



# Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

## Woman, Queer, Jewish: The Sociopolitical Importance and Impact of Identity Labels

BY Megan Polun

ADVISOR • Tom Roach

EDITORIAL REVIEWER • Rabbi Steve Jablow

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*Honors Thesis for Megan Polun*

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**ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I trace and analyze the historical, social, and political uses of three identity labels: woman, queer, and Jewish. These three identity categories are personally important to me because I identify as a queer, Jewish woman. The questions motivating this analysis are as follows: How have these words been defined and who gets to define them? What has it meant historically to move through the world with one of these labels, and what does it look like today? What qualifies someone to identify with one of these labels, and what experiences or qualities do we share? What challenges do we face with these words, and what changes should we hope to see? This thesis is a sociopolitical inquiry into the labels that make up my own identity and shape my experiences within the world. In a time where antisemitism is on the rise and there are nationwide efforts to regulate women's bodies and restrict queer existence, this exploration into these identity labels is both relevant and imperative.

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is a fact that we are all born into bodies with distinct biological and genetic characteristics over which we have no control. We are also born into social and political systems that we did not choose, and we have little control over how these systems make meaning of us, categorize us, and define us. These systems and how they classify us varies over time, region, and culture. For example, Black skin in the United States has an entirely different meaning from Black skin in Kenya, and it also means something different today compared to what it meant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though our identities are partially influenced by the characteristics of our bodies in our given environments, identities themselves derive from how we think about ourselves and choose to present ourselves to the world. This is the foundation of existentialism.

### Existentialism

Existentialism begins from the central understanding that existence precedes essence. Robert Solomon provides an accessible explanation into existentialist approach in *Introducing Philosophy*. He explains that the phrase “existence precedes essence” serves to communicate that there is no such thing as human nature, and, as Jean-Paul Sartre writes, “man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (qtd. in Solomon 307). Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are some of the foundational leaders of existentialist thought. They use the term *facticity* to refer to the facts of our existence (sex, skin color, height, etc.) and they argue that our facticity alone is not enough to determine our identity. Rather, “we must also consider their projections into the future, their ambitions, plans, hopes, and fantasies” (308), or what Sartre calls a person’s *transcendence*. From this foundation, existentialists argue that “whatever the facts about you, you are always something more than those facts” (309).

This puts us in the driver’s seat of our own identity. Sartre warns of people acting in *bad faith*, or refusing to accept themselves as who they are, which can be done in two ways. He uses the example of a man who has sex with men to outline his points. The first way to act in bad faith is by denying that certain facts contribute to your self-identity. Sartre writes that a man who experiences homosexual desire and acts on it yet rejects the label of homosexual for himself “falls into bad faith by refusing to see that his past actions point to his having a self-identity as

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a homosexual” (qtd. in Solomon 309). The second way to act in bad faith is by “believing that your actions conclusively and unalterably establish your self-identity” (qtd. in Solomon 308). As existentialism includes a perspective of our futures in determining our current self-identity, a man who decides that he is a homosexual now and will never be anything besides a homosexual would also be in bad faith, for he is under the assumption that his identity is fixed forever.

Existentialists believe that we are in control over our identity. We are acting in bad faith if we ignore pieces of ourselves that are obviously relevant to our self-identity, but we are also in bad faith if we hyper-inflate the importance of just one facet of our complicated identities. The key to existentialism is that we are defined both by the facticity of our existence and our actions in the past, as well as our intentions and actions that lay in the future. This perspective complicates the process of defining ourselves, but importantly leaves the decision in our own hands. The systems we are born into may be out of our control, but one area where we do have power is in identity. We can choose to accept the arbitrary meanings given to us by our systems, or we can choose to embrace parts of ourselves and fight against the systems that assign power based on facets of our identities.

#### Biological Determinism

There are many who disagree with existentialist ideas. Since we are born into systems that immediately give meaning to the facts of our existence, many come to believe that those facts themselves carry intense meanings. This is called *biological essentialism* or *biological determinism*, and it is a dangerous attempt to erase social and cultural influences on who we are. The idea that we are hardwired to act in one permanent way traps us in a cage that limits rooms for self-exploration and growth. Additionally, in hiding the true causes of our behaviors, this mindset shields factors like government policies and social expectations from rightful scrutiny.

For example, there is a racist stereotype that Black people can’t swim. Some people may believe that this is just an innate fact of having Black skin, but they would be ignorant to the government policies that contributed to the disproportionate percentage of Black children who

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do not know how to swim. In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a massive increase in the number of public swimming pools built in the United States, but they were heavily located in predominantly white areas and were frequently racially segregated (Wiltse). This limited access for Black people to swimming pools, hence why fewer Black people know how to swim. Assuming that this is just a stable fact tied to having Black skin rather than a result of a political ploy is dangerous to our nation's progress.

Similarly, there are unofficial social and cultural policies that contribute to the shaping of our identities. When families realize they are having a girl, they often buy her dolls, cooking toys, or other things geared towards the skills of nurturing. Boys, on the other hand, are often given Legos, tools, or other hands-on toys focused on spatial reasoning. When these children grow up, they often display gifts in either of these fields. Thus, we conclude that women are naturally nurturers and men are naturally builders, ignoring the social and cultural conditioning that fostered those skills within them. In other words, such gendered behaviors are learned, not inherent.

Again, the facticity of our identities is given to us at birth, but the meaning of them is molded and defined by our environments. If not for these political and social restrictions, these examples of differences in people would not necessarily exist. If we accept that these facts have an ultimate meaning and are fixed from birth, we ignore the influence of external factors, and we fail to recognize the control we can have over our own life outcomes. We would also fail to realize where we need to dedicate our energy to ensure that unfair social and political barriers are brought down to create equitable opportunities for all. Essentialism tells us that everything is predetermined and there is no reason to try changing it, while existentialism gives us the power to control our own destinies.

#### Charmed Circle

The influence of our sociopolitical systems on our life trajectories cannot be underestimated. This is because our culture is founded on a historical system of hierarchy, where some identities are treated as more valuable than others. In "Thinking Sex," Gayle Rubin introduces the concept of the "charmed circle" to illustrate how certain traits of sexuality are perceived as

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good, normal, or blessed, while others are seen as bad, abnormal, or damned. The charmed circle of sexuality includes terms like heterosexual, married and procreative. People who engage in sex in ways that align with the inner circle receive approval from society, unlike those who lie on the outer limits of the circle. This approval comes in the form of permission to marry, access to adoption, freedom to publicly discuss and present your sexual endeavors, visibility in popular media, and more. The outer limits contain words like homosexual, casual, and non-procreative sex. People who participate in these forms of sex have often faced social consequences as a result, whether through legal or social systems (Rubin 13). This concept of a charmed circle of privilege can be applied to all identity categories in our world.

Looking broadly at the historical culture of the United States, the charmed circle would include words like white, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian, and male. In order to establish these categories as superior and worthy of privilege, other identity groups had to be classified as less desirable. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “No group ever defined itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself” (xix-xx). These Othered groups include but are not limited to women, people of color, queer folks, and people of faiths other than Christianity. Identifying within one or more of these groups that are on the outer limits of the charmed circle has serious consequences for one’s life outcomes because systems of oppression have been deeply rooted within our culture to ensure that those within the charmed circle can maintain their positions of privilege and power.

It is important to remember the existentialist mantra that existence precedes essence when we see this hierarchy play out in real life. Monique Wittig writes in “One Is Not Born a Woman” that often, “what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor” (266). The fact that has been weaponized against someone as the reason for their subordination is not in actuality the *cause* of such subordination, nor does it make them deserving of that oppression. Wittig suggests:

“...what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an ‘imaginary formation,’ which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the networks of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen *black*, therefore

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they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore they *are* women. But before being *seen* that way, they first had to be *made* that way)." (Wittig 266)

Our facticity does not carry inherent meaning; it is merely a fact of our existence. It is our systems and eventually ourselves which give essence and significance to those facts.

History informs us of the disadvantages faced by marginalized groups, and many of these historical acts still impact us today. Limited access to voting for women and people of color contributed to innumerable laws that negatively impact our existences. Today we see those impacts in the reversal of *Roe v Wade*, acts of police brutality without proper accountability, and more. Redlining practices from decades ago still continue less conspicuously today and also correlate directly to areas lacking proper access to healthy food (Kahn). Jewish people were also excluded from living in many neighborhoods and faced barriers to entry from several professions, which explains the disproportionate number of Jewish people working in banks or in Hollywood (Lapin).

Not only does history reveal the setbacks faced by those on the outer limits of the charmed circle, but it also highlights the advantages afforded to those within the charmed circle.

Without recognizing these privileges, it is impossible to fully acknowledge and realize the end of the systems that perpetuate such inequality. Peggy McIntosh theorizes that many white people, while aware that racism puts others at a disadvantage, remain blissfully unaware of how racism puts us at an advantage. She now sees white privilege as "an invisible knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks" (McIntosh 1). Consciously feeling this backpack of privileges reminds us of the work that needs to be done to ensure that all people have equitable access to the opportunities that we carry around daily as white people.

Clearly, one's identity strongly influences the opportunities afforded to them. But the visibility of that identity is relevant to how people are treated that exist at various levels on the social hierarchy. Most Black people are perceived as Black by others, and that may influence their experiences. But sometimes identities are not always immediately visible. For example, a queer person who "looks straight" could exist as a member of that marginalized group



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without necessarily encountering the same consequences of that identity as someone else. It is for this reason that Jeffrey Weeks claims that “*identity* is a choice. It is not *dictated* by internal imperatives” (416). Weeks agrees with the existentialists here that while there are facts that make up our existence, we are the ones who ultimately choose whether or not to embrace them as part of our public identities. Someone can be Jewish by blood and religiously practice Judaism in private, but they can choose to conceal that fact in public, temporarily shirking the identity of being Jewish. On the other hand, this same person could choose to wear a yarmulke and a Star of David necklace in public to make themselves visible as a Jewish person. Their experiences with other people could vary drastically between these two presentations.

#### Getting Into It

From birth, we are given labels by those around us. These labels are attached to our identities by other people, and they often feel like permanent fixtures of who we are. We are sometimes taught that self-identity is stable, that the pieces of ourselves given to us at birth are unable to be changed. But as discussed, the facticity of our existence carries different meanings in different environments, which establishes that the facts themselves cannot hold much absolute or essential meaning. Additionally, as the existentialists argue, our identities are always fluid, and we must be considerate of both our pasts and our futures when thinking about self-identity. Only through accepting this fluidity and the influence of culture on our life options can we properly address concepts of identity.

This thesis focuses on three identity labels that I claim publicly in my daily life: woman, queer, and Jewish. Each of these carries weight in how I am perceived by others and informs my outlook on the world. While these are labels that lie on the outer limits of the charmed circle, the most prominent identity that I have is my whiteness, because it is the first thing most people will see when they look at me and it affords me the most privilege. Even if I experience oppression for being a woman, queer, or Jewish, my whiteness has always protected me from the most severe of these injustices, and it is essential that that point is addressed.

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It is paramount that we all actively work to dismantle white supremacy and the notion of whiteness as the default and ideal in our society. Committing to antiracist efforts is the only way to create a safer, more equitable world for all of us to live in. Working with Weeks' claim of identity as a choice, the word "white" was not chosen for further analysis because it is not an identity that I can hide or choose to change, nor is it one that I am proud to claim. The selected identity labels are terms that I make the daily choice to embrace and claim for myself, and my exploration of these words will be intersectional and inclusive of various perspectives from those who fall into the categories of woman, queer, and Jewish.

### **WOMAN**

Even though we have built a foundationally heterosexual culture which requires the partnership and contributions of both men and women, women have been Othered and seen as less valuable than men since the dawn of time. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, "In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative..." (13). Women have historically lacked the same rights, access, and power as men, despite making up 50% of the population.

### **What Is Gender?**

An important preface to the conversation of defining "woman" is that woman is a gender, not a sex. Sex is determined at birth based on biology, while gender is a social construct that can be fluid over time. Joan Scott describes the difference, writing that gender is "a social category imposed on a sexed body" (1056). As Judith Butler explains in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," what we call gender identity "is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (520). Butler discusses how the body comes to bear cultural meanings of gender through specific corporeal acts, and addresses that many people misguidedly understand gender "as the spiritual or psychological correlate of the biological sex" (528). This would require that there are true genders and would imply that gendered acts are expressive of that absolute gender *internal* to a person.

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In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Butler rejects this possibility, instead arguing that “...all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation... gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original... ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (Butler 433). As expressed by existentialists, the facticity of our life has no inherent meaning until we give it meaning – existence precedes essence. Your body’s biology carries no essential significance to your position within society – but it is given weight and value by our cultural systems.

But while gender is often described as expressive, Butler argues that it is instead performative: “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). Butler views gender as an established protocol that we continue to engage in. She says that “people are, consciously or not, citing conventions of gender when they claim to be expressing their own interior reality” (qtd. in Gleeson 2). For her, corporeal acts and gender attributes “effectively constitute the identity they are said to express,” as she writes in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (528). Without the perception that our bodily acts are gendered, there would be no concept of gender at all. Thus, a change in how we perceive certain acts would result in a change in our understanding of gender, or even the elimination of the concept of gender entirely.

So while sex is an internal biological attribute, gender is a performative concept that only exists to the extent that we buy into it. Because we repeat the acts that allow us to be perceived as a particular gender so frequently, we often misunderstand them to be coming from within rather than as a result of external social constructions and conditioning. The repetitive banality of wearing skirts and adding extra exclamation marks to emails begins to feel like a personal choice, a willful performance of our internal desires. Yet, these acts are unconsciously a result and reproduction of societal conditioning that we have been exposed to since birth which shapes our internal desires. One is not born a woman, as Simone de Beauvoir argues, but becomes a woman through the repetitive commitment to doing all the things women are expected to do. Still, across history, our cultural understandings of gender have been closely tied to sex, so I will discuss further how biology is a limiting way to approach the discussion of gender.

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#### Defining Woman

Anne Fausto-Sterling reveals in “The Five Sexes” that the medical establishment is committed to maintaining a binary system of sex, even in defiance of nature. “For biologically speaking,” she writes, “there are many gradations running from female to male; and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along the spectrum lie at least five sexes and perhaps even more” (1). She cites examples of such intersex people from some of our oldest sources, including Plato and the Jewish Talmud. Scientists have found a wide range of combinations of chromosomes, genitalia, and other sexual characteristics. Fausto-Sterling says that there is enough proof that “sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories” (1-2). Yet, we still insist upon binary classifications of male or female.

For those who fall in between male and female, commonly referred to as intersex, medical practitioners often recommend a surgery to assign them more firmly to one of those two classifications. In response to why this may be, Fausto-Sterling offers the explanation that we have a “cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes” (5). In order to preserve a hierarchy that affords men more privileges than women, we need clear proof of difference between the two groups. Intersexual bodies “blur and bridge the great divide... they challenge traditional beliefs about sexual difference” (5). This threatens to dismantle man’s seat atop the power structure.

Fausto-Sterling provides a legal example of the reasoning for this binary: “For questions of inheritance, legitimacy, paternity, succession to title and eligibility for certain professions to be determined, modern Anglo-Saxon legal systems require that newborns be registered as either male or female” (3). Notably, this suggests that a female would be denied access to all the items on that list, which has historically been a central part of defining woman – lack of access. But this also deconstructs the credibility of science. The fact that our legal forms intentionally exclude the biological truth of the existence of intersex people demonstrates how the medical establishment has been employed to suit the desires of the legal system – when theoretically, the purpose of science should be to capture the truth of our bodies. Instead, medicine has been co-opted in pursuit of political purposes. This renders the medical

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establishment distrustful and since we cannot trust them to accurate report on which or how many sexes even exist, they become unworthy of sole rights to defining what a woman is.

If we were solely to rely on biology, we might decide that a woman is someone who “has breasts, a vagina, a uterus and ovaries and who menstruates” (5). But as Fausto-Sterling has revealed, there are many people who do not fit nicely into this category, or who might lack one or more of those biological qualities but still identifies as a woman. Is someone who has had their breasts removed due to cancer no longer a woman? Is someone who has gone through menopause no longer a woman?

Perhaps the most useful piece of literature in defining the word “woman” is Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. In the introduction to the book, she tasks herself with answering the question: what is a woman? She notes the perspective of some that “woman is a womb” (11). This biology-based answer is reductive and shrinks the complexity of womanhood down to a single reproductive purpose. Again, is a woman who is incapable of reproducing not a woman? This definition does capture the common idea that our body is what makes us women. Certainly, this is how most children understand it, as demonstrated in J. Jack Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism*. The young son of Halberstam’s partner asked if Jack had a penis or “what girls have.” When Jack answered, “what girls have,” the little boy declared “Well, then Jack, I hate to tell you this, but you are basically a girl!” (Halberstam 18).

However, as demonstrated, science is not a trustworthy source for defining woman, nor can biology be solely relied upon to provide qualities that make up a female, since many women lack some biological traits thought to be essential to a female body. Further, an exclusively biological approach often leads to transphobia and transmisogyny, and any functional definition of the word “woman” must include all women. Julia Serrano, author of the trans woman manifesto *Whipping Girl*, argues that people who call trans women “chicks with dicks” or “she-males” have been “so brainwashed by phallocentricism that they believe that the mere presence of a penis can trump the femaleness of our identities, our personalities, and the rest of our bodies” (4). From Serrano’s perspective, reducing “woman” to biology promotes an exclusivity that ostracizes people who truly experience and perform womanhood

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in their daily lives but lack the “proper” biological qualifications. Having a penis does not negate her identity as a woman.

In some cases, people who would biologically be classified as male have been referred to as women. In a letter from Jack Abbott to Norman Mailer from a federal penitentiary, Abbott outlines the sexual society that existed in prison among the men. Separated from women, they sometimes took on male sexual partners, some of whom displayed feminine attributes. Such men were referred to as “women” by their sexual partners. Upon reflection, Abbott comments that “those attributes I called feminine a moment ago were not feminine in any way as it appears in the real female sex. These attributes seem now merely a tendency to need, to depend on another man” (qtd. in Halperin 272). Womanhood, from Abbott’s and his fellow prisoners’ perspectives, is inherently tied to men, something that cannot be defined absent from its connection to men. Simone de Beauvoir captures this perspective too, citing Benda in his *Rapport d’Uriel*, where he states “The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance itself... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man” (qtd. in de Beauvoir 13).

#### Thanks A Lot, Freud

One of the most prominent voices on the importance of man in defining woman has been Sigmund Freud. In “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinctions Between the Sexes,” he lays out a theory of girls developing “penis envy” when they first see a boy’s genitalia and realize that they don’t have one. He claims that a girl then develops “like a scar, a sense of inferiority” and begins to understand “her lack of a penis as being a personal punishment to herself” (674). Based on Freud’s theories, penises are so inherently superior to vaginas that a child would immediately recognize her own inadequacy for lack of possessing a penis. To him, a woman is automatically defined by her inferiority to men due to her biological makeup.

Freud’s work, unfortunately, has had lasting, widespread influences on our understanding of sex and the human body. Anne Koedt confronts Freud’s wrongheaded theories of female sexuality in “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.” Ignoring biological proof that the clitoris is

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the center of female pleasure and that the vagina is not a highly sensitive area, Freud “contended that the clitoral orgasm was adolescent, and that upon puberty, when women began having intercourse with men, women should transfer the center of orgasm to the vagina” (Koedt 199). Not surprisingly, Freud noted a phenomenon of women struggling with frigidity, or an inability to orgasm. Rather than correct his guidelines on how women should be having sex, Freud claimed that a frigid woman “was suffering from failure to mentally adjust to her ‘natural’ role as a woman” (Koedt 200). Translation: women’s bodies are there to help men have pleasurable sex, and there is no room for a woman’s sexual pleasure in the bedroom. The “natural” role for a woman in Freud’s mind is someone who ignores her own desires in service of the desires of her male partner.

Woman has been defined historically by biological characteristics. This is because men have set themselves up as the dominant group, and in order to rationalize their position at the top of the social hierarchy, they need to point to a clear difference between them and women. The presence or absence of a penis is the plainest distinction between the two sexes, and as a result it has served as the major point of justification for the subordination of women. But we have seen that simply considering biological features such as a penis or a menstrual cycle excludes many women from the definition. A biological perspective on defining woman is too limited to capture 50% of the global population. Since men have historically been the ones allowed to work in scientific professions such as biology and psychology, most historical definitions of woman have been created by men. This is an interesting fact to note, given that the people defining woman have had no lived experience of actually being a woman. Rather than relying on biased and sometimes uninformed scientific perspectives, woman can better be defined by understanding their historical experiences moving through the world.

#### Experiences of Women

Returning to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, we see a focus on the experience of women in defining womanhood. She points out how we are often warned that femininity is fading, and we are urged to act like women and remain women. “It would appear, then,” she writes, “that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (11). For de

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Beauvoir, womanhood is defined by one's engagement with femininity, an attribute that connects to behavior and how we are treated but is difficult to specifically pin down. Due to our subordination to men historically, women's shared trait of femininity may best be exemplified by a (forced) dependence on men.

#### Medicine vs Women (Late 1800s – Early 1900s)

Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English present an explanation of how men managed to keep women subordinated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*. They detail how wives of affluent men lived a life of enforced leisure, since this served as proof of their husbands' wealth and high-class status. But "the boredom and confinement of affluent women fostered a morbid cult of hypochondria," and doctors quickly pounced on this culture for financial gain, making constant diagnoses to ensure their client base as repeated patients (55). Plus, the prevailing medical view on women's health at the time "identified *all* female functions as *inherently* sick," including puberty, pregnancy, and menstruation (55). When tuberculosis began spreading and women demonstrated a higher susceptibility to it, this only helped to solidify the connection between affluent women and illness.

Eventually, "not only were women seen as sickly – sickliness was seen as feminine" (57). Ehrenreich's and English's history of affluent women's interactions with the medical establishment provide background to the longstanding argument that women are weaker than men. But, while for the wealthy, being a woman meant leisure and constant treatment of minor or nonexistent ailments, working-class women had opposite experiences during this time.

Working-class women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States did not have the time or funds to indulge in the hypochondriac culture, or often even to treat serious illnesses. Missing one day of work could cost women their jobs, and "Employers gave no time off for pregnancy or recovery from childbirth, much less for menstrual periods, though the wives of these same employers often retired to bed on all these occasions" (98). Diseases spread more commonly in working class areas due to this lack of access to medical



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care, and working-class women often took on roles in domestic service and prostitution, which put them in direct contact with wealthier people. There was a panic among the middle- and upper-class that the working class were therefore dangerous. Typhoid Mary “epitomized the fear that *all* working-class women represented: they might *look* innocently robust and healthy, but who knew, finally, what dread disease they harbored” (116). To be a working-class woman in this period was to be underserved by medical and healthcare institutions and then targeted as unhygienic and dangerous.

Simultaneously, and because of the lack of healthcare, birth rates were higher in working-class communities, which contained more Black and brown populations. Margaret Sanger saw birth control as an opportunity for population control, declaring in 1919 that “More children from the fit, less from the unfit – that is the chief issue of birth control” (qtd. in Ehrenreich and English, 131-132). Sanger effectively promoted a racist and classist campaign that brought birth control to the United States. While contraceptives themselves have given countless women freedom and control over their bodies, it is important to acknowledge that the path we took to get there was rooted in hate and discrimination towards women of color.

The body has been the site of intense scrutiny in the hegemonic culture’s attempts to clarify who falls into dominant or subordinated groups, and Black women have historically been targeted more than other groups. Siobhan Somerville presents evidence of these practices in “Sexology in Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desire.” She notes that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an obsession in the scientific world with analyzing human bodies in an attempt to prove that anatomy influenced intellect and behavior. “Supported by the cultural authority of an ostensibly objective scientific method, these readings of the body became a powerful instrument for those seeking to justify the economic and political disenfranchisement of various racial groups within systems of slavery and colonialism” (64). Just as Fausto-Sterling revealed with the classification of the sexes, hegemonic culture wielded the medical establishment as a tool to justify the classification of people into separate groups with separate rights.

Black women are often hypersexualized, and Somerville traces the root of that stereotype to such medical practices. In 1867, W.H. Flower and James Murie conducted a study of

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comparative sexual and reproductive anatomy between European and Black women. They determined that there was a notable difference in the African female body, and they implied that it was “located in its literal excess, a specific sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of the ‘normal’ female” (Somerville 65). This adds to a lineage of wrongful experimentation with Black women’s bodies and this scientific racism promoted a bigoted view of Black women as abnormal, monolithic, and hypersexual. Worse, the vestiges of these conclusions are still felt today, as Black women still often receive insufficient healthcare treatment based on incorrect assumptions about their bodies (Zaragovia).

#### Wartime Women (1900 – 1940s)

As the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hosted two World Wars, the accounts of wartime women from Judy Barrett Litoff’s *American Women in a World at War* provide important information surrounding women’s experiences in this time. During World War II, military groups like WAC, SPARS, and WAVES were made for women to contribute to the war effort. For many, it was the first time seeing such large numbers of women in the public sphere performing duties outside of homemaking. One female member of the SPARS, the women’s Coast Guard group, documented her feelings that:

“Men, all men, regarded as one great big awkward group, protested longly and loudly that they didn’t care for ‘women in uniform.’ We knew that, and didn’t expect them to care for us collectively. What man cares for women as a group anyway? Individual men cared for individual women in uniform, and that was all that mattered to us.” (qtd. in Litoff 63)

For these women to don uniforms and take on the traditionally male responsibilities of piloting planes, operating weaponry, and building machines was a massive shift in gender roles, and they were not always welcomed into these male-dominated arenas. Still, some were happy to have women helping out in the war effort in these new ways. In response to being asked if he missed dresses and flowers on women in WAVES, one man said “‘Girls are girls, whatever they dress themselves up in’” (qtd. in Litoff 45). The war brought about a necessary change which made room for women to contribute in newer, more expanded ways.

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#### Women and the Nuclear Family (1950s)

The 1950s are widely remembered as a pro-family time, with popular television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* glorifying the nuclear families of this era. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz explores the behavioral expectations of the 1950s in regard to dating and sexual morality. She writes that “The new practice of going steady ‘widened the boundaries of permissible sexual activity,’ creating a ‘sexual brinksmanship’ in which women bore the burden of ‘drawing the line...’” (40). As always, women were expected to be of sexual service to men, but allowing men too much access to their bodies could leave them branded as tramps. By the 1950s, “Men no longer bore the responsibility of ‘saving themselves for marriage;’ this was now exclusively a woman’s job... it was now considered ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ for men to be sexually aggressive” (40). While men were given freedom to feel and act on their sexual desires, women were left with a sexual double standard to satisfy men without crossing moral boundaries. The practice of going steady was expected to lead to marriage, where the man again would have control over the sexual experiences of both husband and wife.

#### The Old Ball and Chain (1980s)

Indeed, much of women’s roles historically have forced their dependence on men and required them to serve men. Laws restricting women’s access to jobs, labor unions, credit cards, and abortions have necessitated their reliance on men for financial assistance. In “Family as a Locus of Struggle,” Heidi Hartmann addresses how these institutional acts gave men control over women. As she explains, “[Men’s] control of women’s labor power is the lever that allows men to benefit from women’s provision of personal and household services, including relief from child rearing and many unpleasant tasks both within and beyond households...” (372). The institution of the nuclear family solidified the role of women as homemakers.

Writing in 1981, Hartmann cites a study by Meissner and his associates which found that on either of the days they reported, 86% of wives had spent some time cleaning the house, while only 26% of husbands had done the same. Further, 93% of wives contributed 2.5 hours per week to cooking, compared to only 27% of husbands (379). Historically, as demonstrated by

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this data, the expectation for middle- and upper-class women was primarily to cook and clean so that their husbands did not have to. Their performance of femininity and embodiment of womanhood was centered around serving men.

Of course, this servitude to men as part of the woman's role in the nuclear family would be upturned if women were to partner with each other rather than with men. Adrienne Rich explains in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence" exactly why heterosexuality has become such a foundational institution in our culture. Rich posits that "the enforcement of heterosexuality for women [serves] as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access" (13). One important form of enforcement is "the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility," which restricts the liberation and unification of women as a group (Rich 13). The institution of heterosexuality sets the expectation from birth for a woman to marry a man and erases other options. As a result, many women convince themselves that is what they truly desire and buy into it, rather than recognizing the truth and revolting against their subordination.

Rich interrogates the common assumption that "most women are innately heterosexual," instead suggesting that for many women, it's possible that "heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force" (14). It may be hard for many women to separate which of their feelings towards men are innate and which are learned from years of exposure to popular culture and societal propaganda. Women have married men for economic stability, to have a child without socially ostracizing themselves, to remain respectable, and because straight romance is the pinnacle of female achievement. Certainly love has also played a role in marriages, but naming these other factors brings to the surface some of the potentially subconscious motivators women have held for getting married. The invisibility of this cultural influence is an extremely effective asset to heterosexual and male dominance – if left unrecognized, it is impossible to dismantle.

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#### Today

Women today have expanded access to financial freedom, voting rights, and living arrangements that do not require men. Still, the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court reminds us that our rights to our own bodies are always under threat. The #MeToo movement gave women a public outlet to share their experiences of sexual assault, and while it's important that women are vocal about these situations, this only proved how much work still needs to be done in ensuring women equal rights to a safe existence.

#### Challenges and Changes

It can be dangerous to try and define a category of woman at all, and especially problematic if this definition is based on how woman differs from man. As Judith Butler asks in "Gender Imitation and Subordination," "What does it mean to *avow* a category that can only maintain its specificity and coherence by performing a prior set of *disavowals*?" (431). The desire to set such clear boundaries between men and women and position us against each other limits how we are allowed to act as either gender. Joan Scott addresses this same point in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," writing that "the idea of masculinity rests on the necessary repression of feminine aspects" (1063). We have constructed boxes of acceptable behaviors for man and woman, and there is little overlap between the two. In doing this, we force the restraint of certain traits to make ourselves fit into the boxes we have built for men and women.

To me, one does not need to adhere to the societal expectations of the gendered feminine traits to be a woman. As woman is an identity, anyone who earnestly claims that label for themselves is a woman in my eyes, since we are in no position to be declaring someone else's identity for them. We have historically used biology as a marker of womanhood, but, as evidenced above, there are many flaws to this approach. The benefit that this approach afforded us was that we could typically look at someone and know right away whether or not they were a woman, and we as humans have grown accustomed to feeling entitled to assuming such information about someone. With the expansion of the category of woman beyond biology, we must get used to not always knowing how someone identifies and develop habits of asking someone before assuming.

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The challenge with the identity label of woman lies in the assertion of woman as its own unique category. Monique Wittig outlines this in “One Is Not Born a Woman,” where she celebrates the feminist movement of the 1950s for standing up and fighting for a sexless society:

“Now,” however, “we find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of ‘woman is wonderful...’ What the concept of ‘woman is wonderful’ accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ which are political categories and not natural givens.” (Wittig 267)

In other words, contemporary feminists who highlight specific traits of women in order to justify our equal rights are essentially playing into the trap of separating women from men. Wittig finds this approach problematic, as it leaves us fighting for women as a class to be treated better, rather than for the eradication of women as a necessary class entirely.

This myth of a woman and the attempt to fight for it as a class upholds “the illogical principle of ‘equality in difference’” (Wittig 268). In practice, equality in difference has manifested as a “natural” division of labor between men and women that has confined women to the home and the private sphere, affording men sole ownership over public life. Sources discussed earlier such as *Complaints and Disorders* and “Family as a Locus of Struggle” reinforce this point. Americans have long tried to set up systems that claim to be “separate but equal” and we know from history that equality has never been the result. While it is important for women to form an alliance and support one another, it can be dangerous to do so on the grounds that women are an eternal, natural category of the world rather than a socioeconomically created one.

Interestingly, when self-identified men and women reject heterosexuality, they are often stripped of their membership to the categories of man and woman. Sexuality plays a uniquely modifying role in our life experiences.

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#### From Woman to Queer

The social hierarchy and categories of our culture are often maintained through the use of harmful words, and this is especially the case with gender. Michael Kimmel summarizes this behavior in “Bros Before Hoes: The Guy Code.” He explains that “Our peers are a kind of ‘gender police,’ always waiting for us to screw up so they can give us a ticket for crossing the well-drawn boundaries of manhood” (612). When they do, they are pushed back in with words like “sissy” or “faggot.” Kimmel cites an interview with Eminem explaining why he so often uses the slur in his raps: “The lowest degrading thing you can say to a man when you’re battling him is to call him a faggot and try to take away his manhood... Faggot to me doesn’t necessarily mean gay people. Faggot to me just means taking away your manhood” (qtd. in Kimmel 620). While Eminem claims his use of the slur has no connection to homosexuality, Kimmel makes the important connection that for many men, “homosexuality becomes a kind of shorthand for ‘unmanliness,’” and that homophobia is “at least as much about masculinity as it is about sexuality” (614).

Again, the point of calling someone these words is to keep their behavior in line. The word lesbian similarly weaponized, as explained by the RadicalLesbians in 1970. When a woman is called a lesbian, “she knows she that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. She recoils, she protests, she reshapes her actions to gain approval” (154). There is a difference in the impact of the word faggot compared to words like lesbian or dyke, and this difference is illustrated in “the grudging admiration felt for the tomboy, and the queasiness felt around a sissy boy....” Both cases demonstrate “the contempt in which women – or those who play a female role – are held” (154). Men are called faggots when they step out of their box at the top of the social order – it is used to maintain the strength of the current hierarchy and encourage masculine supremacy. To the same end, “Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal... who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs” (154). Women who step beyond their boxes threaten to uproot the social order and give women independence outside of men, and this is discouraged through the use of words like lesbian and dyke.

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These words “imply that you are not playing your socially assigned sex role... are not therefore a ‘real woman’ or a ‘real man’” (154). It appears that one of the most important aspects of playing one’s socially assigned sex role is to partner with the opposite sex. Participating in heterosexuality therefore proves essential to our current and historical social order, which warrants an investigation into the experiences of those who do not conform to this standard, most easily categorized by the label “queer.”

## **QUEER**

### **Defining Queer**

Queer is a difficult word to define because of the changes in its meaning and usage historically. There is evidence of the word queer in the English language as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where it was used to refer to something strange, odd, peculiar, or illegitimate (Oxford English Dictionary). Any connection to homosexuality was still absent when used in these cases, as people often referred to others as queer fellows without intending anything relating to their sexual identity. Around the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, queer developed a stronger negative connotation. The phrase “queer street” was used to describe being in a bad situation, often financially, and can be found as early as the 1886 publication of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (OED).

Though queer as a derogatory term was common in the 1900s, the earliest documented instance of the word queer as a specifically homophobic form of abuse came in 1894, when the Marquess of Queensberry accused Oscar Wilde of having an affair with his son (Barker). A 1922 document from the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor contains the first known official use of the word queer to mean homosexual: “A young man, easily ascertainable to be unusually fine in other characteristics, is probably ‘queer’ in sexual tendency” (OED). In public, the word queer by this time had extended to include things that were not just odd but suspicious, like when it was used in the phrase “queer as a three-dollar bill,” a colloquialism from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In employing the word queer in this way, people made things questionable by associating them with same-sex attraction. Modern day examples can be found in phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “that’s sus.” The original usages of queer



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relating to illegitimacy and suspiciousness heavily influenced the experiences of queer people throughout the history of the United States, which will be discussed later.

The queer community did not always self-label with the word “queer.” From 1952-1973, homosexuality was listed in the DSM as a mental disorder. Many homosexual people at this time took an assimilationist approach, seeking pity as a path towards acceptance for their predilection towards those of the same sex. The Stonewall riots of 1969 ignited a movement of liberationists who adopted the word “gay” instead. Rather than trying not to take up too much space or be too visible, these gay people opted to emphasize “pride over pity, choice over essentialism, and liberation over assimilation” (Barker 51).

In *Why Marriage?*, George Chauncey writes that the 1960s and 1970s brought a change in the gay movement which involved “publicly affirming, celebrating, and even cultivating homosexual difference. In doing so, it was deeply influenced by the growth of Black cultural nationalism, which rejected assimilation in favor of encouraging pride in Black cultural difference” (29). Throughout Black history in the United States, it has remained true that white mainstream culture has been reluctant to appreciate, credit, and affirm the work of Black people. Instead of relying on external validation from dominant culture, Black people learned to take pride in themselves and practice self-affirmation. A prominent example is the reclamation of the n-word. Some of the first public reclamations of the n-word occurred in the title of Dick Gregory’s autobiography and during stand-up comedy shows by Richard Pryor in 1964 (Popa-Watt, 4). Gay people embraced the term queer in the 1980s and 90s as a symbol of radical activism in response to the lackluster support from the United States government throughout the AIDS epidemic. Certainly, the reclamation of the word queer was informed and inspired by this act of political resistance by the Black community.

Indeed, the reclamation of “queer” has been a powerful act of resistance and self-definition for many and for the community as a whole. While slurs aim to assign a low power and low value role to their target, this weapon can be disarmed by those who co-opt the term to self-refer in non-derogatory ways, as Mihaela Popa-Watt argues in “Reclamation: Taking Back Control of Words.” Popa-Watt cites experiments by Galinsky et al. which found that “positive self-labelling increases both individual and group power, as well as their perceived power by

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others... reclaimed slurs are then perceived less negatively after self-labelling” (3).

Reclaiming words both weakens the power of those words to be used as weapons against a group and imbues a sense of ownership and power in the new users.

But theorist Judith Butler takes issue with the idea that we can ever fully own or reclaim a term like “queer” in her essay “Critically Queer.” To Butler, speech acts gain their validity and power through citations of previous, similar acts – much like how a judge’s decision gains credibility through the citational legacy of previous, similar decisions. To this end, “no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force” (227). “Queer” as a weapon or insult therefore “derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult” throughout history (226). Any utterance of queer would carry with it the prior historical meaning of the word. Even as people today proudly affix this term to their self-identity, Butler importantly argues that we cannot completely control the definition of queer due to its historical uses.

Today, queer has become an umbrella term referring to anyone who rejects or refuses to participate in heterosexuality and/or the gender binary. The two often go hand in hand, since the institution of heterosexuality requires a binary understanding of gender where one can exclusively be male or female, as I’ll elaborate on later. Queer has extensive uses in language today. It can be used as a noun, as in, “we need more queers on Bryant’s campus.” This is less common because, to Butler’s point, historically the use of queer as a noun was launched as an insult, so it can still be painful for some people to hear it used in this way. Queer can also be used as an adjective, which is likely the most common form today. People might describe the queer community, their queer relationship, or themselves as a queer woman.

Finally, queer can be a verb, as in “to queer something.” In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner writes that “We queer things when we resist ‘regimes of the normal’: the ‘normative’ ideals of aspiring to be normal in identity, behavior, appearance, relationships, etc.” (xxvi). We can queer an institution or a common understanding by proving how strange they are and delegitimizing them. Queer theorists prefer this usage, working from the understanding that queer is something we *do*, not something that we *are*.

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#### Before Sexuality

In fact, this perspective of queer as an *act* rather than a type of person was the prevailing understanding for many centuries, as explored by David Halperin in “Is There a History of Sexuality?”. Halperin defines our collective contemporary understanding of sexuality as a “positive, distinct, and constitutive feature of the human personality, to the characterological seat within the individual of sexual acts, desires, and pleasures – the determinant source from which all sexual expression proceeds” (259). Essentially, we believe that our sexual behavior reflects some inner trait we call “sexuality,” and we attempt to categorize people based on this. But in ancient times, sexual acts were not considered a result of some inner essence connected to psychology and personality; in other words, there was no sexuality as we understand it today.

Ancient Athenians viewed sex as a representation of domination and the social hierarchy, expressed through penetration. A key difference between classical Athens and today is that “erotic desires and sexual object-choice in antiquity were generally not determined by a typology of anatomical sexes (male versus female), but rather by the social articulation of power (superordinate versus subordinate)” (Halperin 264). The superordinate group contained adult males (as penetrators) and they could only have legitimate sexual relations with those from the subordinate group (penetrated), which included women, adolescents, foreigners, and slaves. It was commonplace and accepted for men to have sex with teenage boys, and there was no implication of this signifying homosexuality nor pedophilia. Importantly, sex in classical Athens reproduced and reinforced the established social hierarchy of its society. As Halperin puts it, “‘Sexuality,’ for cultures not shaped by some very recent European and American bourgeois developments, is not a cause but an effect. The social body precedes the sexual body” (263).

Of course, not everyone abided by those expectations in ancient Greece. There were women who sought sex with other women and men who wanted to be penetrated by other men. Athenian society took issue with this because the desire of a man to be penetrated by another man “represents a voluntary abandonment of the culturally constructed masculine identity in favor of the culturally constructed feminine one” (Halperin 268). This demonstrates the

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patriarchal nature of this culture, as it appears that they could not understand why someone would possibly choose to align with femininity when they were granted all the privileges of being a man. The fact that gay men still face criticism for abandoning their rights to have sex with women reveals how we have yet to completely abandon this patriarchal mindset.

Yet, in ancient Athens, there was still not a label for these men and women like the word “homosexual” – rather, it was assumed that they had previously experienced “proper” sexual desire or would eventually reach that point in the future. In classical Athenian society, “certain kinds of sexual *acts* could be individually evaluated and categorized, and so could certain sexual tastes or inclinations, but there was no conceptual apparatus available for identifying a person’s fixed and determinate sexual *orientation*” (Halperin 269). They understood that there was incredible variation in terms of sexual preferences, and therefore did not bother to assess nor classify each type with labels. They did, however, set clear expectations of what kinds of sexual behaviors were proper and improper, and this was based on reestablishing the social hierarchy.

#### The Invention of Heterosexuality and Homosexuality

Sexuality as we know it today is often understood as a spectrum between two opposing poles of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Many still view heterosexuality as the normal or default sexuality and homosexuality as an aberration, but this view of heterosexuality as “normal” is only as recent as the last hundred years. Brandon Ambrosino provides an important history lesson into this perspective on sexuality in “The Invention of ‘Heterosexuality.’”

Before sexuality was split between heterosexual and homosexual, it was categorized as procreative or non-procreative. We may recognize this approach from biblical laws, which viewed both masturbation and non-procreative sex as a waste of life-bearing seed, but its origins are actually rooted in Stoicism. The Stoics valued regulating emotion for the sake of inner peace, and this required curbing self-indulgences like sexual excess. To convince people to follow these behavioral expectations, they framed sex as moral only if it was procreative, pushing for a “conjugal-reproductive ethic” (Ambrosino 5).

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As a result of such moral guidelines, the 1901 definition of heterosexuality in Dorland's Medical Dictionary was "abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex." Similarly, Merriam Webster's dictionary in 1923 defined heterosexuality as "morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex." Only in 1934 did heterosexuality gain the definition we may recognize today of "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality" (Ambrosino 2). This definition is still problematic because it claims that there is a normal sexuality, and the phrase "the opposite sex" is a falsehood, because, as Anne-Fausto Sterling proves, there are more than two sexes.

The terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were first coined by Hungarian journalist Karl Maria Kertbeny in the late 1860s, but those words weren't first published until 1880, and did not gain public notice until an 1889 publication by early sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Though in the West at this time sex was still viewed through the Stoic lens, Krafft-Ebing importantly admitted that "In sexual love the real purpose of the instinct, the propagation of the species, does not enter the consciousness" (qtd. in Ambrosino 6). This was a revolutionary comment to make because it opened the idea that sex could be for pleasure rather than just procreation, and this view of sexual erotic desire quickly became the norm.

Hanne Blank provides a history of the invention and flourishing of heterosexuality as a societal norm, arguing that it directly corresponds with the rise of the middle class in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. In villages and small neighborhoods, people had long policed each other on behavior, especially sexual behavior, to keep people in line with cultural expectations. But the turn of the century brought an influx of people to cities, and these people brought their sexual perversions with them, leading to a rise in prostitution and eroticism. This surge made it impossible to perform the same policing as before, as small-town gossip could no longer reach enough of the population. "Because the increasing public awareness of these sexual practices paralleled the influx of lower classes into cities, 'urban sexual misconduct was typically, if inaccurately, blamed' on the working class and poor" (qtd. in Ambrosino 7). The middle class needed a way to differentiate themselves and their sexual behavior from the "perversions" they saw in the lower class, which contributed to the creation of heterosexuality as a norm. This is the same pattern that we've seen in every other social hierarchy – to justify

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their position as superior, the middle and upper classes labeled themselves as one thing (heterosexual) and simultaneously set up another, inferior category as comparison (homosexual).

Heterosexuality came to be viewed as an achievement of proper sexual development, largely thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud and his theories of the Oedipus and Electra complexes. The path Freud imagines requires both murderous and incestual mindsets from children on their way towards a successful heterosexuality, but much of society willingly accepted this story as believable. In 1948, sexologist Alfred Kinsey published a groundbreaking study of male sexual behavior which revealed that most men had engaged in some form of same-sex sexual acts in their lifetime. While this publication importantly helped us understand that there were sexualities that existed in between heterosexual and homosexual, it also cemented the idea that sexuality is divided in between those two poles.

As this history demonstrates, heterosexuality is as much a societal construction as gender, and has played a moralizing role in our culture to signal proper behavior in comparison to the deviant actions of homosexuality. But ancient cultures like Athens survived perfectly fine without the idea of such social categories, so it is incorrect and dangerous for us to believe that heterosexuality is a real, fixed characteristic of the world. If we insist on categorizing people based on their sexual behavior, it should be based on how nature *is*, rather than making categories to fit how we think nature *ought* to be.

### The Homosexual Species

With the invention of heterosexuality and homosexuality came the labeling of people as homosexuals. Historically, there had always been people who engaged in gay sex, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were branded with the name of homosexual. As Michel Foucault explains in “The History of Sexuality,” “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Rather than criticizing the act of sodomy, which had been done for centuries, we now began to criticize the person themselves.

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As the concept of sexuality gained popularity, it simultaneously appeared to gain power and control over a person. For the newly designated homosexual, “nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle... It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature” (Foucault 43). It is interesting that this perspective of sexuality as all-consuming has become an accepted view, since history proves both how recent and how fabricated sexuality is. Still, declared a deviant from the rest of society for something as simple as a difference in erotic desire, the homosexual faced various discriminatory practices throughout United States history.

#### Detecting the Homosexual

Foucault discusses that since sexuality had gained such cultural significance, “one had to try and detect it... among all the signs of behavior. The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes...” (44). A historical application of such attempts to detect the homosexual came with United States immigration and military policies. In *The Straight State*, Margot Canaday writes that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during World War I, the army adopted practices common to the Bureau of Immigration that involved visually examining potential recruits to identify the undesirable ones, or ones who appeared to be homosexual. “Military screening guidelines from the war years warned that the ‘degenerate male physique as a whole is often marked by diminished stature and inferior vigor,’ and factors such as gait, shape of shoulders, and amount of hair were closely scrutinized (62).

The military soon realized that homosexuality may not be immediately identifiable on a visual level, and thus added an intellectual approach. More than just sexual degenerates, “‘Homosexuals,’ stated a report on neuropsychiatry during the First World War, ‘constitute a more or less typical group’ of psychopaths” (Canaday 65-66). The army and navy thus developed questionnaires relating to personality to “inquire into sex habits” of potential recruits, with questions such as “Were you ever shy with boys? Do you have too many sexual dreams? ... Did you ever make love to a girl? Did you ever think you had lost your manhood?” (66-67). This crusade to identify homosexuals and eliminate them from the

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military demonstrates the priorities of the United States government – it was more important to ridicule and exclude gay people from service than it was to have a strong number of military personnel. It also reveals the influence sexuality had gained in the public sphere and how far we had come from simply criticizing the act of sodomy.

After World War II, the military distributed some of the largest benefits ever seen in our country through the G.I. Bill, which afforded veterans unprecedented access to higher education and housing. But these benefits were not provided to people who had been dishonorably discharged. 5,000 blue slips signaling undesirable discharges due to homosexuality were distributed by the army and 4,000 by the navy during World War II. “While the discharge was also given to drug addicts, bed wetters, alcoholics, and African American soldiers who challenged segregation, its association with homosexuality made it especially damaging for those who received it” (148). There was fear that the blue discharge and subsequent “denial of rights and benefits stigmatized undesirably discharged soldiers so severely that they were unable to reenter society,” as the charge often followed them throughout the rest of their years (Canaday 154). Just as sexuality was viewed as something that controlled every aspect of someone’s behavior, homosexuality was punished through many aspects of someone’s life opportunities.

The military worked closely with immigration services during this time, and both took these extreme steps to repress the presence of the homosexual in the United States. Determining who can and cannot be a citizen of our country is always a practice in inclusion and exclusion that directly confesses who we value. Canaday writes that “As the state moved to enfranchise women and dismantle Jim Crow, it was gradually working to construct a boundary in law and policy that by midcentury explicitly defined the homosexual as the anticitizen” (9). Aliens could be deported for engaging in homoerotic behavior, and the same visual examination tactics employed by the military to weed out undesirable recruits were practiced by immigration services.

In the early 1950s, an official immigration law passed that barred aliens suspected of homosexuality from entering the country. “That apparatus did not bar immigrants on the basis of pervasion per se, but instead relied on the ‘likely to become a public charge’ clause of the



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immigration law” as justification for their exclusion or deportation. This argument was sometimes further buttressed under the “provision barring immigrants who had committed ‘crimes of moral turpitude,’ or later and much more rarely, the prohibition against ‘constitutional psychopathic inferiors’” (Canaday 21). Some of the most powerful branches of the federal bureaucracy, the military and immigration, signaled the virtues of the United States through these incredibly offensive and discriminatory practices against homosexuals.

In effect, such military and immigration policies encouraged people to stay in the closet rather than freely express their sexuality. As Canaday writes in her conclusion:

“The closet, after all, was a deliberate state strategy that became increasingly explicit toward the end of the century. Its brilliance was in inviting people to pass and then suggesting that they suffered no harm because they could hide. Yet the incitement to pass was part of the harm, and so much more effectively did the state shape the citizenry by letting people in under certain conditions than by keeping them out absolutely.” (Canaday 256)

Military and immigration policies attempting to identify homosexuals before granting them access to state benefits were clearly ineffective, but they didn’t need to work perfectly. The federal bureaucracy could communicate expectations of proper behavior under the risk of punishment for sexual deviants, so although homosexuals could not be entirely excluded, they could sometimes still be threatened into hiding their sexuality.

### **Challenges and Changes**

The word queer carries many challenges with it due to its rich history and the variety of meanings it has held. From its very first definition, queer has been associated with illegitimacy and suspicion, and we see practices throughout history attempting to detect queer people and exclude us from certain rights and benefits. While many today seek to reclaim it as a positive term and a self-identifying label, its historical use as an attack and slur is difficult to overcome.

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As Judith Butler notes in “Critically Queer,” queer has been deployed for the “producing of a subject *through* the shaming interpellation... This interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts ‘queer!’” (226). For this reason, Butler doubts that the reclamation of the term can ever usurp its historical operation as an insult. She recognizes the power in naming ourselves and controlling how those names are used, but she is also realistic in noting our limitations on the meaning of such labels both historically and in the future.

Butler reminds us that:

“The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.”  
(Butler 227-228)

For queer to perform political work, we will have to accept that we can never fully own it nor erase its historical significance – we may only redeploy it.

Butler also laments that while queer is an expansive term, it has often signaled a predominantly white movement and has been insufficient and exclusionary for people of color and other communities. For example, the gay rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s used assimilationist techniques to try and gain acceptance from broader society. But while this may have worked for white, middle-class, educated gay people, other queer people whose queerness was not their only marginalized trait were left out and underserved by this queer movement. Due to examples like this, Butler predicts that “queer” will eventually need to be replaced with words that perform political work more effectively.

Still, queer serves as an important term for many of us in the modern age. As heterosexuality and homosexuality have been positioned opposite to each other, the label “queer” allows us to signal that we do not identify as heterosexual without having to give more specifics about where we fall on the sexuality spectrum. As people who have often faced exclusion for our

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sexualities, having a name for our group gives us a unifying term for our coalition and allyship. Plus, it is significantly shorter than the ever-expanding LGBTQIA+ terminology. Labels can often feel like boxes that trap us, and the label queer provides much more flexibility and room for exploration than other terms. Since queer is such an expansive category, it leaves room for more and more people to stand under the umbrella. This strengthens a group often marginalized due to its limited numbers and dispels the narrative of queerness as abnormal or deviant from normal sexuality.

Further, queer performs important work when used as a verb. Queer theory is defined by Stein and Plummer as “a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations and analyses... breaking of boundaries around gender/the erotic/the interpersonal, and a plea for dissidence” (369). To queer our cultural systems of thought around gender, sexuality, and behavior is to conduct essential questioning of our societal norms. Queering is the antidote to social constructs that confine our life outcomes and is the path towards a freer, more natural existence. So while there is still some dissidence surrounding the effectiveness of the identity label of queer, the word queer itself carries significant power to change our culture.

#### From Queer to Jewish

Much of the queer experience has related to avoiding detection while trying to simultaneously be proud of who you are. Like how Jewish people were tattooed during the Holocaust to visibly mark them as Jewish, there was discussion of doing the same with HIV-positive people during the AIDS epidemic. Both groups have celebrated their existence and proudly fought against repeated attempts to eradicate their existences.

## **JEWISH**

#### Defining Jewish

In defining the word “Jewish,” one may be tempted to turn to biology and bloodlines. Since, according to Jewish law, Judaism traditionally passes matrilineally, it is typically accepted that if your mother is Jewish, then you are Jewish. This religious inheritance passes through the mother because of the two involved in the creation of the baby, you can only be 100%

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certain of who the mother is. But, just as biology is too limiting in defining “woman” because it excludes transgender women, bloodlines cannot fully be relied upon in defining “Jewish” because people can convert to Judaism at any point in their lives. Additionally, an important distinction needs to be made between being Jewish and *living* Jewishly. While one can technically inherit their Jewish identity, the experiences are different for those who were born Jewish by blood compared to those who were raised Jewish with tradition. Just as with the words woman and queer, there may be some shared qualities between everyone who identifies as Jewish, but the experiences with that label are different for everyone.

I was raised by two Jewish parents and so Judaism was part of my childhood. My father was raised by relatively religious parents. His father is my Zayde - Zayde is the Yiddish term for grandfather, while Bubbe is the word for grandmother. Yiddish is a language commonly used by Jewish people in the German region prior to the Holocaust, and many Jews today still use some Yiddish words here and there. Zayde is one of the most religious people I know, and he says that a Jew is someone whose mother was Jewish, though he also accepts people who convert later in life.

#### Who Counts as A Good Jew?

There are competing opinions on what it means to be a good Jew, or if such a concept even exists at all. As Emily Tamkin writes in *Bad Jews*, “...being Jewish - like being anything - can mean many things... consider the strengths and weaknesses of labels. How limiting they can be. And, at the same time, how much room is in them, how much elasticity to stretch and shape them into what you want them to be” (9). For my paternal grandfather, my Zayde, being a good Jew means trying your best to follow the 613 commandments. He expects a Jewish person to marry another Jewish person and have kids in order to continue the Jewish lineage. He also feels that when you are the only Jewish person in a group of gentiles (non-Jewish people), you should do your best to act like a Jew and disprove negative stereotypes that people hold towards Jews. By acting like a Jew, he clarifies that you should be warm, open, and helpful to others.

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Zayde's wife, my paternal grandmother, has been part of Zayde's Jewish experiences since they got married, but still has a different perspective on Judaism. While Zayde is quite observant and expects that from other Jews, Grandma tries not to judge other people's ways of being Jewish since she wants to do it her own way. Her mother, my Bubbe, told her "I don't have to go to schul, I'm Jewish in my heart," and that certainly influenced her beliefs. According to the Jewish law, or *halacha*, women don't have to go to schul, so Bubbe's opinion on her role may be influenced by the fact that legally there is only an expectation for men to study the Torah. To my grandmother, a good Jew doesn't have to follow all the commandments. If you go to services and are philanthropic, but you eat pork, you are still a good Jew in her book. To her, a crucial part of being a good Jew is doing what you can when you can and giving what you can when you can.

My maternal grandparents believe that to be a good Jew, you have to start by being a good person. They both were raised Jewish, but spent less time at temple services than my paternal grandparents, which likely has shaped their opinions. My great grandfather used to tell his kids that "God only cares for people to be good. They don't have to be religious; they only have to be good." Still, my maternal grandparents met through Jewish organizations in high school, raised their kids Jewish, and lived mostly in areas that were relatively heavily populated with Jews for the majority of their lives.

My grandparents all agree in the importance of finding a Jewish community. They don't say that being a good Jew means finding a Jewish community, but they all see value in the ability to comfortably be who you are without fear of judgment or persecution. Lots of Jewish holidays are about connection and spending time with close family and friends, so if you are of the belief that participating in Jewish holidays makes you a good Jew, then it would be beneficial to find Jewish community.

### **Shabbat**

Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest that begins at sundown on Friday night and continues until sundown on Saturday night. Shabbat has always been a crucial part of my Zayde's Jewish experience. Growing up, his parents owned a bakery a few streets away from his house. On

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Friday mornings, his mother would carry a pot with chicken over to the bakery and cook it all day long there while they worked. They'd bake a challah, a ceremonial braided bread eaten on many Jewish holidays, and then carry the challah and the chicken soup back home for Shabbat dinner. As he got older and moved away from home, he made sure to call his father every Friday night so they could still share Shabbat together, a tradition that my father has adopted and that Zayde hopes will continue in the family. I typically go to Shabbat dinners on campus at Hillel and join the family call after, and I can easily recognize how special it is for three generations of our family to come together to celebrate the end of the week on Shabbat.

### Tzedakah

The word *tzedakah* is a Hebrew word that translates to “righteousness” or “justice,” but it is commonly used as a word for charitable giving. In most Jewish homes and at every synagogue you will find a tzedakah box – in my Hebrew school classes growing up, we would vote on where we wanted the tzedakah money to go at the end of the year. Tzedakah is a central part of the Jewish faith, as the Torah tells us that we should pursue justice. In Deuteronomy it is written: “Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsmen in your land” (15:11). But we are told by Rabbi Eleazar, “Do not humiliate a beggar... The reward that is paid for charity is directly related to the kindness with which it is given” (Robinson). While all Jewish people who are capable are expected to give tzedakah, some ways of doing so are seen as holier than others.

Maimonides delineated eight levels of tzedakah:

“[1] The greatest level, above which there is no greater, is to support a fellow person by endowing them with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with them, or finding employment for them, in order to strengthen their hand so that they will not need to be dependent upon others.

[2] A lesser level of charity than this is to give to the poor *without knowing to whom one gives, and without the recipient knowing from who he received.*

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[3] A lesser level of charity than this is when one knows to whom one gives, but the *recipient does not know his benefactor*.

[4] A lesser level of charity than this is when *one does not know to whom one gives*, but the poor person does know his benefactor.

[5] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person *directly into his hand*, but gives before being asked.

[6] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person *after being asked*.

[7] A lesser level than this is when one *gives inadequately*, but gives gladly and with a smile.

[8] A lesser level than this is when one *gives unwillingly*.”

(Chabad.org)

This list is quite reminiscent of the classic proverb: “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for life.” What I appreciate about this list is that it encourages charity for the sake of charity, not as a way to feed our own egos. When I spoke to my grandmother about tzedakah, she told me that she always tries to give anonymously so as not to embarrass any recipient, and that part of giving charity for her involves thanking God that she is in a position to give.

There is a common stereotype of Jewish people as greedy money-grabbers, and I find that Maimonides’ list disproves this depiction. He outlined eight full levels of tzedakah, and nowhere does he leave an option *not* to give. The question of tzedakah is not a yes or no, but about how much and to whom the donations should go. I appreciate this aspect of Judaism because it is rooted in our traditions to give money and support to lift up others. In fact, the concept of tithing originated in Judaism. We are instructed to give one tenth of our income to tzedakah - tithe is a Hebrew word meaning tenth. This tradition has been adopted by many others since its origins and is now common among practicing Christians as well as Jews. This

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demonstrates how the popular narrative about Jewish people is incredibly out of touch with the truth of who we are.

In terms of where to give tzedakah, there is ongoing debate in the Jewish community. The Talmud is a record of the debates between rabbis from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries as they attempted to understand exactly what is meant by the words of the Torah and how to apply those teachings to different scenarios. The Talmudic debates began a longstanding tradition of debate, questioning, and learning in Judaism, one of the things I appreciate most about our religion. While *Torah* translates to “instruction,” *Talmud* means “learning,” and asking questions and debating are key to the process of learning for the Jewish people.

In the Talmud it is written: “In the case of a Jew and a non-Jew, the Jew takes precedence; a poor person and a wealthy person, the poor person takes precedence; a poor person of your own city and a poor person of another city, the poor person of your city takes precedence” (Tractate Bava Metzia 71a). My Zayde takes on this opinion; when he and my Grandma choose where to give tzedakah, he wants them to only donate to Jewish organizations. His rationale is that the Jewish population is so small (0.2% of the world population), so if we don’t look out for ourselves, then no one else will. But the Talmud also contains Tractate Gittin 61a, which says: “The rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor along with the Jewish poor and visit the non-Jewish sick along with the Jewish sick and bury the non-Jewish dead along with the Jewish dead for the sake of peace.” Grandma agrees with this perspective, and tries to donate to both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. The Jewish people have a long history of facing persecution, so the belief is that if we only looked out for ourselves and other groups did the same, then we would be in trouble.

### Persecution

When my brother and I think of what it means to be Jewish, one of the first things that we bring up is a history of persecution. Vi-He She-Amda is a passage from the Passover *Haggadah*, which tells the story of the Jews’ exit from Egypt. It reads: “... it is not [only] one [person or nation] that has stood [against] us to destroy us, but rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us” (Markowitz). The term *l’dor v’dor* means “from generation



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to generation” and it is a core practice of Judaism, as each generation is commanded to pass on the story of our people to their children. The Passover seder contains many prayers and songs that we are told to perform, but the most important part of Passover is that the story is told so that the youngest children understand what happened to our people.

The Jewish people are relentless in reminding ourselves and others of how we have been victims of violence throughout history. On the Passover seder plate, we dip bitter herbs in salty water to signify the tears of our ancestors and the bitterness of their slavery. We dramatize it in ways that are almost comical, but how else can one cope with the constant battle to be allowed to exist? See Appendix A for a historical list of the persecution of the Jewish people. The summary of nearly every Jewish holiday could be as simple as: “They tried to erase us, but we survived. Now, let’s eat.”

In *Bad Jews: A History of American Jewish Politics and Identity*, Emily Tamkin defines antisemitism as “the conviction that Jews are forever foreign or alien to whatever population they happen to be in, and often have designs on corrupting that population” (5-6). The most well-known example of antisemitism is the Holocaust, but unfortunately antisemitism is on the rise again in the United States. For one example, when Jon Ossoff ran for one of Georgia’s U.S. Senate seats, some of his campaign advertisement videos were distorted to make his nose appear bigger (Rojas).

#### Stereotypes: Explained

One of the main negative stereotypes about the Jewish people is that we are greedy, which is surprising given the historical tradition in Judaism of charitable giving, as outlined in the section on tzedakah. In the Middle Ages, Christians were forbidden by the Church to lend money for interest, so they could not be the ones working in banks. Jews were barred at this time from many other professional industries such as teaching and medicine, so careers in trading and money-lending were some of the only options available to Jewish people (AJC.org). Since then, the association of Jews with greed has taken off, and the depictions of hook-nosed, greedy Jewish people can be seen in media for centuries (see J.K. Rowling’s goblin bankers from *Harry Potter*, etc.).

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Recently, the conspiracy that Jews run Hollywood has also gained more publicity. Again, this can be traced back to the fact that while other industries had intentional barriers preventing Jewish people from working, Hollywood had not yet developed such a blockade, so entrepreneurial Jewish immigrants found footing wherever they could. It is true that many major movies studios were founded by Jews, like Universal, Paramount, Fox, MGM, and Warner (Lapin). But it is also important to recognize that Jewish people are represented in Hollywood and in money-related industries because we were not allowed to be anywhere else.

### Nationality and Religion

The Jewish people were granted the land of Israel after the Holocaust for this same reason – no country wanted us to live there. I want to address that I recognize how unfair the treatment of Palestinians has been since this time, but simultaneously I want to acknowledge the fact that Jewish people have the land and the spaces that we have because we were denied from everywhere else. The Israel-Palestine debate has me torn and is far too complex to dive into during this thesis, but I mention this conflict because it has been the breeding ground for anti-Israel and anti-Zionist attacks. Both anti-Israel and anti-Zionist efforts work to undermine the right for Jewish people to have their own space and power, delegitimizing the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Israel remains potentially the only country on the planet whose right to actually exist is frequently debated, and this often presents itself in an antisemitic form.

While some people prioritize their nationality over their religion, there are many times in history where Jewish people were not in control of how they were viewed. When Hitler rose to power, many Jews fled from Germany to France and sought citizenship, since French citizens were initially granted protection. A law in July of 1940 stripped over 5,000 Jewish immigrants of their French citizenship, and months later the Law on the Status of Jews “essentially reversed the emancipation granted to the Jews of France and defined Jewish status in accordance with a racial criterion” (Lachmanovich). *The Book of Lost Names*, a novel based on a true story by Kristin Harmel, includes dialogue that sums up the experiences of French Jews. The mother says to her daughter: “But we left Poland. We – we are French.” Her daughter replies: “We are Jews.” Here, being Jewish trumps any connection to a country.

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Still, we are taught as Jews in Pirkei Avot by Rabbi Chanina “Pray for the welfare of the government (lit., monarchy), for if not for fear [of its power], a person would swallow his fellow live” (Pirkei Avot Chapter 3:2). Historically, our own governments have joined or led the persecution against us, such as the Romans or the Nazi regime, but we are encouraged to have faith in non-Jewish governments. There is a principle called *dina d’malchuta dina* in the Bava Batra 55a of the Talmud which nevertheless requires Jews to follow the laws of the lands in which we live (Jachter). There are Shabbat prayers for the success of the U.S. President and for the country, which I think demonstrates an impressive display of faith despite proof of being let down by these systems in the past.

Ben Shapiro has claimed that “the right kind of Jew regularly attends temple and cares first and foremost about Israel” (Tamkin 4). But many people do not share this Zionist perspective. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 Reform movement “explicitly said that Jews were not a nation but a religious community, ‘and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any laws concerning the Jewish state” (Tamkin 20). It is hard to decide whether our nationality or our religion comes first as Jewish people. The Naturalization Act of 1790 declared that only free white people could become United States citizens, so many Jews immigrating to the United States in this time sought to be viewed as white Americans who just happened to worship differently. Generally, this was a successful tactic in gaining rights and privileges, but it did lead some Eastern European rabbis to dissuade Jewish people from going to America for fear that they would lose their faith in their attempt to acculturate.

Certainly, the Jewish people have a long history of being victims of persecution, and that is one of the motivators for our efforts of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, and seeking justice. The Jewish people were essential allies to the Black community during the Civil Rights era, and we have often stood by their side. American Jews aided with the founding of the NAACP, and despite our small numbers, “made up half of the young people who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964” (Religious Action Center).

But Jews have not always been on the right side of history. Dr. Josh Perelman, chief curator at the National Museum of American Jewish history, says that Jews have been both “victims and

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villains of American history” (Tamkin 9). In achieving status as white people, Jews became eligible to own slaves and were not at risk of being enslaved ourselves. Despite our people’s history of enslavement and our continual reteachings of the bitterness of such experiences, some American Jews did own slaves. For example, the first Jew to hold a U.S. cabinet position, Judah P. Benjamin, owned slaves, and “had his position among those who wanted to keep slavery, not among those trying to end it.” Identities are complex, and the Jewish people cannot claim to solely have been victims and aids to other groups in our history, since we also actively participated in the persecution of the Black community. It is, however, important to dispel the incorrect stereotype that Jews controlled the slave trade. Fewer than 1% of people who owned more than 20 slaves in 1830 were Jewish, according to historian David Brion Davis (Tamkin 15). Still, we know from our history and morals that slavery is wrong, and it should never be acceptable for people to own other people the way we did.

Despite the history of some Jewish people owning slaves, many were active allies in historical social justice movements. Rabbi Abraham Heschel recalled: “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying...” (Heschel). To be Jewish means to have known persecution, and that motivates many Jewish people to join the fight to prevent others from facing similar struggles. In a Pew Research study of American Jews from 2020, 59% said that “Working for justice and equality in society” is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them (Mitchell). This connects to the essential Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*.

### **Jewish Perspective on Woman and Queer**

Traditionally, Judaism has outlined distinct roles for men and women that assign childrearing and homemaking duties to women, while men are instructed to study and teach the Torah. In orthodox synagogues, men and women sit in separate sections so as to prevent the women from distracting their men from their important job of Torah study. The Western Wall, or Kotel, is the sole surviving artifact of the holy Temple built by the Jews in Jerusalem to be the center of worship. It is regarded as one of the holiest sites in Judaism, and thousands of Jewish people travel to visit the wall for inspiration, yearning, or prayer each year. This

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incredibly sanctified space is also incredibly segregated – women have lacked equal rights to pray at the Western Wall, and are given a separate space to pray. Many Jewish women have not had their right to read from the Torah and pray at the Western Wall affirmed and enforced by the courts – my rabbi from home was arrested a few years ago among a group of women who were praying at the Kotel (Women of the Wall). Fortunately, there seems to be progress in the modern era towards this goal of equal rights to prayer, and other movements in modern Judaism reflect this shift towards inclusion of women.

The Jewish perspective on queer people is also evolving in the modern day. Like in many other religions, some Jews interpreted the Torah to say that people should reject or rechannel their homosexual desires and not act on them. Some Jewish people have certainly therefore experienced homophobia as a result of these beliefs. But my Orthodox uncle told me that his rabbi says times are changing. The logic is as follows: they want Jews to have a lot of kids to keep the bloodline going; the more kids you have, the more likely you'll have a gay kid; it's more important to love your children than to be homophobic. Whatever roundabout way they took to get here, they got here, so Jewish children moving forwards should enjoy much more acceptance and freedom from their communities than they have in the past.

To me, Judaism serves to provide moral and behavioral guidelines on how to live. We are commanded to practice *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. We are commanded to give *tzedakah* in any way that we can. Historical experiences of being denied access to certain career paths, neighborhoods, and social clubs has created a desire for a strong Jewish community, and we have always built that for ourselves wherever we go. We are commanded to teach our children the history of our people and the persecution they have faced, and pass these stories down *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation. Telling these stories is a practice in empathizing with our ancestors who experienced hardship, and we convert this empathy into action to support other groups facing oppression. These are values that everyone can learn from and incorporate into their everyday lives, Jewish or not.

## **CONCLUSION**

Identities are complex representations of who we are as people, and they can mean different things to different people. As Judith Butler argues in “Critically Queer,” words always carry their histories with them, which is why it is important to learn about the origins of these identity labels and what they have signified over time. When we look at the history of these labels, we see that they were created to give language to different categories in order to serve the heterosexist, white supremacist, patriarchal hierarchy inscribed in our culture. In order for men to be dominant, they needed to label another group as inferior – that group became known as women. In order for straight people to be dominant, they needed to label another group as inferior – queers. In order for Christians to be dominant, they needed to label other groups as inferior – including Jewish people. This list could carry on, as every dominant group has pointed at and named their subordinate group as Other.

Understanding the origin of these identity labels presents us with questions. Should we embrace our Otherness and unify around it? Or is that playing into the hands of the group who made us Other in the first place? If the term queer was only developed to label us as a target less worthy of respect and human rights, then what power does it really give us to call ourselves a term that originated to oppress us?

Butler, a queer, Jewish, woman, seems like the perfect source to turn to for answers to these questions. She considers unifying around identity categories a “necessary error.” Despite her qualms about claiming these labels for ourselves, she writes that “... it remains politically necessary to lay claim to ‘women,’ ‘queer,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘lesbian,’ precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our fully knowing” (229). If these terms are going to be used to spread false narratives about our capabilities and ideals, then we have the right to embrace them and redeploy them to better represent our truths. Labels like woman, queer, and Jewish can serve as a rallying call, bringing together all who have ever been treated like being a member of that group means they are less than.

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#### Identity and Politics and Identity Politics

Often where we see this unification through identity labels is in the realm of politics. For those on the outer margins of the charmed circle, the ramifications of this position present themselves daily. Therefore, as argued by the Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective and many others, the personal is inherently political. For example, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains how the sterilization practices historically employed in gynecological medicine against Black and Puerto Rican women in the United States directly informed many Black feminists' priority of reproductive justice. It is for reasons like this that the women of the Combahee River Collective declared themselves as "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression..." because "the synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" (Taylor 15). The intersecting identities of being Black and women and lesbian and poor directly impacted how these women could live their lives, and resultingly played a major role in the development of their political positions.

While our identities certainly contribute to our political opinions, Judith Butler still warns us against falling into the trap of using our identities as a foundation for our politics. Given the fact that identity is fluid and open to change, centering our identities in our politics could make our political opinions equally unstable. Instead, Butler advocates for us to focus on "alliance, coalition, and solidarity...", claiming that we should primarily be "concerned with redefining what justice, equality and freedom can and should mean" (qtd. in Gleeson 2-3). Identities are still essential to politics because they dictate who will be impacted by certain policies and whose lived experiences need to be considered, but they should be a complement to our primary goals of seeking justice for all.

Butler also pushes back against identity politics because the process of embracing identity labels "describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition... but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure" (241). Here, Butler essentially argues that the roots of the identity category tree have been tainted from the start, so any power that grows from it is

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equally tarnished. This is quite reminiscent of the sentiment famously expressed by Audre Lorde in 1984, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2). Identity categories may evoke some unity and we may gain a sense of empowerment from reclaiming terms formerly launched against us, but ultimately these words are tools of the master to keep us down. Lorde concedes that “They may allow us to temporarily beat him at this own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (2). Identity labels cannot be co-opted and redeployed in any way significant enough to tear down the hierarchical structure of our cultural systems.

#### Now What?

Likely, if we were to rally around a term like woman, the result would be a hierarchy still, just one that is flipped with women on top and men subordinated. Our issue with identity categories should not be simply that they oppress *us*, but that they carry the power to oppress at all. This is why everyone should care about identity labels and categories, even those who belong to all of the dominant ones. Any world as fluid and ever-changing as this one will eventually reorder the rankings of a hierarchy. Thus, our goal should not be to do away with our individual or collective oppressions, but to do away with the system that allows for such oppression – to eliminate a hierarchy all together.

In this hypothetical world of the future, there would still be differences between people. Some would possess more feminine traits, others more masculine. Some might be attracted only to members of a similar gender, and others may have a spectrum of attractions. Some would practice Judaism, still others may not practice a religion at all. The change here is not in how we behave – all of these behaviors exist in our culture today. The difference is that they would not mean anything more than what they are. To be more feminine would simply be to be more feminine, and it would not carry weight on what life opportunities are available to us. We would have differences and we would celebrate those differences, but they would not contribute to any difference of power. All would share access to the social good and there would be no ranking of people.



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Does this sound idealistic? Yes. Does it seem nearly impossible to imagine based on today's culture? Yes. Might the world end of climate change before we reach this utopia? Yes. But what does that mean? That just because we can't finish a project, doesn't mean we shouldn't start it.

Every step we take towards evening out the power dynamics between different groups is a step in the right direction. Recognizing our privileges and actively working to lift up those who have fallen below us on the hierarchy is not only an option we have, but it is a duty we hold. We had no control over the bodies we were born into and the privileges (or hard knocks) that were afforded to us by our societal systems because of those bodies. We owe it to each other to make life easier and more just for those who share the world with us. The origin of identity categories may be contaminated, but they still can act as a necessary base for alliances that will help us create the world we wish to see.

**APPENDICES**

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#### Appendix A – (Jewish History)

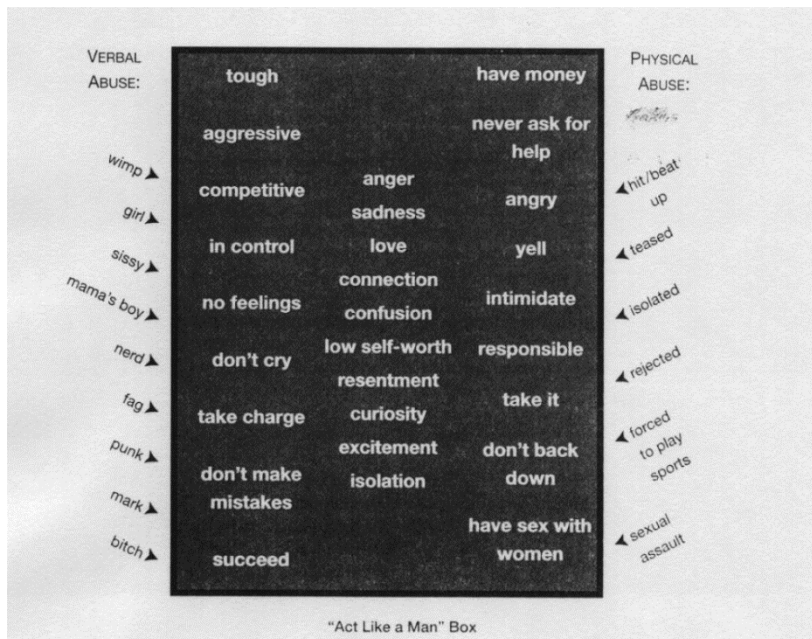
1496	Jews expelled from Portugal
1500s	Marranos are burned in Mexico, Portugal, Peru, and Spain.
1553	The Talmud is burned in Italy.
1648-66	Cossacks, Poles, Russians, and Swedes massacre Jews.
1744	Jews expelled from Bohemia and Moravia.
1818	Pogroms in Yemen.
1840	Blood libel in Damascus.
1862	General Ulysses S. Grant expels Jews from Tennessee.
1882	Pogroms in Russia.
1930s-40s	Official Canadian reply to most Jewish pleas for refuge: "Unfortunately, though we greatly sympathize with your circumstance, at present you cannot be admitted. Please try some other country."
1939-45	Six million Jews are annihilated across Europe. Babies serve as target practice, women are human guinea pigs for doctors and scientists, beards are torn from men's faces.
1948-67	Arab nations launch attacks to annihilate the States of Israel. Fearing for their lives, Jews flee Algeria, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Egypt.
1917-91	The study of Hebrew is a "crime against the state" in the Soviet Union.

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### Appendix B – (“Act Like a Man” Box)



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