



Illustration from *Girl Scout Handbook* (1940)

“No Trespassing”: Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of the Counterpublic Sphere

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Marjorie opened her suitcase and took out her bugle. Swinging its cord over her shoulder, she remarked: “I suppose I really ought to be learning new calls instead of looking for trails.”

“Nonsense; you don’t get points for blowing the bugle.”

“No, but you get smiles and maybe something better from Captain Phillips!”

“What do you mean, Marj?”

“Don’t ever repeat this, Lily.” Marjorie lowered her voice.

“When I succeeded in blowing Reveille correctly, Miss Phillips kissed me!” (Lavell 1922, 54)

This passage, from a Girl Scout novel written in the early 1920s, illuminates some of the most queerly-productive aspects of Girl Scout camp: it implicitly connects the public performance of a particular task or skill with private erotic reward. Similarly, Marj and

Lily's illicit conversation during rest hour highlights the movement between secrecy and revelation, ignorance and knowledge, which Marj handles as skillfully as she does her bugle.¹ She gains power by sharing her secret; she has achieved what every camper desires: through her eagerness to please and to achieve, she has been singled out for "special attention," what I call "lesbian pedagogy," by her beloved counselor, "Miss"—or is it "Captain"?—Phillips. This variability in address gestures towards what I will argue is the instability, even the total redefinition, of gender and sexuality, and the public and private performative complexities within the space of the Girl Scout camp.

Recently, there has been widespread discussion of the function of camp as an aesthetic practice, a performance, a quintessentially queer phenomenon. Yet the idea of camp as a *space*, *summer camp*—and in the case of the Girl Scouts, a highly-routinized, geographically-isolated location designed to aid in the reproduction of girls—has not been explored.² This essay attempts to begin to theorize the relationship between the Girl Scouts, usually regarded as a stable part of the faded wallpaper of white, middle-class banality, and the formation and reproduction of nascent lesbian or queer identities and identifications in the United States.

An Introduction to Girl Scouting

Girl Scout Memory

Since it is a rainy day, we are showing a movie in the lodge. We always screen the same one, a black and white film from the fifties on the history of Girl Scouting. I have seen it so many times that I know all the dialogue by heart. It opens with the older, distinguished-looking Agnes Moreheadesque woman, sitting on a sofa drinking tea. (One year, for my birthday, one of my Scouting friends will send me a relic, an actual piece of the film, a frame of this older woman holding her teacup, pinkie extended.) "Morehead" narrates the film within the film, made in the early twenties, of a group of Girl Scouts and their trusty patrol leader, Margaret, a girl of great bravery and aplomb. Around me girls lie on their backs, sit cross-legged, hold hands, give back rubs, giggle and groan with boredom. I am curled up in another woman's lap, yelling out the proper responses. (Since most of the movie is a reprint of a silent film, there is tinny music, and subtitles.) Everyone reads the titles together, except for the little ones, who don't read yet. Like spectators at the Rocky Horror Picture Show, one must cheer, boo, hiss, etc. at the appropriate moments. We watch the troop help a wayward woman organize her house and wash up her children before her

soldier husband arrives home from the (First World) War. Margaret, trusty patrol leader, demonstrates her ability to “be prepared” in an emergency, when she finds the telegraph man knocked out cold in his office and uses her extensive knowledge of Morse code to call for help. At last “our founder,” Juliette Gordon Low, appears and nods ever so coolly at the camera. She is dressed in full uniform, with a wide-brimmed hat. She looks like a male impersonator. Or is she transgendered? She looks like a butch, her gaze so steady, so alluring. Our heroine.

Already, in this narrative, one might recognize a reinscription of spectatorship that in some ways resembles Miriam Hansen’s discussion of early film viewing practices. As Hansen describes it, early films were screened as part of a larger event, which often included live acts, music, and various audience-generated interruptions. Such conditions of spectatorship, Hansen argues, prohibited the establishment of any stable, hegemonic subject position, and instead allowed for different “horizons of experience,” counterpublic moments of collective spectatorship (Hansen 1991, 23–59). One might read the Girl Scout episode described above as a similar moment of counterpublicity. Indeed, I would argue that the Girl Scouts enables the formation of oppositional horizons of experience even as it performs some of the most rigidly imperialistic and anti-feminist narratives of subject-formation. In the case of the film, a group of pre-adolescent girls feels perfectly entitled to burst into the home of a working-class woman, take charge of her children, and clean and reorganize her household. At the same time, this colonizing impulse is contradicted by, even as it enables, the homoerotic scene of collective spectatorship described above.

It is this peculiar slippage between nationalist narratives of white, middle class femininity and queer forms of subjectivity that makes the Girl Scouts such a suspicious and thorny subject. Many might read the organization as simply a “partial public,”³ an extension of the values and politics of the industrial-commercial public sphere, a “habitus” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term) marked by race and class. I am interested, though, in elucidating how, through the summer camp, it could simultaneously become a counterpublic space for the inculcation and nurturance of (sometimes) anti-nationalist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-heterosexual identities and practices. I base my deployment (and simultaneous interrogation) of the term “counterpublic” on the work of recent political theorists, historians, and theorists of material culture that attempts to understand how collective, oppositional forms of meaning/identity/representation are produced and sustained. As such

theorists describe it, the counterpublic sphere is one in which “subordinated social groups” construct oppositional narratives of subjectivity and resistance (Fraser 1993, 123).

But claiming counterpublicity is difficult. Determining what constitutes dis-identification or a break with the values of the public sphere, as opposed to a simple imitation of them, is always subjective, tenuous, open to interpretation.⁴ Definitions of the difference between “partial” public and “counterpublic” spheres often rely on strictly-demarkated criteria of what constitutes political action, agency, and identity. Even as Hansen admits that it may be difficult to tell “partial” publics from “counterpublics,” she, as well as Nancy Fraser, privileges an alternative public sphere as one that contains collective representations of oppositional identity, forms of visible publicity. In the case of the Girl Scouts, I argue that the line between hegemonic and subversive discourse is always unstable, and that this precariousness may itself produce queer effects.

For example, if we return to Margaret, the heroine of the film discussed above, she signified within the space of “camp” as both a marker of shame and of distinction. To call someone a “Margaret” could indicate that this person was compulsive about rules and cleanliness, or it could mean that she was competent, strong, a butch under pressure. At least once during the season, sometimes twice, our camp would hold a “Margaret Scout” contest, and each living group or unit would field a participant, a child or counselor dressed up to imitate “Margaret.” Parody or not? Similarly, the ritual screening of the film itself offered the camp a moment of communal interaction, a chance to spend time with one’s partner or cruise a new counselor, to cuddle or be cuddled, at the same time that it reinforced the imperialist values of Scouting for girls. It is precisely such queer ambivalences and performances which the rest of this essay will examine.

The Topography of the Camp

At school, living under the same roof, seeing each other day after day, these girls thought they knew each other well; but there is no fellowship so close as that of out-door comrades; the vastness of the sky with its millions of stars, the loneliness of the woods and of camp life, and the close association in work and play, drew them together as they would have never dreamed it possible to be drawn. (Lavell 1922, 80)

Mark Seltzer's work on the "topography of masculinity" in the turn-of-the-century U.S. includes a detailed analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the Boy Scouts, the same underpinnings that Juliette Low would coopt for her own purposes when founding the Girl Scouts. As Seltzer illustrates, the early proponents of Boy Scouting feared that commodity culture was "feminizing" boys. In order to combat this weakening of the body, boys must be "made into men," removed from the feminizing domestic sphere of the home, and taken out into "nature," where through the rigors of outdoor living, they would be restored to a vigorous masculinity (Selzer 1992, 149–155).

The Girl Scouts adapted this ideology of nature and its character-building powers.⁵ But by the time I entered the organization, "nature" had acquired specific resonance. "Living in nature" became the same as "living outside the real world." A place unspoiled by urban or suburban ugliness, a place supposedly without technology, "nature" remained, as it did at the turn of the century, a retreat both from commodity culture and from its allegedly "feminizing" effects. Yet within the counterpublic of the Girl Scout camp, "feminizing" connoted instead a release from the normative definitions of gender and sexuality placed on mainly white, mainly middle and lower-middle class women. At the same time, nature acted as a sort of empty signifier, a name for a space in which one could escape one's family and one's school culture, a place where one's "natural" self and "natural" attractions could surface. Thus, nature and natural became interchangeable definitions, and what was "natural" at camp might be considered completely "unnatural" elsewhere.

As one of the rhetorics employed to explain intense attachments between young girls and between full-grown women (not to mention cross-generational relationships), Scouting rewrote as "natural" relationships and interactions between women that "outside the camp" might signify as "homoerotic" or "homosexual." In the "real world," people had lost the capacity for physical intimacy; here hugging, kissing, giving back rubs, and holding hands (especially on sentimental occasions, such as the last night of camp) was *natural*, produced by nature, by being one's "real" self. Thus, behavior which "outside" would be pathologized or ridiculed, became utterly acceptable and expected under the ideological umbrella of Scouting, so much so that intense, erotic friendships and/or sexual relationships were seen as perfectly compatible with one's heterosexual existence in the "real world."⁶

Many Scouts would be outraged to hear me call this contact "sexual," let alone "lesbian," where the term connotes any self-affilia-

tion with collective identity. Perhaps “queer,” where queer is used to include a whole host of sexual expressions excluded by the already over-determined hetero/homosexual dichotomy, better serves as a label for these relations between women, although it would certainly not have been more acceptable to my counselors than any other “deviant” sexual label. Yet I also have encountered many women for whom “lesbian” was or has become part of their camp identity.

The rhetoric of the “natural” was also used to redefine gender identity. “Real” women were the ones who could build fires with wet wood and hike uphill for ten miles. They were independent, forthright, honorable, and butch.⁷ They ran the camp, drove the vans, built the fires, and held arm-wrestling contests at the dinner table. While in the public sphere of mandatory gender binarisms, these women might have been viewed as cross-gender identified, perhaps even as transgendered, in the counterpublic of camp they were simply camp counselors.

Girl Scout Memory

When I was in high school, my brother and father devised an ingenious strategy designed to regulate my body and my sexuality. Whenever we passed a butch or transgendered woman on the street, the two of them would chortle in unison, “There goes another camp counselor.” At such moments I felt a mixture of shame and anger, shame at this woman’s inability to “fit in” and at my own alliance with her, and anger because, while I had no names for what my father and brother were expressing, I understood how endangered both she and I were by our identities as “camp people,” as queer.

It was more difficult to express “femininity” than “masculinity,” however. In fact, like much of the larger lesbian community in the U.S., the Girl Scout counterpublic legitimated “butch” behavior more readily than it did “femme.” But certain staff members mastered the femme role. It meant a variety of things—the ability to keep one’s temper, to rival Julie Andrews in one’s talent with leading songs, to quiet a whole cabin of homesick children...

Much of the camp humor and play was organized around gender transgressions, but what counted as a crossing over from one gender to another differed in the context of camp ideology. It did not simply mean “women” dressing “as men,” since this distinction did not have epistemological currency within the camp. Instead, the most butch counselors would put on dresses, and the femme darling would don a suit and tie, and this would be considered a cross-gendered performance.

It is tempting to read this gender play as a prototype of Judith Butler's assertion that there is no such thing as "femininity" or "masculinity," that gender is always a parody of a parody, and that such *gender performance* reveals this essential inessentialness (Butler 1990, 138). This assumption was crucial to our "camp" humor and sensibility. Within the camp counterpublic, however, while parody *was* a common form of expression, there existed alongside it a strong emphasis on finding and sustaining one's "true," "natural" self. Only here, in the camp, could one truly be free. As one camp song put it, "Hiking to rainbows, sunsets and stars/Just finding out who we are..." (Anonymous n.d.). That one's identity might be "performative" was only accurate as a description of how one "survived" in the world "outside," by adopting "artificial" imitations of femininity in order to get by.

And get by one did, until the next summer started. Finding in camp a space in which their gender and sexual identities were recognized, emulated, desired and rewarded, many of my counselors took jobs which allowed them to keep their summers free. Some were "professional" Girl Scouts (meaning they worked in the administrative structure of the local Girl Scout organization), elementary and secondary school teachers, recreation specialists (park rangers, program leaders), or seasonal employees; some were combination fruit pickers, Christmas tree loaders, day laborers, plasma donors, and school bus drivers.

While some of these occupations fell into the category of "traditionally female," others did not. While teaching school or running the YMCA's after-school program might be considered a middle-class occupation, many of the jobs my counselors took to support themselves in the off-season placed them firmly within the working class. Camp ideology romanticized the transiencies of seasonal wage-labor: the subjugation of all employment and activities to the camp schedule (whether or not to quit one's "good" job to go back to camp is often the biggest recurring dilemma in one's life) was framed within an ethos of change, transition, movement. Many of the beloved camp songs of my childhood idealize, with a characteristic wistfulness, the vagabond, the wanderer in the wilderness, the exile. With titles like "The Life of a Voyageur," "On the Loose," and "Born for Roaming," they enforce an ideology of a gypsy-like existence. For women, the realities of this hobo-esque lifestyle are obviously fraught with danger. Because of the threat of sexual violence, women have never been able to ride the rails and hitchhike the way men do (although many women have done it anyway). Within the camp counterpublic, a sort of wandering could occur, as one traveled from camp to camp, summer to summer. Each season brought new friends and lovers, and then one moved on.

This romanticization of exile and transition was also a way to transform what are conventionally perceived as the isolating, devastating consequences of a queer existence, including the loss of familial support and the discriminatory practices that bar queer and transgendered people from employment. Thus, the camp legitimized and reorganized what might otherwise be viewed in the bourgeois public sphere as the inability to “fit in.” What might otherwise be regarded as simply a “failure” to attain the privileges and accoutrements of middle class status, or to assume one’s position in the capitalist work ethic—what my parents often referred to disdainfully as the inability to “grow up”—the camp revalued. Being “grown up,” as any queer knows, means submitting to the dual claims of bourgeois normalcy and compulsory heterosexuality—getting a “real job” and getting married (Rich 1986).

Is it any wonder then, that collectively disavowing “growing up” was part of the camp philosophy (reinforced, in part, through the immense popularity of the song, “I Won’t Grow Up,” from *Peter Pan*)? Leaving camp “for good” was thus a highly-overvalued moment. At a certain point, one was regarded as being “too old” for camp. This was a personal decision, made by the individual herself. It connoted a final giving-in to society, a letting-go of “camp.” The sense of loss one experienced at the end of every summer, as goodbyes were spoken and relationships terminated, became at this moment of retirement, a greater, more final loss that could never be recuperated, and each woman had a different sense of when the last summer at camp should be. Some quit in their mid-twenties, others in their mid-thirties. Still others were persuaded to come back to camp after several years of absence. Even after they “left for good,” however, many former counselors remained within a “camp network” of friends and/or lovers, returning during the summer for visits, hosting reunions during the off-season, and volunteering within the local Girl Scout organization. Thus, one could maintain the camp spirit and live within the camp counterpublic long after one had retired, perhaps even for life.

All of these examples suggest that inside the ideology of the Girl Scouts, an oppositional space flourished, one in which compulsory heterosexuality might be suspended, gender redefined, and one’s non-participation in the capitalist work-force supported and justified. As I noted above, however, there seems to be a premium placed, in much work on the public sphere, on counterpublicity as a space for those who claim a particular social identity and who assert their *right* to visibility and to representation. But what about those for whom identity-politics have no urgency, or feel too dangerous, or impossible, or simply not

descriptive of their own immediacies? Is there room for a counterpublic based on practices, congregations, habits?

Furthermore, can the idea of a *counterpublic* adequately account for a space such as the Girl Scout camp, since it was precisely because the Girl Scout camp was perceived by its inhabitants as outside the “real world,” a sort of “private public,” that many of its collective, oppositional practices could occur? Certainly the camp functioned as a “public space,” in terms of one’s ability to cruise and flirt “out in the open” without fear of physical violence. As I have outlined, it also offered a space for the formulation of oppositional identity-practices. Yet it was precisely because the camp was *not* “public,” that in fact it actively shunned publicity, that these experiences were possible. Much of the work on the utopian possibilities of the counterpublic relies, it seems to me, on the (liberal) assumption that visibility/speech itself is inherently liberatory.⁸ But is the closet itself a “counterpublic” sphere? a counter-private? As Michel Foucault notes, “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1978, 27).

Much of the revisionist work on the public sphere after Habermas has been based on a critique of the “private sphere” as an arbitrary, class- and historically-specific ideology.⁹ To claim the private sphere, even as a space of empowerment, is to reinscribe dangerous racist, sexist, and classist ideologies about a false division between social spaces, to ignore that the fantasy of the abstracted, public sphere of white male citizenship in the U.S. exists in part because of its own “othering” of the “private” as a feminizing, racialized space, outside the realm of the “political.” I am certainly not advocating a re-evaluation of this particular positioning. Yet, in our urgency to abolish the idea of the private, have we lost the ability to imagine alternative, closeted spaces as sometimes just as powerfully subject-forming and sustaining?

Returning once again to my memory of watching the same film over and over on rainy days, I find in this scenario a rich image for what happened at Girl Scout camp. In the darkened theater that was “camp,” as long as the Girl Scout film was running, all kinds of other activities could take place among the trees and woods, all of them saved by the label “Girl Scout.”¹⁰ Thus, camp becomes the closet of the Girl Scout public, its own, arbitrarily-designated “private,” whereas space within the camp repeats these layerings: there are the things one says in public versus those things that can only be spoken in private, or written in a note, the differences in how one behaves in the space of the dining hall versus how one behaves in the hidden clearing behind it. As Sedgwick describes this phenomenon:

'Closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech-act of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. (1990, 7–8)

It is these unstable relations between silence and speech, secrecy and revelation, visibility and invisibility, as well as the performance of privacy within publicity and publicity within privacy, that made camp such a richly *queer* location.

Scouting for Girls¹¹

When I was thirteen, I wrote my own Girl Scout novel. My "book" made the rounds of the camp that summer, passed from camper to counselor—my own little queerzine. Later I found it simply embarrassing and put it in the back of my closet, where it lay until I began this project. The narrative describes in obsessive detail the character formation of a particular young woman, obviously modeled on myself, who is packed off to camp by her disinterested parents. It recycles a gothic plot—the main character is a girl who is always being mistaken for someone else, someone who is dead, someone who eventually turns out to be her long-lost sister. Perhaps this convention mediated the ways in which, even at thirteen, I was being "mis-taken" by counselors and peers for a lesbian. The book is a blissful fantasy of an abundance of older, experienced teachers/mothers/lovers; alternatively described as "beautiful," "breath-taking," "fascinating," "talented," "athletic," "long, flowing-haired," and "short, curly-haired," these counselors take care of, instruct, punish, reward, excite, adore, and continually misrecognize and recognize a younger, femme camper.

The novel also contains scene after scene of instruction, where the protagonist "learns," in minute detail, every rule and regulation of the camp, every custom in the dining hall, every ritualized interaction, every song, every game. In the process of the heroine's instruction, the reader learns it all, too. And, as in the case of Marjorie, as the heroine masters public forms of achievement, she is rewarded with private forms of attention.

These fictionalized sites of pedagogical intensity mirror exactly the highly-scripted public of Girl Scout camp life. Besides the clearly-demarcated steps up the Scouting ladder from "Brownies" (ages 7–9) to "Juniors" (ages 9–11) to "Cadettes" (ages 12–14) to "Seniors" (ages 15–17),¹² the Scouting program also includes hundreds of badges, awards based on community service, religious service, etc. All of these

measures of achievement work together to insure that a girl “becomes” a woman within a specific framework by acquiring a variety of “essential” skills.

The Girl Scout camp has its own set of progressions. Besides the hierarchized organization of the camp staff, beginning with the camp director, moving downwards through the assistant camp director, directors of various program areas, unit leaders and unit counselors, the campers themselves are also highly organized. Split first into age groups, they are further divided into interest groups (horseback, general, waterfront, trips, and so on). Once they reach senior (high school) age they may become Counselors in Training (CITs). The dream of many young campers, CITs occupy the middle ground between camper and counselors in terms of privileges and responsibilities. Yet legally they are still campers, meaning officially that they cannot be left alone with children and unofficially that they are off-limits for sexual encounters with counselors.

Every activity in the camp centers around progressions as well. One starts out as a beginning horseback rider, and summer after summer improves one’s riding. One learns to swim and eventually, as a CIT, earns her certificate as a lifeguard. In this way almost every increase in knowledge can be accounted for and quantitatively measured.

These progressions become part of the identities of the girls within them. Not only do the CITs and counselors memorize the characteristics of each age-group as part of their training, but the girls themselves know exactly what it means to be a “Brownie,” a “Cadette,” a “canoe tripper,” or a “wrangler.” This allows younger campers to project themselves easily “into” older identities, to perform them, so to speak, to imitate counselors and fantasize about “being on staff.” Like young girls modeling themselves after movie starlets, my friends and I dressed like staff, imitated their gestures, copied their slang, and tried to “be” them, often convincing younger campers that we “were” counselors. Not only did this involve fashion choices, it also necessitated imitating and appropriating the behaviors of counselors, often in violation of the rules.

In learning how to *be* staff, in addition to appropriating privileges and actions unique to the social structure of the camp, we were also copying, at first “unknowingly,” a variety of styles of self-representation, many of which signified in the world at large as “lesbian.” Cutting my hair, converting to vegetarianism, refusing to shave my legs, begging for flannel shirts and Levis and hiking boots—all these activities, much to my parents’ chagrin, were often associated in the late seventies and early eighties with lesbian “subculture.”

In illuminating queer and traditionally female “styles” of representation, Sedgwick values “gossip” as an important method of representing the differences that constitute one’s society. As she explains it:

I take the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypothesis about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one’s world. (1990, 23)

A queer-identified person must always be aware of the people around him/herself, who may pose a threat to one’s physical or economic or emotional security, or who may offer an erotic opportunity. “The writing of a Proust or a James,” Sedgwick notes, are

projects precisely of *nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world. (1991, 23)

Or (my world) a Girl Scout camp. While the myriad of knots to be tied, songs to be learned, and rules to be memorized itself functioned as a kind of mapping of social space and identity, so too did the incitement to gossip and taxonomize the counterpublic/counterprivate spaces the camp provided. My novel includes numerous lessons in how to “read” scenes between women, scenes of silence, shared glances, unexplained angers, cryptic notes, desired and repelled awarenesses, scenes that require interpretation according to a varying set of codes, scenes that are predicated on established hierarchies of experience and inexperience, knowing and “unknowing,” and an intricate hierarchy of influence unique to the camp and to the Scouts.¹³

For instance, much of the erotics of the exchanges of power and affection I participated in with older campers and counselors centered around convincing them to “tell” me things I wasn’t supposed to know—camp gossip—which started out as questions that were fairly innocuous, such as what “Jo’s” real name was,¹⁴ how old “Leaf” was, and as I grew older, often implicitly or explicitly revolved around the various relationships/sexual adventures of the rest of the camp—who was and who wasn’t, who was doing it with whom. Lists of counselors’ “real” names turned into lists identifying counselors’ sexual preferences, as sexual identity became a more potent “open secret” than any other marker of identity.¹⁵ We learned the public ways in which one

indicated one was queer, too—who switched the gender of pronouns in songs, who wore a baby diaper pin on her staff tie, who sat with whom in the dining hall. With access to such well-kept and well-displayed “open secrets,” my friends and I felt ourselves set apart from the rest of the Cadettes, bound together in our “Harriet the Spy”-esque conspiracy of interpretation (Fitzhugh 1964).¹⁶ And as we began to “taxonomize” the women around us, we could ourselves evaluate, perform, and sometimes reject their styles and mannerisms. We were in fact encouraged, through the dominant discourse of Scouting, to do so.

This “knowledge” of an adored counselor’s lesbianism was often attained only after a long period of what Sedgwick has termed “willed ignorance,” a performance of unknowing. Of course, both the thrill and the terror which accompanied such knowledge sprang from realizing that one “knew it all along,” and seeing in this moment of recognition the threat to subsume the knower—“maybe I’m one, too” (Sedgwick 1993, 23).

Queer theory, though flourishing in recent years, still lacks models for the multiple ways that deviant, perverse sexualities are formed, and how they survive. For example, Teresa de Lauretis’s recent work on modern lesbian subjectivity (1994), while attempting to account for the effects of popular culture on lesbian identity, remains firmly within the psychoanalytic purview. She repeats the same old story of the construction of lesbian identity, in which a universalizing (white, middle-class) mother/daughter relationship forms the basis for a multiplicity of identities and identifications. Because of de Lauretis’s inability to relinquish this model, she ends up reducing the effects of culture, ethnicity and even, I would argue, masculinity, on lesbian subject-formation.

It was precisely my counselor’s distance from my mother, like the camp’s distance from my suburban tract home, that made her so alluring. Simultaneously, her slippage into nurturance traditionally defined as “maternal” was extremely pleasurable, but so was her adaptation of the role traditionally defined as “paternal.” In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, lesbianism itself as an identity may spring in part from such historically-specific, class- and racially-marked moments of substitution (Kent 1995). In the late nineteenth-century U.S., the responsibility for white, middle-class, female identity-formation, once sentimentally held to be solely the mother’s affair, became the job of other counterpublics. It is this distance and slippage between mother and other, having and being, home and camp, that seems so perversely productive, and it is a dialectic (or tria-, or quadra-lectic) for which psychoanalysis, with its rigidly gendered, racialized and class-delimited heterosexual family of origin, cannot begin to account.¹⁷

My counselors offered me multiple opportunities for identifications, identifications that as I have noted above were rewarded and expected within the rigid structure of the Girl Scout program. Perhaps it was this emphasis on the inherent performativity of identity that made assuming a lesbian identity feel, ironically, almost compulsory to me: when at age fifteen I began to want not only to be, but to have, my counselors, I struggled against this “recognition,” not so much out of internalized homophobia (although this was certainly a player) as out of the fear that I was simply succumbing to peer pressure.

In fact, if what I believe—in essence, that I was “taught” to be a lesbian, “brought up” to desire other women—has resonance, then counterpublic spaces such as Girl Scout camp may tell us something about how gay, lesbian, and queer identities and practices have been replicated and sustained in the twentieth century. Perhaps some gays and lesbians, enabled by such institutionalized spaces of pedagogy, do “reproduce” themselves. This hypothesis has serious political and epistemological consequences: the terror/fantasy of gay and lesbian “recruitment” takes on new meaning in this context. With the paranoia around children and queers at an all-time high, to claim that sexual identities are “learned” or “taught” is to unleash the possibility that this knowledge could be just as easily used to justify its “unlearning” or to restrict our access to children.

Because of its emphasis on children, Scouting is in a particularly vulnerable position, evidenced by the recent skirmishes over whether or not gay men could be Boy Scout leaders (significantly, the Girl Scouts have a non-discrimination policy). What would it mean to really “out” the Scouts—or is that what I’m doing here?

It may be that the Girl Scouts as a space of lesbian pedagogy has lost its originary function, that other cultural locations are now able to do the work of “bringing up girls to be gay,” especially in the era of Queer Nation and even Queer Scouts. This analogy between Queer Nation and the Girl Scouts raises another question, a continuous undercurrent in my discussion of a specific or universalizing lesbian pedagogy: the problematic relationship between extremely productive sites of lesbian and gay identity formation in the twentieth century U.S. and their relation to nationalism, militarism and forms of cultural imperialism. Tomás Almaguer’s critique of Queer Nation points out the dangers of a queer nationalism which enables a homogenized, singular queer identity at the expense of racial and ethnic differences (Almaguer 1991).

While Girl Scout camp may have been an idyllic scene of lesbian pedagogy, it, too, relied on the homogenization of identity produced by the Girl Scouts. One was always a Scout first, in the same way that

much of contemporary lesbian theory, a Girl Scout camp of its own, often relies on a homogeneity of experience and privilege. Hence my discomfort at realizing I, too, was “one of them” sprang in part from the sense that I was being recruited, that I would thus have to conform to a particular set of rules and mores. The phrase “scouting for girls” epitomizes this tension; it may be interpreted simultaneously as a metaphor for the imperialist urge to reformulate individual girls into good American women, or as a playful invocation of lesbian cruising. Is lesbian identity, as a set of practices, styles, and counterpublic identifications, itself a form of imperialism?

While the utopian collectivity posited by theorists of the counterpublic sphere seems both politically necessary and utterly attractive, we must not, in our eagerness to invoke radical democracy, forget those counterpublics or counterprivates for whom such moments of collectivity have no meaning, as well as those for whom “identity” is not an organizing term. Yet I would hate for my cautionary tale to be confused with something like a call for a queer rugged individualism, as it seems to me Leo Bersani’s idealization of gay male subjectivity as utterly outlaw might be (Bersani 1995). Many calls for anti-collectivism, for gay male identity or lesbian identity as distinct, pure spaces, it seems to me, are really ways of justifying one’s own misogyny, racism, classism, or AIDS-phobia, a problem that the utopian fantasy of the public sphere as a space for discursive debate among competing counterpublics seems designed to address. Yet how do theories of the counterpublic reconcile the fact that for many gay, lesbian, and queer-identified people in the twentieth century (and perhaps earlier centuries), the dramas of secrecy versus revelation, private versus public, were themselves highly eroticized, and perhaps also constitutive of such identities? Increased visibility, as Foucault (1978) reminds us, always means increased regulation, as much as it means anything else. In our eagerness to coopt and exploit the means of national, not to mention global, publicity for our own queer ends—a project my essay itself participates in, as it “outs the Scouts”—let us not forget those for whom such performative gestures have no meaning, no erotic pay-off, or too great a material cost.

Notes

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1. My discussion of public and private economies of revelation and secrecy relies on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding of the powerful effects of silence and secrecy in the performative relations of discourse around the closet (Sedgwick, 1990).
2. Even *Camp Grounds*, a recent anthology of queer writings on camp, does not include any discussion of summer camp, even as it playfully alludes to this space in its title (Bergman, 1993).
3. In an attempt to distinguish "partial publics" from "counter-publics," Hansen, in her introduction to the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, defines the "partial public" as one which exists inside the workings of "industrial-commercial" capitalist subject-formation, does not function on an "identitarian model," and is "silent" in terms of public discourse (Hansen 1993, xxxviii).
4. For a detailed discussion of this term, and relations of identification, dis-identification, and minority counterpublicity, see José Muñoz, "Disidentification" (1994).
5. Ernest Thompson Seton, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts, wrote sections of the early *Girl Scout Handbooks* (*Scouting for Girls: Official Handbook of the Girl Scouts of America* 1920, 280–372).
6. For a fictional representation of precisely this phenomenon, see Judith McDaniel's "The Juliette Low Legacy" in *Lavender Mansions: 40 Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Short Stories* (1994).
7. I use the terms "butch" and "femme" to represent two forms of gender expression evidenced by my counselors, despite that fact that few, if any, of them would have labeled themselves this way, just as many would not have identified themselves as "lesbian" or as "queer."
8. The utopian ideal of a public sphere in which multiple, and often competing, counterpublics hammer out their similarities and differences presumes not only a kind of formal equality, but also an assumption that representation and self-representation are the paramount political vehicles.
9. For feminist revisions of the "private sphere," see Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (1990); Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" (1989); and

Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (1990).

10. Cindy Patton, in analyzing the space of a supposedly “non-gay” porn cinema, describes the ways the screening of “heterosexual porn” allowed “straight” men to have sex with men without challenging their sexual identification (1991). Similarly, following Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, I would argue that it was precisely because of the ideology of female sexlessness in the nineteenth century that a legitimating space was created for “romantic friendships”; at the same time the doctrine of sexlessness also maintained white, middle class femininity as respectable, distanced from the supposed sexual improprieties of the working classes (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985).
11. This is the title of one of the earliest editions of what would become the *Girl Scout Handbook*.
12. Because of the decline in enrollment amongst older girls, in the 1980s the Girl Scouts added another level to this progression, “Daisy Scouts,” who are five and six years old.
13. I take the term “unknowing” from Sedgwick’s discussion of the performative effects of ignorance both in *Epistemology* and in her essay, “Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot’s *The Nun*” (1993).
14. By the time I was in Scouts, military titles had been replaced with “camp names,” pseudonyms which counselors assumed for the summer, and sometimes for life.
15. My use of the “open secret” comes from D. A. Miller, who argues that secrecy functions as a space of both resistance and “accommodation,” and that the “open secret,” through its unstable status as both known and unknown, undermines the workings of regulatory power (1988).
16. That Harriet is the fictional “role-model” for many a queer child, and that she repeats this process of taxonomizing her world as a kind of queer reversal of adult surveillance, should come as no surprise. For a discussion of the novel and its remarkable author, see Karen Cook, “Regarding Harriet: Louise Fitzhugh Comes in from the Cold” (1995).
17. For two notable interventions into psychoanalysis, one which foregrounds and queers the “having vs. being” dichotomy, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*

(1993), and Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look" (1992).

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