Part III
Outsiders Inside: Finding Room in the City

Introduction

So far I have looked at the home lives in London of some relatively privileged men and told their stories in relation to domestic aesthetics and families. As I have done that I have touched fleetingly on the lives of other men too – Simeon Solomon, Charles Ashbee's boyfriend Chris Robson, Joe Ackerley's lover Freddie, and Oliver Ford's guardsman renters. These men had fewer resources and had to make a home in London more contingently and under different pressures. In this part of the book I shift focus to look squarely at men who came to the city with little or no money and describe how they made home, experienced family, and shaped their sense of themselves as men and as queer men in more straightened circumstances. More specifically I explore the early adulthood in the 1950s and 1960s of drama student turned teacher Rex Batten (b.1938), office worker Alan Louis (1932–2011), musician and photographer Carl Marshall (1938–2010), and playwright Joe Orton (1933–1967). I thus look at a narrower period than the previous parts of the book in order to discern the impact of the intensifying post-1945 debates about home, family and homosexuality which I have touched on already and which I discuss in more detail in the first part of this introduction.

The focus on this period and on young men who moved to London from elsewhere brings further perspectives on the queer draw of the capital. That move was a pivot in each of the life stories I discuss here: London was the 'home' where they could be themselves. I explore how the four men differentiated between homes within and beyond the city, and so also between the homes of their adulthood and homes of their youth. In different ways, they shuttle in their testimonies between these places and times. They reveal some of the pragmatics of finding and

sustaining somewhere to live, the dangers and possibilities associated with bedsit living, and the mobility and contingency of home for poorer queer men especially – something I discuss more broadly in the second part of this introduction. 'Home' or rather 'being at home' did not necessarily mean where these men slept. Bars, other peoples' homes, even churches and cinemas might have been easier places to retreat to and relax in for men who found little privacy in the rooms where they lived.

Home and homosexuality in the 1950s

The 1950s were rhetorically, symbolically and practically 'unprecedentedly home-centred'.[1] The interwar period had seen a growth in suburban housing, in the availability of domestic consumer products, and in magazines flagging the significance and virtues of the English family home.[2] All this chiefly benefited and reached the middle classes, however, and the broadening out of the fantasy (if not the reality) of the ideal home was most marked after the war. A greater proportion of people married then than in the previous half-century. In 1951 three quarters of men between the ages 25 and 34 were married compared to only just over half in 1921.[3] Marriage as an institution and home as a material place and as an ideal represented what could go right for the nation after the crisis and dislocation of war and the disruption wrought by war-time evacuation, mobilisation and rehousing.[4] After the war, home suggested a space of safety. The interior designer Ronald Fleming said in a lecture of 1949: 'more than ever today the Englishman's home is his refuge and comfort from the bitter winds of a cruel world'.[5] If the domestic and associated familial ideal remained way out of reach for most Londoners (not least because of destruction in the blitz), it was still widely touted in novels, films, media, popular psychology, and through the words of politicians, lawyers, medics and more.[6] The new welfare state was based on presumptions about the tight form and functioning of the nuclear-family unit, further ingraining it as the obvious and ideal basis for domestic life.[7] The 'biggest improvement in the material standard of living in Britain since the middle ages', allowed many more to buy for – and indeed to buy – their own homes.[8] The growing availability of private domestic space saw a retreat from the streets as places of socialization, courtship and sex.[9] Home and family were moreover rhetorical tools in attempts to counter 'war-time morality' and to shore up the institution of the family in the face of a rising divorce rate.[10] Not for the first time,[11] but more pervasively and intensely than before, the home became emblematic

of – and instrumental in – the project of national renewal and the cultivation of a putatively shared set of values.[12]

These values were illuminated in part through a fresh focus on those who did not fit in. Deviating from the trumpeted models of home and family was 'not merely a matter of personal failing but a very public symptom of bad citizenship and lax patriotism'.[13] Those without a home, those who didn't take care of it, or who took care of it a little too frivolously, boded ill. In these respects the homosexual was conjured with renewed paranoia in the newspaper press especially. While home and family were figured as intrinsic to a civilised, modern and forward-looking culture (and also as protection against its exigencies), the homosexual in this coverage threatened these things.[14] Rex Batten wrote that for his first lover Ashley 'the heady years of his teens [in the interwar years] when anything went […] had given way to something very different [in the 1950s]. It was called normality, and that was returning with a vengeance […] His ilk had no place in the new planned economy racing headlong to Utopia'.[15] No wonder that homosexual public sex and socialization were more comprehensively attacked and aggressively policed than ever before.[16] No wonder either that the 1957 Wolfenden Committee recommendations for the partial decriminalisation of homosexual acts – and the legislation that at length followed in 1967 – related only to men who had sex together in private and as a pair. The homosexual was rendered acceptable to the degree he might mimic imagined 'normal', 'respectable', and implicitly middle-class domestic lives.[17]

This imagined intersection of the (respectable) homosexual with (idealized) 'normal' lives was predictably problematic. Apart from anything else those supposedly 'normal' lives were very variable indeed. Although marriage had become 'nearly universal' and families 'more homogenous' (most obviously in terms of their size),[18] many 'normal' men and women in the 1950s felt alienated and crushed by the sense that they didn't measure up either.[19] Historians have given an account of the low levels of home ownership, of the chronic housing shortage, of the shared and cramped conditions many people lived in, of the mundanity of everyday domestic life, and of the extent to which 'divorce rather than death became the great disrupter of marriage'.[20] Though almost a million homes were built nationally between 1945 and 1951, at least that number were needed in the capital alone (and an estimated three to four million in the UK as a whole) to fulfil the government's stated aim of a separate home for each family.[21] If people clearly paid attention to domestic fashion, to home and family, and to what these could signify, relatively few were in a position to do very much about their own living

conditions or about who exactly they lived alongside. It was thus in the interstices between a set of cultural fantasies and ideals on the one hand and material realities and pragmatic circumstances on the other that people muddled through in the everyday with varying degrees of resentment, shame, anger, fun, and love. And muddling through amongst them were homosexuals and queer men. Far from 'stand[ing] apart' as one contemporary commentator had it,[22] these men lived alongside other 'normal' men and women who had similar and also rather different troubles and joys. They had to negotiate the practicalities of finding somewhere to live, sustaining a home in the context of illegality, and also navigating consciously and less consciously those potent cultural fantasies of what home and also homosexuality meant.

Michael Schofield's 1960 survey of 127 men (two thirds of whom lived in London), if hardly representative, gives some sense of the diversity in living arrangements for queer men. It suggested continuing involvement in family and the extent to which an independent home was out of reach for most in his group of (largely middle-class) respondents. Seventeen per cent lived in the parental home; 3 per cent with wives; 1 per cent in hostels; 11 per cent in their own property; 29 per cent in rented accommodation with an absent landlord/lady; and 36 per cent in rented premises where the landlord/lady lived. Of that same group 36 per cent lived on their own; 24 per cent lived with their own or their landlord/lady's family; 7 per cent shared with heterosexual men; and 32 per cent shared with other homosexuals (though it is not clear from Schofield's analysis whether these 'other homosexuals' were friends or boyfriends).[23] It was unlikely in this period that a pick-up would be able to take you home; more unlikely still that a man might have the resources to live just with a boyfriend in a jointly owned home. Even for those among that latter minority there was a felt need for particular discretion in this period because of the increased focus on the 'problem of homosexuality',[24] broader knowledge about the existence and supposed threat of the homosexual, and a rising prosecution rate. Such men also remained absent from the official record (unless they were caught out and arrested). While under census definitions a married couple without children constituted a 'family' and the place where they lived a 'family home', there was (unsurprisingly) no such designation for a homosexual couple.[25] Homosexuals seemed to be out in the cold. This was not a new position for queer men as we've seen, but in the 1950s the homosexual was depicted functioning more determinedly outside and in opposition to supposed norms of the home and family. This was the case even though there was frequently a degree of localised acceptance and support

as well as some fluidity. 'Normal' men like Freddie (whom we met in the last chapter) also took male lovers, for example. Such men had a fine line to tread if they were still to assert their masculinity and heterosexuality, however. They should be invested in the home, family and what they both represented, be a participant in the growing trend for do-it-yourself as a brand of manly home-making, yet also display a disdain or charming incapacity for day-to-day childcare, housework, and the details of domestic furnishings and décor. My mother was taken aside by a neighbour in the late 1950s on account of allowing my father to hang the nappies out to dry. As homes became ever more tightly bound to ideas of subjectivity and identity for more of the population, and as the 'cult of the domestic' became less elite and more generalized after the war, so growing numbers of people became attuned to signs of conformity and deviance therein. 'People are very aware of homosexuality nowadays', wrote Schofield, 'and any bachelor with a nice flat is suspect'.[26]

The professional, discreet and domestically conventional protagonists in reformist film and fiction of the 1950s and 1960s were often rewarded ultimately with stable companionship.[27] In this work feverish, uncertain and dangerous passions were left outside and the home secured a more or less compromised but safer future. Schofield's sociological case study of a middle-class homosexual couple in their 30s captured something similar:

> Case XVIII. D is a successful businessman who lives with H, the editor of a trade paper. Both are in their early thirties and except in working hours, they are seldom apart. They both earn good salaries and they live in an expensive flat. It is furnished in excellent taste and they are extremely proud of their home and lavish attention on it like young newlyweds. There is a certain amount of physical love between them but the most striking thing about them is their complete emotional harmony and the way they rejoice in each others' company. The editor described the sexual side of their love affair as 'unimportant'. Both of them have masculine physiques and neither of them take, or want to take, the part of the passive partner. They occasionally visit one of the London clubs together, but most evenings they are content to stay at home or entertain friends. Although they are careful to keep their relationship secret from their business associates, they have a number of heterosexual friends.[28]

Here, in the early 1950s and just prior to the escalation of anti-homosexual rhetoric, Schofield sets the scene for normalisation.

He notes the 'attention' H and D 'lavish' on their home (rather as you might on a child), and uses the couple's home-centredness to mark out their equivalence to 'young newlyweds'. Their openness to visitors at home, their good taste, their domestic compatibility, their restrained passions and refusal of the feminised 'passive role', and their professional and class status are all also part of Schofield's attempt to squeeze them into the mould of normal middle-class masculinity. This was perhaps partly self-justification too. Schofield, from a middle class family in Leeds, identified as homosexual himself. In the year this book – *Society and Homosexual* (1952) – came out he met the partner (Anthony Sykrme) with whom he lived for the rest of his life. Schofield's case study couple neatly capture the mode of homosexuality which those beginning to press for reform felt might gain some cultural approval.[29]

Not so the 'effeminate', 'isolationist' homosexuals charted in 1948 by the *Mass Observation Survey*;[30] the criminal, sexually 'twisted' 'aimless young men' described by Gillian Freeman in her fictional exploration of London's 'youth culture' (*The Leather Boys* [1961]);[31] and the homosexual, to return to Schofield, who entered queer culture at 'the queer bar level', and who 'will […] have to be able to hold his own in a vicious, jealous, back-biting society where no affair is sacred and every effort will be made to hinder his search for happiness'.[32] There were too the press reports of dangerous criminal types preying on such men. A retired army captain 'became terrified at the sound of a ringing telephone bell' and moved address several times after blackmail threats he received in 1955 and 1956.[33] The blackmailer – a Trinidadian immigrant Kelvin Randon – 'always found him' and 'bled' him of nearly £9000. Another case in 1955 – the year which saw the most arrests and prosecutions for homosexual offences – involved a doctor being phoned repeatedly with demands for cash, while a company director in 1957 was door-stepped for money by a former boxer he had earlier picked up in Soho.[34] Each story replayed ideas about the erotics and dangers of working class and now also Afro-Caribbean men. In these reports, as in the film *Victim* (1961) and Garland's novel *The Heart in Exile* (1953), such men crossed over dangerously into or were at least seen to threaten the middle-class home. They highlighted again the apparently porous divide between public and private space for queer men – something which seemed especially troubling in a period when there was such a premium on having a separate and secure home.

If the homosexual was sometimes imagined partially redeeming himself through a conventional middle-class home and family life, at others he was presented as inimical to the domestic sphere and so also to what

it represented. The cultural centrality of home in terms of individual and national identity was reaffirmed on both counts, leaving queer men to negotiate for themselves (and more self-consciously than most) quite how they were to relate to it.

Making home in London

The growing literature on homosexuality in the postwar period almost invariably focussed on the capital, feeding existing perceptions of a city which drew in queer men and also formed and shaped them.[35] It was the 'obvious' home for homosexuals who did not fit into 'normal' homes and families. Such families were conversely often imagined outside the centre of the chaotic metropolis – in its suburbs or the provinces. Schofield notes that while half of the capital's population came from elsewhere, three quarters of his homosexual interviewees were provincial exiles. 'Two homosexuals living together in a small village or even a small town would almost certainly be a subject for gossip', he wrote. Yet, he went on: 'two living together are less noticeable among the millions of Londoners'.[36]

There were, he went on, places in the capital where it was especially possible for homosexuals to feel at home. I noted the reputation of Chelsea, Maida Vale, and Little Venice in earlier chapters; in the postwar period we can add Earl's Court and Notting Hill. 'I expect you know there is a huge homosexual kingdom just below the surface of ordinary life, with its own morals and codes of behaviour', one of Schofield's interviewees observed. 'In Notting Hill Gate this kingdom within a kingdom seems to have come to the surface. That's why I live there. […] When I walk through Notting Hill Gate I feel I'm at a gigantic homosexual party'.[37] The ease this man felt here – which Alan Louis experienced too – relates in part to the area's broader countercultural reputation associated especially with Afro-Caribbean immigration in the 1950s.[38] A sense of home in the city could be as much about an area which felt safe, permissive and accommodating as about a particular flat, room or house.[39]

In Notting Hill as in other areas of inner London like Paddington, Islington, Pimlico and St Pancras, Victorian and Edwardian terraced housing had been divided and subdivided into flats and bedsits as middle-class residents increasingly moved to the new more spacious suburbs roughly from the 1930s onwards. The exodus might appear to alleviate the capital's housing crisis, but housing in central London remained very poor and overcrowded just at the moment when expectations of

living standards were rising.[40] Men and women newly arrived in the capital from other parts of the UK or abroad, those who didn't have the resources to live elsewhere, and those working anti social hours who needed to live near their work places crowded into central boarding houses and bedsits.[41] These areas were characterised by a high ratio of non-Londoners to Londoners (somewhere around 50 per cent) and by large numbers of people working in poorly paid jobs in the city's hotels and restaurants.[42]

Multiple occupancy was hardly unique to central London, but it was particularly common there.[43] This type of housing – and bedsits in particular – suggested a rupture from family, a state of moral uncertainty, and proximity to the pleasures and dangers of the city.[44] In 'kitchen sink' literature, drama and film,[45] the mid-sixties' sitcom *Bedsitter Girl*, and in social exploration and 'how to' type guides,[46] bedsits were associated – with singleness, loneliness and solitude and simultaneously with a lack of privacy and constant intrusion. Tenants usually shared bathrooms and toilets and were often only separated from others by thin plasterboard. This could lead to conflict and/or close friendships between apparently very disconnected individuals.[47]

Press reports underscored the dangers associated with bedsitter areas. In 1962 news broke of the murder of two men 'who lived in the twilight world of the homosexual and […] died in the garrotter's noose'.[48] The *News of the World* salaciously re-imagined the murder scenes in Notting Hill and Pimlico, and the lives of the two victims. Norman Rickard was 38, 'a muscle man with a background of Civil Service respectability. [Alan] Vigar was 23, a slim pretty boy with a weak chest and theatrical ambitions'. They were, the report went on, 'both bachelors; they lived alone; they were both apparently people who minded their own business, and they shunned women. They both entertained men friends in their room'.[49] Vigar's clothes were folded away and 'his room was almost too neat – like Rickard's'. The *News of the World* slotted the men into an urban queer typology: the weak, effeminate ('pretty') theatrical type, and the man with a double life (civil servant by day, kitted out in 'tight blue faded jeans, a cowboy plaid shirt, cowboy buckled boots and an epaulletted leather jacket' by night).[50] What connected them was that tell-tale neatness and their residence in liminal bedsitterland which seemed almost to incite such crime. The newspaper noted that Rickard was murdered in his basement flat 'where the carpet is blood red'.[51] A week later the *Sunday Pictorial* carried a front page story of a man who 'escape[d] the wardrobe killer' (as the murderer was known: the bodies of Rickard and Vigar had been bundled into their respective wardrobes).

Patrick Lambert (pictured anxiously clutching a telephone) had taken a man home before being attacked. The paper doesn't label him homosexual but three paragraphs in some seeds were sown: he was 'a bachelor' who lived 'in a part-furnished bed-sitting room' and 'work[ed] at a local restaurant'.[52]

The men discussed in the coming chapters remember often insecure and *ad hoc* living arrangements in central London in this period. Cheap accommodation was scarce – a situation exacerbated by the removal of rent controls from some 800,000 houses under the Rent Act of 1957.[53] In my interviews several men nevertheless recall finding places fairly easily – through lovers, word of mouth, friends, or adverts in shop windows. Queer black men had difficulty more because of their colour than their desires: 85 per cent of landladies in 1952 said they would not let a room to students who were 'very dark Africans or West Indians'. Alan Louis, we'll see, had to leave one bedsit because his landlady could not tolerate his black boyfriend.[54] He, Rex Batten and Carl Marshall generally found a live-and-let-live attitude amongst tenants and landladies, however, and others found queer men to share with and to rent from.[55]

Overcrowded central London rooming districts stood in sharp contrast to the new suburbs built between the wars and consolidated in postwar developments. One commentator wrote in 1946 that 'the suburban environment determines the style in which – for good or ill – England lives'.[56] Whatever the realities of life in these areas,[57] the suburbs and the specific design of much of their new housing seemed directly to reflect and entrench prevailing ideals about normative and nominally middle-class home and families. They were associated with 'privacy, status, pride in ownership, and a fear of being left behind (literally) by the tide of fashion'.[58] Such developments pushed out the edges of London so that between 1931 and 1961 the area covered by the city doubled in size even as its population fell slightly. Outer London and the eight satellite new towns provided better housing than many working-class inner Londoners had had access to before, and there was 'a huge migration' from 'slum-ridden or blitzed' inner areas of a city that looked 'broken, drab, patched, tired out and essentially Victorian still'.[59] Thus while the population of inner London shrank by over a million between 1931 and 1961 (from 4.4 million to 3.2 million), the population of greater London fell only marginally in the same period (from 8.1 million to 7.99 million). Suburban housing clearly demarcated one family unit from the next and if suburbia was much parodied, it also represented postwar domestic ideals and aspirations in ways that the bedsitters of central London decidedly did not.[60]

The differences between housing in inner and outer London were of course not absolute: suburban houses were not only lived in by families. Single people, house sharers and lodgers often lived in them too, some of them of course queer – Joe Ackerley, for one, lived outside central London in Putney. Families, meanwhile, still lived in central London – not least in the developing though still insufficient stock of council housing. Some bedsits might be sound-proofed and self-contained and with that commodity much sought after by queer men: direct access from the street.[61] Bedsit accommodation could also be stable and enduring: Quentin Crisp lived in his bedsit in Chelsea Square for 40 years before his move to New York in 1981.[62]

There was nevertheless a conceptual divide between inner and suburban London which several of the men discussed in this book replay.[63] Central London bedsitter living did not in fact separate queer men out as contemporary commentators on the 'homosexual problem' suggested, but such (inadequate) homes certainly represented outsider status and existence on the cultural periphery of a society that was looking ahead to better things and to better, more spacious living conditions.[64] The heady mix of queer urban life, immigration, juvenile crime, and youth cultures threatened what a suburban home and companionate marriage seemed to promise.[65] London's bedsitterland did not fit the culturally restorative and modernizing agenda, though I argue in this part of the book that it did cleave some home space for men like Rex, Carl, Alan, and Joe Orton. I discuss Rex, Carl and Alan in Chapter 5 via their memories of this time, showing how postwar experience shaped their lives and conceptions of home in the period since. I look at Orton separately in Chapter 6. This is partly because my discussion of him is more focused on the 1960s, but also because his testimony is not reminiscence but a diary written at the time. In this way Orton gives a different sort of access to the postwar years.

A study from the 1950s found that inner London areas had the highest rates of suicide in the capital and were characterized by social dislocation, loneliness, and anonymity.[66] In what follows I show that these were not the only ways in which these places were experienced. Sex, relationships, friendships, and community were also a part of bedsitter living – and in ways that were personally and socially formative. London more broadly provided a place for my queer case studies to find and to 'be themselves' in terms of sex, desire, and relationships. The city, or rather particular areas within it, in this way served some of the functions of home.