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“Freakin’ at the Freaker’s Ball”: Halloween in the Castro, a Love Story

 In Samuel L. Delany’s book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue,* he explores the notions of queer spaces being “violently” revamped and restructured. His prime example is Times Square in New York City, along 42nd Street between Fiftieth and Eighth Avenue, along which resided many of the movie theatres and establishments frequented by many homosexual people up until the late 1990s. It was for Delany a primary “queer” space within New York City, and how the city’s assault on this valuable neighborhood created a fissure in the fabric of the micro-society that functioned in that community. In the preface he writes, “…the city has instituted not only a violent reconfiguration of its own landscape but also a legal and moral revamping of its own discursive structures, changing laws about sex, health, and zoning…” (Delany xiii). While trying to solidify, through his writing, the existence and social relevance of this neighborhood, he, at the same time, attempts to explain what will be lost in the rendering of it from the city’s landscape. The encroachment of reconfiguration by the dominant culture is due to the constructs of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner termed “heteronormativity,” in their essay, “Public Sex.” They state:

A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness-embedded in things and not just in sex-is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (Berlant and Werner 554-555).

These “forms and arrangements” of heternormativity are so inherent as to become unnoticed, like a filter on a lens, altering everything it encounters without the viewer being aware of its prismatic and distorting effect. Berlant and Werner continue: “[i]t is hard to see these fields as heteronormative because the sexual culture straight people inhabit is so diffuse, a mix of languages they are just developing with premodern notions of sexuality so ancient that their material conditions feel hard- wired into personhood” (555). So it is exactly the slipperiness of the “force” field of heternomativity that make it so hard to resist and combat. It has attached itself like a virus, to the cells of our culture: imbedding, altering, consuming. Something Delany equates with a plague (xix). This is a phenomenon I have been witnessed in the past 20 years in San Francisco’s Castro district.

In the early 1990s, when I was twenty years old, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. When I announced to my friends and family that I was relocating there, I received many warnings from people, many of whom had never even *been* there, about the “gayness” of the area, that it was a contemporary Sodom and Gomorrah, a holy mecca for homosexuals that were bent on flaunting their lifestyles in the face of “respectable” society. There were even a few people that believed that this would be the reason California was going to break off from the North American continent in the next “big” earthquake and fall into the Pacific Ocean…what with God’s obvious retribution and all that. Not only was their vision of the entire city of San Francisco viewed through the prism of heteronormativity, but it came with a sizable dose of homophobia and bigotry as well. Undaunted by the solid religious explanations of tectonic activity and the contagiousness of sexual debauchery, I moved there anyway.

 What I found there surprised me, or, rather, what I didn’t find. With the veil of heteronormativity secure around me, I had no real understanding of queer spaces and what that term meant or what that “space” looked like. For many, from both a positive and negative stance, the city of San Francisco itself is considered a queer space, with the Castro district being the nucleus of queer goodness (or badness, whichever way you like it. The Castro is usually happy to oblige). The irony of this is that the first time I went to the Castro district, I did not even realize that I was *in* the Castro district. The shift between the Mission district, to the Castro was so subtle, so uneventful, so benign, that I was a slightly disoriented by it. Based on the previously mentioned “others”’ description of the Castro, people in drag would be having sex on the streets and when they weren’t doing that, they would be actively trying to recruit people into their way of life and “turn them queer” (I actually expected, and actively hoped, to see a reincarnated Divine on the street corner, peddling conversion literature).



In actuality, what I saw was a busy, urban street with busy, urban people and the “queerest” thing the day had to offer me was a couple holding hands and a woman with a t-shirt that read, “Win a Toaster. Ask me how.” Unable to *see* what was all that queer about San Francisco in general and the Castro district specifically, I called my acquaintances and told them they were idiots. But I now realize that I couldn’t identify a queer space because, at that time, I didn’t know what I was looking for; therefore, I didn’t know it when I saw it.

 As time went on, and I went from being a tourist to a resident of the Bay Area, I was able to understand what was unique and relevant about the Castro and the San Francisco Bay area. In the Bay Area, at least to my understanding and experience, one doesn’t have to be homosexual to be considered queer. And one distinct experience there made me to understand that.

 My first year in the Bay Area, my college friends took me to San Francisco to celebrate Halloween in the Castro. This celebration had been going on since the late 1970s and was a very well-known “carnivale.” I had read about it, and I was anxious to see it for myself. The streets were shut down and it was an immense, inclusive and provocative street extravaganza (the word party just doesn’t encompass it). Everyone was dressed up in various degrees of costuming and everyone was enjoying the experience. The energy was vibrant and communal. I can’t quite begin to articulate the impact of such a large group of people “playing” and the emotional vibrations that play creates. It is beyond energizing. Another point to note, is that there was a strong wave of community that came up through the crowd, welcoming and accepting. Basically, during Halloween in the Castro, it was acceptable for everyone to be “out” no matter his or her sexual proclivities or gendered affiliations or restrictions. In my mind this was an actual representation of Shel Silverstein’s “Freaker’s Ball,” “Come on baby's grease your lips/ Grab your hats and swing your hips/ And don't forget to bring your whips /We're going to the freaker's ball.” Halloween in the Castro was one of the most enjoyable, freeing, foundational moments of my twenties. I realize now that my experience was due to specific moment in time in that specific place. In this very public moment, it was a definitively queer space, even more than usual. But maybe in that moment, we were all queerer than usual. I’m still working that part out.

Unfortunately, both the Castro and I have transitioned away from that idyllic moment. Apparently in the 2000s, Halloween in the Castro exploded its boundaries and became the victim of its own success. As with all places where large crowds gather, someone wants to capitalize on it and turn a profit. In this way, the heteronormative force invades and disperses this queer space. This commercialization attracted larger and larger crowds and the district lost control over it. In 2006, the event was shut down after a shooter opened fire and wounded several people. I could find very little information on who the shooter may have been (most suspected a homophobic nut job, other’s thought it was gang related) or even whether a suspect had been arrested. Still, the loss of this event to the community saddens me, and makes me wonder if, when it comes to the power of profit and the forces that propagate it over aesthetic value and communal richness, resistance is futile.

The Castro, while still an economically and politically thriving community, has been (while not necessarily the victim of a hetero-normative moral “clean-up” such as the one that happened in Times Square in the 90s) altered through growing hetero-normative commercial sprawl. In such a way, I fear that this queer space may transition into another urban “shopping” district featuring chain-stores and chain-restaurants and become a victim of Delany’s plague. But I have faith in the solidity of the city itself and the Castro district specifically. It’s a protected space and my hope is that the community will lock arms and gazes and the Halloween celebration will be brought back to its rightful place, and like Lombard Street, never quite straightens out.

