Performance and Appropriation: Profane Rituals in Gardens and Landscapes
Rituals of Transgression in Public Parks in Britain, 1846 to the Present

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Introduction
When in 1926 Reg Speller photographed a gang of skinny-dippers being chased away from the Serpentine in Hyde Park by a cane-wielding policewoman, he probably hoped to sell the image as a humorous piece about the naughtiness of children and the varied work of the London bobby (Fig. 1). Yet the image also hints at the nature of outlawed pleasures in public parks; in particular, that some rule breaking did not represent merely random acts of transgression but was often part of a ritual-like leisure activity that had its own cultural legitimacy.¹ In the performance—and Speller took a companion photograph of the boys moments before, as they were leaping with abandon into the lake—a kind of appropriation of the place occurs, but it is a performative ritual the grounds of which are temporary, contingent, more or less informally negotiated and frequently broken up by the authorities, in this case with a rattan cane.

The urban parks of the industrial towns of mid-nineteenth-century England and Scotland, Ireland and Wales, were formed as a response to the massive increase in the urban population, the threat to public health, and the threat to the political status quo that this posed. From 1846, when Manchester developed three parks by public subscription, through to the 1890s, parks were seen in many industrial cities, such as Leeds, as a utilitarian necessity: "It is the duty of the Corporation or other public bodies to provide what is in reality a moral, intellectual and physical sanatorium for the ailments that unavoidably attack

¹ Catherine Bell examines what she calls “ritual-like” activities and groups them according to certain shared characteristics: leisure activities such as the illicit skinny-dipping can, for example, be seen as formal, traditional, invariant, rule-governed (see Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], Chap. 5 passim.)
crowded communities.” In 1833, the MP Richard Slaney called for a Select Committee to inquire into the need for open spaces in populous towns, on the grounds that “the want of recreation generated incipient disease, discontent; which in its turn led to attacks upon the Government.” They were also the subject of organized pressure from those urban populations. As Martin Hoyles wrote: “The history of public parks . . . has been a history of struggle, both to create and preserve the parks, and also to determine how they should be used.”

My starting point in this essay is Catherine Bell’s insight into ritual-like activities, in which she observes that “The body acts within an environment that appears to require it to respond in certain ways, but this environment is actually created and organized precisely by means of how people move around it.” That is, the space is appropriated by the activities within it. A public park’s design and regulation required certain patterns of behavior, but in practice the way in which it was used, in accordance with rules or transgressing them, actually affects and even defies those original intentions.

Space and Carnival

The informal open spaces that predated nineteenth-century urban parks were traditionally places of carnival: places of fairs, horse-trading, assignations, dueling, unlicensed public meetings. As Mikhail Bakhtin said of carnival in writing about Rabelais: “No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to . . . every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.” In reading of informal urban open space, one is reminded of this image of carnival: “a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless over-reaching and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled.”

Battersea Park was created by an Act of 1846 and incorporated Battersea Fields, which for centuries had been a popular venue for informal recreation. In 1870, by which time their Rabelaisian, carnival character had been obliterated by the Park, the Fields are still vividly described by a missionary, Thomas Kirk:

That which made this part of Battersea Fields so notorious was the gaming, sporting, and pleasure-grounds at the Red House and Balloon public houses, and Sunday fairs, held throughout the summer months. These have been the resort of hundreds and thousands, from royalty and nobility down to the poorest pauper and meanest beggar. And surely if ever there was a place out of hell that surpassed Sodom and Gomorrah in ungodliness and abomination, this was it . . . I have gone to this sad spot on the afternoon and evening of the Lord’s day, when there have been from 60 to 120 horses and donkeys racing, foot-racing, walking matches, flying boats, flying horses, roundabouts, theatres, comic actors, shameless dancers, conjurers, fortune-tellers, gamblers of every description, drinking-booths, stalls, hawkers, and vendors of all kinds of articles. It would take a more graphic pen than mine to describe the mingled shouts and noises and the unmentionable doings of this pandemonium on earth.

Given this genealogy, it is hardly surprising that the new parks found themselves in a tension between order and disorder, pleasure and policing, anarchic pastimes and “rational enjoyment.”

3 Hansard, 14 July 1833, speech by Richard Slaney, MP for Shrewsbury.
5 Bell, Ritual, 139.
7 Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 8.
9 The phrase was used by Joseph Strutt, donor of the land for Derby Arboretum, quoted in Hoyles, The Story of Gardening, 149, in contrast to what Strutt called “brutalizing pleasures” such as cockfighting.
A carnivalesque response to the park environment was held in check by bylaws and park policing, generally with a good deal of popular support. Nevertheless, resentment of overt displays of authority was a hallmark of much correspondence about parks, and the park-keeper was a figure of more or less good-natured resistance (Fig. 2). The public park was an arena in which, for physical and cultural reasons, social control was often looser than in other public domains such as public reading rooms, so acceptable behavior was an area of continuous negotiation, as it is to this day. But with new laws, on the one hand, and age-old patterns of behavior, on the other (such as picking flowers), enjoyment of the park could easily veer into what became defined as transgression. Hazel Conway, for example, quotes Blackwood’s Magazine, which in 1839 reported seeing children crowding round to see the fowl on the lake in St. James’s Park, and “the verdant-coated verderers of the Office of Woods and Forests, cutting away at ratsans at poor little nursery girls and their helpless charges.”

**Law**

The bylaws, railings, and prohibitive signs on which the order of public parks depended were established to exclude the constant threat of behavior deemed unacceptable to the authorities that created the parks. The social program behind their creation in the nineteenth century was based on consciously promulgated ideals of social inclusion but also on the exclusion of improper behavior or individuals. In contrast to the temporary appropriation by transgressive rituals, these places were created or appropriated by the authorities, which then insisted, with the force of law, on a ritualized version of pleasure.

Many parks required formal dress—in Manchester the park-keepers could “exclude any person from the park . . . not dressed in decent clothes”—and were open only at specified times of the week. Drunkenness was generally forbidden, as were many forms of apparently harmless recreation, such as eating, smoking, informal games, lectures, or sitting on the walls. The first bylaws for People’s Park in Halifax in 1857 forbade “games . . . of any kind, nor yet dancing” (Fig. 3). Bathing in the lakes

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10 The park-keepers at the Waterworks Park in Belfast had to be given police protection in 1865 as they tried to enforce a prohibition on people taking shortcuts through from Antrim Road to Ouldpark (Robert Scott, A Breath of Fresh Air: The Story of Belfast Parks [Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000], 39).

11 Scott, A Breath of Fresh Air, 53 reports a story of a gang of boys raiding the currant bushes in the Botanic Gardens, caught on the railings by the seat of his pants: the Superintendent, Charles McKinn, “lifted the culprit down, examined the damage, and pronounced judgement. ‘The Lord has castigated you on the place provided—but next time He’ll probably leave the job to me.’ He gave the crying child an apple and sent him on his way.”


13 The report of the opening of Baxter Park, Dundee, stressed inclusive ownership to what might be seen as an inflammatory extent: “The people of Dundee entered yesterday into possession of their estate. To-day the workman can say to his wife, ‘Let us take a walk in our Park, and see what the gardener is doing, and how the flowers are thriving.’ To-day the mechanic may put on his walking face and his walking coat, and stroll through his grounds; and, when he is weary of wandering between banks of flowers, he may rest himself in his pavilion, which will be none the less enjoyed for being enjoyed in common by his fellows” (Dundee Advertiser, 10 September 1863; original emphases).

14 All, except eating, forbidden in the 1904 bylaws for Baxter Park, Dundee. The bringing in of “edible provisions” was, however, banned from the Botanic Garden, Belfast (Scott, A Breath of Fresh Air, 8).
was strictly prohibited as was straying from the gravel walks on to the grass, and no dogs were admitted. At Philips Park in Manchester, a year after the park opened without bylaws, the Corporation realized the urgent need for some rules, and in 1847 introduced “a plethora of elegant black notices with gold letters which began outside the park” exhorting [users] to preserve the trees, shrubs, and property from injury, not to walk on the grass, not to touch plants or flowers, segregating the male and female playgrounds, and prohibiting “all gambling, indecent language and disorderly conduct”; subsequent signs also warned against throwing stones at the swans and pulling straw out of the thatched roof of the new summerhouse. At Longton Park near Stoke-on-Trent, the superintendent banned bicycles, tricycles, and dogs in September 1888, and the following year advised against the installation of swings for children and against provision for football and cricket. He also took proceedings against those caught picking flowers, and had notices issued “warning persons against dancing on the grass or otherwise causing damage during band concerts.”

Control and Outlawing

The creation of parks was very often a means of controlling an unseemly space such as Battersea Fields or Kennington Common, which, before its enclosure to form Kennington Park, had been the venue for mass meetings and rallies (Fig. 4). The introduction of bylaws—today seen widely as ineffective and token—was a real means of social control. Social control and the new rituals of correct leisure were also implicit in the park design itself. Natural “desire-line” paths, that is, paths formed by habitual use, replaced by artfully meandering serpentes can be seen as a formal channelling of the potentially threatening dynamics highlighted by Richard Slaney in 1833. When the Commons in Armagh, Northern Ireland, were converted by the Bishop of Armagh into the Mall in 1773, a new symbolic landscape was created. In place of a space in which markets, fairs, and horse-trading could take place informally and unlicensed, the Mall comprised rigid tree-lined walks, and strictly regulated exercise—in this case, a cricket field. At the same time, the Courthouse was built at one end of the oval space and the Gaol at the other and later a Crimean War cannon was erected facing the length of the park (Fig. 5). This was a landscape of occupation, and one in which the forces of law and order ensuring no transgression were palpably demonstrated.

On a different scale, in Prince Consort Gardens, Weston-super-Mare, the construction of formal walks in 1882 was seen as a way of discouraging transgressive behavior: as the landowner’s agent remarked, “If a good shelter were supplied for

3. The genteel landscape of People’s Park in Halifax, as depicted in 1857 (Illustrated London News)
the Band & the walks were furnished, like the Esplanade, with seats, it would be a very pleasant lounge & an improvement to adjacent property. . . . No nuisance would arise from Excursionists. An open green would always be used for noisy games & the like, but walks are not open to that objection.”

The landscaping of Bristol’s Brandon Hill in 1840 was similarly tendentious. The 1830s saw the Bristol riots, the burgeoning Chartists’ movement, and the campaign for parliamentary reform, in all of which the Hill had played a significant role as a venue for rallies and political meetings (Fig. 6). In 1840, the Corporation began a program of “improvements” to Brandon Hill, comprising new gravel walks and planting, which included the creation of bylaws, and it is clear that improvement, both the physical design and the introduction of regulations, was a strategy against working-class organization, dependent as it was on a large, unregulated, public open space.

Although political and religious meetings were either prohibited or subject strictly to consent from the authorities, parks were often used for military drilling, for example, during the 1860s when there was widespread fear of a French invasion, and parade grounds were incorporated in park designs such as that of R. H. Vertegans in 1879 for West Park in Wolverhampton (Fig. 7).

The use of parks for public meetings, and in particular, political meetings, offers a paradigm of rituals of transgression; they are rituals in the sense Catherine Bell describes when she refers to “the ‘social’ work of ritual activities: the formation and maintenance of the social bonds [and power relations] that establish human community.” The bylaws formulated in urban parks founded in the 1830s–1850s reflected a desire to allay and control social unrest: political agitation was clearly incompatible with this aim and the new bylaws almost universally forbade the use of parks for religious or political gatherings. In 1848, at the peak of Chartist activity, the Duke of Wellington recommended the closure of all London parks. These transgressive rituals were marginalized, failed attempts at appropriating the spaces. But by the 1890s, the growth of the Labor movement, and the
presence of Labor members on Corporation committees, had changed the climate of opinion. What had been seen as transgressive behavior, to be outlawed and resisted, was recognized as a legitimate part of the rituals of working-class cohesion.

In Bristol, where public parks were laid out in a relatively short period in the 1880s and 1890s, public meetings were only to be allowed in two of the parks, and then only by permission. The omission of a general right of assembly in the new parks was highly controversial: on 23 June 1891 the Bristol Labour Emancipation League sent in a resolution to the Corporation, strongly protesting the proposed interference by the Corporation in “the rights of the Citizens of Bristol to hold public meetings in their large parks,” while the Bristol Socialist League also protested “emphatically . . . against any restriction of the Citizens’ undoubted rights to hold public meetings in our large Parks and Public Spaces.”

In Manchester, in the 1890s, the labor movement challenged the prohibition of meetings in public parks. The Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council was not satisfied with the offer of specified locations for meetings, the Corporation’s first response retorting that the proposals were “incomplete” insofar as they “do not set apart certain public parks of this city in which public meetings can take place.” The symbolic importance of meeting in a park was strongly felt, and after further lobbying of the Home Secretary, the Corporation relented and in 1897 earmarked Philips Park, Queens Park, Alexandra Park, Boggart Hole Clough, and five recreation grounds for such purposes. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the park superintendent, William Wallace Pettigrew, was able to see the use of public parks for political meetings as a safety valve “wherein disgruntled folk are enabled to air their grievances.” Similarly, consent to hold political meetings in Glasgow Green was described in 1898 as “giving free course and comparatively harmless outlet to sentiment and opinions which otherwise might sometimes attain explosive force. It is a safety valve which should find a place in every great community.”

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6. George Roubotham, “The Grand Reform Dinner on Brandon Hill,” (Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery)
7. R. H. Vertegans, design for West Park, Wolverhampton, 1879, including a Volunteer Drill Ground in the south-west quarter (Wolverhampton Public Libraries)

20 Ibid., 42.
22 Quoted in Hoyles, The Story of Gardening, 164.
23 R. King, The People’s Palace, Glasgow, 86, quoted in Conway, People’s Parks, 189.
In a recent classic example of the politics of parks, the Royal Parks Agency, a quasi-autonomous arm of Government, initially tried to ban the 2003 antiwar rally from being held in Hyde Park, with the Secretary of State herself making the announcement—an attempt withdrawn in the face of public indignation.

The Problem of Inventing Tradition

What park authorities were trying to do was social engineering; encouraging patterns of rational amusement in place of what they deemed irrational or vicious (Fig. 8). In order to achieve this, they invented tradition in the way explored by Hobsbawm and Ranger, and in particular by David Cannadine in his analysis of the contemporary invention of monarchy under Victoria and Albert. Social control was dressed up in ritual-like patterns of prescribed leisure—ritual-like in Bell’s sense of formalized, traditionalized, rule-governed, and invariant—the promenade, archery, drilling, Sunday School pageants, civic ceremonies, or music (Fig. 9).

These were the activities chosen to feature in the flood of engravings and photographs published to promote the new parks and their amenities.

The authorities went to extraordinary lengths to establish, rapidly, a tradition of correct usage. The opening of Baxter Park in Dundee, on 9 September 1863, was marked by an extravagant neomedieval procession of guilds, societies, militia, bands, and councilors, through verdure-decked and banner-hung

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streets (Fig. 10). Similarly, the opening of the People’s Park in Halifax, on 14 August 1857, was a huge set piece, and included the Sixth West Yorkshire Militia Staff and Band, escorting two Russian Guns taken at the fall of Sebastopol, processions of friendly societies, the mayor and corporation, and workpeople from the factories of the donor, Francis Crossley. Although one-off events, they partook of generalized characteristics repeated on countless occasions—openings, jubilees, and so on—in countless parks throughout the land.

These are classic examples of Bell’s “social work of ritual,” mentioned earlier. Natural forms of pleasure were corrected, ritualized into performative rituals—the promenade replaced the aimless wander, admiring the floral displays replaced picking the flowers. Public parks rapidly became the locus for commemoration of national or local dignitaries, pageants, jubilees, thanksgivings, parades, even military training.

The new park was a locus for rituals, which can be illuminated by Arnold van Gennep’s model of separation, transition, and incorporation. The special quality of the new park environment, heightened by symbolic design elements such as imposing gate piers, elaborate bedding, and statuary, made entry into the park a rite of separation; the experience of the park was a rite of transition, in theory—if not in practice—ending with incorporation of the willing visitor in the dominant ethic of the authorities, transformed and pacified by the rational enjoyments on offer. In practice, carnivalesque inversion often defeated the ritual program intended by benefactors and managers. At Philip’s Park in Manchester, the reformers’ motto, written on signs in the park, that “This Park was Purchased by the People, was Made for the People, and is Given to the People for their Protection” was frequently quoted derisively at park-keepers by those flaunting the bylaws.

25 “Opening of the Baxter Park,” Dundee Advertiser, 9 September 1863. “The streets were bridged with arches, the route from the Seminaries to the Park became one continuous chain of tasteful triumphal erections . . . a great new business in banners, flags, colour poles, transparencies, and evergreens—a business of decorators, colour makers, gas-fitters, gardeners, and busy wrights, employed the energies and attention of the people. Great walls of verdure sprang up in the streets. Arches in Gothic, in Norman, and in floral architecture arose within pistol shot of each other, and the great mills came out in an eruption of colour poles, prepared to look as gay ‘as an army with banners.’ . . . Dundee is all bunting and bravery—the air pulses with the sounds of commingling bands of music—the railway stations are hives of men, and every hive is throwing off its swarms until they blacken the streets; there is mustering and marshalling of men at the shore, mustering of men under glittering new banners, red sashes, green sashes, white sashes, and there is much haste and crowding. . . . The Volunteers in their new blouses are one blaze of brilliant scarlet, . . . The bakers in their picturesque and lively costume are gathering to their place of rendezvous, . . . The Freemasons, aproned, sashed, rosetted, and dressed from head to foot in the sleekest of broadcloth, are picking, with hasty steps, their way among the crowd. The trades, in generous rivalry, are, in their sashes and favours, as brilliant as so many tropical birds; and as they move with a forest of silk banners overhead to the starting place, each a link in the great pageant of the day . . . the wonder is . . . how, when once started, it is ever to end. . . .”

26 A Jubilee History of the Halifax People’s Park (Halifax, 1907), 11. The official brochure concluded that “this was by far the most splendid procession, and the most costly, ever seen in the town of Halifax.”

27 Bell, Ritual, 59.

In the 1890s, the Sanitary Committee granted permission for the use of Greville Smyth Park, Bristol, for drilling by schoolboys from Ashton Gate Board School. In 1860, the Rifle Corps of the Birmingham division of the Warwickshire Regiment was given permission to drill and do field exercises in Calthorpe Park during the summer months.

29 Ruff, Philips Park, 78.
Resistance and Rule Breaking

It is clear that there was never a golden age in which bylaws were unquestioningly obeyed, vandalism was nonexistent and gentility reigned as the park-makers had hoped.\(^{30}\) On the contrary, early park history is peppered with spicy stories of resistance to bourgeois rituals of correct leisure.

The daybook of the head gardener of Philip’s Park Manchester is full of the frustration of trying to impose a notion of “rational exercise and amusement” on users.\(^{31}\) In December 1865, he made an official complaint to the Manchester Parks and Cemetery Committee: “In fine weather [the park] was frequented by a number of exceedingly ill-behaved young men and women whose dress and language was both disgusting and filthy... any remonstrations were only received with laughter and sneers, offensive remarks were often addressed to... [p]ark servants by these persons and they dare not resent them.”\(^{32}\)

Despite bylaws, what counted as proper behavior was open to negotiation: when a park-keeper reprimanded a man sitting on a bench with his arm around his female companion’s waist, he was castigated in the local press for his officiousness and for exceeding his powers.\(^{33}\) Working-class couples were often seen as using a “wholesome” space in an “unwholesome” way: lighting was often seen as a way to discourage couples without access to indoor privacy, in search of privacy out of doors. One reason given for the decision of the Society of Merchant Venturers to hand over responsibility for Victoria Square in Bristol to the Corporation was that by 1874, the trees were overcrowded and there were no keys to the gates, so that the public used the garden “often, we fear when dark... for immoral purposes.”\(^{34}\)

Even the introduction of public conveniences was controversial in terms of notions of correct behavior. When they were first proposed for Philips Park in 1846, one member of the Manchester Parks Committee objected on the grounds that: “It is not desirable at any time to have too much accommodation of this kind, nor are the public parks the proper place for such matters. Besides I do not think encouragement should be given to such occupation and I conceive that there is indelicacy in the very idea.”\(^{35}\)

As in England, in America there was strict exclusion of certain forms of leisure activity. Galen Cranz’s study of park development in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco remarks: “Some activities were widely popular but excluded from park life: these exclusions further describe the ideal of enjoyment and reveal its class bias.” Cranz refers to the prohibition of “folk entertainment like horseshoe pitching, tomahawk twirling, and bullet throwing [which] were not refined enough for city parks despite their popularity... Workers pouring into the city from rural areas and peasant immigrants from other countries did not share, of course, standards of behaviour in public places, so that rules against spitting, swearing, drinking, raising of the voice, or running underscored the need to create a civic order.”\(^{36}\)

Reading of the contemporary texts has led Sarah Schmidt to show how, in the development of public parks in Montreal between 1855 and 1912, “two particularly disenfranchised groups, the vagabond and the ‘improper’ courting couple, class-, gender-, and age-specific constructs who embodied economic disorder, social unrest and moral chaos, were ideologically
and physically removed from parks.” She points out the irony that “the vagabond, the most in need of ‘civilizing’, was . . . banned from the very space constructed as that which civilized.”

It is notable how nonlegitimized use, whether by unaccompanied children, vagabonds, or minorities, continued to flourish despite the efforts of those who sought to exclude them.

Provision for children, now seen as integral to good park management, was also controversial. Many parks excluded unaccompanied children: children under the age of eight were not permitted to enter Saltaire Park, near Bradford, without an adult. When Alexandra Parade Gardens were created out of an informal open space of asphalt in the center of Weston-super-Mare in 1909, it was hoped that the laying-out of gardens would reduce the noise created by children playing and by musicians in the summer, which had “become a serious public annoyance.” Similarly, a correspondent to the Weston Mercury in June 1902 complained of the shelter in Grove Park in the same town: “At present the shelter is useless to invalids and visitors by reason of a lot of noisy children being allowed to make it their play place. I have many times seen ladies and gentlemen driven away by the racket” (Fig. 11).

Archery, with its overtones of obeisance to the lord of the manor, or polite country-house amusements, was permitted in Victoria Park in East London, along with cricket, rounders, and boating, but football was not allowed until 1888, forty-three years after the park was opened. Football, although played since the Middle Ages, had no set rules until 1863 and often generated large numbers of players and watchers. It was generally among the last sports to be permitted in public parks.

The games in Phillips Park were the source of much controversy. The playgrounds and other facilities were felt to have marred the central valley and they were removed very soon after the park opened; some altogether, some to peripheral areas of the park. An 1849 guide commented: “It was far from agreeable to find this charming section of the park occupied by men shouting under the excitement of the skittle ground, or the unrestrained merriment of the factory girls who used the swings. It is now quiet and tranquil, and will be a favourite spot for the adult population.”

The 1852 report of the Committee for Peel Park in Bradford stated: “The first step in raising the working man was to see him thoroughly clean . . . let their motto be ‘Touch not, handle not’, and if they do that they will enjoy all the pleasure it

37 Schmidt, 129–49.
38 Ibid., 138.
40 Ibid., 30.
42 Football was finally permitted in Victoria Park, Belfast in 1922, by which time “unofficial football games had been taking pace for over twenty-five years” (Scott, A Breath of Fresh Air, 50).
43 A few pages about Manchester, circa 1849, quoted Ruff, Phillips Park, 57.
is possible to have without doing any harm whatsoever.” One is reminded of the insight of Denis Cosgrove in commenting on the mass trespass on Kinder Scout by working-class ramblers in 1935: the intentions of organizers such as Tom Stephenson, he remarks, “were not to see landscape so much as to experience it physically—to walk it, climb it or cycle in it.” For the working-class users, for whom public parks were ostensibly designed, full experience of the landscape often involved inevitable transgression of the rules.

Transgression as Legitimate Use

So, while clearly in Bell’s sense conformity was often ritual-like, to what extent did transgression also take ritual-like form? We can see it historically in the mass games of football that were complained of in superintendent’s reports, in the defiant use of parks for political meetings and rallies, and indeed in their place in popular culture during the 1960s; the popular song, “Itchycoo Park” by the Small Faces is typical of the regard in which these informal urban spaces were held by a generation devoted to transgression, spaces in which feeding the ducks and getting high were seen as perfectly complementary.

Going back to Reg Speller, we can see it in the persistent use of lakes for bathing. In 1849 it was estimated that, in three hours on one summer day, three thousand people bathed in the eastern lake of Victoria Park, a use condemned by the park’s designer, James Pennethorne, because bathing costumes were not used. Swimming was illegal and people did so “at their own peril, sometimes being taken into custody for it.” And yet they persisted in what Bell would call a “traditionalized,” ritual-like activity. Steen Eiler Rasmussen has described the love of swimming as a long-standing English trait when commenting on the ponds on Hampstead Heath: “The English love the raw sensation of the elements, to feel the wind and the moisture in their faces. That is why they swim in the lakes, dive down to muddy depths—becoming fish in the coolness of the water.” The first park constable in Alexandra Park Hastings had to control among other activities, “skipping, leap-frog (and) kiss-in-the-ring,” suggesting in the individual itemization that the prohibited activities were as ritual-like [traditional, invariant, and rule-governed] as those permitted.

When Philips Park, Manchester, opened, the most common transgression of the bylaws was one rich with cultural associations. The day-book of the head gardener, Jeremiah Harrison, records his frustration over the picking of flowers, particularly by young girls and women but also by boys and men: “visitors seem determined not to go out without a posy as they call it.” The use of the formal, courtly term “posy” suggests that the transgressors and indeed Harrison were aware of the traditional significance of the flowers, huge in Victorian times as a symbol of love and innocence, even when picking them in the park was illegal.

Card-playing also was prohibited in Philips Park, but the prohibition was resisted. “Tuesday a young man told one of our men that four young men were playing cards in the bandstand, they were caught but were not playing at the time. I sent for a police officer and he advised me to reprimand them and let them go, also a plain clothes police officer caught one on Saturday, three got away, that were playing cards in the bandstand, with only one being caught. For four afternoons last week I got a plain clothes officer from 4 p.m. to 9-15 p.m. but he did not catch anyone they were all very quiet, they turned up again last night.” It would be reasonable, given the repeated nature of the offence, to infer that card playing had an important role

45 Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., The Iconography of Landscape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 268.
46 Lambert, Bristol, 58: in St. George’s Park in Bristol, the use of the park for unofficial games of football, even at night, was damaging the turf according to council minutes of February 1897.
48 Rasmussen, London, 239.
49 Hastings Borough Council, Alexandra Park, 1982, quoted in Conway, People’s Parks, 204. See Bell, Ritual, 153 on the “ritual-like” characteristics of many games and forms of play.
50 Quoted in Ruff, Phillips Park, 75.
51 Manchester Parks and Cemetery Committee, July 1910, quoted in Ruff, Phillips Park, 123.
in the social life of the transgressors, and that the park seemed a legitimate location for it, despite the law. The illicit use of the bandstand for this social ritual was a form of appropriation, albeit furtive and unsuccessful.

Correct and Incorrect—Two Sides of the Same Coin

How then did transgressive behavior relate to permitted behavior? I would like to suggest that it was, in some intimate way, complementary, that transgressive behavior was fundamental to public parks. Much of this behavior, when it is not purely antagonistic to the park but in some way a utilization of and engagement with its facilities, should be termed “symbolic inversion.” As defined by Barbara Babcock, this covers “any sort of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms.”52 But, as she continues, “all symbolic inversions define a culture’s lineaments at the same times as they question the usefulness and the absoluteness of its ordering.”53 There is a relationship between the intended ritual program and the rituals of transgression: as van Gennep observes, rituals cannot be interpreted outside the whole system of rituals to which they belong.54

Moreover, we can see how far the transgressive binds together correct behavior and those who behave correctly. In the Montreal parks in the mid-nineteenth century, debates over single women users illustrates how, in Barbara Babcock’s words, “What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central.”55 Fear of prostitution or of fornication was used to define the bounds of correctness. We see today in English and Scottish parks how the disproportionate fear of violence, paedophiles, or of discarded needles rallies a community. (Outside parks, the current hysterical reaction to asylum-seekers again illustrates how what is socially peripheral to the vast majority of the population becomes symbolically central via the mass-circulation tabloid press.) Transgression and conformity are intimately entangled: the margins define the center:

It has been noted in literary theory how high discourses, with their lofty style, exalted aims and sublime ends, are structured in relation to the debasements and degradations of low discourse . . . how each extremity structures the other, depends upon and invades the other in certain historical moments. . . . A recurrent pattern emerges: the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other (in the classic way that Hegel describes in the master-slave section of the Phenomenology).56

Right behavior was continually defined in the nineteenth century by its opposite; it existed in its difference from transgressive, was legitimized by it.

Stallybrass and White go further and refer to “hierarchy inversion as a ritual strategy on the part of subordinate groups.”57 The media reporting of vandalism in Philips Park, Manchester, immediately after World War II, intriguingly dramatizes just such ritual strategy. Access and vandalism had been hugely facilitated, of course, by the removal of railings and gates as part of the war effort (a purely symbolic gesture, as most such railings were not melted down for ordnance but were either sold as scrap or simply dumped). The Manchester Evening Chronicle reported on 5 November (Guy Fawkes’ Night) 1947 that:

53 Ibid., 29.
54 I am grateful to Michel Conan for this gloss on van Gennep.
56 Ibid., 3–5.
Piled high on bonfires in Clayton and Bradford tonight, will be trees, privets and wooden fences taken from Philips Park. Operation Destruction has been carried out in a thorough manner by two gangs of school children, ages ranging from 10 to 13, who call themselves the Bradford Commandos and the Clayton Commandos. The “commandos” carry out most of their operations on the way home from school and employ ingenious devices to avoid capture. Armed with axes, knives, and even small saws and crowbars hidden under their coats and jerseys, these youngsters have their own calls, whistles and signals when danger—in the shape of policemen, park-keepers and watchmen—looms on the horizon. Fred Shaw, a greensman for over 17 years at Philips Park said they even used trip wires against us. The matter has long ceased to be humourous.”

The description, both alarmed and indulgent, portrays the children’s activities as an elaborate miniature version of adult behavior associated with the wartime victory, with its own codes and practices, a form of ritual-like behavior.58

We can see the ritual-like character of transgression again in an undated article from the Daily Chronicle that describes how “Feeding the rats in Peckham Park has become as popular as feeding the animals in the zoo.” The rats were a health hazard and the authorities had a policy of destroying them, but feeding them became a ritual of leisure for users:

This little park . . . is one of the prettiest in London, and the rats have made it also one of the most popular. You can find peacocks and pigeons in the park. But if you discover a little group of children with paper bags in their hands, you may take it for granted that they are there not to feed the birds, but the rats. One of the park keepers told a “Daily Chronicle” representative yesterday that he has never seen anyone run away from a rat. “The rats are most friendly,” he said. “They don’t care for crowds, but on a quiet day they like to see the children, and the children love coming here to feed them.”

To the despair of park managers, feeding the vermin in public parks, nowadays Canada geese and squirrels, continues unabated, despite continuing to be against the law, a performative transgression ritualized over generations.

Transgression and the Withdrawal of Law

This ritual-like nature of transgression is also evident in the later history of public parks from places of legislated order to places abandoned by law (Fig. 12). Despite the physical dereliction, public parks have continued to be places in which ritual-like patterns of leisure, such as hanging out away from adults, have developed (Fig. 13). Transgression continues to take ritual form, for example, in the new role of public parks such as Russell Square that had been largely abandoned by the authorities and their representatives, as meeting-places for homosexuals.61 In Corporation Park, Blackburn, a tree growing near the neighboring school is known by both schoolchildren and park staff as “the cigarette tree,” as the habitual gathering place for break-time smokers among the pupils. The tradition has been going on so long that the tree is beginning to suffer from the nicotine absorbed by its roots and it can be seen as a ritual in van Gennep’s terms, separating the participants from the everyday world of school, a transitional stage of participation ending in incorporation in the outlaw group.

58 Ruff, Phillips Park, 148.
59 Catherine Bell notes that “both the scholar and the unschooled observer are apt to appreciate something ritual-like in many games and forms of play” (Bell, Ritual, 153).
61 The proposal to “restore” the square in 1997 as a Heritage Lottery Fund project, which involved locking its gates at night, was greeted with highly articulate opposition by the local gay community. Similarly, there were objections from the police to nighttime closure of Forbury Gardens, Reading, in the HLF restoration plan, because, with the gates open, “at least they knew where the dealers were” (information supplied by Dr. Stewart Harding, former head of HLF Urban Parks Programme, 2003).
The world of transgressors is inevitably hard to find written up, but this graffiti in Baxter Park in Dundee gives hints of a glorious struggle fitting to a warlike race (Fig. 14). When Central Park in New York was being restored, the number one priority was graffiti removal, because of its role in ritual territorializing of the park by rival gangs, and as early as the 1920s Robert Park of the University of Chicago School of Social Ecology was analyzing “the significance of group bonding in distinctive juvenile gangs.” The debate on dog-walking in many public parks has been ferocious in the last twenty years, attacked and defended with equal passion on both sides, with the transgressors claiming to have “a right to take our dogs there.”

As described by Eileen O’Keefe, Norbury Park, near Reigate in Surrey, exemplifies the juxtaposition of correct and transgressive rituals of leisure:

The graffiti in the grim underpass, crossing from Box Hill to the Norbury Park side of the A24 would not look out of place in the environs of Kings Cross. Smack on the doorstep of the good folk of Mickleham, in a car park on the A24, is the meeting place for the motorcycling fraternity who congregate in their hundreds from across the South East to celebrate their passion for a visual and sound culture of their own.

Transgression such as this rally may be viewed as purely antisocial; it may, by contrast, represent part of a legitimate negotiation over use. Ken Worpole has demonstrated how in today’s post-bylaw public parks “arguments over dog mess, loud

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62 See Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Comedia, 1988). Hebdige has concluded that the ritualistic levels of display especially in Punk-era England, were part of a subculture that “translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasures of being watched” (p. 35).
63 Hebdige refers to Robert Park and the University of Chicago School of Social Ecology, which in the 1920s explored “the significance of group-bonding in distinctive juvenile gangs” (Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 8).
radios, teenage hanging out, scramble bikes, free festivals, all contribute to the problem of a confusion of appropriate activities for appropriate spaces.”

Similarly, in America, the revival of parks at the end of the 1960s was seen to lie in encouraging an “anything goes” approach to programming. But the new uses, deeply embedded in social ritual outside the park, were again threatening to the older ideals of rational enjoyment: “The new and vigorous use of the parks, especially during the Vietnam War, was sometimes disruptive, threatening to conventional sensibilities or downright illegal.” The café by the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, New York, was allowed to become a center for marijuana smokers and despite experimental tolerance, “the result was considered unsavoury and the café disbanded.”

As Galen Cranz has observed, “these rumblings represented a deeper upheaval, indicated by a slogan of the era, Power to the people.” From a historical perspective, there is an irony in the echo of the taunts of transgressors in Philips Park a century before, and it epitomizes the conundrum at the heart of the public park.

Resistance to dominant ritual forms and promotion of alternatives has continued to this day. For example, in the 1990s, there was a strain of protest against the new forms of order represented by park restoration. In a critique of the restoration of Victoria Park, in Bow, East London, Iain Sinclair described the heritage vision of the park as “a homage to the dominant ethic”: “As transients (non-voters) we are here on sufferance. The park is a manifesto: life could be like this, disciplined leisure, controlled enlightenment. Uniformity, cropped grass and fresh paint on the railings. . . . Zero graffiti. The park repels it. We keep our heads down and our hands in our pockets.”

The new ritual route, the heritage trail, is vehemently denounced: “Every artefact within the kidney outline of the park must align itself with the gonzo concept of the ‘Bow Heritage Trail’. This is not a path that can actually be walked, it’s a metaphor, a conceit, meandering aimlessly. . . .” By contrast to the polite and correct promenade along the heritage trail, carnivalesque use of the park, even when licensed, is still presented as a transgression and provokes fury from the establishment’s watchdogs: the East London Advertiser’s reaction to the Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival held in the park was to rage at the litter of “paper, cans, bottles and used condoms” under a headline denouncing the participants as “Mucky Devils!”

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66 Comedia and Demos, Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal (Comedia and Demos: Stroud and London, 1995), 11. The report also quotes Deborah Karasov, The Once and Future Park (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993): “While some park users stroll along the paths and sit quietly among the manicured gardens—the image of bourgeois leisure to which nineteenth-century reformers hoped everyone would aspire—others feel just as comfortable using parks as places to fix their cars, dance to music, or just hang out.”


68 Ibid., 142.

69 Ibid., 142–43.

70 Iain Sinclair, Lights Out for the Territory (London: Granta, 1997), 38.

71 Ibid., 213.

72 Ibid., 212.
In conclusion, “the people’s park” was and is a much more complicated cultural structure than is now perceived. The very notion of a people’s park is fraught with potential conflict. To whom does it belong, and who decides how it should be used? The way in which it is to be used has been the subject of continuous struggle and negotiation. In the people’s park, a lacuna exists between the appropriation of the authorities designed to impose civilizing performative rituals, and the reappropriation implicit in people’s actual behavior. But transgression is often far from a random, negative response to the park; on the contrary, it represents older, carnivalesque ways of engaging with place and community; and because it shares the same cultural lineaments, it is very often the corollary and complement to the dominant rituals, expressed in recognizably ritual forms.