Performing Desire in Times Square: Sailors, Hustlers and Masculinity

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PERFORMING DESIRE IN TIMES SQUARE: SAILORS, HUSTLERS AND MASCULINITY

by

KEL R. KARPINSKI

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Kel R. Karpinski

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Performing Desire in Times Square: Sailors, Hustlers and Masculinity

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Kel R. Karpinski

Advisor: James Wilson

From WWII to the early 1970s, New York City as a port town created a liminal space extending from the piers in the Brooklyn Navy Yard all the way to Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. In Times Square, through interactions on the street, in bars and in hotel rooms, desire and masculinity become a performance between and for men. The queerness of these performances lies in the fact that they fall outside of the norms of society both as same-sex encounters and because sex work is viewed as “deviant.” Further, these interactions eschew traditional labels and limits of desire and sexuality. Male hustlers perform masculinity to both elicit desire in others and as a way to secure power. Desire plays out in this space and time in ways that are unique to itself, allowing sailor and hustler alike to engage in these performances of desire and masculinity while exploring and expanding their sexualities. This thesis examines how such performances of masculinity and desire are represented in films and novels of the era and how they inform notions of queerness at different historical moments from WWII to early Gay Liberation in the 1970s. It includes three separate but interwoven case studies, which are the basis for individual chapters. The first case study examines the MGM musicals *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) and *On the Town* (1949) that were released just after the end of World War II; the second is John Rechy’s 1963 novel *City of Night*; and the third analyzes the art films *Pink Narcissus* and *Flesh* which coincide with early years of Gay Liberation in the late 1960s-early 1970s. My thesis also explores how these texts map queer desire in the city and how they are situated historically. By mapping all of these texts onto the city, I show how these histories of queerness persist.
I knew he was performing a desire he didn't feel, and really I think he was drunk past the possibility of desire. But then there's something theatrical in all our embraces, I think, as we weigh our responses against those we perceive or project; always we desire too much or not enough, and compensate accordingly. I was performing too, pretending to believe that his show of passion was a genuine response to my own desire, about which there was nothing feigned.

—*What Belongs to You* — Garth Greenwell
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Introduction

The history of hustlers and sailors are intertwined in Times Square in New York City. In Paul Cadmus’s famous painting The Fleet’s In (1934) (see fig. 1), sailors on shore leave mingle with sex workers on the streets of New York. The Fleet’s In explores the homoerotic desire of sailors on shore leave in New York City. The sailors’ raucous and rowdy behavior is characteristic of what would come to be known as the norm for sailors on shore leave—seeking out sex in every port town. One of the men wears a red necktie\(^1\)—a calling card for homosexual men at the time—think hanky code but a few decades earlier. This painting would spark the interest of Jerome Robbins who cited it as inspiration for his ballet Fancy Free (1944) and then later for the musical On the Town (1944) and continues to carry with it a queer legacy.\(^2\)

From WWII to the early 1970s, New York City as a port town created a liminal space extending from the piers in the Brooklyn Navy Yard all the way to Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. In Times Square, through interactions on the street, in bars and in hotel rooms, desire and masculinity became a performance between and for men. The queerness of these performances lies in the fact that they fall outside of the norms of society both as same-sex encounters and because sex work is viewed as “deviant.” Further, these interactions eschew traditional labels and limits of desire and sexuality. Male hustlers performed masculinity to both elicit desire in others and as a way to secure power. Desire plays out in this space and time in ways that are unique to itself, allowing sailor and hustler alike to engage in these performances of desire and masculinity while exploring and expanding their sexualities.

The port town of New York City becomes a liminal space as an extension of the sea. Thus


the space of Times Square becomes a continuation of this liminality. As the epicenter of the port town, Times Square allows for a free exploration of vice and desire.

While there is some existing scholarship on the themes and texts with which I am writing about, there has been surprisingly little focused on instances of how desire, masculinity and performance operate in popular culture. The texts that I address include *On the Town*, *Anchors Aweigh*, *City of Night*, *Flesh* and *Pink Narcissus*. Encoded queerness of these texts and their main characters was difficult to understand at the time of their releases. Only through a reading with a new understanding of the fluidity of queerness through a current queer lens can the full potentiality of their queerness be realized.

There are texts that look at the sailor as a homoerotic icon and his connection to masculinity and sexuality, but these are almost exclusively through sociological, historical and ethnographic studies. I instead examine them from a Cultural Studies perspective. Similarly, previous scholarship on *City of Night* engages with the theme of masculinity, but my thesis further expands this work to be in dialogue with other narratives of hustlers and the culture of the sex trade in Times Square and New York City and show a more nuanced view of the novel and its connection to queer history. There has been very little attention to *Pink Narcissus*, and I fill that gap. Finally, the research on *Flesh* largely focuses on Morrissey and Warhol and the reception of the film rather than looking at the complexities of desire and masculinity.

My work offers a fuller view of their connections to queer history. Likewise, by mapping these texts onto the city, I show the importance of these cultural texts to the history of New York City and queer culture.

**Mapping Queer Histories**

I have created maps using Adobe Illustrator to show how each of these texts interact with the space of Times Square (see Maps Intro 1 and 2). Although each of these texts is fictional, they interact
with the real space of the city and Times Square in interesting ways. By looking at each of these texts, one can see how the embedded queer history of Times Square continues to live on even when hidden from plain sight. In tracing the history of the city, one can see how the city changes in each of these moments and how it is shaped by the queer players in its midst.

The map delineates the greater Times Square area as marked by 9th Avenue to the West and 3rd Avenue to the East, 59th Street/Central Park to the North and 34th Street to the South (see maps Intro 1 and Intro 2). This area marks not only the primary spaces that these texts interact but also represent how the Times Square area radiates outward to encompass all of these adjacent areas. Times Square can be reached by a short walking distance from any of these locations and can be felt in the same way. Some of the characters in these fictional texts even comment on this fact – *City of Night* – Central Park becomes part of the world 42nd Street. The terms “42nd Street” and “Times Square” often become synonymous and interchangeable—42nd Street is used to refer to Times Square specifically and vice versa.

This map shows all of the chapters together—all of the texts read together to show not only how the texts interact with Times Square but also how they interact with each other. They traverse the same spaces and places years apart. In keeping the same map layout throughout each chapter, I show how these narratives overlap in these physical spaces. Even writing this from the CUNY Graduate Center at 34th Street and 5th Avenue, I place myself and this scholarship among these continuing queer histories.

**Reading Queerly**

Some of the scholarship that has previously been written about queer sailors has focused on the policy around homosexuality in the military both during WWII as seen in Bérubé’s *Coming Out Under Fire* (1990) and D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1998). Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1995) likewise speaks to the homosocial history of sailors in New York leading up to
WWII. Elizabeth Lee’s “When Sailors Kiss: Picturing Homosexuality in Post-World War II” (2009) provides the foundation for my own work in looking at the homoerotic imagery of sailors in mid-twentieth century modern art.

The encoded queerness of these texts was difficult to understand at the time of their release as were the characters as a representation of this encodedness. Only through a contemporary queer reading with a new understanding of the fluidity of queerness can the full potentiality of their queerness be realized. Here and throughout this thesis, I’m using queer as a challenge to normative sexuality and a subversion of heteronormativity. I see it as way to denaturalize and destabilize identities for those sexualities and genders that refuse to fall in line with the norm. Also as the characters in several texts engage in sex work, long viewed as a form of sexual deviance, I also draw upon Emma Pérez to think about queerness as she posits, “deviant behavior has become a politicized queer identity in the twenty-first century.”

Although I am writing about sex workers, I use the terms that would have been used at the time and that are used in the texts. I want this work to be in dialogue with the texts and to engage them in/on their own terms. Thus, for most of the chapters, I use the terms “hustler” and “john” as those are the terms that would have been commonly used for male sex workers and their clients, and thus are what are largely used in the literature about these texts. In the second chapter on City of Night, I also use the terms “youngman” and “score” as those are terms used by John Rechy and by his characters in the novel, but I also use the terms hustler and john when connecting them more broadly to a larger history of Times Square and the other texts. As historian George Chancey explains, the term “trade” gets used for men who have sex with men, but do not necessarily identify at gay. The term often is used when speaking about gay-for-pay hustlers and sometimes with the

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descriptor “rough” trade when referring to especially masculine men.

A conversation about “situational homosexuality” is often entangled in these conversations about gay-for-pay hustlers. “Situational homosexuality,” as described by Jeffrey Escoffier, entails certain homosexual acts between men being a result of “sexual behavior strongly conditioned by situational constraints” in examples of prison, being away at war or sea, as well as the economic necessity of sex work.\(^5\) He further argues that gay-for-pay falls into the category of situational homosexuality because it is often done out of necessity or even as a means of survival. I argue that the difference here is the element of desire or how desire is situated. Situational homosexuality in the other instances still arises from desire if not for that particular person or body, then for some kind of sexual gratification whereas with gay-for-pay sex work, the desire from the hustler could be viewed as purely transactional as a desire for capital. There is also the potential for the desire to be desired by their clients.

When I write about sailors, I am speaking about the enlisted, usually working-class men in the US Navy. Most of the eroticization of sailors is specifically fetishizing the enlisted men and not the officers. There is often a connection to hustlers and to men considered “trade.” In fetishizing sailors, there is also a fetishization of the masculine that accompanies it.

The image of the sailor as a homoerotic icon becomes so ubiquitous as that it becomes the first person the protagonist sleeps with in *City of Night* at a YMCA no less and is also one of the many pantsless men in *Pink Narcissus*’s alternative Times Square in *Pink Narcissus*. Scholar Tom Waugh writes, “Sailors and khaki had always been part of gay iconography—think of Walt Whitman’s Civil War experiences or of Paul Cadmus’s ribald paintings of sailors from the Thirties—but during the War, a previously marginal cultural tendency centered in seaports and bohemian

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undergrounds took the shape of a mass cultural phenomenon.”

**Queer Theory**

Some of the scholarship that has previously been written about queer sailors has focused on the policy around homosexuality in the military both during WWII as seen in Bérubé’s *Coming Out Under Fire* (1990) and D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1998). Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1995) likewise speaks to the homosocial history of sailors in New York leading up to WWII. Elizabeth Lee’s “When Sailors Kiss: Picturing Homosexuality in Post-World War II” (2009) provides the foundation for my own work in looking at the homoerotic imagery of sailors in mid-century modern art.

I build on David Lugowski’s idea of “hard readings” from “Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood’s Production Code” (1999) as well as Elizabeth Lee’s notion of “reading queerly” to analyze *Anchors Aweigh* and *On the Town*. I also use Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) to examine these performances.

Analyzing these cultural artifacts, I use Emma Pérez’s definition of deviant behavior as she outlines its relation to queerness in her text “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard” (2003). I scrutinize the works applying Valentine’s notion of “erasure of desire” and how identity is rendered “unintelligible” from his article “‘I went to bed with my own kind once’: the erasure of desire in the name of identity” (2003).

My analysis of these films including *Pink Narcissus* and *Flesh* are likewise informed by Richard Dyer’s *Now You See It: Studies is Lesbian and Gay Film* (2002) as well as Thomas Waugh’s *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*

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Feminist scholar Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze” in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” As Mulvey theorizes the male gaze it is created by the camera, representation and characters, and by the audience that receives it. Women get passively consumed by the active male for the pleasure of the male viewer—simplified: women get objectified. Responding to Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, Tom Waugh writes, “If heterosexual culture simplifies and rigidifies the dynamics of male subject and female object through the tyranny of gender difference, same-sex eroticism opens them up, rendering them ever more volatile.” He argues against the separation of subject and object that Mulvey describes as happening in heterosexual encounters instead describing a sameness or unity: “Same-sex eroticism layers upon the individual erotic object choice the option of identification as well as voyeurism, project as well as objectification: we (often) want to be, we often are the same as the man we love.” I instead argue that the characters in these texts queer this dynamic between subject and object by flipping the script. They become themselves the object of desire for their gay male clients and thus the audience. Through their performances of desire, they turn the gaze back onto themselves thus subverting their own objectification. Through this inversion of the gaze that it is neither a male gaze nor a female gaze operating in these instances but a distinctively queer gaze (ga[y]ze). Though this happens perhaps rather obviously in Chapters 2 and 3 as the hustlers perform their desire for the johns, I also argue that this queer ga(y)ze can also be seen in Chapter 1 in how the audience creates queer readings of the films for themselves.

9 Waugh, 44–45.
Performing Desire and Masculinity

This thesis examines how such performances of masculinity and desire are represented in films and novels of the era and how they inform notions of queerness at different historical moments from WWII to early Gay Liberation in the 1970s. It includes three separate but interwoven case studies, which are the basis for individual chapters. The first case study examines the MGM musicals Anchors Aweigh (1945) and On the Town (1949) that were released just after the end of World War II; the second is John Rechy’s 1963 novel City of Night; and the third analyzes the art films Pink Narcissus and Flesh which coincide with early years of Gay Liberation in the late 1960s-early 1970s. My thesis also shows how these texts map queer desire in the city and how they are situated historically. By mapping all of these texts onto the city, I show how these histories of queerness persist.

In the first chapter, I examine the history of the sailor in Times Square and New York City during and just after WWII. Through a queer reading of Gene Kelly’s characters in both Anchors Aweigh (the role of Joseph “Joe” Brady) and On the Town (the role of Gabey), I argue that these characters perform their desire for the female leads, unlike the hustlers in the other texts who perform desire for their male clients, while the true desire of his characters lies with Frank Sinatra’s characters in both films. Kelly’s performance of desire allows him to project undisputed masculinity in an attempt to shield himself from scrutiny. I also look at the image of the sailor as a homoerotic icon in the popular imagination of the 20th century and how his sexuality has been posited both historically and more recently, including the 2016 film Hail, Caesar!

In the second chapter, I analyze John Rechy’s novel City of Night written in 1963. City of Night tells the story of an unnamed narrator of mixed Mexican and Scottish heritage, who is born in El Paso on the US/Mexico border. Upon moving to New York City after his father’s death, he finds himself working as a male hustler or “youngman.” Through his sexual encounters in and around Times Square, the narrator in City of Night learns what is desirable and how to embody that desire.
He denies that he has reciprocal desire for men he has sex with to maintain his own straight identity, yet he craves to be desired by those same men. As he learns to perform desire for his clients, he also learns the power that comes from being able to perform and maintain his masculinity as he moves through the streets of the city.

In the third chapter, I compare the films *Flesh* (1968) and *Pink Narcissus* (1971). Through an analysis of the two main characters in these films (played by Joe Dallesandro and Bobby Kendall, respectively), who are gay-for-pay hustlers, I argue they create a performance of desire for their gay male clients by making themselves the object of desire rather than being a subject of desire. Through the creation of the self as an object of desire, they find agency through this performance of desire. In their interactions around Times Square, these characters explore their sexuality and queerness through these performances.

My ultimate aims for this thesis are to shed light on these histories of Times Square that have been hidden or overlooked, and to show the ways that queerness can resist specific identifications and take on more fluid meanings. Through my readings of these texts, I illustrate how these characters perform their desire and masculinity and create space to explore more nuanced possibilities of queerness.
Map Intro 2

Full Times Square Map Key

*On the Town* Times Square Map Key

1. Times Square/42nd St Subway Station
2. 50th Street Subway Station
3. 59th Street/Columbus Circle Subway Station
4. Rockefeller Center
5. Carnegie Hall
6. Empire State Building
7. Natural History Museum
8. Coney Island
9. Brooklyn Navy Yard
10. The Port of LA - *Anchors Aweigh*
11. Metropolitan Opera House (Old Met Building) The ballet *Fancy Free* opened here on April 18, 1944.
13. Adelphi Theatre The musical *On the Town* opened here on December 28, 1944.
15. Sloane House YMCA Sailors and hustlers alike stayed here when visiting Times Square.

*City of Night* Times Square Map Key

1. 34th Street Armory
2. Sloane House YMCA
3. Apollo Theatre
4. Public Library Central Building
5. 34th Street & Eighth Avenue Subway Station
6. Bryant Park
7. Central Park
8. 42nd Street & Eighth Avenue Port Authority Subway Station
9. Automat Cafe
10. Third Avenue in the low east 50s
11. Port Authority Bus Terminal
12. Chicago
13. Pershing Square, Los Angeles
14. San Francisco
15. New Orleans
16. El Paso
Pink Narcissus and Flesh Times Square Map Key

1. **Times Square** Here: both the alternative fantasy space of *Pink Narcissus* and the spectre of Times Square in *Flesh*.

2. Third Avenue in the low east 50s/Lexington and 53rd Street Subway Station
3. Greenacre Park
4. Bryant Park
5. New York Public Library Central Building

7. **Cine Malibu** *Pink Narcissus* premiered here on May 24, 1971.
Chapter 1

“Twice as Gay”: Queer Sailors On the Town and at liberty in Times Square

Introduction

Not only did Gene Kelly play sailors in the movies, he also served in the Navy during World War II as a Lieutenant on assignment as a Naval Photographer at the Anacostia Naval Base in Washington, DC. In 1945, the same year as Anchors Aweigh opened in theatres, Gene Kelly also starred in the film Combat Fatigue Irritability, which was made for the Navy. Combat Fatigue Irritability is an earlier name for what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This film was used within the Navy to help rehabilitate men who were suffering from PTSD and was not circulated outside of the Navy until recently when it was digitized by the National Library of Medicine.¹⁰ This film could just as easily be about homosexuality in the Navy as it is about Combat Fatigue Irritability. Kelly’s character Seaman Bob Lucas struggles to relate to his “girl” and finds he’s only happy with his Navy “buddy.” He wants his buddies to have “a place of their own” because they are not able to fit in anywhere else (read: not in straight spaces). A voiceover from a Naval psychiatrist indicates that part of Seaman Lucas’s problem is that he has tried to “bury” and “deny” his feelings. Having finally experienced the freedom of being in a homosocial environment, he can no longer return to the compulsory heterosexuality of his previous life and now only finds solace in the arms of his Navy buddy.

In this chapter, I examine the ways that queerness can be read and is shown through Gene Kelly’s portrayal of sailors in the MGM musicals On the Town (1949) and Anchors Aweigh (1945). I also analyze the connection of the sailor to Times Square in New York City and how the sailor and his sexuality has been viewed historically in the popular imagination. The sailors in these films

¹⁰ U.S. National Library of Medicine, Combat Fatigue Irritability (US Navy, 1945), 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-7zBpi4a_Y.
perform their desire for the female leads while their true desire is for each other. This performance of desire allows Kelly’s characters to project an undisputed masculinity that shields them from scrutiny of the relationships between Kelly and Sinatra’s sailors. While both films show characters that are “trying” to mimic and perform heterosexuality as they understand it, they ultimately fail because their homoerotic desire is too resilient.

Even though Anchors Aweigh takes place in Los Angeles and not in Times Square, there is obvious overlap between this film and On the Town both in terms of themes and the starring sailors: Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. Anchors Aweigh is essential to understand the complexity of not only the sailors’ sexuality but how it operates in these liminal spaces of port towns (Los Angeles and Times Square in New York City), which serve as extensions of the fluidity they are allowed at sea. By viewing Anchors Aweigh as a preamble to On the Town, I’m able to show not only how their relationship develops, but also how the liminal space of the port town gets replicated. I read the films queerly out of chronological order centering On the Town for its connection to Times Square. Anchors Aweigh also allows us to see the richness and possibility of their relationship without the imposition of the third sailor played by Jules Munshin in On the Town as a “third wheel.”

I employ a “hard reading” of these films as David M. Lugowski discusses in “Queering the New Deal” he writes,

attending such charges [that queer discourse is “absent” from films during the Production Code Era] are claims that critics who spot queerness in films are “reading too much into it” or “reading too hard”; I, for one, am very interested in “hard” readings. As Richard Dyer has noted, “Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them.”

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These films manage to hold nuance and space for such meanings. Likewise in “When Sailors Kiss,” Elizabeth Lee writes that to “read queerly” in relation to art means to “read between the lines,” which I also apply to the reading of these films.¹² Lugowski in looking at films during the Depression addresses whether or not queer audiences would have recognized themselves in these caricatures portrayed in films at that time: “Queer imagery can be found in all types of U.S. cinema produced between the 1929 stock market crash and the United States' entry into World War II. Furthermore, this imagery was read as such by people at the time.”¹³ Even if these representations were not read as “queer” by the general public, often in the face of the lack of representations, we queers learn to work with what we have.

I use the terms gay, homosexual and queer often interchangeably throughout this paper. I would like to acknowledge Steven Cohan’s differentiation between his own use of these terms when writing about the encoded queerness of MGM musicals,

According to historian George Chauncey, during the first half of the twentieth century sexual preference did not determine identity across the board for all men. As often as it referred to same-sex intimacy, homosexuality signified a type of gender behavior, an effeminate demeanor. Men who acted on their homosexual desires did not necessarily self-identify as “gay”—as happened more automatically after the emergence of the identity politics and the gay liberation movement…”¹⁴ Although I do not always strictly adhere to his terms, I broadly use the term “queer” when demonstrating my own reading and modern interpretations of these films, “gay” to refer to the identity and “homosexual” to refer to sexual acts and how it became interpreted by Army and Navy

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psychiatrists during WWII. Likewise, I use the terms “heterosexual” and “straight” interchangeably to refer to the dominant hegemonic ideal of sexuality of “opposite” sex desire.

**World War II, Homosexuality and the “Buddy System”**

The military has a long history of being associated with same-sex relationships, but this expands dramatically during World War II. Historian John D’Emilio writes, “the war plucked millions of young men and women, whose sexual identities were just forming, out of their homes, out of towns and small cities, out of the heterosexual environment of the family, and dropped them into essentially sex-segregated situations…where heterosexuality was normally imposed.”\(^{16}\) For some this was an opportunity to explore already existing desires while for others it was a chance to realize such desires. Even previous to the war, there was “a highly gender-segregated social world of young, unmarried, and often transient laborers, seaman and the like, the ‘rough’ working-class men.”\(^{17}\) This gave sailors and other men in such homosocial environments the opportunity to act upon same-sex desire without necessarily being labeled as “gay” while away at sea or in Times Square.

Likewise scholar Charles Kaiser describes the army as “a giant centrifuge, creating the largest concentration of gay men inside a single institution in American history.”\(^{18}\) Even though by 1941, the Army now included “homosexual proclivities” as one of their “disqualifying ‘deviations,’”\(^{19}\) often “the only obstacle many of them encountered at the induction center was the ‘Do you like

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\(^{15}\) Winfred Overholser and Harry Stack Sullivan were responsible for creating the screening process used by psychiatrists during the war. Lt. Col. Patrick Madigan was the Army’s chief psychiatrist during World War II and William Menninger served as an Army psychiatric consultant.


\(^{17}\) Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 77.


\(^{19}\) Kaiser, 29.
girls?’ question.” Historian Allan Bérubé speculates that if the Kinsey Report “were accurate and applied as much to the military as to the civilian population, at least 650,000 and as many as 1.6 million male soldiers were homosexual.” This means that many more of the men in the military could have fallen elsewhere on the Kinsey scale without identifying as homosexual yet engaged in same-sex sexual encounters.

My interest in the fluid nature of sexuality and specifically that of sexual identity and sailors is in large part due to the culture of masculinity and “heterosexuality” that allows for homosexual acts among men under certain circumstances, for example being away at sea especially during WWII, that does not threaten either said masculinity or heterosexuality in their eyes. So although being in these same-sex environments for gay men may have served as a way for them to act on already existing desire, it also served for some men as almost a vacuum, in which to explore their sexuality.

During WWII, in the Army and Navy, commanding officers encouraged men to pair off as part of the “buddy system.” These men were supposed to look out for and support each other. The buddy system in the Navy encouraged homosocial behavior and created strong emotional bonds. This created a cover for gay relationships but it also sparked some as well, whether romantic or purely sexual. “William Menninger and other psychiatrists recognized the erotic undertones of these buddy relationships, calling them substitutes for female companionship and a form of ‘disguised and sublimated homosexuality.’” Through the buddy system, men developed companionate, romantic as well as sexual relationships with other men. Bérubé further describes the role of the buddy system:

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20 Kaiser, 32.
21 Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire*, 3. There were two Kinsey Reports: Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953). Kinsey created the “Kinsey scale” which placed human sexuality on a spectrum from 0 to 6 with 0 being completely heterosexual and 6 being completely homosexual.
22 Sailors certainly have been associated with queer acts prior to WWII and are in fact part of a larger history extending back to Walt Whitman’s sailors and Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd* to name a few.
23 Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire*, 38.
During the war the combat soldiers’ acceptance of one another’s pairing and physical intimacy was more a recognition of their need for closeness in life-threatening situations than any conscious tolerance of homosexuality. Buddy relationships easily slipped into romantic and even sexual intimacies between men that they themselves often did not perceive to be “queer.”

This shows the fluidity of these sailors’ sexualities and how easily their buddy relationships “slipped” into deeper waters. Although their desire initially stems from their buddy relationship, it goes much deeper not only at sea but by extension to the liminal spaces of Times Square and other port towns.

**Sailors in the Popular Imagination**

Sailors historically have had the reputation of being more promiscuous and having looser morals because of their raucous behavior when on shore leave and because they presumably weren’t tied down anywhere or to anyone. Bérubé writes,

> Generally [gay servicemen and civilians] believed sailors to be the most available and marines the least. Sailors acquired this reputation because they were out at sea without women for long stretches of time, they were younger than men in the other branches and their tight uniforms looked boyish, revealing and sexy.

Because sailors were “out at sea” supposedly without sexual contact (discounting any same sex sexual encounters), it was assumed that they were more eager for sexual release while on shore leave in these port towns.

According to Steven Zeeland’s oral history project *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line Between “Straight” and “Gay” in the U.S. Navy*, sailors tend to have more fluid sexualities than their civilian counterparts of similar demographic backgrounds. He writes that, “…sailors tend

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24 Bérubé, 188.
25 Bérubé, 110–11.
to be sexually adventuresome. It is one of the many areas where a hard distinguishing line between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ simply does not exist.”

Quoting from Randy Shilts’s *Conduct Unbecoming*, Zeeland writes that even the culture of the Navy has “the most ‘pervasive homosexual subtext’” pointing to the rituals of drag and simulated anal sex in the “Crossing the Line” ceremonies. That many of these sailors sought out civilian men and male hustlers for sexual encounters while on shore leave points to how the sea becomes this liminal space that then gets extended to the port towns. The fluid nature of the sailor’s sexuality easily stretches from the ship to the shore.

The saying in the Navy “it’s only queer if you’re tied to the pier,” implying sex that happens at sea between men is due to circumstance (i.e. that what happens at sea stays at sea), is problematized when sailors on shore leave engage in the same kind of sex acts with other men, and further problematized in the context of the films *Anchors Aweigh* and *On the Town* as they take place during periods of shore leave. It’s no coincidence that shore leave is commonly called “at liberty” because in theory these sailors are “at liberty” to do as they want during this time even if there are strong recommendations from their Commanding Officers of what “not” to do.

The port town becomes a liminal space as an extension of the sea. Thus the space of Times Square becomes a continuation of this liminality. Sailors are unmoored at sea allowing them a freedom unfound on land expect at liberty in porn towns. Sailors get read differently in Times Square than at sea because they are on shore leave and able to let loose.

Times Square was one of the most popular and frequented spots of sailors both during war and peace time despite it being five miles from the Navy Yard. D’Emilio describes the scene, “Crowded into port cities, men on leave or those waiting to be shipped overseas shared beds in

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26 Steven Zeeland, *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line Between “Straight” and “Gay” in the U.S. Navy* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), xix; his emphasis.
27 Zeeland, 8.
28 Zeeland, 14.
YMCA and slept in each other’s arms in parks or in the aisles of movie theaters that stayed open to house them.”30 As a liminal space, Times Square as the epicenter of the port town allows for a free exploration of vice and desire. Times Square still draws many sailors during Fleet Week each May even though the landscape has changed dramatically.

The public had (and arguably still has) more direct contact with sailors than with other branches of the military because of shore leave and yearly Fleet Week celebrations in port towns.

Beth Genné writes

The sailor ‘costume’ (and the institution it signified) also, in a sense, gave the characters license for otherwise unacceptable public behavior, especially during the war and the immediate postwar years. The sailor on leave was treated indulgently by a public that saw him as a cultural hero, a guardian of the nation.31

Thus one wonders if not only were the sexual proclivities of sailors then tolerated but even encouraged by a public that thought they could do no wrong or gave them license to do so because of their extreme circumstances.

**On the Town in Times Square**

The writer Donald Vining famously recorded his sexual encounters in New York (among other port towns) later to be published as *A Gay Diary*. “Vining had affairs with soldiers, sailors, and marines as well as civilians. Many of them took place at Sloan [sic] House, where 60 percent of the residents were military personnel on leave; but he also met men at the canteen, in movie theaters on 42d [sic] Street, in Pershing Square in Los Angeles and Central Park in New York, on the street, and in gay bars filled with men in uniform.”32 Sailors found themselves on shore leave in Times Square

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looking for affection and companionship.

*On the Town*, which was billed as “Twice as gay as Anchors Aweigh” (see fig. 2), was released in 1949. The film relies on the compulsive pairings of heterosexual couples between the sailors and their female civilian counterparts, but through a queer reading, I show that Gene Kelly’s Gabey is not unlike the sailors that Vining encountered. On the surface it appears that Gabey wants to pair with Miss Turnstiles/Ivy Smith when in reality Gabey is only performing his desire for her, taking a journey through Times Square.

The film itself has a queer genealogy which traces back to the gay subcultures of hustlers and sailors in the port town of New York City. Genné writes, “*On the Town*, [was] a film based on the Broadway musical which grew out of *Fancy Free* and also used elements of *Anchors Aweigh*.” She writes that Jerome Robbins’s inspiration for *Fancy Free* partially stems from his intrigue around the Paul Cadmus painting *The Fleet’s In*, which explores the homoerotic desire of sailors on shore leave in New York (see fig. 1).

*On the Town* is the first film that Gene Kelly directed, co-directing with Stanley Donen. Kelly insisted that *On the Town* be shot on location in New York, and throughout the film the sailors are continually in or pass through the Times Square area.

In *On the Town*, the three sailors are compulsively paired with the three female leads showing

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33 Ronald R. Butters, “Cary Grant and the Emergence of Gay ‘Homosexual,’” *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 19, no. 1 (April 4, 2012): 194, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/458388/summary. The use of the term “gay” as we see it here in the promotional material for *On the Town*, at the time Chauncey describes as gaining popularity as a way to describe homosexual men, but similarly Ronald R. Butters explains in the 1930s “gay” may have only served as “in-term” or coded language for those who were homosexual and who ran in circles with homosexual men and women, and that this would have be true as late as 1951. Thus the term “gay” in the theatrical trailer and other promotional material for *On the Town* was being used as a synonym for “happy” or “colorful” although the film is certainly plenty gay in the queer sense as well.


35 Both Jerome Robbins and Paul Cadmus were gay. The musical composer for the musical of *On the Town* was Leonard Bernstein who was also gay (although only 3 of his songs were kept for the film). Thus the film of *On the Town* has a very queer lineage.
how forced these pairings become regardless of the actual desires of the sailors. This film pairs Gene Kelly (Gabey) and Frank Sinatra (Chip) as the buddy duo showing them as the butch experienced and effeminate naïve counterparts adding in Jules Munshin (Ozzie) as a comic buffoon-type character whose masculinity vacillates between a spectrum of hyper-virility (in his equation by the anthropologist as a “prehistoric man”) and “sissy” (counter to Kelly’s sailor).

In the opening scene all three sailors exit their ship at the Brooklyn Navy Yard singing “New York, New York” excited to be at liberty in New York City. After a montage of the three sailors visiting various tourist attractions including the Statue of Liberty and Rockefeller Center, they find themselves in Times Square the epicenter of the port town. The Times Square of *On the Town* is bright and clean, and at least, on the surface lacks the vice and grittiness that it will come to be known for. But from accounts such as Vining’s, the hustling and cruising scene was already active during this time.

Frank Sinatra plays Chip, who is eager to see all of the sights on his 24-hour leave in New York City with his pals. Gene Kelly’s Gabey and Jules Munshin’s Ozzie talk about how they would rather go looking for “dames.” Ozzie pretends to be “a dame” flirting and holding hands with Gabey’s virile sailor character resulting in a kiss on the cheek from Gabey to Ozzie (see fig. 3 and 4). Sinatra’s Chip asks Kelly’s Gabey, “Why do we always have to chase after girls?” showing his reluctance to pursue women. Gabey responds, “I’ll tell you when your voice changes, Jr.,” also alluding to his lack of sexual experience.

The trio board the subway at the 42nd Street/Times Square station to go to one of the tourist attractions that Chip wants to see, used as a guise to go looking for women. Once on the subway, they notice an advertisement for “Miss Turnstiles,” and a fantasy sequence shows Gabey’s unrealistic

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36 In New York City during WWII, sailors were primarily deployed from the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The Brooklyn Navy Yard continued to be the primary hub for the Navy out of New York City until 1961. “History of the Yard | About | Brooklyn Navy Yard,” accessed January 1, 2019, https://brooklynnavyyard.org/about/history.
expectations for what Miss Turnstiles/Ivy Smith could actually be. These impossible expectations set the stage for the unattainable and unachievable mate/woman, making it questionable if Gabey is even supposed to realize her or if the fantasy becomes a stand-in for the fantasy and desire of heterosexual normalcy instead of his actual desires. Even the recurring reference of Ivy Smith as Miss Turnstiles instead of her actual name Ivy Smith creates the distance between the fantasy and the actual. During the fantasy sequence the voiceover proclaims, “she goes out with the Army but her heart belongs to the Navy,” much like Gabey when he later says that he’s “simply crazy about the Navy.” The Navy allows both of them the freedom from conventional heteronormative relationships. The fantasy sequence includes Miss Turnstiles in a series of scenarios starting from the domestic to her dancing and out at society events but these scenes are relatively short compared to the longer scene where she shows off her athletic prowess. The fantasy finishes with her sitting atop of a heap of the men she has defeated. It makes one question whether Gabey’s fantasy then to be with Miss Turnstiles or to be with an athlete who has dominated these other men. Each of these scenarios show Gabey’s own projected desire using Miss Turnstiles as a stand-in for queer desire. The sailors actually cross paths with Miss Turnstiles several times in near misses without realizing it. It doesn’t actually matter if Gabey ever finds Miss Turnstiles/Ivy Smith because she is just an acceptable stand-in for his desire for his fellow sailor Chip.

As the trio search out Miss Turnstiles, their journey takes them on a tour of the greater Times Square area traversing many well-known cruising and hustling spots including Times Square proper, the various subway stations in the area, Columbus Circle as well as Central Park. Gabey’s search for Miss Turnstiles as the elusive fantasy doubles then as a guise for this trajectory. The Times Square of On the Town is marked by 8th Avenue to the west and 5th Avenue to the east, Columbus Circle/59th Street to the north and 34th Street to the south. The map for this chapter also includes historical landmarks such as the theatres where these films and the stage shows that inspired them all premiered (see maps 1.1 and 1.2).
When the characters split up (with Gabey left to search for unattainable woman), Chip is paired with Hildey, the butch and abrasive “unexpectedly female” taxi driver. She is immediately drawn to his meek and effeminate demeanor and becomes sexually aggressive suggesting to Chip that they go back to her place. Chip is reluctant to give into her advances and insists they continue their quest to see the tourist attractions, and also to help look for Gabey’s Miss Turnstiles (ever-faithful to Gabey’s happiness). Hildey does eventually get him back to her apartment, but they are constantly interrupted by her roommate.

At the Museum of Natural History on their search for Ivy Smith/Miss Turnstiles, Ozzie meets the anthropologist, Claire, and is not daunted by the fact that her interest in him is based on his resemblance to a prehistoric man. So even as the three sailors are paired off with women, something is amiss with each relationship, and they don’t strictly adhere to rigid notions of heteronormativity. Each of their relationships become satires of heterosexual relationships.

When Hildey introduces herself to Claire, she says “Dr. Kinsey, I presume” as Claire explains she was just “doing research” on Ozzie. This passing reference to Kinsey’s research on sexuality points to its importance and place in the popular imagination at the time (and certainly still today), but also points to the queerness of the sailors.37

Once Gabey finally catches up with Miss Turnstiles/Ivy Smith at Carnegie Hall, he talks about his hometown in Indiana, and there is a look of recognition on her face. Gabey continually asserts that she is from NYC, and she plays along. Later in the film it is revealed that they are from the same hometown and had the same teacher back in their school days. In addition to Miss Turnstiles serving as a heterosexual ideal for Gabey, Ivy Smith then also serves as a viable option as a beard because of their shared history and similar upbringing, surely she would best understand the

37 At the time when On the Town came out in 1949, only Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) had been published. Sexual Behavior in the Human Female would not be published until 1953, so this comment can be viewed as a direct comment on the queerness of the male subjects aka the sailors.
complexity of him wanting to act on his same-sex desire and the societal restrictions placed on him. Given the fantasy sequence where a “butch” Ivy is strong and athletically-inclined, Ivy could also be read as queer. Now that both Ivy and Gabey have left their small rural town they are able to be queer in the big city.

Gabey finally lands a date with Miss Turnstiles but with a Cinderella-like expiration date. All three sailors and their dates meet atop the Empire State Building. The sailors say they “hate to get leave and leave the ship” and say they have the “Shore Leave Blues.” Back on the ship there is no need for the performance of desire for a Miss Turnstiles, they just have their love for each other.

While atop the Empire State, Chip and Gabey grab onto each others’ arms and smile lovingly at each other. This shared intimacy of touch between Chip and Gabey is the first time they are allowed to show such physical affection in front of yet still out of sight of their companions. It is done under the guide of holding Ozzie over the side of the building to evade the authorities for the incident where he knocked over a dinosaur at the Natural History Museum.

When Ivy Smith/Miss Turnstiles leaves Gabey, Chip says to Gabey, “I know how hard you’re taking this, kid,” to which Gabey responds, “I know you know. That’s why I love you” through a queer reading shows the bonds of their queer love can withstand the temporary disappointment over a failed heterosexual relationship. Chip and Gabey understand each other without having to even necessarily vocalize their feelings.

Sinatra’s Chip and Kelly’s Gabey are more compatible and have an unspoken understanding with each other while Jules Munshin only serves to throw off the dynamic between Kelly’s Gabey and Sinatra’s Chip and becomes a third-wheel. Kelly and Sinatra have good chemistry, and Munshin only cramps their style. There is a depth to the relationships of Kelly and Sinatra’s characters that Munshin’s characters lack. Here when Gabey is left by his date, Chip is the one to comfort him and to know that he’s having a rough time without Gabey having to say it.
Gabey struggles to keep up the performance of his “heterosexuality” especially as the night wears on. Running into this shipmates, he brags about having met the “most beautiful girl” aka Miss Turnstiles. They instead meet Hildey’s roommate Lucy who has since been swapped in as a replacement when Miss Turnstiles has to leave. Although these women become interchangeable as part of the performance of desire the roommate does not fill the role for the ideal archetype of a woman that such a performance necessitates. Thus when Lucy asks Gabey if he’s seen *The Lost Weekend* it becomes particularly telling that he responds “I feel as though I were in it” as he too is grappling with his sexuality.\(^{38}\)

The whole crew (sans Ivy Smith) takes off on a wild chase scene from the cops which takes them into Brooklyn where they coincidentally end up at Coney Island for the big reveal that Miss Turnstiles actually works as an “exotic” dancer. The three sailors end up dressing in problematic Orientalist drag (see fig. 5) in order to hide from the cops. When the trio first runs into one of the cops, Gabey in an exaggerated high-pitch voice flirts with the cop saying, “Who needs sailors with you around?” to which the cop responds, “You’re pretty cute.” When the three in drag perform on stage, they draw a crowd of mostly male spectators including the cops. The cops are allowed to desire the sailors and even enact this desire in public as long as the sailors are in drag because their masculinity remains intact as they desire a feminine subject.

Their true identities are revealed to the cops, and they are returned to their ship at the Brooklyn Navy Yard by the military police. They are shown in the Navy Yard waving goodbye to their “dames” but there is an underlying excitement and relief in being safely back on the ship with their sailor comrades.

\(^{38}\) The film based on the novel by Charles R. Jackson famously tells the story of an alcoholic writer, but the protagonist is portrayed in the novel as also grappling with his homosexuality (as was Charles R Jackson).
Anchors Aweigh

Anchors Aweigh (1945) presents Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra’s sailor characters on shore leave in Los Angeles. The liminal space of one port town gets mirrored to other port towns. Times Square mirrors Pershing Square in Los Angeles and vice versa. This is even evident in the way that Vining describes his encounters with sailors across these port towns. The ways the sailors interact with the space of the port town here in Los Angeles thus mirrors that of their behavior in Times Square. Even though On the Town was released after Anchors Aweigh, there is similarity in both the sailor characters and themes.

Without the third wheel of Jules Munshin’s sailor, Kelly and Sinatra’s characters form a deep and lasting bond that is then echoed in On the Town. Gene Kelly’s character Joseph (Joe) Brady is posited both as butch and as experienced in contrast to Frank Sinatra’s Clarence Doolittle who is effeminate and naïve to the ways of women. Even the naming of these characters, Kelly’s Brady indicates a strong, masculine type while Sinatra’s Doolittle brings to mind the character of Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, and Clarence’s desire to be “shaped” by Kelly’s character and submit to his will.

Sinatra and Kelly were paired together in the films Anchors Aweigh (1945), Take Me Out to the Ballgame (1949) and On the Town (1949). Cohan writes,

In their three films together, Sinatra’s more effete demeanor, like that of other screen sidekicks, is set against Kelly’s muscular physique, athletic manner and heterosexual self-confidence…These asymmetrical male friendships give Kelly’s masculine persona its distinct social inflection as a working-class man….

In these homosocial settings, “the belief among men in this world that so long as they played the ‘man’s’ role, they remained men” further solidifies the masculinity of these men. Chauncey

39 Cohan, Incongruous Entertainment, 165.
40 Chauncey, Gay New York, 81.
writes that “effeminate gay men, were tolerated by tough working-class men because they stood to reinscribe their masculinity rather than challenge it.” Here Sinatra’s character’s effeminacy serves to reassert and reestablish Kelly’s masculinity.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack [Judith] Halberstam posits that queerness as a form of expression is inextricably linked to failure. Here Clarence’s inability to act or enact a successful heterosexuality signals his failure. Looking to José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, Halberstam writes that the queer art of failure is “an equally utopian refusal of social norms.” Although heterosexuality and the pairing up of these two sailors with women is supposed to be the goal, the constant foil of this from one of the men or the other indicates the reluctance of each to pair off with anyone except each other, and their actual goal of creating a relationship with each other.

The film opens with Joe and Clarence both receiving medals of honor for acts of bravery and are rewarded with four days of shore leave. Already, it’s established that Joe would do anything for his shipmate Clarence as Joe rescues Clarence after falling overboard. This signals another kind of failure yet still tied to Clarence’s own queer desire. These two men are as an example of the “buddy system” used during the war as a support system. This buddy relationship is also strong between Gabey and Chip in *On the Town*.

As the sailors all line up at the phone to call their “dames” before heading off on shore leave, Joe brags about “his girl Lola” and how great it will be to finally see her. While on the phone with her, he runs his fingers along the receiver and puts his mouth closer to the receiver as the conversation gets “steamier” in what resembles fellatio (see fig. 6).

When they arrive on shore for leave and Joe heads to see “his girl Lola,” he notices that Clarence appears to be following him. Joe lovingly nicknames Clarence “Brooklyn” insinuating that

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41 Chauncey, 81.
because he’s from the city he should be well-versed in the ways of women, or at least sex. Clarence admits to Joe in confidence that he’s only ever been in same-sex environments from an all-boys school on through to the Navy. Clarence tells Joe he wants to “try” dating girls, “[b]ut I don't know how to begin.” The all-male environments then are not the reason for him not having successfully coupled with a woman, rather it is because he does not desire women. He may be inexperienced with women, but he is equally inexperienced with men and therefore seeks both direction and affection from Joe. There is also a question of whether he’s purposely sought out all-male environments due to his sexual interest, or if this has only served to foster such an interest. Like others in the Navy, the buddy system served to either encourage or cultivate such desire.

Clarence tells Joe that he thinks Joe is the best wolf in all the Navy. In the context of the film, the term “wolf” is supposed to signify Joe’s virile sexuality with women but during the 1920s and 30s historically the term “wolf” was used to describe masculine men who had sex with other men often as the dominant partner or as a “top” but did not identify as gay.43 This was a common term used among the queer subcultures of Times Square during this time period. For men in the Navy who do not identify as gay but nevertheless engaged in same-sex sexual encounters, wolf then is an apt term for Joe. Chauncey explains, “That the wolves regarded themselves as something other than queer attests both to the absence of a sharp hetero-homosexual binarism in their culture…and to the centrality instead of effeminacy to the definition of sexual abnormality among workingmen.”44 Joe is also later referred to as a “sea wolf” both by Clarence and by the love interest Aunt Susie. The naming of Joe explicitly as sea wolf versus just a wolf further alludes to his sexual prowess amongst the other sailors aboard their ship.45

44 Chauncey, 88.
45 In *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* (1949), the second film in the series of three in which Sinatra and Kelly star, their baseball team is named the Wolves possibly a callback to Sinatra calling Kelly a wolf in *Anchors Aweigh*. The films also feature lots of homoerotic moments between the two including a comedy routine they do at the beginning of the ball games which feature oversized phallic
Once successfully flattered and worn down, Joe agrees to help Clarence. Joe begins Clarence’s lesson by pretending to be a “dame” similar to the scene in with Ozzie and Gabey in *On the Town*. Joe adopts a swishy, flamboyant walk complete with hip-swaying and limp wrists to flirt with Clarence (see fig. 7). When a man walks by, giving them the side eye, reading them as queer; they swiftly scurry off realizing what has happened (see fig. 8). This scene is quickly followed by a police car pulling up demanding that they both “come down to the station.” Although it is soon revealed that is to help convince a young boy who has run away “to join the Navy” to return home to the boy’s Aunt Susie, this scene can also be read as the policing of homosexuality and of male hustlers at the time. There are consequences to enacting their queerness and thus sexual deviance in public.

Through asking Joe to show him the ways of the world, Clarence is not asking for a play-by-play with women, but instead is asking to have a sexual experience with Joe. Clarence is constantly trying to mimic what he thinks heterosexuality looks like, failing because not only has never experienced a heterosexual relationship but also because his devotion lies with Joe.

In describing this scene, Steven Cohan writes, “Because the passerby presumably sees the gender role-playing of the two sailors as a homosexual pickup, the scene raises the possibility that even Joe’s wolfish virility may be more a matter of his only appearing to be straight—in fact, as far as the observer is concerned, Joe is the sissy sailor soliciting Clarence.” Cohan suggests that while it seems “a joke at the sissy’s expense” it actually allows the sailors to be read as a couple.46

The following morning Clarence lets Joe sleep in, again missing his date with Lola because Clarence would rather Joe spend time with him. When Clarence reveals to Joe that he thinks that Aunt Susie is the girl that he would like to try his hand at, he asks Joe to come on his date with him, baseball bats. Similar to *On the Town*, which came out the same year, it was also promoted using the word “gay” as “MGM’s Gay Technicolor Musical.”

showing that while he is attempting heterosexuality he uses these insecurities as an excuse for his desire to be with Joe. For most of the film, she is always referred to as Aunt Susie and rarely just Susie or Susan, the sailors thus creating a distance between themselves and her. Aunt Susie can never truly be desired because of her role as a maternal figure and therefore can serve as a stand-in for desire for each of the men for each other. Susie comments “You’re a strange team you two” and later to Joe regarding Clarence, “You’re always with him or talking about him.” While it’s unclear if she has any agency in these scenarios with both Joe and Clarence as she is seemingly passed back and forth by the sailors and whether or not she realizes her role as a beard for either or both of the men, it clear that she recognizes that the two sailors have strong feelings for each other and the remark of them being a “strange team,” “queer” could just as easily be substituted for “strange.”

Later in the film when Clarence finally goes on a solo date with Susie, Clarence spends most of the date agonizing about Joe’s feelings to Pamela Britton’s character (only ever billed as “girl from Brooklyn”) while Joe spends this time gazing longingly at Clarence through the window. When Clarence steps outside and sees Joe, he asks, “What are you doing here, Joe?” to which Joe replies lovingly, “I’m here to see you.” While the sailors are apart, they can’t help but spending all the time thinking of each other. Through these interactions, Clarence is further failing at heterosexuality, barely showing the female leads any attention when they are supposed to serve as his love interests.

The promotional posters as well as the later VHS and DVD covers used for Anchors Aweigh either show just Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly together, totally forsaking the supposed romantic interest, often with Gene Kelly looking longingly at Frank Sinatra (see fig. 9). The instances where Kathryn Grayson’s Aunt Susie is included, she appears to be interested in either Frank Sinatra or Gene Kelly, but Gene Kelly is still giving all of his attention to Frank Sinatra (see fig. 10).
**Hail, Caesar!:** Playing up the camp of Gene Kelly or Gene Kelly finally realized in all of his queer glory

_Hail, Caesar!,_ a film released in 2016, is the Coen Brothers ode to the Hollywood studio system of the late 1940s and 1950s. Channing Tatum plays a character who is a musical actor named Burt Gurney, which is an homage to Gene Kelly.⁴⁷

Burt Gurney, dressed as a sailor, is in a musical film not dissimilar to *Anchors Aweigh* or *On the Town*. He sings a song “No Dames” about how all of the sailors are going to be at sea without any women for eight months. What initially starts as a lament to not being able to be with women turns into a vibrant dance number where the sailors get to explore their same-sex desire that is sure to only increase once in the sex-segregated environment of their naval ship.

The dance number nods to MGM Hollywood musicals of the 1940s but here the queer desire is finally realized through the dance number whereas in *Anchors Aweigh* and *On the Town*, the desire can never fully be realized. The men dressed as sailors tap dance on tables and the bar—they dance gleefully arm in arm with each other, revelling in the fact that they get to spend months away at sea together without any “dames.” The men dance with other men in ways that are alluded to in the Gene Kelly films but here the viewer, straight or gay, knows for a fact that there is desire between the dancing sailors. The bartender is scandalized by both the dancing and the overt queerness of the sailors and proclaims, “This ain’t that kinda place.” The name of bar “The Swinging Dinghy” suggests not only a phallic analogy but also the swinging or vacillating nature of the sailors’ sexuality.

Toward the end of the dance number another group of sailors come into the bar, while the viewer is expecting these sailors to be scandalized by the homoerotic desire of the others, they are

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⁴⁷ Even the name Burt Gurney seems to be purposely chosen for its similarity to Gene Kelly’s (monosyllabic first names and disyllabic last names both ending with the similar “ey” ending sound).
excited and eager to join in on the action. Burt sings:

Out there on the sea! / Here's how it will be / I’m gonna dance with you, pal / You're gonna
dance with me! / When we're out there on the sea / We'll be happy as can be / Or so the
Captain claims! / But we have to disagree. / Cause the only guarantee / Is I'll see a lot of you
/ And you'll see a lot of me!

The sailors pair up for a final dance number which ends in a shot with a sailor upside down
in the arms of Channing Tatum’s Burt Gurney so that when he turns to address the sailors that have
just entered the bar, he is looking through the legs of another sailor reminiscent of the sexual act “69”
(see fig. 11). As he then tries to exit the bar as the bartender tells him to “get out,” he gets “spit
roasted” between two lively dancing sailors.

The character of Burt Gurney even serves as an exaggerated take on Gene Kelly’s own
political views. Kelly protested the House *Un-American Activities Committee* whereas Burt Gurney
leaves with his small dog aboard a Russian/Communist submarine.

In many ways *Hail, Caesar!* is the fantasy realized—what us queers have been wanting all
along from Gene Kelly: those gay sailors are finally able to fulfill their desire for each other without
shame. They are able to play up the overt queerness and camp for today’s audiences in a way that
wasn’t previously possible. *Hail, Caesar!* makes the subtext of *Anchors Aweigh* and *On the Town*
explicit.
The Bronx is up & the Battery's down
To Coney Island
To Brooklyn Navy Yards
To Natural History Museum
To Port of LA

Map 1.1
Map 1.2

On the Town Times Square Map Key

1. Times Square/42nd St Subway Station
2. 50th Street Subway Station
3. 59th Street/Columbus Circle Subway Station
4. Rockefeller Center
5. Carnegie Hall
6. Empire State Building
7. Natural History Museum
8. Coney Island
9. Brooklyn Navy Yard
10. The Port of LA - Anchors Aweigh

11. Metropolitan Opera House (Old Met Building) The ballet Fancy Free opened here on April 18, 1944.
13. Adelphi Theatre The musical On the Town opened here on December 28, 1944.
15. Sloane House YMCA Sailors and hustlers alike stayed here when visiting Times Square.
Chapter 2
The Borders of Desire in *City of Night*

**Introduction**

While the sailors of *On the Town* still find themselves employed by the Navy after the war, what happens after they’ve served their time? Where does a sailor find himself? Many sailors returned to Times Square as hustlers sometimes because they lacked experience outside of their work with the Navy. They had seen other men work as hustlers and make money in this way (some sailors even worked as hustlers while on shore leave to make some extra money) and had solicited the hustlers themselves while on shore leave. Barry Reay writes in *New York Hustlers* that many returned to the “port cities…to which the war years had exposed them”¹ because that was all they had come to know. Times Square would look very different in 1963 than over a decade earlier in *On the Town*. Although the hustling scene had existed for quite some time, by the 1960s the porn theatres and other sex shops starting to line the streets.

John Rechy’s first novel, *City of Night* (1963), tells the story of an unnamed narrator of mixed Mexican and Scottish heritage. The narrator, upon moving to New York City from the border town of El Paso, finds himself working as a male hustler or “youngman”² in Times Square through an early encounter with a sailor at the Sloane House YMCA. His first encounters as a hustler in Times Square in New York City color the rest of his experiences across the American port towns of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and New Orleans, or “darkcities”³ as he calls them, in which the narrator continues to work having sex with men in exchange for money. By the book’s end the

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² Rechy most often uses the term “youngman” to describe the young male hustlers in *City of Night* but also uses the term “hustler.” He likewise uses the term “score” to refer to the clients or “johns.”
³ John Rechy, *City of Night* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), 15. Rechy uses the term “darkcities” in conjunction with “City of Night” as a way to connect the cities in which the narrator finds himself engaging in sex work.
narrator finds himself back in El Paso, and yet the border is always a part of him—helping to inform other parts of his identity as well—creating borders he dare not cross in terms of his own sexuality and gender. Through his sexual encounters in and around Times Square, the narrator in *City of Night* learns what is desirable and how to embody that desire. He denies that he has reciprocal desire for men he has sex with to maintain his own straight identity, yet he craves to be desired by those same men. As he learns to perform desire for his clients, he also learns the power that comes from being able to perform and maintain his masculinity as he moves through the streets of Times Square.

The *City of Night* narrator delineates the physical borders of Times Square as he comes to know it saying, “The world of Times Square that I inhabited extends from 42nd Street to 45th Street, from grimy Eighth Avenue to Bryant Park—where, nightly, shadows cling to the ledges…intimate nameless strangers joined for one gasping brief space of time.”4 Although the narrator in *City of Night* draws these specific borders of Times Square, his actual experience of the space radiates out from this center to the surrounding areas to cover from 34th Street all the way to Central Park at 59th Street as well as from Eighth Avenue, as he says, “I discovered Third Avenue the East 50s”5—all still within walking distance of Times Square proper (see maps 2.1 and 2.2). The narrator even explains through an encounter with a cop (who also becomes a semi-regular score of his) that Central Park became “an extension of the same world of 42nd street.”6 The original cover of the book features a photograph of Times Square and the “Fascination” sign in lights that the narrator later references (see fig. 12).

The narrator’s first sexual encounter with a man is with a sailor he meets at the Sloane House YMCA, near Times Square, upon his arrival in New York City. The sailor explains about another youngman he has picked up, “hes not queer himself—dont like em queer: If I did, Id go with a

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4 Rechy, 42.
5 Rechy, 72.
6 Rechy, 45.
woman—why fuck around with substitutes?”7 The narrator learns through the sailor and other characters that it’s only “queer” if the men are not masculine, and just how highly masculinity is valued. Queer gets used throughout the text of *City of Night* as what is undesirable—anything that does not involve masculine men or where the men both desire each other mutually. Ironically, queer, as it has come to be used and as I use it here, actually allows for more possibility of nuance of a sexuality that does not fit into a neat ascribed box, which is essentially what Rechy is striving for. The sailor asserts his own masculinity and straightness as well as that of the youngman that he solicits despite the apparent contradiction.

**The Border as Liminal Space**

Scholar Kevin Arnold explains that Rechy’s novels describe an “ever-elusive coincidence of masculinity and homosexuality as fantasy.”8 The narrator of *City of Night* attempts to avoid these constructs of gender and rigid definitions of sexuality while inhabiting a precarious space of desire and fantasy. The narrator always inhabits the role of the object of desire and never the subject of desire, the narrator thinks that he has escaped these markers of identity—somehow lived outside of them as he comes to live outside of the physical border space. But as he returns to his hometown of El Paso in the closing pages of the novel, the narrator can never fully transcend the boundaries he constructs for his own identities.

The border here creates a liminal space that is mirrored in Times Square and throughout the other port towns that the narrator comes to inhabit. The narrator describes this experience: “Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night stretching gaudily from Times Square to

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7 Rechy, 32. John Rechy often uses alternative spellings as well as non-traditional grammar and punctuation including choosing to not use apostrophes or using four dots for an ellipsis instead of three. All quotes from *City of Night* are presented as they are written in the original text.
Hollywood Boulevard…” All of the “darkcities” that make up the so-called “City of Night” are also port towns (New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and New Orleans) – and in fact the first person the narrator encounters is a sailor at the Sloane House YMCA. The narrator’s experiences in each of these port towns mirror those in Times Square. In the second to last section of the novel, when the narrator travels to New Orleans for Mardi Gras his experience learning about the possibility of his own desire mirrors his first experiences learning what is desirable as he begins hustling in Times Square.

John Rechy plays with the boundaries and borders of identity in his novels. Rechy’s writings “defy canons, and ultimately embrace all of the human experience—racial, sexual, and/or otherwise.” Frederick Luis Aldama explains that Rechy doesn’t write from within a framework of either/or but instead “embraces the category ‘that transcends them all,’” and yet in many ways Rechy reinscribes the category of masculinity while playing with the limits of sexual labels through his characters in City of Night. His characters are always living in this border or liminal space in terms of their identities. Rechy similarly resists being pigeonholed as a gay writer—he thinks that this limits who will come in contact with the work.

In “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard,” Emma Pérez envisions a decolonial imaginary in order to create queer Latinx narratives where they don’t exist and actively working against a “colonial white heteronormative way of seeing and knowing.” This speaks to the work that John Rechy is doing in City of Night, as well as in his other novels. Pérez writes about this work of subverting as a “strategy of survival,” which is especially apt for City of Night because the narrator is using his body as a means of survival through sex work. The

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9 Rechy, City of Night, 15.
11 Aldama, 47.
13 Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 124.
narrator’s experiences of sex work map the city and more specifically Times Square. Pérez is seeking to not only uncover the queer history in the archives of the border but also to create stories where there are none. While my work is not creating new narratives, it shows how these existing narratives and queer histories are silently embedded into the city and are all but hidden from view. The narrator in *City of Night* explains that in his hustling “on 42nd Street, the park, the movie-houses, I had learned to sift the different types that haunted those places.”

Emma Pérez also writes about the limitations of the archives, and how through studying “the category of ‘deviance’” in the public record, and how deviant behavior has become a politicized queer identity in the twenty-first century.”* City of Night* is situated around the “deviant” behavior of male hustling and how that informs the queer identities of its characters. Rechy likewise names his work as “outlaw” fiction explaining that it “suggests deviance.” The deviance of queerness and sex work falls “outside the law” and yet also “carries an implication that the law itself may be wrong, therefore to be questioned, overturned.”* City of Night*’s narrator always qualifies his hustling in his own lack of desire for his “scores” to reassert his “straightness” through these performances of desire and masculinity.

**What is Desire?**

David Valentine’s “‘I went to bed with my own kind once’: the erasure of desire in the name of identity” speaks to the ways that desire does not always neatly fit into prescribed identity boxes. Valentine writes “Erotic desires which fall outside the trinary of heterosexuality, homosexuality (either/or) and bisexuality (both/and), or which fail to make sense in terms of their basic logic of

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14 Rechy, *City of Night*, 43.
15 Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 127.
17 Castillo and Rechy, 113.
binary gender, are rendered unintelligible.”  

Desire and sexual experiences don’t always match the identities that we claim or that are legible to others. Valentine, drawing from Don Kulick’s notion of language and desire, writes, “Those desires that cannot be labeled—or which require different kinds of labels at different times—are produced as incoherent, or, at the very least, the product of confusion.” Thus, in looking at Rechy’s early works, including *City of Night*, that they “might be read as kinds of ‘anti-coming out’ narratives, articulations of the impossibility of identification, of reconciling masculinity within homosexuality into a stable identification,” we can think about how Valentine’s idea of identity being “rendered unintelligible” because there isn’t a neat narrative of gay or straight identity but rather the sexualities of his characters only become further complicated and resist a static identification creating a fluidity of their sexualities.

Arnold writes, “there is an obvious impossibility, an untruth, in the idea of sex with men if you are ‘straight,’ which here means not only heterosexual, but also masculine, ‘normal,’ etc. for Rechy’s characters.” Valentine asks what “make[s] some kinds of desire more true—and more coherent than others?” How the characters in Rechy’s novels view their own identities then “complicates how such assertions of self and expressions of desire—which are expected to be congruent with such identities—are seen as being ‘truthful.’”

The ways that the characters in *City of Night*, especially the narrator, engage with their own identities subvert these ascribed categories of what is gay and what is straight. Many of the youngmen insist that they do not feel reciprocal desire for the men they sleep with and that the desire is one-sided directed at the youngmen themselves. Yet there is still a constant conversation verging on

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18 Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 124.
20 Arnold, “Male and Male and Male,” 121.
21 Arnold, 118.
22 Valentine, “‘I Went to Bed with My Own Kind Once’: The Erasure of Desire in the Name of Identity,” 133.
23 Valentine, 133.
obsession about desire and how it operates in their sexual encounters. The narrator tells of another youngman, “Like the rest of us on that street [42\textsuperscript{nd}]—who played the male role with other men—Pete was touchy about one subject: his masculinity.”\textsuperscript{24} Arnold extends this fascination with desire from the characters to the readers of Rechy’s texts,

The world of Rechy’s novels is an incredibly seductive one, both in the sheer quantity of sex he details and in the quality of it, a world full of macho, muscled, straight men having sex for money, what we might call a pornographic fantasy. But in giving articulation to this fantasy and at the same time telling us that it is “documentary” or true, I think Rechy is playing into a reader’s desire for this fantasy as a structure of knowledge and desire.\textsuperscript{25}

Arnold is saying that for gay readers sex with a “straight” man becomes the ultimate fantasy and desire, not unlike that of the scores soliciting the youngmen for sex.

Through his sexual encounters in Times Square, the narrator in \textit{City of Night} learns what is desirable and how to embody that desire. He denies that he has reciprocal desire for the men that he has sex with to maintain his own straight identity, yet he craves to be desired by those same men. He wants them to want him, and yet he can’t want them. He creates borders that he can never cross. He also learns through these experiences in the gay and drag bars where he socializes the value of masculinity and how performances of masculinity get read as true or not.

\textbf{Masculinity and Desire}

In \textit{City of Night}, masculinity is valued not only by the hustlers but also by the men that solicit them. Arnold explains,

[Rechy’s] characters’ worth and value is contingent upon the way they appear, what roles

\textsuperscript{24} Rechy, \textit{City of Night}, 53.

\textsuperscript{25} Arnold, “Male and Male and Male,” 118. Arnold is referring to how Rechy has called his work “documentary” including his novels and “fiction.”
they play (sexual or otherwise), and how other characters perceive them…Masculinity is such an integral component to Rechy’s sexual world that it seems his characters cannot do without this identification or subject position if they are to sustain an economy in which sex is even desirable in the first place.²⁶

The narrator describes an encounter with a score who declares, “‘really masculine men don’t read!’”²⁷ and then denounces his desire for the narrator. The narrator first learns from the sailor at the YMCA who tells him “play it dumb—they dig that.”²⁸ This reflects an anti-intellectual conflation of class and being uneducated. Here, “uneducated” becomes synonymous with working-class men, and both represent a masculine ideal. The narrator learns that to “play dumb” will actually work to his advantage, and that in denying his own access to a college education, he is perceived as more masculine. Ironically, the denial of the cultural capital of his college education allows him access to the cultural capital of masculinity, which becomes infinitely more valuable in the world of the sex trade.²⁹ He explains, “And I would discover that to many of the street people a hustler became more attractive in direct relation to his seeming insensitivity—his ‘toughness.’ I would wear that mask.”³⁰

There’s a connection between what is viewed as feminine: sensitive, given to emotions, educated, and then how that is contrasted with what becomes masculine: insensitive, toughness, uneducated. Even though the narrator espouses this anti-intellectual turn, he then continues to spend his time reading in the New York Public Library Central Building at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue when he is

²⁶ Arnold, 124.
²⁷ Rechy, *City of Night*, 44.
²⁸ Rechy, 32.
²⁹ It is striking that in a text so engrossed in the sexualization of the male body and the male sex trade, that race does not come up except in the introduction when the narrator is speaking of his childhood in El Paso and his Mexican mother. When reading sociological texts about gay sex and the culture around men picking up other men, there is often a discourse of what kind of men or body types that are preferred—in addition to the conversation about gender and the desire for masculine men—there is often a racialized code of desire for masculine men as well—Latino and black men are read or assumed to automatically be more masculine and fetishized sexually.
³⁰ Rechy, *City of Night*, 44.
not hustling. Interestingly, his introduction to the library is through his first regular “score” telling the narrator to meet him “between the two lions”\(^{31}\) that famously stand at the foot of the steps to the library.

The narrator always insists that the desire is being enacted on him and that he himself is not acting on desire: “And so, in the world of males, on the streets, it was I who would be the desired in those furtive relationships, without desiring back.”\(^{32}\) Jennifer Moon explains that “his reluctance to ‘reciprocate in any way’ ‘without desiring back’ is a possible evasion of recognition, an attempt not to be seen as a subject with active, and specifically homosexual, desires.”\(^{33}\) He is always the object of desire and never the subject of desire. Arnold writes, “It important to recognize that having sex with men while still remaining ‘straight’ presents a kind of anxiety for Rechy’s characters.”\(^{34}\) The narrator notes of himself, and the other youngmen, that they seek to reinforce their masculinity by “making it with girls” and by insisting that he doesn’t feel any kind of reciprocal desire for the men that pay him for sex. The narrator constantly makes the distinction between men who mutually desire each other versus the youngmen that get paid for sex with men and to be desired. “heterosex appears to function almost entirely as a status symbol, rather than a sustained desire.”\(^{35}\) For the characters having sex with women becomes just as much of a performance as having sex with their clients just as it had in On the Town. This performance operates for the hustlers as a way to reaffirm their straightness to themselves and each other while they simultaneously find themselves amidst gay men and “queens.”

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\(^{31}\) Rechy, 39.

\(^{32}\) Rechy, City of Night, 69.


\(^{34}\) Arnold, “Male and Male and Male,” 118.

The narrator seeks out community in gay and drag bars in Times Square, finding close friends and chosen family among the drag queens, and yet in the context of the narrative, this actually stands to reify his identity as not queer: “as long as the hustler goes only with queens—and with other men only for scoring (which is making or taking sexmoney, getting a meal, making a pad)—he is himself not considered ‘queer’—he remains, in the vocabulary of that world, ‘trade.’” The narrator describes how queens have the ultimate ability to confer masculinity upon the youngmen: “[Miss Destiny] looking alternately coyly and coldly at Chuck then me seductively; all of which you will recognize as the queen’s technique to make you feel like such an irresistible so masculine so sexual so swinging stud, and queens can do it better than most real girls,” and yet later in the novel he makes the distinction that “youre supposed to want real girls only…for ‘love,’” in other words not queens. There is a contradiction of the queens being the ones to make the youngmen feel the most masculine and yet “making it with girls” and desiring “real girls” for “love” also stands as a marker of their masculinity.

One of the few female sex workers in the novel, proclaims to the narrator, “‘All of you keep telling yourselves youre straight—and you make it with chicks to prove it—and when you make it with other guys, you say it’s only for the bread!...Sure, maybe it’s true—Now!’” Is sexuality a liminal space for the youngmen? She insists that their “straightness” becomes its own liminal space that they are only “passing through.”

Eric Bergman writes that *City of Night* is best framed in terms of the “Coatlicue State” in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands.* Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “The Coatlicue State is a Prelude to Crossing.”

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36 Rechy, *City of Night*, 121.
37 Rechy, 118.
38 Rechy, 387.
39 Rechy, 179.
41 Bergman, 70.
“Prelude to crossing” is an effective description because the narrator is always in a state of not having yet crossed the border—yet simultaneously inhabiting the spaces of the border, but what of those who do cross the line between simply being desired by other men for sex and actually desiring the men back? The border becomes its own liminal space just like Times Square as a port town.

**Crossing the (Border)Line**

What of those youngmen that finally give into their reciprocal desire for other men not only for “sexmoney?” Randy, a former hustler, who now “has crossed the line” and become an “active homosexual.”

He is described as having been “all the more desired because he did not belong to that world,” meaning that while Randy lands with his masculinity intact, many of the other men are seen as giving up their masculinity (or maybe never having it to begin with and only having managed to perform it successfully) in engaging in reciprocal desire for other men. For these men, “queer” is marked as necessarily feminine. Another youngman names a specific man, Lance, as being the one for whom his desire shifts, which also shows the vulnerability and instability of their identity as straight if just one man can turn ‘em, so to speak.

When it comes to reciprocal desire, desiring other more feminine men is coded. It is somehow a reflection of a lack of their own masculinity for desiring a feminine partner. Here another hustler Carl is viewed as not masculine because he desires other men who are not masculine. The character Neil clarifies for the narrator, “‘Don’t let him fool you…Carl’s not quite as butch as he’s pretending to be…he picks up the nelliest queens—the most effeminate types, types I wouldn’t even talk to!’”

Only when masculinity desires or is desired by masculinity can masculinity be maintained. In this

42 Rechy, *City of Night*, 235. Rechy is using “active homosexual” to describe those who are openly homosexual and engaging in same-sex relationships not “active” to describe the role within a partnership.
43 Rechy, 235.
44 Rechy, 309, emphasis in original.
scenario, Neil’s gender is not in play—although he distinguishes himself from Carl and Carl’s desire for “the most effeminate types, types I wouldn’t even talk to”—he is not risking his own masculinity (or lack thereof) in this encounter. Neil goes on to recount a story about Carl saying, “Anyway he slid on the spilled beer and fell with legs up—and the queen was there and she shrieked: ‘Highheels and all.’” Neil uses the drag queen’s use of feminine markers for Carl to further support his assertion of Carl’s femininity. Furthermore, these accounts also serve as a warning to the narrator that to be feminine is undesirable as Neil no longer shows desire for Carl as he did when he still thought that Carl was actually butch. This shows the danger of such a border crossing.

There is a double-standard for those who solicit sex from youngmen and the youngmen themselves. Even though Carl now is engaged in sexual encounters of a mutual nature, his gender and masculinity are still policed whereas Neil is not affected by the men he solicits one way or another. Arnold explains, “Characters are either masculine or they are not, and if they appear (i.e. are representationally) gay, regardless of what they actually desire or do sexually (which has nothing to do with their appearance), they are not considered masculine.” Thus as long as the youngmen deny their desire then their masculinity remains intact.

All of the characters in City of Night follow a script of how masculinity and sexuality are allowed to operate. Even the drag queens who are the least normative in terms of gender, also police the borders of masculinity and straightness of the hustlers.

Back inside, the man whines: “See, suguh, when Ah first met him, he was re-al masculine—then he turns femme on me, jest lak thay-at: ovuhnight…When Ah met him, he was hustlin the Quartuh too—the butchest, straightest numbuh y-evuh laid yuh eyes on, Ah wanna tell ye. Now look at him,” he said in abject exasperation,…”an yew know that the lay-ast thing in the world a queen wants is to make it with what turns out to be huh sistuh—why, it is lew-

45 Rechy, 310.
46 Arnold, “Male and Male and Male,” 127.
rid and un-nay-tural as well—it’s—well, Ah dont care what anybody says: It’s exayactly lak bumpin pussies an thay-ats what it is lak—period!...So when he turned femme, Ah, nay-turally, yew know, started lookin aroun for othuh butch numbuhs—he was too effeyminate for me now...Ah guess Ah kinda got used to havin her around.”

Incongruously, the narrator refers to the drag queen relaying this tale as “the man,” yet in this passage she uses feminine pronouns to describe herself (here: “huh” in her put-on Southern accent). She recounts that her once butch love turned femme on her, and that she finds this despicable even if she does miss “havin her around” (my emphasis). She goes on to describe how “un-nay-tural” it is for two femmes to be together, and she despises how “effeyminate” he has become. In the overvaluing of masculinity, femininity is a deplorable trait, and though in this encounter she is speaking to the prospect of a drag queen having sex with a femme gay man, she likens it to lesbian sex (“lak bumpin pussies”), which further underscores the misogyny that gets laden in these attempts to hold up masculinity as an ideal.

Jeremy, whom the narrator meets in New Orleans (and whom I address in greater detail in the following section), tells of a similar tale: “I know someone who fell very much in love with an awol marine; he worshipped him, did everything for him. One day the man came home to find the marine ironing the man’s clothes. The man wanted nothing more to do with the marine.” As soon as the marine is seen as inhabiting the domestic space of the feminine or the homonormative even, he is no longer desirable by the other man. Desire is ever-shifting yet depends on the construct of masculinity to sustain it—this is a border that cannot be crossed.

The Possibility of Desire

In *City of Night*, it’s not only the narrator that feels this anxiety about what desire is supposed
to look like and who he is allowed to desire, it is a constant obsession for all of the youngmen. “‘After all,’ another man added, ‘pretending that you never, never, never do this or that is fine—or if you don’t now, that you never will. But really never, never, never doing this or that—well, it’s slightly insane. It’s a perversion in itself.’”\(^{49}\) There is also the fear that they might actually give in to that desire.

In the second to last section of the novel, the narrator travels to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. He feels called there from the harshness of the cold winter in Times Square. New Orleans like Times Square is a mirror for his experiences in every port town or “darkcity.” He spends most of his time there with a man named Jeremy, and for the first time he finally allows for the possibility of mutual desire and crossing the border of that desire. He describes Jeremy as:

> a well-built, masculine man in his early 30s, with uncannily dark eyes, light hair. He is intensely, moodily handsome….Looking at him, I wonder why such a man would pay another male when he could obviously make it easily and mutually in any of the bars and I wonder if perhaps there is another reason for his having given unasked-for money.\(^{50}\)

In this encounter unlike other encounters, the narrator does not ask for money, and it’s as if he wasn’t expecting it either. While the narrator constantly asserts that he is not interested in expressing desire for the men that he sleeps with and, that unlike other men, he is not in a situation of reciprocal desire, he finds himself in a scenario with Jeremy that throws this into question. The narrator notes that Jeremy is conventionally attractive and masculine and that he would be able to “make it easily and mutually.” The narrator does not expect Jeremy to pay him, and yet he somehow still maintains that the desire is completely one-sided. The money becomes a test of sorts of his own desire—his accepting the money from Jeremy once again solidifies for him that he is not queer—yet it solidifies for him that he is, in fact, wanted and desired by Jeremy: “After a short pause, he asked

\(^{49}\) Rechy, 259, emphasis in original.

\(^{50}\) Rechy, 418.
me—again bluntly: ‘Do you always go for money—only?’ ‘Yes,’ I lied. How impossibly difficult it seemed to explain to him that it was the mere proffering of the sexmoney that mattered; the unreciprocated sex: the manifestations that I was really Wanted.”  

This encounter with Jeremy mirrors his first experience with the sailor in Times Square. With the sailor is when the narrator first realizes the idea of being a “youngman” for “sexmoney” and speaks of how he comes to crave it. This money like Times Square itself “lured” the narrator. Yet with Jeremy he feels like he could do without—that simply the possibility of it is enough. Similarly the call of Mardi Gras and New Orleans echoes the way he felt lured to Times Square—and not just to New Orleans but to a celebration of vice and excess. The narrator says, “I think: If I take the subway, I’ll be on Times Square...Times Square, Pershing Square, Market Street, the concrete beach in Chicago...movie balconies, bars, dark hunting parks: fusing for me into one City...Yes, If I take the subway, I’ll be on 42nd Street. Or in Bryant Park, or on the steps of the library...” For the narrator, these port towns or “darkcities” as he calls him all get mirrored and come to stand in for one another. His experience in each of these port towns comes to mirror the others.

Jeremy confronts the narrator about these borders he’s created: “‘Wouldnt your masculinity be compromised much less if you tested out being ‘wanted’ with women instead of men?’…’Some people tell themselves they want to be...wanted...when, actually, they wish, very much, they could want someone back. And notice I said ‘could.’” Only once the narrator finally parts ways with Jeremy does he admit to himself: “And I was thinking: Yes, maybe youre right. Maybe I could love you. But I wont.”

Jeremy is one of the few men whose words actually resonate with the narrator on some

51 Rechy, 422.
52 Rechy, 33.
53 Rechy, 41.
54 Rechy, 450.
55 Rechy, 425.
56 Rechy, 446.
level—he doesn’t just outwardly dismiss him even though there is clearly a sense of unease at the truth he hears in Jeremy’s words. More than any of his other encounters, the narrator has a level of comfort with Jeremy and maybe there is a sense of desire there for him that allows the narrator to hear what he otherwise wouldn’t be able to. In this passage, the narrator finally allows for the possibility of his own desire.
Map 2.2

City of Night Times Square Map Key

1. 34th Street Armory
2. Sloane House YMCA
3. Apollo Theatre
4. Public Library Central Building
5. 34th Street & Eighth Avenue Subway Station
6. Bryant Park
7. Central Park
8. 42nd Street & Eighth Avenue Port Authority Subway Station
9. Automat Cafe
10. Third Avenue in the low east 50s
11. Port Authority Bus Terminal
12. Chicago
13. Pershing Square, Los Angeles
14. San Francisco
15. New Orleans
16. El Paso
Chapter 3

The Queer Ga(y)ze and Desire in *Flesh* and *Pink Narcissus*

Introduction

Whereas there is a more dramatic change from the Times Square of *On the Town* in 1949 to *City of Night* in 1963, there is not much of shift from the Times Square of 1963 to the Times Square of *Flesh* in 1968. In *City of Night* the protagonist talks about all of the problems and vice of Times Square—all of this is still true in *Flesh* and even into 1971 with *Pink Narcissus*. In these two films *Flesh* and *Pink Narcissus*, one can see how the narrative of Times Square that begins in *City of Night* gets further developed and complicated. The films *Pink Narcissus* (1971) and *Flesh* (1968) both portray gay-for-pay hustlers and their interactions with johns in New York City.¹ Although both of these films are works of fiction, they creatively reflect queer histories of New York City and more specifically of Times Square.² These films were marketed specifically to gay male audiences and mostly shown in porn and arthouse cinemas, like those that would have been found in Times Square at the time (see fig. 13).³

*Flesh* is shown as “a day in the life” but is still steeped in fantasy. *Flesh* was written and directed by Paul Morrissey under the name of Andy Warhol Presents. *Flesh* premiered in 1968. *Pink Narcissus* is filmed as a pink-hued erotic fantasyscape. *Pink Narcissus* was shot over the course of

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¹ I use the terms “hustler” and “john” most often to refer to the characters of Bobby and Joe and their clients, although I occasionally use the term clients, as these would have been the terms used at the time, and are the terms that are most often used in the literature about these films.

² In the process of mapping *Flesh*, to try to piece together particular scenes on the street I initially turned to Google Maps. Do a street view for the scene where Joe stands outside a newsstand near a subway entrance and it is entirely unrecognizable. While the subway entrance in the film has the classic green wrought iron style that we still see on countless subway entrances, this particular one at Lexington Ave and 53rd Street subway entrance has been turned into a modern glass station. Where the one and two floor businesses stood, there are only skyscrapers and chain stores.

³ *Flesh* premiered at 55th Street Playhouse on September 26, 1968 and *Pink Narcissus* premiered at the Cine Malibu on 59th Street between 3rd and 2nd Avenue on May 24, 1971.
seven years starting in 1963 with its release in 1971. James Bidgood directed *Pink Narcissus* and shot most of the scenes in his apartment near Times Square.

Through an analysis of the two main characters Joe and Bobby, in the films *Flesh* and *Pink Narcissus* (played by Joe Dallesandro and Bobby Kendall, respectively), who are gay-for-pay hustlers, I argue they create a performance of desire for their gay male audience by making themselves the object of desire rather than being a subject of desire. Through the creation of the self as an object of desire, they find agency through this performance of desire. They re-inscribe their own gaze, and thus their masculinity, onto themselves to create that performance for their gay male clients and by extension for a gay male viewing audience. I apply a textual analysis in the tradition of Cultural Studies rather than that of Film Studies; I am interested in how these can be interpreted by viewers rather than examining the directors’ intentions. This method allows me to explore more of the possibility and nuance within these films. This is a distinctively queer ga(y)ze and that this perspective and reading of these films could not have been done at the time of their release but only with a new understanding of the fluidity of queerness by reconceptualizing these films through a current queer lens.

While I describe both Joe and Bobby as gay-for-pay hustlers, my queer reading of them and the films necessarily complicates this. While this may be the initial surface reading of these characters as gay-for-pay hustlers, which was my starting point for this project, I purposely complicate this notion while not necessarily refuting it. And in the case of Bobby Kendall, he was a

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4 *Young Physique* magazine starts teasing photos for *Pink Narcissus* starting as early as 1964 as James Bidgood was contributing photos to the magazine under the name Les Folies Des Hommes.
6 Although Bobby Kendall’s character is unnamed in *Pink Narcissus* (perhaps he is *Pink Narcissus*), I hereby refer to his character as “Bobby” for simplification and Joe Dallesandro’s character in *Flesh* as simply “Joe.”
7 This is particularly salient in the case of *Pink Narcissus* because Bidgood didn’t have the final say in the released version because the filmed was taken out of his hands for someone else to edit. The film originally was released under the name “Anonymous.”
gay-for-pay hustler in real life. Joe Dallesandro got his start modelling for physique magazines, which were targeted to a gay male audience and is another form of gay-for-pay. It’s always queerer to be both/and instead of either/or.

Finally, both of these films engage in a dialectic about Times Square without actually ever showing Times Square. Pink Narcissus with its alternate version of Times Square plays with ideas about queer fantasy while still including cues to the actual Times Square. Flesh by not including Times Square and 42nd Street actually creates a narrative about 42nd Street versus the neighboring areas of Bryant Park and Third Avenue by extension. By mapping these films onto the city, I show how hidden histories of queerness are still silently embedded into the city itself.

**The gaze, identification and performing desire**

The characters portrayed by Bobby Kendall and Joe Dallesandro do not embody both subject and object as a vehicle of same-sex desire as described by scholar Thomas Waugh but instead they queer this dynamic between subject and object by flipping the script. They become themselves the object of desire for their gay male clients. Through their performances of desire, they turn the gaze back onto themselves thus subverting their own objectification. The characters “Bobby” and “Joe” create the self as an object of desire, which becomes a form of empowerment, and as a way to find agency in their performance of desire. Through this inversion of the gaze it is neither a male gaze nor a female gaze operating in these instances but a distinctively queer gaze (ga(y)ze). In City of Night the unnamed narrator creates agency for himself by controlling and fulfilling the desire of his clients; similarly Bobby and Joe create these performances of desire and masculinity for their clients.

Jeffrey Escoffier argues that gay-for-pay falls into the category of situational homosexuality

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8 Two of the instances I have come across in my own research include Physique Pictorial Jan 1969 vol. 17, #2-4 and in Mars magazine #30 where he’s listed under the pseudonym Joe Catano.
because it is often done out of necessity or even as a means of survival.\textsuperscript{9} The major difference is the element of desire or how desire is situated. Situational homosexuality in the other instances (prison or being away at war or sea) still arises from desire if not for that particular person or body, then for some kind of sexual gratification whereas with gay-for-pay sex work, the desire from the hustler could be viewed as purely transactional as a desire for capital. There is also a potential for the desire to be desired by the clients.

Contemporary reviews of these films demonstrate a lack of understanding and no potential for ambiguity or nuance of the characters’ sexualities. A \textit{New York Times} review from 1968 describe Joe in \textit{Flesh} as “bisexual.”\textsuperscript{10} Similarly \textit{Pink Narcissus} gets reduced to being about a “gay male prostitute”\textsuperscript{11} again ignoring the complexity and nuance of his sexuality. The characters’ sexualities are far more complex than this and cannot simply be reduced to a surface-level reading.

\textit{Flesh} follows a day in the life of Joe, a young hustler played by Joe Dallesandro. The film begins with a shot of Joe naked and asleep in his bed only to be awakened by his wife who insists that he go out to make money for her girlfriend’s abortion. From the opening of the film, there is a focus on Joe’s naked body—fetishizing his form. Joe’s body is not only on display for his clients but also for the pleasure and desire of the viewing audience through the ga(y)ze). He tells her he won’t go down to 42nd Street, and instead Joe is in areas adjacent but never in Times Square. While he traverses spaces near and around Times Square, he explicitly voices that he doesn’t want to go down to 42nd Street. The film shows Joe on the street and through his interactions with various johns including those who just cruise him but don’t pick him up, a quick hookup in a bathroom stall, an

\textsuperscript{9} Escoffier, “Gay-for-Pay,” 531.
extended session with an artist who photographs him nude so that he may later sketch him and finally with a regular john with whom he has a friendly rapport. At the end of the film, he finds himself back in his apartment now with his wife and her girlfriend. He lies about having actually worked and learns that the girlfriend no longer needs the money anyway. The final shots of the film zoom back in on his naked body asleep in bed again to close out his day.

*Pink Narcissus* shows the young hustler Bobby Kendall in various scenes lounging and daydreaming in his pink, gilded hotel room. These scenes are juxtaposed with various daydream sequences. Each scene comes to mirror each other: those in the hotel room with either those on the street or those in the daydream sequences.\(^\text{12}\) The film opens with a caterpillar hatching out of its chrysalis into a butterfly as Bobby enters the hotel room and admires himself before a wall of mirrors. These mirrors in his daydream are then transformed into both an arena where he is a matador urging along a young handsome biker and also into a row of urinals where the two men have a sexual encounter. When a handsome young bellhop arrives, the scene transforms into a Roman court where Bobby is transformed into both a classical statue and a Roman slave. Bobby is transported to an Arabian Nights style all-male harem with his gaze fixed on a dancer. Bobby simultaneously finds himself on the street in Times Square hustling and in the hotel room while the phone is ringing, one of the johns from the street is on the line. The alternate Times Square is presented in stark contrast to the fantasy of the hotel room, yet all of these sequences present their own expression of fantasy.

*Pink Narcissus and the fantasy of Times Square*

In these films there is a strong connection between hustlers and the gay subculture of 42nd Street/Times Square in 1960s and 70s of New York City. This becomes a symbolic space in *Pink Narcissus*. There are moments where Bobby is simultaneously in the hotel room and in Times Square

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\(^\text{12}\) I hesitate to refer to these moments as “fantasies” as the entire film seems to be part of a greater fantasy and instead opt for daydream to describe the shifts in time and space.
soliciting johns. This doubling serves as a tactic of queer survival—being mutable in identity and being able to exist in multiple spaces at once. Bobby’s gender presentation shifts too—feminine in the indoor space of the hotel—one could even say domestic space, and masculine out on the street. In the hotel, he wears luxurious gauzy fabrics, elegantly lounging while taking a call on a gem-encrusted gold telephone and lit by a soft pink hue (see fig.14). Times Square, with all of its vices and men (many of whom go bottomless even in the winter), lies right outside Bobby’s window. The outside world is shown in stark contrast to the softly lit pink gilded hotel room. Outside is dirty and dangerous with the perverse and criminal lurking around every corner. Long gone is the Times Square of On the Town from twenty years earlier where everything was exciting and glamorous—shot in Technicolor the film offered its own fantasy of Times Square. The excitement is still there but it has become darker and more dangerous. Benderson describes “the hellish apotheosis...a descent into a depraved underworld of homoerotic desire in an urban setting.”

Benderson further explains, “That fragile butterfly becomes synonymous with the innocent, budding masculinity of a beautiful young man in a Times Square hotel room, who is quickly learning to use his body for pleasure and gain.”

While Bobby is out on the street, he wears all white although the contrast to the dirtiness and darkness of the street is much more apparent than when he is lit by the pink hue of his hotel room. His clothing appears stiffer and gives him a more masculine air (see fig.15). On the street Bobby has a greater need to perform his masculinity for his clients to elicit their desire and also to protect him from the dangers that lurk on the street—in the safety of the hotel room he is more able to explore his femininity. Here Bobby is surrounded by darkness, the only visible lights emanating from the neon signs. The sign closest to him reads “TASTE ME.” Both of these spaces, the hotel and the street, represent their own kind of fantasy. The hotel presents an escapist fantasy and spatially

13 James Bidgood and Bruce Benderson, Bidgood (Köln: Taschen, 2009), 111.
14 Bidgood and Benderson, 66.
provides a heavenly ethereal quality above the hell of the streets into which Bobby descends. The alternate Times Square, despite the nightmarish quality, still represents a fantasy of desire and sexual vice even amidst the grime.

The first time the film introduces this alternate Times Square, Bobby opens the window, and sound of the radio announcing the day’s hockey scores can be heard. There is no dialogue in the film and save for the song “I’ve Grown So Lonesome Without You,” the only voices in the film are of a New York news radio station. The radio only plays when Bobby is either staring out of the window onto Times Square or when he is out on the street. The radio is an “intrusion of reality” to borrow a phrase from Dyer\textsuperscript{15} as are the other “realistic” elements that the film includes in street scenes. Even within this space of fantasy, there is a reminder of the harshness of the real world—queers are never allowed the luxury to escape for too long.

A sign that says “Times Square,” which locates the viewer in this fictional Times Square. There are neon signs for the hotel Bobby is in as well as several other hotels and bars (see fig. 16). The hotel room serves as a contrast to the street below. Everything in the hotel is pink, silky and soft or alternatively glittery and gilded like the jewel encrusted telephone that Bobby answers when johns phone up to him. The hotel room is bright and well lit, while the street is dark, dirty and gritty not unlike the actual Times Square. Even Bobby transforms outside of the hotel room. The street has the feeling of a soft-core porn scene with all of the men walking around without pants. Here the fantasy of the gay porn spills out from the porn theatres into the actual streets of Times Square.

Out on the street, the playwright Charles Ludlam stars in a variety of ridiculous roles. Charles Ludlam pushes a cart advertised as selling “dildos, artificial anuses and vibrators.” A large neon sign says “COME” with a lit cigarette. Like many of the signs in this alternative Times Square, this one serves as a double entendre both inviting Bobby into this space and signaling the desire for sexual

gratification and orgasm. The word play also extends to the image of the lit cigarette which points to use of the term “fag.”

Various bottomless uniformed men walk around Times Square including a construction worker, who does not understand the safety hazard. A man in the telephone booth is calling up to the hotel room to Bobby. A sign reads “Bet You Can’t Eat Just One,” the newly minted slogan of Lays Potato Chips and also alluding to the insatiability of these men’s sex drives. The john in the phone booth looks expectantly up to the hotel window. Bobby is lying on the floor now also bottomless. Even in the space of the hotel room, Bobby performs desire for his johns in the way he lounges seductively in his nearly transparent clothes or traces his fingers along the receive as he converses with the johns still out on the street.

In the reflection of the phone booth is mirrored a neon sign that reads “We Are Always Open” pointing both to the all-night nature of many Times Square businesses as well as the promiscuity and availability of those who frequent these spots. There are also signs that say “Lost our lease” and “Going out of business.” Although clearly a fantasy version of Times Square geared mostly toward the gay male, the film maintains some of the “realness” of the actual Times Square including these signs which indicate businesses getting pushed out of the space. These scenes also include a “bag lady,” played by a male actor in drag, who digs through the trash and gets shooed away by one of the shopkeepers. These moments all act as “intrusions of reality”—the fantasy is still there, but one is forced to consider how these spaces can exist simultaneously or coexist.

While a bottomless sailor is rubbing his cock16 on the street, Bobby is in the hotel on the phone with the john in the telephone booth who looks eagerly up at the hotel window. The bottomless

16 I have chosen to use the term “cock” first to keep with the tone of the scenes because of the fantasy/soft-core porn quality of these Times Square scenes in Pink Narcissus. This is also the term that is used in the film itself, although there is no dialogue, it appears on various signs including a Groovy Humor (a play on Good Humor) cart where Charles Ludlam sells “cumsicles” and “cocksicles” instead of popsicles.
construction worker reappears this time next to a “Men Working” sign, a typical sight for a construction site but here serving the double purpose to draw our attention to the hustlers working the street.

Next to a sign for “Cissy’s Bar” is another that reads “Notice this a raided premise,” which points to raids by the Vice Squad of both sex-related establishments such as the porn theatres but also the continued raids of gay and queer bars at the time (see fig. 17). Even though this film was released in 1971, it is important to consider that perhaps the most famous bar raid of the Stonewall Inn had happened only two years earlier in 1969. The bar raid at the Stonewall Inn was in the summer of 1969 where gay and trans activists fought back against the police. Sometimes called the Stonewall Uprising it marks an important moment of queer resistance and which many cite it as the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement in the United States. This would have been an unfortunately regular occurrence for those who frequented known establishments catering to queer clientele. The film expertly juxtaposes the harsh reality of bar raids with the fantasy of bottomless men ready and willing, many with cock in hand.

Bobby, while still in the hotel room, is also on street talking to the john—he exists in both places at once. Throughout the film, Bobby changes shape and place, and by the end of the film he’s become the john. This is one of the many ways that the potentiality of queerness in the film. Bobby shapeshifts and does not retain a static identity. Through his performance of his desire for the johns he is able to inhabit the desire in such a way that he becomes the john himself. Bobby becomes the object of desire for his clients through his performance of desire and masculinity. In this way, the film blurs the line between feminine and masculine, top and bottom, even hustler and john.

A woman walks down the street with a sign announcing “Our Lord is Coming” while throwing pamphlets everywhere. While this alludes to religious activists who in real life would protest the sins peddled in Times Square, the double entendre for orgasm. Bobby walks away with the john. In the hotel, Bobby hangs up the phone. As Bobby makes a deal with the john on the street,
Bobby in the hotel can hang up the phone as even as two separate beings they are still totally in sync. The performance of desire for the johns becomes seamless for Bobby as a queer means of survival.

When it starts snowing outside with icicles on the buildings, and still the men are all pantsless, all of them now are rubbing their cocks. While in *City of Night*, the hustlers all go south to New Orleans for the winter, yet this film shows these men in extreme weather another sharp contrast between the warmth of the hotel room and the harshness of the street. Amidst the snowstorm, a cop wearing a hat and jockstrap and carrying a billy club either doesn’t notice any of the debauchery taking place or more likely doesn’t mind it at all. *Pink Narcissus* still includes a police officer in this fantasy version of Times Square but this one is benevolent and just as interested in acts of public sex as all of the other characters. Interestingly, cops appear in all of the texts discussed in this thesis—often engaged in cruising or sex with the protagonists—even Gene Kelly’s Gabey gets cruised while in drag by the cops in *On the Town*. Dyer describes the uniformed men as “all part of the standard repertoire of gay porn.” In gay porn, uniformed men are included as an idealized fantasy—seemingly “straight” men are made available for gay desire.

The scene shows a corpse-like figure, and then there is a blood bank with two skeletal figures gesturing outside of it. Again, the film includes the harsh realities of life on the street—people dying of overdoses and starvation. Moments later a well-dressed man steps out of a car with red plush interiors. The “Times Square” sign flashes again. There’s a man jerking off outside of the phone booth while a shirtless cowboy stands on the other side. The shirtless cowboy is another anomaly being shirtless instead of pantsless. He reads as a nod to Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy*. The well-dressed man then enters the phone booth, seemingly to become Bobby’s next client. The sign “Get ‘em While You’re Hot” on the dildo and artificial anus cart that Ludlam is peddling flashes again—a reminder that beauty is fleeting and that many hustlers age out of the profession as they become

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“undesirable.” The performance of desire is only legible if the john does in fact desire the hustler. While not presented in any kind of chronological order, because Pink Narcissus was shot over the course of 8 years, the viewer sees Bobby actually aging through the film.

Although Bobby walks away with the john on the street, the john comes alone to the hotel room and rings for Bobby. Bobby answers the door and is suddenly transformed into the john.

**Flesh: There are places besides 42nd Street**

In Flesh, Joe voices his concern to his wife Geri about having to go down to Times Square. He tells her, “I’m not in the mood to go down to 42nd Street you know, so like I call up 2 or 3 people and then hand over the money. Then I can’t call these people anymore, why would I want to do that?” She responds, “Go somewhere else and get it. There are other places besides 42nd Street. Are you going to do it?”

Times Square becomes a spectre in his moves to avoid it. Where Times Square was a desirable attraction to the sailors in On the Town, Times Square in Flesh, similar to how it gets described in City of Night “as haunted,” becomes so hellish that Joe does everything he can to avoid it.

In the next scene Joe is out on the street. He’s wearing a red bandanna with a blue button down over a t-shirt and jeans. This is a slight variation on the t-shirt and cuffed jeans that Reay identifies as the hustler’s “uniform” as named by John Rechy in his novel City of Night (see fig. 18) that hustlers in Times Square would have worn at the time. Reay describes the camera itself as cruising Joe as it moves across his body. Joe performs his masculinity even through wearing the hustler’s uniform—at home in his bed he is always shown naked except when Geri wraps his penis in a gauzy scarf not dissimilar from the fabrics that Bobby is draped in while he’s in the hotel room.

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18 Reay, New York Hustlers, 80.
19 Reay, 206.
Instead of going to 42nd Street, Joe instead stands outside of the Lexington Avenue and 53rd Street subway station, then part of the Queensboro IND line, at the 3rd Avenue and 53rd street entrance (see fig. 19). One can hear the sounds of traffic but is not privy to the conversations he has with the potential johns.

Joe moves further down the avenue and walks by the Greenacre Park Sign on East 51st Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenue. The sign reads “Closes at 9PM” as a man cruises Joe. Ironically, the park closing at 9PM is trying to curb just such illegal activity as the sex work that Joe is engaged in.

After going home with an older artist who photographs and draws Joe in poses resembling ancient Greek sculpture, Joe is back on the street. With this client, Joe performs desire for the client and performs his masculinity similar to City of Night’s narrator and “plays dumb” ad let’s the john “sculpt” him into various poses. This time he is outside of Bryant Park talking with other less experienced gay-for-pay hustlers. Reay names Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library, as a popular spot for hustlers outside of Times Square (see fig. 20). Joe tells them, “You straight? Ain’t nobody straight? What’s straight? It’s not about being straight or not straight you just gotta do whatever you have to do.” Joe shows that this performance of desire allows a certain fluidity of sexuality that doesn’t have to be wrapped up in labels. As Joe talks to these other hustlers about their work he says, “Yeah, it’s hard to learn what you have to do, but once you learn how to do that it’s easy. If you have to care what the other straight people are going to think then you’re not in your bag. Don’t worry he’s only gonna suck your peetas.”

Joe tells one of the other hustlers to find a good street corner. The hustler asks Joe, “Where? Cause I don’t know where to look.” Although they don’t explicitly mention in their conversation to avoid Times Square/42nd Street, it’s clear from the conversation that both Joe and the other hustler wish to avoid that area. While the film also never makes explicit why Joe “doesn’t want to go down

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20 Reay, 94.
to 42nd Street,” these other locations, while still in walking distance from Times Square, provide a vibrant hustling and cruising scene that allow him to avoid the potential competition with other hustlers as well as to better avoid potential run-ins with the police. It could also be a strategy to avoid the over-masculine posturing of other hustlers and not having to perform such a strict code of masculinity. Joe tells him, “Actually go down by the 50s by 3rd avenue. That’s a good area around 56th street...55th street by the newsstand.” He then goes on to tell him, “Your best bet is standing where you were” meaning where they just were outside of Bryant Park. He then reiterates to check out the spot near the newsstand. He describes it saying, “There’s big pop posters down there. It’s good down there.” This is also one of the locations that the City of Night narrator goes to hustle outside of Times Square.21

After they separate, Joe goes into a phone booth and makes a phone call to a regular john of his named David. He asks, “Are you going to be home for a while? What you say I stop over later on?” Joe knows that he can count on David for the rest of the money he needs. When he exits the phone booth he crosses against Bryant Park and the back of the Central Building of the New York Public Library.

Interestingly both Pink Narcissus and Flesh while interacting with the idea of Times Square do not actually ever show the actual Times Square. Pink Narcissus shows this alternate vision of Times Square through a queer fantasyscape while in Flesh, the absence of Times Square is striking.

Post-modern Narcissus stories

In the Greek myth of Narcissus, the titular character is condemned to fall in love with his own reflection after rejecting the advances of many wood nymphs, most notably Echo. The myth has a homoerotic, if not queer, legacy that can be traced through canonical and seminal texts on mythology.

21 Rechy, City of Night, 72.
In her classic text *Mythology*, Edith Hamilton describes Narcissus: “His beauty was so great, all the girls who saw him longed to be his, but he would have none of them.” She goes on to use the term “disgust” to describe his feelings specifically toward the wood nymph Echo who longs for him. I would like to offer the queer reading that Narcissus rejects the advances of his female admirers not because he can love no one but himself but because he longs for someone for whom he can reflect their desire. Narcissus, like the protagonists Bobby and Joe, is not necessarily collapsing the subject/object dichotomy as Waugh suggests occurs in same sex relations, but Narcissus is aware of the desirous effect he has on others wants to reflect the gaze back to them. Although Echo desires him, she can never have him and instead spends the rest of time merely “echoing” his desire back for him—an act that does not actually subvert the gaze. Her echoing becomes a passive act desirous of that which she can never have whereas Bobby and Joe actively seek to reflect back the desire of their clients. In the case of Bobby and Joe, it is not that they desire the clients but rather they are desirous of the attention that the clients give them and want to create that desire for their clients.

There is an obvious connection between this myth and *Pink Narcissus*. Gilad Padva writes, “If Ovid’s Narcissus is only homoerotic, than [sic] Bidgood’s Narcissus is explicitly homosexual.” The myth of Narcissus also immediately calls to mind the scene in *Flesh* when Joe goes home with the artist who has him in poses reminiscent of classical Greek sculpture and his adoration of Joe’s form. While this might immediately recall Adonis first, both myths draw upon the great beauty of these young men, yet the myth of Narcissus more aptly fits with this theorization of the gaze and also an embodiment of Greek idealism. The first shot in *Flesh* of Joe out looking for work is actually

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23 Hamilton, 112; Narcissus may have some unexamined misogyny.


25 It should be noted that in the myth of Adonis, he was also turned into a flower upon his death.
through his reflection in a puddle on the cobblestone street and not a direct shot of Joe himself. His reflection like Narcissus is mirrored to the audience.

*Pink Narcissus* also plays with the idea of the mirror and reflection as a wall of mirrors transform into a wall of urinals in a bathroom where men go to cruise each other. These mirrors also transform into pillars of an arena, designed as ejaculating penises, where Bobby is a matador urging along a young handsome biker with whom he has a sexual encounter in the bathroom.

Their reflections, both in the puddle and in the mirrors, show the desire of the johns as it is mirrored back to the johns, not to the hustlers themselves, and symbolically transform them both into modern Narcissuses. There is a fascination with the beauty of both of these men both within the context of the films from the other characters but also as the viewers of the film. Part of what makes these films resonate with gay male audiences is the beauty of the actors Joe Dallesandro and Bobby Kendall. While the entire film of *Pink Narcissus* is a veritable fantasyscape, *Flesh* still very much enacts this notion of fantasy of the viewer into the intimate moments of Joe’s life and work, and it is no less steeped in the fantasy of Joe’s sexual encounters with the johns.

*Flesh* begins with Joe naked and asleep in bed a shot very similar to how Bobby is shown lying on the floor listening to the radio (see fig. 21 and 22). *Flesh* ends on a similar shot showing the cyclical narrative but also points to the possibility that the whole thing has been a dream. One of the characters in *Flesh* remarks “lots of things feel real that aren’t.” Their performances of desire and masculinity “feel” very real while only being a part of the fantasy. In the fantasy, the only thing real is his body.

Bobby’s and Joe’s beauty become even more important in contrast to the hideousness of their surroundings. They also exhibit a fluidity of masculine and feminine at play in their beauty. These two young men are undeniably masculine but framed and shot in such ways that plays on the feminine and shows those soft edges. Benderson even writes, “Bidgood experimented with the possibilities of contrasting Kendall’s youthful, smoldering masculinity with effeminate, precious costumes and
Bobby himself becomes part of the décor as he transforms into a sculpture, and likewise Joe also becomes a living statue as he poses for one of his johns conjuring up images of Greek myths like Narcissus. In *Pink Narcissus*, Bobby is obviously set amidst the feminine: there is the setting of the pink-hued, gilded hotel room but also Bobby frequently finds himself draped in gauzy fabrics while he performs a certain kind of masculinity on the street for the johns and arguably for the other male hustlers.

The close-ups of Joe at the beginning and end of *Flesh* show the softness of his body while still being muscular and lean, and in some way these moments of stillness betray the femininity that is hidden behind his usual performance of masculinity. In this context, both Bobby and Joe become empowered through their femininity and through their embodiment of the object desire and the feminine. Their performances of masculinity are a way to both carve out space for themselves on the street and perhaps as a survival tactic, because society doesn’t create space for femininity especially that which is subversive and deviant.

**Resisting Identification**

Again, there is something inherently queer about how this particular desire is being formulated and performed even when the performer of said desire is resisting any specific identification. Because there is no dialogue in *Pink Narcissus* it is difficult to consider how Bobby is resisting identification in this context. Whereas in the dialogue of *Flesh*, this becomes much more obvious.

This can be seen when Joe is talking to some other young, gay-for-pay hustlers outside of Bryant Park. They are less experienced, and he offers them advice saying, “You straight? Ain’t nobody straight. What’s straight? It’s not about being straight or not straight. You just gotta do

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26 Bidgood and Benderson, *Bidgood*, 40; this is in reference to an earlier shoot for the magazine The Young Physique but also aptly describes this mix of masculine and feminine in Pink Narcissus.
whatever you have to do.” He understands this requires a certain flexibility and fluidity of sexuality.

Later David, a regular john of Joe’s, says to Joe, “We’re not queer,” and Joe responds, “I know, but a lot of other people don’t understand that,” they’re using “queer” here as a pejorative term as it was understood at the time not necessarily as a way to refute their sexual tendencies. In the same conversation, David asks Joe, “Did you marry her?” And when Joe responds affirmatively, David adds, “As gay as you are?!” In a previous scene after Terry (played by Geri Miller) has finished fellating Joe, asks him “You’re not turning gay, are you?” when he is not as captivated by her breasts as he had been previously.

When read in comparative context, these scenes show that in different spaces Joe understands how the term “gay” shifts. With Terry, it is not necessarily a transactional interaction, and he is having a sexual interaction with her not as part of his work. With David, he can feel more comfortable with his use of gay because it relates explicitly to their interaction and transaction of hustler and john. Joe also explains that he feels that David is more than just a john. He tells David that he views him as a friend and that he “honestly” wants David to like him.

On the surface, this scene implies that Joe feels more comfortable with David than he does with his other johns (or even his wife)—enough so to use to term “gay.” A deeper reading shows that this is just another way that Joe is performing David’s desire back to him. If David views them both as gay and understands their relationship in those terms, Joe, of course, would echo that sentiment.
Map 3.1

Times Square

Port Authority Bus Terminal

Bryant Park

Public Library Central Building

Central Park

Grand Central
Map 3.2

*Pink Narcissus* and *Flesh* Times Square Map Key

1. **Times Square** Here: both the alternative fantasy space of *Pink Narcissus* and the spectre of Times Square in *Flesh*.

2. **Third Avenue in the low east 50s/Lexington and 53rd Street Subway Station**

3. **Greenacre Park**

4. **Bryant Park**

5. **New York Public Library Central Building**


7. **Cine Malibu** *Pink Narcissus* premiered here on May 24, 1971.
Conclusion

By mapping these texts, from *On the Town* and *Anchors Aweigh* to *City of Night*, *Flesh* and *Pink Narcissus*, onto the New York City and in sharing these hidden histories that are silently embedded into the city, I’ve shown how these histories live on in their own ways. Just because these histories of Times Square are no longer visible to the naked eye, does not mean that they have disappeared. They continue to live on through these texts and through the experiences of those who lived them.

Part of the reason I was so drawn to writing about these narratives that are in dialogue with the space of Times Square is because Times Square itself has changed so drastically. In so many other parts of the city one can still glimpse fragments of the past: part of a cobblestone street, an old brownstone, a small business that has survived the decades; but in Times Square it is much harder to find these traces.

Projects such as Queering the Map (https://www.queeringthemap.com) seek to document and map current queer histories through crowdsourcing—not just the major events but the everyday moments and intimacies. Although Queering the Map is based in Montreal, users from all over the world are able to easily add their own map pins with memories or events to the map. Zoom into the Times Square area on Queering the Map, and one can still find queer stories despite the Disneyfication of the area. I myself have dropped a few map pins across the city to share my own queer history. The more people participate in these kinds of projects ensures that these important histories won’t get erased or forgotten.

My interest in these specific narratives stems from the unique ways that they engage with queerness. As I said before, the lack of queer narratives at the time of these texts means that these allow for nuance and possibility in certain aspects. We queers learn to find representations of ourselves where there are none—even growing up many of us cite queer readings of different characters and films because we didn’t have access to those that did exist. There’s a magical feeling
about creating something from so little (although we crave more explicitly queer narratives as well). These kinds of queer narratives in these texts (when they do exist) are so often still relegated to the margins for us to have to seek them out.

In many ways, current films that feature more mainstream gay narratives, take *Love, Simon* for example, are less queer and offer less nuance because they serve up such a normative take on the gay experience and do not offer actual queer narratives. Films like *Love, Simon* target mainstream audiences and thus offer a more sanitized even white-washed version of what queerness or really, gayness looks like that is more palatable to the general public. These films tug on our heartstrings no less but offer an idealistic, best-case scenario for what gay lives look like in 2019—not the lives that most of us are actually living.

We often think of progress in a linear fashion, so it is interesting to think that the texts discussed in this thesis were created over 50 years ago, and yet offer us more space to see queerness in ways that don’t fit neatly inside any one box than the way it is served up through these current mainstream films. I hope we continue to excavate queer stories of the past and continue to create those for the future.
Appendix

Figure 1. Paul Cadmus’s painting *The Fleet’s In* (1934).

Figure 2. Still from *On the Town* (1949) promotional trailer: Twice as gay as “Anchors Aweigh”!
Figure 3. Still from *On the Town* (1949): Ozzie pretends to be “a dame” who’s interested in Gabey.

Figure 4. Still from *On the Town* (1949): Gabey kisses Ozzie on the cheek.
Figure 5. Still from *On the Town* (1949): The sailors dress in Orientalist drag and flirt with the cops at Coney Island.

Figure 6. Still from *Anchors Aweigh* (1945): Gene Kelly’s Joe having a steamy phone conversation which resembles fellatio.
Figure 7. Still from *Anchors Aweigh* (1945): Gene Kelly’s Joe pretends to be “a dame” to teach Frank Sinatra’s Clarence about dating.

Figure 8. Still from *Anchors Aweigh* (1945): Joe and Clarence get read as queer by a passerby.
Figure 9. VHS cover for *Anchors Aweigh* (1945): Joe’s attention is always on Clarence.

Figure 10. Promotional Poster for *Anchors Aweigh* (1945): Joe seems to not even notice the female lead, still paying attention only to Clarence.
Figure 11. Still from *Hail, Caesar!* (2016): Channing Tatum’s Burt Gurney peeks out from between the legs of a fellow sailor after a lively, gay dance number.

Figure 12. 50th Anniversary cover of *City of Night* by John Rechy. This cover is a reprint of the original and features the “Fascination” sign from Times Square that the narrator references in the text.
Figure 13. The marquee of 55th Street Playhouse where *Flesh* premiered in 1968. From [http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6376/photos/45120](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6376/photos/45120)

Figure 14. Still from *Pink Narcissus* (1971): Bobby lounges while on the phone with a john.
Figure 15. Still from *Pink Narcissus* (1971): Bobby talking with a john out on the street in alternate Times Square.

Figure 16. Still from *Pink Narcissus* (1971): View of alternate Times Square from Bobby’s hotel room.
Figure 17. Still from *Pink Narcissus* (1971): Cissy’s Bar & Grill – Notice: This is a raided premise.

Figure 18. Still from *Flesh* (1968): Joe out on the street wearing the “hustler’s uniform.”
Figure 19. Still from *Flesh* (1968): Joe outside the Lexington and 53rd Street Subway Station.

Figure 20. Still from *Flesh* (1968): Joe talking to other gay-for-pay hustlers outside of Bryant Park.
Figure 21. Still from *Flesh* (1968): Joe naked in bed at the beginning of the film similar to how he appears again at the end.

Figure 22. Still from *Pink Narcissus* (1971): Bobby lying on the floor in the hotel room similar to how Joe appears in *Flesh* at the beginning and end of the film.
Bibliography


