

SHAKA MCGLOTTEN – Lessons in Cruising

Lido

Things took a turn at the gay beach on Lido, the island just south of Venice. We were there for the 2017 Art Biennale.

I'd rented a beautiful Airbnb, the kind of place you'd find in a drama about a well-to-do Italian family, except sans family: comfy, well-appointed, three stovetop espresso makers. There we shared our usual intimacies—chatting about art, media, and technology; evening cuddles and morning spooning. Platonic plus.

Independently, we'd researched gay life in Venice. And by research, I mean Google. A gay beach on Lido had come up in both of our searches, so we agreed to spend our Monday there. We got off at the last stop on the bus line. Lido is at the edge of Venice, and the gay beach was at the end of Lido. Like so many spaces made queer by queer sex, it was an open secret and offered a chance to at once engage in the erotics of stranger sociality while disappearing into the anonymity of a public space.

Lido was so well known that "lido" became a shorthand in English for referring to a pool or other bathing sites where people can swim and sun. I'd learned that anyplace people showed skin meant that skin was potentially open to being touched.

The Boy was nervous and excited. I'd promised to give him lessons in cruising, having shared with him some of the stories I'd collected in the past. I studied histories of other queer spaces: molly houses in England (spaces where men met for socializing, sex, and the procurement of both); public lavatories in Paris (and everywhere else); and other in-between spaces, like the Christopher Street piers elegized by the science fiction writer Samuel Delany. I learned that embedded in these spaces were the histories of gay male sexualities. The architectures of queered and queering masculinities attracted the ire of vice squads, some of which, like Paris's, were created in direct response to the anonymous sex occurring throughout new urbanized spaces.

I'd spent years navigating the slowly disappearing cruising spaces in Austin, Texas, mostly university bathrooms and public parks. The university campus was vast—fifty thousand students are enrolled there—and once I'd been attuned to the ambient sexual potential immanent in any and every space, it became a mysterious garden of delights. I'd read books about sexuality and

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space—like Aaron Betsky’s *Queer Space* or Joel Sanders’s anthology *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. But it wasn’t until I began to really dig in, as when I would “study” near one of the out-of-the-way bathrooms men were using to meet, or read books like the ones above while waiting on the toilet for someone to put their eye to a peephole, or trace a finger along the edge of a gloryhole or the bottom of a stall wall, that I gained those necessary, visceral firsthand experiences that are the hallmark of ethnographic research. Participant observation, indeed.

I went online to find these spaces. Virtual networks overlaid, supplemented, and, in my view, eventually supplanted IRL ones. Some nooks and crannies required Sherlock-like sleuthing. Once I learned that these spaces were being policed as discreetly as they were being used for sex, I dug for clues, and eventually I found one: an interlocutor told me that he’d received a criminal trespass citation when he’d been caught cruising one of the campus bathrooms. I submitted an open records request to the university asking for all of the criminal trespass data over the previous ten years. I checked off the spaces I knew were being used for sex on the list and discovered new ones. Notes in hand, I’d look for toilets in quiet corridors and behind the stairs in buildings I’d never entered. Most of the out-of-the-way bathrooms weren’t active anymore, but there were traces, like flakes of dried semen and notes like this one: “meet here M/W/F Fall ’83.” I wondered what kinds of tools men had used to create glory holes in ¾-inch marble partitions. These squirreled-away toilets had disappeared in plain sight, like the sex that used to occur there.

I never get tired of telling people that my PhD research was on public sex. “You can imagine the ‘fieldwork.’”

The Boy’s sexuality largely lived in the web, tendriling through the underwater cables to the net and cloud. His sexuality was (and still is, in many ways) distributed. Contacts are made via pixels and touchscreens, space and time compressed as he taps on someone’s handle on Snapchat, waiting for photos and videos to load. Keep that streak of back-and-forth Snaps going!

These contacts were solicited, connections made and dropped, from his childhood bed. It took him years to find the courage to walk into a gay bar.

He didn’t know that the history of gay identity was shaped by urban spaces and by persecution, by Parisian vice squads cracking down on the sodomites sodomizing in the public toilets. Their outsidership emerged as an inverted structuring of their own confusing of private/public divides. A public toilet is a public space for private functions. It is also a place for private sex that becomes public because it takes place out in the city and because knowledge of it circulated through word of mouth (or, now, Google or the Tumblrs dedicated to public cruising!). Public sex is part of what outted gayness as such. The private closet produced a public culture of queerness as well as the inside/outside of heterosexuality.

Time for some real-world experience.

The only problem was that our directions were confusing or just incomplete. Were we supposed to head north or south along the beach? He was pinching and rotating Google maps, toggling to and from an open browser tab from cruisinggays.com. Although my own cruising histories also began with the web, I didn’t have a smartphone then, so I relied on websites like Cruising-forsex.com. There was no guarantee things would pan out, however. I remember

walking for hours along the trails of San Antonio's Eisenhower Park, hoping to come across someone who'd show me what to do. Bust. No precision-guided lust then.

"Look, I'm the one who studied cruising, and the gay spots are always at the very ends of a beach. And for some reason usually to the left."

But I wasn't sure and told him so.

"I thought you said you knew."

Conciliatory, I suggested we go back and ask the very pretty young woman at the snack bar at the entrance of the beach where we'd bought espressos a few moments before.

I was the one to ask the awkward question.

"Do you know where the gay beach is?"

She didn't know, but she wasn't surprised either. How could she not recognize our queerness? He was wearing his Boy London snapback and skin-tight swimming briefs he'd bought from the boys' section two years earlier for his last trip to Italy. He had bought it, he told me, "to fit in." To be clear, the Boy is not an actual boy. However much he's attached to his boyishness, he's a man.

Still, I told him his outfit reminded me of Tazio from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

"I don't know who that is," he said, still a bit irritated.

He stared as I gave a brief synopsis.

"We can watch the movie sometime. If you liked *Call Me by Your Name*, I'm pretty sure you'll like it."

(Much later, I realized we'd passed the Grand Hotel Des Bains, now luxury apartments, the setting for *Death in Venice*.)

We turned around and walked back toward the beach.

Along the way, a guy in his mid-thirties passed us. The man smiled, clocking the "BOY" emblazoned hat. Cruising success already! Here was another gay.

"Excuse me, but are you looking for the gay beach?"

He had a German accent. "I am, but I've already been here for a while, and I can't figure out where it is. I thought it was to the right here, but I didn't find anything."

"Let's try again," I suggested. We headed south, for Alberoni.

Half an hour later, the three of us were nude, sprawled on towels. We were partially hidden by grass, shrubs, and trees. No one would stumble on us who wasn't looking.

We napped a little. I teased the German, showing off my ass, getting closer to him. He had a huge dick. Boy Scout-style, I'd made sure to douche. I wasn't sure I was really attracted to him, though. That is one of the affordances of face-to-face encounters: there's a different filtering logic than those encounters mediated by screens. You make do with what is in front of you rather than idealizations looping between what you imagine you want most and what you find in the digital grid of possibilities.

I was reticent for another reason, too. How might this affect my platonic plus?

Finally, the lessons.

"All you need to do is walk back into the dunes. Take your time."

“But how will I know?”

“Everyone is there for the same thing. Eye contact will signal interest. Break eye contact if you’re not interested. And, of course”—gazing meaningfully at his barely there Speedo—“people will show off their goods.”

The Boy headed west into the dunes.

Protective, I checked in on him periodically, shading my eyes as I looked back into the sparsely wooded, rolling dunes. I caught him a couple of times in the distance. Framed against the forest behind him, he was adorable and goofy, walking awkwardly in the sand.

The German and I exchanged sun tan lotion massages. He pressed into me from behind.

“Want to head back?” I asked, gesturing behind us toward the dunes.

“Sure,” he replied.

A few moments in, I worried about our things, especially the Boy’s precious phone, which he’d worried about being stolen.

“I’m going to run back and grab our things. I’ll be right back.”

I threw our things into a plastic bag and returned to meet the German. He was gone.



Courtesy of Shaka McGlotten.

Thinking I'd come out at the wrong place, I retraced my steps and perched myself on the top of a dune. I didn't see him. Or the Boy. You probably know where this is going, but I wasn't going there then.

No biggie, I thought. I'll run into one or the other of them soon enough.

But after twenty minutes or so, I started to get worried. What if something had happened to the Boy? I retraced my steps, ignoring the mostly older men giving me the let's do it look, and made my way back to the beach. No luck.

I started jogging, really worried now. Pissed too. How selfish of the Boy to leave his things on the beach, expecting me to watch over them.

Finally, out of breath, I stopped near the entrance to the wooded park at the western edge of the dunes. I asked myself, What would the goddess do? WWTGD?

She'd chill the fuck out.

Immediately after, I almost ran into the only attractive man I'd passed in my search. A bottle of Rush bulging out of the top of his small, pink Speedo, the outline of his dick clearly visible. I'd missed these important details when I'd passed him earlier.

Oh.

We introduced ourselves. He was from Switzerland via Poland.

"Everything OK?" he asked. "I saw you running. Are you on something?"

I laughed, embarrassed.

"No, I was looking for my friends." I explained a bit more.

"Oh, you mean the twink and the older, hairy guy?"

That's what I hadn't seen coming. But I understood.

"Yeah, seemed like they were having a good time."

A flash of furious anger. All right then.

But I'd won the lottery with this one.

We found a spot in a copse along the trail.

He got up off of his knees after he got me hard, turned around, and leaned against a tree. I used spit and precum to ease myself into him.

We passed the poppers.

"Breed me, breed my hole!"

I did.

Lesson in cruising: take the chance.

Creeped these boys at Carolles-Plage

I walked along the edge of the dike, empty, locked cabanas to my left. Like those at the entrance to Lido, I thought they would be so perfect for hooking up. I transposed images from imagined films: more boys in Speedos giving one another knowing looks before sneaking one after another into one of those little white tents. The light filters in through the vents casting the bench and their bodies in stripes of light. Occasionally, one of them pauses in their lovemaking, listening intently to the chatter of voices and the movement of bodies outside.

My Boy and I are separated at the moment—he's still in Stuttgart preparing for a trip to Maine, and I'm on this yoga retreat. We won't see each other for nearly two weeks. We're together together, but I still feel cruisy. A few days earlier, I'd quickly jerked off at the trough urinal in the men's changing room. One aim of my stroll was to see whether there was another, more discreet changing area and whether anyone might be using them, or willing to. I'd tried to convince a hot eighteen-year-old I'd been chatting up on Grindr to meet me there, but he was a no-show.

It was summer, but I still shivered whenever I felt the wind against my skin. I was walking to get warm, disappointed that the tide was still too far out to swim and that I couldn't detect a single cruising gaze.

I saw these boys.

Journal entry, 6/27/17:

YESTERDAY I SAW THESE BOYS AT THE CAROLLES BEACH WHILE I WAS UNSUCCESSFULLY CRUISING THE PROMENADE. A GINGER AND HIS DARK-HAIRED FRIEND. THEY SAT CLOSE TOGETHER, THE GINGER ON THE OTHER BOY'S LEFT, ANGLED TOWARD HIS FRIEND. HE WAS DEFINED AND LEAN—CLEARLY A BODY-BUILDER.

I STRETCHED OUT MY ARMS AND SHOULDERS WITH A BAND AND DID SOME BASIC YOGA POSES NEARBY. I LOOKED TOWARD THEM AS OFTEN AS I DARED.

EVENTUALLY THEY ROSE AND WALKED TOWARD THE BEACH. THE DARK-HAIRED FRIEND WAS GAWKIER WITH WIDE HIPS AND SKINNY ARMS. THEY WERE CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH, BUT THEY DIDN'T. BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE WATER, THEY WERE TINY BLACK SILHOUETTES OF BOYS. I COULD STILL MAKE OUT THAT THEY WERE PLAYING AROUND, HEADS BOBBING IN THE WATER.

I WAITED AND WATCHED AWHILE, HOPING THEY'D COME BACK, HOPING THEY'D LOOK UP AND MAKE EYE CONTACT. EVENTUALLY, THOUGH, I LEFT MY PERCH. I DIDN'T WANT TO KEEP CREEPING. I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THAT CREEP AT THE BEACH, THAT ASCHENBACH.

I write the entry after I've returned to the stone Norman villa where my fellow yogis and I are retreating. Like the men who frequented public toilets in early urban areas, I appropriated portions of the house for sexual ends. I snapped with boys from around the world from an ocher couch in the yoga room while others slept in between classes on the floor nearby. Or I used the time it took to fill the giant claw-footed tub to practice my selfie game—instructions I'd received from the Boy. I felt wound up, toggling between finding angles and light to highlight my physique and fantasies about those boys on the beach. I'd felt this way often—when, heart racing, I'd bought my first porn magazines from an adult bookstore in the years before the net, or when I first started surfing the web for porn in the basement computer lab in the Grinnell College library, or

while waiting for the first hookups I'd set up using the chatrooms at Gay.com, or compulsively refreshing Grindr to see if this or that guy was still online.

It's the same anxiety—which is another word for excitement—that attends all sorts of sexual imminences from which lust, anticipation, fear, frustration, disappointment, and release emerge and find, sometimes, their realization, however impermanent. That's still the same, anyway, whether online or IRL. Things haven't changed *that* much.

Rosengarten im Humboldthain

We throw our late-night McDonald's meal into the garbage as we enter Humboldthain park. It's pitch-black. We're both anxious, but we'd just seen Charlize Theron kick ass in *Atomic Blonde* at the Berlin Sony Center, so I at least was feeling myself.

"It's definitely shorter to cut through the park," I said to the Boy. "And it's totally safe. I mean this is Berlin. And especially since we're together. Anyway, I'm from New York," I said, mangling a Brooklyn accent. I didn't tell him that a few years earlier I'd ridden my bike to a bridge at the threshold of the park; gazing into the dark, I'd lost my nerve and pedaled quickly back to the nearby flat my ex and I were living in.

I could tell the Boy was scared. Like that night we screwed up our return to Castle Solitude and had to walk along too-narrow trails through the forest to get home.

I knew Humboldthain, a small park in Wedding. I'd go on walks with my sister and brother by other mothers, who lived a few blocks away. When I went running there on my own, I'd pass through the rose garden a few times looking for interested looks. I knew it was supposed to be cruisy, but I never saw any action there. I did organize a failed hookup in the garden via Grindr, so I knew there were areas half-hidden from the path, perfect for sex. But the guy couldn't get hard, and there was shit and broken needles on the earth, so I wasn't going to get on my knees to help.

The Boy and I turned into the garden, the gravel crunching beneath our feet. A halogen light in a gardening shed made it possible to see a small path near the entrance.

We made our way through the gloaming. Isn't that such a great word?

Gloaming?

I'm not making this up. The sliver of a moon illuminated rolling clouds and mist that had settled on the partially artificial hill built on the remains of a bunker. From its peak the city sprawled into the distance. Berlin, if you've never been there, isn't a pretty city. Much of it was razed to the ground during WWII, so the housing is Lego-like, matter-of-fact.

We looped a few times through the garden's not-quite-maze hedges. Eventually we made our way to a walkway enclosed on one side by the hill and on the other by a trellis woven through by the vines of rosebushes.

"Whatever's happening is happening here," I whispered. My heart was thumping. I could hear his beating as we walked side by side into a black tunnel.

The Boy's white-snakeskin shoes glowed.

Half-seen figures lined the edges.

The glow of a cigarette briefly lit a face.



Courtesy of Christoph Sawyer.

We reached the midway point. The orange light from the shed almost, but not quite, reached us. A pale form on its knees on the stone pathway. Eyes having adjusted somewhat to the dark, we could make out his jockstrap. He snuffled like a sacrificial animal. I smelled poppers. The Boy was more excited than scared now. We circled him, and he moved, keeping his ass to us, all the while sniffing poppers and grunting.

We took out our cocks out, started stroking.

One or two men had followed us. They moved in.

That's the beauty and the problem with queer spaces: everyone is welcome; everyone is welcome to move in. And then you're faced with a series of questions: *Do I let them move in? Do I want to move in? Or do I want to settle for something else, like watching or letting them watch?*

We both thought about fucking the manimal.

Whispering: "But who else has already been there?"

"I don't want to have to go to the clinic again so soon!"

His teeth grinned in response.

We left him there, a disappointed, pale, still-snuffling, and very willing sacrifice ready to receive the offerings of others.

Like so many men before him, the Boy had learned some lessons. Like them, he had been introduced by an older friend—that's me!—already “in the life.” I'm sure that when it's his turn at intergenerational queer pedagogies, he'll have the necessary experience under his belt, so to speak. Though what kind of lessons will he teach, I wondered? Public nudity, under-stall sex, beach creeping, and thrills of late-night cruising? Sure, but alongside these he'd be teaching about the rhythms of Grindr—browse, swap, ghost—and instructing his Boys in the proper use of emojis. He taught me those things, after all, one of the ways the present teaches the past, the Boy teaches his dad. We exited the park and walked back to our friends', the city as quiet as it gets.