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***State of the Union, or Swinging Both Ways***

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“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

*The Constitution of the United States of America*

“I’ll go into the bedroom silently and lie down between the bridegroom and the bride...”

Allen Ginsberg, *Love Poem on a Theme by Whitman*

14<sup>th</sup> Street is an intriguingly in-between kind of street in New York. For starters, 14<sup>th</sup> Street plays host to the L train – one of the few subway lines that cuts across Manhattan rather than along, and which shuttles New Yorkers between Manhattan and Brooklyn dozens of times each day, allowing for the inter-twining of the two boroughs’ destinies and resident populations.

14<sup>th</sup> Street is also the very first street to extend river-to-river across Manhattan in a single, tyrannical straight line. The first street, to wit, on Manhattan’s famous grid: north of 14<sup>th</sup>, everything is orderly, Cartesian, perfect; south of 14<sup>th</sup>, all hell breaks loose, and the city becomes a lot less navigable, and a lot more labyrinthine, complex, and intriguing. The street is thus a kind of border or membrane between rational and Dionysian New York. Some Manhattanites profess to never ever go south of 14<sup>th</sup>.

To add to these singular characteristics, the immediate urban landscape along 14<sup>th</sup> Street is, furthermore, schizophrenic in nature. An apt description of the street is that it “swings both ways,” in more ways than one. Firstly, a walk along the street takes one from the somewhat more gritty and once-impooverished tenements of Alphabet City to the uber-hip high-end fashion of the Meat-packing District, brandishing boutiques from the likes of Stella McCartney, the late Alexander McQueen, and Diane von Furstenberg. The latter’s initials “D/F” preside over the entire precinct like a sacred cartouche from some Egyptian temple complex, of which she herself is the High Priestess.

Secondly, sexuality on the street is decidedly fluid, from the straight(er) neighborhoods west of 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, to the fabulously gay and once-raunchy haunt of Chelsea east of 6<sup>th</sup>. Here in the 1970s to 1990s, the most notorious gay sex, strip, drag and just-about-any-kind-of clubs flourished. These days, however, the area is populated by a kind of sexually ambiguous species of metrosexual young persons, pushing prams and practicing Prada.

In between these extremes, binding them inextricably together, sits Union Square, an inadvertent symbol of America itself, and the dichotomies of income,

race, religion and sexuality the nation continues to struggle with. This is the true political and historical heart of 14<sup>th</sup> Street and possibly even New York City: 250,000 gathered here to support the union during the Civil War in 1861. More recently, after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Union Square spontaneously became a public gathering place for thousands of mourners holding candlelight vigils. Today, the square is as popular as ever with the city's inhabitants; in particular, the southern end of the Square, flanked by 14<sup>th</sup> street, is one of the most pleasant public spaces in New York to be in to watch the City pass one by.

Union Square's much-feted, much-younger cousin in the west – the High Line Park – is stunningly landscaped but starkly soul-less, accentuating just how much Manhattan is becoming a specific kind of island, custom-made for a specific kind of New Yorker. Around that part of the city, one can see Manhattan as a theme park, drawing throngs of cooing Asians and Europeans keen to partake of the American Dream: the right to purchase and consume ever more meaningless, materialistic, marquee-named tat. In the meantime, the real New York thrives elsewhere, markedly more down-to-earth and matter-of-fact.

This tale of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, told straight up and without pretension, is the tale of America itself – a nation that perpetually swings both ways: Democrat and Republican, Straight and Gay, Have and Have-Not, Authentic and Artificial. Attempts are and have always been made to acknowledge and cater to all the shades in-between, but the way one best conceives of the State of the Union, is in terms of it being quite literally, “bi.”

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