Foreword

Robert F. Reid-Pharr

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For decades the governing cry of our cities has been “Never speak to strangers.” I propose that in a democratic city it is imperative that we speak to strangers, live next to them, and learn how to relate to them on many levels, from the political to the sexual. City venues must be designed to allow these multiple interactions to occur easily, with a minimum of danger, comfortably, and conveniently. This is what politics—the way of living in the polis, in the city—is about.

—Samuel R. Delany, Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, 193

There is a vexing conceptual difficulty that one must face when considering how we might best structure our ever more complex societies, how we might manage the unruly bodies of even more unruly citizens. The question is not only one of municipal administrations or shared resources and responsibilities, but also of how we might encourage (political, social, financial, ethical, and indeed erotic) investment in our various and varied communities such that we might come to recognize our neighbors, both near and far, as neither competitors nor impediments to our efforts at survival, but instead as companions, lovers, and kin whose success and pleasure redound upon us, whose good will and fellow feeling reach us with enough force and regularity to encourage us to protect, embrace, and amplify both the most exalted dreams and the most grubby desires of even—and especially—those whose voices ring awkwardly on the ear and whose visages sit strangely on the eye.
Part of what makes Samuel R. Delany’s pathbreaking work *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* so enormously delicious, so hugely exciting to read, is the fact that Delany so ardently and unhesitatingly announces New York as a *living* city. In the tradition of the grand theorist of urban life, Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 masterpiece, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Delany amplifies and redirects, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* focuses largely on the matter of contact, the myriad unscripted and often unsanctioned ways in which citizens interact not so much apart from capitalist forms of competition as alongside them. For Delany the real issue within the modern metropolis is how to encourage contact across differences of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and especially class. It is this contact that provokes and underwrites the security, possibility, contentment, and astonishment that are the necessary ingredients of successful urban life. “In a democratic society that values social movement, social opportunity, and class flexibility, interclass contact is the most rewarding, productive, and thus privileged kind of contact,” Delany writes. “There is no way people can move comfortably between classes if the classes themselves do not have repeated pleasant social interactions with one another, class war or not” (*Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, 73).

Here is where Delany mounts his most trenchant theoretical intervention. That is to say, he is especially careful to note that not all forms of human interaction can be read as “contact” in the way that he frames the term. In particular, Delany situates the concept of contact against the idea of “networking,” suggesting that the network opportunity—the conference, the fraternity, the professional gathering—is always established *within* the protocols of capitalist competition such that even the most convivial sites of professional and class affiliation, the office cocktail party to take one example, can offer only those opportunities and rewards that work to reinforce the limits of individual networks while reinvigorating the policing of class boundaries. In a series of hilarious send-ups of writers’ conventions he notes that aspiring authors arrive at these events hoping that they will experience the type of surprising, if not exactly unanticipated, pleasures and rewards that one hap-
hazardly encounters in interactions with (relative) strangers in the streets of New York. What these eager conferees inevitably experience, however, is the reiteration of their own class positions. Or as Delany succinctly frames the matter, “Networking produces more opportunities to network—and that’s about it” (139).

While Delany is especially careful to avoid a rigorous, or perhaps better put, brittle distinction between “contact” and “network,” he does suggest that the redevelopment of the area around Times Square and the destruction of many smaller establishments, including pornography theaters, in favor of skyscrapers, chain stores, and malls, is designed first and foremost to allay the fears of tourists who suspect that without the proper policing and surveillance they might trip into exactly the cross-class contact that Delany celebrates. Thus like the eager young writer who mistakes the scripted sociality of the conference for the complexities of casual social interaction, the individual who enters the New Times Square walks into an area in which the necessary acts of class exclusion have taken place already. Even with its much heralded grime and grit, Times Square existed for decades as a location dominated by working class and poor New Yorkers who were often met by middle and upper class persons specifically interested in having contact, including sexual contact, across boundaries of class and race. Today Times Square has become, or at least is imagined to have become, a location in which the middle and upper classes come to see in the streets, the shops, the malls, and the theaters exhausted versions of themselves.

I think it is fair to say that where *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* not only rings, but also reminds the reader of how very limited a palette is most often utilized in the production of what we imagine as properly established theory or criticism, is in Delany’s detailed, evocative, poignant, sometimes shocking, sometimes sad, and often naughty descriptions of the porn theaters that he frequented over a thirty year period.

“But what,” asked a young woman editor, a reader of an early draft, “went on in those movie theaters, before they were closed? Let me see some of that.” (xxiii)
The trick for readers about to experience *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* for the first or the forty-first time is *not* to become so focused on the many descriptions of sexual contact that Delany offers that they miss the stabbing critique embedded within those descriptions. Delany’s genius turns on the fact that he is not afraid to both look and see. He sees homeless men, hustlers, crack addicts, movie attendants, sewer workers, shoe shine men, food cart operators. He sees young and old men, fat and skinny men, mentally and physically disabled men. He sees gay and straight men. He sees poor, working class, professional, and occasionally rich men. The critique that he so boldly offers to the rest of us, however, is not simply that he sees more broadly than we do, but instead that this process is surprisingly simple. What is complicated is the process of *not* seeing. Much of his critique of the intra-class networking that produces so much of the very literary/critical establishment of which he is himself a part is that it so rigorously enforces a sort of class-based conceptual blindness. It is very often—perhaps most often—the case that while the intellectual class may note working class and poor persons, they very infrequently hail them. They look but they do not see. Thus for Delany, the goal is not simply to titillate his readers but also to establish examples, instruments one might say, by and with which we can begin to refuse the clumsy binary between the vernacular and the expert.

In a remarkable exchange between Delany and Hoke—a bear of a man with large “Negro-wide” nostrils, a short uncut cock, a surgically corrected harelip covered by a walrus moustache, and, most appetizingly for Delany, a set of large, work-hardened, and radically nail-bitten hands—Hoke explains why after months of successful casual encounters they fail so miserably when he finally invites Delany to his apartment for a bout of fun/friendly sex.

\[\text{The reason we couldn't make it is that I don't even wanna like the things about me that you think are just great! I mean, I probably don't need anybody who hates 'em. But for any kind of regular thing, I need a guy who just}\]

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sort of ignores them, like I do—but wants to put that little girl through all her changes. I mean—what? You’re thirty-six. I’m thirty-eight. What it is, see, is we’re both homosexual. You need somebody the same sex as you. I need somebody the same sex as me. But that’s just not each other. (102)

That is to say, Hoke offers an un-satiated Delany a succinct, complex, and deftly rendered explication of the mechanics of desire (I need you to want that aspect of my being—that little girl—obscured by my physicality) as well as the complicated instrumentality of identity (your homosexuality is not my homosexuality) in the few polite moments given over to his failed paramour prior to offering him the door. And lest one imagine that Delany, or I for that matter, wish to suggest that the theoretical statements of working class men are somehow more pure or sophisticated simply because they emanate from working class men, I would restate my argument that Hoke’s bravura performance only repeats the idea that our networks often operate not so much by suppressing the artistic/intellectual possibilities inherent in the intricacies of cross-class contact as by ignoring them.

I will note in this regard that flouting normative standards about where and with whom sexual activity might take place has been a key method across the whole of Delany’s rambling oeuvre. From the publication of his first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor*, in 1962, Delany has been playing across not only boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality, but also, and even more importantly, over what presumably can be imagined and said within both fiction and cultural criticism. A full or even adequate treatment of how the theme of race mixing, class mixing, gender bending, and boundary breaking function within Delany’s body of work would be impossible here. Still, one sees these ideas articulated repeatedly and ever more skillfully across the decades of Delany’s writing career. In his most popular novel, *Dhalgren* (1975), his underappreciated *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), the ground-breaking four-volume series Return to Nevèrýon, published between 1979 and 1994, his 1988 book-length autobiographical essay, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fic-
tion in the East Village, his 1994 novel of philosophy, murder, and out of bounds sexual desire, *The Mad Man*, his two late novels, *Dark Reflections* (2007) and *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), and of course *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) itself, we see Delany struggling not only to break the unnecessary boundaries between man and woman, black and white, gay and straight, the vernacular and the expert, but also to encourage—and to teach—others to do the same.

In reading the two long essays that compose *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, many have expressed concern over the idea that by situating his critiques of the redevelopment of Times Square within porn theaters Delany effectively disappears women from his analyses of the promises and intricacies of contact. The point is made even more starkly palpable by the fact that Delany himself returns to this idea throughout the work. Speaking of a scene that exemplifies the fraternity sometimes established between men in the theaters, fraternity often generously shared across lines of race, class, and sexuality, Delany writes that such a scene’s charm, sociality, and warmth—if it has any—depend entirely on the absence of “the woman”—or at least depend on flattening “the woman” till she is only an image on a screen, whether of light or memory, reduced to “pure” “sexuality,” till, a magical essence, a mystical energy, she pervades, grounds, even fuels the entire process, from which she is corporally, intellectually, emotionally, and politically absent. (25)

This observation opens onto a story that Delany tells of taking his friend Ana, a stocky, dark-haired Hispanic woman who works as a daytime temp and a nighttime musician, into a theater with him. The reactions of the men whom she encounters range from unfazed to mildly shocked and pleasantly amused, until she is approached for sex.

He asked me would I let him . . . eat me. Only, I could tell: He really thought I might say yes. And, when I said, “No, thank you,” he smiled, shrugged—he did look sad—and . . . walked away. (29; Delany’s ellipses)
This leads to Delany’s repeated claim that, in fact, the forms of sociality that took place between both heterosexual and homosexual men in the Times Square porn theaters should be taken as useful models for interaction between the genders. Delany celebrates what he calls the “the unmitigated violence to the West’s traditional concept of ‘women’” embedded in a sentence like “He asked me would I let him . . . eat me,” and perhaps even more provocatively in the rejoinder, “He really thought that I might say yes,” precisely because these phrases refuse the idea of a cloistered female sexuality, closeted within restricted (networked) fields of operation in which the point is precisely to harass, control, and encumber women and girls. Delany has particular disdain for the idea that the supposed “cleaning up” of Times Square would create a safer space for women, arguing instead that as the destruction of buildings, businesses, and communities that preceded the renovation devastated the working class communities that inhabited and utilized the area, setting off epidemics of homelessness, drug addiction, and under-aged prostitution in the process, that at best the promised safety for women was only ever imagined to cover a minority of middle and upper class women at the expense of “out of network” women and men. At the same time, Delany ends Times Square Red, Times Square Blue not with an encomium to the lost joys of all male sexual contact but instead with the frank suggestion that the types of sex spaces pioneered by gay men should, in fact, be radically extended to all portions of our communities, that we should “move such institutions from the barely known and secret, from the discourse of the illicit, into the widely known, well-publicized, and generally advertised rhetoric of bourgeois elegance and convenience” (197).

I will end these comments and make way for the thrill of the fantastic essays included in this remarkable work by giving voice to the nagging fretfulness that my rereading of Times Square Red, Times Square Blue has engendered. I have the uncanny sense of having been here before, déjà vécu, of watching with glum bewilderment as a gentrification process largely centered on Manhattan twenty years ago has broken with incredible vigor onto the shores of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and even
humble Staten Island. The arguments that one habitually hears about the displacement of working class and poor communities seem tepid and rehearsed as we witness the erection of a seemingly endless stream of under-populated glass and steel luxury condominiums. This has been met by a vigorous politics of gay respectability in which casual sexual encounters between men still take place, but within contexts that are corralled by rigid boundaries of race and class. Want quick sex? Apps, vacations to gay enclaves, and circuit parties all work. But in each instance there is a quite literal price to be paid. Dollars and Euros are exchanged with alacrity. Body form, clothing style, age, and health status are checked and monitored, and used to segregate and reject with impressive precision and speed. Women, particularly heterosexual women, are often present even as they risk being flattened out and packaged as idols or voyeurs, beings to focus the party and witness the politics of exclusion. What often passes as the LGBTQ community has been largely networked, and operates as a political and economic force that is thought to have grown past the grubbiness of porn theaters and toward the bright tomorrow of shopping sprees and companionate marriage. The good news, however, the shockingly good news, is that the whining, irritable, greedy, hungry, stinking, quick, patient, and cunning beast known as desire still remains untamed. It stalks, it cruises, it looks both left and right, it saddles up pleasant, alert, and appealing to the male, the female, the yellow, the brown, the black, the fat, the disabled, the clumsily dressed, the nappy-headed, the thick lipped, the hairy, the old, the clumsy, and the daring. And when it arrives, reeking of promise and invention, it whispers the same naughty word to those with enough temerity—and hope—to hear: contact!