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A Different Kind of Closet: Queer Censorship in U.S. LGBTQ+ Movements since World War II

By James Martin

Abstract: Since World War II, there has been an increased visibility of LGBTQ+ communities in the United States; however, this visibility has noticeably focused on “types” of queer people – mainly white, middle class, cisgender gays and lesbians. History remembers the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots as the catalyst that launched the movement for gay rights and brought forth a new fight for civil and social justice. This paper analyzes the restrictions, within LGBTQ+ communities, that have been placed on transpersons and gender nonconforming people before and after Stonewall. While the riots at the Stonewall Inn were demonstrative of a fight ready to be fought, there were many factors that contributed to the push for gay rights. What this paper argues is that these factors were not always gay or white and did not always fit into a category; emphasis will be placed on queer leaders like Stormé DeLarverie, Sylvia Rivera, and the fearless ladies in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District.

Movements for gay rights and social justice in the United States have come in many forms, stemming from early attempts in the hegemonic 1950s and continuing into the twenty-first century with the ongoing struggle for equality for trans people. Apart from the contemporary LGBTQ+ movement for trans rights, a noticeable trend in the history of queer activism has been the absence of

queerness¹ in historical memory. “Absence of queerness” in this sense includes the erasure of champion activists that were not gay white men, but trans women, butch lesbians, and queer of color. Notable LGBTQ+ movements did not break out until the end of World War II; however, this analysis will consider the decades after the Civil War, with the rising establishment of a gendered social order. In breaking down the social acceptance of homosexuality and queerness since the nineteenth century, movements and organizations for gender and sexuality will be examined to reveal censorship of sexual fluidity and transgenderism within LGBTQ+ communities, especially after World War II.

Separate Spheres and the Development of Homosexual Life

“Separate Spheres” developed out of the nineteenth century and promoted a binary of gender standards that set men and women apart from each other in terms of expectations and public visibility.² The idea of separating men and women into “spheres” creates a set of positions in which the two genders must remain – with men public and visible and women private and invisible. The development of queer communities was also centered around an idea of “visibility,” which is deeply rooted in the spheres of a male public that does not allow the privacies of a female world to be adequately represented. Metaphorical spheres influenced the growth of queer community and sexual identity simply by allowing them to exist. However, these same spheres worked to suppress lesbian expression by promoting a male world of publicity – one where the gay male community could grow much easier.

¹ “Queer” in this paper will refer to LGBTQ+ people that were not middle class, gay, white men – those of which historical memory has largely created these movements to be about. “Queer” will examine the historical contributions of trans women, drag queens, butch lesbians, and queer of color.

² John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 105.

After the end of the Civil War and the fall of Reconstruction, America began to establish a gendered order, with the enforcement of a “Separate Spheres” mindset. Jim Crow and Separate Sphere ideologies were prevalent in this period to reinforce a patriarchal, white supremacist order that had been challenged by Reconstruction. Siobhan Somerville speaks heavily to the rise of ideas of race and sexuality coming through in the post-Civil War period. Somerville describes the application of Darwinian theories to reinforce sexual and racial prejudices, whereas, “analogies between gender and race structured the logic of hierarchical rankings of bodies.”³ Race and gender were becoming tools used to reinforce and institutionalize an establishment of a white authority, which would carry over well into the next century. Sexuality was now being used to further install ideas of a more dominant race of whites that acted within its own sets of standardized sexuality that they insisted to be the norm. Social changes seemed to be too much, too soon for the white population – creating an urge for whites to strike back and suppress racial and sexual liberties.

Among these efforts to reestablish order and retaliate, science proved to be a proponent of the reinforcement of a white, heteronormative⁴ hierarchy. Psychologists worked diligently to find a connection between race and sexual “inversion” – as seen in Margaret Otis’ 1913 study of an all-girl institution that witnessed same-sex acts of intimacy.⁵ Otis problematically describes the relationship of two girls – one white, one black – wherein she expresses that in the relationship, the “colored girl she loved seemed the man.”⁶ When considering that the white girl in the relationship describes her partner as “the man,” this speaks to the

³ Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 24.

⁴ GLSEN defines “heteronormative” as the assumption that heterosexual identity is the norm in society. <https://www.glsen.org/taxonomy/term/35>.

⁵ Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body,” 24.

⁶ Ibid.

deep-rooted establishment of racial and gender orders that grew between the late-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century. The already racially categorized girl is now being sexually categorized as “the man,” while the white girl maintains her femininity. In reassigning the African American girl’s gender identity, white America is redefining black queerness and assuming that she must take the role of the “man” in the relationship because of her skin color.

Pre-industrial relationships expressed a form of intimacy that has since been unmatched in America without the supposition of sexual contact. America moving into a more industrialized state did provide greater opportunities for people that needed solace away from home, where they were subject to familial traditions and age-old customs. Same-sex intimacy between men was being given a time limit, though, where it was only allowed to exist within one period of their lifetime and had to, somehow, manage to make itself disappear. E. Anthony Rotundo describes nineteenth century intimacies between men as understanding, compassionate supporters of one another. Rotundo insists these intimacies to be vital to men. They serve to ease the transition of boyhood to manhood – referring to the period of romantic friendship in men as “youth.”⁷ Romantic friendships in men proved pivotal in helping them move through the life course, before they ultimately found marriage and an occupation, and had to abandon these homosocial relationships upon “manhood” – whatever point that was, was unclear. This is evident in the case of “James,” a Dartmouth student, who apologizes, in a letter describing a night with his partner, for crying – but does not apologize for his physical relationship with the other man.⁸ The sphere for women, however, kept their lives away from the public eye – allowing different spaces in time for homosocial relationships to exist, while also closeting female sexuality.

⁷ E. Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800-1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 1 (1989): 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Romantic friendships in women proved more long-term and committal in this period of post-war America. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Karen Hansen work contrarily to Rotundo, depicting the continuity that existed within female romantic friendships. Hansen follows the love story of two African American women, Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, that transcended class boundaries,⁹ something that was unlike what Smith-Rosenberg was sharing. Smith-Rosenberg draws out the relationships between white women, the first of Sarah Butler Wister and Jeannie Field Musgrove¹⁰ and the second of Molly and Helena.¹¹ Hansen's description follows with an unclear timeline for how Addie and Rebecca met, but pointed out that both women were from significantly different social classes.¹² Same-sex relationships between men were confined within class and social boundaries (unless in times of war), while same-sex relationships among women would cross those same barriers. Thus, the spheres in which men and women had traditionally existed had shaped the ways their relationships could take form and what boundaries they were able to cross in the process.

Another vital aspect to understanding the development of LGBTQ+ communities is the concept of space. During World War II, sexually segregated units would allow homosexuality to exist. Male relationships needed that privacy, because of this early onset of separate spheres after the Civil War. Race and sexuality during this time became mechanisms of categorization and oppression that were shaping America's political and social landscape for the oncoming twentieth century. Ideas of race prove to also establish ideas of power based on whiteness that will permeate into the lesbian and gay (LG) movements that grow out of the 1950s and

⁹ Karen V. Hansen, "'No Kisses Is Like Yours': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century" *Gender & History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 156.

¹⁰ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Hansen, "'No Kisses Is Like Yours,'" 155.

will create issues for trans people and queer of color trying to find their space. From this period onward comes a trend of backlash, where when the white patriarchal order is questioned, society must be snapped back into line – this came before and after Reconstruction and would continue before and after the 1920s and World War II.

Male queer communities were given an opportunity to thrive in twentieth century America, while men's and women's worlds were effectively kept separate, with one in the home and one outside of the home.¹³ George Chauncey describes the surplus of visibility that was held by the gay male community in the YMCA, Bachelor Housing, and the growing middle class.¹⁴ Gay men in the twentieth century were still subject to public scrutiny and police harassment but were able to convene in public places. As Chauncey describes, hotel clerks and security had “little interest in spending their time ferreting out homosexual activity...so long as the participants observed certain rules of decorum.”¹⁵ Homosexual activity was being regulated by police, yet men taking part in these homosexual encounters were being kept safe – at least partially – by hotel clerks that had laid out a set of ground rules. Through these efforts, the male world was being kept public without creating a negative public image – if these supposed homosexuals acted in accordance to their hotel or eatery, they were not reported, arrested, or castigated. Gay men were being given space to exist publicly, if they remained in line and kept an orderly presentation.

The female world was also subject to its expected standards and norms of the America that was coming out of the Victorian Era. Female relationships of intimacy – whether they had been lesbian or not – were largely restricted to the confines of the home. Nan Alamilla Boyd describes the efforts of lesbian communities

¹³ Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2008) 24.

¹⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

and their struggles for visibility, facing challenges of exoticization and commodification. Boyd goes as far as to say, “[t]ourists wanted to experience unfamiliar sexual worlds as much as lesbians wanted their lives reflected back at them.”¹⁶ This desire for having a life “reflected” back speaks to a greater struggle for adequate lesbian representation in society at the time. While homosexuality in men was acknowledged, policed, and protected, homosexuality in women was only existing because it was marketable and could draw a crowd. While this idea of tourism did bring visibility to female queer communities, it brought it at a cost of lesbians being seen as “exotics,” therefore delegitimizing the upbringing of a solid lesbian community. The need for and lack of lesbian visibility exuded through the growing tourist industry of San Francisco, in which lesbian culture became more of a roadside attraction than it did a genuine way of life.

Commodification was not as heavily present in the world of queer males, but spectacle was a trait present in both spheres as they developed their sexual identities and communities. As Boyd expressed, there was a spectacle in the “exotics” that were lesbians – Eric Garber brings light to the spectacle of the Harlem Renaissance in its relation to the queer community. Specifically, Garber presents drag balls, where participants and the event itself were “legal for the evening”¹⁷ – Garber addresses, though, the biggest part of what the balls lacked – privacy. A large portion of the ball’s attendees were spectators, coming to bask in the lavishness of the festivities and watch as contestants competed to be crowned queen.¹⁸ The drag balls were men dressing as women, vying for the number one spot, in front of large crowds of spectators – again, bringing more visibility to the communities

¹⁶ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 75.

¹⁷ Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture in Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, & George Chauncey, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1991), 325.

¹⁸ Garber, “A Spectacle in Color,” 325.

being developed by men. The difference between the spectacles of the gay and lesbian communities was that drag queens were visibly taking part in a competition for entertainment, while lesbians were being spectated for simply living.

Previously established spheres that enforced a gender binary worked to create separate spheres in which the queer community could exist as well. An established tradition of male publicity made gay communities easier to maintain, where the privacy that was expected of a woman and her sexuality was meant to be kept that way and faced being labeled “exotic” had it escaped the barriers of the home. Gender identities were subject to the male/female binary, where sexual identities were facing another kind of binary in the gay/lesbian model, which in itself prevents the growth of queer communities of those not subject to the gay or lesbian label. This growing enforcement of each respective sphere would slightly relax through World War II and then rise again in the 1950s, working to suppress queer expression in forms of lesbian activism and trans visibility. The existence and growth of a male gay community will be juxtaposed to the lives of marginalized queer people and the power dynamics that exist to restrict sexual expression in LGBTQ+ communities – even to this day.

World War II and Queerness

The war period was drastically instrumental in creating a negative public image of gay men in American society, even though gay life was almost flourishing within the military. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States was forced to mobilize for another world war, sending men overseas and pushing women into the arena of industrial work. With over 16 million men at war and an additional 5 million women entering the workforce at home, the United States was gearing up for a monumental shift in

gender roles.¹⁹ This shift would undoubtedly challenge the patriarchy, sexual freedom, and the separate spheres ideology that shaped American society from the fall of Reconstruction to the dawn of World War II. Consequently, in this development of sexual freedom for men in the military, there will come a view of homosexuality as a form of comedy and female servicemembers being sexualized in their search for wartime entertainment.

In the frenzy that ensued when the United States was faced with mobilizing their men, the United States military still took extra measures to perform psychiatric evaluations to prevent homosexuals from serving.²⁰ With preventive measures being taken so seriously, the United States government was taking a clear stance on homosexuality – it was an intolerable mental disorder. Ironically, even with the enforcement of these “psychiatric” examinations, once soldiers were interacting in their all-male units, there was remarkable space allotted for not just homosexual encounters but displays of queer men performing in drag. Traditional social and emotional standards and expectations of men were no longer so harshly adhered to once these draftees came together – without social pressures, men were more able to express their sexual identity. Serving in the military provided a confirmation of masculinity, where men now had the ability to channel an inner femininity if they so desired. This idea of a masculine confirmation goes back to the establishment of the Spheres – with the preservation of image (through military duty), the male sphere was not badly damaged. This inherently protects gay men and will assure the public that even if a man acted feminine, he was still a soldier and deserved respect, which will become even more apparent with the growth of drag in the military. Though this protects men in the military, it does not protect men at home – while they are expressing themselves more

¹⁹ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 154.

²⁰ Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: A History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 10.

openly, the public is viewing homosexuality as an unfathomable joke.

Understandably, some soldiers lied upon coming into the service, denying their homosexuality so that they could still serve in the forces. During wartime leisure, some soldiers found solace in the performing arts – taking up theatre and musicals with an all-male cast that needed female performers. Allan Bérubé identifies the existence of drag in the military as “a temporary refuge where [gay male GIs] could let their hair down to entertain their fellows.”²¹ This depiction of gay GIs being able to “let their hair down” creates a representation of how important the institution of drag was to the war and the soldiers – important in the same way that homosocial friendships worked for young men in the early 1900s during their transition to manhood. As seen earlier, young men were moving away from home and finding same-sex relationships that assisted in understanding life, women, intimacy, and adulthood. Much like what was happening in newly industrial America, the young men being drafted into World War II were being relocated and needed a support system and somewhere to experiment comfortably.

In 1942, the United States military opened a new drag theatrical production called *This is the Army*, which became internationally recognized as it was performed across Europe, North Africa, the Pacific, and the United States.²² With the U.S. government having made its views on homosexuality clear through its painstakingly intricate screening process, the nation’s reporters took special care in making sure they protected the sexuality of the nation’s soldiers and curbed all insinuations of queerness. The job of the press was to ensure that the soldiers taking part in drag were being protected – their duty was to depict these performances as dutiful, masculine, and, above all, heterosexual. Bérubé cites several outlets that promoted *This is the Army* as the “best soldier show of all time,” being “smart good taste,” and “being as

²¹ Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: A History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 68.

²² *Ibid.*, 70.

American as hot dogs or the Bill of Rights.”²³ There was a growing normalcy being applied to male expressions of queer identity, allowing them to express themselves with little repercussions. This normalcy would not be granted to female enlistees and soldiers, reasserting the power dynamic of American society that continuously worked to limit queer expression of groups other than white men.

With more women entering the war, the argument for drag being the result of a lack of women in the military was becoming increasingly specious. As the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) became more active and present, there came a stronger petition for WAAC to put on shows like *This is the Army*, with the hopes that they would be equally popular. While shows like *On the Double* undoubtedly became popular, their exposure created concerns for the military – concerns that prompted Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, director of WAAC, to implement strict regulations on the performances. With rising concerns over the public image of WAAC, Col. Hobby denied the unit’s tour request on the grounds that the show had “become sexually titillating to men”²⁴, even though *On the Double* was a noted comedy show like *This is the Army*.

Ultimately, what comes from the theatrical demonstrations in World War II is the enforcement of a gendered double standard, which originates in the nineteenth century. Men were given the liberty to demonstrate their masculinity in a feminine way, where they could maintain their perceived heterosexual image in a comedic light – because, surely, it was too ridiculous for two men to become sexually attracted to each other. Women were furtherly kept in their private sphere and when they attempted to express themselves in ways like men, they were immediately sexualized. Homosexuality was comedic and could not exist in a masculinist society where women were objectified, and same-sex intimacies were exiled. Though these encounters existed within the military,

²³ Bérubé, 77.

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

the U.S. government worked tirelessly to ensure they did not exist at home once the war ended.

Heteronormativity after the War

The Homophile Movement²⁵ of the 1950s moved forward with a goal to assimilate into a heteronormative society that promoted a patriarchal order and suppressed expressions of sexuality. The issues with assimilation became apparent with the Homophile Movement's reluctance to acknowledge contributions by trans people and gay/lesbian people of color. By the late-1960s, a growing sense of self-awareness and consciousness that began to take shape in these communities that sought to overshadow the struggle of non-white, non-middle-class gay men and lesbian women. The Homophile Movement laid vital foundations for the importance of political and social mobilization in gay and lesbian communities; however, the late-1960s liberation movements proved to be more radical and fundamental in the wake of newfound consciousness among queer people of color.

With the Homophile Movement taking place as a movement depictive of formal gay men, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) emerged in the 1950s as an alternative to the lesbian bar scene – to give women a space to convene that was as social as it was political.²⁶ The Daughters of Bilitis were founded to provide a space for lesbian women to grow politically; however, it allowed only for a certain type of lesbian to become politically active, reinforcing an idea of assimilation. The Daughters of Bilitis publicly dissociated from “anyone who transgressed received notions of gender propriety, such as drag queens or even butch women”²⁷ – enforcing an expectation of which types of lesbians

²⁵ “Homophile” translates to “loving the same” and was created in the 50s to combat the stigma that was carried with the term “homosexual” that was being criminalized in the age of the nuclear family.

²⁶ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) 26.

²⁷ Jagose, 27.

could be politically active in their communities. With DOB emerging as a way for women to find their political voice in a patriarchal world, there comes a displacement of power – the power being exercised on women by men was now being exerted by lesbians on butch women and trans women. The growing predicament that housed frustration until the post-Stonewall LGBT scene is the lack of representation for queer people – the ones that are not assimilationists.

Even with the growing visibility of lesbian and gay organizations like the Mattachine Society²⁸ and the Daughters of Bilitis, there were growing issues of power and equitable representation. The 1950s echoed the binaries and standards of pre-WWII America but implemented them elsewhere; these regulations of societal expectations were being used in marginalized groups to further push for a standardized American. What was once used by white Americans to separate men from women was now being used by the white, gay establishment to separate non-conforming queer people from the heteronormative culture. Reflecting back to the post-Civil War era, the United States established its “spheres” to permeate even deeper than just the superficial. The spheres invaded the lives of the oppressed who then managed to institutionalize separatism within their communities. The United States made it clear that there was little space for the existence of queer life, and the 1950s would prove instrumental in bringing this realization forward to trans women, butch lesbians, and the greater queer of color communities.

Ditching the 1950s and Fighting for Representation

Moving out of the 1950s meant approaching the tipping point of centuries of oppression on sexual liberation, gender identity, and gender expression. Vicki Eaklor describes the early 1960s as leading up to this monumental change in the desire for civil rights.

²⁸ Harry Hay formed the Mattachine Society in 1953 to protect Gays from being scapegoats for McCarthy-Era paranoia – he took inspiration from the success of Black organizations in the same period.

There was a growing awareness and spirit to fight injustice, where Eaklor credits Dr. King's speech in Washington as inspiring "Americans throughout the country to reject injustice...."²⁹ Eaklor applies Dr. King's questioning of the promises of democracy to all Americans, not just those fighting for the end of Jim Crow. This went far enough to inspire gay men and lesbian women to fight for their recognition and fair treatment in society. Though this monumental speech by Dr. King and the March on Washington seemed to have all of the answers to injustice, there was a growing internal injustice within the African American civil rights movement and the gay and lesbian homophile movement. Both movements promoted the fight against civil injustice but also paralleled in the regard of closeting members they did not feel accurately fit the "respectable" public image they wanted to uphold.

Though the early 1960s created space for organizations like the Mattachine Foundation and Mattachine Society to grow, these organizations were noticeably not public. The Mattachine Society of the early 1960s made the argument that sexuality did not matter, gay and lesbian people were the same as heterosexual people and ran very organized, well-dressed picket lines.³⁰ In creating this view of the well-dressed, formal "gay," the Mattachine Society and the greater Homophile Movement construct an image of what gay should be and how it should be presented to society. This portrayal of a specific image becomes problematic when activists that do not fit this role seek their justices and representation in society. Bayard Rustin faced a similar dissatisfaction with portrayals of standardization as a gay man within the African American civil rights movement. Rustin commanded that what needed to be done was to "control the extent to which people can publicly manifest antigay sentiment."³¹ Rustin's approach is not assimilationist,

²⁹ Eaklor, 108.

³⁰ Ibid., 109.

³¹ Bayard Rustin, "From Montgomery to Stonewall" (speech, Philadelphia, 1986), *Brother Outside*, <http://rustin.org/wp->

rather he is requiring that those who publicly condemn gay people should be the ones assimilating, this stance being very opposing to that of the conservative picket methods.

Lesbian efforts to politically mobilize faced similar opposition from mainstream hetero culture, as seen through Betty Friedan's 1966 formation of the National Organization for Women. Friedan's movement was openly homophobic and unresponsive to the issues being faced by lesbian women, with Eaklor noting that "Friedan herself [referred] to them as the "lavender menace" and their issues as a "lavender herring" and a "diversion" from the real business of NOW."³² There was a growing need for lesbian mobilization that was not being adequately represented through the fight for female equality – the National Organization for Women inherently becomes a national organization of straight women. This realization of misrepresentation, as Carl Wittman would state, was "tied up with both gay liberation and women's liberation."³³ The move toward lesbian consciousness was vital to freeing women from two levels of oppression: the one they faced for being women in a patriarchal society and the one they faced for being lesbians in a society that wanted heteronormativity. Lesbian feminism, then, constructs a promise that women have the choice to build their own self-identity, away from the patriarchal order in society and away from the power dynamics of the feminist movement under Betty Friedan and NOW.

Before the riots at the Stonewall Inn took the nation's queer scene by storm, a riot at Gene Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco embodied the fight against systematic injustices that were representative of the 1960s. Much like the African American fight against institutionalized racism throughout the turbulent 1960s, trans women and drag queens were battling police brutality

content/uploads/centennial/1986%20From%20Montgomery%20to%20Stonewall.pdf.

³² Eaklor, 144.

³³ Carl Wittman, "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto" (1970), *History is a Weapon*, <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/wittmanmanifesto.html>.

and public harassment. Trans women, hustlers, and drag queens frequented the 24-hour eatery and used it as a social hotspot – even as management of the cafeteria was repeatedly calling the police to have queens removed for being too noisy and not spending enough money. Compton’s clientele was not unfamiliar with the police; however, August 1966 would prove to be the final straw, with a riot ensuing as police tried to remove a crowd of rowdy drag queens. One queen in particular fought back feverishly, she “threw her coffee in his face...plates, trays, cups, saucers, and silverware flew through the air at the startled police officers.”³⁴ Limits had been tested and boiling points reached – drag queens of San Francisco’s Tenderloin District were no longer going to sit idly by as their sisters were arrested and harassed by the police.

The riot at Compton’s Cafeteria signified a major paradigm shift in queer people’s tolerance of hate and discrimination. What ignited at Compton’s was the illumination of a need to be seen and heard – trans women were not invisible and were not going to be marginalized, as long as they had a say in the matter. Since the 1920s, drag was a spectacle and WWII promoted it as a comedy show – trans women were breaking the Separate Sphere mold and were bringing femininity into the public sphere. This ascension to recognition by trans women would also meet a contender, however, when gay communities would work to almost discredit trans representation by creating a generalized, white-washed gay movement out of the 1960s. The events leading up to Stonewall around the nation were far from middle-class gay or lesbian – in the case of Compton’s, these activists were white, Asian American, and Latina drag queens and trans women. Susan Stryker highlights the personal accounts of trans women that frequented Compton’s, like Aleisha Brevard, Suzan Cooke, Amanda St. Jaymes, Tamara Ching, and Felicia Elizondo.³⁵

³⁴ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2017), 86.

³⁵ *Screaming Queens*, directed by Susan Stryker (2005; San Francisco, CA: Frameline, 2016).

Lives for trans women were different than lives for gay men in the 1960s. While gay men and lesbian women had emerging social and political organizations to remain active in, trans women and drag queens were subject to the life that existed in areas like the Tenderloin. These nonconformist lives of those being accused to be “impersonators” or having an “indeterminate gender”³⁶ were subject to harassment, judgment, and unjustifiable murder. Leading up to Compton’s, there was virtually no place or structure for trans women to rally around – they had been excluded by the larger, developing LG community. Whether the women working the Tenderloin were transgender, transsexual, or drag queens, Ching describes the need for drugs to be able to go out every night, while St. Jaymes says the environment was one where “you had to be able to either kick ass or get your ass kicked.”³⁷ The only support for trans women came from a community they had to build from scratch. There was no politics or mass mobilization, yet these women with no safety net ignited the path for liberation for all sexual orientations, whereas gays and lesbians were not creating an inclusive movement.

Challenging Stonewall and Promoting Queerness

The riot at Compton’s Cafeteria stands as the beginning of a movement for trans rights, but it is generally glossed over, and credit is given to the riots at a New York gay bar for ushering in this era of liberation. Historical memory and popular culture have worked to promote the exclusionary forces that were the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis – citing these organizations as “pioneers and heroes that risked so much to begin to create a safe space to be an openly gay man or lesbian.”³⁸ Undoubtedly, Mattachine and DOB were playing a risky game in promoting social and political activism of gays and lesbians;

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *In the Life*, season 17, episode 1810. “Civil Disobedience,” aired July 2009, PBS.

however, this assumption avoids mentioning the exclusion of drag queens, trans women, and butch lesbians. What happens with this generalization of early LGBT organizations is the erasure of queer struggles, creating an image that ignores struggles unique to non-LG people. This tendency to group the gender spectrum under just lesbian and gay is evident in how Stonewall is represented and the misconceptions around exactly how the riots started. Accounts of who threw the first punch vary, with Stormé DeLarverie (a butch lesbian and drag king) saying she threw the first blow and Sylvia Rivera (a gender nonconforming person) saying she helped the fight continue. The question begs to be asked, then, of how much history has been rewritten to avoid saying gay liberation was either brought on by a drag king or a pioneer for trans visibility.

Accounts of the riots noted that the person throwing the first punch was a crossdresser, which fit the description of DeLarverie, considering she was a member of the Jewel Box Revue where she posed as a male singer on stage.³⁹ DeLarverie's account is that she was able to still walk out of the bar, with a bleeding eye, while the police officer she fought remained unconscious on the ground.⁴⁰ Rivera's take on what happened that night at Stonewall is more telling of the inequities that existed between gays, lesbians, and trans women. As the police marched into the gay bar, they separated the patrons into three categories – "faggots, dykes, and freaks."⁴¹ "Freaks" meant transgender and gender variant people that did not match their assigned sex – including the likes of DeLarverie and Rivera. Whether the Stonewall riots truly were started by DeLarverie or not, what still rings true is the undeniable presence of queer and gender transgressive people in the gay rights movement that has been overlooked.

³⁹ *In the Life*, season 9, episode 1010. "Movers & Shakers," aired July 2001, PBS.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Jessi Gan, "'Still at the Back of the Bus': Sylvia Rivera's Struggle," *Centro Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 131.

Perhaps the biggest and most telling turning point of the transition from homophile assimilation to liberation radicalism was the presentation of the Stonewall riots and the misconstruing of what they represented. When considering Rustin's command to eliminate public antigay sentiment, there was a growing anti-trans sentiment within the movement for gay liberation. In constructing a movement of white gay males, there comes a denial of the political existence and visibility of trans women of color, like Sylvia Rivera. Sylvia came from a dysfunctional childhood, coping with being the victim of pedophilia and prostitution all by the age of ten.⁴² This image that Rivera represented was deeply problematic and put the heterosocial aspects of the gay liberation movement at risk. With Rivera's troubled past, she was a risky candidate to represent sexual rights – in the same way that Bayard Rustin, as a gay man, was too risky to be one of the faces of the Civil Rights Movement. Jessi Gan illustrates this erasure of trans people of color simply as “[t]his formulation [...] consolidated gender-nonconforming people, poor people, and people of color under the identity category of ‘gay.’”⁴³ This “consolidation” stretches back to ideas of the Mattachine Society's push for conservative assimilationism, wherein there is an effort to quiet the contributions of those not fitting the standard image of “gay” that was going to be presented to the public.

In 1973, Sylvia Rivera spoke at the Christopher Street Liberation Day rally, but was treated as an intruder instead of an esteemed guest with years of experience as an advocate for homeless queer youth. Before Rivera began speaking, they were met with disgruntled boos from the crowd, then proceeded to slam the mainstream women's and gay movements for not being present enough for everyone's struggles. Along with queer rights pioneer, Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) to advocate for all queer people, no matter their gender identity. Rivera expresses their discontent by stating,

⁴² Ibid, 129.

⁴³ Ibid.

“come and see the people at STAR House... the people who are trying to do something for all of us and not men and women that belong to a white middle-class.”⁴⁴ Rivera’s point to address the white middle class reveals the silencing and censorship of queer people of color that has been visible in the gay rights movement, even at its early peak in the 1970s. This call for action in 1973 constructs an image of an oppressed class of people in gay communities - a gay rights movement was just that, a movement for gays. Problematically, this movement was not just built by gays but was being built on the struggles of nonconforming queers that were not being heard.

The rise of consciousness and the realization of the importance of mobilization created more radical movements that strayed from the goal of the Homophile Movement. While the contributions of the earlier movement should not be discounted, what those movements and organizations did, as seen through the Mattachine reprisal and NOW, was exclude on the basis of not conforming to a public image. These groups pushed for assimilation and transferred the power that was once used to oppress them to now oppress transpersons, lesbians, and queer of color. Intersectionality of race, class, and gender worked as the base for the growth of the radicalism seen in the late-1960s and early-1970s after Stonewall and in the wake of trans rights and lesbian feminism.

Analysis and Conclusion

Ultimately, what has transpired since the Civil War-era implementation of Separate Spheres has been the establishment and reinforcement of gender standards that oppress and refuse to bend with the gender spectrum. Historical pushes to commodify lesbians and to restrict the publicity of trans women and gay men

⁴⁴ LoveTapesCollective. “L020A, Sylvia Rivera, ‘Y’ all Better Quiet Down’ Original Authorized Video, 1973 Gay Pride Rally NYC.” Filmed 1973. YouTube video. Posted May 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-JIOWUw1o>.

have created a contemporary society that is still struggling to accept trans women into society. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has been tracking anti-trans violence rates for most of the 2010s, reporting that the years 2013-2015 demonstrated that 73.5 percent of transgender people murdered were black transwomen⁴⁵. In their most recent report, 2019 saw 73.1 percent of murders being black transwomen⁴⁶ - it is astonishing that the two-year period first covered was only a fraction higher than the murders covered in just a twelve-month span. Susan Stryker tackles the present state of transgender America up to the ongoing presidency of billionaire businessman Donald J. Trump.

Under President Barack Obama, Stryker notes that the relationship between trans communities and the “LGBT coalition” had begun to mend after being strained for years.⁴⁷ Obama’s America had repealed President Clinton’s “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” initiative and declared New York’s Stonewall Inn a historic monument - the first monument to ever recognize LGBT people. Trump’s America has made considerable strides to build a country that denounces the importance of trans equality, electing members to his administration who are publicly anti-LGBT and have advocated for conversion therapy.⁴⁸ As this paper has covered, the American public is largely influenced by what goes on in the White House and in the military. When drag shows were popular in the military, they became popular in American culture; however, when the military said gay was bad, the public agreed. President Trump, in 2016, denied all transgender people the right to serve in the military, only one year after the Pentagon lifted the ban, furtherly denying civil rights to transgender citizens.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Campaign, *Addressing Anti-Transgender Violence: Exploring Realities, Challenges and Solutions for Policymakers and Community Advocates* (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2015). This report covered the years between 2013-2015.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Campaign, *Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019*. Accessed <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019>.

⁴⁷ Stryker, 224.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

As the United States has grown in the past century and a half, there is a constant struggle and pushback over power, with a familiar presence taking the lead. Sketching a timeline from the Civil War to the Stonewall Riots is only a small look at the inequities that continue to exist within LGBTQ+ communities. Immediately after the Civil War, before terms like “LGBT” existed, there was an early reformation of what gender and sexuality were – this reformation would influence U.S. sexuality for decades. Race had become a common factor in exerting power over communities of color and was now being used to justify sexual abnormalities, implying that there was a “right” (or, white) way to conduct oneself. As homosexuality became more visible, gender variance became the abnormality, resulting in an internal struggle within LG movements for trans representation.

The decades traced herein have revealed the changing ways of how sexuality has been regulated and how power has been exerted on communities of color and then later utilized within lesbian and gay communities to suppress those that were non-conforming. What emerges from this trend of power is a growing theme of sexual repression and strides to be “normal” in an abnormal world. These strides for normalcy are not being made out of desires to fit in but are stemming from institutionalized preconceptions that being gay or lesbian was socially unacceptable. As homosexuality came to be more visible, there also came a standardization of the homosexual as being white and middle class, constituting an erasure of gender and sexual fluidity that was struggling to develop in the United States and, inarguably, is still struggling to develop today.

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