

**Beyond Flesh and Blood:  
Gay and Lesbian Kinship Structures in Mid-Century America**

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Senior Thesis  
April 24, 2015

In the past decade, the subject of homosexuality has become increasingly prevalent in American sociopolitics. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals have entered into social, cultural, and political dialogues at breakneck speed. This recent influx in the American public's acceptance of homosexuality has had many positive outcomes, such as increased legal protections for LGBT people (Ghaziani 2014:27). Many people argue that we have entered into a "post-gay era," where sexual orientation no longer determines of an individual's social position (Ghaziani 2014). When we talk about the "LGBT community" we are often referring to the political machine that advocates for the equal rights of sexual and gender minorities, and not an esoteric conglomerate with its own social structures. In fact, the political success of the gay community has perhaps hinged on this very phenomenon.

Yet, it is imperative to understand that this structure is a relatively recent occurrence. The united front of the LGBT community today looks very different than it did at the beginning of the movement. The LGBT community has made dramatic shifts in its structure and organization, as well as its missions. To fully grasp the meaning behind the community's success, we must first analyze its origins. This not only requires an analysis of the general public's evolving view on sexual deviance, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how sexual minorities have understood their own identities and organized themselves accordingly. What it meant to be homosexual sixty years ago is different from what it means to be homosexual in 2015; namely, gay people experienced much more oppression and discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation. How homosexual individuals reacted to this disenfranchisement and how shifting attitudes toward

homosexuality have informed these reactions is an interesting field of research. This paper investigates the motivation and origins for American homophobia, as well as its effects on homosexual individuals. It is crucial to take on such questions insofar as they allow us to understand how marginalization affects microcosmic populations. Furthermore, it highlights the fundamental values of the dominant culture and how deviance from those values is perceived and sanctioned.

In this research endeavor, I will analyze the homosexual community's social and cultural development during the 1960s and 1970s. This era marked a dramatic increase in the community's visibility and political prominence, as well as the height of homophobic ideology, policies, and doctrine. During this time, gay individuals engaged in unprecedented community building that resulted in the creation of unique social structures, norms, and values that reflected the particular needs of gay populations. I contend that these undertakings were a direct reaction to American society's refusal to accept, or even tolerate, homosexuality. Estranged from normative social structures, gay individuals flocked together to combat their social isolation, consequently creating spaces where they could celebrate their identities.

Central to my argument is the concept that American homophobia at this time was intrinsically linked to the nuclear family's importance in the era's dominant culture. I situate this contention in a Parsonian discussion of kinship and its unique ability to embody, reinforce, and perpetuate the norms, values, and expectations of the dominant culture. I also address the nuclear family's increased significance in the post-war era, and its perceived connection to stability after the social upheaval of World War II. In doing so

I argue that homophobia stemmed from a perception that homosexuality was antithetical to normative familial structure. Homosexuality threatened the gender roles and sexual conventions explicit in the tenets of the nuclear family. As a result, homosexual individuals were denied access to this fundamental social institution. This exclusion sparked the creation of new and alternative modes of community, and, most importantly, kinship. Generally, these centered on the concept of chosen families and an expansion of the definition of familial roles.

However, these countercultural kinship models were not uniform for all homosexual individuals. While there were many causes for diversity within the homosexual community, I find that the most visible and significant divide was between gay men and lesbians. During this era, homosexual communities were largely sex-segregated, resulting in highly disparate community structures and spaces. I argue that the cause for this schism was the social positions of men and women, regardless of sexuality, that heavily affected even countercultural institutions. Socially instituted gender roles further impacted how the two groups experienced homophobia, thus shaping their relative responses to it. I conclude with a brief summary of the evolution of the gay community in recent years, positing the AIDS crisis as the catalyst for the coalition building between gay men and lesbians that has lasted until today. Ultimately, I examine the modern same-sex marriage movement as an example of increasingly assimilationist political tactics, and its effect on gay and lesbian kinship structures. I understand the push for same-sex marriage as an effort to erase homosexual difference, but I argue that its prominence in

the modern day LGBT rights movement exhibits the continued preeminence of kinship in the American social system.

## ANALYTIC SCOPE

Before progressing into my analysis, it is necessary to delineate the populations at the center of my investigation. As previously stated, the current iteration of the “LGBT community” bears little to no resemblance to earlier manifestations of said community. Namely, the concept of a politically united collective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals is almost antithetical to the way in which these groups organized themselves in the in the 1950s to the early 1970s. For the sake of historical consistency, I will refer to my subjects of study as gay, homosexual, or lesbian. This is not meant to erase the existence or experiences of bisexual (or any non-monosexual) individuals, but is instead a more historically contextual way of representing their social position. Likewise, for the sake of brevity, I will not be exploring the impact of gender identity or expression within the community. Further, insofar as transgender individuals were often either excluded or erased in the homosexual communities of the time, the majority of my analysis will refer to cisgender, homosexual individuals.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I will not be addressing the racial dynamics within the homosexual community. Certainly racial difference and the problem of racism among homosexuals was, and continues to be, a pertinent issue, I

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<sup>1</sup> I also recognize that the concept of a transgender identity was not highly understood at this time. Many of the individuals who would potentially identify as transgender today did not have the vocabulary to articulate their identities. Thus, the transgender community at this time was not as well defined as it is today, precluding its relevance to my current investigation, but assuredly not its importance. This phenomenon may also apply to bisexual individuals.

find the split along sex categories to be the more pervasive phenomenon and the more relevant to a comparison between the historical and modern homosexual community.

The logic behind the historical scope of my analysis also bears explanation. The time span of this investigation roughly encompasses the years between 1950 and 1975. However, the years themselves are not as important as the era that they represent. This period marks the beginning of recovery after World War II, the beginning of what many people refer to as America's "golden age." Yet, it also includes the tumultuous social upheaval brought about in the 1960s and 1970s. This was also a time in which the model of the nuclear family was seen as more fundamental than ever to the American way of life, and consequently when homophobia was at its worst (Coontz 1992). It was during this era that the homosexual community became a visible and dynamic countercultural institution. These years would define the homosexual community's structure, values, and spaces until the beginning of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, and are therefore the most germane to my investigation.

#### FAMILY AND DEVIANCE IN POST-WAR AMERICA

A significant catalyst for the cultural and social manufacturing that took place in early gay communities was the widespread and violent homophobia of American society at the time. Homosexuality was portrayed as an extremely dangerous form of deviance that threatened the very core of American society (D'Emilio 1998:41). Yet, I contend that the bulk of mainstream society's rejection of gay individuals was rooted in the perception of homosexuality as a direct threat to the American family. In this section I delineate the

structure of the nuclear family as it was understood in the United States at the time. I will also illustrate the importance of the family as an institution in general, and its specific importance to the American social structure. I then examine the ways in which homosexuality was perceived as incompatible with the rigid parameters of normative kinship. Finally, I investigate the sociopolitical climate of the era, taking into account a push for traditional values that occurred in the wake of World War II and at the rise of the Cold War. All of this analysis leads me to the conclusion that the increased conservatism of American society led to an extreme glorification of the nuclear family and severe sanctions on deviant behavior, which, in turn, led to rampant homophobia.

### *The Nuclear Family*

Before exploring the clash between ideal American family structure and homosexual individuals, we must first understand the values, norms, and expectations inherent in American kinship. Schneider argues that the normative American definition of family, otherwise known as the “nuclear family,” refers to “a cultural unit which contains a husband and wife who are the mother and father of their child or children” (1968:33).<sup>2</sup> These individuals are said to be relatives, meaning that they are connected to each other either genetically or by marriage (Schneider 1968:21). The bonds between family members become portrayed as inherently primordial phenomena, shaped by natural forces instead of social ones (Schneider 1968:37). Positing family structure as *a priori*

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Schneider’s definition of familial structures is based on how Americans *talk* about kinship and family (1968). Thus, his work is not meant to provide a limiting definition of what kinship can be; rather it illustrates how family and relationships are understood.

lends it a sense of essentialism and authenticity that is absent in other forms of social relationships. As a result, the family takes on a uniquely integral role in society. Parsons contends that the family bridges the perceived gap between the biological and the social realms: “it is the primary social location of entry into the action world... [which] becomes the main agency of the earlier phases of the process by which the individual becomes a full member of society” (2007:336). Thus, adherence to the model of nuclear kinship is not solely portrayed as vital to the stability of the family as an autonomous unit. Insofar as the family is the fundamental locus of socialization, it provides an integral site for the introduction and replication of social values, norms, and expectations, as well as social roles (Parsons 2007:338). Family units that model the values of the greater society will likely produce members of society that not only conform to those values themselves, but also teach their children to conform to those values. Therefore, the stability of the society and adherence to a certain model of kinship structure become intimately linked.

There are several ways in which the lives of homosexual individuals clash with traditional American notions of family. Almost all aspects of the nuclear family structure assume the heterosexuality of its leaders. First, a family cannot even begin without the marriage of two opposite-sex individuals (Schneider 1968). While marriage is, of course, a necessary component, it is only a prerequisite for beginning a family. The core of the American family revolves around procreation:

A married couple without children does not quite make a family... For the married couple without children, one may say, ‘They have no family,’ or ‘Their family has not arrived yet,’ if they are very young. ‘Family’ here means that the addition of children to the married couple will complete the unit and will bring about that state (Schneider 1968:33).

Thus, children (conceived by two married, opposite-sex individuals) are elemental to the institution of the nuclear family. Yet, it is not enough to simply produce children; procreation is a mechanism for both biological and social reproduction. As previously articulated, the purpose of the family unit is to provide children the necessary socialization for full membership in society (Parsons 2007:336). For Schneider, this necessitates not only procreation, but also the cohabitation of the primary family members: parents/spouses and children (1968:33). Therefore, inherent in the understanding of the proper socialization of children is the representation of heterosexual monogamous relationships as the morally preferred model (if not the only model) of family structure.

This illustrates the nuclear family's dependence on heterosexuality. As argued above, the family is perceived as a natural grouping of individuals along the basis of shared genealogy. Yet, a married couple with children is considered family to one another despite the fact that they are not blood relatives. The basis for this exception is the act of sexual intercourse, which brings what would be an exclusively social relationship into the realm of natural phenomena (Schneider 1968:38). However, this is not simply because the two individuals are engaging in primal coupling practices; sexual intercourse also brings about the sense of unity and, most importantly, love necessary for the stability of the family unit (Schneider 1968:38). Schneider posits two different forms of familial affection: conjugal love, which "is erotic, having the sexual act at its concrete embodiment," as well as cognatic love, which is based in the commonality and unity

shared by blood relatives (Schneider 1968:38). Through sexual intercourse, a husband and wife can experience, as well as facilitate, both forms of love:

It is the symbol of love which links conjugal and cognatic love together and relates them both to and through the symbol of sexual intercourse. Love in the sense of sexual intercourse is a natural act with natural consequences according to its cultural definition. And love in the sense of sexual intercourse at the same time stands for unity. As a symbol of unity, or oneness, love is the union of the flesh, of opposites, male and female, man and woman. The unity of opposites is not only affirmed in the embrace, but also in the outcome of that union, the unity of blood, the child...The child thus affirms the oneness or unity of blood with each of his parents...that unity or identity of flesh and blood, that oneness of material, stands for the unity of cognatic love (Schneider 1968:39).

Therefore, heterosexual sexual intercourse between married partners is posited as the closest simulation of blood relations between two people who are not biologically related. In engaging in sexual intercourse, heterosexual couples can be united on both a symbolic and corporeal level, giving this relationship a level of exceptionalism absent in all other relationships, familial or otherwise.

These social expectations elucidate the dissonance between homosexuality and traditional notions of family structure. Most obvious is the lack of a marriage between two people of the opposite sex. The barrier to this is twofold. First, insofar as a homosexual relationship implies romantic and erotic coupling of same-sex individuals, it is, by definition, antithetical to the concept of heterosexuality. Secondly, while marriage is concretized through affection, it is legitimated through the order of law (Schneider 1968:27). Ergo, there are certain procedures for being recognized as a married couple. Same-sex marriage did not become legal anywhere in the United States until May 17, 2004. Thus, during the mid-century the concept of a marriage between homosexual individuals was both a social and legal impossibility. Therefore, homosexual people were

excluded from the prerequisite to creating a family, according to the framework of traditional kinship.

Within a homosexual relationship, the impossibility of becoming married, opposite-sex parents reveals the most glaring deviation from familial norms: the ability to naturally procreate. Many homosexual couples have children in a myriad of different ways, some employing more biological methods than others. However, it is currently impossible for two individuals of the same sex to produce offspring that contains both of their genetic material, and the ability to do so, as I have illustrated, is vital to the nuclear family structure. Gay couples' inability to have children is portrayed as one of the main reasons why homosexuality is antithetical to family structure, and consequently viewed as "unnatural." Under this framework, if a homosexual couple decided to raise a child, they would necessarily fail to embody the values of the mainstream society because their role as parents would contradict these norms. They would not be a family by traditional definitions because they could not fulfill the basic tenets of parenting: providing socialization consistent with the values of normative society.

Consequently, homosexual individuals cannot participate fully in the society because they are perceived as diametrically opposed to the institution of family and the normative expectations of society itself, especially those regarding the appropriate function of sex. Whereas within a heterosexual marriage sexual intercourse is automatically coded as procreative, homosexual sexual acts are purely for the purpose of sexual pleasure and affection; to recall Schneider, they are capable of simulating conjugal love, but not of producing cognatic love. Weston details this cultural upset:

In the United States, sex apart from heterosexual marriage tends to introduce a wild card into social relations, signifying unbridled lust and the limits of individualism. If heterosexual intercourse can bring people into enduring association via the creation of kinship ties, lesbian and gay sexuality in these depictions isolates individuals from one another rather than weaving them into the social fabric (1997:22).

Thus, homosexuality creates a social rupture between individual identities and acts and the principles of the larger society. This cleavage is portrayed as a fundamental incompatibility with normative American kinship. Since the stability of the social structure and the consistency of the nuclear family are perceived as coterminous, society has an incentive to sanction behavior that disrupts this structure.

### *The Rise of Homophobia*

While homosexuality had never been widely accepted in mainstream American society, the 1950's marked a spike in violent and direct homophobia. The tumultuous social climate of World War II threw conventional gender roles and sexual norms into flux: "[WWII] uprooted tens of millions of American men and women, many of them young, and deposited them in a variety of nonfamilial, often sex-segregated environments" (D'Emilio 1998:23). Men were fighting overseas and women were working outside the home (as well as on battle front), casting aside the rigidity of American social norms to help the war effort. While all of this was done in the name of preserving the traditional American way of life, it introduced a new social climate that allowed for different forms of relationships and lifestyles, especially homosexuality, to flourish (D'Emilio 1998:24). Due to the high level of sex-segregation that WWII facilitated, gay men and lesbians were presented with more opportunities to meet others like themselves, to foster a group

identity, and to act upon their desires (D'Emilio 1998:24). After the war was over, homosexual individuals' many homosexual individuals refused to return to the status quo and their need for solidarity only grew, resulting in the proliferation of one of the most iconic symbols of twentieth century gay culture: the gay bar (D'Emilio 1998:32). As the gay bar came into subcultural prominence, so did a new, heightened visibility of gay people. Homosexual individuals were slowly but surely coming out of the closet and into the American social consciousness.

It is this increased awareness of homosexuality that caused the violent homophobic backlash that started in the 1950's and has persisted well into the twenty-first century. World War II had a momentous effect on the structure of American society, namely, the traditional American family. However, for many individuals, returning to these norms and values symbolized a return to social stability:

After fifteen years of depression and war, many Americans wanted little more than to construct a tranquil family environment...millions of men and women married. The birth rate, having declined for more than a century, shot upward as the war came to a close...In the baby boom years of the late 1940s and 1950s, the man or woman choosing to pursue same-sex intimacy was more than ever going against the grain. The reaffirmation of normative gender roles and stable heterosexual relationships made those who lived outside them appear more clearly deviant (D'Emilio 1998:38).

Therefore, this reinvigorated appeal to traditional values created an environment which linked non-normative behavior with the social upheaval and hardship of the Great Depression and World War II. However, this social climate was unique in that it developed as a reaction to previous turmoil. America was trying to recover from war and economic instability, and any behavior that did not conform to the idealized view of normative values was seen as dangerous and consequently sanctioned. It is during this

time that the nuclear family came into prominence as the cornerstone of American society's strength and stability. This resulted in people getting married and having children at earlier ages, dramatic drops in divorce rates, and a glamorization of gender roles (Coontz 1992:26). It is imperative to recognize that while this model was considered morally superior, it was not the universal reality depicted by the media both at the time and today (Coontz 1992:31). However, because a "normal" family life was seen as indicative of an individual's moral character, Americans faced enormous pressure to conform to society's expectations; for example, not being a "family man" could affect men's employment, or incite suspicions of treason, communism, or homosexuality (Coontz 1992:30). Therefore, the nuclear family model was a result of a unique social situation brought about by the end of World War II, which linked family life and social stability and created sanctions for deviance from this model.

As homosexuality became more visible during and after the war, it was posited as previously unnoticed, but very dangerous, threat to the American society due to its perceived incompatibility with the nuclear family. Due to the fact that familial and social stability were seen as coterminous, homosexuality's conflict with family values became symbolic of an aversion to American values as a whole. In the postwar period, gay men and lesbians were used as scapegoats for the problems in American society; their existence seemed to represent a slippery slope that would lead to the country's downfall (D'Emilio 1998:41). Seen as "sexual deviants" or "perverts," homosexual individuals were lumped together with communists and seen as potential national threats starting in the early days of the Cold War (Coontz 1992:30). During this era of McCarthyism,

heightened nationalism, and xenophobia, homosexuality's discordance with American values was construed as immoral, Un-American, and dangerous: "homosexuality became an epidemic infecting the nation, actively spread by communists to sap the strength of the next generation" (D'Emilio 1998:44). While the threat of the "homosexual menace" is portrayed as political, the labeling of gay men and lesbians as sexual deviants clearly originates from social anxieties regarding the traditional procreative purposes of sexual activity and gender roles. Therefore, I contend that the root of American homophobia in the postwar period was tied to a fanatical idealization of the traditional American family coupled with a social climate that violently condemned and castigated deviance.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Increased visibility of homosexual communities combined with heightened suspicion of homosexual individuals led to a myriad of new laws and policies that directly discriminated against gay men and lesbians (D'Emilio 1998:41). The perceived inability to conform to traditional family structure was used to justify institutional prejudices that targeted gay men and lesbians both as individuals, as well as a community. Gay men and lesbians were seen as either mentally ill or criminal, if not both. In this section, I outline how homophobia became institutionalized, which reveals that homophobia was not just felt by the general public, but codified in the American system of authority. I discuss two prominent sites of institutional discrimination: medical pathologization and legalized discrimination. Both represent a procedural manifestation of homosexuality's perceived threat to the nuclear family. I will then illustrate what consequences these policies and

procedures had on homosexual individual. I argue that this extreme marginalization sparked the creation of homosexual microcosms that resemble ethnic enclaves in terms of their origins, functions, and appearances.

### *Institutionalized Homophobia*

In an era where conformity was praised and where deviance was often misunderstood, homosexuality was not only denounced, it was pathologized. The majority of the medical community considered homosexuality a disease and a delusion (D'Emilio 1998:15). However, by the 1960s, many psychiatrists had posited that homosexuality was a mental affliction, rather than a physical one; this was the official viewpoint of the American Psychiatric Association until 1973 (Plummer 1998 [1981]:87). Whether homosexuality was psychological or a physical phenomenon, it was largely considered an individual affliction for which a cure or treatment could be administered (Irvine 1998 [1994]:578). The desire to understand homosexuality through the lens of mental illness is consistent with sociological theories of interaction. For instance, according to Garfinkel, when individuals witness deviance, they attempt to rationalize and normalize it; inability to do so incites anger and moral outrage (1991). Homosexuality was considered deviant, and society's resultant revulsion was then addressed by the medical community. Consequently, many homosexual individuals were subject to medical or therapeutic strategies to eradicate their "disease" that were often traumatic and inhumane:

A view of homosexuality as disease spelled trouble even for those who never ran afoul to the law, since some families committed their gay members to asylums. In their search for a cure, doctors experimented on their wards with procedures ranging from the relatively benign, such as psychotherapy and hypnosis, to

castration, hysterectomy, lobotomy, electroshock, aversion therapy, and the administration of untested drugs (D'Emilio 1998:18).

Given the rising prestige of medical authority that began in the twentieth century, classifying deviance as a symptom of either mental or physical illness was a logical method for explaining and normalizing social transgressions (Irvine 1998 [1994]:578). While the efforts to “cure” homosexuality were not necessarily entirely malicious or indicative of unilateral hatred for gay individuals, they were harmful, and this harm was widely accepted from people both within and outside the medical community.

The understanding of homosexuality as dysfunction led to the creation of procedural constraints on the lives of gay individuals. These came in the form of homophobic laws and policies. Gusfield explains that this is a typical function of government insofar as it serves as the arbiter of the society's values and stability:

Acts of government ‘commit the group to action or to perform coordinated acts for general welfare.’ This representational character of governmental officials and their acts makes it possible for them not only to influence the allocation of resources but also to define the public norms of morality and to designate which acts violate them (1967:176).

Through this analytical lens, I identify the American government as the primary propagator of homophobic ideology, policies, and procedures. Even though doctors and psychiatrists were attempting to explain homosexuality, the American government saw it as an extremely dangerous threat that needed to be eradicated. By Gusfield's logic, the government has the power and authority to define society's values, as well as enforce them. Ergo, several different laws were put in place as an attempt to force conformity and quell the visibility, and the mere existence, of homosexuality.

In the 1950s, the criminalization of homosexual activity led to widespread torment of gay men and lesbians at the hands of law enforcement (Cain 1993:1564). Police raided any space where homosexual people were known to congregate, from bars to homes, and the names and personal information of those arrested often appeared in the newspaper the following morning (D'Emilio 1998:49). Existing laws were used to discourage homosexuals from congregating in public. Besides laws against sodomy, potentially sexual or sensual acts between same-sex individuals were consistently labeled as lewd behavior; someone frequenting a gay bar or neighborhood could be charged with loitering (Cain 1993: 1564-1565). In fact, police officers often used a method known as entrapment: “a system whereby an officer learns the language, behavior, and dress of the homosexual group, enters a bar or walks down a street frequented by homosexuals, and pretends he is one of them in order to elicit a sexual ‘pass,’” which would then result in that individual’s arrest (Achilles 1998 [1967]:177). Moreover, hate-crimes, or crimes committed on the basis of a person’s identity, against homosexual individuals were not recognized, and were rarely taken seriously by the police or the judicial authorities (Nardi and Bolton 1998 [1991]:420). Consequently, gay men and lesbians who sought out community lived their lives in constant fear of arrest, public humiliation, and physical violence (Cain 1993:1565). All of this illustrates the extent to which homophobia was normalized and legitimated through the American government, and the dire repercussions this had for the health and safety of homosexual people.

Clearly, the social climate of the 1950s was extremely unwelcoming to gay individuals. They were portrayed as dangerously deviant characters that threatened

national security and social stability. This perception is evident in the political rhetoric of the era, as well as the medical, procedural, and legal discrimination which homosexual individuals faced. I argue that the core of this oppressive environment was homosexuality's perceived incompatibility with the nuclear family, an institution which symbolized the essential elements of the American way of life and postwar recovery. In the eyes of the government and, consequently the general public, the existence of homosexuality undermined the stability of the American family, which in turn threatened the stability of the society as a whole. Therefore, homosexuality was sanctioned and condemned. Yet, the deprecation of gay men and lesbians was in no way limited to the legal, political, or even medical spheres. Insofar as the family unit is responsible for replicating and modeling the norms and values of the society, the ideal family unit would condemn homosexuality. Consequently, stalwartly gay individuals were ejected from their homes and families of origin and forbidden, both symbolically and procedurally, from creating new families using the existing models for kinship.

### *Homosexual Reactions to Discrimination*

This expulsion from the mainstream society led to the creation of a gay subculture. Seen as pariahs by the bulk of the population, homosexual individuals sought out environments where they could live openly among others that understood and sympathized with their plight. The need for community and solidarity led to the creation of a group identity. As the homosexual community began to flourish and grow, its members created new values, norms, and histories unique to the gay lifestyle. It is

generally accepted with social science communities that homosexual individuals have their own unique culture (Irvine 1998 [1994]:580). Before addressing the characteristics of this culture, which I broach later in the paper, I will first elucidate how marginalized groups construct a collective identity.

Ethnic enclave theory provides a useful framework through which to analyze this phenomenon. This brand of theory describes the behavior of groups of people united amongst one another and separated from majoritarian society due to an aspect of their identity (in this case, ethnicity) (Peach 2005:32). Murray contends that communities of gay men and lesbians resemble ethnic enclaves insofar as homosexual communities revolve around shared identities, experiences, histories, norms, values, and behavior and use these somatic connections to foster solidarity (1998 [1979]). However, unlike ethnic enclaves, gay culture is not hereditary insofar as inclusion was not based on how one was raised; rather, membership within gay culture is a substitution for one's original social position before coming out (Murray 1998 [1979]). Yet, there is still cause for solidarity among the group; Murray quotes Gusfield, concluding that, "communities might also be defined as people who see themselves as having a common history and destiny different from others (1998 [1979]:212). This created affective bonds between individuals, providing the basis for homosexual communities to emerge.

Another crucial part of subcultural structure and ethnic enclave theory is shared space and the idea of community territory; for ethnic enclaves this often takes the form of neighborhoods, such as Little Italy, Chinatowns, etc. (Murray 1998 [1979]:208). Physical communities such as these have certainly been employed by homosexual microcosms. A

gay neighborhood, or “gayborhood” is an identifiable space where gay and lesbian culture is visible, where homosexual individuals reside, and that features gay-friendly businesses and organizations (Ghaziani 2014:2). Gayborhoods provide many positive effects for local gay communities:

They allow gays and lesbians—who, unlike racial minorities, are often not physically identifiable—to find one another for friendship and fellowship, sex, dating, and love. Such individuals can create unique cultures, political perspectives, organizations and businesses, families, rituals, and styles of socialization in and around their neighborhoods. These urban areas thus stand on guard against an entrenched problem of history and ancestry—they help to answer the question, who are my people?—and they offer a renewed sense of roots (Ghaziani 2014:2).

Therefore, the spatial organization and close proximity of a given minoritarian community is just as important to the community’s structure as the symbolic elements insofar as the former facilitates the latter. Without a space in which individuals can congregate and share their common experiences and identities, forging a collective identity is impossible. Gayborhoods created a space not only where homosexual individuals could exist, but also where homosexual identities and cultures could be explored, enacted, and celebrated.

Some have posited that the extreme and multi-faceted discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians catalyzed the creation of the homosexual community structure (Irvine 1998 [1994]:578). I concur with this contention. During the mid-century, if a homosexual individual wanted to live openly, it was not necessarily safe or possible to do so in isolation. Ironically, the severely homophobic ideologies, policies and procedures implemented to quell homosexual activity only encouraged gay men and lesbians to collectivize, first out of necessity, and then out of defiance. Consequently, I propose that

the gay subculture emerged as a reactionary social structure, where the tenets of the community were consciously manufactured, learned, and taught to create new symbolic and material spaces that facilitated the lifestyles of gay individuals.

## ALTERNATIVE KINSHIP

The burgeoning gay community did not erase the fact that declaring one's homosexuality often meant leaving everything behind. Economic security, legal protection, and social esteem were all at stake, but perhaps the most poignant sacrifice was that of familial connection. Here, I approach the logic behind alternative kinship structures and how they were shaped by homosexual individuals' experiences with homophobia and the restrictive constraints of the nuclear family. I illustrate that gay men and lesbians merely appropriated the affective characteristics of kinship structures into their own contexts, therefore allowing for a new understanding of family to come about.

Due to homosexuality's perceived incongruity with traditional notions of family, claiming one's gay identity was seen as an outright refusal of kinship as a whole (Weston 1997:22). For some homosexual men and women, this was not entirely untrue. Many gay men and lesbians had internalized the normative understanding of family that relied heavily on marriage and procreation; since neither of these futures were realistic at the time, they considered their identities and lifestyles averse to "family values" (Weston 1997:25). However, as more individuals found solidarity, connection, intimacy, and friendship in homosexual communities, gay people began to expand the notion of kinship and gay individuals were able to start imagining themselves as part of new kinds of

families (Weston 1997:26). Inherent in this reinterpretation was the element of choice present in homosexual individuals' new family structures.

Two understandings of family emerged: those based in shared genealogy (straight) and those that were chosen (gay) (Weston 1997:28). Yet, the notion that families can be chosen inherently contradicts traditional understandings of kinship. For Schneider, the corporeal connection between families is a necessary condition for the affective bonds of familial love and distinguishes these bonds from those of friendship:

As a kind of relationship, love can be translated as *enduring, diffuse solidarity*. *Solidarity* because the relationship is supportive, helpful, and cooperative; it rests on trust and the other can be trusted. *Diffuse* because it is not narrowly defined to a specific goal or a specific kind of behavior. Two athletes may cooperate and support each other for the duration of a game, but be indifferent to each other otherwise. Two members of the family cannot be indifferent to one another, and since their cooperation does not have a specific goal or a specific limited time in mind, it is *enduring*...Friendship and kinship in American culture are both relationships of diffuse solidarity. What distinguishes friends from relatives...is that you are born with your relatives but you can pick your friends. If you can pick them, by the same token they can be dropped at will and without obligation (1968:52, 53).

Thus, the relationships based on choice were considered too vulnerable to uphold the intense loyalty and longevity that familial relationships that American society thought that they embodied; in Schneider's words, they are not obligated to endure. However, homosexual individuals who had been rejected from their families or who had been discriminated against based on their inability to reproduce the traditional family structure, were all too familiar with the biological family's failure to produce the unconditional love and support it claimed to represent.

As a result, gay men and women began to seek out the emotive essence of family rather than its traditional and fanaticized form, finding enduring acceptance and love

outside of the traditionally biological parameters of kinship. Homosexual individuals' experiences of rejection and indifference from their families allowed them to think beyond their socialization to understand kinship as a more complex set of relationships instead of the rigidly defined, reproductive unit of the nuclear family: "For many lesbians and gay men, blood family represented not some naturally given unit that provided a base for all forms of kinship, but rather a procreative principle that organized one possible *type* of kinship" (Weston 1997:28). Therefore, while shared genealogy is not entirely discredited as a basis for kinship, it is not the sole condition for abiding affective relationships. This proposes that the effects of kinship are not necessarily primordial or natural, but instead can be felt and performed in a variety of social contexts. Consequently, I contend that the discrimination faced by homosexual individuals during this time caused them to understand kinship differently.

Yet, I still propose that Schneider's framework of enduring, diffuse solidarity as the basis of somatic conceptualizations of kinship works best here. In other words, homosexual subculture's reimagining of family still distinguishes between friends and family, but the core difference between the two categories is not solely dependent on shared genealogy or a lack thereof. Instead, kinship is any relationship where enduring, diffuse solidarity is present. Gay men and lesbians illustrated that shared blood is not the necessary condition for such a connection, but rather shared experiences, values, and histories.

## GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

At this point in my analysis I will go into further detail regarding the cultural manufacturing of gay men and lesbians during this time. Up till now, I have referred to an amorphous and seemingly monolithic “homosexual community.” However, in this section, I will argue against such an image. It is crucial to recognize that the homosexual community was largely sex-segregated for the majority of the twentieth century . This section distinguishes between the experiences of homosexual men and homosexual women in the mid-century. This was due to the fact that homosexual men and women experienced community, kinship, and even homophobia in different ways. Understanding this phenomenon is extremely important insofar as the modern LGBT movement often ignores this important detail of gay history in the United States in favor of a more cohesive narrative of unity and inclusion. Therefore, the schisms and disagreements, as well as the discrimination, prejudice, and diversity, within the homosexual community are overlooked and forgotten.<sup>3</sup> I contend that sex-segregation within the gay community was a reflection of the pervasive sexism of twentieth century American society. Thus, while homosexual individuals were able to subvert kinship norms, they were not able to completely evade all aspects of normative culture.

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<sup>3</sup> While there were, of course, other causes for division within the homosexual community (race, gender identity, political leaning, etc.), I have found sex to be one of the most divisive and pervasive causes for dissociation.

*Gendered Experiences of Homophobia*

I have shown that the actions of homosexual individuals were more accurately reactions to their mistreatment at the hands of the mainstream society. The catalysts for the sex divide<sup>4</sup> are likewise reactionary insofar as homosexual men and women experienced aversion to their homosexuality differently. Visibility played a large part in the disjunction. During this time in American society, sex was seen as a determinant of an individual's character, disposition, and even ability. Social expectations of behavior based on sexual difference were far more rigid than they are today, leading to different types of socialization for men and women (Ridgeway 1999). In general, women were expected to be more emotional, nurturing, and sensitive; whereas, men were taught to be strong and stoic. Consequently, it was much more acceptable for women to engage in affectionate, close relationships and even cohabit with other women than it was for men to do so with other men (Knopp and Lauria 1985:158). Furthermore, homosexual women were less likely to go to bars or clubs or engage in the culture of "public cruising," and were less affected by the kind of police harassment that gay men were subject to (D'Emilio 1998:92). This made the lesbian community less visible, which, in turn, allowed for gay women to evade detection more easily than their male counterparts.

Moreover, in the context of the patriarchal structure of American society at the time, gay women were more accustomed to disenfranchisement than gay men by virtue of the

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<sup>4</sup> I intentionally use the word "sex" here to refer to the split between homosexual men and women because I define gender as a self-ascribed identity. Since transgender women were often not allowed in women's spaces and transgender men were not allowed into men's spaces, I do not find it accurate to use the term "gender" to describe the characteristics of the division between the two communities. Also, I recognize that this analysis is reinforcing the concept of a gender binary, which modern queer theory has pushed against. However, I am working within the framework at the time which did not take the fluidity of gender into consideration.

fact that they were women. As a group, women were already facing discrimination and prejudice; declaring one's homosexuality added new challenges to an already challenging social position. Men, on the other hand, were typically the most privileged class of people. Therefore, men who came out as gay went from relative social security to one of the most reviled classes of people in American society at the time. Consequently, I contend that male homosexuality was a larger affront to the patriarchal power structure than female homosexuality. The sexist culture of the United States portrayed masculine characteristics as more desirable than feminine ones. Insofar as male homosexuality was (and still is) associated, albeit inaccurately, with the feminization of men, it represented an unconscionable social misstep. In contrast, the female masculinization associated with female homosexuality was not desirable, but not nearly as transgressive in that it involved the performance of more positive traits.

Additionally, as the dominant group, a large part of men's role in society was to control women and reinforce gender roles primarily through marriage, but also through employment and legislation, among other things. Ignoring this social responsibility was seen as a more significant threat to the strength of the patriarchal power structure. Put simply, subversion from the people typically in power is more concerning than subversion from those typically not in power. Thus, the system of authority had a higher incentive to quell male homosexuality than female homosexuality, making gay men the more visible and vulnerable targets of homophobia at the time. This is, of course, in no way meant to discount the numerous struggles that lesbians (and women in general) had to overcome; however, it is valuable to understand the contrasting social issues that

colored the experiences of gay men and women outside homosexual enclaves to better analyze how those forces affected the structure of the microcosms themselves.

### *Divergent Community Structures*

Discrepant experiences with homophobia and different social positions led to contrasting needs, which ultimately resulted in distinct community structures for men and women. These differences manifested in three core categories of community function: political, social, and spatial. “Political” refers to traditional conceptions of activism, such as protests, rallies, lobbying, etc. The codified values, norms, and expectations of the community fall into the “social” category. Finally, the “spatial” orientation of the groups is indicated through their use of physical space. This discussion approaches both the types of institutions, such as bars, clubs, book stores, museums, shops, and political headquarters, frequented by the communities, as well as kinds of localities these spaces were in (i.e. urban, rural, suburban, etc.). I will address these areas and exhibit the different ways in which gay men and lesbians oriented their communities toward them.

### *Political orientations*

The late 1950s and 1960s marked a heightened politicization of American society, especially from marginalized communities. Across the country, various populations were rising up and loudly voicing their discontent with the system of authority. Insofar as this era coincided with the development of gay and lesbian identities, homosexual communities—both for men and women—necessarily had political components. Yet, gay

and lesbian political organizations fought for different issues in different ways. The Mattachine Society, founded in 1951, was the largest gay political organization of its time, but it catered largely to gay male objectives (D'Emilio 1998:92). The organization was highly exclusive and secretive due in part to the founders' connection with radical leftist politics and communism, as well as the fact that large gatherings of homosexual people were still illegal (D'Emilio 1998:63). Despite the apparent dangers, Mattachine Society meetings created a space for gay men to find others like them, achieving the organization's central mission of creating a sense of community and identity for gay people.

This camaraderie was primarily achieved through the establishment of consciousness raising discussion groups that helped foster solidarity and group identity (D'Emilio 1992:68). The group's founders used their Marxist backgrounds to achieve this end:

Their formulation resembled the Marxist distinction between a class "in itself" and a class "for itself." The difference between these two was one of consciousness. In the former case, workers constituted an objective social category; in the latter, they recognized their common interests. According to Marxist theory, the transformation from one to the other made the working class a cohesive force able to fight on its own behalf. Homosexuals, too, were trapped by a false consciousness, by a hegemonic ideology that labeled their eroticism an individual aberration. The first task of a homosexual emancipation movement, then, was to challenge the internalization of this view by homosexuals and to develop among the gay population an awareness of its status as an oppressed minority (D'Emilio 1992:66).

Thus, the actions and techniques of the Mattachine Society were political in ideology, but social in practice. This was a necessary component of the gay male population's political development. Many of the most prominent mid-twentieth century social movements were run by populations that had already existing group identities where membership was

biologically determined (for instance, race or sex), and members shared a history of disenfranchisement. Given the shame and isolation that colored the lives of most homosexual men up to this point, such group identification had to be cultivated by establishing common experiences and shared values. Community development was a prerequisite for engaging in more traditional political activity, such as demonstrations and protests. Social identity provided the necessary condition for political ideology and shared oppression fueled future group rebellion.

Therefore, at its outset, the gay male community placed building community and solidarity over political sophistication. As a result, the beginnings of gay political action were not planned protests, but were instead riots. One of the most notable incidences of this was the Stonewall Riots. In June of 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a known gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village. Raids of gay bars were common, but on this particular occasion, the patrons of the bar fought back against the police. The fighting went on for days, but eventually the gay dissenters came out victorious (LeVay and Nonas 1995:59). The significance of the fact that Stonewall was a riot is that it illustrates that the events were territorial reactions to the rampant homophobic discrimination inflicted on the gay community at the hands of the police. They were not carefully planned and organized as a way of achieving a predetermined political end or based in any particular strategy. In the absence of other widespread traditional political activity, the events at Stonewall symbolize the gay community's consciousness of their oppression, but also their relative political immaturity. Most importantly, the Stonewall Riots revealed a community that was finally ready to fight back. While organizations

such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance had started gaining prominence in the 1960s, they harnessed the momentum of the riots to empower and enliven the community to engage in more visible political activity (LeVay and Nonas 1995:60).<sup>5</sup> The post-Stonewall politicization of the gay male community marked a turning point in the movement that I argue could not have been achieved without the community building and consciousness raising brought about by the Mattachine Society. Before gay men could start a social movement, they had to establish themselves as a social class.

The political orientation of gay men during the 1950s and 1960s is in stark contrast with the lesbian community. As I have already mentioned, the Mattachine Society was primarily run by and targeted at gay men. To better address these needs and combat the exclusion they faced from the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) was established in 1955 (Gallo 2006). Similarly to the Mattachine Society, DOB's purpose was to increase awareness and acceptance of homosexuality; however, in addition to consciousness raising to achieve self-acceptance, the organization's mission also called for more proactive actions, such as involvement in pro-homosexual research and activism (Gallo 2006:11). As the first major lesbian organization, DOB's politicized mission points to a higher level of political involvement in the early years of the lesbian

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<sup>5</sup> I must acknowledge here that the rioters in the Stonewall rebellions were primarily Puerto Rican transgender women, drag queens, as well as gay men (LeVay and Nonas 1995:59). However, this event is often portrayed as a victory of the gay cis-male community because the consequent political action was largely championed by white gay men in organizations like the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance. It is not my intention to perpetuate this erasure, but instead to illustrate the effects the riots had for the most prominent gay rights organizations at the time. However, in doing so I acknowledge the role that race, class, and gender identity play in these group's prominence and that these narratives can never capture the breadth and depth of gay individuals', especially trans people and people of color, experiences and contributions at the time.

community's development as compared to that of the gay male community. This is perhaps due to the fact the political orientation of lesbians was influenced by their oppression not only as homosexuals, but also as women. The intersection of these two identities created a community with needs quite different from those of the gay male population. As Shirley Willer, a prominent member of DOB wrote:

The important difference between the male and female homosexual is that the Lesbian is discriminated against not only because she is a Lesbian, but also because she is a woman. Although the Lesbian occupies a 'privileged' place among homosexuals, she occupies an under-privileged place in the world (Gallo 2006:130).

Lesbians faced extreme economic and educational disadvantages just like all American women. This was further exacerbated by the expectation at the time that women did not need education or fair employment because their husbands would care for them (Coontz 1992:31). Since heterosexual marriage was not a desirable outcome for most lesbian women, their homosexuality highlighted their social disenfranchisement as women.

This is where the connections between the lesbian community and the feminist movement began to surface. While not founded as a specifically feminist organization, members of the Daughters of Bilitis had been practicing the tenets of feminism long before the larger feminist movement gained prominence in the 1960s (Gallo 2006:135). The women's rights movement at the time was informed by what is known as second wave feminism, a more radical form of feminism that called for women's independence, and in some cases separation, from men, sexual liberation, employment and wage equality, and better access to education, among other things (Gosse 2005:158). Given fact that the majority of "gay" organizations were run by men, combined with lesbians'

heightened experiences of institutionalized sexism's constraints on women, lesbians found community and solidarity within the structure of the feminist movement (Gosse 2005:184). Since the majority of lesbian community spaces were enveloped in an emerging political movement, lesbian populations showed a higher and earlier tendency for political action and engagement than their gay male counterparts.

### *Social structures*

Due to the fact that politics played a large part in the lesbian community, social life and political action were largely linked. This joining of personal and political was not absent from gay male communities, but was much more fundamental to the social structure of lesbian/feminist populations. This is best evidenced by the emergence of political lesbianism in the 1960s:

...The meaning of the word lesbian has changed from private subversive activity to politically revolutionary identity...The lesbian is the woman obviously who unites the personal and the political in the struggle to free ourselves from the oppressive institution...The word lesbian has expanded so much through political definition that it should no longer refer exclusively to a woman simply in sexual relation to another woman...The word is now a generic term signifying activism and resistance and the envisioned goal of a woman committed state (Johnston 1973:275, 276, 278).

Thus, the feminist movement called for women oriented communities and the lesbian identity and lifestyle became emblematic of that particular goal. Lesbianism was associated more with a homosocial lifestyle than with homosexual acts. Emphasizing the importance of the political over the sexual proved to be a pervasive characteristic of the social environment in lesbian communities. While, of course, sexuality was still a part of the lesbian community, it played a much less visible role compared to the gay male

community, where publically “cruising” for potential sexual partners made up a large amount of the social scene (D’Emilio 1998:92). In fact, in a survey conducted in the San Francisco area in 1969 and 1970, 43 percent of white gay men “...had had over five hundred different homosexual partners. By contrast, more than half of the lesbians polled said they had had fewer than ten sexual partners” (LeVay and Nonas 1995:62). The discrepant emphases on sex is only one example of a plethora of divergent community values, as well as a manifestation of pre existing gender roles that encourage men’s sexual promiscuity and women’s chasteness. Yet, while both groups’ means may differ vastly, they share a common goal: the creation of a community. During this time, gays and lesbians were tentatively branching out and finding microcosms in which they could live their lives as they chose. However, given the different needs of homosexual men and women, these communities embodied different values across sex lines.

### *Place-making and gendered spaces*

The variance in sociopolitical orientations between men and women is revealed in their contrasting spatial organization. Gay social life was most visible and accessible in areas where there were not only higher concentrations of homosexual individuals, but also businesses and cultural institutions that catered to the demands of the homosexual community, typically found in urban, more socially liberal, areas (Ghaziani 2014:17). The creation of gay territory is an important part of the construction and celebration of the gay identity. As Knopp and Lauria argue, “They continually transform and use [space] in such a way as to reflect gay cultural values and serve the special needs of individual

gays vis-à-vis the society at large” (1985:159). However, Knopp and Lauria also posit that the diverse needs within the homosexual community have caused some amount of discord about how these spaces are used (1985:159). I contend that the most notable cause for this schism is the sex divide. Consequently, the appearance and function of a given gay neighborhood, or “gayborhood” as it is colloquially called, often reflects the sexes of the locale’s prominent patrons. Insofar as businesses and cultural institutions served as the social epicenters of gay and lesbian social life, the contrasting nature of these establishments highlights the visible distinctions in the sociopolitical values and norms that differed between gay men and lesbians.

A key contrast between gay men and lesbians’ use of space is that gay male areas have historically been more visible. This is caused by a combination of factors both internal and external to gay microcosms. First, the kinds of establishments frequented by gay men at the time were much more conspicuous. Sex played some role in this. As I have stated previously, sexual promiscuity was a large part of gay male culture during the mid-twentieth century (D’Emilio 1998:92). As a result, many gay male community spaces were designed to facilitate this culture of “cruising,” so to speak. Spaces like gay bars, clubs, bathhouses, and sex shops defined the gay male experience for the latter half of the twentieth century (LeVay and Nonas 1995:120). This is not meant to reduce all of gay male culture to sex. For instance, gay spaces, such as “gayborhoods” were extremely important to the creation of gay male community and identity. A gay man living in Greenwich Village, a gayborhood in New York City, writes:

I hate to admit it, but when I first moved in with [my lover], I was uncomfortable with the prominent numbers of obviously gay men on the street down here. My

discomfort was not because of anything like self-hatred or even temptation. It was the realness of the situation, the fact that something once secret and rare could become as natural and commonplace as bread. It's not a normal situation, although it should be (Bram 1991:192).

Therefore, gay men relied heavily on visible gay territory to embody the community's desires, but also as mechanism for safety, solidarity, and acceptance. I will discuss later the specific social forces that made place-making so integral to the gay male experience.

Visible spatial organization was mostly a male phenomenon. Lesbian bars and clubs did exist, but they never reached the same cultural significance for the lesbian community as they did for gay men (D'Emilio 1998:98). Given its more radical and political orientation, different kinds of spaces rose to prominence in the lesbian community:

Distinct lesbian settlements...were influenced by feminist politics, rather than the sexual marketplaces that more often typified the places where gay men congregated. As a result, lesbian neighborhoods then and to this day consist of clusters of homes located near countercultural institutions, like artsy theatres, alternative bookstores, coffee shops, bike shops, and cooperative grocery stores (Ghaziani 2014:235).

This is to say that the kinds of businesses and institutions frequented by lesbians illustrate the heightened politicization of the lesbian-feminist movement and community at the time. Furthermore, the nature of these establishments also "gives them a quasi-underground character, [making] them seem more hidden..." (Ghaziani 2014:235). Yet, influences on lesbian communities were not always exclusively political. Just as with gay men, spaces played a large role in constituting identity in the lesbian community. In his interviews with gay women about the prevalence of men in gayborhoods, Ghaziani collected the following statements:

'We're different genders. We connect in different ways,' one lesbian remarked... 'the social [bar] scene for men is the way that they connect with each

other. Women prefer to connect in a different environment and in different ways'...Another lesbian woman agreed: 'Lesbians like to hunker down and stay in, where you'll see gay men cruising. We like to stay on our patios, drink our beer, and have our barbeques. That's why you don't see us walking around' (2014:236).

These perspectives illustrate a conceived distinction between the values, norms, and even interests between gay men and lesbians, and how this conception of difference manifests spatially. Women preferred to socialize in smaller, more intimate settings, while gay men's establishments were set up for larger social networks and sexual cruising.

Another cause for these dissimilar spatial orientations is the residual social positions of gay men and lesbians. Homosexual men and women were still men and women; despite the fact that their spaces were countercultural, dominant sex roles and inequality continued to inform their place-making. For example, the increased visibility of gay male space was influenced by homosexual men and women's discrepant experiences with the limitations from the larger society. I have argued previously that during this time normative society perceived male homosexuality as a greater, more visible, danger to the American way of life, and gay men were consequently more heavily impacted by homophobia alone. After forfeiting the privilege and social control normally given to men that they forfeited by coming out, gay men dealt with their disenfranchisement and rejection from mainstream society by claiming new territory for themselves (Knopp and Lauria 1985:158). Asserting ownership over physical space was a means of reaffirming gay men's power and autonomy. I argue that once gay men felt in control over their countercultural spaces, they became more comfortable replacing normative values with

their own. This would explain the acceptance and celebration of sexual promiscuity that the spaces facilitated.

While this may exhibit why gay men potentially felt more of a need to territorialize than lesbians, it does not acknowledge the reasons for gay men's ability to do so. Despite their social disenfranchisement, by virtue of being men, male homosexuals at the time were more financially independent and socially mobile than their lesbian counterparts (D'Emilio 1998:93). This made relocating to gay urban centers more challenging for lesbians than for gay men, which had clear effects on the visibility and sheer size of the lesbian community. In fact, specific lesbian oriented communities did not emerge widely until the 1970s and 1980s, and were always on the periphery of the better known gay male spaces (Ghaziani 2014:235). Furthermore, while lesbians have typically had some sort of neighborhood or district unique to them, these were often in less expensive areas than the gay male epicenters (Ghaziani 2014:235). Thus, lesbian spaces were less visible not only because of the different values they were meant to embody, but also because of the types of environments that were accessible and useful to women during the era.

## GAY AND LESBIAN KINSHIP STRUCTURES

As I have argued, while gay men's and lesbian's spaces and values differed in form, they were similar in terms of purpose. Both groups had been denied access to normative society and endeavored to create an alternative community that fostered and celebrated their identities. I have exhibited the many different values that arose during this process, but I will now introduce and analyze the ones I find most significant: alternative

understandings of kinship. Insofar as perceived incompatibility with normative kinship provided the impetus for homosexual individuals' rejection from normative society and values, how gay men and lesbians reimagined family structure is of primary importance.

I have already outlined the general understanding of the differences between homosexual and heterosexual family, but now I will analyze the ways in which the variance between gay and lesbian community values are made manifest in the dissimilarity between their understandings of kinship. Furthermore, I illustrate how gay men and lesbians used their unique social spaces and community structures to facilitate their particular brands of kinship. The entire notion of a chosen family disallows for any concrete description, making it nearly impossible to accurately depict a standardized model of kinship in the gay and lesbian communities. Thus, the following analysis represents the differences in the general trends of family building gay men and lesbians took part in during the time.

### *Gay Men's Kinship Structures*

As previously discussed, gay and lesbian kinship is characterized by the notion of "families of choice." Unlike the heterosexual norm, there is no perception of a biological paradigm to guide who is counted as family and who is not. Thus, the values of the particular homosexual community must necessarily inform the way kinship was felt, assigned, and respected. It is crucial to note that for both gay men and lesbians there are two aspects to the notion of family at play here: kinship relationships between romantic partners, as well as the act of ascribing kinship to individuals considered friends (Nardi

1999:50). Homosexual men and women both typically identified their primary romantic partners as family; however, unlike the normative model of kinship, a monogamous partnership was not a necessary condition for having a family<sup>6</sup>(Weston 1997:111). Creating a family network that extended beyond romantic partnership was a highly individualistic and subjective process where values of support, shared history, and loyalty constituted kinship (Weston 1997).

The extent to which the new understandings of kinship differ from normative models is also important and varies across the sex divide. Both groups used models from the normative family structure at least partially in their reimagination of kinship, even if these were only in name. In a study from the 1970s, gay men's use of these models is outlined:

...Same-sex friendship circles [served] as surrogate families for urban gay men and [met] their basic social, emotional, and material needs. Within the group, people took on family-like roles: there was the "big brother" or "mother," who most likely was the oldest and who mentored the "kid brother," who most likely was the youngest and newest member of the friendship circle. The "best friend" was usually the devoted "brother" or "cousin" who served as someone's constant companion and who acted like a lover but was not involved in him sexually. And the rest were "sisters"—the ones they hung out with, depended on for comfort and material aid, and did not have sex with. These cliques were relatively stable, especially when the members remained single and did not become romantically involved with someone (Nardi 1999:60).

This illustrates the extensive and complex kinship relations within the gay male community that, in some ways, modeled normative family structure. However, there is the notable absence of spouses or kinship constituted through romantic partnership. In

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that romantic couplings between same-sex partners were considered normative in any way by the mainstream society. Same-sex couples still have to fight to be recognized as legitimate couples in the eyes of the law, as well as the society as a whole. However, monogamous partnerships more closely follow the model of normative family than other gay kinship structures, especially the description of friends as family.

fact, this account seems to portray sexual relationships as antithetical to gay male conceptions of family. According to D'Emilio, in the 1950s and 1960s, gay men thought of monogamy as a potentially impossible reality for the gay male community (1998:92). Moreover, in Nardi's study, many gay men posited romantic relationships as more fleeting and therefore less meaningful than their relationships with their chosen family (1999:69). Given that most gay individuals during this time had experienced the dissolution of their family of origin, it makes complete sense that permanence and stability were crucial aspects of their kinship relationships (Nardi 1999:69). While, of course, gay men did engage in monogamous romantic partnerships which were surely a part of their familial structure, it is important to note the emphasis of non-sexual relationships in gay men's models of kinship as representative of community values that do not necessarily prioritize sexual monogamy.

### *Lesbian Kinship Structures*

As discussed earlier, lesbian social communities were heavily influenced by the radical feminist movement. This association had significant impacts on how the lesbian community understood the purposes of kinship. A key characteristic of second-wave feminism was its decentralization and abandonment of organizational hierarchy; radical feminists saw hierarchical structures as by-products of a sexist and patriarchal society and called for egalitarianism in women's communities (Gosse 2005:160). Consequently, the distinct roles found in gay male kinship models were largely absent from lesbian microcosms. The "family" was understood as a tool of patriarchal control, which bound

women into oppressive gender roles (Ettorre 1980:31). Radical lesbian perspectives from the time illustrate the need for women oriented communities to even distance themselves from the concept of sisterhood (Jo, Strega, and Ruston 1990:265). This perspective is admittedly extreme, and referring to other community members as “sisters” was not uncommon (Radicalesbians 2006 [1971]:236). Women’s communities at the time saw themselves as a system of widespread support and affirmation for other women and did not seek to replicate the stratification of mainstream society (Gosse 2005:160). Thus, lesbian kinship structures were much more horizontal than those of the normative and gay male culture due to their general lack of role differentiation.

Romantic partnerships created a slight exception to this phenomenon. Compared to their gay male counterparts, lesbians were much more likely to engage in monogamous sexual relationships (D’Emilio 1998:92). Not only was monogamy more common, but lesbians were also more likely to maintain close, emotionally intimate and supportive relationships with ex-lovers than gay men (Nardi 1992:114). Without the social expectation that sexual relationships were fleeting and less meaningful, lesbians were more able to integrate their sexual and social relationships into kinship structures (Nardi 1992:114). Thus, featuring long-term romantic partnerships as components of a chosen family was more common in lesbian kinship models. This creates a distinction between sexual and non-sexual members of a given family unit, but this seems to be the main basis of role differentiation in the lesbian family unit.

There is one notable exception to the decentralization of lesbian kinship: children. Motherhood brought up interesting kinship dynamics within the lesbian community. As

women who generally did not have procreative sex, lesbians were not seen as capable of motherhood (Weston 1997:168). While artificial insemination and other reproductive interventions became more common in the 1980s and onward into the twentieth century, in the 1950s and 1960s most lesbians' children were from previous, heterosexual, marriages (Weston 1997:168-9). Consequently, the presence of children complicated and sometimes even erased lesbian identity insofar as children were still associated with heterosexual sex and relationships: "Many lesbian parents described motherhood as a status that made their sexual identity invisible. In their experience, heterosexuals who saw a lesbian accompanied by a child generally assumed she was straight and perhaps married" (Weston 1997:168). As a result, more radical lesbians and feminists rejected motherhood; Stein elaborates on this conflict:

Early second-wave feminists viewed women's mothering as contributing to male domination. They suggested that women free themselves from compulsory motherhood. But with time, many feminists came to affirm motherhood as a source of female difference and power. When members of this group of women who were in lesbian relationships began to bear children, they often did so in the belief that they could insulate their chosen families from the exigencies of heterosexual society (1997:132).

Thus, motherhood began to be seen not solely as a reproduction of an oppressive structure, but a new way of promoting the sociopolitical ideology of the community. In a sense, lesbians reclaimed motherhood, taking a social position that historically limited women's mobility and using it as a tool to further liberation. Therefore, the lesbian community's use of the role of mother was both a replication and a reconfiguration of traditional understandings of motherhood. It was a replication in that lesbians used the term mother to describe women who had children in the normative sense, as opposed to

the gay male community where “mother” solely described a nurturing relationship.

However, motherhood also allowed lesbians a way to reimagine traditional expectations of women in a new political context and expand the definitions of parents, children, and family.

Despite their inherent differences, gay and lesbian kinship models were similar in that they reflected the values and needs of their respective communities, as well as elements of choice. Gay men sought to recreate the structure from which they had been rejected, but in a way that was informed by the cultural conventions of the gay male social structure. This corroborates the heightened emphasis on community building for its own sake, instead of political advancement, among gay men. Lesbian communities, on the other hand, were utilized as means to achieve a new political reality. Such an orientation is consistent with the lesbian community’s politicization and close association with second-wave feminism. Yet, both sets of kinship models highlight emotional support, shared ideologies and histories, and mutual loyalty as the basis of these relationships. In other words, gay men and lesbians both engineered new ways of achieving kinship’s affect outside of normative genealogical requirements for family. This process allowed for homosexual individuals to create supportive and loving networks that served and celebrated their individual, as well as collective needs. Therefore, gay men and lesbians’ social, political, and spatial community structures were informed by and used to facilitate their respective understandings of kinship.

## LOOKING FORWARD: EMBRACING “FAMILY VALUES”

So far, I have illustrated the details of gay and lesbian kinship and social structures of the 1950s to the early 1970s. However, I must recognize that the community I have described and analyzed bears very little resemblance to the current LGBT community. The first indicator of this is the term “LGBT.” This understanding reflects the new understanding that the struggles that face gays and lesbians also affect bisexual and transgender individuals. The community now recognizes a plethora of different experiences and identities, and its structure has consequently changed; the late twentieth century showed heightened politicization for both men and women. Put simply, the community has expanded with regard to its members, but contracted in terms of its orientation. It has become larger, and more political.

There are many causes for this shift in community appearance and orientation, which have had substantial effects on the particular kinship structures of gay and lesbian communities and their relation to normative familial models. I contend that the evolution of gay and lesbian communities have largely dissolved the differences between gay male and lesbian kinship and transformed them to better achieve the objectives of the modern LGBT movement, which entails a reintegration into mainstream society. I posit the AIDS crisis as the beginning of this move toward a united coalition of homosexual people and a bridging of the “sex divide.” I then present the prominence and success of the same-sex marriage movement as evocative of the dramatic shift toward assimilation and the reinforcement of the nuclear family’s dominance.

*The AIDS Crisis, ACT UP, and Coalition Building*

As previously stated, the main difference between the modern LGBT community and the communities I have been analyzing throughout this paper is that the former has a united political center. While homosexual men and women still have somewhat separate social spaces, the political face of the community is one of a united front (Gamson 1998 [1995]:593). I contend that the AIDS crisis was the catalyst for this joining. While HIV/AIDS still continues to be a problem even to this day, the AIDS crisis refers to the period of time—roughly the early 1980s to the early 1990s—when the AIDS epidemic was at its height. During this time, an estimated 270,000 people in the United States, many of them gay men, died from complications related to AIDS (LeVay and Nonas 1995:221). At the time, doctors had very little understanding about the disease and how it could and should be treated; however, institutionalized homophobia caused the association between AIDS and the gay male community to slow down medical research and government intervention (Altman 1998 [1994]:507).

This prompted a huge influx in political activity from the affected communities. Much of this action was led by the most prominent AIDS advocacy group at the time, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP (LeVay and Nonas 1995:247). As an organization, ACT-UP emphasized the importance of coalition building and drew heavily from the strategies and structures of past civil rights movements (Reed 2005:182). While ACT-UP membership was not limited to any particular identity, its constituents were largely from gay men and lesbians; “in turn, ACT UP played a significant role in transforming those communities” (Reed 2005:186). As I have shown, gay men’s

communities up to this point tended to be less political. However, the catastrophic events of the AIDS crisis pushed many gay men to get extremely invested in activism (Seidman 1996:10). Moreover, the devastation of the gay male community evoked sympathy and camaraderie from the lesbian community. While not as affected by the disease itself, lesbians felt compelled to unite with gay men under a common cause (Stoller 1998 [1995]:372). The rise in gay men's political involvement as well as lesbians' slow move away from separatism, proved to be transformative regarding each group's orientation toward each other and political action, in general.

*Gay and Lesbian Kinship in the "Post-Gay Era"*

The political unity forged during the height of ACT UP was as unprecedented as it was effective. The aftermath of the AIDS crisis marked a new era in homosexual activism. Gay men and lesbians began to adopt a "power in numbers" philosophy that has lasted to this day (Gamson 1998 [1995]:589). Joining forces proved a useful strategy, and the LGBT political machine made leaps in bounds in the legislative arena throughout the late nineties into the twenty-first century (Ghaziani 2014:26). I contend that these victories are the result of assimilationist politics, which have largely informed the strategies and platforms of the LGBT movement in the past ten years, or the post-gay era:

'Assimilation' is the word that we generally use to talk about this cultural absorption, and it is the primary feature of the post-gay era. For a group like sexual minorities to assimilate means that its members are adopting the perspectives and attitudes of heterosexuals, the dominant group, who, in turn, are incorporating gay people into their existing social structures, like marriage laws...Being gay or lesbian is just one among many other identities—and one that is receding in its centrality. (Ghaziani 2014:28).

This logic is rooted in the notion that today's homosexual community does not face the same degree of homophobic discrimination and oppression that the gay men and lesbians of the mid-century experienced. Consequently, being homosexual does not result in unilateral expulsion from the mainstream society, rendering a homosexual culture obsolete. This perspective portrays the community structures and spaces created by gay men and lesbians in years past as merely archaic acts of necessity. It further posits adherence and access to normative social structures as preferable to countercultural lifestyles. Modern day LGBT politics is about showing heterosexual society that being gay does not make a person different or any less worthy of the American way of life.

Evidence of this phenomenon is found in one of the most prominent political issues of the modern LGBT movement: same-sex marriage. I contend that the campaign for same-sex marriage illustrates the height of LGBT assimilation and the ultimate disavowal of the unique homosexual kinship structures of mid-century gay and lesbian communities in favor of normative familial models. Yet, this is not necessarily due to homosexual individuals desiring to marry one another; rather, as Warner argues, the same-sex marriage movement fails to question the harms that the institutional importance placed on marriage has for those that are unmarried, either by choice or by legal inability (1999:109). It is the fact that same-sex marriage has been the poster-child of the gay rights movement for this long that truly reveals its status as assimilationist.

I argue that placing the right to marry at the forefront of LGBT political platforms posits marriage as the most fundamental and basic right a person can possess. Often, campaigns for same-sex marriage come even before laws protecting LGBT individuals

from other forms of discrimination, such as discrimination in housing, public accommodations, or even employment (Warner 1998:146). This is significant to my research insofar as it illustrates that kinship is still the primary cause for homosexual people's social integration or lack thereof. Marriage allows gay men and lesbians to reenter society and access the benefits of inclusion. This creates a reality in which gay people cannot maintain their reimagined kinship structures and still be treated as full citizens. Thus, the unique familial models created by gay men and lesbians are abandoned, and deemed less valid than normative kinship, but achieving kinship is still the primary function of this new LGBT community. This is not to say that the concept of "chosen families" completely disappeared, but they are still given less social significance than families created through legal and procedural frameworks. While same-sex marriage is certainly not an example of the perfect nuclear families featured in 1950s sitcoms, it still models the tenets of normative familial structures (monogamous couples, child-rearing, etc.), and presents this framework as more desirable than alternative kinship structures.

I contend that this has merely reaffirmed the social conditions of the mid-century. While obviously a same-sex family is still quite different from the picture of a "traditional" family, the importance placed on same-sex marriage illustrates that a certain image of family is still seen as fundamental to the American way of life. The marriage equality movement seeks to legitimize same-sex relationships through the institution of marriage, but does not question the incipient prejudice intrinsic to such a pursuit (Warner 1999). Portraying same-sex marriage as the ultimate freedom merely posits that the only

homosexual kinship relationships are those that can be mediated through the American legal system. This has created a hierarchy of relationships that was largely absent in mid-century homosexual communities. In many ways, it seems that the mainstream LGBT movement is trying to erase its history of countercultural struggle, social reimagining, and divided communities, replacing them with an assimilationist united political front.

Some LGBT individuals have critiqued the same-sex marriage movement for this very reason; yet, their opinions have been largely overshadowed by the fervent supporters of marriage equality. I do not wish to propose an anti-same-sex marriage position in this paper; however, I believe it is important to understand exactly why this movement has gained so much prominence in the last decade, and what impact it has on gay kinship structures. My critique of this phenomenon is not that the current movement is assimilationist; rather, it is that the movement is conforming to the expectations of mainstream society at the cost of its own cultural history. It almost seems as if we have given up the struggle of questioning the systems of power and privilege in American society in favor of a more digestible political orientation. Again, this contention is not meant to be critical of the strategies themselves; in fact, I think that the political tactics of the modern gay community are quite pragmatic insofar as entering into existing structures is much simpler than changing those structures altogether. However, the fixation on same-sex marriage continues does nothing to eradicate the marginalization of any homosexual person who does choose to get married. Even with the prominence of the same-sex marriage movement, alternative forms of kinship, especially those between

non-romantic partners, continue to exist. Ignoring them only replicates and perpetuates the devaluing of homosexual communities during the postwar era.

## CONCLUSION

The years spanning the 1950s to the early 1970s showed colossal growth in gay and lesbian communities. The creation of these communities was sparked by rampant homophobia due to homosexuality's perceived incompatibility with the nuclear family coupled with the family's increasing importance in American society. Faced with marginalization and often cut off from their families of origin and normative society, gay men and lesbians reimagined kinship and community to fit their social needs.

These were inherently shaped by their social positions outside homosexual microcosms, notably on the basis of sex categories. Therefore, gay men and lesbians created distinct community structures that differed politically, socially, and spatially. Variant kinship structures also resulted from this schism. However, both communities' familial frameworks were defined through choice, attributing the affective forms of kinship to non-biological relationships. These alternative understandings of family facilitated community growth and collective identity. The AIDS crisis sharply altered the structure of the homosexual community, and the widespread devastation inspired the creation of coalitions between gay men and lesbians. In the wake of AIDS, the homosexual community became more political and less social, the gay and lesbian communities joined forces, and same-sex marriage emerged as the most prominent issue of the modern LGBT rights movement. This illustrated that kinship was still a primary

concern of the homosexual community and American society in general. However, instead of creating new kinship structures that reflect the unique experiences of gay men and lesbians, same-sex marriage continues to posit conforming to normative familial models as morally superior, as well as necessary for full citizenship within the society.

Gay and lesbian kinship structures force us to look at kinship as a social, political, and emotional phenomenon and not simply a biological construction. As Weston contends, gay and lesbian “chosen families” are not less legitimate, meaningful, or durable than heterosexual “blood” families; they are simply new manifestations of kinship (1997). This argument stems from the notion that all kinship, chosen or inherited, is symbolic, and social norms, rather than some primordial paradigm, dictate how kinship is felt and to whom one understands as her kin (Weston 1997:105). The actions of the gay and lesbian communities in the mid-twentieth century illustrate the fluidity of kinship and offer insight into how marginalized groups cope with their social disenfranchisement.

Given the fact that, once homosexuality became less stigmatized, the homosexual community essentially reverted back to the traditional model of kinship, I contend that subverting and reimagining such fundamental social norms to extent I have illustrated is only feasible from minoritarian groups who do not stand to benefit from the reproduction of normative values, norms, and expectations. Further, the highly disparate ways in which the gay and lesbian communities oriented themselves to kinship shows that, while these structures may be countercultural, they are reactionary insofar as they are intimately linked to the groups’ larger social position. Therefore, the nature of a marginalized group’s disenfranchisement will significantly impact the new structures it creates. Gay

men and lesbians had unique experiences of homophobic social norms and nuclear kinship relative to one another; thus, the ways in which the two groups organized their community values and familial models differed in a way that reflected each group's unique social position. A similar argument could be made for any number of marginalized communities. For instance, a potentially interesting topic for future study would be the social structures of other sexual and gender minorities, such as asexual, bisexual, transgender, or genderqueer individuals.

In this paper I have endeavored to examine the ways in which American social values have influenced homosexual realities. In spite of extreme discrimination, violence, and hatred, gay men and lesbians created communities and challenged normative expectations for behavior. The actions of the gay community throughout the twentieth century have created vast social change and have opened the doors for many people to begin living their lives in accordance with their sexual identities. Gay men and lesbians were able to create self-determined communities, largely divided by sex, to combat their particular experiences with homophobia, embodying their socially prescribed gender roles, but in new countercultural contexts. However, from a sociological perspective, the gay and lesbian communities and kinship structures of the mid-century and today illustrate kinship's fundamental importance to American society. While what it means to be a family is expanding both legally and socially, kinship still serves as the foundation of dominant culture in the United States.

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