Gay New York

Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940

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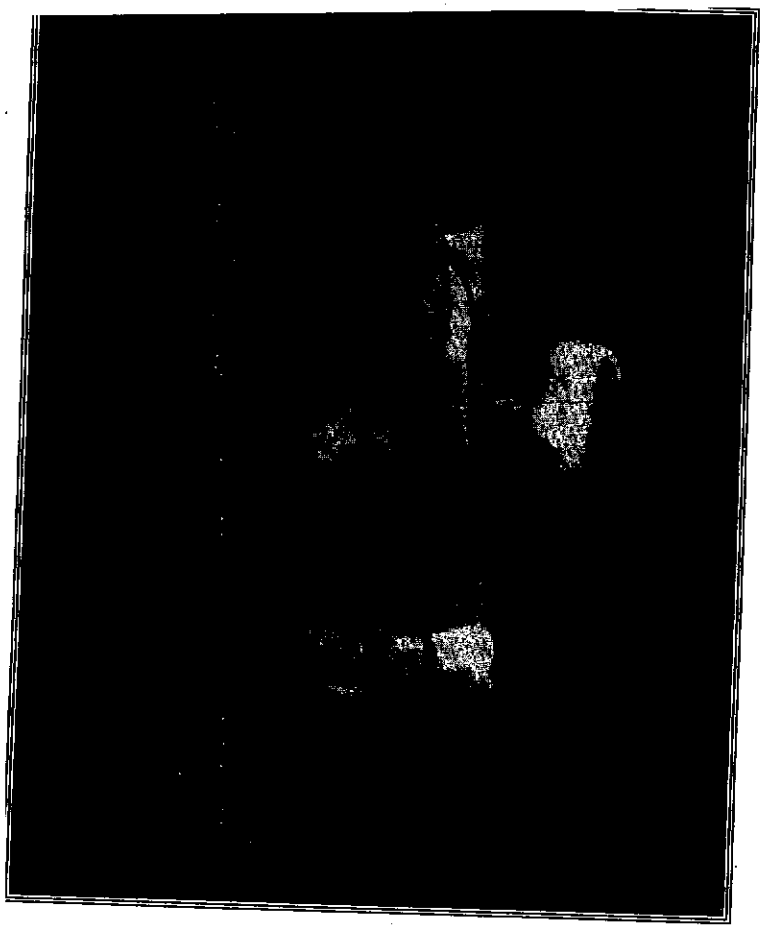

Drag balls were the largest communal events of prewar gay society, and the drag queens and other "fairies" spotlighted at them were its most visible representatives. In a sign of how gay life was integrated into African-American life, Harlem's leading photographer, James VanDerZee, produced this formal portrait of a drag queen, "Beau of the Ball," in 1927. *(Copyright © 1985 by Donna Mussenden-VanDerZee.)*

INTRODUCTION

I

IN THE HALF-CENTURY BETWEEN 1890 AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND World War, a highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing gay male world took shape in New York City. That world included several gay neighborhood enclaves, widely publicized dances and other social events, and a host of commercial establishments where gay men gathered, ranging from saloons, speakeasies, and bars to cheap cafeterias and elegant restaurants. The men who participated in that world forged a distinctive culture with its own language and customs, its own traditions and folk histories, its own heroes and heroines. They organized male beauty contests at Coney Island and drag balls in Harlem; they performed at gay clubs in the Village and at tourist traps in Times Square. Gay writers and performers produced a flurry of gay literature and theater in the 1920s and early 1930s; gay impresarios organized cultural events that sustained and enhanced gay men's communal ties and group identity. Some gay men were involved in long-term monogamous relationships they called marriages; others participated in an extensive sexual underground that by the beginning of the century included well-known cruising areas in the city's parks and streets, gay bathhouses, and saloons with back rooms where men met for sex.

The gay world that flourished before World War II has been almost entirely forgotten in popular memory and overlooked by professional historians; it is not supposed to have existed. This book seeks to restore that world to history, to chart its geography, and to recapture its culture and politics. In doing so, it challenges three widespread myths about the

istory of gay life before the rise of the gay movement, which I call the yths of isolation, invisibility, and internalization.

The myth of isolation holds that anti-gay hostility prevented the devel-pment of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead soli-ry lives in the decades before the rise of the gay liberation movement. s one exceptionally well informed writer and critic recently put it, the 969 Stonewall rebellion not only marked the beginning of the militant y movement but was

> the critical . . . event that unleashed a vast reconstitution of gay soci-ety: gay bars, baths, bookstores, and restaurants opened, gay softball teams, newspapers, political organizations, and choruses proliferated. Gay groups of all sorts popped up while gay neighborhoods emerged in our larger, and many of our smaller cities. This was and is a vast social revolution . . . a new community came into being in an aston-ishingly short period of time.[1]

is has become the common wisdom for understandable reasons, for : policing of the gay world before Stonewall was even more exten-e and draconian than is generally realized. A battery of laws crimi-lized not only gay men's narrowly "sexual" behavior, but also their ociation with one another, their cultural styles, and their efforts to ganize and speak on their own behalf. Their social marginalization 'e the police and popular vigilantes even broader informal authority harass them; anyone discovered to be homosexual was threatened h loss of livelihood and loss of social respect. Hundreds of men 'e arrested each year in New York City alone for violating such s.

ut the laws were enforced only irregularly, and indifference or osity—rather than hostility or fear—characterized many New kers' response to the gay world for much of the half-century ore the war. Gay men had to take precautions, but, like other mar-ılized peoples, they were able to construct spheres of relative cul-l autonomy in the interstices of a city governed by hostile powers. y forged an immense gay world of overlapping social networks in city's streets, private apartments, bathhouses, cafeterias, and ons, and they celebrated that world's existence at regularly held munal events such as the massive drag (or transvestite) balls that ıcted thousands of participants and spectators in the 1920s. By 1890s, gay men had made the Bowery a center of gay life, and by 1920s they had created three distinct gay neighborhood enclaves reenwich Village, Harlem, and Times Square, each with a differ-

ent class and ethnic character, gay cultural style, and public reputa-tion.*

Some men rejected the dominant culture of the gay world and others passed through it only fleetingly, but it played a central role in the lives of many others. Along with sexual camaraderie, it offered them practical support in negotiating the demands of urban life, for many people used their gay social circles to find jobs, apartments, romance, and their clos-est friendships. Their regular association and ties of mutual dependence fostered their allegiance to one another, but gay culture was even more important to them for the emotional support it provided as they devel-oped values and identities significantly different from those prescribed by the dominant culture. Indeed, two New Yorkers who conducted research on imprisoned working-class homosexuals in the 1930s expressed con-cern about the effects of gay men's participation in homosexual society precisely because it made it possible for them to reject the prescriptions of the dominant culture and to forge an alternative culture of their own. "The homosexual's withdrawal, enforced or voluntary, into a world of his own tends to remove him from touch with reality," they warned in 1941, almost thirty years before the birth of the gay liberation movement at Stonewall. "It promotes the feeling of homosexual solidarity, and withdraws this group more and more from conventional folkways . . . and confirms them in their feeling that they compose a community within the community, with a special and artificial life of their own."[2] Once men discovered the gay world, they knew they were not alone.

The myth of invisibility holds that, even if a gay world existed, it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find. But gay men were highly visible figures in early-twentieth-century New York, in part because gay life was more integrated into the everyday life of the city in the prewar decades than it would be after World War II—in part because so many gay men boldly announced their presence by wearing red ties, bleached hair, and the era's other insignia of homosexuality. Gay men gathered on the same street corners and in many of the same saloons and dance halls that other working-class men did, they participated in the same salons that other bohemians did, and they rented the same halls for

*The "gay world" actually consisted of multiple social worlds, or social networks, many of them overlapping but some quite distinct and segregated from others along lines of race, ethnicity, class, gay cultural style, and/or sexual practices. I have nonetheless referred to the making of "a" gay world because almost all the men in those networks conceived of themselves as linked to the others in their com-mon "queerness" and their membership in a single gay world, no matter how much they regretted it. The relationship different groups of men imagined themselves to have to one another is discussed at greater length later in the book.

arties, fancy balls, and theatrical events that other youths did. "Our treets and beaches are overrun by . . . fairies," declared one New Yorker n 1918,[3] and nongay people encountered them in speakeasies, shops, and ooming houses as well. They read about them in the newspapers, atched them perform in clubs, and saw them portrayed on almost every audeville and burlesque stage as well as in many films. Indeed, many lew Yorkers viewed the gay subculture's most dramatic manifestations s part of the spectacle that defined the distinctive character of their city. ourists visited the Bowery, the Village, and Harlem in part to view gay ien's haunts. In the early 1930s, at the height of popular fascination with ay culture, literally thousands of them attended the city's drag balls to awk at the drag queens on display there, while newspapers filled their ages with sketches of the most sensational gowns.

The drag queens on parade at the balls and the effeminate homosexual ien, usually called "fairies," who managed to be flamboyant even in a uit were the most visible representatives of gay life and played a more entral role in the gay world in the prewar years than they do now. But hile they made parts of the gay world highly visible to outsiders, even ore of that world remained invisible to outsiders. Given the risks gay en faced, most of them hid their homosexuality from their straight orkmates, relatives, and neighbors as well as the police. But being rced to hide from the dominant culture did not keep them hidden from ch other. Gay men developed a highly sophisticated system of subcul- ral codes—codes of dress, speech, and style—that enabled them to rec- nize one another on the streets, at work, and at parties and bars, and carry on intricate conversations whose coded meaning was unintelligi- e to potentially hostile people around them. The very need for such des, it is usually (and rightly) argued, is evidence of the degree to hich gay men had to hide. But the elaboration of such codes also indi- tes the extraordinary resilience of the men who lived under such con- aints and their success in communicating with each other despite em. Even those parts of the gay world that were invisible to the domi- nt society were visible to gay men themselves.

The myth of internalization holds that gay men uncritically internal- d the dominant culture's view of them as sick, perverted, and moral, and that their self-hatred led them to accept the policing of eir lives rather than resist it. As one of the most perceptive gay social tics has put it, "When we hid our homosexuality in the past, it was t only because of fear of social pressure but even more because of eply internalized self-hatred . . . [which was] very pervasive. . . . omosexuals themselves long resisted the idea of being somehow dis- ct from other people."[4] But many gay men celebrated their difference om the norm, and some of them organized to resist anti-gay policing.

From the late nineteenth century on, a handful of gay New Yorkers wrote polemical articles and books, sent letters to hostile newspapers and published their own, and urged jurists and doctors to change their views. In the 1930s, gay bars challenged their prohibition in the courts, and gay men and lesbians organized groups to advocate the homosexual cause. A larger number of men dressed and carried themselves in the streets in ways that proclaimed their homosexuality as boldly as any political button would, even though they risked violence and arrest for doing so.

Most gay men did not speak out against anti-gay policing so openly, but to take this as evidence that they had internalized anti-gay attitudes is to ignore the strength of the forces arrayed against them, to misinterpret silence as acquiescence, and to construe resistance in the narrowest of terms—as the organization of formal political groups and petitions. The history of gay resistance must be understood to extend beyond formal political organizing to include the strategies of everyday resistance that men devised in order to claim space for themselves in the midst of a hostile society. Given the effective prohibition of gay sociability and the swift and certain consequences that most men could expect if their homosexuality were revealed, both the willingness of some men to carry themselves openly *and* the ability of other gay men to create and hide an extensive gay social world need to be considered forms of resistance to overwhelming social pressure. The full panoply of tactics gay men devised for communicating, claiming space, and affirming themselves—the kind of resistant social practices that the political theorist James Scott has called the tactics of the weak—proved to be remarkably successful in the generations before a more formal gay political movement developed.[5] Such tactics did not directly challenge anti-gay policing in the way that the movement would, but in the face of that policing they allowed many gay men not just to survive but to flourish—to build happy, self-confident, and loving lives.

One striking sign of the strength of the gay male subculture was its ability to provide its members with the resources necessary to reject the dominant culture's definition of them as sick, criminal, and unworthy. Some gay men internalized the anti-homosexual attitudes pervasive in their society. Many others bitterly resented the dominant culture's insistence that their homosexuality rendered them virtual women and despised the men among them who seemed to embrace an "effeminate" style. But the "unconventional folkways" of gay culture noted by the two 1930s researchers were more successful in helping men counteract the hostile attitudes of their society than we usually imagine. Many gay men resisted the medical judgment that they were mentally ill and needed treatment, despite the fact that medical discourse was one of the most powerful anti-gay forces in American culture (and one to which some recent social theories have

tributed almost limitless cultural power). Numerous doctors reported eir astonishment at discovering in their clinical interviews with "inverts" at their subjects rejected the efforts of science, religion, popular opinion, id the law to condemn them as moral degenerates. One doctor lamented at the working-class "fags" he interviewed in New York's city jail in the rly 1920s actually claimed they were "*proud* to be degenerates, [and] do ot want nor care to be cured."[6] Indeed, it became the reluctant consensus nong doctors that most inverts saw nothing wrong with their homosexuity; it was this attitude, they repeatedly noted, that threatened to make e "problem" of homosexuality so intractable.

l three myths about prewar gay history are represented in the image of e closet, the spatial metaphor people typically use to characterize gay e before the advent of gay liberation as well as their own lives before ey "came out." Before Stonewall (let alone before World War II), it is en said, gay people lived in a closet that kept them isolated, invisible, d vulnerable to anti-gay ideology. While it is hard to imagine the closet anything other than a prison, we often blame people in the past for t having had the courage to break out of it (as if a powerful system re not at work to keep them in), or we condescendingly assume they d internalized the prevalent hatred of homosexuality and thought they erved to be there. Even at our most charitable, we often imagine that ople in the closet kept their gayness hidden not only from hostile aight people but from other gay people as well, and, possibly, even en themselves.

Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it racing—and instructive—to note that it was never used by gay people nselves before then. Nowhere does it appear before the 1960s in the ords of the gay movement or in the novels, diaries, or letters of gay and lesbians.[7] The fact that gay people in the past did not speak of conceive of themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from ig the term retrospectively as an analytic category, but it does suggest we need to use it more cautiously and precisely, and to pay attention he very different terms people used to describe themselves and their al worlds.

Many gay men, for instance, described negotiating their presence in often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and ng it off.[8] Each image has a valence different from "closet," for each ests not gay men's isolation, but their ability—as well as their l—to move between different personas and different lives, one ght, the other gay, to wear their hair up, as another common phrase it, or let their hair down.[9] Many men kept their gay lives hidden from potentially hostile straight observers (by "putting their hair up"), in other words, but that did not mean they were hidden or isolated from each other—they often, as they said, "dropped hairpins" that only other gay men would notice. Leading a double life in which they often passed as straight (and sometimes married) allowed them to have jobs and status a queer would have been denied while still participating in what they called "homosexual society" or "the life." For some, the personal cost of "passing" was great. But for others it was minimal, and many men positively enjoyed having a "secret life" more complex and extensive than outsiders could imagine. Indeed, the gay life of many men was so full and wide-ranging that by the 1930s they used another—but more expansive—spatial metaphor to describe it: not the gay closet, but the *gay world*.

The expansiveness and communal character of the gay world before World War II can also be discerned in the way people used another familiar term, "coming out." Like much of campy gay terminology, "coming out" was an arch play on the language of women's culture—in this case the expression used to refer to the ritual of a debutante's being formally introduced to, or "coming out" into, the society of her cultural peers. (This is often remembered as exclusively a ritual of WASP high society, but it was also common in the social worlds of African-Americans and other groups.) A gay man's coming out originally referred to his being formally presented to the largest collective manifestation of prewar gay society, the enormous drag balls that were patterned on the debutante and masquerade balls of the dominant culture and were regularly held in New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Baltimore, and other cities. An article published in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in the spring of 1931 under the headline "1931 DEBUTANTES BOW AT LOCAL 'PANSY' BALL" drew the parallel explicitly and unselfconsciously: "The coming out of new debutantes into homosexual society," its first sentence announced, "was the outstanding feature of Baltimore's eighth annual frolic of the pansies when the Art Club was host to the neuter gender at the Elks' Hall, Friday night."[10]

Gay people in the prewar years, then, did not speak of *coming out of* what we call the "gay closet" but rather of *coming out into* what they called "homosexual society" or the "gay world," a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as "closet" implies. The Baltimore debutantes, after all, came out in the presence of hundreds of straight as well as gay and lesbian spectators at the public hall of the fraternal order of Elks. Their sisters in New York were likely to be presented to thousands of spectators, many of whom had traveled from other cities, in some of the best-known ballrooms of the city, including the Savoy and Rockland Palace in Harlem and the Astor Hotel and Madison Square Garden in midtown.

Although only a small fraction of gay men actually "came out" at such a ball or in the presence of straight onlookers, this kind of initiation into gay society served as a model for the initiation—and integration—into the gay world for other men as well.*

II

How did we lose sight of a world so visible and extensive in its own time that its major communal events garnered newspaper headlines and the attendance of thousands?

We lost sight of that world in part because it was forced into hiding in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. The very growth and visibility of the gay subculture during the Prohibition years of the 1920s and early 1930s precipitated a powerful cultural reaction in the 1930s. A new anxiety about homosexuals and hostility toward them began to develop, which soon became part of the more general reaction to the cultural experimentation of the Prohibition era that developed in the anxious early years of the Depression. A host of laws and regulations were enacted or newly enforced in the 1930s that suppressed the largest of the drag balls, censored lesbian and gay images in plays and films, and prohibited restaurants, bars, and clubs from employing homosexuals or even serving them. Anti-gay policing intensified during the Cold War, when Senator Joseph McCarthy warned that homosexuals in the State Department threatened the nation's security, and the police warned that homosexuals on the streets threatened the nation's children. Federal, state, and local

The meaning of coming out has changed several times over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1920s it referred to initiation into the gay world, and even when "coming out" was used in a narrower sense, to refer to the process by which someone came to recognize his sexual interest in other men, it referred to something other than a solitary experience. Indeed, before the war this process was more commonly described by saying that someone was "brought out," which necessarily implied he had been initiated into homosexual practices by someone else, than by saying he "came out," something he could, at least grammatically, have done on his own. Writing in 1941, Gershon Legman noted that "this locution is losing its original connotation of initiation by another person, and circumstances of fate are coming to be considered the initiatory agents."[11] The meaning of the phrase continued to change. By the 1950s, gay men usually used "coming out" in a narrower sense to refer exclusively to their first sexual experience with another man. "I remember someone who was a total virgin but ran to the bars every weekend with makeup and screamed and shrieked and camped like crazy," one man recalled, "and everybody would ask, 'For God's sake, when is he going to come out?'" By the 1970s, its meaning had changed again. It could still be used to refer to a person's first homosexual experience, but it more commonly referred to announcing one's homosexuality to straight friends and family. The critical audience to which one came out had shifted from the gay world to the straight world.

governments deployed a barrage of new techniques for the surveillance and control of homosexuals, and the number of arrests and dismissals escalated sharply.[12] Hundreds of gay men were arrested in New York City every year in the 1920s and 1930s for cruising or visiting gay locales; thousands were arrested every year in the postwar decade.

The primary purpose of this new wave of policing was not to eradicate homosexuality altogether, a task the authorities considered all but impossible, but to contain it by prohibiting its presence in the public sphere, the city's cafés, bars, streets, theaters, and newspapers, where authorities feared it threatened to disrupt public order and the reproduction of normative gender and sexual arrangements.[13] The effort was unsuccessful in many respects, for the gay world continued to thrive and became even more extensive in the 1940s and 1950s than it had been before the war. But gay life did become less visible in the streets and newspapers of New York, gay meeting places did become more segregated and carefully hidden, and the risks of visiting them increased. To use the modern idiom, the state built a closet in the 1930s and forced gay people to hide in it.

The periodization I propose here is counterintuitive, for despite the cautionary work of historians such as John D'Emilio, Allan Berube, and Lillian Faderman, and the events of recent memory (such as the anti-gay backlash that began in the late 1970s and intensified in the wake of AIDS), the Whiggish notion that change is always "progressive" and that gay history in particular consists of a steady movement toward freedom continues to have appeal.[14] This book argues instead that gay life in New York was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first, and that the very severity of the postwar reaction has tended to blind us to the relative tolerance of the prewar years.

A second reason the prewar gay subculture disappeared from historical memory is that, until recently, nobody looked for it. One of the most enduring legacies of the intellectual and social retrenchment precipitated by the Cold War was its censorship of inquiry into gay culture.[15] For decades, the general prejudice against gay people deterred research by effectively stigmatizing and trivializing historians of homosexuality as well as homosexuals themselves. Even professional historians with an interest in such inquiry dared not undertake it and warned their graduate students away from it; it is not surprising that some of the earliest, groundbreaking works of gay and lesbian history were written by nonacademic historians such as Jonathan Katz and Joan Nestle.[16] In recent years there has been a dramatic decline in prejudice and an equally dramatic increase in interest in gay culture outside the academy, as well as an explosion of work within it on the social history of other subaltern groups: women and workers, African-Americans and immigrants. Even now, though, any historian writing about

ɔmosexuality cannot help being cognizant of the potential professional ɔnsequences of working on a subject that continues to be marginalized ithin the discipline. Still, a door has been opened, and the gay world is ginning to be seen through it.

A third reason we have failed to see the prewar gay world is that it took ape in such unexpected places and was so different from our own that e have often not even known where to look or what to look for. As in ɪy new field of study, historians first turned to the more easily accessible cords of the elite before grappling with the more elusive evidence of the dinary. This sometimes meant they looked in relatively unrevealing aces: the *New York Times* instead of the African-American press and the ɔloids, white middle-class culture instead of working-class culture, elite edical or juridical discourse instead of popular culture. The old dogma at the gay male world originated as an essentially middle-class phenome-n, which only white middle-class men had the resources to create, and newer dogma that it was created in the pages of elite medical journals, ve had continuing influence.[17] But the most visible gay world of the ly twentieth century, as the headlines in the *Baltimore Afro-American* ggest, was a working-class world, centered in African-American and h and Italian immigrant neighborhoods and along the city's busy water-nt, and drawing on the social forms of working-class culture. Even the and lesbian enclave that developed in Greenwich Village in the 1910s l 1920s, which constituted the first visible middle-class gay subculture he city, sprang up in the midst of a working-class Italian immigrant ghborhood and was populated largely by poorer youths from the outer oughs, even though its middle-class and bohemian members are better ɪembered. The fact that the working-class gay world took different ns and defined itself in different terms from those of middle-class cul-and from those that would develop in the postwar years should lead ɪot to exclude it from our inquiry, but to redefine the very boundaries ɪat inquiry.

final reason we have failed to see the gay subculture that existed ɪre World War II is that it has been obscured by the dramatic growth ɪe gay subculture *after* the war. As the groundbreaking work of Allan ɪbe and John D'Emilio has shown, the war "created something of a ɔnwide coming out experience." By freeing men from the supervi-of their families and small-town neighborhoods and placing them in ɪgle-sex environment, military mobilization increased the chances they would meet gay men and explore their homosexual interests. ɪy recruits saw the sort of gay life they could lead in large cities and e to stay in those cities after the war. Some women who joined the ary, as well as those on the homefront who shared housing and ɛed in defense industries with other women, had similar experiences.

As a result, the war made it possible for gay bars and restaurants to proliferate and for many new gay social networks to form.[18]

The recognition of the significance of the war has shattered the myth that the gay movement and the gay world alike were invented virtually overnight after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969; historians have shown that a political movement preceded Stonewall by two decades and had its origins in a gay subculture that expanded during the war. But the massive evidence that a generation of men constructed gay identities and communities during the war does not in itself demonstrate that the war generation was the first generation to do so. The war was an epochal event for its generation: almost every gay man who was young during the war (like almost every heterosexual man) remembers it as a critical turning point in his life, and given their age, it was almost inevitable that the war should serve as the backdrop to their first sexual experiences and efforts to live outside the family nexus. Moreover, it is clear that the war enabled many men to participate in the gay world who otherwise would not have done so and led many more to have the only homosexual experiences of their lives. But this does not mean that the war generation was the *first* generation to leave the constraints of family life and watchful neighbors, nor that it was first during the war that an urban gay subculture took shape.

Although the war did precipitate an immense social upheaval, prewar American society had hardly been stable or immobile. The United States has always been a nation of transients. The nineteenth century witnessed the mass migration of Europeans to the United States, of newly freed African-Americans throughout the South, and of people of every sort from the East to the West. Every nineteenth-century city and town studied by historians, from Eastern metropolis to frontier trading post, saw at least half its adult residents move away during any given decade.[19] Forty percent of New York City's residents in 1910 had immigrated to the city from foreign lands, and although restrictive federal legislation severely curtailed immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the 1920s, internal migration continued apace as rural depression, agricultural mechanization, and environmental catastrophe pushed millions of farmers off the land and the Great Depression forced millions of urban families and single men alike to leave their homes in search of work. Throughout the half-century before World War II, New York was full of single men and women who had left their families in southern Europe or the American South or whose work on the seas made New York one of their many temporary home ports. Countless men had moved to New York in order to participate in the relatively open gay life available there, and the waterfront, the Bowery, Times Square, and other centers of transient workers had become major centers of gay life.

Thus the many soldiers who discovered a gay world while passing ırough New York during the war had been preceded by at least two :nerations of men (and possibly more, as future research may show).[20] hat subculture did grow immensely after the war, and its character also ıanged in significant ways. But it did not begin then. Moreover, while ew York's prewar gay subculture may have been unusually large, its :istence was hardly unique. Paris and Berlin hosted gay and lesbian bcultures even larger than New York's in the early twentieth century.[21] hile little research has been conducted yet on other American cities, attered evidence nonetheless indicates that Chicago, Los Angeles, and least a handful of other cities hosted gay subcultures of considerable :e and complexity before the war, and that many small towns also sus- ned gay social networks of some scope.[22]

Moreover, the work of Randolph Trumbach, Michel Rey, Alan Bray, ıeo Van Der Meer, and a host of other historians has demonstrated ıt "sodomitical subcultures" had emerged in major European cities by : eighteenth century, and it is possible that similar subcultures took ɔt in the ports of the American colonies, although their appearance ıy well have depended on the later growth of those cities. (In either ıe, the precise terms by which men involved in such subcultures under- od themselves and distinguished themselves from others must be ana- ed with care; threads of historical continuity may link the "molly ıses" Alan Bray and Randolph Trumbach have located in eighteenth- tury London with the Bowery resorts in late-nineteenth-century New :k, but much more work will need to be undertaken before we can ıblish their existence or analyze their significance.)[23] As one American erver noted as early as 1889, there was "in every community of any a colony of male sexual perverts . . . [who] are usually known to h other and are likely to congregate together."[24] It will take another eration of research before we will understand much about those lonies," or be able to judge the distinctiveness of New York's gay ·ld or develop a more comprehensive view of the development of erican sexual subcultures. But we should never presume the absence ɔmething before we have looked for it.

III

ough the gay male world of the prewar years was remarkably visible integrated into the straight world, it was, as the centrality of the ; balls suggests, a world very different from our own. Above all, it not a world in which men were divided into "homosexuals" and erosexuals." This is, on the face of it, a startling claim, since it is ɔst impossible today to think about sexuality without imagining that it is organized along an axis of homosexuality and heterosexuality; a person is either one or the other, or possibly both—but even the third category of "bisexuality" depends for its meaning on its intermediate position on the axis defined by those two poles. The belief that one's sexuality is centrally defined by one's homosexuality or heterosexuality is hegemonic in contemporary culture: it is so fundamental to the way people think about the world that it is taken for granted, assumed to be natural and timeless, and needs no defense.[25] Whether homosexuality is good or bad, chosen or determined, natural or unnatural, healthy or sick is debated, for such opinions are in the realm of ideology and thus subject to contestation, and we are living at a time when a previously dominant ideological position, that homosexuality is immoral or pathological, faces a powerful and increasingly successful challenge from an alternative ideology, which regards homosexuality as neutral, healthy, or even good. But the underlying premise of that debate—that some people are homosexuals, and that all people are either homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals—is hardly questioned.

This book argues that in important respects the hetero–homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation. Particularly in working-class culture, homosexual behavior per se became the primary basis for the labeling and self-identification of men as "queer" only around the middle of the twentieth century; before then, most men were so labeled only if they displayed a much broader inversion of their ascribed gender status by assuming the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women. The abnormality (or "queerness") of the "fairy," that is, was defined as much by his "woman-like" character or "effeminacy" as his solicitation of male sexual partners; the "man" who responded to his solicitations—no matter how often—was not considered abnormal, a "homosexual," so long as he abided by masculine gender conventions. Indeed, the centrality of effeminacy to the representation of the "fairy" allowed many conventionally masculine men, especially unmarried men living in sex-segregated immigrant communities, to engage in extensive sexual activity with other men without risking stigmatization and the loss of their status as "normal men."

Only in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did the now-conventional division of men into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," based on the sex of their sexual partners, replace the division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" on the basis of their imaginary gender status as the hegemonic way of understanding sexuality. Moreover, the transition from one sexual regime to the next was an uneven process, marked by significant class and ethnic differences. Multiple systems of sexual classification coexisted throughout the period in New York's divergent neighborhood

ıltures: men socialized into different class and ethnic systems of gender, mily life, and sexual mores tended to understand and organize their ɔmosexual practices in different ways. Most significantly, exclusive het- osexuality became a precondition for a man's identification as "nor- al" in middle-class culture at least two generations before it did so in uch of Euro-American and African-American working-class culture.

One way to introduce the differences between the conceptual schemas ' which male sexual relations and identities were organized in the first ıd second halves of the twentieth century (as well as this book's use of :minology) is to review the changes in the vernacular terms used for ɪmosexually active men, and, in particular, the way in which *gay* came mean "homosexual". This does not mean reconstructing a lineage of ıtic meanings—simply noting, for instance, that *gay* meant "prosti- te" before it meant "homosexual." In keeping with the methodology the study as a whole, it means instead reconstructing how men *used* ɛ different terms *tactically* in diverse cultural settings to position them- ves and negotiate their relations with other men, gay and straight ke.

Although many individuals at any given time, as one might expect, ɛd the available terms interchangeably and imprecisely, the broad con- ırs of lexical evolution reveal much about the changes in the organiza- n of male sexual practices and identities. For many of the terms used the early twentieth century were not synonymous with *homosexual* or *erosexual,* but represent a different conceptual mapping of male sex- . practices, predicated on assumptions about the character of men gaging in those practices that are no longer widely shared or credible. *ieer, fairy, trade, gay,* and other terms each had a specific connotation l signified specific subjectivities, and the ascendancy of *gay* as the pre- inent term (for gay men among gay men) in the 1940s reflected a jor reconceptualization of homosexual behavior and of "homosexu- " and "heterosexuals." Demonstrating that such terms signified dis- ɛt social categories not equivalent to "homosexual" and that men d many of them for themselves will also explain why I have employed m throughout this study, even though some of them now have pejora- : connotations that may initially cause the reader to recoil.

Gay emerged as a coded homosexual term and as a widely known term homosexuals in the context of the complex relationship between men ɔwn as "fairies" and those known as "queers." According to Gershon man, who published a lexicon of homosexual argot in 1941, *fairy* (as a ın) and *queer* (as an adjective) were the terms most commonly used by ieer" and "normal" people alike to refer to "homosexuals" before rld War II.[26] Regulatory agents—police, doctors, and private investiga- : alike—generally used technical terms such as *invert, pervert, degener-*

ate, or, less commonly, *homosexual* (or *homosexualist,* or simply *homo*), but they also knew and frequently used the vernacular *fairy* as well. In 1917, for instance, an agent of an anti-vice society reported to his supervisor on a "crowd of homosexualists, commonly known as 'fairies.'"[27] Another agent of the society reported ten years later that he had noticed a "colored pervert" in a subway washroom, but added that in identifying the "pervert" to another man in the washroom he had used the more commonplace term: "I said, 'He is a fairy.'"[28]

While most gay men would have understood most of the terms in use for homosexual matters, some terms were more likely to be used in certain social milieus than others. *Fag* was widely used in the 1930s, but almost exclusively by "normals" (the usual word then for those who were not queers); gay men used the word *faggot* instead, but it was used more commonly by blacks than whites. An investigator who visited a "woman's party" at a 137th Street tenement in Harlem in 1928, for instance, reported that one of the women there told him "'Everybody here is either a bull dagger [lesbian] or faggot.'"[29] The investigator, a black man working for an anti-vice society, appears to have believed that the term was less well known than *fairy* to the "normal" white population. When he mentioned in another report that two men at a Harlem restaurant were "said to be 'noted faggots,'" he quickly explained to his white supervisor this meant they were "fairies."[30] While gay white men also used the term *faggot* (although less often than blacks), they rarely referred to themselves as being "in the life," a phrase commonly used by black men and women.[31]

Most of the vernacular terms used by "normal" observers for fairies, such as *she-man, nance,* and *sissy,* as well as *fairy* itself, emphasized the centrality of effeminacy to their character. In the 1920s and 1930s, especially, such men were also often called *pansies,* and the names of other flowers such as daisy and buttercup were applied so commonly to gay men that they were sometimes simply called "horticultural lads." ("Ship me home," said a "nance" to a florist in a joke told in 1932. "I'm a pansy.")[32] The flamboyant style adopted by "flaming faggots" or "fairies," as well as its consistency with outsiders' stereotypes, made them highly visible figures on the streets of New York and the predominant image of *all* queers in the straight mind.

Not all homosexual men in the prewar era thought of themselves as "flaming faggots," though. While the terms *queer, fairy,* and *faggot* were often used interchangeably by outside observers (and sometimes even by the men they observed), each term also had a more precise meaning among gay men that could be invoked to distinguish its object from other homosexually active men. By the 1910s and 1920s, the men who identified themselves as part of a distinct category of men primarily on the

[illegible] interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves *queer*. Essentially synonymous with "homosexual," *queer* presupposed the statistical normalcy—and normative character—of men's sexual interest in women; tellingly, queers referred to their counterparts as "normal men" (or "straight men") rather than as "heterosexuals." But *queer* did not presume that the men it denoted were effeminate, for many queers were repelled by the style of the fairy and his loss of manly status, and almost all were careful to distinguish themselves from such men. They might use *queer* to refer to any man who was not "normal," but they usually applied terms such as *fairy, faggot,* and *queen* only to those men who dressed or behaved in what they considered to be a flamboyantly effeminate manner. They were so careful to draw such distinctions in part because the dominant culture failed to do so.[33]

Many fairies and queers socialized into the dominant prewar homosexual culture considered the ideal sexual partner to be "trade," a "real man," that is, ideally a sailor, a soldier, or some other embodiment of the aggressive masculine ideal, who was neither homosexually interested nor effeminately gendered himself but who would accept the sexual advances of a queer. While some gay men used the term *trade* to refer only to men who insisted on payment for a sexual encounter, others applied it more broadly to any "normal" man who accepted a queer's sexual advances. The centrality of effeminacy to the definition of the fairy in the dominant culture enabled trade to have sex with both the queers and fairies without risking being labeled queer themselves, so long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and sexual role. Just as significantly, even those queers who had little interest in trade recognized that trade constituted a widely admired ideal type in the subculture and accepted the premise that trade were the "normal men" they aimed to be.

Ultimately men who detested the word *fairy* and the social category it signified were the ones to embrace *gay* as an alternative label for themselves. But they did not initiate its usage in gay culture. The complexity of the emergence of the term's homosexual meanings is illustrated by a story told by a gay hairdresser, Dick Addison, about an incident in 1937 when he was a fourteen-year-old "flaming faggot" in a Jewish working-class section of New York:

> A group of us hung out at a park in the Bronx where older boys would come and pick us up. One boy who'd been hanging out with us for a while came back once, crying, saying the boy he'd left with wanted him to suck his thing. "I don't want to do *that*!" he cried. 'But why are you hanging out with us if you aren't gay?" we asked him. "Oh, I'm *gay*," he exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air like an hysterical queen, "but I don't want to do *that*." This boy liked the gay life—the clothes, the way people talked and walked and held themselves—but, if you can believe it, he didn't realize there was more to being gay than that![34]

Gay, as the story indicates, was a code word. Gay men could use it to identify themselves to other gays without revealing their identity to those not in the wise, for not everyone—certainly not the boy in this story (unless he was simply using the word's protean character to joke with the group)—knew that it implied a specifically sexual preference. But it did not simply mean "homosexual," either. For all the boys, the "gay life" referred as well to the flamboyance in dress and speech associated with the fairies. Indeed, it was the fairies (the especially flamboyant gay men), such as the ones Addison associated with, who used the word most in the 1920s and 1930s. Will Finch, a social worker who began to identify himself as "queer" while in New York in the early 1930s, recalled in 1951 that the word *gay* "originated with the flaming faggots as a 'camp' word, used to apply to absolutely everything in any way pleasant or desirable (not as 'homosexual'), . . . [and only began] to mean 'homosexual' later on."[35]

The earliest such uses of *gay* are unknown, but the "flaming faggots" Finch remembered doubtless used the word because of the host of apposite connotations it had acquired over the years. Originally referring simply to things pleasurable, by the seventeenth century *gay* had come to refer more specifically to a life of *immoral* pleasures and dissipation (and by the nineteenth century to prostitution, when applied to women), a meaning that the "faggots" could easily have drawn on to refer to the homosexual life. *Gay* also referred to something brightly colored or someone showily dressed—and thus could easily be used to describe the flamboyant costumes adopted by many fairies, as well as things at once brilliant and specious, the epitome of camp.[36] One can hear these meanings echo through the decades in Finch's comment in 1963 that he still "associate[d] the word with the hand waving, limp-wristed faggot, squealing 'Oh, it's *gay*!'"[37] One hears them as well in the dialogue in several novels written in the late 1920s and early 1930s by gay men with a camp sensibility and an intimate knowledge of the homosexual scene. "I say," said Osbert to Harold in *The Young and Evil*, perhaps the campiest novel of all, "you look positively gay in the new clothes. Oh, said Harold, you're lovely *too*, dear, and gave him a big kiss on the forehead, much to Osbert's dismay."[38] A chorus boy gushed to his friend in another, rather more overwritten 1934 novel, "'I'm lush. I'm gay. I'm wicked. I'm every-

thing that flames.'"[39] And Cary Grant's famous line in the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby* played on several of these meanings: he leapt into the air, flounced his arms, and shrieked "I just went gay all of a sudden," *not* because he had fallen in love with a man, but because he was asked why he had put on a woman's nightgown. The possibility of a more precisely sexual meaning would not have been lost on anyone familiar with fairy stereotypes.*

The word's use by the "flaming faggots" (or "fairies"), the most prominent figures in homosexual society, led to its adoption as a code word by "queers" who rejected the effeminacy and overtness of the fairy but nonetheless identified themselves as homosexual. Because the word's use in gay environments had given it homosexual associations that were unknown to people not involved in the gay world, more circumspect gay men could use it to identify themselves secretly to each other in a straight setting. A properly intoned reference or two to a "gay bar" or to "having a gay time" served to alert the listener familiar with homosexual culture. As one gay writer explained in 1941,

> Supposing one met a stranger on a train from Boston to New York and wanted to find out whether he was "wise" or even homosexual. One might ask: "Are there any gay spots in Boston?" And by slight accent put on the word "gay" the stranger, if wise, would understand that homosexual resorts were meant. The uninitiated stranger would never suspect, inasmuch as "gay" is also a perfectly normal and natural word to apply to places where one has a good time. . . . The continued use of such *double entendre* terms will make it obvious to the initiated that he is speaking with another person acquainted with the homosexual argot.[41]

Will Finch provided a similar example in 1946, when he described how a young man tried to determine whether Finch's friend Edward, whom he had just met, was also homosexual. The youth, obviously very interested in Edward, "acts all right," Finch reported, by which he meant the youth did not act like a fairy and make it clear he was homosexual by camping, "but throws in a few words like 'gay' for Edward to follow the lead on, but Edward plays dumb."[42] And in the early 1930s a speakeasy on East Twenty-eighth Street seeking gay patronage noted suggestively that it was located "in the Gay 20's." Similarly, in 1951 the Cyrano Restaurant let gay men know they were welcome while revealing nothing to others by advertising itself as the place "Where the Gay Set Meet for Dinner."[43]

While such men spoke of "gay bars" more than of "gay people" in the 1920s and 1930s, the late 1930s and especially World War II marked a turning point in its usage and in their culture. Before the war, many men had been content to call themselves "queer" because they regarded themselves as self-evidently different from the men they usually called "normal." Some of them were unhappy with this state of affairs, but others saw themselves as "special"—more sophisticated, more knowing—and took pleasure in being different from the mass. The term *gay* began to catch on in the 1930s, and its primacy was consolidated during the war. By the late 1940s, younger gay men were chastising older men who still used *queer*, which the younger men now regarded as demeaning. As Will Finch, who came out into the gay world of Times Square in the 1930s, noted in his diary in 1951, "The word 'queer' is becoming [or coming to be regarded as] more and more derogatory and [is] less and less used by hustlers and trade and the homosexual, especially the younger ones, and the term 'gay' [is] taking its place. I loathe the word, and stick to 'queer,' but am constantly being reproved, especially in so denominating myself."[44]

Younger men rejected *queer* as a pejorative name that others had given them, which highlighted their difference from other men. Even though many "queers" had also rejected the effeminacy of the fairies, younger men were well aware that in the eyes of straight men their "queerness" hinged on their supposed gender deviance. In the 1930s and 1940s, a series of press campaigns claiming that murderous "sex deviates" threatened the nation's women and children gave "queerness" an even more sinister and undesirable set of connotations. In calling themselves *gay*, a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. Some men, especially older ones like Finch, continued to prefer *queer* to *gay*, in part because of *gay*'s initial association with the fairies. Younger men found it easier to forget the origins of *gay* in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject.

Testimony given at hearings held by the State Liquor Authority (SLA) from the 1930s to the 1960s to review the closing of bars accused of

*This line has been noted by several historians.[40] It has not been noted, however, that Grant followed the quip (which apparently he made up on the spur of the moment) with an equally significant line: "I'm just sitting in the middle of Forty-second Street waiting for a bus." The line has doubtless not been noticed because its homosexual connotations have now been forgotten, but it seems likely that Grant used it precisely because those connotations amplified the homosexual meaning of his first line. In the late 1930s, when the film was made, Forty-second Street, as chapter 7 shows, was the primary cruising strip for the city's male prostitutes, including transvestite prostitutes, as Grant almost surely would have known. One of the reasons it acquired this status was that it was a heavily trafficked street and transportation hub, where men loitering would not draw particular notice—it was, in other words, the sort of place where a man who was cruising could quip that he was just waiting for a bus to anyone who inquired about his purpose.

serving homosexuals provides striking evidence of the growing use of the word *gay*. At none of the hearings held before the war did an SLA agent or bar patron use the word to refer to the patrons. At a hearing held in 1939, for instance, one of the Authority's undercover investigators testified that the bar in question was patronized by "homosexuals or fairies, fags commonly called." Another investigator also called the bar's patrons "fags," but noted that the "fags" preferred to call themselves "fairies." A few moments later he referred to a group of "normal" people having a good time at a party as "people that were gay," indicating that the term, in his mind, still had no homosexual connotations.[45] Twenty years later, however, SLA agents casually used *gay* to mean homosexual, as did the *gay* men they were investigating. One agent testified in 1960 that he had simply asked a man at a suspected bar whether he was "straight or gay." "I am as gay as the Pope" came the knowing reply. ("Which Pope?" asked the startled investigator. "Any Pope," he was assured.)[46]

Once the word was widely diffused within the gay world, it was introduced to people outside that world by writers who specialized in familiarizing their readers with New York's seamier side. Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, for instance, confided to the readers of their 1948 *Confidential* guide to the city that "not all New York's queer (or, as they say it, 'gay') people live in Greenwich Village."[47] In 1956, the scandal magazine *Tip-Off* played on the expectation that some of its readers would understand the term—and others would want to—by putting a report on homosexuals' supposed "strangle-hold on the theatre" under the headline, "WHY THEY CALL BROADWAY THE 'GAY' WHITE WAY."[48] By 1960, liquor authority attorneys prosecuting a gay bar were so certain a bartender in a heavily gay neighborhood such as Greenwich Village could be expected to understand the word that they used one bartender's claim that he was unsure of its meaning as a basis for questioning his candor. "You live only a few blocks from . . . the heart of Greenwich Village," an attorney demanded incredulously, "and you are not familiar with the meaning of the word gay?"[49] The word had become familiar to hip New Yorkers and others fully a decade before the gay liberation movement introduced it to the rest of the nation, and parts of the "respectable" press began using it in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The ascendancy of *gay* as the primary self-referential term used within the gay world reflected the subtle shifting occurring in the boundaries drawn among male sexual actors in the middle decades of the century. Earlier terms—*fairy, queer,* and *trade* most commonly—had distinguished various *types* of homosexually active men: effeminate homosexuals, more conventional homosexuals, and masculine heterosexuals who would accept homosexual advances, to use today's nomenclature. *Gay* tended to group all these types together, to deemphasize their differences by emphasizing the *similarity* in character they had presumably demonstrated by their choice of male sexual partners. This reconfiguration of sexual categories occurred in two stages.

First, gay men, like the prewar queers but unlike the fairies, defined themselves as gay primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than effeminacy, and many of them, in a break with older homosexual cultural norms, adopted a new, self-consciously "masculine" style. Nonetheless, they did not regard all men who had sex with men as gay; men could still be trade, but they were defined as trade primarily on the basis of their purported heterosexuality rather than their masculinity (though modified as "rough" trade, the term still emphasized a man's masculine character). A new dichotomous system of classification, based now on sexual object choice rather than gender status, had begun to supersede the old.

In the second stage of cultural redefinition, trade virtually disappeared as a sexual identity (if not as a sexual role) within the gay world, as men began to regard *anyone* who participated in a homosexual encounter as "gay," and, conversely, to insist that men could be defined as "straight" only on the basis of a total absence of homosexual interest and behavior. Alfred Gross, publicly a leader in psychological research and social work related to homosexuals in New York from the 1930s through the 1960s and secretly a gay man himself, derided the distinction between homosexuals and trade in a speech he gave in 1947. Fairies, he contended, "are preoccupied with getting and holding their 'man.'" But, he remonstrated, they refuse "to recognize that the male, no matter how roughly he might be attired, how coarse his manners, how brutal or sadistic he may be, if he be willing to submit regularly to homosexual attentions, is every whit as homosexual as the man who plays what is considered the female role in the sex act."[50]

A growing number of gay men subscribed to this more limited view of the behavior allowed men if they were to be labeled "straight"; by the 1970s, most regarded a self-proclaimed "piece of trade" who regularly let homosexuals have sex with him not as heterosexual but as someone unable to recognize, or accept, or admit his "true nature" as a homosexual. A complaint voiced by Dick Addison, who had come out in the 1930s, about the rejection of the trade–gay distinction by subsequent generations reflects the conflict between the two interpretive systems:

> Most of my crowd [in the 1930s and 1940s] wanted to have sex with a straight man. There was something very hot about a married man! And a lot of straight boys let us have sex with them. People don't believe it now. People say now that they must have been gay. But they

weren't. They were straight. They wouldn't look for [it] or suck a guy's thing, but they'd let you suck theirs. If you want to say they were gay because they had sex with a man, go ahead, but I say only a man who *wants* to have sex with a man is gay.[51]

Addison's complaint also suggests that "trade," as a practical matter, had become harder to find in the 1960s, a change in sexual practice that suggests "straight" men as well as gay had redefined the boundaries of normalcy. It had become more difficult for men to consider themselves "straight" if they had *any* sexual contact with other men, no matter how carefully they restricted their behavior to the "masculine" role, or sought to configure that contact as a relationship between cultural opposites, between masculine men and effeminate fairies. This narrowing of the limits "straight" men placed on their behavior was also noted by another man, since 1940 a bartender at gay bars, who observed in 1983 that he and his friends had for some years found it "a lot harder to find straight guys to do it with."[52] The bartender himself suggested one reason for the shift: he bitterly criticized the "gay lib movement" for having made straight guys "afraid" to have sex with him—afraid, that is, they would be labeled gay themselves. But whether we attribute this change in attitude to the success of the movement's ideological offensive, as the bartender complained, or regard the gay movement as simply the symbol—or embodiment—of a generational rejection of his view of the sexual world, the cultural potency of the change it represented for him is clear. Over the course of a generation, the lines had been drawn between the heterosexual and homosexual so sharply and publicly that men were no longer able to participate in a homosexual encounter without suspecting it meant (to the outside world, and to themselves) that they were gay. The change the bartender had noticed was not just in the way people "thought" about sexuality but in the way that ideology was manifest in the rules that governed their everyday erotic practices.

The ascendancy of *gay* reflected, then, a reorganization of sexual categories and the transition from an early twentieth-century culture divided into "queers" and "men" on the basis of gender status to a late-twentieth-century culture divided into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" on the basis of sexual object choice. Each set of terms represented a way of defining, constituting, and containing male "sexuality," by labeling, differentiating, and explaining the character of (homo)sexually active men. Any such taxonomy is necessarily inadequate as a measure of sexual behavior, but its construction is itself a significant social practice. It provides a means of defining the deviant, whose existence serves both to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behavior for all men and to contain the threat of deviance, at once stigmatizing it and suggesting that it is confined to a "deviant" minority.[53]

IV

This book reconstructs the gay world that existed before the hetero–homosexual binarism was consolidated as the hegemonic sexual regime in American culture—before, that is, the decline of the fairy and the rise of the closet. It ends around 1940, when the boundaries between the straight and gay worlds and between "normal" and "abnormal" men were beginning to change. Cultural transformations as fundamental as these occurred neither suddenly nor definitively, of course, and traces of the prewar sexual regime and gay world persisted in the postwar years and into our own era (in the continuing association of effeminacy with male homosexuality, for instance).* But the centrality of the fairy in gay culture and in the dominant culture's representation of gay men, the visibility of the gay world and its integration into the straight world, and, most significantly, the different configuration of the boundaries between the normal and abnormal made the prewar gay world this book describes a world distinctly different from the one existing today. A second volume, currently in preparation, will chart the making of the modern gay world—the rise of the modern sexual regime and the rise and fall of the closet—from the 1940s to the 1970s.

This book maps two distinct but interrelated aspects of what I call the sexual topography of the gay world in the half-century before the Second World War: the spatial and social organization of that world in a culture that often sought to suppress it, and the boundaries that distinguished the men of that world from other men in a culture in which many more men engaged in homosexual practices than identified themselves as queer. The first project of the book, then, is to reconstruct the topography of gay meeting places, from streets to saloons to bathhouses to elegant restaurants, and to explore the significance of that topography for the social organization of the gay world and homosexual relations generally. It analyzes the cultural conditions that made it possible for some gay meeting places to become well known to outsiders and still survive, but it pays more attention to the tactics by which gay men appropriated public spaces not identified as gay—how they, in effect, reterritorialized the city in order to construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city.[54] Indeed, while the book analyzes the complex interaction of social conventions and government policies that endeavored to sup-

*Given these continuities, I have occasionally used illustrative material from the postwar decade in this book when it is consistent with prewar evidence.

press the gay world, it focuses even more on the everyday tactics gay men developed to forge a collective social world in the face of that opposition. Gay men's tactical use of the term *gay* to secretly identify gay places, events, and people to each other in the 1920s and 1930s is indicative of the linguistic and cultural stratagems they used to keep the gay world hidden from the straight while rendering it visible to the gay. By describing this book as a study of *gay* New York, I seek to evoke those tactical considerations and that different cultural and political context, even though the homosexual meaning of the term is now widely recognized, and to signal my intention to map the prewar gay city that gay men themselves would have known.

The second project of the book is to map the boundaries of the gay world under a sexual regime in which many homosexually active men did not identify themselves as a part of it.* Many men who identified themselves as queer lived double lives and participated in the gay world only irregularly, even if it was quite important to them when they did so. Given the centrality of the fairy to gay New York, many more homosexually active men refused (or saw no reason) to identify themselves as queer at all. This book charts the shifting boundaries drawn between queers and normal men, as well as among queers themselves, in the decades before the meaning of *gay* had broadened to incorporate almost all homosexually active men under its rubric. It does not offer a theory of the formation of sexual subjectivities or of the constitution of sexual desire, theoretical projects in which others are engaged. Instead, it develops an ethnographic account of the social organization and cultural meaning of sexual practices and of the dominant cultural categories by which sexually active men had to measure themselves as they constructed their identities.[55]

Although the boundaries between the highly visible fairies and the more covert queers were permeable and both distinguished themselves from "normal" men, the strategies they adopted for negotiating their presence in the city and their relations with "normal" men often clashed. Because the highly contested relationship between them was central to the experience of each group and reveals much about the organization of the gay world more generally, it is one of the central concerns of this book. While I identify and distinguish men as queers or fairies when it is analytically appropriate to do so, I also often refer to them as gay men, since they did perceive themselves to be related to each other as queers and to be part of the same world (different from the straight world),

* I do not use "homosexually active" to refer to men who played the so-called active (or "masculine") role in homosexual relations, but to men who engaged in sexual relations of any sort with other men.

even if they contested the terms and significance of that relationship. It is a usage they would have understood by the 1920s and 1930s. I do not, however, use *gay* to refer to men who merely engaged in sexual activity with other men, even if they did so on a regular basis, if they did not consider themselves to be "queer."

This book is not, however, about the making of the gay male world alone, for in mapping the boundaries of the gay world it necessarily maps the boundaries of the "normal world" as well. The prewar gay world was a subculture whose character reveals much about the dominant culture in which it took shape. To call it a "subculture" is not to minimize its vibrancy, but simply to acknowledge that it developed in relationship to a more powerful culture that defined the parameters of its existence in manifold implicit and explicit ways.[56] The men who organized the massive drag balls of the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, were appropriating rituals of the dominant culture—debutante and masquerade balls—and investing them with new meaning. Much of gay culture consisted of this sort of *bricolage*: the manipulation and revaluation of the signs and practices available to gay men in the historically specific parameters of their culture. As this suggests, the relationship between the gay subculture and the dominant culture was neither static nor passive: they did not merely coexist but constantly created and re-created themselves in relation to each other in a dynamic, interactive, and contested process. Not only did the "queer folk" of the gay subculture define themselves by their difference from the dominant culture, but the "normal people" of the dominant culture defined *themselves* by their difference from the gay subculture: they constituted themselves as "normal" only by eschewing anything that might mark them as "queer."[57]

The process by which the normal world defined itself in opposition to the queer world was manifest in countless social interactions, for in its policing of the gay subculture the dominant culture sought above all to police its own boundaries. Given the centrality of gender nonconformity to the definition of the queer, the excoriation of queers served primarily to set the boundaries for how normal men could dress, walk, talk, and relate to women and to each other. At times this took official and precise form, as when the state's ban on gay bars and other sites of gay public sociability produced a set of gender regulations that, as we shall see, literally codified the permissible speech patterns, dress, and demeanor of men and women who wished to socialize in public. But the threat of extralegal sanctions—of ostracism and the loss of jobs, family, and social respect—was a much more potent threat than the threat of judicial sanctions. Indeed, the policing of queer ways, and thus of normal ways, was most commonly effected through the informal policing of the streets, in gossip and in the jeers and manhandling visited on men whom other men

regarded as queer. In defining the queer's transgressions against gender and sexual conventions, "normal" men defined the boundaries of acceptable behavior for anyone who would be normal; in attacking the queer they enforced those boundaries by reminding everyone of the penalties for violating them. While most people did not encounter such policing directly or even take special note of it, it effectively served as a warning to all.

This book is not just about the making of the gay male world, then, but also about the making of the normal world: about how the normal world constituted itself and established its boundaries by creating the gay world as a stigmatized other. Examining the boundaries drawn between queers and normal men in the early twentieth century illuminates with unusual clarity—and startling effect—the degree to which the social definition of a "normal man" has changed in the last century. For the erotic behavior allowed "normal" men three generations ago simply would not be allowed "heterosexual" men today. Heterosexuality, no less than homosexuality, is a historically specific social category and identity.

As my focus on the street-level policing of gender suggests, another of the underlying arguments of this book is that histories of homosexuality—and of sex and sexuality more generally—have suffered from their overreliance on the discourse of the elite. The most powerful elements of American society devised the official maps of the culture: inscribing meaning in each part of the body, designating some bodily practices as sexual and others as asexual, some as acceptable and others as not; designating some urban spaces as public and others as private. Many histories of sex and sexuality have focused on those official maps, the ones drawn up by doctors, municipal authorities, the police, religious figures, and legislators, the ones announced at city council meetings and in medical journals. Those maps require attention because they had real social power, but they did not guide the practices or self-understanding of everyone who saw them.[58] While this book pays those maps their due, it is more interested in reconstructing the maps etched in the city streets by daily habit, the paths that guided men's practices even if they were never published or otherwise formalized.[59] It argues that maps of meaning not only guide social practices but inhere in and constitute those practices, and it argues for the significance of such socially structured and socially meaningful everyday practices in the construction of identities.

Moreover, a periodization of sexual practices and meanings based on those announced by the elite seriously misrepresents their historical development.[60] This book challenges the assumption, for instance, that nineteenth-century medical discourse constructed the "homosexual" as a personality type, and that the appearance of the homosexual in medical discourse should be taken as indicative of or synonymous with the homosexual's appearance in the culture as a whole. I have argued in previous work that the medical literature was more complex than this and represented simply one of several powerful (and competing) sexual ideologies.[61] This book seeks to analyze the power of medical discourse by situating it in the context of the changing representation of homosexuality in popular culture and the street-level social practices and dynamics that shaped the ways homosexually active men were labeled, understood themselves, and interacted with others. It argues that the invert and the normal man, the homosexual and the heterosexual, were not inventions of the elite but were popular discursive categories before they became elite discursive categories.

Similarly, while the study's ethnography of sexual subcultures confirms several of Michel Foucault's most speculative and brilliant insights, it modifies the periodization based on those insights by giving equal weight to working-class culture. Most significantly, it shows that the "modern homosexual," whose preeminence is usually thought to have been established in the nineteenth century, did not dominate Western urban industrial culture until well into the twentieth century, at least in one of the world capitals of that culture. The homosexual displaced the "fairy" in middle-class culture several generations earlier than in working-class culture; but in each class culture each category persisted, standing in uneasy, contested, and disruptive relation to the other.[62]

Two other parameters of the study need explanation. The book focuses on men because the differences between gay male and lesbian history and the complexity of each made it seem virtually impossible to write a book about both that did justice to each and avoided making one history an appendage to the other.[63] The differences between men's and women's power and the qualities ascribed to them in a male-dominated culture were so significant that the social and spatial organization of gay male and lesbian life inevitably took very different forms. As in many societies, for instance, gay men in New York developed a more extensive and visible subculture than lesbians did, in large part because men had access to higher wages and greater independence from family life. Gay men as men also enjoyed greater freedom of movement than lesbians did as women, since many of the public spaces where gay men met, from street corners to bars, were culturally defined as male spaces. Moreover, the different sexual and emotional characters ascribed to men and women meant that the boundaries between "normal" and "abnormal" intimacies, both physical and affective, were also drawn differently for men and women. Given the centrality of gender inversion to the culture and representation of both lesbians and gay men, it will ultimately prove important to theorize their historical development in conjunction, but it may take another generation of research on each before an adequate basis for such theories exists.

Even though this study focuses on men, however, it ignores neither women nor gender, but seeks instead to build on the insights of women's historians into the social construction of gender by examining the construction of masculinity, sexual identities, and patterns of male sociability. It argues that the construction of male homosexual identities can be understood only in the context of the broader social organization and representation of gender, that relations *among* men were construed in gendered terms, and that the policing of gay men was part of a more general policing of the gender order. This book is centrally concerned with the shifting boundaries between sex, gender, and sexuality, and demonstrates that sexual desire itself was regarded as fundamentally gendered in the early twentieth century.

The book focuses on New York, which homosexuals regarded as the "gay capital" of the nation for nearly a century, for several reasons. Focusing on a single city makes it possible to study broad questions with a greater degree of precision and specificity than would otherwise be possible: questions about changes in sexual practices, the interaction between men across lines of class, ethnicity, and neighborhood, the changing uses of urban space, the logic of the territorial organization of the gay world, and the changing focus and character of policing and resistance. It has been necessary to situate the history of the gay world in the context of the broadest social and cultural history of New York City, for the history of that world—from the development of gay enclaves in particular neighborhoods at particular times to the emergence of gay speakeasies and drag balls—can be understood only in the context of more general changes in the social geography of the city, the shifting sites and conventions of commercial culture and urban sociability, and the cultural organization of urban space. The complexity of New York's social structure makes it an ideal subject (if one also fraught with difficulties, as any historian of New York will know) because it facilitates the investigation of a wide range of questions concerning the history of sexuality, such as the extent of class and ethnic differences in the social organization and cultural meaning of sexual practices. Moreover, the city's historic role as a national center of intellectual, cultural, and political ferment has meant that its artists, journalists, physicians, jurists, prison reformers, critics, and activists have had a disproportionate influence on national culture.

I do not claim that New York was *typical*, because the city's immense size and complexity set it apart from all other urban areas. It is particularly important that readers not assume that the periodization I have developed for the gay history of New York is necessarily applicable to the rest of the country. Nonetheless, New York may well have been *prototypical*, for the urban conditions and cultural changes that allowed a gay world to take shape there, as well as the strategies used to construct that world, were almost surely duplicated elsewhere. Only future studies will allow us to determine the representativeness of New York's experience with any certainty, and to test the analysis and periodization proposed here.