

Matt Houlbrook. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 398 pp. \$29.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-35460-6.



Reviewed by Rictor Norton

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"Perils and pleasures" in the subtitle of Matt Houlbrook's book refer to the fact that queer urban lives from the end of the First World War to the publication of the Wolfenden Report were conducted in a surprisingly public manner, making them unsafe yet full of vitality. Cruising the streets in the West End of London was commonplace from the 1930s. Especially visible were the "queans" (particularly the "screamers" and "pan-sies" who wore make-up), but hundreds of masculine youths or "trade" (working-class lads ready "to be had") passed unnoticed as they loitered at street corners, waiting to be picked up by middle-class gentlemen who came to think of themselves as "respectable homosexuals." After dusk, Hyde Park, Clapham Common, Hampstead Heath, and many other parks were hives of queer interaction. And not only sexual activity: Hyde Park was also an important "site of sociability" (p. 55), where queer men strolled with their friends on Sunday mornings before going to Lyons Corner House for lunch. Far from being a "twilight world," this was an "open-air queer culture." London's cinemas, theaters, and music halls were also important queer sites, offering not merely concealment for

sex, but promenades for open queer display. The Biograph cinema near Victoria Station was a famous queer landmark (nicknamed the "Biogrope") for several decades. Despite intermittent police crackdowns and the occasional moral reform campaign, this was "a vibrant queer world" where social as well as sexual interactions contributed to the construction of queer culture.

Houlbrook brilliantly maps the four key spheres of queer social geography, devoting a chapter each to the public world of cruising in parks, the streets, and urinals; the commercial world of bars and nightclubs; the bath houses; and the residential world of bachelor chambers, furnished rooms, and queer lodging houses. Other chapters focus on the representative types who intermingled in this queer culture: the "queans" or effeminate men who adopted female nicknames and organized drag-balls; the working-class men or "trade" who enjoyed sex and long-term emotional relationships with men, but who often had girlfriends and thought of themselves as normal; and the respectable middle-class self-aware "homosexuals" who sought to distance

themselves from the public perception of effeminacy on the one hand and promiscuity and prostitution on the other (though in fact they often fell victim to blackmail by "rough trade"). Class analysis works very well for pinning down these different "modes of queerness": the constructs of "quean" and "trade" were overwhelmingly working class, while that of "homosexual" was overwhelmingly middle class. The vibrancy of queer culture was created mainly by the two former groups, which have become much less visible since the end of the Second World War.

By the end of the 1950s, Houlbrook argues, trade had practically disappeared. Working-class youths earned more money in regular jobs, girls of their own class became more accessible in an increasingly liberal society, and the old working-class communities were broken up by new housing developments. As the fluid street culture disappeared, workingmen no longer casually encountered queers without making a special effort to frequent queer pubs and clubs, where they would be more strictly defined as "renters." Houlbrook thinks that trade is no longer recognizable in modern society, but he overlooks the numerous working-class youths who have gone on to lucrative work for porn magazines and the queer video industry, or in "massage" work. Queens have also declined in numbers, and men who enjoy going out in women's clothes are now too few to support the fabulous drag balls that were staged in the Albert Hall in the 1930s. A new emphasis upon masculine self-presentation, and the split between gender identification and sexual orientation into separate concepts, have made it easier for a manly man to love a man without reconceptualizing himself as a woman. While all this may be true, Houlbrook ignores the increasingly visible presence of transgender individuals in modern queer culture, and the possibility that some queens have followed the ultimate route toward female reconceptualization. Overall, stricter conceptual boundaries between queer and normal or "gay" and "straight" have made the queer world

more exclusively homosexual and in some ways less "queer." Houlbrook amply demonstrates that the exuberant queer culture of the 1920s and 1930s was a golden age.

Houlbrook has delved deeply into primary sources not exploited before. Proceedings at the Metropolitan Magistrates' Courts and City of London Justice Rooms have been surveyed at five-year intervals, yielding data for more than 2,500 "queer incidents"; to this are added material from private diaries and letters, oral history, and numerous newspaper reports. Houlbrook's wide reading in the theoretical secondary literature has been used to interrogate the data. He is a careful collector, and subjects the data to rigorous scrutiny. For instance, his statistics are based on counting *incidents* (a queer incident being a single instance in which one or more men are arrested and subsequently charged), which is a more accurate way of measuring patterns of behavior and regulation than counting total numbers of offenders or total numbers of offences prosecuted. Richly detailed descriptions are used to illustrate each point being made, and Houlbrook keeps us aware of the fact that we are analyzing the lives of real people, not simply sets of behavior patterns and jurisprudential statistics. The queer scene comes alive with abundant testimony from men like Bobby B., who loved doing his Salome dance at queer parties, or "Miss Footsore," who in 1928 made hand-drawn maps of the "Comfort Stations of the Cross" (p. 51).

Houlbrook's focus on queer geography produces an illuminating structuralist interpretation of urinals, the streets, parks, lodging houses, commercial venues, enclaves, working-class areas, and marginal areas. He shows, for example, how the organizational structures of police forces and social/governmental agencies relate to parameters of surveillance of public spaces such as urinals or clubs. However, his near-obsessive use of theories of social geography threatens to lead him away from knowledge rather than toward it. He

claims, for example, that something as common as picking up sailors in a bar and taking them home "brought the city into the home, collapsing nominally distinct spatial realms" (p. 130). He further claims that because queers sometimes held open-house parties which admitted near-strangers, they thereby "collapsed the conceptual separation of public and private spheres" (p. 131). These formulations greatly overstate the case: the burglar who breaks into one's home is more of a spatial deconstructionist than a bit of trade invited home for the night.

Many important features of queer culture do not lend themselves to spatial analysis: queer language or "polari," effeminacy, and, ultimately, homosexual desire itself. A psychological analysis of the widespread taste for rough trade (including Guardsmen) might be more illuminating than teasing out alleged distinctions between public and private space as used by queers. Rough trade is enjoyed as much on Clapham Common as in a furnished flat: the desire itself remains constant regardless of the place where it is experienced. I was not convinced by Houlbrook's concluding "geographical" argument that the modern queer world became more "privatized" than it had been in the past. As a symbol for the alleged "movement from visibility to invisibility, from an open public sexual culture to an exclusive commercial sociability" (p. 271) he unwisely chooses Brydges Place off St. Martin's Lane in the year 1953, when a popular cast-iron urinal was demolished and the Festival Club was opened for private members. But the heyday of "cottaging" was still to come for the urinals at Holloway Road Underground station, enjoyed by the playwright Joe Orton in the 1960s. Today, Hampstead Heath, Clapham Common, and Alexandra Park are as active as ever they were, and queer couples walk hand-in-hand along the streets of central London (not to mention Manchester and Brighton).

Ultimately I felt that Houlbrook's main theoretical claim that the blurring or overlap of pri-

vate and public spheres used by queers resulted in a reconceptualization of queer space was not of sufficient importance to justify his overuse of the theories of spatial/social geography. Traditional historians have always recognized the blurring of boundaries in the demimonde or "underworld," and in the marginalized subcultures of minority groups. Houlbrook seems desperately keen to suggest that the regulation and policing of homosexual behavior were central to "constructing" queer geography, even while he grudgingly admits that the policing in fact reflected queer activity pretty accurately. The data suggest fairly clearly that "official geographies of regulation" (p. 25) and police surveillance in fact *discovered* rather than *constructed* queer geographies. Urinals became an institution in the queer world because queers loved cottaging, not because the police found it fairly easy to make arrests in urinals. Of course it is true that the stereotypes of "West End poofs" and "Dilly Boys" ignore the existence of respectable homosexuals meeting in their private homes, but the public queer spaces exposed and "constructed" by newspaper reports were nevertheless real enough, and created by queers themselves rather than by a "homophobic" society. The important theme that Houlbrook has emphasized, and which many previous historians have not appreciated, is that even places such as urinals and baths were "important sites of sociability" (p. 55), not merely places for making sexual contact.

This is overwhelmingly a study of men. Lesbians get little more than half a dozen references and are largely ignored. Whether the queer world really was almost exclusively male can be questioned. Through the occasional references to women we do learn, for example, that lesbian couples sometimes ran gay clubs and sometimes let out rooms for the rent boys on the Dilly to bring their clients back to. But the possibility that lesbians played a significant role in queer commercial institutions before they developed their

own lesbian clubs in the 1950s is not systematically addressed.

With more than 65 pages of notes and a bibliography of nearly 500 items, Houlbrook's work makes a significant contribution to the study of queer history. His book, however, has its roots in a doctoral dissertation, and retains a sense of meeting the requirements of the examining board. Sometimes I felt that the academic gloss had been spread too thickly over the surface of the data. Houlbrook's writing style is clear and forceful, but is sometimes overembellished with the mantras of critical theory. For example, an otherwise unremarkable observation that young men's bodies are discreetly inspected by other men in the public baths is transformed into "the male body became subject to a pervasive gaze, through which the conventions of bathing actuated a particular form of spectatorship" (p. 97). Such academic discourse seems hardly necessary to describe something recognized by the ancient Greek philosophers watching boys exercise their bodies in the gymnasiums of Athens or Sparta.

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