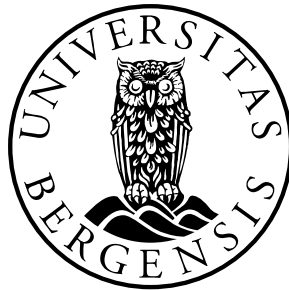


# **Challenging Normativity: Emergent Socialities, Hope and Social Freedom**

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The process of writing this thesis has been marked by continuous and surprising turns. Having followed the path of fieldwork, and this *particular* fieldwork has changed my perspective on life and the world we live in. I have not stopped being surprised by the events of life, and the many different life-stories I have gotten to know during my fieldwork. I would like to take some time to extend my gratitude to everyone who has left their mark on this thesis, and its end-result. This thesis would never have been completed if it were not for the support of friends, family and academic staff.

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May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

From January to August 2018, I conducted my first anthropological field work in New York City (NYC). My initial fieldwork proposal was to study an activist group in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender + (LGBT+) community in a politically turbulent time. This turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. The activists I had reached out to prior to my arrival in the U.S., stopped responding to my emails after I arrived in the United States. The *rendezvous* they had given me the address to was now a Dunkin' Donuts shop. I was stressed, worried, and very anxious about the upcoming months, as my initial research idea was suddenly out of reach. Thankfully, my academic contact person at Barnard College, Columbia University, helped me to get in touch with the organization I have chosen to call Possibilities. Possibilities is a non-profit organization that caters to the need of LGBT+ homeless youth in NYC and became one of the place where I met some of my interlocutors. They welcomed me with open arms, and Possibilities became one of the places I could go to frequently, as a field-site. The organization assists homeless LGBTQ+ youth with everything from housing, health care and accessing social services, such as food stamps and mental health support. The organization itself is not the focus of this thesis, but rather the people I met through Possibilities, and continued to meet outside the events at the center. I also had a variety of other interlocutors that I met in other arenas.

During my fieldwork, I participated in countless hangouts in parks, shelter dinners, a course in sexual health for LGBT+ youth as well as trips to museums, clubs and bars. This thesis is about sociality, identity, social practices and relationships of my interlocutors in LGBT+ communities in NYC. It is also about sexuality, and I ask *how* and *why* sexuality becomes important in U.S. society, and how it shapes the experiences of my interlocutors. I

designate this introduction chapter to present the questions I raise in this thesis, key analytical concepts, theoretical framework, main methods and some of my own experiences as an anthropologist in NYC.

## **METHODS IN THE FIELD AND ETHICS**

### **INTERLOCUTORS**

Most of my interlocutors in NYC were mainly young homeless LGBT+ identifying persons in ages ranging from 20 to 34. It should be noted that the use of the term “homeless” in this context, might be a misnomer. Anthropologist Carin Tunåker (2015) mentions from her work with LGBT+ homeless youth in Britain, that homeless in this context refers more to a state of “homelessness”. What it means, is that most of them do not have a stable housing situation, and that they live in various shelters in the city or “couch-surfing” with friends. “Couch-surfing” was not common among the NYC homeless youth I met, as most of them had a place in a shelter. I met my interlocutors through Possibilities, but later, I mostly continued to meet them outside of organized events. Many of Possibilities’ clients were runaways, whose families either kicked them out or they had run away because their sexual orientation or gender identity caused problems in their homes. Some came from volatile and unaccepting communities, where their families had strong religious beliefs, or were generally conservative. A majority had migrated to NYC, either from other states within the US such as California, Utah, Idaho, upstate New York or from other countries in the Middle East, South Asia or South America. The clients at Possibilities are mostly African Americans, Hispanics and international migrants. Many told me that they moved to New York with the thought of starting a new and better life in an accepting and safe space where their sexual orientation or gender identity did not matter. Being with the LGBT+ homeless youth could be emotionally intense, tough and heartbreaking. In this thesis however, I will avoid being too concerned with the precarity of the situation of the LGBT+ homeless youth<sup>1</sup>, but discuss the possible larger issues of why LGBT+ persons make up 40% of the homeless population under the age of 24 in NYC (Oliveira and Mullgrav 2010:13).

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<sup>1</sup> Surely, this also illustrate how especially African American, Hispanics and non-Anglo-American are disproportionately affected by cases of homelessness, which is related to class and race.



In addition to LGBT+ homeless youth, I had a selection of other interlocutors. These I met through mutual acquaintances from prior visits to NYC, or they volunteered at Possibilities. Admittedly, this was coincidental, and it was not part of my initial plan. However, many of these interlocutors were very eager to be included in my research about LGBT+ people in NYC, especially at a time where they themselves argued it was “very necessary”, referring to the current political climate in the U.S. This group of interlocutors were mostly fully employed adults who lived in shared apartments with friends, which gave them more stability and predictability in their everyday life than the LGBT+ young adults I met through Possibilities. The interlocutors I met through mutual friends or in other arenas were predominantly white, cisgendered<sup>2</sup> gay men between the ages of 20 and 40. Like my interlocutors from Possibilities, most of them also moved to NYC from other states in the U.S.

Although most of my interlocutors were cisgendered gay men, I also connected with some transwomen<sup>3</sup> and cisgendered lesbian women. I believe I connected better with gay men because of my own gender and sexual identity. This is something Kath Weston (1991) also argues for during her anthropological fieldwork in San Francisco. Because she was a woman, Weston also connected easier with other women (p.13-14). Although my two, quite different, groups of interlocutors might seem disconnected from each other, I quickly came to realize that there were many similarities that connected them. Reflections and experiences of both differences and similarities gave me a greater confidence in the validity and importance of my fieldwork data.

## METHODS

My main method in the field was that of “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998), as well as “go-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003, O’Reilly 2012) with my interlocutors. Both methods fall under the traditional participant observation method in anthropological fieldworks. It involved mostly

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Cisgendered’ is the term used when someone identify themselves as the gender they are assigned with at birth (biological sex).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Transwomen’ is the term used when biologically sexed men identify themselves as female (male-to-female [MTF]). ‘Transmen’ would be the term for female to male (FTM) identifying persons. The term ‘trans’ is sometimes contested (rightfully so), which is accurately portrayed by David Valentine in his *Imagining Transgender* (2007).

spending time with my interlocutors in their own surroundings, outings and environments, both physically and socially. I spent a lot of time walking around in the streets and hanging out in parks. I also participated in many events at Possibilities such as creative writing sessions, dinners, group-outings and more. My time with interlocutors that were not in any relation to Possibilities was, to the best of my ability, to do whatever they did when they were not at work, e.g., on evenings and weekends. This included going to museums, lunches, clubs and bars. Regardless, “deep hanging out” and “go-alongs” were crucial methods with both groups. “Go-alongs” with my interlocutors was something I really valued during my fieldwork and felt was the most natural thing to do. I could follow my interlocutors in their daily activities without being too limited to one specific place, and I also avoided bringing my interlocutors into unfamiliar territory or situations. I always let my interlocutors navigate situations, which also made it easier for me to grasp the moment and realize what questions would be relevant to ask. As I will demonstrate in my second chapter, the meaning of place and the symbolic construction of space was important for my interlocutors’ experience of belonging and “go-alongs”. “Go-alongs” are similar to what anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to as “mobile fieldwork”, a method is particularly well suited to learn about how interlocutors see their physical environment and their own place within it (Ingold and Vergunst Lee 2008).

Karen O’Reilly argues that “deep hanging out” and “go-alongs” “is a good way to get people to do and to talk. Such methods encourage a focus on space and place as opposed to a chronological interpretation of events, it emphasizes context and sensoriality, by placing researchers in the mobile habitats of their informants” (O’Reilly 2012:99). It describes the field as highly sensory, and how we learn through our bodies as we experience, live and feel the everyday life (see O’Reilly 2012, and Cerwonka 2007).

Embodied knowledge (knowledge that becomes a part of who we are) is built up over time as we learn to do things our research participant can do, as we do things with them, and as we become part of the setting, the culture and the group with whom we spend so much time. [...] we cannot undertake ethnography without acknowledging the role of our own embodied, sensual, thinking, critical and positioned self. (O’Reilly 2012:99-100).

Because I too identify as sexually different, it was easier to connect and engage with my interlocutors. I often had to explicitly disclose my sexual identity in my first encounters with interlocutors. Later in my fieldwork, I sometimes forgot to disclose it and was met with suspicion and people seemed weary of my presence. However, on later occasions when getting

to know my sexual identity through other people, or through topics we talked about, people became much more relaxed and talkative.

In *Improvising Theory* (2007), Allaine Cerwonka argues that we as researchers could benefit from thinking more about how the body of the researcher is a space of analytical insights about a variety of issues concerning the field (p. 35). Rather than striving for complete objectivity, which she claims is an epistemological *idea* (p. 33, my emphasis), the researcher's bodily experiences should complement and enrich rather than replace critical reason as a mode of analysis (p. 36). There is no point in erasing the anthropologist from the fieldwork as if he or she were not present or obsolete. I argue that by emphasizing the phenomenological dimension of the researcher in anthropological fieldwork also gives more validity to the knowledge that is produced in the ethnography. However, according to Geertz, anthropologists can never fully comprehend the social reality of our interlocutors: "Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces" (Geertz 1986:373). We as anthropologist, can never fully "tap into" the symbolic past and histories as understood by our interlocutors, but by "scratching the surface" of my interlocutors' experiences and expressions, I can at least *try* to understand.

I rarely conducted any form of structured or semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2011). Further, I only used my tape recorder for *one* in-depth conversation. Most of my field notes were written after events had occurred. I realized quickly that taking notes in front of my interlocutors was unpopular, as well as distracting me from "being there". Occasionally, I took notes on my phone, as that seemed to be more accepted than writing with pen and paper. My interlocutors were aware that I was taking notes on my phone, and I had a feeling that it created less "distance" between us than pen and paper would. Writing notes on my phone meant I had to elaborate on my field notes on a later occasion. This, in fact, worked to my benefit. Writing down and elaborating field notes *after* they occurred, helped me to get a relevant distance, and reflect better on what my interlocutors said and did, and what I experienced myself in the field.

Ethical considerations mostly revolved around questions of anonymity. For anonymity reasons, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all my interlocutors in this thesis. Providing an extra layer of protection of my interlocutors' privacy, I have mixed places, people and events that did not occur in the same time or place where such "collages" (see Hopkins, 1996) do not affect the empirical data in any analytically consequential way. This has been necessary in order to shield my interlocutors' identity, many who consider themselves to be in precarious situations or engaged in illegal activities. Sometimes I have had to create new personas by

assembling characteristics and features of different people to ensure complete anonymity for my interlocutors. Although some of my interlocutors engaged in what could be considered criminal activity such as shop-lifting or buying drugs, I never participated myself, or exposed myself to any form of activity that would criminalize me. Because of the precarity of some of the people's life-situation, anonymity and discretion is especially important.

## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST IN THE FIELD

I lived in three different places during my fieldwork, all of them in Brooklyn. First, I sublet a room in Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy). When my sublease expired, I moved to another shared apartment by Prospect Park. I only stayed in my second apartment for approximately two weeks, because I felt the environment was unsafe. Our next-door neighbor was shot and killed five days after I moved in. There was a lot of conflict in the neighborhood, and the police had 24-hour-surveillance right outside our apartment-building with lights on. The week before, a man had set himself on fire in Prospect Park, two blocks away. In general, my stay by Prospect Park was not a very pleasant experience. Also, my roommates were explicitly homophobic, and it did not feel right to stay there for the remainder of my fieldwork. Luckily, I had a good friend with an available room in Williamsburg in Brooklyn, where I ended up staying the last 4 months of my fieldwork.

Anthropologist Joanne Passaro did her post-doctoral field research in NYC, and she raises many important issues related to conducting fieldwork in the "chaos" of a city. Among other things, Passaro mentions the tensions in anthropology itself, and the pressure to study "bounded social units" and "epistemological villages" (1997:149-151). By this, Passaro means that anthropologists are too often concerned with the lives of groups of people that are overdetermined, manageable and/or clearly defined. She argues it is generally not encouraged to do anthropological fieldwork in cities such as NYC, because it can be very uncontrolled, chaotic, and sometimes messy and inconsistent. Indeed, sometimes it did feel very messy and unmanageable in a big city, but because my fieldwork was not bound to any small village, or spatially bounded place (e.g., a venue, or solely an organization's office), it allowed me to follow my interlocutors where they went and places they were familiar with. Much like recent anthropological fieldworks, my fieldwork was spatially bound to NYC as a place, but also clearly marked by "go-alongs" and mobility.

An important topic when doing anthropological fieldwork is that of distance (Passaro 1997:152). Distance in anthropological fieldwork is more related to social distance, and not necessarily geographical distance, although geographical distance may often *imply* a social distance<sup>4</sup>. Passaro argues that social distance is often considered the best way to ensure “objectivity”, and that being “distant enough” is crucial to produce knowledge but being “close enough” is never an issue (p.153). I can relate to this from my own experiences during my fieldwork as I became quite close with my interlocutors. My interlocutors and I shared the category of “sexual difference” and I was close in age to most of them. I believe both factors made it easier for me to enter the consultation setting and establish trust. In many ways, I felt more like an “insider” than a distant “outsider”, and I was admittedly more concerned with getting close enough, than being distant. Unlike previous, “traditional” anthropological fieldwork in far off, remote places, my fieldwork involved an exploration of everyday life in a somewhat familiar place and setting. Also, my “time off” from the field in NYC, helped me to better understand and reflect upon situations and circumstances I had to navigate through “in the field”.

## **ANTHROPOLOGY OF SEXUALITY**

As I mentioned, this thesis aims to explore the interconnectedness between sociality and sexuality in society. By sexuality, I refer to sexual orientation, or sexual preference, to avoid confusion with sexuality as cultural constructions of gender: masculinities and femininities. The lives of sexual minorities have often been overlooked in anthropological research and theory and is often left to the work of gender/queer studies scholars. However, it is not to say that ethnographic research on sexuality is completely absent. A broad collection of anthropological research on sexuality were published in Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead’s classical, bench-mark volume, *Sexual Meanings* (1981), as well as the more recent Ellen Lewin and Edward Leap’s *Out in Theory* (2002) and *Out in Public* (2009). Further, David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* (2007) has also contributed to the anthropological depth and insight to the lives of people in the LGBT+ community alongside Kath Weston’s famous book *Families*

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<sup>4</sup> This trend is often illustrated by anthropologists from the Global North, who travel to remote places in the Global South to conduct their fieldwork. Of course, this has been highlighted in various criticisms of essentialism, epistemology and the romanticizing of “others”. See for example Edward Said (1978 and 1993).

*We Choose* (1991) about gay and lesbian kinship. The works cited above also illustrate regional diversity and represent how the category of gender and sexuality is constructed locally and how sexual difference is organized through social relationships. Early anthropological research on sexuality was often based on heterosexuality as ‘default’ and analyzed through models of kinship and kinship relations, and thus gender (see Butler 1999, 2002 and Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Many of the contributions in anthropology of gender and sexuality in the 1980’s was inspired by symbolic anthropology and the rising feminist critique of anthropology. As argued by Ortner and Whitehead, a turn to a symbolic approach to gender and sexuality “liberate[s] this whole area of inquiry from constraining naturalistic assumptions and opens it to a range of analytical questions that would otherwise not be asked” (1981:ix). Arguably, a new set of naturalistic assumptions of gender and sexuality might consequently have followed, for example in relation to heterosexuality as the assumed “normal”, and sexual difference as culturally variable.

However, the symbolic approach to gender and sexuality paved way for cutting-edge research on the gender and the meanings of masculinity and femininity. In the last three decades years, topics of labor, production, politics, history and gentrification have shaped the field of *gender* in anthropology (Yanagisako & Collier 1987), but has not included as much of sexuality. If gender is linked to sexuality, and gender is linked to a wide range of factors (i.e., labor, production, politics, kinship and family), then sexuality also needs to be explored in the light of such topics as well.

## **THEMATIC FOCUS AND MAIN ARGUMENT**

### **EMERGENT SOCIALITIES**

My main argument is that there is an ongoing process of “emergent socialities” amongst my interlocutors. Building on anthropologists Marcia Inhorn’s and Emily Wentzell’s employment of Raymond Williams’ concept of “emergence”<sup>5</sup> (Williams 1977, in Inhorn and Wentzell 2011), I wish to explore further that term in relation to sociality. “Emergence” does not necessarily signify that something is oppositional to dominant culture, or alternative, but rather

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<sup>5</sup> Inhorn and Wentzell’s account of “emergent masculinities” was set out to be a critique of “hegemonic masculinities”.

mundane in the way it is acted out (Williams 1977:123). In their critique of hegemonic masculinities, Inhorn and Wentzell further Williams' argument, and describe emergence as a concept that "highlights the novel and transformative", whereas "hegemony emphasizes the dominant and hierarchical" (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011:803). As I will use the concept, emergence implies that something can be transformative. I will follow Henrietta Moore and Nicholas Long's definition of sociality. Moore and Long conceptualize sociality as "a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, [...] and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it" (Moore and Long 2012:41). Furthermore, socialities are defined as virtualities and imaginaries, that allow persons to remake sociality through practice. Sociality in this way, highlights human agency (pp. 42-44), which is important in order to look beyond already existing social organization.

It is not my intention to argue that the forms of socialities I describe do not find themselves in some sort of opposition or hierarchy to other forms of socialities. In my opinion, that would be to lose sight of structural phenomenon and institutions which make the framework for legitimate social forms such as the state. Rather, I try to explain how institutions, social expectations and established forms of sociality has limited the practice of other forms of sociality. In many regards, established social expectations and forms of sociality are the reasons for *why* new socialities emerge. As I will show, the mundane reality of my interlocutors' social worlds can produce social transformations – emergent socialities. Again, it is not to argue that dominant culture is to be overlooked. I will describe how people move beyond so-called established cultural forms and processes and take part in changing their own social worlds, which may be emerging *from* those legitimate socio-cultural formations, not necessarily *against* them. Like Raymond Williams, I also argue that "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created" in the everyday lives of my interlocutors (Williams 1977:123). Throughout the thesis, I will argue that the concept of emergent socialities can account for ongoing changes in people's relationships enacted by the hopes and imaginaries of a different future.

## ALIENATION, IMAGINATION AND HOPE

From an empirical standpoint, my interlocutors do not necessarily see traditional or established sociality as harmful in any sense. Nevertheless, they are seeking other legitimate alternatives to

reshape their own sociopolitical and intimate realities through their imagination and hope. The emergent socialities I refer to, depart from society's established morality, norms and values, or taken-for-granted truths. The "established" in this case may resemble Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* as a social field, where the laws of conduct, social reality and naturalized order remains unquestioned (Bourdieu 1995:164). The social fields Bourdieu refers to, can be religious, political, academic and so on. What the fields have in common, is that the given social field becomes the truth for those who live in it, naturalized and self-evident, which shapes people's social reality and guides their attitudes (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:114). It is a form of symbolic domination. In a similar vein, one could be referring to "hegemony". Hegemony, most known through the work of Antonio Gramsci, can be hard to define. It is commonly used in anthropology, arguably in different ways (Crehan 2002:99). Nevertheless, Gramsci mentions a more specific definition of hegemony as "the 'spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group...'" (Gramsci 1971:12, cited in Lewellen 2003:182).

Although there are many ways of referring to the "established" or "dominant culture" (eg. *doxa* or hegemony), my main argument is that my interlocutors create new socialities that depart from the established. Drawing partly on Henrietta Moore's elaboration of the imaginaries of hope as well as David Graeber's theory of imagination and alienation (Moore 2011, Graeber 2008), I will illustrate how the imagination and hope of a different future can evoke emergent socialities. Moore and Graeber's theoretic framework relate to each other in some ways. First, in that imagination is not about "free-floating fantasy worlds" (Graeber 2008:523), but about the process of making and actualizing a reality (Graeber 2008:523, and Moore 2011:203-205). Second, the alienation that my interlocutors experience, is what "sparks" the hope of another reality. Hope in this sense, is what drives the actualization of a reality. Anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans argues that hope is an emotion and action guided towards the future (2017:178). He also argues that hope becomes concretized through different practices, which would be the emergent socialities in this thesis. Hope, is what drives my interlocutors' imagination of other possible socialities than the established, and a future that emphasizes the social freedom of humans.





Photo 1: During Pride Month of June, posters such as these are put up. It illustrates how tolerance and freedom is valued. Especially in NYC, as some sort of imagined utopia.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Throughout the thesis, I will delve into different themes related to sociality. In chapter two, I discuss the social space that is NYC, and the importance of understanding the uniqueness and significance of NYC as a symbolic space for queer culture. In this chapter, I also bring in a critique of the mainstream gay and lesbian social movement, and the ways it has impacted LGBT+ communities, lives and identities. Understanding NYC as a social space is important, because my interlocutors often talked about NYC with a glowing enthusiasm, and NYC provided them with a sense of belonging, a sense of self and a community. Chapter three will elaborate on the relationship between sexuality and family. A traditional idea of the “family” seems to be one of the most central factors that limits other forms of sociality to take place. My interlocutors’ relationship to their birth families is often experienced as tense, or non-existent. As mentioned, my interlocutors from Possibilities are either runaways from home or kicked out of their houses at a young age. This chapter aims to discuss the social conditions and expectations in American society concerning ‘family’, which I argue limit social freedom and cause social stigma around sexuality. In chapter four, I move to a more inter-personal level to discuss love, sex and intimacy. I argue that monogamy and marriage has been institutionalized as the only legitimate union in a romantic relationship, further limiting the legitimacy of other possible intimate relationships between persons. Chapter five will discuss more explicitly

gender and identity fluidity to demonstrate how a binary understanding of gender dominates society and identity construction. In the concluding chapter, I will sum up the main arguments in the thesis, highlighting the analytical concept of “emergent socialities” as a way of accounting for ongoing changes in people’s social relationships, and *why* they emerge.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### THE CITY AS SYMBOLIC SPACE

The sweet smell of rotting trash that had been laying out in the heat was something I had become accustomed to. As we walked around in the Village, Zayyid told me about his time when he first had come to New York. He had found a room in an apartment in the West Village on Craigslist and it was a “steal”, he told me, which meant really cheap compared to regular rental prices in Manhattan. The room he had rented, was in an apartment which he shared with an older woman in her seventies. Zayyid told me it was not an ideal living arrangement, but at least he got to live in the Village and the old woman was very kind.

The apartment was not the best, he explained. The room he had lived in did not even have a window, and the room was more like a mattress in a closet than a bedroom. The bathroom did not have a shower and was only equipped with a toilet and a sink. Zayyid told me that by law, the listing would be considered to be illegal, and perhaps the reason why the room was so cheap. As we walked further, Zayyid pointed to a red brick-stone building and said it was the building where he had lived. While Zayyid was telling me about one of his past living arrangements, he smiled and looked admirably around at the houses in the neighborhood. Not unlike other neighborhoods in NYC, there were rainbow flags hanging in store windows such as barber shops, hair dressers, flower boutiques, small, local cafés and bars. Zayyid pointed to the different venues and explained how lucky he felt to have lived here. Like many of my interlocutors, he would often talk romantically about the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s, and how it must have been like being gay “back then”, roaming down Christopher Street; a well-known street in the Village full of gay and lesbian bars and clubs. He had used what he had left of his college tuition money on rent, just to be able to live in the Village. For Zayyid, using his money towards renting that room had been “totally worth it”. When he had run out of money, he had to find alternative living arrangements.

## INTRODUCTION

The example presented above with my interlocutor Zayyid, begins to tell us something about the importance of space and belonging. It also tells us something about the symbolic constructions and meanings that Zayyid ascribed to NYC. It was in moments such as these “walkabouts”, that I could somewhat grasp what Zayyid was talking about, and how he related gay identity to being in NYC. NYC has become a mnemonic place where gay and lesbian history is inscribed onto the city landscape. NYC is commonly perceived as a liberal “LGBT+ capital”, both represented in popular culture and often referred to as such among my interlocutors. In this chapter, I will give an overview of the importance of NYC as a space of social and cultural belonging for LGBT+ identifying persons. I begin by describing what I mean by mnemonic place. NYC does not only represent an idea of social freedom, liberation and belonging, but also the historical events that has led to the inclusion of LGBT+ persons. Then I will argue that NYC as a sanctuary for LGBT+ people is a historically produced perception<sup>6</sup>. As I will show, this perception has been shaped by a specific historic development of urban gay and lesbian organization, activism and events, starting with the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Although there were activist groups before the Stonewall Riots, the event of Stonewall undoubtedly gave sparks to the gay and lesbian social movement. I will argue that the ideals of gay and lesbian life and identity emerged as specific to the lives of the middle- and upper-class. Because most of my interlocutors were not native to NYC, and mostly poor, it is important to understand the relationship between history, class and belonging. Most of them explained to me that they came to NYC with the thought of liberation and freedom: a place where their sexual orientation or gender identity did not matter. By providing a historic backdrop to understand the importance of NYC as a symbolic space, I will show how imaginaries and hopes of a queer life is one of the foundations that shape experiences of everyday life, and provide a sense and of belonging and identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Many of my interlocutors also told me they were drawn to NYC because of images portrayed by popular culture such as TV shows, movies and various social media. However, popular culture and social media often portray specific images and perceptions of NYC as a liberal “hot-spot”, and the historic links between LGBT+ persons and cities, specifically to NYC in the case of my interlocutors.

## **MNEMONIC PLACES**

Anthropologist Anthony Cohen writes that mnemonic symbols of the past, are almost mythical, filled with timelessness and saturated with powerful emotions (1985:102). Mnemonics can be described as living memory, when memory become materialized into spaces, objects or even rituals (Lattas 1996). Although mnemonic symbols of the past become parts of the present through the construction of communities and belongings, such symbols are also selective. Only a selection of stories and dominating narratives become central and shape the social world. Cohen further discuss how people tend to use such mnemonic or mythical pasts, as a way of imagining and mapping out the past, present and future (1985:99). Moreover, it is to say that people's social worlds are made through a historic resonance and relationship to the past. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu refers to the social world as accumulated history (1986:15); a part of history that is selected, circulated, shared and repeated. More precisely, if we were to further understand 'accumulated history' from Bourdieu's argument, it refers the history of the nobility, the bourgeois. It is a history in relation to a specific social class<sup>7</sup> that becomes relevant, which control the narratives and the selection of which symbols to be mnemonic. Thus, our experiences as human beings and relationships to history and time, function as a model of reality, or a way of imagining the present and different futures (Geertz 1966, cited in Cohen 1985:99). By elaborating on a specific historical event of NYC's LGBT+, I will show how it is connected to the feelings of belonging amongst my interlocutors.

## **GAY AND LESBIAN HISTORY IN NYC**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF STONEWALL**

Gay and lesbian history in NYC is a lengthy one, and I will only provide some background for the purpose of this thesis. The Stonewall Riots in 1969, commonly known as just "Stonewall", signified the turning point in the history of gay and lesbian activism. "Stonewall Inn" was, and still is, a known gay bar in the West Village on the South West side of Manhattan. It was a mafia-run bar, that catered specifically to gay men, whom were still victims of harassment and

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<sup>7</sup> I understand the term class in relation to Bourdieu's work on what produces class, mainly in terms of social, economic and cultural capital (1986).

policing as homosexuality was still a criminal offense (Bausum 2015). Stonewall Inn was also severely overpriced, which also limited what clientele who could go there. Bausum mentions that the frequent customers were closeted<sup>8</sup> gay men with respectable jobs, married men with a desire to be with other men, and artists, performers and academics who lived openly as gay men (p. 7). It was also a scene for lesbian women, drag queens/kings, friends of the clientele and more.

Specialized bars for LGBT+ people were in the mid-twentieth-century, and arguably still is, what anthropologist Gayle Rubin refers to as gay social institutions (Rubin 2002:53). Rubin describes bars as possible and relatively safe meeting sites for gay and lesbian persons. Rubin also describes how other scholars in studies of sexuality have noted the importance of bars: “Because most homosexuals make every effort to conceal their homosexuality at work, and from heterosexuals, the community activities are largely leisure time or recreational activities” (Rubin 2002:31). Because homosexual practices were still very much criminalized in the 1960’s, meeting places such as the Stonewall Inn became important sites for gay and lesbians for rendezvous and services they would otherwise be denied. From such places of recreational activities, like bars, gay and lesbian communities could emerge, while simultaneously linking gay and lesbian community-building to consumption. Because places for leisure and recreational activities became places of importance, they also provided spaces of belonging and a sense of community. Not only were they considered to be safe spaces for gay and lesbian people, but also specific to cities and urban life, linking gay and lesbian identity to cities and urban life.

The West Village in NYC was a renowned neighborhood for gay and lesbians as well as gender variant persons<sup>9</sup>, but had been increasingly policed by uniformed and undercover cops. The NYC police also frequented known gay cruising<sup>10</sup> sites. Although there was a fear of being prosecuted, arrested and harassed for homosexual conduct, NYC and neighborhoods such as the West Village and Greenwich Village became known as “gay neighborhoods”. Being

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Closeted’ implies that one’s sexual orientation is kept secret. Many gay men still lived in heterosexual relationships.

<sup>9</sup> It should be mentioned that gender-variant persons have been largely discriminated against, even in NYC’s scene for LGBT+ people. As I will argue later, LGBT+ communities were mainly organized around the interest and needs of a normatively gendered men and women, white, middle-class persons. For more information, look to David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* (2007).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Cruising’ is the term used to describe (mostly) gay men seeking sexual encounters, both short-term and long-term.

together with other gay people, provided some sense of safety and comradeship within these neighborhoods and bars (Bausum 2015:5). The reputation of NYC's south-west neighborhoods as a gathering place for gay and lesbian persons spread and continued to mark the city as a safer city for non-hetero persons. The safest place for gay and lesbian people was together, and NYC became such a place. However, the NYC police intensified frequent raids and controls.

On June 28<sup>th</sup> in 1969, the police attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn. However, the raid failed and resulted in a counter-attack by LGBT+ people, and violent demonstration in the days that followed. Gay men and lesbian women had for too long, held up with police harassment, arrests, control and discrimination, and that day, the police ran from the mob of frequenters at the Stonewall Inn. Since then, every year in June, NYC Pride is held to commemorate and remember the bravery of the people who fought back, breaking out in violent demonstrations for their civil rights. The NYC Pride Parade is the ritualization of history, it becomes mnemonic, and it always goes through the West Village, Christopher Street and the Stonewall Inn. The Stonewall Inn remains an iconic site in NYC, and June 28<sup>th</sup> 1969 is a day that marks the beginning of a social movement for LGBT+ civil rights in the decades to follow.

## MAINSTREAMING GAY AND LESBIAN IDENTITIES

Historian Christina B. Hanhardt argues in her book, *Safe Space* (2013), that because many LGBT+ persons lived in NYC, mainstream LGBT+ social movements<sup>11</sup> could grow and gain as much influence as they did. Hanhardt makes a thorough investigation of LGBT+ history in NYC and San Francisco, but I will only mention some key features. The author's main argument is that the dominant understanding of sexual identity is linked to place (p. 9). More specifically, Hanhardt argues that the main goals of mainstream LGBT+ social movement, namely gay visibility, protection and civil rights, implicitly reinforced the race and class hegemony in the construction of gay and lesbian identities (p. 9). The mainstream LGBT+ social movement focused largely on increased visibility and safety, and neighborhoods such as

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<sup>11</sup> The mainstream LGBT social movement refers to the activism and political organization which focused on normativity (also often called the 'normalizing' movement). HIV/AIDS issues became a prominent feature of the mainstream LGBT+ social movement, as well as marriage equality, reproduction/family rights and discrimination laws. The mainstream LGBT+ social movement has been critiqued by activists as well as academics for being focused on conformist and assimilationist politics, over-looking the diversity in LGBT+ communities (see Alan Sears 2015).

Greenwich Village and the West Village were known as “gay neighborhoods” because they were the most frequented public places in NYC for gay, lesbian and transgender persons. Also, there were a large group of middle-class LGBT+ artists and academics who lived in the neighboring areas and thus the white middle- and upper-class gays and lesbians became the front figures for the mainstream LGBT+ social movement<sup>12</sup>. With increased visibility also came a greater risk of being exposed to violence, thus a need for more safety (Hanhardt 2013:219).

The discourse of safety for LGBT+ persons in NYC was oriented towards the residents in the ‘gay neighborhoods’, the West Village and Greenwich Village, which mainly consisted of white middle-class, cisgendered gay men and lesbian women. It was a specific type of gay and lesbian identity, that was linked to place, class, life-style and commodities (Hanhardt 2013:218-223). After the Stonewall Riots in 1969, anti-violence programs emerged with a specific understanding of violence, homophobia and safety. According to Hanhardt, the understanding of violence and safety reflected an idea of *who* the city was for, the concept of urban warfare and the policing of populations<sup>13</sup>. NYC as a safe space for LGBT+ persons evolved as an idea from processes of gentrification and social stratification. Sexual identity became partly essentialized, and the possibility of who could be “proper” gay and lesbians was limited to residency in gay neighborhoods, race, class and consumption. This development was specific to cities, specific to the middle-class, consumerism and white gay and lesbian people in monogamous, committed relationships.

The legacy of the mainstream LGBT+ social movements is that more radical alternatives to create an egalitarian city is needed, that unites issues of gender, sexuality, class and race (Hanhardt 2013:220). Safety, antiviolence projects and inclusion of LGBT+ persons evolved from a more mainstream, normative-oriented movement. This movement was driven by the interests of white, middle-class and traditionally gendered gay and lesbian persons in cities, namely NYC and San Francisco. Today, the term safety is no longer used the same way as I described. Safety is mostly provided through legislation and anti-discrimination policies, and

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<sup>12</sup> Other “branches” of the LGBT+ social movement were present, but did not gain as much influence as the mainstream. Radical LGBT+ social movements focused among other things on structural violence, poverty, racism. Other topics were also sexual freedom and anti-traditionalist thinking. It has been argued that the radical social movements did not gain as much influence, because they did not reflect current political trends and topics of importance and thus lacking financial back-up. See Hanhardt (2013) for more.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Herring (2010) refers to this as operations of ‘metronormativity’. Herring claims that such operations are often based on racial, socio-economic and temporal discourses as well as processes of commodification.



not as much direct urban policing. After decades of activism, struggles and controversy, NYC eventually evolved as a safe space for LGBT+ persons.

As middle-class, white gay and lesbians became the front figures of the mainstream LGBT+ social movement, the images of these front figures contributed to further the ideal gay and lesbian identities. As I have shown, it was a community-based social movement that focused on safety, visibility and acceptance. Ultimately, the mainstream LGBT+ social movement paved the way for the possibility of marriage equality, reproduction rights and the inclusion of LGBT+ persons as full citizens. The mainstream LGBT+ social movement also cemented the “ideal” gay and lesbian identity. However, what becomes central in the narratives of my interlocutors who constantly claim their place in “the promised land” of NYC, is the history of solidarity that occurred during the Stonewall Riots due to long-time oppression. The heritage of NYC’s gay and lesbian history can resemble a utopian promise or hope of social freedom and liberation. I argue that this utopian promise or hope is active in the everyday lives of my interlocutors.

NYC has become a symbolic space for LGBT+ people as a cultural site and place of belonging. Although specialized bars and other recreational venues had already begun catering specifically to gay and lesbian persons before 1969, the Stonewall Riots has become an iconic event because it symbolizes a turning point. The Stonewall Riots marks a new era of gay and lesbian persons finally fighting back on oppression, policing and discrimination, in solidarity with each other. However, the mainstream activism towards social change that has led to the inclusion of LGBT+ persons as citizens through legislation, was predominantly shaped by middle- and upper-class interests and thus mainstream LGBT+ social movements may have limited the social field of possibilities by focusing largely on traditional and “established” ideas of family, marriage and sociality. This also illustrates how dominant narratives create legitimate and non-legitimate social possibilities.

In terms of class, certain forms of social, cultural and economic capital have become the signifiers for legitimate gay and lesbian identities. Such forms of capital were also some of the stepping stones for recreational venues, services and the social movement for gay and lesbian persons. As Fatima El-Tayeb also writes, the city becomes a place of gay consumption (2013). In a similar vein to Hanhardt’s argument of urban policing, El-Tayeb argues that “the policing of urban spaces through a neoliberal discourse [is] bent on controlling the public through privatization and through framing the city as a site of consumption” (El-Tayeb 2013:81). Further, this has resulted in a cultural space of commodified and essentialized identity, where marginalized people are kept on the outside because they cannot achieve consumer-citizen

status. El-Tayeb states that “in the neoliberal city (white, middle-class, male) gay consumer-citizens represent the successful integration of minorities into the mainstream” (p. 81). The integration of LGBT+ persons is also exemplified by the mainstream LGBT+ social movement who fought for marriage equality, reproductive rights and similar causes which can be considered to be normative.

I will try to show how my interlocutors actively relate to LGBT+ history through places in NYC. As I mentioned, NYC becomes a mnemonic symbol of past events that creates imaginaries and hopes of a more liberating and utopian future. NYC as a queer utopia can resemble a perception of the city as the mythical past of an ‘ethnogenesis’ for LGBT+ communities, an ‘ancestral landscape’ and lived history (Munn 1992:113). My interlocutors came to NYC for a reason, which is to belong. They actively draw on historic events and symbolic meanings of NYC as a space, and the ‘pull’ they felt which drew them to NYC. By claiming the city as their place of belonging, they also begin to transform the meanings of being gay, detaching those meanings from class and normativity, and produce new possible socialities.

## **A PLACE OF BELONGING**

Through the organization Possibilities, I met Zayyid, the young, gay man I described in the beginning of this chapter. Zayyid is in his twenties and experiencing periods of homelessness which means that he does not have a stable housing situation. He is originally from Syria and came to the U.S. as a college student in 2011. During the escalation of the conflict in Syria, he applied for a temporary protective status (TPS). Later, he filed for asylum on the grounds of his sexual orientation as a gay man. In Syria, Zayyid had suppressed and hidden his sexual orientation, and coming to America had been like a “homecoming” experience, he told me. Zayyid said his experience as an *openly* gay man was limited to the U.S. He had still been gay in Syria – it was simply never an option to be “out”, he said, “you can’t be gay in Syria”<sup>14</sup>. Further, Zayyid also expressed some dissenting opinions towards his country of origin.

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<sup>14</sup> Few anthropological works take up the issues of homosexuality in the Middle East, but see (among others) *Syrian Episodes* (2007) by John Borneman and *Reconceiving Muslim Men* (2018) by Marcia Inhorn and Nefissa Naguib (eds.) for further discussion on Arab as well as Muslim masculinities.

Zayyid: The most influential social component of my life was my international school. I found a better sense of belonging there than in my household and my city of birth, in fact, I quickly grew to resent and begrudge my household and country of birth. I wanted the world outside of my school grounds to represent the world that was within my school grounds. My school was pretty much a micro-culture of its own.

Zayyid talked about his experiences of being a Syrian gay man after coming out in the U.S. and told me: “The more I embraced being gay, the more sharply I rejected being Syrian, being Arab. Today, I can almost say being Syrian feels foreign to me, so does being Arab”. Zayyid felt conflicted about being Syrian and being gay as if they were incompatible, because he was never able to live as an openly gay man in Syria. I would also argue that this could be related to ideas about masculinity. The discourse of Arab masculinities may not have room for a social gay identity as portrayed and imagined in Western culture, where gay and lesbian identity already is a part of the socio-cultural world, however contested that may still be. Also, as NYC’s gay and lesbian historical events may show, this may further demonstrate the symbolic meaning of NYC as a site for social freedom, and how this is also “exported” to other places. Zayyid explained how he saw gay identity as “nationless”, although he incessantly denounced his Syrian heritage and the impossibility of being gay *and* Syrian. For him, being gay involved a form of spatial and social belonging, which was linked to being open about it and being in NYC.

I will elaborate on Zayyid’s story and how it is telling about NYC as a place of belonging. Although Zayyid no longer was living in the Village, he said that he felt lucky he still lived in NYC. Zayyid expressed that in NYC, he could walk freely around the city without being “the homeless guy” or “the gay guy”, and that he could disappear into the crowd without being noticed. Although he felt very lonely sometimes, he felt more like himself and “at home” in NYC than he had ever done before in Syria, Los Angeles, Las Vegas or San Francisco. I will elaborate on Zayyid’s story and how it is telling about NYC as a place of belonging.

Zayyid and I continued walking out of the Village and towards the train station, closer to Greenwich Village. On 12<sup>th</sup> street, by St. Vincent’s Triangle, New York City AIDS Memorial monument stands proudly across the street from where NYC’s first AIDS ward was opened at the St. Vincent’s hospital. Zayyid looked at the monument with admiration. It was quite big, covering the entire Triangle from the ground and reaching above the entire place, almost as a roof. The monument was white and had triangles on each side

with the edges pointing down towards the ground. It was a very peaceful place, serene and calm as people sat on the benches reading a newspaper or drinking coffee. Zayyid expressed how amazed he was with NYC, and that the City Council would raise such monuments so people would never forget the past, and the struggles of others. Everything seems ‘to be in place’ for people to be themselves here, Zayyid continued. Before we reached the end of the Triangle, we parted ways and Zayyid decided to stay at St. Vincent’s Triangle ‘just to chill’.

When the NYC City Council raise such monuments and memorial sites from LGBT+ history, it also physically manifests the story in the present. Historical monuments and memorial sites enforce and support the politization of NYC as an inclusive place and LGBT+ identifying persons belonging to the social history.

As I mentioned in the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this chapter, Zayyid used the last of his money from his college tuition to move in to an apartment in the West Village. It tells us something about the importance Zayyid put to living in a historically known gay neighborhood, and to feel like he belonged. When the money eventually ran out, he had to move. After having navigated through alternative living arrangements, as well as private shelters for young LGBT+ people in the last five years, Zayyid was now enrolled in the public shelter system and waiting for a single-room occupancy (SRO). Waiting for a SRO is a process that can be long and unpredictable. With help from the staff at Possibilities and the director Emma, he also received his green card in the Spring of 2018 which brings some sort of stability to his everyday life. However, getting housed in a SRO seemed to be Zayyid’s biggest concern. Making a home for himself is something he has not been able to in the last five years. His idea of the future and the possibility of a gay life has been changed because of his status as homeless. In some of my other interlocutors’ cases, I learned that saying “sleeping at a friend’s house” was sometimes used if the person had offered sexual favors in exchange for a place to stay the night and to avoid spending the night on the streets. Zayyid admitted that this was something he had had to do occasionally in the time after living in the West Village. It was not something he was very proud of, but it was a way of “getting by”, and staying (relatively) safe.

Severing his ties to the Middle East, his family and his Syrian identity, identifying as a gay man is what Zayyid wholeheartedly embraces. Although he described being gay as nationless, he made clear that NYC means so much to him, which I argue has to do with the mnemonics of NYC. He made clear to me several times, being gay the way he envisions it, does not include himself identifying as Syrian or Arab. However, his idea of being gay seems to be

out of reach due to his situation as a person experiencing periods of homelessness. The shelter Zayyid lived in had strict regulations of when one must be in or out of the shelter. Usually it is not permitted to “hang out” inside the shelters during the day, and the residents need to find something to do. Zayyid spent most of his days just walking around the Village, Chelsea or at the New York Library. If the weather was nice, he enjoyed walking along the Chelsea Piers and Hudson River State Park, on the west bank of Manhattan. Sometimes, if the weather was bad, he would go to a public library and hang out, read and browse the internet. At least by living in NYC, he felt a belonging to the LGBT+ community and the hope of a better future for himself.

To better understand what Zayyid thinks being a gay man is about, I recall Zayyid admitting to envy guys who travel out to Fire Island<sup>15</sup> for Memorial Day Weekend or during the summer season: “You can see them all over Instagram. The fit, smiling guys. Big groups of friends with six pack abs. Looks like they’re having so much fun. Wish I could do that”. I told him I felt the same way, trying to give some sort of comfort. Zayyid said he knew that the representation people put out on Instagram is not necessarily reality, and it is just a fraction of people’s actual lives. As we continued to talk, I told him that it is mainly resourceful gay men who travel out there. Zayyid told me that he realized that, but also explained that he so desperately wanted to fit in in the “normal” gay community. He also explained that he could imagine all the drugs, alcohol and sex-orgies going on at Fire Island: “but just because I’m gay, doesn’t mean I fuck around”, he muttered. This example also supports El Tayeb’s argument about LGBT+ persons’ inclusion to mainstream society by becoming proper “consumer citizens”.

In some ways, Zayyid still lived through the past, where the hope of a gay life in the U.S. was still just a vision of the future as it had been in Syria. His everyday life has become marked by uncertainty, prolonged youth and an inability to transition into adulthood and his idea of gay identity. Zayyid often referred to the future, that it is constantly in the making, and that he has hopes that one day he might achieve what he wants the most:

Zayyid: So much to go: academic pursuits, relationships, friends, chosen family, professional identity, a career, a contribution to my community and so much more. It's been an excruciating slow start, and I feel like I haven't really started yet. I feel like an overdue baby in a

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<sup>15</sup> Fire Island is an island off the coast of New York state which is known for attracting gay and lesbian travelers during the summers. It can hardly be overlooked when living in NYC, everybody talks about Fire Island. See anthropologist Esther Newton’s *Cherry Grove* (1993) for an extensive ethnography on Fire Island’s gay community.

woman's body. I'm turning 25 this summer, and it's almost as if the typical progression of growth stopped at 18, and is still at 18... I feel like I've lost years working on things that should have been there, and were, but weren't all of a sudden, and I had to start over and rebuild them on my own terms.

However, Zayyid explained that if he lived in NYC, the possibility of a better future is present, and he still feels like he belongs. If he could not make a life for himself in NYC, there would be no other place to go.

Zayyid has some sort of idea of what the gay community consists of and the sociality of it, which becomes clear whenever he talks about NYC in general and his dream of getting into an SRO in a "gay neighborhood". He has insisted in his application for an SRO, that he wanted to be housed in Chelsea, the West Village or Hell's Kitchen. In addition to Zayyid arguing the incompatibility between Arab and gay identity, he was educated at an international school in Syria, and his thoughts about gay identity has been affected by outside sources such as social media, popular culture and NYC's gay and lesbian history. Zayyid has also lived in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, and despite his current situation he has never felt more like home than in NYC. My interlocutors often mentioned how much more of a community feeling they get in NYC, than they have ever got in any other city. Not only are there social services that cater specifically to LGBT+ persons, but also imagined as the birthplace of queer culture, and my interlocutors sometimes made references to things such as the chronicle movie, *Paris is Burning*<sup>16</sup>, and Stonewall.

In trying to manage potentially conflicting identities between being Syrian and gay, he is still struggling to reach what he idealizes as gay identity: he experienced unstable housing situations, an inability to be a correct gay consumer in some sense. In other ways, he felt connected to the LGBT+ community by hanging out in historically gay neighborhoods, trying to remember a time before he was even born. However, the authenticity of these neighborhoods is being eroded by commercial businesses, middle- and upper-class families moving in and rising real estate prices. It became clear to me that for Zayyid, being gay implied living in a specific area, being involved in specific activities and being together with other gay people. Zayyid's idea of gay identity is linked to NYC, a social space of collective memories, almost like a mythical utopia.

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<sup>16</sup> *Paris is Burning* (1990) is a well-known documentary/chronicle about the drag scene in NYC in the 1980's.

When analyzed in the terms of the concept of class and capital as informed by Bourdieu and gay and lesbian identity by Hanhardt, I would argue that Zayyid is unable to be gay in the way he had imagined for himself and this inability puts his life on hold. He is noticeably Arab-looking, he is on social security, living off food stamps and housed in a shelter. Nevertheless, the community-feeling Zayyid gets from living in New York gives him a sense of self and identity that would be otherwise impossible in the way he imagined (the lack of) gay life in Syria. Although Zayyid wholeheartedly embraces being gay, he is somewhat stuck, and his vision of being gay becomes unattainable. Still, he has hope, that one day he might be “proper gay” and he keeps walking around the Village, trekking through spaces of NYC’s gay history.

I understand Zayyid’s experiences partly as how gay identity is linked to consumption, commodity and life-style. That argument is not unlike what Hanhardt argues for when she writes about how the ideal sexual identities are produced as a result of the mainstream LGBT+ social movement. Also, following Bourdieu’s argument on forms of capital and representation, ideals or personifications of a group become “the sign, the emblem, [...], and create, the whole reality of groups which receive effective social existence only in and through representation” (1986:24). In this case, it would be the interests of a white, middle-class gay and lesbian urban life-styles and identities that shaped the mainstream LGBT+ social movement. The normative and the “established” and possibilities for LGBT+ persons’ social life, is so tied to a specific historical development of gay and lesbian identity.

With the help of Zayyid’s life history, I have illustrated how he actively draws on a specific historic accumulation of LGBT+ life in NYC, that it shapes his social world and gives him a sense of belonging and a community. Yet, the ideals of gay and lesbian life and identity which are closely linked to class and consumption and a specific form of normativity make being gay somewhat unattainable for Zayyid. This has created a social boundary of who can be included in the established LGBT+ community and those who cannot. After moving to NYC, Zayyid finds other places to “consume” LGBT+ related commodities such as social services that are specifically for LGBT+ persons. Also, Zayyid consciously use the city landscape, mnemonics of the city, to identify as gay, regardless of his social status. NYC as a symbolic and historic space for social freedom and liberation is what provides him with hopes and possibilities to transform his life situation. This is similar to what Andrew Lattas refers to this as an “opportunistic nature of memory, how it seizes upon particularities of circumstances to sustain and believe in other possibilities” (1996:263). For Zayyid, being in NYC gives him some sense of community, belonging and identity which are embedded in sexual difference, not in class, nationality, religion or ethnicity.

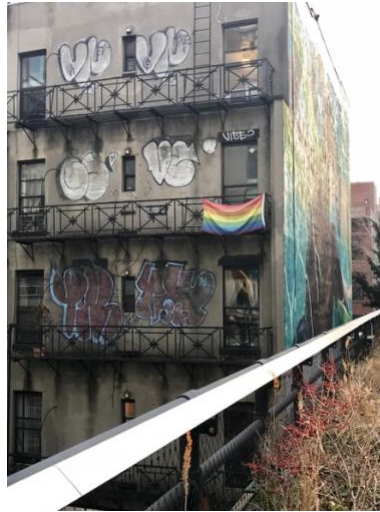


Photo 2: Rainbow flags are found everywhere in the city, symbolizing and marking the presence and persistence of the LGBT+ community.

## **COLLECTIVE MEMORIES**

I wish to present another example of gay space and social life, that is quite different from Zayyid's. Kris, one of my other interlocutors, is a gay-identifying man in his early forties, fully employed and renting an apartment in West Harlem with two other guys. Like Zayyid, Kris also moved to New York. Kris is originally from an urban area in a southern state, where he also attended college. Kris and I met through a mutual friend at a drag show in January, and he was immediately interested in my research project. He agreed that this research was needed, and he would love to participate and contribute in whatever way he could. Kris has a different background than my interlocutors from Possibilities, and I thought it would be an interesting addition to my pool of interlocutors. He is roughly ten-twenty years older than most of my other interlocutors and myself, college educated and has a stable housing situation. His idea of a "cool" Friday night is going out with friends, drink wine, visit a museum or have dinner somewhere hip. In general, he has his life very together, and would be the typical gay consumer-citizen El-Tayeb and Hanhardt describe.

One time while we were having lunch, Kris told me about his college days. He used to book flights to NYC on the weekends and go to the Village to party for a few days, do drugs and have casual sex before returning to his home state. It was just what they did "back then" he



told me, almost admirably. It was also because Kris had not “come out” as gay to his parents at the time, something he had really dreaded. NYC had been the place they went to, to live out their “inner gay” Kris said, explaining that the city he was from did not have the same opportunities as NYC did. NYC was where Kris and his friends went to “be gay”, he finished.

Kris pointed out he felt a pressure to be “normal” in the gay community. By “normal” he meant to partner or in a domestic relationship, much like the traditional life-styles Hanhardt referred to when talking about aims and goals for the mainstream LGBT+ social movement. Kris told me that in his twenties and early thirties, he had been in a very unhealthy environment. His friends and himself at the time had been heavy party-goers and did drugs on a regular basis: “The people I used to hang out with... It was very bad. The things they said, did... it was a very poisonous environment to be in”. I asked what he meant, and Kris answered that they were just very obnoxious. They had expressed very racist attitudes towards people of color and Kris’s friends’ habits were unhealthy: going to clubs, daytime drinking and brunching every weekend, doing drugs such as “molly”<sup>17</sup>, GHB and ecstasy. Kris summarized that they were basically very racist and snooty. There were expectations to how one should live. Kris expressed a concern that if the LGBT+ community experience so much discrimination, and with its history of criminalization, stigmatization and being the sexual other, it was worrying that they themselves were so exclusionary. Only a couple of years ago, Kris had come to the realization that he was in fact an addict. He parted ways with his previous friends and started his journey towards sobriety. Drugs, alcohol and partying used to be a big part of his everyday life, and he was under the impression that this was how life was supposed to be like. He would even show up to work “high as a kite” sometimes, to use his own words. According to Kris, this was mostly because of the way he was introduced to the LGBT+ community in his early twenties and frequent drug-use.

On another occasion, Kris and I went the Whitney Museum in the Meatpacking district. In situations like these “go-alongs”, I found it easy to communicate and talk to my interlocutors about different topics. It felt very natural and mundane. More often than not, Kris and I talked like friends do in general: basic things such as romances, everyday life, busy schedules, being frustrated about the MTA and other everyday topics. Knowing Kris had been single for a longer period of time, I asked him what he thought about getting married, implicitly trying to make a joke about his age. Kris explained he had some ambiguous feelings about marriage, and that he felt marriage had become almost “mandatory” after the Marriage Equality Act in 2015. We

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<sup>17</sup> “Molly” is a common slang for MDMA, a well-known party-drug.

walked at a slow pace, while Kris was holding his phone and taking pictures and I tried my best to make my gaze seem interested in the artwork. Kris expressed a paradox in the LGBTQ+ movement strive for equal rights: “It’s funny, because we definitely play by our own rules *anyway*. We like to be different, act different, you know?”. He looked at me, waiting for me to agree. I just looked back, silent. He continued to explain what he meant. It was not that he was against marriage in particular, it was just not for him. Kris also mentioned that equal rights does not necessarily mean that gay people and straight people are the same, but it was about the principle of equal opportunities and protection from discrimination.

Later, Kris and I left the Whitney, and continued to walk west, towards the Hudson River and Christopher Street Piers. The Christopher Street Piers is another well-known, historic LGBTQ+ site on the west bank of Manhattan by the Hudson River. The Piers used to be a place where gay men and transgender women went to ‘cruise’ or do sex work. The view from the piers was beautiful and gave us a clear sight to the Freedom Tower, where the previous World Trade Center was located. Kris and I got closer to the piers, and the light breeze had a cooling effect. Kris sighed, and asked me if I knew the story of Marsha Johnson. Admittedly, I did not, and I was often struck by how little I knew about the LGBTQ+ history in NYC compared to my interlocutors. Kris started to tell me the story, although he was not exactly sure how things “went down” himself. He continued, and said that early in the 1990’s, a transgender woman named Marsha P. Johnson had been found dead in the water, floating in the Hudson River nearby the Piers. No one ever found out exactly what happened to her, but it was rumored that she had been killed and dumped in the river by a gang of youths, with whom she had been seen in conflict some nights earlier<sup>18</sup>. Officially, the police had concluded the case of Marsha’s death as a suicide. Kris explained that the assumed murder of Marsha had raised many questions in fight for LGBTQ+ rights, furthering the need for protection from discrimination, violence and safe spaces.

The unsolved, assumed murder of Marsha remains a memorable and historic event. The Piers used to be a known site for cruising and sex work predominantly amongst homeless LGBTQ+ youth of color. Now, the Piers are a more recreational place with small coffee-carts and various sports arenas such as basketball or volleyball, and where many people go for a run. The Piers are also a known for having art exhibitions and concerts. However, for my interlocutors such as Kris, the Piers are not imagined as a place for recreational activities and leisure time, but rather a historic space for LGBTQ+ people. Events of struggles, policing and

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<sup>18</sup> It has also been made a documentary about Marsha P. Johnson’s named *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017).

violence do not only become symbols of the past, but they are also signs of the progress that has taken place ever since. The Piers, like other known historic LGBT+ sites, are not only remembered because of bad or tragic events. Sites are remembered, however, in terms of people; people who have fought back on suppression, discrimination and persecution. When my interlocutors talk about the past, they talked mostly about the bravery and courage these people had, and the solidarity that existed in the LGBT+ community. Furthermore, in addition to people's bravery, the past serve as a memory of how far the process of inclusion has come for LGBT+ persons. Places such as the Piers are mostly something people talk about with positive remarks, rather than being remembered for the violence and crimes.

## **SUMMARY**

In some ways, Kris and Zayyid share similar experiences. Both are originally from other places than NYC and were drawn to the city because of its social history and for being gay-friendly. Both Kris and Zayyid associated NYC with being a safe space for LGBT+ persons and a place for social freedom and possibilities that were not present where they were from; a southern U.S. state and Syria. NYC pulls many people to itself, for various reasons. From the experience of my anthropological fieldwork, NYC's history of gay and lesbian activism, historic neighborhoods, events, violence and conflict with law enforcement and other people are parts of my interlocutors' social world. As many of my interlocutors come from other states and countries, NYC is talked about as a place of possibility for freedom. Freedom in this sense, is not only to be interpreted as freedom *from* something, but freedom to be able to do something (Berlin 1969). Although one could argue that the two forms of freedom go hand in hand, my interlocutors expressed, like Zayyid, that coming to NYC was more about having the freedom to be whoever you wanted to be, without being judged or discriminated against. In Kris' case, NYC was the city he and his friends used to visit when they went to college. NYC had been the place they both went "to be gay".

A sense of community emerges from a mutual history of events. I have tried to show that the feeling of a community is based on living memories of the past, mnemonics, and the powerful emotions that history brings. The difference from the "normal", the heterosexual, is what has been the main reason for LGBT+ person's suppression and discrimination, and not necessarily class, social stratification or race: which is a rather new perspective that Hanhardt

describes as part of a process of urban warfare and governing populations (2013). Claiming the city as their own, is related to a mnemonic past, histories of LGBT+ people's suffering and oppression, as well as taking charge and fighting for their freedom. Like the famous writer James Baldwin has written: "freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be" (1968). Places become mnemonic and important for the LGBT+ community. Kusenbach has argued that, "everyday spatial practices and relationship to place, can become so filled with meaning and experiences, that they turn into symbols of someone's personal identity (2003:471). The past becomes a resource by which LGBT+ people can make a connection to self, to others, and NYC as a mnemonic space for LGBT+ people. NYC has also become a symbol for possibilities and social freedom largely through the historic events when the LGBT+ community collectively fought back on suppression. Although this evolved into what I referred to as the mainstream LGBT+ social movement, it does not change the fact that its history is available to all. My interlocutors, like Zayyid, draw actively on the collective memories of historic events, sites and neighborhoods to claim their place in the larger LGBT+ community, and the possibility of freedom and liberation. In this regard, the assumed sociality of gay and lesbian identity that is linked to class, consume and life-style is challenged. People like Zayyid, take the events of history to transform the meaning of being gay, as a way of doing, imagining and claiming their place in the community regardless of class or consumer status. Kris "fits in", somewhat, to what one could imagine as the ideal gay identity in relation to Bourdieu's argument on forms of capital and class. However, what I have illustrated in this chapter is how people, from seemingly different backgrounds, can relate to a community through a mutual history. The history becomes symbolic and alive, and people create an imagined community and sense of belonging. Although there are social boundaries, such as class, which socially separate people like Zayyid and Kris, they still imagine themselves as part of the same community through mnemonic symbols of a mutual past, where their suppression has been traditionally bounded in being sexually different.

I have argued that the meaning of space is significant to my interlocutors' feelings of belonging, and specifically the idea of a "safe space" in a historical context. NYC's LGBT+ history is a history about change and hope, which I argue also enacts the hope of people in the LGBT+ community in NYC today. Furthermore, as NYC became "gayer", and the mainstream social movement paved way for important political progress in terms of rights, it further conformed LGBT+ people to already established values, such as family, marriage and

reproduction. As I will continue to demonstrate, NYC is imagined as a site for what can be possible, where people make, and re-make their social relationships in different ways.



## CHAPTER THREE

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### FAMILIES AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

It was one of those unusually chilly March afternoons. The sky was cloudy, and it looked like it could start to rain at any minute. A group of seven people from Possibilities and I were hanging out by the Hell's Kitchen waterfront area and the cold Northeast wind swept us in the face. It was mid-day, so there were only a few other people who occasionally strolled or jogged past us. Nathan took a hit of a joint before he reached out his arm and offered me the rest. This time I felt I had to say no, and maybe someone else would like to share. It was cold, and "smoking up" was a way to try to keep somewhat warm. I knew I had the opportunity to go back to my apartment and take a long bath at night, while the others were going back to their shelters. Juan grabbed the joint out of Nathan's hand and said, in Spanish, "pásame", which means "give [it] to me". Juan stood up against the railing and finished the joint while gazing over the Hudson River. He smoked it down until he almost burnt his fingers, then flicked the rest into the river.

Nathan and I sat on a bench across from Juan while the others traded stuff they had hustled the day before: hygiene products, shaving cream, razors and winter accessories such as gloves and hats. Juan asked Nathan if he stayed in touch with his family in upstate New York. Nathan shook his head and said "Nah, bro'," and continued by telling how he had been kicked out when his dad found out he was gay and told to never come back. Nathan had left his house only with a backpack, a pop-tart, a black eye and a nosebleed. His parents had cried, Nathan said, but also called him "fucking disgusting", shut the door behind him and shouted "fagot!", and told him to never come back when he walked away. Juan shook his head and said: "yeah, my family was loco too," while pointing towards his head. Juan told us he had to stay for longer periods with his aunt, Patricia, even before he came out to his parents. They continued to talk about their families, and how

everything had changed for them after coming out or being outed<sup>19</sup> to their parents. Although coming out had been some sort of liberation for both Nathan and Juan, it also meant to part with their families, however involuntarily. On the other hand, they both agreed, at least they got to be themselves, and amongst like-minded others. Shortly after, frustrated with the intolerance and reaction of his parents, Nathan exclaimed something like “well, so much for ‘blood is thicker than water’, huh?”. One of the other guys, Faisal, had overheard the conversation and commented: “‘blood is thicker than water’... Uhm, you know, that sayin’ has been sorta’ twisted. The original goes more like: ‘the blood of the covenant runs thicker than the water of the womb’ or something. Which actually means the exact opposite”. Faisal continued to talk and said that *his* family was right here, and made an arm-gesture towards the others. The others nodded in agreement. Stacy, one of the transwomen, took her boyfriend’s hand, leaned over and kissed him. This was as happy as she had been in a very long time, she said and smiled.

## **IS BLOOD THICKER THAN WATER?**

The comment about the quote “blood is thicker than water” by Faisal, a 24-year-old from Iran, triggered my curiosity. The saying is widely debated and can be interpreted in many ways. According to Nico Lang (2013), one of the ways to understand it is that relationships built through camaraderie and blood spilt in battles bonds soldiers (non-consanguine relationships) stronger, and has greater meaning than traditional kinship relations and blood (consanguine relations). Lang’s approach to the “blood is thicker than water” quote implies that solidarity and shared experience can build stronger and more durable relationships than those through blood. Lang’s approach also reflects well in some of the experiences my interlocutors had with their biological families. In this chapter I will delve into the topic of family, and how my interlocutors experienced “coming out”, the relationship between family and sexuality, and the emergence of family-like relationships. For many of the people I connected with during my fieldwork, “family” was an ambiguous term. Because some of my interlocutors were runaways to NYC from their birth families, sadness, resentment, anger and disappointment were some of the feelings they expressed when talking about their biological family, or the family they grew

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Being outed’ is a term commonly used when someone else (or something) disclose your (non-hetero) sexual orientation without one’s consent or wishes.



up with. However, when talking about family in everyday life, most of them talked about non-consanguine relatives, people in their “inner-circle” and new forms of families. This is not something new to the literature on gays, lesbians and kinship, and is explored among others by anthropologist Kath Weston in her book *Families We Choose* (1991).

I begin with exploring the role of the family and homosexuality and will build on the arguments made by John D’Emilio (1983). D’Emilio has argued that the family as an institution has become an affective and moral social unit. Building on this, I move on to describe how the notion of the American family is described as a moralizing social unit based on religious values and heterosexuality, which is also linked to production and reproduction of both citizens and society (See Schneider 1980, Jakobsen 2003, Weston 1991 and Butler 2002). Later, I will relate these arguments to the experiences and practices of my interlocutors and show how the traditional role of family is transformed through community, practices of voluntary affiliation and relationships with meaningful others.

I argue that the practice of family-making is a form of emerging sociality and important networks of support and care. I argue that it is an ongoing process of liberation from traditional perspectives on the family, and established family values. My interlocutors express a freedom to create their own future, where they imagine the family as a process, practice and a social network of care, support and protection. Further developing one of my main arguments from chapter two, I will argue that the historical link of discrimination and prosecution and subjective experiences of alienation and rejection has formed a collective past and an “ethnogenesis” for LGBT+ people, making it possible for other socialities to emerge alongside the ideal of the nuclear family and established social forms.

## **FAMILY AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

In his essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity”, John D’Emilio explores the relationship between family, gay identity and capitalism (1983). According to D’Emilio, the growth of industrial cities provided a space of potential and possibilities for homosexual identity to unfold. With the rise of capitalism, the economic interdependence of the family also declined (D’Emilio 1983:469). Because capitalism drew men out of traditional work and into the industrial labor market, families were no longer self-sufficient nor independent as the household relied on wage labor outside the family. This does not mean that families were no longer interdependent, and

as D'Emilio argues, the family became more of an affective unit. The family was no longer a producer of goods for self-consumption, but of emotional satisfaction and happiness (p. 469). With capitalism becoming more institutionalized, urban centers such as NYC experienced rapid growth. The rise of capitalism that led to a transformation of the role of the family, made men and women freer to explore their attraction to their own sex, both emotionally and physically (p. 470).

Like Michel Foucault (1984), D'Emilio argues for a historic production of gay identity. This does not imply that same-sex sex practices never were historically documented. On the contrary, whilst homoerotic descriptions date many centuries back, D'Emilio writes how one must separate what is homosexual *behavior* and homosexual *identity* (D'Emilio 1983:470, italics in original). Following industrialization and capitalism, urban life made it possible to organize and unfold one's social life outside the heterosexual, nuclear family. Because capitalism allowed for social organization outside of the family, communities of gay and lesbian people emerged in industrialized, big cities, although more of gay men than of lesbian women (p. 471). According to D'Emilio, this had to do with the access to the labor market at the time as there were still gendered differences in the labor force and well-paid jobs were mainly held for men, still leaving some women economically dependent on men (p. 471).

However clandestine, gay and lesbian communities became increasingly visible in urban areas. As I described in chapter two, dangers of being gay or lesbian also rose with the increased policing of social life. Openly gay and lesbian people were often denied employment, police made sweeps in gay male bars and the surveillance of known gay and lesbian cruising sites (p. 473). D'Emilio suggests that such organized, homophobic forms of policing partially had to do with a dual relationship between family and capitalism:

On the one hand, [...] capitalism has gradually undermined the material basis of the nuclear family by taking away the economic functions that cemented the ties between family members. [...] On the other hand, the ideology of capitalist society has enshrined the family as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, the place where our need for stable, intimate human relationships is satisfied. (p. 473).

The role of the family fits well within the capitalist relations of production and reproduction: not only a reproduction of emotions or feelings of security, but also the reproduction of morality, values, culture and consequently, the nation. D'Emilio's arguments might be a bit reductive in his explanations of gay identity as well as of suppression and discrimination of

gays that look solely at the rise of capitalism as its foundation. Nevertheless, I agree on his reflections on the liberation of gay men and lesbian women, which is that LGBT+ communities have emerged from a social space that exists outside the boundaries of the heterosexual nuclear family (p. 474). Judith Butler has argued in a similar vein, that kinship and family is established as the moral basis and legitimate social unit in society, and therefore it is assumed that sexuality needs to be organized with reproductive purposes and relations (2002:14). This does not only limit itself to reproductive family relations, but also what it symbolizes which is the reproduction of the nation and culture. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini argue furthermore that sexual morality has been governed by the state for a long time, and that “sexual progressivism” (marriage equality, adoption rights, assisted fertilization and other medical reproductive methods) is oriented towards the family (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). Hence, the *inclusion* of LGBT+ persons into mainstream society is founded on a conformist and heteronormative perspective.

## HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is a term used to describe the moral and conceptual meaning of heterosexuality and as such not synonymous with heterosexuality. (Berlant and Warner 1998, in Jakobsen 2003:28). Heteronormativity is everything that reaffirms and enforces heterosexuality as the norm, and “is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects [...], romances and other protected spaces of culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998:554-555). Heteronormativity’s given place in American society is what has given rise to the scrutiny of people of sexual difference, and is the motor of social organization in U.S. (p. 564). I understand these latter reflections as how social life is organized in the U.S., and what social forms governs the politics of social freedom and therefore its boundaries. Progressive sexual politics such as same-sex marriage may suggest a conformist approach to gay and lesbian persons, and to gender identity. This is what Lisa Duggan describes as the emergence of homonormativity. More precisely, homonormativity is when gay and lesbian couples conform to established heteronormative social organizations such as domesticity, monogamy and reproduction (Duggan 2002). This is now (to a certain degree) supported legally in the U.S. which further maintains the idea of

the nuclear family's dominant position in American society<sup>20</sup>. However, the kinds of social relationships my interlocutors valued, does not resemble what one would call either monogamy and partnership<sup>21</sup> or traditional ideas of family.

As I will show, my interlocutors' life-stories suggest that chosen familial relationships are closely connected to their experiences of "coming out", and their birth family relations. Their experiences of rejection and alienation are linked to the idea of the nuclear family what the values and morality the role of the nuclear family entails in American society. The role of the family in American society always assumes heterosexuality, it assumes the binary of male and female gender and it assumes sex as a means of procreation and reproduction, all of which should be challenged. The family as *the* enshrined set of social relationships also creates the public imaginaries about the future, namely a heterosexual future, therefore making it difficult to "come out". Thus, coming out is often described as a deep and personal decision, filled with angst, dread and/or fear. And maybe most importantly, the experience and process of coming out and disclosing one's sexual identity is shaped by an assumption of "normal sexuality", namely heterosexuality. Heterosexuality as the assumed "normal state of sexuality" is closely linked to the cultural meaning of kinship and family (Weston 1991). As I have already mentioned, the nuclear family is the basis for American society, and the moralizing social unit that governs social boundaries and legitimate relationships. Idealizing the family as such, limits social possibilities and arrangements outside the heterosexual nuclear family. Another way of approaching family, is what John Borneman argues for in his critique of traditional kinship studies. Borneman argues that anthropologists should be looking towards agency and voluntary processes of affiliation, which he calls "processes of caring and being cared for" (1997:574). In her book *After Kinship*, Janet Carsten also elaborates on how kinship and family are malleable concepts (2005). Much like Weston (1991) and Borneman (1997), Carsten argues that mundane and intimate shared experiences, or substances such as food, transform and supply certain social relationships with emotional power (Carsten 2005:161).

In the following sections I will illustrate how tensions between coming out and family are experienced. Questions about coming out seemed to be a trigger with most of my interlocutors, because of the turns in their lives after disclosing their sexual orientation to

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<sup>20</sup> This was also the (successful) goals of the mainstream LGBT+ social movement, which I elaborated on in chapter two

<sup>21</sup> I will elaborate on monogamy, partners and intimacy in chapter four (4).

their parents. I will show how the LGBT+ community can emerge as a new form of family, and how new forms of family-making are much like the processes of voluntary affiliation John Borneman argues for.

## **COMING OUT - "THEY NEVER NURTURED MY GAY"**

KRIS

Car horns were singing from distant and near, the trains underground made a trembling sensation beneath my feet as people jay-walked across the street with phones glued to their ears. Late spring in New York City (NYC) seemed similar to a hot Norwegian summer day: it was humid, the sun was glaring and I could feel my skin prickle from the exposure. My t-shirt had a darkened area in the arm pits, accompanied by a feeling of my t-shirt sticking to my back from the sweat. People who rushed past me bear the same pit-stains and egg-shaped areas of sweat on their backs. Clearly, I was not the only one battling the hot and humid weather. I had become accustomed to the NYC traffic, and knew exactly when and where I could jay-walk without risking my life, just to get ten seconds ahead. I tried not to walk too fast and avoid getting too hot while also not being too late to my meeting. The East Village is always lively, yet not the busiest area in NYC. It is also one of the places where some of my interlocutors prefer to eat, drink and frequent. Walking along the streets after Bowery and towards Alphabet City is picturesque as it has traditional red brick buildings with black fire escapes running diagonally down in the front. One side of the street is always in the shade, giving a nice break from the sun. The smell of East Village is a wonderful, awful mix of trash that has been laying out in the sun, coffee, different foods and marijuana. Occasionally, you could come across a strong smell of old urine, that stuck in your nose until you walk past the next coffee shop to the smell of freshly grinded coffee beans. Not unlike NYC in general, the East Village is very diverse, but has a certain appeal to the younger generation. At the end of the street, despite my bad eye-sight, I could see Kris standing and looking down on his phone.

As I approached Kris, he saw me in the corner of his eyes, put down his phone, smiled and gave me a hug. We had matching marks of sweat on our t-shirts. We briefly asked each other how things are before continuing down the street into Alphabet City for some

much-needed cold brew and water. Kris and I strolled around the streets talking and chatting before sitting down outside on a sidewalk coffee shop. Kris has many interesting experiences from his life, that he is happy to share. Whenever we meet, we talk about anything from politics to what we had for breakfast. That day, we mostly talked about personal experiences of being gay, of sexuality, love and relationships. Kris told me about his college days, where he would book flights to NYC and just go to the West Village, party for a few days, do drugs and have casual sex before returning to his home state. His thirties were marked by personal mental struggles, parties and addiction-problems. Mental struggles, and mental health issues seem to be a recurrent issue with LGBT people: a constant fear of rejection, of being on the outside, struggle for familial approval, self-doubt, low self-esteem – which I also can relate to – is something all my conversational partners mention.

Kris and I sat in the shade of the trees that branched over our coffee table, and Kris mentioned that he was introduced to the gay community by being served drugs, thrown into a vivid party scene and thought for a long time this was how what “gay life” was all about. Continuing with that in mind, he said that he thought this was how many young LGBT+ persons are experiencing their early days after “coming out”. Later in our conversation, he talked about his coming out experience, and how the process leading up to coming out had been dominated by very powerful feelings. Kris as well as other interlocutors said that these feelings can “eat you up from the inside”. Kris was also raised in a strong Catholic household. Religion had been very important to his family, and they were very active in the church community. Kris told me that gay and lesbians were not a topic that came up often, but when it did, people would say things such as “abomination” or that gay and lesbians were going to “end up in hell”. As we continued our conversation, Kris said that he felt his parents sort of knew he was gay, even before he explicitly came out to them. Even during his college years, he was openly gay amongst friends at campus, but not at home because he felt a need to be heterosexual.

He told me about one time when he came back from a trip to NYC and was showing his family pictures from the trip. He laughed and smiled slightly while shaking his head. “This was back in the days when you went to the store to get your pictures developed”, he explained. Kris continued to tell the story, that as he had flipped through the pictures, there were pictures of him with a couple of drag queens outside a gay bar in the Village. Both Kris and his family had awkwardly ignored the tension in the situation and never talked about it again. Kris told me that he had said to his parents that he was

only at the bar for the entertainment. His parents had not been amused by the thought of drag queens, and the entertainment purposes. This did not make it easier for Kris to come out.

Eventually, telling his family became a necessity for his own sanity and happiness, according to Kris. Kris explained that in the time after coming out, he had felt that his parents never let go of the idea of him having a girlfriend or a wife and children. All his brothers and sisters have kids and/or wives and husbands, whilst Kris is still seen as a youth in the sense that he has not stepped in to adulthood the same way his siblings have. The image of his own future and his life-trajectory, clearly broke with his parents' image of Kris' future, creating an ambiguous and weird situation for all parties. Kris stopped laughing and smiling, becoming more serious. Still, to this day, even though they have become a lot more accepting and open, they never ask Kris about his love life and potential partners. He felt it was hard to be himself with his parents, although they were more accepting than before, he also held some resentment towards them because "they never nurtured my gay!" Kris exclaimed in frustration.

What Kris talked about that day, highlights some of the points I mentioned initially in this chapter: that the family is one of the basis of American society, the ideas of kinship, reproduction and how it always assumes heterosexuality by default. The phrase "they never nurtured my gay" is a telling example of how Kris experienced growing up, and his relationship with his parents as a closeted gay man. What it means, is that Kris never experienced that his parents fostered being gay, or that it was even a possibility that Kris could be. He was assumed to be heterosexual. Social boundaries and expectations from parents and close relatives are linked to imaginaries of the future, a reproductive future, and heterosexuality can be considered as the signifying foundation for that future. Heterosexuality and family become the moralizing social values that limit the field for social possibilities outside of the heterosexual nuclear family. Kris's story about assumed heterosexuality and growing up, is also similar to many other interlocutors, and Natalia's story is another compelling example.

## NATALIA

Natalia volunteered at Possibilities during the weekends. Natalia has piercing green eyes and is remarkably beautiful, with long nut-brown hair and toned skin. On an everyday

basis, she worked as a secretary in a small legal firm in Manhattan. Natalia is American born, but her father is *colombiano* (from Colombia) and her mother is from NYC. Her father had lived in the U.S. since he was eighteen years old and attended college in NYC. Later, two of his sisters also moved to the U.S., and her entire family lives in NYC now. On a particularly hot day in July, Natalia and I went to a bar in Williamsburg, right off Bedford Avenue. We sat under one of the parasols on the rooftop, sipping frozen margaritas while trying not to cringe from the overwhelming taste of tequila, or the brain freeze from drinking too fast. I asked Natalia about her experience of coming out. She put down her glass, leaned in closer and it looked like she was getting ready for story-time.

When Natalia was seventeen, one of her aunts had seen Natalia kissing another girl. Her aunt threatened to “out” Natalia to her mother if she did not tell her mother and father herself. Natalia wanted to tell her parents herself, which she did the following week. Her mother’s initial reaction was denying it could be possible that Natalia was lesbian. Natalia tried to imitate what her mother had said: “NO! You cannot be a lesbian. We need to get you to talk to someone.”. Natalia rolled her eyes and told me her mom had arranged sessions with a psychologist for her the week after coming out. Her mother had also said that “it was just a phase”, and that “no daughter of hers was gonna be a lesbian”. Natalia told me that she loved her mom and dad deeply, but in that period of her life, they really “broke her heart”. She took a big zip of her margarita, waved the waiter over to our table and ordered two more drinks. She continued to talk about the time after she had come out to her parents, almost by extortion from her aunt. Natalia had agreed to see a “shrink” just to fulfil her parents’ wishes because she was a minor at that time. When she turned eighteen, she had immediately stopped her sessions. She told me: “just because I went to see a shrink doesn’t mean I could be ‘fixed’. I am who I am, you know?”. Her parents were not very happy with her decision, and continued to say, and hoped, that she would grow out of this phase she was in. I shook my head to show my understanding of Natalia’s situation. She kept talking, and said that it was not only her parents who thought it would just be a phase. Her friends also said that it was normal to experiment with other girls. Natalia sighed, and explained that being lesbian, is not necessarily about fooling around with other girls, it was more about being *in love*, and wished more people would understand that. “People are too obsessed with sex,” she said, and hoped that people would realize that it is about more than sex. For her, it was about romance, desire, care and emotions.



Now, six years later, Natalia's parents have finally accepted her sexual orientation, Sometimes, however, they refer to her sexual orientation as "a choice of life-style", which annoyed her. She hated the fact that they would call it a life-style, as if it was something that could be chosen – because she would never have chosen this for herself knowing it would cause her so much personal stress and disappointment for her family. Also, she made the point that her girlfriend, Yvonne, was not just a trait or habit, but her partner.

In the experiences of Kris and Natalia, there is clearly some tension between coming out and the relationship with a person's biological family. When they grew up, they were conditioned to understand heterosexuality as default. Further, identifying as LGBT+ can sometimes be wrongfully dismissed as mere choice or a life-style as in the case of Natalia when her parents express the impossibility of their own daughter to be lesbian. Consequently, reducing sexuality to mere choice, is to reduce the complexity of sexual and gender identity (identities other than heterosexuality and cisgendered persons) and dismiss a person's desire, love and emotions. I argue that the fact that coming out is still a thing, validates heterosexuality's dominant position in society. Just because the U.S. has *legally* recognized LGBT+ persons in almost every way, does not necessarily mean society is free of discrimination, harassment or social expectations. Indeed, it is a step in the right direction for inclusion of a minority, but social boundaries and limitations remain. Established forms of sociality is deeply rooted in socio-cultural models of kinship, family and reproduction. By this, I argue that sexual and gender identity and coming out, cannot be seen in isolation, but in relation to the cultural value of the nuclear family in U.S. society.

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The history of suppression, prosecution, criminalization, discrimination and violence against LGBT+ persons cannot be ignored when looking at social relationships within and outside LGBT+ communities. Indeed, Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier have argued that social change cannot solely be understood in its particularity, but also by making historical analysis: "our proposal to link historical analysis with symbolic analysis rests on the premise that we cannot comprehend present discourse and action without understanding their relation to past discourse and action" (1987:46). In chapter two, we saw that NYC is a mnemonic place for LGBT+ persons and inscribed with meaning, and that NYC provides a sense of belonging and community. In the words of D'Emilio, the LGBT+ community became my interlocutors' new family, where the need for stable and intimate relationships is satisfied (1983:473). My interlocutors are drawn to NYC because they are looking for social freedom and networks of

support. NYC's gay and lesbian history has become a symbol and anchor for LGBT+ identity and solidarity, which becomes central in the lives of my interlocutors. For example, how Kris used to travel to NYC on the weekends to delve himself into the LGBT+ party scene.

Based on the ethnography presented so far, I argue that new socialities are emerging with an idea of social freedom and hope of the future based on the experiences of rejection by their birth families. Whilst traditional forms of the (nuclear) family is bounded in a conjugal unit between man and woman with a purpose of reproduction, family can also be understood as forms of human dependency and support (Butler 2002). Because of the rejection and alienation my interlocutors have experienced with their families, they have found it necessary to create new networks of support, and an affectional community, much like D'Emilio has argued (1983:475). The American ideal of the family as morally correct and legitimate still affect the experience of LGBT+ people's adolescent years and follow them into adulthood. My interlocutors' tensions or strenuous relationships with their birth families have driven them to look for new personal relationships in a society grounded in equality and justice. Together, some of my interlocutors have created new forms of family with whom they share experiences, values and hope. However, not all my interlocutors have the same experience.

## ERIN'S STORY

Erin is a petite woman with a narrow, kind face. She has thick eye-glasses and thick, wavy, black long hair. At first glance, one would never imagine that this tiny and energetic woman had been involved in radical activism for over twenty years with several arrests on her track sheet. Now, she works as a social worker in Queens. Erin and I met at one of the group meetings at Possibilities but continued to meet outside and we bonded quickly. We went to different LGBT+ political meetings, book launches, lunches and cafés. Her experience as a lesbian woman and the process of coming out, was not as challenging as it had been for Kris or Natalia. In this section I will describe how her relationship with her family also shaped her coming out experience.

Erin comes from a small town in the Midwest, and her biological mother and father were never married. When her mother got pregnant, her biological father decided to leave them because it was considered highly inappropriate by both their families and the township community to be unmarried and have a baby. It was more acceptable for her mom to raise Erin

alone, Erin explained. Later, her mother's gay friend had stepped in and filled the role of the father. Erin called him "dad" in our conversations, to separate from her biological "father". She told me that her dad, her mom's friend, was more of a dad than her biological father had ever been. Erin's mom never bothered to collect child support from her father, because she did not want anything to do with "that piece of shit," Erin explained. Her dad had also been the one to take her to her first Pride parade, in a stroller.

Being from an untraditional family had helped Erin in her process of coming out, she said. Erin explained that because her mom was so close with the LGBTQ+ community, Erin's mom never "forced" heterosexuality on her. It was also the starting point for Erin's engagement in activism, realizing that the possibility of coming out as easy as she did, was not the case for everyone. Erin found herself not dreading coming out as much and was quickly accepted by both her mom and dad. This does not mean she has been without challenges of discrimination. In NYC, the neighborhood Erin lives in is considered a family dominated neighborhood, which she had been explicitly told on several occasions. Erin explained that she had felt she had been harassed on several occasions for her sexual orientation as a lesbian woman, being told that this is a *family* neighborhood, and not feeling very welcomed or accepted. Also, some of her neighbors have from time to time called the police on her for silly things such as not having her front yard properly groomed, leaving the trash cans open, or for neglecting her cats. She expressed that she has not properly been accepted in the neighborhood because she does not have any kids, a partner, but a horde full of cats. They have called her neglective, unfit to have pets, mentally disturbed, none of which does not coincide with any of my impressions of Erin as a person.

One time, Erin and I had lunch in her office. She talked about her early years as an activist with ACT UP! and her transition to more direct community outreach work through social work. Due to personal health issues, she was no longer able to participate as actively in direct action activism as she had been doing for so many years. In fact, she had not been involved in any form of organized protest in the last ten years she explained. However, her job as a social worker made her able to do direct involvement with youth in precarious situations, but in a more legitimate way. Erin explained that being a social worker sort of legitimized her personal views on injustice and when she processed cases. Her judgement as a social worker was more valuable, tolerable and legitimate than her opinions as a street activist. I looked at her with curiosity as I was biting through my sandwich. She told me she had lost more and more faith in protests on the streets, activist blogging, marches and similar acts of resistance. The reason for this, she said, is that the government would not listen anymore, and that the only

effective tool would be a boycott of some sorts, because it effects the economy and big businesses – which is what the government cares about. Erin was also tired of waiting for political change, and new policies, legislation and increased state funding for social welfare could often take a long time to get into effect: “Especially with this government, I guess we really just have to wait this one out,” she uttered afterwards, clearly disappointed. To make quick and meaningful changes in people’s lives was also one of the reasons she engaged more directly with the LGBT+ youth.

Erin put down her sandwich, took a sip of her tea and explained her frustration on behalf of her clients. According to her own experience, Erin meant it had become a moral obligation for parents to “punish” your children for being defiant and “correct” their behavior. In this case and the case for clients at Possibilities, for being sexually different or identifying differently from to their male or female bodies. Erin leaned back into her chair, gazed up to the ceiling and continued talking. What she did for her clients was trying to provide for them, the most basic structures they need in life to “get by” in society. She explained that she was trying to give them what their parents never did, a sense of belonging in society, a life-line, a safety net, something to build a future on, where their sexual or gender identities were the least of their concerns. From behind her file-stacked desk, she pointed to a picture hanging on the wall behind me. “She was my life-partner,” Erin said. I was curious to know more, so I asked who she was. Erin explained that the woman in the picture had been her girlfriend. They had been together for fifteen years. Erin looked at me through her thick glasses with her hands folded on top of the desk. She did not speak with joy. “What happened,” I asked. “She killed herself a couple of years ago,” she replied. Erin’s life-partner had struggled with mental health issues for years. She continued to tell the story, and after her partner had committed suicide, Erin had been absolutely devastated. Now, there was no room for a new partner in her life, she had been the one and only. Erin explained that her life now, was about taking care of her clients, making sure they got another chance at life, a fair chance. “And saving stray cats,” she chuckled and tilted her head.

To Erin, caring for her clients, and her cats, gave her a new sense of meaning in life after the loss of her life partner, and later her mother and dad. With her experience as a social worker for the NY state, and from Possibilities, she also explained how she sees how the LGBT+ communities somehow operate as a family, as caregivers and “raising” a new generation of LGBT+ people. Just because Erin is single, does not mean she is alone, without a family or a meaning in life. This brings me to my next section, where I wish to demonstrate

a case where one of my interlocutors explicitly talk about making a new family that is founded on mutual support, care and life-experience.

## **VOLUNTARY AFFILIATION**

One of the clients at Possibilities, Cassandra, became pregnant with her boyfriend during my fieldwork. Cassandra identifies as a bisexual cisgendered woman and is originally from a small town in Pennsylvania. Every Sunday, Possibilities hosts dinner for their clients followed by a discussion group. One evening in the end of April, homemade lasagna was on the menu and the clients flocked to the serving station.

Cassandra came to the table I was sitting by along with a dozen of other regulars. She had only taken a small serving of lasagna and salad on the side. Normally, Cassandra did not talk very much, but today she had a lot on her mind. She told everyone at the table what she had been going through lately. Since this was her first pregnancy, Cassandra expressed that she was worried about the baby's health and being a good mother once he or she was born. She said the pregnancy reminded her of one of her ex-girlfriends. She told us that while she was working as an escort, her girlfriend at the time had gotten pregnant on purpose with some random guy, so that the two of them could have and raise a baby together. Cassandra shook her head vigorously, "it was crazy," she said. She had had very little contact with her girlfriend, as they lived in different cities and having an open relationship. Cassandra said she was so surprised by this, because this was not something they had decided on, but simply just talked about some months earlier: "I got off the train, and went to see her, and when I saw her belly I was like: What the fuck?! I didn't do that, that ain't mine!". She poked around the food on her plate without eating anything, while continuing to rant about her ex-girlfriend. She did not say how things ended between them, but she said that her ex-girlfriend was now dead, and the baby was in foster care. "One thing I don't want for my baby, is drama. I have had too much family drama in my life, jumping from group home to group home, crazy ass girlfriends and boyfriends. I don't want my baby to be around that. We're gonna create a safe and good environment for our baby, right babe?" she said, and turned to her boyfriend who was currently on his second plate of food and did not seem to pay much attention. She also

told the people around the table, all the things she could no longer eat because it was not good or healthy for the baby.

Sneaking up on everyone in the room, was a smell of “K2”, a synthetic sort of weed that smells like a forest fire when it is lit. Cassandra reacted immediately, and while she was shaking her head, she said that whenever she could smell smoke, she could feel her baby ‘drop’ in her belly. While pointing at another guy, André, she continued: “he’s gonna be our baby’s godfather. I’ve known him for a long time and I trust him. Although he’s not my blood, he’s family. He will be good for the baby, he will take care of him whenever we need him”. She smiled at André, who stood in line for more lasagna. At the end of the dinner, Cassandra hugged me goodbye, and her, the boyfriend and the future godfather left.

In cases where traditional family ties are not present, it seemed that new family-like structures took place. For Cassandra, these bonds had to be forged on the grounds of loyalty, trust, respect, affection, care and stability among other things. As I mentioned initially, the term “blood is thicker than water” is challenged through the experiences of my interlocutors. Whilst “blood is thicker than water” symbolizes the biological family as a source of unconditional mutual support and love through consanguine relationships, the experiences of Cassandra and the others, demonstrate that it is not so unconditional after all. Non-normative sexuality challenges the established social morality in American society, and as in Kris’ case, heterosexuality was always assumed. When growing up, both Kris and Natalia never felt it was an option to be gay or lesbian. This led to them both to suppress their sexual identity, their true self. After coming out to their parents, they felt they lost their parents’ support and care. Like Cassandra, the need to find other networks of support, someone who cares for her and someone she can care for, is a process of family-making.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have argued that family and the traditional idea of the nuclear family is embedded in power relations that governs the possibility for social organizations. From we are born we are conditioned into thinking in terms of heteronormativity through parenting, education, potentially religious beliefs or other cultural foundations. This is inherently to think

about the future, sexuality and reproduction (both procreation and of the nation and culture) through heterosexuality. Imagining the future through heteronormativity ensures heterosexuality as the legitimate, morally correct, and always already assumed, sexuality.

Although kin-making has been studied in many ways as explained by Janet Carsten (2005), kinship relations have mostly been studied as “blood relationships” and marital relations. Kinship has been assumed as a heterosexual-based set of relations. What I illustrated in this chapter, is that family, and meaning of family, is ambiguously (dis)connected from biological kin. For my interlocutors, “family” meant stable, supportive networks of support – to be cared for, and caring for others. Such connections become cemented through the mutual experiences of alienation and discrimination: from the past, to the present and towards a hope of a different future. Because Kris, Natalia and Cassandra have experienced rejection and alienation from their families they need to find peers with whom they can develop familial affection.

Based on the experience of my interlocutors, experiences of disclosing one’s sexual identity is also linked to class. In a larger political landscape, where welfare provision is limited, poor families rely more on their children to support the family as young adults and into adulthood. It almost becomes a moral obligation, where feelings and emotions of care and being cared for are central. Therefore, coming out can somewhat disturb the future as it is imagined through biological family and relatives. New imaginaries of the future are filled with hopes and dreams, but not entirely directed towards biological family.

Coming out and disclosing one’s sexual identity is only linked to non-heterosexual identities which I argue also reproduces heterosexuality’s dominant position in U.S. society: a person does not “come out” as heterosexual. As Judith Butler argued, kinship and family is the moral basis and legitimate social unit in society, and therefore it is assumed that sexuality needs to be organized with reproductive purposes and relations (2002:14). Like I elaborated on in chapter two, the inclusion of LGBT+ persons in to society was based on conforming to heteronormative life-styles, such as with the Marriage Equality Act. This is not necessarily a bad thing as everyone should have equal opportunities to live their lives. However, it reaffirms heteronormativity’s position in U.S. society. One could ask what other forms of socialities are possible? I argue that the experiences from my interlocutors are examples of the limitations of social freedom. For example, in Kris’ case, whilst growing up, being gay had never been a possible option for him. Much like others, there is an expectation or assumption of heterosexuality, and one’s social reality is mostly revolved around this idea, creating ambiguous and strenuous relationships to be both self and others. Kris, Natalie and Erin, describe how such

assumptions has had a direct effect on their personal lives and strained family relations. They find new meanings and a sense of belonging through shared, collective experiences similar to their own.

I argue that they represent “emergent socialities”: socialities where networks of social support and care are established outside the biological family relation. At the same time, it is not that much different, because it still works in the same manner. Chosen families through voluntary affiliations are still moral units, and every family can be different with different values, practices and more. Solidarity in the LGBT+ community is based on a historical notion of collective suppression and subjective experiences of being suppressed. Their connections as a community and family are founded in visions and hopes of a future that accepts sexual difference, fostering acceptance, tolerance and equality. As Faisal said when he flipped the well-known saying: “the blood of the covenant runs thicker than the water of the womb”, is that collective and shared experiences may forge strong family-like relationships. The sharing of stories of rejection and conflict with their birth families are some examples of what has drawn the LGBT + identified people closer together, founding communities of support, care and caring for each other. They also come together through enactments of hope; hope of different times to come and the hope of a future society that is more accepting.



# CHAPTER FOUR

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## LOVE, SEX AND INTIMACY

### WHAT IS LOVE?

In this chapter I will build on the previous chapters and discuss in more detail the topics of intimacy, romance, partners and marriage. Whilst chapter three describes cases where families are chosen rather freely through voluntary affiliation outside consanguine relationships, I will now elaborate on intimate inter-personal relationships. I will show how normative gender roles have been enforced as the theoretical foundation for how academics, including anthropologists, normally understand social organizations of family, intimacy and love. In U.S. society, there is also a moral, socio-political and emotional backdrop which further strengthens normative relationships between love, intimacy, family and gender. Through empirical examples, I will argue that normative perspectives on social life overlook other conceptualization and practices of love, intimacy, marriage and partnership. Moreover, I discuss how heteronormative ideas of romance and love are challenged and transformed by my interlocutors, and become neither heteronormative nor homonormative. I argue that their perceptions and practices of love and intimacy in everyday life are key elements of emergent socialities.

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Anthropologist Charles Lindholm states in an article that “it is very often assumed by Western social scientist and philosophers that the Western ideal of romantic love serves primarily as a socially acceptable reason to engage in intercourse” (2006:10). This is also morally enforced and valued in various societies, such as in the dominant North American. By this, I mean as Lindholm argues, that Western popular culture, movies and TV series, most often portray sex as an act of romantic love and intimacy (p. 6). In turn, this has cultivated an idea of what sex, sexual morality, relationships, love and intimacy should look like between persons. One should not overlook the fact that the idea of romantic love has mostly been represented as heterosexual

and heteronormative<sup>22</sup>. This Western idea of romantic love and intimacy has been described by Howard Gadlin as a product of capitalism (1976). He argues that:

“the home ceased to be the center of all social existence; the family ceased to be a productive unit. [...]. Contemporary forms of interpersonal intimacy emerge with the self-conscious bourgeois individual whose life is torn between the separated worlds of work and home” (Gadlin 1976:306).

Lindholm builds on Gadlin’s argument and states that men and women sought comfort with each other, to find meaning in a society that experienced significant economic and social transformation: “Love provided what the newly industrialized society had taken away: a feeling of belonging and significance. Without capitalism, then, there would be no love” (Lindholm 2006:10). However, Lindholm, and implicitly Gadlin, describe intimacy, love and family as purely heterosexual, between *men* and *women*. Comparatively, as I described in chapter three, the process of industrialization and capitalism Gadlin and Lindholm mention in relation to family and love, is not so unlike what historian John D’Emilio (1983) has argued with the formation of gay identity. Gadlin’s, Lindholm’s and D’Emilio’s approach involves a separation of sexuality from procreation and conceptualizes sexual expression as personal desires. Unlike Lindholm and Gadlin, what D’Emilio ultimately argues for is a more *radical* liberation of persons and social life. Drawing from historical research and his own experiences as a gay man, D’Emilio concludes his essay with the following:

[...] we have had to create, for our survival, networks of support that do not depend on the bonds of blood or the license of the state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured. The building of an “affectional community” must be as much a part of our political movement as are campaigns for civil rights. In this way we may prefigure the shape of personal relationships in a society grounded in equality and justice, [...] a society where autonomy and security do not preclude each other but coexist. (D’Emilio 1983:475).

What D’Emilio is calling for, is a more processual and radical approach to family, love and

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<sup>22</sup> In recent years, movies such as *Imagine Me and You* (2005), *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) *Call Me by Your Name* (2018) and *Love Simon* (2018) raised important questions of same-sex love on movie-screens and television. These movies also illustrate what Charles Lindholm mentions about the idea of romantic love as a preliminary reason for intercourse.

intimacy. Lindholm and Gadlin are only two (of many) examples that shows how academic approaches to family, love and intimacy are in general theorized from a normative perspective and assumed to be heterosexual. Minorities such as LGBT+ communities have historically been suppressed and denied basic civil rights, as I described in chapter two. Consequently, as D’Emilio has argued, they also have created their own structures of intimacy, kinship and companionship outside the heteronormative. Similarly, I suggest that social anthropologists should keep trying to expand anthropological theories of love, intimacy, gender and family, and pay close attention to the multiple practices outside the traditional, established and “morally correct” ways of living, or the conforming socialities of normativity. In the following sections, I will illustrate how some of my interlocutors relate to the topics of romantic love, sex and intimacy that moves beyond the normative.

## LOVE AND SEX

Edward is a young man in his early thirties who works as a manager at a juice bar on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. He lives in Astoria, Queens, with his partner, River, and together they have a cat, Truffles. They have been together for almost 7 years. Their apartment is a two-bedroom unit, and even though they both work full time, they need to rent out the second bedroom through Airbnb to make ends meet. River is half-French-Canadian and half-American and works as a paralegal for a small law firm in Downtown Brooklyn. Every other weekend he and River go to Edward’s parents’ house in Yonkers to have a family dinner. Despite a busy schedule and hectic city-life, they also see River’s family in Montreal at least once a year. Last summer, they had even been to River’s brother’s wedding on the Amalfi Coast in Italy together. Edward told me that River’s mother sometimes refers to him, Edward, as *l’èpouse*, which means “the wife”, in French.

About fifteen years ago, when Edward and his family had moved to NYC, Edward had been quite a different man from who he is now. First of all, Edward was still closeted, and was so until a few years later. He had frequently felt “down”, experienced periods of anxiety, got in trouble at school, acted out and was very lonely. Edward described himself as an “emo-kid”, just without the gothic make-up. It was not until he had lived in NYC for a few years, graduated high school, made many new friends in the LGBT+ community and explored the gay scene in Manhattan, that he had come out to his family. Edward explained that his coming out experience

was not very dramatic, and that he still maintains a very good relationship with his parents and sister: “I know many people expect a sob-story of gay people coming out. That just wasn’t me,” he said and slightly rolled his eyes. However, coming out had been a relief. Edward looked at River, smiled and continued to talk. Edward admitted that actually disclosing his sexuality to his family and friends had been like a veil being lifted. He said that it had allowed him to be who he really was, and eventually meet River: “I wasn’t living my truth, it was like I was living someone else’s life”. He continued to say that he had felt that he *had* to be straight, because that was what was normal and expected. River continued where Edward stopped talking, about living one’s truth, and said that life is too short to live by everyone else’s rules. To be truly happy, River said, “you sometimes need to make your own [rules]”.

At first glance, Edward and River are a traditional couple in many ways. As I discussed in chapter two, they are somewhat the model “gay consumer citizen”, middle-class and both are white, cisgendered men. They also have full-time jobs and seemingly adapted to what would be homonormativity (see chapter three). Neither Edward nor River share the hardship of coming out, such as many of my other interlocutors who were kicked out from their homes and rejected by their families. They are the typical gay men on social media, that Zayyid (see chapter two) envies and dream to be like. However, as Edward and River communicated more openly, and we went out in larger groups together, details about their relationships became clearer.

After about two months of hanging out with Edward and River, I found myself in what I thought were a very awkward situation. I had been sitting and waiting for them at a coffee shop in Astoria. Feeling a bit bored, I started to swipe on Tinder. After some minutes of swiping right and left, something caught my eye: it was River. I had come across one of my conversational partners on a dating app. What do I do with this? Do I tell Edward? I put down my phone, just to gather myself before meeting Edward and River. They eventually came, late as usual, and we had lunch before walking around the neighborhood. I decided not to say anything about seeing River on Tinder at the time. But it struck me how coincidental things could be during fieldwork: what are the chances of something like this to happen?

On a later occasion, Edward turned his phone to River and myself, and showed us a guy’s profile from what seemed to be a dating app. River just laughed and said: “good luck, he’s totally out of your league”. One would likely anticipate such a moment to be quite tense, where one partner in a relationship shows the other a profile from a dating site, but on the contrary, it was not. Edward expressed his sexual frustration, which he continued to do more often. Whenever Edward took me out to bars or clubs with his friends, he made sexual comments about men he saw on dating apps, in the bar, or guys he had seen at the gym.

Sometimes he would say that he would like “to be destroyed by that guy”, or something like “oh, too bad he’s a bottom<sup>23</sup>”, “I could eat that ass all day”, or “he’s cute, I wanna date him”. Edward would even go over and talk to guys in the bars. Curious to know more, I asked him what his deal with River was. Edward and River’s relationship was purely emotional he told me. Although they sleep in the same bed every night, they only occasionally kiss each other and talk explicitly about being with other men. They had never had sex together just the two of them, not even tried. Edward and his friends laughed over the loud music that was playing in the bar. “I thought you knew,” Edward told me as if it would have been the most obvious thing in the world. Edward took a shot with one of his friends, walked out to the dancefloor and started to grind on a guy that he also went home with that night.

Edward and River had been living together for nearly five years, and they are dependent on each other for emotional support and care for each other a great deal. They are in a traditional way, a couple. It is a non-sexual relationship which can illustrate how love and sex may mean different things. To put it boldly, not all sexual relationships are loving, and not all loving relationships are sexual. On the subway, back from a bar-outing and back to Astoria, Edward told me: “He [River] is basically my boyfriend in every way, we just don’t have sex”. However, Edward made it clear to both his friends and me, that it does not mean that he was some “slut” who just slept around with everyone else. His friends nodded their heads in agreement. He does not always want *just* sex. He wanted something more, Edward said, and preferably with someone who has an affective and loving desire towards him, not just in a sexual way, similar to what he shares with River. In a sense, Edward and River are still trying to figure out how to balance their personal relationship with each other, while seeing other guys. Sometimes, they had brought a third person in to their relationship<sup>24</sup>, but it never seemed to work out the way they had imagined. Edward said that it never works out because many guys seem to have a problem with his relationship with River or vice versa: “Like, we’re kinda a package deal,” Edward explained, making it seem like the most obvious thing in the world. Whoever Edward dates, needs to be OK with dating River too.

Clearly, Edward and River are a “traditional” couple in many ways, such as when participating in family gatherings on both sides, co-residency, shared household economy and a deep sense of caring for each other and being cared for. They express romantic feelings for

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<sup>23</sup> “Bottom” is the most common term used by my interlocutors when talking about the “receiving” partner during sex. “Top” is the term used for the active partner.

<sup>24</sup> Three people in relationship was sometimes referred to as a “triad” or a “trouple” amongst my interlocutors.

each other, but they do not have a sexual relationship. They both look for sex partners on dating apps, which is a consensual and mutual agreement between them. They are in the process of balancing a sexual life with others, and a committed partnership with each other, without losing sight of other possibilities of love, for example affection and commitment that might involve a third partner in their life. A similar case was with another interlocutor, Neil. I asked him once how things were with his boyfriend, Grant. “All good, all good,” Neil said. As I also had become more exposed to open relationships and polyamory, I asked if they were “exclusive”. Neil exclaimed a loud “HAH!” and replied: “oh God no, I could never imagine myself in a monogamous relationship. And we are both the same. In fact, we are talking about having a threesome again this weekend”. At that point, many of the things my interlocutors tell me, did not really surprise me anymore, so I just exclaimed in response: “well, now you just have to find the third person”. Neil made sure that finding the third one, was not a problem, *at all*.

To return to what Lindholm argued about romantic love, Edward and River’s example also shows that intimacy, love and sex is not necessarily intertwined. They make a distinction between love and sex, where sex is not quite as intimate as love. Another conversational partner, Sierra, was engaged to be married to another woman, and in a conversation about marriage, she said candidly: “Well, I think that marriage isn’t really about straight or gay people. It’s more about companionship and a way of being together. It’s love, right”. What she said might illustrate how marriage and love has begun to transcend the roles of gender and sexuality, and it is now more about love and caring for each other, regardless of gender identity or sexuality<sup>25</sup>. What my interlocutors found to be the most important, “was living a truth” as River stated, to be free to love and a possibility to live their life as fit for *them*, without being too concerned with what everyone else thought.

In her 2006 book, Elizabeth Povinelli tracks the governance and forms of love, and argues that intimacy and love are governed by [hetero]normative values and morality. She stresses that not only is it so on a national level, but also as a global concept based on gendered differences and assumptions about sexuality (p. 176). The concept of being able to love *freely*, according to Povinelli, is a complicated relationship between a person’s social freedom and

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<sup>25</sup> This is also similar to one of the campaigning arguments in the fight for marriage equality in the U.S. – that marriage and love between same-sex couples is a constitutional right, regardless of gender: #LoveWins! The expression #LoveWins! was the term that was highlighted after the Supreme Court ruling on June 26th, 2015, when the ban on same-sex marriage was lifted nationwide in the U.S. <https://www.hrc.org/blog/live-blog-lovewins> (Accessed 01.02.2019).

society's social boundaries, which marked by "manageable" forms of sociality (p. 192, 197). Edward and River's example illustrates how other alternatives of love is imagined, practiced and thus materialized.

## **THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL**

To reflect more broadly on the topics of intimacy, relationships and same-sex marriage can be fruitful. In many ways, same-sex couples challenge traditional kinship structures, by not representing the assumed need for clear gender roles, or to be able to reproduce and have children the "natural" way. The role of the nuclear family is strong in North American society (see Schneider 1980; and also chapter 3), and has a strong conformist connotation to it for LGBT+ communities. There is seemingly only a specific legitimate way of living together, which is by marriage (complicated by the legal circumstances for domestic partnerships versus a marriage). It entails the basis of a conjugal connectivity where the idea of love or what love is, is closely linked to the institution of marriage and reproduction, and thus implicitly a binary understanding of gender. Tradition and religion are influential in the shaping of US normativity and morality around sex, which is reflected in American politics (see Jakobsen 2003 and Schneider 1980). In this regard, those who do not fall into the traditional categories of sex, sexuality, gender or kinship are thus either obligated to choose between conforming to heteronormative and traditional morality, or alienated, stamped as "outcasts" and potentially "non-citizens"<sup>26</sup> (Berlant and Warner 1998). Other arrangements of love and intimacy, can be lead to a form of social uncertainty for the state (the future becomes more unpredictable), because it escapes the normative regulations and organizations of social life (e.g. through marriage and procreation). Such normative regulations are also widely politically and legally supported by the state.

The institution of marriage has a religious origin and the sacredness of marriage is often enforced and emphasized by various Christian and non-Christian institutions (see Jakobsen 2003). This is not particular to the US, also in Norway this has been highlighted in the media, when Progressive Party politician Sylvi Listhaug firmly stated in a speech from 2009 that

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<sup>26</sup> By "non-citizen", Berlant and Warner (1998) refer to what sort of person is politically valued as a citizen: the heterosexual, heteronormative, monogamous and middle-class, which also is linked to futurity and reproduction of the nation-state.

“marriage is between *men and women*”<sup>27</sup> (original emphasis, my translation). In the same speech, she also gave the family as a social unit, the most central, most important and almost sacred role in society. The same can be argued to be the case for the US, where a classic populist rhetoric would be to claim that the majority should not suffer by granting minorities “special rights”: but what is “special” rights? If a population does not have the same rights, then is it really a democracy? On what basis should not everyone be granted the same rights or opportunities as the “majority”? My argument here is that politics of universal rights might be conforming (as it has for the LGBT+ communities), and limit forms of sociality. Normativity and traditional sociality thus become the foundation of society, the premise for inclusion and possibly also limit how academics conceptualize love, intimacy and partnership.

To expand my argument, I would like to bring attention to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s article “Sex in Public” (1998) and the extended work of that article found in Warner’s book *The Trouble With Normal* (1999). By bringing these works into discussion, I wish to reflect upon how queer culture-making is illustrated in the ethnography I have presented so far. The imagination of NYC as a queer utopia, with its history and impact on social life, has made it possible for LGBT+ people to claim the city as their own. A community that had been suppressed, criminalized and policed, grew stronger through a resistance movement and feelings of solidarity between its community members. This solidarity still lives on in LGBT+ communities. My interlocutors represent parts of the LGBT+ community who demonstrate the *need* to expand and challenge established social boundaries. One could be talking about the emergence of a *queer sociality*.

The term “queer” can be defined in multiple ways. A common definition is to draw a parallel between sexuality and queer as almost synonymous. For the purpose of this thesis, I choose to draw on the use of queer as described by José Esteban Muñoz, which is non-identitarian, focused on process and the future (2009, see also Heckert, Shannon and Willis 2015). Muñoz writes: “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009:1). Further, queerness for Muñoz is that the present is not enough, and that something is missing. This was true for many of my interlocutors as well, who are “living their truth”, as River said, regardless of what other people might think. “Queering the perspective” is a way analysis which allows people to imagine a sociality that lies outside the normative and social imaginaries that are their own. It is a challenge of the established, but also proves that possibilities or other futures are possible,

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<sup>27</sup> Quote from speech, Progressive Party national assembly May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009.



although people might be categorized as “outsiders”. At the same time, I would argue that through acts of repetition, persistence and genuineness, new socialities emerge parallel to existing socialities. In some ways, it shows how agency is deployed “to live another truth” than what is expected, by one’s birth family or society at large.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have continued to argue that LGBT+ communities are being more linked to traditional forms of living through marriage, assisted reproduction, opportunities for adoption and protection from discrimination by law and inclusion in society. The premises of inclusion for LGBT+ people in U.S. society, has left some persons on the outside of the established. As previously argued in chapter two, the commodification of queer social spaces, or social space in general, through capitalism has led to an inclusion of LGBT+ persons to mainstream society and normative way of living through same-sex marriage, reproductive rights and anti-discrimination laws. However, I argue that this has left little room for alternative and *other* acceptable ways of living. As an extension of this, queering the perspective of social life in NYC can offer such alternatives, and may help us to better understand and explore alternative life-trajectories, broken or fulfilled dreams and challenge stereotypes about gender and sexuality. As the example with Kris and River shows, is that love, sex and intimacy is redefined in their own terms, their own perspectives and their own truth. The examples presented in this chapter, is similar to J. Halberstam’s argument in “What’s That Smell?” when Halberstam states that “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (2008:27). Meanwhile, it is also important to keep in mind how structures of identity, patriarchy and class intersect with the task of exploring social life and different ways of being. My interlocutors’ practice and expressions of love, sex and intimacy take many different forms that challenge the normative social organization of marriage, procreation, sexuality and gender. One could argue for emergent *sexualities* with the purpose of conceptualizing sexuality as multiple, fluid, dynamic

and rhizomatic<sup>28</sup> in nature, that in turn can expand our understanding of human sociality to an understanding of emergent socialities.

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<sup>28</sup> Rhizomatic is a term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). It is often used to describe how things (e.g. identities or social forms) evolve in disperse directions without any centralized axis and without a specific end goal or form. It can often be described as multiplicity as is done by Linstead and Pullen's article "Gender as Multiplicity" (2006).

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### **GENDER IDENTITY AND FLUIDITY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

So far, I have discussed sociality in relation to symbolic space, family and sexuality, and love and intimacy. In this chapter I will elaborate on the topic of gender identity. Some of my interlocutors have more radical ways of relating to gender and gender identity. I will show how imagination and practice conjure up a new reality and new understandings, through collective representation, repetition and support. As I mentioned in chapter one, David Graeber writes, “if there is anything essentially human, it’s the capacity to imagine things and bring them into being, [...] and that alienation occurs when we lose control over the process” (Graeber 2009:526). The process of alienation is a form of oppression that arises from living within a doxic field – which is the assumed reality and normativity of social life. Following Graeber, I suggest that by taking control over that creative process, my interlocutors’ practices bring their imagined world into being: a world of another truth and another reality. I begin with an example from a series of educational courses at Possibilities, which I believe highlights and strengthens the argument I am trying to make about emergent socialities, social freedom and identity.

#### **SEX EDUCATION**

Today was the first day of a series of sexual education classes, to inform clients about safer sex practices, and as a preventative tool for sexually transmittable diseases (STD’s). When I arrived, I was met with five clients who were smoking weed and chatting, as per usual. Inside, was a cluster of the regular clients, and some new faces. Emma, the director, had put up a projector, so that the invited health worker could show her PowerPoint slides. The chairs were lined up in a half-circle over three rows, facing the wall where the projector was aimed towards. The wall had cracks on it, running down from the ceiling

and paint had started to peel off. I sat down next to Zayyid who had saved a seat for me. In the corner of my eye I saw Adrienne, a young African American transwoman, strutting confidently towards Zayyid and I. Adrienne has a tall figure, broad shoulders with well-defined deltoids that she proudly shows off when wearing cropped tank-tops. Her long, well-groomed nails are always painted in bright colors, and today they were pink. Her dark, doe eyes are never in need of any make-up, as they capture the room wherever she is. She sat down next to us, crossed her legs and greeted us: “how we doin’ girlfriends?” Shortly after, the health worker started talking. The health worker made a lengthy introduction about who she was, what she does and the plan for the lessons in the coming weeks. That day was the first lecture, in which she was going to talk about the male and female anatomies and reproductive systems. On the wall, the PowerPoint slide said, in big, bold letters: “Reproductive Health”. The health worker had to talk very loud, as the clients could not stop talking over her and giggling. It took about ten minutes before they calmed down, at least for a brief moment.

After some time of mind-blowingly boring information about the six-week course of reproductive health, the PowerPoint slide showed a basic illustrated picture of a penis. Adrienne exclaimed loudly: “That’s a small ass dick yo’. Even *my* dick is bigger”. Everyone burst out laughing, and it took another four-five minutes for the clients to settle down so the health worker could continue: “Well, every penis is different,” she said, trying to be pragmatic and eager to move on. Adrienne’s comment seemed to linger in the room, and some of the people put out their hands to simulate a measurement of Adrienne’s penis. Later, towards the end of the male anatomy section, the health worker started talking about the internal anatomy. She pointed to the illustration on the PowerPoint which said “prostate” amongst other things, and she asked if anyone knew what this was. One of the young men said: “yeah, that’s what makes me moan during sex” followed by another client saying, “amen sister” and an elongated “yeah boy” from the other side of the room. Most of the clients at Possibilities are self-identifying transwomen and gay men, and the comment made quite the “hit” amongst the clients. Zayyid, who liked to take on the smart-guy role in the group, took the job of explaining: “well, it’s basically a tiny gland right inside the anus. It’s where a guy can get an anal orgasm. And it’s actually pretty good,” he said while he shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Although Emma and the health worker tried to calm them down, everyone made a big fuss at this point. There was shouting, screaming and laughing. Adrienne who had made the comment about her penis earlier, yelled to a guy sitting across the room: “Hey

yo! Would you come and tickle my prostate,” while making a tickle-gesture with her index finger and mischievous smile wrapped across her face. When the intense volume of over thirty people’s voices shouting across the room had quieted down, the health worker tried to proceed with the lesson. Moving onward, she started to talk about the female reproductive system, and put up an illustration of a vagina. Some clients exclaimed things such as “gross”, “meat monster”, “untouchable” and simply just a loud “nope” followed by arms crossing, heads shaking or index fingers waving side to side. Adrienne said: “my vagina *definitely* does not look like *that!*”.

When the health worker asked: “this is the hymen. Does anyone know what that is”, two of the lesbian girls, one of which always brought her daughter to meetings, tried to answer despite the many other conversations that were going on in the room: Tara, who always brought her daughter, raised her hand and answered that the hymen was “the virginity”, some sort of membrane partially covering the vaginal opening which was the cause for bleeding when girls have sex for the first time. The health worker nodded. One of the other transwomen, Farah, exclaimed over the chattering that not every girl has an intact hymen, as she herself never did. The health worker looked confused and answered that only *girls* had this thin membrane. Farah answered fiercely: “I *am* a girl”. The health worker corrected herself, saying that only female *bodied* persons, had a hymen. Farah stood up, stroke her hands down her body, turned around and showing her ass to the health worker while explaining that *she* had a woman’s body. The other clients verbally agreed, some raised their hands snapping their fingers whilst other smacked their hands together, laughed while shouting “yaaass guuur!” (excessive use of vowels to mark the pronounced elongation of the words). In the back of the room I could see the director Emma sitting with a smirk smile. The lesson continued.

The course in “reproductive health” continued the following six weeks. I noted how the course was named “reproductive health”, as if sex is unambiguously linked to reproduction. What is also striking about the above example is how my interlocutors express and relate to gender. It certainly challenges a binary understanding of gender, but also the role of gender in social and biological bodies. For example: when Adrienne first said that her penis was bigger than the illustration and later made a comment about her vagina. Or when Farah, with her deep voice, claims to never have had a hymen and then proudly touches her body in front of everyone. The only confusion in these statements appeared to be with the health worker, who just rolled her eyes in frustration with the crowd she was teaching. There was almost like a consensus amongst

the client at Possibilities for accepting and supporting each other. It was some form of solidarity between them. Later, such narratives were repeated amongst my interlocutors at Possibilities, thus creating new acceptable ways of “being gender”. For my interlocutors, the boundaries between social and biological bodies become blurred and fluid. On the other hand, perhaps such a boundary would be too presumptuous because that would presuppose an *a priori* understanding of gender.

## **SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL BODIES**

The debate surrounding the social and the biological, culture versus nature, has long been contentious when concerning gender (see Ortner and Whitehead 1989). Social anthropology is one of the academic disciplines that have proven how the biomedical, Western binary division between the male and female is not universal. Anthropology has been leading on the frontier of questioning and challenging biological essentialism and determinism. An example could be in Native American societies.

The *berdache* in Native American societies were sometimes described to hold a sacred role in their respective communities, and may illustrate a parallel to my example from the sexual education course at Possibilities. The *berdache*'s were acknowledged by their communities, because of their ability to “swap” genders in different contexts, or take on differently gendered roles (Ortner and Whitehead 1994). But historical accounts of Native American gender-fluidity have sometimes been violent. As gender studies professor Scott Lauria Morgenson mentions: “on reportedly finding [about forty indigenous men] dressed in women’s apparel or living in sexual relationships, Balboa [a Spanish *conquistador* and explorer] threw them out to be eaten alive by his dogs” (Morgensen 2011:36). Transgressions of gendered and sexual “nature” became linked to savagery or “primitivism” by the first Christians, and the category of *berdache* was imposed to describe Native American homosexuality by early settlers in America. The term *berdache* arose from the Arabic expression *bardaj* [slave] “[...] first to condemn Middle Eastern and Muslim men as racial enemies of Christian civilization, by linking them to the creation of *berdache*, [men who] “kept boys” or “boy slaves” whose sex was said to have been altered by immoral male desire” (Morgensen 2011:36). After being subject to criticism, the

term berdache, widely used by anthropologists, was replaced by the more accepted term “two-spirit”<sup>29</sup>.

There is also a concern with the approach to the two-spirit term, which is that the analytical lens has been from a “Western” discourse and assumption about gender. The assumption about gender, is often binary, or dualist, still accounting for *two* genders. Ethnographic descriptions of two-spirit persons across the world, is often based on (Western) stereotypical performances of gender, and the division of labor in society (Ortner and Whitehead 1994:86-88). It can be argued that the gender binary (and heterosexuality) is constructed in compliance with capitalism. Two-spirit persons’ roles were devalued and diminished during colonization, and furthermore with the transformation of U.S. society to a capitalist economic system (see Povinelli 2006). As I have mentioned throughout this thesis, the gender binary and heterosexuality is constructed to ensure the continuous reproduction of the economy and the state by the continuous reproduction of people, thus there is also a need to control and govern the populations’ sexual life (Povinelli 2006:192, 197; see also Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). I argue that such a heteronormative assumption of gender, is largely incorporated in the social life in North American society, thus making gender variance an “anomaly”. In turn, this would also explain the heated public discussions about transgender persons. The transgender term can be problematic, because it presupposes gender as binary (for example a *man* identifying as *woman*, is a transwoman). Although both Adrienne and Farah identify as transwomen, they also evoke and talk about their male bodies. In Linstead’s and Pullen’s words, gender can, in other words, “be characterized as a multi-dimensional category of personhood encompassing a distinct pattern of social and cultural differences” (2006:1301). Further, they argue that anthropologists and historians have uncovered

that the essential fluidity of gender and sexuality may be labelled in whatever ways a society finds useful, [...], and [...] that masculinity and femininity as labels refers to characteristics which may exist side by side and simultaneously in bodies which may be inscribed as either male or female. (Linstead and Pullen 2006:1291)

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<sup>29</sup> The “two-spirit” term was officially affirmed by participants at the Third Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg, 1990.  
[https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/c2c/docs/2017\\_10\\_C2C\\_Program\\_PR.pdf](https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/c2c/docs/2017_10_C2C_Program_PR.pdf) [Loaded: 15.05.2019]

As I believe my empirical observations describe, Adrienne and Farah somewhat mirror the quote from Linstead and Pullen above. According to Linstead and Pullen, masculinity and femininity exists side by side and at the same time, in *one* body. By looking towards gender as fluidity then, we can begin to move beyond binaries of gender.

Following up that argument, anthropologists have documented how the gender binary does not reflect the lived human experience “yet it powerfully constrains social life and possibility, often violently” (Linstead and Pullen 2006:1301). What my interlocutors show us is that they have been “victims” of such constraints, and alienated from their original communities. Especially my interlocutors from Possibilities who were cast out of their homes and rejected by their families. As I mentioned in chapter three, some of my other interlocutors were put in therapy against their will, and/or had strenuous relationships with their birth families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Now, I will discuss how gender and transgressions of gender can be institutionalized to socially and culturally acceptable forms.

## BECOMING GENDER

Not unlike the two-spirit person described amongst Native Americans, anthropologist Unni Wikan uncovered institutionalized forms of transsexualism in Oman (1977). However, these are not the same. The *xanith* Wikan describes from Oman, is analyzed from a sexual perspective, where she describes the *xanith*'s as homosexual prostitutes, the receiving partner during sexual intercourse, and therefore also socially recognized as women (Wikan 1977:304): “It is the sexual act, not the sexual organs, which is fundamentally constitutive of gender” (1977:309). Wikan also argues that

[t]he transsexual is treated *as if* he were a woman; for many critical purposes he is classified with women; but he is not allowed to become completely assimilated to the category by wearing female dress. This is not because he is anatomically a male, but because he is sociologically something which no Omani woman should be: a prostitute (1977:310).

Subsequently, Wikan argues that *xanith*'s serve as “sexual relief” from frustrated single men and satisfying their “biological drive”, because sexual release is a part of man's nature (1977:314-315). Although the Omani *xanith* is (mostly) socially recognized as women, they can reclaim their status as men by proving his manhood through marriage. By consummation of the marriage, i.e., through sexual intercourse with a woman, the *xanith* reclaims his status as a man if he can hand over a bloodstained handkerchief after the wedding night, as proof of his



own and the woman's honor.

Although Wikan accounts for the *xanith* as someone who moves between the categories of man and woman, as something in between, the *xanith* is ultimately either man or woman – they cannot stay *xanith* forever, and if they do not marry during their lifetime, they become socially recognized as old men, *agōz* (Wikan 1977:309). It remains an institutionalized form of gender variance, supported and sanctioned by social norms and society.

These accounts of *xanith* is still problematic because the binary understanding of gender is still present. The *xanith* is still either *man* or *woman*. Like two-spirit persons, the *xanith* inhabits what is considered both male and female qualities, and both two-spirit persons and *xanith*'s are categorized and understood through a binary concept of gender. What remains to be explored further, is the freedom of gender, where the category of gender also reflects the mundane practices of people. Such an approach should entail thinking about gender as a form of fluidity and multiplicity, detached from biological sex, sexual acts and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity.

## BEING AND BECOMING

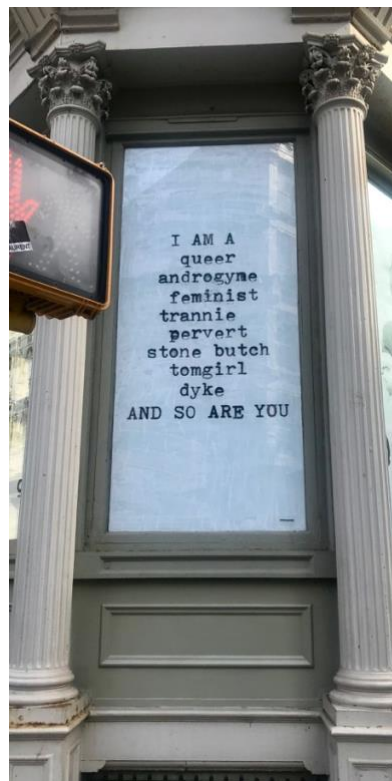
To continue the topic of practices and categories, I will now elaborate on the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. Identity can be defined in many ways, but Richard Jenkins defines it as: “the human capacity to – rooted in language – to know ‘who’s who’. This involves knowing who we are, who others are, them knowing who we are [...] and so on” (Jenkins 2014:6). Identity is a process that is dialectical, and dependent on classifications or categories (p.7). Regarding classifications and categories, identity can be ascribed onto bodies, based on the assumptions of what is perceived or what is “normal” to assume. This process is what Michel Foucault refers to as a disciplinary power or subjectification (Foucault 1970, cited in Jenkins 2014:109). Such an approach to identity is not only rooted in language as Jenkins suggests, and does not necessarily reflect a person's inner truth. For example, one of my interlocutors, Nasir, told me he used to be a lot more feminine: “Like, people literally used to confuse me for a girl. I'm not the biggest guy around and had a way of walking and dressing myself... So, people often turned their head when they walked past me on the street”. He continued: “I also used to wear high heels and make-up a lot. Like, every day almost. It was the time where I sort of embraced my femininity”. He described his style as a lot more androgynous, and he had longer

hair. Nasir continued, it was never his intention to create some sort of gender confusion about his own gender, but he simply just felt like dressing the way he did: he was the way he was, but a man nonetheless. Further, he explained that he always felt like a guy, a guy who liked to wear high heels and make-up. Now, he dressed more “basic”. He was still fashionable in his opinion, but did not wear high heels or women’s clothing anymore. I asked Nasir if it was some sort of drag performance or cross-dressing. He looked at me as if it was the silliest question in the world. Nasir said that it was simply his style at the time. It had nothing to do with him wanting to be a woman, or to be *womanlike*.

Another example related to this topic is from when I accompanied one of my interlocutors, Brian, a self-identifying transman, to a transgender support group meeting in Brooklyn. Brian greeted many of the people with hugs, so it was obvious it was a regular group of people that attended the weekly meeting. Brian introduced me as “his stalker”, who took notes and asked “obvious” questions about his life. His friends laughed, and we shook hands before grabbing a cup of coffee and entering the meeting room. As the meeting began, we had to introduce ourselves by name, and our preferred gender pronouns. This was standard procedure in most group meetings I had been to. Many of the transgender persons in the meeting presented their preferred gender pronouns as either “he/him” or “she/her”. A few presented themselves with “they/them” (singular form), as I experienced many do when they do not conform or identify with neither male or female. An older person, maybe in their (singular) 60’s, struggled to choose between “she/her” or “they/them”. After some back and forth, they (singular) said: “well, I guess I’m still questioning”. Another person presented themselves by their name and then said: “I don’t really give a fuck about the pronouns”. The rest of the group seemed a little surprised, and the convener explained that it would be useful if the person could choose pronouns, so that everyone could be respectful when addressing each other during the meeting. The person just answered that they could just refer to the name the person presented. The group could respect that, and the meeting continued.

The latter example illustrates how the latter two persons I mention, highlights two arguments. The first, illustrate how gender identity can be fluid and changeable. It does not have to be static. Second, the persons who did not want to present gender pronouns, can be seen as a subtle act of resistance to the obsession of categorizing gender. Although the practice of presenting one’s gender pronouns is so that everyone can be respectful when talking with each other, and not to assume anyone’s gender, it can also be viewed as an act of difference, as being different, but still categorizing in a way. Brian, who I accompanied, explained that people have

a tendency to “misgender”<sup>30</sup> him, which really annoyed him. He did not imply that people misgendered him intentionally, but attributed misgendering to “ignorance”. In this way, the practice of presenting oneself with preferred gender pronouns is to make it easier to be respectful and address someone with correct pronouns. On the other hand, the practice illustrates the *need* to do so, because most people in the U.S. have assumptions about gender, gender stereotypes, gendered bodies and physical appearance.



*Photo 3: NYC is a place where more radical social forms are present, both socially, but also creatively in street art. Such as this example.*

## **SUMMARY**

Identities as I have illustrated in this chapter, with focus on gender, are problematic categories to relate to. First, employing identity as an analytical point of departure often follows with certain assumptions about the identity in question. As the examples with both Adrienne and

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<sup>30</sup> To “misgender” someone means to address someone with a gender pronoun that they do not identify with. E.g. a transwoman identifying as “she/her” or “they/them”, being addressed as “he/him”.

Farah illustrate, their male- and female-bodied comments, female clothing and deep voices seemed to confuse the health worker who gave the lecture. The academic discussion of gender in anthropology is often detached from biological sex, as is discussed by Sherry Ortner (1972, see also Ortner and Whitehead 1994). Social anthropologists may have been too concerned with gender, the discussion of masculinity and femininity and the multiple ways gender is culturally constructed, *still* categorized in relation to people's male and female bodies. This form of categorization is exemplified by the term transgender. Subsequently, it limits the ways gender can be understood apart from the male or female body, as seen in the example of how anthropologists have conceptualized two-spirit or the berdache as *gender-crossing*: as a person who is crossing something that is presumed as a given gendered truth (biological body) to begin with.

In this chapter, I have argued that expressions of other truths about gender becomes manifested in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. The practices of talking about sex, about the body, gender identity and gender pronouns, is in contrast with the normativity in society. In a sense, my interlocutors take their freedom, and redefine what gender means to them, wreaking havoc at the categories of man, woman, the masculine and the feminine. Although anthropologists have made accounts of gender variance in "other" societies, gender variance in Western societies is often categorized as anomalies or even deviance. Also, gender variance or gender-crossing is often continuously analyzed with an underlying understanding of gender as a binary, between the male and the female. There seems to be little room for gender variance in Western societies, which may be to a lacking focus on practice rather than categorization in academic disciplines. Gender and sexuality is so fundamentally intertwined and part of a dominant, heteronormative structure, whose established position alienates those who fall outside any given category. However, as shown in this chapter, these processes of alienation are overcome by people taking charge of their own creative process, and create new, possible alternatives. It is because of the limits of social freedom in society that alienation occurs. Gender is never a static category, and is continuously recreated and in a state of becoming as Linstead and Pullen suggest (2006). Gender is emergent, and the emergence of other possibilities also creates new social forms and ways of understanding the person. My interlocutors bring their imagined world - their own truth - into being, and through a practice of repetition, solidarity, acceptance and hope, they create new normativities and socialities.

# CONCLUSION

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## SOCIAL FREEDOM AND EMERGENT SOCIALITIES

### EMERGENT SOCIALITIES

In the first chapter of this thesis I stated that I will argue that my interlocutors' reality and everyday lives create new forms of social relationships and intimate realities, which I have called "emergent socialities". "Emergent socialities" combines Raymond Williams' concept of "emergence" (1977) and Henrietta Moore and Nicholas Long's (2012) definition of "sociality". Sociality is understood as a dynamic interaction between humans who are engaging and getting to know their social world, and their purpose and meaning within it (Moore and Long 2012:41). Emergence implies that the creation of socialities is a continuous process, always in the making.

In chapter two, I argued that the aims and goals the of mainstream LGBT+ social movement was to protect and further the inclusion of LGBT+ persons (although mostly cisgendered gay men and lesbian women). I showed that a premise for inclusion of LGBT+ persons in U.S. society was that they conformed to established social forms. With LGBT+ persons conforming to normative society, focusing on the role of family, marriage and tradition, the idea of "normal" was further strengthened and simultaneously restricting other possible social forms. In this chapter, I also showed that my interlocutors attached immense importance to NYC as a cultural site and therefore coming to NYC, hoping for some sort of utopia to become real, and how the mnemonic significance of the city creates a community of belonging. Because they had been rejected by their birth families or original communities or feared being so, LGBT+ identified people came from near and far to live a life in NYC where they could form other kinds of relationships and be part of other non-normative forms of socialities. Through ethnographic examples, I showed that although the hopes and dreams about a better life are not fulfilled for everyone (and maybe never will be), there was still hope for a better future among my interlocutors like Zayyid.

In chapter three, I explored further the role of the family, and how the traditional nuclear family still holds a prominent position in U.S. society. I mentioned how the idea of the family is both a moral and cultural value, closely linked to the reproduction of the nation and traditional

gender roles and heterosexuality. As a moral and cultural value, the social organization and imagination of the nuclear family, can result in alienation of persons who do not conform to the normative regulations of gender or sexual orientation. I described how some of my interlocutors experienced “coming out” as difficult and challenging, because of the expectations from their biological families. Coming out was still a cathartic moment, because it allowed them to be their true self. Further, I argued that the ways my interlocutors understand and practice “family” are sort of voluntary affiliations which are based on solidarity, trust and sharing similar experiences of rejection from biological family. New forms of family-making are taking place amongst my interlocutors, where being cared for, and caring for others are at the core of what “family” means.

Then, in chapter four, I described how my interlocutors’ intimate relationships differ from the established and expected social norms. Marriage and committed, monogamous relationships seem to be “normal”, and I discussed how some of my interlocutors challenge monogamy as the only legitimate social form of love. Drawing on Elizabeth Povinelli’s argument that love and intimacy are predominantly governed by heteronormative values and morality (2006), I argued that alternative forms of love and intimacy can cause some sort of alienation from the established society. Through an empirical case, I demonstrated that my interlocutors redefine partnership, love and intimacy. The concept of being able to love *freely*, according to Povinelli, is a complicated relationship between a person’s social freedom and society’s social boundaries. What my interlocutors found to be the most important, “was living a truth”, to be free to love and a possibility to live their life as fit for *them*, without being too concerned with what everyone else thought. I also argued that love, sex and intimacy need to be detached from gender and sexuality. Hence, chapter four illustrates how other alternatives of love is imagined and practiced, and as a part an ongoing process of social change and emergent socialities.

Finally, in chapter five, I discussed how gender identity can be a contested category. The various expressions of gender some of my interlocutors practice and talk about can be somewhat radical and challenge established forms of gender identity. I argued, in the words of David Graeber (2008), that alienation occurs when humans lose control over their own creative process and when the possibility to hope and desire freely is being taken away by the rule of the established and society’s expectations. Lastly, I argued that categories, such as gender, are limiting the ways of thinking about the human. The personal truths, are not necessarily represented by the established exterior and collective truths.

## A PRACTICE OF HOPE TOWARD DIFFERENT FUTURES

Society can produce alienation, but my interlocutors show how they reclaim control over the creative process in their lives, and reshape their own reality (see Graeber 2008:526). It is the power of social expectations that creates alienation, social boundaries and delegitimizes other possible social forms. Social freedom is bounded by limits of traditional social organization - which is both normative, heterosexual and what I have referred to as “the established” and social expectations. In some ways, my interlocutors seek a form of acceptance and radical pluralism, where the terms of inclusion are based on tolerance, multiple ways of being and the enactments of hopes that shape and create emergent socialities. They imagine a social life outside the normative which also becomes actualized through practice. Through my ethnographic cases, I showed how my interlocutors reclaim their own creative process, and that new socialities, and in turn normativities, become real through collective recognition of personal truths. By focusing on the agency and alternative practices of persons such as my interlocutors, anthropologists can begin to reimagine the human.

Instead of conforming to politically and socially acceptable lifestyles, I argue that my interlocutors can imagine other possibilities outside of traditional sociality. This approach puts human agency first in the analysis (see Graeber 2008), and through the practice and hope of other alternatives, my interlocutors’ practices create new social forms and socialities. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued

“the seemingly subtle though socially significant normative shift that begins with struggles aimed at freeing persons from some *specifiable forms of social organization or social injustice* within a field of tactical power but ends with a devotion to freedom as a radical and ultimate break *from all social conditions/horizons*” (Povinelli 2006:187).

To specify, I argue that through a practice of hope, my interlocutors seek to free themselves from specifiable forms of social organization, because of the alienation they have experienced. My interlocutors have experienced different forms of rejection because of their sexual difference or non-normative life-style, some more dramatically than others. Even though they are still marked by rejection in the past, coming to NYC has created a hope for a better life. Hope is what actualizes a break from established social conditions, and reorient their reality to a new future. The hope toward a differently imagined future is what creates and drives the process of emergent socialities that I have discussed. In following Pelkmans’ argument that hope is an emotion and action guided towards the future (2017:178), I argue that the emergent

socialities my interlocutors create have a future horizon. Whereas Pelkmans argue that hope becomes concretized through acts of praying, protest and similar, I argue that hope becomes concretized through acts of voluntary affiliation, alternative forms of love, intimacy and radical expressions of gender identity. This hope, is oriented towards a future that emphasizes the social freedom of humans, free of alienation and multiple social forms that lie outside the normativity of “the established”. When alienation occurs, hope arises, in the margins of society and with its transformative potential, create new emergent socialities.



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