

A FEAR OF ADOLESCENT CRUISING: ADULT REACTIONS  
TO A TRADITION THAT WON'T GO AWAY  
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Growing up in Snyder, Texas, my friends and I spent our Friday and Saturday nights cruising—what we referred to as "making the drag." We drove down College Avenue-Snyder's main strip, turning around in the Bar-H-Bar parking lot on one end of our circuit and at the Sonic Drive-In on the other end. Were I able to go back and interview myself as I was then, I think I would describe those hours I spent on the drag as being "really cool." Whatever the phrase lacks in articulateness, its connotation is unmistakable. Cruising was important to me. It was important for lots of reasons but especially because of how it changed me: it made me feel tougher while I was out there commanding a few thousand pounds of metal to drive me around; it made me feel older than my years sneaking smokes and sipping beer from a can; it made me feel like I had sexual potential as me and my car full of male friends imagined—incorrectly as it turned out that the young women out cruising found us desirable and sexy; and it made me feel connected to something larger than myself since I knew from hearing them recount their own experiences on College Avenue that my older sisters, cousins, and parents had made the drag when they were in high school. "Really cool," indeed.

These days, my interests in cruising are much less experiential than they are intellectual, but I still find cruising "pretty cool." Apparently, some towns and cities across the U.S. do too since cruising remains as traditional today as it has been for the last fifty years in these places. I have been surprised, however, to find that in an increasing majority of locales around the nation, this folk performance has come to be regarded by many adults as the scourge of their community.<sup>1</sup> I explain these differing adult perceptions of adolescent cruising by arguing that as adolescent cruising—one of the traditional and informal performances of white middleclass adolescents due to its socialization and enculturation potential (McCormick)—became appropriated by those outside the target audience (i.e. ethnic minorities and those presumed to be in the lower class) its legitimacy was attacked. Therefore, when cruising the mall emerged as a new means of facilitating socio-cultural reproduction among middle-class adolescents, many communities had voices calling for the criminalization of the performance and its performers. Ultimately, then, these differing perceptions of adolescent cruising—as traditional activity and as criminal activity—have much less to do with the performance's changing nature and much more to do with the fear of middle-class adults that they will be

unable to make the adolescents for which they are responsible grow up to be middle-class adults.

In explanation of this position, let me briefly sketch the relevant data in this case a sequence of events which traces the development of adolescent cruising on the strip—on which I base my argument.<sup>2</sup> Cruising's golden days began in the mid-1950s due—in large part—to the entertainment industry's strategic use of the hot rod culture as a marketing tool. A flood of movies like *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Drag Strip Girl*, *Hot Rod Gang*, and *Ghost of Drag Strip Hollow*; songs like *I Get Around*, *Little Old Lady from Pasadena*, *Little Deuce Coupe*, and *Mustang Sally*; and even texts like the *Hot Rod Happy* comic strips all exploited the taboo of the hot rod culture in the hopes of attracting a newly emerging and potentially powerful market segment: baby boom teenagers. In doing so, the idea of a tripartite performance of adolescents, automobiles, and commercial strip was aggressively marketed to these teenagers. It became so attractive, in fact, that by the mid-1960s adolescent cruising on the commercial strip had become an increasingly traditional way for adolescents to spend some of their non-institutional time. By about 1975 (though I don't mean for any of these dates to be precise, they're meant to be touchstones which give the historical sequence a rough placement in time<sup>3</sup>), adolescent cruising on the commercial strip began to be transformed. The oil embargo and the rise of the regional shopping mall were two economic reasons for this transformation, but social and cultural forces—which I will address momentarily—were also at work. By 1985, the future of adolescent cruising on the commercial strip was no longer just in jeopardy, it was being actively dismantled in newspapers and local political meetings around the nation. None of this is to say that cruising is dead or dying, because it certainly isn't. In fact, adolescent cruising was reborn in the shopping mall. Interestingly, cruising the mall seems to have followed the same sort of development as cruising on the commercial strip. It was accepted by the middle-class—if not eagerly than at least willing—as an appropriate way and place for their teens to hang out, it was traditionalized, and very recently, cruising the mall has begun to show signs of having its legitimacy challenged by voices in the local community.

Given this data, adolescent cruising on the strip appears to have developed unidirectionally through time. In fact, letters, editorials, and articles in newspapers from around the country seem to indicate that, in today's performance of adolescent cruising on the commercial strip, kids hurt each other—even kill each other—and property is damaged. The seemingly level-headed response to these charges would be to keep adolescent cruising from occurring. But the level-headedness of this response can be challenged by correlating the perception of cruising's increasingly dark

menace with its shifting demographics: from a performance which was controlled primarily by white, middle-class adolescents to a performance which is increasingly being adopted by those outside the white middleclass. Examining cruising's receptions in their historical context suggests that as adolescent cruising becomes increasingly performed by those outside the white middle-class, the white middle-class apparently finds adolescent cruising less effective at reproducing its target population, and it therefore has no reason to perpetuate the performance.

Make no mistake, I understand that it seems like I am, at best, making an argument that is purely academic or, at worst, naive. Cruising, after all, has been and is the venue for fearful activities: assault, rape, homicide, drug abuse, and property damage. This is all well documented (if, I believe, exaggerated in terms of its epidemic proportions and endemic nature). But my reading of the performance suggests that cruising has always had the specter of menace hovering around it.<sup>4</sup> The significance of this menace—whether it is seen as pranksterism or as criminal—I believe, is contingent on whether or not the performance is perceived as achieving its reproductive potential.

In Paul Lyons' book, *Class of '66*, the perception of white, middle-class adolescent menace as pranksterism in a white, middle-class town in New Jersey is evident. He reports these memories from a middle-age, middle-class informant:

"We hung the assistant principal in effigy the first week he was at school. . . . He was a real nice guy, Mr. Turner; it was just that we disliked the idea of having an assistant principal. About two weeks after he arrived, we passed the word that we were packing guns, and within two or three days, they did a complete search of the whole school building—we didn't have any guns." Dave, roaring with laughter, tells of boyish pranks: "We did a mock shooting on the steps of the local diner. Davy Hunter had a '57 Chevy; he pulled up in front of the diner and got out, and we had these cap guns, but they were real loud; [Davy] pulled it out, pulled up in front of the diner, shot this guy on the steps, ketchup packets all over, picked him up off the steps—this was Saturday night, busiest night of the week," he interjects, "threw him in the trunk of this car, and sped off. . . . we drove [the cops] crazy." (46)

Even more relevant to my argument, Howard and Barbara Myerhoff reported on the way in which the menace of adolescent cruising—menace as pranksterism—was handled by the authorities in early 1960s California. They wrote that

[t]here is a mischievous, often amusing overtone to all these incidents; they are not the kind likely to be malicious or violent. Rather, they are

spontaneous and gratuitous, proving nothing but providing "kicks." An incident was observed in which a boy was picked up for drinking and curfew violation. In the patrol car he expressed his concern lest the occasion jeopardize his chances for entering college. The officer, who had until that point been rather surly, hastened to reassure the boy that such a possibility was quite unlikely, and implied that nothing would come of the visit to the station. (285-86)

In these examples, the menace of adolescents—while frustrating to adults—is finally laughable—even capable of evoking nostalgic remembrance some-time later—because it appears to be developmental: it was simply what kids did when growing up. Therefore, adolescent menace was considered pranksterism rather than criminal behavior.

Today, however, cruising and the menace which surrounds it is not viewed as pranksterism; instead, it is perceived as a much darker and more dangerous sort of threat. Adolescent cruising on Salt Lake City's State Street provides an example of adolescent cruising having its menace transformed into criminal behavior. Reporter Rebecca Walsh described the cruising on State Street in 1999 as

a night club on asphalt. Site of a mating dance of sorts, punctuated by stops for drinks at the Chevron, where tailing is flirting, and two drivers exchanging phone numbers can reduce traffic to gridlock. It's a social, at times violent, tradition Salt Lake City police want to end. Using two murders in two years as a catalyst, city police claim cruising State has spun out of control. Decades of harmless fun has taken on a sinister cast. ("Tracking taillights . . .")

Shortly after her report, the Salt Lake City City Council passed a ban on cruising State Street (Egan 1999: Online). Reading the newspaper accounts leading up to, during, and following the elimination of adolescent cruising on State Street, it becomes clear that the cruising menace which was once pranksterism had become criminalized. Assistant Police Chief Roy Wasden described his changing perception of the activity like this: "[Cruising has] changed a lot in 25 years. . . . There's just a lot more of everything: more traffic, more weapons, more violence" (Walsh, "Tracking taillights. . ."). Salt Lake City resident Don Steiner, in his public forum letter in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, supported this position as well. He asserts that State Street cruising "was not American Graffiti, where cute little kids honk at each other for attention; it had become a continual crime scene on weekends. I applaud Salt Lake City for its efforts to make State Street once again safe

for all citizens" (Steiner). Because of cruising's transformation into a criminal menace, it seemed self-evident that the performance had to be abolished. Therefore, when Salt Lake City decriminalized many traffic violations, it left cruising State Street—along with drunken driving, excessive speeding, and reckless driving—"a more serious criminal offense" (Kennedy).

The logic of cruising's criminalization, however, has been challenged by individuals who fear that criminalizing cruising only *appears* to be an appropriate response to cruising's menace. In Salt Lake City, it was among others—ACLU Legal Director Stephen Clark who urged City Council members to proceed cautiously with criminalizing cruising. He argued, "I'm very concerned about how the cruising ordinance will be implemented and enforced. It's one more opportunity for people who are marginalized in our community to be targeted and harassed" (Walsh "New SLC Law . . ."). And in Denver, for instance, it was Hispanic voices who noted in an article in *La Voz* that "[w]hat the media failed to see, but what was clearly evident to anyone on Federal [Street] over the weekend, was in its so-called 'random' stopping of vehicles, the DPD [Denver Police Department] systematically pulled over and impounded vehicles driven by people who were young and brown or who displayed Mexican flags. Anglos drove by untouched" ("Crusade for Justice. . .").

These voices of dissent argue that it seems to be part of human nature to fear that which is different and that is what is driving the criminalization of cruising. Researcher Doreen Massey concurs with the general principle: "Attempts to forbid behaviour which is different have always been part of the armoury of those who insist on establishing their own behaviour as 'normal' and 'natural', and therefore by some leap of logic to be conformed to by everyone" (127). The implication would be, then, that if cruising's performers were homogeneous they would not elicit the same sort of fear that a heterogeneous group of cruising performers would. According to this reasoning, cruising should have been much more homogenous when its menace evoked, at best, frustration than it is now when its menace evokes fear. James Bradley's 1971 master's thesis in sociology on a relatively unthreatening performance of adolescent cruising in San Leandro, California, seems to confirm this condition. In San Leandro, for instance, there were "few Mexican-Americans" (51) and no Blacks (49-50) who cruised. In other words, a lack of difference correlated with a lack of threatening menace. According to this theory, then, as cruising becomes a more diverse activity (as it had on Salt Lake City's State Street), fears would begin to surface. Tim Lucas unpacks the process through which the white middle-class fear of cruising becomes a public policy which criminalizes cruising. First, he argues, the word "gang" becomes confused

with "race" (146-47). Next, the media creates a moral panic around "gangs" (that is, "minority youth") so as to titillate an audience which assumes it is being informed (152). Finally, Lucas argues that this moral panic leads to the "terrifying visions of white suburbanites. . . of the migration of drive-by-shooting gangbangers in South-Central (LA) to the more prosperous (white) peripheral neighbourhoods" (152). To stop this migration, cruising becomes outlawed.

Compelling as this explanation of the adult fear of cruising which is characterized by its difference is at first glance, cruising seems less about the performance of difference than it is about different people coming together to perform the same thing. In fact, cruising is arguably much more about assimilation than differentiation. Certainly, there are good reasons for those adolescents outside the white middle-class to want to participate not only in cruising but in all sorts of middle-class leisure activities. As Regina Austin argues in an article on governmental restraints on black leisure in *Southern California Law Review*, the appropriation of middle-class leisure spaces and practices results in the creation of "real and symbolic capital" by those non-middle-class adolescents who appropriate them.

But assuming assimilation is trying to be achieved, the question remains why adults—and white, middle-class adults in particular—would criminalize cruising if difference was not heightened but diminished during the performance. Barbara Ehrenreich suggests an answer when she argues that the middle-class (she claims an interest in the "professional" middle-class alone, but I think her argument applies to a greater or a lesser extent to the middle-class generally) is not concerned with those who are different per se but about losing its own status. She writes that the middleclass is "insecure and deeply anxious. . . . It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. . . . Whether the middle class looks down towards the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling" (15). If cruising is one of the traditional mechanisms for reproducing middle-class behaviors and values, then when this mechanism runs the risk of becoming either "clogged" by too many users or too effective at moving others into the middle-class (which results in either kicking others out or limiting the participation of all those involved), the mechanism itself comes under attack. Don Merten offers a brilliant case study of how this process is initiated when a burnout becomes a cheerleader. He argues that

having a burnout as a cheerleader was so problematic. . . . [because] it violated an implicit assumption that the hierarchies of status categories and activities were congruent. But at a far more fundamental level, sta-

tus categories and activities not only identified types of people but also separated types of people. Since status categories and activities were expected to be hierarchically congruent, people who were near the bottom of the status hierarchy were not supposed to be in high-prestige activities. Having a burnout as a cheerleader was not just an isolated violation of this expectation but rather, like a taboo violation, threatened the integrity of these two categorical systems and their assumed congruence. . . . In other words, if a burnout could be a cheerleader, was there any limit as to what could happen; were any expectations valid? (65)

Likewise, when cruising became perceived as inefficiently socializing and enculturating middle-class adolescents, it became feared, criminalized, and dismantled.

Still, though, the need to socialize and enculturate middle-class adolescents remained; therefore, new mechanisms were constructed to achieve these ends. Enter cruising the shopping mall, a landscape which serves as an escape from and defense against intrusions from outsiders—just as the commercial strip once did. I suspect that the recent challenge to cruising the mall's legitimacy as a middle-class leisure activity is a result of middleclass fears over the efficacy of the performance's ability to reproduce middle-class values and behaviors within the target population.

Given what I've learned about adolescent cruising, I don't think this will be the blow that finally destroys the performance. As much as middle-class adults fear cruising's menace, they also seem to fear the loss of its reproductive potential. Cruising, after all, changes people. I know that from personal experience. This is precisely why middle-class adults have a love/hate relationship with the performance. And because of the power in this traditional performance, people change cruising.

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## NOTES

1. For example, I was surprised to find that in Abilene, Texas—my fieldsite—cruising has begun to come under attack. This, in fact, was what originally caused me to look to other attacks on cruising around the nation so as to understand the motivations for this attack.

2. This is not to suggest that cruising exists as some sort of transcendent, universal (or national) tradition. Rather, adolescent cruising is always localized from popular culture representations even as these localizations build the popular culture representations. This does not, however, preclude me from making general statements about the phenomenon.

3. For example, in my fieldsite of Abilene, Texas, it is only now—in the late 1990s—that this transformation to the tradition of adolescent cruising is becom-

ing manifest in the local government as it considers whether to enact adolescent curfews on the weekend.

4. This inherent menace is a result, at least in part, of the inherent menace in adolescent themselves. As ambiguous figures, adolescents pose a threat to the normative order, and their activities—however tame they may actually be—have at least the specter of this menace hovering around them.

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