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Still ACTingUP
Voices from ACTUP's Oral History Project
on the Current State of the LGBTQ Community

By

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Examination of the ACTUP Oral History Project using assimilation and activist identity theories reveals activists' questionable presumptions about LGBTQ marriage, conflation of LGBTQ and activist identities, and nostalgia. Findings suggest a transformation from counterculture to assimilated subculture via segmented assimilation in which advantaged cohorts assimilate while others do not.

Keywords: ACTUP, activist identity, LGBTQ marriage, counterculture, assimilated subculture, segmented assimilation, cohorts.

Introduction

Last year, conservative LGBTQ people refused to participate in the annual parade in Los Angeles, dubbed “the Resist March,” because they felt it was too political. In a National Public Radio story, Matthew Craffey, a member of the conservative LA Log Cabin Republicans, said, “It’s just very disappointing to me. I feel this is the one weekend a year we really can put the politics aside.” Meanwhile, Brian Pendleton, a spokesman for the parade, doesn’t mind that corporate sponsors withdrew their support for a parade with a political message: “I think people would...wonder if their messaging has been coopted by corporate America.” For Drian Juarez, a transgender woman, the politicized parade “is about coming back to our roots” (Duran 2017). In “The Queer/Gay Assimilationist Split: The Suits vs. the Sluts” (2001), Benjamin Shepard demonstrates that this split within the LGBTQ community—conservative vs. confrontational—have marked the entire history of the gay liberation movement. On the one side are assimilationists, who seek a place at the national policy table by focusing on gaining LGBTQ legal rights while disentangling gay liberation from other social justice issues like poverty, homelessness, racial justice, and access to medical care. Assimilationists tend to be White and middle class; they align with conservative politics and bourgeois social values, and they seek to minimize the differences between the LGBTQ community and the White, middle class elite by working within the system, and by upholding the public/private divide that characterizes bourgeois society. On the other side are liberationists, who challenge the foundations of the existing social order in America by questioning taken-for-granted institutions like marriage and militarism. Liberationists seek to address all forms of discrimination and social injustice affecting LGBTQ people, including the class structure, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. They see an emancipated sexuality as a means of cultural transformation and promote a distinct

LGBTQ identity within a society in which there is no ‘mainstream’ (Ferry 2012). They identify the source of America’s social problems as coming from a single source: a White, Christian, middle class (or better), abled, heterosexist, male dominated, and capitalist society (Shepard 2001).

An examination of the Oral History Project, a collection of testimonies from former ACTUP members, suggests that the quarrel between assimilationists and liberationists rests on monolithic assumptions about assimilation, a complex and varied social process. The testimonies suggest that the LGBTQ community has transformed from a counterculture to an assimilated subculture, evidencing fragmentation that suggests ‘segmented assimilation’, in which some cohorts advantaged by race, class and youth assimilate while other groups, including the older generation, remain largely unassimilated.

The sample is not broad enough to determine the assimilative path of minorities, gender non-conforming, and the working class, but there are hints that they have been segmented out of this assimilation. This reflects the sample itself, for ACTUP was a self-selecting group mostly comprised of White, middle-class men, as discussed below. This paper will argue that the LGBTQ community has been ‘de-sexualized’ in a way analogous to the de-racialization of other minorities on their path to assimilation. And it will show that the assimilationist/liberationist binary stems from monolithic ideas about assimilation on both sides, questionable presumptions about LGBTQ marriage, the conflation among liberationists of LGBTQ identity with activist identity, nostalgia for the old neighborhoods and for their youth, and the fear that they will be forgotten.

An LGBTQ House Divided

The gay liberation movement began in fits and starts in the Sixties with the general consensus among LGBTQ people that official intimidation including police raids of bars was far too great a factor in their lives (Shepard 2001). The leading organization advocating for LGBTQ people before Stonewall was the Mattachine Society, which approached LGBTQ rights from an apologist perspective and sought only tolerance, because that was the most they could hope for at the time. The riots at California Hall in San Francisco in 1965 and at Stonewall in New York in 1969 sparked a new political radicalism within the community and a new willingness to confront the rest of American society while proclaiming LGBTQ difference. The movement formed a natural alliance in the Sixties and through the Seventies with the women's movement and other countercultural and anti-racist movements, for they all shared a common enemy: the White, Christian, heterosexist, and conservative factions of American society. Although gay liberation dubbed itself a 'unisexual' group, some lesbians were torn between the two movements; there were, however, practical considerations including self-interest and mutual support favoring this alliance—for example, not to have two separate parades (Shepard 2001). The paramount concern of both the LGBTQ and women's movements was the autonomy of the body and sexuality from public or governmental scrutiny and control. In "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," Lisa Duggan articulates the goal of LGBTQ liberationists as "the expansion of a right to sexual privacy against the intrusive, investigatory labeling powers of the state, and the simultaneous expansion of gay public life through institution building and publicity" (Duggan 2001, 180). Both liberationists and assimilations seek the same right to

sexual privacy (viz. 'respectability') accorded to heterosexuals without fear of governmental or public scrutiny and control.

The division within the movement came into sharp focus shortly after the Stonewall uprising in 1969, when the conservative Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) broke from the newly formed Gay Liberation Front (GLF) to lobby on behalf of gay people for legislative reform. The constitution of the GAA stated that the group is, "exclusively devoted to the liberation of homosexuals and avoids involvement in any program of action not obviously relevant to homosexuals" (Shepard, 52-3). This narrow political vision has been a hallmark of assimilationist tactics through the decades: to pursue legal progress without 'rocking the boat' too much. In contrast, the liberationists seek to promote distinction over commonality and fundamentally change society through a broad political agenda that advocates for the poor, the homeless, the gender non-conforming, the disabled, and racial minorities. To liberationists, the assimilationists are social conformists who see LGBTQ sexuality from an apologist perspective; they regard them as people whose lives are generally comfortable in American society with the exception of their sexuality. To liberationists, assimilationists are too closely aligned with the white, patriarchal, heterosexist, middle class Christian social factions whom they see as their oppressors. To assimilationists, liberationists are extremists who flaunt behaviors that offend bourgeois morality and political causes that alienate LGBTQ people from the rest of White, middle class society.

The role of sex within the public sphere constitutes the biggest division between the two sides. Assimilationists regard sexuality as a private matter that does not dominate their identities; they have traditionally supported laws that enforce the private/public divide that characterizes White bourgeois society, including the policing of parks, rest areas, and public bathrooms.

Assimilationists promote lifetime monogamous relationships characteristic of bourgeois society and condemn ‘promiscuity’ and rampant sexual displays like overt cruising and raucous LGBTQ parades. Liberationists see gay identity as primary, value a separate LGBTQ subculture, and regard sex as something to revel in privately and publicly. “‘Perverts of the world unite!’ was a liberationist anthem during the Sixties” (Shepard 2001, 56). Liberationists seek to expand the notion of sexual freedom beyond ‘consenting adults in the privacy of the home’ to include a kind of privacy-in-public—not to have sex in public, but to feel free to display affection in the same way that heterosexuals can and not to need to hide their sexuality. Indeed, during the Seventies and Eighties a lively gay sexual street life flourished in certain cities, with active cruising and signaling through fetishized dress such as leather and different colored handkerchiefs denoting various sexual preferences (Newal 1986), numerous video stores with booths for spontaneous sexual encounters, and an expanding LGBTQ commercial sector (Duggan 2002). Since Stonewall, increasing LGBTQ artistic representation in the media has aided in bringing greater visibility to gays and lesbians, displacing the moral constraints of bourgeois sensibility that had formerly required the community to remain invisible to the general public.

And then came AIDS. The disease arrived around 1980; by the mid-Eighties it gripped the LGBTQ world in terror and isolation. Opposed and scorned by the rest of society and ignored by a president who wouldn’t even mention the word ‘AIDS’ until the disease claimed the life of his friend, Rock Hudson, six years into the epidemic, liberationists and assimilationists, and gay men and lesbians came together as never before. During this period ACTUP—the group upon which this study is based—formed and began its legendary series of public protests and daring stunts like dumping the ashes of dead friends and lovers on the White House lawn in a demand for increased funding for medical research, AIDS education and prevention, and for speeding up

the availability of anti-HIV medications. ACTUP was one of several activist movements at the time, including Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), and is the only one with a transcribed oral history. During this era, AIDS activists and fundraising groups downplayed the less ‘socially respectable’ aspects of gay sexuality, such as recreational drug use, anal sex, promiscuity, and bodily fluids in an effort to woo an American public that was at best ambivalent and at worst openly hostile to the first casualties of the disease (Harris 1997). Nevertheless, the 1986 ‘Bowers vs. Hardwick’ ruling by the Supreme Court, which upheld outdated and pernicious pre-liberation Georgia sodomy laws, confirmed a widespread cultural attack against gays and lesbians: even sex between consenting adults in private was deemed illegal by the Court. In this hostile and urgent social atmosphere, the rift between the assimilationists and liberationists disappeared and gay advocacy became a ‘big tent’ encompassing groups including single-issue assimilationists, multi-issue coalitions, and confrontational activists (Duggan 2002).

The rift burst wide open again in 1994, when a faction of White assimilationist gay writers’ circle, dubbed the Independent Gay Forum (IGF) and led by Larry Kramer, Andrew Sullivan, and Michelangelo Signorile, positioned itself as ‘gay centrists’ and portrayed liberationists as political extremists. Aligning with the American Right, they set aside the progressive causes of the liberationists in favor of the rights to marriage and military service, two of the foundational institutions of our society, and professed conservative values, including a pro-life stance that betrayed the movement’s longstanding alliance with feminism (Duggan 2001). With their mantra, “We’re just like you,” they cultivated an image similar to the white, middle class elites—and similar to most Congressional lawmakers. The gay media abetted this image makeover by highlighting the ‘high disposable income’ of this new market niche; however, their demographic research was based on the mostly White middle class readers of gay

publications (Teunis 2007). By winning the support of foundations and lobbyists with a clear and easily articulated focus on ‘rights’, assimilationists de-prioritized the more complex social issues championed by liberationists such as poverty, housing, medical coverage, and racial injustice. They ‘embraced the enemy’ in an effort to fend off the furthering of the anti-gay statutes that were sweeping the nation at the time, like the Federally-sponsored Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 and numerous anti-gay state ballot initiatives in the elections of 2000 and 2004. The LGBTQ “Millennium March” in Washington, D.C. in 2000 epitomized the widening gap between assimilationists and liberationists. Billed as a patriotic, conservative, and pro-life affair, it aimed to placate the right-wing media and its constituents while excluding leather folks, trans-genders, social activists, and sexualized displays from the parade (Shepard 2001).

These assimilationists intentionally widened the rift in the movement by calling upon the ‘good gays’ to reject the ‘bad gays’ for what they characterized as their promiscuous, drug-abusing lifestyle (Crossley 2004). They defined the ‘good gays’ as people who are gender conforming, romantic, and patriotic; who share small town family values; who desire lifelong monogamous marriage; who do not have a subculture or active protest movement; and who conform to the bourgeois separation of the public and private spheres—namely, those LGBTQ people who most resemble the very ruling class categories that the liberationists see as the enemy (Ghaziani 2011; 2014). They defined the ‘bad gays’ as those who value erotic experimentation and exploration, who do not equate sex with romance or committed monogamous relationships, and who are publicly open about their sexuality. The ‘bad gays’ include people in the leather, fetish, SM, and transgender communities, many of whom have little interest in fitting in with the rest of society. These LGBTQ people became the chief focus of social control. The ‘bad gays’ share a “resistance habitus” (Joseph 2002)—“the hallmark of resistance to dominant

heterosexual norms and mores” (Crossley, 239)—which motivates them to rebel against socially imposed rules of sexual conduct, including monogamous marriage. In contrast, assimilationists presented monogamous marriage as the key to social ‘respectability’. As Andrew Sullivan, a leading assimilationist, contends that “marriage is not simply a private contract; it is a social and public recognition of a private commitment. As such, it is the highest public recognition of personal integrity” (Duggan 2002, 187). Sullivan and other assimilationists equate ‘personal integrity’ with monogamy and believe it is the key to attaining the right to privacy, including the right to display affection in public in the same way that heterosexuals can without hiding their sexuality.

It is undeniable that in recent years LGBTQ people have made considerable advances in American society, including progress in gaining civil rights like marriage and military service, in winning greater societal acceptance—64% of Americans approve of LGBTQ marriage (Gallup 2017)—and in fighting the AIDS epidemic. Formerly gay neighborhoods have transformed into luxury enclaves through a de-concentration of LGBTQ people and an influx of wealthy heterosexuals while LGBTQ people now live in many neighborhoods with heterosexual majorities in certain cities (Ghaziani 2014). At the same time, the rise of the Internet has made it easier for gay people to connect socially with others regardless of their geographic location in cities like New York and has decreased the need for ‘gay ghettos’. These developments have led conservative gay writers like Andrew Sullivan and Amin Ghaziani to triumphantly proclaim the advent of a ‘post-gay’, ‘post-AIDS’ society in which LGBTQ people have assimilated by becoming just like heterosexuals. In “There Goes the Gayborhood,” Ghaziani claims that “sexual orientation is losing primacy for how we define ourselves” (2014, 5) and that LGBTQ people now “disentangle [identity] from a sense of militancy and struggle” (28). He further claims that

LGBTQ people “are adopting the perspectives and attitudes of heterosexuals, the dominant group, who, in turn, are incorporating gay people into their existing social structures” (Ghaziani 2014, 28). In other words, *we* have amended our offensive ways and now *they* accept us.

Ghaziani and Sullivan portray a one-sided abandonment of a distinct LGBTQ identity, sexual culture, and political movement as the means of assimilation to mainstream society. Although Ghaziani acknowledges that assimilation into the mainstream may be easier for some LGBTQ people than for others, just as it has always been easier for some people to ‘pass’ as straight (Chauncey 1994), he dismisses liberationists as outmoded, regressive factions who resist inevitable social change: “Assimilation into the mainstream is always accompanied by infighting within a minority group, especially between those who are eager to blend in and those who are determined to hold onto what makes them different” (2014, 49).

Liberationists like Lisa Duggan and Sarah Schulman reject the terms of this assimilation as exclusionary of many Queers, including racial minorities, working class people, gender non-conforming people, and the disabled. In their view, the assimilationists’ rights agenda aligns with the new neoliberal economic order that followed the dismantling of the ‘welfare state’ by Ronald Reagan and other conservatives, including regressive tax and social policies (Duggan 2001). Duggan argues that in this new society, *freedom to* do things are guaranteed by the state, but *freedom from* such things as hunger, homelessness, and illness (through access to medical care) are not. Liberationists like Duggan accuse assimilationists of seeking to transform a distinct LGBTQ subculture into a White, middle class, de-politicized and domesticated niche market, blind to institutions like the class system, heterosexism, economic injustice, and racial prejudice:

There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous Queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative—we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever (189).

Liberationists like Duggan point out that it is easy for assimilationists like Sullivan to declare victory for the LGBTQ cause because he is middle class and has access to housing, socio-economic advancement, and life-saving HIV medications—and they fret that Sullivan is not alone. Schulman and Duggan accuse Sullivan and other assimilationists of seeking to relinquish a distinct LGBTQ culture and identity. In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Schulman characterizes this loss of cultural identity:

Last night I saw a young queen walking by...Maybe nineteen. This was the most endangered type of man in my generation, the kind most likely to die...At one point they seemed to have disappeared, to have been wiped out. But then new ones were created. Do they know their own history? Do they wonder why there are so few sixty-year-old versions of themselves passing by on the sidewalk? (Schulman 2013, 63).

Duggan and Schulman believe that the assimilationists' agenda erases a unique gay sensibility that has been a creative force in our culture for decades. Schulman cites the granting of the rights to marriage and military service as an example of Marcuse's 'repressive tolerance', "in which communities become distorted or neutered by the dominant culture's containment of their realities through the noose of 'tolerance'" (50), reminding us that gay liberation used to be more interested in questioning the institutions of marriage and empire than in seeking to take part in them. But she also believes that a unique LGBTQ sensibility will ultimately prevail over the conformity that she and other liberationists reject:

I'm an optimist and believe that this period of conformity is in part a reflection of the conservative tenor of our nation as a whole, and in part an unacknowledged consequence of AIDS trauma. And that it can't last forever. So, pressure to marry and have children, institutionalized monogamy, social recognition through marriage and motherhood, financially strapped female parents, relationships by habit, sexual repression, the propensity of single parent lesbian households due to lack of accountability, identity by consumerism, privatized living, lack of community, over-burdened projecting broke parents, obstacles to being productive...sound familiar? Can the Gay Fifties last forever? Thankfully, not. Just as with straight people, these 1950s values of control and homogeneity will probably prove to be unbearable at some point and we will have a swing back in the other direction towards LGBT communal living, sexual revolutions, and collectivity (Schulman 2013, 160).

Schulman compares the current period to the Fifties, when the trauma of the War left a social atmosphere of denial and conformity in its wake, and she implies that a new spirit of rebelliousness, sexual experimentation, and social activism will eventually re-ignite the LGBTQ community in the same way that the Sixties ushered in an era of social transformation.

Amin Ghaziani summarizes the current schism within the LGBTQ community succinctly:

Assimilation advocates argue that (1) integration increases choice for how to be gay (Signorile 1997); (2) it prevents urban ghettoization (Bawer 1993); and (3) it reconfigures the public-private split by allowing homosexuality to enter the public sphere (Sullivan 1996). Diversity and distinction devotees counter that (1) assimilation is socially homogenizing and erases a unique gay sensibility that has been a source of cultural innovation in America (Harris 1997); (2) assimilation is an illusion, since what we really have is a state of “virtual equality” (Vaid 1995); and that (3) this “triumphalist view” of assimilation downplays “a stone wall of hardcore homophobia and heterosexual domination” (2014, 103).

At issue is the question of who speaks for the LGBTQ community. Unfortunately for liberationists, the *New York Times* has “situated [Sullivan] as our spokesperson for 15 years” (Schulman, 40), so his conservative image and posture have come to represent the LGBTQ community to most Americans.

Theory Meets Practice

While Schulman and Duggan have written about LGBTQ community divisions as a failure of will, and Ghaziani has described them as a matter of settling in, neither approach goes far enough toward breaking down the binary of assimilationist/liberationist, and may in fact reinforce the divisions. Instead, we need to build bridges through a more thorough understanding of assimilation and specifically of what it feels like for individuals—especially activists—when a counterculture transforms into an assimilated subculture (as the Amish have done). We can distinguish between the ACTUP participants’ LGBTQ identities and their activist identities and identify precisely what specific assimilation processes are unfolding in the LGBTQ community

without pointing fingers. As a foundation to this analysis, the following section comprises three parts: (1) a description of the ACTUP Oral History Project with an explanation of how its interviews have been examined, (2) a focused review of important concepts from assimilation theory, and (3) a brief discussion of relevant aspects of activist identity theory.

The ACTUP Oral History Project

ACTUP formed to fight the AIDS epidemic in the face of public indifference, hostility, and silence. The members of ACTUP were activists, defined by Peacock et al as people for whom “personal investment and collective action are implicit in involvement in a group with a political cause [and are]...important to a member’s sense of self. This suggests that members share an emotional connection and that membership serves individual needs” (Peacock et al 2001, 192). Activists associate community and identity with politics and collective actions; they see others as not only ‘neighbors’ but also as political actors. They are not to be considered typical members of a group, because it is possible that most people are not very political or identify with a political cause. But activists will be expected to have a stronger opinion about assimilation and about their group’s position in the larger society than a typical member of the group, and they will also likely be familiar with this schism given its long presence as a guiding characteristic of the LGBTQ liberation movement. It is for these reasons that this group was selected for an investigation into the current state of the assimilationist/liberationist schism in the LGBTQ community. Assimilation theory and activist identity formation theory will be measured against their testimonies to see if there are any insights to be gained about whether or not the LGBTQ community has assimilated and if so, in what way it has done so.

When ACTUP formed, then-President Ronald Reagan refused to mention the AIDS (formerly GRID) epidemic until September 17th, 1985, nearly seven years into the epidemic

when his friend Rock Hudson died of the disease. During this period, the LGBTQ community was under siege not only by a deadly disease but also by a hostile Republican party and conservatives—if not the general public—some of whom called the disease ‘God’s punishment for homosexuals’. Through unconventional and confrontational means, ACTUP succeeded in speeding access to new drugs for HIV patients, increasing public funding, and establishing the community norms of safe sex, which were in ascendance until the ‘protease moment’ in 1996 (Rowe and Dowsett, 329), when combination therapy changed the medical and social landscape. ACTUP was the preeminent voice of gay liberation throughout the Eighties and Nineties, and its influence on LGBTQ history and on the way that medications are developed is still being assessed.

The Oral History Project (OHP) was produced as a form of salvage anthropology from 2002-2015, establishing a first-hand record of the experiences of 186 ACTUP participants. The OHP is a collection of audio recordings and transcripts of interviews with the former members of ACTUP conducted mostly by Sarah Schulman, a writer who was also an activist and member of the group. In her book, *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2013), Sarah recalls driving through Los Angeles with the radio on and hearing an announcer say that gay people were once oppressed and that then society changed and they were accepted as equals. She says she almost crashed the car because of her outrage at this whitewashing of history. She knew then that she needed to preserve the memory of that period of struggle before it was lost forever and decided to interview the former participants of ACTUP as a kind of salvage anthropology. Sarah did the LGBTQ community a tremendous service by recording their history for the sake of future generations. Although the Oral History Project was compiled as a living history of a past social movement, its data can be examined for information about other social topics, such as the current schism

between assimilationists and liberationists within the LGBTQ movement. Much of that information is implicit and requires examining the presumptions made in the testimonies as much as their actual content. Sarah's role in the interview is interesting in that she also belonged to ACTUP, personally knew the participants, and often expressed her own opinions during the interviews rather than posing as a disinterested social scientist. Often, the material resembles conversations between friends more than interviews, which makes for an engaging read and helps the reader sense the camaraderie that existed among the activists. Sarah also produced along with Jim Hubbard a documentary about ACTUP, *United in Anger: A History of ACTUP* (2012), which offers a fascinating window into that important period of LGBTQ history. We owe them a debt of thanks.

In order to discover their impressions about the current state of the LGBTQ community, 84 oral histories from 2010-2015 were examined and 22 were selected based on relevant discussions about the LGBTQ community during the height of the epidemic and during the recent past for the purpose of comparison. The transcriptions range from 23-104 pages, with a median of 63 and an average of 54 pages. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to discuss ACTUP's greatest failures and successes. These questions elicited the most information about current conditions. It will be noted that the participants show a remarkable awareness about identity categories and discuss them with striking alacrity—more so than one would expect from a typical person. This may be due to their social activism, which by its nature questions the individual's position within the larger society and seeks to reconcile perceived injustices. The age of the participants ranges from 44-82, with a median of 63 and an average of 53.3 years old. The overwhelming majority of the sample is white (79 of 84) and male (59 of 84); the selected histories also overwhelmingly represent white (20 of 22) and male (13 of 21)

participants. All but two had at least a Bachelor's degree, and most of them are middle class or better, based not only on their education levels but also on their discussions early in each transcript about their family backgrounds.

Voices from the younger generation are completely absent while voices of racial minorities, women, and working class people are also starkly underrepresented. This is due to the nature of ACTUP's membership, which only represents a specific cohort of the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ activists. Indeed, there were less than half a dozen Blacks among the 186 interviewees and only slightly more Latinos. This may be surprising given Schulman's pro-diversity politics, but one must bear in mind the self-selecting nature of ACTUP, which was composed of people who had a certain amount of confidence that they could confront the legal system due to their already socially privileged status. There were a socially disproportionate number of people in the group from families who were also politically or religiously prominent members of their home communities. A striking proportion of the members went to Yale, specifically, renowned as the gayest of Ivy League schools and a tailwind for anyone who wants to take on the system. As for the mostly male membership, it must be remembered that AIDS affected gay men far more than it affected lesbians, so although it was an affliction affecting the entire LGBTQ community, gay men who were victims of the disease were obviously far more motivated to join a movement to fight it than others who might be motivated by empathy. Furthermore, ACTUP was not the only important group of LGBTQ activists during this period; other groups representing Black and other racial minorities also led the fight on behalf of the LGBTQ community. It should also be borne in mind that LGBTQ activists only represent specific cohorts of the LGBTQ community; most people are not activists. These serious limitations exclude a large swath of cohorts of the LGBTQ community. The sample is by no

means a generationally-, gender- or racially-balanced sample and cannot be presumed to represent the broader LGBTQ community (Cosson, 97). Indeed, the perceptions of the interviewees focus almost exclusively on the experiences of the generation of gay, middle class White men who went through the AIDS epidemic and who took part in ACTUP's activism. Frequently, the interviewees conflate their discussion of 'gay community'—meaning gay white men—with the LGBTQ community in all its diversity. A more thorough investigation of current conditions would include prominent activist groups comprised of Blacks and other racial minorities as well as non-activists, who comprise the majority of the LGBTQ community. It would also include the voices of more women, transgender/gender non-conforming, and young people. Further study with a broader sample is warranted. Nevertheless, this sample provides a window into some of the changes in the community, however limited it is by demographics.

My goal in this study is not so much to measure 'how assimilated' LGBTQ people are, but to find the fault lines around this project of assimilation and their meaning for the LGBTQ community. This requires reading the transcriptions not only for what the participants say but also for how they said it in the context of the conversation. Some statements about conditions in the LGBTQ community were implicitly accompanied by judgments about those conditions. If the gay community remains an unassimilated subculture separate from the larger society, we would expect to see a lack of structural and socio-economic integration into the larger society, including exclusion from the dominant institutions of that society. The transcriptions may also offer clues to the cultural aspects of this assimilation, for that would indicate whether the LGBTQ community has fused into the 'melting pot' or has assimilated as a unique subculture, a distinction that will be elucidated in the following section. Assimilating as a subculture—at first an apparently contradictory idea—does not require the adoption of the meaning of cultural norms

and institutions, but it does require access to them or a means of working around them that does not strain the larger social system, as shall be shown (Thurnwald 1933). The transcriptions will be examined for clues as to the possible structural, socio-economic, and cultural assimilation of the LGBTQ community in light of assimilation theory, and the activists' feelings about the current state of the community will be assessed in light of activist identity formation theory in order to distinguish between activist and LGBTQ identities. In this way, assimilation theory and activist identity formation theory can be brought together to characterize the nature of this group's possible assimilation and possibly to resolve the longstanding dispute between assimilationists and liberationists.

Theories of Assimilation

The literature on assimilation describes two primary theoretical issues, including the time sequence of its phases and its multidimensionality. Scholars consistently use birth cohort and generation to describe progressive phases of assimilation (Waters and Jimenez 2004). They also distinguish between 'straight line' assimilation, in which each succeeding generation becomes increasingly 'American', and 'bumpy line' assimilation, in which some groups experience both progress and setbacks without the alteration of their long-term assimilatory trajectory (Brown and Bean 2006). The importance of generational cohorts (sub-groups) in assimilation cannot be underestimated. Assimilation is a highly variable social phenomenon: no two groups have followed the same exact course, some groups assimilate differently for different cohorts, and some groups have never fully assimilated.

Assimilation is a complex phenomenon theorized along somewhat independent vectors and at different speeds including: (1) structural or associational, (2) socioeconomic, and (3) cultural assimilation (Card 1984). First, 'structural' or 'associational' assimilation is the degree

to which a person or group mingles freely with members of the majority group, including engaging in primary relationships with the dominant group and enjoying free access to their educational, political, and social institutions. For instance, women were not structurally assimilated when they were excluded from associations and had no right to vote or run for office; today, they remain underrepresented in Congress and can thus be technically described as not equally assimilated on the structural level as men. Second, ‘socioeconomic’ assimilation describes the ability of a person or group to achieve material success without any hindrances from the dominant society based on legal or social prejudice. The full socioeconomic assimilation of a group would indicate their even dispersion among the various occupations and industries of the economy and their even dispersal across the country, something that rarely occurs in American society. Third, ‘cultural’ assimilation is the degree to which a person or group adopts the cultural patterns of the dominant or majority group in a society. This includes adhering to the major cultural institutions of the country such as language and marriage to one person as well as to the personal values of the majority—even extending to outward appearances such as dress, gesture, and emotional expression (Alba and Nee 1997).

There is a scholarly debate whether structural or socioeconomic assimilation is most important, but all agree that cultural assimilation is the most pliable and problematic of the three factors (Brown and Bean 2006). Certainly, structural assimilation—the ability to mingle freely with the majority—can lead to greater job opportunities, but socioeconomic assimilation marked by occupational success also can provide greater opportunities for free association with the majority—for instance, having enough money to join private social clubs or to frequent restaurants leads to greater association with the middle class majority. Some argue that the primary motivation for assimilation is the drive for material success, and that this very drive is at

the core of our American character; the ‘American Dream’ has largely been defined around this notion of the ability to improve one’s life unimpeded by the majority. There is also widespread agreement within the major theories of assimilation that cultural variation is allowed so long as an overarching American identity is adopted. The theories only differ in the degree to which they allow for the existence of subcultures, which need only pose no threat to the integrity of the social system or generate tensions too strong to be contained within that overarching system. Thus even the most stringent theories of assimilation do not demand uniformity in all areas of culture and only require the acceptance of American values, roles, and behavioral patterns in the primary arenas of social contact, such as on the street, in schools, and in business.

There have been three major theories of assimilation: (1) classic assimilation, (2) cultural pluralism/multiculturalism, and (3) segmented assimilation. These theories reflect a changing American society, economy, and attitudes towards out-groups. The split within the LGBTQ community is largely based on monolithic ideas about assimilation and its meaning for the community.

Classic Assimilation

In the most general terms, *classic assimilation* has been defined by Alba and Nee as “the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it” (1997, 863). Classic theories of assimilation developed during the dramatic inflow of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe into the United States following the First World War. These European immigrant groups were spoken of by the White majority society as ‘races’ and were seen as inferior national origin groups. Their assimilation consisted of a process of ‘de-racialization’ that allowed them to come to be seen as White and to enter the mainstream of American society over time, with each succeeding generation becoming

more and more ‘American.’ During this period, the United States was imagined as a ‘melting pot’ or ‘magic crucible’ in which ethnic differences declined in favor of conformity to the norms of the dominant White, middle class, Protestant majority; for instance, most groups during this period dropped their original languages in favor of English. This “straight line” program of convergence to Anglo-American norms was easiest to impose when there were plenty of manufacturing jobs to accommodate the new immigrants; the industrial economy reinforced a kind of mechanical solidarity and social ‘like-mindedness’ in which ethnicity was considered more of a barrier than a boon to economic success (Kivisto 2017). Indeed, some minorities, in a desire to fit in with American society, replaced their ethnic sounding names with WASP names, while many Jews, who were among the last group of Europeans to be accepted as White, even got surgical alterations (nose jobs) to conform in appearance to the dominant WASP class. The irony of this conformism is that the founders of the country, although mostly of British Isles descent, did not regard their American-ness as a kind of ethnicity, but rather as stemming from adherence to certain universal ideals including democracy and private property rights.

Today, we look back at this period and cannot help exclaiming, ‘but wait, there are other people you are overlooking.’ Indeed, Blacks and Native Americans were completely excluded from the early Twentieth Century assimilation project, which makes the description of Europeans such as Poles and Italians as ‘races’ even more striking. Indeed, racial prejudice is the one thing that has consistently blocked assimilation of particular groups; it appears that American society can accept any differences except for the purely physical ones, like the color of one’s skin. Racial prejudice occurs when the member of a race or ethnicity cannot be seen as an individual and instead is viewed as a representative of his group; when this attitude pertains, members of different groups cannot interact as equals and, therefore, structural (and by

extension, socioeconomic) assimilation becomes impossible (Kivisto 2017). Despite over three hundred years of residence and complete acculturation, Blacks continue to be blocked from structural assimilation in the United States by racism. The same thing happened to British subjects of Indian sub-continental origin in the United Kingdom despite their cultural assimilation, because assimilation requires acceptance of the out-group by the majority, whereas acculturation does not (O’Flannery 1961). This glaring exclusion provided the most forceful argument against ‘classic’ theories of assimilation and fostered new theories of *cultural pluralism* or *multiculturalism*, which arose during the next major wave of immigrants following the Second World War.

Cultural Pluralism/Multiculturalism

In the purest form of *cultural pluralism*, several cultural systems co-exist and there is no mainstream. However, this has never properly described American society (though it does describe Belgium, for instance, and arguably Canada and Switzerland), just as the complete obliteration of ethnic differences has rarely occurred under *straight line assimilation* (O’Flannery 1961). Instead, assimilation of new groups under cultural pluralism requires only the adoption of enough of the social conventions of American life to avoid challenging the dominant institutions and to allow social exchanges to proceed smoothly. In this model, assimilation boils down to finding a way to play by common rules and to live together cooperatively. It requires the addition of a shared American identity, including the ability to speak English and to hold certain core values, but it does not require the relinquishment of ethnic identity. Thus, assimilation under multiculturalism does not require homogeneity, but it was still measured against a standard of the White middle class majority.

Indeed, it could be argued that American society is a collection of overlapping subcultures, depending on where one locates the core culture. As the sociologists Dowd and Dowd explain:

The answer depends on two considerations: (1) where the boundaries are drawn; that is, where on the continuum of subcultural characteristics the sociologist would place the edge or boundary of the subculture; and (2) the nature of the common culture; that is, those factors or variables considered to be essential, defining elements of the common culture. Concerning boundaries: if we place the marker at three or more standard deviations from the mean, then the United States clearly is not an overlapping network of subcultures. If, however, we move the marker closer to the mean, which would effectively define many more groups as subcultures, then the claim that the United States comprises a complex network of overlapping subcultural groups becomes true by definition. Using a marker very close to the mean would place almost all groups (other than Goffman's suburban, good-looking WASP) outside the center. Using this approach, some sociologists have offered as examples of subcultures older people living in housing facilities for the aged, rodeo cowboys, universities (Newman 1997) and a wide variety of occupational groups, including truck drivers, transit police, test pilots, cab drivers, artists, construction workers, philosophers, athletes, and even sociologists. With this boundary marker, it is inevitable that one would almost certainly reach Henslin's conclusion (2001:49) that "U.S. society contains tens of thousands of subcultures" (2003, 25).

The concept of a subculture has never been consistently defined; the word has been used to describe minority groups in a continuum from social worlds to countercultures to insurgencies. It depends on whether one considers subcultures to be common or to concern only marginalized groups as heroic resisters against the hegemonic forces of assimilation or globalization, as many sociologists implicitly do. While countercultures actively separate from, resist, and desire to change the dominant culture (Dowd and Dowd 2003), subcultures do not challenge the practices and beliefs of the dominant system, but seek only to maintain their distinction within that system. It follows that countercultures do not assimilate, while subcultures do, for they do not represent a counter-system. Instead, subcultural differences from the dominant system are smoothed over by 'external' assimilation, which occurs when an object, custom, or institution from the dominant culture is adopted but its meaning is changed to suit the minority group, like Jews who have

Christmas trees (Thurnwald 1936). This change can be transformative, having far reaching consequences comprehended only over time, to the very constitution of that object, custom, or institution. *External assimilation* denotes the outward changes that a minority group adopts that result in similarity of actions and appearances to the majority, while *internal* or *subjective assimilation* includes the psychological life and identity of the minority; these processes occur independently and to different degrees (Johnson 1963). A related phenomenon, *controlled acculturation*, as described by Eaton, refers to “the process by which one culture accepts a practice from another, but integrates the new practice into its own existing value system,” such as monogamy among Mormons. In controlled acculturation, the subculture “does not surrender its autonomy or separate identity, although the change may involve a modification of the degree of autonomy” (Eaton 1952, 338). In contrast, certain individuals in the minority group may emphasize the distinctive aspects of their own cultures in order to resist assimilation, based on their own subjective feelings of group affiliation. Thus, acculturation in the multicultural model does *not* require changes in or the adoption of the dominant group’s values (Teske and Nelso 1974); it requires becoming a member of a larger, national community, but it does not mean forsaking other identity communities.

In this model, race/ethnicity can be both a hindrance and a resource to individuals. Certain cuisines, festivals, or religious observances of minority cultures can become alternatives or specialties in American society, like Italian restaurants or Chinese New Year. Ethnic-based associations like the Knights of Columbus provide important networking resources for individuals who are already assimilated in society. At the same time, residential segregation, while a symptom of racial prejudice, also affords American Blacks greater political power because it allows them to elect officials from their districts in government more effectively than

if they were dispersed evenly among the general population. But segregation is a Catch 22: it decreases daily contact between the out-group and the majority and thereby hinders structural assimilation into the greater society (Marston and Van Valey 1979). Multiculturalists see parallels between American blacks and Native Americans and the nationalist minorities in European states, whose suppression causes them to adhere as a collective within the larger nation-state (Kivisto 2017). In both cases, dominant elites isolate the minorities socially and economically by branding them as the Other.

Segmented Assimilation

The third major theory, *segmented assimilation*, combines classic assimilation with multiculturalism by emphasizing social class as crucial in determining the assimilative path of the members of a group. In segmented assimilation, different class cohorts from the same minority undergo vastly different experiences leading to opposing trajectories in American society. For those on the bottom of the economic ladder, poor urban schools, cut-off access to employment opportunities, and other structural barriers can cause *reactive ethnicity*, in which individuals become more ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’ in reaction to the repeated experience of prejudice. These impediments can lead to downward or stagnant assimilation, in which the children of minority groups may join gangs and engage in other behaviors considered oppositional to society while other, more privileged children of the same race or ethnicity continue to improve their socioeconomic status. For the second and third generations of class-advantaged groups, various home-country attitudes, traditions, and social affiliations can serve as a socioeconomic resource (Raijman 2015) and provide a source of personal meaning for individuals who desire to be ‘ethnic’ some of the time but not all of the time (Kivisto 2017). This phenomenon has variously been described as “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1979) and “ethnic options” (Waters 2005); these

forms of ethnicity are completely volitional and of low-level intensity. For instance, Irish-Americans can feel more Irish on St. Patrick's Day but less Irish the rest of the time. Indeed, it is striking that every ethnicity even beyond the third generation in America retains some upholders and maintainers of the ethnic consciousness, including churches, social organizations, civic groups, and groceries, such as in Little Italy in Lower Manhattan, along with the limited jobs and business opportunities that they provide, despite considerable structural and socio-economic assimilation (Glazer 1993). Thus, ethnicity is felt most strongly at both ends of the class spectrum.

Segmented assimilation theory has gained traction among scholars with the advent of the global economy, in which class differences have become more pronounced and the middle class has been hollowed out. In today's neoliberal economic order, *diversity* has replaced multiculturalism by presenting subcultures as lucrative niche markets ready for corporate exploitation. To be a citizen in this new economic order requires being economically well off enough to be a good consumer; the emphasis under neoliberalism is on class, not on race or community of origin (Chasin 2000). As Miranda Joseph explains:

Diversity, like pluralism, is—explicitly—a strategy for the expansion of capital. However diversity discourse locates the production of the communal formation necessary to that expansion directly in the marketplace, rather than running it through the nation-state, and posits various particular identity communities, rather than national community, as the goal of the process. Like pluralism, diversity performs a kind of assimilation—an assimilation to corporate culture, to production and consumption—that is simultaneously the articulation of sameness and difference (2002, 23).

In Joseph's interpretation, the marketplace has replaced the nation state in the new corporate embrace of diversity amid the rise of the consumer-citizen. Some sociologists cite the wildly different receptions shown to working class Mexican immigrants and to the new wave of professional-class suburb-bound Asian immigrants as evidence for this argument (Brown and

Bean 2006). Others claim that the Black/White divide has permuted into a Black/non-Black divide, with new Asian and Latino immigrants of the professional class being granted status as ‘honorary Whites’ (Kivisto 2017). They point to faster-rising rates of intermarriage—a sign of structural assimilation—between Latinos, Asians, and Whites versus slower-rising rates of intermarriage between Blacks and Whites as evidence.

Furthermore, the ever-increasing division of labor in this highly competitive market economy, where manufacturing jobs and their predictable pensions are scarce due to automation, has abetted the marked rise of individualism in modern societies (Kivisto 2017). Rising individualism can also be attributed to new and more complex notions of identity as a fluid, complex, and multi-dimensional construct (O’Flannery 1961). Increasing numbers of immigrants and citizens now identify as ‘multi-racial’, which seems inevitable given the time that has elapsed since these various groups immigrated and the high rate of intermarriage among many of them. For these individuals, membership in a particular ethnic or racial group represents a *symbolic* or ‘ethnic options’ ethnicity and constitutes only one of several meaningful, largely volitional identities, such as being a lawyer or a Christian (Brown and Bean 2006). Indeed, identity itself is becoming increasingly multiple and elective amid increasing social fragmentation, calling into question the survival of any community as such; because of social media like Facebook, even family relationships are starting to resemble friendships more than ties of obligation (Wilkinson et al 2012).

Ideas about *assimilation* are also becoming more complex. For one thing, individual groups assimilate into different geographic regions and different sectors of the economy. The present study focuses exclusively on the experiences of LGBTQ people in New York City, so it is questionable whether the insights gleaned here can be generalized to the rest of the country.

Increasingly, the idea of socially constructed boundaries and borders are being applied by contemporary social scientists to a wide range of fields, including “social and collective identity, class, ethnic/racial, and gender/sexual identity inequalities, the professions, science, communities and national identity” (Kivisto 154). In *Remaking the American Mainstream*, Alba and Nee distinguish three boundary-related processes: “boundary crossing, boundary blurring, and boundary shifting” (60). In *boundary crossing*, the individual exits the minority group and joins the majority; this is *melting pot assimilation*, which entails a one-sided movement on the part of the minority towards the majority. The opposite occurs in *boundary shifting*, when the norms of the majority change and the boundary moves to accommodate their differences, such as the acceptance of Catholics as Christians by the Protestant majority. This usually can only happen after a considerable amount of boundary crossing and *boundary blurring*. In boundary blurring, a more complex two-way process of change occurs in both the minority and majority groups, so that the demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ becomes problematized and it isn’t always obvious who is on which side of the boundary. Boundary blurring is the most favorable process to the maintenance of a subculture, as Kivisto explains: “The sort of assimilation made possibly by boundary blurring can lead to the maintenance of a meaningful and substantive minority group identity, something that can be more substantive than the thinner version of ethnic identity maintenance depicted in Gans’s (1999) symbolic ethnicity and Waters’s “ethnic options” thesis. A two-way process results in hyphenated or hybrid identities” (2017, 155).

In boundary blurring, enough of the dominant society’s customs and manners are adopted by the minority that social interactions between the minority and the majority proceed smoothly. The motivation behind boundary blurring is the often overlooked allure of assimilation, which remains a greatly maligned topic in cultural studies, probably because assimilation in general is

still associated with the ‘melting pot’ and the loss of distinct identities. Robert E. Park, one of the founding members of the Chicago School of assimilation in the early Twentieth Century, recognized that assimilation is attractive because modern societies are individualistic. Kivisto interprets this to mean that people seeking to enhance their life opportunities will expand their social circles by treating the ethnic group “not as a community of fate, but as one of a variety, of possible affiliations and sources of personal identity. The cosmopolitan group, in contrast to the parochial group, is one in which individuals possess options, including the options of loyalty, voice and exit” (132). Park believed that individualism and cosmopolitanism were deeply intertwined, which in our age of ever-increasing individualism becomes even more pronounced: “What one actually finds in cosmopolitan groups, then, is a superficial uniformity, a homogeneity in manners and fashion, associated with relatively profound differences in individual opinions, sentiments, and beliefs (607).” Conforming to superficial conventions like fashion grants the individual ‘inner freedom’ and expands the individual’s social horizons and increases the complexity of their social circles. Whereas assimilation has the reputation among academic circles of fusing differences into like-mindedness, it actually can promote the proliferation of diversity by making possible a greater degree of individualism by emphasizing only external conformity (Kivisto 2017).

The rise of the ‘consumer-citizen’ within the global economy may also not be the alarming devolution into atomism and social disconnectedness that some sociologists have suggested; it does not mean the end of any sense of community or neighborliness. Instead, Dowd and Dowd (2003) argue that the ‘core’ of American society has relocated from the former White, Christian, middle class ideal to a set of broadly shared social and political ideals: They identify five pillars as the underpinnings of what might be defined as an American culture transcending

segmented identities: (1) multinational capitalism, (2) foundational education, (3) technology, (4) consumerism, and (5) a collective memory of significant events and people. Their analysis suggests an alternative view to Lisa Duggan's characterization of neoliberalism as bypassing the state and putting into place an exclusively economic order lacking all other forms of social bonds. Indeed, this characterization of American society is in line with the ideas of the founders who, although mostly of British Isles descent, did not regard their American-ness as a kind of ethnicity, but rather as stemming from adherence to certain universal ideals including democracy and private property rights.

Activist Identity Formation

In his article "The Liminal Effects of Social Movements: The Red Guard and the Transformation of Identity" (2000), Yang concludes that activists are not born but made. He cites several studies of collective action published between 1984 and 1996 to illustrate that the experience of participating in an activist group--whether the women's movement, workers' groups, environmentalists, Chinese student protesters, or the Red Guard—tends to shape the identities of those involved and change their lives forever. According to Yang, this transformation unfolds in three stages. First, the liminal experience—a term borrowed from ritual theory—describes the degree of the immersion of the individual in the activism of a group. For instance, being a lobbyist is less liminal than participating in a revolutionary movement in which one's ordinary life and position in society become distant memories. In highly liminal experiences, deep, physical connections are often felt among members of the group: in this case, male and female Red Guards were traveling in trains packed in a close proximity never before allowed in Chinese society. Second, upon the completion of a successful revolutionary movement, participants typically undergo an "inward turn" characterized as a period of

introspection and even nostalgia and depression at the loss of the meaningful experiences that preceded their success. Third is the “outward turn” which marks the participants’ return to the main society and subsequent involvement in another social movement. Yang has shown that the same individuals involved in the Red Guard eventually became the elders in subsequent social movements in China and theorizes that it is love for the people and a commitment to “freedom, egalitarianism, communion, and creativity” (397) that maintains the activist identity through its various manifestations.

The Interviews

The testimonies of the Oral History Project mostly concern the biographical experiences of the members who took part in ACTUP. For instance, they generally begin with individual life histories, including upbringing, education, profession, and sexual identity and history. They proceed to a recounting of the individual’s experiences in ACTUP, including where they fit it within the organization, what activist demonstrations they took part in, and whom they associated with. This material constituted about 95% of the production of the Oral History Project, so the clues to the assimilation of LGBTQ people had to be gleaned indirectly through references, asides, and the tone of what they said: it wasn’t often so much what they said, but how they said it that mattered. A lot of the information relevant to this study was found at the end of each interview, when the participants were asked to assess ACTUP’s greatest successes and its greatest failures. This question elicited the greatest discussion of the contrast between past and present conditions within the LGBTQ community, including members’ own assessment of what social progress remains to be accomplished and how they view the changes in the community and its position within American society.

Counterculture

The recollections of the Oral History Project respondents make it clear that prior to the turn of the 21st Century, gays and lesbians were structurally and socio-economically blocked by the larger society and the community was a counterculture. Jeffrey Fennely remembers growing up knowing that his sexual orientation was unacceptable to society and feeling structurally blocked: “What I remember was knowing there was something different about me and knowing it was really bad. So the reason I was tortured was because I was conscious both of the orientation, the feelings, and of how not okay it was (Fennely interview, 2).” He attests that many Queer children couldn’t be themselves with their own families: “gay and lesbian kids are the only kids who are born orphans, because they’re not raised by people, which is why exposure is so important (Fennely interview, 3)” Staying in a small town was not an option for most, because they were rejected by the majority society: “a lot of those Queer people had to really leave home once they found out what they were, and create entirely different worlds for themselves (Fennely interview, 3).” Larger cities with sizable homosexual neighborhoods and an active sexual street life offered sexual opportunities and venues, as Benjamin Heim Shepard recalls: “It felt really exciting also because I was coming to New York ... just walking down Eighth Avenue to see you could make a new friend, you could be at Show World, you could be at any number of places (Shepard interview, 12).”

A structural block like rejection from family and the impossibility of staying in their home towns led people to build alternate families within the LGBTQ counterculture found in these neighborhoods, as Jeffrey Fennely recalls: “There were all these avuncular types, these sort of like big brothers more.” The LGBTQ community provided a place for Kevin Robert Frost to belong: “I didn’t really get a sense of what community meant, of what gay community

particularly meant until I moved to New York” (Frost interview, 4). Jeffrey Fennely says that despite finding a neighborhood refuge, LGBTQ people were socio-economically blocked and unable to enter many professions: “I didn’t do a lot of things because I was gay..., and I think politics was probably one of them” (Fennely interview, 11). Some like myself were able to ‘pass’ and to pursue careers in hostile work environments by remaining in the closet, but the early leaders of the movement were generally people who were gender non-conforming, as Richard Burns points out: “in the early days of Queer organizing, the people doing the organizing were often people who couldn’t pass. They were already outsiders” (Burns interview, 45). Eugene Fedorko observes that many leaders of the early movement were racial minorities: “it was not the white boys who started the lesbian and gay revolution; it was the A-trainers. It was the people of color” (Fedorko interview, 29). Richard Burns states that those who could pass wanted nothing to do with this group of outsiders: “They didn’t feel like they didn’t need a movement [*sic*]. They were doing just fine. And I remember and we were sort of considered the great unwashed, hippies or something” (Burns interview, 46). Indeed, some in the LGBTQ community lived outside the capitalist system, like Eugene Fedorko:

Having lived in Provincetown through the seventies and lived with all of these freethinkers and artists and people — we lived outside the system. We would go to Berlin. We would take blotter acid, fifty on a cigarette paper, and we’d take like about fifty pieces of cigarette paper and go and live in Berlin for the winter and sell blotter acid for five bucks, or live in Rome or live in Paris. We were outside of that stuff, delightfully so. And, I’m just not like the rest of them. I don’t want to be. I never will be. And I love my outsider outlaw identity. I adore it (Fedorko interview, 29).

Most Americans want a legal job, not to deal drugs as part of a countercultural lifestyle, and most Americans do not wish to identify as ‘outsider outlaws’ from the rest of society.

Another indication of a counterculture is acute awareness and resistance to the reigning economic system, as demonstrated by a comment by Esther Kaplan: “We’re all existing in the

context of American capitalism and I think that it takes a lot of consciousness to resist that” (Kaplan interview, 15). Most Americans don’t talk that way; they take capitalism for granted. This counterculture sought to dismantle the major institutions of the majority society, as Richard Burns recalls: “the gay agenda in the late seventies was dismantle the military and dismantle the nuclear family” (Burns interview, 46). They aligned with other countercultural movements like Feminism against a common enemy, as Dolly Meieran explains: “You know, on one level politically and religiously, it was sort of the same enemy. It was Cardinal O’Connor...It was the same political senators and representatives who were opposing abortion who were also opposing anything that would lead towards decriminalizing—I mean, there were still sodomy laws, I mean” (Meieran interview, 10). Every attack against LGBTQ people brought them closer together, as Richard Burns relates:

I think that in our own community, every time we’re attacked, you have an uptick in Queer engagement and activism. When you think back to ’77, ’78, Anita Bryant nationally touring, attacking us, that resulted in gay organizing around the country. You’ve got *Bowers vs. Hardwick* in ’86. You had HIV and AIDS. You had the Boy Scout case resulted in more activism. Matthew Shepard’s murder in ’98 completely galvanized for a brief period that generation (Burns interview, 52).

Anita Bryant was the spokeswoman for Florida orange juice, a symbol of everyday American life; even orange juice hated us. The Supreme Court’s 1986 ruling in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* upholding a Georgia law that outlawed homosexuality between consenting adults in the privacy of the home finally motivated the White middle class men to join the countercultural movement. As Richard Burns notes: “All of these, perhaps, privileged guys who felt like they didn’t need to be a part of the Gay Movement, when *Bowers* came down, they were publicly told, ‘You are less than. You are illegal.’ So you had an uptick, a dramatic uptick, in engagement and in dollars going into gay organizations” (Burns interview, 36). Augmented by the newly energized White,

middle class assimilationists, the LGBTQ movement gained increasing access to the money and power implicit to their race and social class.

The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend

AIDS intensified the sense of a counterculture at odds with the majority society and brought gay men and lesbians together like never before. Evangelicals called AIDS ‘God’s punishment on homosexuals,’ and there was a running joke in the LGBTQ community that God must love lesbians, who were largely unaffected by the disease (personal testimony). The testimonies confirm that, indeed, the lesbians stood by the gay men. According to Esther Kaplan, “a lot of women were in the room because their gay male friends were dying” (Kaplan interview, 30). Jeffrey Fennely vows his eternal gratitude: “And the lesbians, fucking lesbians, just thank God for them, because I really don’t think we could have done it without them. The healthy people getting together with the angry people with AIDS and just doing it all, it saved lives” (Fennely interview, 51). Andrea Benzacar points out that the unity of the group sprang from the direness of the situation: “we worked together as if our lives depended on it, because they did (Benzacar interview, 16).” In order to fight the disease, LGBTQ people first tried to “get the science we needed to understand what behaviors were safe and what weren’t. We needed it for health reasons, for transmission and for treatment,” according to Zoe Leonard (Leonard interview, 50). The group formulated “Safe sex”—the use of condoms for anal sex—as a unifying social ethic, as Cynthia Chris relates: “I think part of the sex-positive tone; the idea of, embracing the idea that you could, you didn’t have to be monogamous; you didn’t have to practice abstinence; you could be sexually active; you could be sexually active with known HIV-positive partners; you could be sexually active with anonymous partners, and do so safely” (Chris interview, 27). Practicing safe sex became a political act. According to John Voelcker, “it

was a point of pride to kick someone out of bed if they wouldn't be safe" (Voelcker interview, 37). But the fight didn't stop there; the LGBTQ community wanted to change the majority society. Tracy Morgan describes their tactics: "Working within the system exacts a price. . . . I have a different suggestion, a different tactic. . . . Remaining more elusive, more anonymous, even, we become perhaps a scary element, one that cannot be tamed, named, or held down. We do not become members of the system that is killing us. We remain outside of it, able to affect it with our mass power" (Morgan interview, 60). There was a sincere desire to address racial injustice. Joan Gibbs, the sole black female among the selected participants, affirms this: "So we started basically to challenge not only racism within society broadly, but also at a time within the lesbian and gay community to raise consciousness around racism" (Gibbs interview, 10). The community celebrated its diversity. Blane Charles, the sole black male among the selected participants, recalls founding "The World Ball for Unity, which is what we did, which is the bringing together of all the different groups within the gay community—leather, drag queens, trannies, everybody; and artists—and providing a platform to celebrate what made us special, and celebrating the diversity within our own community" (Charles interview, 35). Unlike immigrant groups, the LGBTQ community was not built upon a shared cultural, ethnic, or racial background. According to Esther Kaplan: "I don't think there was a presumption that it was supposed to be like a common culture that everyone shared" (Kaplan interview, 29). Richard Burns recalls feeling proud of the counterculture's diversity on full display at the LGBTQ Center on West 13th Street:

So that was something that we were proud of. Gay Men of African Descent had been founded at the Center, again before my time, and so then it was normal. ACT UP was founded there, then Queer Nation, Lesbian Avengers, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, IGLHRC, all started as an idea, somebody's meeting there. So we felt like, well, these groups, you know, this is a community, and this messy Queer Center is where they belong (Burns interview, 39).

He cites the prominent Black LGBTQ activist group, Gay Men of African Descent, and other activist groups with different focuses working in parallel with ACTUP on behalf of the LGBTQ community and using the Center as a home base. When considering the insights afforded by this study, it is important to remember that ACTUP represented only one cohort of LGBTQ activists—a mostly White, middle class group—and was not the only group fighting for treatment for HIV, for rights, and for racial and economic justice on behalf of the larger LGBTQ community. The counterculture was diverse and, for Richard Burns and others, that was a point of pride.

Signs of Fragmentation

In 1994, with the advent of HAART (Highly Active Anti-Retrovirus Therapy) and the development of powerful new drugs called protease inhibitors, everything changed. Suddenly, HIV was transformed from a death sentence to a chronic illness for those with access to healthcare. This also marked the beginning of the breakdown of the unifying community ethic of safe sex, causing consternation among the activists, who cast around for an explanation. As Charlie Franchino explains, “a lot of them feel that it’s a chronic manageable disease. I think that’s why we’re seeing safe sex go right out the window now” (Franchino interview, 44). Jeffrey Fennely believes the breakdown in safe sex was generational: “I think generationally, the younger generation did not experience, see, feel, touch, witness, sit next to, hear people who were sick. It was not as immediate. It wasn’t as proximate” (Fennely interview, 44). Joseph Sonnabend, a doctor, offers a more biological explanation: “If you’re the penetration, you’re the – then it’s obvious that some people may have erectile problems with condoms. I think this is probably more true as people age.” But he can’t explain why the passive partner in anal sex would also prefer to forgo condoms: “If you are a bottom, for example; what’s of interest to you

is whether your partner uses a condom or not. So it's a different thing going on, over there that, who is using the condom. But it's an important part – so far, we like to think of as being consensual and so there is a factor.” He consoles himself with the fact that the unprotected sex is consensual, but he worries about people infecting others on purpose: “I would come across people who would go out to the bathhouse and have sex when they knew they were infectious” (Sonnabend interview, 84).

The testimonies allege that assimilationists like Larry Kramer purposely renewed a division between conservative assimilationist gays and liberationists, which Eugene Fedorko says has existed “probably since cavemen, yeah” (Fedorko interview, 19). Benjamin Heim Shepard accused Larry Kramer of “creating the old ‘good gays-bad gays’ divide that has always been there,” which he considers “really dangerous” to do in the public media. For one thing, they preached monogamy and lectured people about the complexities of their sex lives, which motivated Benjamin Heim Shepard to help create an ACTUP sub-group called SexPanic!:

I just think that what to me was attractive about ACT UP in this moment and Sex Panic! in this conversation was just this idea of rejecting the dangers of prohibition, the dangerous logic of prohibition, which is part of the war on drugs, it's part of why prohibition didn't work in this country. I mean, it doesn't work when you tell people to stop doing something. It doesn't work. You have to work with them (Shepard interview, 12).

Shepard attests that: “Young activists, we all were getting sick of Larry Kramer's, you know, Old Testament prophet argument, worked really well for a while there. Then it got old. So some of us were united in being angry about the Turds and Gabriel Rotello and Michelangelo Signorile and the rest of them” (Shepard interview, 27).

As part of their division of the community along lines of morality, Kramer and the other ‘Turds’ advocated Mayor Giuliani's “triple-X zoning laws” that eliminated gay venues like bathhouses and blue movie houses ostensibly for public health reasons, but Benjamin Heim

Shepard claims it really “was just a way to push the poor out of New York City and sanitize New York City.” They also pushed a proposal for “names reporting”, calling on ‘good gays’ to report the names of any ‘bad gays’ having unsafe sex for the purpose of criminal prosecution. Shepard was horrified:

BHS: Well, for me with ACT UP, my first campaigns were around names reporting and obviously also the triple-X zoning law stuff with Sex Panic!, which is, I guess, an affinity group. I mean, it came out of the ACT UP family and—

SS: It was actually in response to people like Gabriel and Mike [Signorile], who were ACT UP, so actually it was kind of a reaction to that discourse.

BHS: But I don’t think there was an official position from ACT UP to say, “We’re endorsing the turds...”

A third line of division they sowed was along lines of class. These White, professional class, male assimilationists commandeered the movement by winning over the big LGBTQ organizations and their funding for marriage and military service rights. According to Andrea Benzacar: “Look at what the big organizations are focused on: getting us into the military and getting us married. I think there’s a strong argument to be made that these are not the issues of most—certainly working-class gay people—or most women (Benzacar interview, 32).” Eugene Fedorko explains what happened: “Okay. Some people tell me I oversimplify, but I really see it as a separation between the white boys and the rest” (Fedorko interview, 30). They succeeded, possibly because those organizations were mostly run by other White, professional class men, and possibly because rights are easier to understand and to sell to the general public than more comprehensive social changes. According to Dolly Meieran: “Housing isn’t a sexy issue, and class and classism are difficult for people to kind of wrap their heads around” (Meieran interview, 10). Joan Gibbs attests that funding controlled the movement: “But that’s how come marriage, I think, became such a thing, because the money was put there and they tell you what

to do with the money. You can't say, "Okay. I'm going to fight about—I want to do issues pertaining to homeless LGBT people" (Gibbs interview, 23).

This did not sit well with the liberationists, who recognized that this cohort of assimilationists were turning their backs on the issues that affected the majority of LGBTQ people, who were not White, heteronormative, male and middle class. As Joe Ferrari said, "I don't care about gays in the military, but I care about healthcare or whatever else" (Ferrari interview, 42). This has remained a problem, as Dolly Meieran attests: "And, yeah, still obviously race and class are kind of too much on the periphery. I think that was the biggest disappointment" (Meieran interview, 31). Housing and healthcare aren't pressing issues for people who already have them, like Andrew Sullivan. Cynthia Chris was infuriated at the White men's turn against racial justice: "This has been a criticism of the larger group forever, right? The marginalization of most people of color. I don't have a problem saying that it happened again in this group" (Chris interview, 33). John Voelcker calls out the rampant racism of this group of assimilationists: "Larry Kramer when asked why we always sent white men to the media, he said 'we should always send our best people.'" Trans and gender non-conforming people fared no better, according to Andrea Benzacar: "people who are non-gender-conforming. They get very, very super marginalized" (Benzacar interview, 33). And several of the lesbian participants like Linda Meredith felt betrayed by the men whose cause they took up when they were sick and vulnerable:

I feel really sad about it. I feel super angry about it. But mostly, I guess, the pervasive feeling is, wow. I worked in ACT UP on a lot of things, 24/7, right beside you, in the jail, on the street, in the meetings, for seven years. The thing is, I always knew there was an inkling of it, but it was suppressed a little more. There was a façade to it that I remember. Or maybe I'm just more of a rabid-dog feminist now that I'm fifty-seven years old (Meredith interview, 40).

Another current in the participants' responses presents evidence of segmented assimilation. This form of assimilation occurs in immigrant groups when cohorts advantaged or disadvantaged by class follow markedly different assimilative pathways, with wealthier groups assimilating and working class groups trending into 'downward assimilation' marked by unemployment and anti-social behaviors among the next generation such as street gangs. In the case of the LGBTQ movement, the segmentation appears to have happened along both lines of class and lines of race, according to the testimonies of the activists. By fragmenting the movement, the cohort of White middle class assimilationists set the stage for segmented assimilation along these lines.

Signs of Structural Assimilation

Certainly, LGBTQ standing in society did improve, as Joe Ferrari observes: "you look back and the whole culture has changed" (Ferrari interview, 23). Charlie Franchino agrees: "a lot of the initial things we were clambering for we attained" (Franchino interview, 44). Joe Ferrari marvels that "So much has changed. ... The lives of gays and lesbians are better off. The way we're represented in TV and in the media has changed" (Ferrari, interview 43), indicating broader structural assimilation for LGBTQ people. But not everybody shared in this success; the testimonies suggest that those only certain cohorts of the LGBTQ community assimilated on the structural level. Charlie Franchino identifies one such cohort: "You look at all these younger generations, like I look at my nieces and nephews, they're in college or just out of college, they all have gay friends. It's like no one cares. It's no big deal. It's very refreshing" (Franchino interview, 49). Note that he talks about college students; they are probably middle class. Richard Burns says of the younger generation that, "Well, in some ways they're lucky" (Burns interview, 49). Ira Sachs confirms that the young no longer bear the shame his generation did:

IS: And I just think the amount of self-hatred that gay people live with, I'm sure there are many, many other people who live with it, but gay people really—we don't own it, but we have it.

SS: Do you think that that's changing?

IS: For the next generation, you mean? I think it is changing, yes.

SS: So that's the good news.

IS: I do (Sachs interview, 35).

Joan Gibbs, the only black woman in the sample, sees a parallel between young LGBTQ people and young black people:

They grew up when there was abortion rights and then increasingly gay rights too. a time they didn't grow up when it was like people being—when there was absolutely no protection for lesbians or gay men. And there was no movement for a lot of that time. And so it's different. It's like young black people, right? They have no memory of segregation, so they don't see racism—they don't see or feel racism the way those of us who are older do, and I think young gay people suffer from that same thing (Gibbs interview, 45).

Gibbs adds that “They go to college, some of them go to Ivy League schools, top-tier schools ... actually it's a class thing, too.” This suggests that minorities of middle class status have also assimilated on the structural level. John Voelcker thinks the situation has improved for gender non-conforming youth, indicating ‘boundary shifting’ by the majority away from formerly rigid gender norms: “We're at a place where—transgender kids are being discussed, and parents are trying to do the right thing by them, instead of smacking them upside the head and telling them, man up” (Voelcker interview, 36). Joe Ferrari feels that the lessening of social opposition and its ‘us/them’ mentality has made the younger generation less political: “There's a lack of political consciousness among the gay community now. ... It's a whole generation later” (Ferrari interview, 33). The importance of birth cohort in assimilation cannot be stressed enough; and class is the determining factor for assimilation in a neoliberal society of have's and have-not's: to assimilate, you have to be middle class. Jeffrey Fennely notes that only a veneer remains of the connection once felt by former members of ACTUP: “But you have these reunions, still. They're

not the same. ... I don't know, there's sort of this tacit understanding that it's not our lives anymore, so there's something different about the actions now and activism now. But it's all changed. It's all become prettier. It's all become Facebook-y" (Fennely interview, 50). To Esther Kaplan, the counterculture has succumbed to capitalism: "You look at what passes for counterculture in this city right now, and it's all about marketing things. It's all about creating your little marketable pickles or crafts or whatever" (Kaplan interview, 15). Rather than the countercultural *epater la bourgeoisie* art of a Keith Haring or a Jean-Michel Basquiat, the young people simply want to compete in the capitalist arena.

Signs of Socioeconomic Assimilation

The testimonies further suggest increasing socio-economic assimilation, meaning a lack of social structures preventing one from improving one's life through access to well-paying jobs and institutions. Zoe Leonard states that many of the survivors have gone on to assimilate on the socio-economic level:

I think for those of us that survived, for those of us that are alive, we're a much smaller generation than we would have been because so many of us died, as you know all too well. But the generation that made it is so fucking awesome. There's so many great people that got politicized through that experience, that made that happen, that worked in ACT UP, that are now professors and doctors and lawyers and nurses and artists and writers and filmmakers and god knows what else (Leonard interview, 64).

Richard Burns notes that even LGBTQ organizations have 'assimilated', if such can be said of organizations: "Well, something that you see in our movement organizations as they've grown ... you recruit people for their fundraising capacity, their giving capacity, *their connection in other worlds* [italics mine]" (Burns interview, 40). John Voelcker works in an industry he could never have dreamed of working in before:

We're at a place where—I work in a relatively conservative industry, the auto industry—although on the media side of it, which is more progressive—but basically, I haven't—

with one exception, and the guy is crazy—I haven't gotten any feedback at all, and I'm pretty openly gay, even in the context of our industry. And even 15 years ago, I might not have been employable in that industry (Voelcker interview, 36).

He adds that gay conservatives have re-surfaced because LGBTQ people are going to be whatever they were going to be if their sexuality didn't matter in the first place:

JV: – it may be a peculiarity of the auto industry. I'm happy to work for a gay man who is proud of never in his life having voted for a Democrat. We are a diverse community, in unexpected ways.

SS: But I mean, if gay liberation is about gay people becoming right wing, is it worth it?

JV: Um – I always figure that in the end, it was about gay people doing whatever they were gonna do, without regard to their sexuality.

Voelcker is “happy” to work for a conservative gay man, despite Schulman's reservations. The fact that being gay or lesbian doesn't compel one to also be a Democrat confirms increased assimilation, but it is notable that John is White and middle class, so this assimilation is of the segmented variety.

The testimonies identify another cohort besides working class and Black LGBTQ people that remains blocked on the structural and socio-economic level: many of the generation that survived the epidemic. Many AIDS survivors expected to die and weren't prepared to continue living, as Ira Sachs explains: “I talked about making a film called *Oh, Fuck, I'm Going to Live*” (Sachs interview, 32). Some people ran up massive credit card debts figuring they wouldn't live to have to pay them off (personal testimony). Many survivors were left with crippling or shaming damage to their bodies, like blindness, incontinence, and deformities attributed to the medications, as Ira notes:

IS: How do you represent what happened, what happened to the body? How do you represent — less death; it's really what happened to the body. I felt the shame that exists around the physical alterations that people go through based on the AIDS medications, is an unspoken conversation.

SS: The Crixivan look, yes.

IS: Many looks, many, many looks, that people walk around the world with, without anyone to talk to about what that feels like to have (32).

What Ira is referring to is Crixivan, an early protease inhibitor, which caused embarrassing deformities like a bulging abdomen, a ‘buffalo hump’ on the back, and facial and gluteal wasting. Many (myself included) became too sick to work and went on disability, as Jeffrey Fennely tells Schulman:

JF: [A] lot of my friends were giving up and going on welfare or on ACT UP welfare. I’m sorry, not ACT UP welfare. AIDS — What was it called? They were receiving welfare.

SS: Disability?

JF: Disability. I’m sorry, god. One of my friends was receiving welfare and he was on disability (Fennely interview, 38).

Andrea Benzacar says that many survivors suffer from PTSD and have given up dreams of improving their lives: “A lot of us reflect on various aspects of post- traumatic stress disorder that many of us suffer from. And the way, for a lot of us, our lives have been completely derailed—careers that we had, and ambitions that we had, and friends that we had (Benzacar interview, 4).” Ira Sachs notes that others have succumbed to drug addiction: “I think the epidemic of mid-forty-year-old HIV and AIDS survivors, whether with or without HIV, who have gotten involved with drugs, crystal meth specifically, and gotten close to dying through that is astounding. ...And there are so little places for people to feel good about themselves” (Sachs interview, 33). Eugene Fedorko notes that “I’m one of the few people my age” (Fedorko interview, 3), a generational loss analogous to the Jewish Holocaust. He says his friends are emotionally shut down about the experience they endured: “A lot of my friends... get very uncomfortable when you start talking about how horrible the nightmare was that we all came through” (5). Charlie Franchino says that he is haunted by terrible memories: “It’s the great sense of loss, all those people. ... I still have nightmares, the AIDS nightmares. It’s just something that’s always going to be with us in our generation, and we’re never going to get over it” (Franchino interview, 49). Emotional and physical damage including drug addiction and PTSD

has blocked many of the older generation who survived the epidemic from structural and socio-economic assimilation, consistent with segmented assimilation.

Signs of Cultural Assimilation

Cultural assimilation involves one or more of three processes: boundary crossing, boundary blurring, and boundary moving. In boundary crossing, individuals join the majority in the classic idea of the ‘melting pot’; in boundary moving, the majority changes its norms to accommodate the minority, such as Catholics coming to be seen as Christian by the Protestant majority. Boundary blurring is a more two-way process; it is the process whereby assimilated subcultures can occur. This seemingly contradictory term describes the maintenance of a subculture under an overarching national identity through ‘external assimilation’, that is, the assumption by the minority of enough outward conformity to the majority along with the retention of significant differences from the majority, termed ‘inner freedom’. For instance, conformity to the clothing fashion of the majority rather than dressing in ethnic clothes allows an individual to expand his structural association beyond the parochial group to more ‘cosmopolitan’ groups with whom he may have actually very little in common; the increased contacts allow for greater socio-economic assimilation without requiring the individual to adopt the actual values of the majority.

The testimonies suggest that assimilationists fostered boundary blurring through the rallying cry, ‘we’re just like you’ to fight for acceptance by the heterosexual majority, presenting a ‘heterosexualized’ image of LGBTQ people as no different than the majority. This boundary blurring did not sit well with Joan Gibbs: “I never liked this line. People used to yell it all the time, sort of like, “We are everywhere and we’re just like you.” I never liked that. I still don’t” (Gibbs interview, 14). Andrea Benzacar agrees: “Yes. I have very strong feelings about this—

about the way gay people are being heterosexualized.” Steven Spinella, an actor, complains that actors still have to remain in the closet because once straight people see them as gay they can’t see them in any other way: “Well, I think the argument about not being publicly gay for certain actors is once the audience knows that you’re gay, that the fear is that they won’t be able to see you as straight.... especially if you play a character that is sexualized, that is, has to, has to convincingly be in love with this woman or this man” (Spinella interview, 14). Benjamin Heim Shepard wanted to do activism to help LGBTQ people resist the argument that they had to stop sexual experimentation and practice monogamy: he “wanted to go out and put street signs all over, like ‘Don’t Fall Into the—’ like, heteronormative, like the GAP signs, but saying “Heteronormativity: Don’t Fall Into the Trap” (Shepard interview, 32). Charlie Franchino believes that the AIDS crisis led to greater gay civil rights by humanizing them: “I think it seared gay men and women into American consciousness. We exist. We’re no more different than you. We became so much more visible. It became that much easier, I think, for people to start accepting the civil rights that we’re clambering for [sic]” (Franchino interview, 49-50).

It isn’t possible to be ‘just like you’ when ‘gay’ is identified with ‘AIDS’. The testimonies attest that ‘gay’ and ‘AIDS’ have become separated in a further instance of boundary blurring. They once were synonymous, as Jeffrey Fennely recalls: “So there’s the being gay thing, and then there’s the ‘You’re going to die’ thing” (Fennely interview, 12). Richard Burns attests that young gay people know nothing about the epidemic: “Well, I think, if anything, I want to talk about what it was like to live every day in the context of constant dying and how when I talk and work with folks in their twenties and thirties today, they don’t know anything about that (Burns interview, 47).” Eugene Fedorko says that AIDS has been completely marginalized, and he sees the reduced size of the AIDS memorial as symbolic of that

marginalization: “At first we were supposed to get the whole park, and now we’re getting a triangular corner of it. It’s just another way that I feel that we’ve been marginalized and the whole AIDS epidemic has been marginalized” (Fedorko interview, 6).

Boundary blurring occurred largely through the enforcement of the private/public divide that characterizes the White, middle class majority. Assimilationists further blurred the boundaries between the LGBTQ community and the majority by promoting the image of LGBTQ monogamous couples as a framework that straight people could understand, as John Voelcker explains: “I think the starting point is a nice couple, with a bedroom door that you never go behind. But it’s kind of about frameworks that people understand. And I think the kind of sexual culture that I never saw, in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, was probably less understandable than the couplehood thing” (Voelcker interview. 36). The key is the “bedroom door that you never go behind,” because straight people might feel uncomfortable with what they find there; the assimilationists’ tactic was to enforce the private/public divide by ‘heterosexualizing’ the LGBTQ community so that the majority would stop thinking about ‘what they do together’. While selling this image to heterosexuals, they positioned marriage and its implied monogamy to the LGBTQ community as the cure for AIDS, as Cynthia Chris recounts:

It’s funny; I just saw somewhere about a float in the Rose Bowl parade, with a gay-marriage theme. I’m not sure who sponsored this – gay-rights organization? The banner on it was something like, “Love Keeps You Safe.” Implying – and that a couple got married on this float, two men got married on this float, during the Rose Bowl. And implying that you would be safe from HIV, I presume (Chris interview, 27).

Monica Pearl says, “Marriage is not the cure.” But I think it seems like it to a lot of people” (Pearl interview, 51). Liberationists like Cynthia Chris resented this attack on people’s complex life choices: “This was a group that didn’t want to buy into an idea that long-term, monogamous partnering was going to save you from worrying about transmission” (Chris interview 27). John

Riley resented that marriage rights pushed aside the fight against AIDS that brought the group together in the first place: “the biggest problem with the whole marriage equality fight is that it’s eclipsed so much of the AIDS fight” (Riley interview, 48). John Voelcker and others supported the equal right to marriage for LGBTQ people but questioned the imposed bourgeois morality behind it: “Not to necessarily think that marriage is ideal for everybody, under all circumstances — it feels a little heterosexist to me” (Voelcker interview, 37). But in discussing the rising phenomenon of ‘barebacking’ or unprotected sex, he quite tellingly gives several good reasons besides monogamy for people to marry: “Yeah. Barebacking. You know there’s nothing so powerful to incent safe sex as seeing three of your good friends die horribly in 18 months while they have been fired from their jobs, evicted from their landlord, and disowned by their family.”

Marriage offered tremendous relief from many of these threats, including the right to inherit a lease, to inherit money, to make medical decisions for an incapacitated partner, to share medical and life insurance, and all the many other great rights that come along with marriage. For many LGBTQ people, family recognition issues were most important, as Richard Burns recounts:

RB: And, and I think the fact that we have focused on it [marriage] is because we have been an actually democratic movement. The moves towards those issues came up from the grassroots. They were not decided in the offices of a national gay organization. National gay organizations did not want to take on marriage. They thought it was a loser. It was Queer couples around the country who kept insisting on suing, or trying to go to a clerk’s office. ... it was a democratic phenomenon that that came up.

SS: But there’s a difference between a movement for relationship recognition and a pervasive ideology that marriage is a centerpiece of being accepted in our society.

RB: Of course. Of course.

SS: These are two separate issues.

RB: Well, I guess my point, certainly, if you talk to Terry Boggis at the Ettelbrick Project at Stonewall about *LGBT family recognition issues*, that’s what this is all about. ...[italics mine]

SS: Yes, but I'm disagreeing with you because, while I understand what you're saying, that the wish was a grassroots wish. It makes us more acceptable to straight people the more we resemble them.

RB: Oh, sure.

SS: That's not coming from us; that's coming from them. So that the spotlight on marriage and the emphasis on marriage as grounds for tolerance does not come from us. That's the only grounds we could get.

RB: Right, right, right (Burns interview, 46).

Schulman, a liberationist, is uncomfortable with the idea that marriage sprang up from the grassroots, but an Internet search for 'gay couples lining up to get married at the courthouse' produces numerous feeds of LGBTQ couples lining up at the courthouse across the country as states legalized gay marriage. In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, she calls for a separate-but-equal version of legal relationship recognition suited to LGBTQ people who are often polyamorous rather than the extension of heterosexual marriage with its implied monogamy to LGBTQ people. However, as Burns points out, marriage was available and easier to adopt and adapt than inventing an entirely new institution.

Further boundary blurring through the enforcement of the private/public divide occurred through the decline of explicit safe sex messaging. Public service advertisements about specific sexual practices and free condoms dispensed on the counters of bars violate bourgeois norms, and such preventive strategies simply disappeared, according to the participants. Charlie Franchino observes: "You don't see safe-sex education out there anymore. You go to a bar, there's nothing. You used to be bombarded with it. You see nothing out there anymore" (Franchino interview, 46-7). Benjamin Heim Shepard wishes the United States would adopt "the Brazil model, which is that explicit, explicit, explicit information about how to stop the spread of HIV...on TV and bus ads, in subways, in subways all over (Shepard interview, 29)." But Shepard doubts that is ever going to happen in America: "We're such prudes, you know, and yet it really goes back to the Puritans." John Riley attest that even the manufacturers of condoms, the

principle prophylaxis for safe sex, don't want to talk about prevention: "Condom manufacturers don't really want to talk about AIDS and condoms because they don't want to be associated with AIDS. They're still afraid of it. Occasionally you might see one, but it's not about disease prevention" (Riley interview, 49). The sudden cessation of safe sex messaging helped to divert the general public's attention away from the hyper-sexualized image they had of gay men in particular.

The private/public divide was further reinforced by the decline of the sexual street life that once animated gay neighborhoods like Chelsea and the Village and both offended and titillated the majority bourgeois morality. This occurred because of both political and economic forces. Benjamin Heim Shepard blames Giuliani's "triple-X zoning law" that closed bathhouses, blue movie houses, and booth stores for the loss of the street life he once cherished: "And the idea that Giuliani was trying to take away the low—without the low, you don't get the high. You don't get the pulse of New York. So it felt like it was HIV prevention, but then there was this attack on public sexual culture and then attack on the public commons by very extension, and, all of a sudden, what is great about New York City, which is the messy street life, we're losing that" (Shepard interview, 12). He misses the old days: "So, New York— ... we're supposed to be less prohibitive, and yet over the last fifteen years, we're no longer a sexual mecca. We are no longer a place that people can walk off the bus at 42nd Street and find something, public sexual culture." Jeffrey Fennely shares with Sarah his nostalgia for the once active street life in his old neighborhood at the end of Christopher Street:

JF: The only real gay life is the couples that walk their dogs ... so there's really not a lot.

On this block, no, it's been really gentrified.

SS: Sad (Fennely interview, 1).

Note that Schulman calls this situation “sad”: She misses the street life as well. Fennely attributes the decline of street life to rising real estate prices rather than blaming it on the Mayor: “That’s what happens. I said to somebody, Chelsea 1000 or 11 or 10011 is the gayest zip code in town, and it’s not anymore. It’s like the gays go in, they fix it up, and then the rich people move in, kind of like the mayor of Castro Street” Fennely interview, 2).

Besides, with high prices dispersing the LGBTQ community throughout the City, the density of LGBTQ people on the streets has made cruising an inefficient means of meeting someone. It’s all moved online, as Benjamin Heim Shepard notes:

BHS: I mean, you have to have a good phone to make connections, but it’s not public in the same way it used to be.

SS: So that gentrification has a kind of sexual conservatism that comes along with it.

BHS: Yeah, absolutely (Shepard interview, 32).

This suggests that the rise of the Internet has also reinforced the private/public divide and contributed to the boundary blurring between the LGBTQ community and the majority society.

Queer Subculture

The participants note the rise of the new moniker, ‘Queer’, as a replacement for ‘gay and lesbian’ and see it as part of the evolution of the community. For one thing, the name was freely chosen and not imposed by others like the medical sounding terms, ‘gay and lesbian’. For another, it is more expansive and descriptive of actual sexual behavior. As Zoe Leonard explains, “now it’s a conversation about Queer identity” (Leonard interview, 60). She explains that ‘Queer’ evolved out of the frank examination of actual sexual behavior that determined the categories ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ to be inadequate:

I think what we needed to do was to let go of certain kind of categories so that we could get the science we needed to understand what behaviors were safe and what weren’t. We needed it for health reasons, for transmission and for treatment. Then out of that, I think the idea of a Queer identity, having an identity that’s gay-positive is incredibly important

to me, to so many people in ACT UP, what we found along the way was that the word “gay” didn’t quite cover it, that there were all other—There were people who were bisexual. There were people who had different experiences in their past or their present. There were things that were contradictory. “Queer” was more expansive, more inclusive (49).

She sees ‘Queer’ as inclusive: “Actually, that definition and the multiplicity that it allows for feels like the definition that would have worked for me all along (12).” ‘Queer’ is not only a sexual identity for the participants; it includes multiple aspects of identity including artistic expression. Leonard is gratified to see her former art collective, ‘Fierce Pussy’, serving as a role model for the next generation of Queer artists:

It’s really weird, like, actually fierce pussy, we’re like the grandparents or something, but also the work that we’re making now feels incredibly contemporary, and it’s kind of interesting. We’re shifting to keep up with the conversation. We’re not having the same conversation we were having twenty years ago. We’re having a really different — they’re still about desire and sexuality and identity and feminism and rights and our bodies and public expression, but the terms keep changing, and that’s really, really exciting. It’s incredibly exciting (Leonard interview, 60).

Ira Sachs, a filmmaker, also finds meaning and satisfaction in Queer subculture: “I run *Queer Art Film*, which is a monthly series at the IFC, where we invite an artist to pick a film that they love and share it with an audience. It’s a good idea, but what’s really great about it is that every month a couple hundred people get together and they hang out and they watch a movie and they talk to each other, and they’re in a room” (Sachs interview, 30). This subculture is marked by new sexual strategies that have replaced the former unifying ethic of safe sex. Kevin Robert Frost identifies one strategy called ‘serosorting’, which means having sex only with someone with the same HIV status as oneself, whether or not it’s ‘bareback’ sex: “Serosorting meant that you tried to identify people who you thought fell into whatever category it was you were looking for. So presumably if you were negative, you were looking for a negative partner. If you were positive, presumably you were looking for positive partners” (Frost interview, 3). He points out

that gay men are using biological facts to negotiate safety in sex: “Now there was a study that— an online survey that looked at gay men’s behavior and found that gay men are actually asking their partners what their viral load status is today. Are you undetectable or not?” ‘Undetectable’ indicates that the virus is so deeply suppressed by medications that blood tests can no longer detect its presence; HIV-positive, undetectable individuals are highly unlikely to pass along the contagion.

A second emerging sexual strategy identified by the participants is PrEP, or Pre-exposure Prophylaxis, namely, the drug Truvada, which has been shown to prevent infection from HIV despite unprotected sex with HIV-positive partners. He puzzles over the controversy surrounding PrEP: “And—the arguments about PrEP which—kind of withdraw from, because it’s just hopeless. The polarization. I don’t— and it’s interesting to see why PrEP, why has it been such a vivid and in-your-face argument. Why? What is there about it? It must be kind of complex. But it’s certainly tantalizing to try and sort of get to the bottom of it (Sonnabend interview, 98)”. Many activists struggle to come to terms with the advent of PrEP: “you’re either for PrEP or you’re against PrEP. There’s no, nothing in between there.” Just as in 1994 during the ‘protease moment’, assimilationists may worry that PrEP may bring about unbridled promiscuity and undermine the monogamy they’ve been promoting; meanwhile liberationists may worry that it makes gay men vulnerable to new epidemics. As Joseph Sonnabend, a doctor, explains: “That’s another ominous thing, is the sort of denigration, if you like, or the minimization of other sexually transmitted diseases as if they’re just kind of nothing, you know, which is completely ominous, too. That part is scary” (Sonnabend interview, 89). As a former member of ACTUP, he sees sex without a condom as inherently self-destructive, although medical prophylaxis does not equal ‘unprotected’ sex: “It’s not very attractive. I mean, these are

guys who are damaging themselves. I mean, it's hard to drum up sympathy for some –.”

Sonnabend's testimony shows that there is indeed, a “complex” around PrEP: if there was a pill that protected one from *all* venereal diseases, would the liberationists be in favor of it then? We know where the assimilationists stand.

These new and evolving sexual strategies are signs that the subculture's values are evolving and that the ‘abandonment’ of safe sex that the participants noted earlier does not signal the end of a subculture-specific sexual ethics. As medicine progresses, so will the ethos, but neither monogamy nor unbridled promiscuity appear to describe what's happening. Moreover, the rise of negotiated safety suggests that we shouldn't take LGBTQ marriage too literally as monogamy; if sex is negotiable, so is marriage. Liberationists need not despair and assimilationists are in no position to declare victory. The subculture lives on, though at a lower intensity than was needed during the times of intense social opposition during a pandemic.

Activist Identity

The participants exhibit the stages of activist identity formation described by Yang in his article, “The liminal effects of social movements: Red Guards and the transformation of identity.” The first step is the “liminal experience”: identification with the movement that becomes so intense that it takes individuals outside of their normal social environment and habitus, like the culminating aspect of a ritual. Kevin Robert Frost claims that this is, indeed, what happened: “It was all-consuming” (Frost interview, 1). Monica Pearl says that, “ACTUP did become a way of life, absolutely” (Pearl interview, 32). Andrea Benzacar claims that, “It was a singular transformative experience, and continues to be. My life is radically altered because of it” (Benzacar interview, 16). The emotional intensity of the experience was so beyond that of mere advocacy or lobbying that it attained liminality. According to John Voelcker, “A lot of

people said Act Up was the high school they never had (Voelcker interview, 38).” Stephen Spinella goes even farther:

You would get in that room, and that room was like — I don’t know. It was like the best drug ever. It was like it was people who believed in something, who worked together, who were ferocious, and who were gay, and who were and fighting with an enormous amount of energy and intelligence. And it was thrilling. I pity anybody who wasn’t there. ... (Spinella interview, 22-3).

“I pity anybody who wasn’t there”—really? Few people would want to live through a plague like that, alongside the social opprobrium, derailed lives, and emotional and physical suffering that it entailed.

Clearly, Spinella isn’t speaking out of his ‘gay’ identity. He’s speaking out of his ‘activist’ identity. The activists who are nostalgic for ‘the good old days’ are really conflating their LGBTQ identity with their activist identity. They are older now and nostalgic for their youth, for the old neighborhood, for the counterculture, and for the friends they lost. Their sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves has dissipated, as Jeffrey Fennely stated, “It’s all become Facebook-y (Fennely interview, 50).” They exhibit what Yang terms “the inward turn,” indicating a period of mourning and nostalgia after the experience of a successful social movement. Zoe Leonard says: “I was like, ‘I want to not live in New York for a while,’ ... I think on some really profound level for me, also, wanting to discover what my own voice would be outside of a collective” (Leonard interview, 64). Monica Pearl says: “There was a sense of kind of saturation of grief and sort of an incapacity to do any more, that really drove people away. I think that was my feeling. I think I wanted more life. And I sort of felt bad about leaving [New York City], but I think I felt like I had to” (Pearl interview, 49). Andrea Benzacar says, “People got tired. People started needing to live their own lives” (Benzacar interview, 40). And Esther Kaplan says, “I have a lot of nostalgia” (Kaplan interview, 35). This is consistent with activist

identity formation as described by Yang: they are nostalgic for the sense of purpose and meaning that they experienced fighting for the social good in a desperate situation.

They also exhibit what Yang terms “the outward turn,” which is when former activists re-group to seek new causes to champion and to renew their activist identities. Monica Pearl points out that there remain plenty of other things to fix in our society:

So did we fix everything? Did we make men and straight people and all the people who are not us, I guess is how you’re putting it, aware of our issues and identify with us? No. A lot of the same problems still exist. Sexism still exists. Heterosexism still exists pretty badly. Racism still exists. Sex is still not empowering or powerful for everyone. But there was a moment to make real change out of those coalitions and those identifications, so it worked then. So I don’t know (Pearl interview, 39).

But Joe Ferrari is worried about the future of activism, like Duggan and Schulman, who complain that the LGBTQ community has been de-politicized: “People don’t understand what it takes to be involved in a democracy. You have to participate. You have to demand. You have to push. Nobody does something because they’re nice. Nobody ever did anything for us ever, period, end of story. Everything was fought” (Ferrari interview, 22). Nevertheless, several of the participants find the Occupy movement intriguing. John Voelcker speculates that, “I think an Act Up–like entity will evolve, for other reasons. I don’t know where the Occupy movement is going” (Voelcker interview, 38). Eugene Fedorko is optimistic that a time will come again when activism will rise up among the populace: “For me, just to, again, be aware that there’s that body of energy out there, that when the right time comes along, like the black Civil Rights Movement, the Lesbian/Gay Civil Rights Movement, ACT UP, Occupy Wall Street, when the times comes along that we’re able to gather that energy and be effective. It’s very important” (Fedorko interview, 37). Benjamin Heim Shepard (and several others) see continuity in social movements, supposing that the former ACTUP participants will become the elders in the next social movement: “you still see people coming out of Occupy now that are in ACT UP (Shepard

interview, 35).” Dolly Meieran agrees: “in something like Occupy, maybe because there are a few, you know, of the same people involved” (Meieran interview, 30). The testimonies suggest that the former ACTUP members have conflated their meaningful activist identities with their LGBTQ identities, and that they will at some point find a new cause to champion. The rise of Donald Trump has become that moment, with town halls, mass demonstrations, and direct actions springing up all over the country against his divisive, economically oppressive policies.

Thematic Discussion

This evidence from the ACTUP interviews supports the hypothesis that assimilation theory could account for the continuing rift between assimilationists and liberationists among LGBTQ activists. Although the focus of the Oral History Project has been to capture the activists’ recollections of shared struggle, it also reveals some monolithic assumptions about assimilation that underpin the assimilationist/liberationist divide. The activists’ frequent use of divisive, good gay/bad gay constructions reinforces the problem, while their themes of fragmentation, exclusion of large segments of the LGBTQ community, and nostalgia for a radical cause, old neighborhoods and a vibrant street life, all paint the picture of a counterculture in transition to an assimilated subculture. This new social condition embodies a contradiction that neither side fully understands.

Duggan articulates the goal of the LGBTQ movement as “the expansion of a right to sexual privacy against the intrusive, investigatory labeling powers of the state, and the simultaneous expansion of gay public life through institution building and publicity” (180). Both liberationists and assimilationists have always sought the same right to sexual privacy (viz. ‘respectability’) accorded to heterosexuals without fear of governmental or public scrutiny and control (Duggan 2001). When Charlie Franchino and Ira Sachs notice attitudes towards LGBTQ

are changing among the younger generation, they confirm the shifting boundaries of respectability. While Monica Pearl acknowledges that some outcomes of activism are unanticipated and that many results are only partial, she also affirms that the revolutionary movement was largely successful in securing legitimacy of the LGBTQ community within American society.

However, liberationists like Duggan and Schulman reject the terms of this assimilation as exclusionary of many Queers, including racial minorities, working class people, gender non-conforming people, much of the older generation, and the disabled. They accuse assimilationists of seeking to transform a distinct LGBTQ subculture into a White, middle class, de-politicized and domesticated niche market, blind to institutions like the class system, heterosexism, economic injustice, and racial prejudice. They accuse Sullivan and other assimilationists of seeking to relinquish a distinct LGBTQ culture and identity.

Instead, the testimonies suggest that the LGBTQ community has transformed from a counterculture to an assimilated subculture. The fragmentation they describe suggests 'segmented assimilation', in which some cohorts advantaged by race, class and youth assimilate while other groups not so advantaged remain largely unassimilated. The sample is not broad enough to determine the assimilative path of minorities, gender non-conforming, and the working class, but there are hints that they have not assimilated, partly because their priorities were set aside by the conservative 'rights' activists. . This paper argues that the LGBTQ community has been 'de-sexualized' in a way analogous to the de-racialization of other minorities on their path to assimilation. It shows that the assimilationist/liberationist binary stems from monolithic ideas about assimilation and questionable assumptions about LGBTQ marriage on both sides. It also demonstrates that liberationists' nostalgia for the old counterculture and its

neighborhoods and their hopes for further collective action reflects a classic process of activist identity formation, as described by Yang—an identity that the interviewees conflate with the LGBTQ identity, further fueling their anti-assimilationist attitude.

Counterculture

The testimonies make it clear that LGBTQ people were an unassimilated and oppositional counterculture. The difference between a counterculture and a subculture is that countercultures resist the dominant culture while subcultures do not and so can be assimilated (Dowd and Dowd 2003). When Richard Burns recalls that the LGBTQ agenda in the late seventies was to dismantle the nuclear family and the American empire, he is enunciating the resistance of a counterculture. Along the same lines, Esther Kaplan speaks of the efforts needed to resist the hegemonic capitalist system, and Eugene Fedorko celebrates his “outsider outlaw identity” (Fedorko interview, 19). These are countercultural voices and not the way most Americans speak about society. Burns and Fedorko both point out that the early leaders of the movement were often people who couldn’t ‘pass’ and people of color. In Burns’ words, “They were already outsiders” (Burns interview, 45). When Jeffrey Fennely states that he had to leave home because he was gay, he is describing blocked structural assimilation. When he adds that there were a lot of professions he didn’t go into because of his gayness, he is describing blocked socioeconomic assimilation. Several participants describe finding a safe community in the gay neighborhoods in New York, places where they could create new families and associate with people like themselves. The counterculture provided a great source of meaning and personal identity for many people who were gay and lesbian (Chauncy 1995).

Segmented Assimilation

The participants note increasing fragmentation among the community since the ‘protease moment’ in 1994, when new drug combination therapies (HAART) transformed AIDS from a death sentence to a chronic illness for those with adequate healthcare. Perhaps not coincidentally, this was precisely the moment when the (IGF the Independent Gay Forum presented themselves as spokesmen for an imagined group of ‘centrist gays’, pushing for marriage and military service rights and setting aside the social issues that affect the majority of LGBTQ people, including those in the working class or who are racial minorities, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, or women. It’s possible that assimilationists saw the writing on the wall: that HAART would allow the ‘bad gays’ to resume their ‘promiscuous’ ways and that they would lose the chance to impose their moral vision on the others. Once HIV became a manageable disease, they knew they had to act quickly.

By championing marriage and military service rights, assimilationists commandeered the movement and split the community. They constituted a White, middle class, male-dominated cohort. The fragmentation the participants observed indicates segmented assimilation because ‘fragmentation’ is how segmented assimilation feels to those undergoing it. In segmented assimilation, cohorts advantaged by race, class, and generation assimilate on the structural and socio-economic level while others disadvantaged by class, racial minority status, gender-non-conformity, age and disability remain ‘blocked’ from assimilation.

In particular, the participants discuss the situation of survivors, many of whom suffer from PTSD, the shaming effects of both the illness and the medications used to treat it, and the abandonment of their careers. Once a person is on disability, it’s very difficult to go back to work in today’s competitive economy because no one is going to take seriously a resume that

says “on disability for 10 years.” Andrea Benzacar says, “Our lives have been completely derailed” (Benzacar interview 41). I stopped associating with most of my professional friends because I could no longer afford their lifestyle and I felt embarrassed. The literature confirms their impression. Lewis (2015) describes “an age effect wherein middle-aged men perceive the least acceptance for all groups [in the LGBTQ community]” (1201). Other studies confirm the exclusion of older men and HIV positive individuals from the LGBTQ social scene (Han 2007; Fraser 2008).

Since the testimonies suggest that issues of race and class were abandoned, those groups most affected by those issues may be presumed to remain blocked as well. However the point of view represented here is limited by the profile of the ACTUP participants in the sample, which was less than ten percent Black and Latino and was mostly White and middle class. This is not a broad sample and cannot truly account for the assimilative path of those other cohorts directly, although there is certainly evidence that their likely social concerns were abandoned by the assimilationists.

Cultural Assimilation: Boundary Blurring

What kept LGBTQ people in a counterculture was their hyper-sexualized image among the majority who upheld a private/public divide that characterizes bourgeois society. Most citizens don’t regard each other first with a preconceived idea about each other’s sexuality; the subject doesn’t come up in typical social interactions like paying for groceries or picking up the laundry. Gay neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village and Chelsea used to be tourist attractions not only for LGBTQ people, but also for heterosexuals who came downtown to see the ‘Bohemian’ lifestyle of its inhabitants (Chauncy 1995). The street life was remarkably different than anywhere else in the country and even in the City. People were blatantly cruising

for sex; they were wearing leather chaps and fetish outfits, including different colored handkerchiefs denoting specific sex acts; bars, porn movie houses, and leather stores added to a general air of licentiousness that does not exist in majority White middle class neighborhoods. This provided an element of titillation for the bourgeoisie coming in to see the ‘freak show’ and to spot drag queens, bull dykes, and hyper-masculine or effeminate men (Chauncy). They would ponder, “What do they do together?” in a way that no one does with heterosexuals. Many homosexuals made no effort to mask their sexual preferences. In fact, many flaunted it, because they felt that this was their turf and the heterosexuals who lived among them did so partly because of the draw of the *laissez-faire* social atmosphere.

The testimonies suggest that there was not a ‘straight line’ convergence to the majority culture as suggested by Ghaziani, in which LGBTQ people became “no different than heterosexuals” (2014 10). Instead boundary blurring occurred. Boundary blurring is a two-way process marked by greater societal acceptance and some instances of outward conformity that mask the retention of a distinct subculture and identity. In boundary blurring, enough of the external protocols of the majority society are adopted by the out-group to call into question who is on which side of the line. This boundary blurring manifested as a kind of *desexualization* that paralleled the way other minority groups such as Italians and Poles were deracialized in their assimilation and eventually came to be seen as White.

Desexualization, as the word is used here, signifies a process whereby sexuality becomes a less salient characteristic of the social perceptions of LGBTQ individuals. The LGBTQ community is unique in that it transcends bounds of race and class. It is not an ethnic minority, yet it was seen as the Other. Robert Ezra Park, the founder of the Chicago school of assimilation

at the University of Chicago at the turn of the last century, offers a helpful characterization of racism that can help define this coined term.

Park suggests that assimilation of an out-group into the majority is most difficult for racial minorities because physical differences condemn them “to remain among us as an abstraction, a symbol [...]” (1914, 611). As Kivisto (2012) elaborates:

The member of the race cannot be seen as an individual, but merely as a representation of the collectivity. This constitutes the social psychological underpinning of racial prejudice, for insofar as people are not capable of viewing the other as an individual, they are unable to establish patterns of interaction based on reciprocity and respect (136).

Instead of the emphasis on racially ascribed physical traits, the sexual behavior of LGBTQ people is what sets them apart physically from others.

Previously, many individuals in the LGBTQ community were regarded by the majority as representative of their collective sexuality, which at the time was perceived as disrupting bourgeois values. When Tracy Morgan talks about the painting collective, ‘Fierce Pussy’, she evokes a time when LGBTQ artists intentionally worked to shock the bourgeoisie as part of their countercultural expression. As Shepard writes, “Countless gays, lesbians, and Queers, particularly gender/fetish, SM, leather, or transgender communities had very little interest in fitting into the status quo” (2001, 54).

Schulman laments what she sees as the LGBTQ community’s lost impulse to shock people: “Being uncomfortable or asking others to be uncomfortable is practically considered antisocial because the revelation of truth is tremendously dangerous to supremacy (167).” Desexualization does not mean creating an asexual image of LGBTQ people; it means simply that they have come to be seen as individuals rather than as representatives of a transgressive sexuality. Most people see each other as individuals first, not as sexual or hypersexual beings;

they don't ask of heterosexuals, 'what do they do together'? With desexualization, the same respect and privacy accorded to majority citizens is granted to LGBTQ individuals.

The testimonies reveal two dimensions in this desexualization: heterosexualization and the enforcement of the private/public divide. Heterosexualization includes the insistence that "We're just like you", the separation of 'AIDS' from 'gay', and the presentation of LGBTQ marriage as monogamy to heterosexuals and as the cure for AIDS to the LGBTQ community. The enforcement of the private/public divide has five elements: the end of pro-sex safe sex messaging, the dispersion of the old neighborhoods, the end of a once thriving sexual street life, and the rise of the Internet. The assimilationists promoted an image of heteronormativity in order to make LGBTQ people more acceptable to the majority (Ferry 2012). When Oral History Project participants like Joan Gibbs, Benjamin Heim Shepard, and Andrea Benzacar push back against this approach, they reflect the mostly liberationist constitution of ACTUP. However, Charlie Franchino suggests that AIDS led to gay marriage because it showed our humanity and made it easier for the majority to accept civil rights for LGBTQ people. Along the same lines, the effective treatments removed a major barrier between LGBTQ individuals and the majority who previously could not help seeing them as carriers of a deadly venereal disease rather than relating to them as fellow citizens. As for marriage, John Voelcker explains that it provided the kind of framework that heterosexuals could understand, as opposed to the sexual culture that existed in the seventies and eighties. While Schulman objects to gay marriage as monogamy, Richard Burns counters that it offered a means of gaining LGBTQ family recognition. The divide is based on whether one interprets marriage as monogamy or not. John Voelcker points out that there are other reasons to get married than monogamy, the same ones he cites for safe sex, such as financial security or inheriting a lease.

Everyone during the epidemic knew people who lost their jobs and insurance because of AIDS, who were kicked out of their apartments because their lovers owned the leases and died of AIDS, whose lovers' families denied them visitation rights in the hospital, and who lost their lives to illness while being cast out into the street. The community was rife with these horror stories. In this case, LGBTQ marriage represents an external assimilation because the institution is adopted without the meaning it carries for the majority (Thurnwald 1936). Straight people never announce that, "We're getting married and have decided to be monogamous," but Hoff's study shows that half of gay marriages are non-monogamous, and "there was no difference in relationship satisfaction between couples with monogamous and open agreements" (2010, 827).

The other factor in effecting the desexualization of the LGBTQ community was the separation of the private/public spheres. Although the participants lament the end of pro-sex safe-sex messaging, research suggests that, "community norms have shifted such that unsafe sex is more acceptable" (Morin 2003). That, along with the availability of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PReP), reduces the impetus for safe sex messaging. The interviews address the dispersion of the community and the loss of its lively sexual street life due to gentrification. Instead, the rise of the Internet provides a new means of meeting that does not require such close proximity. Notably, there are few mentions of the Internet in the eighty-six interviews, probably reflecting the age of the participants; young LGBTQ people are particularly high users of the Internet for dating and other purposes (Grov et al 2014). These days, instead of cruising each other and possibly being noticed by other people, men may pass each other on the street without noticing or being noticed while so many are looking at dating websites on their phones.

Activist Identity

The participants miss the old counterculture, and Spinella goes so far as to say of the height of the AIDS epidemic, “I pity anybody who wasn’t there.” Here he speaks not as an LGBTQ person suffering through a plague but as an activist. I lived through this and it was a nightmare and I don’t pity anybody who wasn’t there. The participants are activists at heart, and they conflate LGBTQ identity with activist identity, following a three-step pattern of activist identity formation outlined by Yang in his study of the Red Guards. The activists are understandably nostalgic for the old neighborhoods, the ‘good old days’ when they were young, and for the experience of serving meaningful social causes amidst the direst of circumstances, exhibiting the ‘inward turn’ described by Yang. Their concern about the future of activism and their interest in the Occupy movement make it evident that some of them will likely resume their activist roles as the elders in new causes like universal healthcare constitutes the ‘outward turn’. The newly energized LGBTQ pride parades to which assimilationists object for being too politicized and the recent uprising of protest against Trump and his policies show that activism is not dead. The issues may have moved on, but the activist fervor persists.

An Assimilated Subculture

Through these various forms of boundary blurring the former counterculture has assumed enough of the overarching national identity and manners to allow it to assimilate as a distinct subculture. Although the testimonies make it clear that the intense bond that held the LGBTQ community has diminished with the fading of the epidemic, Leonard and Sachs relish the Queer culture, and several of the participants express admiration for the moniker because of its expansive and inclusive characteristics. The question of the degree to which Queer constitutes a subculture is not the subject of this analysis, but the structural and socioeconomic assimilation

for certain cohorts noted by the participants indicates that they now belong to cosmopolitan groups. Kivisto expands on Park's observations about individualism, cosmopolitan groups and the lure of assimilation:

Park thought that assimilation was attractive because modern societies are individualistic. What this means is that people will seek to enhance their own opportunities and expand their life options, and that one way of doing so is to refuse to permit the parochial constraints of the ethnic group to limit self-realization. It means that individuals will seek to expand their social circles and will treat the ethnic group, not as a community of fate, but as one of a variety, of possible affiliations and sources of personal identity. The cosmopolitan group, in contrast to the parochial group, is one in which individuals possess options, including the options of loyalty, voice and exit (132).

Sullivan may be right when he asserts that there is no *need* for a separate Queer culture because in an assimilated subculture, the individual is free to exit the group; for instance, Amish individuals are free to shed their Amish identity and live like the majority. Sullivan misses an important point about assimilated subcultures: the out-group is not labeled and isolated by the majority. Instead, 'Queer' was freely chosen by the group and constitutes a meaningful identity for some but not all LGBTQ people.

While assimilationists did not achieve their goal of imposing monogamy and depoliticizing the community, liberationists take marriage too literally and seem unaware of the extent to which the LGBTQ community has re-constituted on the Internet. In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Schulman worries that the 'Disneyfication' of former LGBTQ neighborhoods extends to the inner life of the community as depoliticization, conformity, and domestication. But through boundary blurring, LGBTQ people can outwardly conform while maintaining "inner freedom" (Kivisto 137). The assimilation is only external; the mind and behavior are unaffected.

Evidence for this distinction is found in Barrett and Pollock's analysis of data from the Urban Men's Health Study, assessing degrees of assimilation versus sexual expression among men who self-identify as having a same-sex orientation. Whereas they expected to find that those

who were the most conforming to the heteronormative culture (those with low sexual expression and high assimilation) would also have the highest rates of marriage-like relationships, they found instead that those they termed Innovators, who scored high for both sexual expression and assimilation, actually had the highest rates of stable, dyadic partnerships (2011). As Figure 1 shows, 58% of the subjects score high on sexual expression, while 50% score high on assimilation, suggesting outward conformity, and only 22% conform to the assimilationist ideal of becoming “just like you” (with low sexual expression and high assimilation scores) Interestingly, the largest group in the sample fits the classic pattern of the gay male lifestyle (with high sexual expression and low assimilation scores).

Assimilation	CONFORMIST 22%	INNOVATION 28%
	UNINVOLVED 20%	NONCONFORMIST 30%
	Sexual Expression	

Figure1. Schematic representation of Barrett and Pollock’s categories of adaptations to same-sex orientation among men (2011)

This study strengthens the argument that assimilation as a subculture does not require the loss of identity and sexual experimentation presumed by assimilationists and feared by liberationists. Further it is evident that Liberationists confuse the separation of the private/public sphere with the loss of a subculture. Instead, the closet was replaced by respectability and

privacy: “the bedroom door that you never go behind,” described by John Voelcker (Interview, 37). At the same time, LGBTQ presence in the media has continued to expand. This is exactly what Duggan claims that both sides have always sought (2001). The divide between assimilationists and liberationists as it is configured today rests on monolithic assumptions about assimilation and evaporates when assimilation theory in all its complexity is applied. As an ‘assimilated subculture,’ in certain cities, LGBTQ people are free to be open about their sexuality in public but not to be overtly sexual, just like heterosexuals. They can hold hands and they don’t have to hide who they are, but they have to respect the rules of American society regarding modesty in public conduct.

It is important to note significant limitations of this paper. First, it is based on the experiences of LGBTQ people living in New York City, long a bastion of liberal tolerance. Moreover, the subjects of the ACTUP Oral History Project are not typical of the general LGBTQ population, so their responses may not represent the broader sentiments of the LGBTQ community. Most people aren’t activists, myself included. Notably absent from this sample are voices from minority groups and working class backgrounds. The younger generation are completely unrepresented. Further study incorporating larger, more diverse samples is warranted. It would also be interesting to study the implications of open LGBTQ marriages on the institution itself, for external adaptations can have transformative impacts on the institutions adapted (Thurnwald 1936).

Another qualification of the material is that Sarah Schulman is not an impartial interviewer. We must bear in mind that she is a liberationist and activist who opposes an assimilation process that she perceives as promoting uniformity and erasing a distinct LGBTQ sensibility and sexual culture. At times she imposes her point of view on her subjects, for

example, when she disagrees with Richard Burns' assertion that the push for marriage sprang up from the grass roots. She frequently directs the conversation into subjects important to her and not necessarily to her interviewees, who often respond with "yeah, yeah." But she did the community a remarkable service by preserving the memories of that difficult period of medical, identificational, and political struggle before it could get lost in the general amnesia about suffering that characterizes our society. We don't like to talk about slavery, racism, indentured service, Vietnam, Iraq or any other terrible part of our history. Even 9/11, while often cited as a source of grievance, remains largely unrepresented and unimagined in movies and books.

And let us bear in mind the humanity of the interviewees. At the time of the interviews, they were all at least 50 years old and recalling events that happened in their youth. It's only to be expected that nostalgia for those years of activism and youth and for the old neighborhoods may color this specific cohort's perceptions of the current status of the LGBTQ community. People move on and issues change. As Joe Ferrari remarked, "It's a whole generation later." The passing of time and the loss of youthful vigor tends to add a rose-colored tint to our recollections and the aging process tends to sour our perceptions of current conditions.

Conclusion

There has been a split in the LGBTQ movement between assimilationists and liberationists since Stonewall. In its latest manifestation, assimilationists like Sullivan and Ghaziani proclaim the era of a 'post-gay' society in which LGBTQ people have melded into mainstream society by becoming no different from the heterosexual majority. They claim that sexuality is losing importance in LGBTQ self-definition and that a distinct and politicized subculture no longer has a need to exist. Liberationists like Schulman and Duggan dispute the terms of this assimilation, pointing out that it excluded the majority of LGBTQ people and

claiming that it erases a unique sensibility that has been a source of creativity and sexual exploration.

An examination of the Oral History Project, a collection of oral histories of the survivors of ACTUP, suggests that the split between assimilationists and liberationists is based on monolithic assumptions about assimilation on both sides and the conflation of activist and LGBTQ identities among liberationists. Discussions of fragmentation within the community suggest segmented assimilation, in which some cohorts assimilate (notably the younger generation) while other cohorts do not (notably the older generation). The sample is not broad enough to determine the assimilative path of minorities, though the abandonment of social issues important to them are clues that they have not assimilated. The testimonies present evidence of structural and socio-economic assimilation and the persistence of a subculture through boundary blurring via a process of desexualization akin to the deracialization experienced by other, ethnic and racial minorities on their assimilative path. This process includes heterosexualization, the end of explicit pro-sex safe sex messaging, the separation of 'AIDS' from 'gay', the deconcentration of LGBTQ neighborhoods due to rising real estate values, the rise of the Internet, and the coopting of marriage as an external assimilation. The application of assimilation theory to the select testimonies of the Oral History Project suggests that the LGBTQ community has transformed from a counterculture to an assimilated subculture.

This study brings into question the binary assimilationist/liberationist that has marked the history of the LGBTQ movement. Further study with a broader, more representative study is warranted, including more voices from racial minorities, working class, and young people. It would also be enlightening to incorporate the assessments of non-activists within this framework of segmented assimilation. Finally, given Thurnwald's (1936) observation that the adoption of

an institution's external form without the adoption of its meaning can alter the nature of that institution, it will also be useful to study the long-term implications of LGBTQ marriage with its negotiable monogamy.

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