

# Love-Politics: Lesbian Wedding Practices in Canada and the United States from the 1920s to the 1970s

ELISE CHENIER

*Simon Fraser University*

IN 1972 THE BROOKLYN-BASED lesbian feminist newspaper *Echo of Sappho* profiled Sandy and June, a white butch and femme couple, on the occasion of their recent wedding ceremony. Sandy and June were one among hundreds of same-sex couples who had exchanged vows at Father Robert Mary Clement's Church of the Beloved Disciple, which opened in 1970 to cater to the spiritual needs of lesbians and gays. When asked how they felt about their wedding "in relationship to the women's movement," Sandy and June did not respond directly, describing instead what their marriage meant to them: it was "a holy union and very beautiful," they said. "This church makes you feel as normal as anyone could be."

Sandy and June's embrace of normal seems to anticipate the queer Left critique of the marriage equality movement that dominated American lesbian and gay politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Where once one's outsider status provided a perch from which to critique how capitalism and liberal democratic states worked hand in hand to privatize sexuality and to advocate for collectivist responses to social inequalities and injustices, Lisa Duggan argues, the modern marriage equality movement "upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within . . . heterosexist institutions . . . while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."<sup>1</sup> June and Sandy's seeming inability to draw a connection

I am deeply grateful to the many archivists who assisted me in this research; to historians Margot Canaday and Gill Frank, who shared valuable sources with me; to Reviewer A and the *JHS* copyeditor for making this a better, cleaner article; and to Annette Timm for her very thoughtful and generous editorial support. Research for this article was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 179. See also Gust A. Yepa, Karen E. Lovaasa, and John P. Eliaa, "A Critical Appraisal of Assimilationist and Radical Ideologies Underlying Same-Sex Marriage in LGBT Communities in the United States," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 1 (2008): 45–64.

*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 27, No. 2, May 2018  
© 2018 by the University of Texas Press  
DOI: 10.7560/JHS27204

between their wedding and the women's movement appears to confirm the depoliticizing nature of marriage.

The problem, however, is not that Sandy and June failed to grasp the radical potential of the women's movement and its critique of the oppressive nature of marriage and monogamy. It is that the tools we use to assess the post-World War II era, tools that draw on early feminist critiques developed in newsletters like *Echo of Sappho*, fail to grasp Sandy and June. As butch and femme—twentieth-century cultural identities in which Canadian and American women adopted and adapted masculine and feminine cultural codes to give shape and expression to same-sex sexual identity and desire—Sandy and June were what we today call “genderqueer.” For them, and for women like them, genderqueerness, sexual desire, and intimacy wound together in an “erotic dance,” but to the rest of their world, their genderqueerness marked them as freaks.<sup>2</sup> Wedding ceremonies, which, among lesbians in Canada and the United States, were common only among butches and femmes and studs and fishes (parallel identities in the black community), were one of the ways lesbians asserted a public feeling of love, and in the 1970s it was transformed into a political claim not for equality as normative political subjects but for equal standing with heterosexual citizens as non-normative queers. When Sandy and June wed, they followed a decades-old practice of transforming romantic, illicit love into a theory of justice. They practiced “love-politics.”<sup>3</sup>

In her 2013 article “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post Intersectionality,” Jennifer C. Nash examines second-wave American black feminists' discourses about love advanced by, for example, writer Alice Walker, poet June Jordan, and playwright Ntozake Shange. By theorizing love, they transformed the personal into a theory of justice. According to Nash, however, these theories have thus far been narrowly viewed as a practice of self-valuation.<sup>4</sup> They are much more than that. Love-politics as practiced by black feminists in America represent a “significant call for ordering the self and transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self and for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood . . . [for] producing new forms of political communities as a kind of affective politics.”<sup>5</sup> Nash's more expansive view allows her to show that affective love politics departed from the identity-based politics that dominated 1970s and 1980s black feminist (and mainstream lesbian and gay) politics in the United States and Canada. Although Nash's main objective is to push back against the marginalization of black feminist thought as a relic of an identitarian past and show

<sup>2</sup> JoAnn Loulan and Sherry Thomas, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny, and Other Rhythms* (San Francisco: Spinsters Book, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post Intersectionality,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 11, no. 2 (2013): 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

that “black feminism’s political tradition is rich and heterogeneous,” her insights into love-politics make possible new ways of understanding same-sex wedding practices among black and white lesbians in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Love was embedded in the political imaginary of some of the earliest women’s and gay liberation texts. American radical Left activist Carl Wittman’s 1969 “A Gay Manifesto” declared: “Where once there was frustration, alienation, and cynicism . . . we are [now] full of love for each other and are showing it.”<sup>6</sup> New York’s Gay Liberation Front described itself as “a revolutionary homosexual group . . . creating new social forms and relations . . . based upon brotherhood, cooperation, human love and uninhibited sexuality,” and in 1973 radical feminist Robin Morgan claimed, “We have a right, each of us, to a Great Love . . . a committed, secure, nurturing, sensual, aesthetic, revolutionary, holy, ecstatic love. That need, that right, is the heart of our revolution.”<sup>7</sup> When lesbian political activist Madeline Davis addressed the Democratic National Convention in 1972, she emphasized the right of gays and lesbians to love.<sup>8</sup>

It was black feminists, however, who developed and theorized love as political praxis, chief among them lesbian poets and writers June Jordan (who had a wedding ceremony in the 1970s) and Audre Lorde, along with writers and intellectuals Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>9</sup> According to Collins, in the context of America’s intense hatred of blacks, loving black

<sup>6</sup> Carl Wittman, *Refugees from America: A Gay Manifesto* (San Francisco: Council on Religion and the Homosexual, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Robin Morgan, “Lesbianism and Feminism: Synonyms or Contradictions?,” in *Speaking for Our Lives: Historic Speeches and Rhetoric for Gay and Lesbian Rights (1892–2000)*, ed. Robert B. Marks Rindiger (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 210. Recently, scholars working in a Western European philosophical tradition have taken up love as a political practice. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The analysis presented here, however, draws on four decades of black feminist theorizing that has been overlooked and remains unacknowledged by these scholars.

<sup>8</sup> Madeline Davis, “Address to the Democratic National Convention,” in Rindiger, *Speaking for Our Lives*, 179–80. Davis would later coauthor with Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> References to these feminists’ views on love can be found in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 161–86; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 295–300; June Jordan, “Where Is the Love?,” in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 268–74; Audre Lorde, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii; and Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” and “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984; repr., 2007), 53–59, 145–75. In her examination of African American feminists’ articulation of love as political praxis, Nash coins the term “love-politics.” See Nash, “Practicing Love,” 2–3.

people “constitutes a highly rebellious act.”<sup>10</sup> Political love, which June Jordan defines as “a steady-state deep caring and respect for every other human being, a love that can only derive from a secure and positive self-love,” claims, embraces, and restores the wounded black female self; it “stakes out a radical conception of the public sphere . . . based in a collective ‘public feeling’ of love.”<sup>11</sup> Distinct from identity politics, which seeks recognition for “the wounded subject,” love-politics calls for a transcendence of the self to produce “new forms of affective political communities . . . a collectivity marked by ‘communal affect,’ a utopian, visionary, future-oriented community held together by affiliation and ‘public feeling’ rather than an imagined—or enforced—sense of sameness.”<sup>12</sup> Within black feminist praxis, argues Jennifer C. Nash, love-politics constitutes a “critical response to the violence of the ordinary and the persistence of inequality that insists on a politics of the visionary.”<sup>13</sup>

In this article, I argue that wedding practices, by which I mean the enactment of a conventional wedding ritual by a same-sex couple, is love-politics in action. As Nash points out, African American feminist theorists’ formulation of love-politics specifically excludes romantic love, but given the intense hatred directed toward same-sex attracted people, lesbians’ pursuit and expression of romantic love equally constituted an act of rebellion. My argument also builds on Cathy Cohen’s critique of queer political practices that construct all forms of heterosexuality as oppressive and her insistence that liberatory practices must be alive to the diverse ways sexual oppression cuts across lines of difference. Traditionally, social historians of the lesbian and gay past draw on social movement theories that privilege identity formation and the rise of an oppositional collective consciousness since these are assumed to be the necessary conditions for spontaneous and organized resistance and protest that will lead to radical, transformative change.

Nash’s analysis of love-politics highlights a theory of justice that does not rely on identity and difference; when extended to include romantic love as expressed in wedding practices, love-politics allows us to make sense of a widespread cultural practice among those who rejected heterosexuality and simultaneously embraced its most iconic ritual. Seeing wedding practices as love-politics allows us to see how ceremonies and rituals queer historians have long viewed as oppressive functioned for some as means to resist the pathologization and criminalization of same-sex desire and to assert and celebrate one’s essential human dignity.

Critics of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century marriage equality movement have rightfully argued that advocacy for same-sex marriage privatizes sexuality, something that gay and feminist liberationists

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Nash, “Practicing Love,” 13.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 16–17.

<sup>13</sup> Nash, “Practicing Love,” 19.

fought so hard against. They have convincingly demonstrated how it fosters a new “homonormativity” and shifts queer politics toward neoliberalism. Yet hundreds of thousands of lesbians and gays embraced the opportunity to marry, even when the state did not recognize it, because wedding ceremonies and marriage rituals also serve as a powerful way to affirm queer love and desire. They are semipublic acts that claim, embrace, and restore the wounded self and radically reconceive the public sphere to include genderqueerness and same-sex desire and intimacies. Wedding practices contributed to the formation of social, sexual, and political communities based on a radical ethic of care rather than a shared injury or wounded identity.<sup>14</sup> When black, Latina, and white women like Sandy and June organized wedding ceremonies, they “imagine[d] a world ordered by love, by a radical embrace of difference.” Same-sex wedding practices were therefore part of a distinct political tradition that drew on conventional romantic forms to affirm queer life.<sup>15</sup>

Historians have traced female same-sex marriage as far back as 1778, when Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler established a household together in Wales.<sup>16</sup> Evidence of women who considered themselves married—none had a state license, of course—grows richer in the 1800s and richer still at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Boston marriages, a term used in America to describe long-term domestic relationships between two women who were financially independent and usually university educated, became common.<sup>17</sup> These examples concern white women, and no wonder. A stable source of income was essential to establish a household, and literate middle- and upper-class women were more able to produce and preserve records of their lives together.<sup>18</sup> The expansion of employment

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14. On the limits of identity politics and its corollary, the politics of recognition in the context of same-sex marriage in the United States, see Tom Boellstorff, “When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 227–48.

<sup>15</sup> People participate in ceremonies, rituals, and even political protests for diverse reasons. For example, some women likely wanted to marry because they had spent their youth fantasizing about wearing a white wedding gown and did not want to be robbed of the opportunity. Oral interview evidence suggests that some women married to signal to other women that their partners were “taken” and that flirting with them would not be tolerated. Yet, just as the fact that some people attend LGBTQ rallies in hope of meeting a sexual partner does not diminish the political significance of participating in a march or the march itself, the diverse motivations that led women to hold a semipublic wedding do not diminish the fact that such ceremonies affirmed queer life.

<sup>16</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1998), 120–25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 190–230.

<sup>18</sup> There are early traces of women of color forming such unions. Addie Brown, a working-class African American servant from Maryland, “longed to call her lover, Rebecca Primus, a Reconstruction-era teacher from a prominent black, Connecticut family ‘my husband.’” “‘If either Addie or Rebecca were a gent,’ commented Primus’s mother, ‘then they

opportunities during and after World War II meant that many more women could live together and support themselves into old age, and while many of them considered themselves married, a combination of conventional mores that placed a high value on discretion, middle-class sensibilities that held that one did not make a spectacle of oneself (unless of course one was marrying a person of the opposite sex), and the need to avoid exposure in order to maintain one's social and professional position meant that they would never have considered having a ceremony. Of course, in all social and economic classes, one also found women who regarded marriage as oppressive, outdated, and generally something to be avoided, regardless of the sexes involved.

Another type of marriage often framed as same-sex marriage was that between biological females who lived as a man / were men and cisgender women. Many of these couples applied for and received a marriage license because they presented themselves as female and male, either because the male partner was trans or because presenting as male was a survival strategy for living a lesbian life.<sup>19</sup> This article, however, focuses on women who made a public declaration of commitment as genderqueer women, in the style of a conventional wedding and in the presence of an officiant, and usually other lesbians. The earliest recorded ceremonies occurred in New York in the 1920s and 1930s between black women. According to Mabel Hampton, a black lesbian born in 1902, blues singer Gladys Bentley's 1931 marriage to her white girlfriend is only the best known; weddings between women were quite common.<sup>20</sup>

In post-World War II Canada and the United States, stud and fish and butch and femme communities had the following principal features: they existed in major urban centers and took root in some of the least desirable drinking establishments because only those establishments were willing to tolerate lesbian clients. These establishments were dangerous places for three reasons. First, bars were often raided by police, and everyone inside was at risk of being arrested on morals charges. Such an arrest could have dire consequences. Anyone caught up in these raids could be exposed as a homosexual, which could potentially result in job loss, the loss of one's

---

would marry.” Steven J. Niven, “Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke Ground with Marriage to a Woman in 1931,” *The Root*, accessed August 21, 2015, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2015/02/gladys\\_bentley\\_a\\_lesbian\\_icon\\_and\\_blues\\_singer\\_of\\_the\\_harlem\\_renaissance.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2015/02/gladys_bentley_a_lesbian_icon_and_blues_singer_of_the_harlem_renaissance.html).

<sup>19</sup> Alison Owsram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 146–48. For an example of such a marriage, see “Girl Who ‘Wed’ Another Girl: Pre-1950 Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Marriages in the U.S.,” San Francisco Public Library, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://pre-1950sgaymarriage.org/index.php> (site discontinued).

<sup>20</sup> Mabel Hampton, interview by Joan Nestle, undated (tape 1), *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA, Lesbian Herstory Archives*, Brooklyn, NY, accessed May 17, 2017, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/SPW63>.

housing, and alienation from family and friends. Second, men in and around the bars were known to harass and even assault butch and femme and stud and fish women. Finally, heavy consumption of alcohol often led to verbal and physical conflict between women. Going to a bar was a risk, and historians have characterized those willing to take it as courageous sex and gender rebels. Stud and fish and butch and femme women, most of whom were working class, refused to repress their same-sex desire or to submit to social and familial pressure to be heterosexual. Butches and studs fashioned their bodies in contemporary masculine styles and boldly ventured out into the public. By forming visible public communities, these women asserted queer women's right to exist and made it possible for other women to reconstruct their sexual selves from shameful and freakish to legitimate and desirable. Given the extraordinary vilification of homosexuality and female masculinity during these decades, these were tremendously significant acts.

Since at least the 1950s, weddings—by which I mean ceremonies involving two women who declared a commitment to each other before an officiate and that may or may not have included friends—were a significant feature of stud and fish and butch and femme communities in the United States and Canada.<sup>21</sup> They were “carried out with all the seriousness, ceremony and celebration of a natural nuptial proceedings between a male and a female [*sic*]” in cities across Canada and the United States.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the weddings were entirely conventional affairs conducted according to the customs of the time and shaped by the same constraints faced by any other couple; money and resources determined the scope and size of the event, but the wedding involved many of the standard trappings: invitations, rings, bridesmaids, a certificate of marriage, a cake complete with topper, and lots of drinking and dancing. Ivy, a Toronto femme and sex worker, described a wedding she attended in the mid-1950s as “a real wing-ding” complete with fancy clothes, a limousine, and a hired band, all extravagant luxuries for her social group. Some weddings were so big, she explained, that “even the cops would go.” She meant as guests, of course. In 1957 *Hush*, a local tabloid, reported a police raid of the wedding of “little Marlene B., the blushing bride, and Lillian ‘Butch’ O., the she-male groom who was attired for the occasion,” indicating that police attendance was at least as likely to be unfriendly.<sup>23</sup> In 1953 Philadelphians Naomi Garry and Elsie Holmes, an African American couple, sent out embossed invitations for their marriage celebration. Local police raided the event, reportedly on the suspicion that the couple had taken out a marriage license. Garry and

<sup>21</sup> Male same-sex couples also had wedding ceremonies, which I explore in “Outlaws to Inlaws,” a manuscript in progress.

<sup>22</sup> “She-Male Queer Colony Celebrate ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Marriage,” *Hush*, August 17, 1957.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* The relationship between the Toronto Police Force and gay women is explored in greater detail in Elise Chenier, “Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living ‘the Gay Life’ in Toronto, 1955–1965,” *Left History* 9, no. 2 (2004): 85–118.





Figure 1. Toronto tabloid *Hush* provided regular coverage of goings-on among local butch and femme lesbians, including this wedding ceremony. *Hush*, February 23, 1957, 1.

Holmes were charged with the illegal sale of alcohol. Neither woman attempted to conceal the gathering's purpose: they defended themselves against the charge on the grounds that they were entertaining wedding guests. The ten-pound turkey, large bowl of eggnog, and five-tier wedding cake served as corroborating evidence.<sup>24</sup>

Given that stud and fish and butch and femme lesbians rejected heterosexuality and insisted on making themselves publicly visible as queers, why did they embrace heterosexuality's most defining public ritual? For two principal reasons: first, asserting a right to give expression to same-sex desire extended to the right to make a public declaration of one's love for another; and second, while later critics would see conventional marriage as anathema to queer life, for many studs and fishes and butches and femmes, "bride"

<sup>24</sup> "Wedding' of Two Women Interrupted by Police," *JET*, April 16, 1953. See also Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30, 136.





Figure 2. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1960s. Individuals unknown. From the personal archives of Dorothy Fairbairn. Permission granted for use.

and “groom” fit with their queer identities and the logic through which they organized their relationships. Indeed, when Daisy de Jesus married couples in the Broadway Central Hotel lobby in New York City, the vows included questioning the femmes if they were willing to take their partner to be their “butch.” By reworking its normative conventions, the wedding ceremony gave form and expression to romantic love. Neither ironic nor an appropriation, it was a radical assertion of self-love and queer dignity.

Even though they were released from the social pressures and legal constraints imposed on married heterosexuals, butches and femmes and studs and fishes overwhelmingly sought long-term stability in their romantic relationships. All of the women Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy interviewed for their study of Buffalo’s public lesbian communities from the 1940s to the 1960s “entered the community with the hope of finding a perfect or great love, and many continued that search throughout their lives.”<sup>25</sup> Davis and Kennedy also found that lesbians tended to compare themselves to heterosexual models. In their relationships, butch and femme women “both drew on the patterns and language of the dominant heterosexual society and transformed them according to the imperatives of lesbian social life. The striking similarity between lesbian and heterosexual relationships of this period is the centrality of the gendered couple to the

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 245.



Figure 3. Edna Knowles and Peaches Stevens married at Liz's Mark III Lounge in Chicago. *Jet*, October 15, 1970, 54.

emotional and affectional life of both communities.”<sup>26</sup> Narrators described some relationships as “being like that of husband and wife,” even when they had not had a wedding ceremony.<sup>27</sup> Sue Prosin’s 1961 study of twenty lesbian couples’ attitudes toward role relationship and self-image shows that attitudes on the West Coast were much the same: “In areas related to marriage, the values were no different [from those in heterosexual culture]. They were, in many respects, more strongly projected. The very emphasis on ‘togetherness,’ the marked emphasis on fidelity, and the consistent expression of the concept of obligation and responsibility would seem to indicate that a great deal of the value system of the dominant culture has been retained.” She also noted greater identification with “the cultural concept of marriage among those who expressed an identification with masculine and feminine roles.”<sup>28</sup> Sociologist Ethel Sawyer arrived at the same conclusions

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 280, 286–87.

<sup>28</sup> Sue Prosin, “The Lesbian: A Study in Self-Image and Role Playing Patterns,” Sue Prosin Papers (Collection 2225), Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

in her 1965 study of a group of African American studs and fishes who hung around Jim's, a bar in St. Louis, Missouri. Her informants, Sawyer wrote, "have incorporated the value of mate stability." The ability to get along with one's mate was "the single most important criterion for ranking persons directly above them[selves]. . . . Members of Jim's groups speak of [couples who have maintained relationships for two or more years] with pride."<sup>29</sup> Prosin identified "fantasizing" as an important "means of adapting to or coping with mate instability. . . . With almost every new relationship it is, 'this time we'll make it last' or 'this time it's the real thing.' . . . The role of fantasy in the face of tremendous mate turnover operates to ensure one at the beginning of each new relationship that there is in fact reason not to drop out of the system—to leave the life—as this time it's sure to work out."<sup>30</sup> Despite the high turnover among romantic partners, serial monogamy remained the most common relationship pattern.<sup>31</sup>

As Davis and Kennedy point out, however, bars provided a place for women to meet, flirt, and form intimate relationships, but the constant flirting challenged relationship stability.<sup>32</sup> As African American student of sociology Eleanor Hunter put it, one's "recreational playground becomes a relationship battlefield."<sup>33</sup> Public lesbian culture took root in working-class bars, restaurants, and cafés. Flirting and sexual repartee formed the main language of communication, and relationships were notoriously difficult to sustain partly for this reason. Cjörli Egenhoff's 1969 account of a lesbian wedding describes how a newly married couple celebrated their nuptials with cake and Champagne at a popular local lesbian bar. The bride danced with a former girlfriend more than her new spouse liked, and a fight between the two butches ensued.<sup>34</sup> Guests of the bridal couple intervened to smooth out relations between the newlyweds. The incident illustrates a point made by sociologists and historians alike: bar life made lesbian community possible, but the emphasis on flirting, drinking, dancing, and good times worked against the long-term stability of monogamous relationships. Davis and Kennedy conclude that lesbians had two options: avoid going out, or trust your partner.<sup>35</sup> The public wedding ceremony was clearly a third.

<sup>29</sup> Sawyer, "A Study of a Public Lesbian Community," manuscript, Washington University, 1965, 24, <http://elisechenier.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Ethel-Sawyer-A-Study-of-a-Public-Lesbian-Community-1965.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Prosin, "The Lesbian," 24.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 231–77.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Hunter, "Double Indemnity: The Negro Lesbian in the 'Straight' White World" (unpublished manuscript), December 9, 1969, Nan Boyd Papers, "Black Lesbians," GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco.

<sup>34</sup> Cjörli L. Egenhoff, "Observations of a Sub-Cultural Wedding" (unpublished manuscript), 1969, Kinsey Institute Archives, Bloomington, IN.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 254. See also Sawyer, "A Study," 27.

Lesbian weddings provide further evidence that stud and fish and butch and femme couples did not seek to overturn gender roles. Rather, they negotiated them in their own unique and creative ways. Not having a legally binding marriage allowed plenty of room for negotiation, too. Since the relationship was not subject to state law, terminating it was much easier than ending a relationship was for couples who had legally wed. Parting ways did not incur legal costs, but the women were also unable to enjoy legal protection concerning shared assets or shared responsibility for children.<sup>36</sup> Butches held no property or legal rights over femmes, and, in the United States, butch and femme women could marry across the color line. It seems that lesbian marriage partners could have at least some of their cake and eat it too.

A 1951 investigation at the Women's Army Corp (WAC) training camp in Fort Myer, Virginia, reveals how lesbians used wedding ceremonies and marital conventions to identify and define sexual and affective relationships, a practice that stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of military investigators, who identified lesbians solely by sexual activity.<sup>37</sup> On 5 January 1951 Private Shirley Bowdon purportedly confessed to her commanding officer, Major Merrill, that she was a homosexual. The following day Bowdon was interviewed by two male officers of the military's Criminal Investigation Division and admitted to having "performed acts of cunnilingus," an act that in the eyes of the investigators confirmed that she was a true lesbian. The officers asked her to identify other lesbians in the ranks. Bowdon gave them eleven names. Within three months, the list of suspected lesbians had grown to eighty-two and included personnel stationed at Fort Lee, a WAC training camp 133 miles south.

The most common evidence that investigators used to identify homosexuals was eyewitness accounts of acts of physical touching such as kissing, embracing, mutual masturbation, and cunnilingus. Members of the Women's Army Corps, however, were more likely to identify weddings and marriages as proof. At Fort Myer, for example, WACs identified five married couples among their peers. Private First Class Norma Jordan was "married to a girl prior to entering the service and they had a license." Private Breita Burch was married to twenty-year-old Private Alice Grover, and they wore wedding rings they had given to each other. In a love letter Private E. C. McHale had sent to Private Virginia Page, McHale "declared that she was deeply in love with PAGE and that as soon as they could avail themselves of leave, they would go on a 'honeymoon'; buy wedding rings; and after leaving the service, purchase a home together 'a million miles from anyone

<sup>36</sup> My own research shows that many lesbian women had children by choice. See Lynn Crush, interview with the author, 1993; and Ivy Barber, interview with the author, 1993.

<sup>37</sup> Testimony of Peggy J. Davis, March 25, 1951, Office of the Provost Marshal, Fort Myer, VA, p. 6, decimal 220.8, box 3778, classified decimal file, 1950-51, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917, Record Group 407, National Archives at College Park, MD.

else' and just live by themselves." One informant told investigators that two women who worked in a local tobacco factory supplied couples with marriage licenses.

Two of the women under investigation stood up to investigators and brazenly announced their plans to marry. The first was Private Martha C. Stahovic, who informed them that she and her girlfriend, a civilian, had engaged in mutual cunnilingus, that her girlfriend was arriving within the month, and that they would be married. The second was Private First Class Peggy Davis, one of the eleven women Bowdon originally identified as a lesbian. During her interview she admitted only to kissing and petting with a civilian named Doris Marie Hall. Seven weeks later in a second interview, she "spoke freely of an abnormal sex life . . . divulged that she performed mutual cunnilingus with Hall . . . [and] said that she and Hall intended to be married soon."<sup>38</sup> That Davis's proclamation of her "homosexual proclivities" included the announcement of her upcoming wedding illustrates how marriage ceremonies functioned as one way some women affirmed the dignity of same-sex love and desire. Her same-sex desires, in other words, were more than sex acts.

Davis's admission was evidence enough to issue her discharge papers, but instead, investigators informed the Washington Police Department's Morality Division that on 11 March 1951 an unlawful wedding was to occur. Captain Roy E. Blick led the raid on Room 1014 of the Ambassador Hotel at 10:30 p.m., where officers found fourteen women, seven in female apparel and seven in male apparel—everyone but the bride, Doris Marie Hall, a WAC. Peggy Davis, the groom, and her best man sported black tuxedos. Also in attendance were Mr. and Mrs. Tutino, who acted as officiates. No one was inebriated, and no acts of lewd or lascivious behavior were witnessed; thus, the only charge that could be made was one against Mr. Tutino for impersonating a minister. At some point during the raid, however, nineteen-year-old bridesmaid Private Bonita Ashurst called Blick a "bastard" and a "son-of-a-bitch," earning her a charge of disorderly conduct. Once back on the base, all the WACs present at the marriage were placed under investigation. Asked by a military officer why the couple had married, a private explained, "Just to make things a little better."<sup>39</sup>

Peggy Davis and Doris Marie Hall married in a hotel room because it was one of the few public spaces lesbians could secure for such an event. Some pastors tried to make this option available to same-sex couples. In the 1920s New York's Reverend Munroe, for example, began performing

<sup>38</sup> Cunnilingus is significant because oral and anal sex operated as confirmation of homosexuality for men, and because of uncertainty about what constituted homosexuality in women, it appears that the same standard was used for women. This standard of measure would seem to confirm Alfred Kinsey's finding that mutual masturbation among adolescent boys was common, thus explaining experts' reluctance to consider it a homosexual act.

<sup>39</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 192n68.

wedding ceremonies for same-sex African American couples in his church.<sup>40</sup> Couples more commonly had to organize their own space, but renting private venues for weddings was tricky, since managers and owners had the right to refuse to rent to homosexuals or, for that matter, to anyone else they deemed objectionable, including, of course, African Americans. Precisely because they were refused service in most white-run venues, urban black communities had their own large venues for big social events. Puerto Rican New Yorker Daisy de Jesus recalls how lesbian weddings would occur in Harlem's large halls in the midst of a regular night's entertainment, and spontaneous ceremonies took place at house and rent parties as well.

White lesbians did not have access to such places and were more likely to marry at home, in a hotel room, or in a bar, the only public places where queers could openly congregate. Regular patrons of the Palais, a Detroit bar popular among white working-class lesbians, celebrated weddings with the full support of its straight manager.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes bartenders assumed the role of officiate. At other times a regular became known for her willingness and skill at presiding over the ceremony, like Toronto's Pat Murphy, better known as "Father Murphy" for just this reason.<sup>42</sup> New Yorker Daisy de Jesus performed spontaneous wedding ceremonies in the less noisy lobby adjacent to the bar at the Broadway Central Hotel.<sup>43</sup> Those who planned in advance preferred ceremonies in private homes and hidden niches in city parks.<sup>44</sup>

When stud and fish and butch and femme couples had wedding ceremonies, they married as bride and groom, not as bride and bride. A 1957 photo of Ivy, a white butch, and Gerry, a black femme, in the Toronto tabloid *Hush* shows a smiling Ivy in a tux and Gerry in a white dress.<sup>45</sup> A Minneapolis couple wearing tux and dress posed for a snapshot as they grinned over a two-tier cake with the knife in their hands. A photo published in the popular African American magazine *Jet* shows an unnamed bride wearing a long white sleeveless gown, the groom, "Peaches," sockless in a fashionable suit and slick pompadour haircut.<sup>46</sup> Bobbi, a butch lesbian of white heritage, was not a photographer but gladly served as one for an African American friend who married twice. Both ceremonies were elaborate events in which the groom wore a tux, the bride a formal gown.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Hampton, tape 1, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Roey Thorpe, "The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938–1965," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 170.

<sup>42</sup> Ivy Barber, interview with the author, 1993. Religious studies scholar Marie Cartier uncovered the same wedding practices in Los Angeles. See Cartier, *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology before Stonewall* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Daisy de Jesus, interview with the author, June 20, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Chuck Renslow, interview with the author, May 17, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> "Freak Wedding! Bridegroom Is a Girl!," *Hush*, February 23, 1957, 1.

<sup>46</sup> "Two Females 'Married' in Chicago—to Each Other," *Jet*, October 15, 1970, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Bobbi, personal communication, July 12, 2011.



Wedded couples' genderqueerness and their adaptive relationship to mainstream heterosexual culture allowed them to view the wedding ceremony as a fitting form for expressing and celebrating romantic love, a point made clear by two black studs from Tampa, Florida. Riding the wave of political activism that encouraged direct action tactics to challenge exclusionary institutional structures, African American couples Brenda Ann Bush and Mary Alice Wesley, and Jannette Louise Spires and Thelma Jean Harris informed the press that each couple had paid the one-dollar fee for a marriage license at the Hillsborough County Court.<sup>48</sup> In a December 1970 interview with the *St. Petersburg Times*, Bush explained: "I feel ours is like any other match. It's ordinary. But they put the burden down on us and try to stop us." Their love was ordinary; it was only others who made their queerness a burden. As they saw it, their gender identity, not their sexuality, formed the basis of their claim to the right to have their marriage recognized by the state. Bush and Spires asked the journalist if they did not look masculine. "We even walk like men," they insisted. But, they said, "we are not hermaphrodites. We are Lesbians." When they signed their marriage certificates as grooms, they did so as women. It was on the basis of gender difference, on their ability to fulfill the role of husband and wife, that these couples demanded the state recognize their intimate relationships. As a political stance, their actions contrasted sharply with emerging white lesbian-feminist theory, which viewed gender difference as anathema to liberation.<sup>49</sup> Their marriage politics also stand apart from the (wounded) identity politics that would soon come to dominate lesbian and gay rights politics.

The call for a love-politics came from another corner: progressive Christianity. The 1963 pamphlet *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* pushed back against the antihomosexual hysteria that defined Cold War American culture and politics.<sup>50</sup> The Quaker pamphlet was soon followed by the formation of the multid denominational Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in Los Angeles. Following their 1964 founding conference, CRH clergymen advocated blessing same-sex unions as a way of asserting the dignity of gay people. Acting on their recommendation, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, founders of the lesbian civil rights organization Daughters of Bilitis (formed in San Francisco in 1955) facilitated a community discussion about church and state marriage rights for lesbians.<sup>51</sup> While they themselves had no desire to marry, they supported lesbians' and gay men's right to do so. Martin and

<sup>48</sup> Nancy Osgood, "Their Choice of Mates Not Covered by Law," *St. Petersburg Times*, December 12, 1970, 6B. Thanks to Gill Frank for bringing this story to my attention.

<sup>49</sup> Davis and Kennedy, *Boots of Leather*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 69. See Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 94.

Lyon did eventually marry on 16 June 2008, providing yet more evidence of the significance of the historical and political context in interpreting marriage as a political practice. In the 1970s liberal feminists like Martin and Lyon did not see marriage as desirable or necessary. Three things likely changed their minds: their advanced age, a concern to protect their estate, and the fact that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the need to assert one's power in the face of homophobic opposition to same-sex marriage equality had a strategic value that it did not in the 1970s.

Countless lesbians and gay men jumped at the chance to have a church wedding. In fact, Reverend A. Cecil Williams of San Francisco's United Methodist Glide Memorial Church was already performing ceremonies for his lesbian, gay, and trans congregants. United Church of Christ Reverend Thomas Maurer, who was also president of the militant homophile organization Society for Individual Rights (SIR), followed suit. Between 1968 and 1974 more and more ministers publicly came out as gay and founded gay-positive congregations, and as they did, more and more couples organized wedding ceremonies. Troy Perry's ecumenical Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), founded in Los Angeles in 1968, and Polish Catholic father Robert Clement's Church of the Beloved Disciple, founded in New York City in 1970 and also ecumenical, reported that blessing unions was one of the most popular services they provided.<sup>52</sup> Some lesbians and gays, including Perry's own congregants, accused same-sex wedding celebrants of "aping the other established churches" by reproducing conventional rituals rather than forging a new path, but their criticisms had little to no effect.<sup>53</sup> In 1971 both the *Los Angeles Advocate* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared that a gay marriage boom was under way.<sup>54</sup>

Perry was by far the most radical of all the out gay clergymen. At the same time he established the Metropolitan Community Church, he began strategizing to challenge state laws that criminalized sodomy.<sup>55</sup> Less known are his efforts to force the state to recognize same-sex marriage. As in many other states, marriage in California was defined as the joining together of two people, and the legislation did not specify that they needed be of the opposite sex. In March 1969 Perry blessed the union of Neva Heckman and Judith Ann Bellew, and the following year he launched a lawsuit in which he argued that Heckman and Bellew's marriage was, in fact, legal

<sup>52</sup> Troy Perry, interview with the author, May 8, 2012; and Father Robert Clement, interview with the author, July 7, 2011. See also "Homosexuality: Gays on the March," *Time*, September 8, 1975.

<sup>53</sup> Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions*, 186.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Grieg, "The Boom in Gay Marriages," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 14–15, 1970, 1, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 267.

since it complied with the state's definition of marriage.<sup>56</sup> The court ruled otherwise, but the case demonstrates that Perry saw same-sex marriage as a tool that could be put to work in the broader movement's Herculean task of transforming the way Americans viewed "the homosexual."

As advocates for social and political change, clergymen like Perry encouraged couples to consider sharing their wedding story with the media to bring more attention to the issue. After two years on the job, Reverend Bob Wolfe of the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto finally found a couple willing to do so. "Linda" and "Nancy"—they requested to remain anonymous—were a white butch and femme couple. One wore a tux, the other a white dress. As they explained to the journalist assigned to cover the story, the issue was a matter of simple justice: "Straight people get married when they're in love. Why shouldn't we?"<sup>57</sup>

Gay and women's liberationists had plenty of reasons why lesbians and gays should not get married. Martha Shelley characterized marriage as a "form of Uncle Tomism" intended to "reassure the straight society that we are respectable."<sup>58</sup> In his enormously influential text "A Gay Manifesto," Carl Wittman embraced love but characterized traditional marriage as "a rotten, oppressive institution." The marriage contract "smothers both people, denies needs, and places impossible demands on both people. . . . Gay people must stop gauging their self-respect by how well they mimic straight marriages. Gay marriages will have the same problems as straight ones except in burlesque. . . . To accept that happiness comes through finding a groovy spouse and settling down, showing the world that 'we're just the same as you' is avoiding the real issues, and is an expression of self-hatred."<sup>59</sup> Many gay and women's liberationists viewed the church, the family, and the state as the key institutions that produced the conditions of their oppression, and they did so by imposing gender roles that reinforced men's authority over women and heterosexuality as natural. This criticism extended to butch and femme culture. Lesbian feminists regarded masculinity and femininity, even among women, as oppressive.

Working-class femme Joan Nestle and trans activist Leslie Feinberg disagreed with this interpretation and argued that butch and femme are unique sexual identities based on a claim to sexual pleasure forged in a culture that insisted women's sexuality be subordinated to the goal of

<sup>56</sup> "Perry Plans Marriage Test," *Advocate*, June 24, 1970, 2.

<sup>57</sup> "I now pronounce you . . . er," *Toronto Sun*, April 6, 1975.

<sup>58</sup> Martha Shelley, "On Marriage," *Ladder*, October/November 1968, 46–47.

<sup>59</sup> Wittman, "A Gay Manifesto," in Karla Jay and Allen Young, *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Douglas Books, 1972), 330–41. The manifesto was initially distributed by the radical gay liberation group Red Butterfly and by the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. Its appearance in Karla Jay and Allen Young's anthology ensured it the largest possible audience and established it as a foundational text.

procreation and the fulfillment of men's sexual needs.<sup>60</sup> In a 1971 essay on the topic, butch lesbian and DOB president Rita Laporte extended the conversation to include an examination of marriage. Whether between a woman or a man or a femme and a butch, when marriage is built on a "master and slave" relationship in which one person—usually the femme—was considered less worthy than the other, it was oppressive. But "the lesbian butch/femme marriage can and usually does hold two full human beings." With the liberationist critique of monogamy as patriarchal and capitalist in mind, she argued,

the truly monogamous Lesbian, butch or femme, is so not out of a morality picked up from the church or elsewhere, but out of a deep desire to dedicate herself to one particular other person. She simply does not enjoy promiscuity, or changing partners. . . . She is made whole by her love, her marriage, and this wholeness gives her the freedom to grow into the fullness of her humanity. . . . There is a kind of feeling between a butch and a femme in love with each other that is neither purely erotic nor purely friendly, though these feelings are present too. There is a total and liberating kind of possession, each of the other and each by the other.<sup>61</sup>

Just as Nestle and Feinberg rejected lesbian feminists' critique of butch and femme culture as a perpetuation of heteropatriarchy, Laporte argued that radicals who denied "the beauty and authenticity of such lifelong, monogamous Lesbian marriages" overlooked a deeply meaningful aspect of queer women's experience.<sup>62</sup> Just as butch and femme reworked conventional sex and gender norms, lesbian weddings reworked conventional heteronormative rituals.

Lesbian wedding practices of the 1950s and 1960s, performed in semi-private settings, were in the 1970s used in a very public manner to challenge homophobic attitudes, to insist on the dignity of same-sex couples' intimate relationships, and to protest lesbian and gay men's exclusion from the rights and benefits of citizenship. Following on the heels of Troy Perry, on 18 May 1970, second-year law student Jack Baker and librarian Michael McConnell of Minneapolis visited a local county clerk's office to apply for a marriage license. Baker and McConnell had been dating for four years, but their application was about more than romantic attachment and tax benefits; it was a planned political action that aimed "to provoke a heterosexual backlash by rhetorical and psychological confrontation, [and to] make our

<sup>60</sup> Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986), 100; Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 394–405.

<sup>61</sup> Rita Laporte, "The Butch/Femme Question," *Ladder*, June/July 1971, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

presence felt by the straight society, make them face the issue.”<sup>63</sup> Further, they believed that by integrating gay cultural practices like nonmonogamy and liberationist values that rejected patriarchal gender roles and the legal subordination of one partner, gays would liberate heterosexuals from marriage’s oppressive aspects. Conventionally attractive, middle class, and white, Baker and McConnell made great copy, and their story was picked up by mainstream news outlets across America.

Many more women than men, however, undertook similar actions. Significantly, the majority were women of color, and none were middle class.<sup>64</sup> The first of these challenges was launched in 1970 by white Kentucky residents Tracey Knight, a butch go-go dancer, and Marjorie Jones, a single mother. Both used pseudonyms to limit confrontation with a “cultural climate ‘so rough, so hostile’ to homosexuality that . . . you were afraid to go out sometimes.” They were approached by an attorney who proposed they challenge the state’s marriage law by applying for a license.<sup>65</sup> Knight and Jones agreed, had a marriage ceremony in a local gay bar, and on 8 July 1970 applied for the license. Knight hoped that their action would “make [heterosexual] people realize that we’re human beings the same as [they] are.”<sup>66</sup> The case went to court, and during the trial Louisville County’s attorney, Bruce Miller, threatened to arrest Jones for contributing to juvenile delinquency (because she was raising her children while in a lesbian relationship). Jones sent her children to live with gay friends outside of the state until the trial was over. She was terrified Miller would make good on his threat but was nevertheless willing to take the fight all the way to the Supreme Court if it went that far. It did not.<sup>67</sup>

Jones and Knight and most of the women who followed them emphasized that treating their love for each other as the same as love between people of the opposite sex was a matter of justice, which was distinct from the equal rights argument advanced by most lesbian and gay activists. The National Gay Task Force and other, more locally based gay rights organizations steered away from the marriage issue for fear that it would undermine the struggle for municipal-level nondiscrimination ordinances, which were the focus of most gay rights organizing in the 1970s. Franklin Kameny was an exception. An American astronomer who in 1957 was fired from his job with the Army Map Service when it was discovered he had been arrested on a morals charge, Kameny spent the rest of his life openly fighting for civil

<sup>63</sup> Michael Boucai, “Glorious Precedents: When Gay Marriage Was Radical,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 27, no. 1 (2015): 140.

<sup>64</sup> This finding is based on an extensive review of American mainstream and lesbian and gay print media and is part of ongoing research for a book-length manuscript.

<sup>65</sup> Catherine Fosl, “‘It Could Be Dangerous!’: Gay Liberation and Gay Marriage in Louisville, Kentucky, 1970,” *Ohio Valley History* 12, no. 1 (2012): 45–64.

<sup>66</sup> Margery Jones, interview by Catherine Fosl, January 16, 2012, University of Louisville Oral History Center.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

rights for gay people. In 1961 he cofounded a Washington, DC, chapter of the homophile organization the Mattachine Society and was a founding member of the East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO). Unlike other lesbian and gay activists who adopted a civil rights model in the fight to end gay oppression, Kameny insisted that lesbians and gays had a right to marry. In 1974 he appeared as a debater on the popular Public Broadcasting Station program *The Advocates* for its episode "Should Marriage between Homosexuals Be Permitted?" and in 1975, acting in his capacity as a board member of the newly formed National Gay Task Force, he supported the marriage challenge launched by Michele Bernadette Bush and Paulette Camille Hill.<sup>68</sup> He also appeared before the District of Columbia City Council's hearings on revisions to its marriage and divorce statutes to push for state recognition of same-sex marriage.<sup>69</sup>

That all people should be free to love and that gays and lesbians deserved equal rights, including the right to marry, were not two sides of the same coin, although it was easy to see them that way. In a 1973 appearance on David Susskind's enormously popular television talk show, Bernice Goodman, a fierce advocate for lesbian mothers and gay and lesbian youth and the first psychotherapist in America to come out publicly, said that she used to view marriage as a legal institution that oppressed women but that lately she and her long-time partner, Sandy Churnik, had come to feel that marriage validated loving, committed relationships.<sup>70</sup> "There is nothing that makes valid in our society . . . the homosexual way of life, or any part of our lifestyle," Goodman said.

We have to validate ourselves . . . [and] realize our importance, and our lifestyle, that it's very respectable, very worthwhile, but we've never had enough images, we've never given ourselves back to ourselves. . . . We like living together and we want to be able to share this with everyone, even down to the corner grocer and shoemaker, as corny and trite as that may sound.

Churnik: I want total recognition of the degree of commitment we share in comparison to the degree of commitment that any man and

<sup>68</sup> *The Advocates*, program 425, "Should Marriage between Homosexuals Be Permitted?," aired May 2, 1974, on WGBH, WGBH Media Library & Archives, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/f4ae6e-should-marriage-between-homosexuals-be-permitted>. Kameny's witness was Elaine Noble, a member of the Daughters of Bilitis and the National Organization of Women and an instructor at Emerson College in Boston.

<sup>69</sup> "License Change Denied in Same-Sex Marriage," *Capital*, July 10, 1975.

<sup>70</sup> *The David Susskind Show*, February 11, 1973, Miscellaneous Sound Recordings 0274, Rudy Grillo sound recordings, 1970–89, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division; Bernice Goodman, *The Lesbian Mother* (New York: Institute for Human Identity, 1973). Interestingly, Goodman appeared on the Susskind show anonymously but then revealed the name of a book she had just written. For more about Goodman's activism, see "In Memoriam," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 17, no. 1 (2004): xix–xxii.



woman are permitted to share in our society. We're entitled to it equally.<sup>71</sup>

Both supported same-sex marriage, but for different reasons. For Churnik, it was a matter of equal civil rights. For Goodman, the social recognition and legitimization marriage brings would make lesbian life more livable.

As Goodman herself acknowledged, lesbians interested in social and state recognition of their intimate relationship were "a minority in the gay minority." Imagine, then, what it was like for African American and Latina women, who were even more of a minority within the gay minority. Yet five of the lesbian couples who in the early 1970s made their wedding ceremonies an opportunity to publicly demand their love be recognized as on par with that shared by opposite-sex couples were women of color. Like white women and men, they demanded a license and insisted that they had the right to love anyone they wanted. For women of color, these actions put them in a minority within the African American and Latino communities, as well as within lesbian and gay political circles.

The first instance, already alluded to above, involved Brenda Ann Bush and Mary Alice Wesley, and Jannette Louise Spires and Thelma Jean Harris, two couples from Tampa, Florida. When they applied for a license in 1970 they were told to return in four days. The application went to Judge William C. Booker, who issued a court order denying the license on the grounds that marriage is intended for "the procreation of progeny." He explained that while there existed no statute prohibiting the marriage of two females, "marriage is defined as a legal contract of matrimony by a man and a woman . . . and can be entered into only by persons of the opposite sex."<sup>72</sup> The two couples do not appear to have pressed their cases further, at least not in the courts. The second couple to go public were Latinx Bobbi Jean Sanchez, a butch feminist, and Joan Kearse, a black femme who did not identify as a feminist. They were married in New York in 1971 at a ceremony officiated by gay priest Father Robert Clement, who had also married Sandy and June, the couple discussed earlier. Their wedding was covered by the *New York Post*, a local daily, and by the short-lived lesbian periodical *Echo of Sappho*.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to the Tampa couples, Sanchez, who strongly identified as a feminist, tried to downplay the ways their relationship was gendered. Kearse would have none of it, and because the traditional female role suited her, she could not abide feminist claims that she was oppressed. Women were well aware of the feminist critique of both sex roles and the institution of marriage as oppressive, but that did not mean they agreed with it.

<sup>71</sup> *The David Suskind Show*, February 11, 1973.

<sup>72</sup> Osgood, "Their Choice of Mates," 6B.

<sup>73</sup> "2 Women Are Joined in 'Holy Union' at Church," *New York Post*, April 19, 1971; Lesbian Herstory Archives, "Relationships—Marriage 12000," "Lesbian Marriage, Echo of Sappho," no date [1972?], 10.

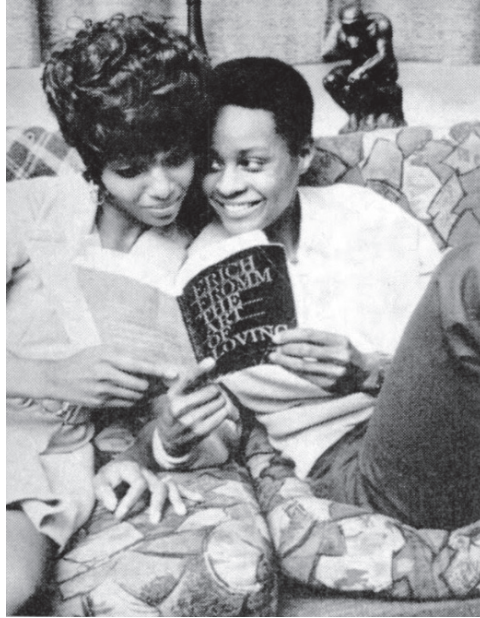


Figure 4. Donna Burkett and Manonia Evans.  
*Jet*, November 1971, p. 20.

Later that same year, Wisconsin couple Manonia Evans and Donna Burkett applied for a marriage license in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In all other documented cases, the clerk accepted the application and referred it to his superiors for consideration, but when Evans and Burkett handed theirs over, Milwaukee county clerk Thomas Zablonksi flat out refused to accept it. Evans and Burkett sought a court ruling ordering Zablonksi to issue the license. According to the lesbian-feminist journal *Mother*, the suit charged that “the denial of the marriage license deprived the two women of due process and equal protection of the law.” “The law should protect us and help us the way it does any two straight people who love each other and want to live together,” said Burkett. “Those are our civil rights; that’s what this is all about.”<sup>74</sup> Their efforts to obtain a marriage license failed, but Evans and Burkett went ahead with a Christmas wedding at the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church. Two hundred and fifty supporters attended, including Burkett’s mother.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> “Marriage Fight Due,” *Mother* 1, no. 7 (December 1971): 1.

<sup>75</sup> Donna Burkett, interview with the author, January 31, 2014. Given the number of guests and the fact that the media covered their request for a license, it is remarkable that there is no newspaper coverage of the wedding itself.



Figure 5. Grace Thornton (right) and Phyllis Marshall of Dayton, Ohio. *Jet*, February 20, 1975, 23.

In 1974 Phyllis Marshall and Grace Thornton, both of Dayton, Ohio, applied six times to the Montgomery Domestic Relations Court for a marriage certificate.<sup>76</sup> “It’s a case of the government ruling other people’s lives,” explained Thornton in *Jet*.<sup>77</sup> The couple made no attempt to appear respectable. Thornton was remarkably frank about past convictions for armed robbery, perhaps because she saw the oppression of poor women with the oppression of lesbians as interconnected: “Like a lot of poor Black girls, we eventually got hooked into prostitution at an early age. That’s almost a way of life for a poor girl who wants to make anything of herself.” The couple launched a lawsuit for one million dollars in damages in the hope

<sup>76</sup> “Law Bans Wedding of Ohio Lesbians,” *Jet*, February 20, 1975. They may have been inspired by Jack Baker and Michael McConnell, who appeared on Phil Donahue’s popular television program, which at that time was recorded and aired in Ohio.

<sup>77</sup> “Law Bans Wedding of Ohio Lesbians,” *Jet*, February 20, 1975, 22.

that it would pressure the state to act in their favor. "We love each other and are not ashamed to scream it from the roofs," Thornton explained. "The whole world is love, if people would just let it be." The two women told reporters that if they were ever issued a marriage license, they would have a "big church wedding."<sup>78</sup> Not long after their story hit the press, they were kicked out of the public housing apartment they shared.

The most significant difference between the views held by adherents to gay and women's liberationist ideology and those of African American and Latina women was their relationship to the church and the traditional family, institutions viewed by liberationists as the primary source of oppression and exclusion for women and queers. Furthermore, for many people of color, liberationist groups did not provide the network of support needed for everyday survival, and the heterosexual nuclear family remained a valued refuge, as well as an important site for political organizing.<sup>79</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's research on San Francisco's Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) found that part of the cultural alienation Latina and Latino lesbians and gays felt in mainstream gay culture was the result of that culture's "alienation from one's family, from one's community, from one's self." One of his lesbian narrators reported: "The hardest and most rewarding experience I felt in dealing with my Gayness is the acceptance of *familia*. It's a very sensitive subject, especially in the Latino culture when the daughter, who is expected to leave only after her wedding, decides to leave because of her Gayness. . . . My gayness is very important to me, but my Raza consciousness tends to come first."<sup>80</sup> Gay liberationists, GALA explained, "suggest our second ailment [after the Catholic Church] is the family; on the contrary, it is our source of strength. At the core of GALA's philosophy is not to alienate our selves from our families and community but to help them come to understand our gayness in a latino context."<sup>81</sup>

African American lesbians and gays were in the same position, with two noteworthy differences. Black churches were much closer to the political struggles of the 1950s and 1960s than were Catholic churches. Second, African Americans were still reeling from the 1965 Moynihan Report's attack on the African American family: *The Negro Family: The Case for*

<sup>78</sup> Dale Huffman, "Two Women Fighting to Wed Each Other," *Dayton Daily News*, April 11, 1974. After this story appeared, both women were evicted from their shared Dayton Metropolitan Housing Department apartment. Ace Elliott, "Female Couple Evicted," *Dayton Daily News*, December 11, 1974. Both articles in "Relationships—Marriage 12010," LHA.

<sup>79</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 63–64.

<sup>80</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "'That's My Place!': Negotiating Racial, Sexual, and Gender Politics in San Francisco's Gay Latino Alliance, 1975–1983," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 242.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 250–51.

*National Action*, better known by the name of its author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. It aimed to shed light on the causes of higher levels of poverty among African Americans. Although the report is credited with inspiring the “War on Poverty,” there was much in it to be criticized, most especially Moynihan’s claim that the structure of family life in the black community was a “tangle of pathology . . . capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world” and that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time.” Rather than focus on external factors like racism, the report identified black families as the underlying problem. Specifically, Moynihan claimed, the black family’s “matriarchal structure” led to the emasculation of black men. “The steady expansion of welfare programs,” Moynihan concluded, “can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.”<sup>82</sup>

Although Moynihan was looking for causal explanations for the disproportionately high rates of poverty among blacks, his findings provided fuel for other fires. In the 1950s mental health experts blamed “smothering mothers” for causing male homosexuality, and the Moynihan Report breathed new life into this pseudo-Freudian image. According to historian Kevin Mumford, 1970s polling indicated that as a group, blacks showed little difference from whites on the issue of homosexual discrimination. However, “popular commentators easily connected the purported deviance of the black family to the incidence of homosexuality, dispersing homophobia into public debates on race” and intensifying the silencing of African American lesbians and gays.<sup>83</sup> The other effect was to make African Americans that much more protective of conventional family life. In the 1970s black lesbians and gays had more reason to defend the family than denounce it.

Coming out was also made much more difficult by the fact that black lesbians and gay men relied on their communities as their community relied on them to survive in a hostile world. The pressure to marry and have children faced by white women was about meeting their own culture’s normative expectations; for women of color, the pressure to marry and have children was also about shoring up a minority struggling under oppressive conditions enforced by the majority.<sup>84</sup> By failing to live up to

<sup>82</sup> US Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1965), 14. For a queering of the Moynihan controversy, see Kevin J. Mumford, “Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965–1975,” *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 53–73.

<sup>83</sup> Kevin Mumford, “The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969–1982,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 62.

<sup>84</sup> There is a rich literature on the topic of the politics of reproduction in the era of black nationalism. See Sherie M. Randolph, “Not to Rely Completely on the Courts: Florynce ‘Flo’ Kennedy and Black Feminist Leadership in the Reproductive Rights Battle, 1969–

those expectations, one risked disappointing one's family, one's community, and one's race. Where many white women chafed under their parents' and community's heterosexist expectations, women of color were torn between a desire to maintain an allegiance to their community and contribute to its survival and the desire to live outside of heterosexuality. Rejecting heterosexuality, in other words, was hard, but turning one's back on the entire African American "race" was even harder simply because the consequences were more profound. To be alienated from the African American community left women with few resources to cope with the racism of everyday life.

This, according to Eleanor Hunter's 1969 study of black lesbians in southern California, was one of the reasons there were almost no African American lesbians to be found in the bars, the only public space other than all-women sports teams where women congregated and socialized in this era.<sup>85</sup> So where was everyone? African American lesbians, she found, balanced the need to sustain ties to their community and protect their families from shame by living behind a heterosexual "front." They dated men. Many even married and had children, keeping their same-sex activities well hidden.<sup>86</sup> Many avoided even developing friendships with other lesbians. This was not true everywhere, of course. There had been a vibrant African American bar community in Buffalo since at least the 1940s and in St. Louis, Missouri, and Philadelphia since at least the 1960s.<sup>87</sup> In late 1960s New York, a group of African American women formed the Soul Sisters as a social alternative to the white-dominated bars. A few African American women also took on leadership roles in the lesbian homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis.<sup>88</sup> With the exception perhaps of those involved with DOB, however, these women played little or no role in shaping feminist and gay liberationist politics.

Lesbians of color were also less likely to be found among the membership of groups and organizations that plotted movement politics. This was partly because of white women's racism but also because the women's and gay liberationist critique was irreconcilable with many African American and Latina lesbians' relationship to family.<sup>89</sup> This is not to say that women

---

1971," *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 1 (2015): 136–60, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>, accessed October 2, 2017; and Robyn Ceanne Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 103–7.

<sup>85</sup> Eleanor Hunter, "Double Indemnity: The Negro Lesbian in the 'Straight' White World," December 9, 1969, unpublished paper, "Black Lesbians" folder, Nan Boyd Papers, GLBT Historical Society.

<sup>86</sup> See also E. Frances White, "Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism," *Radical America* 18, no. 2–3 (1984): 19–20.

<sup>87</sup> See Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 113–50; Sawyer, "A Study"; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 49–83.

<sup>88</sup> Aida Rentos, interview with the author, April 11, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> See White, "Listening to the Voices."



of color were uncritical of patriarchy, homophobia, and sexism but that because family was so necessary and because all members of their social group needed to be liberated, not just women or queer people, the solutions they proposed and pursued were less likely to involve the dismantling of the family and the church. Alice Y. Hom's research on the lesbian of color community in Los Angeles and New York in the 1970s and 1980s illustrates the point. One of Hom's narrators reported that "the white lesbian feminists she encountered were very anti-male and unaccepting of formerly married women with children—particularly those with male children. Many lesbians of color, on the other hand, did not take an anti-male stance as they felt that their liberation was tied to the freedom of their racial communities."<sup>90</sup> Although sexism and patriarchal attitudes were as troubling for women of color in the civil rights and Black Power movements as they were for those in the New Left, antiwar, and gay liberation movements, within the black community men were considered allies. Leaving mixed-sex movement politics to form women-only groups was not an easy or even a desirable strategy.<sup>91</sup> Most lesbian of color activists were uninterested in a political movement or strategy that left men of color out.<sup>92</sup>

The assertion that love—if "let be"—is the pathway to justice was an argument that many lesbians embraced through their participation in conventional marriage rituals. Wedding practices reinscribed lesbians as capaciously loving and in so doing created—even if only for a brief moment—a radical conception of the public sphere based in a public feeling of love.<sup>93</sup> Those who in the 1970s launched a public campaign to demand the state recognize their relationships as on par with heterosexuals were putting into political practice values and ideals that were forged in stud and fish and butch and femme culture.<sup>94</sup> Just as masculinity did not belong to men nor femininity to women, wedding ceremonies did not belong to heterosexuals. From their perspective, the wedding was a cultural ritual that celebrated and validated loving sexual relationships between two people. It liberated

<sup>90</sup> Alice Y. Hom, "Unifying Differences: Lesbian of Color Community Building in Los Angeles and New York, 1970s–1980s" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2011).

<sup>91</sup> Deborah H. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72.

<sup>92</sup> Hom, "Unifying Differences," 79, 101. See also the Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Albany, NY: Kitchen Table / Women of Color Press, 1986).

<sup>93</sup> Nash, "Practicing Love," 13.

<sup>94</sup> Because my research so often elicits a strongly worded assertion that not all lesbians and gays embraced marriage, it is perhaps worthwhile to acknowledge here that, just as not all lesbians and gays embraced either the assimilationist or the liberationist politics of this era, so it is that not all lesbians and gays embraced wedding practices. But many did and still do, which makes the subject one of historical significance and value.

queer love from the shackles of antihomosexual sentiment.<sup>95</sup> When rooted in love-politics, wedding practices assert a radical conception of the public sphere based not on the wounded subject or group rights but on an affirmation of queer life.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELISE CHENIER is a professor of history at Simon Fraser University. She is currently completing a manuscript on same-sex marriage in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s tentatively titled "From Outlaws to Inlaws." She is the founder and director of the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony ([www.alorarchives.org](http://www.alorarchives.org)) and the creator of [interracislintimacies.org](http://interracislintimacies.org), an online, open-access archives and visualization of the historical research process. Her scholarly publications, which have appeared in journals such as *Radical History Review*, *Oral History Review*, and *Left History*, fall between traditional scholarship on the history of sexuality and gender and on various aspects of building online archives.

<sup>95</sup> Heather Love's advocacy for a queer ordinary suggests a similar effort to create a space for subjectivity that is not rigidly defined as either normative or antinormative, as is the tendency in queer theory. See her "Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary," in *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 74–95.