

SEX IN PUBLIC

Lillian G Lippold

After Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's "Sex in Public"

We open on a colorless, colorful expanse. Something like a void perhaps, in the way it hangs onto emptiness and fullness at once. The stars are a long ways away, leaving the space feeling freely private. Yet, when one squints, one can spot pupils at their centers, eyelids blinking out light. Thus, this private space is also one watched from the radical public, a public so public that even now I get chills thinking it into being.

SOLSTICE and PEBBLE appear quite suddenly, having floated in while no one was paying attention (or perhaps everyone was, here). They're both clad in something sheer and holographic, so they give off the impression of two glowing orbs. Their bodies are radically accessible to the public, though this public doesn't pay much mind. It isn't heteronormative.¹ This public is made up of star-eyes.

SOLSTICE and PEBBLE notice each other.

Greetings.	SOLSTICE
	PEBBLE
You also.	
	SOLSTICE
Where are you off to?	
	PEBBLE
Elsewhere. ²	
	SOLSTICE
Oh! Funny. Me too.	
	PEBBLE
Really? I hope we meet each other. ³	
	SOLSTICE
Well...greetings!	

PEBBLE simply smiles, sweet and silent for a moment.

¹ Heteronormativity "consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations...contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity" (548)

² "Intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse" (553).

³ Queer temporality likes to double back on itself. For the thrill.

PEBBLE

You are a world-making type of person.⁴

The certainty with which they say this is important, as all notions of intimacy should be recognized.

SOLSTICE

You got that right.

PEBBLE

I mean, we all are, but your world is so...

SOLSTICE

I know.

PEBBLE

Incoherent.

SOLSTICE looks as though they might cry from the sweetness of this comment.

SOLSTICE

Thank you.

PEBBLE

Do you want to have sex?

SOLSTICE doesn't speak, just nods, and the two of them gaze at one another in silence. Eventually, SOLSTICE gets flustered and looks down at their hands.

SOLSTICE

Sorry, you're just...really good at that.

PEBBLE

Good sex is a magical feeling.

SOLSTICE nods, closes their eyes, takes one deep breath in, exhales, repeats twice more. This is sex too, and radically public.

PEBBLE cont.

I really love your name by the way.

SOLSTICE

Yours too. Don't know why I didn't come up with that.

⁴ "The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" (558).

PEBBLE blushes, their whole body turning bright red. SOLSTICE smiles a sweet, flirty smile, one without any danger.

PEBBLE

I just...everytime you speak, I hear so many different voices. I feel like I can't even count them all.

SOLSTICE shrugs. They're nonbinary. They get that a lot.

SOLSTICE

You've got voices too. The enthusiastic ones at a 9 o'clock drag show. Few but mighty.

PEBBLE grins. They're nonbinary. They get that a lot.

The two share a moment of surveying the other's body. Their gazes travel, and as they do, the gazes in the sky travel also. Shoulders, bellies, soles of their feet. Noses, scalps, nipples, lower backs. Kneecaps. None of the eyes of the vast public are intruding on this moment. All are welcome here.

Eventually, PEBBLE grows tired. They wipe the sleep from their eyes. Rest is their most valued treasure, and they plan to return to it, though not without acknowledging their gratitude for SOLSTICE first.

PEBBLE

I have a question.

SOLSTICE

Of course.

PEBBLE

Do you think this is utopia?⁵

SOLSTICE thinks for a moment. They're thinking with so much focus that they begin to float slightly away from PEBBLE. PEBBLE doesn't even reach out to hang onto them. This is simply the natural order of things.

SOLSTICE

I don't know.⁶

⁵ Questions are gratitude, utopia is appreciative.

⁶ This is always the correct answer when utopia is involved.

SOLSTICE begins to float away, and PEBBLE watches with a nostalgic look in their eyes. It isn't that harmful nostalgia that drives empires and generation but another kind, that simple nostalgia one feels for playing in the street with the neighborhood kids at age 8 where one never thought about the aesthetics of what one wore. Perhaps, better put, PEBBLE feels playful, like a new set of earrings passing from one human hand to another.

SOLSTICE, on the other hand, has entirely fallen asleep. The erotics of the day have been exhausting for them, though time doesn't quite spin like that in this dimension. They gaze out into the many distances that surround them, and they see millions, trillions of eyes blinking back at them from the stars. They feel comforted by these many eyes. They feel the love in this hypertrophic space of gaze.

When they turn their head back, just for a moment, they glimpse PEBBLE again. They commit the sex they shared to memory but then scratch it out, thinking better of it. What comes will come.⁷ Sex is as elusive as it has always been. SOLSTICE is at peace with this.⁸ What them and PEBBLE have shared will die the way all presents do. They thank their "host space," the eyes, and their own body, and float wherever they may (563).

⁷ This is Benjamin, my apologies. "For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter."

⁸ "All love is rehearsal for death," a sticker on my laptop says.

Works

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Essay. In *Illuminations*. Boston, MA:

Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.

Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>.