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"Chauncey's book breathes a *largess* of political spirit, a willingness to put treasured truisms to the test of evidence and to evaluate sympathetically the past's claims for itself. It sustains some of the highest virtues of American social history: assiduous archival work, intricate stories, a democratic view of historical agency, a strong overarching interpretation.

Chauncey's meticulous and beautifully accomplished recreation of the city's sexual map emerges from his painstaking research in police and trial records. But while Chauncey never suggests that the 1910s and '20s were a golden era of tolerance, he implies that the vitality of the subculture outstripped the forces of regulation."

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Gay NEW YORK

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

1890–1940

GEORGE CHAUNCEY

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

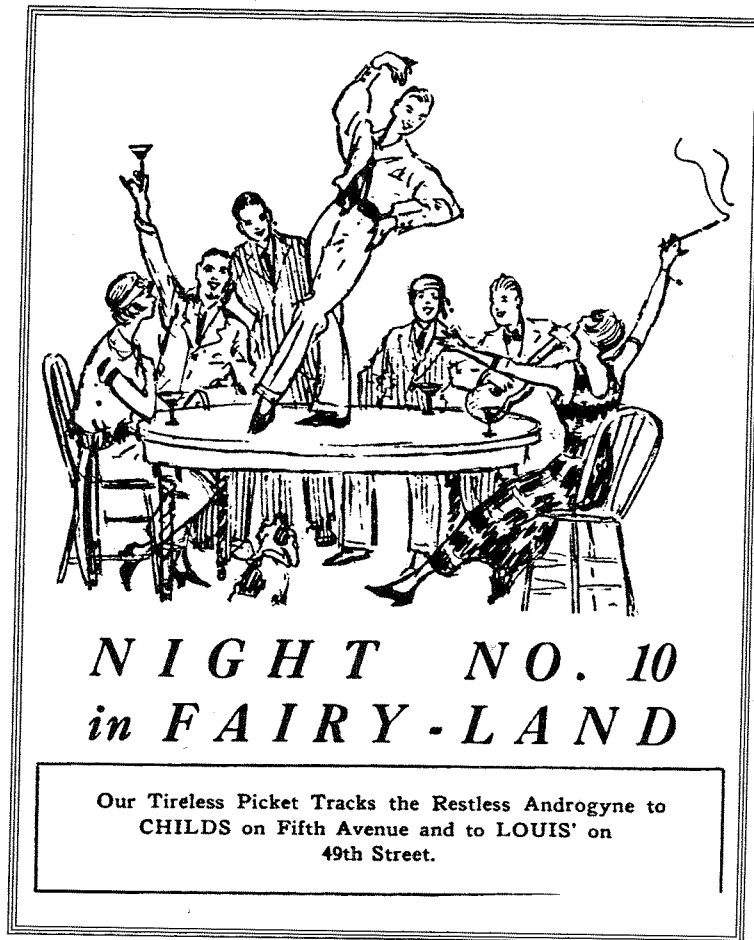


Figure 6.1. Gay men and lesbians made numerous cafeterias and restaurants their meeting places. This sketch of a supposed gay drinking party appeared in *Broadway Brevities* in 1924. (Collection of Leonard Finger.)

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

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

BACHELOR HOUSING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As in most housing situations, then, gay men at the Y constantly ran the risk of being discovered and penalized for their homosexual liaisons or simply for their status as homosexuals. But so long as they regulated

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ments" had simply replaced the hotels as the sites of prostitution and unrestrained socializing between men and women, it reorganized itself as a general anti-prostitution society, which continued to be a major force in the city's anti-vice campaigns until it disbanded in 1932.²⁸

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

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

Even after the suppression of the Raines Law hotels, larger, more conventional hotels unconnected to saloons, some with as many as a hun-

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

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

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

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

CAFETERIA SOCIETY

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

Particular restaurants served as the locus of particular gay social networks; overlapping groups of friends would meet regularly for dinner and camaraderie. The role of restaurants as social centers meant they were a key part of the gay world for men.

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

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

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

The cafeterias and Automats were not just cheap places to take meals. Many people also used them as meeting places.

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

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

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

*Of the two hundred men arrested on homosexual charges by the police in cooperation with the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1920–21, thirty-nine were restaurant employees, by far the largest single occupational category represented. Frederick Whitin, general secretary of the Committee of Fourteen, surmised in 1921 that this might be related to the apparent move by homosexuals, like prosti-

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

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

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

The history of two cafeterias in the Village in the 1920s and 1930s, Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria, both located on Christopher Street at Sheridan Square, demonstrated

men could be made part of the spectacle of an establishment, even as they turned it into a haven. Both cafeterias, like the turn-of-the-century Bowery resorts before them, seem to have premised their late-night operations on the assumption that by allowing lesbians and gay men to gather there they would attract sight-seers out to gawk at a late-night "fairy hangout." The 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City* almost surely described the Life when it delicately explained that "a cafeteria [at Sheridan Square], curiously enough, is one of the few obviously Bohemian spots [left] in the Village, and evenings the more conventional occupy tables in one section of the room and watch the 'show' of the eccentrics on the other side."⁵⁰ Several other guidebooks made the same (and usually equally coded) point about both Stewart's and the Life,⁵¹ but in 1936 one man, outraged by the situation, described the "show" more explicitly. One of the largest cafeterias in town, "brilliantly lighted, [and] fully exposed to two streets [in the Village]," he charged in a medical journal, was the meeting ground for "exhibitionists and degenerates of all types".

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many gay men and lesbians, in fact, especially younger people who felt they had less social position to lose, regularly tested the limits on their openness at restaurants, speakeasies, and other establishments, by dancing together, speaking loudly about their affairs, and camping for others. While at the Round Table in Greenwich Village one night in 1929, Parker Tyler was invited to join a group of lesbians and gay men who were clearly unwilling to brook any restrictions on their evening's fun: "Someone—Lesbian—rushed up and asked me to join their drinking party," Tyler wrote a gay friend, "and I did and someone who said he had just been brought out began making drunken love to me but he

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

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

Most managers, like the ones who stopped Tyler from dancing, never let matters get "out of hand." But when the informal injunction against gay visibility was successfully challenged by gay men and lesbians or gave way to public fascination with gay visibility, the formal agencies of the law—the police and social-purity organizations—sometimes stepped in to reestablish (the social) order. They sometimes did this with the con-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Execution of Law depends on Location of violations (Ch. 1, 1.1)

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

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

fairys [sic] and anybody could tell who they were simply [by] looking at their actions”: among other things, the men felt free to make eye contact and strike up conversations with strangers and to call them over to their tables. The management's collusion with the arrangement was confirmed when a waiter, upon questioning, admitted he knew the men were “fairys,” although he protested that he personally “didn't [have] any use for them.”⁶²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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