

## The Affective Lives of Cruising: Recharting Space, Place, and Time

Alexander P. Chun<sup>1</sup>  and Sandra Jeppesen<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of American Studies, Brown University, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Lakehead University, Canada

**Correspondence:** Alexander P. Chun (alexander\_chun@brown.edu)

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### Abstract

This article turns to cruising maps as sites in which normative conceptions of space, place, and time might be reimagined. The authors first examine a brief history of queer mapping practices, paying particular attention to how queer cruising maps challenge constructions of private and public life by charting veiled sexual publics obfuscated by subtle queer social codes. Then, paying particular attention to ephemera and affect, the authors investigate the ways these queer cruising maps are animated by economies of affective experiences and other queer ephemera—feelings, lingerings, barterings, passings, and potentialities. The authors then argue that such an affective experience reorients stabilized notions of space, place, and time. The article concludes with a meditation on the futures of cruising, reflecting on how queer social and sexual relations have been (re)shaped across time into the present moment. Through such a provocation, the authors seek to critically examine how queer sexual practices and counterpublics are mapped and remembered, and how their contours of belonging continue to be contested, opening potentials and possibilities for new queer futures.

### Keywords

affect; counter-maps; cruising; queer; temporalities

### 1. Memories, Vignettes

All personal anecdotes in this article reflect the experiences of the first author. The use of the first-person singular pronoun “I” is employed to reflect this perspective while later uses of the first-person plural pronoun “we” reflect the joint scholarly contributions of both authors.

I am 14 years old, shopping for jeans in the Mall of America’s Abercrombie and Fitch. An older, middle-aged white man unsubtly stares at me from across the store, toggling his gaze between me and a rack of

button-down shirts he ostensibly peruses. Just about to start at the public high school, I am incredibly nascent in my sexuality. I haven't yet had a first kiss or a boyfriend. I haven't yet cruised or been cruised. And yet a creeping adrenaline begins to stir a felt intuition—a suspicion that sex and queerness are everywhere. The man walks over to me. I run out of the store and look for my mother.

I am 20 years old, rifling through a book in Toronto's Glad Day Bookshop. It's Pride Month, and folks are spilling in and out of the stores, restaurants, and bars that line Church Street. A man approaches, startling me out of my book. He asks if I'm here alone. "I'm here with a friend," I stammer back, confused. He smiles politely, nods, and walks away. It'll take some time before I understand what he was really inquiring about.

I am 23 years old, huddled on a public bench beneath a bridge on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. Fingerless knit gloves keep my hands warm enough to annotate the pages of the academic article I'm pretending to read. A car parks about 100 feet from me, joining a handful of other parked vehicles in which men sit and wait. It's around 5 pm, so I presume that most of the men just got off work. After a few minutes, a middle-aged man exits his vehicle, crosses the street over to me, and stands at the entrance to a wooded area just a stone's throw to my right. He stares at me intently, and I offer him a smile before returning my attention to the reading in my lap. My right leg is shaking. The man scans the other cars before heading into the wooded area. A few minutes later, another man leaves his vehicle and trails after. They disappear into the woods and my imagination.

I am 24 years old. My boyfriend and I are stumbling through the streets of Provincetown after spending the night dancing at an underwear party. The streets are surprisingly empty, which makes it all the more obvious when we spot a group of men converging near a large, raised dock on the water, just off Commercial Street. We watch other men leave the same dock. Curious, we approach. Lapping waves gently hush soft moans. Moonlight traces converging silhouettes. Shifting sands bring bodies closer together.

## 2. Introduction

Cruising refers to the sexual practice in which queer people, most often gay men, seek out sexual encounters in public spaces, such as parks, malls, movie theaters, rest stops, bathhouses, and bars, amongst others. Typically, cruising happens anonymously and spontaneously, and while certain geographic sites might be known as a cruising spot, one never quite knows what or whom they might find. The sexual negotiation often happens without words, with communications exchanged through coded physical movements: the gesture of a hand, the tapping of a foot, the nod of a head. In *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Pastime*, Alex Espinoza recounts his first time being cruised, recalling how he was approached by a stranger seeking a sexual encounter:

That moment with the stranger broke a seal inside of me, released a flood of emotions and hormones and urges that, up until that moment, had remained just beneath the surface....I had crossed a threshold, and before me now was a world of secret exchanges, of fleeting acts of intimacy occurring in public places. It was a world where I was noticed, where I could perform, where I was needed. Even though my identity as a gay person was nascent, in those spaces, in those small cracks lying just below the everyday, my sexual identity took root. (Espinoza, 2019, p. 29)

This article seeks to examine such a “world” that Espinoza details—the “cracks” in which public yet obfuscated social spheres and queer counterpublics of the everyday might be found (Espinoza, 2019, p. 29). In this article, we offer cruising maps as sites to examine queer social projects in which normative conceptions of space, place, and time are challenged. In doing so, we offer cruising as a sexual practice that blurs uneasy delineations between public and private life, and with it, ideations around space, place, and time. This article argues that cruising maps replot space, place, and time by charting ephemeral, ever-shifting queer lifeworlds and sociality, pushing back against containers of space that are marked by, and assigned meaning from, stable physical geographic markers and chrononormative measurements of duration. As Halberstam (2005) points out, geographies and temporalities are intimately linked and best understood as co-constitutive, arguing that “a ‘queer’ adjustment in the way in which we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space” (p. 15). The goal of this article is neither to romanticize cruising nor moralize queer sexual practices along binaristic understandings of “good” or “bad.” Rather, starting from an analytic that takes cruising as a given, as a sexual practice that has existed, still exists, and will continue to exist, we’re interested in what cruising does and can do.

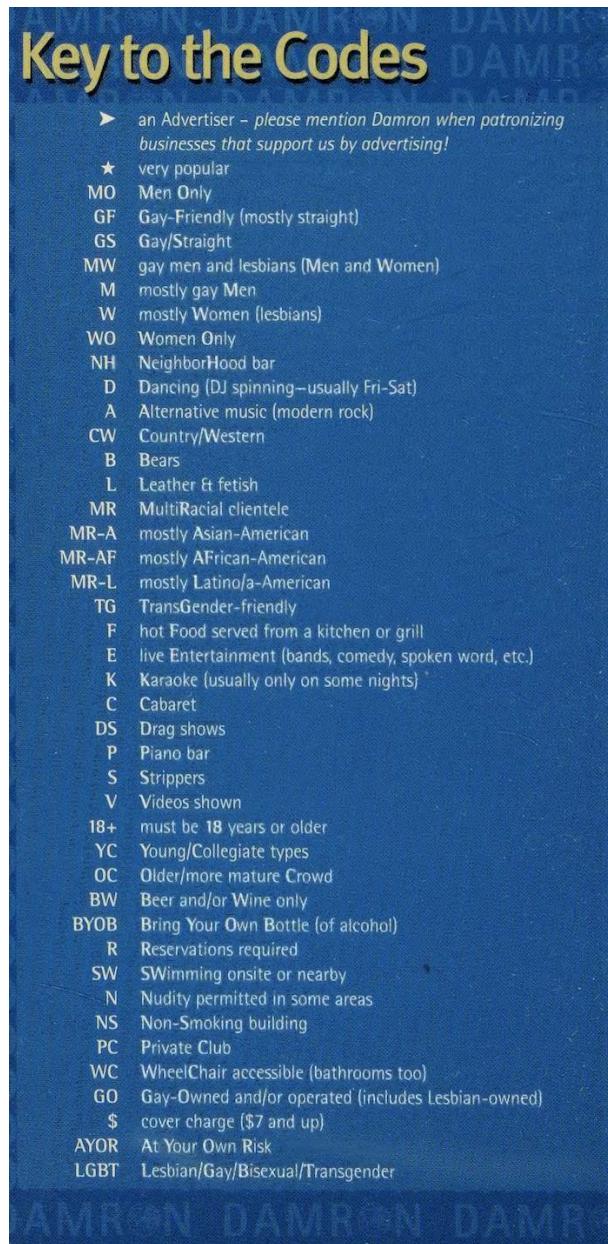
This article first examines a brief history of queer mapping practices, paying particular attention to how queer mapping challenged constructions of private and public life by charting veiled sexual publics obfuscated by subtle queer social codes. Then, paying particular attention to ephemera and affect, we are interested in the ways these queer cruising maps are animated by economies of affective experiences and other queer ephemera—feelings, lingerings, barterings, passings, and potentialities. In doing so, we examine how affect “constitute[s] cultural experience and serve[s] as the foundation for public cultures” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 10). We then pay attention to how such an affective experience reorients stabilized notions of space, place, and time, arguing that understanding cruising as an affective intimacy, more than acts of physical intimacy, offers an invaluable entry point to rethink how space, place, time, and ultimately sex ought to feel. In focusing specifically on the affective lives of cruising and its destabilizing potentials, we seek to expand conceptions of what sex and sexuality are, moving the investigation beyond just the materiality of bodies and pleasures of physical contact.

The article concludes with a meditation on the futures of cruising, reflecting on how queer social and sexual relations have been (re)shaped across time into the present moment. Through such a provocation, we seek to critically examine how queer sexual practices and counterpublics are mapped and remembered, and how their contours of belonging continue to be contested, opening potentials and possibilities for new queer futures, particularly for queers of color.

### 3. Private Publics and Public Privates

In 1964, Bob Damron, a gay bar owner in San Francisco, published the *Damron Address Book*, a map and catalogue of gay and gay-friendly spaces across the US (Gonzaba, 2022). Damron was an avid traveler and visited every entry, jotting down bars, arcades, bookstores, cruising spots, hotels, community centers, and erotica stands, amongst other places where queer folks, with a particular focus on gay men, might gather. After printing 3,000 copies of his first guide, Damron began publishing a new edition each year, updating his guides with the newest openings and pending foreclosures of queer spaces. It is estimated that by 1987, 100,000 copies of Damron’s guides were circulated annually (Gonzaba, 2022). That same year, the Damron Company was formed, overseeing the publication and distribution of the *Damron Guides*; such a move also enabled a team of fact-checkers to keep the guides up to date (Damron, 2003). While other gay travel

handbooks existed at the time, Damron's were particularly notable for the great detail they included. For instance, the inner cover (see Figure 1) of the 2003 edition of the *Damron Men's Travel Guide* serves as a "Key to the Codes," in which the book's identification system is broken down: MO is short for Men Only; GF means Gay-Friendly (mostly straight); GS is shorthand for Gay/Straight; and so on (Damron, 2003).



**Figure 1.** "Key to the Codes": explanation of abbreviations used in the 2003 *Damron Men's Travel Guide*. Source: Damron (2003).

The guidebook then goes on to outline both sodomy laws and national resources for queer folks. Under the guidebook's section "Sodomy Laws," US states with both "heterosexual and homosexual sodomy laws" as well as states with "homosexual sodomy laws only" are listed, followed by the urging: "To get your state off this list, please contact the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, providing a phone number and website" (Damron, 2003, p. 6). In this way, the *Damron Guides* insist that queer sex and sexuality are inherently political,

urging users of the guidebook to engage with policymakers and politicians and to challenge constructions of the private and public life that are bifurcated along understandings of sex as linked to familial kinship and heterosexual reproductive futurity.

The “Sodomy Laws” section ends with a note on “Cruisy Areas,” urging users to “proceed with caution” as such areas “may involve risk,” followed by a chilling warning: “BEWARE—MOST POLICE DEPARTMENTS IN THE USA HAVE COPIES OF THE MEN’S TRAVEL GUIDE” (Damron, 2003, p. 6). And indeed, such a warning remains relevant as cruising sites are increasingly targeted and subject to police raids in the present moment.

In “Sex in Public,” scholars Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner investigate how the private and public life are constructed along axes of acceptable sexualities (Berlant & Warner, 1998). In doing so, they examine “sex as it is mediated by publics,” paying particular attention as to how “heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 553). More specifically, the two argue that intimacy becomes linked to the private life, while work and politics remain in the public sphere. This means that “nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” are sequestered away, rendering intimate life as:

The endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood. (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 553, emphasis in original)

And yet the *Damron Guides* explicitly link the political with the supposed personal by highlighting how the formation of public cultures is shaped through the regulation of sexualities, as well as the surveillance of sexual subjects—a gaze further emphasized through the *Guides*’ awareness of police possession of the guidebooks.

In their discussion of sex and publics, Berlant and Warner offer queer counterpublics as those that both resist and contest the sequestering of sex to the private life. They write:

Queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality. Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies *do* bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic—an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation. (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 558, emphasis in original)

Cruising slots easily into definitions of such queer counterpublics, in which sex resists any inherent tie to familial structures of kinship or heterosexual coupling. Further, cruising is commonly constituted by the ways it makes sex public, shared, promiscuous, and non-reproductive.

In July 2024, writer and filmmaker Leo Herrera published (*analog*) *CRUISING*, as much a map as it is a guidebook filled with personal anecdotes and tips to navigate cruising spaces, from the bathhouse to the public park to the arcade to the sex club (Herrera, 2024). In it, Herrera describes what he calls the “three-point system” of the street cruise: “1. Lock eyes as you pass. 2. Look back. If they look back, stop. 3. If they stop too, walk toward them” (Herrera, 2024, p. 39). In an interview on the Sniffies podcast *Cruising Confessions*, Herrera says: “The whole world is waiting in that, ‘Are they going to turn back?’” (Gonzalez & Patterson-Rosso, 2024). Herrera’s quick remark in the podcast is strikingly utopic, perhaps in a way that borders on romanticization, but we are interested in these moments of unspoken negotiation, the tensions, the passing moments rife with what-could-be in which the “whole world waits” (Gonzalez & Patterson-Rosso, 2024). Further, we see resonances between the world Herrera remarks upon and the queer worlding project Berlant and Warner argue for in their offering of queer counterpublics. Berlant and Warner define queer culture as such:

A world-making project, where “world,” like “public,” differs from a community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 558)

Cruising exemplifies such “incommensurate geographies,” constitutive of queer world-making projects. While cruising sites themselves might be geographically plotted, evinced by maps such as the *Damron Guides*, the act of cruising itself resists fixed charting. It is a social lifework that is entirely spontaneous, affective, and ephemeral.

#### 4. The Affective Lives of Cruising

Accounts of cruising often detail the experience as incredibly felt and intuitive. The practice is charged; it’s affectively rich. In Michael Bullock’s “Cruising Diaries,” a span of entries that ranges from 1991 to 2001, Bullock remembers his first time cruising:

That summer vacation I was fifteen, and had just finished my freshman year of high school. On a perfect sunny day at a water park in New Hampshire with my parents and two little sisters, I noticed a man who couldn’t take his eyes off me. He looked about as old as my dad; he was hairy, well built, and had a receding hairline, which I found incredibly sexy. The way his eyes burned through me awakened the strangest sensation, combining delight, arousal, and panic....My lack of gay knowledge as a teen in the pre-internet era led me to conclude that gay men were like unicorns: mythical, incredibly rare creatures. I felt lucky to have a real one in front of me, but why did I have to be here with my family? I pouted. Still, I found his gaze empowering; it gave me a weird sense of control. As the first child of loving parents, my healthy self-esteem prevented the Catholic priests in our parish from convincing me that my same-sex urges made me an outcast or a freak; instead, I fancied myself an insider belonging to a taboo secret society. I wasn’t going to let anything disrupt my first taste of being objectified. Aiming to heighten the man’s desire, I grabbed a lollipop from my mom’s bag and made a spectacle of myself. Once I could see that he was hooked, I headed toward the locker room, making sure he followed. (Bullock, 2020)

Bullock's detailed recount recalls the deep viscerality awoken within him upon being cruised for the first time. He describes a sort of abject pleasure, "the strangest sensation, combining delight, arousal, and panic," upon receiving attention from a man who immediately reminds Bullock of his own father (Bullock, 2020). In a peculiar reversal of normative power distributions, in which youth and sexual nascency are regarded as powerless, Bullock feels "a weird sense of control" and an immediate belonging "to a taboo secret society" that is queerness; he springs into action, grabbing a lollipop and further seducing the man (Bullock, 2020).

Espinoza's first memory cruising also took place when he was 15. In reflecting on his cruising experiences, he writes:

Much later, I would come to understand the coded desires attributed to cruising, the power associated with performing such intimate acts in these open spaces. The energy and rush I felt engaging in something so intense in such a public place worked to elide any sense of crushing doubt and insecurity. These unmapped geographies became my domain, my territory, the places I turned to at the low points in my life, in those moments when I felt the most alone, the most undesirable. (Espinoza, 2019, p. 31)

Here, Espinoza keys into the affective "rush" in queering a public place through sexual intimacies, calling cruising sites "unmapped geographies" (Espinoza, 2019, p. 31). In this way, Espinoza highlights how cruising sites are constantly in-flux; they are ever-moving, ephemeral, and constantly (re)made.

In "Ephemera as Evidence," José Esteban Muñoz defines ephemera as a sort of "invisible evidence"; ephemera may be "a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 6). Arguing that archives fail to properly account for minoritarian life, Muñoz argues that attention to the ephemeral makes possible the enactment and recognition of lifeworlds that might otherwise "not be upheld by a foundation as unsympathetic as a rigorously enforced archive" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). Thus, understanding cruising sites as aqueous, as resisting fixed charting on a standard map, allows us to see past surface geographies into the "taboo secret society" and "unmapped geographies" both Bullock and Espinoza gesture toward (Bullock, 2020; Espinoza, 2019, p. 31). Writing about Tony Just's photography project—a documentation of a public men's room, a popular cruising spot—to further his argument, Muñoz writes that Just's work "accesses a hidden queer history of public sex outside the dominant public sphere's visible historical narratives" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 6).

Importantly, Muñoz also highlights affect as constitutive of ephemera, arguing that such structures of feeling shape queer sociality:

Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored *within* the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived. Queerness, too, can be understood as a structure of feeling. Since queerness has not been let to stand, unassailed, in the mass public sphere, it has often existed and circulated as a shared structure of feeling that encompasses same-sex desire and other minoritarian sexualities but also holds other dissident affective relationships to different aspects of the sex/gender system. (Muñoz, 1996, p. 11, emphasis in original)

It is for such a reason that we argue cruising maps ought to be understood for the ways they chart affective lifeworlds. It's these affective relations that shape queer sociality and sexual practices, in turn challenging constructions of both the public and private life. In such a way, these maps expand what typical cartographic renderings might offer, providing a different entry point in thinking through the covert social lives that fixed maps will always miss.

## 5. Queer Landscapes, Queer Temporalities

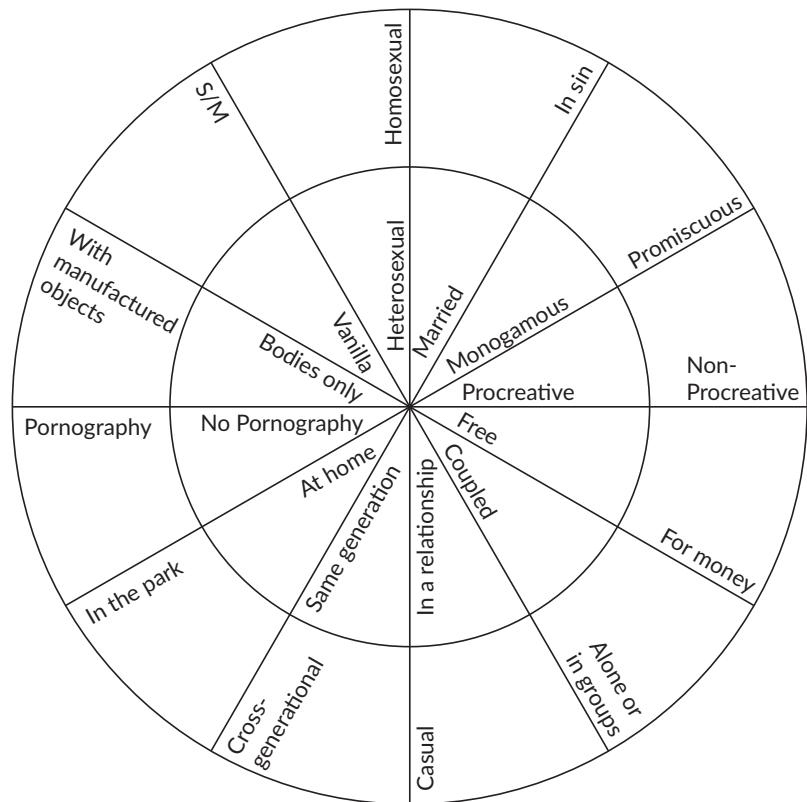
What becomes of time in the cruising space? In what ways is time queered?

As Halberstam points out, "Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1). Thinking of queer time and queer space as interlocutors, we are interested in what strange temporalities emerge amidst cruising practices.

As Elizabeth Freeman argues, "One of the most obvious ways that sex meets temporality is in the persistent description of queers as temporally backward, though paradoxically dislocated from any specific historical moment" (Freeman, 2007, p. 162). And indeed, cruising is regarded as socially-backward, given that respectable sex is private, monogamous, and reproductive, rather than public, promiscuous, and casual. Freeman also argues that queer time provides an alternative to thinking through conceptions of linear, personal development that chart milestones in such a way as to produce reproductive, heteronormative citizens. In other words, hegemonic conceptions of time, or chrononormativity, dictate when subjects "should" have sex, when subjects "should" get married, when subjects "should" have children, when subjects "should" buy a home, etc. Such a conception of time favors heteronormative coupling and familial structures, as well as a manageable social order that is favorable to state interests and the economic capitalist market. However, as Freeman points out, queers resist such a timeline. Social stigma, AIDS, and invisibilized communities have meant that many queer folks come out late in life, have sex later than straight folks, and find love and start families in a way that resists chrononormative demands.

As we see in the accounts offered by Bullock and Espinoza, men of all ages cruise. Bullock and Espinoza were both pulled into such a scene at only 15 years old, which would typically be considered quite young. Further, both men have a cruising experience with a partner considerably older than them; in being cruised, Bullock is reminded of his own father. While society often associates nascency with helplessness, a move that emerges from social regulations that link sexual purity with innocence, naivety, youth, and femininity, both men detail a feeling of power that emerges while cruising. In fact, Bullock takes the lead in his story, grabbing candy to seduce the man before leading him into a locker room. The sexual ethics become blurry, given our cultural insistence that youth lack the capacity to properly consent to sexual experiences, yet notions of queer time complicate these understandings of linear sexual development. Such a lens of queer time challenges the idea that age is an exceedingly relevant identitarian marker in the formation of social connections. In lingering with the ethical complexities of sexual encounters such as these, Bullock and Espinoza offer ambivalent, pleasurable, and even "empowering" accounts that challenge the expected distributions of power that inform contemporary sexual ethics, offering personal perspectives on intimacies that are often deemed illegible and morally incomprehensible. In her essay *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin offers

her “Charmed Circle” (Figure 2) as a visual to understand how sex practices become moralized and socially-understood as normative or deviant (Rubin, 1984).



**Figure 2.** “Charmed Circle” in Gayle Rubin’s 1984 essay *Thinking Sex*. Source: Rubin (1984, p. 281).

Sex in the middle of the “Charmed Circle” is understood to be socially acceptable, morally good, and normative. Sex in the outer circle is deviant, queer, and perverse. Cruising lives in the outer-ring. It is “promiscuous,” “non-procreative,” “alone or in groups,” “casual,” can take place “in the park,” “in sin,” and it is often “cross-generational.”

Samuel Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* offers an ethnographic account of queer cruising spots in New York City, arguing that gentrification, urban renewal projects, and conservative politics aimed at “cleaning-up the streets” pose an existential threat to spaces in which gay men have met to cruise (Delany, 1999). Delany reflects on his own time at a movie theater in Times Square, cruising other men: “Many encounters were wordless. Now and again, though, one would blossom into a conversation lasting hours, especially with those men less well-off, the out-of-work, or the homeless with nowhere to go” (Delany, 2019, p. 15). Time becomes strange in such a place, where the social order is structured by a queer sociality and the outside world is shut out. Halberstam writes about Delany’s account the following:

[It elucidates how] the relations between sexuality and time and space provide immense insight into the flows of power and subversion within post-modernism; and finally, that queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 23)

Once, when cruising a public park to look for a group orgy, Herrera remembers being lost, unable to find where other men were supposedly gathering. He thought to himself:

OK bitch, think....This park is old as fuck. How did the men before me do it? Horny guys during the war...they had no phones, they couldn't go around asking people where to suck dick in fucking Nazi Germany. Where do we go? Away from the street. Away from the lawn. Away from laughing straight people. Into the dark. Into the quiet. Into a place where we can see out but they can't see in. (Herrera, 2024, p. 45)

In this instance, Herrera keys into the waiting—a temporal limbo constitutive of cruising. He thinks across temporalities, intuiting where those before him may have gone, what they may have done. It isn't until Herrera abandons the map on his phone, adjusting his eyes to the dark and further opening himself to the world around him, that he catches, out of the corner of his eye, a lit cigarette. Another lights, then another. Herrera realizes he is being watched. There are cruisers all around him, standing in the dark. Herrera's immediate affective response is a deeply visceral one, prompting an emotional reaction that is equally physical. He writes, "I felt my ears flush and my heart start to pound. My chest tightened" (Herrera, 2024, p. 46). In his recounting, Herrera oscillates between pleasure and pain, between looking and having. And to do so, throughout his accounts, he recounts his time cruising as so affectively charged that he could literally feel it; he describes the "electrifying jolt of eye contact," the sex that "charges the air" (Herrera, 2024, p. 59). In defining queer time, Halberstam offers: "'Queer time' is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frame of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 15). Similarly, when Herrera realizes that there are cruisers all around him, he thinks to himself: "I'm already inside" (Herrera, 2024, p. 46). In other words, he has stepped out of such chrononormative temporal logics and into the invisibilized queer sociality of the cruising park.

In New York City's Prospect Park resides the Vale of Cashmere, a popular cruising spot for Black and Latino men in New York City. Herrera explains that the site "is a secluded, petite valley created when a glacier melted underground and collapsed the soil, leaving a divot surrounded by steep walls of earth" (Herrera, 2024, p. 51). Then, in the 1800s, the area became a children's playground with earth fertile enough for a "majestic" rose garden to bloom (Herrera, 2024, p. 51). A Brooklyn mayor's wife was so taken with the beauty of the park that she named it the "Vale of Cashmere," inspired by the Thomas Moore poem titled "Lalla Rookh, an Oriental Romance." Yet in 1960, the garden fell into disrepair. Herrera writes: "The lily pool became overgrown, the fountains ran dry, the rose bushes withered. The men arrived" (Herrera, 2024, p. 52). Herrera offers a trans-temporal lens, showing us how the earth has changed through the centuries. "Because of a series of events 17,000 years ago," Herrera continues, "men gather here to shoot their semen into the soil" (Herrera, 2024, p. 51).

Here, we can read the Vale of Cashmere as an abundant archive of queer ephemera; a site in which a shared structure of queer feeling is housed, in which invisibilized queer traces beget themselves, in which viscerality and visceral reactions shape sociality. In doing so, we begin to see a hidden structure of feeling and marketplace of affect that aren't immediately obvious; it invites us to reimagine the landscape. As George Chauncey points out in *Gay New York* (Chauncey, 1994), public gathering spots within the metropolis historically served as ideal meeting grounds for queer individuals; deep histories have shaped, remade, and repurposed such spaces. Herrera's explicit remark about men "shooting their semen into the soil" invokes an obvious next question

given the remark's pun: What grows from this "seed"? In other words, we might wonder what remains, what is left behind, and what new life is born from these traces. The land, overgrown and abandoned, is dismissed as unruly and abject. And indeed, on the website of Prospect Park Alliance, a collective of staff and volunteers dedicated to the upkeep and day-to-day maintenance of Prospect Park, the Vale of Cashmere is filed under "From the Archives," with the last entry—in which it is stated that the Vale is on the list of pending revitalization projects—being authored in 2014, over a decade ago (Prospect Park Alliance, 2014).

Atlas Obscura calls the Vale a "secluded ruin" (Lampbane, 2019); Herrera calls it a "garden" (Herrera, 2024, p. 61). In doing so, he suggests that the overgrown foliage and unruly botanics of this "secluded ruin" might be a sign of a flourishing life that is meant to be unkempt. What if we understand the unruly foliage as growing in tandem with the queer sociality? All sprouting from the same "seed," the same traces. What would it mean for the Vale to be "revitalized"? Even the language of revitalization implies that the land is closer to death than vitality. But, as Herrera shows, there is an abundance of life. Chrononormative time frames a ruin as an abandoned thing of the past. Queer time frames it as a rich site of queer structures of feeling in which we might discover an entire social lifeworld, a queer counterpublic.

Herrera concludes:

Our enclosed spaces are so commonly associated with loss: bars close, bathhouses close, nightclubs close, bookstores close. But you can't close a natural cruising area. You can mow it down, burn the bushes, send in cops, but it grows back, even if it takes a decade or two. They survive plagues, wars, depressions. Before we had walls and bars, we had only the outdoors to find one another. (Herrera, 2024, p. 54)

## 6. The Futures of Cruising

"You know, you're quite young to be here," said Court—a white, middle-aged sex and intimacy coach—to me over breakfast. We sat in a group of just over 20 men in the dining hall housed within a queer community gathering and retreat space in upstate New York. It was the first full day of a five-day, gay Tantric-BDSM retreat, where I was spending the week conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

I couldn't quite discern if Court's comment was simply observational, or if I was reading into skeptical undertones. He wasn't wrong; in my early 20s, I was the youngest at the retreat by decades, with the next-youngest attendee in his 40s. Most men were middle-aged and able-bodied, though there were also attendees in their 80s who used hearing aids and walking canes. I was also the only Asian person, and besides one other Black attendee, the rest of the men were white.

"Yeah, I noticed that as well!" I replied to Court. "Why do you think that is?" It's a question I had already pondered for quite some time as I had become increasingly aware of the lack of age-diversity in gay sexual spaces, such as bathhouses, leather bars, and other cruising sites. The demographics of this retreat reflected the demographics I had often encountered in those spaces, where I most often tended to be the youngest and one of few people of color.

"Well," Court answered, "For your generation, this kind of thing is a novelty. For us, it has been a necessity."

I nodded, allowing Court's insight to sink in. While I don't disagree with him, I am unconvinced that his observation accurately represents how queer sexual and social practices have changed through and across generations. Queer sexual spaces and ecologies have undergone drastic change in the past half-century, given the advent of the digital age, social movements that have resulted in a widening acceptance of queerness, the rise of queer neoliberalism, and, of course, the AIDS epidemic. I have no doubt that before and throughout this change, safe, protected spaces for queer men to meet one another to socialize and form networks of intimacy were crucial—a “necessity,” as Court said. But the retreat overwhelmingly reflected a demographic of men who were white, cis-gendered, and financially well-off. While this is far from true for every cruising site—and sometimes not true at all, as cruising sites themselves, not just participants, are shaped by classed, racialized, and gendered lines—my conversation with Court left me reflecting on how these queer counterpublics are changing and have changed across generations. What are the racial, class, and sexual politics of these spaces? Should these counterpublics be resistant to change? What would be lost?

It's no secret that the digital age has drastically changed the landscape and counter-maps of cruising. Social networks have moved online, and in some instances, they stay there entirely. The rise of cruising and hook-up apps has also meant that individuals may “cruise” more intentionally—they can browse through and select specific sexual partners, choosing specific times and locations to meet. Our present-day culture of immediacy has shaped cruising in the digital age. Further, the hypervisibility and surveillance that accompany digital technologies and social networking platforms jeopardize the ephemeral nature of cruising in person. Drew Zeiba writes:

Virtually mediated intimacy, conversely—whether Grindr hookups or Facebook friends—privileges unrelenting visibility, which, unlike the visibility of a fluorescent-lit toilet stall, privileges legible identity over anonymity. While on platforms like Grindr or Scruff, you might put any profile photo you want, or none at all, it seems that such an array of selectable, identifiable individuals could have a cognitive effect similar to any other online environment. And the common back-and-forth of face pics and nudes leaves a saveable record. Compared to the public of shared physical space, the digital “public” of a clearnet app doesn't provide much cover. (Zeiba, 2022)

Despite this, we are reluctant to romanticize past cruising practices. Heather Love offers the provocation: “Is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past?” (Love, 2009, p. 27). Cruising before the digital age bore incredible risk from the state but also from fellow cruisers. While digital cruising is not fail-proof by any means, users are better able to screen potential sexual partners and establish sexual negotiations and agreements ahead of time, but that is not to say that cruising (digital or in person) is free from the social hierarchies that structure the world outside of the cruise. In *A View from the Bottom*, Tan Hoang Nguyen writes about Douchebags of Grindr, a public forum in which users of Grindr, a popular gay cruising app, submit “douchebags” who have discriminated against others based on arbitrary, superficial reasons that are often racist, misogynistic, classist, ableist, and/or fatphobic (Nguyen, 2014, p. 1). Such biases shouldn't be too surprising, given the ways these online digital sites and maps reflect and, just as importantly, shape biases in the offline social order.

How do queer subjects, and queer of color subjects in particular, mediate the past, present, and future as they build queer counterpublics and inherit sexual practices? How do we look back at histories of exclusion and chart new futures?

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In 2001, Nguyen released a pornographic videotape, *K.I.P.* (Nguyen, 2001), that engages the contradictions and tensions of such a question. In the film, Nguyen edits his face into a pornographic film of white gay men having uninhibited condomless sex before the AIDS epidemic. Nguyen's face floats phantasmically; the men fall under his gaze. Freeman writes on the film:

This is not a tape about inclusion, ultimately, for a trace of pleasure is also visible: the surface of the television also simply reflects a voyeur taking his enjoyments where he finds them. Given the historical framing of this video by AIDS and racism against Asian Americans, it might seem politically inappropriate for the videomaker-character to experience any bliss by looking at white gay men barebacking. Yet there he is, watching. (Freeman, 2005, p. 65)

Nguyen's film is not a rewriting of history, but it is a renegotiation of inheritance—a manipulation made possible through digital technology. In editing his face into a space from which he would have been excluded, Nguyen challenges such a history and where he fits in. In reimagining this racialized queer counterpublic, Nguyen enjoys the space retroactively, further queering the time and place in which such pleasure exists, charting new possibilities and potentials for queer futures.

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## About the Authors

**Alexander P. Chun** is a PhD student in the Department of American Studies at Brown University.



**Sandra Jeppesen** is professor of interdisciplinary studies at Lakehead University, Orillia.