

Lesbians in 1950s America: Legal Violence and Lesbian Spaces

Danika Mein, Simon Fraser University

Growing up in a Catholic family, my grandmother was never able to live as her authentic self. A looming fear of rejection and neglect pushed her away from coming out to her loved ones, and instead she lived as a falsified version of herself for decades. After the passing of her husband and years of living a life that did not align with who she truly is as a person, she came out to her family and friends as lesbian. Lesbianism during the 1950s in North America was called unacceptable and unnatural. It was shameful to be anything except for straight, forcing women to hide their identities in fear of rejection from their families, friends, and society. The notion of a “proper lady” was to be an obedient wife (to a man), and their only requirements beyond submissiveness were to bear and raise children. As decades have passed and views on sexual identity have shifted, lesbians have become free to express themselves and live authentically. My grandmother, since the passing of her husband, has finally felt comfortable enough within society and within her family to live the life she has always yearned for. She is now happily dating a woman and has been very free in sharing who she is with those around her. Her story is what inspired me to research and share experiences like hers, as it is important to talk about the discrimination and hatred lesbian women faced in the 1950s.

This paper will explore the lesbian individual and her community in 1950s America with a focus on the legal violence that she faced during this period. I will begin by looking at *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Malinda Lo (2021) to show a fictional depiction of the lesbian experience in 1950s America. While this book is an imagined scenario, it is a well-researched example that displays the authentic and real experience that many lesbian women would have had. Topics that I draw on from this book include lesbian spaces and legal violence faced by lesbians. I will then move my focus to my secondary research sources regarding legal violence. In this section of my paper, I will discuss the historical violent actions taken by law enforcement officers and lawmakers against lesbian individuals and this community and how these actions negatively impacted them socially, emotionally, and sometimes physically. I will then highlight lesbian spaces and how legal violence impacted these safe havens for this community. Using this

Unwriting & Queering

evidence, I argue that the legal violence taken against lesbian women in 1950s America, despite its clear intent to abolish these individuals, brought together a community that would flourish in the years to come.

Last Night at the Telegraph Club is the story of Lily Hu, as she navigates the uncovering of her sexuality in a time where lesbianism was thought to be unacceptable. Despite the opinions of her family and society, Lily explores a world that is unknown to her, finding interest in a friend from school, Kathleen Miller. The two girls share a romance before they are separated by both the law and their families. Before they are torn apart, Lily and Kath frequent the Telegraph Club, a hotspot for lesbian women, to find like individuals and to freely express themselves. It is here that the two girls learn to identify and accept their sexuality and begin to build a community of people who understand and support them despite what the societal outlook on lesbianism is. The Telegraph Club showcases the importance of spaces for lesbian women, as these spaces offer a safe environment for these individuals to express their true identities and to find comfort in community. In the case of Lily, the Telegraph Club is a driving force in her finding her footing within her sexuality. It is because of the exposure to an otherwise hidden lifestyle and the unwavering support of other women that Lily can confidently identify as lesbian.

Eventually the Telegraph Club is raided by police, while Lily and Kathleen are there. The two girls get separated in the chaos and we later find out that Kath is arrested and unable to contact Lily. In an attempt to figure out where Kath is, Lily and some other women whom she met at the Telegraph Club contact a lawyer of whom they say “he’s one of us” to track down her whereabouts (343). Although it is not directly said, it is understood in this comment that to navigate the legal system lesbian women must sneak around to ensure that their true identities stay hidden. It would not have been a viable solution to simply contact the police themselves to inquire about the location of Kathleen as it would be implicating themselves with the “crime” of lesbianism. This interaction with the law showcases how the legal system actively worked against lesbian individuals and this community. Firstly, the abrupt raid on the Telegraph Club gives an example of the ways in which the legal system imposes violence against lesbian spaces. The club is raided based on alleged homosexual activity, and its attendees are targeted simply for being lesbian. Secondly, the calculated and hidden movements in working around the legal system that lesbian women must take in fear of repercussions shows the violent suppression that is imposed on them. They are not able to navigate the world around them in a manner that is afforded to non-

lesbian individuals, as they know they will not be treated with the same kindness that a supposedly “normal” person would.

In the novel’s historical context, 1950s America, Queer women experienced discrimination within the workforce because society viewed these individuals as unnatural and something to fear. Lesbian women were disallowed from working as civil servants or joining the army because their sexuality made them untrustworthy individuals who should not be placed in any position of power. In the case of women working within the military specifically, “lesbianism – or simply the suspicion of lesbianism – became an easy justification for dismissal” (Boyd, “Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s” 119). Eskridge notes that “this anti-homosexual fervor motivated federal agencies to adopt more explicitly anti-LGBT policies” (377). Societal views on lesbian women seeped into laws regarding the restrictions placed on the LGBT community in terms of how they were able to interact with the workforce. This blatant legal violence and discriminatory outlook from society forced many lesbian women into hiding, as they could not risk their social standing or jobs. Similar to the restrictions on civil servant and military positions, the state of Florida launched a campaign during the 1950s that moved to fire any gay or lesbian teachers on the basis of them exposing children to a homosexual lifestyle (Boyd, “Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s”). Sexuality was not separate from the workplace in the eyes of the law, and lesbian women were disallowed from working in a position with any authority or power. Legal violence against lesbian women impacted them economically in that their jobs were threatened, it impacted them socially in that society viewed them as deviants, and it shaped them emotionally as the weight of discrimination forced them to reject or deny their true identities.

Legal violence did not just impact lesbians’ working lives, but also the spaces they occupied. Lesbian spaces acted as environments in which these women could freely be themselves. They were able to find both friendly and romantic relationships in these spaces and build communities that would support them in their sexuality. Boyd comments that “public visibility in bars, taverns, and nightclubs engaged lesbians in a relationship with the state as a collective, as a social group” (“Lesbian Space, Lesbian Territory” 71). This collective, in the eyes of the law and society, was a danger to the public as these spaces encouraged homosexuality, which was deemed unnatural and illegal. Thus, lawmakers and enforcers targeted these spaces and those who existed within them. Legal violence regarding lesbian spaces was often physical, as they would bring in police dogs to both intimidate and injure women (Faderman 165). Sexual harassment was also

common during the raids of lesbian spaces. For example, a raid of a Los Angeles lesbian bar included a strip search of all patrons and employees that were present at the time of the raid (Faderman 165). This violent treatment goes beyond the necessary force that would be required of a raid and is due to the outlook on lesbian women from law enforcers. Lesbian women were seen as threats to society and to the family unit and were thus treated with cruel and violent punishments.

Faderman, in speaking about legal violence and the LGBT community, says that “the worst police harassment took place inside the gay bars” (164). Undercover female police would be sent into these establishments to entrap women into what they believe to be a normal lesbian encounter. Once these women implicated themselves with the crime of lesbianism, they would be arrested. This had detrimental effects on their lives outside of these lesbian spaces, as often their families and workplaces would find out about their sexually deviant behavior. These “undercover agents threatened the safety of bars and taverns – no one knew who was watching whom” (Boyd, “Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s” 109). The looming threat of being found out by an undercover police officer took away the feelings of safety, comfort, and community within many of these lesbian spaces. This uncertainty drove many lesbian women away from these spaces in fear of their sexuality being uncovered to their families, friends, and workplaces. Legal violence first worked to remove the lesbian individual from these spaces, but this was not entirely successful, as many women still congregated in bars despite the possibility of persecution. Instead of focusing on the individual, then, legal violence seemed to switch its focus to the establishment instead.

In 1949, the liquor license of a lesbian bar called the Black Cat was revoked based on alleged homosexual activity. This action was appealed by the owners of the bar with no success, so they hired a lawyer and took their fight to the courtroom. It was here that judge Robert L. McWilliams shut down their case, denying the right for the LGBT community to gather. This decision highlights the laws view on lesbian women in that “[...] the public assembly of homosexuals on a regular basis was clearly a frightening prospect to law-makers” (Boyd, “Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s” 122). Disallowing a group of people to come together based on their sexuality is an example of clear discrimination against lesbian women taken by lawmakers and enforcers. It was not until 1951 that the Supreme Court overruled McWilliam’s decision and returned the liquor license to the Black Cat and “affirmed that homosexuals were, indeed, human beings, and the public assembly of homosexuals was not in itself illegal” (Boyd, “Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s” 122). This ruling from the US Supreme Court

Unwriting & Queering

began paving the way for lesbian women to claim a position within American society as respected individuals, but there was still much work to be done, as legal violence against lesbian women would not end here.

The Black Cat was certainly not the only lesbian bar to face legal violence during the 1950s. Tommy's Place was also shut down following a police raid of the establishment in 1954. All three owners of the bar were arrested and "were charged with contributing to the delinquency of minors by serving them alcohol" (Lo, "The True Story"). The raid took place due to police suspicions of underage girls visiting the bar and being sold alcohol, marijuana, and narcotics by the bar owners, bartenders, and patrons of the bar (Lo, "The True Story"). Many young girls who visited the bar were forced to testify against the three owners, and one girl recounts being told she could either testify against the bar or face trial as an adult herself (Lo, "The True Story"). Months after the raid and the finishing of the trial two of the three owners were sentenced to prison on the count of selling narcotics or alcohol to minors. Following the trial and sentencing of these women, those who knew them said it was unlikely that any narcotics were being sold or used within Tommy's Place, and that the drugs that were found during the raid were likely planted by the police (Lo, "The True Story"). The raid on Tommy's Place and the events that followed clearly show the disadvantage lesbian women faced while dealing with the legal system. These women were discriminated against not due to fears of exposing minors to alcohol or drugs, but to "the threat of homosexuality and gender nonconformity" (Lo, "The True Story").

In the decades following the 1950s, lesbian women continually worked to carve out a space for themselves within society. Many homophile movements came to fruition during this period, with the Daughters of Bilitis being the first lesbian group that appeared during the 1950s (Faderman and Timmons 128). This organization, like other homophile groups, offered lesbian women a community that would validate and support them as their authentic selves. Unlike lesbian bars, the Daughters of Bilitis began as an underground support group, meaning they were not subject to violent raids or scrutiny from the law. As membership grew and the organization became more well established, they became more visible to the public and worked to offer a supportive community to lesbian women across America. Homophile organizations such as Daughters of Bilitis functioned to pave the way for national recognition and acceptance of the lesbian individual and community. It is because of the initial work of groups like this that freedom was granted to lesbian women in America.

This paper has highlighted the legal violence faced by lesbian women in America in the 1950s. Not only were individual women impacted by this violence, but the lesbian spaces that many of these women found communities within were also targeted. Lawmakers and enforcers actively worked to strip lesbian women of their identities and any spaces that validated them. The raids on lesbian spaces were violent acts and were taken with the intent to abolish the lesbian individual and community. Despite all of this, the lesbian community flourished throughout the following decades and established a place within society. They are now viewed by American law as humans deserving of rights and respect and are no longer treated as social and sexual deviants.¹⁹ This did not come without the efforts of the lesbian individual and community in the 1950s, though, as they set the precedent for modern day lesbians to move throughout the world without fear of violent legal repercussions. The title of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is a reference to Chapter 40, in which Lily admits to her mother where she was when the raid happened and is kicked out of her family home, but the novel makes the Telegraph Club an important setting not only for Lily's journey of self-discovery, but also for the positive community it creates. For teenage readers, the historical reality gives a sense of continuity and perspective on the challenges of being lesbian now, and for me as a reader that context supports my empathy for my grandmother.

¹⁹The rise of right-wing power in American politics under Trump is endangering this.

Works Cited

- Boyd, Nan Alamilla. "Lesbian Space, Lesbian Territory: San Francisco's North Beach District, 1933–1954." *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 61–85.
- Boyd, Nan Alamilla. "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s: Harassment, Prosecution, and the Legal Defense of Gay Bars." *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 91–119.
- Eskridge, William N. "Federal Law and Policy." *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*, edited by Marc Stein, vol. 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004, pp. 375–80.
- Faderman, Lillian. "Butches, Femmes, and Kikis: Creating Lesbian Subcultures in the 1950s and '60s." *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, Penguin, 1992, pp. 159–87.
- Faderman, Lillian, and Stuart Timmons. "Organizing Underground." *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, Basic Books, 2006, pp. 105–37.
- Lo, Malinda. *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. Dutton, 2021.
- Lo, Malinda. "The True Story of the Raid on Tommy's Place." *Malinda Lo*, 22 June 2021, www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/6/22/the-raid-on-tommys. Accessed 9 July 2024.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Nicky Didicher in guiding my research and offering support whenever needed.

I would also like to thank my grandmother and her girlfriend for sharing their story with me. You both inspired me to research a topic that is deserving of exploration, and I am grateful I now understand a piece of your personal histories.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).