

Introduction

Women and Public Places

I was out bicycling once and I saw a woman who wore a hot-pink Spandex body suit, riding a hot-pink ten-speed bike. I assumed she wanted to be noticed, so I said hello. She sprinted away from me. I have no idea what was on that woman's mind.

Marty Westerman, How to Flirt: A Practical Guide (1992)

In 1990 I drove from Indianapolis to Washington with my husband and my nine-year-old daughter. We stopped in a small town near the Indiana-Ohio border to refuel the car. As usual, I pumped the gas, then went, by myself, into the station to pay for it. Behind the counter was a young man half my age, hugely fat and grinning broadly. I placed my charge card on the neutral ground of the rubber mat between us, smiled briefly, and stated the amount the pump showed.

The young man completed the electronic transaction. I thanked him politely, and he replied “you’re welcome” and moved as if to hand the credit card back. I found myself smiling again as I reached for the card, and as I did so, the young cashier playfully retracted the card and waved it at me, out of my reach.

“Say ‘please,’” he said. “Ask for it nicely!”

I smiled again—I could not help myself—but managed to say

nothing, and shaking his head and laughing ruefully the young man at last returned my charge card.

It was a game I recognized from my own experience as a woman in public places and from my interviews with hundreds of women and men in the Midwest and throughout the country. It was not news to me that age and social class—I was at least two decades older than the young cashier and dressed, if not for success, at least professionally—were things that might have counted between two men, yet counted for nothing for me. Nevertheless, being treated as the juvenile or merely playworthy object of someone else's enjoyment will probably always take me by surprise. Like many other women to whom I have spoken in the course of the Indiana interviews reported in this book, in public places, at least, I want to think of myself more as a citizen than as a source for gender games. That fact alone probably accounts for my fascination with public places, where rituals—sometimes argued by women and men alike to be innocuous, even flattering, or explained away as the province only of the lower classes or the youthful—can be transformed into full-fledged verbal abuse or can escalate into unambiguous physical assault, even rape. And although this book focuses on the routine troubles of women, I could also write about some of the routine pleasures of public places. For women and those in other social categories who are disadvantaged in public places, even these routine pleasures will be experienced with knowledge of what *can* occur. A counterpoint to the opening epigraph is this informant's narrative:

About a year ago, I was aerobic-walking near a mall, for exercise. It wasn't very late, just past dusk. It was the summertime. It was nice out. As I went by one of the stores, a man standing outside said hello to me, and just to be polite, I smiled and said hello back. Then he started to follow me, keeping talking to me. I was only a few blocks away from home, so I started to run. The man started to run too, and he caught me and raped me. At gunpoint. They never caught him.

Such possibilities affect the experience of civility that all citizens feel.

In my work on this book, I discovered I was not the only woman (or indeed the only person of either sex) to be intrigued and troubled by everyday life in public places. Simply put, most of the women I spoke with shared my concerns for the particular ease and even physical safety women feel in public places today. By *public places*, I mean *those sites and contexts that our society understands to be open to all; our characteristic behavior and appearance for public places do and are meant to vary from those for private dwellings*. Communication in public places is characteristically appearance dependent; that is, the individual relies on her or his estimation of another's discernible, visible form as a clue to what is, for the context, significant identity, and the individual understands that others will judge her or him in the same way. In chapter 2, "Contexts," I expand this basic definition to include semipublic venues such as stores and restaurants, public festivals and celebrations, parks and recreational areas, and places of entertainment like movie houses and concert halls. Slightly different and characteristic rules will apply for all of these sites, with all segments of society aiming for civility. But the everyday courtesies we believe to comprise civility can mean more than we ordinarily think.

Both liberals and conservatives now embrace civility as a good, simply because what is evident in our public places is often so horrifying that some call to arms seems needed (see Coser 1988 on the political identification of civility). Formerly, civility was seen as a straitjacket. Now crime is taken to be a reality. Our desire for authenticity as defined by our own social categories produces effects that are in some ways opposite to what we mean by civility: We value whatever the person does if it is an authentic representation of the category we momentarily consider essential to the individual's being *and* is defensible. Thus, we also value the individual's loyalties to the social categories with which we believe she or he should identify—a modern-to-post-modern trouble, since if individuals have ten or twenty selves, any one such self might well be argued to be authentic (Goffman 1959; Tuan

1982). Civility and authenticity can clash when we are among strangers: Often, once civility lapses when authenticity is expressed, as I noted while observing a group of young African-American men. Every passing white stranger, especially the middle-aged and old, was a target for hoots and hollers that referred to their alleged ugliness, yet African-Americans who passed by were conspicuously ignored. This example features public harassment by African-American men to whites of both sexes; but troubles among strangers can be instigated by a member of any group against a member of any group.

These young men's hoots and hollers are among a general set of troubles to which all citizens are subject. I call these actions *public harassment*, that is, *that group of abuses, harrying, and annoyances characteristic of public places and uniquely facilitated by communication in public*. Public harassment includes pinching, slapping, hitting, shouted remarks, vulgarity, insults, sly innuendo, ogling, and stalking. Public harassment is on a continuum of possible events, beginning when customary civility among strangers is abrogated and ending with the transition to violent crime: assault, rape, or murder. Women, upon whose experiences I focus in this book, can currently experience shouted insults, determined trailing, and pinches and grabs by strange men and be fairly certain that no one—not the perpetrator and probably no official—will think anything of note has happened. Thus, public harassment is a sort of civic denial, the study of how, why, and with what effects this harassment exists for women and men.

STUDYING PUBLIC HARASSMENT

In order to represent the views of as many women and men as possible, I observed and interviewed in one city, Indianapolis, Indiana. I do not chronicle what happens across the nation with regard to public harassment; I do provide a detailed description of what happens in one large Midwestern city. I examined public places in Indianapolis both systematically and fortuitously for five years, from 1988 through

1993. I took care in these observations to cover all sections of the city and to be present at varied times of the day in all sections. I also observed at a representative selection of mundane and notable or spectacular events in several public spaces: movie theaters, grocery stores, and dry cleaners, the opera and the symphony, and graduation ceremonies. I took notes on site whenever possible; when it was not, I recorded interactions as soon afterward as I could.

My interviewers scheduled their interviews, and so, for the most part, did I. Some of my interviews were requested on the spot—that is, I sometimes asked an individual if I could interview her or him at the time of the incident. Most were happy to talk, although some were not interested in answering all of the questions I put to them. I have included some partial interviews in my analysis, specifically those that provide interesting insights.

Of the 506 interviews, I did nearly 400, or about 80 percent. I also used fourteen other interviewers, whom I trained for the task myself. These men and women often interviewed informants whose specialized experience in public places, they felt, would match their own. Five of these interviewers were, like myself, white women who identified themselves as heterosexual. Also among my other interviewers were two African-American women, two Asian-American women, and five men. Two interviewers had contacts with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals.

The interviews themselves were free-form and in depth. Interview questions included ones that solicited the person's feelings and opinions about public places, the range of their "good" and "bad" experiences there, and their strategies for managing a situation deemed a "trouble" or a "problem." Informants defined what good and bad experiences were. I also asked whether they had publicly harassed others and, if so, I asked them to give an interpretation for this conduct.

Often, women informants needed little in the way of a formal interview or prepared questions. My interviewers and I were often able to ask informants to talk about their concerns; we discovered that they

would neatly cover many or most of our questions without prompting. This was a tribute, perhaps, to how much an informant was troubled by public abuse. A typical interview lasted an hour, although the range was thirty minutes to three hours. Men's interviews tended to be briefer and less detailed than women's, but this was not always the case. Many men had reasons of their own to have experienced public harassment. Premier among men with more experience than they would have liked were gay or bisexual men, men who were members of an ethnic or racial minority like African-, Jewish, or Asian-Americans, and men with disabilities. One of the foremost results of my research was to identify which groups of men did, and which did not, feel that they shared the troubles of public harassment with women.¹

My interviewers and I spoke with 506 citizens of Indianapolis and the surrounding area: 293 were women and 213 were men. About half of these 506 informants identified themselves as white; 21 of these identified themselves as Jews. About half of the 506 identified themselves as people of color or as racially mixed. Indianapolis is about 20 percent nonwhite, so I overrepresented nonwhites in my group of informants to get a satisfactory sample of Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and those who identified themselves as "mixed race." There were 259 white informants, 114 African-Americans, 58 Asian-Americans, and 75 informants who identified themselves as racially mixed. All groups were divided approximately evenly between women and men.

All social classes were represented by the respondents. I evaluated socioeconomic status by occupation, speech, and income, judging 116 informants to be upper class, 285 to be middle class, and 105 to be working or lower class. Informants were relatively young: 100 were between fifteen and twenty years of age, 299 were between twenty-one and thirty-five, 75 were between thirty-six and sixty-five, and 32 between sixty-six and eighty-five. Forty informants mentioned they had a disability that they felt was a difficulty in public places; these disabil-

1. See the discussion in chapter 5, "Interpretations."

ities ranged from stuttering, to hearing loss, to epilepsy, to diabetes, to using a wheelchair. Thus, 466 informants allowed themselves to be identified as able-bodied.

About 10 percent of informants identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. I did not specifically ask informants for their sexual preference, but some disclosed this to me. A total of 454 informants either identified themselves as heterosexual or expressed no sexual preference to me or to other interviewers (I presume there were gays, lesbians, and bisexuals among the 454). Of the 52 informants who identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, 29 were lesbian or bisexual women and 23 were gay or bisexual men.

Sixty-six of the women interviewed had had experience with violence or near-violence by men in public places: 12 had been stranger-raped; 22 had been in a situation that they thought was likely to turn into stranger-rape but had not; and 32 had experienced serious physical harassment from a stranger—one woman was knocked off her bicycle into a ditch when a man playfully patted her buttocks, other women were simply and casually punched by passing strangers. I neither particularly selected nor rejected women who identified themselves as having experienced violence in public places. I did not ask women directly if they had been stranger-raped, so that the 34 who chose to reveal a rape or near-rape were probably only a portion of the women in the sample who had had these experiences.

In general, I ask the reader to accept Indianapolis as representative not in any statistical sense but as representative of the range, diversity, and tenor of public harassment and women's reactions to it. Although there are certainly ways in which the Indianapolis area may be typical of the state or the Midwest, I have not distinguished what is distinct about Indianapolis, or Indiana, or the Midwest from what is typical of the United States as a whole. My interviews elsewhere in the country suggest that there are more patterns that are nationally typical than there are patterns that can be ascribed to regional color. My purpose is to outline the basic situation of public harassment.

Although my observations continued for five years and although

my interviews run into the hundreds, it is not a statistical portrayal I give. Instead, I suggest that Indianapolis is a microcosm that represents the public harassment of women by men throughout the United States. I do present some data and suggest some correlations, but I am not interested in numbers of incidents *per se*. My primary interest is how women manage public places—and what these tactics have to say about women’s situation in society in general. I am also interested in what men have to say about their public harassment of women and how both sexes interpret public harassment: We live in a time of competing paradigms for events like public harassment, and in a time of voluble interpreters, both generous and mean-spirited on all positions. Women’s and men’s interpretations limit the present relationship between the sexes as much as they do public harassment.

This is not, however, a story of one situation in which women are besieged by men. Instead, it is a story of women contending with difficult circumstances for which they receive little sympathy from popular belief, advice, or legal and medical practice. Perhaps this book will provide some of that guidance to women, and to men as well.

The ways in which the women I interviewed coped with individual circumstances will not always please readers. Having lectured on this research in different venues and for different audiences, I know that what some of my informants say and what some have done will amuse or outrage some readers. Yet part of the reader’s task is to feel the situation of a woman experiencing harassment: to feel her fright, to understand what she has been taught and read, to think—as she thinks at the moment—of what might happen to her, and to remember—as she remembers—what has happened to her among strangers.

GENDER AND THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC HARASSMENT

Public places can engender a characteristic set of incivilities that can injure an individual’s self-esteem either fleetingly or, since the occurrence of these incivilities is repetitive and recursive, more momen-

tously and even permanently. Women often see the dilemma and dissatisfaction of public harassment as evocative of larger issues in their relations with men—as men often see them as evoking their own perceived gender dilemmas. Few women have practiced gender-specific public harassment toward strange men with anything like the same sense of freedom, entitlement, and righteousness that men exhibit, aside from the breach that teen or young adult women sometimes accomplish in groups.

Yet women do publicly harass. Often female harassment is milder; sometimes gender is the focus, but more often it is race or ethnicity, sexual preference, or disability. Many have documented women's fear of stranger-rape (Brownmiller 1974; Stanko 1985). It is disturbing that, as much as fear of rape restrains women in public places, women *do* muster sufficient racism or homophobia to overcome these fears and to harass members of "other" ethnicities or sexual preference groups.

We as a society have neglected public harassment, especially the heterosexually romanticized public harassment that women experience from men: the vulgar slur that pretends to be flattery, the act of caressing a breast or buttock that a man might explain was compelled because the woman was so alluring, the screams and blows from playful men who harrass women because men believe them lovely—or because they believe them to be no better than dogs. Instead of examining the breached rules of public places *per se*, society prefers to examine tangential issues—architecture, city life, etiquette, and civility—that reflect some, although customarily few, of these public harassment abuses.

This neglect is regrettable. In women's lives, public harassment abuses are frequent reminders of the ever-present relevance of their gender. In the history-less present of public places, gender norms need to be constantly established and are being constantly accomplished. Public harassment reinforces the basic division between the sexes and prescribes the conduct or mere presence of some while punishing others. In the same way, African-American citizens of Indianapolis

consistently report that white merchants and clerks sometimes doubt their ability to pay for even quite small purchases or purchases the white person believes are luxuries (Gardner 1994). As a result, for African-Americans in general, every normal act of paying becomes imbued with proof of financial stability.

Likewise, gender among strangers must constantly be “proven,” even though this is out of awareness, never presumed to be achieved once and for all. Women can come to understand tacitly or explicitly that their claims as members of the category “women” are something that they need to work constantly at achieving, with the hope that this achievement will prove satisfactory to their current audience—and that audience in the public realm may rapidly shift and thus change its standards, making it hard to know how to please reliably. It is not simply a “good” appearance that will make a woman immune (she may hope) to public harassment or even public notice, since each judge evaluates one woman differently. Neither is “good behavior,” even when understood as proper traditional feminine behavior, any guarantee of escape from public harassment, since the extremes of “flattering” public attention are sometimes as troublesome as disapprobation.

In the course of mounting this proof, women sometimes modify their lives and attitudes, their opinions about themselves, their appearance—even their bodies by, for example, plastic surgery. A government lawyer in her thirties told me she had changed her pattern of travel to work to avoid the summertime clutter of male workers near her downtown Indianapolis office building who shouted their appraisals of every entering woman:

I now take the long way to work. That is to say, I go about three blocks out of my way, so I can enter inconspicuously at the back of the building. I don't want to go all through that, the hassling and the grief from guys. I don't want to be reminded how they, men, have power over me, as a woman. I just want to concentrate on my job and think about being a good public servant. I want that to be most important.

For this woman, the workers symbolized greater issues, to be sure. But is her case unusual, or is her discomfort atypical? My observations and interviews say that neither is true.

INTERPRETING PUBLIC HARASSMENT

In chapter 4, "Behavior," I elaborate on some forms of public harassment often encountered by women and others. For now, it will be enough to point out that public harassment can result in an alienation of the individual in public places from fellow citizens both female and male, undermine the trust and civility that many analysts now hold up as the cure for urban ills, and create both a gulf between private and public realms and a gulf between the individual's private and public selves.

Forced dependence on the private realm is often counseled as a remedy for troubles in public places: Women are, and have traditionally been, advised to forsake success outside the home for contented containment within it. (When one encounters a front-page article in the travel section of the Sunday *New York Times* on the attractions of "travel in the home"—armchair travel—it is somehow natural that a woman is the author [Berne 1993].) Thus, when speaking of incidents of public harassment that women have traditionally regarded as trivial or on which women are reminded to "refuse to dwell," some women informants suggested that public harassment is another method of "segregation," a force for relegation to the home. Some women, in more dramatic comparisons, likened their experiences to the Holocaust, to the rape of women and girls in former Yugoslavia, to the experience of being in a pornographic movie, and to Asian-American internment during World War II. Further, white women often compared their situation to that of African-Americans in general; some African-American women discovered through public harassment that they lived in a sexist as well as a racist society.

In short, the public harassment of women is pertinent to feminist concerns with the reification of the public/private split. Public

harassment also suggests ways in which a different environment has affected women's sense of self in society. Public harassment suggests that a woman's unchallenged female self is still located in the home: It is at home, less so in the workplace, that a woman is still an authority on her own experience, without the clutter of etiquette and popular advice, medicalized and legalized labels, and socialization to cloud what she knows to be true. In public places, the harassment of women can still be romanticized, eroticized, or erased.

Incidents like the one I experienced in the Indiana gas station are, I know, at the innocuous end of a spectrum of public harassment that affects women. Many women informants—and more men—actively supported these acts with traditional depoliticized interpretations. Yet almost every woman who supported them was also disturbed by many public harassment abuses; almost no men counted themselves upset by any form of public harassment.

Part of the message of this book is that romanticized accounts of public harassment and unsatisfactory strategies for managing public harassment are not necessarily linked. Women informants who expressed traditional romanticized definitions of public harassment did not invariably feel that they were unable to handle harassment; conversely, women with highly developed politicized feminist consciousness were not always satisfied with their methods of handling harassment. In fact, chapters 5 and 6, on interpretations of and strategies for handling public harassment, tell a more complicated story. Public harassment is, paradoxically, a situation in which even self-identified feminists said they fell back on what they counted as “traditional” strategies for sound and self-protective reasons I will detail later. More than this, women who specifically said they were “not feminists” sometimes acted more actively than did their feminist sisters.

Our current attention to public places is characterized by media attention to the homeless, the deinstitutionalized chronically mentally ill, the affronts to those perceived as lesbian and gay, drive-by shootings, and the victims of startling acts of violence such as the Central

Park Jogger, Rodney King, and Reginald Denny. I am afraid that these subjects will haunt us for some time. Media attention has also been focused on the power of racial conflict, discrimination, and harassment to burst from private places and workplaces into the public realm. Although I concentrate on more mundane and often verbal interactions or minor physical altercations, all these recent media topics underline the price women, gay men and lesbians, and people of color can pay for their trust in and civility toward strangers. These stories also highlight the sound reasons informants sometimes had for suspicion of strangers. These extreme possibilities always coexist with the civility-based etiquette of public places—an uneasy pairing in the consciousness of many citizens who venture into public. Public harassment has long existed, but for some groups it is now beginning to be a more widespread or legitimized cause for complaint and action.

Another part of the message of this book, then, is that although public harassment like gay-baiting and -bashing and racial tension and hostility are realities in public places, we have no excuse to ignore the sexual discrimination and harassment that also occur there. Our attention to these other forms of conflict forbids us to take gender-based public harassment for granted any longer or to write it off as a signifier of little more than momentary inconvenience. Instead, we need to see public harassment as on a continuum of incivility that we can manage by informal strategies or by invoking existing laws or creating new ones.

Most of the sociological and feminist research on the position of women in contemporary American society has focused on either the home or the workplace. With several notable exceptions, such as the work of Mary Jo Deegan (1987), Lyn Lofland (1973), and Elizabeth Stanko (1985), the situation of women in public places has been neglected. In part this neglect reflects popular notions of the irrelevance or triviality of public place behaviors and situations that suggest public places are merely irrelevant transitways for citizens engaged in work, leisure, or travel. But incidents of public harassment are not irrelevant

and are sometimes deeply felt and significant to the individual. To ignore public harassment robs us of understanding of a context, the public realm, in which we all spend an appreciable portion of our lives and which, indeed, most of us could not for long avoid. Worse, to ignore public harassment blinds us to the active discrimination that we still tolerate and that we ourselves—women as well as men, Jews as well as Gentiles, people of color as well as whites—commit in public places. For, paradoxically, public places are contexts that also allow the disadvantaged to avenge themselves against the advantaged or, in the contextual pecking order, against the even more disadvantaged.

WOMEN AND MEN, TARGETS AND OFFENDERS

Public harassment affects men as well as women, and women are sometimes responsible for acts of public harassment. If public harassment cannot be understood as a situation in which men are inevitably vile offenders and women are inevitably innocent gulls, then public places are perhaps the most complex of all contexts to analyze. Women sometimes publicly harass members of social categories different from their own or social categories that they think merit disapproval. I once saw an Indianapolis woman, passing by a gay bar, momentarily drop the hand of her toddler to scream at, then shove, a man who was attempting to enter. She thereby provided passing members of the public with as neat a lesson in virulent homophobia as the lessons in virulent sexism provided by any group of foul-mouthed construction workers who touch and scream at passing women. She also furnished her child with a vibrant lesson about the disdain to which gay men can be freely subjected and the violence with which they may be treated. Onlookers learn from public harassment, too: Here, they may have learned about their fellow citizens' fear- or hatred-induced inaction in coming to the defense of, even rebuking, someone categorized as gay. I have also observed women insult members of a race different

from their own or, as service personnel, subject someone of a different race to heavily communicated inattention, plodding service, recalcitrant help, humiliating scrutiny, or condescending and intrusive banter that played to the customer's race. Women as well as men also practice public harassment against people with disabilities.

Public harassment can be practiced by and on anyone. It is one weapon in the armamentarium for indicating contempt, displeasure, and veiled loathing and hostility. Although I concentrate on women as targets in this book, plainly there are other books to be written about the public harassment of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men or the public harassment of African-Americans or other ethnic groups.

By practicing public harassment, women contribute to the continual sustenance of a social order, namely the public order, that is capable of repressing and demeaning others. Thus, women often sustain the character of the very order that victimizes them. This is so because of their behavior and attitudes toward public harassment in which gender seems to be the point, as well as toward public harassment directed at a victim's ethnicity or disability. Some women refuse to criticize men offenders; some women fault women victims. Those women who practice public harassment on members of another social category give themselves a stake in the traditional apologetics their own harassers will use. This leads to another conundrum, that of choosing strategies for response and philosophies to match those strategies. The call is for civility, but what is needed are practical solutions that can achieve civility where it is lacking and preserve it where it exists.

In the chapters that follow, I elaborate the public harassment of women by men as pervading all contexts, involving all types of men, and encompassing many kinds of behavior and degrees of offense and harm. I also describe how women and men account for public harassment, and how women choose strategies for dealing with it. To begin, I describe how targets of public harassment interact with, modify the actions of, and potentially change places with their harassers. Involved in this groundwork is to make the basis of my work explicit.

I emphasize certain public places among those generally recognized as such by Americans. Of course I am limited by the character of Indianapolis, which lets me report (for example) citizens' behavior in the carnival atmosphere that overtakes the city during the Indianapolis 500, but prevents me from writing about a city that allows same-sex citizens to kiss or hold hands in public places (as I might if I were writing about parts of Manhattan) or ensures that access to public transportation enables people with mobility impairment to be more faithfully represented in public places (as I might if I were writing about Berkeley, California). My focus on Indianapolis constrains my discussion, for the most part, to the public places of cities rather than small towns. My methodology also limits me to a discussion of public places of the present time without much attention to their development. In addition, my discussion is based of course on the public places of American society as distinct from other cultures.

TARGETS OF PUBLIC HARASSMENT

I write especially about the ways in which the various manifestations of public (dis)order to which women are regularly subjected are part of a more general pattern of the communication through which public order can and does operate. More specifically, I explore the characteristic form of social control that we find with regard to these breaches of public order and speculate on the ways in which this social control is related to the experiences of women. I suggest, first of all, that it is useful to think of women—as well as some other groups—as habitually *situationally disadvantaged* in public places: Whatever their status or advantage in other contexts, in public places they are subject to public harassment.

Targets of public harassment are often, although not always, the traditional targets of discrimination elsewhere. These are women, ethnic and racial minorities, gays, people with disabilities, the fat, the old, the disordered—even the inappropriately or unattractively dressed