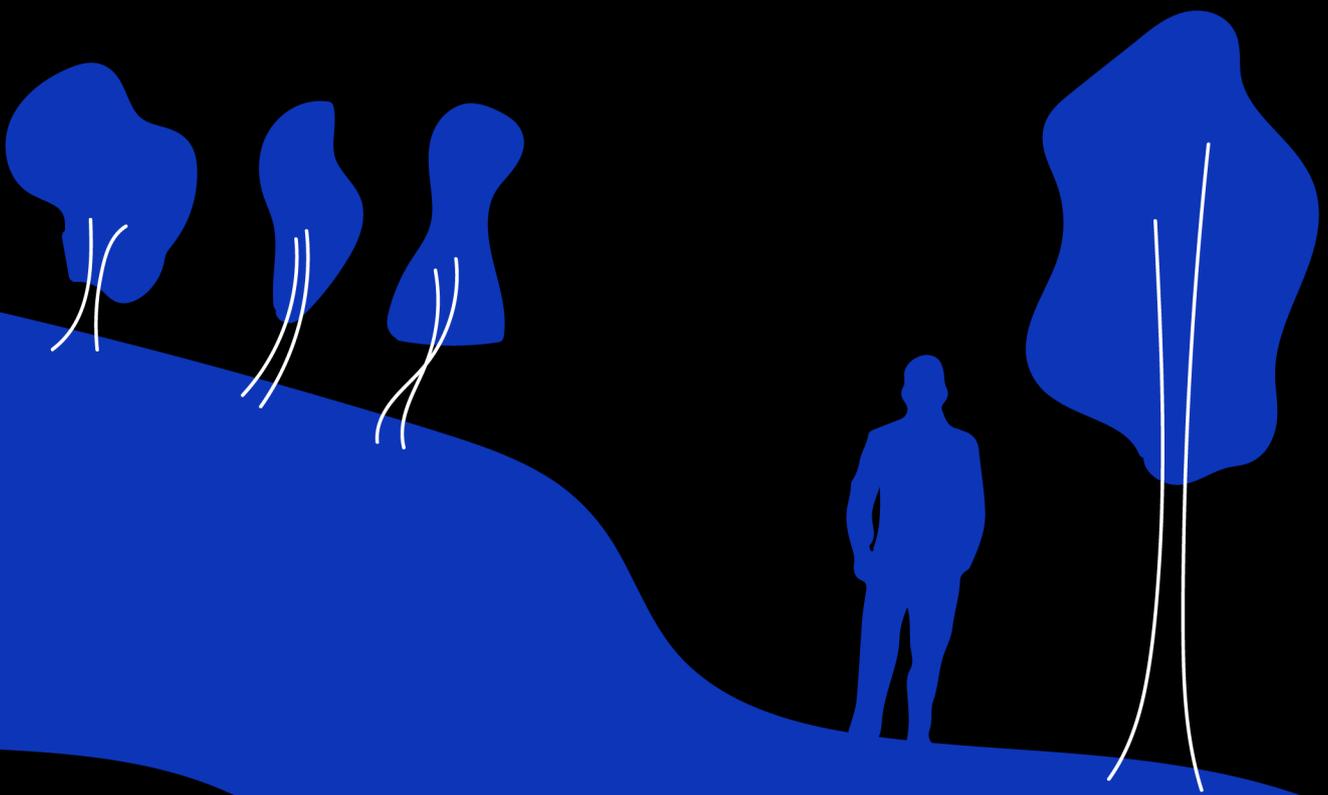


# HIDDEN IN PUBLIC

An anthropological research of gay  
meeting places in The Netherlands



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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an anthropological research of gay meeting places in The Netherlands. At these gay meeting places the activity of cruising takes place, which is the search for same-sex social and sexual interaction within the public space. This activity that mainly seems to revolve around having fun, is for some men more of an emergency solution for a society that does not accept certain forms of sexuality. The government is actively adjusting and closing the gay meetins places in order to discourage men from participating. In this research I will explore how the phenomenon of cruising challenges our societal view on sexuality, by looking into the friction surrounding this activity. I will provide insights into the social and sexual needs of cruising and question the social and cultural value of cruising for the cruisers and our society. This will be done by looking at cruising in relationship to the concepts of sexuality, public space, community and safety. With this research I hope to gain valuable insights that can contribute to current debates about the position of cruising in our society and how non-heterosexualities can exist in the Dutch society.

## **acknowledgment**

I am very grateful for all the brave, kind, and helpful men I have met during this research. I want to thank all the cruisers who opened up to me and shared their secrets, feelings, ideas, stories, and emotions with me. It was overwhelming to see how open you all were and how much you trusted me with very personal topics. You have taught me a lot for this research but also on a personal level. I have so much respect for the cruising culture, and I am so grateful that you allowed me to take a look at this world. I want to thank my key participant for helping me set my first steps in the field. I also want to express my thankfulness towards Stichting Platform Keelbos, who helped me throughout this process. Without them, I would not have been able to write this thesis. I also want to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Herbert Ploegman. You brainstormed with me, helped me, and challenged me. Especially at the end, you were incredibly flexible when it came to giving feedback. Finally, I also want to thank my family and friends for all the emotional support because it has been an intense journey.

# Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Research topic and focus	5
1.2 Thesis outline	7
<b>2. Gaining access &amp; methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Gaining access & reflexivity	9
2.2 Methodology	10
<b>3. The social and sexual importance of cruising</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Connecting sex to space	15
3.2 'The ethics of cruising'	16
3.3 Intimacy, fast sex, and a cup of coffee	17
<b>4. A community of strangers?</b>	<b>19</b>
5.1 Who is the stranger?	21
5.2 Individuals and a feeling of community	23
<b>5. Cruising: a public outdoor activity</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 Cruising in relation to the public space	27
4.1 Sharing public space	29
<b>6. A feeling of safety</b>	<b>34</b>
6.1 The social and physical risks of cruising	36
6.2 Cruisers and the police: a complicated relationship	37
6.3 Important safety aspects	38
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>8. Bibliography</b>	<b>42</b>

1 |

# INTRODUCTION

*"I am gay, and I have been visiting de HOP (gay meeting place) (..) for 25 years. I recently saw your call for users of the HOP, asking to let you know what kind of impact this has on us. I would love to (anonymously) react to this.*

*For me, Ginkelse Zand was the only place where you could meet like-minded men in a safe, relaxed way. It is located far from the inhabited world, so you do not easily cause a nuisance. A lot of places are not suitable for meeting each other during the day, but this one is. In addition, it is a large area with much privacy. I like to meet men, and for me, sex is also an escape/relaxation that I now have to seek in more dangerous places, now that this HOP is closed. Patrolling police/groundskeepers make me feel hunted. You run more risk of being spotted by the public. Meeting men now brings stress.*

*A HOP is essential, especially for men who do not dare to 'come out' because of their religion, culture/environment, or bisexuality.*

*Gay meeting places are an important part of society, even relationships are created here, and they are still (even in this digital age) essential."*

- Results of a questionnaire by Bureau Spotlight (translated from dutch)

The above text is written by a cruiser, which is a man searching for same-sex social and sexual interactions in a covered area within the public space; this activity is called cruising. His regular spot will soon be closed by the government, and in this text he explains what those consequences mean to him and many other cruisers. Cruising is, for many men, an important activity due to its contribution to their social and sexual lives. Cruising occurs at certain specific areas, these are called cruising spots, but most cruisers in The Netherlands call it a HOP, or 'de baan'. Cruising spots can mainly be found in the woods, at a parking lot, in the corners of a park, and they are exceptionally even hidden in the middle of the city.

The main goal of cruising is to find sexual interactions or have social interactions and thus mostly to have fun. However, in addition to all the enjoyment, these spots lead to a complex societal dynamic consisting of meddling policymakers, frustrated locals, and homophobic incidents. In this research, I will explore this complexity by looking at cruising as a phenomenon in itself and as an emergency solution for a society that does not accept certain sexualities. As a first step to better understand all this complexity, I will share a short historical overview, followed by my research relevance, focus, and questions.

## 1.1 Research topic and focus

Cruising spots are an age-old phenomenon, which can be traced back to Greek and Roman times. In these times, sexual relations between men were still normal and accepted, but this changed with the advent of Christianity, where homosexuality was labeled as criminal activity (Bulkens, 2010). Cruising became a worldwide phenomenon, but during this research I will only focus on The Netherlands, where during the Second World War, cruising spots were used as a resistance against the Nazi regime, where homosexuals were persecuted and deported. Meeting places made it possible for homosexual men to have sexual interactions with other men in an anonymous and, therefore, safe atmosphere (Sluis, 2016) (Bulkens, 2010). Before, during, and after the war, it was mainly the 'plaskrul' (a public toilet design) in Amsterdam that became the place for hidden, quick, and anonymous sex in public space. Today, the 'plaskrul' is still an iconic symbol against the repression of homosexuality. After the government

removed many of these toilet designs and improved the Dutch infrastructure, meeting places began to spread across the country to places often located outside the city center. Parking lots, parks, and forests are now popular locations to establish cruising spots (Koop, P., 2020; Sluis, 2016; Hekma, 2004).

Anno 2021, there have been many improvements concerning gay acceptance compared to 80 years earlier. Nevertheless, we still live in a society where being straight is the norm and where many men still do not dare to 'come out of the closet'. Heteronormativity is still heavily experienced by many cruising men, who keep their non-straight sexuality hidden or suppressed. One of the men I spoke to called his homosexual side a "condition" and said he "had to learn to live with that. Another man said, "I have a very nice closet that I would like to stay in." Not daring or wanting to 'come out' is a frequently named reason for men to start cruising. More importantly, it was the most named reason I came across. This makes cruising not only an age-old cultural phenomenon with a rich history, but it also tells us how non-heterosexual interactions are still not accepted in dutch society.

Cruising has been researched before by anthropologists worldwide, but most of the research was done at least ten years ago. With my research, I want to contribute to the research of dutch cruising spots, and I want to fill the gap of the last ten years. This is important since cruising is being discouraged by adjusting and closing cruising spots (Browne, 2007; Flowers et al., 2009), making it even more urgent to study this fast-changing field. What also stands out to me is how research on cruising tends to focus a lot on the dangers of cruising (Flowers et al., 1999; Flowers et al., 2009; van Lieshout, 1995; Munoz, J. E., 2009), drawing attention away from the positive sides that cruising may include as well.

I began my research with a research goal rather than a main question. This research goal is to better understand the cultural and social value of cruising for the cruiser and the societal friction it causes. With this goal, I hope to contribute to current debates about the position of cruising in our society and how non-hetero sexualities can exist in Dutch society. This is important since cruising spots currently still experience much resistance from the government and civilians (Lange, 2015), indicating that non-heterosexual interactions are still not accepted.

In order to reach my research goal, I started my research with the following main questions:

- How can cruising help fulfill a cruiser's social and sexual needs?
- What are the shared social norms and behavioral rules among cruisers?
- How is cruising influenced by public space, and how does cruising influence public space?
- How is the decision-making process of cruisers influenced by how they experience safety during cruising?

## 1.2 Thesis outline

My theoretical framework will be incorporated into my data analysis chapters. By linking theory directly to the insights I gained during my fieldwork, I can use the theory to support the data and use the data to question the theory. For this reason, the data analysis chapters are each linked to both a sub-question and a concept.

In the first data chapter, 'the social and sexual importance of cruising', I discuss the concept of sexuality. In this chapter, I focused on the sub-question: how can cruising help fulfill a cruiser's social and sexual needs? I will discuss the performance of gender and sex, connect sexuality to space, argue how cruising spots can be seen as a space of transition, explain the 'ethics of cruising' and explore the sexual and social needs of the cruiser.

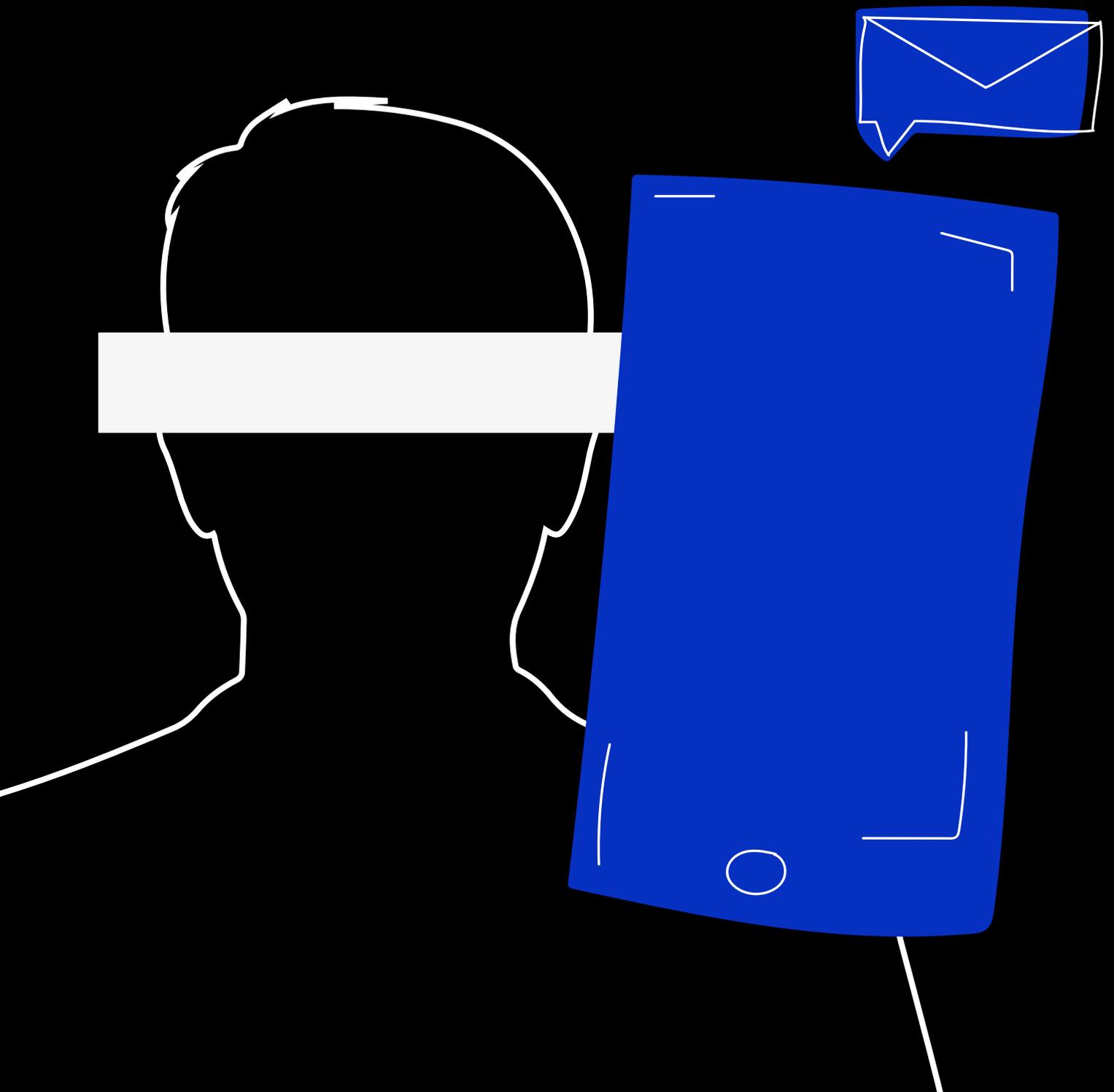
After learning more about the social and sexual importance of cruising, I zoom in on the idea of thinking of cruisers as a community. In this chapter; 'a community of strangers?', I am searching for the answer to the sub-question: what are the shared social norms and behavioral rules among cruisers? To do so, I first take a look at why communities are needed and formed. After that, I question the role of strangers within cruising and question the 'we feeling' among strangers by looking at shared social capital. I will then use this knowledge to discuss how cruisers can be thought of as a community or, instead, as loose individuals.

The third chapter evolves around the space where all the men eventually come together: the public space. The chapter is named 'cruising: a public outdoor activity'. This chapter will start by defining why cruising is inseparably connected to public space. Then I will analyze the frictions between the way space is conceived, perceived, and used. This chapter will help me answer the sub-question: How is cruising influenced by public space, and how does cruising influence public space?

The last chapter is about safety, named; 'a feeling of safety'. Here I want to answer the question: How do cruisers perceive and experience safety during cruising? I first explain the social and physical risks and how they are perceived and experienced by the cruisers. Then I discuss the relationship between the police and the cruisers.

In the end, I will reflect on my research findings and goal in the conclusion.

# 2 | GAINING ACCES & METHODOLOGY



In this chapter, I will first explain what I had to keep in mind when gaining access to the field, who helped me gain access and how my research was influenced by me being my own research tool. Then in the methodology section, I will discuss the research methods I used, how these methods contributed to the collected data, and who the participants are.

## 2.1 Gaining access & reflexivity

I started my research knowing that I had to keep a couple of things in mind. First of all, my research concerns a very sensitive subject. I dealt with a vulnerable group of men that I wanted to ask very personal questions about sexuality, homophobia, personal struggles, fears, concerns, and emotions. I was afraid that many of the cruisers might not want to open up about some of the topics since they might consider them to be loaded or taboo. Even if the men wanted to open up to me, it still might be difficult information to share and talk about. Nevertheless, it was essential for me to gain access to these topics to understand cruising and fulfill my research goal. Besides the sensitivity of my subject, I also realized that anonymity is, for many cruisers, of great importance. After doing a theoretical observation, before the start of my field research period, it also became clear that anonymity was of great importance to cruisers. This made me expect that I might get a reluctant attitude from them when approaching them for questions.

Another important element that I was aware of when starting this research was that I am a woman researching a field full of men. When I, as a woman, would enter a cruising spot, it would directly become clear that I was not there for cruising. The men might feel like I am bothering them, or I might give the impression to be invading their space. At the same time, as a woman, I also felt vulnerable to go to a cruising spot by myself. From a young age on, I have always learned to avoid going to remote and calm areas alone in order to keep myself safe. Growing up, I had to bike past a cruising spot when I wanted to visit my sports club; my dad would always warn me about this spot and tell me to just bike past it quickly. However, now, I had to conduct my research in precisely the places that seemed unsafe for me, something that went against all that I had learned about keeping myself safe. For this reason, I decided at the beginning of my research that I would only visit cruising spots during the daytime, at a spot where I would be mobile enough to leave at any moment or under the supervision of a cruiser I would trust.

So with all of this in mind, I started my search to gain access to the field. My main goal was to be a trustworthy person to them, who would listen, not judge them, and where they would feel comfortable with. One of the first things I did was contacting Stichting Platform Keelbos, an interest group for cruisers. They are the only cruising interest group and see themselves as the only organization that stands up for cruisers. Stichting Platform Keelbos started to help me directly after connecting with them. They generously involved me in all their email contact, in their meetings, and connected me to cruisers. They also shared a lot of documents with me and introduced me to my key participant, who is a spokesperson for the organization in the region of Amsterdam. Stichting Platform Keelbos seems to have a good image among the cruisers; they are a known name and help men filing police reports after accidents and do everything in their power to prevent cruising spots from being closed or adjusted by governmental organizations. Due to the image Stichting Platform Keelbos has among the cruisers, I seemed to gain trustworthiness among the men I connected to via Keelbos. This really seemed to help me pursue the image I wanted to create for myself and contributed to a more open attitude from the

cruisers towards me. During the rest of my research, I will use the abbreviation SPK instead of their full name.

Much information on cruising spots can be found online. Since these websites are very easily accessible and allowed me to look around with the anonymity of the internet, I could gain information on cruising spots and the cruisers among each other without interrupting the ordinary course of action. One specific cruising website became my regular spot for research. When going to this website, the first thing you see is gay porn. When pressing on a random spot in the screen, you go to the homepage where a newsfeed can be found. The website's most essential features for my research were the private chats, the story page, and the map showing all the cruising spots in The Netherlands. Each spot had an individual page that shows the trustworthiness of the spots, a star rating, information on the route, most visited times, and important notes on safety or accessibility. On these pages, one can also leave a reaction. The website eventually became a way to learn more about cruising and the cruisers by observing; it also offered me a chat function to contact the cruisers.

## 2.2 Methodology

The main methods I used for this research were online and offline observations, semi-structured interviews, a walk-along, and document analysis. Due to COVID-19 measures, the emphasis was more than usual on 'non-physical' research. My research took off by getting in contact with SPK. I was involved in almost all the email contact between the SPK members and the parties with whom they were in discussion. This email contact would sometimes occur multiple times a day, but other times I would not receive an email for a couple of days. It was very valuable for my research to see the topics the SPK members discussed and the thoughts they shared; it gave me an impression about how certain events made them feel. Emotions like frustration, happiness, and even grief for a fellow cruiser who had passed away, were shared in these conversations. The conversations would be more informational in other emails, especially if the communication was not between the SPK members themselves but between the SPK and members of a governmental organization. I decided not to share the names of the specific governmental organizations in my thesis because I do not want to interfere with these sometimes still ongoing cases.

SPK shared many documents concerning consultations, lawsuits, documented meetings, and guidelines (of governmental organizations) with me. By doing document analysis, I started to better understand the tensions between the government and the cruisers. It allowed me to look at policies, interventions, decisions, and behavior from different perspectives. I also learned more about these different perspectives by joining the meetings of SPK. I joined one meeting between a governmental organization, a neighborhood organization, and SPK. Since this meeting featured different groups with different visions on the same issues, I learned more about the different perspectives of these groups. Another interesting meeting I joined was a mediation conversation between mediators working for the police and SPK. This mediation conversation was interesting since the mediators had the job of emphasizing both sides of the case we discussed that day; it again showed another perspective on the same issue. All the meetings of SPK I joined were online video calls since this research was conducted during the covid lock-down.

One of my key participants, the spokesman of SPK in the region of Amsterdam, helped me to prepare to go into the physical field. This key participant, a white young adult male theater maker/

actor, is a cruiser who is also regularly at cruising spots to conduct interviews for his own research. I first got to know this participant by email via SPK, we then had two video calls, and after that, I asked if he could give me a tour of a cruising spot. I trusted my key participant completely, making it more comfortable for me to do the walk-along. We visited a cruising spot he regularly visits himself. We talked about his experience with this spot during the walk along, his vision on cruising and cruising in relationship to society. When I saw something I did not understand, I could ask him about it. This walk along contributed a lot to my research since our conversation brought new insights and because it was good for my research to experience the atmosphere and 'feel' the space I was researching. After all the stories I already heard of cruising, and after all the documents I read about cruising, this experience made it easier for me to visualize these stories.

After the walk along, I decided to go to a cruising spot on my own. On the cruising website that I introduced before, I looked for a cruising spot nearby. In order to keep myself safe I decided to go to a spot that was not too remote, that had some non-cruising visitors as well, where I could go by bike, and I could find some activities during the daytime. In order to remain safe, I decided to visit this spot during day time. On the cruising website I read that it is a spot with relatively few visitors, and I found directions on how to find it. I visited the spot during the daytime, and by following the descriptions, I could easily find it. I observed some of the men and discovered that my walk along taught me a lot about recognizing cruisers and indicating a spot as a cruising area by recognizing specific elements. What I also learned during my observation was that, as expected, I, as a woman, could not approach men without it making them shy. When asking cruisers questions, they would directly back away and make clear that they were not interested. This is in contradiction to my key informant's experience, who told me he could interview the men by approaching them on the spots. This gave me the insight that as a woman, or maybe more generally as a non-cruiser, I can not expect cruisers to trust me with their story. The men's reaction at this spot made me decide that I would do no other field observations and interview attempts since it made me uncomfortable that I seemed to bother these men and invading 'their space'. I attach high values to respecting my participants' boundaries, and so this way of collecting data was limiting me and did not seem to fit me.

What did work was doing phone interviews. Via the cruising website I approached men on the chat, and via SPK a call for interviewees was sent out. Phone calls are not only a practical decision during Covid times; they are also a very safe way for both the participant to communicate and me. I asked all the men their preference for time and date and made appointments with the men who were only available at very specific moments. This way, the men would have more control, and I could directly show them that I respected their boundaries. When calling, I would directly introduce myself, tell them about the research, ask their permission to use the call in my research, and make clear that I would keep their identity hidden. This is also why I do not use the real names of the man I interviewed in all vignettes but a pseudonym.

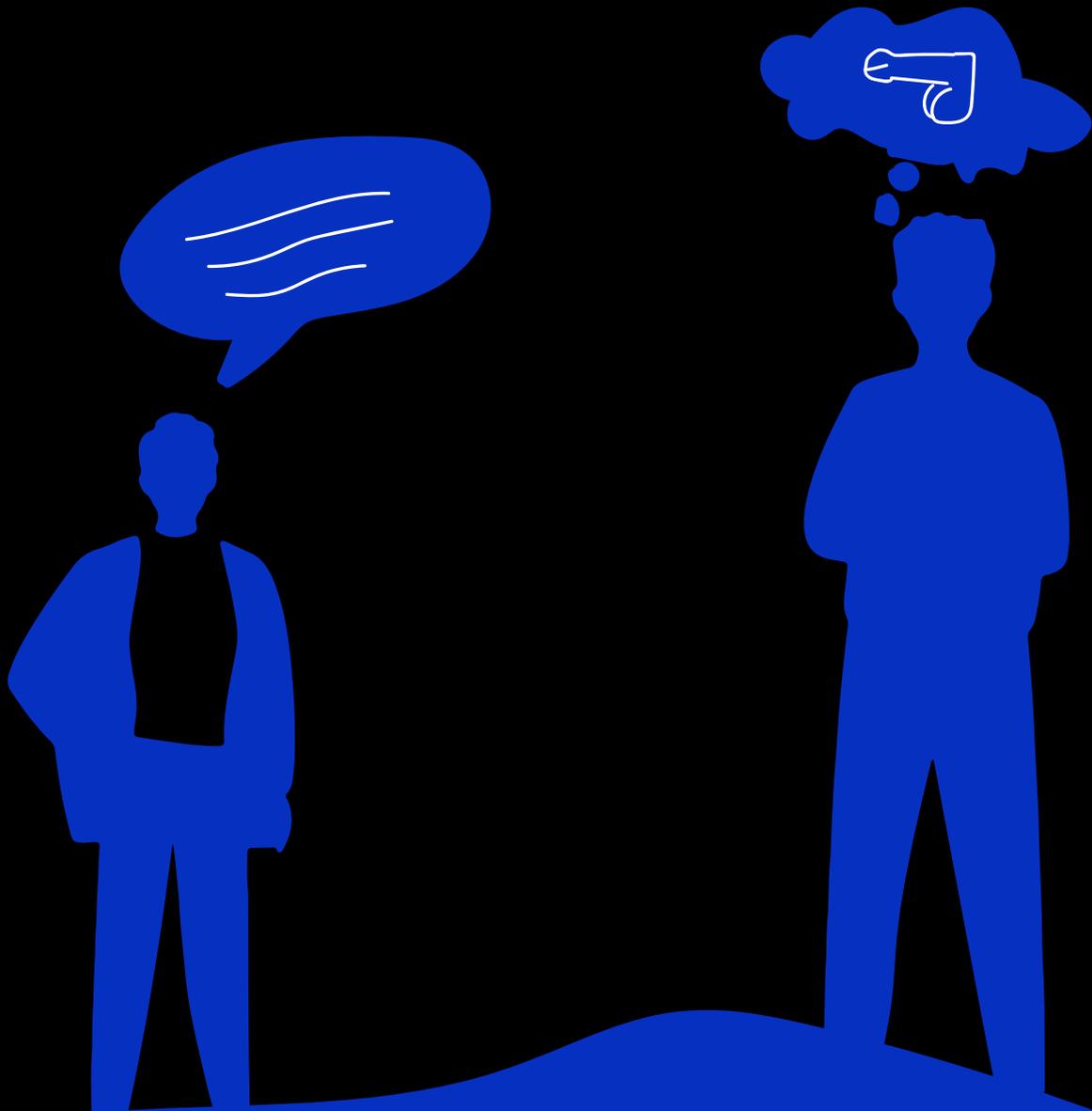
The phone interviews became a very valuable way of collecting data. The phone gave a sense of anonymity, and when talking about difficult/ private topics, they did not have to look me in the eye. I tried to make clear at the beginning of my phone interviews that nothing would be strange for me and that they could be as open as they want to. Against my expectations, all the men were very open to me. They shared many personal stories with me and answered every question, even if I noted that it was ok not to answer if it made them uncomfortable. The interviews were semi-structured, so when I conducted the interviews, I would have a set of questions to start with, but eventually, a conversation would go its own way. There was a lot of space for spontaneity, which mainly resulted in the men

telling me every detail about everything they thought, felt, and experienced. Many men gave me a very in-depth look into their lives, including tragedies, emotions, and desires. For many interviewees, the interview seemed to be a good opportunity to express themselves and to feel heard. A big part of the men I talked to could never talk to someone about their cruising experiences since they keep it a secret or a low-key topic within their lives. These men, who were sometimes dealing with loneliness, seemed to value having a good conversation. This could be felt in the length of the interview but also in the topics we discussed.

Almost all the interviews were with white males between the ages of 30 and 70. This group of men seems to be the most active on the cruising website and the most involved in SPK. During interviews and even in documents, it was always mentioned that cruisers are from all different ages, cultural backgrounds, and layers of society, saying that 'it is a reflection of society'. However, in reality, this was only reflected in the participants I had connected with partly. I did notice the men came from different layers of society and that there was a slight difference in cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, I mainly talked to middle-aged white men when it came to age and skin color there was not a lot of diversity. During my walk along and my cruising spot observations, it became clear that there was more diversity among the cruisers than I had yet connected with. I saw an extensive range in age but also in skin color. Since talking to cruisers at the spot themselves and the lesser involvement of younger and non-white people in SPK, it was hard for me to collect data on this group of participants.

Based on all the data I gathered with the above-mentioned methods, I will share my insights based on this data in the following four chapters.

# 3 | THE SOCIAL AND SEXUAL IMPORTANCE OF CRUISING



After Stichting Platform Keelbos had sent out an email with the call for cruisers wanting to help a student by doing an interview, I got multiple answers back. One of the answers was the following: "Hi Iris, I saw your call, and I would like to help... My name is Nick, 52 years old, and a truck driver. I am secretly bi-sexual, and well, it is a good combination with being a truck driver. So if you ever want to date, haha, just kidding... but if you want to know something, let me know. xxx Nick.". After receiving his email, I was first surprised by his joke about dating me. It turns out he is not the first that tried persuading me. When thinking about it, many of the men I talk to do not identify as gay but rather bi-sexual, so why wouldn't they give it a try.

I call Nicks during day time on a weekday. He told me he prefers that since he is on the truck and thus alone. I was a little bit nervous that he would continue to flirt with me once he answered the phone, but the only thing I heard was him enthusiastically greeting me. Nick recognizes my name from our email conversation and says that he has time to call now. He puts me on the speaker, and I can hear the sound of the traffic in the background. Nick talks very casually. His tone of voice sounds sweet and helpful. We call while he is working, meaning he is calling from the truck while driving. He continues to tell me laughingly that "cruising is a great secondary employment condition of being a truck driver", referring to how many parking spots for truckers are used for cruising. When asking Nick about his sexuality, he answers, "I am bisexual. It has crept in a bit. That is how you are born, you can resist it, but you are what you are.". When I ask him if he is 'out' he answers, "the people in my environment do not know it. I have a beautiful closet, and I would love to stay in it"; when asking him why he explains, "because at home they will not understand it.". Nick continues to talk and says he "comes across many people with religions, thousands of reasons, that have the same problem but eventually you have to do something with it.". By doing something with it, he means that we all want sex in the end, so we find a way to get that, for example, by cruising. I ask if he ever thought about 'coming out' but he says he will not do it, "My girlfriend is from the bible belt, and there it is not possible.". I always regarded The Netherlands as a secularized country, so in the beginning, I was surprised to hear this, but not anymore. Nick is not the first one to explain to me how religion plays a big role in suppressing his sexuality. When I tell him this, he agrees that religion still plays a big role for many cruisers.

Nick is not yet finished explaining what bothers him about his own sexuality and the society's view on it. He says, "it should be normal, I think, being bisexual, it is strange that in 2021 it is still such a big thing to not be straight, especially in the more religious parts. You also have dutch Islamic people, there you also do not even dare to tell that you are not straight, then they might hang you". Nick cruises three times a week, sometimes one time a week, "it depends on work" for him. We continue our talk about Nick's journey of accepting his own sexuality. Apparently, his thoughts always were; "Am I a moron? Am I retarded?" But he then explains that things changed because of cruising, saying: "I meet a lot of people with the same deviation, you feel like you are alone, especially in the past it was something no one talked about", due to cruising Nick now knows "I was normal, I am not alone.". But he also adds that; "you feel that you walk around with a secret". He is positive about his profession; "being a truck driver is a very free profession. At home, I am different. That is just the way it is. I switch in a minute. You do your thing there, and you do your thing here"; "Everyone is welcome". He ends our conversation by saying that "it is something a little strange. It is very social and feels like coming home with fellow sufferers."

I was impressed by my conversation with Nick, him finding himself deviant and doubting about being a 'moron' or 'retarded'; showed me how big of a role hiding his sexuality played in his self-acceptance and in his wellbeing. It touched me that he lives with these thoughts. I wanted to know more about Nick, so I decided to call him again.

Also, this time he is driving in his truck. When I call him, he is enthusiastic again, and he puts me on speakerphone. I explained to him my above-mentioned thoughts of our last conversation. I ask Nick what cruising gives him that he can not get at home, he answers me saying; "you can test your sexual boundaries, stretch them, you can do things that you can not do at home. People experiment", he adds; "you feel more open outside of your relationship. You dare to take an extra step". When asking him if people sometimes have fantasies or needs that go too far for him or that are strange to

him, he answers; "sometimes people go a little extreme, but the most important thing is that you respect each other."; "I find something strange, and multiple people find it strange. But everyone has their own kind. But yes, I find some things strange.". He ends this part of the conversation by stating, "what is normal? It is all normal!."

Nick and I talk a little more about the social part of cruising. He tells me a similar story as in our previous call about how cruising taught him that being bi-sexual is no longer a problem to him and that he learned it was fine and that he is not alone because of cruising. He does add one new thing to the conversation, saying that, "In the past, we would sometimes drink a beer, in corona times this is a little bit different, but normally we would have great summer nights.". When we end our conversation, I feel good about our talk. I admire that Nick was willing to share very private thoughts with me and was not shy about sharing his feelings.

### 3.1 Connecting sex to space

In the late 20th century Judith Butler, a queer theorist introduces the theory of 'doing' gender. She states that having fixed sexual identities is problematic (Lyons & Lyons, 2006, P. 155). Vance (1991) states something similar around this time, saying that sexual meaning is, just like identity, not fixed but rather produced by the time, place, and the culture it takes place in. In Judith Butler's book Gender Trouble (1990) she explains in her theory, 'doing sex', how sexuality is a social structure. According to her, there is no biological link between men being masculine and women being feminine, but it is rather a result of performance. This performance of gender mainly consists of individuals acting in an expected way, men behaving masculine and women behaving feminine. As a result of this expected behavior, gender is reproduced and thus made real. We are not always aware of our performance, but we can change this script once we are.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that changing the script is not without consequences. People who do not live up to the expectations within our society have to deal with the consequences, like exclusion, bullying or even violence. Judith also adds to this theory that seeing heterosexuality as the 'normal' all other sexual preferences are made abnormal. The labeling of gender and sexuality can, because of this negatively influence the actors identifying as not heterosexual.

According to Vance (1991), There is a difference between homosexual behavior and homosexual identity. Also Katz's (Vance, 1991) states this and further explains that same-sex relationships, physical and/or emotional, are not evidence for identifying as 'gay'. But they are more of a start point to many questions about the meaning of these acts to people who are part of them and in what culture and time they live (Vance, 1991). This relates to Butler's theory in the way that we as a society tend to label sexuality based on what is expected by society, but that in reality sexuality isn't fixed but rather fluid, just like gender.

In the vignette, Nick states, "I am bisexual. It has crept in a bit, that is how you are born, you can resist it, but you are what you are.". His explanation that it took time for him to 'become' bisexual shows how sexuality is indeed fluid, like both Judith and Vance stated. It shows how a person's sexuality might be something you are 'born with', but at the same time, one's sexuality is a process in which one can grow, develop and thus change. All of this is, like Vance states, produced by time, place, and the culture it takes place in. Nick's religious environment might not have influenced the fact that he likes both men and women, but it did influence the way he looks at his own sexuality and the way he performs his sexuality. So, first, Nick discovered his bisexual side. He then suppressed his bisexuality, but when he

started cruising, his sexuality changed again. Nick learned to accept his bisexuality and looks differently at his bisexuality. Cruising gave him the opportunity to test his sexual boundaries and experiment in a new place, creating his sexuality to maybe even change again. In this way, a person is always producing and reproducing his own sexuality.

In the interview with Nick, there is also another very clear overlap where a practical example illustrates Judith Butler's theory on performing gender. Like many other cruisers I talked to, Nick still feels like their homo or bisexuality is not accepted in today's society. Nick describes it as walking around with a secret, others have called it in interviews; "playing theater". Nick describes in his interview that when you are from a religious area, it is not possible to be open about your bisexuality. Many of the other cruisers I talked to also have religious motives behind not wanting to 'come out' as being bi or gay. Not daring to show non-expected sexuality and thus 'playing theater' shows that as a result of being in an environment where heterosexuality is seen as normal, and other sexual preferences are made abnormal, the men have decided to follow the script and only perform, maybe not their gender, but very much their sexuality as straight. At the same time, they also have become aware of the script, and they found a space where they feel allowed to be themselves and show a side that by society is described as abnormal.

It becomes even more interesting when we combine this idea of performing gender and sexuality with a theory of Munoz, named the "assimilationist homosexual" (Munoz, 2009. p. 55): someone who is willing to 'turn off and on' their sexuality. Munoz explains that the 'assimilationist homosexual' can find his sexual pleasure in the anonymous sphere of a cruising spot (Munoz, 2009). This seems to make a cruising spot almost an area of transition where one turns his sexuality 'on' by entering and 'off' by leaving. My material shows that one does not turn his sexuality on or off but rather decides to perform his sexuality differently based on the space where this performance takes place. This can be seen in how Nick is performing an accepted form of sexuality at home with his girlfriend, but he changes the script when entering a cruising spot, where he performs a not accepted side of his sexuality.

### 3.2 'The ethics of cruising'

Tim Dean is a philosopher who researched 'barebacking' (sex between strangers without a condom) from an anthropological perspective. According to Dean (2009), Cruising spots have an uncommon and specific look on how sexual encounters can make sexual dreams come true and how it should take place. Dean explains that the principles of cruising do not have anything to do with the amount of sex or the kind of sex one has. It is about "how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness.". This 'own otherness' is about accepting and respecting the sexual dreams of 'the other', even when they are different from your own. Someone's 'own otherness' means that you must accept and respect your own sexual dreams. Dean named this 'the ethics of cruising', which illustrates how cruisers try to create a space accessible for whoever wants to participate while always respecting one's sexuality.

Similar findings to 'the ethics of cruising' come out of my research. Cruisers shared stories with me about how "all kinds of men visit these spots, from young to old, from fat to thin, feminine males but also masculine males" and that "everyone is welcome there". Nick also highlighted in his interview that there might be things that you find strange, but that everything is normal and that everybody can

do their own thing. Other participants told me that “everybody can be themselves”, “you can be you”. Some men want only sex with a specific ‘type’ while others are less critical, some are very expressive when trying to get attention from the other men, while others are shy and prefer to first take a look. At cruising spots, you let others be themselves, and you treat people with respect.

In other words, cruising ethics are all about ‘you can be you’, and ‘you learning about you’. Nick mentions in his interview that sexual boundaries can be tested and that being in a space outside of your relationship gives you the opportunity to do things you would usually not dare to do. Also, other participants indicated that “cruising spots are a place where you can learn about homosexuality”, saying: “cruising spots taught me that it is ok to be gay. How it works and what it is”. When growing up in a hetero family and a heteronormative society where no one teaches you anything about what gay sex can or should be, a cruising spot can be a space where you can learn more about this. “Married and young men come to discover, they are discovering. They first take a look from a distance to see what happens and they are not yet quite sure what they want, what they do not want. It is a very safe environment for your first acquaintance”, a participant explained. Once you learn more about what you do and do not want, you can tell this to cruisers when you encounter them. The advice of a cruiser concerning this topic was that “you determine for yourself what you are looking for, be honest about it, also make sure you make it clear, no is no, even if you have to say it three times..”. Listening and respecting someone’s ‘no’ is a common ‘rule’ but “sometimes someone is really horny, and you have to say no three times”. This and learning to be clear about what you want, because “if you do not say it they can not take it into account”, is a common subject, showing that cruising requires you to grow a thick skin.

Besides all the sexual needs, cruising also has a large social component. Therefore, in the next subchapter, I will explain more about the sexual and social needs of cruisers.

### 3.3 Intimacy, fast sex, and a cup of coffee

Nick is a white man, identifying himself as a bi-sexual trucker from a religious area of The Netherlands. However, when it comes to cruisers, men from various layers of society, cultural backgrounds, and all ages cruise, and they all have their own reasons, needs, and morals. When talking to cruisers and when reading other cruising research, the emphasis is mostly on the search for sex. Especially during interviews, cruisers would highlight that it is about having or watching sex and that they “just want to have fun”. Cruisers consider cruising spots as easy accessible, free, no strings attached, and anonymous. When you are married or when you are not ‘out’ yet, a cruising spot is a space where you can have sexual interactions without any trace leading back to you ever being there. This need for same-sex interactions, when you do not feel free to seek these interactions in other locations like dating/sex apps or gay bars, should not be underestimated in its values since one’s sexuality can have a daily influence on one’s life. A participant described this by saying that “a cruising spot is important, especially for men who are not able to come out of the closet because of their religion or culture/environment”, something similar to what Nick said in his interview. Another man described that cruising was an “emergency solution” to him since he has been alone for so many years and still needed to fulfill his needs. Another explained how “it is a piece of desire that can not be satisfied at home”.

Where cruising is for some just about sex, it is for others also an important part of their social life. SPK (Stichting Platform Keelbos states) that a “cruising spot is still a social retreat for particularly lonely men that have built a bond with countless other men who visit the same spot”. In a conversation, they

described how “intimacies and fast sex are not predominant and decisive, but the social component, why the men involved want to meet there, are evident and very important.” This statement of SPK is confirmed a lot when talking to the cruisers. Many of them explain to me how “the social aspects of a cruising spot are of extremely important value”, that it offers them “a reason to get out of the house and be recognized by other visitors”. In the vignette, it also becomes clear how cruising spots offered Nick conversations with like-minded people and that he learned from the other cruisers to accept his own sexuality. It is not uncommon for cruisers to have a talk, to drink a coffee together or have a beer or smoke. This illustrates how these men from all different ages, backgrounds, and layers of society can find a common connection because of the cruising spots.

For some men, the motive behind cruising is mainly to find sexual and not social interactions. I noticed that it is mostly the men who came ‘out’ for their non-heterosexuality, to be the visitors who tend to attach more values to the sexual interactions rather than the social ones. Some of the men going to cruising spots are very attracted to the idea of quick, easy, anonymous sex. They like the tension of having sex with a stranger, like the thrill of being in a public space, or just really do not want any strings to be attached, which is all part of cruising. Many men keep their cruising experience a secret from their partner, but for others, it is something they share with their loved ones (some literally sharing it in the form of a three-way). A man who is in a gay marriage told me that they “love each other, so it is ok for the other person to eat dinner somewhere else”, referring to sex with another. He explained that so many straight couples cheat and that it always comes to light, “even if you say it is not allowed, it will still happen, so why would you not just be open about it”. Another man, who is in a straight marriage, is open to his wife about his cruising adventures but “she does not want to know anything about it”. He explains that cruising saved his relationship: “I have needs, and if I could not do this (cruising), then we would have split up”. This is important to note since it shows that there are so many different motives behind every cruiser.

To conclude: Sexuality is performed and an ongoing process, influenced by the time, place and culture it takes place in. In our society, heterosexuality is seen as the ‘normal,’ and all other sexual preferences are made abnormal. Many cruisers are aware of this, and for those we do not feel free to ‘come out,’ a cruising spot can become a space of transition. Within the spot one can perform a sexuality that is not accepted outside of the zone, making him ‘switch’ scripts when leaving or entering the zone. The ‘ethics of cruising’ show how the cruising spots offer a space allowing ‘you to be you’ and ‘you learning to be you’, making cruising spots a safe space for self-development and self-acceptance. Where the needs for some cruisers are mainly focused on the sexual part, there is also a large proportion of cruisers, where cruising also has a contribution to their social lives. This social component is especially essential for the men who are not ‘out’ or experience loneliness. In the next chapter, I will further explore this social aspect by exploring the ‘we feeling’ among cruisers and if cruisers can be thought of as a community.

# 4 | A COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS?



*Today I have a phone call with Jan. I got to know Jan after an email was sent out by SPK with the question of who wanted to help a student by doing an interview. Jan reacted and told me I could call whenever I wanted. So I did.*

*When I called Jan, it turned out he was at the cruising spot. I first thought it was a co-incident, but it turns out Jan goes there every day. He explains that he almost always goes to the same spot; "I pass it when I go back and forth to town. I am a fanatic cross cyclist and long-distance cyclist. This is also one of the reasons I go here, but sometimes I see it as a win-win situation. Those two activities are not always separated from one another. I ask Jan if cruising is a secret activity for him, he answers, "the most intimate acquaintances know about it, but I don't hang it on my nose"; meaning he does not want too much attention focused on it. He follows this up by saying, "I am not ashamed of what I do here, it is just a very direct way of looking for sex contacts. I am also on Grindr. I like younger men, and I even get approached by these younger men here in the woods too. Here it is not always busy, but sometimes something happens. What I like the most about it is that it is direct, no bullshit, no difficulties."*

*I understand why cruising is an easy way of finding sex, but I wonder what the advantages are of always having sex with strangers. So I ask him about this, he reacts saying, "it is also strange to have sex with a total stranger, but that is also the fun part. The tension is a very nice element, but it is not my favorite form of sex. It is rather an emergency solution. I have lived alone since 2007, and if you never bump into someone where you seriously want to connect with, then this is indeed an emergency solution." After we deviate a bit from this theme, we come back to it a little later when I ask him; "do you often meet the same men?". Jan says, "there is a group of regular visitors, the hard core, where I now belong to. Sometimes I think 'there you have those bitches again', but they will probably think that of me too". He starts to laugh and continues, "still, it surprises me that every time you are there, you can see a car that you have never seen before, so there is a constant flow." "Do you have a feeling of community with this hard core?", I ask. Jan answers: "Yes, we are with 4 or 5 men who always say hello to one another. With one of them, I regularly talk, with another, I sometimes talk. I am a loner, but there is still a non-sexual side to it. It became an important part of my social life. Now when I bike past it or make a visit, I always have a talk or a little adventure. For many single gay's like me, cruising is an important part of our social contacts."*

*I am calling Mike, a white man who has been cruising for more than 35 years. I met Mike also via SPK. Mike gave me an interesting description of a cruising space, saying: "a cruising spot is just a bar without drinks". "Why not go to a real bar then?" I ask him, to which he answers, "I have a form of asthma, I am from a time where everybody was smoking in a bar, and the advantage of a cruising spot is that when people smoke, it does not bother me." It took Mike 30 years to 'come out', "I was afraid I would not be accepted".*

*I ask Mike about why he cruises and if he also cruises for the social aspect of it, to which Mike directly says, "bluntly... no, only for sexual contact". Mike then explains to me that there is something that he calls 'common sense' when cruising. Things like "walking around naked at a parking lot where other people are as well, is just not neat.", and that this also counts for leaving behind trash. "when I have a tissue with me, I put it in my pocket and later I will throw it in the trash.", "when I see someone smoke, and they leave their burning cigarette on the ground, I tell them 'it is super dry, what if we get a fire!', or when someone throws a piece of paper on the ground, then I will ask them 'why do you not put that in the garbage bags'".*

*Our conversation then shifts to the subject of how to show interest in a fellow cruiser. Mike explains to me how he personally approaches someone. He says, "always first make eye contact, just watching. You stand there watching from a distance, and if he seems fun, you walk by to say hello, if he does not greet you back, then you know you can continue to walk, it will not work out." Then "you first make a little talk and think about if you want more, then you start to scan the other slowly", Mike also offers an alternative for making small talk, saying: "If you see someone and think 'I like this man' then you try something, for example, you walk by and slightly touch him, if he rejects you, then you know that*

*this man does not want you". Mike also explains; "this all goes in a very decent way, never rude. In all my years of cruising, I have never been in a situation where this did not happen respectfully."*

*Another phone call I made was with Andre. He is part of SPK. I met him before during a video meeting between SPK, a neighborhood association, and a governmental employee (see the vignette on page 29). Andre mentioned, during a call, that he sometimes cleans the cruising spots, but I also heard stories of a cleaning crew by other cruisers. For this reason, I asked if I could call to ask some questions about this topic.*

*When Andre answered the phone, he was cleaning one of the spots at that moment. We start the call by saying hello, asking the other how it is going, and then I ask him if he can explain to me why he cleans. Andre starts by saying; "I started this from my own initiative because I saw there was so much junk. There must be something that can be done," "so I get my trash grabber and start to grab. The first success was achieved that same night. Online I read comments asking who cleaned, and that is how it started. I am retired now, So I try to keep up, I hang plastic bags, and other times, if they are full, I empty them. You can see that it works. After I started, it spread. I do not only clean up the trash left by the cruisers, but also by other visitors". Andre explains that he is not afraid to address people on their behavior but 'not all the men who find it important also act according to it, but some also do.'. He then explains how cleaning has become an activity that is rewarding: "I have free time, nothing to do, and it is nice to get out of the house, the people here know me, they recognize me, and it feels familiar here, that makes it rewarding.". Cleaning the spots "only results in positive reactions," and apparently, Andre is not the only person cleaning. He explains: "I always go alone, but there are more people like me. Without any agreement, everybody has their own spot that they keep clean.."*

#### **4.1 A community of strangers?**

Both Jan and Andre have explained to me during their interview that there is a non-sexual side to cruising and that they recognize regular visitors and share social interactions with them. This got me thinking about in what way cruisers can be thought of as a community. I first started exploring this question by questioning why we form a community or a form of collectivism in the first place. To find answers, I looked into Eriksen (2010), who states that it is essential for us, human beings, to create a feeling of security and that security is often created in a group formation, in the form of collectivism or a 'we feeling. This collectivism or 'we feeling can increase the feeling of security for an individual. A sense of sameness or belonging makes humans feel secure in a certain social setting. Jan expressed feeling like he belongs to a certain group of regular visitors, and Andre even explained how being recognized by the other cruisers gave him a sense of security. This shows how, as Eriksen claimed, a feeling of security in a social setting is indeed connected to sharing a certain 'we feeling or collectivism with them.

Eriksen continues his theory on feeling socially secure by stating that a community might create security, but they also tend to be cruel when it comes to 'outsiders'. Those who are not part of the community are strangers, and strangers can lead to fear for the insider of the community (Eriksen, 2010). In this theory, Eriksen also explains that a socially insecure situation can arise when you are in a situation where you have to improvise and where you do not know the others with whom you share your field with (Eriksen, 2010). Cruising is an activity with a lot of improvisation in a field where you do not know the others. Based on Eriksen, this would thus be a very insecure situation. But in contradiction to what Erikson says, improvising with strangers also has a lot of positive sides when applying it to cruising. Improvising is seen as fun and finding yourself in a field of strangers can also increase safety. Jan and

Andre both shared in their interview that they know some of the cruisers who, like them, are regular visitors of the same spot. Still, it also is clear in the vignettes that 'the strangers' is a big part of cruising as well. Connecting with strangers, having sex with them and even just their presence is an important part of cruising. Cruising is a way to meet new people so if there are no strangers, there will be no new people to meet. Without strangers, a big element of cruising would thus be lacking. Nick also makes this clear by joking about being annoyed by always seeing the same men because he wants there to be strangers. It makes it exciting. Also, it is the element of the stranger that takes part in making cruising unpredictable, but instead of seeing this, like Erikson, as something dangerous, it is experienced by the cruisers as an exciting element. The strangers also make cruising more anonymous and thus safer.

With strangers as an important element of cruising, it is important to question what a stranger is and to explore how a community can be formed with strangers. When the unknown cruiser is a stranger, but a stranger that is part of a community of other strangers, then the cruiser does not belong to what Erikson calls an 'outsider'. For this reason, I first started to explore what makes a community a community when the members of this community do not know each other. A theory I encountered when asking this question was one of Lehning (1998), who states that individuals in a civic community can trust and act with one another even when the other is a stranger. According to Lehning (1998), this is due to a social capital that strangers can share. This social capital is according to him that the trust between people grows the more they interact. This train of thought overlaps with how Jan expressed that he started getting to know the so-called 'hard core' of other regular visitors and that by regularly spotting them and starting to talk (interact) with them he felt more and more connected to them, trusting them.

If shared social capital can be relevant in creating a community with strangers then it is important to first take a broader perspective on what social capital entails, because according to many scholars, shared social capital is more than just trust. Putnam (et al., 1994) for example, says that it is also about shared norms, and Gonzales and Nowell (2016) even adds to this: "information, obligations, expectations are part of social capital" (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Son, Lin, & George, 2008, as cited in Gonzales and Nowell, 2016 P.2). When looking at this more extensive set of elements that create a shared social capital, this would mean that cruisers should besides interactions that can grow their trust, norms and values, also share information, obligations and expectations. For this reason, I will use parts of the vignettes to show you the shared social capital among cruisers.

In the interview with Mike, he explains how the cruisers communicate when trying to find out who is interested in you. He explains how he uses mainly non-verbal but also some verbal communication to test the other cruiser's interest. In a research conducted by Flowers, it is stated that non-verbal communication is also used to keep cruisers' activities hidden from the unaware by-passer. Flowers states that even though every cruising spot does not necessarily use the same 'language' men who are skilled cruisers are more likely to succeed (et al, 1999). This was confirmed when talking to cruisers about it; one cruiser said; "if you visit a spot that is used for cruising, that you didn't know about before, you will see by the behavior of the man that.. oh! they are cruisers".

The insight that is also gained from Mike's interview is how he describes that there is a form of 'common sense' among the cruisers, explaining that some things are not seen as 'decent behavior'. This by Mike named 'common sense', is at the website of SPK, but also other cruising websites, displayed as a list on how to behave. These lists illustrate how this 'common sense', has become a set of rules, or a guideline to follow, that is maintained and made real. The shared norms and behavioral rules consist of: respecting others, 'no is no', turning the lights of your car off, blinking with the lights when interested, trying to stay within the cruise area and not leaving trash behind. In all vignettes but also in many other

interviews I conducted these norms were shared. Other cruisers even added more guidelines to how one should be cruising, like; “not wanting to be seen by/ not wanting to interrupt non-cruisers.”

What surprised me throughout my research was that one, widely shared, behavior rule is that a cruiser must contribute to keeping the cruising spots clean. Almost all cruisers I talked to mentioned that they would address people on their behavior when throwing their trash on the ground. Mike also explains in his interview the positive reactions he would get from all his cleaning work and that beside him there are more men who each clean up their own cruising spot, without this being organized as a whole. Andre also mentioned how he knew what people thought of his cleaning work because he could see online reactions. When I later asked him about this he turned out to be the administrator of the website I have been using myself to learn more about cruising spots. This website consists of a news page, chatting functions, photograph- and story sharing but another important feature is finding, rating and commenting on cruising spots. This website does not only help you to find a cruising spot nearby, it also gives you the option to share important information about it. Some men share in the comments how crowded it is, what the best times to visit are, how safe it is, how to find it and what kind of activities they experienced there. The website is easy to find and accessible with and without an account.

A ‘we feeling’ and a sense of community is created due to cruisers sharing a form of social capital. Cruisers share information, thoughts, ideas, norms and values, and they address each other when someone is not behaving accordingly. Cruisers share a language and because of a shared non-verbal way of communicating, they mostly recognize fellow cruisers at a spot. This makes it possible for the cruiser to recognize a cruiser as an ally rather than an outsider. What I will further explain in the chapter NUMBER, is that when misbehavior of cruisers is noticed (leaving lots of trash, confronting non-cruisers etc.) this can lead to tensions at the spots which can result in government interference. This thread mainly involves the complaints filed by the non-cruising by-passers and people who go to cruising spots to intentionally look for confrontations (verbal and physical anti-homo statements), making the real stranger the non-cruiser, who leads to fear for the insiders. This is in line with Eriksen’s explanation of why we form a community in order to keep ourselves safe.

Even with all that the cruisers share, there is also a lot of difference among the cruisers. Some cruisers feel more involved in a ‘we feeling’ than others. So even now that I have argued that there is a sense of community among the cruisers, there is still a difference in how involved each individual feels towards this sense of community.

## 4.2 Individuals and a feeling of community

SPK states in many documents and meetings that: “cruising spots are still a social retreat for particularly lonely men that have built a bond with countless other men who visit the same spot. The social control among these men is high”. Some of the cruisers also mention this ‘we feeling. Jan, for example, confirms this feeling in his interview, where he explains that he has already been alone for a long time and that cruising became an important part of his social life. Andre mentioned a similar thing, by describing how being recognized and known at the cruising spots make his cleaning work rewarding. In other interviews, statements came forward saying, “it is not too strong but a bit of a ‘we are together’ feeling (...). You have something in common.”, “you are among each other”, “us knows us”, and “we are a strange little club”. Since many visitors are regulars, some have formed friendships or even relationships.

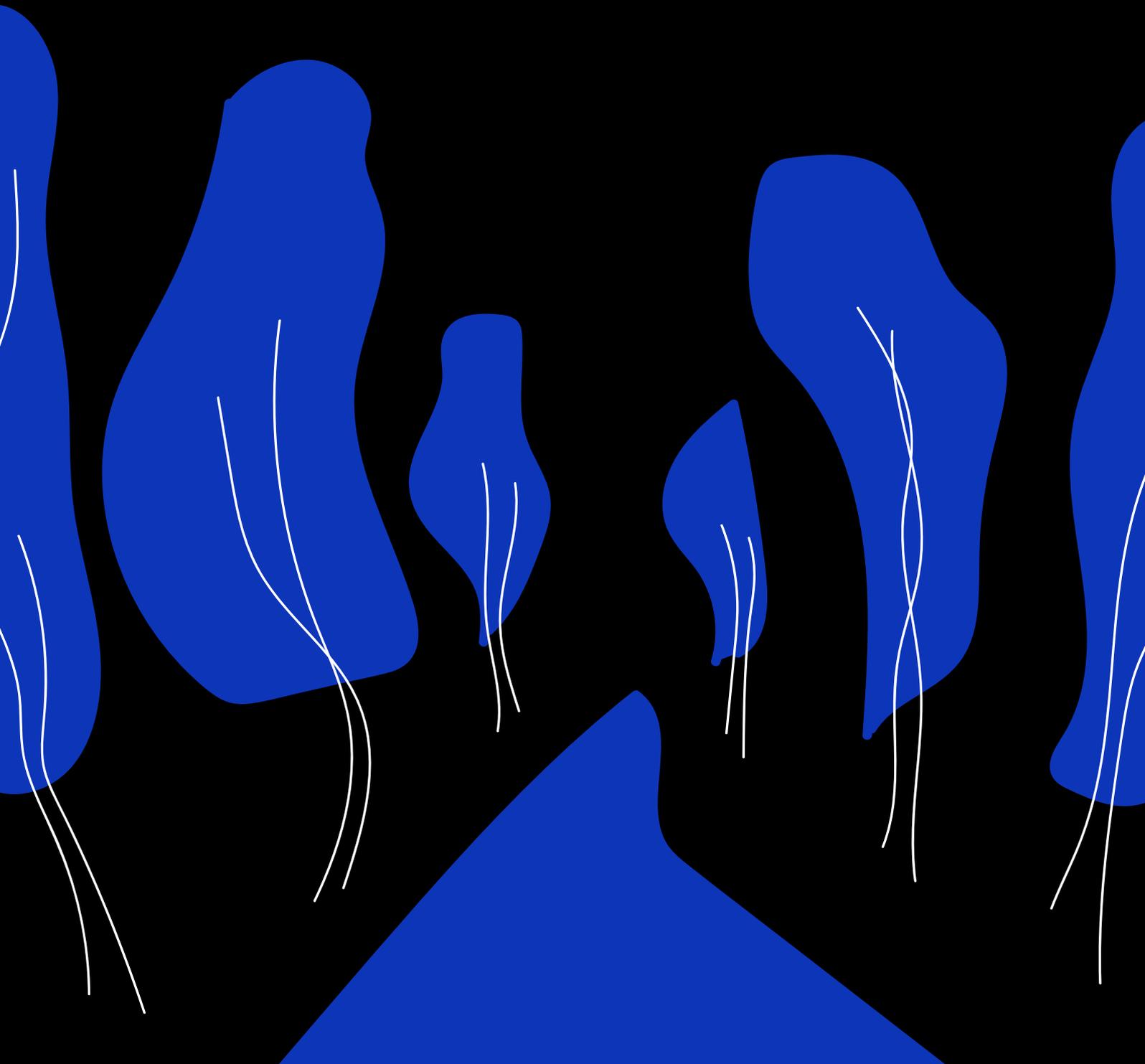
The men can share thoughts and feelings, and they give each other social support. This is especially important for those who feel lonely; cruising helps them out of their social isolation. Andre mentioned how cruising spots get him out of his house. Another cruiser said, "some come to talk around the table, together they smoke a cigarette, and then they leave again". "Sometimes it is a dark world and a little sad" says a participant, pointing out that cruising is of course not only positive, like for Jan, for whom it is also just an 'emergency solution' against loneliness and unfulfilled sexual desires.

With so many men whom all have different motives for cruising, cruising for some is simply just about sex, while for others, it is also about social interactions. Not all cruisers attach a lot of value to the social aspect of cruising. For them, it is really more about sex itself, like for Mike. These men are not looking for companionship but rather for quick and easy sex. In a cruising spot, you should be able to do what you want, and others should respect this, "some want to talk, and others do not". This means that there is a difference of how connected someone feels towards the 'we feeling', or the thought of being a community. The level at which one feels involved is up to the cruiser's participation. In a way, it is a mindset, meaning that there is a form of community, but that it is up to the individual to want to be a part of it.

SPK is an organization that has the main goal of preventing cruising spots from closing. They have no 'real authority' but they have a big network in the cruising scene that they use to warn people or update them on current cases with policymakers. What I find interesting is that in mediating conversations, they are talked to in a way that the policymakers see cruisers as a collective without keeping in mind that cruising also exists of a lot of loose individuals. Sometimes phrases like "you should stop going there" are brought into the conversation. 'you' meaning all the cruisers, showing that they are seen as one group. In reality, this is not how cruising works because if a man individually decides to cruise somewhere outside of a cruising area and it causes tensions with policy makers or non-cruiser, this can not be controlled within the community itself. But even so, the whole community is blamed. The issue with this is that cruisers can decide for themselves the level of involvement in the community, this results in that there is no way to reach all cruisers and ask them to adjust or stop a certain behavior. This 'strange little club' simply does not work the same as a tennis club, where all members are known and follow the organization's orders.

To conclude: In order to find social safety, we look for a sense of community, or a 'we feeling'. According to Eriksen (2010), strangers and improvisation can be seen as a reason for socially insecure situations, but for cruisers, improvisation is seen as fun, and strangers can also increase safety. Many cruisers share a we-feeling and feel a sense of community, but the extent to which a person actually feels that they are part of this, is different for each individual. Men who are not 'out' or deal with loneliness tend to feel more connected to a community than those whose main motive for cruising is for solely sexual interactions. It also becomes clear that it is not the unknown cruiser that is the real stranger, due to shared social capital. Confrontations with non-cruisers can lead to frictions and government interference, making them the real threat for the community, and thus the real stranger. In the next chapter, I will further explore the use of public space, how cruising space is produced, and look into, among others, the above-mentioned friction.

# 5 | CRUISING: A PUBLIC OUTDOOR ACTIVITY



*Today I am meeting Joe, an artist/ theater maker who has been cruising since he was about 17 years old. I have been talking to him via zoom a couple of times now, and he is willing to give me a tour of a cruising spot that he regularly visits himself. We decided to meet at the metro stop nearby. It's a place that I know myself very well since I used to live around the corner. I have always known that there was a cruising spot not that far away from my home but I had never been there. I am a little nervous because this will be my first time visiting a cruising spot, and I have no idea how the men will react to a female visitor. The idea that Joe is joining me makes me feel a lot more comfortable about all of this.*

*When I arrive at the metro stop and walk down the stairs, I wait for Joe to arrive on his bike. I wait for him under an overpass since it starts to rain a little. Soon after arriving, I see Joe in the distance, he is wearing a bright red coat. We say hi. I jump on the back of his bike and we start to talk about where we live and what keeps us busy during the day. When we arrive at our destination Joe parks his bike against a low fence. Right behind the fence is a Scottish Highlander. When entering the area, by opening the gate of the low fence, we carefully walk around it and then both make a picture of the big cow. I explain Joe how these animals are placed here to scare away the cruisers. Joe knows the story and tells me laughingly that he loves to take pictures of them every time he comes here. I take the picture you can see below.*



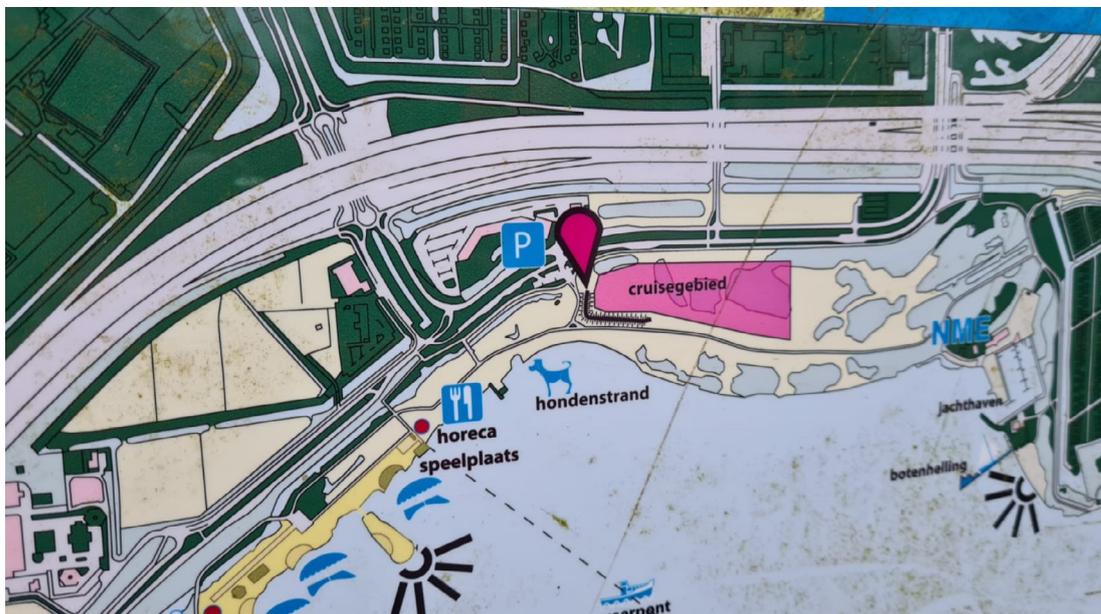
*"We are both wearing the wrong shoes" Joe says, while pointing at our sneakers that are sinking in the muddy ground. When walking through the swampy area, we pass a man. He greets us. When asking Joe if he can tell whether a man is here for cruising or not, Joe answers by telling me that I can assume every man wandering around this area is here for cruising. We continue our walk and come across some more men. They look at us for a moment but then continue looking at the ground. I feel a slight tension. Joe points in the direction of an Albert Heijn bag hanging in the lower part of a tree and explains how these bags function as garbage bags "they are placed there by a man who comes every now and then to empty them". The bags are strategically placed in more hidden spots so men have good access to them after*

sexual intercourse. It was nice to see this for myself since I heard many stories about this system.

We continue our walk when an old man walks up to us and says to Joe, "I hope your friend is open-minded, it is quite colorful over there" while laughing. This makes me a little nervous. What am I about to see? We walk up a little hill while Joe explains to me how the space we are heading to is super crowded in the summer. Apparently, it is then filled with naked men who lay on the grass naked while seeking sexual interaction or going for a swim in the lake next to the spot. While listening to the story, I notice we are entering a crowded spot. The trees have no leaves, and I can directly see 20 to 30 men. It feels like all the men look in our direction, but they just as fast turn their head away. Do we stand out? Is it because I am a woman? Or because both me and Joe are the only ones wearing bright red and orange coats instead of a black one like the rest? I feel safe to be with Joe, but it still feels like I am intruding a space that is not meant for me. It is hard to explain the tension that I am feeling, I wonder if it is sexual tension or just my own un-comfort.

One man standing close to us has his pants dropped to his ankles, his arms crossed before his chest, and has a big smile on his face. The other men are pacing around, walking in circles or lines. It is quiet except for two men both holding a bike and having a conversation. Me and Joe walk to the edge of the cruising zone. While passing by the men I try not to make eye contact for too long, I don't know why but it feels uncomfortable. On the side of the zone, a man is receiving a blow job by another man. Joe is looking at it and I join him shortly. His staring makes it more comfortable for me to stare too. I do this while thinking about whether the men would be ok with me watching. When I ask Joe about it he lets me know that now that the leaves have dropped, the men know they are exposed.

We walk towards the exit of the cruising spot, where Joe shows me a map of the area with the cruising zone highlighted in a pink shape. he explains that the whole beach area used to be a cruising area, but now when a man is seen somewhere outside of this little area, they directly get addressed about it. You can see a picture of the map below.



## 5.1 Cruising in relation to the public space

Cruising is a legal activity in the public space that takes place between trees and bushes, in the corner of a park, mostly in remote places and exceptionally even in the middle of the city. My walk along with Joe was my first time entering a cruising spot. It is easy to find out where a spot is, but gaining access to it can be hard, especially as a woman. I also visited another spot, alone, but the men acted hostile towards me. When asking questions, they would reject me and react uncomfortable and distant. But not the day I went with Joe, it was due to him that I

gained access. This shows how cruising might take place in public space, that you can easily enter it, but that gaining access is more complicated. Nevertheless, even when I had gained access, I still felt like I was invading 'their' space and that the space was not for me, illustrating that even when public space is open for everyone, it can still create a sense of inclusivity and exclusivity.

The walk along gave me a sense of the atmosphere, I could 'feel' the space. What stood out to me was that there was a hard-to-explain tension. I doubted whether it was sexual tension or my own un-comfort. When I later described these feelings to a participant, he said to experience this tension as a feeling of "old school hunting", explaining that "public space gives you something extra.". This also illustrated how the same space can 'feel' different for each person but also how public space contributes to the whole cruising experience. The man then goes on by saying that "the tension of getting caught plays in the background but it is a form of tension, it makes it a bit more complete.", adding the element of other users of the same space as a contribution to the experience of cruising is something I will go into on page 29.

When talking to cruisers about Public space it becomes clear that they consider public space to be easily accessible, anonymous, and free of charge. Most men also stress that there is no alternative for cruising spots in the private space. It is not always possible nor wished for to meet at someone's house or at a hotel, and many cruisers consider this option to be less accessible, anonymous, and more dangerous (fear of being ambushed, robbed, assaulted and blackmailed). Another important element of cruising in the public space is that it gives you the possibility to meet new people. In, for example, a hotel, you can not meet new men but only make an appointment with someone you already know. Meeting new people is an essential element of cruising, like I have discussed on page 21. Commercial spaces where the performance of sex is more accepted, like sex clubs or cinemas, are not considered a good alternative for cruising because they cost money and can mostly be found in inhabited areas making them less anonymous.

In the vignette, I described how the weather influences the atmosphere, the visitors and the behavior of the cruisers. Now that the leaves had dropped, there was way less cover than during summer. This can be a big issue since covered areas are an important aspect of a cruising site. Cover offers privacy for other cruisers, but they also protect the cruisers from the ignorant by-passer. As a result of the fall season, the cruisers have to put in more effort to find cover or do their activities more visible. For others, it might mean that they will be dropping out during the fall season. While walking along with Joe, he explained to me how during summer, the cruising spot is more crowded and social, a story I had heard by other cruisers as well. During a phone interview with a participant, the men explained; "in the summer there is more talking, you walk around a little longer, there is a relaxed atmosphere. In the winter less people are there, everyone is a bit more distance, and there is more fast sex". This subject came up during many interviews, and it clearly shows that good weather means that there are more social interactions between the men and that sexual interactions tend to take longer. Some of the men I talked to did not care about the cold, but most of them clearly stated that they did not like being in the cold, so they would cruise less and stay shorter during the winter season. All of this illustrates how public space changes depending on the season, affecting the atmosphere, interactions and behavior of the cruisers.

Studies on cruising, namely those by Esteban Mones (2009) and Flowers (2009), claim that cruising is undeniably linked to public space. This is also shown in the results of this research. Cruising is not just influenced by elements of public space concerning accessibility, it being free of charge and anonymity but also the atmosphere, tensions and weather influences cruising as well. In the next subchapter, I will further explore how public space is produced by looking into Lefebvre's theory on the production of space, by doing so I will explain the current frictions in relation to cruising.

## 5.2 Sharing public space

*I was invited by SPK to join an online meeting between them, a neighborhood association and governmental employees about the closing of a highway parking spot. The conversation was online due to the covid lockdown that made it impossible for us to meet in person. The meeting started off with some technical difficulties, but after a minute or two we were able to all hear and see each other. What stood out to me was that all of the people in the meeting were middle-aged white men. Everyone was dressed casually.*

*The neighborhood association was represented by a man who started by introducing himself and the association. The association has been working against noise nuances from the highway close to their homes for 4 to 5 years and they want a better noise cancelling plan along the highway. They recently heard of SPK and now want to talk. The man says: "we both want something but it is a little bit the opposite. so maybe we can find common ground". I found it a very positive sign that the man wanted to talk and find a solution.*

*An alderman introduces himself next by explaining his field of work and the area he is working in/with.SPK is represented by two men and I am introduced by them as someone who is joining for her master research. I find it comfortable that they introduce me since this is my first meeting and I do not yet know what my role in this conversation is. I want to try to be as neutral and less visible as possible since I want to observe the situation without influencing it. The men of SPK explain how the parking spot, which is the main topic of today's conversation, is also functioning as a cruising spot and that they want a replacement location when the parking spot closes or that meeting spaces nearby can get more space in order to grow bigger in capacity. The alderman directly responds in a friendly tone of voice: "it being a gay meeting place as the only argument, is not a reason to keep the parking spot open". What surprised me is that the alderman then explains that "cruising spots are indeed very important and that within the gay community it is an anonymous space to quickly enter and leave.". These words show a form of understanding and recognition towards cruising, something I have not yet seen in any court or governmental paperwork so far. The alderman explains that more space will be created at another parking space, "including more space for the gay's". Unfortunately, after some critical questions of SPK, it soon becomes clear that the expansion of the other parking spot will probably not benefit the 'gay's' since these interventions mainly lead to a loss of cover and probably a smaller space left for the cruisers.*

*When SPK starts comparing what happened at other spots to this case, a heated discussion arises between a member of SPK and the neighborhood association about the relevance of this comparison. I wonder where this is going when luckily, the heat is cooling down a little when the alderman interferes. The alderman repeats the importance of meeting places by highlighting its hundreds of years old history, but he also notes "that it is not a lawful thing and not a reason for not closing the parking spot". It feels like we are getting in a loop of disagreements. No side is going to bow to the other sides. There is clearly a difference between what each party wants with the parking space, and no one is giving each other the answers they were hoping for. The alderman explains he is gay himself, it seems that he mentions this in order to find common ground with SPK and to make clear that he has no homophobic motives. SPK keeps repeating that the parking spot is too important to too many cruisers for them to compromise too much.*

*When the discussion is getting more calm, the man of the neighborhood association says: "when I walk with the dog I always almost slip because it is covered in condoms. I look at it from my house, I do not like that so much. I do not like that SPK wants to prevent this parking space from closing.". SPK seems to get a bit tense and reacts to this by explaining to have "opposite interests" and that this parking spot meets all the requirements needed for cruising, something that a lot of other spots nearby do not. The man then continues talking, he says: "I am not against gay people, absolutely not, but I am against them doing it in a public space where I have to look at, I have a lot of difficulties with that. When I would want to meet someone, I would take them home, I would not find it appropriate to do these things in public space. In my experience it is even punishable by law.". SPK then starts to explain it is not legal and that*

*governmental organisations cut the cover that make the men visible for him. A couple of minutes later, the man tries to explain again why he wants to close the parking spot, but this time more reasons than just the cruisers come to light. He describes how a lot of youth are loitering on the parking spot while playing loud music, that truckers leave their lights on making them shine straight into his house at night, that these truckers are also loud talkers, that there was a shooting once resulting in stray bullets ending up in his garden. The man just really wants to get rid of the parking spots and I can see both men of SPK truly understanding these reasons as well. They sympathize and understand him but then when things start going in a more calm, empathetic situation, the man starts to talk again, saying: "I have to say. Honestly, I will let them do their thing, I will respect them but I feel like you should do these things at home. I am way more disturbed by the noise disturbance and it causes us health issues. Our situation is getting worse and worse by the month." There is a moment of silence and then one of the men of SPK says "you just made... maybe not a mistake, but rather a misjudgment by saying 'I don't need it, they can better just do it at home,' because it is not always as easy as you just said it. A lot of people live in the anonymity, a lot of them are married and bisexual and for them these places are important, so also this parking spot". "A hotel is also not an option because you do not meet new people and also the bill will go home and your wife will probably ask you 'what did you do there?'" The man of the neighborhood association has an estranged look on his face, showing he does not like the idea that men would cheat on their wives.*

*We are getting to the end of the conversation and no real agreement has been made. SPK does understand that there are many important reasons for the neighborhood association to close the parking space, but they will not give up fighting this decision since they are "the only people that stand up for the cruisers". Soon another conversation will be planned between the neighborhood association, the governmental organization that will make the final decision and SPK. I think based on this conversation, they will probably close the parking spot because even though the alderman does not seem to have homophobic motives, a space being a cruiser spot just does not seem to be a good enough argument for keeping the space.*

Both Browne (2007) and Lefebvre (et al., 2004) agree that the use of the same space for different reasons can cause friction. This can clearly be seen in the above-described situation, where the same space had different functions for different groups. Each of these groups had their own interests, which led to a lot of friction. Lefebvre explains these frictions with his theory of producing space, a theory that I find very fitting with the situation I met in the field. In this theory, he divides different groups who together produce space: those who use the space (the representational spaces), those who perceive the space (the spatial practice) and those who conceived the space (the representations of space). Together they form 'the social space'. The representational spaces, spatial practice and representations of space have a dynamic relationship that is produced over time. When people/ groups are not in line with (one of) the others, friction can arise.

The theory of Lefebvre is very applicable for cruising space. The representation of most cruising spaces is conceived by city planners who designed it for the use of walking, parking or fishing. Some people use these spaces where it is designed for, the non-cruising by-passer who is, for example, parking their car or walking their dog. At the same time, the space is also used by those who do not use it for its original intentions, like the cruiser, using this same space for sexual interactions. The spatial practice of the cruiser thus conflicts with other users of the space but also with how governmental organisations conceived the space.

Cruising spots are used by not-aware by-passers, families, couples and recreationists. During my document study, I found out that a small amount of complaints being filled by non-cruisers about cruisers to governmental organizations is already enough to investigate the spot. Complaints concerning

cruising spot mainly consist of comments about trash and overt sex. According to some of the cruisers these kinds of complaints are “more inside of their head” than really there, blaming homophobia and prudety as a reason for being overly sensitive. This statement is mostly followed by explanations saying that non-cruisers just ‘do not like the idea of gay men having sex in a shared space’, rather than that it really was the nuisance that causes them to be disturbed. This statement was given by many cruisers in documents and interviews. Another argument made on the side of the cruiser is: “so what, then you see two gay men having sex, is that really that bad?”. This questions whether it is really that bad to sometimes be confronted by how ‘the other’ uses the space. What also became clear during the meeting described in the vignette is that as soon as a sign of a homophobic motive is given for wanting to close a certained spot, tension arrises and the conversation gets more heated, illustrating how this homophobic motive, experienced by the cruisers, is a very sensitive topic.

In the vignette, it becomes clear that the man of the neighborhood association does not understand the need for the existence of cruising spots. Arguments like “I feel like you should do these things at home” or the estranged look when confronted with the idea that some men want to hide these activities for their wives, made it clear that it was hard for him to sympathize with the cruisers. Here the vignette shows how sex is seen as a private activity within our society, creating clashes in morals when done in public space.

It is sometimes hard to define if the reasons for closing a cruising spot is made with homophobic motives like the cruisers suspect. This is mainly since the government argues for the closure of a spot by using practical arguments. In the vignette it is for example argued that the parking spot should be closed due to noise and light disturbance from non-cruisers that impacted the life of many citizens living across the parking space. This is a legitimate reason that might stand alone from other social-cultural-related motives. What does become clear is that cruising spots are not wished for, there is a clear clash in morals, their existence is never protected and their social importance is never seen as a ‘good enough reason’, for governmental organisations to not close them.

In a case study about a cruising spot near Arnhem done by Sluis (2016), is explained that cruising is still stigmatized, and cruising spots do mostly not fit with the ideal image of most towns and are sometimes even seen by non-cruisers as ‘creepy’ and alarming places where we should get rid of (Bell en Binnie, 2004; Phelan, 2001; Califa, 1994, as cited in Sluis, 2016). According to Browne (2007) and Sluis (2016), the most effective measures taken against cruising is still by making hiding spots visible, since it makes cruising spots no longer meet the conditions needed by the cruiser in order for it to function according to wishes. This also became clear in my own research, where SPK stated multiple times that the loss of cover made cruising spots indeed partly or fully unusable. A research that was shared with me, was that of Mattias Duyves (2018) on cruising safety, showing how “remediation, clearing, remodeling and redevelopment of crucial terrain variation had been lost and no privacy and shelter was left.”, this is “dysfunctional for the safety of the cruiser”. Based on other document analysis, the “placement of fences or leaving behind pruning” and the placement of “a horse trail” or “barrier” are all tactics to make cruising spots less suitable for cruising. This can again be connected to Lefebvre since by reconceiving the space to a different use, those who conceive the space try to make the space differently perceived. This makes space something that is always produced and reproduced.

SPK was established when the government wanted to close a parking place called Keelbos and Ravenbos. These parking spots had an important social meeting place, the cruising spot. This was the beginning of what would become a very important interest group for cruising spots (SOURCE). After

the establishment, SPK never scared away from trying to prevent other spots from closing. 'Over time cruising spots have become smaller and smaller', by changing terrains governmental organizations try to prevent cruisers from coming or by closing parking spots, they can even make the visitation of certain spots impossible.

When looking at the documents of the many cases SPK is involved in, but also when connecting this to the situation sketched in the vignette, it shows how the argument of cruising as an important element for the social life of many men, is never enough. A lot of accusations about prostitution or violence at the spots are contradicted by all cruisers I talked to, who say that a lot of these roomers are incorrect but that these roomers do form the basis of the motive to close the spots. Even in some of the documents the government is agreeing that indeed, some interventions are set in motion based on roomers. SPK has stated many times that, according to them, certain decisions by policymakers are motivated by homophobia. Where governmental organizations state that the dumping of pruning waste is a mistake, there is always the question 'is it?' or 'was it intentionally forgotten?'. In many conversations where SPK tries to confront policymakers with homophobic reasoning there always comes a 'but...' behind the phrase 'i am not homophobic'. A cruiser I talked to explained how "there is always someone in a position of authority that is anti gay", he points out that this means that not everyone is, but that sometimes those who are allowed to make certain important decisions are. Many men feel like they get blamed for trash that is left behind by non-cruiser and that they are seen as the "scum of society". The term 'gay-bulling' to describe all the little incidents that always have a different reason than being homophobic has been named a lot. Whether the motives behind certain policy interventions are always truly of a homophobic train of thought is hard to conclude, but it is clear that there are some cases in which homophobic motives do come to light.

In a case between SPK and a governmental organization it became clear that 'light' and 'sight' are important criteria for social security according to the governmental organization. The organization stated that "the users of a road should not be afraid of what is hidden". "The users should be able to see from a distance if someone who is coming out of the distance has bad intentions. Apart from the intentions of this person, it can cause an unpleasant feeling". What is stated here is that having less cover is better for the social safety of the use of the space. The user of the space is here the user for whom the space is conceived, the user who perceives the space differently in this case, the cruiser, is not being taken into account with this approach. Cover and thus privacy is important for the social safety of cruisers besides that it contributes to the function of keeping their sexual activities hidden. By reducing cover and thus making sexual activities more visible, the nuisance increases, creating more friction. The 'light' and 'sight' plan that must contribute to social safety is thus only in favor of non-cruisers safety, showing how the governmental organization does not recognize the cruisers as an important user of the space. It also increases the nuisance of cruising and causes more friction with the non-cruisers, making it a disadvantageous plan for all the users of the space. The safety of the cruiser is not taken seriously, or is not even considered at all in some cases. Almost every intervention of the government is focused on the comforts of the non-cruiser, even if it causes the cruiser to be endangered and eventually increases the nuisance.

In a discussion about trash complaints at a specific cruising spot, the governmental organization refused to place trash cans, stating that they did not want to facilitate the cruising spot. This argument was used in a lot of conversations and documents. Instead of finding a solution to share a space by adjusting the conceived space in a way that would support the cruisers and reduce the nuisance, there

was a fear that it would approve the way the space was now perceived, which did not sit well with the government. This once again makes clear how cruising is a not-wished for activity that is actively being discouraged, purely because it does not fit with the norms of how we as a society look at sexuality.

To conclude: Many elements of public space like; atmosphere, accessibility, and the weather, all influence cruising. Using the same space for different reasons causes frictions, especially since cruisers also use the public space for activities it was not conceived for. Cruising challenges the norms of society concerning heteronormativity and public sex. Cruisers experience the motives behind the closing and adjustment of cruising spots by governmental organizations as homophobic. There are sometimes signs that point to homophobic motives, but in general, this is hard to point out. What does become clear is that a clash in morals causes cruising spots to not be wished-for as they are seen as a not accepted form of sexuality. This results in policies that discourage and stop cruising. Interventions almost never seem to prioritize the cruiser's need and only contribute to more nuisance. Nevertheless, the government refuses to 'facilitate' cruising since they do not want to encourage cruising.

# 6 | A FEELING OF SAFETY



Andre and I are talking on the phone about his cleaning activities at some of his regularly visited cruising spots (page 21). But after all the talk about cleaning, we also start to talk about his own cruising experience and specifically about safety. I ask him what a good cruising spot is, to which he answers, "most cruising spots are at parking spots, some in the woods, but most of the time it's parking lots connected to a forest. There must be lighting and other visitors.". When mentioning safety he adds to this; "very little happens in The Netherlands". This surprised me because I have heard a lot of stories about incidents. But then later he mentions; "I have been chased by a car, insulted and more. You call 112 and it will be fixed".

I have been in a meeting with Andre where he mentioned that he had "almost been beaten to death", so I asked him what happened and if there seemed to be homophobic motives behind it. "it's a combination" Andre answers, "they kept shouting 'give me your keys!' they wanted to steal my car. I have been totally beaten up.". In the end the men were not able to get Andre's keys, "the doctor said that if they kicked my head one more time, I would no longer be here today". Andre's story is shocking and it surprises me that he is still going. I ask him where he pays attention to in order to prevent this from happening again, to which he gives an extended answer: "sometimes you have a couple who comes looking for a third, but if you see two men in a car then you have to pay attention.". He describes using his intuition when it comes to assessing the situation; "you can smell if they are bad people. it's their body language, their way of talking.". "you always have to pay attention to safety."

I ask Andre something I ask every cruiser when it comes to safety, "what do you do to establish your own safety?"; he answers, "I put my car key in my sock and leave all my personal belongings in the car. This is to prevent being robbed. Luckily these kinds of incidents do not often happen anymore. Even though lately some people did get robbed and abused. So I just never bring valuable items with me, only my common sense. You never know who is going to be there. I wait in my car on the parking spot to see there are more people, because then it is just safe. If I have my doubts due to one car, then I leave."; "you are an easy target, especially me, I am old" he says while laughing.

I am on the phone with Jan, we already talked a lot about how he experiences cruising and how he feels connected to fellow cruisers (page 20). I now ask Jan about negative cruising experiences and if he feels safe, to which he responds with an experience he had with a voluntary cop: "during spring they drove past me when I was on my way to the cruising spot and they shouted 'get out of here!'; on the public road. When I ask 'why?'; 'you know why'. Eventually, they left. A month ago when I did not feel very good, I decided I needed to get out of the house. they got me stuck in the verge, rolled down their window and asked me 'what are you doing here?'; when I said 'that is none of your business, why do you ask?' they told me 'well, we have seen you here before'. A heated discussion arose and when I asked they refused to give me their service number. When they drove off but later did this again, I made a picture of the license plate in order to trace the cop. During the lawsuit, I got a reaction that has kept me from sleeping all night. They claimed I was running across the street and such. My last piece of respect for the police corps has disappeared.". "Because of the complaint I made, they asked if I wanted to have a conversation with the cop. I wanted to but both cops refused.". I find it very painful that those who had to keep Jan safe made him feel unsafe, an experience I never had myself. It is sad that I was not surprised but I have heard more stories like this from other cruisers.

It becomes clear that it is not just the cops that have bothered Jan, he continues his talk by explaining that; "People drive to the circuit and when then they drive past me extremely hard, on purpose, homo hate. They call it a nuisance but I call it problematic.". "It is something of the past 2/3 years that I am not called a fag but a pedo, I find it very scary and also dangerous. But I have been called pedo by by-passers. Pedo, gay, in some of the heads of stupid people that seems the same."; "I have been threatened a couple of times, a car drove right at me, going 80 km an hour.". "For a long time, I thought it was just rude behavior, but after some time being called names, I found out it was gay-related.". Jan describes one more incident, saying; "two boys were yelling and screaming from their cars to the gay's", "but it was

*good to hear that after I reported it they directly came and I have never seen those boys again. This shows that not the whole corps is rotten.” Unfortunately, In other incidents with the police, Jan explains how the police “would address those who are on their phone, or who wait in the car, they send people away, note their license plates.” Jan calls it “cops that gay-bully”, A term I have heard other cruisers use as well. Jan continued: “they laughed in my face when I wanted to file a statement, they said ‘then you should not go to cruising spots’. Stichting Platform Keelbos helps many men since they are an interest group for the cruisers because many men do not dare to file a statement in fear of losing their privacy.”*

## 6.1 The social and physical risks of cruising

What becomes clear from the vignettes but what is also a returning subject in other interviews and a much-discussed topic among other cruising research, is that cruising men are faced with multiple risks. Research about risk-taking and sexual decision making in the context of cruising, tends to focus on how men avoid diseases, this did not only stand out to me but also to flowers (et al., 2009), who also explains this by saying that cruising safely is about way more than using a condom during anal intercourse or oral sex. Flowers (et al., 1999) states that a cruiser has to make decisions concerning his safety that also involve the risk of social and physical safety threats. Flowers has thus made three categories of risks: sexual, social and physical risks (et al., 2009). In my research I mainly focused on social and physical safety since sexual safety is an already extensively researched topic.

Social safety concerns the consequences that cruising can have on your social life according to Flowers (et al., 1999), I also want to add consequences for the emotional well-being of the cruiser, to the definition of social safety. How real these fears are can be seen in how important anonymity is for the majority of the cruisers. Jan demonstrates how big this fear is when he explained that SPK helps cruisers to file statements for the police, since most of the men do not want to do this for the fear of losing their privacy. A big part of the cruisers are afraid to lose their family, friends or jobs when people find out about their cruising activities. These consequences have a big influence on the social life of the cruisers and thus form a big social risk. While cruisers protect themselves from these risks by staying anonymous, they also bring themselves in more danger. Sluis (2016) illustrated this, stating how cruisers are sometimes faced with people who want to black-mail them. Pictures are taken and in exchange for money, the men can prevent the black-mailers from revealing their identity. Andre makes a similar statement in his interview by saying “you are an easy target”. The way Jan was treated by the police but also by by-passers shows that he has become a victim of homophobia, causing stress, sadness and sleepless nights. Jan is unfortunately not the only participant who told me about these kinds of experiences. Homophobic incidents are not singular, especially intimidation and being called upon with anti-gay swear words, making verbal abuse and intimidation a common treat for cruisers.

Physical safety issues are physical threats. Physical incidents, like the robbery experience of Andre, can cause serious injuries that can even be life threatening. Other cruising researchers also talked about police brutality (Sluis, 2016; Flowers et al., 2009) and “gay bashing and robbery” (Munoz, J. E., 2009. P.60). In my own research, police brutality came only in the form of a social threat, like the cops that intimidate Jan. What did stand out to me is that even after the heavily violent incident of Andre and the threats against Jan, both men did not stop cruising. Many men I talked to explained this by saying that these (homophobic) incidents also happen in other places and are not necessarily cruise-related.

I am glad to have noticed that most stories of homophobic, violent incidents that circulate, seem to be more of a common fear than a common reality since almost all the men I talked to only heard of robberies, black-mailing and violence but had not seen or experienced an incident like that themselves. But even though the incidents are not happening that frequently, it is still a justified and very common fear for many cruisers and it causes a lot of men's cruiser stress, meaning that meeting other men has become a stressful activity based on the constant awareness that 'something that might happen'.

## 6.2 Cruisers and the police: a complicated relationship

Cruisers and the police seem to have a complicated relationship. The police have to protect the cruisers but at the same time the police are by a lot of cruisers seen as a threat. According to Sluis (2016) cruising is an activity that finds itself in a 'grey zone' since there is a very fine line between the legal and illegal aspects of it, but when reading the action framework concerning cruising spots (2017) it states that "visiting a cruising spot is not prosecutable. Also having sex outdoor, regardless of sexual orientation, is not prosecutable.". This statement clearly shows that cruising is not illegal. For many people, this seems confusing. They do not understand that sex in public is not illegal as long as those we participate try to hide it. Cruising activities take place in a covered area which makes it no longer a legal issue.

The police state in their action framework on how to deal with cruising spot that it is their job to "protect the vulnerable group of visitors from anti-gay behavior, robbing (threatening with) violence and murder", and that they "realize the vulnerability of this group. They are free from assumptions, expressing personal opinions and stereotyping and acting within the framework of the law. They act professionally and without prejudice.". In reality, it seems like these honorable principles are not always actually applied in practice. This can also be seen in the incidents between Jan and the police, where the police is accused of homophobic and intimidating behavior. This by Jan called "gay-bulling" by the police is experienced by many more cruisers I talked to. This shows that homophobia is still a relevant issue within the police force and that the described idea to "act professionally and without prejudice" is not always fulfilled. Many of the cruisers I spoke to about this subject still want to call the police when something is wrong. They still feel like the police can secure their safety and that the cops want to help them. They describe, just like Jan did, that there are cops who genuinely want to help but that there are also cops who are "the rotten apples of the group", breaking the trust in the whole police force. When cruisers or SPK address the police about this homophobia, it would cause a whole lot of hassle instead of the understanding response and the need for wanting to better, that the cruiser hoped for.

Jan, SPK and the police do seem to all agree on the fact that many cruisers are not willing to report crimes committed against them. The police state that the: "willingness to report is very low. A part of this is due to the men's double life and the low amount of trust in the police". The low trust, negative experiences, the fear of losing anonymity, and the low willingness to file police reports are dangerous since those committing the crimes will not be stopped and might thus repeat this behavior. By closing spots where reported incidents took place, the homophobes are rewarded for their behavior and thus encouraged to continue. Not trusting the police can further escalate the situation of the cruisers when they do not feel safe enough to call the police when in danger.

### 6.3 Important safety aspects

The interference of policymakers who close cruising spots or destroy the covered areas are by many cruisers experienced as dangerous, it might give them more sight and thus a better overview to estimate their own safety at the location, but it also makes them more visible for those who come to do harm. As mentioned, homophobic incidents are not singular. Where some of these attacks have a clear homophobic motive, other incidents are more focused on the vulnerability of these men. This vulnerability is then used to blackmail or rob them. Some of the cruisers I talked to are very much aware of being a so-called 'easy target' and experience this as a big safety concern.

To improve one's safety cruisers have shared tactics to keep themselves safe. Andre already explained a lot of these tactics in his interview. One tactic is to always leave all your personal belongings in the car and to put your car keys in your socks. Another is to always first watch, to observe a location, to check the other people entering the zone and to estimate if it is crowded enough to find safety in numbers. There is a big social control among the men, which makes the presence of fellow cruisers of great importance. But it is also the surrounding itself that the cruiser has to keep in mind. One cruiser that I talked to explained that he "really prefers to go during the day or at twilight so that you can still recognize someone.", showing the importance of watching before acting. A third tactic is to always follow your intuition. Andre called this something he "can smell", but other cruisers have called it an "antenna" and a "gut-feeling".

It is important to also note that there are a lot of men who do feel completely safe. For some of the cruisers safety is indeed a subject in the back of their minds but not always something they are busy with. Many participants said to mainly focus on 'scoring' rather than fears and dangers. One cruiser explains that he "feels aware of his safety outside" and that he is "looking to see if there is something alarming." when entering a cruising zone. But the man also explains that he is "not anxious minded", but just "aware of it".

To conclude: Social safety threats threaten the social life and the emotional well-being of the cruisers. Homophobic incidents are not uncommon and are mainly seen in the form of social danger. Physical incidents happen incidentally, but it is mainly stories circulation about these risks that cause fear among the cruisers. This fear is called 'cruiser stress', making the experience of cruising a stressful activity. The low trust in the police as a result of many negative experiences, and stories of homophobic incidents, result in a low willingness to involve the police when incidents happen. The bad relationship between the cruisers and the police seems to be a big danger itself, since those committing crimes are not taken accountable, increasing the chance for repeated behavior. By closing cruising spots where homophobic incidents have happened, this behavior is rewarded and even encourage.

7 |

# CONCLUSION

I started this thesis by explaining how cruising is an age-old cultural phenomenon. During this research, I learned that cruising is still of great importance to many men. The majority of the cruisers feel like they can not or do not want to 'come out' for their non-heterosexuality. For most of them, it is even the reason why they started cruising in the first place. Cruising spots offer a transitional space. Within this space, men can perform their non-heterosexuality, test their sexual boundaries, stretch them, and explore things they can not do at home. It is a space where one can freely experiment and where people respect the otherness of others and learn to express their own otherness.

When growing up in a heteronormative society and raised in a hetero family, cruising can offer a space to learn from other non-heterosexual men about gay or bisexuality, contributing to their personal development. Cruising spots offer a cruiser the opportunity to talk to like-minded people and sometimes even build friendships or relationships with them. There is a 'we feeling' among the cruisers, who share different forms of social capital, and there is a high social control among the men.

The public space where cruising takes place is easily accessible, free of charge, and anonymous for cruisers, but also for non-cruisers. The use of the same space for different reasons causes friction between the cruisers and the other users. Homophobic incidents happen incidentally, and due to low trust in the police, many cruisers do not file a police report. When stories about unsafe situations do reach the police or certain governmental organizations, it causes them to intervene and sometimes even close these spots. This rewards and promotes homophobia. Government involvement and police control increase the cruiser's vulnerability by upholding and creating policies that prioritize the intentional user's (non-cruisers) needs, values, and norms but not that of the cruiser.

The sexual relevance of cruising does not seem to be recognized as essential, and the social relevance of cruising is sometimes not even recognized at all. Cruising carries a negative and sexualized image that contributes to the government not wanting to facilitate it. They are afraid that placing trash cans or implementing safety measures would promote cruising. This argument shows how cruising is seen as a harmful activity that should not occur and that the government recognizes cruising as a form of sexuality that does not meet society's norms. Society is not open-minded enough to deviant forms of sexuality and thus finds it hard to deal with a space produced for it.

As long as we do not have a space in society for cruisers, cruising will likely stay of great social and cultural importance. Furthermore, if we did have a place for them in society, we would not mind them cruising. The prudishness, heteronormativity, and intolerance of our society seem to stand in the way of accepting cruising as a respectable practice, resulting in the suppression of a group that is in such desperate need of a space where they can express themselves.

On a personal level, I have learned a lot from the cruisers. They showed me how respect and otherness are appreciated within a group consisting of men from a variety of layers of society, ages, and cultural backgrounds. It has made me aware of how heteronormative our society is, and the impact sexuality can have on your daily life when you do not have the freedom to practice and/or express it. It has taught me that cruising does not only evolve around risk calculations and danger but that fun and excitement are even more important. I realized how cruising is not about challenging the norms of the society but also about challenging your own norms and learn to self-accept.

To conclude: Besides the rich history of cruising, it is also of great social and cultural value for a vulnerable group within our society. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that cruising is, for many men, an emergency solution for a society that does not accept certain forms of sexuality. Cruising challenges the norms and values of today's society which causes friction. Non-heterosexual interactions are still not

accepted in our heteronormative society, and current policies discourage cruising instead of focusing on addressing homophobia. As long as we do not have a space within society for the cruising men, we must establish a safe cruising culture that causes less friction and nuisance by; respecting and recognizing cruising as a valuable practice, introducing policies where the cruiser's needs, values, and norms are taken into account, and regaining the trust between the cruisers and the police. Unfortunately, we do not seem to be there yet.

8 |

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