Women on the Home Front: The Women's Army Corps and Lesbian Community During and After World War II

Gabrielle Camp
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

WOMEN ON THE HOME FRONT: THE
WOMEN’S ARMY CORPS AND LESBIAN
COMMUNITY DURING AND AFTER
WORLD WAR II

By

GABRIELLE CAMP

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Dr. Paul Renfro, Associate Professor of History
Thesis Director

Dr. Shantel Buggs, Assistant Professor of Sociology

Dr. Katherine Mooney, James P. Jones Associate Professor of History

Signatures are on file with the Honors Program office.
Introduction

The Stonewall Uprising, which began on June 28, 1969, is often seen as the impetus of gay and lesbian community in the U.S. The most widely purported version of this story is that a police raid on The Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City, inspired gay men and lesbians to come together and fight back against their oppressors for the first time. Although there is some truth to this narrative, it erases the complexities of these communities. Placing Stonewall as the beginning of gay and lesbian history implies that “the lives of gay men and women were bleak and brutal, eked out on the margins of society.”¹ However, as historian John D’Emilio argues, the accomplishments of the Stonewall Uprising imply a far greater level of organization; if gay men and lesbians were so isolated and invisible, how would they have generated such a large response to Stonewall?²

Gay and lesbian communities existed in the U.S. long before the raid on Stonewall, even if they were not as well-articulated as the gay liberation movement that followed Stonewall. Particularly once the U.S. began industrialization and the importance of urban areas increased, gay men and lesbians sought out others like themselves and formed their own communities.³ Historian Margot Canaday asserts that World War II was a crucial moment for these communities as the state grew powerful enough to create its own definition of homosexuality, “helping to produce the category of homosexuality through regulation.”⁴ World War I did create the foundation for some of this regulation, but the “scale and permanence of state-building” that

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³ D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, 11-13.
occurred as a result of World War II was much greater.\textsuperscript{5} Although gay and lesbian community existed prior to the war, World War II marked the first moment the state had such an influence. Furthermore, the increasing visibility of homosexuality during the war allowed more gay men and lesbians to leave evidence of their sexualities and to create what D’Emilio refers to as “subcultural institutions” where they could further develop their identities.\textsuperscript{6}

World War II was also the first time that women could enlist in the Army as servicewomen rather than nurses, which further contributed to the development of lesbian community.\textsuperscript{7} The Women’s Army Corps (WAC) began as an auxiliary force to help the U.S. Army in World War II, but it evolved into one of these subcultural institutions in the development of lesbian community.\textsuperscript{8} The WAC, acting on behalf of the state, determined what separated lesbians from heterosexual women. Before World War II, there was no legislation that specifically addressed lesbians. Historian Allan Bérubé contends that lesbians in the U.S. were traditionally seen as “nonexistent or as less significant than gay men,” so the WAC was the first institution with enough of a “lesbian problem” to necessitate a legal definition of lesbianism. This level of control was oppressive, but it also gave the community the language and the space to develop. The combination of the intense state regulation and the evolving role of women in the military as separate from men allowed lesbians to forge their own community and identity. However, the WAC was a racially segregated space, so white lesbian community and Black lesbian community developed separately until after the war. The framework that the WAC created for lesbian behavior informed how lesbians interacted with later forms of community.

\textsuperscript{5} Canaday, \textit{The Straight State}, 59.  
\textsuperscript{6} D’Emilio, \textit{Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities}, 20.  
\textsuperscript{7} Bérubé, \textit{Coming Out Under Fire}, 28.  
\textsuperscript{8} This paper will focus on the development of lesbian community. For more on gay male community developed as a result of World War II, see Allan Bérubé, \textit{Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
especially as they began creating and patronizing gay and lesbian bars. And, just as the WAC
defined lesbian identity and community, the way that lesbian history has been recorded shapes
the way that lesbian community is remembered.

A Note on Language
While the modern definition of lesbian refers to women who are attracted exclusively to
other women, for the purposes of this paper, a lesbian is any woman who was attracted to, or
pursued romantic or sexual relations with, another woman. Although there was not much
technical distinction between male and female homosexuality in the mid-twentieth century, this
paper will prefer terms such as “lesbian” and “lesbianism,” both for the sake of continuity and
because they are more specific terms than “gay,” “homosexual,” or “homosexuality,” which
could refer to men or women. When relevant, though, this paper will preserve the language of
the source. Because many of the sources cited in this paper were created in the 1980s-90s, the
language in these sources occasionally differs from what would be considered acceptable in
modern writing. For example, women may have referred to themselves as “dykes.” While this
may be considered an offensive term now, many lesbians in the late twentieth century reclaimed
the word and used it in a positive way. And, while words like “homosexual” and
“homosexuality” may seem clinical in the context of the modern queer rights movement,
sexuality was often viewed through a psychological lens in the 1940s-1950s.

Additionally, there are two names for the organization that this paper discusses: the
Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) and the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). Both names
refer to the same body. However, the Army decided to remove the word “auxiliary” from the title
shortly after the founding of the organization to reflect the growing importance of women to the
Army’s functionality. This essay will prefer the term “WAC” to remain as consistent as possible
since most of the sources discuss either the organization as a whole or events that occurred after
the name change. However, when treating the few events that explicitly occurred prior to the
name change, this paper will use the more accurate title, “WAAC.”

Lesbians in World War II

The 1930s-1940s marked a change in how lesbians saw themselves. Many women
growing up at this time felt isolated because they recognized that they were attracted to women
and that society would not approve, and they “didn’t know another person on earth” who shared
those feelings. Homosexuality was primarily discussed in psychoanalysis, where it had been
classified as a mental illness. Dr. Judd Marmor, a psychiatrist who worked to depathologize
homosexuality in the 1970s, said his mentors described homosexuals as “emotionally immature,
deceptive, impulsive, unreliable, and incapable of truly loving” in the prewar period. The
“sickness” label complicated early attempts at gay and queer organizing because it discouraged
people from identifying as homosexual. Then, as the literature on homosexuality grew, lesbians
began to realize that their feelings had names and, even if they were sick, they were not alone.
Books like The Well of Loneliness helped lesbians to see themselves in print. The Well of
Loneliness was among the first positive representations of homosexuality, and it set the standards
for how lesbians found women like them even decades later. Lesbian books were “increasingly
available” in the postwar period, which “revolutionized the publishing industry.” Moreover,

9 Leslie, interview by Elizabeth Laprovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold (New
York: Routledge, 1993), 33. Like all the narrators in Kennedy and Davis’s project, “Leslie” is a pseudonym.
10 Judd Marmor, interview by Vernon A. Rosario, “An Interview with Judd Marmor, MD,” American Psychiatry
11 The Well of Loneliness is a 1928 novel by Radclyffe Hall and was thus very popular with women exploring their
sexualities in the 1940s-1950s. It describes the growing relationship between two women in World War I. Although
it was published prior to World War II, many lesbians who were coming of age during and after the war attached to
it because it was such a positive representation of lesbian relationships.
12 Martin Meeker, Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 2006), 87.
attitudes towards women at this time enforced sexist expectations for subservience. Often, historians ignore the intersections between gender and sexuality that separate gay men and lesbians.\textsuperscript{13} However, understanding the tensions between the evolution of women’s roles and the increasing visibility of homosexuality is essential to understanding the formation of lesbian identity and community.

In December of 1941, the U.S. officially joined World War II. As the U.S. involvement in World War II pulled more and more from the male work force, the U.S. began seeking out female workers to fill in the gaps in labor. To encourage women to join historically male-dominated industries, the government curated the image of Rosie the Riveter, a patriotic, middle-class white woman ready to work, but it did not expect the need for Rosies to continue past the war.\textsuperscript{14} Women had lived within the male-female division of labor for so long that, while World War II may have disrupted their traditional roles, government officials expected that women would return to homemaking and clerical positions as soon as the men returned home. But Rosie had a much larger impact than the government anticipated. Women began working in men’s jobs, which paid more, and even women who had not previously been employed joined the workforce.\textsuperscript{15} These jobs allowed women the chance to experience a level of financial independence that the lower-paying women’s jobs did not. INSERT

One of the jobs most notable for its recruitment of female employees in World War II was the WAAC, which was created in 1942. The women of the WAAC took over noncombat positions in the U.S. Army as the Army recognized the importance of administrative work to its

continued success. A little over a year later, the Army changed the title to the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) and gave the women, known as Wacs, military personnel status. By removing the auxiliary status and granting women some of the benefits that came with military status, the Army officially recognized the significance of the Wacs’ work. The Army attempted to mobilize women by portraying the work of the Wacs as “feminine,” but it struggled to compete with civilian labor, which also needed women to work but paid more and provided more freedom. Most of the jobs the WAC provided were stereotypically “women’s jobs,” and the Army’s reputation for sexism and racism only made it less appealing than the civilian workforce. The Army also did not treat the Wacs as fully equal to their male counterparts, but it held Wacs to many of the same rules. The official history of the WAC also reports that only about five percent of Wacs had not previously been employed, and women who were domestic workers, service workers, less educated, or unemployed had higher discharge rates. The WAC wanted to curate a respectable image for its recruits, which disproportionately affected lower-class women and women who did not have the resources to complete their education. And, while the WAC claimed to accept Black women into the corps, enlistment was “difficult or impossible” for Black women. The recruiters often prevented them from applying, and the WAC avoided publicizing information about recruitment efforts for Black women to avoid negatively affecting their recruitment of white women. Nevertheless, it managed to attract personnel.

The WAC tended to recruit young women who were childless and unmarried. These women appealed to the WAC because they were less likely to be affected if they had to relocate

16 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 72.
17 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 72-73.
20 D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, 27.
for basic training or if they were assigned somewhere far from home. However, this group of women was, as D’Emilio notes, “statistically likely to include a disproportionate number of lesbians and women whose sexuality was most malleable.”\(^{21}\) Many women had “no word and no concept” for homosexuality prior to participating in World War II.\(^ {22}\) The environment of the WAC allowed for women to explore their sexualities through their relationships with other women. For example, Bert, a narrator for the oral history project *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, says she started to realize she was a lesbian because a Wac kissed her.\(^ {23}\) She, like many lesbians at the time, had not had reason to question her sexuality prior to this event, but the WAC created a unique set of circumstances for women in World War II. Women were often expected to become homemakers and to focus on their families. The Army offered one of the few reprieves from these stringently enforced expectations for women in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, since women were not allowed to fraternize much with men for fear of pregnancy and other scandal, it was a place where women primarily interacted with each other. Pat Bond, a former Wac, described frequently going out with the other lesbians in her unit, “dancing and drinking, falling in love and out of love.”\(^ {24}\)

Although the Army did not intend for the WAC to attract so many lesbians, according to former Wac and official Army historian, Mattie Treadwell, the WAC earned a reputation for being “the ideal breeding ground” for lesbianism.\(^ {25}\) Some women enlisted knowing that the WAC had this reputation and knowing that they were lesbians. Bond admitted that, in addition to

\(^{21}\) D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 27.


\(^{25}\) Treadwell, *The Women’s Army*, 625.
her desire to escape the monotony of her life in Davenport, she also had heard from her friends that the Army was “90 percent gay.”26 Jacqueline Byer, another former Wac, said, “While I knew there were homosexuals in the Army, I knew they were on the teams I played with.”27 Both Bond and Byer knew they were lesbians before they enlisted, and while the draw of finding other lesbians was not the only reason they joined the WAC, they benefited from being around other women like them. The WAC introduced non-lesbian women to lesbianism for the first time as well, which allowed them to form their first responses towards lesbianism. Some women’s exposure to lesbianism encouraged them to question their sexuality; others felt that they were heterosexual but became more accepting, and still others weaponized their heterosexuality to further oppress the lesbians.28

Despite evidence to the contrary, the WAC denied any abnormal presence of lesbianism among its ranks. According to Treadwell,

The only explanation that could be found for such accusations appeared to be the vague and erroneous nature of popular ideas on the subject: any woman who was masculine in appearance or dress, or who did not enjoy men’s company, was apt to be singled out for suspicion. Medical authorities pointed out that the true female homosexual was only occasionally of this type, and more often just the opposite. 29

However, the Army later appropriated these exact “vague and erroneous” stereotypes in its psychological evaluations to prevent lesbians from entering the force. At Fort Oglethorpe in 1944, the mother of a Wac found love letters between her daughter and another woman. She

28 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 163.
29 Treadwell, The Women’s Army Corps, 625
threatened to expose the WAC for allowing this behavior. The fear of public outcry about the presence of lesbians in the WAC caused the Army to include questions in its psychological examinations that would help identify and exclude lesbians.\textsuperscript{30} The Fort Oglethorpe case shows that the WAC’s reputation for attracting lesbians was not exclusive to gay or lesbian communities.

The public concern about female sexuality among the enlisted women stemmed from a smear campaign against the WAC. As Meyer shows, this campaign grew from responses to a series of columns written by journalist John O’Donnell in 1943.\textsuperscript{31} O’Donnell claimed that he had heard from a “lady lawmaker” that the WAAC (which, at the time, was in the process of becoming an official part of the Army) would furnish “contraceptives and prophylactics” so that the Wacs could enjoy the same sexual liberties as their male enlisted counterparts.\textsuperscript{32} He mocked both the women of the WAAC and the idea that they might pursue sexual freedom. In this same column, O’Donnell also questioned why the WAAC would want to get rid of its auxiliary status. As an auxiliary corps, he argued, any woman who was “obstreperous enough” could choose to leave at any time, a power which she would not have once she was an official member of the Army.\textsuperscript{33} O’Donnell’s column reflects the commonly held perception that women did not truly want to help the Army, and it ignores the fact that many women wanted the potential benefits and status that would come with the WAC’s new status. The Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, seemingly forced O’Donnell to recant. Two days after O’Donnell put out his initial column, the newspaper published an article with statements from WAC officials and Stimson clarifying that nothing O’Donnell said was true, and anyone spreading these rumors “cannot be less than Nazi-

\textsuperscript{31} Meyer, \textit{Creating GI Jane}, 33.
\textsuperscript{33} O’Donnell, “Capitol Stuff.”
inspired.”

Although O’Donnell’s columns focused on the dangers of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, the WAC was constantly fighting against the idea that the Wacs were using their new personal freedom to explore sexually perverse lifestyles. The newspaper’s retraction of O’Donnell’s statement did not do much to mitigate the discussion of the sexual morals of the WAAC; once O’Donnell published those columns, “the fat was in the fire” and people readily discussed the morality of the WAAC.

Thus, even if the rumors about the high presence of lesbian Wacs were true, the WAC likely denied these claims to protect its reputation. Especially during the heightened tensions of the war, U.S. society held women to a higher standard of morality than men, which led to scandals about increased promiscuity, pregnancy, and lesbianism in the WAC. Lesbianism was the easiest of these scandals for the WAC to deny because of prevailing attitudes about homosexuality in women. The state believed that homosexual acts between women, unlike those between men, were harder to define since women tended to have closer relationship with each other. Furthermore, when the WAC was first created, lesbians were largely invisible compared to gay men, so the Army did not believe it needed to screen for lesbians in the way it did for gay men. Bond said that she knew several women who showed up to their psychiatric evaluation with “argyle socks and pin-striped suits and the hair cut just like a man’s.” To Bond, these women were easily identifiable as lesbians, but the Army did not recognize them as such. In a separate interview, she recalled that Army men usually assumed that the lesbians in the WAC

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36 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 159-160.
37 Canaday, The Straight State, 177.
38 Bérubé, Coming Out Under Fire, 28.
were “whores” for not pursing relationships with them. Bond’s experiences show that people either did not realize the number of lesbians in the WAC, or they did not care enough at the time to investigate the claims. The prevalence of sexism and the ignorance about lesbianism created a space for lesbians in the WAC.

Additionally, the WAC was initially willing to overlook lesbian Wacs because it desperately needed women to enlist during the war. The WAC was often viewed as a masculinizing force for women, which made it an inherent threat to rigid contemporary conceptions of gender. Between the societal concerns about unsexing women and the fact that civilian jobs often paid more and offered more freedom, relatively few women were willing to join the WAC. From 1942-1946, only about 150,000 women served in the WAC in some capacity. Because of the potential for scandal after the Fort Oglethorpe incident, the WAC implemented policies to prevent lesbians from entering the force. However, the WAC could not risk excluding too many interested women from serving, so these policies were not as strict as those for gay men. Bond said the extent of the questioning she and her companions faced about homosexuality was the psychiatrist asking, “Have you ever been in love with a woman?”, and as long as they denied they had, they could enter the WAC. Bond’s story demonstrates that some people in the WAC may have been aware at least peripherally of the lesbian problem in the WAC, but that it was not enough of a disruption to inspire concern. The Army also ran ads that portrayed servicewomen as homemakers to push the narrative that the Wacs were “feminine

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41 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 149.
42 Treadwell, The Women’s Army Corps, 766.
43 Bérubé, Coming Out Under Fire, 33.
44 Bond, “Pat,” in Word is Out, 58.
The WAC depended on lesbians to fulfill its recruitment needs and, therefore, could not act too harshly, but the presence of lesbians only further damaged its reputation.46

Once the war was over and the need for recruitment decreased, the WAC began systematically ridding the Army of lesbians. The WAC claimed that the number of lesbians in the Army was “no greater and probably less than in the civilian population,” so no action was needed during the war, but that “more specific action” might be needed in peacetime.47 “After the war, when we were no longer needed, they decided to get rid of the dykes,” Bond remarked.48 These so-called “witch-hunts” forced lesbians to turn against one another or to flee the Army to protect themselves.49 The WAC provided lesbians a sense of security that encouraged community-building throughout World War II, but this security ended with the war. What had once been a safe space for lesbians became dangerous as the Army threatened women with dishonorable discharges if they found evidence of homosexuality. In this manner, the WAC minimized the impact of women, and lesbians in particular, in the war effort and in post-war U.S. society. These discharges were especially common in the 1950s as the U.S. attempted to revert to prewar gender roles, and the war was far enough in the past that the WAC could ignore the work of the lesbian servicewomen.50

With a dishonorable discharge for homosexuality, not only were these women barred from service, but they also could not hold any government position, and many private employers would not hire them either. Women were likely disproportionately targeted for and vulnerable to

45 Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter, 117.
46 D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, 29.
47 Treadwell, The Women’s Army Corps, 625-626.
48 Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 166.
49 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 177.
this type of discharge because it affected their financial agency.\textsuperscript{51} If women could not support themselves financially, then they had to rely on men, which compelled them to try harder to fit into heterosexual societal norms. Bond recalled the experience of her friend in these witch-hunts, They called up one of our kids—Helen. They got her up on the stand and told her that if she didn’t give the names of her friends they would tell her parents she was gay. She went up to her room on the sixth floor and jumped out and killed herself. She was twenty.\textsuperscript{52} Bond believed the WAC was fully responsible for Helen’s death.\textsuperscript{53} Bond had once looked forward to joining the Army and escaping her hometown, but her vivid recollection of what happened to her friend colored her experiences. Her stark change in attitude reflects a shift in the treatment of lesbians in the WAC. Furthermore, Helen’s story shows how damaging the lesbian label could be. For her, death was preferable to tarnishing her reputation to her family or the public world. Some of the tales of discharge and witch-hunting may have been exaggerated to fit into the “gay folklore” surrounding the antihomosexual policies of the World War II era, but the fact that this level of government policy has become so relevant in the historical consciousness is just as important.\textsuperscript{54}

Because so few women served in the war, and many were eventually discharged or forced to leave, lesbians of this era also turned to bars. Lesbians moved to large cities which they knew would have lesbian bars and other types of public lesbian life, in search of others like them.\textsuperscript{55} The same conditions that pushed women to join the WAC—the increasing desire for

\textsuperscript{52} Bond, “Pat,” in \textit{Word is Out}, 61.
\textsuperscript{53} Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 168.
\textsuperscript{54} Bérubé, \textit{Coming Out Under Fire}, 216.
\textsuperscript{55} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 8.
financial freedom, the questions raised around gender roles during and after the war, and the realization that other gay people existed—influenced these women to move away from home. Bond, who became an active participant in bar culture once she left the WAC, said bars provided “a sense of being somewhere finally where everybody was gay, not just you” that not even her time in the WAC could match. Unlike the WAC, which required physical and psychological examinations, as well as the potential for relocation, gay and lesbian bars existed in every major city in the U.S. following the war. Bars also did not have the same restrictions on class as the WAC, which attracted many working-class lesbians. The bars were very public displays of lesbian life and allowed lesbians to build relationships with gay men in addition to other queer women. So, although some patrons were former WACs or servicemen, bars were an especially common outlet for working-class lesbians, young lesbians, and other lesbians who could not or would not serve in the WAC. Many lesbians refused to join the Army because they did not want to leave the cities in which they had already made lesbian friends. Further, they enjoyed that the war gave them more opportunities to make more money and dress or act how they wished. Despite the positive feeling some women harbored towards bars, though, these public places often permitted hostility toward lesbians. However, despite these risks, bar culture remained popular among lesbians.

The Development of Community

In 1947, a woman who went by the name “Lisa Ben” created a magazine called *Vice Versa* to write about her experiences as a lesbian and to review books and movies with “the

59 Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 77.
slightest tinge of two girls being interested in one another.” She distributed this magazine for free to other lesbians in her life. Lisa Ben, like many lesbians after World War II, wanted to find others like her and to find some way to relate to them. The needs of the U.S. labor force during World War II led women to push the boundaries of their rigidly sex-defined roles. Even once the war ended and the need for female labor decreased, many women pursued jobs. Coupled with bar culture and a growing body of lesbian literature, lesbians became increasingly aware of themselves and each other. Women like Doris Lunden could go to the library and discover that, though they previously “had no inkling of how many lesbians there might be,” they were part of a larger community. Neither the WAC nor the bars were completely open to lesbians. Nevertheless, lesbians explored the WAC and bars as avenues through which to meet women like themselves, and these explorations led to a growing sense of identity and community.

These early lesbians likely would have understood identity as the ways in which people articulate their sense of self. As Stuart Hall argues in his essay, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” this notion of identity is comforting but incomplete. Identity would not exist without the tensions between Us versus Them, the Self versus the Other. People form separate identities because, at some point, the normative population inscribed some form of Othering onto them. These Others may not have had much in common before, but the factor that makes them Othered may also contribute to the development of community as they begin to seek out others with similar experiences. Hall’s argument focuses on how British society inscribes the identity of the Other onto Black people in the twentieth century, but this argument works for lesbian identity.

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during and after World War II as well. The factor that united lesbians during and after World War II was their antinormative attraction to their own gender; women were expected to form relationships with men and to raise a family, and lesbians defied these expectations. Without the level of Othering done by the WAC, this identity and community would be unnecessary. While the new formation of a gay identity did help people feel more connected to a sense of gay community, it also made gay people intimately aware of how separated they were from heterosexual society.  

Lesbians especially felt this separation, as they existed outside of both heterosexual and patriarchal norms. This tension between isolation and connection, as well as invisibility and visibility, are essential to understanding the initial formation of lesbian community. The violence and alienation that lesbians experienced after World War II drew them together as “members of a persecuted minority.” Thus, the experiences of lesbians in the war were essential to the formation of lesbian community, especially given the power the WAC had as an arm of the state.

Prior to the 1940s, the definition of homosexuality was nebulous. Through the process of state-building in the twentieth-century U.S., the government created the framework for defining homosexuality. The U.S. involvement in international issues throughout the twentieth century pressured the state into setting the terms for what citizenship was, as well as who had the right to participate in state activities. Previously, the state did not need to define female homosexuality because administrators did not think there were many lesbians. Women could not participate in government work in the way that men could, so the state did not need to monitor their activities. When the military began employing women in noncombat activities, women (and lesbians in

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63 Meeker, Contacts Desired, 2.
64 Bérubé, Coming Out Under Fire, 227.
65 Canaday, The Straight State, 3.
particular) flocked to the WAC. As the WAC increased in importance to the state, the need to explicitly define female homosexuality increased as well. As the desire to find community compelled lesbians to join the WAC, it defined the parameters of lesbianism. These parameters then persisted in how lesbians came to identify themselves in other aspects of their community.

The early definitions of lesbianism from the state (and from people who identified as lesbian) relied on how women and homosexuality fit into the context of heterosexuality, which came with far more rules and expectations. In theory, “lesbians” (or “homosexuals,” as they were then called) were women who engaged in homosexual activity. In practice, a lesbian could be any woman who acted or dressed in a traditionally “masculine” way, pursued close relationships with women, or avoided contact with men. Even if these same-sex relationships were not explicitly romantic, and even if the women ended up in relationships with men, the state still treated these women as potential homosexuals because their behavior did not fit into heterosexual norms.

However, the WAC could not always distinguish between true lesbians and women who were simply behaving in a nonconventional way. A Sex Hygiene Lecture given to the commanding officers in the WAC warns the officers against baseless accusations, telling them to only to show concern if the homosexual behaviors “undermine the efficiency of the individuals concerned and the stability of the group.” The WAC differentiated between “overt acts” of homosexuality and mere “tendencies” and struggled to mete out the proper punishment for either. The U.S. government’s definition of homosexuality came from sodomy laws, and because these laws primarily targeted men, the military would have had to invent its own

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definitions to punish women. Women who styled themselves as men might be seen as lesbians, or they might be patriotic women dedicated to helping their country in its hour of need. Thus, as long as the women were not incredibly obvious, and as long as the state did not wish to create a standard by which to punish lesbianism, they could openly explore their sexualities. The state’s refusal to punish or explicitly define lesbianism allowed for lesbians to develop a sense of community without much initial interference.

Because the WAC only permitted lesbians in the Army if they were covert, World War II forced lesbians to codify subtle ways by which to identify each other. Women did not usually wear pants before World War II, but as women worked more in men’s jobs, pants became more acceptable. Even women who did not need to wear pants for their jobs bought some. “During the war years, everybody wore pants,” said Dee, a lesbian oral history narrator. Pants represented a shift in how women presented themselves, and they allowed lesbians to push the boundaries of heteronormative society. The increase in women’s labor during the war made pants “a costume and a symbol” for both lesbians who did not feel comfortable in women’s clothes and for lesbians who wanted other women to know they were lesbians. Some lesbians cut their hair extremely short. Lesbians also developed specific signals and slang that they used to speak to each other during the war. For a while, the WAC could not afford to punish these women because of how badly it needed recruits. The WAC’s denial of the presence of lesbians granted lesbians a state-sanctioned form of community. Lesbian community thrived as women found more tools to come together despite their Othering.

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70 Bérubé, Coming Out Under Fire, 28.
71 Dee, interview by Elizabeth Laprovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, 155.
72 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, 125.
73 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, 155.
74 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 166.
These forms of expression culminated in the creation of the butch-femme dynamic in lesbian relationships.\textsuperscript{75} This dynamic, based on the expectations of heterosexual relationships in Hollywood movies, represented the community’s carefully curated vision of what lesbian community was.\textsuperscript{76} Lesbian couples from the WAC to the bars followed the butch-femme structure. In the 1940s, when the roles of the butch and the femme were still solidifying, these identities operated on a spectrum; women could choose if they wanted to fully commit to a masculine or feminine appearance without being judged.\textsuperscript{77} The butch-femme dynamic became an important part of lesbian community because it allowed lesbians to adopt parts of the heterosexual society that had Othered them. These roles were not a secret to the non-lesbian public, either. A newspaper critic reported seeing two female characters in a ballet, one of whom dressed and walked “mannishly” while the other followed her. “Even if I had never seen ‘Trio,’ which License Commissioner Moss recently banned, I could guess what they were,” he added.\textsuperscript{78}

Joanna, another oral history narrator, said a group of men targeted her and her butch because “evidently, we did look a hell of a lot [like a gay couple].”\textsuperscript{79} What the WAC would later describe as a “vague and erroneous” misconception of Wacs was actually a result of the image lesbians had created of their community. There were other forms of lesbian relationships (such as the white, middle-class “romantic friendships” that Meyer describes), but the butch-femme were

\textsuperscript{75} Lesbians divided themselves into the categories of “butch” and “femme,” where butches were the more masculine-presenting partner and femmes (sometimes spelled “fem”) were more feminine-presenting. Butches typically had short hair, dressed in men’s clothes, and pursued the relationships. Femmes usually had long hair, wore makeup and dresses, and took on a more submissive role. Many lesbian couples consisted of one butch and one femme.

\textsuperscript{76} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 157-158.


\textsuperscript{78} John Chapman, “‘Clean-Up’ Moss Offers Dirty Ballet at Center,” \textit{New York Daily News} (New York City), March 2, 1945. “Trio” was a 1940s play that became the center of controversy because it portrayed an older woman romantically interested a younger girl.

\textsuperscript{79} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 156.
the most visible and thus the most responsible for shaping the sense of community.\(^{80}\) The visibility of butches as an Other made them a beacon of community and a source through which lesbians realized they were not alone.\(^{81}\) Although the visibility of the butch-femme dynamic did exacerbate the Othering lesbian couples experienced, it drew the community closer together by highlighting the differences between heterosexual and lesbian relationships.

Lesbian identity existed in a contentious state. The WAC provided cover for lesbians while indirectly allowing lesbians to learn how to express their sexualities without fear of punishment. This combination of visibility and invisibility brought the community closer. Yet the witch-hunts of the 1950s threatened this sense of safety, as the WAC removed their existing protections and exploited the social networks had previously strengthened the lesbian community. Bond felt “isolated and alone” as her community turned against itself and the WAC made women turn in their friends or lovers.\(^{82}\) When a woman was accused of lesbianism, the Army investigated not only the suspected lesbian, but her entire network of friends.\(^{83}\) These witch-hunts also disproportionately affected butches. Butches embodied the societal fears about how masculinity could empower women, so the WAC was most eager to get rid of them. Because they were visibly Other, butches were also much easier to single out compared to femmes. Of course, even heterosexual women showed affection to other women, so the most “deviant” behavior lesbians exhibited was the rejection of gender roles, which was especially obvious for butches.\(^{84}\) Thus, butches became targets for lesbian witch-hunts. The Othering that

\(^{80}\) Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 151.
\(^{82}\) Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 169.
\(^{84}\) Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Post-War America,” 197.
these witch-hunts caused negatively impacted lesbian identity and community in the short term by forcing women out of the WAC and discouraging lesbians from trusting each other.

The butch-femme dichotomy, which once united the community, came to represent the evolution of the perception of lesbians in the postwar period. In the 1950s, the division of butch-femme roles became less of a choice lesbians could make to foster a community and more of a requirement to being qualified as a lesbian. As the WAC reverted to the prewar societal expectation that women should not work outside of the home or occupy masculine spaces, the lesbian community followed suit by alienating anyone who did not completely follow the role of the butch or femme. According to the community, the lesbian community created its own set of normative behavior based on heteronormative expectations for relationships. More experienced lesbians now expected the newcomers to follow these strict rules. “There was no being versatile or saying, ‘Well, I’m either one. I’m just a homosexual or lesbian,’” said Vic of her experiences. Lesbians who did not conform were called “ki-ki, which was “a sort of queer of the gay world.” This newer form of lesbian community represented a much more solidified unit where the state had clearly exerted its influence. The intensity of their Othering forced butches to adopt a “tough” attitude and aesthetic as they committed to the strict distinction between butch and femme. Both coexisted within the context of lesbian community, but they depended on clearly divided roles because once the WAC made invisibility impossible for lesbian community, lesbians needed to create a more normative form of community to combat the dangers of their

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86 Vic, interview by Elizabeth Laprovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, 165-166.
87 Lunden, An Old Dyke’s Tale,” 32.
88 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, 159.
visibility. And, since the only relationships that are socially accepted are those between man and woman, those were the easiest to emulate.

Despite the problems inherent within this dynamic, the division of butch-femme roles does provide an interesting insight into how lesbian community fit within the heterosexual norms that the state enforced. Pat Bond recalled that lesbian relationships in this time were a rigid butch-femme scene. You had to be one or the other. I tried being a femme for a while. I didn’t like it that much because the femmes had to do all the work. Just like in heterosexual life. If your lover was a butch, she could hardly go to work in those outfits – you know, men’s clothes. So the femmes would get office jobs and support the butches. 

In a heterosexual relationship, the men worked to support the women, and lesbians felt compelled to perpetuate this dynamic, albeit for vastly different reasons. Heterosexual men were often the sole breadwinners as an extension of the patriarchal expectations for women to submit to men financially, emotionally, and physically. However, femmes became breadwinners because butches obviously did not fit into normative gender standards and as a result could not get jobs as easily. Thus, in lesbian couples, the feminine partner retained a sense of agency that women in heterosexual relationships did not. While they did subscribe to heterosexual notions of love that the state provided, lesbians in the 1940s and 1950s subverted the expectations for femininity within the heterosexual context, which shaped the earliest forms of lesbian community-building. Butches and femmes would never fully map onto heterosexual relationship dynamics. However, under Hall’s contention that Othering also helps foment identities, these experiences ultimately strengthened lesbian community.

89 Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 171.
Lesbians exerted their own agency by using these state-sponsored witch-hunts to better define their identities. Through witch-hunts, the WAC set the boundaries for how lesbians could interact with the state. Canaday describes several women who, when the WAC accused them of lesbianism, made detailed confessions that subverted the expectations of the WAC officials. The WAC implemented the witch-hunts to control the women in its ranks, but these women’s confessions demonstrate how Othering could become an empowering force. The state imposed restraints on how the lesbians of the WAC could define their identity, and these restraints helped these lesbians articulate their identity more than ever before. Then, Meyer argues, as butches became more visible in the 1950s, that their obvious Otherness made them “an anchor and a rallying point for the formation of lesbian community.” The strict division of butch-femme roles excluded some women from participating authentically in lesbian community, but others found comfort in reclaiming the parts of their identity that had been used to Other them. The women whom the WAC targeted got involved with bar subculture and other forms of community in response.

This form of community was inherently exclusionary. The witch-hunts encouraged lesbians in positions of power to suppress lesbians without as much influence. “It was our officers who were conducting these summary court martials. Lesbian officers,” said Bond. Lesbianism became an “explosive issue” in the WAC, and many women leveraged it to protect themselves or as revenge to get women that they disliked discharged. Officers benefited from the power structures in the ways WAC that enlisted women could not. They exploited their authority by accusing enlisted women, and their accusations shielded them from being suspected.

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93 Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 164.
Furthermore, lesbians who left of their own volition before the witch-hunts began did not have these same experiences, and thus were left out from that form of community. Byer, an officer who was honorably discharged from the WAC in 1948, said she “never knew anybody” affected in the witch-hunts even though she remained involved in the Army into the early 1950s. Her officer status and her departure so soon after the war protected her from the witch-hunts. Betty Deran said she was assigned to “a very plush post” where she managed the public image of the WAC, and one of the issues she handled was the discovery of a “lesbian nest” in her company. She recalled “feeling it was good that anyone didn’t get court-martialed” but that the women “were just damned stupid” for being “so open in their activities that they got caught.” Deran’s assertion that the women could have prevented themselves from being caught speaks to her privilege as a woman in power in the WAC and as a woman who was probably not visibly Other. The atmosphere of the witch-hunts set the standard for lesbians to participate in revenge outings as well. Bond knew of people who called their lovers’ families or jobs and out them as gay. “People weren’t just afraid of the straight community; they were afraid of each other,” she surmised. This lack of trust and abundance of internal division became an essential part of lesbian community after the war.

The WAC created the conditions for the class divisions within lesbian community. The witch-hunts were worse for poor women because some of the markers for homosexuality in women were class-based. The butch-femme dichotomy, which the WAC specifically targeted, tended to be more prevalent in working-class lesbian relationships, whereas middle-class lesbians practiced “romantic friendships” in which both partners presented femininely, and the

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94 Byer, December 1984, GLBT Historical Society, World War II Project.
96 Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 172.
sexual nature of the relationship was not obvious. The privilege that the officers had over enlisted women in the witch-hunts also reflects class differences. Officers had more financial resources and opportunities for privacy than enlisted women, so their relationships were easier to conceal. Status and income protected these lesbians from the Othering that working-class lesbians experienced. When the butch-femme scene solidified around the image of working-class bar culture in the 1950s, middle- and upper-class women did not participate. Middle-class women stayed away from lesbian bars because their visibility could lead to unemployment, and upper-class lesbians held their own separate parties to avoid the danger of the bars. Openly participating in lesbian culture could have drastic and negative effects. The working-class lesbians were accustomed to this treatment because of the witch-hunts, so they often chose to make themselves even more visible, and the upper-class lesbians could use their wealth to practice their own privatized form of community. Middle-class lesbians were left in an awkward position; they were too invisible to benefit from the butch-femme scene or bar culture, but they did not have the social or economic capital to join the gatherings of the wealthy.

Similarly, the segregationist policies of the WAC limited the ability of Black lesbians to participate in lesbian community. Black WAC units had different command structures and responded differently to the directives on how to deal with lesbians. The WAC expected officers to inspect their units for signs of lesbian activity. In her memoir, Lieutenant Colonel Charity Adams Earley, the first Black female officer in the WAC, said she did not believe the WAC’s extreme measures were necessary in her unit. Adams wrote, “I cannot swear to the kind of social activity that took place with all the members of the 6888th, but I will swear that the efficient

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97 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 158-159.
98 Bérubé, Coming Out Under Fire, 44.
99 Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, 43-44.
performance of the unit was not impaired."\textsuperscript{100} However, Meyer also reported an incident where a Black officer named Captain Harriet White paid the women in her company to report lesbianism because of concerns about public image. Meyer believes that White acted out of concerns for the delicate position of Black women in the WAC.\textsuperscript{101} This argument may also hold true for Adams; if she focused strictly on the performances of the women in her unit, then she would not have to worry about how their sexualities affected their reputation. Not as much information about Black lesbians in the WAC exists in the historical record compared to white lesbians, so comparing their community experiences during the war is difficult. Throughout Byer’s entire time serving during World War II, she did not interact with a Black Wac. She told an interviewer, “I don’t remember a single black member in the Women's Army Corps.”\textsuperscript{102}

Black lesbians still attempted to participate in some aspects of the dominant lesbian culture. A similar butch-femme dynamic persisted in Black lesbian communities. Some Black women and other lesbians of color even participated bar culture to varying degrees of acceptance.\textsuperscript{103} But lesbian community made Black women feel excluded because of their Blackness. Audre Lorde described her fellow Black lesbians as “\textit{the invisible but visible sisters}” whom she could never acknowledge aloud. She wrote,

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who

\textsuperscript{100} Charity Adams Earley, \textit{One Woman's Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC} (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 180-181.
\textsuperscript{101} Meyer, \textit{Creating GI Jane}, 170-171.
\textsuperscript{102} Byer, December 1984, GLBT Historical Society, World War II Project.
\textsuperscript{103} For more on Black lesbians’ experience in the heavily racialized bar culture, see Kennedy and Davis, “‘Maybe 'Cause Things Were Harder…You Had to Be More Friendly’: Race and Class in the Lesbian Community of the 1950s, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 113-150.
were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred
bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me.  

The existence of Black lesbians as a separate category from lesbian implied that lesbians were
capable of a similar level of oppression within their community. However, many white lesbians
refused to acknowledge the Othering that occurred among the lesbian community. The
community’s internal racism prevented Black lesbians from engaging in bar culture and forced
them to turn to house parties. House parties were a safer alternative for the beginnings of the
Black lesbian community because it was initially too small to afford its members much
protection in public.

The conditions the WAC used to define lesbianism also affected the development of
lesbian bar culture. Lesbians often had to negotiate to open gay bars, which existed as a source of
profit, not because the owners cared about the homosexual community. According to Bond,
although their profits came from lesbians and gay men, “they didn’t put any money back into the
community – they had a sort of disdain for us really.” Bar owners, like the WAC, directly
benefited from the support of the lesbian community, and, like the WAC, they did not care. Most
of the bars were meant for gay men. While lesbians could patronize these bars without issue in
the 1940s, as the tough butch culture of the 1950s proliferated, they earned a reputation for
violence. “Gay women were fighters,” Bert explained. “Wherever there was a group of lesbians,
you could be sure that there was always going to be fights.” Even nonviolent but still
antinormative acts, such as women dancing together or showing affection, could result in them

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being kicked out of a gay bar.\textsuperscript{109} Bar culture pushed lesbians into the public sphere in a time of strict expectations for women’s behavior.\textsuperscript{110} When lesbians could not fit within these constraints, they quickly became targets. These bars and the WAC appeared to be spaces for lesbian community, but they only allowed lesbians to exist under specific circumstances.

Women’s involvement in World War II allowed lesbians a previously unheard-of amount of visibility, which allowed them to reshape their perceptions of themselves and of other women in a space away from men.\textsuperscript{111} Therefore, the WAC was the first arm of the state to enforce rules and punishments for being a lesbian. Some of these regulations pushed lesbians further apart, some brought them together, but they all led to a more clearly articulated form of identity and community. The postwar period created several opportunities for different kinds of lesbian community, especially as lesbians gravitated toward bars, and the WAC influenced many of these opportunities. Because lesbians were trying to work within the rules of the state, much of early lesbian community grappled with the tension between wanting to be respectable to the dominant heterosexual culture and not wanting to erase their identities. The desire to be visible without losing the safety that invisibility offered created many of the conflicts within the lesbian community.\textsuperscript{112}

The WAC would not have lasted as long as it did without the far-reaching ties of lesbian community, but it weaponized these networks and permanently altered how this community functioned. Lesbians became accustomed to acting tough and not trusting in the institutions that

\textsuperscript{109} Bond, “Tapioca Tapestry,” 172.
\textsuperscript{111} Faderman, \textit{Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers}, 121.
\textsuperscript{112} Although the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a lesbian community space prevalent in the late 1950s, is a little late for the extent of this thesis, its history as a place for the “well-integrated, respectable lesbian” reflects this tension well. As the homophile movement of the 1950s-1960s pushed for gays and lesbians to conform to heteronormative norms, the women who were less willing to conform to the norm were not always welcome in more official spaces like the DOB. For more on the DOB as a community space, see Meeker, \textit{Contacts Desired}, 100-102.
offered them community. At the time of her interview in 1981, Bond still had “a great distrust of women” from her time in the WAC.\textsuperscript{113} To better control the circumstances of their Othering, lesbians created their own set of norms by which to subjugate and Other women even within the community. Different forms of community came to exist based on a lesbian’s class, race, and willingness to conform. Women like Lorde could attempt to carve out a space for themselves within the community at large, but they would have to grapple with the fact that they were an Other within an already Othered group. Still, Lorde maintains that these interactions ultimately strengthened her connection to lesbianism:

Lesbians were probably the only Black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other; we learned lessons from each other, the values of which were not lessened by what we did not learn.\textsuperscript{114}

This attempt at community, even if it could be alienating at times, culminated in later movements toward gay liberation and, eventually, intersectionality. Historians Davis and Kennedy argue that, because these early forms of lesbian community did not have a political movement to back them, they could not directly effect change in the Othering of lesbians. Nevertheless, the idea that lesbians needed to make themselves visible and start openly fighting for their interests was as important to cultivating a sense of community then as it would be to later movements for lesbian rights.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{113} Bond, May 1981, GLBT Historical Society, World War II Project.
\textsuperscript{114} Lorde, \textit{Zami}, 179.
\textsuperscript{115} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 378.
The Evolution of a Homonormative Narrative

According to an often-cited interview between Bunny MacCulloch and former Wac Johnnie Phelps, President Truman gave General Eisenhower orders to investigate the “lesbian problem” within her battalion, to which Phelps replied,

_Yessir. If the General pleases I will be happy to do this investigation.... But, sir, it would be unfair of me not to tell you, my name is going to head the list....You should also be aware that you’re going to have to replace all the file clerks, the section heads, most of the commanders, and the motor pool....I think you should also take into consideration that there have been no illegal pregnancies, no cases of venereal disease, and the General himself has been the one to award good conduct commendations and service commendations to these members of the WAC detachment._

_GENERAL EISENHOWER: FORGET THE ORDER._

This story has entered popular consciousness about the WAC’s treatment of lesbianism, especially after Lillian Faderman’s inclusion of this quote in her important work on lesbians in the WAC. It has become an empowering tale for those interested in feminist and queer history, but it is not true. Historian Donna Knaff investigated Phelps’s rank, where she was stationed during her service, and the progression of her military career in comparison to Eisenhower’s to disprove the entire story. She cites Phelps’s drug problem and potential mental health issues as the impetus for this story but asserts that this story still has irreparably influenced how people perceive lesbian history.¹¹⁷ Many people still see this moment as a defining moment in lesbian visibility.

¹¹⁶ Qtd. in Faderman, _Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers_, 118.
Traditionally, archives represent a utopia of knowledge and historical memory. People long to preserve knowledge, and they want this knowledge to be as unbiased and straightforward as possible. However, archives are inherently political. They can be powerful institutions, and because they require money and space to sustain themselves, they rely on outside wealth to continue preserving information. Those that provide these funds control the choices archives make, including what documents the archive will hold, how the catalogue and metadata will describe the documents, and whether the archive will digitize the documents. Archives, while they do provide information, exist to protect the interests of those in power. They construct historical narratives by controlling the availability of sources. When treating subjects as controversial as the presence of lesbians in the U.S. Army during World War II, the information that archives and collectives choose to preserve, as well as how they preserve it, represents as much about the historical events as it represents the archiving body.

Much of the information that prominent historians of lesbian community gathered on the legislation and correspondence about lesbians in the WAC comes from U.S. government archives. These archives hold vast amounts of information on military service in the U.S., but many of these records are either not digitized or, because they have incomplete metadata, are not properly searchable in the catalog. Thus, even with the knowledge of which Record Groups and case files to search for, the casual researcher cannot access the primary sources. When Bérubé initially conducted the research for his book, *Coming Out Under Fire*, he had to wait for

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118 For more on the idea of archives as a utopia, see Thomas Richards, “Archive and Utopia,” *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York, 1993), 11-44. His work refers primarily to archives in imperial Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth century, but many of his conclusions apply to archives as a whole.


the military to declassify some of the sources before he could use them, and even then, he still had to wait for them to be declassified. He also reported that government officials would not allow him to access some sources, and other sources “disappeared” before he could view them.\textsuperscript{121} The Freedom of Information Act, archival organizations, and other state-supported infrastructure helped later scholars like Canaday.\textsuperscript{122} In the decade between Bérubé’s \textit{Coming Out Under Fire} and Canaday’s \textit{The Straight State}, archival documents became much more accessible to scholars researching gay and lesbian history. Still, much of this information is difficult to obtain unless the researcher knows the exact file information and is willing to spend hours sifting through material on-site. The archives act as an arm of the state in their own right, and their choice to not digitize certain materials, or to not include metadata that makes the materials easier to search in the catalog, is political. The choices of the archives determine which communities are allowed to access their history, as well as what narratives they are allowed to put forward. The inability to access information about the state directly from the state makes accurately describing the interactions between the military and lesbians difficult, especially since so few of these sources pertain to women already.

Additionally, gay and lesbian archives did not develop until after many of these researchers published their works. Gay and lesbian archives are inherently different from traditional archives because “they are often legible only as desire, as love and intimacy, as performance, as activism” and thus do not have many “official paper records.”\textsuperscript{123} Instead, these archives formed from oral history interviews conducted with older lesbians about their experiences with coming out or finding community, as well as whatever documents they

\textsuperscript{122} Canaday, \textit{The Straight State}, xiii.
donated. The newness of these archives and their reliance on testimony about very personal subject matter limits their power over the dominant historical narrative. They, like the government archives, do not have many digitized resources, and, unlike the government archives, they do not have the official documents that might grant them as much status or influence. Because so little of early gay and lesbian history exists in a tangible form, like official correspondence, legislation, or other documentation, these archives lack a certain authority, especially with stories like Phelps’s being disproved. And, like any archive, gay and lesbian archives cultivate their own narratives. Lesbian archives exist in response to both the heteronormative erasure of lesbian lives in state-sponsored archives and the exclusion of lesbians in gay male archival spaces. Thus, lesbian archives often prioritize stories from women that shape lesbian identity as a cohesive unit.

The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) Archive, for instance, hosts a collection of letters from women who were isolated and afraid but found hope because the DOB presented them with the ideal of having a monogamous relationship with another woman. Although this experience was not universal for all lesbians, the grouping of women under the middle-class, normative ideology of the DOB is the dominant narrative in how lesbian community formed. In historian Martin Meeker’s description of lesbian community, for instance, he says that the DOB was an alternative for the many lesbians who were not “brave and brazen enough” to face the violence that came with patronizing bars. This vision of community contrasts, however, with the book on older lesbians in which Bond said, “When civilians stopped us – ‘Oh, look at that big dyke,’ – we’d just stick out our tongues. We liked that. It was like a confrontation. It was neat.”

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126 Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 77-78.
127 Bond, “*Tapioca Tapestry*,” 171.
and the members of what she saw as lesbian community enjoyed confrontation, and she recorded this, but because Meeker drew material from the DOB version of lesbian community, he felt that Bond’s group was not representative. The material that lesbian archives choose to use, and the archives from which historians choose to conduct their research, affect the version of lesbian history that is most widely available.

Many historians undertook their own oral history projects in the 1980s with lesbians who discovered themselves during and after World War II. Some of these oral histories became part of the archives, while some of them become part of a book or larger work. Most of the full interview transcripts or audio recordings are not public, which, again, creates issues with how later historians access information. Since, for many of these women, the only stories of theirs that are public come as snippets situated within a larger argument on the development of lesbian identity, whatever parts of their interview that do not fit within the context of that argument remain unknown. This paper relied heavily on Pat Bond, not because she was necessarily the most reliable of the narrators, but because she was one of the few whose stories and transcripts survived intact. Many of the women interviewed also chose to remain anonymous. While understandable given the harmful attitudes toward lesbians that was still prevalent in the 1980s, it limits the detail of the information available. By the time these women were interviewed, thirty to forty years had passed since they had participated in the WAC or early forms of bar culture. Only the younger lesbians’ stories have been recorded, and they did not get to tell their stories until these experiences had long passed. Aside from the limited number of Black women, few oral history narrators describe the lesbian community experience for women of color. Similarly, little information exists about how community experiences were different for women of different
classes or social backgrounds. The archives promote themselves as guardians of information, but even the most valuable of this information has the potential to be incomplete.

The historical context in which these books were written also affects how people view lesbian history today. Books written and researched in the 1970-1980s reflect the newness of gay history as a field, as well as a desire to commemorate or explain the gay liberation movement. Davis and Kennedy describe the shift that occurred from when they began research in 1978 to when they published the book in 1993. When they started their project, few books on gay and lesbian history existed, but they describe the “ferment in the air” as gay people and lesbians began grappling with the extent of their oppression. Their book’s conclusion illustrates how lesbian community-building in the 1940s-1950s led to the development of the gay liberation movement. Like Bérubé, and like any oral historian, they chose the quotes from their oral histories specifically to support this argument. While the argument is compelling, it narrativizes these sources for later historians. Davis and Kennedy also are one of the few early sources to focus on lesbian community and identity as separate from those of straight women or gay men.

Often, historians choose to focus holistically on gender or sexuality, rather than recognizing both as important factors to identity, which creates “a gendered history that is desexualized, and a sexual history that is degendered.” At the time Bérubé and D’Emilio wrote their respective works, gay history was still in its infancy, and since gay people wanted to create a united narrative to rival that of the dominant heterosexual history, they occasionally grouped lesbians together even at points when lesbians considered themselves a distinct entity.

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130 Although Davis and Kennedy published in 1993, the fact that they began much of their research in the 1980s affects their work in an arguably more significant way than the politics of the 1990s.
Similarly, developments in feminism and queer rights movements of the 1990s and 2000s color the sources that Meyer and Canaday present in their works. This period was an important time in feminist thought, which likely encouraged them to consider the impact of gender on sexuality. Additionally, in 1993, the U.S. military decided that, although it would still not allow “homosexual conduct,” it would also not require U.S. military personnel to disclose their sexualities, and it would not permit personnel to be questioned about their sexual tendencies.\textsuperscript{132} Canaday’s discussion of state control over citizenship, and how this control affects women, reflects the concerns about the changing role of women and gay people in the U.S. military. Meyer explicitly discusses the relationship between “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and her research in the opening of her book.\textsuperscript{133} The primary sources and their interpretations are inextricably linked.

Some sources interact with the primary sources and the prevailing historical interpretations in a way that creates an interesting conversation. Donna Penn, for instance, brings attention to the lack of sexuality histories explicitly about lesbians, and Meyer explicitly says that she wishes to fill this niche.\textsuperscript{134} Davis and Kennedy contextualize their work in lesbian history by denouncing Faderman’s assertions that butch-femme roles were entirely oppressive. They contend that butch-femme roles allowed working-class women agency and argue that, by minimizing this agency, Faderman’s interpretation of lesbian history is incomplete.\textsuperscript{135} By highlighting the weaknesses the prevalent interpretations of lesbian histories, these sources show that early lesbian community, while it united many women, was not a homogenous force.

\textsuperscript{132} The Department of Defense policy at this time described homosexual conduct as “any bodily contact…between members of the same sex for the purpose of satisfying sexual desires,” as well as “homosexual marriage or attempted marriage.” This policy, also referred to as “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” was in effect from 1993–2010. Department of Defense, \textit{Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction}, 1304.26, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/www/external/paf/projects/dopma-ropma/DODI-1304-26.pdf.

\textsuperscript{133} Meyer, \textit{Creating GI Jane}, 1-10.

\textsuperscript{134} Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Post-War America,” 190-203; Meyer, \textit{Creating GI Jane}, 148-149.

\textsuperscript{135} Kennedy and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 13.
These sources all draw on the sources Bérubé collected. Because Bérubé’s book and journal articles were some of the first works to describe gay and lesbian experiences in World War II, and he compiled so many sources, later historians of the subject matter all rely on the records he was able to access. D’Emilio cites papers that were in Bérubé’s personal collection, and in one note, he says he is “indebted” to Bérubé for showing him a particular source. In her acknowledgments, Meyer mentions that Bérubé provided her with sources and guidance. Many of the sources on gay and lesbian life in World War II refer to each other, but none are referenced as often as much as Bérubé. The military documents, interviews, and gay publications that he pulled together appear in some facet of every history that has since been written about lesbians in the WAC. His work was monumental to gay history, both for the perspective he provided and the sources he unearthed. Writings on gay or lesbian community in World War II would be incomplete without Bérubé, who did much of the work in compiling documents from across archives, theorists, and personal collections. Therefore, the sources that he was able to gather and the way he interpreted them are the dominant narrative.

From the “ferret out the lesbians” legend of Johnnie Phelps to the idealization of gay liberation, gay and lesbian history exists as an artifact of the time when it was written. Much of the language now used to describe community or identity would not have made sense in the context of 1950s gay rights. Women did not have a unifying label like “lesbians” until well into the publication history of the DOB. They were gay-gals, dykes, sexual deviants, and all manner of terms borrowed from other, more oppressive structures of society because they did not initially know the extent of their community identity. It is problematic to try to prescribe a

136 D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, 27n8.
137 Meyer, Creating GI Jane, x.
138 Bessette, Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives, 28.
hegemonic narrative for this community because of how incomplete the primary source record is and because of how entrenched these records are in past historical interpretations.

**Conclusion**

The 1940s-1950s were a time of strictly enforced roles for men and women, but the intense need for labor in World War II disrupted these traditional structures. For the first time, many women had the opportunity to have a life away from familial obligations or men. The WAC did not attempt to exclude lesbians from the Army, likely because lesbians were among the few women who would not care about its poor reputation. But, once the war ended, the WAC no longer needed to employ as many women. The WAC, which had once explicitly told officers not to seek out lesbians in their battalions, began ridding the Army of lesbians.

> We were very good at our jobs. I mean how many ladies of that era could have taken a bus motor apart and put it back together again? Dykes could. How many women worked on syphilis and gonorrhea wards? I did. You know, we did one hell of a job. And then they decided they wanted to get rid of us.  


The Wacs operated outside the constraints of what was expected for women. Many of them performed secretarial duties, but there were many who wore masculine clothes and performed traditionally male tasks. Once the war ended, reestablishing the rigid expectations for women became increasingly important for the state to continue subjugating women. Still, the WAC shaped lesbian community even as they forced lesbians to leave. The WAC was one of the first chances many lesbians had to see other women like them. It also defined what forms of lesbianism were and were not acceptable to the state.
Similarly, archives today act as an arm of the state, and the records that they hold affect how lesbian community is portrayed in history. One oral history narrator lamented that the bar culture had no archive; the only record of her community was “scratched on a shit-house wall” and on “all the dives in Buffalo that are still standing with my name. That’s it, that’s all I got to show.” Archives are an inherently political space. The information that these archives choose to hold, make public, digitize affect what information is accessible to scholars. Scholars make their own decisions in how they present this information, as well what information they include. Thus, lesbian community is a combination of the rules set out by the WAC and the pieces that archives and historians have chosen to remember. It is not a cohesive picture, and it occasionally excludes the experiences of lesbians who do not fit the historical narrative. Still, lesbians were able to come together. An anonymous narrator from Davis and Kennedy’s oral history project said,

Things back then were horrible, and I think that because I fought like a man to survive I made it somehow easier for the kids coming out today. I did all their fighting for them. I'm not a rich person; I don't even have a lot of money; I don't even have a little money. I would have nothing to leave anybody in this world, but I have that that I can leave to the kids who are coming out now, who will come out into the future, that I left them a better place into. And that's all I have to offer, to leave them. But I wouldn't deny it; even though I was getting my brains beaten up I would never stand up and say, ‘No, don't hit me, I'm not gay, I'm not gay.’ I wouldn’t do that.

What can be pieced together about the development of lesbian community during and after World War II shows how the WAC forced lesbians to organize. And, while the bar culture had

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its risks, it provided an undeniable atmosphere of community. Ultimately, although each of these exercises in community had problems, they helped lesbians to establish their identities, and they contributed to the emergence of later movements.

Works Cited


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