

**“Even Being Suppressed, We Were Able To Love”:
Identity Formation and the Coming-of-Age Experience for White Lesbian
Communities, 1945-1970**

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Funded by Laidlaw Foundation

Consider how the following women describe being gay in the 1950s:

Sher: You sure didn't want to be a lesbian--that's the last thing you wanted to be.

Brandy: That first of all, we were so suppressed, but even being suppressed, we were able to love. Without all the choices and stuff that we didn't have. With all the suppression that was around us, we were still able to love.

Muriel: You know, the suicide rate with young gays is very, very high; and I would say that those are the people that don't feel okay. And the people that feel okay will survive. Now how do you get to feel okay? It's just that you are, let's just say, at peace with who you are. And you have no other choice but to feel okay, because that's who you are. And without feeling that, you might be a statistic.

These quotes, coupled with a rise in anti-trans policies and repressive gay rhetoric, motivated me to explore the various ways in which one's social context affects their identity formation process, in this case with lesbians who came of age during the postwar period. And, more specifically how their social context affected their abilities to understand, form, and accept their identities as lesbians. This process of understanding and accepting the lesbian identity, as the last quote emphasizes, is crucial to the survival and happiness of generations of young queer women. To do this, I employ Adrienne Rich's (1984) "politics of location" framework to understand how one's identity is grounded in the historical, social, and material conditions in which they live and have lived.

Because of this, I aim to explore: What are the different contextual factors lesbians used to understand their sexuality in this era? And, how do their social classes during both childhood and adulthood influence the role of these contexts?

I intentionally chose to explore the coming-of-age period for these women- specifically, between the ages of 14-24 because it encompasses both adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. Adolescence is considered a crucial time for sexual development. For teens, sexual identity is used as a “means to construct a personal identity” (Modell 1989). Beyond their teen years, the coming-of-age period provides a glimpse into early adulthood for these women where they begin their life trajectories.

Literature Review

Societal Expectations for White Women

In the wake of the Cold War and the aftermath of World War II, white American women were forced to contend with contradictory gender expectations. The 1950s, traditionally seen as the age of the housewife- popularized by postwar media that promoted women’s place in the home- does not provide the full picture of what 1950s living was like for women (Breines 1992). During this time, women continued to enter the labor force- a feat ushered in by wartime industry- and higher education institutions (Breines 1992; Faehmel 2011; Faderman 1991). Yet, while women’s autonomy and independence continued growing, America beckoned in an era of the nuclear family and the modern housewife, effectively pushing women back into the home. These women came of age when new lives and opportunities beckoned while prohibitions against exploring them multiplied in the wake of Cold War hysteria (Breines 1992). While white women continued to enter the labor force and college at rising rates, it was evident that they

remained committed to establishing the American family. At the close of the 1950s, 70% of all women were married by 24, and ½ of all American women had their first child before they reached 20 (Mintz and Kellog 1992). By the mid-1950s, 60 percent of women left college before finishing their degrees, contributing to a phenomenon Elaine Tyler May (1988) described as “homeward bound.”.

Young women already struggled to find their place in American society, a problem made all the more confusing when you take into consideration women who loved other women. Because the war had ushered in these profound changes to the workforce, and thus the independence of all women, lesbians became increasingly harder to spot in day-to-day life (Gilmartin 1996; Kennedy and Davis 1994). At the same time, their refusal to engage in traditional achievements of womanhood- marriage, childbearing, and rearing- painted them out to be both sexual and gender outcasts, evading “life’s responsibilities” (Caprio 1966). The “gender paradox of the 1950s” (Breines 1992) provides a unique context in which to observe its impacts on identity formation and coming-of-age experiences for all women, but especially for women who harbored same-sex desires.

Family Matters

For young people coming of age, regardless of the historical era, the family remains a fundamental site of socialization (Collins 1998). In Patricia Hill Collin’s (1998) exploration of the institution of the family, she found that families are “primary sites of belonging” and play key roles in the construction of “understandings of social institutions and social policies.” At the time, many psychiatrists concluded that homosexuality was a result of parents failing their children in the home (Terry 1999; Davis 1958). Alfred Kinsey’s reports (1948;1953) on rising rates of homosexuality concluded that “50 percent of American men and 28 percent of American

women had what could be considered homosexual tendencies” (Faderman 1991) fueled the nation’s “pink scare” a term describing the larger moral panic about homosexuality (Terry 1999; Littauer 2015). This led many medical “professionals” to publish advice guides for parents that guided them on how to avoid the “problem” of homosexuality with their children (Terry 1999). One such example is Maxine Davis’s *Sex and the Adolescent: A Guide for Young People and Their Parents* (1958), which advised parents on the “facts” of “sexual abnormality” to ensure the fullest “possible protection” of the next generation of children from a lifetime devoid of “the deepest satisfactions in life- natural sexual union,... the home, and children.” As long as these young women lived at home, they would be under the watchful eye of their parents, who were being informed left and right of the warning signs of homosexuality, which would have severely limited their ability to express their sexual preferences (Ponse 1978).

The hysteria of the Cold War provoked many to reaffirm the establishment of the family and heterosexual marriage as the cornerstone of American democracy (May 1988; Terry 1999; Littauer 2015; Breines 1992). In efforts to shield this exceedingly vulnerable American institution, many began to shift the blame for rising rates of homosexuality on the nation’s mothers (Littauer 2015; Terry 1999). Phillip Wylie (1996) coined the term “momism” to describe the way American mothers shield and overprotect their children, turning their sons into homosexuals and their daughters to resent the obligations of their sex. Looking specifically into the mother-daughter relationship, a girl’s relationship with her mother was considered the “most important in the development of successful feminine identification” (Littauer 2015). If the daughters grew up to be lesbians, which was widely considered to be unfeminine (Penn 1993), it was a result of failed parenting by the mother. Additionally, many young women during this time grew up yearning for a life different than their mothers (Fischer 1986). The changes in the

dominant culture- such as entrance into the paid labor force, and the rise of second-wave feminism- forced many middle-class daughters to anticipate a life path that contrasted sharply with their mothers (Fischer 1986). Due to the rise in the literature regarding “momism” and the data trends found by Fischer (1986), I anticipate that the mother-daughter relationship, and its potential tensions, will have a profound effect on the daughter’s progression into her lesbian identity.

Women Coming to Understand Their Desires For Other Women

With the McCarthy era’s new focus on the dangers of homosexuality, many of these young women grew up with homosexuality being discussed far more than any previous generation. While the discussion was predominantly negative, conversations about sexuality became increasingly commonplace. At the time, many psychologists and psychiatrists wrote at the time that lesbianism was a sign of sexual maladjustment and immaturity (Faderman 1991; Caprio 1966; Littauer 2015; Davis 1958). Women *achieved* adulthood through their marriages and families, not their participation in the workforce (Faderman 1991). Lesbian’s gender transgression coupled with their sexual transgressions furthered lesbian’s perception as “deviant” in the postwar era (Penn 1993). Even while discussions about homosexuality became more commonplace, there was still a great deal of stigma and repression associated with lesbianism. This affected young lesbians coming of age in various ways. For starters, rural lesbians were not in geographic locations suitable to find other lesbians (Ponse 1978). Second, many queer youth were further isolated because they were too young to gain access to the bars (Littauer 2015). Because of this, finding a lesbian community became the main priority for many young women coming to understand their same-sex desires (Kennedy and Davis 1994)

Given the isolation and societal negativity, I anticipate that a young woman's social life thus becomes crucial to understanding and accepting her lesbian identity. Finding a group of people in similar situations provided support for lesbians that was crucial in "neutralizing and overcoming" the stigma of being gay (Ponse 1978). This quest for a lesbian community becomes especially poignant when examining the rise of peer culture. As young women came of age, they were often forced to navigate differing behavioral and societal expectations from that of their peer group and that of their parents. In this progression into young adulthood, it was not uncommon for these young women to begin to grant more credibility to their friends than their parents, facilitating the power of the peer group (Breines 1992; Faehmel 2011). Thus, these new social networks not only facilitated these young women's understanding of their identity and the lesbian subculture but also provided them a chance to break away from their parent's expectations.

One key site for socialization in this era was the bar (Kennedy and Davis 1994; Achilles 1964; Ponse 1978; Thorpe 1997; Gilmartin 1996). The bars provided a way to meet other lesbians and "a context for each individual to confirm gay identity" (Achilles 1964). Socialization was also facilitated in schools (Parsons 1959; Faehmel 2011), different sports teams, and house parties.

While most lesbians participated in some form of socialization with other lesbians, their degrees of discretion and socialization were affected by their class status (Kennedy and Davis 1994; Gilmartin 1996; Thorpe 1997). Because of the risk posed to their higher-status jobs and class reputation, many "upwardly mobile" (Kennedy and Davis 1994) and "middle-class" (Gilmartin 1996) lesbians restricted their sexual expression. They were limited in their ability to freely socialize in public spaces compared to working-class lesbians. While finding a community

would have been a major assistance in facilitating the progression into a lesbian identity, not all young women had the same access or ability to explore these socialization sites.

Butch-Femme and Class Relationships

Another way young lesbians could have explored their sexual identity was through the use of butch-femme roles. Although, the meaning and relative significance of these labels have been contested throughout the decades. For Kennedy and Davis (1994), butch-fem roles in the pre-political era of the lesbian community served as “both a powerful personal code of behavior and as an organizing principle for community life.” Nestle (1992) expanded on this definition, insisting that these were not only roles that structured social interactions and personal identity but served an erotic function, as well as a means for political resistance before the more organized gay liberation movements. Meanwhile, Faderman (1991) regarded butch-fem roles as a matter of group/subculture expectations rather than a matter of personal identification. Although, Kraus (1996) would argue that often personal identity is constructed through group dynamics and interactions. Regardless of the significance or alternative/changing meanings of these labels, lesbians during this time, especially those ingrained in the bar scene, would have been exposed to them at some point or another (Kennedy and Davis 1994).

One major factor that influenced a young woman’s adherence to butch-femme roles was her class status (Gilmartin 1996). Throughout these interviewee’s lives, the percentage of working-class white women increased from the 1940s to the 70s; 1940: 72.6%, 1950: 76.5%, 1960: 78.4%, 1970: 80.3% (Horton et. al. 2000). Although working-class status increased for these women during this time, many women’s newfound entrance to the arena of higher education allowed them to garner markers of traditional middle-class status and become “upwardly mobile.” For middle-class lesbians, the bar presented itself as a different cultural

space (Gilmartin 1996; Thorpe 1997). This was largely because middle-class lesbians navigated the relationship between sexuality and public space differently from working-class lesbians, as they had employment and social options that were at risk every time they went “public” with their sexuality (Gilmartin 1996). Middle-class lesbians were forced to contend with the prospect of community and the risk of exposure (Thorpe 1997). One major aspect of this was butch-fem roles, as the style and appearance of these labels would have been a bit too public for middle-class lesbians (Thorpe 1997). Though, Crawley (2001) found that while working-class lesbians are more likely to *present* as butch or fem, this does not necessitate a differing level of participation in butch-fem across class lines. This vulnerability not only prevented middle-class lesbian’s entrance into bars but also colored their opinion of the bars and their patrons. Many middle-class lesbians distinguished themselves from the “bar people” and looked down on the bar scene overall (Gilmartin 1996; Thorpe 1997). Because these women were unable to attain traditional middle-class status markers, such as marriage and motherhood, they assumed an “identity of difference” to reaffirm their superior class status from working-class lesbians. The social context of class then provides a challenge to one’s degree of discretion and participation within the lesbian subculture.

Methodology

To better understand the social context in which these women grew up, I utilized pre-existing interview data accessed from the Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University. My mentor, Professor Mignon Moore, created an archive that included these materials, in that process, she transcribed some of the recordings and cleaned up the other transcriptions.

These interviews were conducted in 1992 by Rochella Thorpe. Thorpe (1997) led this series of oral history interviews for her thesis on lesbian life in Detroit during the mid-20th century and its intersections with class and race. Detroit, a major city alongside the Canadian border, was home to at least twenty different lesbian bars from the early 40s to the mid-1970s (Thorpe 1997). Additionally, it faced a population surge during wartime years due to its position as an industrial and automotive center. This makes Detroit a unique location to analyze at this time. Thorpe surveyed a large sample of Detroit lesbians, but for my project, I focused on a subset of her dataset- 15 interviews. Due to the condensed research period, I focused exclusively on the white interviewees. But, I aim to add Thorpe's data on black lesbians in a future, expanded version of this project. While these interviews were not conducted within the sociology discipline, I concur with Gilmartin (1996) that the historical timeline of these interviews provides insight into the ways "particular issues emerge and develop", and allows researchers to follow their development over time. This becomes especially useful as I aim to explore the lives of these women from the age of 14 to 24, or what I term their "coming-of-age" period. Having access to pre-existing interview data is beneficial for numerous reasons because of the short research period but also because the period I plan to examine was around 75 years ago, which raises issues in terms of data collection. Having access to interviews allows me to hear what it was like then, from the people who directly experienced it.

To analyze the data, I set up a large spreadsheet to track the demographics of each interviewee (education level, religion, class background, etc.). Of my 15 interviewees, one completed up to high school, five attended some college or trade school, two received up to their Bachelor's, and seven pursued degrees beyond their Bachelor's. To determine if my respondents were middle-class or working-class, I used three determinants of middle-class status: a four-year

college degree, a job that requires a college degree, and a median income that allows the family to comfortably provide for themselves. I used these determinants to determine both their social class during childhood and their social class during adulthood, as I explored identity formation in both periods. Two of my respondents were strictly middle class from childhood to adulthood, and five were strictly working class from childhood to adulthood. Eight of my respondents were working class during childhood, and then became “upwardly mobile” and transitioned into middle-class status in adulthood.

After numerous readings of each interview transcript, I created a memo and summary datasheet about each woman’s interview. From there, I utilize the qualitative analysis software, NVivo, to conduct my thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This allowed me to code the raw interview data, to “develop and interpret themes” and to establish relationships within my dataset. By utilizing both memo data and qualitative coding software, I was able to locate trends in my dataset while maintaining the complexity and nuance of each individual’s coming-of-age story.

Findings

“Confusing Feelings”: Coming of Age, Coming Into Identity

The women interviewed in this study were often 30+ years from their adolescence but were able to recall their first realizations of their same-sex attraction. For many of the interviewees, sexual attraction and “crushes” began long before they even knew the term “lesbian” or “homosexual.” Brandy describes knowing she was “different” in high school because she was fascinated with cheerleaders. She did not have the words to describe her feelings and had never even heard the word “lesbian” in high school. She first understood what her feelings “meant” when she played softball with a group of lesbians that took her to her first

gay bars. Looking back now, Brandy believes she experienced same-sex attraction from as young as four years old.

One interviewee, Rebecca describes her earliest memory of same-sex attraction as occurring in high school when she had “confusing feelings” about two girls in her classes. Though she now reflects on this memory with romantic undertones, she denotes that at the time she didn’t know she was attracted to women nor did she know the word “lesbian”. Rebecca explains the impact of not being able to understand her feelings, saying “I had no real cord of my own life because there was no gay group... there was no information.” Rebecca emphasizes the power of “naming” her feelings, “if you don’t know the word, the thing doesn’t exist.”

Though a majority of interviewees experienced same-sex attraction before college, 7 of the women (46.6% of interviewees) were engaged to men, and 2 of the women (13.33% of interviewees) were married to a man. For the women who were in these heterosexual relationships, many recall the societal pressure they faced to get married and have children. Margaret Butler, a secretary at Ford Motor Company, was engaged twice in her life, though she was never “sexually involved” with the men. While Margaret was fully aware of her same-sex desires during both of her engagements and knew that she was never going to get married, she notes that she faced an “awful lot of pressure” from society and her parents to get married. Linda, one of the two women who had gotten married, attributes her marriage to an accidental pregnancy. She explains, “my parents said, you know, you have to get married and you have to take care of your children. So that's what I did.” Though some women used these relationships to “put on a show” for society and to appease their families, others went into it with genuine intentions. Rebecca, while aware of the irony now, expresses that:

“It might seem to you, well, how could a person who just faced the fact that she was gay all of a sudden be in a relationship with a man? Well, I wish I had a diary and could go and read it and tell you how that happened, but it didn’t seem unnatural to me, or unusual, or... I didn’t have any trouble dealing with it. I remember thinking, at a certain point when I did think about it, well, maybe I was just mistaken.”

These women’s experiences in heterosexual relationships reflect how they were shaped by the historical and social context in which they lived. Getting engaged, or even married to men, was a fulfillment of the societal expectations before them, a situation that became more complicated with the understanding that they were solely attracted to women.

Another major obstacle in these women’s understanding and acceptance of their sexual identity as lesbians was their religious background. For Carole, a physical education teacher, religion played a primary role in her inability to accept herself as a lesbian growing up. Carole was raised Catholic, which she describes as a fundamental reason why she was so judgmental of herself and had a hard time accepting her sexuality. She notes that it took her 10 years “to think of it as not sinful.” For Jay, religion played a similar role in preventing her acceptance of her sexual identity, but additionally, she cites religion as inhibiting her from acting upon her same-sex attraction. Others described leaving the church in response to their teachings on homosexuality. However, some of the women described their participation in affirming church groups like Dignity, Affirmations, and Metropolitan Community Church later on in life. Many of these groups did not start until well into the 70s, which is outside of these women’s coming-of-age experience, albeit important social support groups.

The progression of these young women into attraction, behavior, and assumption of their lesbian identity was often a long and difficult road helped or harmed by their families, class backgrounds, peer groups, and exposure to lesbian subcultures.

Family as a Social Institution

As mentioned previously, families are “primary sites of belonging” and play key roles in the construction of “understandings of social institutions and social policies” (Collins 1998). This held true for the women involved in this study. Familial background, especially during the coming-of-age period was a crucial contextual factor in the progression of these young women into their lesbian identities.

Family values played a large role in the way these young women navigated their sexual identities. In some families, a future of marriage and family creation for their daughters was emphasized, while others didn’t apply the same pressure. For example, Martha, one of the white-collar respondents, explained that her family told her:

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," and when my aunts, there would be a family thing and my aunts and uncles would say, "When are you going to get married," my mother would say, "She'll let you know, you'll be invited." I mean, it was just wonderful, the support. So I never felt like... And then, finally, they stopped asking.”

Martha describes this support from her family as “wonderful” but acknowledges that many other lesbians at the time did have pressure to get married. One interviewee, Jay explained her family’s preoccupation with her leading a certain “type of lifestyle” finding a man and getting married.

Others explained how their family’s background influenced their ability to accept their lesbian identity. Linda, whose mother was a Lebanese immigrant, explains that because of the discrimination her family experienced due to her mother’s ethnicity, she and her brothers were

raised to treat others equally and without difference. Later on in life, she attributes this loving household as a major reason she “never felt that there was anything wrong with loving another woman.” Margaret Butler expressed similarly that her father’s background and work as a union activist instilled a more accepting and tolerant household environment to grow up in, which facilitated her acceptance of her sexual identity.

While some family members played a large role in the young women’s understanding and acceptance of their lesbian identity, living at home with their families created a block to sexual expression for some of the lesbians interviewed. Brandy explains that, back then most women were living at home during late adolescence and early adulthood and “didn’t leave [home] as early.” According to Koz, living at home for longer periods led to her always feeling the need to “watch” how she dressed and being forced to consistently lie to her parents about her whereabouts. This double life that Koz was required to live created tension between her and her family, and caused her to block them out of her life almost completely. Others describe instances of stopping at gas stations to change into their bar attire and changing again before returning home. Living at home under the watchful eye of siblings and parents, prevented many of these young women from freely socializing and expressing their sexual identities.

One might question why these women didn’t simply move out earlier on. For many of the working-class respondents, this was not only not practical, but there were many societal challenges to purchasing a home as a single woman. Not only would they face the financial burden of supporting themselves, but some describe that many landlords wouldn’t rent out apartments to two women, because it appeared “funny”. This was not as big of an issue for middle-class respondents like Judith Hill. Judith recalls leaving home as soon as possible and attending college out of state. While there was certainly a widening of educational opportunities

for white women, living in on-campus dorms and attending college out of state was still not as widely available for working-class families compared to middle-class ones.

Other respondents reflect on the difficulty of coming out to their families. One interviewee expressed that, “you’re not really truly free until you share with your family.” For Linda, coming out tarnished her family relationships, leading her to get disowned with zero contact from her siblings for seven years. Others, like Sher and Judith, reflected on their coming out experiences recalling that their families understood their sexuality, but didn’t necessarily accept it. For many, coming out to their families resulted in relative silence. Judith explained that after coming out to her mother, she said “‘If you ever want to talk about it,’ well she never wanted to talk about it, so we really have never talked about it.”

Overall, families played an important role early on in these young women’s ability to express and accept themselves as lesbians.

“It Takes One to Know One”: The Lesbian Peer Group

As these young women came of age and struggled to make sense of their desires for other women, the peer group became an increasingly important site for mutual understanding and community.

Some interviewees expressed the struggle to seek out other lesbians while growing up. There were few, if any, direct, visual symbols of lesbianism outside of the bar scene. Many of the women interviewed referred to some variation of the expression, “it takes one to know one” about seeking out other lesbians. But for young lesbians, who were unaware of the more discrete visual cues, it was a massive struggle to seek out others. Rebecca was one of the lesbians who struggled to find a lesbian friend group in young adulthood. Rebecca implies that the isolation from the lesbian community during her young adult years caused her to experience profound

isolation and even suicidal thoughts. She provides an account of calling her brother and asking him to connect her with a counselor in Ann Arbor because she figured this was the best way to “get in contact with somebody who was gay.”

For the middle-class respondents, attending college was the primary location for seeking out other lesbians. Sarah, who went on to get her Master’s Degree, describes calling a gay hotline at university to figure out where the gay bars were located. Though the hotline provided her with an address to one of the bars, her partner, whom she met in school, was too afraid to go. Others like Judith, sought out lesbians by getting involved in athletics on campus. In college, her exploration of sexuality truly began, as she describes lesbians as being “prevalent.” Judith found other lesbians in college by joining a sorority with physical education majors, describing this as “a very good way to find other lesbians.” Getting a four-year degree, one of the four key determinants for middle-class status would have enabled young women from middle-class families to find a core lesbian community more easily and earlier on.

For many young lesbians, these friend groups were the only places they could be their true selves. Linda muses, “When I’m with all gay women I don’t have to feel that way, so I don’t wear makeup if I don’t feel like it, and I don’t get my nails done, and I dress how I please.” Lesbian friend groups provided support and shelter from a world that continued to repress them.

After the long search and quest for a lesbian community, many of these friend groups remained tight-knit and long-lasting. According to Brandy:

“Because of how we had to struggle at the beginning I think we made us a closer-knit... You know, we survived together. And I think that's what sustained our friendships over all these years because a lot of those people I still see 'em. And I don't think people were

gonna have friends like that, where they can say, ‘This is my best friend for the last 40 years.’ ‘This one here's been my friend for over 40 years.’”

The secretive and unspoken nature of their sexuality in most public settings made lesbian friend groups vital for self-expression. The struggle they faced together created bonds that were long-lasting and unbreakable.

Upon finding a lesbian friend group, entrance into the lesbian social scene began for these young women. Many describe going to the bars for the first time with close friends. Brandy recalls her first entrance to the lesbian bar scene when she was 21 years old, “I had a friend who wanted to go and she had been down there many times, and she says, ‘Come on. Go down with me.’ She says, ‘I’ll be with you.’ She says, ‘As long as there's two people together nobody will bother you.’” Having a lesbian friend group provided support, mutual understanding, and exposure to other lesbian social sites.

“The Social Scene”: Lesbian Bars and Butch-Femme Identities

Every respondent in this study has at some point or another attended a lesbian bar, regardless of class status. It’s important to note that their shared geographical location, Detroit, enabled this participation in lesbian bar culture. Detroit was home to at least twenty different lesbian bars from the early 40s to the mid-1970s (Thorpe 1997). This does not necessarily hold true for lesbians in other geographic settings. Muriel, upon moving to Detroit, found that the lesbian bars were her “only outlet” to be with other gay people. Similarly, C.B. describes the bars as:

“a place to meet other people of your own kind. Where else were you going to go, you know? Back then, there was no gay churches. You know, it isn't like today where you can go to certain churches in order to meet some of your own people.”

Interviewees stressed the importance of the bar, especially in the relative absence of other gay support centers. They cite this as one of the struggles of their generation of lesbian women in particular.

While middle-class respondents had their own stories of bar experiences, these women had access to another socialization site: house parties. Carole, who grew up working class but achieved middle-class status in adulthood, recalls going to a friend's cottage on the weekends to avoid the "trashy" bar scene. This contrasts with working-class respondents like Brandy who never attended house parties in her friend group, because "everybody had parents"- another downside of living at home for young lesbians.

The class difference within the bar scene was a fact that both working-class and middle-class respondents were well aware of. Muriel, one of the working-class respondents, distinguishes between "slum bar" people and "middle-class" people. She notes that "Slum bars don't have long relationships. Middle-class people have longer relationships." Sue, a middle-class respondent, theorized that bar patrons were predominantly blue-collar workers. These contrasting images of "bar people" and "middle-class" lesbians drum up images from Gilmartin's 1996 paper on class differences within bar culture.

Though many upwardly mobile respondents referred to bars in a derogatory manner, they had been involved in the bar scene at one point or another. Fred's, a bar on the East Side of Detroit, appeared to attract a more "professional crowd," suitable for middle-class respondents. C.B. explains "The better element went to Fred's. The worst element stayed there [The Palais, also known as The Pit]." Though most middle-class and upwardly mobile respondents had a strained relationship with the bar scene, Fred's provided a more acceptable option for them to patronize.

For these young women, entrance into the bar scene also meant exposure to butch-femme identities. However, for these respondents butch-femme took on a variety of different meanings and levels of importance.

Some of the women emphasized that while they were aware of the butch-femme roles, they didn't fit into either category. According to Linda, these roles were there and often assumed by lesbians in the bar scene, but it was never forced on anyone. C.B. adds to this stating that while they too were aware of butch and fem, within their relationship it was not as clearly defined as to who was who. Conversely, Carole declared that in her experience "you were butch or you were fem...and the lines were drawn." Though these women experienced different levels of importance of butch-femme roles, they were very much aware of their meanings.

Butch-femme roles also posed a unique relationship to class among these interviewees. Claire, an upwardly mobile interviewee, noted that "butches worked in factories" whereas femmes "were secretaries, or teachers, or nurses" seeming to imply that middle-class occupations were more fitted for femme rather than butch roles. Judith Hill, a middle-class respondent, emphasized that blue-collar lesbians were more prone to "stereotyping." She continued throughout the interview to distinguish herself from them, repeatedly referring to blue-collar lesbians as "they" and noting she "didn't have much in common with" them.

For some interviewees, their relationship to butch-femme roles proved to be dynamic and seemingly contradictory. Sarah, a middle-class respondent, emphasized that butch-femme roles were considered to be "politically incorrect" and that she did her best to avoid duplicating "heterosexual roles" as an avid feminist. Throughout the interview, Sarah repeatedly described her and her feminist group's aversion to these roles, but ultimately conceded that they "worked very hard to appear as if we weren't into it." Though, she later goes on to detail her friend

group's dress as consisting of flannel shirts, blue jeans, and hiking boots which she referred to as "more butchy." Even for the women who were more outwardly intolerant of the roles, their influence still left a mark.

For two interviewees, butch-femme roles provided them a chance to explore and negotiate their gender expression. Brandy, a self-identified butch, explains that from as young as eight years old they were always "playing football with the boys" and referred to by their mother as a "half-son." Later on in the interview, Brandy reveals their struggle with gender dysphoria claiming "I've always thought I was in the wrong body." The butch's more masculine style and behavior provided Brandy a way to outwardly express the way they felt inside. Muriel was another interviewee who struggled with gender expression and felt that they were a man in a woman's body. They credited both the feminist movement's facilitation of the acceptance of women wearing jeans and butch-femme style for allowing them to dress differently.

Regardless of how one felt about or enacted butch-femme roles, their presence was undeniable. For some women, these roles coupled with the second wave allowed them more freedom and autonomy over their style of dress. Meanwhile, others felt trapped by these roles and denied them completely. All in all, these roles were key elements of structuring social interaction in the lesbian community, and for many facilitated a more direct expression of their sexual identities.

Conclusion & Next Steps

All in all, the relative lack of conversation surrounding homosexuality during this time forced these young women to get creative with the exploration of their sexual identities. It was through this that they were able to build a long-lasting community and their distinctive subculture in the bar scene. Familial background played a large role in women's (earlier)

acceptance of their sexual identities. Additionally, the length of time spent living in the family home provided a major obstacle to expressing sexual identities. All of these women in one way or another ended up experiencing the lesbian bar scene, one of the key social sites for lesbians in this era. But for some, class background assisted in the opportunities that some women were afforded for socializing, e.g. going to college, moving out of the parental home earlier, and access to house parties. Lastly, butch-femme roles were a large presence in the bar scene, but their meanings and levels of significance varied for each respondent.

The significance of understanding the history of lesbian life is best explained by one interviewee, Sarah:

“I think it's critical that we know our history. I think it's really important that you're doing this work and that young lesbians now know what it was during those days for us and that we know what it was like decades before that. So I think it is important to keep documenting it and getting our history in the archives as fast as we can because the older lesbians are dying”

The ultimate goal of this project was to understand how one's social context impacted their ability to come into their identity. But, I believe another important lesson emerged. By understanding obstacles to acceptance in the past we can create better support systems for our future. In exploring the various ways previous generations of lesbians were helped or harmed by their environment, we can begin to create an environment that fosters acceptance and support for all young queer people.

In the future, I hope to expand this project and include the black lesbian interview data. Additionally, I plan to continue my focus on understanding and building support systems for queer youth in my LiA project next summer.

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