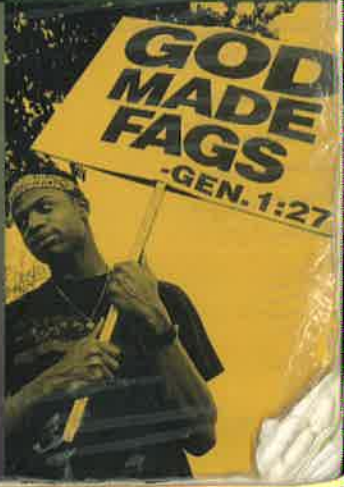




# Queers in space

Communities | Public Places | Sites of Resistance

Edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter



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# Queers in space:

Communities | Public Places | Sites of Resistance

Edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Ph.D., Anne-Marie Bouthillette, M.A.,  
and Yolanda Retter, Ph.D.

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## Restriction and Reclamation: Lesbian Bars and Beaches of the 1950s

Joan Nestle

When I published *A Restricted Country* in 1987,<sup>1</sup> I did not think in terms of queer spaces, but a basic tension in the narratives is the existence of restricted territories and my need to deconstruct them into sites of lesbian freedom. Images of geography and metaphors of place came naturally to me as I tried to re-create the pre-Stonewall struggle for lesbian survival, whether concretely as a neighborhood—the Lower East Side in the 1960s—or abstractly as historical disenfranchisement—“When the Lions Write History.”

Silenced and policed,<sup>2</sup> we congregated in allotted spaces. Borders were marked and real; vice laws, police, and organized crime representatives controlled our movements into and out of our “countries.” But what could not be controlled was what forced the creation of these spaces in the first place—our need to confront a personal destiny, to see our reflections in each other’s faces and to break societal ostracism with our bodies. What could not be controlled was our desire.



A 1950s lesbian bar in the South. Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Education Foundation, Inc./Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

### *The Bathroom Line*<sup>3</sup>

We had rituals, too, back in the old days—rituals born out of our lesbian time and place, the geography of the fifties. The Sea Colony<sup>4</sup> was a world of ritual displays—deep dances of lesbian want, lesbian adventuring, lesbian bonding. We who lived there knew the steps. It was over twenty-five years ago [now over thirty], but I can still peer into the smoke-filled room, feel the pressure of bodies, look for the wanted face to float up out of the haze into the circle of light, a tumult of recognition. “I wondered how long it would take for you to come here,” the teacher welcomes her adoring student and then retreats into the woman-made mist.

Because we lived in the underworld of the Sea Colony, we were surrounded by the nets of the society that hated us yet wanted our money. Mafia nets, clean-up-New York nets, vice-squad nets. We needed the lesbian air of the Sea Colony to breathe the life we could not anywhere else, those of us who wanted to see women dance, make love, wear shirts and pants. Here and in other bars like this, we found each other and the space to be a sexually powerful butch-fem community. We entered their nets with rage, with need, and with strength. The physical nets were visible, and we knew how to sidestep them, just as we knew, holding hands in the street—clear butch-fem couples—which groups of straights to stay away from or which cars flashed danger as they slowed down at the corner of the curb. We knew how to move quickly. We had the images of smashed faces clear in our memories: our lovers, our friends who had not moved quickly enough. It was the other nets, the nets of the righteous people, the ones that reached into our minds, that most threatened our breathing. These nets carried twisted in their invisible windings the words *hate yourself because you are a freak, hate yourself . . . you use your tongue, hate yourself you look butch and femme, hate yourself because you are sexual.*

The powers of the mainland controlled our world in some obvious ways. The cops would come in to check their nets, get their payoffs, joke with the men who stood by the door. They would poke their heads into the back room to make sure we were not dancing together, a crime for which we could be arrested. Of course, the manager had flashed the red light ten minutes before the cops arrived to warn us to play our parts. We did, sitting quietly at the square tables as the cops looked us over. But if they had looked closer, they would have seen hands clenched under the tables, femmes holding on to the belts of their butches, saying through the touch of their fingers: “Don’t let their power, their swagger, their leer, goad you into battle. We will lose, and they will take pleasure in our pain, in our blood.”

But the most searing reminder of our colonized world was the bathroom line. Now I know it stands for all the pain and glory of my time, and I carry that line and the women who endured it deep within me. Because we were labeled deviants, our bathroom habits had to be watched. Only one woman at a time was allowed into the

toilet because we could not be trusted. Thus the toilet line was born, a twisting horizon of lesbian women waiting for permission to urinate, to shit.

The line flowed past the far wall, past the bar and the front room tables, and into the back room. Guarding the entrance to the toilet was a short, square, handsome butch woman, the same woman every night, whose job it was to twist around her hand our allotted amount of toilet paper. She was us, an obscenity, doing all the man's tricks so we could breathe. The line awaited all of us every night, and we developed a "line act." We joked, we cruised, we commented on the length of time one of us took, we made special pleas to allow hot-and-heavy lovers in together, knowing full well that our lady would not permit it. I stood, a fem, loving the women on either side of me, loving my comrades for their style, the owner of their stance, the hair hitting the collar, the thrown-out hip, the hand encircling the beer can. Our eyes played along the line, subtle touches, gentle shynesses weaved under the blaring jokes, the music, the surveillance. We lived on that line; restricted and judged, we took deep breaths and played.

But buried deep in our endurance was our fury. That line was practice and theory seared into one. We wove our freedoms, our culture, around their obstacles of hatred, but we also paid the price. Every time I took the fistful of toilet paper, I swore eventual liberation. It would be, however, a liberation filled with a memory.

Public space for the pre-Stonewall working-class lesbian bore all the tensions of a stigmatized private self. The public bar was a privately coded place. Its awning and darkened street window never revealed its secret, yet going to the bar meant going out. Our exposure was enclosed, but the secrecy was also disclosure. The space was both a gift and a torment. It replicated the wonder of desire and the burden of its condemnation. But almost every night, there would be times when the spirit of the enclosed community threatened its enforced containment. These were the early signs of deconstruction, the first cracks in the wall.

### *Riis Park, 1960*<sup>5</sup>

I may never change my name to nouns for sea or land or air, but I have loved this earth in all the ways she let me get close to her. Even the earth beneath the city streets sang to my legs as I strode around this city, watching the sun glint off windows, looking up at the West Side sky immense as it reached from the river to the hills of Central Park. Not a Kansas sky paralleled by a flat earth, but a sky forcing its blue between the water towers and the ornate peaks that try to catch it.

And then my deepest joy, when the hot weekends came, sometimes as early as May but surely by June, when I would leave East Ninth Street early on Saturday morning, wearing my bathing suit under my shorts, and head for the BMT, the start of a two-hour subway and bus trip that would take me to Riis Park—my Riviera, my Fire Island, my gay beach—where I could spread my blanket and watch strong butches

challenge each other by weight lifting garbage cans, where I could see tattoos bulge with womanly effort and hear shouts of the softball game come floating over the fence.

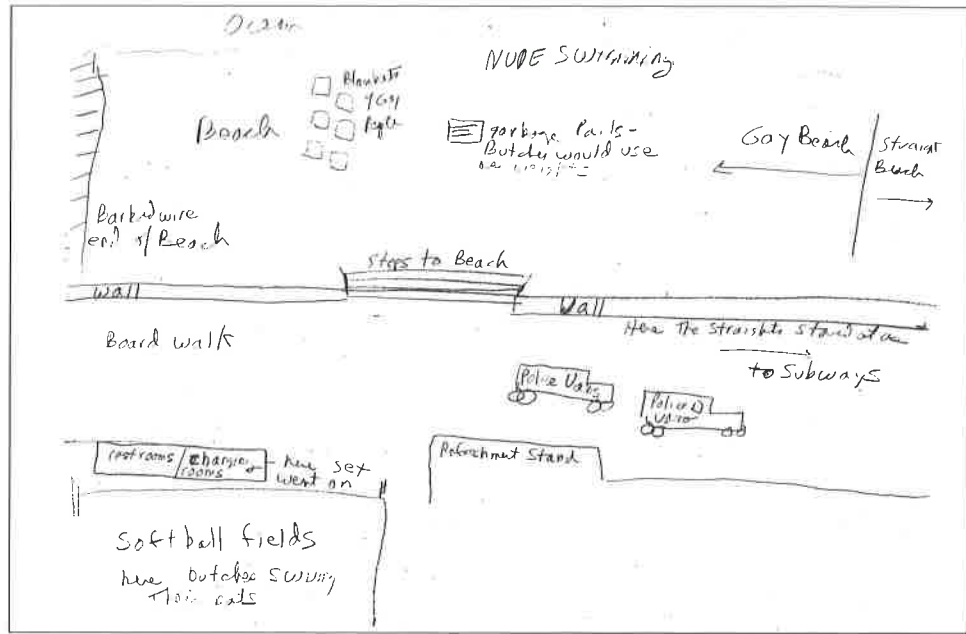
The subway wound its way through lower Manhattan, out to Brooklyn, and finally reached its last stop: Flatbush Avenue. I always had a book to read but would periodically cruise the car, becoming adept at picking out the gay passengers, the ones with longing faces turned toward the sun waiting for them at the end of the line. Sometimes I would find my lesbian couple, older women, wide-hipped, shoulders touching, sitting with their cooler filled with beer and cold chicken.

The last stop was a one-way, long, narrow station, but I could already smell the sea air. We crushed through the turnstiles, up onto Flatbush Avenue, which stretched like a royal highway to the temple of the sea. We would wait on line for the bus to pull in, a very gay line, and then as we moved down Flatbush, teenagers loud with their own lust poured into the bus. There were hostile encounters, the usual stares at the freaks, whispered taunts of *faggot*, *lezzie*, *is that a man or a woman*, but we did not care. We were heading to the sun, to our piece of the beach where we could kiss and hug and enjoy looking at each other.

The bus rolled down Flatbush, past low two-story family houses, neighborhoods with their beauty parlors and pizza joints. This was the only time that I—born in the Bronx—loved Brooklyn. I knew that at the end of that residential hegemony was the



Femme women at the beach, c. 1950s. Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Education Foundation, Inc./Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.



Riis Park c. 1958. Map by Joan Nestle.

ocean that I loved to dive into, that I watched turn purple in the late afternoon sun, that made me feel clean and young and strong, and ready for a night of loving, my skin living with salt, clean enough for my lover's tongue, my body reaching to give my lover's hands the fullness I had been given by the sea.

I would sit on the edge of my blanket, watching every touch, every flirtatious move around me, noting every curve of flesh, erection, nipple hard with irritation or desire. I drank in the spectacle of lesbian and gay men's sensuality, always looking for the tall, dark butch who would walk over and stand above me, her shadow breaking the sun, asking my name.

And the times I came with my lover, the wonder of kissing on the hot blanket in the sunlight, the joy of laying my head in her lap as we sat and watched the waves grow small in the dusk. The wonderful joy of my lover's body stretched over me, rolling me into the sand, our wrestling, our laughter, chases leading into the cooling water. I would wrap my legs around her, and she would bounce me on the sea, or I would duck below the surface and suck her nipples, pulling them into the ocean.

Whenever I turned away from the ocean to face the low cement wall that ran along the back of our beach, I was forced to remember that we were always watched —by teenagers on bikes, pointing and laughing, and by more serious stagers who used telescopes to focus in on us. But we were undaunted. Even the cops deciding to clean up the beach by arresting men whose suits were judged too minimal, hauling them





Home of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.  
Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Education Foundation, Inc./  
Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York.

over the sand into police wagons, did not destroy our sun.

Only once do I remember the potential power of our people becoming a visible thing, like a mighty arm threatening revenge if respect was not paid. A young man was brought ashore by the exhausted lifeguards and his lover fell to his knees, keening for his loss. A terrible quiet fell on our beach, and like the moon drawing the tides, we formed an ever-growing circle around the lovers, opening a path only wide enough for the police carrying the stretcher, our silence threatening our anger if this grief was not respected. The police, sinking into the sand under the weight of their uniforms, looked around and stopped joking. Silently they placed the dead youth on the stretcher and started the long walk away from the ocean. His lover, supported by friends, followed

behind, and then like a thick human rope, we all marched after them, our near-naked bodies shining with palm oil and sweat, men and women walking in a bursting silence behind the body, escorting it to the ambulance, past the staring interlopers. The freaks had turned into a people to whom respect must be paid.

Later in my life I learned the glories of Fire Island, the luxury of Cherry Grove. But this tired beach, filled with the children of the boroughs, was my first free place where I could face the ocean that claimed me as its daughter and kiss in blazing sunlight the salt-tinged lips of the woman I loved.

When I look over my narratives that grew out of this time period, I am struck by the competing language of control and liberation, of colonization and autonomy. These forces always exist together just as they did in the physical public spaces we occupied. As I grow older, I still return to these memories as the most compelling, as the truest metaphors for how it was to love. Since the seventies, I have been to fully liberated spaces like the Michigan Women's Music Festival, Sister Space, and other all-women gatherings, but while I have enjoyed the openness, homogeneity, and safety of them all, they do not call to my imagination in the same way. Perhaps it will always be the site of the first kiss, of the first entry, of the first battle for erotic life that will call

for commemoration. Surely the struggle between our public expression and societal control has not gone away, yet I think there is something deeper calling out from these places, the dark and red-lit bars, the liberated zones of sea and sand. It was here that women transformed themselves, right under the fist of the state. It was here, on continuously shifting ground, that we created the semblance of communal permanence. It was here that we found a way to be real in places that were never our own, by deed or laws of property. Whether it was the bar or the beach, we claimed these places by the courage of our often-wounded bodies and the persistence of our need. We created moments, afternoons, nights of liberation out of the mortar of surveillance.

Now they live in my memory, the final site of reclamation.