

10 Testing proximity and intimacy

An everyday reappropriation of private and public space

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It's the early 2000s and I'm in a navy-blue Chevy with Julio. We're in the middle of insufferable traffic in Mexico City's *periférico sur*. It's supposed to be a highway, but often the traffic moves at such a slow speed that sometimes we come to a complete stop for various minutes. This is not an extraordinary occurrence. It's my first car ever, and it doesn't have air conditioning, but it has a sunroof that we love because through it we can see the sky. It's a small utilitarian car that originally didn't even have a radio, but a nice sound system was installed as an add-on. It also has tinted window film that was added for safety and sun control, which also affords us paradoxical privacy to be alone in the middle of a crowded city. The car is important because it was one of the spaces where we have had the chance to explore our intimacy in many ways: with music, with conversation, with our bodies and selves. The heat is intense, but we sing out loud to Robbie Williams and Blondie songs even though we only know half of the lyrics. We are hot and sweaty and stuck in traffic, but we are happy and together. We kiss when we come to a complete stop.

We are in our late teens or early 20s and we both live at our respective family homes. Sometimes after finishing our classes at university, we go to my house and we continue what we started in the car. We spend hours in my bedroom, exploring our intimacy even more and having a nap afterwards. Sometimes our explorations and naps are interrupted by an unexpected arrival to the house. We set off in trepidation when my grandmother enters the kitchen adjacent to my bedroom, my mother comes home early from work, or my grandfather visits for some unknown reason. We get dressed and pretend that we are studying. We often find interruptions to our passions and experiments. Still, we manage to enjoy ourselves. The bedroom feels spacious; it has high ceilings, a door with a lock, a big window and an en-suite bathroom. Those details afford us a degree of privacy that we appreciate immensely. They also play a crucial role in our starting to understand the power that we could generate through our togetherness. José Esteban Muñoz (2007) wrote about how sleeping during the day disrupts the capitalistic wheel of productivity. This was true for us, as our afternoon joy seemed to put university coursework, our duties, and all the outside

world on hold. We would enjoy being together in the afternoon, having sex, but also talking, laughing, listening to music, and daydreaming about plans, projects, and our present and future. We created a relational space beyond the established codes of sex and generated a narrative of gayness in relaxation mode, being at ease, in a frequent state of oneiric pleasure.

While we would often find various gradients of public oppression and violence against gay people, that public experience would contrast radically with our experience of being alone with each other. The intimidating public space attuned us to pay attention to the opportunities and spaces of privacy and intimacy that perhaps we would not have seen in a more accepting environment. In a more inclusive scenario those opportunities would not have been necessary. Harshness helped us see softness in places perhaps we would not have searched for it and allowed us to create an intimacy organised around fleeting opportunity, the unexpected place. It was an intimacy that differed from the normative idea that love should be restricted to the confines of private life. While sexuality in general has been an area of human life that has been the object of social regulation, gay sexualities have been disproportionately oppressed in a way that both public and private lives have been punished. Gay relationality itself has been disciplined, prohibited as if society wished it to be ceased. I believe that these persecutory dynamics made us more inclined to discover opportunities to explore our affects wherever we could. Thus, we discovered the thrill of holding hands in the empty football fields at university, gently touching our waists when we were queuing for lunch at the cafeteria, subtly rubbing our legs in the dimmed light of big lecture theatres, and multiple intimate ways of showing each other that we were 'there'. We would seek each other's hands and each other's gaze in the classroom; a way of subtle communication amidst the presence of everyone else.

People have bodies, and these occupy a physical space; this fact does not seem to attract much attention when the bodies in question fit within a standard of normality or uniformity in a particular context. However, when that sense of the normal is disrupted, the space occupied for those bodies seems to be excessive and unwarranted. Our gay bodies did not attract much attention when we were alone, but when we were together, there would be an enhanced sense of awareness in ourselves and in others. Julio and I would sit close to each other in our psychology classes, and that was already a peculiar event to a degree because it was populated mostly by women. Our closeness would sometimes be noticed and disliked in subtle and sometimes overt ways. On one occasion, a fellow student sitting directly behind us in the classroom commented to her friend about how 'homosexuality wasn't natural and that's why God didn't allow homosexuals to make love looking at each other's faces'. We were not sure whether she intended for us to hear her comment, but we made sure that she listened to us when we said that we could think of a dozen positions to make love while looking each other in the eye. With hindsight, I know that we could have confronted her

differently, but at the time it was all that we could think to do. Our response created momentary tension in the classroom as a classmate applauded and cheered our response, while others remained in silence and showed some expressions that could be interpreted as disgust. On another occasion, in a class about adolescent development, the expression of disgust came from the teacher as he directed a narrative exercise in which we needed to write a story in response to a theory of psychosexual development. We wrote a story based on a gay relationship, and when we read it out loud – like everyone else in the class – we could see the abhorrence in the teacher's face. His only feedback was that homosexuality was a peripheral topic to the theory, a stage of underdevelopment, and then moved on. We were an annoyance, an undesired noise. Warner (1991) writes: 'Historically we might say that queer sexuality is like gender or race in being a political form of embodiment that is defined as noise or interference in the disembodying frame of citizenship' (p. 12). Our presence, our togetherness, seemed to create some minor, yet persistent, tension – a noise – amongst some people in our classes. It is important to note that many people expressed their acceptance of our relationship, and many more did not seem to care. This realisation was very important because it helped us to understand that, at least in that environment, our closeness was more powerful than we had initially imagined. We started to question why, if heterosexuality was presented as the 'natural' and default constitution of humanity, some people seemed to be so troubled by our presence? Surely a couple of youths in a state of 'underdevelopment' could not cause them such anxiety. Or could they?

In the early 2000s, in our cultural context, we would not have dreamt of studying queer theory as part of the curriculum. It was only when a lecturer pointed us in the direction of Michel Foucault's (1979b) 'History of Sexuality' for a research project that we started to find support in our academic and, consequently, personal lives. Our personal research led us to texts such as Marina Castañeda's (1999) 'La Experiencia Homosexual' and Urvashi Vaid's (1995) 'Virtual Equality'. Then, on one occasion, we were at a birthday party for one of our friends. She introduced us to an older gentleman who was very worldly and very kind to us. Even though it was not our birthday, at that party, he gave us a copy of the book 'Loco Afán' (2000) by Pedro Lemebel, which presents a collection of stories of homosexuality from a Latin-American – particularly Chilean – perspective. We believed this gentleman to be gay, but he had never spoken about it with us, so, in a way, we interpreted the gift as a sign of friendly unspoken recognition, one in which he told us that he 'saw' us. This event stayed in our memories and we would talk about it in times to come. We understood that there was a rich message in his act; one in which he was showing us there were other men out there who were like us, that we recognised each other, and that we could communicate amongst us, even without speaking overtly.

These books were crucial in our lives because we engaged with the ideas of authors who had travelled the paths that we were currently travelling,

and they had been successful in the process. They were very articulate, intelligent, and sensitive people whose ideas were robust, sensible, and current – certainly more than some of the texts we would review as part of our degree. Julio and I would often talk about these books and reflect on our own experiences and how the ideas they presented applied to our relationship. In the early years of the internet in Mexico, these seminal texts opened a world of ideas that was only accessible because we sought it fervently. Our experiences of being gay sparked in us the interest of investigating and understanding ourselves. These authors' ideas encouraged us to believe our experiences were valid and that the heteronormative knowledges that had been presented to us could be contested and scrutinised. The scarcity of gay literature in our immediate social context meant that our journey was slower than it could have been if only we had been aware of LGBTQIA+ studies, queer theory, and their scholars.

The books and articles we found – even if they were not numerous – provided a haven and source of stimulation in our lives. However, this engagement with the literature was possible – I think – because we had our love life, to some extent, sorted. Julio and I had each other, which meant that we were not concerned with the idea of loneliness that we had envisioned in our lives in earlier years. He told me that as an adolescent he had thought of becoming a priest, as he never conceived himself pursuing the heteronormative route that was predetermined and seen as the only option. It was his way of escaping what Michael Warner (1991) called a 'repro-narrativity: the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession' (p. 7). In contrast to Julio, I had not contemplated the religious 'escape'. Instead, as an adolescent, I had imagined a worse alternative, as I pictured myself following the heteronormative path while secretly experiencing desire for men without acting upon it. Lies and repression would have been my way to escape. Since models of gay life were nearly non-existent, it was not surprising that as young men we were thinking of a future in which our desire was avoided and suppressed. Fear has been instilled in gay people by constant acts and discourses that reinforce the notion that living a gay life is dangerous, tragic, and conducive to dissatisfaction. Like the comments from our classmate and teacher (and many others we have experienced throughout our lives), heteronormativity works as a constant policing of nonconforming identities. In the form of hostile actions, harmful discourses, and oppressive institutions, heteronormativity presents an undesirable image of LGBTQIA+ lives. Julio and I were exposed to these harmful representations of gay life that still persist and affect many other gay men nowadays (see, for example, Bradlow et al., 2020; Liu, 2020; Newman et al., 2018). It quickly became apparent, however, that those bleak depictions of gayness were not an omnipotent force from which there was no escape. We debunked that narrative the moment we reciprocated each other's feelings, as we realised that we could be gay and live a fulfilling life because we started, at that very moment, living a

fulfilling life. We experienced a protective relationality; a way of being with each other and supporting each other that afforded us access to a state of mind that perhaps we would have not been able to achieve individually. For example, we would go to cafés and restaurants together and we would gauge our proximity and affection, testing how close to each other we could be, how openly we could talk, and how much we could be ourselves. If you have not experienced ‘minority stress’ – ‘the excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position’ (Meyer, 2003, p. 675) – the act of going to a restaurant with your partner might not seem like a great achievement. For us, however, it was a reclamation of space that had a personal impact on our everyday lives. While I do not believe that we felt at risk of being verbally or physically abused or attacked, at least not constantly, we would have a somewhat constant sense of awareness and vigilance that did not allow us to be at ease. We would test our proximity in different spaces and our observations gradually showed us a sense of confidence to be in the world, a feeling that goes beyond a sense of safety.

Self-vigilance was an important coping mechanism for us. Members of the LGBTQIA+ population have experience in developing protective mechanisms to be safe from abuse (Armstrong et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2011) and we were no different. By being aware of others and their potential hostile responses to our presence, we tried to remain safe. However, at the same time that our self-vigilance was a protective mechanism, it also prevented us from engaging fully in life. Julio and I coped well with everyday challenges to our togetherness, but this was partly because we took on the challenges that we sensed we could take on and discarded the ones that felt unattainable. In this constant process of assessment, we perhaps let opportunities of self-affirmation pass, some of which could have been within our reach. There were people to whom we never revealed we were a couple and there were situations in which we did not challenge heteronormative assumptions. We did this because although we had a political commitment – we did not call it ‘political’ at the time – to raise awareness about gayness and heteronormativity – we did not know it was called ‘heteronormativity’ either – sometimes we had to choose between calling out some people’s assumptions and microaggressions or getting on with our lives. Many times, we chose to get on with our lives. There needs to be a delicate balance between the agency and resilience with which LGBTQIA+ individuals are asked to respond to a hostile environment and the responsibility being placed on individuals alone.

One of the challenges that we did take on most of the time was the reappropriation of the space; a space from which we did not know we were excluded, until we realised we were. Julio and I loved dancing. We met in a dance class and dancing was an important part of our everyday lives. We liked to go to gay clubs too, where we would be able to dance together. There were various gay night clubs we liked, but we would not always go

to those venues because we also wanted to go meet our non-gay friends who would often want to go to 'mainstream' night clubs. They would go to gay clubs with us on occasion, but we wanted more; we wanted to go there all the time, not necessarily because we did not like other night clubs, but because we wanted to experience the feeling of being at ease and seeing other people like us; and it was only in the gay scene that we could experience that casualness, that lack of inhibition. There was an evident contrast between our experience on a Friday night in the gay scene, all dressed up, feeling gorgeous and feeling free and our experience outside of that scene, where some people responded to our clothing, our demeanour and our conversations in a negative way. Although we loved the gay clubs and the gay scene, it would have been a high cost to only live for the Friday and Saturday nights and put the rest of our existence on hold. It would have been an even higher cost to restrict ourselves to live freely only in the gay scene. So, instead of limiting our gayness to the gay scene, we brought our gayness to the rest of the world and, in doing so, we discovered that while there are many vigilantes of the heterosexual regime, some of them were not as well-equipped to defend their position as we were.

From mild reaffirmations of our right to be ourselves to more forceful reappropriations of the space, we had our fair share of acts of resistance and most of the time we succeeded. There was one time when we went on holiday to Ixtapa, a seaside town in Mexico, and the hotel receptionist insisted on giving us a room with two single beds. When we asked for a double bed instead, she said she would have to check whether that was possible. There is an important difference between the Spanish and English words for 'double bed': while in English it is just a 'double-sized bed' intended for two persons, in Spanish it is called a 'cama matrimonial', the literal translation of which is a 'matrimonial bed'. This might indicate a broader issue with the old-fashioned way of the Spanish language when it comes to naming beds in particular (and the material world more broadly, but that is another topic). When we asked whether it was a question of the tariff or availability, the receptionist evasively said she would need to check with her manager. We were determined to not let that discriminatory act pass and we eventually got our room with a 'matrimonial bed'. On another occasion, we went to the police station to report that we had been robbed on our way to the club. As we were giving our narrative of the events to a few police officers who were on duty, Julio and I saw in the reflection in the window that an officer behind us was mocking our clothes and his perception of our apparent effeminate behaviour. Probably believing that we could not see him, he completed his derision by mouthing the word 'puñales' – 'faggots' – and making a vulgar gesture. The officer who wrote down our statement did not do anything to stop the mockery, nor did anyone else in the room. Julio and I exchanged looks in silence, and while it was an intimidating experience that made us feel like we were the wrongdoers there, we continued with our testimony with determination. We were asked to come back on

a couple of occasions to finalise the process and, in spite the intimidating feeling of being in a room where public servants were against us, we wanted to demonstrate we would not allow their harassment to obstruct our access to a public service. As I write about it now, I find it pathetic that a group of grown men in a position of power would try to ridicule a couple of youths half their age. This is what I consider to be the fragility of heterosexuality: if it requires an army of soldiers to defend what is supposedly a powerful force of nature, how powerful is that force really? Why would something that is portrayed as the only natural and legitimate developmental path of humanity need to be protected so fiercely? Why were they so anxious and perturbed by people who supposedly did not represent a threat?

Having realised that we had some kind of power – the power to disturb with our sole presence – we continued testing it, not because we wanted to disturb people but because we understood we had the right to live and inhabit the world like anyone else. Our protective relationality paid off as we expanded the spaces in which we could be ourselves. Public gardens, national parks, shopping malls, the sports club we attended, cinemas, theatres, museums, the streets. Our appropriation of these spaces led to further changes. We did not want to just change our relationship with the materiality of the space and dare to be ‘there’, we also wanted to feel good about ourselves and have an experience that did not feel like we were foreigners in our own land. And we would experience an ephemeral bliss that led to a more continuous happiness. Although some of those states would be brief, they would occur often, and we discovered that we could recreate them not only in the intimacy of the car, or the bedroom, or at clubs, or just the two of us in isolation, but also in other public spaces. Foucault (1979a) wrote about the panopticon effect, in which people who have been under surveillance under punishing regimes experience the feeling of being constantly seen, even when such surveillance is not constant, nor infallible. Julio and I gradually discovered that heteronormativity was at the same time a powerful regime and a fragile collection of practices which could not invigilate us permanently. We wanted to feel good regardless of where we were, not only in venues advocated to the LGBTQIA+ communities. Thus, family celebrations, social gatherings, and academic appearances were events we attended together as an act of self-assurance and visibility. Friends, university staff, family members, acquaintances, and strangers would see our togetherness and this contributed to the destigmatisation and de-exoticisation of gayness in our immediate circles.

A few years ago, a person who knew us both in some capacity told me that her son had come out as gay and while she confessed with tears in her eyes that it had not been an easy topic to handle nor an immediate cause of celebration for her, the fact that she had known Julio and I together, as a couple, had helped her to see the ordinariness of gayness and embrace her son’s gay identity. That conversation came as a pleasant surprise to me, as I had not imagined that our presence could have helped someone else in such a way.

We hoped – when we wrote our undergraduate thesis on gay men’s relationships, when we chose academic projects on gay topics, when we created theatre projects that represented gay characters – that the work we were creating was helping some people. We hoped, but we did not know. At the time, we probably did not realise that our everyday presence in the world would have a positive impact on others as well but, with hindsight, it is evident that our ordinary lives were putting some changes in motion. Like Kathleen Stewart (2008) writes: ‘[the ordinary] can become a vague but compelling sense that something is happening, or harden into little mythic kernels’ (p. 4). We were probably just trying to live our lives, but along the way we were creating kernel moments that would transform ourselves and others in the process.

In the small, interior space of an unassuming car, we discovered the power and beauty of our intimacy. We would close the windows, open the sunroof, play our music, sing along, and lose ourselves in the intimacy of our time together. We would enjoy our sense of mobile intimacy, and, at some point, we realised that the intimacy and the power was in the bond between us and the feeling within us; a portable intimacy that travelled with us, one that we brought with us and shared as we moved in the world.

Postscript: On relationships that transcend space, time, and kinship

Throughout this chapter I have used mostly the first-person plural, ‘we’, to describe my experiences. While this might raise some questions regarding the ownership of the narrative and the fusion of two voices into one story, this was a deliberate move for which I take full responsibility. Julio is not here to respond or corroborate this narrative. He died in 2019. However, over two decades of shared history as lovers, friends, and family – the type of family Tony Adams writes about in this collection – we had mutual, implicit, and unconditional trust in each other. We knew each other’s passwords, PIN numbers, bank details, and other far more important secrets like our fears, anxieties, pains, and also the joys we experienced throughout our lives. I am not saying that it was an idyllic relationship in which everything was easy and open; we had our individual struggles that needed solitary processing, but we would always – eventually – share them with each other, even when this implied truths that were difficult to hear. We worked and wrote together for several collaborative projects and had the confidence of saying that, while we were separate individuals with our own personalities, we could effortlessly become one voice. Acknowledging and defending this unified voice is not a small act, especially in societies that encourage individuality and an increased sense of independence and personal achievement. Many of our achievements were only possible because we were together, and this I want to emphasise. Against the many people that might not have wanted us to be together or believed in the validity of our connection, insisting on our unity is essential.

In a society that has conceptualised ‘homosexuality’ around a sense of deviancy (see, for instance, Frederick, 2014; Woods, 2014), it is still common to find the historic legacies of these oppressive discourses and practices. Early on in our identity exploration, we distanced ourselves from the ‘homosexual’ label and opted for the ‘gay’ label. Although this might seem like a small move, we saw this as a parallel process to our resistance to being relegated from the spaces we inhabited; we also wanted to resist the social institutions that insisted on defining our subjectivities. Over the years, Julio and I encountered many people – gay and non-gay – who held those views that portrayed relationships between men as deviant and even as impossible. Being together in a queer type of relating that transcended definitions of friendship, family, and romantic attachment has been our most extraordinary deed; one that we cherished and one whose ordinariness never deceived us. We knew we were everyday fixtures in each other’s lives, but we also knew that what we had found was marvellous.

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