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Crossing Signals

In gay bars these days, the men's costumes, with their coded signals, are so elaborate that even habitués are beginning to get confused. Keys dangling from a belt over the left hip generally signal a desire to be sexually dominant; on the right, a passive disposition. But the designations may change from city to city and bar to bar. An expert on left-right symbolism interviewed for the gay tabloid the *Advocate* last week warned of a further possible misunderstanding. If they are on the right side he said, it may just mean that the wearer is righthanded.

Another contributor reminisced about the good old days when "you could read a guy like a page, top to bottom." Nowadays, wrote Karl Maves, two strangers in a bar may spend more than 20 minutes staring at each other just "to figure out what the hell the other one is supposed to mean." The fellow in cowboy boots and beads, with the blue sequins spelling LOVE on his olive-drab army pants, "must be a sort of butch hippie," a cruiser might speculate. "Or at least non-nellie. Without being anti-nellie of course."

Like most subcultures, the homosexual world has its own language. To cruise is to go out looking for sex. A nellie is an effeminate fellow, and a butch a virile one. Male gays who project or seek hypermasculinity go to leather bars, often to pick up a partner for s. and m. (sadism and masochism) or b. and d. (bondage and discipline)—terms sometimes used among heterosexuals as well. Brown leather refers to either a newcomer to the leather crowd or a bar where patrons are more interested in posturing than in seeking risky sex. Trade refers

to a very masculine hustler (prostitute), and rough trade refers to straight men who seek homosexual sex (called rough because of the risk of violence from the straight partner once the sex is over).

Many gay terms for sexual styles and tastes are put-downs. Besides nellies, effeminate gay males are called twinkies, sissies or queens; they do their drinking in vanilla bars, swish joints or fluff parlors. The all-purpose term queen is used in many combinations: a drag queen wears women's clothes, and a chicken queen (or chicken hawk) prefers sex with underage boys.

Among lesbians, a butch, dyke or bull dyke is a mannish woman who seeks a femme—a passive, dependent partner. With the rise of feminist consciousness, the butch-femme pairing seems to be fading, though the terms are still in use. Butch women are sometimes called brothers; effeminate male homosexuals call each other sister. An auntie is a derogatory term for an older male homosexual. Abigail is a nickname for a stuffy middle-aged gay. A front marriage is a legal marriage of convenience. Fag and faggot are acceptable terms among gays if no straights are present.

Gay speech can be fresh and funny but also dirty and self-deprecating. Bruce Rodgers, who compiled more than 12,000 terms for his book *The Queens' Vernacular*, acknowledges that many gay activists regard gay slang as "another link in the chain which holds the homosexual enslaved."



KEYS DANOLINO LEFT