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## SEX IN THE TRENCHES

It is impossible to overestimate the effect of World War II on American culture, and in particular on lesbians and gay men. The United States entered World War II, which had been ongoing since September 1939, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This decisive turning point in U.S. history reordered American social life and mores, public and private space, and virtually all social interactions having to do with gender and sexual behavior.

The country's entrance into the war radically transformed the domestic economy into a booming war economy, ending the Depression. The war economy not only provided much-needed jobs for Americans—the unemployment rate dropped from 17.2 percent in 1939 to 4.7 percent in 1942 and 1.2 percent in 1944—but also stimulated production of manufactured goods and increased farm production. As military-related industries such as shipyards, munitions plants, and aircraft manufacturing factories thrived, they provided employment for millions of women and men and drew workers to move from their towns and cities of birth. Between 1941 and the late 1960s, more than five million African Americans moved to urban areas, a shift that greatly helped facilitate the work of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

These changes posed fundamental questions of citizenship. Throughout American history, full citizenship—the ability to fully partake in the obligations of governance, including voting and defending the nation, as well as to receive entitlements, such as equal

protection under the law and access to state-sponsored programs—was influenced by a variety of factors. These included race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation as well as gender, gender expression, and sexual behavior. The enormous challenges that the United States had faced since the turn of the century, including waves of immigration, the rise of cities, the Great Depression, and World War I, had redefined citizenship. It was now a society more tolerant of racial, ethnic, and religious differences and one that was striving, however imperfectly, to embrace social and personal freedoms.

### WAR, GENDER, SEX

Although new freedoms in the early twentieth century centered increasingly on gender and sexual behavior, social anxiety about homosexuality remained. In some cases, it became more prevalent. Margot Canaday documents how a fear of the single man, the non-family man, was conflated with male homosexual behavior by the Federal Transient Program (FTP) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Both of these single-gender New Deal programs gave work to displaced adult men. Men living together generated anxiety, as did the imagined possibility of younger men being sexually exploited. This anxiety eventually caused the federal government to focus less on programs aimed at unattached people, and ultimately to avoid implementing policies that might be seen as enabling “sexual perversion.”<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, the first major change that occurred after Pearl Harbor was the massive relocation of men into the armed forces, where they would be living together. After the war began and conscription started, most Americans supported the war effort. By the end of the war in 1945, more than sixteen million United States citizens and residents had joined the armed forces. Ten million of those had been drafted. Although the armed forces accepted men up to the age of thirty-eight, the majority in all branches were in their twenties; 35 percent of navy personnel during the war years were teenagers.

The majority of men in the armed forces were white, but other racial groups were also represented. Seven hundred thousand, or 4

percent of the military, were African Americans; they were joined by 350,000 Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans. Throughout the war—until President Truman issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948—the American armed forces were segregated. This meant that, with rare exceptions, only white men could become officers or fight in combat. African Americans and other racial groups worked as cooks, truck drivers, stevedores, or warehouse workers. (There were some attempts at integration, and at the instigation of Eleanor Roosevelt, the USS *Mason* was manned with an African American crew trained to fill all of the ship's positions, not just cooks and mess hall workers. The *Mason* was nicknamed “Eleanor’s Folly.”)

As men entered the armed forces, a major shift in gender roles occurred. With men at war, women were hired in occupations and positions that traditionally had been held by men, including office work and factory jobs. Previously, women’s employment was often predicated on class and race. Many working-class women, including minority women, already worked because they had families to support. Now middle-class women were expected to work. When the war began, married women and mothers of young children were urged to stay at home. As the war continued, they too began entering the workforce. Before 1941, women made up less than 25 percent of the U.S. workforce—about twelve million workers. By 1945, that number had reached over eighteen million, a full third of the workforce. (Simultaneously, the number of women employed as domestic workers fell from 17.7 to 9.5 percent.) Over a million women—“government girls”—worked clerical jobs in Washington, D.C.; three million worked nationally in war plants. There was a 462 percent increase of women in defense industry jobs. After initial industry skepticism, women ultimately performed as well as men, and in jobs that demanded manual dexterity, even better. These women were seen as vital to the war effort as the fighting man.

These workplace shifts substantially altered gender roles. Home-front women workers were regarded as independent and strong. Ubiquitous government propaganda posters featured Rosie the Riveter in bright colors, with her masculine factory uniform and a kitchen head scarf, flexing her biceps, with the slogan “We

Can Do It!” Images of women working heavy machinery and driving trucks routinely appeared in *Life* magazine and other publications.

In a decisive break from the past, large numbers of women experienced independence, economic security, and psychological satisfaction. Women were paid less than men for the same jobs, but they were paid better than before and for jobs not previously open to them. In 1940 Los Angeles, 55 percent of nonwhite women worked as help in white homes. By 1950 this number had dropped to less than 40 percent. Fanny Christina Hill, an African American who went to work at a munitions factory, claimed, “The war made me live better, it really did. My sister always said that Hitler was the one who got us out of the white folks’ kitchen.”<sup>2</sup>

Once they entered the workforce, most women liked being able to support themselves or their families, find new communities, and acquire useful skills. Most gained a stronger sense of self. Many lived on their own or with roommates, away from their families, and conducted their social and romantic lives as they pleased. For single women who did not rely on a man to support them, and for lesbians who had never expected a man to support them, this was a major step in economic and social independence.

Conscription into the armed forces was limited to male citizens, but many women enlisted. This was a major change in United States culture since, aside from nurses, women had never before been admitted into the military. Military women were granted a social status and respect not offered them in civilian life. Over 250,000 women served in the war: 140,000 in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) and over 100,000 in the U.S. Navy as WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). By 1945, 43,000 women had joined the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve and 10,000 had enlisted in the Coast Guard Women’s Reserve, known as SPARs. Women in the military performed numerous jobs, including nursing, clerical duties, weather forecasting, photography, and air traffic control; most vital was the work of radio and telephone operators and communication directors. Now able to work in jobs from which they were excluded before, women could be viewed as strong, competent, and skilled professionals.

Widespread public support of the war was indicative of a cohesive mid-century American identity. The growing threat of Germany, Japan, and Italy was great enough that Americans, including members of traditionally disenfranchised groups, felt obligated to defend their country. That is not to say the patriotism of minority groups was without critique. Large numbers of African Americans who had moved north for war-related work faced discrimination there, just as they did in the South. In 1942 the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the oldest African American newspaper in the country, started the Double V campaign, arguing that victory over fascism overseas must be accompanied by victory over racism at home.

The war drastically accelerated the massive movement of people that had begun with the rise of cities. Men moved from their hometowns to join the armed forces. With fathers, sons, and brothers overseas, and mothers, daughters, and sisters often working in distant defense plants, members of the extended biological family did not necessarily live close to one another. Increased contact with new people and ideas often challenged the religious and moral upbringing of these women and men.

In response to all of this, many aspects of marriage changed. During the war, “the proportion of persons never married and the median age at first marriage declined by as much as they had during the preceding half century”; one commentator called the skyrocketing rate of marriage “the war disease.”<sup>3</sup> Between 1940 and 1943, over a million more couples than expected got married.<sup>4</sup> Many of these marriages occurred hurriedly, as couples publicly declared their love for one another before the men left for war.

World War II changed ideas about private and public, broadening the parameters of social permissibility. It was now permissible to show deeply felt personal emotions in public. Crying as a loved one shipped out, weeping over a death, and other displays of emotional pain and distress were acceptable public behaviors. This was also true of sexual passion and desire, as illustrated by Alfred Eisenstaedt’s famous photograph *V-J Day in Times Square*, in which a sailor is passionately kissing a nurse in broad daylight. Such behavior, unthinkable before the war, was now acceptable. Servicemen on leave, even if intoxicated, were respected by civilians. The emotional

urgency of the war changed social and sexual expectations. Women could now socialize, even flirt, with servicemen in public venues.

The female body, once seen as in need of protection, was now a fortified body that built ships and defended democracy. This was happening as sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, and friends were killed, wounded, paralyzed, and shell-shocked during the ferocious battles in Europe and the Pacific. The destruction of the male body was evident, even as government censorship shielded civilians from the worst images. In the national imagination, the nobility of the cause made these bodies heroic, highlighting the tragedy of their destruction. Images of fighting men in the popular press were a jarring paradox—extraordinarily valiant and extraordinarily fragile. Documentary combat photographs were often juxtaposed with pictures of shirtless men on battleships or in trenches—dirty, sweaty, and vulnerable. Images of patriotic men, many of them teenagers, dying for their country highlighted their fragility and nobility. This new standard of national masculinity, and its counterpoint image of strong women, radically altered how America viewed men and women.

#### AN ARMY OF LOVERS

The physically and emotionally vulnerable “new American man” was a reality for men living under the stress of battle and threat of death. For the first time in American history, large-scale, highly organized single-sex social arrangements were considered vital to national security. Men on battleships and battlefields lived together in close quarters with little privacy. The physical intimacy and stressful conditions often led to emotional and sexual intimacy. Servicemen in these all-male groups turned to their fellow troops for emotional and psychological support. The stress of leaving home, shipping out, active battle, and years of war allowed men to be vulnerable with one another in ways impossible outside of this environment.

Servicewomen were undergoing similar experiences. Without men in their everyday lives, WACs and WAVES formed emotional friendships that were, perhaps, similar to the female romantic friendships of the nineteenth century. But now a more open

culture encouraged awareness of sexual possibilities. Certainly women's new social freedoms, such as access to higher education, reproductive control (albeit limited), and the vote, made these relationships markedly different than in the past.

Wartime conditions produced social systems appealing to homosexuals. Single-sex environments encouraged homosocial relationships. Lesbians who were economically and socially independent of men found the military a haven. Homosexual men could now avoid their family's heterosexual expectations.

Many men, including homosexuals, found outlets for their abilities and talents in the military. The United Service Organization (USO), a private organization founded in 1941 to boost morale by providing recreation and other services for the military, brought entertainment to the troops and offered a place for men with theatrical interests. Director and actor Tyler Carpenter writes about how he was recruited to put together a series of USO shows using professional entertainers and enlisted men. When his heterosexual commanding officer discovered the projected cost, he suggested using recruits in drag to play the female parts.<sup>5</sup>

The benefits of the military for homosexuals were outweighed by the reality that sodomy was prohibited by Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The article stated: "Any person subject to this chapter who engages in unnatural carnal copulation with another person of the same or opposite sex or with an animal is guilty of sodomy. Penetration, however slight, is sufficient to complete the offense." Anyone suspected of being homosexual, and thus presumed to be engaging in sodomy, could be discharged and punished under military regulations.

While the code regulated the behavior of homosexual service members, it did nothing to keep them out. But by mid-1941 the Selective Service had instituted a policy to screen homosexuals from joining the military (although the policy did not always succeed). This decision had a complicated history. During and after World War I, in which there was little recruit screening, many soldiers were diagnosed with severe emotional trauma. Some of it was certainly "shell shock," but the military thought preenlistment screening could have prevented the worst cases. To avoid a recurrence, in 1940

the government, in conjunction with psychiatrists—including Harry Stack Sullivan, who was quietly homosexual—set up a psychological screening process to weed out men ineligible for military service.

At first this process focused on mental and emotional disorders; little attention was paid to sexual practices, although effeminate men were suspect. As the screening process was amended by other psychiatrists and the army surgeon general over the next year, homosexuality became a disqualifying category. The armed forces now banned people with "homosexual proclivities" because they had "psychopathic personality disorders." These new categories conflated the idea of the "sexual psychopath" with stereotypes predicated on gender norm deviation. The result was a government-sponsored definition of the homosexual. The navy broadened these categories by issuing vaguely worded orders that banned people "whose sexual behavior is such that it would endanger or disturb the morale of the military unit."<sup>6</sup> For the first time, a direct link was being made between homosexual behavior and a threat to national security.

Although Harry Stack Sullivan refused to categorize homosexuality as an emotional disorder, the army surgeon general disagreed. But both views were irrelevant after December 1941. The immediate need for women and men to join the war effort outweighed any other considerations. Homosexuals eager to join the armed forces found little to prevent them. Ample personal stories attest to how homosexuals enlisted. Historian Allan Bérubé writes of Robert Fleisher enlisting in 1943 and worrying about being rejected: "My God . . . couldn't they see my curly platinum blond hair that was partly bleached, the walk, maybe the sissy *S* in my voice—all the things that I thought would give me away?" The only question he was asked about his sexuality was "Do you like girls?" to which he answered "yes," since it was true.<sup>7</sup> Pat Bond describes the recruiting sergeant at her 1945 enlistment as "like all my old gym teachers in drag. Stockings, little earrings, her hair slicked back and very daintily done so you couldn't tell she was a dyke, but *I* knew!"<sup>8</sup>

Bond claims that many women arrived at recruitment centers "wearing argyle socks and pin-striped suits and the hair cut just like a man's with sideburns shaved over the ears—the whole bit." She

remembers that when she entered the barracks for the first time, a voice loudly proclaimed “Good God, Elizabeth, here comes another one!”<sup>9</sup> Tyler Carpenter remembers how in 1941 his lover, Eddie Fuller, went with him to the induction center in New York, where they waited in line with heterosexual couples:

Finally, it was time to enter. The boys and the girls kissed. Eddie and I shook hands, a convention that fell far short of the kiss we both wanted and deserved. “Tyler, you’ll be fine. You can do anything that any of the other guys can do,” Eddie said. I breathed deep, climbed the steps and entered into an unknown world.<sup>10</sup>

It is impossible to know how many homosexuals served during the war years. Lillian Faderman argues that the “‘firm public impression’ during the war years that a women’s corps was ‘the ideal breeding ground for lesbians’ had considerable basis in fact.”<sup>11</sup> Hypothetically, if Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 study of male sexual behavior was correct, then somewhere between 650,000 and 1.6 million male soldiers primarily had sex with other men.<sup>12</sup>

Millions of young women and men, many of whom may never have heard the words “fairy,” “invert,” “homosexual,” or “lesbian” and may not yet have discovered all aspects of their sexual desires, had enlisted. Being thrown together with so many different people of the same sex gave them an opportunity to understand their lives in new, radical ways. Bérubé weaves a broad, textured tapestry of the lives of same-sex-desiring service members during the war. Many speak of erotic, affectional, and sexual relationships with their fellow enlistees. Some of these relationships—like that of Tyler Carpenter and Eddie Fuller—began before the war and lasted for decades. Others occurred during the war, ending when the partners reentered civilian life. Many were brief sexual encounters, similar to heterosexual liaisons on the home front. Many women and men enjoyed same-sex romantic and physical relationships during the war, but for the remainder of their lives engaged in different-sex relationships.

In spite of potential harassment and prosecution, homosexual

women and men began forming communities within the military. Maxwell Gordon, stationed at the San Diego Naval Training Station, remembers feeling a sense of recognition:

Here’s all these interesting people from all over the United States. . . . There were some teachers and some clerks and office workers. For the most part they were rather “sensitive” boys. . . . I thought, “Oh, these are more my kind of people. You know, we can communicate.” . . . We became very chummy, quite close, very fraternal, very protective of each other.<sup>13</sup>

Homosexual men, especially if effeminate, were often harassed, but groups such as the one Gordon describes were frequently ignored for the sake of unit cohesiveness. David L. Leavitt, along with his homosexual shipmates stationed in Guam, claimed a secluded island beach as their own. Only a select group of men knew of the existence of this beach, which they called Purple Beach Number 2, reminiscent of a perfume brand.<sup>14</sup>

While on leave, homosexual men and women also found community in bars, baths, and private homes. This was particularly true for women who were stationed on bases near cities. Jean S. recalls socializing during the war after joining the Women’s Army Corps:

My commanding officer turned every head at the Boston Army base—5’6”, curly blonde hair, cute as can be and a smart cookie. She played around, but had a partner in Georgia. . . . There were women in the detachment I knew were lesbians, there was no question in my mind, but we never spoke of this. You just didn’t at the time. You just wouldn’t make any reference to it. We would socialize together, both straight and lesbian.<sup>15</sup>

“Sensitive” men often found one another while working on the extraordinarily popular “soldier shows” for which the USO provided the know-how and the materials. These shows were written, directed, and performed by men in the armed forces. Since there

were no women in outlying camps, enlisted men would perform female roles in drag. Performances ranged from comic portrayals of burly men in dresses to realistic female impersonation. For actors and audiences, these performances were a needed relief from the stress of war. For men who identified as homosexual, these shows were a place where they could, in coded terms, express their sexual desires, be visible, and build a community. These lyrics for a “female” trio in a soldier show demonstrate how homosexual enlistees introduced their own humor into skits:

Here you see three lovely “girls”  
With their plastic shapes and curls.  
Isn’t it campy? Isn’t it campy?

We’ve got glamour and that’s no lie;  
Can’t you tell when we swish by?  
Isn’t it campy? Isn’t it campy?<sup>16</sup>

Later in the war, when WACs were available to perform with men, their involvement was limited; usually they worked backstage to help the men be made up as women. An indication of the popularity of female impersonation in soldier shows is evident in Irving Berlin’s *This Is the Army*. Written for an all-soldier cast, it premiered on Broadway in 1942 and a year later became a hit Hollywood film with Ronald Reagan. Both the Broadway and film versions featured soldiers dressed as women.

Surprising images of military male bodies appeared in advertisements for popular products in the national press. The most startling of these, placed in *Life* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, was a series of six “True Towel Tales”—each based on a story from a serviceman—produced by the Cannon Towel company. Set on different battlefronts, the ads featured men in various stages of undress using Cannon towels while bathing. “True Towel Tales: No. 6” showed a group of presumably naked soldiers in a grounded canoe; the central figure is standing, covered with a palm frond, in a bathing-beauty pose. The advertisement clearly displays the men as sexual objects

and highlights their vulnerability, in sharp juxtaposition to the realities of war.

Advertisements for Pullman sleeping cars (civilian train cars used to move troops) featured half-naked servicemen partying. One Pullman advertisement showed two soldiers, following tradition, removing their shoes and socks to enter an Egyptian residence during the day; the sexually suggestive caption was “I never did this in *daylight* before!”<sup>17</sup> An analysis of advertising in *Life* magazine demonstrates that “just before the conflict, in 1940, there had been several issues of the magazine with no adult men alone together, without women; by 1943 and 1944, only one issue had no such male-to-male interaction in advertising.”<sup>18</sup>

Communities of homosexuals in the service and in civilian life mutually reinforced one another. Numerous venues in cities across the nation catered to homosexual clientele. African American servicemen, banned from bars in many cities, were welcomed in the Harlem jazz club Lucky’s Rendezvous, where, *Ebony* reported, black and white patrons “steeped in the swish jargon of its many lavender costumers.”<sup>19</sup> The Black Cat in San Francisco welcomed female prostitutes, lesbian civilians, and homosexual servicemen. For heterosexuals, sexual activity outside of marriage was so prevalent that special terms were coined for young women who would socialize and have sex with servicemen as a patriotic duty: “victory girls,” “khaki-wackies,” and “good-time Charlottes.”

The enormous social shifts of this era also changed how people wrote about homosexuality. Medical professionals and popular journalists did not radically alter their views of same-sex behavior, but new ways of thinking about homosexuality were emerging. In 1941 George W. Henry, a psychiatrist and director of the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants, wrote *Society and the Sex Variant*, one of the first comprehensive scientific studies of homosexual behavior. Based on interviews with homosexual women and men starting in 1935, the study frequently reaffirms stereotypes of homosexuality as inverted behavior. For instance, it describes male homosexuals’ speech as “excessive, chatty, gossipy, mincing,” with “many sexual innuendoes” and “extravagant superlatives,” whereas

lesbian speech is “cautious, businesslike; response prompt, precise, often monosyllabic.” With all of its flaws, the study gave the 1941 reader interviews with female and male homosexuals who spoke honestly about their lives. Henry’s vision—he thought it unscientific to classify persons as fully male or female—was startling for the time.

A year later, Philip Wylie’s enormously popular, and harsh, critique of American culture, *Generation of Vipers*, was published. Not particularly sympathetic to homosexuals, his view, like Henry’s, was guardedly tolerant. Attacking sexual ignorance, Wylie stated that “America is still populated with male ignoramuses who stand ready to slug a nance on sight and often do so.” He argued that homosexual activity was increasing in the United States and was “common in the navy, the army, and in colleges both for men and for women,” and that “a very large portion of the upper-class and upper-middle-class citizens of the nation have made one or more experiments in that form of erotic activity.” Suggesting that all people have homosexual feelings and that “inborn sluggers of nances” are repressing their own homosexual tendencies, he noted that most Americans find homosexual acts “horrible, repulsive, loathsome, and altogether beyond the pale of thinkability. . . . The fact that it goes on all the time means only that millions of people have dangerously guilty consciences.”<sup>20</sup>

Even the government displayed its own ambivalence. In 1943 the federally funded National Research Council, Penguin Books, and the *Infantry Journal* jointly published *Psychology for the Fighting Man*. A guide for young men new to the service, it forthrightly and calmly addressed men’s fears about homosexual impulses:

A soldier can take what comfort he may in the knowledge that other men are confronted with just about the same problems as he is and that, while they may never find an escape from them, most men manage to endure them and do not allow them to impair their efficiency seriously.

It helps to work hard.

It helps to avoid the company of those preoccupied with sex.

It helps to get as much fun as possible. Companionship with the other men and the varied social activities of camp life keep a soldier from lonely brooding and day-dreaming. So does the intensive activity of campaign and battle. For those who enjoy them, athletic sports—boxing matches or ball games—are diverting and healthful.<sup>21</sup>

The guide also noted that some homosexuals in the military were not conflicted about their sexuality. It advised that if such men “readily apply their interest and energy to the tasks of army life” and “if they are content with quietly seeking the satisfaction of their sexual needs with others of their own kind, their perversion may continue to go unnoticed and they may even become excellent soldiers.”<sup>22</sup>

At the same time that it was distributing *Psychology for the Fighting Man*, the military was beginning to purge homosexuals. In 1941 secretary of war Henry Stimson ordered all “sodomists” be court-martialed and, if found guilty, sentenced to five years of hard labor. The courts-martial quickly became too costly. In 1942 Stimson allowed Section 8 discharges—called “blue discharges,” after the color of the paper on which they were printed—for homosexuals. A Section 8 discharge was not a dishonorable discharge, issued after a court-martial, but neither was it an honorable discharge. The Veterans Administration quickly determined that a Section 8 discharge precluded a former service member from entitlements. These included access to health care at a VA hospital and accessing the numerous benefits of the GI Bill, such as college tuition, occupational training, mortgage insurance, and loans to start businesses. Worse, a Section 8 discharge often meant that the former service member was unable to get a job in civilian life.

The army alone issued between forty-nine thousand and sixty-eight thousand Section 8 discharges. As the war drew to a close, Section 8 discharges were given more frequently. Homosexuals were not the only ones affected. African Americans were discharged, often for protesting civilian and military Jim Crow laws, in such disproportionate numbers—22.2 percent for a group that made up

only 6.5 percent of the army—that the national black press started a campaign against the practice.

For homosexuals, receiving a Section 8—which essentially indicated mental illness—could be devastating. Women and men were often committed to hospital psychiatric units for examinations, grilled about their sexual thoughts and practices, and forced to give names of their sexual partners. Many men were physically and sexually abused, and public humiliation was commonplace. In some places, homosexual servicemen were rounded up and placed in “queer stockades” until they could be processed. More than five thousand homosexuals were released with Section 8 discharges from the army, and more than four thousand from the navy. Margot Canaday notes that the military stepped up purges of lesbians after the war, when women were supposed to go back into the home.<sup>23</sup>

The implicit inclusion of homosexuals in the military, juxtaposed with official discrimination, complicated the homosexuals’ relationship to the ideal of American citizenship. This model was to be enacted in numerous ways over the next decades. While visibility brought benefits to homosexuals, it also brought opposition, particularly the stigma of a pathological identity. As Canaday notes, “What was an inchoate and vague sort of opposition between citizenship and perversion in the early twentieth century became a hard and clear line by midcentury.”<sup>24</sup> The effect of these witch hunts was personally traumatic. Pat Bond states that at her base in Tokyo, over five hundred women were sent home and discharged. She vividly recalls a specific tragic incident: “They called up one of our kids—Helen. They got her up on the stand and told her that if she didn’t give 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.”<sup>25</sup>

Such events illustrate an ongoing struggle between legal principles, which categorized homosexual behavior as a crime, and the more “enlightened” principles of medicine, which viewed homosexuality as an illness. As medicine’s power to define homosexuality grew, so did the implications of what it meant to be homosexual. Psychiatry, which had once defined homosexuality simply as a sexual act, now defined it as a psychological state, present with or with-

out physical acts. Many psychiatrists believed that homosexuality should not be punished, but as a profession, they believed it could be cured.

#### BRINGING THE WAR HOME

When the war ended, society expected women and men to revert to traditional gender roles. As men came back from the war, women were expected to give up their jobs. However, while some women did leave the workforce to raise a family, many women wanted, or needed, to continue working. Lesbians, who were never going to have the economic support of a husband, worked to support themselves. Polls taken between 1943 and 1945 showed that 61 percent to 85 percent of women wanted to keep their jobs, including 47 percent to 68 percent of married women. This massive realignment of the workforce, economics, and gender roles played a decisive role in shaping how Americans viewed both the housewife and the working, economically independent woman.

American postwar life was marked by trauma. Virtually everyone in America had lost a family member, work colleague, friend, or neighbor. Physical trauma was most visible on the wounded or maimed male body. Emotional trauma was equally apparent. Men were now more able to be emotional, express their feelings, and even cry. The stereotypical “strong, silent type,” quintessentially heterosexual, that had characterized the American Man had been replaced with a new, sensitive man who had many of the qualities of the homosexual male.

After the war, homosexual novelists began exploring the intense emotional lives of men who had fought in the war. These novels were an attempt to uncover how the severe trauma of the war affected not only fighting men but American masculinity. They detailed the complicated connections between the war, American men, and homosexual identity in society.

Some novels took place during the war and explored men’s relationships with one another. John Horne Burns’s 1947 *The Gallery* presented a sympathetic portrait of military patrons of a gay bar in



Naples. Another example is *The Invisible Glass*, a 1950 novel by Loren Wahl (the pen name of Lorenzo Madalena, who took the title from a quote by W. E. B. Du Bois). The novel details the tragic relationship of Steve La Cava, a white lieutenant, and Chick, an African American driver, who are stationed in Italy in 1945. In a scene in which the two men are sharing a bed, Wahl made the homosexuality clear:

With a slight moan Chick rolled onto his left side, toward the Lieutenant. His finger sought those of the officer's as they entwined their legs. Their faces met. The breaths, smelling sweet from wine, came in heavy drawn sighs. La Cava grasped the soldier by his waist and drew him tightly to his body. His mouth pressed down until he felt Chick's lips part. For a moment they lay quietly, holding one another with strained arms.<sup>26</sup>

*The Invisible Glass* contains surprising nuances. Chick, a former UCLA student, is straight but has sex with men; Steve is just coming to terms with his sexuality, even though he has fallen in love with men. Much of the plot revolves around military racism, reflecting the complexity of men's lives in the war.

Novels such as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), Fritz Peters's *The World Next Door* (1949), and James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950) examined men who had come out during the war and the effect on their lives after the war. An ongoing theme in these novels is how the rising presence and acceptance of homoerotic desires in men's lives was transforming American masculinity.

Homosexual writers were not the only ones concerned with same-sex relationships in the postwar novel. Norman Mailer's 1948 *The Naked and the Dead*, on the *New York Times* best-seller list for sixty-two weeks, dealt with masculinity. One of its main characters, General Cummings, a repressed homosexual, embodied all of the contradictions of American masculinity. James Jones's 1951 *From Here to Eternity*, which won a National Book Award, contained numerous references to sex between men. One of its main characters, a heterosexual soldier, spent a great deal of time socializing

and having sex with wealthy gay male civilians for money. The enormous popularity of these works demonstrates that large numbers of people were ready to consider questions about how Americans thought about sex.

Other heterosexual novelists explicitly critiqued what they saw as destructive American masculinity. Richard Brooks's 1945 *The Brick Foxhole* detailed the brutal murder of an openly gay man by a sociopathic soldier. Brooks, later a noted film director, made it clear that his antagonist's hatred of homosexuals (as well as Jews and African Americans) was directly linked to his ideas about white American masculinity. The "brick foxhole" in which these soldiers are trapped signifies, among other things, masculinity.

Social conservatives objected to the content in these books, claiming they misrepresented the wholesomeness of the American fighting man. Mailer's editor made him change the frequently used "fuck" to "fug," and Jones's editor made him remove scenes describing, or even discussing, the characters' homosexual activities. According to James Rorty, the National Organization for Decent Literature, a group founded in 1937 with support from the American Council of Catholic Bishops, was one of a myriad of censorship and reform groups at work after the war. These groups were reinvigorated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in direct opposition to the changes brought about by World War II. The goal of the National Organization for Decent Literature was "to organize and set in motion the moral forces of the entire country" by prohibiting, through use of boycotts, the sale of "the lascivious type of literature which threatens the moral, social and national life of our country."<sup>27</sup> Their list of indecent books, including Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Lillian Smith's antilynching novel *Strange Fruit*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Zola's *Nana*, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, was sent to parishes, women's clubs, drugstores, and supermarkets.<sup>28</sup>

Because so many Americans were now enjoying the freedoms that had emerged during the war—including the freedom to read about sexuality—the censorship groups made limited headway. Civil liberties organizations, librarians, and free speech advocates resisted these groups, although with uneven results. Compared to heterosexual themes, homosexual material was seen by free speech

advocates as less defensible in the legal system or the court of public opinion. Therefore homosexual material was the most likely to be banned. This two-tiered system was instrumental in reasserting a decisive separation between heterosexuality and homosexuality in the public imagination.

The tension between the possibility of new freedom and the heightened sense of danger that it brought was instrumental in forming the postwar homosexual. As Allan Bérubé states, “The veterans of World War II were the first generation of gay men and women to experience such rapid, dramatic, and widespread changes in their lives as homosexuals.”<sup>29</sup> The new postwar openness created a more openly sexual society that placed hostility to homosexuality in sharp relief.

After the war, marriage rates among young people rose precipitously. The age of marriage dropped—many marriages happened right after high school—and the birth rate in the United States increased tremendously. January 1946 saw 222,721 births; in October, there were 339,499. The 1940s saw 32 million births, up from 24 million during the 1930s. This trend continued into the next decade. Many heterosexual couples and their new families moved to the suburbs that were being built across the country. Their migration out of the city again radically changed the nature, texture, and population of urban areas.

Meanwhile, lesbians and gay men—terms that were beginning to be used with more frequency, first within the homosexual community and then in popular speech—were understanding their relationship to American society primarily through cities. Lesbian and gay male veterans frequently decided not to return to their towns of birth; instead they moved to large cities, where they knew they could live more openly. Homosexuals had undergone a sexual revolution during the war. This revolution contributed almost immediately to a new sense of community, first in the armed forces and then in civilian life. Large cities across the country—especially those on the East and West coasts, where women and men from overseas disembarked on their return—saw enormous growth in the number of lesbians and gay men. While these urban homosexual communities were not entirely new, their numbers were now much larger. Their formation

was also aided by technological advances—inexpensive paperback books, wider access to the telephone, 78 RPM and then long-playing records, and eventually television—that precipitated the faster circulation of ideas and images.

Even fundamental ideas about space and community changed. In contrast to communities organized around the biological family, the new homosexual communities needed smaller living spaces for single people or couples, but a much larger space for community activities. These social spaces included restaurants, theaters, bars, coffeehouses, and parks. Most large cities had neighborhoods that accommodated these needs. Many of them, such as San Francisco’s North Beach, the west side of Boston’s Beacon Hill, or New York’s Greenwich Village, were neighborhoods that had previously been occupied by newly arrived immigrants, who required vibrant public social space in which they could sustain their own culture.

These neighborhoods were often in the less prosperous sections of cities. One reason is that most veterans, even those with access to GI Bill benefits, had little money. A second is that the small-scale economy of these areas facilitated affordable retail space—a necessary building block for newly forming communities, especially since many lesbians and gay men decided to start their own businesses. Having made the decision to be more open about their sexuality, they understood they might have a difficult time finding employment; going into business for themselves allowed them to act, dress, and speak as they chose. And if they were veterans, they could take advantage of the GI Bill’s business loan guaranty program. (These businesses are the source of the stereotype of a gay man running an antique shop or a lesbian running a dog-grooming service.) Third, the less affluent neighborhoods of a city were often less policed—a plus for lesbians and gay men, who were acutely aware of how social and legally marginalized they were. But lower-income urban neighborhoods also had their disadvantages; for example, city officials were less interested in providing services such as street cleaning. Furthermore, a distinctly homosexual neighborhood allowed the police to always know where homosexuals were.

The lesbian and gay bar was a central pillar of these communities. It offered space for socializing, hearing community news, and

meeting new friends or sexual partners. Boston's gay bar scene in the late 1940s ranged from the upscale Napoleon Club in Bay Village, where jackets and ties were required, to the Lighthouse in the city's notorious Scollay Square, which catered to sailors and gay male civilians.<sup>30</sup> Not far from the Napoleon Club was Vickie's, a lesbian bar in the Hotel St. Moritz, and Cavana's, a tough bar described by the *Mid-Town Journal*, a local scandal sheet, as "the bistro where muscular amazons, who could punch as hard as Popeye after he had eaten three cans of spinach, would cuddle blonde cuties on their laps as they guzzled boilermakers."<sup>31</sup> Many of these neighborhoods had nightclubs featuring performers who played to homosexual audiences using lesbian- and gay-specific language, stories, and songs.

These bars and clubs promoted the crossover appeal of drag performers and gay comics, who blurred gender and sexual lines as they had earlier in the century. The Jewel Box Revue, which started in 1930, was an elaborate touring show of female impersonators, lavish spectacle, and gay-themed comedy. The revue played smaller clubs, such as the Garden of Allah, but also large theaters in cities such as New York, where the show headlined at Loews State Theater at Forty-fourth Street and Broadway and Harlem's Apollo Theater. In production numbers such as "It's an Old Manish Custom" and "Can't Do a Show Without Girls," the performers spoofed and took seriously the conventions of gender roles.

These overtly homosexual shows were sometimes unwelcome in smaller cities. Butch lesbian singer Frances Faye, born Frances Cohen in Brooklyn, had a far easier time as a performer in small clubs. Noted enough to appear in a 1937 Bing Crosby film and on television, she was famous for singing jazz and show tunes in nightclubs. In the mid-1940s she began tossing off bawdy lines and references to homosexuality in songs, often adding, "It's not dirty, it's just how I say it." In the late 1940s she was hardly hiding her lesbianism, and in the late 1950s she was chanting at the end of her act, "Frances Faye, all the way, gay gay gay, is there any other way?"

Sometimes bars, especially in small cities, were the only site to offer community across class and gender differences. Ricardo Brown writes that "Kirmser's was the underground queer bar in St. Paul, a hidden sanctuary for homosexual men and women in the 1940s."<sup>32</sup>

Homosexuals new in town would hear about a bar or club in any number of ways. Sometime bars would advertise in code. Boston's College Inn Club ran advertisements that boasted the club had "Singing Waiters—New York Style."<sup>33</sup> Often when local newspapers ran exposés of "sex pervert" arrests, they would mention the bar name; this too would be a key—albeit an intimidating one—to finding community.

The growth of the new gay and lesbian communities can be better understood in conjunction with how other marginalized groups were treated in cities. Race, configured differently in each city, helped define the character and the political cultures of gay bars and communities. Marc Stein writes about how complicated the racial politics were in Philadelphia during the 1940s and 1950s, when the racially diverse city was becoming less segregated. While many white homosexuals were moving to or visiting Center City, the emerging "gay neighborhood," their African American counterparts were living and socializing in the neighborhoods in which they were born.<sup>34</sup>

Racial tension and violence were also indicative of widespread sexual anxiety. In June 1943 a small group of white sailors claimed they were jumped by Mexican Americans wearing zoot suits—long jackets with wide, padded shoulders worn over high-waisted, pegged pants. After the accusation, two hundred sailors swept through East Los Angeles and attacked all men wearing zoot suits. Many of those attacked were teenage boys, some as young as twelve or thirteen. The victims, accused of draft dodging and assaulting white women, were stripped and thrown into the gutter, their clothing burned. The riots continued for several days; the police did nothing to stop the thousands of servicemen who were displacing their sexual anxieties onto "illegal" Mexican American youths. After Eleanor Roosevelt condemned the riots as stemming from anti-Mexican discrimination, the *Los Angeles Times* attacked her for communist leanings. The zoot-suit riots were a turning point for the Mexican American community and organizing, and "the racial battles of the 1940s promoted a clear and increasingly powerful model of oppression-driven group-based political power."<sup>35</sup>

Seven years later, William Parker—whom many in the homosexual community dubbed "Wild Bill Parker"—became chief of

police in Los Angeles. His approach to law enforcement has been characterized as “Confront and command. Control the streets at all times. Always be aggressive. Stop crimes before they happen. Seek them out. Shake them down. Make that arrest.” Parker’s tough stance was clearly an attack on targeted groups. Not surprisingly, the arrests of those accused of “sex perversion” crimes skyrocketed. Police misbehavior, ranging from intimidation, threats, illegal searches, and blackmail to out-and-out violence, is never aimed at only one marginalized community. The growth of the new gay and lesbian communities, shaped not only by their members but also by outside forces, can be understood only in conjunction with how other marginalized communities are treated in these cities.<sup>36</sup>

Interracial marriage was criminalized in many states—and would be until the 1967 Supreme Court ruling *Loving v. Virginia*—and interracial dating was frowned upon. Even so, there was probably more conscious discussion of interracial relationships and racism in homosexual than in heterosexual communities. Sometimes these social arrangements were complicated. In Buffalo, New York, most African American lesbians met one another through a circuit of house parties. The more upscale and nonhomosexual black nightclubs, such as Little Harlem and Club Moonglo, were open to both black and white patrons and were hospitable to lesbians, thus creating a congenial interracial space for socializing.<sup>37</sup> In his July 7, 1943, diary entry, Donald Vining, who was working at the front desk of the William Sloane House YMCA in Manhattan, notes that two men, one “very blond” and the other a “very black negro sailor,” who were possibly a couple, came in looking for a double room, which they could not rent because the Y was full. While his fellow clerks voiced racist opinions, Vining wrote the following ambiguous, disconcerting self-reflection:

At all of which I sigh, for nothing has made me so hopeful and happy in a long time as the sight of that blond and the inky black sailor together, asking for a double. I suppose there’s a certain amount of hypocrisy in me that lauds such a relationship and shrinks from sex with the many negroes who frequent the Lyric and even the Apollo, but the fact that one

grants equality to other races doesn’t seem to me to mean that you necessarily should be willing to sleep with them. But is my revulsion a kind of prejudice? I don’t know but I think not.<sup>38</sup>

Awareness of a shared minority status across race, complicated by racial and gender tensions, led naturally to a homosexual political identity. This political identity, formed within a potentially vibrant, self-supporting social structure, took root in major American cities after the war and grew into the LGBT movement that we know today.