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“Two Nice Girls Sitting On A Park Bench Talking”: Why It Matters Who Interprets Space in Diana Son’s *StopKiss*

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In Diana Son’s play *StopKiss* we are confronted with two women who are the survivors of a hate crime based on perceived sexual orientation. This attack takes place in New York’s West Village. The location of the park and assumptions about this park are not the main focus of the play; nevertheless, this space is centrally important to the play and the audience. My argument revolves around a central premise: while both the gay and straight communities see the West Village as primarily “gay space,” the straight community assumes that gay [-occupied] space also means space safe for LGBT persons. In contrast, the gay community understands gay [-labeled] space to signify an area where LGBT persons are in greater danger of experiencing homophobic violence. Both the media and society create a specific view of this space that is “safe” to outsiders looking in, but destroy possibilities of safety to the actual users of that space.

In Scene 4 of *StopKiss*, Mrs. Winsley, a witness, is being questioned by Detective Cole about what she saw. Her immediate response to the Detective when he asks why the assailant would call the women “pussy-eating dykes” is: “Two women in a West Village park at four in the morning? What’s the chance they’re not dykes?” (Son, 32). This statement is so important because, to an uninformed audience it places Callie and Sara in a space seemingly claimed by gays and lesbians. This association proves to be something of a two-edged sword. To begin with, by labeling the West Village park as a gay space, it is thought of by the heteronormative community as a haven for the homosexual constituency. This, in turn, immediately leads any same-sex pair in the space to be labeled as gay, creating immediate targets of hate crimes based on sexual orientation without the slightest knowledge of the pair’s actual orientation or history.

In their study, "The formation of fear in gay space: the 'straights' story," Leslie Moran, Beverly Skeggs, Paul Tyrer, and Kathleen Corteen address the issues of labeled space and the reactions of both the heteronormative and homosexual communities. Their study addresses the gay communities in Manchester (a very large gay community) and Lancaster (a more provincial city with no clearly identifiable and durable gay space), both in England. They write:

Our particular concern in this study has been to examine the unexpected findings which indicated that the gay Village, far from being experienced by its most frequent gay users as a safe space, was experienced as a space of danger and a location that was unsafe" (Moran et al. 191).

The assumption that a space labeled for a particular group of citizens is safe is specifically questioned and dismantled in this study. Through their interviews, the researchers began to realize that spaces generally considered "safe" by the un-discerning and uninvolved public are actually considered *less* accessible to the community for which it has been labeled. Moran's research also brings up the point about perceptions of danger to a specific place and community:

The survey offers data that not only challenges one of our research presuppositions, that the 'gay Village' would be experienced as safer space, but also complicates our understanding of the impact of public gay space. More specifically the experience of Manchester's gay Village as a space of danger is an experience associated with those who use it most frequently. Perceptions of danger rather than experiences of violence seem to play a key role. Finally, one of the effects of established gay space may be a change in the way danger is perceived (Moran et al. 179-180).

Moran and Skeggs are positing that, despite the suppositions of the outside community, a space specifically labeled for the homosexual community is considered more dangerous by that population than any other area. The idea is based on the population's perceptions rather than their actual experiences. However, the crimes committed in this space, as in the case of Callie and Sara, certainly add weight to such perceptions.

We should remember that Callie and Sara are not regular visitors to the West Village and, therefore, their concept of the space is extremely different

from that of a West Village regular. As members of an outside community, Sara and Callie would perceive this gay space as safe space. In their article, "*Queer as Folk: producing the real of urban space*," Skeggs, Moran, Tyrer, and Binnie address the stereotyping of space created by mass media and society through programs such as *Queer as Folk* based on the lives of four gay men in England's Manchester village. They write:

The comfortable occupation of place in *Queer as Folk*, can be contrasted to our research where negotiation of violence is an ever-present concern. For *Queer as Folk*, it [the Village itself] is ontological security – coming out, finding an identity, belonging, fitting-in: issues which, in our research, are always underpinned by violence. This becomes apparent when we compare the different representations of the place . . . *Queer as Folk* actually has the potential to change how people see and experience the Village – a change, we argue, that could be potentially dangerous. Our research demonstrates how movement in and out of the area is prone to danger . . . As we know from prior research on gay male homophobic violence, struggles for visible identities will often incite danger, for visibility is a threat to the normalized landscape. The visualizing of the Village makes it *simultaneously* a potential space for the expression of visible identity and also a way of identifying potential targets for homophobic violence (Skeggs et al. 1846).

Although this research is set in England, the fear and the reality of safe spaces for GLBTQ in the United States are still very similar. Because of their unfamiliarity to the violence specific to the West Village park, Callie and Sara may be considered naïve, as well as prime victims for the violence that they experience. They are not privy to the community's fears and perceptions of danger, and so their naivete and association of the space as safe for a lesbian or gay couple are partially responsible for the attack they endure.

Callie and Sara know that the West Village is a generally homosexual area. Their conversation about going to Henrietta's in the West Village leads us to see how these two characters view the West Village and gives us insight into their own innocent notions of the space:

SARA: There's a bar. In the West Village. Henrietta's, you ever been?

CALLIE: Once.

SARA: Will you go with me?

into the private realm. In turn this withdrawal generates the decline and deterioration of the community and the public realm, which in turn gives rise to more crime in public places (Moran et al. 176). This research allows the reader to understand that intervention and/or possible expected community in the West Village is actually discouraged by the very labeling that can seem to make the space so attractive to a questioning and previously hetero-labeled pair of women.

Mrs. Winsley's response to the situation is actually quite interesting in regards to the heteronormative and homosexual reactions to, and in, a labeled community. As a heterosexual person, Mrs. Winsley would assume that the two women in the park were lesbians and, according to the logic so far used in this discussion, that the park would be a safe space for them. However, because she is a long-term resident in the area, she would be aware of the possible danger in which two women in the park might find themselves. Mrs. Winsley refuses to place herself in danger because she realizes how hazardous the area is and assumes, immediately, that the two women are "dykes." She is able to shock the assailant in to leaving Sara alone, but she is still withdrawn into "a private realm" because she is unwilling to physically place herself with the women.

In our reading of *StopKiss* we see a definite removal from the positive safe space created in *Queer as Folk*. Son is showing her audience the true reality of the space – and the reality of labeling specific areas. We can not simply say that the best response to such a situation is not to label areas as belonging to one type of community or another, it is not that simple. Perhaps Son is working to make us realize that we can't assume a safety of space for anyone, be they homosexual, heterosexual, or questioning. Society's renditions of specific areas in mass media and modern culture are both damaging and far from true representatives of the communities' actual perceptions or experiences of the space.

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