

# “It Beats Rocks and Tear Gas”: Streaking and Cultural Politics in the Post-Vietnam Era

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Streaking . . . is the latest attempt to erode and destroy convention, decency, and decorum and is primarily an act of . . . defiance rather than an isolated, innocuous student prank. Its precursors are long unkempt hair, dirty jeans, dirty feet, hippyism, “ups,” “downs,” LSD, heroin, and so-called total female liberation.

—Murray Elkins, M. D., in the journal  
*Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* (167)

My gut reaction is that it makes the world safe for goldfish.

—Paul Bohannon, anthropologist, Northwestern University  
(quoted in Judith Martin B14)

FROM LATE JANUARY THROUGH LATE MAY 1974, A WAVE OF “STREAKING”—roughly defined as running naked in public—occurred in the United States, primarily on college and university campuses; the brief phenomenon<sup>1</sup> eventually spread around the world. Although the exact number of streaks during this time is unknown, one group of researchers gathered data on over 1,000 incidents on US college campuses alone (Aguirre et al. 569). Streaking generated significant press coverage and spawned a plethora of stalker-related consumer items including coffee mugs, T-shirts, necklace pendants, “Keep On Streaking” patches, “Streak Freak” buttons, a “Nixon Streaking” wristwatch, pink underwear embroidered with “Too shy to streak,” and two dozen novelty singles (one of which, Ray Stevens’ “The Streak,” became a major hit).

Although some observers were deeply offended by streaking and saw it as (perhaps further) evidence of the breakdown of traditional society,

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the overwhelming consensus among mainstream social observers in 1974 was that streaking was nothing more than a silly diversion. That consensus view has stuck over the years: Today, streaking's reputation as a harmless and ultimately meaningless fad is effectively uncontested, securing its place in pop culture history next to hula hoops and pet rocks. Isolated streaks still happen, of course, and still have the power to agitate individual authority figures and, say, producers of live television. But any potential social or political significance the 1974 streaking wave may have held has been evacuated, allowing it to serve as an innocuous marker of a "wackier" era in our cultural memory.

This enduring trivialization presents a problem for the historian, however, because it represents an essentially antihistorical acceptance of the definitions and meanings given to events in the past by the actors involved in those events. For example, one of the key scholarly histories of the 1970s, Peter Carroll's *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, does not mention streaking at all, even though it does reference a host of cultural moments that are more generally agreed to have political significance.<sup>2</sup> The academy's disregard of streaking is generally true of other noteworthy twentieth-century "fads" as well (hula hoops, panty raids, etc.). In the case of streaking, the consensus view not only erases from the historical record the animated discursive struggle waged over streaking's significance at the time, but also silences streaking's small but telling role in the historical trajectory of conservative cultural hegemony. Why, we might ask, were conservative voices such as the *National Review* and George Will such ardent defenders of streaking as "apolitical" fun, as a "return to normalcy," while leftists like Marshall McLuhan and many campus activists were silenced or ridiculed when they attempted to ascribe political significance to streaking? Contrary to the dominant narrative from 1974 forward, the story of streaking is not the story of a meaningless fad; it is the story of how streaking was turned into a meaningless fad through extensive discursive effort. At the very least, the fact that a fairly abnormal activity—running naked in public—was widely interpreted as a "return to normalcy" is an act of social imagination whose origins and consequences are worth investigating.

The cultural analyst seeking to take a second look at this process finds little support in the literature; to the extent that a phenomenon like streaking has been studied at all, it has usually been from a sociological or economic rather than a popular culture perspective.

Sociologists—often from that subspecialty called “deviance studies”—can tell us something about how fads spread and how they interrelate with behavioral norms, but they are less successful at telling us what they might mean.<sup>3</sup> Economists, for their part, provide a producer’s perspective on how to create (or at least capitalize on) consumer fads; alternatively, they explore fads within their own discipline—the literature on “management fads” is surprisingly extensive. The cultural studies work that has been done on fads tends to address them through the lens of consumption and/or reception and is most interested in questions of pleasure and resistance—useful in understanding fads engineered by the culture industries (e.g., *Pokemon*) but less successful in coming to terms with more “organic” fads like streaking.

One of the more productive concepts within cultural studies to help explain these phenomena is John Fiske’s notion of the “media event.” Widely credited to Daniel Boorstin, the term was brought to greater prominence in the 1990s by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, who theorized the production of spectacle in the creation of events for mediated consumption. Fiske’s contribution was to move beyond a definition of media events as top-down public-relations orchestrations in order to address the role of the popular in their emergence, emphasizing the cultural dimensions of such moments. Certain events capture the public’s attention and imagination, he argues, because they provide a discursive site at which societal tensions can be examined and negotiated. Fiske rejects easy distinctions between media events and nonmedia events: “We can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a ‘real’ event and its mediated representation” (2). He sees media events as points of maximum turbulence and visibility for ongoing social struggles that might otherwise remain hidden, “useful to the analyst because their turbulence brings so much to the surface, even if it can be glimpsed only momentarily” (7). Subsequent work has refined Fiske’s notion of the media event. In particular, James Carey, drawing on Benedict Anderson, has connected media events to nationalism in a spatial sense: media events help construct the symbolic borders of the nation and serve as rituals of inclusion and exclusion for the imagined national community (45).

This article seeks to expand on Fiske and Carey’s work by concentrating on the ways that media events—despite the disembodied and deterritorialized flows of media themselves—are nonetheless anchored to spatial referents that they both depend upon for their legibility

and transform through the process of mediation. In other words, media events are capable of reconfiguring spatial relations and remapping social geographies in culturally significant ways, even if these can be “glimpsed only momentarily.” In this specific case, streaking rearticulated—however fleetingly—the relationship between the college campus and the broader society at a particularly volatile moment in American history. The university was a problematic social space at the time of the streaking wave: in the American imaginary of the early 1970s, the campus had become a dangerously politicized space, ground zero for the Generation Gap and a place that increasingly appeared to threaten established gender and racial hierarchies with the rise of feminism and civil rights. At the same time, the campus had also become the symbolic locus of national decline, because many Americans blamed this alien specter—an oppositional and confrontational student body—for a host of challenges to “traditional” culture as well as military defeat in Vietnam. Within this sociospatial context, streaking temporarily effected a dual “reterritorialization” of the American campus, with mainstream and conservative forces asserting primacy and control over the university as a social space against formations representing the political left. On the one hand, streakers themselves reterritorialized the physical campus, cloaking themselves in nostalgia and a discourse of apolitical “student-ness” in order to deploy an assertive semiotics of white masculinity in the face of direct and indirect threats to white male hegemony within the university setting. On the other hand, mainstream observers used streaking to reterritorialize the symbolic campus, constructing streaking as a “return to normalcy” that fit particularly easily into a conservative backlash politics of nostalgia. Of course such reterritorializations, like all acts of hegemonic struggle, were necessarily partial, temporary, and contingent. I emphatically do not claim that streaking was anything more than a small but telling episode within a larger cultural struggle whose political effects mostly played out elsewhere. However, the racialized and sexualized politics of nostalgia within which streaking was made to fit—the rhetorical move that reasserted an imagined 1950s American innocence predicated on white patriarchy following the upheavals of the 1960s and the early 1970s—has been anything but trivial. Streaking did not launch that political movement, but it did briefly embody it and cannot be fully understood apart from that context. In other words, streaking did not do, but it does show. Its social construction as a “return to normalcy”

thus represents one of the early manifestations of a project that culminated culturally and politically in a conservative populism whose repercussions continue to be felt today.

### Winter of Discontent: The American “Crisis of Innocence” in the Early 1970s

Streaking emerged as a national media event at an interesting juncture in political and collegiate history. Both the nation and the university were undergoing historical transformations; both were widely perceived to be in crisis. The university’s turmoil was in many ways the nation’s turmoil, with countless observers expressing a sense of lost “innocence” as they came to terms with the repercussions of the 1960s and the early 1970s. At the most basic level, there was an all-too-real crisis of innocence in the nation’s leadership. But the trouble ran deeper, undermining cherished myths of America as a youthful, good, and innocent nation.

To the extent that one can talk about a popular mood, the United States in early 1974 was an unsettled and gloomy nation. As *Time* described the zeitgeist in January 1974, “The year 1973 probably cost Americans more in terms of their self-image than any year in recent memory” (“American Notes” 8). The United States had just lost a major war, a defeat for which many Americans held campus activists responsible. Major social ruptures dominated popular discourse, including the gender divisions addressed by the Equal Rights Amendment. An oil crisis shook the economy, Spiro Agnew resigned, and the dimensions of Watergate became clearer (“Of Crisis” 11–12). And 1974 was not looking any better, opening to strikes, floods, and a spate of political kidnappings, most notably that of Patty Hearst. Commentators saw a nation driven “half mad with hunger for America the beautiful, the brave, the innocent” (Baker 43). This crisis was a common theme on both right and left, with many Americans longing for “an Age of Innocence, a time before the war, on the other side of the Generational Fault” (quoted in Woods 356).

As the invocation of the “Generational Fault” implies, this putative loss of innocence was articulated to a perceived division between older and younger Americans. As several historians have noted, the college campus was, therefore, broadly implicated in this national anxiety as

the key institutional framework within which the social changes of the 1960s were generated and consolidated.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one senses the almost palpable relief in the mainstream press that “militant” student activism of the 1960s might be on the decline in the 1970s as students re-discovered the “half-forgotten joys” of the 1950s. A typical reaction came from the president of Columbia, who hoped for a “nostalgic rediscovery” of the “golden optimism” of the 1950s (quoted in Weissman 781). A spate of articles heralded this shift with headlines like “The Less Militant Campus” or “The Collapse of Activism,” and provided various explanations: Activists were burned out, they had entered “the system,” they had nothing left to fight for, etc. (Weissman 781–85).<sup>5</sup> Counterintuitively, most of these articles located the source of change within students themselves rather than in social conditions, indicating an eagerness not just to explain a drop in activism but actually to redefine the nation’s youth as a less threatening species. For example, the *New York Times* described students as “more relaxed and tolerant today than two or three years ago, less tense, less hysterical and less given to violent protest . . . less uptight . . . more willing to listen” (Sulzberger 29). At stake in this debate was less the state of student activism (which of course continued and still occasionally turned violent) than a particular understanding of students as social agents and the university as a social and political space: What kinds of politics would be practiced there and by what kinds of youth? Pessimists called the “new mood” cynical and apathetic; optimists called it “better organized and . . . less contaminated by the excesses of counter-culture ‘spontaneity’” (Weissman 781). But all of these discourses had a common theme: by marginalizing “militant” tactics, they worked to reconfigure the university as a place where protest might occur, but it would ideally be less confrontational, less threatening, and less destructive than the upheavals of the years immediately before. The result was substantial discursive pressure to contain campus protest within less destabilizing parameters. As one administrator stated, “There is some hope that those committed to social change will no longer use the streets as part of social change” (quoted in Loniello 4).

This consensus that protest should be “less hysterical” (a notably gendered term) is significant, given that the focus of student activism had shifted from antiwar protests to the push for increased rights for women and people of color (Sulzberger 29). The war, which many young males had a personal interest in opposing, was effectively over,

but political and demographic shifts were changing the character of the American university. Although college enrollment had skyrocketed in the 1960s, from 3.8 million in 1960 to 9.7 million in 1974, new enrollment in four-year colleges had dipped dramatically in 1972, due to a breather in the baby boom and fewer men attending for the deferment. Women increased their presence on campuses, doubling enrollment since 1966 and comprising nearly half the student body in 1974; by 1978, they would outnumber men.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, thanks in part to a growing black middle class, as well as the Civil Rights Act and affirmative action, African Americans were attending college in unprecedented numbers, with black enrollment doubling between 1970 and 1976 ("College Enrollment" A8). In addition to demographics, this shift was felt in a variety of symbolically important ways. Women's studies and African-American studies programs were opening around the country, while programs like Harvard's Afro-American Cultural Center sought to increase opportunities for people of color. Perhaps even more important from the point of view of middle-class white male students long accustomed to privileged status, more schools were going coed, while all-male clubs and fraternities were being forced to admit women as well ("Baa" 10; Hines). Such innovations met with significant resistance. For example, Joan Roberts, founder of the Women's Studies program at Wisconsin, became a cause célèbre when she was denied tenure by an all-male committee; around the same time, that university's Afro Center was unceremoniously shuttered in a round of budget cuts ("Denial" 2; Weissman 784). But defenders of the white male campus (and curriculum) were clearly losing ground. Major legislation like Title IX was applying significant pressure on universities, allowing blacks and women to use the legal system to change a variety of practices and decisions. Equality activists also proved adept at more confrontational tactics. For example, Joan Roberts' supporters barricaded the members of her tenure committee in a room and forced them to watch a guerilla-theater skit; when the committee chair tried to escape through a side window, he was physically attacked and had his face smeared with lipstick ("Denial" 2). In the face of such growing assertiveness, critics such as John Simon began to grumble about the "imbecile democratization of higher education," while Columbia professor Charles Frankel complained that affirmative action for women and minorities undermined the meritocracy of the university (quoted in Scully 6). One conservative philosophy professor,

Sidney Hook, warned darkly that agitation for changes to the curriculum might plunge American campuses right back into the turmoil of the late 1960s: “Signs are multiplying that if direct threats to academic freedom from radical students are dwindling, they are gathering force once again from certain groups among faculties” (quoted in Scully 6). The widely anticipated nostalgic rediscovery of the half-forgotten joys of the 1950s depended, it appeared, on keeping “certain groups” in check.

The important point is that the campus politics that were being contained in the spring of 1974 were precisely the ones that most threatened to consolidate and advance the gains of the previous decade in terms of opportunities for women and people of color. While many Americans were longing for the Age of Innocence of the (white, patriarchal) 1950s, the university continued to lead the way in altering the gendered and racialized relations of power on campus and in American society at large. And it was at precisely this sociohistorical juncture that young white men began stripping off their clothes and running in public.

### The 1974 Streaking Wave

Streaking’s origins are, unsurprisingly, rather uncertain, but a few incidents made the archives. Quakers were among the earliest documented streakers, running naked through streets in the seventeenth-century England “to show the naked truth of the gospel” (David Martin 26). A less spiritually motivated streak occurred in 1776 when continental soldiers ran naked past houses in Brooklyn “with a design to insult and wound the modesty of female decency” (“Founding”). In this century, probably the earliest reported incident was at Stanford in 1918, and various streaks were reported over the years (“Streaking: One Way” 41–42). Nonetheless, these were relatively isolated incidents, and neither the term *streaking* nor the phenomenon itself was in mainstream circulation in the early 1970s. The 1974 wave appears to be the first time that streaking became a concentrated nationwide phenomenon and media event.

The exact beginnings of the 1974 wave are also murky, but two behaviorists who studied the phenomenon credit students at Florida State with the first streak in this wave in late January 1974, quickly followed by Washington State, Maryland, and Texas (Evans and Miller



403). The first national press reports appeared in early February, and incidents increased throughout the month (Aguirre et al. 578; Evans and Miller 404). By early March, all three networks, the three major newsweeklies, and the wire services had run stories on streaking. The peak of the wave was March 2–9, during which 156 incidents were reported (Evans and Miller 404–06).

Typically, students would streak between dorms or down the local frat row. But there were variations, including streakers on bicycles, in wheelchairs, and on roller skates. The creative heterogeneity of the streaks became a topic in its own right, with papers delightedly reporting the most outrageous or humorous new twist. At the University of Georgia, a small group of streakers parachuted onto campus; sadly, one of them landed in a cesspool. At South Carolina's main library, a streaker paused at the circulation desk just long enough to ask for a copy of *The Naked Ape* before running out. At Michigan State, a class on "Criminal Sexual Deviation" got streaked. At the University of Maine, a meeting was called to discuss how to handle streaking incidents; sure enough, the meeting itself got streaked ("Where Are" 2). Campuses around the country competed for the largest mass streak, a title ultimately won by Colorado's 1,200 streakers.<sup>7</sup>

Although predominantly a college phenomenon, streaking was not limited to campuses, with streaks reported on a Pan Am 747, on Wall Street, and in the state legislatures of Michigan and Hawaii (Marum and Parise 178–80). Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* was streaked, though the incident was edited out before broadcast (Brown 71). So-called reverse streakers ran through a Florida nudist colony fully clothed ("A Streak of" 22–23). During a Beach Boys concert, two naked men ran across the stage; they were later discovered to be none other than two members of the band, Mike Love and Dennis Wilson ("Random Notes" 28). The most famous noncollegiate streak, and the one that gave network executives sleepless nights, occurred during the 1974 Academy Awards show: a streaker ran behind David Niven as he introduced Elizabeth Taylor. Liz was "unnerved," but Niven coolly quipped, "Isn't it fascinating to think that probably the only laugh that man will ever get in his life is by stripping off and showing his shortcomings?" The streaker, Robert Opal, was soon getting gigs as a "guest streaker" at Hollywood parties (Nordheimer 36; Schnakenberg 551–52).

By the end of April, campus streaks had become increasingly rare, even as the wave began to spread to the rest of the world. A "western

diplomat" streaked a crowd in Peking, and incidents were reported at the Eiffel Tower and St. Peter's Square ("Miscellaneous" 336). By May, coverage had shifted into postmortem mode, pondering the significance of the phenomenon. Although the occasional streaker might still be seen, usually at sporting events, streaking as a national media event was over by June 1974.

While even the earliest national reports tended to link streaking with goldfish-swallowing and other pre-Vietnam-era acts (some of which were themselves revived from the 1920s and the 1930s) that history had deemed innocuous, what is most striking in the struggle to secure a social meaning for the 1974 wave is the strong need to stabilize the practice discursively. In other words, journalists and other observers had to figure out what they were dealing with before they could be sure it was harmless. For example, the first article in the *New York Times* asked: "Is it an art form? Is it an uncontrollable urge? Is it political? Perhaps perverse? Healthy? Naughty?" (McFadden 35). The problem, of course, was that streaking was potentially all and none of these things, which helps account for the deep ambivalence in initial mainstream reports about the threat that streaking might pose. *Newsweek*, for instance, dismissed streaking as "play," but "like playing bank robber." Using metaphors of war and disease ("Blitzkrieg," "epidemic"), it reported prominently on streakers who were injured during their streak, as well as one who assaulted a campus official ("Blue Streaks" 63). Similar ambivalence marked the *New York Times*' reports, which referred to streakers "frolicking," even as it put "A Form of Assault" in a bold-faced subhead (McFadden 35; see also "Columbia"). But over the course of the next few weeks this ambivalence gave way to certainty: streaking, mainstream America soon concluded, was indeed safe.

In the next two sections I will examine the process by which this transformation occurred: how and why streaking was made to make sense as a "harmless fad," an apolitical, desexualized "return to normalcy" of the nostalgically constructed 1950s.

## White Boys Streaking

The first act of reterritorialization that streaking accomplished was a situational "retaking" of the university campus by white males. It is crucial to note that the streakers were overwhelmingly male and

frequently associated with fraternities (Anderson 227–28; Evans and Miller 412). Unsurprisingly, press accounts overrepresented the percentage of female streakers in their photo selection and reporting, but although many women did streak, they were much more likely to wear some kind of covering. Significantly, they were also frequently subjected to leering and abuse, such as the Barnard College woman who, surrounded by a pawing crowd, had to climb up a statue and be rescued by police (Judith Martin B14; “Streaking: One Way” 42). Such incidents reinforced that streaking was an essentially male prerogative: only males enjoyed the security to streak fully and without fear of molestation. Equally importantly, streaking was an activity practiced by whites. Although it stands to reason that there must have been some African Americans among the thousands who streaked, no reports or pictures of black streakers appeared in either the mainstream press or the major black press. Effectively one hundred percent of streakers were white, a fact reinforced when some African Americans actively sought to distance themselves from streaking. For example, a student at traditionally black Howard University said, “Nothing like that will ever happen here. The students that go to Howard do not reflect the lack of morality, or the banality and just outright decadence that occurs at white institutions” (quoted in Judith Martin B14).

The semiotics of white masculinity deployed by streaking were not merely an accident of demographics, then, but were constitutive of the activity itself. Indeed, given that streaking prominently foregrounds race and gender in its signification, the whiteness and maleness of the streakers was largely the point, especially in the context of the political changes on campus and in American society. At least some observers recognized streaking as a reaction to these changes. As one antifeminist wrote to *Time* in praise of the outbreak of streaking, “They have chosen the best possible way in which to show people that men and women are not equal. When women start wearing the pants, men start shedding them” (Vealey 5).

Nonetheless, students attempted to legitimate streaking by silencing any overt sexual and racial politics and by drawing instead on nostalgia for pre-1960s apolitical student-ness through a discourse of youthful innocence. As a streaker at Yale explained to *Newsweek*, “We’re college students, and college students are supposed to have fun” (“Streaking: One Way” 42). Likewise, a Memphis State senior disavowed politics by locating streaking within the realm of meaningless

play: “Maybe you don’t need a reason to streak. I mean what kind of reason is there to play basketball or anything else?” (Malcolm 49). This sentiment was echoed by a Wisconsin student who said, “We just want to have an old-fashioned college prank. You know, streaking for streaking’s sake” (Pinsley 2). Constructing students as nonpolitical pranksters, and the university as a space in which harmless hijinks are a time-honored tradition integral to the college experience, students worked to efface streaking’s reactionary semiotic content.

Although most streakers claimed not to have a politics, their attempts to depoliticize streaking did not go uncontested, particularly in the early days of the streaking wave. A poem in one of the Wisconsin student papers called out the politics of streaking, noting the failure of these white males to support women’s and blacks’ civil rights:

Oh, my conscience cannot rest! It must be asked—  
 Where was your shivering torso when Joan Roberts got the axe?  
 Your ice-blue shriveled dong as the Afro Center’s bag was packed?  
 (Peary 6)

In addition to such criticisms, some students and academics attempted to articulate streaking to issue-oriented political agendas. For example, a few students at the first mass streak at Wisconsin declared it a “Streak for Impeachment,” an idea that had been circulating on other campuses as well (McFadden 41; Pinsley 1). The University of Wisconsin’s *Daily Cardinal* quoted various students who claimed explicit political meanings for the activity: fifteen students who chanted “Dicks against Dick” during their streak; a woman who planned to streak for women’s rights; a male streaker who said, referring to Nixon, “We have to show that bastard we don’t care about him and want him out. Streaking is an expression of freedom against his policies” (Wang 2). The paper also reported on “streak-ins” planned by the Yippies and ran an editorial by a leading African-American campus activist, Kwame Salter, calling for more political streaks:

Imagine if political utility were found in streaking. . . . People streaking for Joan Roberts, feminism, . . . ethnic minority opportunities, . . . better dorm foods, lower tuition . . . Could administrators dismiss the impact of 5000 or more streaking bodies? Campus Police Chief Ralph Hansen would hyperventilate. Chancellor Edward Young would probably regurgitate. (4)

Such discourses, while only rarely calling attention to issues of race and gender (the women's rights streak, significantly, apparently never came to pass), attempted to construct streaking as a new addition to the methods of social protest available to student activists—to locate it, one might say, within the discursive realm of the 1960s university rather than of the 1950s. Despite these efforts, however, streaking and issue-oriented politics soon emerged as mutually exclusive categories. Even Salter, in his suggestion that streaking could be made political, was acknowledging that this potential had not been realized: “Streaking is more political than mooning—or it could be. . . . Imagine ‘streaking’ for a cause—and not ‘just because’” (4).<sup>8</sup> But one student feared that a politically motivated streak “might possibly turn off a few people” and reiterated his preference for an “old-fashioned” prank—streaking “just because” (Pinsley 2). A few days later, the student paper of the University of California, Santa Barbara, echoed this depoliticization: “Is it a spontaneous outpouring of emotion against oppressive established social mores, or merely the latest fad of those lovable campus crazies?” The answer was not in the article, but in the accompanying photograph: a streaker smeared in peanut butter, looking for a female smeared in jelly with whom to make a “sandwich” (O’Connell 1). The “latest fad” of those eternal “lovable campus crazies” was winning the day.

The reterritorialization of the American university effected by the discursive construction of streaking as a nonpolitical student fad was not merely symbolic: it helped make the physical campus safe for white male streakers. This victory did not always come easily; as sociologist William Anderson wrote of officials’ predicament, “[It] was such a new phenomenon [that] there were no university regulations which explicitly prohibited or even referred to the fad. . . . Even the campus police were confused as to whether streaking constituted illegal conduct when the first incidents occurred on campus” (226–27). Most cities had laws prohibiting lewd behavior and indecent exposure that seemed to outlaw streaking, and some citizens were calling for a crackdown. But if streaking was a harmless fad similar to goldfish swallowing, as most streakers themselves (and most of the mainstream press) were arguing, then a different response seemed to be called for than if it was “perverted” or “lewd.” As one officer at the University of Iowa expressed the dilemma, “This sure is a lot of fun. Too bad it’s illegal” (Roerman 12). At the same time, giving in to demands for repression could lead

to greater instability: although a few schools such as Brigham Young had effectively deterred mass streaking through early and well-publicized arrests, riots had resulted on at least four campuses when police attempted to repress streaking incidents (Evans and Miller 407–08). Essentially, school officials were caught in a crossfire of meanings, and the discourse into which streaking was placed—innocent play or sexual crime—would both produce and be produced by the response from authorities.

Expected to formulate a policy in the face of competing discursive constructions, authorities on many campuses adopted an approach that is critical in understanding streaking as a reterritorialization of the campus: they established different rules for the university and for the rest of society. Memphis State, for instance, blocked off the campus and permitted streaking within the perimeter, but arrested anyone who streaked off-campus. The Associated Press reported that at the University of Massachusetts, “There have been scattered arrests, generally when the streaking spilled onto city streets and interfered with non-students” (“Streakers Getting” 7). Similarly, officials at other schools at most referred students for possible disciplinary action, while nonstudents were arrested and turned over to local authorities for prosecution (Anderson 233; Evans and Miller 414). In other words, for students, streaking was a prank; for everyone else it was a crime. Not only was the nonstudent stalker more likely to be arrested, he was also more subject to social sanction. For example, one psychiatrist wrote, “It should be noted that just as anything innocent can be perverted, some adult stalkers, such as those attempting to appear on television, are doubtless exhibitionists” (Toolan 152).

This distinction between student and nonstudent is more crucial than previous scholars have recognized, because it not only helped decriminalize streaking “on the ground” (thereby increasing its “harmless” connotation in wider society); it also actively constructed the campus as a site of youthful hijinks—as it ostensibly was before the revolutions of the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> And although stalkers and authority figures were constructed as adversaries in this process, in fact they very much collaborated in reterritorializing the campus. Both needed students to be “students” in order to legitimate both streaking and the tolerance of streaking. Therefore, both participated in constructing the campus as an innocent, apolitical space: the student stalker in order to engage unmolested in an activity antithetical to the politicized campus of the

early 1970s, and authorities in order to contain more threatening and destabilizing student activities.<sup>10</sup> Campus police, in particular, seemed relieved to interpret streaking as a return to a pre-1960s university culture. The public safety director at the University of Massachusetts favorably contrasted streaking to “throwing bombs and fighting police” and added, “I see this as indicative of a change back to normalcy, a return to traditional student behavior” (“Streakers Getting” 7). As one campus security officer summed up the prevailing attitude while idly watching a streaking episode at Wisconsin, “It beats rocks and tear gas” (Wang 2).

### Streaking and the Politics of Nostalgia

While streakers were reterritorializing the campus for white masculinity, mainstream observers were reterritorializing the “campus”—the symbolic role of the university as a social space—for the politics of nostalgia. But whereas student streakers could fall back on their student status in order to construct streaking as a harmless prank, sustaining that construction in the broader public debate required much more discursive labor. In particular, streaking was potentially threatening not just for any political articulation but also for its generic similarity to exhibitionism and flashing. For society at large, streaking had to be emptied of any potential sexual and criminal threat if it was to be considered a harmless prank.

Even in the relatively liberated days of the early 1970s, nudity produced enormous social anxiety, so it is unsurprising that defenders of streaking worked to erase this sexual threat. The commentator who contrasted this “innocent” youthful sexual exuberance with “perverted” adult sexual exuberance has already been mentioned; this distinction was repeated countless times by students and social observers alike. For example, the *New York Times* quoted one student claiming, “There’s nothing sensuous or freaky about streaking,” while a psychiatrist added, “[It’s] more naughty than sexual” (Malcolm 49; McFadden 41.) Dr. Joyce Brothers agreed that “there’s nothing at all sexual about streaking,” while the *Christian Century* reasoned that “the speed of the streaker rules out the motive of exhibitionism” (“Streaking as Praxis” 310; “Streaking: One Way” 42). Despite this effort to desexualize streaking, its sexual aspect could not be entirely erased; instead, it was

mocked. Commentators and authority figures who saw a sexual threat in streaking were roundly ridiculed as “moralists” and “bluenoses,” while most press accounts included at least one pun or witticism that blunted streaking’s erotic potential (“In Praise” 8; “Streaking: One Way” 42). For example, the *New York Times* wrote, “Suddenly a naked body is running at you, and just as suddenly it is gone. As one coed put it, ‘You don’t have time to look at the face too’” (Malcolm 49). Some even turned the sexual threat around: streakers were young innocents, and those who attempted to repress them were the ones with the sexual hang-ups. For instance, a student poem titled “Vice Figure” spoke of the “horny administrator” cracking down on streaking and linked police pursuit with perversion, shifting the deviance from the naked bodies to those who would apprehend them (Peary 6).

This desexualization of streaking allowed observers to see the phenomenon as a return to a “normal,” natural state of youthful innocence. Streaking was “the new spring rite,” perhaps vaguely naughty but not really dirty—just young naïfs cavorting without reason (McFadden 35). As the *New York Times* saw it, streakers were not sprinting across the quad; they were “gamboling across the country, fueled by a certain annual spring silliness” (Malcolm 49). One commentator linked streaking to Dionysian and Bacchanalian rites, arguing that “students [will] be especially stirred by spring. Their youth, exuberance, and energy tend to make them more strongly responsive to changes in nature than their elders, who are likely to celebrate spring with a spate of tennis, golf, gardening, or even bird watching” (Toolan 152). Furthermore, there was perceived to be something particularly “American” in the practice, and this trope slid easily into a generalized sense of national renewal as Americans “half-mad with hunger” for the “Age of Innocence” saw in streaking youthful innocence and spiritual rebirth. *Newsweek* wrote that “all seemed to agree that streaking was the sort of totally absurd phenomenon the nation needed after a winter of lousy news.” *Time* added at the end of March, “What began as a tentative titter at the edge of the national awareness has become one great, good-natured American guffaw” (“In Praise” 8), while the *National Review* wrote, “Nixon may be impeached, England may sink beneath the waves . . . and Mailer is writing another book—but almost anything can be borne if people start laughing again” (“The Streaker: Faster than the . . .” 362). Unlike those angry, violent, long-haired peace agitators, much less those angry, violent blacks and feminists, “nonpolitical”



white male streakers were celebrated as the antidote to America's national blues, or at least a welcome distraction from them. For example, *Time* reassured its readers that streaking could help heal the nation's crisis without involving anything like a political point:

[Streaking] could hardly have come at a better time. The U.S., too long assailed by inflation, shortages and Watergate, sorely needed a diversion. Combatting the sour mood was scarcely behind the students' exuberant rush to take it off; students have never really needed much of a reason to cavort beyond the incandescent mix of youth, health and spring. ("In Praise" 8)

It is perhaps understandable that students would claim innocence for streaking and that campus administrators would collaborate in that act, but the enthusiastic society-wide effort to reterritorialize the symbolic campus as a site of national rebirth requires a closer look. Indeed, it was the rhetorical move of articulating streaking to the prelapsarian innocence of the imagined America of the 1950s that ultimately enlisted the now depoliticized, decriminalized, and desexualized practice into the service of a conservative politics of nostalgia. As noted above, countless observers drew parallels to such "innocent" 1950s activities as goldfish swallowing and panty raids. Others posited a more general return to some of the "more naïve pleasures of the past, such as spring proms" (Toolan 157). Judith Martin in the *Washington Post* called streaking "a nostalgic trip back toward the '50s . . . a retreat from the '60s," and situated the phenomenon within a revival of fraternities, beer, 1950s music, and, again, proms (B1, B14). Conservative pundit George Will approvingly linked all these tropes—streaking, national renewal, American mythology, and 1950s innocence:

And who knows? Maybe these bumptious cheerful streakers will "bring us together" by bridging the generation gap: they could swallow fistfuls of goldfish and then streak into telephone booths. That is just what America needs to become a land fit for heroes: nostalgia buffs in the buff. (A27)

The dark side of this nostalgia for the 1950s has been explored by numerous scholars who have illustrated how the "norms" of the 1950s are used to delegitimize the various social struggles that came to the fore in the late 1950s and the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> In the case of streaking, this "return to normalcy" was clearly predicated on the primacy of white

masculinity. For example, one social scientist, concerned to establish streakers' normalcy, defined the "typical" stalker:

Is he a devious deviant, an uncloseted exhibitionist, a playful pervert, a dangerous psychopath or disturbed and immature adolescent, or perhaps none of these? He is tall (5'11") and weighs 170 pounds. He is a Protestant. . . . He is described as nice-looking, . . . and comes from a small town (under 50,000 in population). His mother is a housewife and his father a business or professional man. (Heckel 146)<sup>12</sup>

The stalker's normalcy—his whiteness, maleness, youthfulness, middle classness, and supposedly apolitical nostalgia for the innocence of 1950s America before feminism and civil rights—made him the ideal representative of the status quo ante. The many commentators contrasting stalkers with 1960s protesters throw this construction into even sharper relief. For example, *Time* distinguished streaking from more threatening student activity when it claimed that "folks are simply grateful that students are no longer rioting or building bombs" ("In Praise" 8). The *New York Times* wrote that streaking had led to "generally favorable comparisons with some more violent campus demonstrations of the nineteen-sixties" (Malcolm 49). Even the conservative *National Review* bent over backwards to legitimate streaking:

The spirit of the thing is entirely different from the defiant nudity and even public sexual intercourse seen in places like Berkeley during the later 1960s. That *was* political and nihilistic in motive, the participants going all out for Ho and Mao. The stalker, in contrast, is a humorist, a reliever of tensions. ("The Stalker: Faster than the . . ." 362)

Stalkers "relieved" tensions, unlike left-wing student activists who, apparently, produced them. The frequency with which observers reached for this contrast indicates an urgency to the interpretation of streaking as a turning away from the activism of the 1960s, thereby helping to redefine the university as an institution less threatening to the hegemonic social order. One of the few observers at the time who grasped the importance of "nonpolitical" white masculinity to the construction of streaking as "harmless" put it:

[That's] why streakers don't get busted. Streaking's . . . not directed against entrenched power. Just them kids having a good time. . . . If we had "Streakers for Socialism" on Wall Street, or "Asses for Ecology" streaking General Motors, or blacks streaking George Wallace with "SEX!" painted in DayGlo on their protruding places, there'd be a lot of naked people in jail. (Cloud 4)

With streaking established as a return to normalcy—at least as long as it was performed by white males and contained on college campuses—observers were able to rearticulate the role of the campus in the American imagination. No longer need it represent the primary site and source of the Generation Gap, identity politics, and ignominious military defeat; no longer need it be associated with long hair, sexual licentiousness, and angry blacks and women demanding a new curriculum. Now the university—as reterritorialized by streakers—could at least provisionally function as a less threatening, less destabilizing, more "American" social space. In other words, through streaking the campus became a site of temporary backlash—against leftist politics, against the feminist movement, against the civil rights movement. Streaking may have only briefly reclaimed the American university for white patriarchy, but it would be a mistake to dismiss it because of this brevity. As we have witnessed in the years since, reactionary conservatives have mounted a decades-long project to mobilize the politics of nostalgia in the service of neoconservative economic and social policies, and have consistently and repeatedly attacked the academy for its supposed liberal bias; streaking was one early moment in this struggle. In that light, it is unsurprising that conservatives like George Will and the *National Review* became such eager apologists for streaking, because streaking waged for them a cultural skirmish in an ongoing political war.

## Conclusion

In 1969, a group of female students at Grinnell staged a "nude-in" to protest a speaker from *Playboy* who was on campus to discuss "The Playboy Philosophy." They stripped off their clothes, and when they demanded that the speaker also take off his clothes, he fled. Eight of the group were convicted of indecent exposure; as the Iowa attorney general's office said at the time, "You can't have people running around stripping off their clothes for any reason" (Cloud 4).

Five years later, a writer to the *Daily Iowan*, Burns H. Weston, lamented that, while he did not have a problem with streaking per se, “A few short years ago, our campus and city police saw more obscenity in principled protest than they now see in ‘streaking,’ and proved the point with arrest and mace and jail. What has happened? What are our values?” (Weston 4).

This article attempts to answer Mr. Weston’s question. The values that mainstream society asserted—as Weston well suspected—were those of an imagined status quo ante: an innocent America structured by white patriarchy. In 1974, the construction of streaking worked to reterritorialize the university following an era of radical protest and in the face of challenges from women and people of color. Luckily for the academy and American society, progressive initiatives such as Women’s Studies and African-American Studies departments would continue to thrive and be the source of extraordinary accomplishments. Nonetheless, the larger political project of which this episode was a part was largely successful: the discourses surrounding streaking reveal the ease with which radical and leftist voices could be positioned as oppositional to cherished American myths, and even a casual student of American history will quickly grasp that this is a recurring theme that remains with us today. In that light, streaking was neither the beginning of that project nor its most significant or lasting aspect, but rather a brief moment of high visibility for broader political struggles that were ultimately far from trivial. Perhaps revisiting “harmless fads” will encourage us to pay better attention to the inexhaustible means by which potential resistance is contained, repressed, or marginalized, and the social configurations in which and through which these processes occur.

## Notes

The author wishes to express his appreciation for their insights and suggestions to the anonymous reviewers at the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Professor Bernard Yack, Professor Elana Levine, and especially Anna Nekola.

1. The widespread emergence of streaking in 1974 exhibits the characteristics of a “fad” as generally defined by sociologists, for example, “a nontraditional preoccupation by diffuse collectivities on a circumscribed object or process” (Aguirre et al. 569). However, I mostly avoid using the word in my own voice in this article. In popular usage, *fad* is often synonymous with terms like “craze” and “fashion” and has acquired trivializing or even pathologizing connotations, making it a pivotal term within the discursive struggles analyzed here. Therefore, in order to avoid reproducing the very discourses that are my object, I have favored

- terms that I hope are more neutral—terms that in any event were not in play in the discursive struggles over streaking—such as “wave” and “phenomenon.”
2. Carroll insightfully analyzes the interplay of pop culture and politics in the 1970s, from Nixon meeting Elvis to *All in the Family*. My point is not to criticize Carroll for omitting my particular pet project from his study, but to suggest that even professional historians are not immune to trivializing discourses.
  3. In the case of streaking, there is a small but excellent body of sociological work that seeks to explain how streaking arose, how it spread across the country, and what contributed to its quick decline. In particular, I point readers to the articles by Anderson and Aguirre and colleagues in the bibliography. In this context, I should point out that there is much that we will probably never know about streaking, such as why the first streaker in 1974 made his seminal naked dash. Was he just drunk? Playing a game of Truth-Or-Dare? Inspired by something he read? Who knows? In general, I am happy to leave it to psychologists and sociologists to grapple with the “whys” of individual and collective behavior. But even if he really did streak for “no reason,” we cannot let that be the last word on the subject, since we are still faced with the questions of why streaking captured the public’s imagination and what political purposes it was made to serve.
  4. For example, Alison Bernstein and Arthur Levine (Mar./Apr. 1990).
  5. See also Beverly Solochek, “The Calm After the Storm,” *Parade* 10 Feb. 1974; “What’s Become of Yesterday’s Student Rebels.” *U.S. News & World Report* 13 Jan. 1973: 34–37; “Switch for Student Activists—Working Inside ‘The System.’” *U.S. News & World Report* 4 Feb. 1974: 68; Alan Wolfe, “What Future for Campus Radicalism?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 13 Nov. 1972; Byron F. Evans, “Is Student Protest Over?” *Current* May 1973: 46–49.
  6. US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Figure 13. Enrollment, degrees conferred, and expenditures in degree-granting institutions: 1960–61 to 2000–01.” 14 Jan. 2005 (<http://www.ed.gov>); HEGIS, “Table 175. Total first-time freshmen fall enrollment in institutions of higher education: Fall 1955 to fall 1993.” 14 Jan. 2005 (<http://www.ed.gov>). HEGIS, “Table 188. Total undergraduate fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions: 1970 to 1998” 14 Jan. 2005 (<http://www.ed.gov>).
  7. Except where noted, all incidents in this paragraph are from “Streaking: One Way to Get a B.A.,” 41–42.
  8. *Mooning* had been a recognized term since at least the early 1950s. Although some observers compared mooning with streaking, few attributed to streaking the same vulgar disrespect and antiauthoritarian politics that mooning had connoted for decades.
  9. I say ostensibly because this mythical, innocent student past never really existed, of course. One need only read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s semiautobiographical account of his student days in *This Side of Paradise* to recall that the American university and its denizens have long been a source of social anxiety. In the specific case of student fads and pranks, the 1950s were also no “innocent” era. Consider the case of those “lovable campus crazies” who carried out panty raids during that decade: several raids resulted in serious property damage and even riots, and in one instance Missouri called out the National Guard. At a time of war in Korea, such social disruption was seen by some as tantamount to treason: “[O]thers contrasted the college pranks with news from Korea. There, last week, ‘raiders’ also were active—82 Communists were killed in a typical three-day period; 43 U.S. casualties were announced” (“Campus ‘Panty Raiders’” 26). Panty raiders were threatened with revocation of their student deferments, which would have made them eligible for the draft. At the same time, many 1950s accounts of panty raids are similar to the discourses seen during the streaking wave: “Most people tended to dismiss the incidents as just a species of spring madness. They recalled the

goldfish-swallowing craze of the 1930s" ("Campus 'Panty Raiders' 26). The fact that panty raids, like streaking, were a form of sexual assertion (one might say "antagonism") suggests a certain cyclicity in these white male "hijinks." In that light, the 1970s' invocation of the 1950s as the "golden age" appears an even more conservative rhetorical move than it already did.

10. One could productively invoke Marcuse's "repressive tolerance" thesis here. My larger point, however, is that while campus administrators were interested in maintaining behavioral control by tolerating streaking, the wider societal embrace of streaking cannot be fully explained by Marcuse's ideas.
11. See, for example, Marcus and Miller.
12. I have cited this article as an example of the ways in which streakers were "normalized," that is, constructed as "normal" rather than as deviant, perverted, or threatening to the social order. I did not introduce it as an empirical description of actual streakers, and I have not evaluated the methodology by which Heckel arrived at his assessment of the "typical" streaker profile. But the quotation does raise the question of the streaker's Protestantism, and whether religion is a relevant category of analysis for this study. I have found it not to be so: religion simply was not an important part of the discourse nor of the politics at play. It is, of course, fair to say that the streaker's Protestantism was "assumed" in the construction of streakers as "normal," but I found almost no sources—including religious publications such as *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*—that referenced religion, even to marginalize or silence it. While religion has always played a role in American politics, especially in the resurgence of conservatism in the late twentieth century, the categories that I do primarily discuss here—race, gender, and (to a slightly lesser but still significant degree) class—played an overwhelmingly greater role in the construction of streaking.

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