The Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name: McCarthyism and Its Legacy

At work you completely avoided people. If you did make friends, you had to be sure never to bring them to your home. Never to tell them who and what you really were. We were all terrified in those days. Lyn on New York in the 1950s

When I was arrested and being thrown out of the military, the order went out: don’t anybody speak to this woman, and for those three long months, almost nobody did; the dayroom, when I entered it, fell silent til I had gone; they were afraid, they knew the wind would blow them over the rail, the cops would come, the water would run into their lungs. Everything I touched was spoiled. They were my lovers, those women, but nobody had taught us to swim. I drowned. I took 3 or 4 others down When I signed the confession of what we had done together.

No one will ever speak to me again.

— Judy Grahn on the military in the 1950s, “A Woman Is Talking to Death”

The social upheaval occasioned by the war was more than many Americans could bear. The years after became an age of authority, in the hope that authority would set the country back in balance. The pronouncements of those in charge, not only in the medical profession but in government as well, were virtually sacrosanct. There was little challenge to their notion that “extreme threats,” such as the encroachments of the Soviets, required extreme solutions to weed out those who did not accept the reigning views. A breaking point in American rationality, justice, and common decency ensued. If political conformity was essential to national security, sexual conformity came to be considered, by some mystifying twist of logic by those in authority, as no less essential. In a decade of reaction, while women were sent back to the home, dissidents of every kind were deprived of their livelihoods and even packed off to jail.

Twentieth-century American witch-hunts began not long after the war. Those accused of Communism were their first target, but persecution quickly spread to other unpopular groups. Despite figures that Alfred Kinsey gathered during these years, which showed that 50 percent of American men and 28 percent of American women had what could be
considered “homosexual tendencies” (that is, homoerotic interest in the same sex at some point in their adult lives), the statistical normality of same-sex love was now denied more fiercely than ever. The “homosexual” became a particular target of persecution in America. He or she presented an uncomfortable challenge to the mood that longed for obedience to an illusion of uncomplicated “morality.” Even Kinsey was suspected of being a subversive, merely because he said that so many people in his studies admitted to same-sex attractions and experiences. Dr. Edmund Bergler angrily wrote in the Psychiatric Quarterly about Kinsey's statistics on widespread homosexuality in America that Kinsey had created a “myth of a new national disease.” That “myth” would be “politically and propagandistically used against the United States abroad, stigmatizing the nation as a whole in a whisper campaign.” Homosexuality was a detriment to the country’s image and standing in the world. As far as those who spoke for mid-twentieth-century heterosexual America were concerned, homosexuality was a love that had better not dare speak its name. The heterosexual majority tyrannized. As one writer expressed it in 1951, if homosexuality was condemned by most people in a society, then loyalty to the society demanded that good citizens support condemnation of homosexuality and the laws against it.¹

By commonly accepted (though statistically erroneous) definition, the demarcation that separated “homosexual” from “heterosexual” was now more clear than ever. Between 1947 and 1950, 4,954 men and women were dismissed from the armed forces and civilian agencies for being homosexual. In 1950, the persecution escalated. Sen. Joseph McCarthy, whose barbarous tactics set the mood of the era, began by attracting attention as a Communist witch-hunter but soon saw an opportunity to broaden his field. Ironically, McCarthy’s two aides were flamboyantly homosexual, even fliting about Europe as an “item,” but that did not stop him from charging the State Department with knowingly harboring homosexuals and thereby placing the nation’s security at risk.²

The Republicans decided to make political hay out of the issue. Republican National Chairman Guy George Gabrielson wrote in the official party newsletter early in 1950 that “perhaps as dangerous as the actual communists are the sexual perverts who have infiltrated our government in recent years.” By April of that year ninety-one homosexuals were fired from the State Department alone. In May 1950, New York Republican Governor Dewey accused President Truman and the Democrats of tolerating not only spies and traitors in government service, but also sexual perverts. Soon after, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee joined the attacks, recommending that homosexuals be dismissed from government jobs since they were poor security risks because of their vulnerability to blackmail.³ Just as the number of women who dared to live as lesbians was increasing during the postwar years, their persecution was increasing as well—not just because of personal prejudices against them, but as a result of national policy.

Despite the general pretense, the concern about homosexuals in government was not primarily that they constituted a security risk because they were vulnerable to blackmail: that could have been obviated if the government simply declared that no one was to be fired on the ground of homosexuality. The concern was actually caused by discomfort with whatever was different. In fact, the Senate subcommittee admitted that there were two reasons why homosexuals should not be employed in government; that homosexuals were a security risk was only the second reason. The first was that “they are generally unsuitable,” which was explained to mean that homosexuality “is so contrary to the normal accepted standards of social behavior that persons who engage in such activity are looked upon as outcasts by society in general.” Official policy therefore became to persecute “outcasts.” That the matter of security risk was only of secondary interest is demonstrated through the committee’s recommendation that homosexuals be dismissed not only from the State Department, the military, and Congress, but also from occupations such as caretaker at the Botanical Gardens.⁴
One woman who was affected by the Senate Subcommittee recommendation recalls that she was fired in 1951 from a job that had absolutely nothing to do with “national security.” She had been doing social relief work in Germany for a private agency. Like all organizations operating in occupied territory, the agency had to be approved by the State Department and was subject to all its regulations. Through a “security check” of her past, it was discovered that not only had this woman gone to a psychotherapist in the 1940s, but she had discussed lesbianism with him. Though she had had no lesbian experiences since she took the job in Germany and was even trying to live a heterosexual life, she was nevertheless found undesirable because of her “homosexual tendencies.” She had no recourse against her accusers. As she later observed of U.S. government tactics, “to be accused is to be guilty.”

The Senate also justified the government policy of harassment of homosexuals by claiming that they must be fired from government jobs because of the “lack of emotional stability which is found in most sex perverts and the weakness of their moral fiber.” The cross-fertilization of ideas between government and the medical establishment was apparent. Both were bent on sexual conformity, and neither accepted any responsibility for establishing the truth of their allegations against homosexuals. Homosexuals were condemned by the most obvious of begged questions: they were by definition perverts, which meant that they were emotionally unstable and their moral fiber was weak.

While homosexual men bore the brunt of sexual witch-hunting by the government, women who loved women and who dared to live lesbian lifestyles became more than incidental victims. Although statistically they lost fewer jobs than their male counterparts since there were fewer women than men employed by the government, lesbians realized that for the public “homosexual” was a scare-term: it was horrifying whether it referred to men or women. Lesbians believed, with plenty of justification, that whatever opprobrium was expressed for gay males would apply to them also and their livelihood and community standing would be just as endangered if their secret were known.

By 1951, federal agencies were using lie detectors in loyalty investigations of men and women in supposedly “sensitive” government jobs to determine whether they were either Communists or homosexuals. It was clearly the intent of the Senate, whose recommendations justified such measures, to include lesbians among those that were to be dismissed from government jobs, since the report on which the recommendation was based pointedly specified that 4 percent of the female population in the United States was lesbian. Republican floor leader of the Senate Kenneth Wherry, who was the coauthor of that report, declared that he was on a “crusade to harry every last pervert from the Federal Government services.” Under the influence of such thinking, the head of the Washington, D.C., Vice Squad requested increased appropriations, not only to hunt down male homosexuals but also to establish a “lesbian squad” to “route out the females.” Senator Wherry explained, with some confusion, the rationale for such actions to the New York Post:

You can’t hardly separate homosexuals from subversives.... Mind you, I don’t say every homosexual is a subversive, and I don’t say every subversive is a homosexual. But [people] of low morality are a menace in the government, whatever [they are], and they are all tied up together.

Such convictions about the connections between leftists and homosexuals were apparent in the nature of the interrogation that women who were under suspicion were forced to undergo. M.K., who held a high ranking civil service job in Albany, New York, tells of having been summoned to New York City by the U. S. Civil Service Commission in 1954 and being put through a four day ordeal. For the first three days she was confronted with
“evidence” of her communist leanings, such as having danced with a (male) U.S.S.R. liaison officer in Seoul, Korea, when she served there a few years earlier, and having applied to visit a North Korean university. On the fourth day she was asked directly, “Are you a homosexual?” After her denial, she was informed that the government had unearthed evidence that she had lived with several women in the past and had gone overseas with one. With no better proof against her she was barred from federal government employment “for security reasons, on the grounds of moral turpitude.”

“Are You or Have You Ever Been a Member of a Lesbian Relationship?”

The Senate Subcommittee report led finally to an Executive Order signed by President Eisenhower as one of his first acts in office. That Order mandated the investigation for homosexuality not only of persons in “sensitive” positions, but of any government employee and of all new applicants for positions. It permitted no judicial review. An employee who felt she was dismissed unfairly would have no recourse beyond her department. She could be fired merely on the basis of anonymous accusations. Homosexuals in state and local government jobs were harassed as well. Lesbians were particularly affected. Since so few women could become doctors or lawyers or business leaders during the 1950s, because professional schools by now generally discouraged females, middle-class lesbians were forced into those professions that were more available to them as women. They made careers in teaching and social work—government jobs in which, by virtue of sexual orientation, a lesbian broke the law every day she came to work, regardless of how good an employee she was.

Psychoanalysts and the government had done such a thorough job in promoting the irrational fear of homosexuality that even groups that should have seen themselves as allies because they were persecuted in the same way, and should have wanted to form a coalition to fight injustice, denounced homosexuals. Instead of banding together with homosexuals—as reactionaries accused them of doing—leftists were almost as bad in their homophobia as the government. Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde says that when in 1953 she worked on a committee to free Julius and Ethel Rosenberg she realized that the one taboo among those socially liberated people remained homosexuality:

I could imagine these comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, “Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?”

To leftists, homosexuality was reason for suspicion and shunning not only because they deemed it—through myth and prejudice equaled only by the right—“bourgeois and reactionary,” but also because it made an individual more susceptible to the FBI.

Not even the bravest bastion of liberalism, the American Civil Liberties Union, dared to offer a strong defense on the lesbian’s behalf during those years. As astonishing as it may be in retrospect, the ACLU National Board of Directors affirmed in January 1957 that “homosexuality is a valid consideration in evaluating the security risk factor in sensitive positions” and made clear that unless it was an issue of entrapment or denial of due process, the ACLU was not going to fight battles on the side of homosexuals: “It is not within the province of the Union to evaluate the social validity of the laws aimed at the suppression or elimination of homosexuals,” the Union declared. Although it took a liberal stand on all other issues, it literally advised lesbians that the best thing they could do would be to “abandon” their lesbianism and become heterosexual.

Although Sen. Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate in 1954 for his overly zealous witch-hunting, the spirit he helped establish lived on through that decade and into
the next. Homosexuals in all walks of life, not just those who worked for the government, were hunted down. Not even young college students were safe. In 1955 the dean and assistant dean of students at UCLA published an article in the journal *School and Society* lamenting the “attraction of colleges, both public and private, for overt, hardened homosexuals” and recommending that all “sexually deviate” students be routed out of colleges if they were unwilling to undergo psychiatric treatment to change their sexual orientation. Students entering state supported universities were obliged to take a battery of tests in which thinly veiled questions on sexual preference appeared over and over. What the authorities expected such tests to reveal is unimaginable, since homosexuals who were smart enough to get into those institutions were surely smart enough to realize that they must dissemble. The 1950s mandated that women learn to lead a double existence if they wanted to live as lesbians and yet maintain the advantages of middle-class American life such as pursuing higher education and the careers to which it led. As one midwestern woman recalls, “If anyone ever asked if you were a lesbian you knew that you needed to deny it to your dying breath.” They understood that if they could not develop the skill of hiding, if they were not wily enough to answer “no” to any form of the question “Are you or have you ever been …,” they would not survive as social beings.

The popular press saw nothing objectionable in the ubiquitous harassment of homosexuals. In fact, stories of lesbian conspiracies and the dangers posed by those who were sexually “abnormal” were treated with great relish. In their scandalous *Washington Confidential*, for example, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer announced that psychologists and sociologists who had “made a study of the problem” in the D.C. area believed “there are at least twice as many Sapphic lovers as fairies” and reeled off the names of several bars where lesbians sported with homosexual men, observing “all queers are in rapport with all other queers.”

Mass circulation magazines presented homosexuality as a chief cause of American ills in articles with titles such as “New Moral Menace to Our Youth,” in which same-sex love was said to lead to “drug addiction, burglary, sadism, and even murder.” Lesbians were presented in those magazines as “preying” on innocent “victims.” As *Jet*, a black magazine, characterized the lesbian in 1954, “If she so much as gets one foot into a good woman’s home with the intention of seducing her, she will leave no stone unturned ... and eventually destroy her life for good.”

Such sensationalism was not limited to *National Enquirer*-type trash literature. For instance, *Human Events*, a weekly Washington newsletter that purported a readership of “40,000 business and professional leaders,” declared, echoing the insanity of Senator Wherry, that homosexuals must be hunted down and purged because “by the very nature of their vice they belong to a sinister, mysterious, and efficient International, [and] members of one conspiracy are prone to join another conspiracy.”

If a magazine attempted to present homosexuality in a better light it was subject to censorship. In 1954 when the newly established homophile magazine *One* published a short story about a woman choosing to become a lesbian, “Sappho Remembered,” the Postmaster General of Los Angeles confiscated all copies of the issue that had been mailed and demanded that the publisher prove that the story was not “obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy.” With blatantly homophobic reasoning, the federal district court upheld the Postmaster General’s decision, arguing about “Sappho Remembered”:

This article is nothing more than cheap pornography calculated to promote lesbianism. It falls far short of dealing with homosexuality from a scientific, historic, or critical point of view .... An article may be vulgar, offensive and indecent even though not regarded as such by a particular
group... because their own social or moral standards are far below those of the general community.... Social standards are fixed by and for the great majority and not by and for a hardened or weakened minority.\textsuperscript{16}

Obviously what the Court meant by “dealing with homosexuality from a scientific, historic, or critical point of view” was simply supporting the prevailing prejudice that homosexuality was diseased or sinful.

That pulp novels with lesbian subject matter should have been permitted to proliferate during this period is not as surprising as it may seem at first glance, since they were generally cautionary tales: “moral” literature that warned females that lesbianism was sick or evil and that if a woman dared to love another woman she would end up lonely and suicidal. On the surface, at least, they seemed to confirm social prejudices about homosexuality. But despite that, many lesbians read those novels avidly.

The pulps, with their lurid covers featuring two women exchanging erotic gazes or locked in an embrace, could be picked up at newsstands and corner drugstores, even in small towns, and they helped spread the word about lesbian lifestyles to women who might have been too sheltered otherwise to know that such things existed. Lesbians bought those books with relish because they learned to read between the lines and get whatever nurturance they needed from them. Where else could one find public images of women loving women? Of course the characters of the lesbian pulps almost always lived in shame and with the knowledge that, as the titles often suggested, they belonged in “twilight,” “darkness,” or “shadows.” Self-hatred was requisite in these novels. Typically the lesbian was characterized by lines such as “A sword of self-revulsion, carefully shielded, slipped its scabbard now for one second to stab deeply to the exposed core of her lesbianism.”\textsuperscript{17} But often the books suggested that lesbianism was so powerful that a heterosexual woman only had to be exposed to a dyke and she would fall (though she was usually rescued, rather perfunctorily, by a male before the last pages—in which the real lesbian was shown to be doomed to suitable torment). Lesbians could ignore their homophobic propaganda and moralizations and peruse the pulps for their romance and charged eroticism.

Perhaps lesbians knew enough to be realistic about the limitations of the publishing industry. Just as they needed to be careful in their own lives, writers and publishers needed to be careful: novels with lesbian subject matter and even fairly explicit sexual scenes could escape censorship if they had “redeeming social value,” which meant that they could not “legitimize the abnormal condition [of lesbianism]” by showing lesbians as anything other than ultimately defeated.\textsuperscript{18}

Writers who through their personal experiences might have been able to present more honest and happier depictions of lesbians did not dare to, even if they could have gotten such a book published. For example, novelist Helen Hull (\textit{Quest, Labyrinth}), who spent much of her adult life in a love relationship with academic Mabel Robinson, was inspired by the Kinsey report in 1953 (that showed such a high incidence of lesbian experience in America) to think about writing a novel on lesbianism. She observed in her writer’s journal that such a novel could show “what I have always thought, that conduct is not in any way consistent with either social code or law.” Hull reflected that most of the women she knew best had not conformed to the stated mores of their society, “even when they have been important through their work and recognized positions.” She briefly considered putting some of those lesbian friends into a novel: “K.... had courage and serenity, had groups of followers, must have had people whom she helped; E. had courage and liveliness and capacity for work and ingenuity about developing her school.... She kept her sanguineness and her invincibility.” But such people, who could have been much-needed
role models for young women who chose to live as lesbians, never got into a lesbian novel because Hull concluded, as would most women writers with a reputation at stake during the period, that after all, “I don’t want to be connected with the subject of lesbianism.”

It was not true, of course, that lesbians during the 1950s invariably paid for their nonconformity through misery, as the pulp novelists said they did. But whatever joy they found had to be procured outside of the main social institutions, and they had to be clandestine about it in a society that withheld from them the blessings it gave freely to all heterosexuals. Front marriages with gay men were not uncommon during the 1950s, not only for the sake of passing as heterosexual at work, but also in order to hide the truth from parents who could not bear their own failure in having raised a sexual nonconformist and who might have a daughter committed to a mental hospital for lesbianism. Lesbians often felt they could not trust close acquaintances with knowledge of their personal lives, even if they suspected those acquaintances might also be lesbian. A Vermont woman remembers, “Everyone was very cagey. We pretended to ourselves that we didn’t talk about it because it shouldn’t matter in a friendship, just as being a Democrat or a Republican shouldn’t matter between friends. But the real reason we never talked about it was that if we weren’t 100 percent sure the other person was gay too, it would be awful to be wrong. We’d be revealing ourselves to someone who probably couldn’t understand and that could bring all sorts of trouble.” It was a climate calculated to lead to paranoia, and many lesbians never overcame it, even when times improved.

It was also a climate that stripped lesbians of the possibility of self-defense by making it dangerous for them to organize effectively. The decade following the war that expanded the potential of lesbian lifestyles did see the formation of the first lesbian organization in America, Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), which was originally founded as a private social group to give middle-class lesbians an alternative to the gay bar scene. That such an organization could have been started in the 1950s is testimony to the war years' effectiveness in creating something of a self-conscious lesbian community. DOB was not interested for long in remaining a social club. It soon became involved in “improving the lesbian image” and demanding lesbian rights. But an organization that valiantly attempted to be political in a time when the idea of rights for sexual minorities was inconceivable was bound to remain insuscule for a long while.

Daughters of Bilitis, which was founded in the mid-1950s, understood lesbians’ fears that joining the group would expose them to the danger of being harassed as perverts. Recognizing the need for lesbian anonymity, DOB tried to overcome those fears by pledging secrecy to their membership in the best of faith. At meetings a greeter would stand at the door and say, “I’m—. Who are you? You don’t have to give me your real name.” The Ladder, which was DOB’s official magazine, even ran articles quoting an attorney who stressed that lesbians had “nothing to fear in joining DOB,” and they assured the readers: “your name is safe”—that there were no reasons to worry about the magazine’s mailing list falling into the wrong hands, that the constitution guaranteed freedom of the press, and that a 1953 Supreme Court decision said a publisher did not have to reveal the names of purchasers of reading material, even to a congressional investigating committee.

But such legal protection apparently did not apply to lesbians. Daughters of Bilitis could not know that informants had actually infiltrated DOB in the 1950s and were supplying the FBI and CIA with names of the organization’s members. The FBI file on DOB stated, as though the mere fact in itself were evidence of the organization’s subversiveness, “The purpose of [DOB] is to educate the public to accept the Lesbian homosexual into society.”

Nor was DOB free from local harassment. During the 1959 mayoral campaign in San Francisco, Russell Wolden challenged the incumbent, George Christopher, by saying that Christopher had made San Francisco a haven for homosexuals. Wolden’s scare tactics
campaign literature highlighted DOB:

You parents of daughters—do not sit back complacently feeling that because you have no boys in your family everything is all right.... To enlighten you as to the existence of a Lesbian organization composed of homosexual women, make yourself acquainted with the name Daughters of Bilitis.

DOB suspected that as a result of such exposure there might be trouble, so they removed all membership and mailing lists from the San Francisco headquarters for the duration of the race. As they later discovered, they were right to be prudent, since the San Francisco police, goaded by Wolden, did search the organization’s office. Lesbianism in itself was not against the law in California, but law enforcement officials ignored that detail.24 Not by virtue of what they did, but just because of who they were, lesbians were subversive, and no such action against them by the police was considered excessive.

Obviously the time was far from ripe for any successful organizing to create a large-scale movement through which the lesbian could work to put an end to persecution. Several DOB chapters were begun around the country by the end of the '50s, but the organization remained small (though its mere existence was something of a miracle in those days). Through official intimidation, the public policy of control and containment of lesbianism was largely effective, even to the end of the next decade. The many women who loved women and were bisexual or did not wish to live a lesbian lifestyle usually felt compelled to deny that aspect of their affectional lives and thus could do nothing to challenge the view of the lesbian as “other” than the “normal” woman. Women who were part of the lesbian subculture also usually denied their lesbianism by day and even by night were afraid to join with other women politically to begin to present their own versions of what their lives were about.

*War in the Cold War Years: The Military Witch-Hunts*

Military life had particular appeal for working-class women who identified themselves as lesbians in the 1950s. In addition to compatible companionship, it offered them opportunities for career training and travel that females without monetary advantages would have had difficulty finding on their own. But lesbians who enlisted in the military at this time were at grave risk, regardless of their patriotism or their devotion to their tasks. Civilian life could be difficult in the 1950s, but military life was harrowing. The tolerant policy regarding lesbianism that was instituted during the war was long gone. Now love between women in the military was viewed as criminal. Military witch-hunts of lesbians were carried out relentlessly, though frequently without success: not because there were few lesbians in the military, but rather because civilian life had already trained lesbians to guard against detection and they learned in the military to polish those skills.

In contrast to the liberal Sex Hygiene lectures that military officers had been given during wartime, officers in the women’s branch of the Navy (WAVE) were instructed in 1952 that “homosexuality is wrong, it is evil, ... an offense to all decent and law abiding people, and it is not to be condoned on grounds of ‘mental illness' any more than any other crime such as theft, homicide or criminal assault.” The WAVE recruits in turn had to listen to set lectures which told them that sexual relations are appropriate only in marriage and that even though they were in the military they were expected to conform to the norms of femininity. Lesbians were presented in the cliche of sexual vampires who seduced innocent young women into sexual experimentation that would lead them, like a drug, into the usual
litiy of horrors: addiction, degeneracy, loneliness, murder and suicide. Not only were the women encouraged to inform on each other, but chaplains and psychiatrists who were naval officers were instructed to help detect and discharge lesbian personnel.25

Air Force policy was similar: Air Force regulation 35–66 stated that prompt separation of homosexuals from the military was mandatory, and specifically demanded that physicians and psychiatrists, as well as all other military personnel, report to administrative officials any knowledge they had of an individual’s “homosexual tendencies.”26 A woman was to be considered culpable even if she had had only an isolated lesbian experience years before she joined the military, since that was evidence of her “homosexual tendencies.” As Kinsey’s statistics indicate, a huge number of women in the military would probably have been subject to discharge if their full histories were known, though luckily for the functioning of the female branches of the armed services, most women were willing and even anxious to lie about that aspect of their affectional lives.

But even mere association with putative lesbians was enough to get a woman discharged in the 1950s if she were caught, since this too was considered evidence of “homosexual tendencies.” Annie remembers a friend who had been in WAVE officer training school with her in Virginia who had not yet even decided that she was a lesbian, but she socialized with a crowd of women who were investigated and found guilty of homosexuality. Never actually having had lesbian experiences, she nevertheless was ordered to leave the WAVES “because of the company she kept.” Like all military personnel who were asked to resign, she was required to submit a statement saying she was tendering her resignation for the good of the service. If a woman refused to do so when requested she would face a trial by general court-martial. Although she had to sign such a statement incriminating herself, she had no right to know her accusers or to have access to documentary evidence against her. She had none of the protections of a civilian court.27

Investigations for lesbianism in the military were capricious and violated the rules of common sense and common decency. One woman who had been in the Air Force from 1950 to 1954 says that her Air Force squadron at Otis (which she estimates was about 50 percent lesbian) was required to sit through repeated lectures against homosexuality. Their personal possessions were subject to inspection at any time without notice, often at hours such as 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday, and evidence of lesbianism was especially sought by the inspectors. Official tactics defied rational explanation:

I had my mother's wedding ring in a drawer and they took it and demanded to know who the girl was that I put my initials in there for—even though the date on the ring was 1930, which was before I was born. They refused to give it back to me. They said it was the property of the government and they were holding it for future investigations. They threatened me with discharge even though they couldn't prove anything. I wasn't even sexually active while I was on that base. But to this day they have my mother's ring.28

Entrapment was part of official policy. During the Korean War the Marines not only sent women from their Criminal Investigation Division (CID) into lesbian bars to serve as decoys to catch other personnel, but they also planted informers on women’s softball teams on military bases, assuming that an interest in athletics was practically tantamount to lesbianism. Women who looked stereotypically lesbian were sometimes kept in the service as Judas lambs, under the assumption that they would attract other women with homosexual tendencies and the military would thus be able to catch lesbians who might otherwise have gotten away.29

Another common lesbian-catching tactic was to identify particularly vulnerable young women who were under suspicion of lesbianism and to threaten them not only with court-martial and discharge but even with exposure to their parents. They were interrogated until they gave the names of all women from their unit they knew or even thought were
lesbian—or, in at least one documented case, until they committed suicide. The military’s brutal methods were not much different from those of the civilian government at the time, although they must have been even more devastating to the young women who had been encouraged to see the military as one big family and a way of life. To be shamed and cast out of that family must have annihilated more than a few of them.

Since military personnel were encouraged to rid the services of lesbians, officers believed they might have a free hand in their achieving their goal. One woman, who was an Army nurse in occupied Japan in 1954, says that when she and her lover were accused of being lesbians the intelligence officer assigned to the case raped her lover “to teach her how much better a man was than a woman.” When she contacted a higher officer she got his promise of protection from future harassment only in return for her agreement to leave the Army without fighting the case. Nothing was done to punish the intelligence officer.

But because the military’s irregular methods were sometimes incredibly heavy-handed, the most savvy lesbians were able to escape detection with ease. One former WAC estimates that of the 250 women who arrived with her at a WAC detachment, 150 were booted out, primarily on the basis of a ludicrous verbal test they were forced to take immediately upon arrival, in which investigating officers asked questions such as:

Did you ever make love to a woman?
Have you ever thought of making love to a woman?
Do you envision sucking a woman’s breast?

She, a lesbian, trained in hiding, of course said no to everything and survived the test. More naive women, undoubtedly many of whom had had no lesbian experiences and knew nothing of the street wisdom that lesbians learned in the subculture, were more honest and answered as Kinsey’s statistics could have helped predict they would. The next morning at the barracks the sergeant told her, “They weeded out all the Queers last night.”

Despite such outrageous systematic spying and demoralization, which naturally led to an atmosphere of tension and anger, many lesbians could survive precisely because they had developed such sharp skills in looking over their shoulders. As Marie remembers of her stint during the Korean War:

You learned to always be skeptical about someone new, to always keep track of who was around before you spoke, to hang on to the friends you knew you could trust. When I came to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina I went out for softball, but for half a year all the women on the team were really distant and quiet. I finally found out that since I was three or four years older than most of them they figured I was a CID plant. One of them had been at El Toro Air Force Base in Santa Ana where they discovered that the pitcher on the team was actually a planted informant.

By refusing to acknowledge, as it had during World War II, that lesbians would be especially attracted to military life and that such a life would even encourage lesbianism, the military was denying the obvious. The military’s obtuse policies encouraged lesbians to be cynical toward authority and reinforced the notion they had learned from the outside world that because enemies were everywhere, “lesbian” had to signify an “us” and “them” mentality at least as much as it signified a sexual orientation. Those lesbians who managed to get through the service in the ’50s without being detected had learned that they must find ways to outwit the authorities or they would be destroyed. Usually they succeeded in maneuvering. Although a secret investigative board for the Navy actually claimed in 1957 that the rate of detection for homosexual activity in the Navy was “much higher for the female than the male,” lesbians who were in the military say that most of them managed to escape detection and that “for the few lesbians they got in the services, there were
hundreds of us who fell through their grip.” It was often a matter of luck whether or not one would get caught. But even more often it was a matter of networking. Women in the Marines, for example, were able to establish a pipeline so that they knew what was going on at all times and when crackdowns and investigations were likely to come. Friends from boot camp who had been sent to different bases kept in contact with each other. The softball teams would travel and spread the word about witch-hunts. Lesbians who worked in places such as the Filing Office would know who was under investigation and could warn other lesbians. At least partly because of such good pipelines, most lesbians who were in the service in the 1950s left with honorable discharges, although not without emotional scars.34

But despite networking, large numbers of lesbians were occasionally purged from some bases, such as a WAC base in Tokyo from which 500 women were sent home “under conditions other than honorable.”35 Those who were discharged from the service for homosexuality were deprived of all veteran’s benefits. They were generally so upset, exhausted, and mortified by the process that they did nothing but sink off to hide and heal their wounds as best they could.

Almost never did they have the energy to protest what had been done to them, although one woman, an Air Force Reservist, Fannie Mae Clackum, actually did win a suit against the government in the U.S. Court of Claims in 1960, which suggests that in somewhat saner times an objective court could understand how outrageous the military’s tactics were. Clackum demanded eight years of back pay, complaining that she was accused of homosexuality but given no trial or hearing and no opportunity to know the evidence against her or to know her accusers. From April 1951 to January 1952 she had been repeatedly questioned by an OSI officer regarding lesbianism. She was asked to resign, although she was never informed of specific charges. When she refused, she was demoted from corporal to private and ordered to take a psychiatric examination. She was finally discharged as an undesirable at the beginning of 1952. The court found that her discharge was invalid, but Clackum was an isolated instance of a woman who dared to carry out a challenge to the reigning powers in the 1950s, since everything—the psychiatric establishment, the military’s demoralization tactics, the government, popular wisdom—militated against the lesbian believing that she had the human right to expect justice.36

A major effect that military life of the 1950s had on lesbian subculture was to confirm even further that for the outside world love between women was a love that dared not speak its name, that it would certainly not be treated with common decency and respect. But at the same time the military experience strengthened the bonds between women who chose to be part of the lesbian sisterhood; it showed them how to network and how to guard against the forces that were enemies of women who loved women. Such knowledge was also to become very useful in life outside the military.

A Sad Legacy

Although the McCarthy era has been long dead and the lot of the lesbian has improved considerably, the years of suffering took their toll and created a legacy of suspicion that has been hard to overcome, more liberal times notwithstanding. That suspicion has not been entirely groundless. Even in the last two decades, at the height of the gay liberation movement, lesbian teachers have been fired from their jobs, not for committing illegal acts such as having sexual relations with a minor, but simply for being lesbian.

Wilma, who was a high school physical education teacher in Downey, a Los Angeles suburb, in the early 1970s, says that after a couple of years at the school she decided she would tell her best friend on the faculty that she was a lesbian because “I thought we were
really close. She was always telling me about her problems with her husband and her children, and I was tired of living a lie with her." The other woman went to the principal the next day, saying that in the light of what she had learned she could no longer work with Wilma. He immediately called Wilma into his office and demanded that she write out a resignation on the spot. In return for her resignation he promised he would not get her credential revoked: “But he said he just wanted me out of the school. We had been good friends. He was priming me for a job as an administrator. I thought, ‘I screwed up my whole life for a ten-minute confession.’”

Wilma was able to get another job in the Los Angeles school system, but she drastically changed her manner of relating to her colleagues. She married a gay man, always brought him to faculty parties, and made sure everyone knew to address her as “Mrs.” She came to school in dresses, hose, and high heels: “Even when I went to the school cafeteria I’d change from my sweats into a dress.” Fifteen years later, she still feels she must constantly censor herself with her colleagues: “I keep a low profile and I’m always on guard.”

Wilma’s situation remains a nightmare for many lesbians. While very few engaged in front marriages in the 1970s and ’80s, some still attempted to pass as heterosexual and even invent, or let heterosexuals assume, an imaginary heterosexual social life. Two studies of lesbians, one in the ’70s, the other in the ’80s, both indicated that two-thirds of the sample believed that they would lose their jobs if their sociosexual orientation were known. Most of those who did not feel threatened were self-employed or worked in the arts, where homosexuality is equated with bohemianism.

Despite the many successes of the gay liberation movement, which has made homosexuality much more acceptable in America, middle-class lesbians often feel that activists are a real threat to them because they draw public attention to the phenomenon of lesbianism and thus create suspicion about all unmarried women. The closeted lesbian’s cover could be blown. Older lesbians especially, who perfected the techniques of hiding through most of their adult lives, still cannot conceive of suddenly coming out into the open, even in what appear to be freer times.

They are uncomfortable not only with radicals who demand that they leave their closets, but with anyone who discusses the subject of lesbianism, as I discovered a number of times in trying to arrange interviews with “senior citizen” lesbians, women over sixty-five who were professionally employed during the McCarthy years. Despite my promise of complete anonymity, they were often fearful. As a sixty-eight year old retired teacher wrote me:

One reason lesbians of my generation are reluctant to come out is our memory of that time; there is no guarantee that there won’t again be a rush to the documents, and a resurrection of our names from somewhere, with who-knows-what-kind of repercussions. I am retired and on a pension; presumably nothing can change that. But we didn’t believe the stuff McCarthy got away with, either. Can anyone promise for sure that “they” won’t say to me, “You taught under false pretenses; therefore, you don’t get your pension!”

They have little faith that the progress that has come about through the gay liberation movement is here to stay. There is probably nothing that would convince them that lesbians are not still surrounded by hostile regiments out to destroy them, as they were in the 1950s.

Lesbians inherited a mixed legacy from the 1940s and ’50s, when lesbianism came to mean, much more than it had earlier, not only a choice of sexual orientation, but a social orientation as well, though usually lived covertly. While the war and the migration afterward of masses of women, who often ended up in urban centers, meant that various lesbian subcultures could be established or expanded, these years were a most unfortunate time
for such establishment and expansion. Suddenly there were large numbers of women who could become a part of a lesbian subculture, yet also suddenly there were more reasons than ever for the subculture to stay underground. The need to be covert became one of the chief manifestations of lesbian existence for an entire generation—until the 1970s and, for some women who do not trust recent changes to be permanent, until the present. The grand scale institutional insanity that characterized the Cold War also affected many lesbians profoundly by causing them to live in guilt, pain, self-hatred born of internalizing the hideous stereotypes of lesbianism, and justified suspicion as well as paranoia. The 1950s were perhaps the worst time in history for women to love women.

However, even the persecution of the 1950s aided in further establishing lesbian subcultures. It made many women feel they had to band together socially to survive, since heterosexuals could seldom be trusted. And while it made lesbianism a love that dared not speak its name very loudly, nevertheless it gave it a name over and over again that became known to many more thousands of American women. Were it not for the publicity that was inevitably attendant on persecution, some women, even by the 1950s, might not have realized that there were so many who shared their desires and aspirations, that various lesbian subcultures existed, that lesbianism could be a way of life. Fanatical homophobes who would have preferred a conspiracy of silence with regard to lesbianism were right in believing that silence would best serve their ends. Each time the silence was broken—even by the hateful images of homosexuality that characterized the 1950s—more women who preferred women learned labels for themselves, sought and often found others who shared those labels, and came to understand that they might probe beneath the denigrating images that society handed them to discover their own truths.