
SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

Being Alone Together: From Solidarity to Solitude in Urban Anthropology

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Abstract

The characteristic urban experience of solitude challenges traditional anthropological theories of urban life. This article surveys urban theories that treat solitude primarily as loneliness, anomie, and social disorder. It then challenges these theoretical perspectives with ethnographic cases of gay identities and “being alone together,” drawn from fieldwork in New Delhi, India. I develop a heuristic concept of “social solitude” in contrast to “solidarity,” and examine the political and philosophical consequences of focusing on solitude as an urban way of life and an expression of sexuality. I discuss representations of solitude in modernist literature and conclude with a reading of Deleuze. [Keywords: Solidarity; Subjectivity; Desire; Urban Anthropology; Homosexuality; Delhi, India; Deleuze]

The hotel lobby accommodates all who go there to meet no one.

—Siegfried Kracauer, “The Hotel Lobby,” in *The Mass Ornament*

E.B. White once wrote of New York that it “will bestow the gift of loneliness and the gift of privacy” on any person who “desires such queer prizes.” He added, “The capacity to make such dubious gifts is a mysterious quality of New York. It can destroy an individual, or it can fulfill him [or her]” (1949:9). White’s sympathetic, agnostic take on urban solitude stands out when set against more traditional sociological writings on the city. Sociological theory has long viewed solitude as a symptom of anomie, as an expression of both personal and social disorganization. On this account, solitude is an undesirable product of urban society and a barrier to the solidarity necessary for both happiness and political participation.

The Chicago sociologists of the 1930s stated this theme in different ways, drawing connections between social heterogeneity, density, and “breakdown,” primarily taking their vocabulary if not their pessimism from Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. As the co-founder of the Chicago School, Robert Park wrote, in an introduction to Zorbaugh’s pathbreaking study of Chicago’s social geography, the city is “remarkable for the number and kinds of people crowded together in physical proximity, without the opportunity and, apparently, with very little desire for the intimacies and mutual understanding and comprehension which ordinarily insure a common view and make collective action possible” (in Zorbaugh 1929:vii-viii). This presented a peculiarly urgent political problem for Park:

Our political system is founded upon the conviction that people who live in the same locality have common interests, and that they can therefore be relied upon to act together for their common welfare. This assumption, as it turns out, is not valid for large cities.... All traditional forms of local government fail or break down altogether (ix).

Louis Wirth, reviewing more than a decade of research in the late 1930s, concluded that the weakness and thinness of urban social relationships constitute “essentially the state of *anomie* or the social void to which Durkheim alludes in attempting to account for the various forms of social disorganization in technological society” (1938:13).

Such understandings of the spatial and social organization of the city as political and social disconnection are hardly exhausted. Writing in the

New York Times in early 2009, noting the absence of actual protests despite the much-bruited “populist rage” amidst the current financial crisis, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh repeated much of what Park and Wirth had said, with a modern technological twist. “Our cities are no longer dense, overcrowded industrial centers where unionized laborers and disgruntled strikers might take a public stand,” he notes—establishing a new contrast, old *solidary* city versus new *anomic* city, as against the rural/urban contrasts of his forebears. “In today’s cities, even when we share intimate spaces, we tend to be quite distant from one another.”

These days, technology separates us and makes more of our communication indirect, impersonal, and emotionally flat.... Count the number of people with cellphones and personal entertainment devices when you walk down a street. Self-involved bloggers, readers of niche news, all of us listening to our personal playlists: we narrowly miss each other (Venkatesh 2009).

Venkatesh of course does not conclude here, and he treats this technologically-aided self-involvement not as a cause, but as a characteristic symptom of a deeper isolation and disconnection. The specifics are different—Venkatesh, in particular, avoids the ecological determinism and fear of diversity associated with the Chicago School—yet the note of concern about lack of solidarity is the same as in Park and Wirth. Between the Chicago School and Venkatesh, meanwhile, sociologists have worried about the “lonely crowd” and “bowling alone,” always with much the same opposition between solidarity and solitude.

Insistently in this literature, social difference and personal desires are presented as a challenge to the achievement of solidarity. Wirth could only recognize diversity, the plurality of ends and aims that the city encompasses, at the price of communication and commonality: “Cities generally, and American cities in particular, comprise a motley of peoples and cultures,” said Wirth, “of highly differentiated modes of life between which there is often only the faintest communication, the greatest indifference and the broadest tolerance, occasionally bitter strife, but always the sharpest contrast” (1938:20).

Later generations of American urban anthropologists and sociologists, of course, would start from within this heterogeneity and difference, and examine the forms of social order and solidarity that not only remained

in this massive concatenation of persons and interests in a defined geographical ambit, but actively structured it and made its forms of life possible (Whyte 1955, Jacobs 1992 [1961], Stack 1975). By contrast to Park's dire prognostications, some recent ethnographies address precisely the questions of how local government actually flourishes in these contexts of diversity, though not perhaps in its traditional forms and taking the term "government" in a wider sense (Sanjek 1998, Gregory 1998).

These latter ethnographers of local communities and social order, however, are linked to the theorists of urban anomie by their shared analytic focus on solidarities. Solidarity is, of course, the sociologist's special domain—yet the shared background of the social disciplines in theories of belonging and togetherness, of political participation and social unity, has hindered ethnographic attention to solitudes and their sociological entailments and implications. The constant concern with community, the "conviction that those who live in the same locality share common interests," to quote Park again, involves a political vision—one in which place, personhood, and full political identity are bound together, even when the analysis is of disorders, of anomie, of rents in the fabric of solidarity.

In this essay, I contrast "solidarity" and "solitude" through two ethnographic episodes from my fieldwork in New Delhi, in order to bring these two terms, analytically, into closer contact. This is primarily a methodological exercise, rather than full-fledged ethnographic description. Through short and compact examples, which present a strong contrast along axes of identity, solidarity, and community, I ask whether solitude can be studied ethnographically without reducing it to the negative underside of solidarities, politics, belonging, and—at its greatest extension—society. Can we speak of a social solitude and examine its potentials for collective life in great cities? Can we construct an ethnography that can encompass urban places where people go to be alone together?

I take my initial cue from White's account of New York as a space of both solitude and encounter. "No matter where you sit in New York," he notes, "you feel the vibrations of great times and tall deeds, of queer people and events and undertakings" (White 1949:10). One comes to the city to be by oneself, but together in that state with all the others gathered close around you.

In order to offer some preliminary answers to the questions above, I examine here two highly contrasting social encounters with gay identity and homosexual desire—queer in another sense altogether—in New

Delhi, India. In my first example, the social organization of desire explicitly tends toward solidarity; in my second, it unfolds, socially, in contexts of solitude. The second example may, indeed, indicate a “strain toward anomie,” to misappropriate Merton’s phrase (1957:157), but that is appropriate to my interests in the loose structure necessary to accommodate urban diversity, difference, and even idiosyncrasy. In the last section of this article, I revisit the problem of difference—so central to Wirth and Park—and examine Gilles Deleuze’s (1997) reading of Melville’s “Bartleby, The Scrivener” for a different way of representing the relation between political belonging—what Deleuze criticizes as paternal *filiation*—and urban solitude.

Nigah/Queer Perspectives

My last week in Delhi, I went to an open mic night featuring readings and performances by a group of young, gay artists. The evening was sponsored by a collective called “Nigah,” which is devoted to bringing “queer perspectives” to the city of Delhi (the Hindi word *nigah* can be loosely translated as “perspective”).

Most of the Delhi literary set were there that night, people I had gotten to know casually during my time in the city. The audience was, on the whole, well-travelled, English speaking, liberal and straight. They had British and US degrees and contributed to local magazines like *First City* and *Outlook*. The audience was small, but so was the room they had rented, and the atmosphere was convivial if humid. I chatted with acquaintances as we milled about between performances—the event was free-form and capacious. An Indian-American Fulbright scholar did a stand-up routine about the differences between being gay in the US and in India; a short play about coming out was performed; a male singer dressed in salwar and dupatta did a lovely rendition of a ghazal. Near the end of the event, a playwright and activist read to the audience letters from a pioneering Indian gay activist, part of an archive he was constructing. They were primarily letters sent from New York and Canada in the early 80s, describing the optimism and community building in the gay communities there. The letters and the speaker both insisted on the same point—we must construct, they said, an *Indian* gay history, to be a focus of our own collective identity. We must, the playwright said, gather stories of gay lives being lived in Delhi. “Stonewall

is a very nice idea,” he said, “but it’s not *Indian*. It’s not going to be on *Doordarshan* [the state TV station] anytime soon. It’s not *ours*.”

Nigah both aimed to develop a public life and a cultural life for gay and lesbian Indians, and to provide a safe space for the cultivation of an identity and a sense of community. Collecting stories, and telling them, is the model of active participation and community building offered here.

At the Volga

After the event at Nigah, I stopped on my way home to get some food nearby, at a restaurant called the Standard—a long, low, dimly-lit room on the second storey of the Regal Cinema Building. Sat by myself in a booth at the corner, with a view out on the still-busy street scene, I ate a small plate of tandoori chicken, had a double whisky, and observed the middle-aged, middle-class clientele scattered around the room, widely separated from each other. As usual, it was mostly men there that night, a few in small family groups, some eating together, and others—like me—alone with their thoughts.

The Standard was a familiar hang-out of mine, along with two other similar restaurants, the United Coffee House and the Volga. All three are located in Connaught Place, the grand circular shopping district built to serve the colonial capital in the 1920s, and all are large, well-upholstered dining rooms with décor dating from the 1960s, at least—the heyday of Connaught Place as the resort of governmental elites and modern Delhi-wallahs of all stripes. They once formed a set, a class of destinations including other restaurants like Gaylord’s and the cinemas on the circle, where affluent residents of Delhi would congregate, taking advantage of the self-consciously modern leisure activities: cinema-going, window-shopping, dining out, even picnicking on the broad park in the center of the complex and sipping café *al fresco* (see Mitra 1970, Vasudevan 2001). Writing in the late sixties, Ved Mehta gave a rich description of the urban leisure class in Delhi and the ambiance of the resorts in Connaught Place and their analogues in other cities:

For what might be called formal relaxation, city people here in India...go to Western-style restaurants, such as the Gaylord and the Volga in Delhi, the Blue Fox in Calcutta, and, in lesser cities, the local Kwality. Following the custom of British days, most of these

restaurants have small dance floors, with bands playing Western music almost continuously from morning to night, whether or not anyone is dancing, or even listening. They play such old standbys as “Greensleeves” and “Green Eyes” and such current favorites as “Lemon Tree”...These Western-style restaurants...are air-conditioned in the summer. They provide a refuge for students, housewives, government officers, and businessmen alike, though the groups seem to patronize them at different times of day—housewives coming for elevenses, government officers and businessmen for lunch, and the student crowd for tea and a little dancing. In the evenings, there is a similar cycle of attendance, beginning with husbands bringing their wives—or wives bringing their husbands—for dinner, and ending with students in mixed groups, who arrive later in the evening for coffee. At their best, these restaurants give one the illusion of being in Europe; at their worst, they suggest a barricade set up against the signs, sounds, and smells of the India outside (Mehta 1970:66).

Some of these institutions have been expensively renovated for a new class of clientele; new variations on the old formula have sprung up, including a “London-themed” restaurant serving Mughal cuisine in a space decorated with pillar boxes, red telephone booths, and Underground maps. The Volga, however, has declined into shabby irrelevance. Indeed, the Volga is now the most dilapidated, the most bereft of the restaurants around “C. P.,” as Connaught Place is usually called.

The Volga is the haunt of lone men, workers in the petty offices that ring Connaught Place, clerks and agents, and car salesmen. The velveteen banquettes and heavy curtains emit the stale aroma of old cigarette smoke and mildew, and its air-conditioning consists of a single noisy window-unit over the door, aided by large industrial fans set up in the corners. Hindi is the language of preference there, and the staff consists of one or two weary old men who move about slowly with trays of drinks. There is a menu, but items are often unavailable, and drinking is the primary activity there—drinking and smoking. The tandoori chicken is tolerable, though, and is the item most consumed—it is associated with liquor and masculinity in India (see Ghassem-Fachandi 2009).

I initially took the Volga to be a fairly neutral public place, someplace I could go to be by myself and relax from the pressures of fieldwork. There

was, however, a social world percolating there, under the surface, which I only slowly learned to understand. Early in my stay in Delhi, I went to the Volga with a friend visiting from Bombay, an Indian woman unfamiliar with Delhi. We were immediately the objects of prurient attention—men stared as we walked in, and we waited awkwardly before being seated in an upstairs balcony I had never before seen occupied. The waiters treated us with unusual solicitude. My companion was plainly uncomfortable, as soon was I, and through her presence I discovered a sexualization I had ignored or blocked in my earlier visits. Far from being anonymous or unintelligible, far from being just another note in the chaos of metropolitan noise, we were all too transparent to the men who sat around the restaurant—or, perhaps, they were too exposed to our gaze. Either way, we had to be secluded upstairs. I later gathered that the balcony was reserved for non-conforming couples like us, while the room below was the almost exclusive preserve of single men or, at best, tight clusters of men sullenly together.

On return visits, I began to notice more—the men's room at the back of the restaurant, down a short alley past the kitchens, was filled with graffiti, in the kind of English which is globally standard for the form: blunt, Anglo-Saxon, often misspelled. There were offers for sex, proposals for unlikely rendezvous, and phone numbers you could call for minutely described sexual services. Little of this graffiti mentioned heterosexual sex. This is a world less of desire than of needs, and as on the menu in the restaurant not everything is reliably available, so you take what you can get.¹

I returned often to the Volga. I could relax there. I both stood out and blended in at the Volga—I was foreign, but alone, and in that latter attribute a sort of native.

My Solitude and Theirs

What community is relevant for understanding the Volga? What solidarity could this be an expression of, what communication is happening between these silent and lonely men? I never had any conversations of substance at the Volga, though I had many encounters. I was halted often enough on my way in or out of the restaurant, on the street, by the friendly approach of a man who would delicately feel me out—perhaps I would like to come home with him, see a real Indian home? Perhaps I would like

to take him home with me? Conversations nearly always began with some mention of the family connection, talk of his wife or mother at home, queries about my situation, whether I was staying in a hotel or living alone. I was never brave—or foolish—enough to accept these occasional invitations to go home with some man and “meet his wife.” On one occasion I fell into conversation with a young man inside the Volga, and offered my telephone number. I was barraged for a month afterward by obscene text messages.

These were always tense interactions. I was always treated as a foreigner, occasionally accosted, occasionally flirted with, but also kept at a distance. As I understood when I went there with a woman, this was a sexualized space, and by no means a “safe” or convivial one. This is also why I liked to—why I *could*—go there to be alone. Something in the space of the Volga did not quite permit these approaches of intimacy, even as it provided a place for them. But as long as I didn’t interact with anyone, the speculation and surmise in the eyes of the other men was generally tolerable. They knew all they needed to know about me, just by my presence there. For my part, I had enough experience in India to feel that I could read the social significations of the middle-aged men sagging into their booths, wearily working their way through a double whisky, some of the younger men in tight groups, guarding their alcohol as if someone might come in and punish them for this presumption of adulthood. I inferred a great deal from these postures, these groupings, these solitudes—as those who talked to me and those who didn’t also assumed a great deal about me. Of course, I only felt and imputed the pressures of the social world, the assumptions and identifications as they took form in those around me in the Volga. I only imagined that I knew anything about what these men—individually—were thinking and desiring, where they came from or where they were going; but I flatter myself that I do *know* something, generically or perhaps ethnographically, about the sort of lives that lead one to the Volga, and what specifically is being sought there.

No conversation with the denizens of the Volga would have elicited a claim of belonging, or would have put such a claim on me. No shared *difference* was eligible to cover and characterize the particularities of the inhabitants of this urban space, to forge us into a collectivity. There was no access of intimacy; the norms of the space actually forbade any “intimate event” (Povinelli 2006) that could cut across our solitude and create a sociality—other, that is, than the ever-present potential, never pursued by me but

clearly sought out by others there, of a brief physical contact before returning to our various homes. Even this potential, which saturated the space and charged both the distance the men kept from each other and the approaches that were, seldom, made, must have remained for most unrealized.

Sympathetic as I am to the political project outlined by those at Nigah—which would encompass this space if only they could collect these stories, the particular trajectories of some of the men at the Volga, and weave them together to signify a community and a style of life, of gay life, in India—something remains resistant to that project here. More concretely, and problematically, the politics of visibility that were promulgated by Nigah, however enclaved that “counter-public” may be, are entirely impossible to read in the furtive encounters and coded propositions of the Volga, and in fact visibility would destroy whatever fragile accommodation this latter space provides—an accommodation, as Kracauer describes the possibility of the hotel lobby, of “all who come to meet no one” (1995:175).

The Volga is an institution that both provides for, and is—in its shabby irrelevance—shaped by a certain, highly particular and compartmentalized practice of self. It does not foster a formal politics of community, but is the revelation of an urban possibility of *being alone together*. Such places are ever-present in cities, but they tend to escape an ethnographic vision attuned to what is new, emergent, violent, structuring, or solidary. Note that the Volga is decrepit and unrenovated; it is left behind by the vigorous politics of reshaping and renovating the city for a resurgent middle-class and for new kinds of leisure and consumption. E. B. White dwelt in similar places in his New York, like the Lafayette Hotel, where he stops on his tour about Manhattan and has a drink. “In the café of the Lafayette, the regulars sit and talk. It is busy yet peaceful. Nursing a drink I stare through the west windows The café is a sanctuary. The waiters are ageless and they change not. Nothing has been modernized” (1949:38). However, by the time his essay was published a year later, White was forced to note that “the Lafayette Hotel, mentioned in passing, has passed despite the mention” (5).

Solitude and Social Thought

The Volga, and the lives that pass through it, present a challenge and a problem to the canons of social thought about cities; most especially, as I have argued above, to sociological and anthropological attempts to understand cities through the lens of solidarity, either its pathological

forms as anomie or its fragmented, politically problematic presence as particular communities and identities. Further, the free-floating desire and routine failure to connect at the Volga challenge images of the city which emphasize its coordination and collocation of needs and services. Thus, commenting on the Chicago School's Simmel-derived (but not strictly Simmelian) notion that the city was the most "rational" community, a universe of calculation and precision with no room for superstition or fantasy, Jonathan Raban noted that "in a rational community, the disconnected loner is a sport, a mutant; he exists in the minority statistics of the outcast and the maladjusted" (Raban 1974:152).

Surely the Volga is a place of idle fantasy, and it is Raban's argument that the form and social conditions of the city provide particularly fertile ground for such fantasy. But if we conclude that something sexual and collective—a coming together—is freed in the diversity and density of the city, we have not yet left the terrain of the Chicago School. They acknowledged that urban heterogeneity and density encouraged the growth of what we would now call subcultures—homosexual subcultures, commercialized sexuality of all sorts, "hobohemia"—and yet saw this as another element of urban disorder, the negative underside of approved and productive solidarities (Wirth 1938:22-23, Zorbaugh 1929, Cressey 1932). Revaluing this anathema of sexuality as order, as community, brings us to Nigah—being gay and Indian together—but not yet to the Volga.

The most important ethnographic fact about the Volga is that it was always populated, but was only occasionally—and never for me—a place for encounters that turned into connections. The dominant way of being in that space was being alone together—a pact of mutual privacy only slightly tinted by mutual surveillance and individual speculation. At the Volga we cannot discern solidarity—the place was too heterogeneous, too anonymous for that—but can perhaps see a form of social solitude. That is, this is a socially-shaped, structurally-given kind of solitude in company, for which we still need social thought—neither psychology nor personal histories—and more particularly a different kind of urban thought, more attuned to the contradictory "life-embracing currents" that "find themselves with equal legitimacy" (Simmel 1903:339) in urban subjectivity and in urban space.

What the Volga demands, interpretively, is a language of description that neither imputes any shared identity, least of all a sexual identity, nor a coherent subjectivity—that would make this a group or, at worst, a mob—nor emphasizes atomized individuation, which would ultimately reveal the

Volga as a marketplace. Either would involve some identity claim, some *identification*, some sense of solidarity or at least abstract mutual interest, and would link these many solitudes under a regulated norm.

We might turn to a different sort of ethnographic archive for insight into how to interpret these subjectivities and spaces—specifically, to comparisons drawn from the European modernist literature of the city. For sake of brevity, I take my passages from well-known works of literary criticism by Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin, which highlight the ways in which anonymity and solitude emerge as key collective values in the experience of the modern city, without collapsing into the pessimism of the lonely crowd.

Williams points out in his discussion of urban subjectivity that the “fragmentary experience” which is the “perceptual condition” of the subject moving through the city—the “characteristic movement of an observer in the close and miscellaneous environment of the streets”—“does not necessarily imply any particular mood, let alone an ideology” (1977:242). As against the pessimisms of the city (Eliot, Pound), he counterpoises the description and enactment of urban subjectivity in the writings of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. From Woolf’s *Orlando*, Williams excerpts this account of the heroine traversing the city in an automobile:

Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish. What was seen begun—like two friends starting to meet each other across the street—was never seen ended. After twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack and, indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of identity which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment (quoted in Williams 1977:242).

Williams compares such exclamations of overload, such fleeting sights and passings-by, with the simultaneous movement and stream-of-consciousness commentary of Bloom in *Ulysses*—“There he is, sure enough, my bold Larry, leaning against the sugarbin in his shirtsleeves watching.... Stop and say a word: about the funeral perhaps.” Williams assures us that there is, in such urban encounters and fleeting glimpses, “an active exchange, even an active community, within the imagined speech of thought.”

The genius of *Ulysses* is that it dramatises three forms of consciousness...—Bloom, Stephen, and Molly. Their interaction but also their *lack of connection* is the tension of composition of the city itself.... The only knowable community is in the need, the desire, of the racing and separated forms of consciousness (Williams 1997:245, emphasis added).

Baudelaire, as read by Walter Benjamin (1968), also seeks language for expressing this *lack of connection* as a mode of being in, knowing, and participating in the city and the crowd. The poem *A une passante* records the sighting of a beautiful stranger as she passes the poet and moves on. The poet exclaims:

...j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
 O toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi que le savais!
 [...I know not where you flee, you know not where I go
 O you I would have loved, (O you knew it too!)]²

Walter Benjamin points out that a kind of love is celebrated in this poem, and a kind of corporeal intimacy, wholly consonant with solitude and loneliness. This is, he tells us, not love at first sight, but love at *last* sight, which is as much love of the crowd and its constant motion as love of this woman (who is, in any case, only singled out among many others by the poet's passing attention). "The very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates," and also bears her away forever. "What makes his body contract in a tremor—*crispé comme un extravagant*, says Baudelaire—is not the rapture of a man whose every fiber is suffused with *eros*; it is, rather, like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man" (Benjamin 1968:169). Of this love, Benjamin adds, "one might not infrequently say that it was spared, rather than denied, fulfillment" (170). Sexuality and desire, here, are much more diffuse than any narrow view could encompass, one concerned with order or alignment of aim with object, with reproduction of society if not of the individual. Sexuality is, indeed, the form or term of a kind of connection, yet it feeds here on denial, and is constructed not from the center of a self-secure identity but from fragments of perception and affect. In this, loneliness and the sense of privacy are indeed "queer prizes"—in our contemporary critical sense of "queer"—and the city is the natural home of "queer people and events and undertakings."

Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty has said in passing, “A way of life—an attitude of escapism [*attitude de fuite*] and need of solitude—is perhaps a generalized expression of a certain state of sexuality” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:168-169, see also 1945:197). This aside is part of a larger effort, of course, to find a phenomenological language more adequate to embodied experience than could be formulated on the basis of strict binaries between mind and body, intention and action.⁴ What is interesting and relevant here is that this passing reference to the sexual as a foundation for solitude itself enacts the very movement of connection and disconnection that dominates Woolf’s, Baudelaire’s, and Joyce’s depiction of the urban subject, fleetingly grasping at images and bodies and consciousnesses that endlessly slip by. *J’ignore où tu fuis* finds its parallel in *attitude de fuite*. The passer-by escapes somewhere, she flees, and the poet cannot know her final destination—nor does he try to discover it. The poet seizes on the very thing that ratifies his own attitude of flight and desire for solitude; the flight of *la passante* turns his own solitude into something mobile. In this regard, solitude is a means of connection, with particular social consequences—constructing particular kinds of spaces within urban form. Ethnographically, solitude becomes an experience that we can locate in resorts and retreats in urban space, places where people go to be alone together. As Merleau-Ponty says later “solitude and communication cannot be two horns of a dilemma, but two ‘moments’ of one phenomenon, since in fact other people do exist for me” (359).

This seems to me a warrant for an ethnography of spaces like the Volga, and of solitude and its forms of sociality, in direct contrast to the ethnography of solidarities, of communities, of filiations and kinships within the city. The study of urban kinships and more explicit city solidarities has purpose and import—descriptions of such positive solidarities worked to counter, if only by inversion, the too-totalizing theories of modern anomie and disconnection. But the Volga does not ratify that latter view, either, and in fact presents a strong challenge to over-determined descriptions of anomie, isolation, and pathogenetic urbanism—precisely because of the free-floating desire that suffuses the space, a form of sexuality and connection that cannot be delimited by any particular object.

Being alone together in spaces like the Volga, if we attend to its communicative silences as expressions of a kind of sociality, rather than seeing it as a *lack* of—or *anomic*—solidarity, as isolation and separation, can help perhaps identify resources and forms for being together in ways that do not top-

ple over into the ideogram of the asocial individual on the one hand, or the wholly integrated mechanistic cog in an oppressive, statistically defined agglomerate on the other—neither *Gemeinschaft* nor *Gesellschaft* (see Hertz 2001, Moore 2007:Ch. 2). “Solidarity”—whether organic or mechanical—does not provide many tools, analytically, for identifying such resources and forms, for it is prejudiced toward the articulation of thick social connections or at least mediated ones, identities and affiliations. There are few resources in formal sociological theorizing, I find, for articulating this condition of social solitude. Neither typologies of urban and rural socialities, nor myths of progression from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft* can encompass this plural solitude, this combination of contraries in which norms are present, but solidarity is not, regulation is thick, but impersonal, and isolation is experienced as co-presence. The analytic fictions of sociological thought, which contrast mechanical to organic solidarities, pure homogeneities to pure heterogeneities, cannot recognize this empirical possibility in urban locations.⁵

All Destinations

The lonely crowd remains a dominant sociological trope for understanding urban experience, as in the Chicago School’s concern with urban fragmentation or in Venkatesh’s diagnosis of a contemporary technological isolation and disconnection. Being alone together, as I have described it, represents a mirror image—or a transformation—of the lonely crowd. The solitude and anonymity of the men at the Volga is guarded and maintained through their co-presence in this place of retreat, rather than anonymous proximity creating a sense of solitude and isolation.

It should be noted that Georg Simmel’s dialectical articulation of the conditions of the spirit in the metropolis can encompass both visions—the lonely crowd and being alone together. For Simmel, urban reserve was not the occlusion or perversion of society and social ties, as he emphasized in a warning not often heeded by his sociological successors: “What appears in the metropolitan style of life directly as *dissociation* is in reality only one of its more elemental forms of *socialization*” (1971:332, emphasis added). Much of what Simmel offers as socialization is neither solidary nor pleasing, yet he insisted that “it is our task not to complain or condone but only to understand” (1971:339). This essay rests on such a Simmelian caution. I am not claiming—or interested—to overturn sociological theory or debunk anomie, but rather wish to explore the resources

for understanding solitude ethnographically, as it emerges in urban spaces as a collective reality, and a collective desire.

Deleuzian thought, too, with its primary focus on desire and its plurivalence, is predicated on a movement beyond “judgment,” beyond insistent recourse to sociological causes or psychological etiologies, to trace the “lines of flight” and the immanent cartographies of becoming. This perspective on social life, its determinations and its inventiveness, is well suited for an ethnographic practice that resists the categorical fixity of diagnostics—including, as here, the sociological diagnostics of anomie—and recasts the diagnosis as a prognosis, as it were (see Biehl and Locke, in press, whose account of a Deleuzian ethnographic practice I am drawing on here). Such ethnography must focus on movements and becomings, which may well be registered in moments of waiting and also moments of silence.

For my purposes, Deleuze’s most relevant articulation of these procedures and their potentialities comes in his engagement with Melville. Deleuze found radical hope in the dramatically anomic figure of *Bartleby* and his ambivalent formula “I would prefer not to”; in Melville’s works more broadly, Deleuze found resources for describing the loose structure that can accommodate *Bartleby*’s solitude and singularity within social thought. In lieu of a retrospect and conclusion, I wish to come to a stopping point here through a brief account of what Deleuze saw in *Bartleby*, and how it links up with an anthropology open to wider readings of solidarity, and attentive to solitude.

“If *Bartleby* had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role,” Deleuze says (1997:73). Rather, by his agrammatical “prefer not,” *Bartleby* becomes for Deleuze the expression of a certain hope of a whole body of nineteenth-century literature—freedom from personal dependence, from fixed subjectivity rooted in social identifications:

The entire nineteenth century will go through this search for a man without a name, regicide and parricide, the modern-day Ulysses (“I am No One”): the crushed and mechanized man of the great metropolises, but from which one expects, perhaps, the emergence of the Man of the Future or New World Man (74).

Deleuze argues that *Bartleby* is an “Original”—a literary type he credits Melville with developing—a searing figure who must stand alone, outside

the rules of society. “Each original is a powerful, solitary Figure that exceeds any explicable form” (82). For Deleuze, Melville’s “Originals” come in two variants, the demonic and the angelic (Bartleby is, of course, the latter), which are across Melville’s various texts counterpoised against each other and against a third kind of figure who represents the Law, charity, and paternal filiation (in “Bartleby,” this figure is the attorney—Deleuze 1997:80). The task of the Original is to blur the paternal function; Bartleby’s intransigence and solitude resists the domination of the Law—but no resistance is unconditioned. That is, for Melville to figure the possibility of another social norm, “to liberate man from the father function, to give birth to the new man or the man without particularities, to reunite the original and humanity by constituting a society of brothers,” (Deleuze 1997:84) he requires *both* Bartleby and his employer, the attorney, who proves the meaning of Bartleby’s formula by his struggle against it. The formula, in its constant iteration, sends the attorney—the representative of Bourgeois (city-man) rectitude—near madness:

From the original arrangement to [his] irrepressible, Cain-like flight, everything is bizarre, and the attorney behaves like a madman. Murder fantasies and declarations of love for Bartleby alternate in his soul. What happened? Is it a case of shared madness, here again, another relationship between doubles, a nearly acknowledged homosexual relation (“yes, Bartleby...I never feel so private as when I know you are here...I penetrate to the predestined purpose of my life...?”) (Deleuze 1997:75, quoting Melville 1967:89).

What the attorney—who ultimately acquiesces in Bartleby’s death in prison—finally reveals of course is that “there are no good fathers,” underscoring the necessity of dissolving the paternal function to constitute this “society of brothers,” “a *community of celibates*, drawing its members into an unlimited becoming” (84, emphasis in original). “Celibates,” here, does not mean abjuring sexuality, but rather identifies an extension of the axes along which the relation is imagined—not just vertically, through agnation and reproduction, but extending outward, passing through “all intensities” to—at its extremes—“the homosexual relation between brothers, and passing through the incestuous relation between brother and sister” (84-85).

“How can this community be realized? How can the biggest problem be resolved?” Deleuze asks himself, at this point. The parallel ethnographic

question, based on my materials, is: can we resolve the apparent conflict between an ethnographic bias toward solidarity and the existence of urban solitude? “But is it not already resolved, by itself, precisely because it is not a personal problem, but a historical, geographic, or political one? It is not an individual or particular affair, but a collective one...It is not an Oedipal phantasm but a political program” (85).

Melville’s political program, as Deleuze sees it, is an American one, seeking a vision of community that is about movement and combination rather than “a nation, a family, a heritage, or a father” (85). In this American, pragmatic vision, *patchwork* is the key trope of togetherness and collective identity: “the affirmation of a world in *process*, an *archipelago*.”

Not even a puzzle, whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others: isolated and floating relations, islands and straits, immobile points and sinuous lines...an infinite patchwork with multiple joinings (1997:86, emphasis in original).

Pragmatism, Deleuze reminds us, “is this double principle of archipelago and hope.... Like Melville before it, pragmatism will fight ceaselessly on two fronts: against the particularities that pit man against man and nourish an irremediable distrust; but also against the Universal or the Whole, the fusion of souls in the name of great love or charity” (87).

This simultaneous struggle against antagonistic particularity and universal identity is exemplified in a passage from Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* that is not directly addressed by Deleuze, but which—in its combined fever of classification and refusal of ranking—is obviously appealing to anthropologists (compare Boon 1990:196). Melville opens *The Confidence-Man* with a description of piebald cosmopolitanism aboard the Mississippi steamship *Fidèle* that highlights the “isolated and floating relations” Deleuze sees in Melville: “At every landing, the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange; like Rio Janeiro fountain, fed from the Cocovarde mountains, which is ever overflowing with strange waters, but never with the same strange particles in every part.” On board *Fidèle*, there “was no lack of variety.”

Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes; Santa Fe traders in striped blankets, and Broadway bucks in cravats of cloth of gold; fine-looking Kentucky boatmen, and Japanese-looking Mississippi cotton-planters; Quakers in full drab, and United States soldiers in full regimentals; slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, and old-fashioned French Jews; Mormons and Papists; Dives and Lazarus jesters and mourners, teetotalers and convivialists, deacons and blacklegs; hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters.... In short, a piebald parliament, an Anarcharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man (Melville 1961 [1857]:17-18).

Melville goes on to celebrate this vision of diversity as an expression of the “all-fusing spirit of the West” (1961:18), but the roll of epithets and stereotypes opposes this conclusion. As James Boon has pointed out, the combination of “kinds” here undermines any smug certainty about fusion into a universal Whole, and draws our attention to the general particularity rather than the particular generality. What “kind” of man is a “convivialist”? One, surely, which stretches any narrow sense of what makes up an essence—and what essence does humanity have here except its proclivity to travel (“that pilgrim species”)? We might add that there is no privilege imputed here, for instance, to actual Pilgrims, as the mythic founders of the US, since they are only one travelling kind among many, and hardly the first.

Rather, the political vision here is broader, and available for appropriation to the study of social spaces—like the Volga—that invite anonymity and solitude, rather than identification with a supervening solidarity. Boon argues for the challenging political vision contained here by adding to this vision of plurality another text—Melville’s fragment “The River,” where he, in Boon’s words (1990:196), “recovers darker doubts and contests History’s seemingly irreversible flow.” Melville wrote in “The River” of the violent meeting of the Missouri and the Mississippi, which confluence confounds any notion of priority, of separation of strands:

The Missouri sends rather a hostile element than a filial flow. Under the benign name Mississippi it is in short the Missouri that now rolls to the Gulf,...the Missouri that not a tributary but an invader enters the sea, long disdaining to yield its white wave to the blue (Melville, "The River," quoted in Boon 1990:196-97).

"All destination;" Boon comments, "no filiation." Or, as Deleuze puts it, registering the force of Melville's agrammatical language, "something strange happens, something that blurs the image, marks it with an essential uncertainty, keeps the form from 'taking,' but also undoes the subject, sets it adrift and abolishes any paternal function. It is only here that things begin to get interesting" (1997:77).

Urban solitude as I have defined it here is, like Melville's "community of celibates," itself already a social fact, not an "individual or a political affair, but a collective one," a positive experience and relation, "drawing its members into an unlimited becoming" (1997:84). Places like the Volga are temporary locales of retreat, spaces one passes through, retaining one's anonymity, but which remain available for periods of dwelling, and return. Even when—rarely—some connection is made here and urban anonymity is broached and collapses into an intimate relation, that relation by its intimacy and personality only buttresses the wider anonymity. Urban solitude, this social solitude, is "agrammatical," perhaps, but it is already there as a possibility, if one only barely accommodated in sociological theory.

E. B. White, for his part, implies that the city of strangers is where this happens—one needs the locale, the "city as a goal," in order for any empirical realization of this congress of contraries. He has his doubts, as must we all:

New York is peculiarly constructed to absorb almost anything that comes along...without inflicting that event on its inhabitants The quality of New York that insulates its inhabitants from life may simply weaken them as individuals...I am not defending New York in this regard. Many of its settlers are probably here merely to escape, not face, reality (1949:15-16).

Yet, he concludes, "it is rather a rare gift, and I believe it has a positive effect" on whoever makes the city his or her goal: "Whether it is a farmer arriving from Italy...or a young girl arriving from a small town in

Mississippi to escape the indignity of being observed by her neighbors, or a boy arriving from the Corn Belt...it makes no difference" (18).

My destination, many evenings in Delhi, was the Volga. But that place, borrowing its name from a river in Russia, is only one of many destinations, one of many "life-embracing currents" that finds itself in the city. All destinations.

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ENDNOTES

¹For more detailed accounts of the social worlds of men who have sex with men in Delhi, see Seabrook 1999, and Cohen 2007.

²The poem and translation are taken from Benjamin 1968:169.

³Henrietta Moore (2007:118-119) interprets a related passage from Merleau-Ponty in her rethinking of the grounds of gender theory and the theory of the subject in anthropology. I am indebted to her work for directing me to this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought, and informing my line of interpretation here.

⁴See Bearman 1991 for a thoughtful and thorough exploration of the possibilities and limits of Durkheim's (1997 [1893]) schemes of solidarity. Bearman pays special attention to the axes of regulation and integration along which Durkheim distributed his types of solidarity, and Bearman reminds us that for Durkheim, if not always for his successors, anomie was asocial condition, not a psychological one. I have tried to retain this strictly sociological meaning of anomie throughout this essay, while occasionally citing uses of the term that diverge from it in more psychological directions.

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