




12-2019

Affect and Manhattan's West Side Piers

Ricardo J. Millhouse
Arizona State University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.03>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Human Geography Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Millhouse, Ricardo J. (2019) "Affect and Manhattan's West Side Piers," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 28 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.03>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol28/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.



Affect and Manhattan's West Side Piers

Ricardo J. Millhouse
Arizona State University

Derek P. McCormack (2010) argues, "Affect, is like an atmosphere: it might not be visible, but at any given point it might be sensed... Emotion, in turn, can be understood as the sociocultural expression of this felt intensity" (643). This paper puts McCormack (2010) and Ben Anderson (2009) into conversation to think through the ways in which *atmosphere* in relation to *affective* and *emotive* life has been conceptualized. I center the affective atmospheres that happen with queer bodies that make New York's west side piers queerly affective. I use "queer bodies" to signal the dis-identification with heteronormativity or binaristic sexualities. Queer sexualities carry political weight with regard to the comments that the politically loaded term "queer" brings to public consciousness. So queer sexualities and queer bodies substantively challenge cisgender and heteronormative social institutions that are disgustingly oppressive to the queer bodies that, perhaps, use the piers as a space to mark their affective and emotive capabilities. Ultimately, my aim is to situate atmosphere as an analytic to explore the socio-spatial meanings that are attached to spaces and places. As a result, I wish to further spatial knowledge that considers atmospheres as a legitimate dimension of space and placemaking.

Ricardo J. Millhouse is a PhD Candidate in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University. The register of his work is sharpened by Black feminisms, queer of color critiques, queer theory, and human geography. His primary work seeks to understand the corporeal impact of socio-spatial marginalization and gentrification on Black queer people in Brooklyn, New York. He is particularly interested in exploring the spatial articulations within Black queer spaces, including sensation, desire, and nostalgia amid gentrification. He uses critical ethnography, photovoice methods, and archival research to explore representational and non-representational dimensions of Black queer spatial production. Contact: rmillhou@asu.edu

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author(s) and the publication source are credited.


<https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.03>

This paper thinks through the ways in which places and spaces – two spheres of endless and unprecedented possibilities – become queerly and erotically atmospheric not by simply who or what occupies the place or space, but what bodies do or *potentially* do while sited to a locale such as Manhattan's West Side piers. LaToya Eaves (2014) argues that Black women's geographies support spatial epistemologies and ontologies as well as analyses of space, place, and landscape. I argue that atmosphere is a spatial epistemology, an analytic, and a concept that is almost already a consequence and an affect of spatial production and placemaking. I rely on the images from Alvin Baltrop's *The Piers* to think through how people who have been cast at the fringes of society such as gay men, re-fashioned Manhattan's West Side piers from the early 20th century to the mid-1980s not by simply being placed in space, but their queer performances and acts alongside and within the piers. I deploy queer as a critique, a social formation, and an identity; it refers to people who embody and enact forms of gender and sexual nonconformity (Eaves 2014, McGlotten 2012, Bowden 2012). Alvin Baltrop (1948-2004) was an important Black queer photographer from the Bronx who captured decaying landscapes, despair, and sexuality, simultaneously. He documents a period of queer eroticism between Stonewall and the AIDS pandemic (1980s), his friends who were in the Navy with him, the graffiti art of Tava, and Gordon Matta-Clark's "Day's End." He is widely known for his images of New York's West Side piers in the 1970s. His images are distinct insofar as they are voyeuristic, queer, and erotic. *Dreams into Glass* notes that Baltrop's photography does not end and begin with *The Piers*, but rather, he documented images of the homeless, young runaways, sex workers, and public sexual acts throughout the city.

Defining Atmosphere and Attunement

Geographic thought frames *atmosphere* as an important dimension/effect of Black queer spatiality. On the one hand, Marxist geographers have considered the reproduction of social formations and class relations. On the other hand, feminist geographers have thought about the sex-gender system and the extent to which it is spatialized. Yet humanist geographers who take lived experiences as a point of departure fail to address the point at which "bodies' interiorities and exteriorities, depth, and surfaces come together or apart" (Longhurst 2001, 24). Atmospheres help us contend with this disconnect and find ourselves amongst the complication that is characteristic of space (Eaves 2014). Atmosphere is a becoming that is felt rather than seen. Ben Anderson (2009) defines atmosphere as the "shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge" (78). Anderson also argues that it is the very ambiguity of affective atmospheres – between presence and absence, between subject and object, and between the definite and indefinite that enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity. Considering his theorization, atmosphere envelopes social relationships in place with people's subject formations, which together make a given space-place distinct.

According to Kathleen Stewart (2011, 445), "Atmospheric attunements are a process of what Heidegger (1962) calls worlding – an intimate compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds. Here, things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements." Take Chinatown as an example. As a place, it has forces, relations, and movements that are responsive to the social and cultural desires of the spaces in which it resides. This is to say that



the process of worlding and placemaking are, in fact, political processes with cyclical affectual consequences: attunements. Stewart explains that when worlding happens, inhabitants may fall in line with the status quo – even if that status quo is derived from normalization initiated by the state. “Chinatown” for instance is a product of worlding that has been co-produced by people and the state (an institution that has now acted out its fetish of the “other”). Attunement is called into being when we consider the affective orientation of daily life. Shaka McGlotten (2012) takes up *attunement* to think through affective ordinariness that is prompted by advanced or late capitalism in an effort to do justice to a young Black gay boy who was a victim of racist and homophobic violence. McGlotten (2012) says,

[I]f theories of intersectionality work to identify the structural inequalities that shape everyday life as a world of violence, unequal access, and limited or nonexistent resources punctuated by a range of minor resistances, then everyday life comes to refer only to those forms of life lived under what bell hooks has famously called White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This tends to subsume what I take up to be some of the critical stuff of life, the something-else-ness of life – the ephemeral, or incoherent modes of awareness, attunement (5).

I ask us to consider the something-else-ness that seldom gets mentioned in writings on space and place. Thereby, I take up *attunement* and *atmosphere* as analytics that help us think through how we – as social actors – understand, produce, and utilize space, place, perhaps outside of normalization; they signal a way to *craft* and *do* spatiality. Spatiality is the theory behind the production of space that is inherently co-constitutive (Kirby 1996). Spatiality engages the premise that space/place-making is a process that involves remembering, animating, and feeling. These practices and affects produce atmosphere. The benefit of using the analytic of atmosphere, and by extension, spatiality, is to

analyze what people do alongside what is felt in a place – where social relationships and performances are sited to understand some extent of the desires and social identities that mark the place. Atmosphere is the feeling that encompasses the place and looms over and between people.

Ben Anderson (2009) has conceptualized *atmosphere* in relation to *affective* and *emotive* life. Affect is an unmediated potential for things to happen. Affect, according to Raymond Williams (1977), involves a happening across structures of feeling. There are a number of social, cultural, and political inspirations that channel affect ranging from media and capital to governments. Emotive life, on the other hand, is the mediated, static, and conclusive personal reaction of affect. In this paper, I center the affective atmospheres that happen with queer bodies that make New York’s west side piers queerly affective, and make it, well, a distinct place. I use “queer bodies” to signal the dis-identification with heteronormativity or binaristic sexualities. Queer sexualities carry political weight in regard to the comments that the politically loaded term “queer” brings to public consciousness.

Anderson’s (2009) conceptualizations and theorizations regarding atmosphere have been motivated by Karl Marx (1856) who argues that the capitalist mode of production conditions people’s lives; it presses on social life. Simultaneously, atmosphere envelopes and affects social life. Anderson (2009) is also driven by the phenomenology of aesthetics by Mikel Dufrenne (1973). According to Dufrenne, and by extension, Anderson (2009), “atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter in relation with one another. They are never finished, static, or at rest” (79). In this sense, Anderson is alluding to the spatio-temporal and kinesthetic aspects regarding movements, people, and as a result, atmospheres.

Baltrop's *The Piers* (1977) and *Becoming Atmospheric*

To think through the structures of feeling that preempts the production of space (Henri Lefebvre 1974), I will center Baltrop's *The Piers* (1977) to consider how New York City's Christopher Street Pier (Pier 45) was re-appropriated by gay men to meet, hangout, and have public sex. While hiding from his subjects, Baltrop strived to capture the liveliness, unrest, and becoming of Pier 45.

Pier 45 and the West Side piers have historically carried a queer atmosphere by what people did in the area: hookup. In the early 20th century, the area was a temporary outpost for well over 500,000 seamen and other workers who had traveled from all over the world. By World War I, Pier 45 and the surrounding area (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) was dense with bars, warehouses, and men. Its isolation made it an ideal location to have privacy in public (see Chauncey 1994). There were a number of bars in the area that had become a common cruising area for gay men. Will Kohler (2016) says that gay men in the mid-1960s would cruise between the trucks that were parked under the raised West Side Highway (now demolished) at night. He goes on to say that the trucks were empty and unlocked, which allowed gay men to have public sex, which was common up to the early-1980s. Stonewall (1969) marked Pier 45 as the nucleus of gay life since the riot was the act that pushed back on the state and its arms that were oppressing LGBT people who made claim to the area. Considering public sex was a common occurrence at the piers, they carry a distinct atmosphere, which is historic and queer.

Atmospheres have both subjective and objective qualities that are felt (emotional) and pre-personal (affective). According to German philosopher Gernot Böhme (1993),

Atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thing-like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through

qualities – conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subject-like, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space (122).

In light of this quote, though non-definitive, atmospheres are thing-like and subject-like, simultaneously. In my sense of the atmosphere of Pier 45, they are both/and the object of inquiry waiting to be discovered through its (im)materially emotive and affective capabilities. Atmospheres are realized through the senses; they are spatial happenings within their indeterminate boundaries. Atmospheres *become* through what bodies or things do. Think how energies and intensities between bodies are felt rather than traced or mapped. Perhaps Böhme (1993) was accurate to leave his estimation of atmosphere intentionally vague and non-static.

Baltrop's images in *The Piers* consider the ways in which queer people make the piers atmospheric instantaneously. Baltrop captures the possibilities that the subjects make of the space by what they do at the piers – either through sex, sunbathing, or being physically harmed. To be frank, Pier 45 becomes atmospheric through distinctive behaviors and body attractions and repulsions that are felt. According to Anderson (2009), "atmospheres have a characteristic spatial form – diffusion within a sphere. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari, we can say that atmospheres are generated by bodies – of multiple types – affecting one another as some form of 'envelopment' is produced" (80). In this case, the sexualized bodies that are captured by Baltrop are affecting. The images have the capability to affect at the moment you may experience them from elsewhere. In this regard, where and when you may experience the images envelopes the space, making it atmospheric.

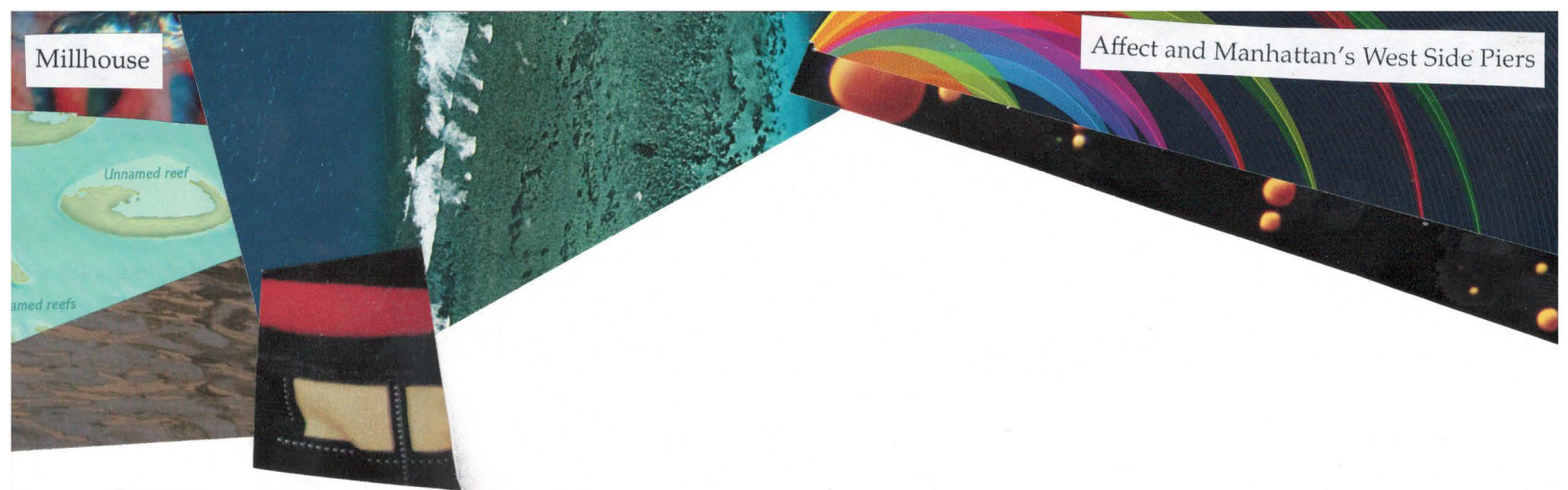
Pier 45 becomes erotically atmospheric through the ways in which the queer bodies

have been positioned relative to the piers, and relative to one another. In Figure 3, two men lay naked on the pier. The man pictured to the right lays flat on the pier while the man pictured to the left faces the man to the right; both men's body language as it is captured in the image is welcoming – their bodies attract. In Figure 4, 5, and 7 men sit naked on the pier; lumber rests at their feet. Their pensive gazes are oriented toward the Hudson River (see Figure 1). Although they are naked, their bodies rest; they are comfortable with one another. Two men walk past each other in a large, dilapidated warehouse in Figure 6. The man pictured to the left is smiling. He is wearing wide-legged jeans, a white, plain t-shirt, and black shoes. He is walking toward the camera and his gaze is focused on the naked buttocks of the man on the right. The man pictured to the right is walking away from the camera. He is wearing black boots, a leather vest, and wristwear on his right wrist. In Figure 8, two men are engaging in oral sex in front of a window in a room that is cluttered with old lumber and crumbling cement walls. The man pictured on the left wears only a white t-shirt while his pants are below his knees. His knees are bent, and his body is lowered close to the ground to perform oral sex on the man pictured to the right. The man on the right is wearing a dark t-shirt and his pants are down; he towers over the man on the left and his left hand is touching the man on the left's shoulder. Considering Baltrop's images, the gay men who are sited at Pier 45 produce an atmosphere which is queer and erotic due to their relative queer acts – either through engaging in public sex or resting on the pier. The queer and erotic atmosphere is a significant dimension of queer spatiality.

To borrow from Anderson (2009), "there are two different spatialities. The first is the spatiality of the 'sphere' in the sense of a certain type of envelope or surround. The second spatiality is spherical, but it is, more specifically, a dyadic space of resonance – atmospheres 'radiate' from one individual to another" (80). For me, the intersection of spatialities, atmosphere, and queer life envelopes the

possibilities of queer sexual behavior and queer place-making that underscores how places are almost always sites of becoming. Anderson's approach to spatialities and their connections to atmospheres is informed by Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness*. Relph (1976) argues that spatial experience has various intensities which fall on a spectrum: "direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at another" (9). Thereby, the placelessness of the piers, particularly Pier 45, is an attitude, not a fact. The attitude of the photos that are captured by Baltrop is, in my opinion, characterized with depth, rhythm, and intentionality of the queer subjects that move within the sexualized atmosphere of Pier 45. What I mean by depth is what is seen and not seen but gestured towards. Specifically, Baltrop's queer subjects are gesturing towards the ways in which Pier 45, as a place of becoming, is, perhaps, a site of conceived and perceived sexualization and queer identities. Secondly, the rhythms of Pier 45, as it has been captured by Baltrop have affective and emotive capabilities through the slowing of time-space by the gay men at Pier 45. Consider how men are positioned in a way that signals to the onlooker how time-space is perhaps slowed through the leisurely gestures and nudity. Now, closely gaze at the intentionality of the queer subjects that are captured by Baltrop. The intentionality of the queer subjects to make the space of Pier 45 become erotically atmospheric through their body comportment is rooted in the understanding that Pier 45 is public space that is not inviting to those who do not adopt heteronormativity or politics of respectability. In this regard, the piers are presented as an illegal mechanism of colonialism – they are a publicly private space, which means that they are only understood to be a space reserved for those who adopt respectability and live their public lives in a heteronormative manner.

In a nuanced sense, spaces and places become atmospheric according to people's actions, their engagement with objects/things, and the immaterial aspects that are felt. Taking this further, the requirements for *becoming*



atmospheric involves some degree of depth, rhythm, and intentionality. So, a space and place, such as the piers, broadly, and Pier 45, in particular, as they have been captured by Baltrop have *affects* – that is, rhythms that have intentionality and depth with felt consequences. The requirements and the sensing of

atmosphere(s) are motivated by a set of politics as well. Besides, ask yourself: for whom and for what meaning making end do atmospheres unfold? The answer may lie in the intentions of the people who produce the space and place, and, by extension, the atmosphere.



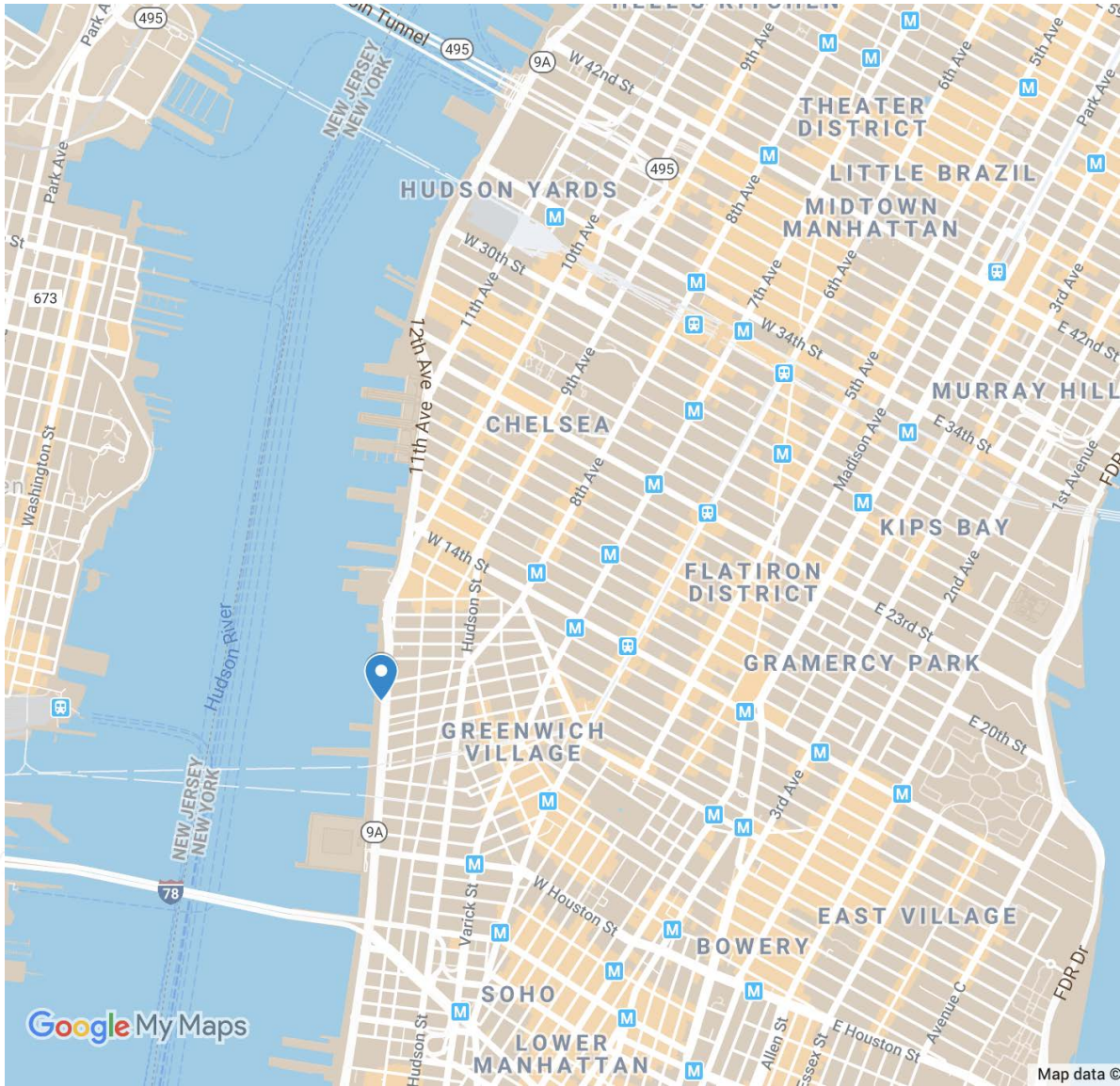


Figure 1. Map of Manhattan's West Side
Google Maps

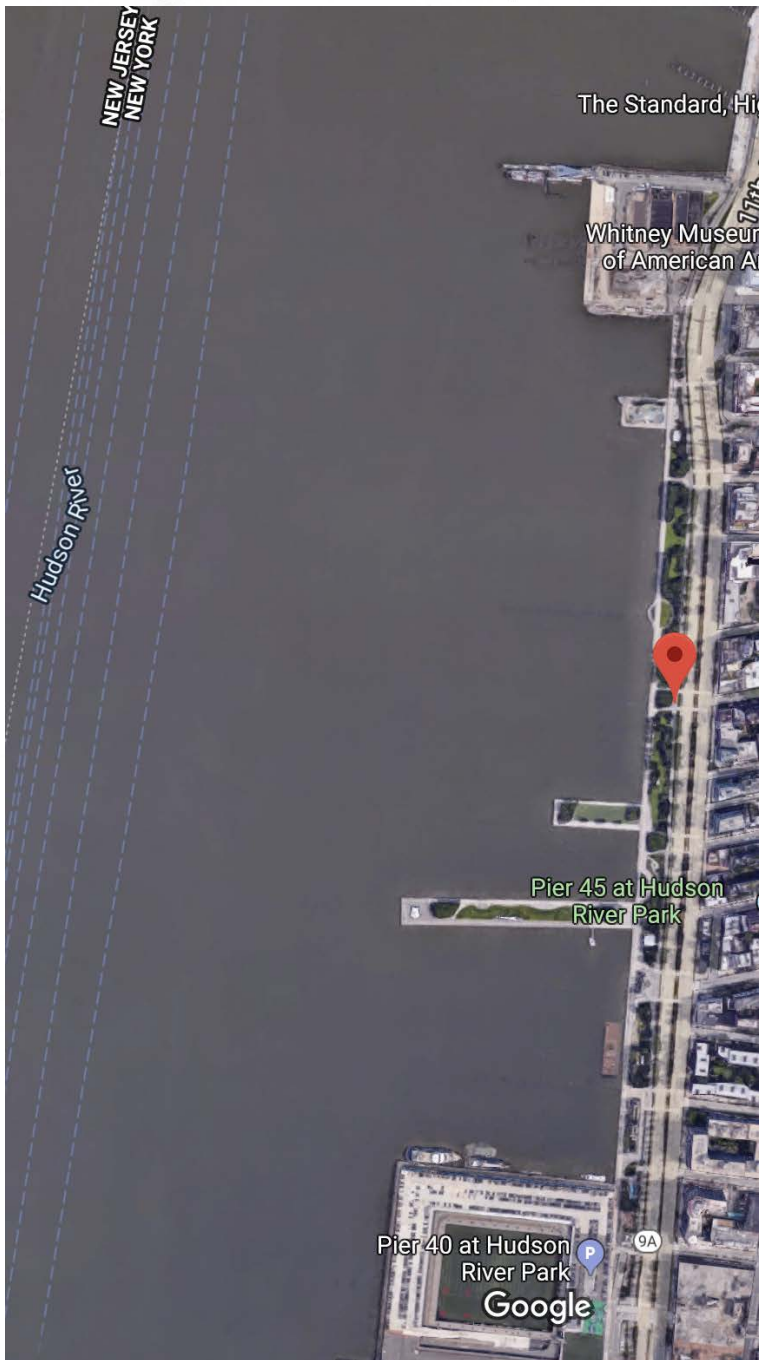


Figure 2. Map of Manhattan's West Side (Satellite View) Google Maps



Figure 3. Two men lay on the pier.
 From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.

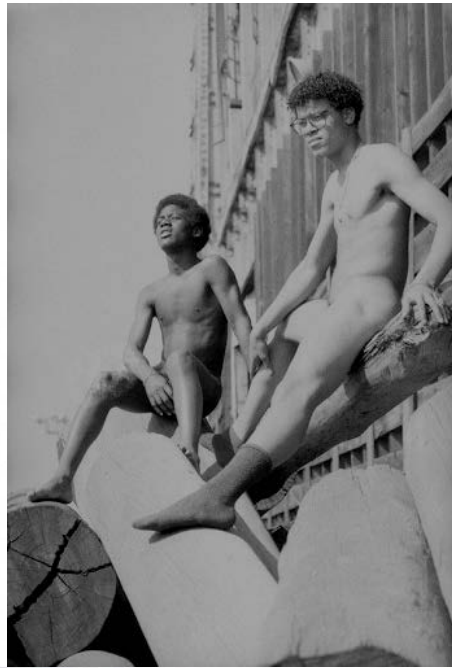


Figure 4. Two men sit unclothed on the pier.
 From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.





Figure 5. Men lay on the pier.
 From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.



Figure 6. Two men pass each other. One man gazes at a semi-nude man.
 From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.





Figure 7. Three men sit and stand unclothed on the pier.
From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.



Figure 8. Two men engage in oral sex.
From Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.

Works Cited

Anderson, Ben, and John Wylie (2009). "Affective Atmospheres." *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(2): 77-81.

Baltrop, Alvin (1977). *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. Madrid: TF Editores.

Böhme, Gernot (1993). "Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven* 36: 113-126.

Bowden, Kathy (2012). "Glimpses through the Gates: Gentrification and the Continuing Histories of the Devon County Pauper Lunatic Asylum." *Housing, Theory and Society* 29(1): 114-139.

Chauncey, George (1994). *Gay New York*. New York: Basic Books.

Dufrenne, Mikel (1973 [1953]). *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. Translated by Edward S. Casey, Albert A. Anderson, Willis Domingo, and Leon Jacobson. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Eaves, LaToya (2014). "Spatial Articulations of Race, Desire, and Belonging in Western North Carolina." *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1640.

Heidegger, Martin (1962). *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Kirby, Kathleen (1996). *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Kohler, Will (2016). "Homo History - Sex: Christopher Street, the Trucks, and the West Side Highway Piers A Sexual Wonderland." *Back2Stonewall*.

Longhurst, Robyn (2001). *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. New York: Routledge.

Marx, Karl (1856). "Speech at the Anniversary of the People's Paper." In Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second Edition. London: Norton, 577-578.

McGlotten, Shaka (2012). "Ordinary Intersections: Speculations on Difference, Justice, and Utopia in Black Queer Life." *Transforming Anthropology* 20(1): 45-66.

Stewart, Kathleen (2011). "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 29(3): 445-453.