TEAROOM TRADE*

Laud Humphreys

While the agreements resulting in “one-night-stands” occur in many settings—the bath, the street, the public toilet—and may vary greatly in the elaborateness or simplicity of the interaction preceding culmination in the sexual act, their essential feature is the expectation that sex can be had without obligation or commitment.1

At shortly after five o’clock on a weekday evening, four men enter a public restroom in the city park. One wears a well-tailored business suit; another wears tennis shoes, shorts, and teeshirt; the third man is still clad in the khaki uniform of his filling station; the last, a salesman, has loosened his tie and left his sports coat in the car. What has caused these men to leave the company of other homeward-bound commuters on the freeway? What common interest brings these men, with their divergent backgrounds, to this public facility?

They have come here not for the obvious reason, but in a search for “instant sex.” Many men—married and unmarried, those with hetero-sexual identities and those whose self-image is a homosexual one—seek such impersonal sex, shunning involvement, desiring kicks without commitment. Whatever reasons—social, physiological, or psychological—might be postulated for this search, the phenomenon of impersonal sex persists as a widespread but rarely studied form of human interaction.

There are several settings for this type of deviant activity—the balconies of movie theaters, automobiles, behind bushes—but few offer the advantages for these men that public restrooms provide. “Tearooms,” as these facilities are called in the language of the homosexual subculture,2 have several characteristics that make them attractive as locales for sexual encounters without involvement.

According to its most precise meaning in the argot, the only “true” tearoom is one that gains a reputation as a place where homosexual encounters occur. Presumably, any restroom could qualify for this distinction, but comparatively few are singled out for this function at any one time. For instance, I have researched a metropolitan area with more than ninety public toilets in its parks, only twenty of which are advertised for sexual games, and the company used by the company. As places for deviant sexual activity, these restrooms can be attended to in volume of one’s choice.

Public restrooms attract homosexuals for a number of reasons; one is that they are easily recognizable as venues, providing a variety of facilities with a variety of potential advantages of privacy and convenience.

AVAILABILITY

In the first place, they are available to the male patient; they are not like any sort of public places—restaurants, bars, stores, bus stops, and courthouses. In the second place, American social structures are not suited to the restrooms, parks, and roadways. The third place is the city itself—a well-programmed environment for sexual activity, now attracting a larger population of the American age, from the cities. . . . [M]any of the young people that take the streets to the parks, to the parks, not on the street, but the city, they provide the public facilities for the sake of others and the sociological purposes.

It is a function of these social structures and facilities for the purposes of the individual. Perhaps the social function of “civilization,” and post-World War II sailor stations.
only twenty of which are in regular use as locales for sexual games. Restrooms thus designated join the company of automobiles and bathhouses as places for deviant sexual activity second only to private bedrooms in popularity. During certain seasons of the year—roughly, that period from April through October that midwestern homosexuals call “the hunting season”—tearooms may surpass any other locale of homoerotic enterprise in volume of activity.

Public restrooms are chosen by those who want homoerotic activity without commitment for a number of reasons. They are accessible, easily recognized by the initiate, and provide little public visibility. Tearooms thus offer the advantages of both public and private settings. They are available and recognizable enough to attract a large volume of potential sexual partners, providing an opportunity for rapid action with a variety of men. When added to the relative privacy of these settings, such features enhance the impersonality of the sheltered interaction.

**AVAILABILITY**

In the first place, tearooms are readily accessible to the male population. They may be located in any sort of public gathering place: department stores, bus stations, libraries, hotels, YMCAs, or courthouses. In keeping with the drive-in craze of American society, however, the more popular facilities are those readily accessible to the roadways. The restrooms of public parks and beaches—and, more recently, the rest stops set at programmed intervals along superhighways—are now attracting the clientele that, in a more pedestrian age, frequented great buildings of the inner cities. . . . [M]y research is focused on the activity that takes place in the restrooms of public parks, not only because (with some seasonal variation) they provide the most action but also because of other factors that make them suitable for sociological study.

It is a function of some societies to make these facilities for elimination available to the public. Perhaps the public toilet is one of the marks of “civilization,” at least as perceived by European and post-European culture. I recall a letter from a sailor stationed in North Africa during World War II in which he called the people “uncivilized” because they had no public restrooms and used streets and gutters for the purpose of elimination.

For the cultural historian, American park restrooms merit study as physical traces of modern civilization. The older ones are often appended to pavilions or concealed beneath the paving of graceful colonnades. One marble-lined room in which I have done research occupies half of a Greek temple-like structure, a building of beautiful lines and proportions. A second type, built before the Great Depression, are the toilet facilities located in park administration buildings, maintenance shops, or garages. For the most part, these lack the artistic qualities of the first type. Partly because they are not as accessible from the roads and partly because they are too easily approached by supervisory personnel and other interfering “straights,” these restrooms enjoy homosexual popularity only during the months when other outlets are closed.

With the depression of the 1930s a new variety of public toilet appeared on the park scene. Ten of the twelve tearooms in which I made systematic observations. . . . were of this category. Although the floor plans and building materials used vary from city to city, the majority of restrooms I have seen were constructed during this period. These have been built by the Works Projects Administration and, in any one community, seem to have been stamped from the same die. In the city where most of my research took place, they are constructed of a native white stone with men’s and women’s facilities back-to-back under one red roof. They have heavy wooden doors, usually screened from public view by a lattice-work partition attached to the building’s exterior. In most of these doors, there is an inset of opaque French panes.

Each of the toilet facilities in the building has two windows of the same opaque glass, situated at either side of the room. The outside of these apertures is always covered with heavy screen. Against the blank wall opposite the door there are (from left to right) three urinals and two stalls, although smaller restrooms may provide only two urinals and one stall. Some of the facilities still have wash basins intact, situated in the
corner to the left as one enters the door, but few of these are in working order. There is an occasional wastebasket. Paper towels are seldom provided, and there are no other furnishings in the rooms (see Figure 1).

Few park restrooms date back to the 1940s, when the nation was concerned with building those other major outlets for homosexual activity, the military posts. Apparently, most public construction in the 1950s was connected with the rush to provide more athletic facilities—swimming pools, golf courses, skating rinks, and the like.

The past decade has witnessed the construction of new, functional, cement-block facilities. Most of these structures are located along the expressways, but a number are appearing in the parks and playgrounds of our cities. These relief stations may be viewed as an expression of the current interest in urban planning: some replace buildings no longer fit for use; others are located on the newly created urban playgrounds; and the bulk accompany the nation’s answer to problems of mass transportation. However one may interpret the new construction as a reflection of the course of American history, it should be a boon to the tearoom customers. Most of the newly built restrooms are isolated structures with ready access to the roads and thus meet the prime requisites of tearoom activity.

According to some older respondents, the real turning point for the tearoom trade arrived with the WPA. One man, who has been active in the homosexual subculture for more than forty years, puts it this way:

I suppose there has been such activity since the invention of plumbing. I first started out in one of those pavilion places. But the real fun began during the depression. There were all those new buildings, easy to reach, and the automobile was really getting popular about then. . . . Suddenly, it just seemed like half the men in town met in the tearooms.

Not all of the new buildings were easy to reach, but those that were soon found popularity for homosexual activity. Tearoom ecology, like that of society at large, is highly affected by the location of transportation routes. Whether by accident or design, most large city parks are located close to major thoroughfares and freeways. Because the activity in tearooms reaches its peak at the close of the workday, restrooms will draw more customers if located near principal commuting routes. Facilities that lie along freeways or at the entrances to parks are the most noteworthy and popular. Those that were located well off the expressways were less successful.

**LOCATING TEAROOMS**

There is a greater awareness today of homosexuals as citizens. In many large cities there are gay organizations sheltering beds for the homeless and to provide a place for masturbation. The volume of people has increased the volume of business.

One summer a man named Sid, who had been a frequent visitor to the city’s public parks, was content to wait while waiting for the WPA to install a new tearoom. For one who was not interested in such activities, this could be a difficult experience, one finding where to relax and socialize.

Occasional local changes in the environment can make a difference. For example, a young man (whom I later met on a train) who was wearing a suit and plain clothes asked if I knew of a tearoom for sale. After returning his business card (he had some remarkable drawing in which it was raining), he asked: “Look, fellow, if you don’t know where the place. We’re going to have a real tearoom. Because of trouble for the most part, the northeast part of the city. You’ll find plenty of customers there. A lot of my best business has been there. I recommend a couple of places.”

I only enter, wage, or cut a few dollars in both private and public places. However, I became curious about the possible tearooms by observing the normal behavior of the most obvious client. During this period, the tearooms that are located in the most popular gay labor unions, such as admittance to the post office, the on the squares, and those in the more popular parks.
muting routes of the metropolitan area. The two facilities that I found to attract the greatest numbers for homosexual relations were adjacent to four-lane traffic arteries. All others in which any noteworthy amount of activity was observed were located within five minutes’ driving time of the expressways that circle and cross the city.

LOCATING THE ACTION

There is a great deal of difference in the volumes of homosexual activity that these accommodations shelter. In some, one might wait for months before observing a deviant act (unless solitary masturbation is considered deviant). In others, the volume approaches orgiastic dimensions. One summer afternoon, for instance, I witnessed twenty acts of fellatio in the course of an hour while waiting out a thunderstorm in a tearoom. For one who wishes to participate in (or study) such activity, the primary consideration is one of finding where the action is.

Occasionally, tips about the more active places may be gained from unexpected sources. Early in my research, I was approached by a man (whom I later surmised to be a park patrolman in plain clothes) while waiting at the window of a tearoom for some patrons to arrive. After finishing his business at the urinal and exchanging some remarks about the weather (it had been raining), the man came abruptly to the point: “Look, fellow, if you’re looking for sex, this isn’t the place. We’re clamping down on this park because of trouble with the niggers. Try the john at the northeast corner of [Reagan] Park. You’ll find plenty of action there.” He was right. Some of my best observations were made at the spot he recommended. In most cases, however, I could only enter, wait, and watch—a method that was costly in both time and gasoline. After surveying a couple of dozen such rooms in this way, however, I became able to identify the more popular tearooms by observing certain physical evidence, the most obvious of which is the location of the facility. During the warm seasons, those restrooms that are isolated from other park facilities, such as administration buildings, shops, tennis courts, playgrounds, and picnic areas, are the more popular for deviant activity. The most active tearooms studied were all isolated from recreational areas, cut off by drives or lakes from baseball diamonds and picnic tables.

I have chosen the term “purlieu” (with its ancient meaning of land severed from a royal forest by perambulation) to describe the immediate environs best suited to the tearoom trade. Drives and walks that separate a public toilet from the rest of the park are almost certain guides to deviant sex. The ideal setting for homosexual activity is a tearoom situated on an island of grass, with roads close by on every side. The getaway car is just a few steps away; children are not apt to wander over from the playground; no one can surprise the participants by walking in from the woods or from over a hill; it is not likely that straight people will stop there at all. According to my observations, the women’s side of these buildings is seldom used.

Active tearooms are also identifiable by the number of automobiles parked nearby. If two or more cars remain in front of a relatively isolated restroom for more than ten minutes, one may be reasonably certain that homosexual activity is in progress inside. This sign that the sexual market is in operation is an important one to the participants, who seldom enter a park restroom unless the presence of other unoccupied cars indicates that potential partners are inside. A lone arrival will usually wait in his auto until at least one other has parked nearby. That this signal is obscured when a golf course, zoo, or other facility that draws automobiles is located in close proximity may help explain the popularity of the isolated restroom.

Another means of recognizing the active tearoom requires closer inspection. Here, I refer to the condition of the windows and doors. Men who play the tearoom game must be able to know when someone is approaching. A door that squeaks or sticks is of great assistance; however, the condition of the windows is even more important. If they are of opaque glass, are nailed shut, or have no broken panes, the researcher may presume that the facility is seldom used for homosexual encounters.

In a western city, I have observed an exception to this rule. One of the popular meeting places there was a restroom located beneath the
VOLUME AND VARIETY

The availability of facilities they can recognize attracts a great number of men who wish, for whatever reason, to engage in impersonal homoerotic activity. Simple observation is enough to guide these participants, the researcher, and, perhaps, the police to active tearooms. It is much more difficult to make an accurate appraisal of the proportion of the male population who engage in such activity over a representative length of time. Even with good sampling procedures, a large staff of assistants would be needed to make the observations necessary for an adequate census of this mobile population. All that may be said with some degree of certainty is that the percentage of the male population who participate in tearoom sex in the United States is somewhat less than the 16 percent of the adult white male population Kinsey found to have “at least as much of the homosexual as the heterosexual in their histories.”

Participants assure me that it is not uncommon in tearooms for one man to fellate as many as ten others in a day. I have personally watched a fellator take on three men in succession in a half hour of observation. One respondent, who has cooperated with the researcher in a number of taped interviews, claims to average three men each day during the busy seasons.

I have seen some wait in turn for this type of service. Leaving one such scene on a warm September Saturday, I remarked to a man who left close behind me: “Kind of crowded in there, isn’t it?” “Hell, yes,” he answered. “It’s getting so you have to take a number and wait in line in these places!”

There are many who frequent the same facility repeatedly. Men will come to be known as regular, even daily, participants, stopping off at the same tearoom on the way to or from work. One physician in his late fifties was so punctual in his appearance at a particular restroom that I began to look forward to our daily chats. This robust, affable respondent said he had stopped at this tearoom every evening of the week (except Wednesday, his day off) for years “for a blow-job.” Another respondent, a salesman whose schedule is flexible, may “make the scene” more than once a day in the tearoom. At the time of my interview, he claimed to be in the tearoom for the twenty-four-hour period.

According to those who are not partner they want...

You go into the bar or the room and you see a bunch of guys who stop there all day, all during the day.

It is this sort of bar or tearoom housed in the night-stand van.

Of the bars... one of the tearooms makes only a small percentage of access to tearooms. But it constitutes a majority who follow this pattern. The several types of covert Phương of those who went to these tearooms and these are the places... and... and...

Tearooms are... as growing... they attract a variety of people. There are active in the tearooms... we consider that... we can... that... sexual self-identification of the individuals who do not want to be identified as... if they... put them on a "societal"

PRIVACY IN THE TEAROOM

I have mentioned the portents of an active... other facilities. The... the... the...
than once a day—usually at his favorite men’s room. At the time of our formal interview, this man claimed to have had four orgasms in the past twenty-four hours.

According to participants I have interviewed, those who are looking for impersonal sex in tearooms are relatively certain of finding the sort of partner they want . . .

You go into the tearoom. You can pick up some really nice things in there. Again, it is a matter of sex real quick; and, if you like this kind, fine—you’ve got it. You get one and he is done; and, before long, you’ve got another one.

. . . when they want it:

Well, I go there; and you can always find someone to suck your cock, morning, noon, or night. I know lots of guys who stop by there on their way to work—and all during the day.

It is this sort of volume and variety that keeps the tearooms viable as market places of the one-night-stand variety.

Of the bar crowd in gay (homosexual) society, only a small percentage would be found in park restrooms. But this more overt, gay bar clientele constitutes a minor part of those in any American city who follow a predominantly homosexual pattern. The so-called closet queens and other types of covert deviants make up the vast majority of those who engage in homosexual acts—and these are the persons most attracted to tearoom encounters . . .

Tearooms are popular, not because they serve as gathering places for homosexuals but because they attract a variety of men, a minority of whom are active in the homosexual subculture. When we consider the types of participants, it will be seen that a large group of them have no homosexual self-identity. For various reasons, they do not want to be seen with those who might be identified as such or to become involved with them on a “social” basis.

**PRIVACY IN PUBLIC**

I have mentioned that one of the distinguishing traits of an active tearoom is its isolation from other facilities in a park. The addition of four picnic tables close to a once popular restroom all but eliminated that facility for research purposes. This portion of a tape, made as I toured the parks in search of action one April Sunday, is indicative of this ecological pattern:

This [park] is really dead! The tremendous volume of picnickers in all of the parks . . . . It seems like every family in the city is out today. It is a beautiful day, very warm, very pleasant. And everyone is out with their children . . . . The one facility in this park which is most active consistently is just completely surrounded by picnickers, and this would kill any gay activity . . .

At this stage in the development of American culture, at least, some sort of privacy is requisite for sex. Whether deviant or “normal,” sexual activity demands a degree of seclusion. Even orgies, I am told, require darkness or a minimum of light. When, as is the case with fellatio, the form of sexual engagement is prohibited, privacy decreases risk and is even more valued.

This constitutes a dilemma for those who would engage in impersonal sex of this type: how to find a setting that is accessible and identifiable, that will provide the necessary volume and variety of participants, while preserving at least a minimum of privacy? The trysting place must not be too available for the undesired. It must not be identifiable by the uninitiated. The potential participant passing by should be able to perceive what is taking place inside, while those playing baseball across the way should remain ignorant of the sexual game behind tearoom walls.

Ecological factors, the tearoom purlieu, that separate these facilities from other activity in the public park, have already been discussed. The presence of walls and stalls and opaque windows also help preserve the needed privacy. But there is another aspect of the tearoom encounters that is crucial to the maintenance of privacy in public settings. I refer to the silence of the interaction.

Throughout most homosexual encounters in public restrooms, nothing is spoken. One may spend many hours in these buildings and witness dozens of sexual acts without hearing a word. Of fifty encounters on which I made extensive notes, only fifteen included vocal utterances. The fifteen instances of speech break down as follows: Two were encounters in which I sought to ease the strain of legitimizing myself as look-

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out by saying, "You go ahead—I'll watch." Four
were whispered remarks between sexual part-
ners, such as, "Not so hard!" or "Thanks." One
was an exchange of greetings between friends.

The other eight verbal exchanges were in full
voice and more extensive, but they reflected an
attendant circumstance that was exceptional.
When a group of us were locked in a restroom
and attacked by several youths, we spoke for
defense and out of fear. . . . This event ruptured the
reserve among us and resulted in a series of con-
versations among those who shared this adven-
ture for several days afterward. Gradually, this
sudden unity subsided, and the encounters drifted
back into silence.

Barring such unusual events, an occasionally
whispered "thanks" at the conclusion of the act
constitutes the bulk of even whispered com-
munication. At first, I presumed that speech was
avoided for fear of incrimination. The excuse that
intentions have been misunderstood is much
weaker when those proposals are expressed in
words rather than signalled by body movements.
As research progressed, however, it became evi-
dent that the privacy of silent interaction accom-
plishes much more than mere defense against ex-
posure to a hostile world. Even when a careful
lookout is maintaining the boundaries of an en-
counter against intrusion, the sexual participants
tend to be silent. The mechanism of silence goes
beyond satisfying the demand for privacy. Like
all other characteristics of the tearoom setting, it
serves to guarantee anonymity, to assure the im-
personality of the sexual liaison.

Tearoom sex is distinctly less personal than
any other form of sexual activity, with the single
exception of solitary masturbation. . . . For now,
let me indicate only what I mean by "less per-
sonal": simply, that there is less emotional and
physical involvement in restroom fellatio—less,
even, than in the furtive action that takes place in
autos and behind bushes. In those instances, at
least, there is generally some verbal involvement.
Often, in tearoom stalls, the only portions of
the players' bodies that touch are the mouth of
the insertee and the penis of the inserter; and the
mouths of these partners seldom open for speech.

Only a public place, such as a park restroom,
could provide the lack of personal involvement
in sex that certain men desire. The setting fosters
the necessary turnover in participants by its ac-
cessibility and visibility to the "right" men. In
these public settings, too, there exists a sort of
democracy that is endemic to impersonal sex.
Men of all racial, social, educational, and physi-
cal characteristics meet in these places for sexual
union. With the lack of involvement, personal
preferences tend to be minimized.

If a person is going to entangle his body with
another's in bed—or allow his mind to become
involved with another mind—he will have cer-
tain standards of appearance, cleanliness, person-
ality, or age that the prospective partner must
meet. Age, looks, and other external variables are
germane to the sexual action. As the amount of
anticipated contact of body and mind in the sex
act decreases, so do the standards expected of the
partner. As one respondent told me:

I go to bed with gay people, too. But if I am going to
bed with a gay person, I have certain standards that I
prefer them to meet. And, in the tearooms, you don't
have to worry about these things—because it is just a
purely one-sided affair.

Participants may develop strong attachments
to the settings of their adventures in impersonal
sex. I have noted more than once that these men
seem to acquire stronger sentimental attachments
to the buildings in which they meet for sex than
to the persons with whom they engage in it. One
respondent tells the following story of his room-
mate's devotion to a particular restroom:

(We had been discussing the relative merits of various
facilities, when I asked him: "Do you remember that
old tearoom across from the park garage—the one they
tore down last winter?")

Do I ever! That was the greatest place in the park.
Do you know what my roommate did last Christmas,
after they tore the place down? He took a wreath,
sprayed it with black paint, and laid it on top of the
snow—right where that corner stall had stood. . . . He
was really broken up!

The walls and fixtures of these public facilities
are provided by society at large, but much re-
mains for the participants to provide for them-
selves. Silence in these settings is the product of
years of interaction. It is a normative response to
the demand for privacy without involvement, a

rule that has evolved for solitary re-
donation; and interaction be a number of ways,

The primary author has set this scene for the reader to
the mechanisms

How, then?

What rules guide play in it? What are the

What are the rules of such activity?
sideways, when they relate this

These questions fore I can report

Note

1. Evelyn Hall, "Worlds," in

2. Like most nomenclature, the con-

3. It is not possible

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rule that has been developed and taught. Except for solitary masturbation, sex necessitates joint action; and impersonal sex requires that this interaction be as unrevealing as possible. In a number of ways, the structure of tearoom encounters has been developed, refined, and communicated. The primary task of this book is to describe for the reader the social structure of impersonal sex, the mechanisms that make it possible.

How, then, does such an operation work? What rules govern it? What roles may people play in it? What sort of ritual sustains the action? What are the risks—to players and others—of such activity? What kinds of people find the tearooms inviting for sexual experience, and how do they relate this behavior to the rest of their lives? These questions remain to be answered; but, before I can reply to them, it is important for the reader to know how I found these answers. Answers become clear only when we are aware what questions were asked and how conclusions were reached.

Notes


2. Like most other words in the homosexual vocabulary, the origin of tearoom is unknown. British slang has used "tea" to denote "urine." Another British usage is as a verb, meaning "to engage with, encounter, go in against." See John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English (London: George Rutledge & Sons, 1921).

3. It is not possible to know how many sexual acts are performed in the various types of settings. Writers on the homosexual subculture agree, in general, on the relative popularity of these locales. For general surveys of the homosexual scene, see especially Evelyn Hooker, "The Homosexual Community," in Personality Research (Copenhagen: Monksgaard, 1962), pp. 40–59; and Maurice Leznoff and William A. Westley, "The Homosexual Community," Social Problems, Vol. 3, No. 4 (April, 1965), pp. 257–263.

4. By estimating (a) the average daily frequency of sex acts in each of twenty restrooms observed and (b) the average number of automobiles suspected of having been parked by participants near restrooms in five different parks, I have concluded that approximately 5 percent of the adult male population of the metropolitan area under study are involved in these encounters in a year's time. The imprecision of the methods used in obtaining this "guessimate" does not warrant elaboration.

5. Alfred C. Kinsey and others, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948), pp. 650–651. See also William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Homosexuality: The Formulation of a Sociological Perspective," Journal of Health and Social Behavior, Vol. 8, No. 3 (September, 1967), p. 180: "About one half [of the male homosexuals studied] reported that sixty percent or more of their sexual partners were persons with whom they had sex only once. Between ten and twenty percent report that they often picked up their sexual partners in public terminals, and an even larger proportion reported similar contacts in other public or semipublic locations."

6. Although I made fifty systematic observations of tearoom encounters, fifty-three acts of fellatio were observed at those times. The sexual acts sometimes occur in such rapid succession that it is impossible to report them as involving separate encounters.

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