 2000:Section 225(4), (5)(a), Subpart 24-2 – Prohibited Facilities). The law also granted local health officers with the power to close any such establishment as “constituting a public nuisance” and “a threat to the public health.”

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<sup>2</sup> The 1985 text of the law only prohibited anal and oral intercourse, a 1993 amendment added “vaginal intercourse” (Colter 1996), revealing the code originally aimed to police homosexual relations.

A study of the inspection documents of the DOHMH reveals that the agency's inspectors visited bathhouses, gay bars, and adult theaters and video stores either overtly or covertly to collect evidence of sexual activity for at least a decade after the passing of the law (Elovitz and Edwards 1996). The inspectors—informally called the “sex police” within the agency—then brought the evidence to court to order the closure of establishments where they witnessed forbidden activity. After a decade of documented shut-downs by the DOHMH, the agency slowed down its inspections; today, it does not hire sex inspectors anymore. Nevertheless, the law is still in effect, and any local authority has the power to shut down any establishment that allows sexual activity on its premises.

Not every commercial sex venue where sex happened was closed during the wave of shut-downs by the city. Venues could continue to operate if their main purpose was not to provide a space for sex, and if they took substantial measures to prevent sexual activity. Many bathhouses, gay clubs, and adult video stores thus changed their space and the description of their business to discourage sexual activity. For some places investigated, the DOHMH required that the management hire guards whose sole task was to monitor the space and stop sexual activity (Colter 1996; Elovitz and Edwards 1996). The policing at the city level thus moved inside the venue: city inspectors would police venues and their management, and the management would police its patrons.

As I will show with interview data below, the management of commercial venues still sometimes turns a blind eye on some sexual activity, and patrons find ways to have sex in these places; however, the sense of sexual freedom that was a

big part of these places was lost. Managers of commercial sex venues are responsible to prevent sexual activity and stop it if it begins, but they seem to deresponsibilize themselves about the activity they cannot see. Furthermore, since inspections have become rarer, establishments tend to loosen their monitoring until they are inspected or hear that other places have been inspected. People thus still turn to these places for sex, but they are usually frustrated by the limitations they pose. Previous ethnographic research in sex venues (reviewed in the previous chapter) showed how their appeal was in creating a small world where nudity was ubiquitous and sex could happen anytime and anywhere. By restricting when, where, and how sex can happen, the commercial sex venues of NYC today cannot completely fulfill their patrons' desires. The following describes how today's commercial venues in NYC comply with the law against sexual activity, and what my respondents thought of them.

### *1.1. Bathhouses*

Although the gay bathhouse remains one of the most prominent venues for gay cruising in many of the world's urban areas today, they are not very popular in NYC. Up until the early 1980s, the city had many world-famous gay bathhouses; they were, however, the first to be targeted by health inspectors who quickly moved in to shut them down. At the time of my research, only two such facilities still operated, while in much less populated North American cities, many more still operate (Woods et al. 2003). The East Side Club and West Side Club, owned by the same people, call themselves "social relaxation clubs for gay and bisexual men." Because sexual activity is forbidden in commercial establishments, the management forbids

full nudity and sexual activity in all common areas of the club, and staff will enforce that rule by warning any patron who violates it. However, guests can rent small private rooms and invite other men to join them inside. What happens behind closed doors is left to the discretion of the patrons; the establishment merely provides a place for “social relaxation” but not explicitly for sexual activity.

Although these bathhouses provide a space for towel-clad men to cruise one another and possibly have sex in the privacy of their rooms, my respondents tend to find them uninteresting. Requiring patrons to constantly wear at least a towel around their waist and to hide behind closed door for sex makes it impossible for them to enjoy the voyeuristic and exhibitionistic pleasures of group sex in common areas, which are what a lot of people look for in a bathhouse experience. My respondents knew that NYC bathhouses—because of the way they restrict nudity and sex—are a lesser version of the ones they can find elsewhere: “the bathhouses, they make you put towels on; if it weren’t New York City, I’d be walking around nude” (R2). They also did not like the false pretense of the establishment not being a place for sex and the restrictions the bathhouses placed on sexual activity:

“technically it’s a gym—as they say—but they have like a treadmill and an elliptical off in a corner so it can qualify as a gym; you’re not supposed to do anything out in the open” (R6). The place where they could have sex was unsatisfactory: “I didn’t like the space either. You get a room, but it’s legitimately a closet with a bed that’s like a bench, basically with a pad on it” (R6). My participants also found these venues too expensive for what they offer (they require patrons to pay a monthly or yearly membership, and a room rental fee on every visit): “for that much money, it’s

not enough of a guarantee for me” (R1). Every respondent who had tried NYC bathhouses preferred not to go anymore, mainly because they did not find them sexually satisfying.

### 1.2. *Adult theaters and video stores*

Pornographic theaters have completely disappeared from NYC, but adult video stores and peep shows remain. Adult theaters and sex shops were targeted not only by the public health code as establishments where sexual activity happened, but also by the zoning policies that wanted to spread out adult businesses, regardless of sexual activity. As described by Samuel Delany in *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue*, adult theaters have all shut down over a long process of renovating midtown Manhattan into a tourist destination (1999). There are thus almost no more venues where men can collectively watch porn movies and engage in sexual activity. However, adult video stores, a similar type of venue, still exist. These stores operate as sex shops, selling porn videos and sexual paraphernalia, but also provide a viewing area in the back or on a separate floor. These areas have private viewing booths where patrons can go in, close the door behind them, and insert bills into a machine that will show porn videos on a TV screen. Although these booths are a space where patrons can watch porn and masturbate, they do not violate the public health code because they do not provide a place for sexual activity among patrons. They also always have staff monitoring the place to make sure patrons go into the booths only one at a time. Yet gay cruisers know to look for stores that provide “buddy booths”: viewing booths that have small openings in the partitions separating them. Through these “glory holes,” patrons can look at each

other masturbate, exchange a hand job or blow job, or even have anal sex (although this is rarer because of the constraints of the space). Many of these adult video stores operate throughout the city; those of my participants who patronized them thought they were a convenient place for quick, anonymous oral sex.

Although video stores could be convenient, respondents saw many drawbacks with them. The design of these places imposes considerable limitations on the types of sexual activity people can engage in. People also often find these stores to be insalubrious or generally “seedy places” (R10). They are tailored for quick, anonymous sex, which is insufficient for some people: “I think some people go to the bookstore<sup>3</sup> and that sort of thing for that: if they really wanted so precisional, in-out, anonymous, on a timer . . . And I just think there’s no point” (R12). Another major drawback was the feeling of being constantly surveilled by a rude staff. An employee of the store is always present in the viewing area to make sure that no one tries to go into a booth with someone else and to tell patrons to get out of the booths if they have not paid for videos. A light outside the booth changes color when a customer inserts bills in the machine, and then again when the meter expires. If the patron does not immediately put more money in, the employee walks to the booth and knocks loudly on the door telling the user to put money back in or leave the place. Consequently, as in bathhouses, the policing of sex in video stores makes them generally unappealing, or too limited, to the gay cruisers I interviewed.

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<sup>3</sup> Video peep shows are also called gay bookstores.

### 1.3. *Bars and backrooms*

Sex clubs—bars that serve alcohol and dedicate a place for sex—were all closed in NYC in the 1980s. However, as in the past, sexual activity also happens in gay bars and nightclubs that are not sex clubs per se. Patrons may have sex more or less subtly in the bathrooms, in dark corners, or in backrooms. A bar can become a popular cruising spot if the physical setting is conducive to sex and if its management is permissive. Before the health department began inspecting sex in commercial venues, some gay bars were known for letting almost anything go. However, after the public health code changed, inspectors began visiting these places and requiring that the management take measures to keep patrons from engaging in sexual activity. Gay bars today apply different measures to comply with the law, but they often change with the fluctuating worries of the management about imminent inspections. In the end, my respondents still find sex in NYC's gay bars, but they are limited and unreliable places for group sex.

In gay nightclubs that look nothing like sex clubs, patrons sometimes have furtive sex in the bathrooms. This respondent, for example, talks about regularly finding sex in a posh Manhattan gay lounge that most would not expect to be a cruising place:

R14: [Name of bar], surprisingly, always has a cruisy bathroom. We used to go to [theme night] every Monday night and usually also I might take a dip into the bathroom and jerk off with someone.

I: At the urinals or in the rooms [stalls]?

R14: Into the rooms.

I: Is it surveilled?



R14: Not that I've ever experienced, but I know sometimes they'll come and like knock on the door or something but that's it.

Gay clubs often facilitate voyeuristic pleasures in their bathrooms by putting no partition between closely placed urinals, installing a wide trough, putting glass windows between stalls, or strategically placing mirrors. There, especially in the late hours of the night, men may be cruising for sex. They may find someone to take home, masturbate together or have furtive sex at the urinals or, like in the above example, move to a stall. Patrons have to be discreet because not everyone is looking for sex, and because they know the management cannot allow sex. Indeed, not every cruiser is comfortable with sex in bars; another participant, although he knows the bathroom of one of his favorite gay bars is cruisy, chooses not to have sex there: "I don't like fooling around in public places that aren't devoted to sex because I'm very uncomfortable that I might get in trouble with the establishment or with the authorities" (R11). The management of these bars will take at least minimal measures to prevent sexual activity by having an employee monitoring the bathrooms. One gay bar of the city humorously prevented sex in its bathrooms by writing in large letters on the wall of the stalls area: "one gay at a time, sweet Jesus!"

Other gay bars are more explicit about being places for cruising. A famous example is the Cock, whose rooster logo only humorously tries to hide the sexual message that its name implies. The bar opened in 1998 and quickly became a place of different permissiveness: go-go dancers doing sleazy sex shows, patrons smoking indoors long after the ban, and of course, people having sex. The place quickly attracted the authorities, and cops and inspectors fined and warned the establishment with any offense they could observe. The bar closed down and

reopened a few times and changed location once. In the current location, when entering, patrons receive a small sheet of paper that reads: “BY ORDER OF THE NYC DEPT OF HEALTH: NO SEXUAL ACTIVITY ALLOWED” (Figure 2). Larger signs with the same statement were posted on the walls inside the club. At some point in the past, the bar assigned an employee to walk around the bathrooms and darker corners with a flashlight to tell patrons to keep everything in their pants; at the time of my research, however, the venue did nothing to actually enforce the no-sex rule: “They have signs that say ‘no sexual activity allowed’ but they will not stop you. . . . I’ve even had a bartender come up to watch me have sex and then go back to work” (R13). Whether they patronized the place or not, most of my respondents knew that the Cock was a place where one could go to look for sex late at night.

Although many respondents thought the Cock was a good nightclub with good DJs, go-go dancers, cheap drinks, and sexual possibilities, there were some problems with the space. One reason is that it got overly crowded. Patrons looking for action typically gathered in an alcove area at the back of the bar that was informally designated for sexual activity. At the peak of the night, men were so tightly packed in the backroom area that it was almost impossible to move in and out of it: “I hadn’t been in a while just because when that place gets crowded, that little back corner is so tiny—and I mean you can’t fit 10 people in there comfortably, but when you’ve got like 30 or 40 guys back there, it’s kind of awful” (R13). Other respondents even thought it was dangerous to venture in that corner because, as people tried to make their way in and out of it, they would step and trip over others who would be kneeling down for oral sex. Another well-known problem was theft (a

crowded space where it is acceptable to grope people's groin area is indeed a pickpocket's heaven). At the door, the staff even told patrons to put their wallet in their front pocket and watch it all night. One of my respondents who had his wallet stolen there said, "I don't go to [the Cock] very much because I don't like having to watch my wallet constantly" (R9). Because sexual activity should not be allowed at bars like the Cock, it happens in ways that are inconvenient and risky for participants.

People still enjoy sexual activity in some of NYC's gay bars, but they cannot rely on them because what is allowed one day may not be the next. The Eagle, a club that caters to Leather, BDSM, Bears, or generally masculine men, has gone through different waves of permissiveness during the time of my research. One night that was very popular among my participants was the weekly "Jock Strap Night," where patrons were invited to check all their clothes except for a jock strap (an athletic underwear that hides genitals but leaves the buttocks exposed). At the beginning of my fieldwork, people told me about how they had sex in the bathrooms, corners, and even sometimes open areas of the club. In June 2011, about 20 policemen and inspectors came in for an unannounced inspection, saying they were responding to noise complaints from the neighborhood. The event was covered in online media because it happened at about the same time NY State was legalizing same-sex marriage and a few days before gay pride, which gay activists qualified as particularly ill-conceived and ill-timed. Although the bar was not charged for allowing sexual activity (Baker and Meenan 2011), its management began monitoring it after the raid. From one day to the next, people who were used to

going to the Eagle for the sexual activity found new restrictions. Employees wearing fake police badges now walked around with flashlights to prevent sexual activity—my respondents humorously call them “the sex police” (although a different one than DOHMH inspectors). These monitors sometimes walked around with their flashlight on the flashing setting so that patrons had a few seconds of warning before they got into their eyesight. The club still wants to cater to the clientele of gay cruisers by allowing some erotic activity but keeps interrupting it before it delves into prohibited activity. These mixed messages become confusing for patrons who are unsure whether it is okay or not to have sex in the space, and having to obey to monitors interrupting becomes frustrating.

They don't really seem to be too intent on keeping people out who are going there looking for action because it happens all the time. They flash their lights, break it up, and they'll come back a few minutes later if they think people are still doing that. I think the time I got kicked out for having sex was only because I didn't stop when they asked me to. I think if I had stopped and gone away right away, they would have left me alone. (R13)

While people can still enjoy the Eagle as a sex venue, they also fear that it may not be around much longer. Located on the far west side of Chelsea, the club used to be one of only a few establishments in an industrial area where practically no one lived. Now that real estate developers are increasingly building high-end residences in the neighborhood, complaints against the establishment, like those that led to the 2011 raid, will become more frequent.

Gay bars like the Eagle are now threatened by gentrification just literally next door. I think the Eagle's persistence at that location... its days are numbered because the gentry moving in with their kids are not gonna want their kids to be walking by a gay bar; it's just that simple . . . I expect them to shut down within the next five years because the community will want them out. (R11)

Although some commercial sex venues have survived the public health and zoning policies in NYC, they have lost a lot of their interest. The outlawing of sex in establishments creates spaces that are inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even dangerous for sex. Even though the health department has not sent inspectors to see if clubs are allowing sex for many years, employees monitor the venues to make sure patrons do not engage in prohibited activity. People can have some sexual activity in these places but they are not completely free to do it the way they want. They also cannot rely on these places being around tomorrow because policing and gentrification may lead to their closure. Sex parties respond to these shortcomings by offering a space where cruisers can find the freedom they are looking for, free of invasive monitoring and away from the eyes of authorities.

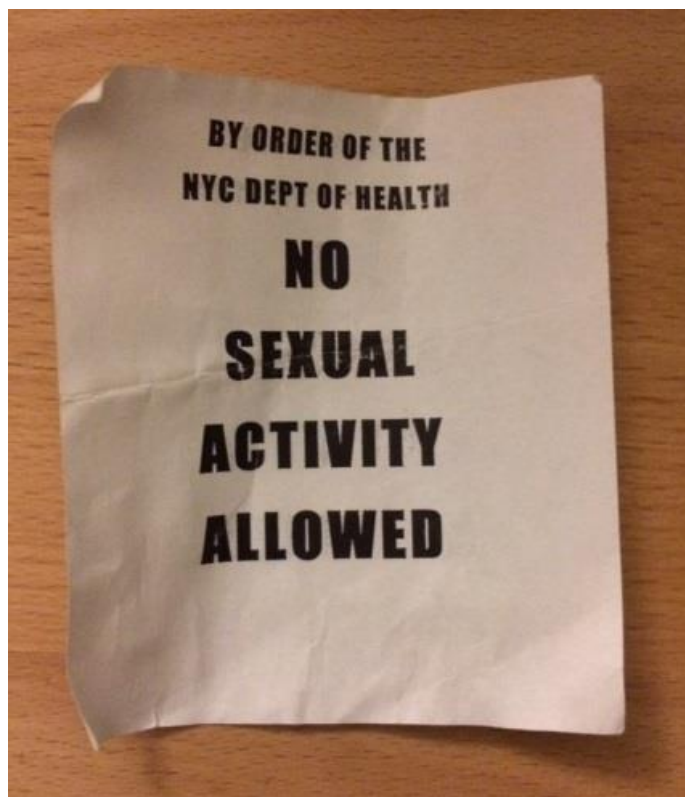


Figure 2. Small, 4" by 5", paper flyer handed to every patron upon entering the gay bar the Cock.

## 2. *Creating new sex venues*

As many gay activists and HIV prevention workers predicted when the state outlawed sex in commercial venues, closing places where people have group sex would not end risky sexual practices but only move them elsewhere. From an epidemiological perspective, commercial sex venues host—using the words of DOHMH’s commissioner Thomas Farley—“densely-connected sexual networks” that public health authorities need to dismantle by closing these establishments (2007:5). But sexual networks are also social ones, and the people involved in the gay cruising culture have been able to find ways to keep having group sex and new places to do so. They have resorted to different strategies to keep going. The first

two are to keep their activity legal by either 1) playing around the definition of sex in the public health code or 2) playing around the definition of what an establishment is. As these two strategies are not failproof, organizers may instead try to avoid law enforcement by 3) being mobile to make it harder for inspectors to locate them or 4) remaining invisible from inspectors and the general public. All these strategies have different levels of efficacy.

First, some sex venue organizers have explored the boundaries of the sexual activity prohibited under the public health law. The public health code forbids “anal intercourse, vaginal intercourse and fellatio” from commercial establishments, but does not rule against a plethora of other possible acts: kissing, caressing, masturbating, touching each other’s genitals, etc. Therefore, there is still a wide range of erotic events and practices that can happen in commercial establishments. BDSM and fetish events, for example, can still happen legally as long as they do not allow intercourse or fellatio. Another popular event frequently advertised by gay bars is the “underwear party,” which requires patrons to undress to their underwear, and about which I will say more below. A long-standing event that has pushed the boundaries of sex in commercial venues is the party called New York Jacks. Founded before the AIDS epidemic, the event was targeted to men who enjoy mutual masturbation only, without ever getting into oral or anal intercourse. When the public health code added the prohibition on sexual activity, the event claimed to be perfectly safe and compliant with the code because it had always strictly forbidden oral and anal sex to focus on masturbation. The event is still held twice a week in private clubs. However, the strategy of restricting only the sexual activity

forbidden by the code is not a guaranteed success. Even though things like penetration with sex toys, licking other parts than the penis, penetration with fingers or fisting, or exposed genitalia are not strictly forbidden by the code, the DOHMH has often found ways to use such behavior to rule against an establishment. That is, the agency has at times required that establishments take measure to forbid “conduct which may reasonably lead to . . . prohibited activity” (DOHMH quoted in Elovitz and Edwards 1996). Therefore, trying to operate a commercial sex venue by avoiding the specific activities prohibited in the code may not be successful.

Another strategy to remain out of the purview of the public health law is to move group sex to places that are not commercial establishments. The code outlaws sexual activity in commercial establishments only—in places that sell memberships, entry, goods, or services. It is thus still legal to host people for group sex in a private venue that does not charge admission or sell anything. Private sex parties have thus become increasingly popular in NYC as popular sex clubs and bathhouses started to shut down. As I am about to describe below, sex parties exist on a continuum from the smallest and least organized to the largest most planned out. Small sex parties at someone’s home are definitely out of the purview of the health authorities, but larger parties that emulate commercial sex venues could be regulated. As sex venue organizers lost their legal establishments, many of them looked for private venues to pursue their activity, leading to an elaborate underground economy of private sex clubs and parties. Although they call themselves private parties to distinguish themselves from commercial establishments, the DOHMH knows that it could act on them. As its commissioner stated, “many ‘private’ sex parties operate as businesses,



with entry fees, fixed locations, and regular hours and thus may be subject to enforcement of the existing regulation” (Farley 2007:4). Moving group sexual activity from commercial establishments to private ones does not make it immune from the law.

Whether the type of venue and sexual activity happening in it is legal or not, there is arbitrariness in the application of the public health code that makes any type of erotic event a risky business. Although some types of sexual activity are not forbidden by the code, the DOHMH could rule that it is likely to lead to forbidden activity; although some venues are not commercial establishments, the DOHMH could decide that they have enough in common with establishments and regulate them. In the end, sex venue organizers never know when the DOHMH will decide to send inspectors or what they will use to prosecute establishments. It is thus always safer to avoid authorities as much as possible. One strategy to avoid inspections has been to be mobile: if a group sex event keeps changing location, it is harder for the DOHMH to know where to send inspectors and when. Another strategy is to remain invisible, or to make sure that no one but the interested people knows of the existence of a venue. I will explain in more detail how invisibility has become the main strategy to maintain private sex clubs, but before, I describe the range of events that participants call “sex parties.”

### *2.1. What is a sex party?*

Again, today’s commercial sex venues in NYC are often closely monitored by staff, could close down at any time, and thus do not offer a reliable space for free sexual interaction. This is why I argue that sex parties have become the main place

of group sex in NYC. Sex parties, however, come in very different shapes and sizes. Because of the different strategies they use to either comply with the law or avoid it, these different types of events will have different advantages and disadvantages: they may be difficult to find and to access, may not be frequent or reliable, and may not offer complete sexual freedom. The midrange private sex club has become the principal institution for group sex because it reproduces the most features of legal commercial sex venues. My study focuses on that type of venue, but I describe here the full range of sex parties and their pros and cons to give a better sense of what a private sex club is and why it has become the go-to venue. (Table 3 shows the characteristics of different sex parties.)

## 2.2. *Ad hoc parties*

At its most basic, a sex party is a small group of people getting together for sex in private without definite planning or organization. Public health authorities can regulate the most organized and commercialized forms of group sex but not smaller, private ones, often happening on the spur of the moment. Gay cruisers remain open to impromptu sex parties that can form on different occasions: after a night out in the bars, if a social gathering turns up frisky, or when looking for a sex partner online. Indeed, internet and location-based phone applications have been important for the culture of gay cruising and group sex. Many gay cruising websites have party listings for people looking to host or join a group; small ads and GPS-based apps allow people in groups to find more people in the moment. Ad hoc

parties<sup>4</sup> are not commercial, typically go unplanned and not advertised, are hosted in someone's residence, and usually are composed of very small groups.

Small sex parties are a good alternative for group sex in a context where commercialized cruising places are forbidden, but they do not replace the need for stable venues. Because they are organized on the spur of the moment, ad hoc parties do not provide a reliable place that someone can access frequently: "I have been in other small group situations, like four or more; it's not with any regularity, but I have" (R6). They are also not widely accessible: even for the parties that are listed online, people will have to be "approved" by the host, usually by showing photographs. Ad hoc parties are thus too private to fulfill the desires of gay cruisers.

Not being regulated, small parties provide a space that is safe from the unwanted looks of authorities, which, in turn, allows for different kinds of unsafe behavior. Several small parties involve the use of drugs like GHB or crystal methamphetamine. In the urban gay vernacular, to "party and play," "PnP," or "parTy" (with the capital "t" when writing in online ads) means to get together with a group of guys to have extended sessions of sex and drug taking. People who use crystal often have very long group sex sessions—sometimes lasting an entire weekend. They keep inviting new people on online cruising websites, one reason being that people on drugs often cannot keep an erection, so they want sober guys to keep coming to satisfy them. Health researchers have raised concerns about this

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<sup>4</sup> I take the term "ad hoc parties" from Hurley and Prestage's (2009) study of sex partying in Sydney, Australia.

phenomenon because the drugs lead to increased risk-taking, putting people at high risk for contracting and transmitting HIV and other STIs like hepatitis C. People make use of the vernacular of “party and play” to find or avoid drug users; for example, an online party ad would say “no PnP” if the host wants to make sure that hard drug users do not show up. The practice of PnP is less frequent in more organized events, which usually forbid drugs, and 95% of my respondents did not use hard drugs at sex parties.

### 2.3. *Very private parties*

A small sex party can also be an organized enterprise. Some people who like to host small parties will have them more or less frequently and organize them in advance. They keep a list of past attendees and interested ones. The host usually preapproves every guest, often by seeing his pictures. When sending the invite, the host often requires an rsvp with current photographs. He may then share the picture of the attendees with everyone coming. These events are not advertised on cruising websites or small ads; people are usually referred to the host by someone who attended before. Sometimes, the organizers of these small parties are also involved in the organization of larger sex parties like those mentioned below. These very private parties<sup>5</sup> represent an opportunity to have sex with a smaller group of men handpicked from larger events that are open to all. They are usually held at a

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<sup>5</sup> I take the distinction between “private” and “very private” parties from Welzer-Lang’s (2005) study of swingers culture in France.

private residence and have no more than a dozen people. Here is the text of an invite email shared by an organizer:

dude....  
 before we start sending invites... we wanna know if you are def up for  
 a small group this friday or not.  
 we generally get bt 5 and 10 guys  
 boyb [bring your own booze], invite only, and we share pics of the dudes  
 coming.  
 you said you were up for it so we want to make sure  
 please get back asap  
 thanks!

Like with ad hoc parties, very private parties are not commercial and safe from policing. They are planned in advance so they can be more reliable for the cruiser hoping to find group sex on a specific night. However, it can be difficult to know about them and to be admitted to them. Being very selective can be an advantage for people looking to play with a very specific type of person but inconvenient for those who enjoy larger and more diverse groups, not to mention for all who are refused admission.

#### 2.4. *Hotel parties*

A small apartment becomes inadequate when a host wants to have a larger group composed of relative strangers, so many sex party throwers turn to hotel rooms and suites. Several party listings on cruising websites list events planned in hotels. The host has reserved a room and is looking for guests to join on a specific time and date. Like for the party types above, the host can base admission on any arbitrary criteria. The host will only give the exact address and room number to the guests he approves. These parties might be free of charge, or the host may ask for a contribution towards the cost of the room. The number of people present will vary

depending on the size of the room be limited in order to not attract too much attention from the hotel staff. Depending on the hotel, the host might need to warn people on how to behave: “when the guy was doing the hotel parties, obviously they want people with a bit of decorum” (R12). Some organizers will try to find hotels where the management is unlikely to complain:

There’s another one [party] that they advertise on [name of cruising website]. This guy rents a hotel room—it’s a cheap hotel room, on [location]; one of those seedy, very cheap hotels—and he rents a room and he invites people and you can confirm and go there and it’s a sex party. It has no cost; you go there and he just throws a sex party. He does it once a month. (R17)

Hotel parties are more planned out, more advertised (on small ads and cruising listings), and more accessible than very private parties. Nevertheless, they are still infrequent and too exclusive to satisfy most gay cruisers.

## 2.5. *Apartment parties*

At the next level, some hosts regularly hold sex parties at their apartment and make them open to almost any gay cruiser. What I categorize as “apartment parties” are events that are held at the organizer’s residence on a regular basis (on a fixed weekly or monthly schedule), that are more widely advertised online to try to fill the space consistently, that generally admit any men, and that charge a fee to at least cover the expenses of the owner, if not make a profit. The men organizing these parties rent apartments that are bigger than what they would need to live in and use the extra space for sex parties. They can then use the revenues from the events to cover the extra rent, in addition to the costs of maintenance and supplies, which can be high when regularly hosting large groups of people. They also have to be strategic about where to rent apartments, preferring places where neighbors are

unlikely to note the activity or to complain about it. These organizers make full use of the internet to attract as many people as they can fit in their apartment in order to make their investment profitable. They use cruising websites, make their own blog or website, and send regular updates to long email lists. They will be much less discriminatory with their selection criteria, attracting a more varied clientele, as long as these people can follow the house rules. In their email invitations like the one below, they also make sure to give very clear directions to the space to avoid that anyone disturbs neighbors:

#### RULES

- Door closes at 11pm SHARP
- No illegal drugs or chewing gum permitted. Anyone visibly high/drunken won't be admitted.
- Be EXTREMELY quiet in the hallways & keep donation IN pocket until inside apartment
- Clean inside and out B4 you arrive; no showers available
- Respect our neighbors; control the moaning!
- Drinks stay in the kitchen, playing stays in the playroom ONLY
- One at a time in the bathroom
- The party will end 30 minutes after there are only 3 men remaining
- No re-entry
- Clothes check provided: Underwear & undershirt at MOST. Cell phones must be checked during the party. Space is limited; do not bring excessive bags, backpacks, etc.

The organizers of this party also provide very precise directions into the building to make sure their guests know exactly where they are going and do not get lost in the apartment building. They also tell them to not walk to the apartment with

money in hand and to not come if they are inebriated so to not raise suspicion from the neighbors. Guests also have to remain quiet both outside the apartment and even inside while they have sex. The necessary precautions to keep apartment parties discreet (e.g., “control the moaning”) can be an obstacle to their full enjoyment.

As in the types of parties described above, apartment parties are the enterprise of one single party organizer. Participants sometimes take issue with organizers that are too particular about house rules. One party organizer, for example, insisted on interviewing every potential participant. Newcomers had to arrive at least a half hour before the party and get fully naked for an interview in front of the party organizer, who would ask him why he is interested in attending a sex party. One participant thought that interview was unnecessary:

R19: I’ve been there once. It was okay. The guy who runs it, I felt, was a little, like, I dunno, he’s a little, like, queeny: he likes to be anal about the way he runs it. . . .

I: And he’s the one doing the screening interviews before the party?

R19: Yeah, he did that.

I: Did you think that was weird?

R19: I thought that was a little weird, yeah. . . . Yeah, like I felt there was this whole, like they make you get naked and do the interview and I guess they’re looking to see if you’re comfortable being naked... I dunno, it was just a little... it was just kinda strange and it was a lot of waiting to get the process started...

Other participants have had trouble following some unspoken rules of etiquette of apartment parties.

R2: That party can be fun, you know. That party can be fun but he’s a little... I’m beginning to feel he’s a little peculiar. . . . I couldn’t find his party listed,



and I think he blocked me, but he's always been a friend of mine. . . . I always used to get guys to go there, but lately I haven't been able to go. . . . He wrote me a very peculiar text that said... he didn't say anything about me but I think he was talking about me: "oh well, you know I have guys who ask too many questions and I have no patience" and then he just... that's all he said.

From one day to the next, and for no clear reason, this participant stopped receiving invites from a party he used to go to regularly, and the owner seems to have blocked him from seeing his party listings on the cruising website where he used to advertise. Thusly, just as sex venues have to put up with arbitrary policing from law enforcement, party-goers have to put up with arbitrary rules from sex party hosts and can be banned from certain places without clear reason.

Compared to hotels, very private, and ad hoc parties, apartment parties start to resemble commercial sex clubs because they are open at regular frequency in a fixed location. They are also open to a wider clientele and attract larger groups of people than the parties previously mentioned. Yet, they still attract much fewer people than sex clubs: sometimes only a handful of guys on a slow night and about 20 to 30 men on a good night. Compared to commercial establishments and to the larger parties described below, all the parties mentioned above are the enterprise of a single individual. These hosts can have a lot of house rules and be capricious about etiquette and who they let in. Also, these events will only last for as long as the organizer is willing to do the required work and can stop at any time. Some regular apartment parties have also had to stop because of complaints from neighbors and issues with landlords. These parties are thus not very reliable venues for group sex.

## 2.6. *Private sex clubs*

The next level of sex parties—which are the main focus of this study—are held in private sex clubs. Organizers call these events “private sex parties,” but they have a lot in common with commercial sex clubs. Many of these private sex parties are held in residential buildings, but—and this is one thing that distinguishes them from apartment parties—they are in spaces where no one lives. In the case of the first venue I observed (henceforth Venue 1), the host had bought a residential loft for the sole purpose of hosting sex parties. The second, Venue 2, was the basement of a walk-up apartment building. Venue 3 was an office or studio loft space. In all three cases, the spaces would have been inconvenient as residences or workplaces: they had few or no windows, were unrenovated or decrepit, were too large to be affordable, or were awkwardly designed or unappealing. What made them unappealing to most renters or buyers made them interesting for sex party organizers: they had lots of space with little visibility from the outside, could be customized for the purpose of parties, and were in undesirable buildings where tenants did not care about what others did (like artists or music rehearsal studios, massage parlors, and so forth). Although organizers could claim their events to be private parties when it was convenient to do so (e.g., when interacting with authorities), they were run like commercial sex clubs.

During the time of my research, only one sex club was an actual commercial establishment. Paddles (where I did not conduct participant observation) started out as a club for men and women into BDSM. The heterosexual BDSM community of NYC made the case that they could have a legal play club if their practices did not

involve fellatio and intercourse. After opening, they started sharing their venue (on designated nights) with gay BDSM groups and also with the jerk-off party NY Jacks. Eventually, they started scheduling gay sex parties on specific nights of the week. Although there is forbidden activity on these nights of the week at Paddles, the club has been granted a special license to operate as part of a harm-reduction program. The club was designated as a place for the Men's Sexual Health Project, a program created by a NYC physician to offer HIV testing and counseling in the city's sex clubs. Paddles also does not have a license to sell alcohol, but patrons can bring their own. Although it is the only real commercial sex club in the city, its operations are very much like the private sex clubs I describe in this study.

Private sex clubs are organizations more complex than all the other types described above. They involve more people, whose roles I describe further below: venue owners, venue managers, party promoters, and staff. People involved will want to be paid or make a profit, so these events will try to attract as many people as they can to collect the most money from entry fees and tips to employees. Organizers will advertise as widely as they can: on cruising websites, specialized blogs, their own websites, with email newsletters sent to thousands of people, and sometimes with flyers distributed late at night in gay bars. However, they do not advertise in printed media in order to not be easily visible to the wrong people or authorities. Some events will restrict admission based on certain physical criteria, but many parties are open to all. All but two of the 40 events I observed hosted between 100 and 200 people. Private sex clubs are the closest to commercial sex venues in that they are open almost every night of the week, are in a fixed location,

are less arbitrary in their admissions process and rules, are available to almost any gay cruiser, and attract large crowds of men. I will describe these venues in ample details in the next chapters, but I will first complete the spectrum of sex parties with two types of larger events.

### 2.7. *Underwear parties*

Sex parties still happen in commercial gay nightclubs under the label of “underwear parties,” which club promoters use to attract a more sexually adventurous crowd. There is nothing illegal about having a party where patrons are invited to undress to their underwear (or go fully naked), as long as it does not involve sexual activity. Therefore, underwear parties use a strategy of “no sexual activity” to get around public health law. Although sexual activity is not technically allowed at underwear parties, my respondents said it usually happens. Most of the space will be filled with men in their underwear drinking, talking, and dancing, but there will often be a curtained-off area for sex. The social aspect of these events hides their sexual component:

[The guys at underwear parties] don’t fool around until the very end. It’s much later... it’s totally different than [name of a private sex party] ’cause it’s not a sex party; it’s something that morphs into one later on, after 1–2 in the morning. . . . All the gorgeous young guys are not all having sex; they’re just there to hang out and walk around in their bathing suit. . . . Some of them don’t [go to the backroom] and some of them do. (R9)

These events also take advantage of the fact that inspectors are less likely to come very late at night. In the gay clubs on Fire Island, for example, underwear parties will turn into sex parties after the police have left for the night. (The island, a summer retreat off the shore of Long Island, is only accessible by boat and has no roads for cars. It is not part of NYC, but becomes an extension of its gay life during

the summer.) Other clubs make little effort at hiding the sexual purpose of underwear parties:

We didn't quite realize just how much "underwear party" means sex party at that time. We ended up going to that underwear party, which was mostly just a sex party in the backroom. . . . It's in a gay bar and basically they turn it into an underwear night, and then they had this backroom with this pool table that they put a big tarp over and people had sex on. (R14)

To avoid getting caught by authorities, underwear party promoters organize their parties in different clubs. These roaming sex parties make it harder for inspectors to investigate them if they hear a complaint, since it will be difficult to know where the next event will be. Depending on the size of the venue, underwear parties can attract several hundred men.

### 2.8. *Circuit parties*

At the end of the spectrum are circuit parties with a sexual component. Circuit parties are very large gay dance parties that are usually held once a year only. Most large cities in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia have at least one such yearly event. Dance party enthusiasts often travel to whichever city is currently having a party, creating the "circuit." Although many of these events are only places to dance all night long, some of them have a designated area for sex. In NYC, the annual Black Party is unquestionably the largest "sex party" in the city. The Black Party caters to people who are into leather, vinyl, or fetish gear, but even people who are not usually interested in these will make an exception and gear up for that special event. For a few years, the event was held at the Roseland Ballroom—a popular venue for live concerts and other large events—but moved to a Brooklyn warehouse in 2015. Tickets can be reserved in advance and cost at

minimum a hundred dollars. Although the main area is a dance floor, the Black Party has a place dedicated for sex. Those of my respondents who went talked about the Black Party as the biggest orgy they had ever been to, and looked forward to it every year.

Circuit parties are very occasional, so they do not fill the need for regular sex clubs that can be regularly accessed. They are also too expensive for many cruisers and are an all-night affair that often involves drugs, which turns off those who do not want to use them and stay up through the next day. However, because circuit parties attract out-of-town visitors and international gay tourists to the city, all the other smaller sex parties held during the same weekend are packed. During the Black Party weekend, all the regular private parties will hold special nights on its theme, and regulars will make sure to go. Two interviews were done before the Black Party weekend and the respondents reported they were surely going to visit private sex clubs over the weekend:

It's gonna be crowded for sure 'cause a lot of guys who can't afford to go [to the Black Party], they're gonna wait for the next day because the ticket is like 100 [dollars] . . . this [private] party coming up on Sunday is going to be very crowded for sure. (R16)

A wide range of sex parties have replaced commercial sex venues in NYC, ranging from the smallest to largest, from the most private to most public, from hardly accessible to open to all, and from almost unknown to widely advertised. Any event or venue that charges admission or sells anything and provides a space for sex is illegal under NY State's current public health law. Sex parties will thus use one of several strategies to avoid troubles with authorities. They may claim they are private, not commercial events, claim they do not allow sexual activity, or try to

avoid authorities by staying mobile or invisible. Because of these strategies, sex parties can be hard to find, hard to access, infrequent, unreliable, or subject to the arbitrary rules of hosts. Gay cruisers look for places where they can freely have sex and which are regularly available, reliable, and accessible to large groups of men. In the current context, private sex clubs respond to this desire the best. I will describe how sex club organizers create this space of sexual freedom and protect it from unwanted intrusions.

<i>Type of event</i>	<i>Typical size</i>	<i>Venue</i>	<i>Planning</i>	<i>Advertisement</i>	<i>Entry</i>	<i>Admission/selection process</i>
Ad Hoc Parties	<10	Home	Not planned in advance	None or small ads & cruising websites	Free	Individual selection in person or from online picture or profile page
Very Private Parties	<10	Home	Planned a few days before	•Cruising websites •Email list	Free	Individual selection in person or from online picture or profile page
Hotel Parties	10 to 20	Hotel room or suite	Planned a few days before	•Cruising websites •Email list	Free or contribution toward costs	Cruising website profile or pictures
Apartment Parties	20 to 40	Adapted home	Regular event	•Cruising websites •Email list •Personal website •Specialized blogs	Entry fee +/- \$20	•Nothing or •Online pictures or •At-door screening
Private Sex Clubs	40 to 200	Large space in residential building (loft, basement, etc.)	Regular event	•Cruising websites •Email list •Event website •Specialized blogs •Email newsletter and website	•Entry fee •Clothes check \$20 to 30	•Nothing or •Online pictures or •At-door screening
Underwear Parties	Hundreds	Nightclub	•Regular or occasional •Planned ahead	•Venue website •Social media •Listings in magazine and	•Entry fee •Clothes check \$20 to 30	None
Circuit Parties	Thousands	Large event space	•Occasional •Planned a long time ahead	•National and international publicity •Any media	Advance tickets Over \$100	None

Table 3. Typology of sex parties available in NYC today.



## CHAPTER 4 – Protecting Sexual Freedom in Clandestinity: An Ethnography of the Sex Party Business in New York City

This chapter describes the elaborate organization that goes behind creating a space of sexual freedom, followed by how organizers shield their patrons from anything that could interfere with their enjoyment of the space, namely, unwanted intrusions from authorities. Although organizers are successful in providing a space of sexual freedom, clandestinity creates new forms of risks. The last part of this chapter explains how keeping the private sex clubs invisible from authorities poses obstacles to organizers and creates dangerous situations when dealing with difficult patrons or in the case of emergencies.

### *1. The organization of private sex parties*

In commercial sex venues, gay cruisers in NYC today cannot find the type of sexual freedom they seek, but can do so in private sex clubs. Talking about a bondage sex party in a private sex club, a respondent describes this freedom:

I don't go for the bondage per se, I just go for more of that generic sex space feel . . . it's that sort of... it's that freedom that I love: where everyone's there and available and there are no restrictions on what you can and can't do. Whereas if you go to a cruisy bar or something like that, it's the same sort of feel but there are those restrictions on what you can do. So I like that ability to sort of let the chemistry take you where it wants to go without having to stop and get in and cab and go home. (R10)

Private sex parties are successful in providing gay cruisers with a space where they can express their sexuality without limits. This space of sexual freedom

is the product of the labor of many different people: owners, managers, promoters, and staff. These people play an important role in shaping the sexual culture of sex parties in NYC, a process I will describe further in the next Chapter 5. What I turn to here is what they do and what risks they take to create a safe space of sexual freedom, that is, one that is shielded from policing and unwanted intrusions. The enjoyment of collective intimacy, indeed, requires the feeling that the space is impermeable to such intrusions. Therefore, the job of organizers is to make the guests feel like they are in a safe space of sexual freedom, even though the place actually could be busted at any minute. (To be clear, guests are not doing anything reprehensible by going to a clandestine sex club, and the organizers are the only one taking legal risks, but patrons could still have a hard time enjoying their sexual freedom if they know the site could be raided.) I will now describe how organizers create sexual freedom and protect it with invisibility. The subsequent section will describe the new risks and obstacles this situation poses.

### *1.1. Venue management: the case of Patrick Fisher*

The story of private sex club manager Patrick Fisher describes well the organization of sex parties in the past two decades. Patrick, who is now in his early fifties, moved to NYC in the mid-1980s to work as an artist. As a young man, he discovered the sex clubs and bathhouses that still existed back then—his first job was at the now defunct New St. Marks Baths. As the sex clubs he knew were closing down, he realized that people were looking for new places for group sex. Since his income as an artist was small, he decided, in 1992, to try throwing a sex party in his apartment and artist studio. The party worked really well—since he knew people

from the cruising culture, he had no problem getting a large number of people to his apartment. However, neighbors in the building quickly started to complain about the noise from the party and the constant ins and outs in the building's hallway. He already had garnered a good following for his events and enjoyed the extra income, so he decided to look for other spaces.

Over the next few years, the party kept moving around from one space to another. These places were private clubs and video stores that kept being shut down for one reason or another. One venue that otherwise worked well ended up kicking out Patrick's party after he had been interviewed by a popular magazine about public sex in NYC. The magazine had posted the party flyer, which showed the location's address; the venue got worried because they did not want that type of publicity and ended the party. He ended up hosting his party for about four years in a dance studio; they covered the hardwood floors with plastic every night and hung out sheets to divide the space. This party kept going until the vice squad raided the party late on one night and arrested Patrick for selling alcohol without a license: "we were selling beer without a license, so the vice squad came and busted us. I got handcuffed and put in a holding cell. . . . I had to do community service; I got fined like \$40".<sup>6</sup> He did not throw another party for about a year after that arrest, not knowing where to host them or whom to work with.

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<sup>6</sup> Quotes in this chapter are from my interview with Patrick.

Patrick had always been very comfortable talking publicly about sex parties, and in 1999, an acquaintance of his, who was not himself a sex party participant, offered him a new space. The man had recently bought a small residential walk-up building in the city. He lived on the top floor and offered Patrick to rent the other apartment in the building, and to use the unrenovated basement to host his parties. Patrick took his offer and has been running one of the most popular private sex clubs of NYC in that space since.

Having found a steady place to host parties, Patrick got the permission from the owner to invest in some renovations for the basement party space. From the outside, people only see a New York walk-up building like any other. On the inside, Patrick's club leaves little to be envious of to the large commercial sex clubs that used to be legal in the city and still are in other places of the world. His personal experiences in commercial sex venues came in handy: "I set it up the way the way I want to have a party myself. I designed it all myself!" The basement, completely painted in black, has a maze area, cages, slings, beds, a bathtub, large areas, smaller alcoves, and all the facilities to make it convenient: a clothes check area, changing room, a shower stall, toilet stalls, sinks, water fountain, sound system, club lightning, and so forth. The neighboring buildings are commercial, and the owner is the only other person living above the club. Therefore, no one else can hear parties, making complaints unlikely.

Patrick is under the impression that health inspectors have left him alone for so long because he is providing a safe space for sexual communities. He thinks that authorities are more likely to raid clubs where they know people have unsafe sex

(the venue where he was arrested was having unsafe parties on nights Patrick was not hosting). He thus enforces a safer sex, “no barebacking allowed” policy both because of his personal conviction and because he thinks the health department is more likely to give him a pass if he does so. However, he also knows that NY State’s Public Health Law forbids sexual intercourse, regardless of condom use, and that a safer sex policy does not make his enterprise any more legal. But, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, there is a large amount of arbitrariness in the application of the law, and experienced party organizers like Patrick come to develop a sense of what will attract the attention of authorities and not. Therefore, even though sex clubs should be places of unrestricted sex, there is one restriction in Patrick’s club that condoms be used for anal sex. Some of my respondents have complained about it; others applaud it. When walking down to the basement, the first thing someone sees is a huge sign saying, black on white and in capital letters: “No barebacking allowed; anyone caught barebacking will be kicked out.” Several smaller signs throughout the space repeat the policy and tell guests to report rule-breakers to a staff member. His place is always well-supplied in condoms and lube packets, which he gets for free at a LGBT community health center. He has also hosted the Men’s Sexual Health Project several times, offering free HIV testing as well as vaccines when there was a meningitis epidemic in NYC’s gay population. He thinks that these harm reduction incentives put his venue on the good side of authorities: “if the city wanted to close down a place, they would find a reason to close it down, but I think we’re providing a pretty good community service.”

Patrick and the owner invested in the space not only to host Patrick's parties, but also to make more revenue by renting it out to other party promoters. Just as Patrick had been doing in the 1990s, most sex party organizers have been going from one space to another constantly because of the unreliability of sex venues. Several party promoters were thus willing to rent out Patrick's private sex club by splitting the revenue from the entry fees. Several parties came through the space over the past 15 years. At the time of my study, the venue hosted several themed parties on a regular basis: parties open to any type of men; a party reserved to men aged 18–35; a party destined to men who enjoy urination play; a party for Bears; a mixed event open to all the LGBT community; a party for transgender, transvestites, drag queens, and their admirers; and a party for lesbians. Patrick has thus been able to provide a space for different sexual communities and subcultures.

Patrick has some requirements as to whom he will allow to use the space. He will only work with people he knows or are trusted in the community: "I try to find out from people if they know who he is and what his or her . . . reputation is in the community—if people know him—because I really wouldn't wanna do it with a stranger." He also sets clear terms for use of the space: "I tell what the rules are: they can't have barebacking, they're responsible for what goes on... we just provide the space, and then they have to completely staff it." Everyone is responsible for setting up and cleaning after their own parties, although Patrick can recommend cleaning staff for promoters to hire. The promoters also have to guarantee a fixed minimum amount of money, after which they share revenue from the door. It takes an approximate minimum of 25 paying guests to cover the expenses of the venue,

that is, Patrick's "paid for" time, the owner's share, and the long list of supplies, maintenance, and utilities:

Condoms (well, we don't pay for the condoms and the lube but...), coat check tickets, . . . mouthwash, hand sanitizer, moist towelettes, toilet paper, paper towels, doing laundry . . . (there's usually fresh towels . . . ), and, like, random things that we might, you know, have to buy, or something breaks down that we have to replace: light bulbs, . . . fixing furniture, maybe fabric, . . . plumbing supplies... Or a toilet seat breaks and we have to get a new toilet seat.

If promoters cannot get a certain minimum of guests, they will not be able to make any money and end up being more of a burden to Patrick. "One guy, I think he had like eight people show up, . . . it's like, well, okay, this isn't gonna work, sorry."

At the time of my research, Patrick was throwing his own party only once a month. Nevertheless, the place had parties almost every Friday and Saturday nights, and some weeknight and Sunday afternoons or evenings. The revenue from managing the space—in addition to occasional contracts as an artist and photographer—was enough to support his modest lifestyle.

### *1.2. Venue owners and managers*

As the case of Patrick's club illustrates, there are different types of people involved in the organization of sex parties: venue owners, venue managers, party promoters, and party or venue staff. These roles are distinct, but for some parties, one person can fill many or even all of them (hosts of apartment parties, for example, usually fill all the roles themselves). In the case of another venue I observed, the owner of the space also managed it (by hiring other promoters), sometimes threw his own, self-promoted party, and took care of some of the staff duties like doing the door and cleaning while also using volunteer staff. This was the only place where the owner was actively involved in organizing parties (or the only

party organizer I know to have actually bought a place for parties). Otherwise, owners are not typically involved in the parties; they gain from them by having someone make use of a space that would otherwise bring no income. In the case of Patrick's club, the owner could actually make money out of a basement that would not be rentable. In other cases, the owner might not have a negotiated agreement with the venue managers: they may simply be content that the "tenants" are paying the monthly rent on a space that would do badly on the real estate market.

A venue manager is needed when a sex club starts having parties organized by different people. When a sex club proves to be well suited for sex parties, party organizers will hear about it and want to use it, and the owner will want to make it as profitable as possible. The role of the manager is to make sure the place is booked by different private parties consistently, to negotiate the terms of use of the space with the promoters, and to oversee the events. Party promoters can move their events and clientele from one place to another; managers stay connected to one venue. A goal of venue managers is also to protect the longevity of the space by making sure that parties do not get the attention of neighbors and authorities. They will establish rules and enforce them, making sure that people enter and exit the premises quietly and that no illegal activity takes place, such as using or selling illegal drugs, illegal sale of alcohol, underage drinking, or prostitution. Managers are also responsible, as Patrick said, for the general maintenance of the space. They also promote their own space by greeting party guests and fostering socialization among guests, organizers, and staff. Patrick spends a lot of time interacting socially during parties:



Just walking around talking to the staff, talking to the DJ, if there is a DJ, introducing myself to people who might look like they're new. Or if someone looks like they're uncomfortable, I might try to make them feel more comfortable just chatting to them. . . . I just, like, introduce myself and say that this is my space and "how did you hear about it? Are you having fun tonight?"

Venue managers are usually people who are also gay cruisers and got increasingly involved in organizing events after being guests at sex parties. Managing a venue is a way to get an income from something that was part of their personal lives already.

### *1.3. Party promoters*

Venue owners and managers play an important role in providing a space for sexual communities; party promoters are the unifying agents of these communities. Party promoters come up with the specific concepts or themes of a party, and thus play an important role in shaping the culture of sex parties. Although some parties are open to all and not organized around a specific theme, several events center on highly specific sexual practices, demographics, or identities: college fraternity themed events for younger people; jock, for athletic or muscular men; Bear, for larger, hairy, and rugged men; daddy-son, for older men who like younger ones and vice versa; Leather and BDSM; foot fetish; watersports, for people who enjoy urination play; "poz" parties, for HIV-positive men who prefer to play with other men of the same status; bareback parties, sometimes connected to poz parties, for people who prefer not to use condoms; ethnicity-specific parties, for example, parties for Black and Latino men only; oral bukkake parties, where everyone is supposed to ejaculate on one or more previously designated guys; anal gangbang, where everyone is supposed to fuck only the previously designated bottoms; and

the list goes on. Party promoters are usually people who are active participants of these sexual subcultures and hosting parties is an extension of their own sexual lifestyle and preferences. They usually get into the party business with good starting connections in their subculture, and they will want to reach out to this community to get people to come to their event.

Venue managers are responsible to make sure the clubs are booked every night; party promoters are responsible for filling the venue to its maximum capacity on the night they have the venue. To do so, they have to promote or advertise the event by different means. Promoters do not use widely “public” forms of advertising because managers and owners do not want the address of the club to be public for safety reasons. Promoters may also not want the party to be available to just anyone. The most important advertising tool for a sex party promoter is his email list. Every party promoter keeps a list of email addresses of people that want to stay updated about his parties, and whom he has approved as a good enough fit for specific events (depending on the concept of the party). Promoters will periodically send mass emails (some do so multiple times a week) to their list, announcing upcoming events with every detail about time, location, and specifics of the event. These emails will also usually contain the ground rules of the venue and event (e.g., “no bareback sex allowed,” or what type of clothing is allowed or required) and also detailed instructions about how to enter and exit the venue discreetly. Advertising through email is also a convenient way to send information only to the people a promoter wants to see at his party. If a patron has been unruly, or if a promoter judges he is not a good fit for his event, he will take his email address off

the list so he is not informed of future events. When a patron enters the event, staff may verify that his email is on the party email list; if he is not, this can be grounds for refusing admission to the event. A party promoter's email list is a precious and well-protected marketing tool. Promoters would never share this list with anyone by fear that another promoter could "steal" these email addresses to advertise competing events. The size of this email list is also proof of a good following, which can help in negotiating arrangements with a host venue. Any serious party promoter has several thousand emails on his list; the largest I know of had around 10,000.

Promoters use different means to get people on their lists. Most of this recruiting is done online, but some promoters still rely on other means. A few promoters, for example, will stand outside popular cruisy gay bars (like the Cock) at closing time and invite people to their party, sometimes giving people a small flyer. They will also talk about their parties in social events or gay bars and will expect some word-of-mouth referrals from people who have been to their parties. Yet, most of the recruitment is done online. On cruising websites and personal ads, promoters will announce their events and ask people to send them an email if they are interested and want to get the information about the location of the event. If the party is selective regarding age and body type, the promoters will ask for pictures of the interested person. A promoter could also ask the person to write a line about why he is interested in the event, especially when it revolves around a specific practice, to make sure that he will be a fit with the event (e.g., if it is a gangbang, the promoter will want to know if the guy wants to be top or bottom; or if it is a fetish night, he may want to know if the person is experienced with the specific practice or

curious about it). If the interested person fits with the criteria of the event, the promoter will add his address to the list and send him the details of the party. Many party emails contain a disclaimer saying that receiving the email does not guarantee access, for example:

[Party name] is only for good-looking guys who are in good physical shape. You are receiving this invite based on pictures you have sent or ones I have seen on a website or app. Due to fake or old pictures you are never guaranteed entrance into the party. Even if you have been in the past. Your final entrance will be determined upon your arrival.

On the evenings of events, promoters also use cruising websites and phone applications to invite people who are looking for sex at the moment. There is also a blog managed by a man who puts together a weekly list of sex parties, with details about the theme, admission criteria, and how to “apply” or get information.

As promoters keep doing events and recruiting people, they grow in size. A new promoter that has few connections will have a hard time getting people to his party. A regular sex party participant I spoke with had decided to begin organizing a party for tattooed men. A little less than 30 men showed up, which was not enough to cover the basic expenses of the night. A novice party promoter may indeed end up paying money to host his first few events. The promoters of the tattoo parties decided to abandon the venture although it is normal that an event takes some time to gain a reputation and grow. The biggest parties in private sex clubs attract between 150 and 200 people on a regular basis (this excludes underwear parties in nightclubs and circuit parties). As a party grows, however, so do the expenses for supplies and staff, as does the time required to organize the event and promote it. Successful parties consistently generate revenues, but they are not that lucrative a

business. Promoters enjoy the extra income, but most of them keep doing their parties because they like them and because they like to create a place for their sexual subcultures to get together. As Jeff North, a long-time party promoter who was hosting one of the most well-attended parties in NYC at the time of my study, and whose story I tell below, says:

It was never to make money. I never did this to make money. Now I make money and it's not bad, but this is years and years and years later. At the beginning, it was purely—at the very beginning—for my personal aggrandizement. But then it was... I really got a kick out of... satisfaction out of expanding people's horizon and making them think a little outside of the box and... Especially when it was something I deemed as being safe, you know? So that is the reason I did it. It was never for the money. Never for the money.<sup>7</sup>

A party, and the network of people who attend it, is held together by its promoter. If a promoter has to stop organizing the party, the group of people attending it can dissipate from one day to the next. A party can survive its original promoter if someone is interested in keeping it going, and if the former is willing to pass the torch. A party promoter in his early thirties I interviewed had taken the torch organizing an event he used to attend regularly for fun, when its founder had to step down. The young promoter inherited the email list to advertise the parties, as well as the “brand” and concept of the party, which was a foot fetish party:

The foot fetish party that I now host has been ongoing for over ten years, so I've come into it from the easy end, like I didn't have to start it. I didn't initiate it: it was just something that was running that I started going to when I came to New York. I became friends with the hosts and, when one of them

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<sup>7</sup> This and following quotes from Jeff North are from my interview with him. The name is a pseudonym he has been using to organize his parties since the beginning.

had to step down for professional obligations, they asked if I wanted to step in. So I had it easy: I had nothing to do with the organization of it. . . . I came into it with somebody that already had a listserv that already had people that emailed, so there was no recruiting to do. There was no pulling together to do: it was just a matter of posting “just come out and do it.”<sup>8</sup>

Especially in the case of specialized sexual subcultures—like foot fetishists—choosing a successor for organizing events is important for keeping the subculture alive from one generation to the next. There is also a trajectory in which occasional participants become regulars, then start helping out as staff, and eventually take the lead in organizing.

Although many parties cater to very different groups of men, most sex party promoters see themselves in a competitive field. Indeed, many sex party goers of the city are able to attend a variety of events, from the most to least specialized. With nearly 40 individual sex parties happening over the course of a week, the sex party goer has a lot to choose from. This is why party promoters are very protective of their email list. Sometimes, however, promoters will join forces to try to get a larger crowd for a special event. These events will mix two slightly different types of clientele that might appreciate the occasional mix (for example, younger guys with older muscular men, Bears and Leathermen, and so forth). On these occasions, when a patron comes in, he will have to say which promoter’s list he is on so that the entry fee goes to the appropriate promoter.

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<sup>8</sup> From my interview with the organizer of party.

#### 1.4. *The case of party promoter Jeff North*

To show how sex parties make the connection of individual sexualities to sexual subcultures, I turn to the story of a popular sex party promoter who goes by the pseudonym of Jeff North.

Behind Jeff North is Dennis Wright who, much like Patrick Fisher, had moved to NYC for college in the 1980s and is now in his fifties. As he says, before the Internet, public sex environments and commercial sex venues were the place where people went for sex. He regularly cruised public bathrooms, attended bathhouses like the St. Marks Baths, and popular sex clubs. As the landscape of sex venues changed in the late 1980s and 1990s, he started going to private sex parties and became friends with the people who organized them, Patrick being one of them. However, he never thought he would organize them himself because he believed it could hurt his career prospects.

In the early 2000s, he had a sexual experience that initiated him to watersports (urination play). He had started practicing surf with a young man he found very attractive, without knowing if he was gay. One day, after an afternoon of surfing, the young man asked Dennis bluntly if he wanted to go back to his place, smoke pot, drink gallons of water, and piss on each other. Dennis did not know if the guy was kidding or not but decided to accept the invitation. The evening went as the young man had suggested and ended with the two guys lying on the bathroom floor, tightly embraced and urinating together. Dennis described this as a mind-blowing sensual experience: "I had the sensation I was melting into him." This experience

sparked an interest in watersports that lasts to this day and which led him to almost create a whole sexual subculture.

After his first experience, Dennis discovered that finding partners for watersports was not easy. Because of his group sex experience, he sought out sex parties that focused on watersports. He found a popular party in NYC that offered a place for gay men to practice watersports in groups. He went but was “horrificed” by it because he found the men unattractive and could not bring himself to participate in the sexual activity and the urination play. The men were mostly large and old; no one fitted the young and athletic type of guy like the one he had his first experience with. He realized that watersports were generally tied to the sexual subcultures of Leathermen, BDSM, and Bears and did not attract a young crowd. He traveled to Washington, DC for another event, which he found only slightly better. There were at least a few “cute guys” with whom he could experience lying into the tub and “getting pissed on.” Nevertheless, he was very frustrated by the crowd of these parties and by how hard it was to find younger, thinner, or more athletic guys to fulfill his fantasies. He thus decided to create his own event and turned to his connections in the sex party world.

A party organizer he knew offered him a space where he could throw a watersports party. For a while already, Dennis had been connecting in chatrooms with guys who were interested in watersports. He announced to his contact list that he was planning on throwing a watersports party for young, in-shape guys, but this was met with a lot of skepticism. Many of his contacts had an experience similar to Dennis’: they were young men who had difficulty finding other young men for



watersports. They could not believe that Dennis could successfully organize a group event with a crowd of young, athletic guys, and they feared that they would find the same older crowd at his party. Therefore, Dennis had the idea to prove to everyone that he could do it by doing a pre-party where they would take pictures to advertise the main event. He managed to get ten guys who accepted to participate in a play session that would be photographed, promising to crop out or blur their faces before distributing. He created a password-protected website to publish the pictures and gave access to people who were interested in attending the party. The first party (after the photoshoot one) ended up being a success. The pictures attracted many young men, and they also created an image of what people would be doing, which allowed people to get into watersports quickly, without shyness. The party has been a regular event since then.

Dennis decided to keep photographing the parties for a while and made pictures available only to attendees. At some point, someone suggested that he make the website accessible to others for a charge. There must have been a whole lot of men who wanted to see those pictures, but who did not fit the physical requirements of the event. Since the pictures were anonymous, he could easily start selling membership to the website without threatening the privacy of the models. Dennis thus created the persona of Jeff North and began producing and directing porn videos, also using the pseudonym for his party promoting. The website ended up growing into a major pornographic website and studio. Because Jeff had access to a large network of young, attractive, exhibitionist men into watersports, he could find porn actors for a new brand of watersports video. His videos became best-

sellers and won industry awards. They met success because Jeff created a niche that did not exist in the porn world: that of young men into watersports (in porn as in the real world, watersports is relegated to Leather/BDSM videos).

Jeff created a niche in the porn world that has now been exploited by other producers, but he also created a real-world network around a sexual practice. With his parties, he allowed young men into watersports to get together. He also developed his website into a cruising and social site where people can make a profile and connect with other guys into this fetish across the country and the world. Although the first people to come to his parties were young men who had been looking to do watersports for a while, the growing popularity of the event also attracted people who had not entertained such a fantasy before. The brand of his event draws from the college fraternity culture, and the group—at the sex party, on the website, and in the porn videos—revolved around this fictional fraternity. His parties have one of the strictest door policy in NYC, requiring people to be under 30 and in good physical shape. Therefore, the events attract young men who want to go to an age-restricted sex party, although they may not be interested in the watersports side of it. There is, indeed, absolutely no pressure to get into the piss play, and most people go for more traditional sex behavior. However, the piss component allows people to try it out, and some may develop a liking to it. Jeff wants his parties to be a place for guests to experiment with different erotic activities:

In accordance to my mission statement, . . . my vision for these parties, to create an environment where people can kind of safely explore things that might be outside of their comfort zone or try to, you know, broaden their horizons, and this and that. And my biggest thrill of all is when I get someone

who isn't into watersports at all, comes to my party, and sees it and finds it hot, maybe he tries a little bit, maybe pisses on somebody and goes, "Wow! I never thought I'd like that but that was really hot!" That kinda makes me happy, you know?

Jeff's main party has been going on for over 12 years now. It has found its home at Patrick's club, where it is held only once every other month, attracting around 200 guests every time. Jeff also started throwing other non-watersports parties at that venue and at other ones in the city. His events have become some of the most popular sex parties in the city for in-shape, young men. Although he tries to dissuade older people from coming by telling them there is an upper age limit, several guests are well over the age of 30. Having done the party for over a decade, some of his original guests have aged over the limit, but Jeff feels it would be mean to deny them entry. "As long as they are in good shape" is generally the acceptance rationale.

### *1.5. Staff*

Finally, staff members help venue managers and party promoters by fostering an atmosphere of sexual freedom and by protecting the space. Staff can be connected to a venue or to a party. Venue staff typically hold duties concerning the space: cleaning, maintenance, security, and supplies. Staff brought by the promoter will work more closely with the clientele: entry, greeting, clothes check, bar, and music. Some staff work for salary or tips; others are volunteers who may also be regular party guests and who are happy to help for a free entry. Participant-helpers also gain some status in the sexual subculture by getting involved, which grants them influence in shaping and maintaining the norms and values of the party (this is explained further in Chapter 5, which details the norms of interaction of sex

parties). Compared to paid staff, volunteers may end up working very little and having a lot of time to play (promoters appreciate having people they can turn to for help if need be). Organizers expect paid staff to work steadily for the time they are hired (usually the whole night), and these employees have very little time, if at all, to participate in the sexual action. Some of the paid employees may not even be interested in participating, while others, who are also sex party goers, can find the responsibility of their duties quite frustrating.

I now turn to the description of a work night at Jeff's event, a popular sex party that has been going on for over 15 years. By extensively describing the duties of managers, promoter, and staff in the unfolding of a party, I want to show how: 1) private sex parties are not just house parties, but complex organizations; 2) how the collective effort of organizers creates a sense of community; 3) how a lot of work is put into creating a protected space of sexual freedom.

#### *1.6. Working at a sex party*

Between 2012 and 2014, I joined the crew of party promoter Jeff North and helped with 13 individual events (held at Patrick Fisher's venue) under various staff roles. I describe a typical night of work at this event by putting together my experiences in different roles over different nights.

Over the past week leading up to this day, Jeff sent me multiple texts messages to verify that I was available to work the event. Staffing a party can be difficult, and a lot of stress happens from people not showing up to work or canceling last minute. He also texted me multiple times throughout the day to make sure I would show up to his midtown apartment promptly at 8 p.m. As I show up, on

time, Jeff has a sigh of relief. To my surprise, he is in the company of a female friend who he is hosting for a few days. The woman introduces herself to me and tells me, in an enthusiastic voice, about how she would love to peek at what happens at Jeff's parties (I assume she tells me this to signify that she is well-aware of where Jeff and I are headed and that there is no need to cover up details). Jeff is stressfully scattered between getting his things ready to leave, finishing up a few emails to potential guests, and texting other staff to make sure they are en route to the venue. He stashes his laptop computer in his backpack and we head to the door along with his friend, who is taking her dog for a walk. Before exiting the apartment, he pauses to recite a mental checklist of everything he needs before leaving. We then head to his SUV, parked on the street. Apart from the front seats, the whole truck is filled with supplies that he shopped for during the day: three large kegs of beer, cases of beer cans, several cases of nonalcoholic beverages (small bottles of water, Gatorade, or juice), snacks (fruits, candy bars, pretzels, small bags of chips, and breath mints), plastic cups and pitchers, and other props (posters and banners with his party logo on them, electric lamps, empty containers, and so forth). We say goodbye to his friend and get in the car.

Jeff drives us to the party venue, which is in a non-central neighborhood of the city. During the ride, he vents about the hassles he had booking a bartender for the night and about conversations he has had with Patrick and with an HIV doctor about revising the safer sex policy. He also tells me that Tim has been very active recruiting people for the party online. Tim is actually one of his online avatars that he uses to promote the party on cruising websites. Jeff created profiles on different

websites, using an athletic young man's pictures. He uses that profile to chat with people curious about the party. Jeff tells me it is important to keep Tim's existence alive in the guests' imagination. When people at the party ask me if Tim is there, I am to say I have seen him pass by a few minutes ago and that he is probably playing in the sex space. Jeff thinks Tim can serve as a barometer to measure guests' general satisfaction with the crowd at the party: because the avatar's photographs are of a very attractive man, if people keep asking where Tim is, it is probably because they have a hard time finding anyone interesting to play with; if they do not look for Tim, they probably have found people at least as attractive as him to have sex with. After filling me in about party-related things, we catch up about what we have been up to since the last party.

We park the truck on the street in front of the party building, and Jeff calls Patrick to say we have arrived. Patrick comes out with his regular helper, Shawn,<sup>9</sup> and the two party staff members who have already arrived. Those who know each other exchange hugs; others introduce themselves and shake hands. We then begin the physically demanding task of unloading the truck, walking through the hallway and down the stairs carrying heavy cases of beverages and full kegs. When all the supplies are in the basement, people begin setting up the party space and their own work area. Patrick and Shawn are preparing the venue and the supplies they provide: they make sure the toilets and washing area are supplied; they fill condom

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<sup>9</sup> All staff names are pseudonyms.

and lube packets dispensers; they organize the furniture, test the lights and change light bulbs; and so forth. Tonight's party staff is composed of five people: a bartender, a DJ, a clothes check attendant, a doorman, and a "swing" who is there to help everyone else as needed.

The bartender unpacks cases of beverages and places them in large containers, places the kegs of beer in giant buckets, and plugs the pumps in. Meanwhile, Jeff buys ice bags from the nearby grocery store, which the bartender will pour over the beverages and kegs. The bartender also sets up the snack area. The clothes check attendant prepares boxes of hangers, number tags, pens, and markers. The doorman sets up his station upstairs with a stool and small table stand. Jeff will give him an iPad with the updated email list of guests and some small bills for change. The doorman also gets together a light to verify the authenticity of bills, a clicker to count the number of guests, and pens and paper to write the email addresses of new guests. The DJ sets up his equipment and playlist and tests the sound system. After they are done with their respective duties, the staff hang a 12-foot banner and stick signs with the party logo throughout the space. They also place signs with the norms of conduct of the party: signs saying "no wet play in this area," which tell people they should not urinate in the bar and DJ area of the venue, and signs saying "urinal" that are hanged above the two bathtubs where young men will sit in later in the night.

Things usually go much more smoothly when the staff has worked the party before, but unfortunately, personnel often changes. New workers are usually assigned to the swing role, since it allows learning by helping the others. Tonight,

four out of five staff members are experienced, and Jeff repeats many times how he is appreciative about their work and their time.

For a good 45 minutes before the party starts, all the staff and organizers are busy preparing; people will routinely shout the time left till the party starts (“15 minutes to showtime!”) making some realize they have little time left and rush around. Two or three minutes before the start time of the party (10 p.m.), Patrick makes everyone stop what they are doing in order to gather for what he calls an affirmation. Everyone makes a circle holding hands. Patrick and Jeff welcome the new staff member and thank everyone for coming. They make wishes for a crowded party (always hoping to break 200 guests) with no problems. After this, downstairs staff take their clothes off, keeping only their shoes and maybe underwear (some decide to work in complete nudity), and go to their station. The doorman (the only fully clothed worker) goes upstairs, unlocks the front door, and gets ready to greet guests.

On the outside door, the doorman has placed a small sticker that shows the party logo and that says, “don’t buzz, come in.” Shortly after the official start time of the party, guests begin to arrive. They open the front door of the building and can see the doorman sitting at the end of the short hallway, next to the staircase to the basement. The first guest walks to the doorman’s table and two others stand in line behind him. The doorman asks the first guest’s email address and does a search of it on the spreadsheet on the iPad. The address is on the list, so he takes the entry money from the guest, counts the entry with the clicker, and points the guest to the basement. He repeats the same with the two other guests: one of these two is on the



email list and the other is his friend who is not on the list. The doorman judges that the newcomer fits the age and physical shape requirement of the event and tells him that he can join the party if he adds his email to the list. The new guest writes down his email address on the paper provided and both pay their entry fee and walk downstairs. The party invite states that the event is for in-shape guys under 35 years of age and that anyone over 35 years old will be denied admission. Jeff had instructed doormen to not be too firm with this rule; even if someone looks slightly over 35, he can come in if he is in good physical shape (has a slim body). Because the venue is in a neighborhood accessible to only one subway line, guests tend to show up at the door in small packs, with quiet times in-between. These small rushes of work can make it difficult to apply the subjective admission criteria without offending people. Four guests walk in and line up to the doorman; one of them looks a little too old for the event and the doorman finds he may not be attractive to the guys downstairs. His email is on the list, so he lets him in, but types, next to his address: "take off the email list." After the party, Jeff will review the list and take off these marked addresses so they do not receive invitations to future events. Later in the night, seven guests arrive at the same time and line up in front of the doorman's table. The doorman can see that one man in line looks well over the age of 35 and not in great shape. To sound fair, he says out loud: "everyone, take out your photo ID; this is an age-restrictive party." He quickly eyes the identification (ID) cards of guests without paying much attention to the birth year of those who fit the type of the party and lets them in. When the visibly older guest gets to him, he first asks for his email to see if he is on the list (and he is) and then looks at his ID. The doorman

says: "I know you're on the email list, but you're 51 and this is party for guys under 35." The doorman apologizes as, conveniently, Patrick happens to be walking up from the basement. The doorman invites Patrick to tell the older guest about other events at the venue. They go to front of the hallway and talk for five minutes. Patrick apologizes that tonight's event is restrictive and tells him about another watersports party at his club that is not age-restricted. The doorman, who strategically asked the man's email address before telling him he could not go in, makes a note to remove the address from the list. Later in the night, a patron that had been removed from the list previously shows up at the door (it is easy to find the dates of the parties online even if one does not get the emails, and someone who previously got the emails will know where the location is). The doorman, who has been working the party for a while, recognizes him and tells him (for what happens to be the fifth time) that he does not fit the age requirement of the event. The man protests saying that he knows there are other guys his age and even older who are admitted in and that there is no reason he should not be allowed in. He asks to talk to Tim in a failed attempt to look like he knows the organizers. The doorman says he will get Jeff and texts him to come to the front door. A few minutes later, Jeff shows up and has a short conversation with the man, apologizing about the door policy. It turns out Patrick had also decided to deny him access to any party at the space because he tends to push himself onto other guys without taking no for an answer. Patrick comes down from the upstairs apartment and gently but firmly explains his decision to the man and tells him not to come back.

When stepping into the basement, guests find the clothes check room, closed off by a rolling table. The attendant points the guest to the changing area and instructs them to pick up a hanger, put all their clothes on it, and bring them back to him. The changing area has a bench and a few chairs and hook on the walls. The guests take their time to undress and put all their clothes properly on the hanger. Some of them choose to stash all their clothes in their backpack. They have to take off all their clothes, with the option of keeping their underwear on, but must keep footwear (some regular guests bring a separate pair, knowing it will get wet and soiled). Then, the guests bring their hanger and bags to the attendant. Justin, a regular sex-party-goer who has worked several of Jeff's parties, is there tonight. He took the time to write "clothes check boys need dick too!" on a sheet of paper and post it to the wall by his station. He has also written "urinal" on a piece of masking tape that he stuck on his bare chest. The guys checking their clothes giggle and inquire about the "urinal" sticker. Justin says he will be happy to drink their piss when the guys need to go. The guests smile and say maybe they will take him up on his offer later.

As he grabs their clothes, Justin makes sure that everything holds well onto the hanger and that nothing falls off pockets, which is often the case. If so, he reorders the clothes and shows the guest the best way to do so for future times: hang your pants through the belt loop so they do not hang upside down and put your t-shirt and other clothes over the pants to protect the pockets. He then puts a numbered tag on the hanger or sticks it with tape on the bag and writes that number

with a sharpie on the guest's arm or shoulder. He charges the clothes check fee; some guests also put money in the tip jar.

Guests then enter a room with the small bar counter on one side, the DJ booth on the other, and a bench and a table with snacks along the wall across. This is mainly the social area although there is no rule against sexual activity anywhere in the space, and patrons sometimes begin to play there, too. Most people, however, will move further into the club for sex, since the social area has more circulation and is more brightly lit. As guests start coming in, the bartender starts pumping the keg into pitchers to then pour them in plastic cups when guests ask for a beer. Patrons have a choice of draught beer, canned beers, and bottled juices and water. This event does not offer liquor because—as a watersports party—Jeff wants people to drink as much fluid as they can and doing so with hard liquor would be dangerous. There is a jar on the bar counter with “just the tip!” written on it: a tongue-in-cheek way to ask for tips, alluding to the phrase men sometimes use to try to convince a partner to have intercourse by falsely promising he will only insert the tip of his penis. Some patrons carry folded dollar bills in their socks to be able to tip the bartender as they get drinks; others will come back at the end of the event when they got their wallet back from the clothes check. Throughout the party, the bartender will be busy pumping kegs, serving drinks, carrying and unpacking new cases of beverages, and opening more ice bags to pour over them (in the middle of the party Jeff will go buy more ice from the grocery store). The DJ and the bartender (during quieter times) will also make small talk with patrons who are taking a rest from the sexual action.

Throughout the night, Shawn, sometimes helped by Patrick, will be cleaning the space behind patrons. He will walk around with garbage bags and pick up rubbish from the floors (cups, snack packages, condoms and wrappers, empty lube packets, and so forth). He will also keep supplying the bathroom area. When they are ready to shower, guests can get a towel from the clothes check. When laundry baskets get full, Shawn will give them to Patrick or Jeff, who will take them to the laundry room in the upstairs apartment and then bring fresh towels downstairs as needed.

Patrick and Jeff are the only two people who will walk between floors because the downstairs staff work in the buff and no one should go through the hallway unless fully clothed. Patrick sometimes wears a robe so he can quickly dress and undress as he moves up and down (he prefers that no one walk around the sex area with clothes on because it could break the mood of people cruising and having sex). On the front door of his apartment, there is a small magnetic sign to indicate whether he can be found upstairs or downstairs. During the party, Patrick and Jeff may be helping the staff, socializing with guests, or sitting in the upstairs apartment where Jeff may do more online promotion. At some point in the night, Jeff may decide to take his clothes off and go lie with the guys in the bathtub for a while.

There is a constant flow of patrons throughout the night until the party ends at 5 a.m. In the earlier hours, most people come in. In the middle, some of the early arrivers may start leaving while other guests keep coming in. In the last hours, the flow is generally outward, although guests trickle in sometimes during the last hour of the event. When a guest is ready to exit, he will get his clothes back from the

clothes check attendant, dress up, and go back upstairs. The doorman will stay upstairs to see guests out and wish them a good night. It is important that he remain at the door until the very last guest has exited the venue to make sure that everyone leaves quietly and properly dressed up. In the warm summer night, many guys want to exit shirtless because the temperature downstairs is so hot. The venue owner and Patrick, however, do not want half-naked men to exit the building because they are worried it could attract attention from neighbors.

The work night is demanding for a lot of the staff. The bartender is constantly on his feet serving and carrying beverages. In the winter nights, keeping the clothes check orderly is a physically demanding task: the attendant needs to constantly move hangers with a lot of clothes and heavy coats. As people come in, space becomes sparse and the attendant needs to squeeze clothes where he can. As people start to leave and some space frees up, the attendant starts “consolidating” clothes, moving clothes from the last of the four hanger poles towards the first one, so that space frees up at the end of the cue for new entrants. The venue cleaner keeps walking around cleaning. The doorman monitors the flow of people coming in and people exiting.

As the crowd thins out, everyone starts to relax a little bit and look forward to the end of the night. After 4:30 a.m., the DJ starts making periodic announcements through the sound system saying how much time is left for the party and that people need to start “finishing off.” At 5 a.m., the staff politely tries to direct the few stragglers who are still playing to the changing area. Jeff also starts counting the

money he collected from the doorman periodically during the night and prepares everyone's pay envelope.

As the last guests exit, everyone starts wrapping up. The bartender puts leftover cans and bottles in plastic crates to be used at the next event and wraps up snacks. Someone will walk around to remove the party signs and banner. The clothes check attendant picks up hangers and towels thrown everywhere in the changing area and cleans up his station. Bartender and attendant also collect their tips. The doorman gives the last entry money to Jeff, along with the list of new emails. Jeff checks the number of entries from the door and clothes check and verifies them with the amount of money collected. He then gives everyone his respective salary. Then, people collectively bring up the party supplies: empty kegs, which are now much lighter to move around; cases of beverages; and leftover plastic cups and snacks. Everyone packs up the truck. While this is happening, the venue manager and staff start cleaning the place. They pick up rubbish throughout the space, separating recyclables from garbage. Then, they hose down the whole space to clean it.

The party staff usually leaves shortly after 5 a.m. while the venue staff is still cleaning. Some head to the subway, but others hitch a ride in Jeff's truck, which now has more seats free because of less supplies. Jeff offers to drop some of them at a more central subway station. When people are available, Jeff may take everyone to a diner near his place. In these instances, the small group of party staff will sit together for a bit and order breakfast food. They eat and talk about how the night went, what went well, what could be done better, and so forth. Tiredness kicks in, so

people do not hang too long before heading home sometime between 6 and 6:30 a.m. Tonight, after dropping another staff member at the subway station, Jeff, Justin, and I have breakfast at the diner. Justin, who regularly works at a retail store, has to leave promptly at 6:30 a.m. to start his whole-day shift at the store, after this sleepless night. As we leave the restaurant, we run into Jeff's friend who just got out of bed and is walking her dog. She is full of energy and curious about how the night went. I let Jeff fill her in as I excuse myself to head to bed.

The people involved in organizing sex parties work collectively toward the creation of a protected space of sexual freedom. They create an ambiance that is erotic and sociable, and protect that small sexual world from unwanted intrusions and from authorities. The next chapter will describe further what this sexual world looks like. I now turn to how the organization strategically protects the sexual center of sex clubs and the new risks that emerge from working in clandestinity.

## *2. The risks of protecting sexual freedom*

As I described in Chapter 3, current commercial sex venues in NYC offer only limited possibilities for sexual activity. Because of policing by municipal authorities and by the management of these establishments, patrons feel constantly surveilled. The private parties I have described are the only places where New Yorkers can freely enjoy group sex: they can roam around naked and engage in pretty much any type of sexual behavior anywhere in the space, with no worries of being interrupted by any form of authority. This sense of collective intimacy can only persist as long as the privacy of the space is maintained, so the role of the organizers is to protect this small sexual world from the outside. Because these private clubs' legality is



debatable, organizers have to do everything they can to keep authorities away from them.

### *2.1. Layers of protection*

There are multiple layers protecting the small cocoon of sexuality from the outside world. The first thing that organizers do to protect the space is to make sure it is not noticeable to anyone but those invited. This is why promoters send instructions about how to carefully enter and exit the space with the invitations to their parties and have staff members make sure they are respected. Someone needs to know the exact address to get to the sex party. Jeff's party at Patrick's venue had a small sticker on the outside door, but the two other venues I observed had absolutely nothing. As we can see from the examples above, party organizers have to set rules of behavior to maintain the inconspicuousness of the space and make sure that guests follow them. A sign on the door is there to make sure that people do not buzz the wrong apartment; a doorman will make sure that people are quiet in the hallways and that people follow the right path to the party space. He will also make sure that everyone is properly dressed upon exiting and remain quiet inside and on the street in front of the building.

Between the outside world and the sex area of the club, there are multiple intermediate layers. These layers are there to make sure that an unwanted intruder does not stumble onto people having sex and to keep the sexual aspect of the venue invisible. When people enter through the main door at Patrick's club, all they see is the door attendant who will verify that their email on the list. If someone is not on the invitation list or does not clearly know what event is going on, the doorman will

say that this is a private, by-invitation-only event. Even if someone were to step down the stairs, he or she would first see the clothes check and changing area, where people are not engaged in sexual activity. All the venues I have observed had a few such protective layers separating the outside from the place of sex: hallway, lobby, changing area, social space, and so forth—each of them closed off by doors or curtains. These multiple layers create opacity around the sexual center of the club and complicate access to uninvited people.

Another usefulness of multiple protective layers is that some of them can be closed off when necessary, without having to shut down the whole club. For example, during one night of observation at Jeff's party, a car accident happened in front of the building. Within a few minutes, a tow truck and a few police cars arrived right in front of the building, their gyrating lights flashing inside the hallway through the small glass window of the front door. Jeff came down from the upstairs apartment and saw police officers standing in front of the building. He worried that guests walking to the party might turn away from fear that the police could be there to raid the sex club. Patrick came down and shut off the light in the hallway, forcing me to work in the dark. Although the police were not there for the club, he did not want them to see anything through the front window. He also asked that we tell guests who would want to come out to wait downstairs until the cops are gone. The police quickly left the street, Patrick turned the lights back on, and we resumed the normal activity of the doorway. Although this was a small moment of worry for the organizers and the few guests who came in or tried to leave at that time, no one else inside the club had any knowledge of it. The issue was happening at the outside

layer of the club and could not make its way through the sexual center. If the issue happens within the sexual center of the club, the layers allow organizers to move it out quickly to deal with it. For example, when patrons are too drunk or high and disruptive or aggressive, organizers will quickly move them to an intermediate layer so they can deal with that person away from the ongoing sexual action and away from the outside public.

By complicating the access to the sexual space, these layers also allow more reaction time in the case of an investigation. The third venue I observed took extensive measures to prevent unwanted intrusions. The organizers had set up an elaborate surveillance camera system in the building outside the party space: one filming the street in front of the building, one in front of the door of the loft apartment, and two in the hallway and staircase leading to this door. A staff member would spend the night looking at a TV screen showing the cameras, while another was waiting in the hallway on the ground floor, but not visible from the outside of the front glass door. When the upstairs staff saw a young man walk to the door outside, he would communicate to his colleague downstairs through a walkie-talkie to tell him to open the door. If a cop or someone who was obviously not a guest to the party (e.g., a woman) would show up, the upstairs staff would tell the downstairs attendant to stay away from the door and not open it. The door between the party space and the hallway would also always remain locked and the inside doorman would open it only when he saw the guest approaching it through the camera system. Then, he would verify that the person was indeed at the right place by checking his email on the list. From the hallway, the guest could only see a black

curtain behind the doorman and nothing that suggests a sex party. Once inside, the lobby area was only a changing room where no sex happened. Once undressed, the guests finally entered the party space through a door, which remained closed throughout the event, and could even be locked from the side of the lobby. If the organizers saw police officers at the downstairs door through the camera, they could “lock in” the naked men in the party area and lower the music so that if they somehow made it upstairs, they could not see or hear anything from the hallway. As in Patrick’s space, this venue uses multiple layers to keep the sexual space separate from the outside world not only to protect the invisibility of the club, but to be able to manage issues without disturbing the sexual space. Patrons are typically unaware of the extensive measures in place to protect the space, and organizers need to keep it that way. The organizers take on the burden of protecting the space so that guests can enjoy sexual freedom free of any worries.

### *3. Clandestinity and its discontents*

Keeping sex clubs invisible to authorities and the general public makes it possible to have a space of unrestricted sexual freedom; however, there are consequences to operating sex clubs in clandestinity. This section explains how keeping authorities away from private clubs creates obstacles for organizers and risks for patrons when they would need these authorities.

#### *3.1. Handling unruly patrons*

Organizers try to conceal their concerns with preserving invisibility from guests in order to let them freely enjoy the sexual aspect of the parties but also do so because savvy patrons might try to use the organizers’ worries to their advantage.

At each venue I observed, unhappy sex-party-goers had often threatened the organizers that they would tell the police about their clandestine operation, and they have sometimes gone through with it. As Patrick says: “The couple times police have come is because someone has, like, gotten pissed off at the party, and they wanted to try and get it shut down.” Organizers are thus cautious in how they deal with guests in and out of the club.

Staff working at the door have to be delicate if they need to refuse entry to someone showing up at the door so as to not infuriate them. These potential guests know the exact time and location of the party and, if offended by the rejection, could decide to complain about the event to the police. This is why Jeff, who tries to be very selective with whom he admits to his parties, still lets several people who do not quite fit the admission criteria go in (and deletes their email addresses from the list later on). He tells me that sometimes his guests complain that he let an older, out-of-shape man in, but he would rather do that than offend people who could try to ruin his business. In this case, there is not much consequence to letting the out-of-shape guest in, beside the occasional rants of other patrons. In other cases, however, organizers have to let people in who could compromise the safety of other guests—for example, in the case of guests who tend to be aggressive with others or people who are highly inebriated on alcohol or drugs. Door staff at commercial clubs are instructed to not let anyone visibly inebriated inside; if such a patron would threaten the security staff, they would have no problems calling the police to deal with him or her. Because private sex clubs organizers need to avoid the police, and

because they do not want to attract attention to their location by having an inebriated person loitering in front of it, they often choose to let such patrons in.

Guests who enter the space peacefully and sober can also turn into unruly patrons once inside. Every now and then, guests will come to the staff to complain about someone who pushes himself on people aggressively or someone who is passed out on alcohol or drugs. Again, in a commercial club, security staff would kick out these patrons without hesitation, but organizers cannot do that in private sex clubs. They have to carefully handle these people without infuriating them, otherwise there could be consequences for the venue itself. Shortly before 2 a.m., on a night when I was working the door at Jeff's party, Patrick came up from the basement and asked if Jeff was upstairs. I replied yes, and he put on his robe to go fetch him, telling me that they needed to kick out a drunk guy who is too much for him to handle alone. Shortly, they both went back downstairs; Jeff said, "time to play bouncer!" as he passed by me. About 30 minutes passed during which I routinely heard parts of arguments between them and someone else. Jeff finally came up alone, with an exasperated look on his face. He said there was a guy who was very drunk; he had vomited on the floor and been aggressive to other guests. He was refusing to leave the party, saying that he would call the cops on them if they kicked him out and that his father is an important public official who could put them in trouble. The young man then came up, wearing only a pair of jeans and carrying his shoes and the rest of his clothes in his hand. Jeff told him to put on his clothes before he went out, but the guy laughed at his face and angrily said "man, I'm really gonna fuck you up," as he stormed out the door, barefoot and shirtless in the cold January

night. Jeff, shaken by the event, was worried about the boy bringing in the cops; however, Patrick, who joined us upstairs, was more concerned about people seeing a half-naked man in front of the building in the winter. Jeff went to look outside and could not see him anywhere around the premise; they assumed he got into a cab. Patrick, still very cool-headed, reassured Jeff that the young man would probably not do anything. Indeed, few people would go to the police or to their dad to complain that they were kicked out of a gay sex club.

Although threats to bring the authorities to the space can be worrisome, mad patrons rarely have a case to bring up to the police. As Patrick says, his interactions with the police have usually gone smoothly:

The police would show up at the door and they'd say "what's going on?" "We're having a party" is what we would say. And so "is anyone injured?" or "is there something going on here?" And I said "no everything's fine." They say: "well we got a complaint, so just give us your information. If something was going on that you're not telling us about, you know, we'll get back to you." And, you know, there was nothing going on; it was just someone that, like, wanted to cause trouble, so they called the police and they make up some bogus reason to get the police there. . . . The last time the police showed up they said they got a noise complaint and they got there and there was no loud music and they realized it was bogus so they left.

Even if unruly patrons rarely go through with their threats and even if complaints do not do much against the venues, organizers still prefer to try to avoid offending patrons, making the handling of tough patrons difficult.

### 3.2. *Competition*

Police threats are not only used by patrons, but also between competing sex party organizers. Owners, managers, and promoters negotiate different business agreements, and disputes over terms sometimes lead to long-lasting tensions between different people in the sex party industry. Also, as in any other field of

business, party promoters are in competition over who will attract the most guests. Because of these tensions, some of the viler party organizers may try to sabotage other people's events. One way to do this is to make false complaints to authorities or report an illegal business and hope that the investigation will lead to the venue being closed down. On a night when I was not present, there was a false investigation at one of the clubs I observed, which was documented on online gay media and told to me by the manager. Late in the night at a party, a woman came saying that she was from the DOHMH. She said the venue was in violation of the health code, confiscated the money collected from entry, and told the manager to close the party and that the police would come later to make sure the venue was closed. The police never came, and the organizers later found out that the DOHMH had not sent any inspectors. The woman was apparently hired by a group of people who elaborated the scheme to steal money from the venue. Another venue encountered similar problems when someone started posting warnings about the venue on gay cruising websites, discouraging people not to go because the police had raided the place before and would likely do so again. This person kept posting these warnings even if the host tried to convince him of the contrary multiple times (no raids took place at the venue). Although the organizers at this venue did not know who the person was and what his intentions were, they speculated that he might be a competing sex party organizer. Current sex regulations push today's sex venues into clandestinity, which makes them vulnerable to ill-intended actions by angry patrons and competitors.



### 3.3. *Emergencies*

Because they feel like they have to remain hidden from authorities, party organizers may put their clientele at risk when emergencies arise. The three venues I observed did not allow the consumption of drugs, but patrons sometimes use them before coming to the venue or do so discreetly in the bathrooms or in the corners. During one night of observation, a young man arrived by himself to the party, looking perfectly sober. He asked the clothes check attendant if he could use the bathroom before he checked his clothes, which the attendant let him do. The young man went to the bathroom, came back, checked his clothes, and entered the party space. Less than an hour later, a guest came to tell the staff that there was a guy completely passed out on drugs inside. Two guests then came back into the changing area, carrying the young man who had used the bathroom earlier and who now looked unconscious, except for periodic spasms. Two or three guests, a staff from the venue, and the party promoter gathered around the young man, whom they had sit on the sofa. They tried to ask him his name and what drug he had done, but he could not make an intelligible sentence. Some people started getting scared that he might be having a drug overdose that could be lethal; others claimed that they knew about drugs and that this overdose would pass in a few moments. People started debating about whether they should take him to a hospital and how so. The venue manager walked in, from his office area, looking more exasperated than concerned, and said that people would have to walk him away from the space if they were to call an ambulance. The guest who was playing with the young man before he lost consciousness, somehow feeling responsible for the young man, volunteered

to take him by taxi to a hospital. The clothes check attendant retrieved the young man's clothes according to the number written on his arm, and the party promoter started dressing up the semiconscious guest. As he did so, he found a small vial containing a clear liquid in the boy's shorts pocket—most likely gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB). The guest who wanted to take the young man outside also put his clothes back on; he and a venue staff member carried the young man out of the space on their shoulders, and I followed. They walked him away from the club's door, his feet literally dragging on the sidewalk. About 100 feet away from the club's door, they hailed a cab. The taxi driver stopped and left as soon as he saw the comatose men. They tried to get on his cell phone to see if he had a contact in case of emergency or a friend coming to the party, but they could not get him to unlock the phone with the passcode. They then called the venue manager who was still inside to ask if they could call an ambulance. The manager said he would come down and instructed them to take the boy farther away from the club before they call the ambulance. After he slowly made his way to our group, I headed back in to resume my staff duties. As I learned later, they got to another street and called the ambulance. Waiting for the ambulance, the young man suddenly snapped back into consciousness, got scared by the two men carrying him, and started to madly dash away from them, crossing the street without looking for cars. The ambulance opportunely arrived at this moment and the young man ran to the paramedics, telling them he had been doing GHB. The ambulance took him away alone and everyone headed back to the club with some relief but still startled by the turn of events.

Back at the venue, the manager, his staff member, and the party promoter went to the office space and talked behind closed doors for a few minutes. When they came out, some of the concerned staff and guests ask how everything ended. The venue manager simply walked away, saying everything was fine, which did not assuage the concerns of the others. The party promoter described the outside scene to those who stayed in. A staff member expressed the criticism that if someone's life is at risk, the priority should be to get him the care he needs, not to walk him away from the space. The promoter defended himself, saying that they are not legally liable if something bad happens. They debated between what is legal and what is right without reaching an agreement.

Although other venues would not hesitate to call an ambulance if a similar case happened, clandestine sex venues are riskier than commercial establishments in the case of emergencies. Residential places do not have the same regulations as commercial ones in regard to, for example, fire safety or salubrity. These specific risks are caused by clandestinity, which is the result of laws against commercial sex venues. Private sex club promoters do not choose to create an illegal business; they choose to take risks to provide a space of sexual freedom. Although they can take measures to make this place safe (e.g., in regards to safer sex), they end up exposing their clientele to different kinds of risks. The public health law in NY has thus not reduced risks, but only increased them.

#### *4. Conclusion: from regulation to interaction*

Chapter 3 and this one made the bridge from health regulations and the other factors affecting gay cruising to the practice of gay group sex (described in the next

chapter). Public health policies in New York have changed the landscape of gay cruising, and participants and organizers have to be creative in order to re-create the space of sexual freedom that they had lost in the decades after the onset of the AIDS epidemic. Private sex clubs have become the main venue for gay group sex because, in the current context, they are the sites that are the best at providing gay cruisers with what they were once looking for in the bathhouses and sex clubs of the past.

As Chapter 2 showed, every sex venue organizes sexual and social interaction in a unique way. The next chapter describes the norms of interaction at private sex clubs. These patterns of interaction are shaped by the features of private sex clubs, many of which, described in this chapter, stem from the unclear legal status of these venues. Because they cannot widely advertise their venue and events, managers have recourse to the party-promoter system, where events cater to specific crowds, require invitation, and are time-bound. Venue managers are also less likely to invest in a space because they cannot guarantee its longevity and usually go for a minimalist design, making their clientele share a common space. The way in which gay cruisers are put together in a private sex club thus fosters a mode of cruising that I call “collective intimacy.”

## CHAPTER 5 – Fostering Collective Intimacy: Observation of Social and Sexual Behavior at a Gay Private Sex Party

Shortly before 1 a.m., it is the peak of the Friday night party at the private sex club known as the Village Loft. Leaning over the railing of the mezzanine, I look down to the first floor of the venue. I see a crowd of almost 50 men filling the entire living room of this Manhattan loft apartment. Everyone is completely naked. Most of the guests are engaged in some form of sexual activity, some in pairs, some in small groups. People have sex standing against one of the walls, lying down on the few pieces of furniture, or on the carpeted floor. Those who are not having sex are walking around looking at the action or are in search of a partner; as they do so, they brush against others' bodies or freely start touching guys they are interested in. From the lobby area below me, I hear the voices and laughter of people socializing, mixing with the moaning of those having sex in the play space.

The Village Loft, one of the three private sex clubs I have observed, successfully provided a space of collective intimacy where people could connect with one another both sexually and socially. In the previous chapter, I explained how private sex club organizers navigated legal and material constraints to provide and protect this type of space. In this chapter, I describe this space of collective intimacy looks from the inside, and how it takes shape with participants' interactions and organizers' decisions.

I also explain how the private sex club is a unique type of venue with its specific culture and norms by comparing it to other places of group sex. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, the features of different spaces of group sex shape different sexual cultures. In public sex environments like bathrooms and parks, non-cruisers can walk into the space at any time, and it is crucial that they not notice any sexual activity going on. Cruisers use silent gestures and coded language to communicate interest to others, and sex remains furtive so it can be easily stopped in case of interruptions. Because sex in public places is stigmatized and often illegal, silence also protects everyone's anonymity, so people rarely make personal connections in these places. In contrast, commercial sex venues, because they are closed off from the general public, offer spaces where sex is ubiquitous. Bathhouses, adult theaters, and sex clubs are only attended by cruisers, so open displays of nudity and sexual activity are the norm. Although the boundary around a commercial sex venue removes the necessity for silence, they still often discourage social interaction to promote sex. Bathhouses are usually very dimly lit, some rooms even pitch black, to encourage physical interaction stripped of personal identity. They are also typically open 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, favoring a constant circulation of patrons; who is attending at any time is quite random, and people are unlikely to find one another again at the venue. Gay bathhouses thus create a space of "easy sex," where sex is abundant and stripped from any social interaction.

Similar to commercial sex venues, the private sex clubs of NYC today create a space where sex is ubiquitous. Because they have to operate in clandestinity, these clubs are more limited in their organization than legal commercial venues (i.e., they

cannot open 24/7, have to use small and inconspicuous spaces, and are only known to people who look for them). As a result, private sex clubs differ from public and commercial spaces in that they have a sexual culture characterized by what I call collective intimacy. That is, they extend aspects of physical intimacy (familiarity with bodies, nudity, and sexuality) and interpersonal intimacy (affection, deep knowing, and belonging) typical of close relationships to the community of cruisers attending sex parties. Because of restrictive policies against group sex venues, group sex organizers have to work hard to create and protect spaces where people can freely have sex, and the clandestinity creates greater bonds among the people who attend them.

To explain what collective intimacy is and how it is fostered, I turn to data I collected as a participant observer in the role of staff member at the Village Loft. I also use quotations from in-depth interviews from those of my respondents that were regular attendees of parties at the Village Loft (all interviews were conducted after my work of participant observation at that venue was completed). Again, I have conducted participant observation as a staff member at three different private sex clubs of NYC. At Venue 1 (the Village Loft), I observed 19 parties where the focus was to learn about the patterns of behavior of party participants. My staff duties, as I will explain below, put me in a convenient position to look at the sexual activity of the space without being involved in it. I worked 13 nights at Venue 2 (Patrick Fisher's space) and eight at Venue 3. For these two, my staff duties were mostly in the front layer of the parties, so my observations focused on management and less on sexual activity. The observation of venues 2 and 3 was mostly used in the

previous chapter; the description of sexual behavior in this chapter draws mostly from the observation of Venue 1. However, the few times I could look at the interaction within the central layers of venues 2 and 3, what I saw mostly complied to the patterns I had seen in the first venue. This chapter focuses on my observation of Venue 1; at the end of the chapter, I will briefly tell how venues 2 and 3 resemble or differ from Venue 1.

### *1. Setting the stage for sex*

Venue 1, known in the field as “The Village Loft,” was one of the most popular private sex clubs of NYC during the earlier part of my fieldwork. The venue was owned and managed by Alex,<sup>10</sup> a gay male entrepreneur in his forties. Unlike most organizers I spoke with, Alex did not begin organizing sex parties as an extension of his own sexual lifestyle, but purely as a business venture. He already had several successful investments and was looking to begin something new. Hanging out in gay bars, he heard people complain about the lack of group sex venues in the city. Although he had never been interested in sex parties on the personal level (he described himself as monogamous and into dating), he thought he could respond to that demand by opening a sex club—in turn, he enjoyed the social aspect of throwing parties on a regular basis. He started at his apartment a year and a half

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike Patrick Fisher, the manager of this venue wanted his identity and the exact location of his club to remain confidential. Alex is a pseudonym and I changed the names of the venue and party. I also modified some features of the space to make it less recognizable.



before I began my fieldwork, but quickly decided to move to another place as the attendance grew. A few months before I first contacted him, Alex bought a large loft apartment for the sole purpose of hosting parties. Once a week, he hosted his self-promoted party; the other days, he rented the venue to other sex party promoters and also for nonsexual events. Alex was thus owner and manager of the space as well as party promoter. In some aspects, Alex's case looks like "apartment parties" described in the last chapter, but it is actually a "private sex club" since no one resides in the space and he rents it to different party promoters.

Managing a private sex club and hosting a sex party requires making several organizational choices. Policies on sex venues, as we have seen in the previous chapter, limit the options of sex party organizers. Organizers have to deal with legal and material constraints as they try to satisfy their clientele. As this chapter will demonstrate, organizational choices shape the behavior of sex party participants. Regular participants, however, also have a lot of influence on sex party organizers' decisions. The collective intimacy of a section of the gay cruising culture takes form with this back and forth between outside constraints, participants' demands, and organizers' choices.

### *1.1. The venue*

Alex protected his space from inspections by using the strategies of invisibility and privacy (defined in Chapter 3). From the street, the building was a residential walkup like any other in the neighborhood; there was no signage indicating the club and people could only find it if they had the exact address. In the downstairs hallway, a staff member asked where people were going and instructed

them to go up the staircase quietly if they said they were coming for the party.

Through the apartment door, people would enter the lobby area of the club, which was curtained off from the sexual space. Alex would greet guests, check their address on the email list, collect their entry fee, and direct them to the clothes check. As in the other clubs described in the previous chapter, the sexual space of the Village Loft was hidden within several protective layers, and people had to go through many checkpoints to reach it.

The place was also protected from neighbors' complaints. The building was in a prime location and only had a few, very spacious units, which must have been worth a lot on the real estate market. However, the building was in mediocre condition and the units had very little window space, making them less appealing as residences. On the flipside, large spaces with few windows are ideal for clandestine businesses, and rumors circulated among regulars of the party that the other units also hosted other kinds of clandestine businesses. Curious guests frequently asked Alex if he ever received complaints from other people in the building; he always replied vaguely or said that the neighbors were always gone on weekends. Whatever the truth was, Alex had found a place that worked for his parties. The constant ins and outs on party nights did not bother anyone (although he also made sure that people remained quiet in the hallways).

### *1.2. The space*

The Village Loft was only used to host private events but still looked like an apartment. The lobby area of the club, where people entered, was a kitchen. It was complete with counters, cabinets, and appliances but was empty of furniture or

kitchen tools, showing that it was never used for its culinary function. The living room and bedrooms of the apartment, which composed the play area of the club, were entirely carpeted and their walls painted in light colors. This décor contrasted with the black walls and concrete floor of Patrick's space, which are much more typical in commercial sex clubs. The two bathrooms looked like those in any home, with toilet, sink, bath, and shower of residential quality. The venue looked like an apartment more than a club, but its lack of furniture and living commodities showed that no one resided there.

Alex made a few renovations to the apartment to transform it into a private sex club. First, he removed the doors inside the apartment to keep people from secluding themselves and to favor the constant movement of the crowd through the space (a practice that I describe more extensively below). Alex did not want people to use the bathrooms for sex or for taking drugs, thus he also removed the door of the upstairs bathroom, which was by the play space. For the downstairs bathroom, which was in the lobby area where Alex spent the whole night, he taped the latch in so people could not fully close it. (People could hope for a moment of privacy in this bathroom, but when he saw the door closed, Alex routinely opened it to peek at what was going on inside.) Midway through my period of observation, he also modified the interior setup of the apartment. The play area of the apartment had two spaces: first, on the entrance level, there was a very large living room; secondly, people could walk up a staircase to a mezzanine with a hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom. After the first few months of observation, Alex closed down the venue for two weeks for renovations. During that time, he removed the

wall separating the bedrooms and hallway on the mezzanine floor, creating a single large space.

The furniture changed several times during my observation but was always kept to a minimum. When I first observed, there were sofas and a sling (a large structure of metal poles hanging a leather hammock with chains), but Alex eventually removed them. At the end, the top floor only had one large bed as furniture. The bottom floor had several faux-leather-padded large ottomans, which could be arranged in different configurations to create seating or beds.

### *1.3. The event*

Alex advertised his party through the means described in Chapter 4. He announced it on cruising websites and small ads, through his own social circle, and relied on word of mouth. He collected the email addresses of anyone interested and emailed this list usually once a week to announce the week's party. Alex's announcements did not use the same "branding" tactic as some of the parties mentioned in the previous chapter. Although he named his party to try to make it recognizable, he kept changing names, never settling down on one specific concept or theme. His emails did not use images or logos; they were in plain text and used the first person to invite people (e.g., "hey man! I hope you can make it to my party this week.")

Partly because Alex was not part of any specific sexual subculture, his party did not cater to a specific crowd; it was open to any man, did not have admission criteria like age or physique, and did not focus on a specific sexual practice. Alex always kept his venue well-supplied with condoms and lube packets, but he did not

have rules about safer sex. Indeed, he also advertised his events on barebacking cruising websites (sites for people who only want to play without condoms), where he emphasized the amount of “raw” action going on at these parties. Yet, the event was not completely a bareback party, and a lot of guests only played with condoms. By the end of my observation work, the party concept narrowed down to a “no attitude” sex party, the process and definition of which I will develop later in this chapter.

Alex’s parties were held every Friday from 9 p.m. to approximately 3 a.m. (a little earlier or later depending on the attendance). About 100 people came to the party every night, though the space would typically have no more than 70-something men at one time. People would start arriving as soon as the club opened at 9 p.m. Early on, there might be between 20 and 30 guests in the space; the crowd would get denser and reach its peak midway through the event. Around 1 a.m., there would be a high flow of early arrivers leaving and of late arrivals. It would then thin down to 20-something people in the last hour, until Alex started telling people to start heading to the clothes check. Figure 3 shows the number of people entering and leaving and the total number of people present for every hour of a typical night at Alex’s party.

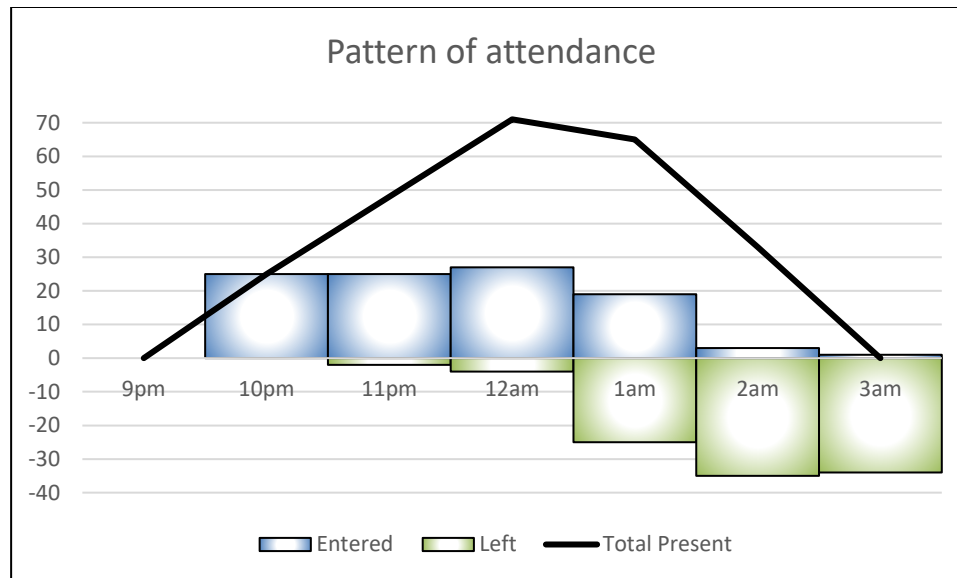


Figure 3. Number of entries, number of exits, and total attendance for every hour of a typical party at Venue 1.  
(Total entrants: 100. Maximum present at one time: 71.)

#### 1.4. The work

Owner and manager of his own club, as well as promoter of his own party, Alex also tried to fill as many staff duties as he could. At every one of his parties, he was working the inside door, checking emails of guests, and taking their entry fee. When he was renting his space to other promoters, he would let them do that work but always remained present. At the end of every night, Alex would do a quick clean up, picking up used condoms, empty lube packets, and paper towels from the floor, and emptying trash cans. He would do a more thorough cleaning during the daytime.

For the other duties, Alex got help from volunteer staff members. In every one of his party ads, Alex would end with a line saying that he was always looking for helpers for the parties. Each night, he would get about six to 12 people helping. Many of these helpers had been regular guests at his party who decided to get

involved; others were complete newcomers. In general, the core of the staff was composed of people who were there almost every Friday night. The main benefit of helping was to get free entry to the party, and most staff members alternated between times of work and times of play (me being an exception). He also extended the invitation to come for free to other promoter's parties at his space. Being a regular staff member also meant integrating a clique of friends who socialized before and during the party, at the diner after the event, and even on other days of the week. The more people came to help on a night, the more time everyone had to play. Some very dedicated helpers, however, arrived an hour before the party started, left after every guest had left, and worked for the most part of the night. Alex asked staff members to arrive at 8 p.m. (or an hour before the party started) not because there was a lot of preparation to do but because it reassured him to know people were going to make it. Like Jeff, Alex was always stressed out about who was going to show up until the moment they arrived.

People could shift between different staff roles, but Alex preferred to have the same people do the same tasks at every party. The downstairs doorman was always Ryan (late 40s), a trusted friend of Alex. His only job was to make sure that people who went upstairs were party guests. He spent most of the evenings downstairs, only to come upstairs in the last hour of the party, when he figured that no one else would come in anymore, and would then quickly undress and join the few remaining guests still playing. Compared to other staff roles, the downstairs doorman job allowed for the least play time and socialization opportunities because it required standing alone outside of the party. However, Ryan never complained

about it; Alex also said that he enjoyed that role because he liked to smoke. Because of his assiduity at the job and because he was close to Alex, other staff members speculated that he may be the only paid helper.

Alex needed several staff members to work at the clothes check and changing room, which was in a windowless, midsize room next to the kitchen. Initially, Alex was using rolling clothes racks to hang clothes, but he had to upgrade to something sturdier and eventually had poles and a wooden structure fixed into the walls. After checking in with Alex, guests went into the clothes check room, where a staff member would hand them a hanger and tell them to put all of their clothes on it. People had to take all of their clothes off, including their underwear and footwear, which they would do in front of the staff, who might help them hang everything the right way so nothing falls off. A staff member would then hang the clothes and place the shoes on the floor underneath them. Hangers came in three colors that were used in three different sections of the hanging racks. Staff members told guests to remember the color of their hanger to have a sense of where their clothes were hung. When they came back to check out, the staff would ask the guest to point to his clothes in the respective color section. Because clothes were kept in a room where patrons could walk in and out, it was crucial that staff always be present to watch people's belongings. There were at least two staff members in the room all night; if more helpers were present, they would rotate between work shifts and breaks to play.

Behind Alex in the kitchen, one staff member would stand behind a small table to serve water to guests. He had two, one-gallon water jugs that he would fill in



the kitchen sink and place in the refrigerator behind him. He would then pour water into small plastic cups as patrons came for it. When the guests were done drinking, he would take their cups and stack them on the kitchen counter. As the stack of “clean” cups on the table would run out, Alex would instruct him to take the used stack and place it back on the table in guise of clean cups. Because many guests would come for water after sexual play, some of these cups became slippery from lube rubbing off patrons’ hands, but I never heard anyone complain about this unhygienic practice. The “water boy” role was the least demanding one and was often given to new staff members. The kitchen area also had a little nook with four folding chairs where people could sit down to talk or dress up at the end of the night. Although it was not very spacious, the kitchen was the main socializing area for guests and the only one where it was acceptable to have loud conversations and laughter. The clothes check was also often noisy from staff members socializing. If people initiated sexual activity in the kitchen or clothes check, Alex would quickly tell them to move into the living room, which was on the other side of a black sheer curtain.

Inside the play space, Alex needed one staff member as bathroom attendant on the mezzanine level. This person stood outside the bathroom doorway (the door was removed) and made sure that patrons entered one at a time only. When someone was using the bathroom, the attendant would tell others coming to form a line against the wall. When the line was particularly long, he would maybe allow two people in at a time: one to use the sink, the other for the toilet. The attendant would also keep the bathroom supplied in toilet paper, paper towels, hand soap, and

mouthwash, taking these from the closet when needed. He would also take some paper towels and do a quick wipe every now and then as water often spilled around the sink. Alex was adamant that there be someone tending the bathroom at all times of the night, even if there were only a few people at the party. Every night, he elected one staff member—someone experienced and trusted—to be the main attendant and gave this person the responsibility to find other staff members to take his place if he wanted a break. If he saw the main attendant downstairs, he always asked if someone else had taken his place. I never got a clear response from Alex as to why it was so important to him to have someone guard the bathroom at all times; however, because he was stuck at the party door the whole night, Alex seemed to appreciate having someone experienced as his eyes and ears on the second floor.

For my participant observation, I worked in every staff position except the downstairs doorman, which was always reserved for Ryan. After the first few weeks, Alex always wanted me to be main bathroom attendant upstairs, and so did I: it was an ideal position as an observer because it required me to stand by the bathroom's door with not much else to do than stare at the sexual interaction going on in front of me on the mezzanine floor. When guests stood in line for the bathroom, they often had casual conversations with each other and with me, allowing me to glean some information by asking quick questions. From Alex's perspective, I was one of the most patient staff members; indeed, my research benefited from the bathroom attendant role, and I hardly ever needed breaks. When my feet were killing me when or I got tired, I would ask another staff member to take my position and head to the

kitchen or clothes check for about a half hour to sit down and socialize while having a granola bar and energy drink before going back upstairs.

## *2. Physical interaction*

The organizational features that I described above aim at creating a space where people can freely have sex. The sexual play space at the center of these venues is a protected space of sexual abundance where: you are free to have sex anywhere you want within that space; you are free to make explicit sexual advances on anyone (although everyone always retained the right to turn these advances down); you can see or watch anyone having sex (and everyone can look at you); you are free to have as much sex as you want with as many people as you want; and you can acceptably engage in any type of consensual sexual act (with the exceptions, in some places, of safe or unsafe sex or “messy” play like urination). On the flipside, this valuation of sexual abundance challenges participants’ freedom to choose more private forms of sexuality (i.e., they can hardly avoid touching and cannot seclude themselves from others). Private sex clubs create this space of collective sexuality by choosing organizational features that impose collective physical intimacy. (I define physical intimacy as a familiarity with others’ naked bodies, affectionate physical contact, an openness about showing your sexuality, and a lack of vanity around nudity and bodily functions.)

One way in which The Village Loft creates collective physical intimacy is by requiring full nudity of both guests and staff. Staff members arrive at the venue during the hour before the party starts. As soon as they walk into to the club, Alex greets them, saying something like, “great! You’re here! Let’s get you undressed first

and then we'll see where you'll be working.”<sup>11</sup> Alex always had this urgency about people getting undressed, like the event could not start while people still had clothes on. A few minutes before the event started, he would gather the staff in a circle to give a breakdown on who would do what. Sometimes, these meetings were done with people standing, fully naked in the bright light of the clothes check room; other times people would lie around on the furniture or carpet in the dim lights of the play room. It was important that the staff be comfortable being fully naked so they transmit that attitude to the guests.

When guests walked in, they were greeted by the fully naked staff and, after paying their entry fee, were directed to the clothes check room to undress. Every night, some guests would keep their underwear on as they handed their clothes to the staff. The staff would then tell them everything—including underwear—had to go. A few guests every night would question that requirement, but the staff was always adamant about the requirement of full nudity and would comfort hesitant guests that they would feel much better about being fully naked after a few minutes in the play space.

Not only does the venue require participants to be fully naked, the time structure of the party creates a dense crowd where people cannot avoid close proximity to others' bodies. Early in the night, people would keep their distance

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<sup>11</sup> I never recorded any conversations during observation. Unless specified, the quotes in this chapter are what I wrote in my fieldnotes right after every party and are to the best of my memory.

from each other unless they wanted to play together. As people kept coming in, the timider guests would stand against the wall and look at the more uninhibited ones playing on the furniture, located more centrally in the space. As the space kept filling up, people could not find spots to stand away from others, so they had to keep moving away from people they did not want to play with and toward those they were interested in. At the peak of the night, a very dense crowd would fill the space and guests kept brushing each other as they moved through it to reach someone they were interested in, or to try to get a good look at people engaged in sex. In this constant movement in the thick crowd, guests could not avoid close body contact, erect genitals brushing against them (either intentionally or accidentally), and hands caressing their bodies, tickling a nipple, or reaching for their genitals or buttocks.

Indeed, touching someone's body or reaching for his genitalia was a common gesture to silently ask if someone was interested in sex. Because everyone was in the presence of others having sex, loud conversations were frowned upon, and it was preferable to communicate with gestures and whispers. As people would pass each other in the densely crowded space, reaching a hand to someone was a polite way to express interest, and this invitation for sex could be turned down easily. Participants also touched people having sex to see if they could join in—for example, reaching for the groin area of two guys engaged in oral or anal sex. As they felt the touch of a stranger, people might look at who it was and, if interested, position their body to receive more touching or replicate the gesture. If uninterested, the most polite way to decline advances was to ignore the person touching, look away, and

wait for him to go. If the guy would not take the cue, then the touched person might brush the hand away gently; if someone still tried to feel his way in, a last resort was to push the person away more firmly or verbally communicate that one is not interested. People had to strike a balance between not being too prudish in pushing touchers away and not being too persistent in touching people who do not welcome the touching. I will describe the intricacies of sex party etiquette (this understanding of how to approach and reject people appropriately) later. By putting a crowd of naked people looking for sex in the same open space, clubs like the Village Loft forced people to learn how to deal with constant physical approaches.

Guests spent a lot of their time at the party walking within this dense crowd of fully naked men, feeling up different guys until they found one or more who reciprocated. Once they found a match, they could play with a guy for a little or a long time and then move to others. At the peak of the night, there could be 70 men moving around the space slowly, looking for sex partners. Small groups of two or more would initiate sexual activity, then people might join in or the group may disband to move to others. When people played together very briefly, it may have been because the guys realized they were not compatible or just because they wanted to play with as many different people as they could. Early in the night, sexual scenes would be on the shorter side, and most of them would break before anyone ejaculated, which is because most men wanted to try playing with many guys before they reached orgasm and lost arousal. Later in the night, small groups would be more likely to stick together and keep having sex until everyone climaxed.

The constant movement in the crowd allowed people to engage in any type of intercourse or preliminary sex act in no specific order. As they got together, people could start kissing, masturbating, or having oral, oral-anal, or anal sex. People, however, did not go through these acts in any sequence from “preliminaries” to intercourse. Some guys who were really “into ass,” for example, would kneel down and start “eating” or “rimming” a guy’s anus before doing anything else. Indeed, amid a large crowd of men looking for sex, people could allow themselves to be highly specific in what acts they wanted to do. Every evening, for example, there were a few avid bottoms passively waiting for tops to fuck them. These guys would go to the bed, kneel on all fours with their rear up in the air and wait for people to come from behind and start fucking them. Taking that position signified that the bottom was willing to take anyone who wanted to fuck him and that he was looking for receptive anal sex only. Some guys would take that position for only a few minutes if no one came to them, but others spent a large amount of time waiting in that position. Sometimes, there could be two or three bottoms kneeling side-by-side waiting for guys to come fuck them; tops could then keep switching between different guys easily.

The open-aired, densely crowded play area favored this movement between people, encouraging participants to experiment with a variety of partners for short amounts of time rather than settling down for one guy to have a complete sex session with. People could not isolate themselves from others: anyone could watch you having sex and try to join in by feeling you up. As a sexual scene was getting more intense, more and more people would gather around the guys involved to look

at the action, sometimes creating a few concentric circles of men watching toward the center. People watching might contribute to the scene by commenting, cheering, or holding the guys engaged in complicated positions. Just like it was impossible to avoid people looking at you having sex, it was unavoidable to see people doing it. There were no inappropriate places to have sex in the play area; people would start doing it on the floor, next to the stairs, in line to the bathroom, and so on. Whether one had sex with very few or many guests, it was always done in the copresence of others, fostering a sense of group sexual intimacy.

As the night went on, the space would warm up and become almost steamy. A thick “sex smell” would pervade: a mix of sweat, semen, latex, and lube, sometimes with a hint of fecal matter. Bodies would routinely come out of the crowd to line up the bathroom, sometimes puffing and drenched in sweat and other fluids. The bathroom was the “pit stop” between different rounds of sex, where people used the toilet before cleaning themselves quickly over the sink. They would wash their hands, rinse their dicks, wipe themselves with paper towels, gargle with mouthwash, and head back to play.

As stated before, the bathroom door had been removed, so even though the bathroom attendant monitored the ins and outs, guests did not have complete privacy around their bodily functions. Although some guys were shy to use the toilet with people around, more experienced ones had lost such vanity. As I was watching the door one night, a man came to the bathroom and, seeing no one in line, said, “great! There’s no one in.” As I replied that someone was currently in there, the man inside flatulated loudly. The man at the door exclaimed, “ew! He’s pooping!” which



the one inside could hear and prompted him to respond, “so what?” with a loud irritated tone. The man at the door looked startled at this reaction and walked away quietly. On another night, a guest who arrived for the last moments of the party entered the bathroom with a disposable enema. Shortly after, Alex came up to clean the bathroom as he had just closed the door to new entrants. He was making small talk to the man sitting on the toilet as he wiped around the sink and picked up garbage. The guest then started emptying the fluid he had injected in his rectum to clean himself, as both of them were minding their business. The club forced people into close physical proximity, which, in the long run, made them “unlearn” traditional values of bodily privacy around nudity, touching, sex, and defecation.

The physical gestures between participants were often like those exchanged between close intimate partners. Previous observers of group sex (cited in the introduction) saw little displays of affection in bathhouses, park, bathrooms, or sex clubs (Corzine and Kirby 1977; Delph 1978; Humphreys 1975; Ponte 1974; Tewksbury 2002; Weinberg and Williams 1975); people usually focused on genital gratification or “rough fucking,” as Martin Levine (1998) put it. At Alex’s party, although a lot of the sex could qualify as rough fucking, there was also a lot of passionate kissing, loving embraces, gentle caresses, and cuddling. Amid the crowd, some people even found a way to get into what looked like passionate lovemaking. For example, on a sparsely attended night, a mid-30s-looking man was standing against a wall getting fellated by a slightly older man kneeling down. Another mid-30s, muscular man approached the scene slowly; the two guys standing looked at each other for a moment before starting to make out. They left the man who was

fellating to go lie down together on the nearby sofa, then became inseparable for the rest of the evening, about two to three hours. As they took turns sucking and fucking each other, several people came around to look at them, sometimes trying to touch them to see if they could join in. The two men only had eyes for each other, making complete abstraction of people around them. The sex was unlike a lot of the repetitive pounding that I usually saw around: they were changing positions, feeling each other's bodies, kissing, looking into each other's eyes, and whispering what seemed like tender words. They stopped what they were doing a few times to take short breaks at the bathroom and resume in different places in the venue. Toward the end of the night, they were in the bed, one fucking the other who was lying on his back. The top pulled out, jerking his dick (not wearing a condom) and said he was about to come; the bottom softly said, "inside, in my ass..." The top then put his dick back in and both moaned as they closely held each other. After the climax, they stayed locked together for a while, lying one over the other and not moving. Later, they got up, cleaned up, got dressed, and left together. The intimate setting of the sex space made it possible for these two to enjoy intimate sex together in the middle of the crowd. In this example, the two participants were closed to others joining in, but similar displays of affection also occurred within larger group sex situations. Physical intimacy could also be a part of social interaction.

### *3. Social interaction*

The physical intimacy created by the space extended to social relations and created interpersonal intimacy: gestures and words of affection during conversations, exchange of personal information, sharing of deeply personal stories

and feelings, and familial group bonding. Similar to their physical interaction, the staff showed example of social interaction. Staff members were very affectionate with one another, regardless of whether they played together sexually or if they only socialized casually, as the following description of a work night at the party illustrates.

It is my second night of observation at the Village Loft. Alex had asked me and all the staff to show up between 8 and 8:30 p.m., but I get there shortly after that. Downstairs, I recognize Phil (late 20s), who was working upstairs last week. He says “hi” warmly and hugs me; he has to stay downstairs until Ryan, the regular doorman, arrives. I make my way upstairs and Alex is relieved to see me, although he is concerned about Ryan not being there yet. I recognize James (late 40s) in the clothes check from last week and meet another guy, Eric (mid-30s); both of them are already fully naked. As I also undress, James shows us the proper way to have people hang their clothes and where to place hangers. Phil comes upstairs stating that Ryan has arrived and taken his spot at the door. Alex tells us to go sit in the living room where Marvin (late 50s) and Andre (late 30s) are already sitting.

First, people sit around the bed and sofa and Alex explains, for a few minutes, what everyone’s assignment is for the night and a few technical details for each role. I also introduce myself and my research project. After that, it is 9 p.m.; the door is officially open, but there are no guests yet. Alex tells us to sit and relax in the living room while he takes his spot in the kitchen area waiting to greet guests. It turns out to be a party that is very slow to start: only a handful of guests arrive during the first hour, leaving plenty of time for the staff to socialize. Andre introduces himself as a

gay porn star to those who had not met him yet. People ask him what porn studios he has worked for and what it is like to make a porn scene; to the latter, he responds nonchalantly: “well, you have sex and they film!” Marvin then says that he could bring a camera next week and film people; the others giggle and disapprove, “unless you want to pay us?” Marvin says people could wear masks, like in Treasure Island Media’s videos (a famous gay porn studio exclusively making bareback videos, which everyone at the party knew about). He says that the studio’s crew often recruit people for their shoots in cruising places with lines like: “hey, you’ve got a great dick; wanna be in our video?” He says guys will often do it for free, for fun, and for the status in the gay cruising culture they can get from it. James says that there were two guys from Treasure Island Media’s videos at the party last week: “have you seen *Sperm Bank*? They were in that movie. I fucked one of them so good!”

James then motions me to come sit on the small space next to him on the sofa. I go, he places his arm around my shoulder and asks: “so, you’re from Montréal; is that a good city for sex?” I tell him that there are multiple gay bathhouses and that backrooms have recently been made legal, so there should be good places for gay cruising. “What about the circuit parties,” he asks, “is Montréal where Southern Decadence is?” I tell him that one is in New Orleans; Montréal has the Black and Blue. “Oh yes, the Black and Blue; that’s the one I was thinking about.” While we are having this conversation, in the bed in front of us, Phil asks Eric to come snuggle between him and Andre as they keep conversing about porn. Marvin joins them too, cuddling with Phil. These four are sitting or lying down on the bed for a while, their

bodies interlocking in one way or another as they keep discussing and changing position.

A few of the men present at this point are regular sex-party-goers who have visited several venues in the city, and the conversation turns to other parties in the city and at Alex's space. Alex talks about another promoter who rents his space and how he sets it up differently: with music, TVs with porn videos, and erotic posters on the walls (Alex's parties have none of these). "They have music and they dance around the space," says Alex, rolling his eyes. James asks, "What's the crowd like?" to which Alex answers, "All young, twink type." James and Eric agree: "yeah, these young guys don't know what a good sex party is about."

A little later, James is standing in front of the bed, talking to Phil, who is lying on his back. Phil one says to James, who is a well-built man in his late forties: "I want to have a body like yours when I'm older." James—who, of course, is standing fully naked in front of us—thanks the young man, saying that he works a lot on his body, going to the gym all the time. "It's tough being a gay man," he says, "especially in large cities like New York, LA, or San Francisco. If you live, say, in Ohio, you can get by without a perfect body, but it's harder around here."

Guests are trickling in. I ask Alex if he wants us all to go to our workstations. He says we do not have to; we can just chill or play. Phil pulls Andre and Eric from the bed, saying it is time to go play upstairs, and invites the rest of us. I thank him for the invitation but decline it for professional reasons; James and I go to the clothes check to host the guests coming in, while the others go to the upstairs play space. Later on, Eric comes back to the clothes check area. James touches the tip of

Eric's penis with his finger to see if there is any dripping and teasingly asks if Eric came; Eric coyly admits he did. "What about the others," James asks, as he softly moves his finger between Eric's butt cheeks, "is it in there?" Eric responds in the negative. Later in the night, Eric will get the chance to tease James back. James will only take several very short breaks to go play, leaving the clothes check twice and coming back quickly, every time sporting a firm erection as he returns to work. Both times he comes back, Eric hangs one of the plastic coat hangers on James's penis shaft to amuse the company. James and Eric share this physical complicity even though they had only met once before at the party and never had sex together.

Staff members were like any other cliques of gay friends, although closer with their bodies and sexuality. They shared an interest in the gay cruising culture—gay porn, gay nightlife, and gay tourism all blended together in their conversations and interactions. They also openly talked about their bodies and their sexuality, which were at the center of their participation in the gay cruising culture.

This familiarity between staff members extended to guests as the night progressed. Early in the night, guests often stood away from others who were sitting and talking, because they were reserved or because they were eager to find people to have sex with. After a round of sex, however, many guests looked forward to sitting down and socializing casually while they waited for their sexual energy to come back. They would then join the staff in their affectionate social interaction.

It is about 1 a.m. on my eighth night of observation, the party, which has been well-populated tonight, is coming down from its peak. I am sitting on one edge of a sofa with three guys squeezed onto it: on the left is Tony (mid-30s), who is there for

the first time; next to him is Eric, who just played with him; then Ian (early 30s), a regular guest, right next to me. On the bed, which is on Tony's side of the sofa, another occasional guest (mid-30s) is sitting quietly; he listens to our conversation for a few minutes before falling asleep for a nap of about a half-hour, after which he will go back to play. When he is sleeping, the guys on the sofa giggle at his gentle snoring and keep conversing quietly. Andre joins us and sits in front of the sofa on the carpet. Eric rubs his foot on him and says, "foot massage!" Andre actually takes Eric's foot and starts rubbing it. Ian remarks on how small Eric's feet are; Eric says he also has tiny hands. Andre opens his hand and faces Eric's to compare them, and they realize they are exactly the same size.

As they are conversing casually, Ian asks the guys if they have boyfriends. Tony says he is in a long-term relationship that is sexually open. Ian enviously says this is the perfect kind of relationship and that he wishes to get into one someday. Tony says that he and his boyfriend have played with other guys at home a few times, but that this is their first time at a sex party; his boyfriend is currently playing upstairs. Excited, Ian says: "this is so great that you get to do this together," and keeps asking a few questions about their relationship. Later, Tony's boyfriend comes down to get him before they leave. They are both mid-30s with toned, athletic bodies. Ian comments on how attractive they both are and how envious he is of their relationship and sex life. After they are gone, Andre wonders how the carpet, on which he is sitting, can remain so soft when so many people are having sex on it. The conversation moves into speculations about how Alex can keep the carpet clean, considering the type of activity that is done over it every night.

After they had spent a moment playing in the space, guests who were reserved at the beginning of the night let their guard down and enjoyed the close company of others. As in the example above, they would be comfortable enough to sit tightly with other naked guys or to fall asleep next to other people. They caressed or massaged each other and commented on their bodies. Conversations also quickly shifted from the mundane to the more personal: they could talk about technical aspects of the party, romantic relationships, or—like the two following examples show—very personal aspects of their lives.

Routine conversation could quickly morph into personal talk. On my fifth night of observation, I sit next to Marvin on the bed and ask him how his week was (in his late 50s, Marvin is a regular staff member who was close to Alex and present every week). He says he has been busy at work. I say I have been tired early in the week, after staying up almost all night because of the parties. He replies he actually had to miss work on Monday because he partied all weekend. Besides working Friday's party here at the Village Loft, he went to another party on Saturday night and hooked up with another group of three guys on Sunday, too. On Sunday, he said they did drugs and he was the "pig bottom" of the group, all bareback. "I play bareback only. Of course, I've been HIV-positive-undetectable for a long time." He says that the party life is hard on him, which is why he had to miss work on Monday, but he just wants to enjoy it. He tells me that he was married heterosexually with children and now has grandchildren. He came out as gay and moved to the city 10 years ago, which was a tough transition. Shortly after his move to NYC, he



discovered the sex party scene and found in it a way to enjoy his sexual life with his new gay identity.

On the younger side of the gay life course, Jimmy is an 18-year-old Latino American from NYC. He joined the party on my eighth night of observation and quickly blended in with the regulars, especially Ian, Eric, and Andre. After playing together during the first hour of the party, these four were standing close to the lobby, talking to each other, forming a small circle in the dim light of the living room, holding each other by the waist. They stood like that, talking to each other softly, for over a half hour. Later in the night, I got the lowdown on what they were discussing. Jimmy said he was still “in the closet” and was asking questions to the others, who were 12 to 20 years his senior, about how coming out went for them. He is in his freshmen year in college, all of his friends are straight, and says he wishes he could talk to them about his gay experiences but feels like he cannot. He also fears that his Latino parents might react badly to his homosexuality. Ian told him that he himself was not fully out at 18 years old and that Jimmy should not feel rushed to tell everyone. Eric told him that, even if college culture might feel very straight, there must be many other gay people there and a lot of supportive people. Jimmy asked: “what if I run into a guy from college here?” to which the others responded saying that if another one was here, he would be so for the same reasons and that there would be nothing to be embarrassed about. He asks if the others met at the party and if they were friends. Andre and Eric say that they had met at the party several weeks ago and have sort of become friends, although they only met once outside of the event. Jimmy asks if they ever felt bad or “dirty” after sex parties. Andre says

that there is absolutely nothing to feel bad or shameful about group sex, as long as everyone is having fun. Jimmy felt like the Village Loft was out-of-the-ordinary, unlike any other place he had been to. When it was still early in the night, Jimmy left because he had plans to go drink with his college buddies, which he said he found “boring.”

As these examples show, there were no rules against conversation and no boundaries around how personal the discussions could get. Over the course of a night, there would always be a mix of people having sex and people socializing: people might talk early in the night if they preferred waiting for more people to arrive before having sex; they could talk while resting in-between rounds of sex; or they talked after sex, to enjoy each other’s company before they headed home. In the play area, there was always a loud stream of talking and laughing coming from the lobby and clothes check area. In the place space, however, conversation had to be quiet and sounded more like pillow talk. Not every guest would get into either casual or personal conversations. Indeed, many men entered the space, did their thing, and left without exchanging any word. Nevertheless, at this party, there were no norms against personal conversation like many observers of other gay cruising spaces have described. And although people usually said they came for the sex, it looked like several of them also came to find conversation partners.

There was a wide range of conversation topics, most of them somehow related to gay male life: bars, porn, gyms, nightclubs, sex parties, travel, dating, sex, relationships, coming out, HIV, and so forth. People also talked about their work and living conditions. People exchanged phone numbers or business cards and made

plans to meet outside the party, whether for a sex hookup, for a date, for networking, or for a social activity. Social and business connections, friendships, and romantic relations formed at this event. James once referred to the group of regular staff and guest as “like a little family,” missing people when they would not come for a bit.

However, some of these connections remained frail. As in other cliques of friends, participants sometimes gossiped or argued about little things, which could devolve into bigger drama that would turn people away from the space. A few weeks before the end of my observation, I walked in the kitchen area to find Ryan and James having an argument. A friend of Ryan’s came to the party that night to play and help out and had just left. Ryan asks James in an angry tone, “did you give him trouble?” James responds affirmatively, “if the guy wants to work, he can’t be out playing all the time—he’s got to come back and work!” Ryan then tells James that he should not “give shit” to the staff. James argues that we should only have staff members that are ready to work, not people who want to come to a sex party for free and play all night. He says that such guys are not dedicated to working for the party, that they are probably not going to come back anyway, and so he does not have to make them feel nice. Ryan responds that there are not many people who are ready to really work for the party, that we have to take all the help that we can get, and that giving shit to staff is not good. Their voices are getting louder as the argument escalates. They cannot reach common ground, stop arguing, and break off, each obviously pissed at the other. Just a few weeks ago, James was expressing familial bonds with the group, but these quickly dissipated. After this party, he never

came back to the Village Loft. Although people can make meaningful friendships at the event, some relations are also based on weak foundations and can quickly evaporate.

#### *4. Group values*

As I have described in the pages above, the organization of the party created a space of collective intimacy where physical and interpersonal intimacy with the group was normative. Setting the stage for collective intimacy is not enough to create and maintain it; the values of collective intimacy have to constantly be protected. Not only are these group sex practices threatened by authorities who can shut down sex clubs, they are also threatened from the inside of the gay cruising cultures. Not every gay cruiser wants to be in a place where just anyone can touch them, watch them, or try to connect with them personally. There has to be a constant regulation of interaction within a sex party to maintain the values that the core group of participants cherish.

At Alex's party, there was a group of regular staff members and guests who were coming to the party almost every Friday, and they informally acted as the regulators of the party's values. These people were very sociable with regulars and newcomers: they did not hesitate to correct behavior they thought was inappropriate, to applaud people who were exemplary participants, and to snub people who did not share the values of the place. Volunteers and regulars of the party had an informal say in establishing the norms of the place and could use their standing at the event to enforce them. One way to enforce the norms of the space was sex party etiquette.

#### 4.1. *Sex party etiquette*

Early during a party, Andre tells me about a sex party he had recently been to. He was having sex with a guy and having a good time until he started feeling someone licking his balls from behind, which distracted him and made him lose his hard on. I ask him if it would have been better that the guy try to make eye contact before starting to touch, to see if he was welcome or not. Andre agrees that this would have been more tactful but that if you go to a sex party, you should not mind being touched by people you are not attracted to: just let them do it and do nothing, and they should leave. He tells, however, of times where he looked away and said “no” to guys who would try again and again, saying how such people do not know how to behave at a sex party. The proper way to handle propositions in sex parties is a topic of much conversation among regular sex party goers; indeed, “sex party etiquette” was one topic Andre liked to talk about. At its core, sex party etiquette is about knowing how to make advances, how to decline them, and how to handle rejection.

Because sex parties are spaces of collective intimacy, participants must feel like they can approach anyone present for sex. A gay sex party is a sea of naked men moving around, freely touching and caressing each other, and looking at each other having sex. People who try to maintain their distance from others, who get offended by uninvited hands on their bodies, or who try to hide away from others when they found someone to have sex: these people can ruin the atmosphere of sexual freedom of a sex party. Of course, some people, especially newcomers, might react to unsolicited touching in the way one has been used to doing: with surprise or offense.

More experienced participants thus have to correct such reactions and educate novices. While I am observing as bathroom attendant on one night, Eric, who is a 30-year-old, youthful, petite man, is talking with Alan (late 40s), another regular staff member. A guest comes from the side, sees the young man, and without Eric seeing it coming, reaches down to caress Eric's penis. Although Eric is accustomed to the norms of behavior of the event, the unexpected gesture provokes a knee-jerk reaction, and he jumps in surprise and pushes the hand away. Realizing the rudeness of his gesture, he quickly relaxes and apologizes to the man, saying he is not interested in sex at the moment. As the man walks away, Alan mocks his young friend by mimicking the way he reacted to the gesture. Eric smiles understanding that he overreacted to the groping. In this case, two regular participants keep each other's behavior in check; however, regulars are also quick to tell newcomers how to behave, as a further example will show.

On another night, Phil reacts to unsolicited groping in a more appropriate manner. Early during the party, he and Eric are lying on the bed, calmly conversing while waiting for more guests to arrive and for work to do. Dan (mid-50s), a man who has been a frequent guest of the party, arrives to the space and stands next to the bed, looking down at the two guys who pay no attention to him. He starts fondling Phil's penis. The gesture interrupts the conversation the two were having, but Phil keeps facing Eric, completely ignoring Dan's touching. After a few seconds, Phil looks at Dan and says: "I'm just chilling for now; I'll go play later." Dan nods, takes his hand off Phil, and walks away to look for other guys. In the two examples above, neither Phil nor Eric were interested in having sex with the men who reached

down to grope their genitals. Phil's reaction was more appropriate than Eric's because it did not make Dan feel like it was out of place to make a sexual advance: it was perfectly fine that he touched Phil's penis; Phil was simply into socializing more than sex at the moment. Pushing away the man's hand, as Eric did, could threaten the atmosphere of sexual freedom because participants should not have to hesitate about making sexual advances.

Regulars do not like guys who guard their bodies or rudely turn down advances, but they also do not like guys who keep insisting and do not take no for an answer. In a place of sexual freedom, everyone can manifest his interest to someone; however, everyone also has the right to turn down advances. Turning someone down has to be done in a way that will not offend the other nor make him feel inappropriate. The subtle ways in which people turn down advances (by looking away, ignoring, or walking away) could be for any reason that is not personal: maybe someone is just relaxing at the moment and not looking for sex; maybe he is looking for something or someone specific; maybe he is busy with someone else, and so forth. When someone insists, however, he forces people to push them away more harshly or to voice that they are not interested. People who do not understand the subtle "noes" indirectly ruin the atmosphere of sexual freedom because they give reasons for people to be more guarded and turn people down more harshly.

On a night when I was working as bathroom attendant, I could see two men engaged in intercourse, surrounded by a few other guys. Everything was going its course when, suddenly, the tops pulls out, turns around, and slaps someone, shouting, "stop it!" The crowd dissolves revealing a man who had been kneeling

down behind the top—someone whom I often described in my fieldnotes and nicknamed “Licker.” Licker was a late-40s man who seemed to get a particular kick out of licking guys’ buttocks and feet, especially as they were having sex with others. As far as I know, he never socialized with anyone and no one knew his name even though he was there almost every night I observed the event. Regulars sometimes said “hi, how are you?” when they saw him arrive, but he would not respond. He was known for coming behind people subtly, when they did not expect it, and making first contact with his tongue on their buttocks or feet. On another night, a regular guest, Tyler (early 30s), told me, “every time I play, there’s this guy who starts licking my feet; I always push him away, but he always tries again anytime I start playing with a guy.” Tyler did not like the way Licker would try to get what he wanted completely unannounced, sometimes when you least expected it. I have myself been startled by his wet tongue on my backside a few times, while I was talking to other participants. Another issue people took with him was that he often persisted after people moved away from him or gently pushed him away, requiring them to shout at him or be more aggressive. On another night when I was working the bathroom door, I could see Licker insisting on licking the ass of one of two guys playing together. After a bit, the guy being licked turned around and loudly said, “Hey! No!” and the pair walked away. As they passed by me, the guy who had to say no asked me, “is there a more private space here?” Being bothered by Licker, these two guests felt like a private space for sex would be better than this space of collective intimacy. By abusing the freedom of the sex party, people like Licker can thus ruin the collective erotic atmosphere of private sex parties.



Regular guests and staff members were usually the ones actively correcting or commenting on other's behavior in order to maintain the proper values of a space of collective intimacy. They might mock someone's reaction if they thought it was inappropriate, or they might directly tell people to change what they are doing (for example, they would always tell people who are talking loudly in the play space to be quiet). They would also applaud people who behave properly, denigrate those who did not, and by extension, define who and what was sexually desirable and not.

#### 4.2. *Proper behavior and desirability*

People who understood sexual etiquette were more accepted among regulars of the party than people who did not. Actually, people who were active contributors to the atmosphere of sexual freedom became more sexually attractive than those who geared away from it. People who had a lot of sex, who were not selective in their choice of partners, and who would have sex in the open for anyone to watch or join in, were considered "hotter" than those who would not participate or were extremely picky and shy. A beautiful physique was also desirable, but meant nothing if you did not want to contribute to the collective sexual activity of the space.

Although it was always fine to turn down some sexual advances, the more you played with anyone, the better people regarded you. On my 15th night of observation, I accompany Ryan and Earl (mid-30s), another regular staff member, to their cigarette break in the staircase by the apartment door. Earl starts praising fellow staff member James's sexual prowess: "James really fucks anything with a hole: short or tall, Black, White, or Asian. He fucks anyone!" Ryan replies: "Yeah, and with the dick he has, he can fuck anyone he wants!" According to Ryan's comment,

James has an appendage that anyone would desire to play with, and which allows him to handpick his partners. However, collective intimacy is about enjoying sex as a group, so James enjoys letting everyone enjoy his sexual attributes.

Offering yourself to anyone was highly regarded, which explains the practice that I described above in this chapter of bottoms to lay on all fours and let anyone fuck them with no discrimination whatsoever. Other bottoms were more active in finding partners, walking around, reaching for guys' dicks, and asking them to fuck them. The bests of these bottoms would get fucked by several guys in a row, from the young to old, and slender to obese. In itself, being promiscuous made you attractive, but even more so if you had a beautiful physique. "Have you seen this guy?" Ian asked me one night, "he's super-hot and he lets anyone fuck him!" He then walked into a small group of people gathering around an early thirties man with a beautifully toned muscular body who was indiscriminately letting anyone play with him. As I will describe below, being picky was more typical of physically attractive guys and was the biggest turn-off of regulars of the party. Being unselective and physically attractive was the most desirable.

People were well regarded if they were not too picky, so by extension, they also were if they had many partners over the course of a night. Ryan and Earl, in the example above, applauded James's lack of selectiveness; staff members would also monitor how many partners people had. As the staff was gathering before a party, Earl pressed Tyler: "I don't think saw you play at all last week." "I have," responded Tyler, "I played with one guy." "One guy?" Earl replied, with exaggerated awe, "there were 130 men here, and you played with only one guy?" Earl then asked a few

questions trying to figure out, unsuccessfully, who was the guy that Tyler played with. It was Tyler's third time at the event, and although he was comfortable with most aspects of the collective intimacy (that is, he would be affectionate, friendly, and comfortable with nudity), he was more particular about sex partners. Earl, while he had made his comment sound like he was just poking fun, was implying that it might be time for Tyler to get to the next level and open up more sexually.

People evaluated with whom and with how many people they played with, but they also judged what people did sexually, certain acts carrying more worth than others. As I was standing by the bathroom door on one night, there was mid-30s Latin American man lying back in the sling, legs up in the air, for about a half hour. During that time, six men took turns fucking him bareback (the bottom was continually asking guys to fuck him "raw" and to come in his ass). After a moment, the crowd in that room thinned down, so the bottom got up and came in line to the bathroom. With a flirtatious tone, he asked a guy standing in front of him in the line if he would also fuck him in the sling. The guy hesitated for a moment and mumbled the beginning of an answer but was promptly interrupted by the bottom: "No? What do you do? You just suck and don't fuck? *You* suck! You're such a Chelsea boy!" The man replied apologetically that he preferred getting fucked than fucking and reassured that he was not a Chelsea boy. The man from the sling then calmed down, saying: "Oh, that's good, then. You're cool, not like those Chelsea boys who just suck." As this vignette shows, refusing to engage in some forms of sex carried the risk of being judged as being too stuck up for the event, and one needed to defend oneself if the target of such accusations. This example also brings in the archetype of

the person regulars did not want to see at the party because he threatened collective intimacy: the “Chelsea boy,” or “guy with attitude.”

#### 4.3. *Attitude*

The most repulsive feature that one could have at the sex party was “attitude.” The “guy with attitude” was a type of gay cruiser who went to private sex parties in NYC but when the regular participants of Alex’s party wanted to keep at bay. Before the party starts on one night, Alex mentions the party of another promoter who rents his venue, saying that, as usual, every staff member of his party is welcome to attend for free. James and Earl ask him how the crowd is, and Alex replies, rolling his eyes: “they all look like models and spend the night just looking at each other. They rub and pass each other and I think: ‘that’s yourself that you just passed now!’,” (which means that the guys are so picky about whom they have sex with that they reject guys who look just like themselves). James and Earl reply: “Oh no, I’m not going to come; I hate guys with attitude. I don’t mind hot guys, but I hate attitude.”

This short conversation describes the main characteristics of the guy with attitude: he is an attractive, fit, young man who is extremely picky in his choice of sexual partners. He will spend most of the night looking around for someone he wants to play with, even if that means he will participate very little or not at all in the sexual activity of the party. Participants sometimes also refer to the guy with attitude as a “Chelsea boy” or “Chelsea queen,” using the stereotype of the gay man living in the Manhattan neighborhood of Chelsea: a typically young man, middle or

upper class, who carefully grooms his body, wears stylish clothes, and prefers to connect with similar people.

Guys with attitude oppose the value of collective intimacy by being selective instead of engaging sexually with different people. As described above, the guys at the Village Loft want to have a lot of sex regardless of who it is with; oppositely, it is more important for guys with attitude to find a suitable partner than to have a lot of sex. An interview respondent who was also a regular guest at the Village Loft and of several other clubs and parties in NYC described the typical crowd of another event:

They think that they're good-looking, and they're really only looking for other good-looking guys to have sex with; and sometimes, they don't even have that much sex. I wanna be in a place where people are having sex and are friendly to each other. (R2, 61, Asian)

Guys with attitudes also have no consideration for sex party etiquette. In a space of collective intimacy, it is acceptable to make sexual advances on anyone, and there is a polite way to turn these down. The guy with attitude does not welcome unsolicited touching and has no respect for those who try to do it. Another regular participant of the party at the Village Loft described, in interview, the difference between guys with and without attitude:

There are guys that have beautiful bodies but don't have the mentality of a Chelsea Boy. If they're not into you, you'll know, but there's a certain conversation. That doesn't make them Chelsea Queens because of how they deliver it. Unlike, when you have to deal with the Chelsea boys, it's like they wanna slap you but they can't. It's like a bitch slap! But not using your hands, it's like, attitude. (R3, 28, Black)

Anyone could have attitude but, as participants tell in interview, guys with attitude are usually White American males, on the younger side, and with slender,

athletic bodies. Another regular participant of the Village Loft interviewed privately explained his perception of this White American attitude:

I think it's probably an American thing, an attitude towards sexuality like they think: "I'm cute so you're supposed to come to me" or that kind of arrogance. I don't necessarily have that attitude or that arrogance about myself because I don't fit into that idea of what's supposed to be a cute American gay male. You know, I'm not white; I'm not that tall or anything. (R1, 41, Black)

Because they have a certain picture of the guy with attitude, when regulars of Alex's party see a slender and well-toned young man come to their event, they suspect him—by default—of being a guy with attitude. At the end of the party one night, I stopped to talk to Marvin and Ryan who were standing in the downstairs hallway by the outside door, talking about the party that just ended. A young man walks down the stairs and passes by us to exit to the street. After he is gone, Marvin says, "that guy got fucked so much tonight!" which prompts Ryan to reply in surprise with a slow "really?" Because the young man fitted the image of a guy with attitude, learning that he was not came with surprise.

Because young and fit men were assumed to be guys with attitude until proven otherwise, these guests were sometimes put under more pressure to play than patrons that were older or less fit. As I am standing by the bathroom on a night when there were still two bedrooms upstairs, two young men with well-toned bodies walk up to the mezzanine area together. It is the first time I see them at the party. They peek into one room, then the other, and then stand in the hallway, looking into the two rooms from a distance and whispering to each other. The speed of their pacing around contrasts with the slow cruising that other guests are doing, which makes them look unaccustomed to sex parties. Phil, who had been looking at

them in the hallway the whole time, goes to them and motions them toward a bedroom saying: “go in! Go play! Don’t just stand here; go in!” One of the two guys, seemingly annoyed by Phil’s pushing, replies: “what? Is this a ‘no standing’ zone?” The two young men then walk downstairs. Earl comes up a few minutes later. Phil describes the interaction he had with these two guys, tarnishing the reputation of these two guys with attitude. Attractive patrons who may want to take their time to ease into the sexual activity of this party are put under pressure to get into the action quickly in a way that less attractive patrons are not. Regular participants that do not like the guys with attitude actually act differently toward younger and more attractive men. Trying to encourage these young men to participate in the collective sexual activity, regulars become too pushy, provoking the young men to respond with the dreaded “attitude.”

#### 4.4. *“This is a no attitude party”*

Regular guests and staff members of Alex’s party are people who go, or had been going, to several different sex parties in NYC. At the event and in private interview, they mention other sex parties as the home base for guys with attitude. Friday nights at the Village Loft had become a haven safe from guys with attitude, and regulars want to keep it that way. When he opened the Village Loft, Alex did not have much experience with group sex, and not much of a concept for his party. Because he was accepting any type of men to his party and because guys with attitude tend to go to more selective events, Alex attracted people looking for a “no attitude” space. As they got involved with the space, regulars could enforce the norms of collective intimacy, which is incompatible with “attitude.” As we have seen

above, regulars kept attitude at bay by regulating interaction and applauding exemplary conduct. The few staff members who got close to Alex also could influence him as he made changes to his venue.

Indeed, staff often had nothing to do to prevent attitude because the design of the space would take care of it on its own. The two young men from the previous vignette, for example, had a hard time enjoying their time at the event. After the interaction with Phil, they came back upstairs with a third young man and started playing together in one of the bedrooms. As is typical at the party, as soon as they began, people started gathering around the three young men, trying to join in by touching them. Visibly annoyed by this attention, the three guys got up and moved to the other bedroom, hoping to make it clear that they were not open for others to join. Shortly after, people started crowding around them again and tried to join in. They quickly got up again and tried to go downstairs. After a few repeats of this little scenario, the three young men left the party together, possibly to go to a private home to play without the constant distraction. In this crowded open-air space, it was just impossible to be selective of who would touch you.

Many organizational choices of the venue aimed to favor collective intimacy and discourage “attitude,” and regulars advised Alex in these decisions. By removing the walls separating the bedrooms, Alex favored collective sexuality and made it harder for people to hide from certain people. Requiring complete nudity also contrasts with the parties typically attended by the guys with attitude, which allow underwear. Eventually, the event actually labelled itself as a “no attitude” party. After 15 weeks of observation, Alex added a note to his party invites that read:



Note: This is a no-attitude/no-standing around party, for everyone able to hold their own in large active crowds. Anyone looking for a “jock perfect only party” with self-inflated egos and self-conscious hands over their “pee-pees” should not apply—this event is not for you...

The concept of “no attitude” party—which embodies the value of collective intimacy—took shape between the decisions Alex took to navigate around NYC’s restrictive policies against sex venues and the way in which participants made use of the Village Loft.

### *5. Discussion and comparison with venues 2 and 3*

The organizational features of private sex clubs aim at creating a sense of collective intimacy among people who belong to a sexual subculture. All the clubs I observed accomplished this goal by: favoring large, open spaces to small, private ones; hosting time-restrained events to bring a crowd together at planned intervals; using the privacy or clandestinity of the venue to make people feel like they are part of an “in-the-know” group; using the services of volunteers or hired staff who were part of the sexual subculture of the parties; providing socialization areas; and planning parties around specific concepts so guests shared common sexual preferences.

The three private sex clubs I observed favored large open spaces over small private ones. A contrasting example is the gay bathhouse, which has hundreds of very small private bedrooms where patrons can close themselves off from the others when they are having sex. Private sex club owners do not have complete choice over the layout of their venue because these establishments are not legal; building small bedrooms or cubicles in a private sex club would be a high

investment for a place that could be closed down any moment. Nevertheless, venue organizers actually spend money renovating by opening up space. As witnessed at the Village Loft (Venue 1), Venue 3 also had some walls and doors removed. The room that served as entrance, clothes check, and changing room was closed off from the rest of the venue. After they got naked, guests proceeded into the play area through a door that staff would always make sure remained closed. The first area of the play space had the bar counter, a table with snacks, a sofa to sit down and socialize, and doors to the bathrooms. The bar loosely divided this socialization space from the sex space. The rest of the play space was very large but divided with a few large curtains hung from the ceiling. The curtains and furniture would create smaller areas; their display would change from one night to the next, but the spaces created were always large enough for groups and accessible to anyone. Venue 2—which Patrick designed himself in the way he likes sex clubs—offered some almost-private spaces. One half of the play area of his club was an elaborate maze built with sheets of plywood painted in black. Peepholes on every wall allowed people to look at what was happening on the other sides of the maze. In some of the dead-ends of the maze, participants could hang up a chain to separate themselves from others; a sign read “if the chain is up, you are not invited.” These few nooks allowed people to seclude themselves from the hands and bodies of other people but not from their eyes, so everyone’s sexual activity remained visible to everybody. The rest of the venue was open-air, like at the two other clubs. The three sex clubs thus set the stage for group sex in the open.

All venues organized their events on the same time structure, which aimed to put everyone in the same place at the same time. Parties usually started in the evening and ended in the wee hours of morning, the total duration being six or seven hours. In contrast, venues like bathhouses or public sex environments are open 24/7, which increases the randomness of the people attending, makes social bonds unlikely, and preserves a sense of anonymity. On the contrary, the time structure of private clubs ensures that events are densely crowded at the same time and make it likely that people will keep seeing one another if they go regularly. Because everyone is there looking for sex at the same time, they are more likely to have group activity; because they repeatedly see one another, they are more likely to bond with other participants.

The residential or clandestine nature of private sex clubs also set the stage for a different kind of interaction than in completely commercial venues. Alex's and Patrick's venues were in residential buildings, although their interiors looked very different. The Village Loft still looked like a residence, although it was mostly empty. In contrast, Patrick's basement venue looked like a commercial club: the concrete walls and floor were all painted in black; the toilets and sinks were of a more commercial quality; the maze, peepholes, slings, and cages made it clear that the place's only purpose was to host sex parties. Venue 3, an empty loft space, was in-between the two others. In all cases, however, people had to know where to go to find the venue, and discovering a private sex club behind the inconspicuous door of a residential walk-up building created a sense of exclusivity—that everyone present was “in the know.” The clandestinity prompted questions when people introduced

one another: is it your first time here; how did you learn about this place; what other sex parties do you go to? These interactions connected participants to an underground network of gay cruisers and private parties. Commercial sex venues, because they are visible to the public and because any man interested in sex with men can access them, do not create this sense of exclusivity.

Private sex clubs are almost like grassroots organizations in that they are run by people who are enthusiastic sex-party-goers. The managers were always on site and available to talk about their venues and the parties. Staff members were often also participants, and sometimes they even gave examples of how they wanted the guests to behave. At Alex's venue, staff members would exemplify the "no attitude" behavior, applaud others who did, and corrected those who did not. At Jeff North's parties, guests were greeted at the clothes check by Justin, who usually made a sign saying that he was available throughout the night as a "human urinal." Sometimes, Jeff himself would take his clothes off and lie down in one of the tubs with his guests to have others urinate on him; when that happened, the DJ would take the microphone and announce that the host was in the tub. Private sex clubs thus have ways to "educate" newcomers to the values and practices of their subculture and increase a sense of belonging.

The three venues I observed also encouraged socialization by providing a space for it. At the Village Loft, people socialized around the kitchen area. Venues 2 and 3 had larger socialization space which also had a bar counter with a staff serving drinks and a snacks table. Venue 2 also had a DJ. At every party, loud conversation filled the social space. There was no formal separation between the

socialization and sexual play areas; especially at venues 2 and 3, people often started sexual activity in the middle of people socializing, blurring the boundary between social and sexual activity. Past research observed that talking about personal topics was frowned upon in places of gay cruising (Corzine and Kirby 1977; Delph 1978; Humphreys 1975; Tewksbury 2002; Weinberg and Williams 1975); however, in gay private sex parties, participants talked about who they were, what they did, and so forth. I overheard many conversations about work, college, living conditions, and many things that identified participants. People often came to the space with people they knew and often exchanged contact information with people they met. As described in this chapter, people did not only do small talk, but sometimes had conversations about very personal topics.

The party system of private sex clubs also plays an important part in creating group belonging. No private sex clubs are open to anyone on any night of the week, as is the case with commercial sex venues. To enter a private sex club, you have to be invited to the specific party going on during the evening you want to go. Once a party-goer has found a party that he likes, he will stay updated on that promoter's activities and follow him to his events. The guys who like Alex's "no attitude" party went to the Village Loft almost every Friday; they knew that on any other day of the week they might find a crowd they did not like at the same venue. Therefore, the "no attitude" crowd got together at the same time on Fridays, increasing a sense of familiarity with other participants and of group belonging. Jeff North's event, the college-age watersports party held at Venue 2, was held only once every other month (or six times a year); many guys "booked" those night on their calendar

ahead of time, and a large part of the crowd of 200 men were people who had seen each other there before. The regular crowd at every party helped maintain the practices and values of the subculture and helped create a sense of familiarity among participants that contributed to the collective intimacy.

The organizational features of private sex clubs—which are constrained by policies on commercial sex venues—influence the type of interaction that takes place in them. As I have described in this chapter, the spatial and timely organization of these clubs create physical intimacy among patrons, as well as a sense of group belonging. The next chapter will turn to interviews with sex-party participants to further describe how they experience collective intimacy and how gay cruisers who might prefer other modes of cruising adapt to it.

## CHAPTER 6 – Collective Intimacy in the Lives of Gay Cruisers: In-Depth Interviews with Sex-Party-Goers

### 1. *Introduction*

#### 1.1. *Brian, Evan, and Jason: three types of cruisers*

Now 50 years old, Brian has been cruising since he moved to NYC for college. Throughout his cruising career, he has seen it all: bathhouses, backrooms, sex clubs, parks, toilets, and now private sex parties. Although he goes to a lot of parties, he is not really interested in group sex; it is the desire for anonymous sex that has been driving him to cruising places—the thrill of having sex with strangers. Because he goes to parties regularly, he has gotten to know people in NYC's sex club scene, which, in turn, has made these places less interesting to him. Now, when he gets horny, he travels out of town and goes to sex clubs where no one knows him so he can realize his fantasies of anonymous sex. Brian has been in romantic relationships in the past, but they have usually been separate from his cruising activities. He keeps love at home and anonymous sex outside of it. Although he has had a good sex life with his boyfriends, cruising allows him to fulfill what he calls his more animalistic desires, which cannot be completely satisfied in a long-term relationship. Although he knows some people at the parties, they have not integrated his circle of friends. He does not typically hang out with other cruisers, though he has no problems letting close friends know about his sexual lifestyle. Although he is happy

with his personal and professional life, he feels like cruising may have gotten in the way of his success at work and in relationships. However, he knows the desire for sex with strangers is deeply anchored in him and he would rather not try to resist it completely.

Evan, 28 years old, has been in a committed relationship with another guy his age, since they met in college. After a few years of monogamy, he felt that although he loved his boyfriend very much, they might have been missing out on a lot of sexual fun. As young men in their early twenties, they agreed that they should be able to explore their sexuality in an enjoyable, safe, and positive way. Since then, they have routinely visited sex parties together to experiment with the world of cruising and live sexual adventures. Some of their close gay friends joined them and they met new friends at the parties, gradually forming a small clique of young gay men who get together to go to parties and hang out after to exchange stories. They have been comfortable talking about their sexual experiments to heterosexual and non-cruiser gay friends, who have been inspired by their sex-positive attitude. Evan and his boyfriend only go to sex parties together because cruising is meant to enhance their sexuality as a couple, not grow them apart. To them, a strong relationship is much more important than the sexual pleasures they can get from sex parties. The same goes for their social relations: although they have enjoyed the company of fellow sex-party-goers, their long-time friends, who are not cruisers, matter much more to them. As a matter of fact, they felt that the growing presence of cruisers in their social life might be a sign that they had not focused on other friendships enough, and have decided to cut back on sex parties for a while.



Jason is 27 years old and has been going to sex parties regularly for several years. He goes out to NYC cruisy bars almost every week and to sex parties every month. He rarely misses a chance to attend the sex parties he likes. Whether he heads to a bar or sex club alone or with friends, he will always know people there. In fact, he only goes to the events where he will find people he already knows. Cruise bars and sex clubs have mainly become a social space for him. He spends most of his time there catching up with friends and will only play if someone or something catches his eye, and that is fine with him. His friends are cruisers of different ages, his roommate being one of them, and even his female friends go to sex parties (though not the same ones as him). Several months ago, he started dating a guy he met at a party. They live in different cities and their relationship is very open sexually. They cruise separately when they are apart; when they are together, they may go to sex parties or enjoy time with each other at home. He enjoys his relationship but also derives a lot of sexual and social satisfaction from sex parties. For Jason, cruising culture is a place where he can connect with others and with a community.

Brian, Evan, and Jason represent three different types of cruisers in the way they see cruising in relation to their broader social and intimate lives. Brian represents the impersonal cruiser, the one who keeps his cruising behavior separate from his social and intimate life and sees cruising strictly as a means to quench his sexual needs. Evan represents what I call the recreational cruiser, the one who sees cruising as a pleasurable, though small part of his personal life. The recreational cruiser finds intimate fulfillment in close relationships and friendships but sees

cruising as a fun way to experiment, explore, and have fun. Finally, Jason represents the collective cruiser, the one who sees cruising as an integral part of his intimate and interpersonal life. The collective cruiser's sexual lifestyle is an important part of himself, and he prefers to surround himself with like-minded people.

### *1.2. Shifting types of cruising*

Chapters 1 and 2 showed that the practice of gay cruising has been very different at different times and in different places. Different modes of cruising either separate or blend sexuality, intimacy, or sociability. For example, anonymous cruising, like Humphreys (1975) described it, was about separating sex from intimate or social relations, while cruising at a Leather sex club, like Rubin (1991) observed, was more of a social affair. Chapters 4 and 5 described how the organization of private sex clubs in NYC favored a form of cruising I called collective intimacy. The present chapter gives a more thorough account of the different types of cruising and shows how participants adapted to the norm of collective cruising in private sex parties.

A point repeated throughout this dissertation is that cruising is about different ways of connecting sex, intimacy, and sociability, and this chapter will provide more insights into how this is done. In the first part, I describe the various ways in which cruisers are sociable at sex parties, how the sexual and social activities go together, and how cruisers relate to one another. The second part looks at how sociability among cruisers affects their social relations outside of sex parties, showing the difference between those who keep their sexual lifestyle to themselves and those for whom cruising has pervaded all aspects of their social lives. Finally, I

describe the types of intimate relationships cruisers foster in sex clubs and outside. In each of these parts, I will also show how the characteristics of collective cruising are better suited to the culture of private sex parties.

Private sex parties favor collective cruisers, but impersonal and recreational cruisers frequent them. Impersonal cruisers would rather go to places where they can cruise anonymously (e.g., public places or large gay bathhouses) and recreational cruisers would prefer going to large commercial sex venues that are less communal, but none of these places are readily available in NYC today. This chapter will show how impersonal and recreational cruisers make do with places of collective cruising and show how the current context in NYC thus makes collective intimacy more normative among cruisers.

Data for this chapter are taken from my in-depth interviews with 20 sex-party-goers in NYC. These participants were recruited through different sex clubs and events, some of which I have observed and others not. Although the sample is small, participants show different perspectives because they participate in very different types of events.

Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Age (mean: 39; median: 32)	
20s	8
30s	3
40s	4
50s	4
60s	1
Ethnorace	
White, non-Hispanic	10
Black, non-Hispanic	2
Hispanic/Latino	4
Asian	2
Mixed race	2
HIV serostatus	
HIV-negative	15
HIV-positive	5

Table 4. Interview respondents' characteristics.

## 2. *Sex parties and sociability*

The very notion of a sex party challenges many traditional ideas about sexuality. Most people view sex as an individual or private thing, while parties are a social affair. Sex parties transform sex from a private activity to a social one done in large groups of people who may or may not know each other. Sex becomes something you do among a crowd of friends, acquaintances, and strangers; it loses its deep intimate element and blends with the superficiality of sociability.

Sex-party-goers vary in the degree at which they separate different aspects of sociability and sexuality: some try to keep their cruising an individual affair, while others do it in groups; some separate sexual activity from social interaction, while others enjoy mixing them; some try to maintain boundaries between sex partners

and friends or social acquaintances, while others seek out relations that blend these boundaries. On one end of the spectrum, cruisers go to parties alone and try to maintain the sex completely separate from social interaction, while, at the other end, cruisers seek out events, activities, and relations that completely merge the sexual and the social. Although cruisers at sex parties can be anywhere on the spectrum, current NYC sex parties veer toward sexual sociability and almost train cruisers for it.

### *2.1. Degrees of cruising sociability*

Although past studies on cruising said that it was mostly a practice that men did individually, sex parties transform cruising into something more social. Sex parties are, after all, parties. Take for example Jeff North's party, an event held once every other month and targeted to guys in their twenties. Many young men go to every occurrence of this party, making it likely that friends and acquaintances will also go and making it hard to cruise individually, without being social. Respondents varied in their desire to go to parties with people: some wanted to keep it an individual thing; others wanted to be with a few trusted friends; others would only go to places where they knew people.

#### *2.1.1. Cruising anonymously*

Although sex parties are very social, several cruisers still choose to go to sex parties alone, to go to events where they will not know anyone, and to stay away from conversation. These anonymous cruisers were into impersonal sex, the type that has been described in studies of sex in bathrooms, bathhouses, and public environments (Delph 1978; Humphreys 1975; Tewksbury 2002; Weinberg and

Williams 1975). Two of my respondents were such anonymous cruisers, and although they made do with sex parties, they preferred more impersonal places:

R5 (49 years old): Yeah, personally, I was always into anonymous sex, and when I went to frequent a sex club or a bathhouse, it was because it was gonna be anonymous. I didn't know these people usually, you know? I didn't really get to know them. So it was really anonymous. That was my thing: anonymous sex.

For this respondent, conversation actually killed the sexual fantasy. He preferred going to places where no one knew him and to spaces that prevented social interaction (like glory holes or dark rooms). Because the landscape of cruising places has changed in NYC, he found the city to be a less interesting option for sex. Because he is a regular cruiser, he has gotten to know people in the sex party scene and cannot anonymously go to any of them anymore:

R5 (49 years old): Well, I don't participate in them. . . . The fact that I know people now... It's difficult because I go there and then, I can't just be a drunk anonymous person, you know? I have to actually talk to people and engage. I don't want to engage when I go to that thing; I wanna be, like, in that zone, you know?

I: So you don't necessarily wanna play at sex parties? . . .

R5: No, not for me anymore. Now, if I were to travel, I would certainly visit the bathhouse or, you know, go to whatever was going on in that town because it's all full of anonymous people. I just can't pull it off in New York anymore!

This respondent became involved with sex parties in NYC and helped with the organization of some of them. He made friends with some local sex-party-goers but then only went to parties to help and socialize. He was not opposed to socializing with other cruisers, but social interaction was an obstacle to his sexual fantasies, which were about strictly anonymous sex. Now, when he feels like

cruising, he has to go on a trip outside the city, where he can be anonymous once again.

The other respondent who preferred to cruise anonymously also had a hard time maintaining boundaries with other cruisers. Other sex-party-goers would often ask to see him outside the parties and his answer was also “I didn’t come here for that”:

R20 (49 years old): And what I refer to when [I say], “I didn’t come here for that,” means I go there to fuck. I don’t go there to have conversations, exchange numbers, “how are you,” “where you been,” “tell me your dreams,” none of that nonsense. I go there to fuck, to release, and go home, you know?

Despite his efforts at keeping a boundary between cruising and his intimate and social life, this respondent ended up finding a boyfriend at a sex party. As he was leaving a party, he agreed to share a cab with a man he had sex with that night, and they ended up forming a couple and remained together for five years.

Although it is still possible to cruise anonymously in private sex clubs today, these two examples show that it can be very difficult to avoid all social or intimate connections in these venues.

### *2.1.2. Cruising clandestinely*

Not everyone wants to go to a sex party alone; indeed, many would not dare going to an underground sex club by themselves, especially for the first time. Also, going with a close friend can help mitigate the feeling of stigma that can be associated with going to an underground sex club. This was the case with two respondents who had been going to sex parties together. The first one, who had been going alone for a while, initiated the other:

R3 (28 years old): One day, [my friend] was telling me that he wanted to do something crazy, and I was, like, “what kind of crazy?” And he was telling me how he never did this, he never did that, and I’m like, “okay, cool,” and I said, “I have somewhere to take you for your birthday.” It was his birthday when I first took him to his first sex party. Blew his mind!

For this respondent’s friend, it was important that they could trust one another not to tell other people about their participation in sex parties.

R8 (27 years old): I trust him on that respect. . . . Like, I mean, can’t just go and tell all your friends you go to a sex party! You know? But he’s, like, a good friend. Like, he introduced me to it and I feel like, if he trusts me enough to introduce me to it, to me, he wouldn’t go tell everyone I go to sex parties, you know what I mean? ‘Cause not everyone’s understanding of it; everyone’s easy to judge.

These respondents enjoyed the social interaction at sex parties but they did not want these relations to mesh with their social lives outside of parties. For example, R3 had made friends at sex parties (“I have made friends at sex parties. . . . It’s fun, sometimes, when you walk into a place and, you know, a person recognizes you or likes you”) but was adamant that he would not get into a boyfriend he met at a sex club because it would connect cruising relations with outside relations:

R3 (28 years old): I don’t wanna meet a boyfriend at a sex party because it would not be a good story to tell the kids: “Oh! You know how I met your daddy...?” No!!!

Unlike the anonymous cruisers above, these two enjoyed some sociability at sex clubs; however, they would not let their sex-club friendships mesh with outside ones, except with the ones with very close and trusted friends.

### *2.1.3. Cruising individually*

There are cruisers who need not be anonymous at sex parties and who are not clandestine about their sexual lifestyle, yet, who want to keep cruising as an individual enterprise. One reason is that friends can be an obstacle when you are



pursuing sex. When asked if he would have liked to have friends to go cruising with, a participant responded:

R1 (41 years old): Oh, no! . . . I don't really like going out too often with friends because of the fact that— What if you do meet somebody, then, you know? And what if the friend gets drunk? Then you've gotta babysit him, and you gotta— Then whoever you might possibly meet, you know, you gotta be, like, "oh well, just take my number."

This respondent thought friends could be a burden when cruising. Another respondent did not want to cruise with friends because, even though he was open about his sexual lifestyle with his friends, he was not so comfortable having sex around them.

I: You don't have a lot of friends who do that [go to sex parties] with you?

R13 (31 years old): No, I don't. . . . I've never been to Paddles with somebody I know. I have been to The Eagle and to The Cock with friends and, I won't say it's gotten weird, but there is something about somebody that you don't consider a fuckbuddy watching you get laid in the middle of a bar, you know? It's never made me uncomfortable, but it is... I do feel a lot more comfortable when I'm doing it alone—a lot more uninhibited.

These cruisers let themselves enjoy sociability at sex parties, and they do not need to keep their sexual lifestyle secret from their outside relations. However, sex-party acquaintances are less important to them than friends in the "real world":

R6 (30 years old): I usually go alone. I have gone with a friend a couple times but I usually go alone. And there are people that I know there, or I'm acquainted with either from previous times at the party or from the real world. Generally, they're not friends of mine, just people that I know, you know? And you say hi, and you have superficial conversation, and whatever.

Individual cruisers try to not get too close to other cruisers because they do not want to get to a point where they have a relationship history with too many people at sex parties.

R13 (31 years old): The more parties I went to, the more I realized: I don't wanna see these people elsewhere; I don't want phone numbers; I don't wanna try to hookup with anybody 'cause odds are, the next time I go to a party, I'm gonna see him again, and that's fine with me. I don't need to make friends or anything like that.

As this respondent points out, private sex parties raise the odds that you will encounter people you have met there again. Therefore, you do not need to try to meet someone you liked outside of parties because you will likely have the opportunity to see him again at the parties. One also needs to be careful about who he develops closer ties with because these new relations will be around when he wants to go cruise individually. Because private sex parties create close social networks in the cruising scene, some cruisers choose to be careful about whom they associate with.

#### *2.1.4. Cruising cliquishly*

For some cruisers who have a lot of gay friends, going to sex parties is something they do in groups. The following respondent would always with go to sex parties with his boyfriend and at least two other friends.

R15 (29 years old): Two other friends. . . . We kind of go together. We don't do anything ever with them: we kind of just congregate before, and then usually, after, we all go to a diner and swap stories and eat because we're all starving and we've been starving ourselves the whole day.

For people who cruise in groups, going to a sex club with your clique of friends is just like going to any other social event: being with people you know makes it easier to explore places you have never been to; it makes the first moments more comfortable than being alone in the crowd; and it gives you people to exchange stories with after the event. Going to a party with your friends also makes it easier to meet new people, who may join your social clique:

R15 (29 years old): Like we go to these usually my partner and I, and maybe he'll make a friend, and then that friend ends up showing up at brunch one Sunday. Or—we usually go, it's me and my partner and then one or two of our other close friends—we'll meet beforehand and we'll go and then, you know, they'll make friends or something. It all just kind of circulates around each other.

Although a clique cruiser want to be familiar with the people at the sex parties he goes to, he does not value his sex-party friends as much as friends he has met through other means. As their clique of sex-party friends kept growing, the previous respondent and his boyfriend started thinking that cruising might occupy too much space in their social world:

R14 (28 years old): I know that my boyfriend kind of brought up, like, "is this bad that we know so many people at a sex party?" Like, is that kind of when you have the self-reflection moment, you know? "Maybe we go to this too much!" Funnily enough, it's about the time that we stopped going and kinda took that year off so... So, like, I think we ended up getting to a place where we were like, "I don't think I want these relationships with these people" and "I think if I'm starting to recognize a lot of people, maybe we're going too much."

This type of cruiser wants to be able to go into the world of sex parties when he desires, and to be able to retreat from it when he wants to. When you realize that the people you spend most of your time with are cruisers, it prompts the question whether you are willing to take on "gay cruiser" as a more stable part of your identity. If not, it may be time to back off from sex parties for a while and refocus on other friendships. Some participants do not want to identify themselves as regular sex-party-goers because of the stigma attached with having too many sex partners:

R3 (28 years old): There're times when you—I don't know if you realize it—there are times when you say to yourself you don't wanna go to every sex party because you don't want everybody to say, "oh my god! Last time I was here, he was here. What is he? A regular?"

The cruisers in cliques benefit from the social aspects of sex parties, but only to a certain point. They want to go to parties with friends and want to enjoy sex parties as a social experience; however, they do not want to completely be part of a community of cruisers.

#### 2.1.5. *Cruising in community*

If you put no limits on the number of sex-party-goers you can have in your circle of friends, you can quickly become very connected in the world of sex parties in NYC and beyond, and parties can become a predominantly social affair:

R7 (28 years old): People are social because I've been going for years—I would say about five years now, maybe longer—so I've met a bunch and I'll see, you know, maybe half of my friends every party, so... And I sometimes get friends from out of town who will come in, friends of other people that I know will come in and everything, so, it's like, you know, you spend a lot of the time talking to people, catching up and everything, so it is a social space, yeah.

As you get to know more people, sex parties can become more social than sexual. The previous participant, for example, said he often went to sex parties for sociability (“I just went kind of to be social and to go along for the past year, typically”), and sexual activity was an occasional extra.

Respondents who cruised anonymously feared that socializing with people would make sex parties less sexual and sought places where they did not know anyone. Those who cruise in community may agree that sociability makes sex parties less sexual, but they actually seek that out:

R9 (58 years old): It's social; it's, I would say, 90% social, 10% sexual for me. In fact, sometimes I barely do anything there but maybe jack off with somebody because I am so busy keeping up with the old-timers. I call them the old-timers, but some of them are newer guys. It's a friendly crowd.

Another participant compared sex parties to local coffee shops where people catch up with friends:

R4 (50 years old): So I guess it's kind of like my local coffee shop where I might meet someone for coffee; it's that casual for me. And then we can both be naked and then, like, a hot guy walks by, it's like, "okay, we can talk more later," and then, like, run off.

For this type of cruiser, being able to have sex at a party is only a bonus to the opportunity to hang out socially with friends. Amid their busy lives, it can be difficult for friends to find a moment to get together. Sex parties end up being convenient places to see your friends. Some respondents also mentioned being able to connect with out-of-town friends at larger events. Sex parties provide a place to satisfy both the need for social interaction and for sex.

Contrary to cruisers who think that sex parties are not part of real life, the community cruiser sees his sex-party friends as real friends. Even if the main thing they have in common is sex parties, this does not mean that the relationship is any less significant:

R10 (33 years old): I would definitely call them friends. . . . There're people that I've met there and that I have hung out with outside of the parties as well.

Community cruisers feel like sex is an important part of their life, and they like meeting other people who share that interest. Sex parties are not only a place to have sex, but also a place to socialize with like-minded people:

R18 (27 years old): One thing I like about sex parties is that if I do meet someone there, I know that they relate... That they have an open mind about sexuality and that they... I just really like having friends that I can be sexually intimate with who... Like, it's not that I go to parties looking for dates or anything, but it's nice to surround myself with other people that I know like sex, and that I can talk about it with, and possibly do it with, and not worry that they're going to be—quote, unquote—prudes about things.

When you are open to socializing with other sex-party-goers at sex clubs and outside, you can integrate a network of people who are involved in the culture of sex parties. Even if the friendship takes its sources in cruising, it evolves into other things and groups of sex-party-goers may get together for various non-cruising activities. The following respondent, who was in his sixties, talked about long-term friendships he had with other sex-party-goers. They spend time together outside of parties, travel together, and have even helped each other in their professional lives.

R2 (61 years old): And there's a whole group of us that get together. There's probably about half a dozen of us, and we'll get together. They organize it because I don't have the time, but they'll organize it and 2 or 3 of them are people who give sex parties... who *used* to give sex parties and everybody's in their sixties, you know? . . . So we'll get together [in Greenwich Village] and have dinner together. And one year, last year, I took them all to [city], which is this very nice resort area.

For this type of cruiser, the friendships you make at sex parties are just like those you can make in any activity group, like an amateur sports team:

R11 (59 years old): I've been in two major social groups since I moved to New York: one is the sex party people, and the other is the sports team people—I'm on a sports team—and all my friends come from one or the other of those groups.

Sex parties have definitely become a community space for people who feel part of a sexual subculture of some sort—for example, fetish, BDSM, or Leather. NYC used to have more bars targeted to these groups, but now that there are practically none left, private sex parties have become the place where people who share specialized sexual interests come together. For people who are part of these groups, sex parties fill the void created by the closure of most of the Leather bars in NYC. The social dimension of sex parties definitely outweighs the sexual one:

R12 (52 years old): With the gentrification in New York, there are no Leather bars anymore, except for the Eagle. There used to be the Lure; there used to be Rawhide; there used to be Man's Country; there used to be a whole mess of them back in the day: the Cell Block, TJ's place, the Spike, the Vaults... So there are no Leather spaces anymore . . . so there's no place for somebody to socialize. . . . Yeah, you don't have that, so I think the parties do fulfill a lot of that.

As commercial sex venues and cruisy bars have been closing in NYC, people have been losing not only spaces to have sex, but places to socialize with their sexual communities. Private sex parties thus proliferated to replace not just sex venues, but also places of sociability for sexual communities.

For some participants, sex parties were a place to join a community of people who could rely on each other. This respondent described an evening at a sex party where the promoter had asked people to sing for his birthday.

R4 (50 years old): My 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party was at the GSA [Golden Showers America], which is a sex party for guys that are into watersports. . . . When they sang "Happy Birthday", . . . the harmonizing of all these men who are over 50 was just so beautiful, it almost brought me to tears and I felt like I was being ushered into a brotherhood of men who are over 50, that are still sexually vital, and that, you know... That life after 50, you know, sexually you can still be good and you still have this community of people and this brotherhood that enjoys each other's company and maybe kind of watches out for each other.

This section showed that people come to sex parties with different social needs and desires. Some sex-party-goers want to go to parties alone and do not want to get to know people there or be known to them. Others may go with friends and enjoy some social interaction there but do not want to become part of a community of sex-party-goers or do not want them to integrate their outside social network. Finally, some sex-party-goers seek out social interaction at parties even

more than sex, want to make friends with other cruisers, and are happy to belong to a sexual community.

Sex parties are, by design, better suited for the most social cruisers. As I have described in Chapter 5, in contrast to sex venues that support anonymity, the organization of private sex parties favors repeated encounters and physical and social proximity among participants. Therefore, private sex parties lead those cruisers who are less socially inclined to actually partake in social interaction. The next section looks at the value of social interaction at parties.

## *2.2. The role of sociability at sex parties*

Even cruisers who are not socially inclined often end up socializing at sex parties because social interaction is hard to avoid and because the social area plays an important role in the enjoyment of the sexual activities.

### *2.2.1. Getting into cold water*

As I described in Chapter 5, the play areas of sex parties are heavily focused on sexual activity. Upon entering them, a guest will find himself in close proximity with other naked men who may not ask before touching and groping any area of his body. Many respondents felt like they needed some time at the beginning of events to warm up to sexual activity. Hanging in the social area, talking to people, and drinking alcohol helped them loosen up before walking into the play space:

R10 (33 years old): I tend to ease my way into a party, kinda like slowly getting into cold water. That's kinda how we do it. Usually, depends on chemistry, but I'll look for someone I know. You go right to someone you know, so that you can, you know, get a couple drinks in you and relax, chit chat a little bit. And then, you see someone that you're attracted to...



When he walks into a sex party, this participant needs the safety of the social area and of people he knows so he can relax while getting inebriated. Once he made it into cold water, he becomes sexually forward and is able to behave along the norms of sexual interaction of the space. Compared to cruising spaces that do not have a space for socialization (e.g., bathhouses and public environments), sex parties offer an intermediary space between the outside world and the sexual play area. Many participants take advantage of the socialization area to slowly get into sexual activity, and so learn to mix sexuality and sociability.

### *2.2.2. Sizing up potential partners*

Some cruisers prefer not to know anything about the people they have sex with, but others actually prefer to talk to people before having sex with them:

R1 (41 years old): I mean, sometimes I actually enjoy talking to someone who I find attractive because it gives me a chance to talk and find out if the vibe that I'm getting from them... if I'm correct on the vibe that I'm getting, you know? 'Cause that's the only way I'm gonna really find out, for sure: it's if I actually talk to them.

Some sex-party-goers like to observe the demeanor of a potential sex partner through social interaction to see if they are really attracted to them. Also, conversation can help to communicating what specific acts people prefer—for example, figuring out if someone is the top or the bottom for anal sex or if someone is interested in specific practices (e.g., watersport, footplay, and so forth).

### *2.2.3. A break space*

Sexual activity in the play area goes on uninterrupted through the night and participants usually need to take breaks from it. The social area is a place to rest while talking to other guests or the staff:

R19 (23 years old): I usually go there [social area] just kind of when I want a break and, like, have something to drink and sit down. I do, like, I guess I chat, sort of... hmm... it's more of a break space for me than a conversation space.

Even for regular sex-party-goers, the sexual activity in the play area can be quite intense with the ubiquitous sexual activity and constant unsolicited touching. For participants who do not feel completely comfortable with the norms of sexual activity, the social area represents a “safer” zone of the club, where they can retreat into interaction patterns they are more familiar with:

R15 (29 years old): Yeah, and I like that area, actually. It's a nice, like, reprieve. Almost like a little safe zone, too. Like, you can go there and you can feel less like you're gonna get groped, or attacked, or whatever. Especially if you've, like, been tossed around in the back, you can, like, “okay, I can sit here, have some water, and a pretzel, and, like, rehydrate myself!”

The social area is not only something sex-party-goers enjoy but also, for many, something they need. People need to step out of the intensity of the sexual activity in the play area every now and then: during these breaks, they get to interact socially with fellow sex-party-goers.

#### *2.2.4. Social interaction and sexual pacing*

Many sex-party-goers need to take breaks from the sexual activity because they want to extend their time at the sex party and make the most of their night. Few cruisers shared the perspective of the anonymous cruiser who said: “I want to come; I wanna go home” (R20). Someone's favorite sex party is not held every night—for example, some parties occur only once a month or every other month—and so, when it happens, participants may want to stay as long as they can. For some people, the entry fee—ranging from 20 to 30 dollars—is steep, which also motivates them to extend their stay as much as they can. The social area is a space to rest in-

between rounds of sex and the staff is usually happy to facilitate socialization and make people at ease.

Social interaction also helps sexual pacing. Many sex-party-goers try to delay their first—and sometimes only—orgasm of the night as much as they can because they fear that, after it, they will lose sexual arousal and interest in the event. These participants will have sex until they get close to orgasm, a point at which they stop and go take a social break, and then repeat:

R10 (33 years old): In a longer party, often times guys don't wanna cum right away so you'll play for a little bit, and then you'll stop and take a break and you go back to your friends and relax for a bit, grab another beer, whatever, and then... lather, rinse, repeat, you know?

Other participants will take social breaks to recharge after orgasm until they are ready to have more sex:

R14 (28 years old): I mingle in the beginning . . . and then I'm usually in the zone the rest of the time, yeah. And then, like, once I orgasm and I need a break, I'll go back up front, grab a drink, maybe sit down until I feel, like, "I'm getting horny again; I'm gonna go back out!"

Even if someone says he is going to sex parties mainly for sex and not in order to socialize or make friends, he will often partake in the social interaction. That is because social interaction serves a purpose in the sexual activity: it can help with warming up to sexual activity, getting to know potential partners, giving breaks from sex, and pacing sexual activity. Thus, even the less social cruisers end up partaking in conversations and meeting fellow sex-party-goers.

### *2.3. Negative views on being anti-social*

Casual conversation was so typical at parties that many respondents saw those who stayed away from it in a negative light. Besides the two respondents who

wanted to be anonymous when they cruised and stayed away from conversation, all the respondents partook in the social activity. When they walked into a sex party where people were not socializing as much as they were used to, they felt it was strange:

R6 (30 years old): One of the things I don't like about [name of the party] is that nobody talks to anybody, and if you try and talk to someone, they look at you like you have 14 heads! It's like, "why are you talking to me?" It's anti-social. And it's in [venue], and that back room, I'm always amazed at how quiet it is back there. . . . It just feels odd, like, "are we at the library?"

They also thought there was something disturbing about people who would not talk to anyone. The following respondent thought anonymous cruisers might be uncomfortable with their sexuality and with being at a sex party, and this was somewhat scary to him:

R15 (29 years old): Yeah, if I've met them before, then I'll say hello, for sure. I'm not there to be anonymous and sketchy, like I'll say hello to people if I know who they are. . . . There're, sometimes, there's, like some sketchy people that seem really uncomfortable being there. That's like, like there was this one guy, this last time that I went, that was this big muscular African American guy who kind of just stood by the door and kind of, like, held his hands over his johnson, like, looked around nervously, and it was like, it felt like he was on the DL kind of thing and not really comfortable with what he was doing there and that freaks me out, that makes me uncomfortable.

He thought people who do not talk might also be people who are not out with their homosexuality, which he found disturbing. Another explanation for being anti-social was drug use. People who "party and play" (who get high on hard drugs for extended sex sessions) tend to be much less social than others:

R2 (61 years old): Sometimes you want to be able to also socialize with them, but sometimes they're looking to get fucked by the next guy, then... [chuckle]. . . . I would like to [socialize], but some of them, I'm guessing, if they're partying, they just wanna get fucked by as many guys as they can.

Some participants also associate impersonal sex with inexperience and young age. As you keep going to sex parties, they believe people can grow up from a strict focus on sex and learn to integrate sociability with sexual activity:

R10 (33 years old): I just enjoy that casual [social] environment much more than that intense focused “I’m here to fuck.” Like, I feel like I’ve outgrown that, for the most part. . . . When I first started going to the parties, I used to be more focused, and I would just... I was just a horny little boy. I think—to me—I think it’s an age thing more than anything else. I relax and I enjoy just hanging out and letting things take their course a little more.

Like the respondent above, some participants began going to sex parties with a strict focus on sex but encountered a social environment and, if they were open to it, developed an appreciation of sexual sociability.

Regular sex-party-goers have a negative view of people who do not want to socialize at parties. They may think that cruisers who refuse to socialize are closeted gay men, are drug users, or are too novice to have understood the pleasure of sexual sociability.

#### *2.4. Friendships and sex*

As you become sociable at sex parties and start making friends, questions arise about the nature of that relationship. Traditional friendships are not sexual, and participants broke that convention in different degrees and with varying levels of comfort. Some respondents tried to maintain clear boundaries between their social acquaintances and their sex partners, others looked for relations that blended the social and the sexual, and several were at different places in-between. Although the idea of being freely sexual with friends was still radical to many respondents, most had some form of sexual intimacy with friends.

### 2.4.1. *Maintaining boundaries*

Some cruisers lose sexual interest in people they socialize with. They may have had sex when they first met at a sex party, but after they became friends, the relation became platonic:

R9 (58 years old): Once I've become chummy with them, there's no sex. There're also other people that I know from other places: there's a couple of guys that go to the Eagle a lot that I see there [at the sex party]. So now, we're chummy; not interested in them sexually at all. It's just that I know them from other walks of life.

If you stop having sex with people you start socializing with, sex parties will become less sexual as they become more social. This respondent, who previously said that he found parties to be ten percent sexual, would agree with anonymous cruisers who thought that sociability got in the way of sex:

I: You said it's 90% social, . . . do you feel like the social gets in the way—

R9 (58 years old): Yes, it does! It does; true!

I: —of the sex?

R9: Yes: people wanna talk about theater, or they wanna talk about their retirement plans, or they wanna talk about what book they read, or where they travelled, and trips to Europe, or whatever, and then, of course, it gets in the way of the sex thing.

The more sex-party-goers get to know each other beyond their shared interest in cruising, the more social interaction becomes about topics completely unrelated to sex. For respondents like this one, when sex-party friendships move into nonsexual dimensions, the sexual interest also diminishes.

For cruisers who decide to go to sex parties with outside friends, the question goes the other way: does a friendship that was primarily nonsexual become sexual? Many respondents found it awkward to expose their sexuality to

their friends at sex parties, like R13, quoted earlier, who preferred to cruise individually for that reason. Other respondents mentioned it had been troubling, for example, to stumble upon good friends having sex and realize that they were sexually attracted to them. Other respondents preferred to maintain some friendships as platonic because they thought sex could ruin the friendship:

R16 (27 years old): There's another one who is really cute, but he's been trying to, you know, hookup with me, but he... we've already talked about it and I wouldn't wanna turn it into that, do you know what I mean? Because I really like him more... . . . I rather have him as really good friends.

#### 2.4.2. *Sexual proximity*

When you go to sex parties with friends, you can hardly avoid having sex in the co-presence of each other. As described in Chapter 4, private sex clubs usually make large, open spaces for sex and have no places where people can hide from others. If you are uncomfortable seeing your friends engaged in sexual activity, the only option might be to leave, like in R14's story above. Most respondents said they became comfortable with having sex around their friends; some of them even enjoyed it. For one, it gives great material to talk and laugh about:

R16 (27 years old): But also a good friend of mine who's a really big freak, he likes watching his friends fuck or getting fucked, do you know what I mean? So he's always, like, he's kind of my buddy, my partner in crime. We share very similar interests. . . . It's funny because we'll look back [at a night at a sex party] and we'll laugh about it!

For the next respondent, seeing your friend having sex has become casual; however, watching them may be crossing another boundary:

R6 (30 years old): [Talking about a friend.] We've gone to parties together. We've never had sex or anything together, but, I mean, we've, like, had our dicks sucked in a circle but we've never done anything to each other. I've, like, watched him fuck people and I'm sure— Not like *watched*, but I've *seen*

him fuck people at parties and I'm sure he's seen me do stuff at parties, but we've never done anything together.

Even if participants want to maintain clear boundaries between friends and sexual activity, sex parties make it likely that they will run into their friends having sex, forcing them to share a dimension of intimacy that most friends typically do not share. They may end up sharing some erotic pleasure, even if only visual. For example, R9, who, above, said he was not turned on by people he was acquainted to, occasionally found himself getting off by watching an acquaintance doing something:

R9 (58 years old): No, it's not black and white at all: there are blurred areas. Yeah, definitely; sometimes a lot of it. What's there is visual for me, you know, and watching some guy get off on somebody else: that excites me, you know? Well, that's true with anyone, yeah, that's almost like porn except it's live and you're looking at in flesh instead of on some screen somewhere and that keeps me interested.

The first time you stumble upon your friends having sex at a party is awkward, but, in time, people seem to get more comfortable with it and even up to the possibility of enjoying the sight. A few respondents mentioned that they initially found it weird to see their friends having sex but eventually opened up to the idea. Sex parties led participants to begin breaking down the boundaries that typically separate friendship from sexuality. They developed a closeness with each other sexualities through having sex in the presence of one another.

Other respondents took it one step further, being comfortable with mild sexual play with their friends:

R10 (33 years old): Not very seriously, like, I don't get into hardcore stuff with them, but, like, they'll piss on me and I'll piss on them, you know? . . . It's not heavy sexual play. It's not hugely intimate, which might make the difference, I guess. Like, I can care less if one of my friends came up and



pissed on me. I'd be, like, "Ha! Yay! You're pissing on me!" I'm not gonna get hard from it, but I don't care, you know, I don't care if he does it. Whereas if someone came up to try to suck my dick, I'd be like, "uh, what are you doing?" It might be a little weird.

Respondents had different degrees of comfort about that they could do with friends. For the respondent above, urination play was acceptable but fellatio would cross a boundary he preferred to maintain with friends. Most respondents were in a similar intermediary area where they were comfortable with sexual proximity or mild sexual play with their friends. A few respondents were at the point where they were perfectly comfortable with having casual sex with friends.

#### *2.4.3. Sexual friendships*

Some participants were at ease taking their friendships wherever they felt:

R19 (23 years old): I wouldn't say that because we know each other, that we wouldn't do anything sexual. It's like: if it's a sexual interest, we'll do something sexual; if there's a social interest, we'll do something social; if it's both, we do both.

This respondent was comfortable letting a friendly relation become sexual.

Others would actually seek out friendships with people they could have sex with. A sexual friendship had the potential for great sexual satisfaction:

R18 (27 years old): I just like having friends that I can... that will try to learn what I like. Like, that I can actually talk about the things with; . . . talk about what I like, and not just do the old routine because that's what we're supposed to do. . . . Like, "can you not suck my dick that fast 'cause that's not fun for me?" And then they'll get it, and then they'll fix it, and it's great! . . . It would be nice if I could get all my sex friends in one room, like, "let's have at it!"

For this respondent, the closeness of a sexual friendship would actually enable a better understanding of each other's desires. Having a good friend you can

have sex with might be more pleasurable than doing it with a stranger, maybe even more than in a monogamous relationship:

R18 (27 years old): For me, it kind of comes naturally, but I think it's also because I'm... because I'm not so much a relationship person. It's kind of just the way that I developed. Like, I've had relationships, and to this point they've all been monogamous, but I don't know if that's what I'd do, going forward. But having sexual relationships with people that I'm attracted to just seems like a very natural thing. I don't really like suppressing attraction to people, especially if they reciprocate it. I just think it's better to do it with a friend than a stranger—I guess that's what I'd say.

Compared to participants who liked going to sex parties to find an almost endless supply of sex partners they did not know, this person looked forward to making more and more sex friends, and ideally, a sex party would be with a group of people he knew.

Some respondents had been able to sustain close friendships with a sexual component that began at sex parties:

R11 (59 years old): Two of my oldest friends in the city—whom I've known for more than 20 years, 25 years—I met at [name of sex party]. . . . I go over to their place. They have a nice place; everybody's naked all the time. We play sometimes with each other, sometimes we don't, you know, it's fairly relaxed. If it happens, it happens; if it doesn't happen, nobody's bent out of shape. That's one reason why we're still friend after all these years: nobody's worried about anything—we're so relaxed with each other.

For this respondent, sex was a great way to express your love to your friends:

R11 (59 years old): I like to have sex with my friends because I think it's a very creative way... a very nice way of expressing extreme friendship. And if I had a lover, what would a lover be but my best friend?

Sex friends become people you can go to cruising venues with and fall back on if nothing interesting is happening:

R4 (50 years old): [Talking about a friend.] We had, like, an affair maybe when we met. I wouldn't say we have really dated, but, you know, sometimes we hookup, even now. Or, like, if we're at party and nothing's going on, we'll

get something started together. . . . Or, you know, when we were in [foreign country] together, we... my boyfriend was having an affair with someone and they went off and did their thing. And [friend] and I went out to, like, all the sex clubs or pretty much the bars, and the bars would have backrooms.

Other respondents also mentioned friends met in sex venues made good travel companions with whom they could explore cruising places in other cities or countries. For example, R2 had a boyfriend and a regular “fuckbuddy” who also had a boyfriend. When the respondent and his buddy traveled together, it was all about cruising:

R2 (61 years old): We know that, if we go on a trip, neither of us is gonna wake the other one up and say “let’s go to a museum!” What we’re gonna do is we’re gonna go fuck all night, and sleep all day, and we’re not gonna feel guilty about being in another country and not exploring their arts, you know?

Although R2 and his fuckbuddy mostly got together for leisurely sex, their relationship also had some form of commitment:

R2 (61 years old): All I know is... I’ve had this discussion with [name]—you know, who is not my partner; he’s kind of a fuckbuddy, right?—and we both just decided that we’re gonna grow old together. As far as we know, until we can’t do it anymore, we’ll always have sex with each other, you know? That... yeah, it was kind of like “yeah, let’s grow old together!” you know?

Respondents like the ones above had been able to find close friends at sex parties with whom they shared sexual closeness, intimacy, and caring for each other as they aged.

Many cruisers came to sex parties with the traditional notion that you should not have sex with people you are socially acquainted with, or even have sex around them. However, because sex parties encourage sociability, it is difficult to have sex away from your friends and acquaintances in these venues. Participants thus have to lower the boundaries that exist between social and sexual acquaintances and

become more comfortable with sexual sociability. A first level of sexual friendship is when you become comfortable being naked, seeing each other have sex, and maybe even enjoy watching your friends having sex. Other participants take their friendships to the next level where they are completely comfortable having sex with them. These cruisers may have several people in their circle of friends with whom they may have sex casually at parties or elsewhere.

As we can see, sex-party-goers vary a lot in what they think of the social aspects of private sex parties. Some want to have nothing to do with it: they do not want to talk to people and do not want to be connected to other party-goers; they only cruise for anonymous sex. Others are fully connected to the people there: they go to catch up with friends, feel like they belong to the group, and enjoy conversation as least as much as the sex. In between, people range on a spectrum of perspectives: some enjoy conversation, but only as a complement to sex; they like the people but do not really care about them; they are comfortable knowing people but do not consider these groups as their community; or do not want to fully associate with them. The social nature of private sex parties, however, does lead people to form some social ties beyond staying anonymous. The way they view sociability at sex parties is often connected to what they are willing to reveal to their outside relations about sex parties. For example, a respondent said he did not want to date someone he met at a sex party because he would not want to tell people outside where they met. Or, people do not want to have too many sex-party friends because they do not want their whole social world to revolve around them. The next section of this chapter looks at respondents' social lives outside of sex parties.

### 3. *Relations outside sex parties*

Although many sex-party-goers consider sex parties separate from the real world or real life—as a respondent quoted above did—such a separation can be hard to maintain. As you begin socializing with people at sex parties, you become increasingly likely to run into other sex-party-goers in social events unrelated to parties, and your social network can become composed of other cruisers. If cruising becomes an important part of your personal life, then you must also decide what to disclose about it and to whom. Sociability with cruisers requires sex-party-goers to reconsider the traditional boundaries between private sexual life and public social life.

Attitudes about cruising in the general population—or a participant's perception of them—informs the level of disclosure he will feel comfortable with. The more you think friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, dates, or other gay men view things like sex parties in a negative light, the more likely you are to want to remain private about attending them. Fear of sexual negativity is even worse because sex clubs in NYC are clandestine businesses.

In contrast to the perceived sex-negativity in a participant's environment, sex parties allow him to connect socially with people who share his appreciation of group sex. As I described in the first section of this chapter, sex parties lead people to interact socially with fellow sex-party-goers, with the possibility of developing enduring friendships that provide different aspects of intimacy and feelings of belonging. Whether a participant perceives negative attitudes about cruising in his

social environment or not, the cruising community is a space where cruisers can feel normal about their sexual lifestyles.

As I will describe below, respondents have different perceptions of stigma about cruising and different strategies to deal with them. Some prefer to keep their sexuality completely private, others will carefully select who they share this aspect of their life with, some will prefer to surround themselves only with people who share their lifestyle, and a few decide to go public about it. Private sex parties make the cruising community easily accessible to sex-party-goers, more than other venues that are less social. Because the cruising community is easily accessible, and because it provides safety, comfort, and pleasure, NYC sex-party-goers may be more likely to make the move to integrate the social and the sexual.

### *3.1. Degrees of disclosure*

Sex-party-goers have to decide which non-cruisers in their social environment they will disclose their experiences to. People who are unfamiliar with cruising may react with shock and judgement, or with curiosity and excitement. Respondents had different levels of comfort with the matter, from being very afraid of people's judgement to enjoying shocking people.

#### *3.1.1. "My sex life is my little sanctuary"*

In fear of being judged for your sexual practices, one strategy is to remain absolutely private about your sexuality with everyone in your social circle:

R17 (49 years old): I don't talk these things with any of my friends. . . . So I don't discuss my sex life with anybody. It's like my little sanctuary, I guess, where I can do whatever I want, whatever I feel, and I don't want anybody judging or even thinking that I should or should not do that.

Although this respondent was out as gay to his family and straight friends, he did not want to open the door to talking about his sexuality. In NYC, he mostly hung out with other gay men, but he also did not share any details about his sexual practices for fear of receiving unsolicited advice: “I don’t really wanna take that chance. I don’t even wanna hear someone giving me advice.” Because he was going to sex parties where people have bareback sex and often consume drugs, R17 was particularly careful about disclosing details about his behavior because he did not want friends to say their opinion about his behavior. He set a tacit ‘don’t ask; don’t tell’ rule by never asking or disclosing information about any sexual encounter, even dates. For this respondent, the world of sex parties was a place where he could let loose, but he did not want to bring any of it home because he thought it would jeopardize his relationships there.

### 3.1.2. *“You have to admit, it is a little taboo”*

The cruisers who cruised clandestinely were, as we may expect, very selective in whom they would disclose to. R8, quoted earlier, only went to parties with a friend he trusted to remain discreet because, as he put it, “not everyone’s understanding of it; everyone’s easy to judge.” Although they were out as gay to their families and close friends, they did not feel like these people completely understood or approved of their homosexuality. R8 felt like telling he went to sex parties would bring the issue to a whole other level:

R8 (27 years old): I mean, I can’t go tell my brother I go to sex parties, that wouldn’t work, my brother would be like, “you need help!”

I: And your friends, too?

R8: Oh yeah, there are a couple that I tell, not a lot. . . . I know where they stand on certain things, you know, like I couldn't tell my brother: he's military, like, he has different values. I don't think he would understand.

Similarly to R17 above, R8 felt like people around him may give him unsolicited advice about his sexuality, like telling him he needs to seek professional help. He also feared that gay people might hold judgement: "You have to admit, too, it's a little taboo!" This respondent did not believe there was anything wrong with going to a sex party, but he felt like it was appropriate to remain private about your sexual lifestyle. Although he thought that most people would be curious about trying a sex party, he also thought it is very normal to prefer to not talk about it.

Guys who cruise clandestinely usually do so because they fear what people outside sex clubs would think about them going to sex parties. Although they like to share about their sexual lifestyle with people, they are very careful about whom they disclose information to. They avoid the company of fellow cruisers who are more open about their adventures to outside relations because they could expose them.

### *3.1.3. "I tailor it to what I think the person wants to hear"*

Many respondents evaluate how different people in their environment would react to sex parties and decide what to disclose and what not to accordingly:

I: So you're pretty open about your sex life?

R19 (23 years old): Yeah, I mean, I tailor to what I think the person wants to hear, like, if they don't wanna hear it, then I don't tell them. . . . I understand why it would make people uncomfortable.



Such respondents appreciate the company of people to whom they can talk about their sexual adventures, but they understand why some people might not want to hear about them and respect that attitude.

Participants of this type do not simply tell their gay friends about sex parties and remain discreet with straight ones; among their gay friends, there are those who are comfortable with cruising and those who are not:

R13 (31 years old): They're gay friends that are long-term relationship oriented and, you know, wanna have the two and half dogs and a couple kids—that sort of shit. So I just don't bring it up around them. I know, even from some of the conversations we have, that there are certain things that I can't talk about with them. And they're good friends of mine. I would never judge them for feeling the way they do. . . . So I just don't bring it up around them. I don't really... It's sort of like a dual personality kinda thing, and I have some friends who see both sides of it, and I have some friends who only see one of the other.

Cruisers of this type split their social worlds in two and end up feeling like two different persons depending on the context. Although they appreciate the company of their non-cruiser friends, having to constantly be careful about what they say and not say makes their relationship with them less close than with their cruiser friends.

Some respondents liked to talk about sex parties to non-cruiser acquaintances but were careful not to make anyone uncomfortable: “we try not to push anything on them that would make them uncomfortable” (R15, 29 years old). In such cases, respondents seem to feel like tradition trumps difference: the role belongs to the person with the unusual lifestyle to respect the values of the traditional one. These respondents will not be completely “out” about their sexual lifestyles because they care about and respect their more traditional non-cruiser

friends. They also do not fully integrate cruising communities because this could require them to disclose their lifestyle to more people.

3.1.4. *“I could never be friends with people who would clutch their pearls”*

Many participants chose to not be around people with whom they would have to watch what they say and did not enjoy the company of people holding more traditional sexual values. Being open about your sexual lifestyle did not necessarily mean surrounding yourself with other sex-party-goers. Some respondents preferred to be direct about their sexual lifestyle because, if the person would be uncomfortable, they probably would not get along anyway:

R19 (23 years old): I guess that I generally don’t make friends with people that I think are close-minded—and I would find someone who, like, really rejected that to be close-minded. So, I guess we probably wouldn’t just get along for other reasons if they didn’t want to hear about it.

Some of these respondents also liked to tell about their sexual lifestyle to their non-cruiser friends to open up their horizons:

R14 (28 years old): Yeah, and in fact, with a lot of our friends, we’ve been open with about, like, kind of being open. . . . We’ve actually had a lot of support from our friends around it. . . . Like, even our group of straight friends were very much, like, “you and [partner] just have the most beautiful relationship,” like, “you’re so open, you’re so honest, you’re so willing to kinda take those, like, go out there, and experience sex, and do it in a really adult way, and yet still love each other, and be intimate and still sweet.” . . . So it’s good to hear.

Respondent like this one, instead of trying to not disturb people who may have more traditional values, tried to make their part in changing people’s attitudes by talking about the positive aspects of sexual adventurousness.

Respondents can also use their cruising stories to fit in with straight men during locker room banter:

R9 (58 years old): Even my straight colleagues: I used to come in, in the morning, I said, “did you get any last night?” They said, “No, did you?” I said, “no, somebody came in my right hand.” And they’d be “Ha! Ha! [Name or R]!” You know? [Laughter] ‘Cause they haven’t had sex with their wives in three weeks or whatever, they’re, “good for you!” [Laughter.]

A few respondents enjoyed being blunt about their sex party adventures, either for shock value or to make people envy their sexual exploits. Straight male friends, for example, were often envious of the cruiser’s lifestyle and wished there were equivalent venues for heterosexual men and women. These respondents wanted to be able to talk about sex parties without censoring themselves and would have made no apologies if they offended someone:

R6 (30 years old): I could never be friends with someone who would clutch their pearls if I said, “hey! I got fucked last night at a party,” or “hey, I fucked this guy last night, it was hot!” Like, you know, I can’t have people... I wouldn’t wanna have someone in my close knit people that would freak out about that. ‘Cause I’m opened about that kind of stuff.

### 3.1.5. *“A comfortable bubble of gay men”*

Some cruisers have chosen to surround themselves with only gay men as a way to avoid being judged for their lifestyles. Not every gay man is tolerant of cruising—something I will expand on later—but these respondents found acceptance in groups of gay men. The following respondent felt comfortable in his clique of gay men who were about the same age, even if most of them were not into sex parties:

R10 (33 years old): I pretty much exclusively hang out with gay men. I don’t have any straight friends; I don’t have any female friends. I did in college: all my friends in college were girls. But now, since moving to New York, I’ve surrounded myself in this comfortable bubble of gay men... And it’s so comfortable!

Even though most of his friends would not go to sex parties, he found tolerance in his group of gay men. Feeling accepted by your friends for being a sex-party-goer becomes very important if sex parties occupy a large part of your lifestyle. This respondent, for example, started getting involved in the organization of parties. When a participant begins getting involved at another degree with sex parties, there really is no more place for people judging him in his personal life:

R10: The way I look at it, if someone is gonna judge me for hosting a party, then it's not someone I wanna spend any time with because I certainly wouldn't judge anybody else for doing what they wanted to do, and I mean, it's a huge part of my life.

Even in gay groups that were not related to cruising, some participants found acceptance. R11, whose social life revolved around sex parties and gay sports leagues, was able to be fully open about his sexual lifestyle in his sports groups:

R11 (59 years old): They all know. They all know I do this kind of stuff because everybody on the team knows since I've been on a team for 18 years. . . . Well, they all know I'm kinky, they all know I get pissed on and I like it!

This respondent thought that social interaction in gay groups often revolves around sex, so even in a sports team that had nothing to do with cruising, he found a space to talk about his sexual lifestyle.

At the next level, some respondents preferred to associate only with people who had at least some experience with cruising or sex parties:

I: So you have a lot of friends that you go to parties with. Do you still spend time with people who don't go to parties?

R7 (28 years old): Yeah, of course. I have friends, of course, that are girls—that are not welcome to most of these. I have a friend that... he's not really cool with... he's not really into sex parties. He'll go once every now and then if myself or someone else can persuade him, but he wouldn't otherwise I see him. Yeah, I have other friends like that who don't go, yeah. . . . Well my one

friend who's a girl, actually, she goes to another party that's at that space that's for mixed-gender party: the Spam party.

In the case of this respondent, people who did not go to parties were people who only went every now and then or who frequented other parties than the ones he attended; everyone he spent time with had at least experienced a sex party. Surrounding themselves only with open-minded gay men or with cruisers was a way for participants to feel comfortable talking about their sexual lifestyle.

### *3.1.6. Connecting work and sexual openness*

The next level is to let your sexual lifestyle pervade the work part of your life. Although some of the respondents above were open about their sexual practices with coworkers, they were not in jobs related to sex. The respondents below were in occupations where talking about sex or cruising were commonplace—for example, working in nightclubs, in sex shops, being a sex performer, or of course, running a sex club.

Even if it is not within the gay scene, the nightlife world, in general, is welcoming of, even looking for people who have experience with marginal lifestyles:

R12 (52 years old): Working in the club scene in the East Village and Lower East Side, certainly like... all the little Goth chicks know that I'm into fetish stuff, you know? I don't feel any discomfort talking about the more graphic things because they're asking me about it! Where to get a collar like that for their strange little boyfriend, you know? [Laughter.]

Being part of a sexual subculture actually helped this respondent land the job he currently has. The alternative bar scene of NYC's Lower East Side—different from the more mainstream scene of the West Side—attracts people with subcultural flair. That he could actually talk about fetish-related topics with the clientele was a plus.

Thus, this respondent could be open about his sexual lifestyle all the time, at home and at work.

When your sexual lifestyle integrates the sphere of work, you are forced to reconsider the traditional separations of public and private life around sexuality. For example, if you work in the gay nightlife scene, your sexual lifestyle will likely crossover with your work. Working in a popular gay nightclub, the next respondent often ran into people he had encountered at the sex parties. Although, at first, he felt exposed, he turned the situation to his advantage:

R16 (27 years old): I don't even care anymore, really; it's like a joke. It's come to the point that I really don't give two shits anymore. I used to be very, like, "oh my god! I can't believe that guy from the parties is here." I don't care. And sometimes, guys who I've done it with, they go to the club or whatever, "hey! How are you? It's been a while! Cool! Let's go downstairs! Okay!" So we just do something quick and it's like, whatever, do you know what I mean?

Respondents like this one have a social life where they can be cruisers one hundred percent of the time. His public life revolved around spaces where he was surrounded by fellow gay cruisers, like sex clubs, nightclubs, and gay-populated gyms. However, although all of R16's social and work life revolved around gay nightlife and cruising, he carefully prevented this gay sexual culture from entering the private space of his home:

R16 (27 years old): One thing, though, is I try to keep straight people there [as roommates at his apartment] only because I don't want them mixing in my world. . . . Because I know what's gonna happen [if I have gay roommates]: it's gonna turn out like a sex place, do you know what I mean? And I'm trying to separate... I'm already working with a lot of... That's the scene that I'm in and I can't be bringing that home. My apartment is very quiet; it's very calm. I try to balance things to keep myself sane, and I like to see different perspectives. I can't be around the same people all the time, do you know what I mean?

So R16 had accomplished a complete reversal from the traditional separation of sex in public and private life. Sex was what he did in his public life, and the private space of his home was where he can retreat from it—he did not even bring guys home to his place. For people who regularly go to sex parties or get involved with them, sexuality often becomes more a dimension of public life than of the private sphere of the home.

### *3.1.7. Going public*

As cruising became part of their public life, some respondents became comfortable talking publicly about their sexual lifestyle, either writing in blogs, in other media, or at community events.

R1 writes about his sexual adventures on a blog, so he cannot hide anything about his sexual lifestyle. While being open about their sexual lifestyle—even if only within your circle of friends—a lot of respondents notice that their non-cruiser friends live vicariously through their stories:

R1 (41 years old): Well, all my closest friends, they read my blog anyway so, whatever I might not have said on the blog, after they read it, I'll say in our regular conversation. They get all the 4-1-1 on what I left out from the blog, which is very little, but still. . . . Even my mother knows what a sex party is. . . . I mean, I don't give her details or anything like that, but yeah.

Telling parents or family about your sexual lifestyle is on the extreme end of the spectrum of disclosure. Most participants, when I asked them whom they were comfortable telling about sex parties to, mentioned that they would never tell their parents and family. Only two respondents stated that relatives were familiar with their sexual lifestyle. R4 found that family members were actually curious and titillated by it. But being public about your sexual lifestyle changes your reputation

and can make it hard to develop friendships and close relationships with people who are uncomfortable with the publicness of cruising:

R4 (50 years old): And that's the reason I broke up with my first boyfriend: I ended up telling my mother that I ran sex parties, 'cause I felt like, "I'm not ashamed that I run sex parties."

Being too open about his involvement with sex parties made his boyfriend uncomfortable and ended the relationship. Being very open about your adventurous sexual lifestyle is difficult in a culture that is still very sex-negative. Although you can find comfort by surrounding yourself with other sex-party-goers or people who are tolerant of your lifestyle, when you go public, negative attitudes about cruising will get back to you. People may not only judge what you do in your sexual life, they may be weirded out by the publicness of your sexuality:

R4: So I think they might view people like that differently. In a way that, like, you know, that you're always aligned with sex, you're always about sex; and that's not true.

When your sexual lifestyle is public, people may assume that every dimension of your life is about sex. However, as we have seen above, some of the more public cruisers end up divorcing sex from their private life at home. They find balance by having more sex in public and less in private.

### *3.2. Judging cruising in the gay world*

Choosing where you want to be on the scale of disclosure described above is largely informed by your experience of stigma or your perception of attitudes toward sex parties in different populations. Respondents perceived a variety of negative attitudes toward cruising that can influence them to seek the company of



people they know do not hold them. Many of these negative opinions came from within the gay world.

### 3.2.1. *Abnormal sexuality*

As mentioned by R4 above, many people think that people who go to sex parties or who are involved in their organization are obsessed with sex. Two of the sex party organizers interviewed in this study had been portrayed in the media as obsessed with sex. As knowledge about sexual compulsion or addiction has become more commonplace, cruisers sometimes have to answer to accusations of being sex addicts, or to ask themselves the question.

Two respondents expressed struggling with some form of sex addiction or compulsion and felt their sexuality was somehow abnormal. They felt there was something wrong with their sexuality because it was not like most people's, for example, in terms of number of partners:

R5 (49 years old): If it wasn't for a certain degree of sex addiction, I'd probably have more success in my career and maybe had had more interpersonal relationships develop; more relationships, maybe boyfriends, that kind of stuff. I'm sure that the sex addiction was... and I'm using that term... I don't know if I'm clinically a sex addict, but I just know that—just by the sheer numbers—I'm obviously not normal.

For this respondent, the number of sex partners he had, which he assumed was much higher than average, meant that he was not normal and probably a sex addict. The other respondent felt he was a sex addict because his behavior went against mainstream cultural norms:

R20 (49 years old): Proud sex addict, yeah, . . . I no longer contest if I'm a sexually compulsive or a sex addict because I know. . . . Like today, today, today, I was [tells about cruising in a public park], but who does that? Only a sexually compulsive person does that. You know what I'm saying? Like a normal person does not do that. They'd be aghast: "you did what? You stuck

your dick out and this stranger sucked on it? In the middle of the park? In the middle of the day? Are you insane? Are you...? That's crazy!" You know? And I'm like, "that's nothing: I didn't fuck him! I didn't turn him around and..."

Although this respondent felt like being a sexual compulsive was not fundamentally wrong, it was abnormal. The cultural abnormality of their behavior made these respondents feel like their sexuality was inherently problematic or a psychological disorder. Although most respondents did not express that their sexuality was problematic, these two show how breaking cultural sexual norms lead them to feel psychologically abnormal.

### *3.2.2. The gay double standard*

A lot of the negative views on cruising come, as respondents explained, from the gay world itself. A few respondents thought their sexual behavior could make them fall on both sides of the sexual double standard. Being sexually adventurous and promiscuous could both earn them the positive label of "stud" and the negative label of "slut" by different sections of the gay community. They could feel both sides within the gay club scene:

R16 (27 years old): Most people, when they know that I go to these parties or do all this stuff: I'm a slut. You know what I mean? For some people, it's a good thing. But some people say no! "No, no, no!" We just live in a very judgmental society.

This respondent thought gay sexual culture was oxymoronic in that it encourages the things that it will reprimand. Gay men are expected to treat one another as sexual objects, but they are also judged for doing so. You are expected to put forward your sexual assets but labeled a slut if you use them too much. If you are out about your sex-party-going, people may also assume you are a sex or drug addict:

R16 (27 years old): Yeah, sex parties! A lot of guys will associate sex parties with drugs and booze and people who fuck bareback. . . . Seriously once some of these guys found out that I go to sex parties, they thought that I party, that I'm snorting it up, and taking E, this and that and, as soon as they found out!

Some participants had a hard time navigating gay bars and nightclubs.

Although many people go to gay bars to find sex partners, being too obvious about it could earn someone the label of "slut." Sex-party-goers did not do as well in gay bars because the norms were so different from sex parties.

R6 (30 years old): I don't think it's especially easy to meet somebody in a bar. I think it's even harder, maybe, because everyone is there with their friends and everyone is trying to look cuter than everybody else, and nobody wants to talk to anybody!

Sex-party-goers, who are used to being direct in their approach at sex parties, found the norms of interaction at gay bars to be crippling. What was even more frustrating to cruisers was that gay bars used the language of cruising to attract customers, even though they had nothing to offer in terms of sexual activity:

R9 (58 years old): I mean, many people don't go to bars to cruise at all. . . . And I went to that place on 10th Avenue. I don't think anybody was cruising at that Hardware; totally uncruisy. I've been there, they even have, what? "Cruisy Singles Night" on Tuesdays or something. I went there: I ain't seen anybody... They're not cruising each other. . . . They're not really cruising. They're hanging out, it's a social thing.

The gay bar crowd, especially the one associated with the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen, gave contradictory messages about cruising. Even if some nights were labelled "cruisy" and if people worked hard to make themselves as sexually desirable as possible, approaching people for sex was frowned upon, and being labelled a "slut" was feared.

### 3.2.3. *Watch your mouth on a date*

Being a sex-party-goer was an obstacle to dating. Respondents found that gay men who went on dates are likely to frown upon cruising:

R9 (58 years old): 'Cause if I go on dates on OkCupid or Match.com and I mention the Eagle, they start... sometimes they... yes, they can get judgmental on those. Yes, absolutely, it's very common. Not to be mean-spirited, but they'll say, "woo, that's a sleazy... why are you going to those sleazy...?" And then they think about, "why am I at this date? I'm sitting at Starbucks, having a coffee with a guy that likes to cruise at odd places." So I try not to say too much, 'cause I've learned, the hard way, it's not necessarily what they wanna hear.

As with R9, several other respondents mentioned not disclosing their sex-party-going to guys they went on dates with, at least until a stronger connection was established.

### 3.2.4. *Skeletons in their closet*

Several respondents knew that some gay people looked down on cruisers but did not let these judgments get to them. A few respondents thought that if someone thinks cruising is bad, it is probably because they have something to hide, like some repressed desires:

R1 (41 years old): I know a lot of people who are out there judging and shaking their finger at me: they've either thought about it, or they're probably doing it because, what I always said is that, when you're pointing the finger at somebody else, you're usually using that finger to distract them from looking at you.

As a matter of fact, if you cruise regularly, you may stumble upon people who you know have expressed negative opinions on cruising. R10 (33 years old) once stumbled upon one of the people he would have least expected to see at sex parties:

R10 (33 years old): There's a certain decorum that has to come with that, and we had a conversation, and he said, "please don't tell [others] you saw me here," and I was like, "don't worry." But again, I think everyone's got

skeletons in their closet and I think—even though some people won't do it—I think everyone has thought about it.

### 3.2.5. *Perception of stigma in the gay community*

Some respondents felt that there was a substantial proportion, perhaps a majority, of men in the gay community who would frown upon cruising and sex parties. Although he had never encountered anyone who judged him for his sexual lifestyle, this respondent thought many gay men would disapprove of his lifestyle:

R6 (30 years old): I mean, the gay community is not a monolith, and I'm sure that some people think that that's a bad idea or that's not something they would do. And yeah, there might be those who judge and think, "that's just gross and you're gross for doing it," I'm sure there are people who think that, sure.

Another respondent had been judged within a sex club:

R13 (31 years old): I don't know what the situation was. Maybe they did know, or they walked in and were surprised to find that they found, or they heard about it and didn't believe somebody or something, and they walk in and sort of say something about, you know, about whores and sluts or just like, really, really childish things. Meanwhile the guys getting busy are just looking around like, "get the fuck out! Why are you here?"

Whether these encounters affect participants' perception of themselves or not, they remind them that judgmental people are out there and give cause to justify a separation of cruisers and non-cruisers. R5, who recruited people for sex parties on cruising websites, thought there were two very separate camps in the gay community:

R5 (49 years old): One guy would be all into it, the next guy would be, "don't even talk to me. How do you...? This is disgusting! I wouldn't wanna be a part of that." And then I realized, you know, there's a difference: they fall in two categories. . . . So there is a stigma, I think, in the gay community about sex parties. It kinda divides in half: half of the gay population are into it, and the other half are opposed to it and kind of offended by it, I find.

### 3.2.6. *The gay Disney fairytale*

Respondents thought that sex parties and cruising bothered a lot of gay people because they go against what the gay community has been fighting for in terms of civil rights in the past decades:

R13 (31 years old): I think the gay community, because it's been in a fight for civil rights in recent years, that's become a bigger deal, and I think the idea that these types of parties do actually happen probably work against that ideal. So they sort of, not only do they not identify with it, but they almost the opposite of identify: they sort of shun it as making the rest of the community look bad.

R15 thought that single people were more likely to be against cruising because they wanted to maintain the romantic ideal of a faithful partner:

R15 (29 years old): I think there's pockets of it that are still gay couples or gay people that are very conservative or traditional, and some of them are single and they're just out looking for... I think it's mostly the single ones 'cause they're out looking for their prince and they don't like the idea or the picture of their prince being someone that is sexually adventurous to other people.

With so many grounds for judgement within gay culture and the general culture, sex-party-goers have to carefully decide to whom they will tell about their sexual lifestyle, which influences whom they prefer to spend their time with.

Depending on if they experienced judgement or if they perceive negative attitudes toward sex parties, participants will disclose their lifestyle to more or less people.

To avoid the problems of disclosure, participants may choose to surround themselves only with tolerant people, only gay people, or only other cruisers. They can also decide to make their work life or public life revolve around their sexual lifestyle, by working in sex clubs, nightclubs, or other jobs related to the sex industry. Because social interaction is so commonplace at private sex parties,

participants can easily connect with other cruisers and integrate sexual communities and subcultures.

As several quotes in this section evoked, being a known sex-party-goer affects people's dating prospects, which leads participants to reevaluate the place sex parties have in their romantic life and which is the topic of the following section.

#### *4. Cruising and intimate relations*

Sex parties make people reconsider the boundaries between social relations and sexual ones, between private sexual life and public social life, and finally, between sex and love. Because private sex parties create intimacy between lots of people, they challenge distinctions between sex for sex and sex for love.

Respondents thus had a range of perspectives on the place of cruising in their broader sexual and romantic life. For some, sex parties were a place to satisfy their physical desires while waiting to find a boyfriend; for others, parties were a complement to sex in a romantic relationship; finally, for some respondents, sex parties fulfilled many of their sexual and romantic desires. Because they challenge the exclusivity of intimacy, private sex parties pose challenges to monogamous or committed relationships and are better suited to participants who enjoy having intimate bonds with multiple people.

##### *4.1. Cruisers' relationships*

The way respondents understood the place sex parties played in their broader intimate lives depended greatly on their relationship status and history at time of interview. (Table 5 shows the different relationship arrangements and desires of participants.) Seven of my respondents were in a committed romantic

relationship of some sort, and the other thirteen were single at the time of the interview. Within the singles, only six were really looking for a boyfriend or partner: they either expressed a strong desire and readiness to be in a couple or said they had been going on dates or had ads on dating websites like OkCupid or Match.com (distinct from cruising websites that are more targeted to sex). The other seven single respondents were not actively looking for a partner at the time of the interview. Some preferred the singles life and did not want to have a boyfriend; others were open to the possibility but did not want to do things to search for one (e.g., put an ad on a dating website or go to mixers) and had more of a “what happens, happens” kind of attitude. Some of the non-looking singles said they might want a relationship later in life but that their current situation did not really allow it.

Participants in relationships had different degrees of openness. Only one was technically in a monogamous relationship, that is, he was “cheating” on his boyfriend when he was going to sex parties. The six others had some form of agreement with their partners about sex beyond the relationship. Two were in a couple’s agreement to have sex with other people as a couple and only go to sex parties together; separately having sex outside the relationship was not allowed. Two were in one core relationship in which both partners are free to have sex with other people individually or together as a couple; however, they only had one main relationship and would not go on dates with other men. Finally, two were in more polyamorous arrangements; that is, they had multiple boyfriends or allowed themselves to get close to different people; they were free to have sex and to date different guys.



Similarly, the respondents who were single looked for different types of relationships. Three of the looking-singles were looking to settle down in monogamous relationships; the other three were hoping to get into an open relationship. Most (five out of seven) of the non-looking singles said that, if they were to be in a relationship, they would go for an open relationship; one of them had a preference for a couple that only plays together. Only one of the non-looking singles said that, if he were to do a relationship, he would go for a monogamous relationship only. Depending on what they had and what they desired, respondents perceived sex, love, and cruising with varying degrees of importance.

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<i>Single (13)</i>	
<i>Looking for a relationship (6)</i>	
Looking for a monogamous relationship	3
Looking for an open relationship	3
<i>Not looking for a relationship (7)</i>	
Relationship would be monogamous	1
Would cruise with partner only	1
Relationship would be open	5
<i>In a relationship (7)</i>	
In a monogamous relationship	1
Couple cruises together only	2
Couple is only sexually open	2
Polyamorous	2
Relationship preferences (regardless of current status)	
Monogamous	4
Couple plays together only	2
Couple is only sexually open	12
Polyamorous	2

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Table 5. Relationships characteristics and preferences of respondents.

## 4.2. *Cruising, love, and sex parties*

### 4.2.1. *"I wouldn't need to go do some of the crap that I do at a party"*

The first type of respondents were the ones who wished they could get a boyfriend so they would not have to cruise for sex anymore. These respondents were single at the time of interview and actively looking to settle down in a monogamous relationship. These respondents had a feeling of loneliness that they thought romantic love could remedy:

R3 (28 years old): I would love to have a boyfriend. It's not fun sometimes when it's cold and you're in the bed by yourself with six pillows. No... It's kind of like an old woman there, dying. So a boyfriend would help. And there are times when you sleep by a boy, like sleep overnight by a guy that you have something with and... It's hot! It's romantic! And who wouldn't want that?

Respondents like this one desired traditional monogamous arrangements. Although, through sex parties, they encountered several people who were in open relationships, they were not keen on the idea of sharing a boyfriend. If they got into a relationship, these respondents would then require monogamy from both parties, and sex parties would be over, together or separately:

R8 (27 years old): I mean, totally, that would be my first thing: "no, you cannot go there anymore," you know what I mean? Even if you want it to be a joint thing, not happening.

Because they are set on having a monogamous relationship only, these respondents are not keen on dating someone they would meet at sex parties:

I: What about finding a boyfriend there?

R8 (27 years old): That would be an issue.

I: Yeah? What about it?

R8: We would have to find... I mean, you never know who you could fall in love with anywhere, but, there would be rules: "you can't go back there

anymore!" [Laughter.] . . . I mean, I personally wouldn't go there if I had a boyfriend. The reason may be they're not fulfilled, that's why they go, you know what I mean? . . . I mean, totally, that would be my first thing: "no, you cannot go there anymore," you know what I mean? Even if you want it to be a joint thing, not happening.

In this respondent's opinion, people in relationships who go to sex parties probably do so because they feel unfulfilled. If he met a boyfriend at a party, it would be a requirement that he not use that outlet as a way to fill a potential void in the relationship.

These respondents feel like they would have no problems stopping going to sex parties if they found a boyfriend. Actually, they wish they could find a boyfriend soon so they can stop going to sex parties:

R3 (28 years old): I think to myself, if I have a boyfriend, I wouldn't need to go do some of the crap that I do at a party. I can do with him!

Cruisers like these two respondents see sex parties as a sexual outlet while they are single. They would prefer to be in a monogamous relationship and to not have to go to parties to satisfy themselves. Their desire for monogamy does not mesh well with those of cruisers who are into open arrangements.

#### 4.2.2. *"If you're 44 years old, you shouldn't be doing that"*

Another group of respondents also firmly believed in monogamy as the ideal relationship, but considering their non-monogamous lifestyles, had no real hopes of finding a boyfriend. R1, a regular sex-party-goer, was against the idea of looking for a boyfriend:

R1 (41 years old): I'm just open to whatever happens, happens. I don't believe in the idea of looking for a partner. I just believe in letting it happen.

However, if he were to meet someone, R1 thought he would stop cruising and choose to be monogamous:

R1: I think it probably would change my sexual lifestyle. . . . I feel that—once I do get in an actual relationship—that that [cruising] probably will stop. . . . If I get involved with someone that that's the person I'm gonna be monogamous with, it's like, for me, that they have to have something about them where they're like, besides being the epitome of love for me, they also have to be the epitome of sex for me in order for me to, you know, even be involved with them, actually.

If R1 were to get in a relationship, it would have to be with someone who could fulfill his emotional and sexual needs to the point that cruising would become irrelevant. Because of these high prerequisites, R1 knew that he might not find a boyfriend and was fine with it. Although he thought that a monogamous relationship was ultimately superior to cruising, he believed that that type of relationship was unlikely to happen, so he was content with cruising.

Although a sexually open relationship might allow these cruisers to reconcile their need for sexual adventure and for commitment, many respondents refused to give it a try.

R17 (49 years old): Open relationship? No, that doesn't work for me. Doesn't work for me. . . . It's just me. But do I want [a relationship]? Yeah, it's been pressing now that I'm gonna be 50 and I'm still single.

This respondent had focused on cruising for most of his adult life and was now getting tired of it and wished he could get into a relationship. Cruising was not really something he wanted anymore but rather something he was stuck with:

R17 (49 years old): I'm at a stage where, like, I've been there done that. So, you know, it's hard for me just to go to a bar pick up someone, I think. . . . That's why it's easier for me to just to go to a sex party and just have sex and I'm done and I go back to my life... I think it's sad, sometimes.

Even though they spent a lot of time at sex parties and were not actively looking for relationships, participants of this type thought that settling down in a committed relationship someday would be better. For R17, who was nearing 50 years old, the issue was becoming more and more pressing. A younger respondent, who currently preferred to not date and live off of sexual adventure, also thought that aging as a cruiser might be sad or just not what he should do:

R6 (30 years old): I don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, but I wouldn't think that I would be entirely content being in my forties and still doing that. And I don't know 'cause I'm not in my forties, but—and this could just be bias or whatever or I don't know—but that doesn't seem to me as if that's something that I would enjoy. But I don't know: I'm not forty. . . . I guess, just sort of, you know, like societally ingrained in me, like, it's not... You know, "you should settle down by then," or, you know, "if you're 44 years old, you shouldn't be doing that."

This respondent felt like there was a social imperative to get into a committed relationship and stop cruising at some point. He felt it was okay to live off of sexual adventures at his young age but that he would have to settle down at some point.

#### 4.2.3. *"We fell in love, but we're also missing out"*

Other respondents agree that a relationship is more important than cruising but can also keep cruising in a relationship. For the couple that plays together, sex parties can be a fun way to diversify sex in the relationship, but it should never replace sex within the relationship:

R15 (29 years old): If he and I haven't had sex in a week and this party comes up, we'll probably not go to the party just because it's, like, "we need to focus on us for a while before we..." But if we've been having a ton of sex when the party comes up and we're all still very horny, then it's like, "let's let the juices flow!" You know, "let's go everywhere!"

For this type of respondent, sex parties are a place to explore and experiment with sexuality. Relationships are important, but you do not want to miss out on the sexual scene out there:

R14 (28 years old): I came to him and I was, like, "I'm . . . so excited to be here in New York and there's such a sex-positive atmosphere. I really feel like we've met and fell in love in [state] and I love that, but I feel like we're also missing out. We're young and we're living in New York City... So much more than in [state] and we're, like, missing out on this whole sexual scene" right?

For these participants, the sex you have at sex party is not on the same level as the one you have in a relationship. Cruising is about adventure, exploration, experimentation, and having fun:

R15 (29 years old): I have this very romanticized vision of, like, 1970s New York, and I think that I take myself there when I go to the [sex club]. . . . Have you ever read *Just Kids* by Patti Smith? It's a story about 1970s, 1960s, New York and it has this very grungy, underground, gay scene, because, you know, you couldn't be out. New York was dirty, New York was unsafe, the arts were, like, kind of seeping out of these crazy places instead of the Disney World New York that we live in now. So there was, like, this adventure of finding something amazing around any corner and from any place, whether it was, like, this sexual encounter, whether it was this art, whether it was this music, it could happen anywhere. . . . All that stuff that, you know, was way before my time and I'll never be able to experience. It's just like a fantasy.

These respondents fulfill their need for intimacy in their relationships; going to sex parties is a fun, leisurely activity that is not related to their intimate needs.

All the respondents of every type mentioned above had one thing in common: they did not think that cruising was necessary for their lifelong personal satisfaction. They either wanted to stop cruising, thought they would stop if they found a relationship, or only saw it as an optional complement to sex in a relationship. The other types of cruisers below said they would keep cruising in the long run.

#### 4.2.4. *"I can't really fight it"*

Respondents who said they would never stop cruising had different reasons for thinking so. Some of them simply thought they would never be able to stop seeking it out. These respondents also thought that a close relationship was more valuable than cruising, but they knew that no one romantic partner would ever be able to satisfy all their sexual needs. One respondent said that sexual monogamy was simply incongruous with the human—more specifically male—sex drive:

R5 (49 years old): Personally, I don't believe that—as animals—we're meant to be monogamous; I never thought that. I think that that's a ridiculous notion. Because we are animals! Everyone forgets that! We're humans, but we're animals, and the animal side is what governs all the stuff: the sex, our hunger, our rage; all this stuff is animalistic qualities, right? So how is it that we—because we're humans—can be suddenly, like, able to be or should be monogamous? Doesn't change the fact that we're animals, and especially male animals (now women are a different breed, you know.) [Laughter.] That possibly could happen, with women, the monogamy. I never thought that, as males, we were meant to be monogamous. So the hunter quality that we have is there certainly in me, and I can't really fight it. I mean, I could fight it, but it would just cause... Why would I wanna do that to myself?

According to this respondent, the sexual drive is something stronger than himself and there is no point in trying to resist it. For this type of participant, cruising was a way to satisfy these animalistic desires. These respondents, who were also anonymous cruisers, completely separated their needs for sexual variety from their intimate relationship needs. R5, for example, although he would have preferred to be in an open relationship, was in a monogamous relationship and cruised to satisfy the "excess" sexual needs that could not be met with his boyfriend. R20 had been in open relationships where each partner was allowed to seek out sex outside the relationship, as long as it remained devoid of emotions:

R20 (49 years old): When I'm in a love affair, you know, the matrimonial bed is the matrimonial bed and I don't want anybody in here, you know, that's just how I am. You can stick your dick in anything, but put a condom on and this is where I sleep. . . . I think that's where the outdoor sex comes into play. Because it disallows... It disallows any kind of intimate setting because I don't want you getting emotions.

R20, who identified as a sexual compulsive, gave priority to his boyfriends, but knew he would always need to satisfy other sexual desires outside the relationship. For him, cruising places were better for satisfying his sexual needs because they did not connote intimacy as, for example, a bedroom does. Thus cruising posed no threat to his intimate relationship.

#### 4.2.5. *"I am just happy to have good friends and play around"*

Other cruisers said they would be cruising in the long haul because it provided them with a lot of satisfaction in their personal lives. Most of these cruisers were not looking for a relationship—at least at this point in their lives—because they preferred to focus on other things, like their careers:

R10 (33 years old): I'm not closed to the possibility of a relationship, it's just not something that I'm actively looking for. I feel like I sort of came to New York to play and to explore and to sort of, you know, I'm sort of here to find myself. I'm looking for a career, I'm looking for direction, I'm looking to just enjoy this part of my life in a city that's perfect for this, for this point in my life. I don't feel solid enough to really be comfortable settling down 'cause I'm too erratic, and I'm too spontaneous, and I'm too unsettled to hitch myself up to somebody, and then, maybe my life drastically changes in six months and I decide, I don't know, I'm gonna go [away] for a year and then, what happens, you know? So, I don't know, it's just not something I'm looking for. I like the freedom to just explore whatever life throws my way.

Although he was open to being in a relationship at some point in his life, this respondent would not want to stop cruising for a boyfriend. He was open to a relationship someday, but it would have to be an open arrangement. He had given



monogamy a try a while back, but it did not work because he missed going to sex parties too much.

Compared to the respondents above who thought that a committed relationship did or would give them more satisfaction than cruising, these respondents thought that a relationship was depriving them of things they liked. When he was in a relationship, R10 felt he longed for his sexual freedom; R13 also felt he was missing out, but mostly on personal time and time for work:

R13 (31 years old): Missing my own personal time, missing, you know, [independent work] time, time to network with people for [work], and, to be honest with you, it wasn't that I was missing the sex so much, 'cause I was still having it, and still having a great time. Towards the end, I did start to feel a little bit like, "I'd love to go to the Eagle and, you know, fuck around. I'd love to go to a party or something," but it never bugged me enough that I would go and do it behind his back or anything like that.

This respondent did not feel like he was missing on the sex, although he longed to go back to his favorite cruising places. He also felt like the relationship was taking more away from him than it was giving anything. He came to the conclusion that he was not into dating for the time being, and maybe forever. Another respondent shared the feeling that a relationship cut him from enjoying friendships more than it provided anything.

R18 (27 years old): I want to try having my next relationship be non-monogamous because usually . . . limiting my sexual contacts to one person is always very draining to me . . . and I don't feel like myself and I've actually felt like I've lost a lot of friends because of I had to cut off sexual contact with them because of monogamy. So I'd rather have a lot of happy friendships than tie myself down to one person. And I would like to find a singular person that I don't feel like I have to cut off the rest of me to enjoy being with.

Some respondents of this type simply do not understand the relevance of monogamy, considering all the fun there is to be had in the gay world. It may be fun

to be with a boyfriend when he is there, but there so many other people to have fun with when he is not there, and missing out on that just seems unjustified. These respondents thought that gay men who were actively looking for a relationship were hurting themselves more than anything. They watched their friends being constantly disappointed by the dating scene and preferred not to be a part of it:

R16 (27 years old): I'm not in a rush to find a partner, do you know what I mean? 'Cause I learned through my friends' mistakes, like, they're depressed, "oh my god! I need to find someone. Help me find someone. I'm gonna go in Tindr!" I'm like, "you try to find someone through these ridiculous apps like Scruff?"

Other respondents thought that many gay men entered unsatisfying relationships just because they felt a relationship was so important. They preferred to appreciate what they had rather than longing for something they did not have:

R12 (52 years old): So I'm not with anyone now, I mean, I have had long term things but, you know, I'm not desperate. I'm comfortable, I have good interaction with friends and family so, I mean, I have social things to do so it's not like... it would be nice [having a boyfriend]! But, you know...

These respondents feel fulfilled in their interpersonal lives and sex parties contribute to that. They do not share the view of other gay men who are desperate to settle down into a relationship. They feel better able to enjoy the different relations they have: family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, casual sex partners, and fellow cruisers. They do not think that a romantic relationship would provide something more than these other relations.

#### 4.2.6. *"I don't really wanna spend my 60s and 70s alone"*

Although the respondents above seemed optimistic that the company of good friends and of fellow cruisers would give them enough to be satisfied in their

intimate and interpersonal needs, other committed cruisers also thought they needed a more committed relationship.

All respondents who were 50 years or older knew they would not stop cruising to get into a monogamous relationship. They were too used to going to sex parties and knew too many people in the cruising world to leave it, and simply had not been monogamous in too long a time to even consider it:

R9 (58 years old): I would be honest with them. I mean, I just can't lie, I mean, I'd just have to tell them. I've been monogamous before in a relationship—it's not a problem—but I haven't been in a relationship for so long that the concept is not important to me, right?

Although cruising provided them with sex, friendship, community, and some dimensions of intimacy, it did not fulfill some other dimensions of intimacy related to aging. That is, some of the older cruisers in my sample felt they needed the companionship and care that a romantic partner could provide as they age. R9, for example, had cared for his siblings who were in their 70s and 80s through their illness and thought that he should also find a partner with whom to spend his older days:

R9 (58 years old): Yeah, there's something about ageing and... That's advanced, extreme, advanced disease but, you know, I don't think I'll be satisfied if I just continue this. I mean in a true, emotional satisfaction; forget about sex, that's not even... I don't really wanna spend my 60s and 70s alone, I have a lovely house [location]. I don't wanna live there alone.

At this point in his life, this respondent was not looking for a relationship to satisfy his sexual needs, but one to fulfill his emotional need for companionship and for care. The most experienced cruisers in my sample thought the sexual connection was of little importance in a romantic partner. Because cruising places would always

be there to satisfy their sexual desires, they were happy to be in a platonic relationship that would provide them with other dimensions of intimacy:

R11 (59 years old): It is possible for me to conceive of a relationship which is strictly non-sexual and all the sex happens outside of the relationship. In fact, there are many people I know whose relationships have devolved into that kind of relationship and there's no reason why it can't start out that way in the beginning. Being in love is something very different, at least to me, than having sex. I can mentally divorce that completely because I know what being in love is like and it hardly ever depended on the sex. It's very different, at least to me, the love part from the sex part.

Although they were very open in the types of relationship arrangements they could get, both R9 and R11 had a very hard time finding someone to date steadily and had been single and hoping to find a boyfriend for 15 and 20 years, respectively. Gay people who go on dates seem to be separate from gay cruisers, and the former do not perceive the latter as good dating candidates. Cruisers who have put less importance on relationships and dating have less of a relationship history, and people on dates seem to be suspicious of men who have never been in long-term relationships:

R9 (58 years old): I don't find the dating scene very easy. It's very difficult and people I meet that are in my age range, they've had lot... They've had boyfriends for 10, 20, 30 years... They've outlived... Their lover died or they broke up. They're in a very different... coming out of a very different kind of... experientially in a different situation... I'm not... And they always ask, "what about you?" You know, they're waiting for me to say that I've had Joe, or Mike, or Jim for 16 years and we broke up, and I don't. I can't... I "..." [Mimics being speechless.]

Long-time cruisers may also be accustomed to their independence and to living alone, which makes it hard to develop a relationship. Because regular cruisers live their intimate and sexual lives outside of the home, long-time cruisers have no experience with the type of intimacy typical to committed relationships.

R9 (58 years old): I don't have template for that, because I didn't, like, spend my forties with some boyfriend, watching videos all night long, going on trips, and whatever boyfriends do with each other. I have no idea what they do... Baking cookies? . . . Whatever they do: I haven't had that experience.

Many regular cruisers actually only spend time at home if they want to be alone. Their social, sexual, and intimate life all happens in public places or in bars and clubs. Being in a relationship where the intimacy usually happens in private quarters feels strange. R9 thought that his lack of experience with intimacy at home might make dating difficult.

Although they are satisfied with their sexual life and friendships, long-time cruisers who have not been in relationships feel like there are dimensions of intimacy that they could get from a committed relationship. However, because the gay dating scene and the cruising scene are separate and often incompatible, they have a hard time finding a partner. Other cruisers, however, had been able to fill all their intimate needs while cruising.

#### 4.2.7. *"I would be open to developing any number of relationship"*

A reason to have an open relationship that was common among respondents was that it is unrealistic to expect one person to fulfill all your intimate needs:

R2 (61 years old): I just don't think it's realistic that any one person could possibly satisfy another person's total needs.

R4 (50 years old): I think it'd be hard to find someone who can provide every element you want in a relationship.

R20 (49 years old): My personal doctrine is, I don't profess to be your dream come true. . . . That's a lot of pressure on the other person to say, okay, you are my dream, you are perfect.

Several cruisers understood that there are different dimensions to intimacy and that you can find these in a variety of relationships. Those who are open to

getting different forms of intimacy from different people felt like a committed relationship was not so important:

I: [If single,] would you feel like you really need to find a boyfriend?

R4 (50 years old): No! I think maybe that's one of the reason I went so long without a boyfriend: it's that I never felt the need to have one. Because I have my friends for affection, and lots of love, and I'm very close to a good core group of people that provide me with so much intellectually, emotionally, and also with affection. And I can also have the sex thing separate, and then even with the sex, I can still have, you know, intimacy, and some of... I don't know how emotional it is, but, for the moment... It's fun.

This respondent was able to get love and affection from his friends and to feel physical and emotional intimacy with his partners at sex parties. R4 and R2 had multiple people with whom they shared a close connection. Both had long-distance boyfriends and very close friends with whom they had sometimes had sex. R2 had become platonic with his first boyfriend, which he described as a "soulmate" and life partner, but also had a younger boyfriend with whom he had a sexual relationship. Although these two respondents cared very much for everyone they were involved with, the prospect of any one of these relationships ending was not worrying them too much. They had met all of their partners at sex parties or in other cruising contexts and felt that sex parties were good places to meet people who shared their relationship values. These respondents enjoyed meeting and connecting with new people, and sex parties were a place where they could seek out this pleasure:

R2 (61 years old): I really enjoy meeting people and developing relationships. . . . I would be open to developing any number of relationship because I just find that it's rare to find people that you like and are just nice people to be around, you know? So anytime that happens, I don't wanna say, "well, I already got two boyfriends, so see you later," you know? I just feel like what excites me about this whole gay men sex thing—because it's much more liberating than heterosexuals—is that you can have, you know, intimate

relationships with people who are not your boyfriend. There is something there, you know, I think.

Sex parties played different roles in respondent's intimate lives. For some of them, there were a temporary or accessory thing to satisfy their need for sex while they were single, to have fun and explore before settling down, to complement an existing relationship, or to satisfy specific sexual needs that were not satisfied in their current relationship. For others, sex parties and cruising were an important element of their intimate lives: they satisfied desires that could not possibly be met by a boyfriend, or they provided a place to find a multitude of people they could get close with.

## 5. *Discussion*

### 5.1. *Three types of cruisers: impersonal, recreational, and collective*

Respondents varied in the way they connected cruising with their broader social and intimate lives and on how they understood their sexual lifestyles. They could be grouped in three broad categories.

#### 5.1.1. *The impersonal cruiser*

The impersonal cruiser is the one who cruises mostly out of sexual need and who separates the sex he has while cruising from his intimate and interpersonal needs and relations.

Impersonal cruisers include men who like to cruise anonymously—who prefer not to talk to anyone at sex parties because it ruins their sexual fantasies. These people go to sex parties because they have strong sexual desires that they need to satisfy. Once they are satiated, they have no interest in lingering and

chatting with people. They do not want to make friends with other cruisers and have no interest exchanging phone numbers to meet outside. Outside of parties, their friends are generally not cruisers, often straight people. The cruisers that are anonymous at parties do not necessarily mind talking about them with friends outside of parties; however, their social world is separate from that of sex parties.

Clandestine cruisers—those who keep their lifestyle completely private with friends and acquaintances—are also impersonal cruisers. They do not need be anonymous at parties and usually enjoy some conversation with other sex-party-goers. Still, the relations at parties remain at parties. They would not want to hang out with other sex-party-goers outside of parties and certainly not date one, because that could reveal their sexual behavior to people outside.

Impersonal cruisers—either anonymous or clandestine—view sex parties and other cruising venues as places where they go to satisfy their sexual needs. They may feel the need to have sex because they are single and say that they would stop going when they find a partner. Once these cruisers find a satisfying partner, sex parties will have served their purpose and they will not need to go as long as the relationship holds. Others may go because they are not fully satisfied with the sex in their current relationship, either because the sex is not good or because they feel like they have more desires than their partner can satisfy. These include cruisers who report sexual compulsion or addiction. They all see cruising with some aura of negativity; they wish they did not have to go to parties. The romantic ones are eager to find a partner so they can stop having to go to sex parties. The compulsive ones wish they could spend less time cruising and more doing productive things. The



clandestine cruiser also does not like the worry about being outed as a sex-party-goer and wishes he could avoid them.

For impersonal cruisers, sex is a need, a drive, or a compulsion; something that needs to be released. Sex, in its pure form, is completely disconnected from intimacy. The sex they have at sex parties is completely devoid of emotions. They see sex in a relationship as something better than cruising; cruising sex is an obstacle to a healthy, fulfilling romantic relationship.

#### *5.1.2. The recreational cruiser*

Recreational cruisers are those who think that cruising is an enjoyable but unnecessary part of their lives. Cruising provides them with an extra satisfaction in their sexual and interpersonal lives, but it is not as important as other close relationships and friendships, which are their primary sources of intimacy.

The recreational cruisers will prioritize a good committed relationship over cruising. Those who are in couples do it to spice up their sexual lives and experience new things, but make sure cruising never gets in the way to the relationship. The recreational cruisers who are single say that they want to live up before they settle down in a committed relationship. The recreational cruiser does not think he needs to go to parties and does not necessarily think he will go to them all his life.

The recreational cruiser feels no need to hide his sexual lifestyle to outside relations; sex is a positive part of life and there is nothing to feel shameful about consenting adults having fun. The recreational cruiser even likes to titillate non-cruisers or straight acquaintances with stories about the last sex party. They sometimes even like to be the ambassador of sex positivity. Indeed, the recreational

cruiser rarely spends time with other cruisers. That is because he does not see sex parties as a part of his social life. Chatting with other people at sex parties is part of the fun, but these acquaintances usually remain sex-party specific. They may have some friends with whom they go to sex parties, but it is not their main social circle. Recreational cruisers see sex parties strictly as leisure; they are not part of their “real” life. Other relations—couple, long-time friends, family, work—are more important than the people they meet at parties. If they stop going to parties, they will not go at length to stay in touch with people they have met there.

For recreational cruisers, sex is pleasure. Romantic sex, in a relationship, is better, but can be enhanced by exploration and adventure. Experimenting with sex in cruising places can make the recreational cruiser a better romantic partner. The recreational cruiser often uses words like fun, pleasure, exploration, experimentation, and adventure when talking about sex parties.

Because they see cruising as leisure, it is important that it remains a small and manageable part of their life. If he starts going to every sex parties, the recreational cruiser will worry that he is forgetting the relational aspects of sexuality (and suspect a growing sex addiction). If he realizes that his circle of friends is exclusively composed of cruisers, he will worry that he has not paid attention to other relations in his life (because he does not want to be a collective cruiser).

#### *5.1.3. The collective cruiser*

Finally, the collective cruiser is the one who sees cruising as an integral part of his interpersonal and intimate life.

The collective cruiser is very connected to other people in cruising culture. He knows party organizers—if he is not one—and he always knows other people at parties. The collective cruiser always spends a lot of time talking to other people at parties; he is eager to catch up with friends and acquaintances and to meet new people.

Outside of parties, the collective cruiser is likely to spend a lot of time with other cruisers. Sex is an important part of himself and his identity. He would only surround himself with people who are comfortable with his sexual lifestyle. They often say they feel part of a community or sexual subculture.

The collective cruiser does not think that a romantic relationship should get in the way of cruising. Cruising can provide pleasure, but also intimacy and affection, and there are no reasons to limit that. Collective cruisers feel deprived in monogamous relationships; they feel better in open relationships or polyamorous arrangements. Collective cruisers do not feel like there is anything wrong with cruising and sex parties and see no reasons why they would ever stop going to them. The younger ones are inspired by the older ones to keep going.

For the collective cruiser, sex, intimacy, and emotions are not really separable. He believes that any kind of sexual encounter can be intimate and filled with emotions. The community cruiser is open to experimenting with sexuality but also relations. He is more likely to blur the boundaries between friends, lovers, and sex partners. For him, sex is a force that brings a diversity of people together to share pleasures, love, intimacy, friendship, and solidarity.

## 5.2. *Private sex clubs and types of cruising*

Private sex parties are best suited for collective cruisers; indeed, they contribute to fostering community and lead other types of cruisers to develop some of the characteristics of the community cruiser. As we have seen in Chapter 5, the characteristics of private sex clubs and parties increase sociability among patrons. Bringing people together in the same place at the same time, having to be “in the know” about events to be able to go, restricting admission based on shared preference, involving participants in the organization, and creating open spaces for the collective sharing of sexual and social pleasure: all these characteristics fit the desires of the collective cruiser.

The impersonal cruiser would be happiest in public environments and venues that favor anonymity: public toilets, parks, rest areas—environments where sex needs to be silent and furtive and where socialization is discouraged. They also like backrooms that are pitch black in sex clubs and bathhouses, and glory holes like the ones in adult peep shows. They like places that are easy to go in and out of when they need sex. They go to sex parties because they are pretty much all that is left of cruising venues, but they are not the ideal places for them. They are bothered by the conversations and social aspect. They do not like being recognized by other cruisers; as they get to know people at parties, which is hard to avoid, parties become less interesting as a sexual outlet. The clandestine cruisers are also confounded by the more social cruisers they see at parties. Impersonal cruisers are nostalgic of public sex: backrooms, toilets, parks.

Recreational cruisers like to go to sex venues that have a high entertainment value. They like facilities that are clean and well-constructed. They enjoy themes,

concepts, decors, DJs, bars, and elaborate designs (e.g., mazes, cages, slings, and so forth). They are happy at sex parties in general, but not necessarily in clandestine ones. The recreational cruiser likes places that are safe and clean, and some of the private sex clubs of NYC are too “seedy” for him. They also do not want to be part of a community of cruisers, and may feel uncomfortable in a place where everyone knows each other. Although they enjoy some conversation at a sex venue, they do not like it when these relations bleed into their close interpersonal world. For example, the couple who goes to a sex venue to have fun on a Friday night would prefer not getting too close to the guys they play with because that could be a threat to the relationship.

The collective cruiser, of course, wants to be in places where he will know a lot of people; he might actually feel out of place if he walks into a venue where he does not know anyone. He will usually go to the places organized by people he knows are part of his community or subculture and not even consider others. The private sex parties of NYC are the best places because they have actually been created by other collective cruisers. Indeed, the fact that sex venues exist in a context of illegality is because there are sexual communities strong enough to make their practices survive in the face of threat. The collective cruiser does not mind the impersonal and recreational cruisers because he needs their presence at sex venues. Although he likes to meet with his fellow community cruisers, he likes the events to always have a number of new people for sexual variety. At sex parties, the collective cruisers form most of the regular clientele, while anonymous and recreational cruisers are a part of the attendance that keeps changing. The collective cruiser may

have a feeling of superiority over the two other types. He can feel like his relationship to sexuality is healthier than that of the two others. He can feel like people who just go to sex parties to have sex and leave are less mature because he has evolved into a more relaxed, friendly, and wholesome attitude.

The collective cruisers are often the ones who have a no-attitude stance in parties. They enjoy socializing and sharing sex with diverse people. Impersonal cruisers, although they do not socialize much, tend to fit with the no-attitude values because they have few selection criteria in sex partners. As long as someone can provide something to satisfy their desire, he will be a relevant partner. Recreational cruisers can be “guys with attitude.” They go to sex parties to have fun and they want to make the most out of their experience; therefore, they will be more selective about whom they play with. They do not want to have sex out of desperation and will wait the time needed to find a partner who is right.

### *5.3. Pulled towards collective cruising*

Because the field of cruising in NYC is dominated by private sex parties, the general culture pulls towards collective cruising. The majority of respondents in my sample are of the collective type, and even those who could be categorized as impersonal or recreational share some characteristics with the collective type.

When they go to private sex parties, people who prefer the impersonal or recreational modes of cruising are influenced to get into the collective one. As I have described in Chapter 5 and in this chapter, social interaction is almost inevitable at sex parties and is necessary if you want to make the most of your time at the event (for example, because participants will want to take breaks in-between rounds of

sex). Even if they did not intend on socializing when they went to the party, participants ended up chatting with people there. The more you surround yourself with sex-party-goers, the more likely you are to develop ties to a sexual community and be more committed to it. Without realizing it, sex-party-goers integrate your social circle and you become part of a community of cruisers.

The pull into sexual communities is especially hard to avoid since NYC has little to offer to impersonal or recreational cruisers. These two groups have to frequent the sites tailored to the collective ones. Therefore, the policies that have outlawed commercial sex venues in NYC and renovated public places to preclude cruising have contributed to an increase in collective cruising. In a context of clandestinity, collective cruising dominates because underground sex clubs require the collective work of people involved in sexual communities. Today's underground sex clubs of NYC have, indeed, been created from scratch by collective cruisers.

Policies around sex venues thus not only change sexual behavior but the way people understand the place of sex in their intimate and social lives. When people go to sex venues, they bring their conceptualization of sexuality with them, but this understanding of sex also gets influenced by the culture of the place. Different types of cruising places not only carry different norms of behavior, but also different ways to conceive of sexuality, intimacy, and sociability. The types of places available in a locale will, therefore, contribute to change the local culture and the way people understand sexuality and intimacy. Therefore, making changes in the landscape of cruising places changes notions of sexuality, intimacy, sociability, and community.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation had two primary aims: 1) to understand what form of cruising is practiced in today's private sex clubs of NYC and 2) to understand what gave this model of cruising its shape.

In response to the first aim, Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated that cruising in private sex clubs follows a model of collective intimacy, which is different from anonymous/clandestine cruising or recreational cruising.

Going to a private sex club in NYC today has little in common with the practice of anonymous cruising. Previous ethnographies of gay cruising had described it as an anonymous practice: for example, Humphreys' talked about impersonal sex in bathrooms (1975); Delph (1978) proposed that gay cruisers were forming a silent community; and Weinberg and Williams (1975) said that men in gay bathhouses avoided conversation to prioritize "easy sex." In these cases, cruisers maintained a clear boundary between the sex they had in these places and their intimate and social lives. As the previous chapters have shown, private sex clubs are neither impersonal, anonymous, or silent.

My observations are closer to those of ethnographers who have found cruising to be a social affair. The Leather sex club that Rubin (1991) observed was a community space for that subculture, much like the Leather and Bear retreats observed by Hennen (2008). The private sex parties I have observed did not cater to



a specific sexual subculture like Leather or Bear, and few of my respondents identified with such specific groups, but interaction still had a strong social component. Although the mode of cruising might be similar between the subcultural venues Rubin and Hennen have observed and the private sex clubs of my study, what I found is different because sex parties fostered collective intimacy in groups that were not already part of a sexual subculture with social networks in place outside of sex venues. Rather, the structure of the private sex club created this sense of collective intimacy among the group.

Every mode of cruising involved living sexuality, intimacy, and sociability in a way that is different from the dominant model of relating. In mainstream culture, sociable relations should never be sexual, intimacy is reserved to a few close relations (i.e., family and close friends) and lived in the private space, and sex is reserved to the one closest relationship of all. Whether is it done impersonally, recreationally, or collectively, cruising goes against that model of relating.

Impersonal cruising breaks down the connection between sex and intimacy that traditional sexual morality requires. Impersonal cruising also has no sociable component, which was a means of protection when homosexual activity was forbidden. If many men have cruised anonymously to protect their identity, many gay men have and still do enjoy impersonal cruising even if they have nothing to hide about their personal life. Indeed, the two respondents I interviewed who preferred impersonal cruising were also quite open about their sexual lifestyle with acquaintances. These respondents, however, also came of age at a time when there were still many public grounds available in NYC, and their sexual desires might have

taken shape by cruising in parks and bathrooms. As younger cohorts of gay men are socialized in a culture where homosexuality does not have to be kept secret and where places suited for impersonal cruising are rarer, this mode of cruising could disappear from the repertoire.

Younger generations are more likely to be socialized into the recreational mode of cruising. Recreational cruising differs from the traditional model of relating because it actually connects sex with sociability rather than with intimacy. Recreational cruising is not impersonal or anonymous; it is something that is often done with friends. Recreational cruisers, however, still uphold that intimacy is something to be experienced in private and at home. Recreational gay cruisers will take advantage of both the legal recognition of same-sex relationships and the growing industry of commercialized sexual recreation. Recreational cruisers will be able to enjoy sexual-sociability in commercial sex venues while also living more traditional domesticated intimate relationships. They will not, however, mix both, and cruising will remain a leisurely activity. Although recreational cruising might be the dominant model of gay relating in the near future, gay cruisers in NYC are more likely to cruise collectively.

The practice of collective cruising involves taking down the boundaries between sexuality, intimacy, and sociability that are in place in the dominant model of relating. For collective cruisers, sex and intimacy are connected to sociability and can be lived outside of the home. Indeed, for some respondents, the home was a place to enjoy solitary privacy only. Collective cruisers do not have boundaries in their relations with other cruisers. They may also have multiple intimate

relationships that are both sexual and intimate. Collective cruising is normative among gay cruisers in NYC today because the main cruising venue available, the underground private sex club, is organized around that mode of cruising. Indeed, collective cruising seems to have taken shape out of the clandestine status of sex venues in NYC.

The second aim of this study was to understand what gave shape to the mode of cruising that is practiced in NYC today. The answer to this question is in a long chain of factors connecting the norms of interaction at private sex clubs to the broader history of gay cruising.

Private sex clubs and sex parties set the stage for collective intimacy, as Chapter 5 demonstrated. These venues put their clientele in a single open space for sexual activity rather than offering small, private ones. The sex parties hosted in them are occasional, time-bounded, and often cater to a specific crowd selected by age, body shape, ethnoracial group, or sexual preference. Private sex clubs also offer socialization spaces where these exclusive groups can connect. These venues and events are also run by organizers and staff who are also often participants. The way in which sex-party-goers are brought together today favors repeat encounters, group physical intimacy, and sociability, thus creating a sense of collective intimacy.

Although private sex clubs are elaborated by venue owners and managers, they have to work within strict constraints, which was the topic of Chapter 4. The characteristics of private sex clubs are not all chosen by organizers in order to create collective intimacy; some of them result from the context of clandestinity in which they have to operate. For example, having a single, open space for

participants to have sex has to do with the fact that venue owners are unlikely to renovate a space to create small rooms (which is typical in licensed bathhouses and commercial sex clubs) when there is a constant possibility of the place being shut down. The “by-invite-only” system also has to do with clandestinity. Venue managers and party promoters cannot publicly advertise their clubs and events and so they have to keep lists of guests’ emails collected by interacting on cruising websites. The fragmentation of gay cruisers into particular groups is thus also an effect of clandestinity. Commercial sex venues would not have the same freedom to exclude patrons on arbitrary criteria.

Finally, the context of clandestinity of private sex clubs is due to several societal factors outlined in Chapter 1. Most importantly, NY State Public Health Law has been the main reason why commercial sex venues have closed down in NYC, giving way to private sex clubs. This regulation was created in the early years of the AIDS pandemic, in the hopes to prevent transmission of HIV/AIDS. There were, however, several political and moral undertones in such public health policies. The clandestinity of gay cruising was also a result of gay social movements abandoning the defense of non-normative sexualities in favor of civil rights like same-sex marriage and family rights. The stigma surrounding gay cruising both in the mainstream and gay culture has also contributed, as some respondents expressed in Chapter 6, to cruisers preferring to have their entire social lives revolve around cruising, contributing to the creation of clandestine communities.

Collective intimacy seems to have been able to become the main model of cruising in NYC because of the context of clandestinity. It is unclear whether this

mode of cruising would continue to exist in a context where commercial sex venues would be legal. As explained above, recreational cruising seems like a model better adapted to both commercialized sexual recreation and to private intimacy. However, the collective cruiser, who can free himself from the need for stable committed relationships, is also very well adapted to the requirements of the postindustrial globalized political economy. Able to satisfy his desires for sex, intimacy, and sociability in sex venues, the collective cruiser is best at navigating a world where attachments to an intimate relationship or to a community are increasingly difficult to maintain. In sex clubs, the collective cruiser can experience “bounded intimacy” (Bernstein 2007), which provides him with fleeting experiences of “disclosing intimacy” (Jamieson 1998) and “pure relationships” (Giddens 1992).

A limitation of this study is with the focus on the context of NYC. Elsewhere (e.g., in Canada, Australia, and many Western European countries), commercial sex venues operate legally. The conclusions I make here suggest that recreational cruising would be the dominant model in these places and that the collective forms of cruising that I observed here would be harder to find. An exception would be for the case of specialized sexual subcultures, which are likely to keep sustaining collective intimacy among their members. Studies in locales where the landscape of cruising is dominated by commercial sex venues could verify the conclusions I make here.

A point that was underexplored in this study was how sameness might be a motor for the development of collective intimacy. Sexual subcultures, for example, are likely to keep practicing collective intimacy because their members share a

sexual identity based on very specific sexual preferences, motivating the need for sociability among these people. As mentioned above, private sex parties in NYC often cater to specific groups of age, body type, ethnorace, or sexual preference. These exclusionary practices might benefit collective intimacy because sociability might be easier, for example, among age peers or among people sharing a specific sexual preference. Parties that are reserved for black and Latino men seemed to have been created in response to the racial/ethnic discrimination that gay men of color have experienced in some gay sex parties. The racial/ethnic division of the gay cruising culture deserves greater attention, especially when we consider that black and Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) have had a much higher prevalence of HIV infections than white MSM, especially for younger cohorts (Wejnert et al. 2016). The lack of racial/ethnic mixing among MSM has been identified as one of the main factors in maintaining these disparities (Raymond and McFarland 2009). Group sex practices could be an ideal site to understand the reasons behind the lack of racial/ethnic mixing in the gay community. Whether cruising culture in the past was really more inclusive and mixed remains to be verified, but queer theorists were right in predicting that gay cruising was moving towards privatization and exclusion.

Finally, the statement, in NY State Public Health Law, that commercial sex venues pose a threat to the public health needs to be revisited. As stated in the Introduction, public health scholars seemed to have reached a consensus that even though sex venues may be risk environments for the transmission of HIV and other STIs, closing down venues is not the way to remedy the problem. Interventions that

work with venues to make them safer are more likely to yield results. A detailed understanding of the patterns of sexual behavior in sex venues, like the ones I have provided in Chapter 5, can help develop HIV/STI prevention strategies tailored to these environments.

But the most concerning risk of private sex clubs does not have to do with HIV/AIDS or STIs. Rather, of prominent concern is the risk created by the fact that private sex clubs have to operate invisibly from authorities. As I have described in the end of Chapter 4, sex party organizers do all they can to avoid dealing with authorities and try to take care of problems and emergencies on their own. Sex club organizers should not have to hesitate to call an ambulance when one of their patrons needs it. The fact that these venues are unregulated and are not subject to inspections by the health, buildings, or fire departments is also concerning. Gay men in NYC are currently having sex in conditions that can be insalubrious and dangerous in the case of emergencies. Changing the context so that sex club organizers and public authorities can work together in creating safe environments for gay men is a priority and should be done before sex-party-goers suffer the consequences of cruising in clandestinity.

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