

# Beyond Sexual Politics: Unlikely Spaces for Queer Identity in the Postwar United States

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## Reviewed Works

Gutterman, Lauren Jae. *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.

Johnson, David K. *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

In their recent works, historians Lauren Jae Gutterman and David K. Johnson examine the development of queer sexual identities and their corresponding communities in the postwar United States.<sup>1</sup> Gutterman's monograph *Her Neighbor's Wife* studies married women who desired women and how this phenomenon complicated notions of sexual identity categories. Comparatively, Johnson's focus in *Buying Gay* is on the development of gay male networks via the distribution and consumption of homoerotic physique magazines. In *Her Neighbor's Wife*, which examines the same-sex desires of married women from the 1950s through the 1980s, Gutterman argues that marriage was a flexible arrangement for wives who desired women. Far from a stifling or universally heteronormative institution, Gutterman contends, marriage afforded women a "constrained freedom" and opportunities for same-sex relationships.<sup>2</sup> Tracing shifting understandings of lesbian desire within marriage, Gutterman shows the institution of marriage to be surprisingly malleable. In *Buying Gay*, Johnson argues that male physique entrepreneurs and the commerce they inspired were central to the construction of a national gay community in the postwar U.S.<sup>3</sup> Eschewing the distinction between gay commercial culture and gay politics, Johnson shows that gay entrepreneurs fought political battles to disseminate their magazines in the free market, thereby facilitating gay identity and political activism. Physique entrepreneurs advocated for free expression and fought antigay censorship, participating in the

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<sup>1</sup> For descriptive purposes, "queer" is the most accurate term when discussing Gutterman's subjects, or the joint subjects of Gutterman and Johnson. This is because Gutterman's work emphasizes same-sex desire over group identification. She intentionally uses the term "wives who desired women" to avoid labels such as lesbian or bisexual, classifiers which her historical subjects did not necessarily adopt.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Jae Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 9.

<sup>3</sup> David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xi-xii.

politics of gay rights while expanding the gay market. While differing in their specific subjects, both works complicate narratives of the homophile era and emphasize the role of mainstream institutions in the development of queer culture. Consequently, the works complement each other well. Both emphasize the role of ostensibly heterosexual institutions in the construction of queer sexual communities in the postwar period. *Her Neighbor's Wife* and *Buying Gay* bridge the homophile and gay liberation eras, describe queer identity formation beyond physical communities, and problematize boundaries of identity categories.

In *Her Neighbor's Wife*, Gutterman focuses her study on lesbian desire within marriage. Using diaries, personal correspondence, novels, marriage guides, and oral histories, Gutterman examines how historical actors understood same-sex desire within marriage, how marriage as an institution facilitated same-sex relationships, and how “wives who desired women” conceptualized and reconciled their sexuality with their otherwise traditional roles as wives and mothers.<sup>4</sup> Gutterman notes that in the immediate postwar era, wives who desired women did not necessarily consider their sexual desires central to their personal identities nor somehow invalidating of their status as married “normal” women.<sup>5</sup> Social and economic pressures to marry channeled most middle-class women – regardless of their sexual orientations – into marriage. Thus, the institution itself was not inherently heterosexual, and women often made room for same-sex relationships within it.<sup>6</sup> Marriage at midcentury, then, ought not to be understood as “cover” for lesbians. Instead, marriages existed on a continuum: some women understood themselves as leading double lives, whereas others created marital relationships which were surprisingly compatible with their same-sex desires. In such instances, the institution of marriage could shield wives who desired women from social suspicion and the scrutiny of the state regulatory apparatus. What is more, gendered expectations of marriage – particularly the white, suburban model – actually “enabled married women’s same-sex relationships” by providing physical space, time, and social connections for women to engage in same-sex relationships.<sup>7</sup> Far from the lesbian bars and urban spaces traditionally associated with postwar lesbian culture, Gutterman recounts women finding romantic partners in prototypically suburban spaces: churches, neighborhood gatherings, and even PTA meetings.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, *Her Neighbor's Wife* concludes that marriage was not inherently heterosexual, nor was it a totally repressive institution for queer women. Additionally, Gutterman shows that it was only as the homophile movement evolved into the more radical lesbian feminist movement that women felt pressured to reconcile their sexualities with their status as wives. Prior to the advent of lesbian feminism, women did not necessarily view their same-sex desires as antithetical to their roles as married women, nor was divorce a prerequisite in the personal journey toward a lesbian or bisexual identity. The advent of lesbian feminism, which serves as the dividing point for the book’s two halves, altered how women conceived of same-sex desire within marriage and made marriage a complicating factor for women claiming a lesbian identity.<sup>9</sup> Lesbian feminists, asserting sexual labels for both personal and political reasons, policed the boundaries of the lesbian community. Thus, lesbian feminism had both a liberatory and stigmatizing effect for

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<sup>4</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 37-8.

<sup>7</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 54-5.

<sup>9</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 151-2.

wives who desired women. On the one hand, lesbian feminist politics often fostered and facilitated women's same-sex desires and relationships. On the other, it pressured women to choose between their identities as lesbians and their status as married women, thereby forgoing the benefits that came with the latter.<sup>10</sup>

*Her Neighbor's Wife* is a highly sophisticated work, contributing to both queer history and the broader history of marriage. Building upon works like Regina Kunzel's *Criminal Intimacy*, Gutterman further complicates the relationship between lesbian desire and identity in a period when the paradigm of hetero-homo binarism was theoretically entrenched. Gutterman also adds to the history of queerness within familial institutions, building upon such works as Daniel Rivers' *Radical Relations*. By focusing on wives who desired women, Gutterman queers an institution which heretofore has been treated as exclusively heterosexual, much in the same way that John Howard's *Men Like That* showed that churches, homes, and other rural locales possessed the potential for enabling queer desire. Emphasizing how women acted on their desires within the framework of marriage, Gutterman shows the histories of marriage and LGBTQ identity are more closely linked than previously supposed. In shifting our attention to married women, Gutterman also complicates the previous chronology of queer Americans and state repression. Historians have generally asserted that the immediate postwar period was the most hostile and oppressive time for gay and lesbian Americans, with police harassment, social scrutiny, antigay immigration regulation, and federal employment purges exemplifying the period.<sup>11</sup> However, *Her Neighbor's Wife* shows that marriage afforded wives who desired women a "constrained freedom" in economic matters and from the state's scrutiny over their sexual lives. Counterintuitively, it was not until the rise of lesbian feminism that women felt forced to choose between their sexual identities and the legal protections of marriage. For lesbians in America, Gutterman shows, the state most scrutinized their sexuality not in the immediate postwar period but in the 1970s and 80s, when the court system dissected women's sexuality to make decisions regarding alimony and parental rights. Ironically, a major victory of the feminist movement – easier access to divorce – became an administrative tool to police queer female sexuality.<sup>12</sup> By historicizing women's same-sex desire within marriage, Gutterman enhances our understanding of the state's regulation of sexuality and complicates clear narratives about the development of coherent sexual identity categories in the second half of the twentieth century.

Similarly, David K. Johnson's *Buying Gay* also evaluates same-sex desire at midcentury, and the unlikely spaces which could serve as outlets for queer expression, networking, and politics. In *Buying Gay*, Johnson details the history of physique entrepreneurs whose magazines facilitated entrance into a nationwide imagined gay community in the 1950s and 60s. Physique entrepreneurs were local or regional distributors of so-called "physique" magazines. These homoerotic pictorials were sold under the guise of magazines intended for muscle-building enthusiasts. The mail-based networks they created enabled connection between gay men, as well

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<sup>10</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 161-2.

<sup>11</sup> Historians have well documented anti-gay policies and state-sanctioned violence against queer people. For examples, see: Christopher Agee, "Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco's Gay Bars, 1950-1968," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (Sep. 2006): 462-489; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Eithne Luibheid, "'Looking Like a Lesbian': The Organization of Sexual Monitoring at the United States-Mexican Border," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 3 (Jan. 1998): 477-506.

<sup>12</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 200.

as associated aspects of physique culture with gay male subculture. Not only did physique consumers consequently engage with a gay community, but state repression made interacting with the magazines a legitimately risky kind of “mail-order activism.”<sup>13</sup> Johnson contends that physique culture facilitated connection on a scale greater than the early homophile organizations. The homophile era, Johnson boldly declares, “could just as easily be labeled the physique era.”<sup>14</sup> *Buying Gay* uses a source base of the magazines themselves, as well as oral history interviews, court records, gay news media, and over 200 contemporaneous letters from physique magazine aficionados.<sup>15</sup> Using this evidence, Johnson shows that physique entrepreneurs, appropriating the structures of consumer capitalism in the postwar era, built a consequential national gay cultural network which sometimes overlapped with formal homophile organizations. The magazines, directory services, and their pen-pal clubs created interactive platforms Johnson likens to modern social media networks, search engines, and dating apps.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, physique entrepreneurs’ fight against censorship from the U.S. Post Office Department made their legacy both cultural and political. The history of the physique magazine industry, then, was central to both the broader cultural formation of a national gay community and the political mobilization for gay rights.<sup>17</sup>

The book excavates the history of physique entrepreneurs, making them essential to the consolidation of gay identity and the fight against state oppression. Johnson details the stories of several such physique pioneers, noting the differences among their business models and similarity in their central purpose. Physique magazines from Los Angeles, Chicago, and Virginia are all discussed, as are their frequent clashes with federal officials on charges of obscenity. *Buying Gay* shows that while physique magazines were no more scandalous in terms of their overt sexual content than other magazines of the era, they were targeted specifically because of their intended audience.<sup>18</sup> Physique entrepreneurs also created “gay mail-order book services” and directories which facilitated connection among readers.<sup>19</sup> The Cory Book Service (CBS) and Directory Services, Inc. (DSI) created mailing lists of like-minded men interested in gay media. However, these same services, because of their very accessibility, were easily infiltrated by hostile government officials and used to prosecute the magazines and their customers. Beyond the act of connecting individuals and spreading information, Johnson shows, pictorial magazines’ use of ancient Greek iconography allowed for the “construction of a collective memory” based around an alternate gay identity.<sup>20</sup> Rather than an identity defined by bar culture, camp, and the “swish” archetype, the invocation of ancient Greece promoted a gay identity and an imagined past centered around masculinity and “admiration for the male body.”<sup>21</sup> In some instances, Johnson suggests, men may have understood their sexual identities in these terms more so than the identifier “homosexual.” *Buying Gay* shows the cultural and political importance of physique magazines, and Johnson’s emphasis on the risk men took by partaking in physique culture justifies his assertion that their participation constituted a form of activism.

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, xiv.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 84.

*Buying Gay* combines what Johnson perceives as two separate historiographical threads. The first focuses on the role of capitalism in the development of gay and lesbian communities, chief among them John D’Emilio’s seminal “Capitalism and Gay Identity.”<sup>22</sup> The other thread, exemplified by the works of Nan Boyd and Marc Stein, focuses on physical community sites and formal political organizations during the homophile era.<sup>23</sup> *Buying Gay* coherently unifies these two fields, showing how homophile activism could occur via consumer markets.<sup>24</sup> Blending the consumer and political aspects of the physique market, *Buying Gay* also elevates the significance of institutions like CBS within the narrative of the homophile movement. Johnson transforms these obscure services into some of “the key organizations of the early gay movement.”<sup>25</sup> In shifting focus to physique entrepreneurs, Johnson re-periodizes the development of a “gay market” to the homophile era rather than a post-Stonewall phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, *Buying Gay* places new importance on the Supreme Court case *Manual v. Day*, in which a physique entrepreneur achieved victory over the U.S. Post Office, greatly diminishing the latter’s ability to censor and suppress gay publications. This case “reinforced and clarified” *One, Inc. v. Olesen*, widely considered to be one of the most consequential court victories of the homophile era. Whereas *One, Inc. v. Olesen* established the right to distribute pro-gay writing via the mail, *Manual v. Day* expanded that decision to include homoerotic nude photography.<sup>27</sup> *Manual v. Day*, the book persuasively shows, had long-term ramifications in expanding and accelerating the marketplace for gay periodicals.<sup>28</sup> However, just as Gutterman demonstrates the political achievements of lesbian feminism undermined marriage as a protective institution for queer women, Johnson shows that physique entrepreneurs’ legal victories, while important precedents for free speech and queer expression, ultimately hastened the demise of physique magazines and their corresponding culture. Loosened restrictions allowed for more explicit gay men’s magazines, which rendered the physique model moot. These significant interventions add depth to the existing historiography and unify the occasionally dichotomous fields of queer political and consumer history. One small but important critique, however, is that Johnson’s clear reverence for these physique pioneers leaves little room for any negative aspects that consumer capitalism may have wrought on the nascent gay movement. *Buying Gay* does note that later physique institutions like DSI consolidated and corporatized the previously small, consumer-driven market. However, Johnson’s veneration of DSI buries this phenomenon among the consequential court victories happening at the same time. Johnson notes in passing that some scholars have criticized queer consumer culture as a force which reinforced homonormative assumptions, but *Buying Gay* never really addresses this criticism or the downsides of a gay

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<sup>22</sup> In “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” D’Emilio argues the rise of the wage labor system under industrial capitalism decoupled sexuality from procreation, created urban spaces that facilitated gay sex, and ultimately led to modern conceptions of gay identity. Johnson extends D’Emilio’s focus on market forces and their relationship to gay identity to the realm of consumer culture, not simply the broader developments of industrial capitalism. John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 100-113.

<sup>23</sup> See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, vii, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, ix.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 168-9.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 187.

culture based on consumption and capitalist markets.<sup>29</sup> This important omission aside, one cannot overstate the importance of Johnson's book, which will undoubtedly prove an enduring work.

Taken together, *Her Neighbor's Wife* and *Buying Gay* represent an exciting direction in LGBTQ history. Combined, the works present a narrative of queer community development happening alongside the early homophile movement, but only tangentially connected to it. Both works do, however, contain notable omissions, which leave room for future scholarship. For one, neither book engages with race in a sustained way. *Buying Gay* mentions the universally white composition of the physique entrepreneurs as a group, the infrequency of men of color pictured as models, and some slight evidence which suggests multiracial readership. Johnson does also note how entrepreneurs' racial biases limited their view of both their target market and perceived community.<sup>30</sup> *Her Neighbor's Wife* is similarly focused primarily on middle-class white women. Gutterman, however, is slightly more attentive to the ways in which racial privilege insulated white subjects, and also takes care to highlight the few women of color present in her sources.<sup>31</sup> Recent works such as Timothy Stewart-Winter's *Queer Clout* and the collection edited by Jonathan Bell, *Beyond the Politics of the Closet*, can perhaps provide a roadmap for scholars to think about queer people's relationship to mainstream institutions while simultaneously considering how race and class augment those relationships. One could imagine a future study utilizing Gutterman's flexible view of marriage which maintains a sustained focus on how racial or class inequities altered the institution's effectiveness as a shelter from state-sponsored harassment.

Additionally, Johnson's work briefly notes the roles of straight-identified people who participated in the queer marketplace. Straight physique models willingly posed for the magazines, and Johnson even details the story of Elsie Carlton, a straight woman who came to own CBS.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Gutterman's inclusion of heterosexual spouses as agents who condoned and facilitated queer relationships expands our conception of who can be centered in stories of queer community making. Thus, both works challenge scholars to consider the extent to which non-queer actors participated in and shaped queer networks even in a period when the homo-hetero binary became increasingly rigid. In this vein, both works undermine preconceived notions about institutions – marriage and seemingly apolitical magazine networks – previously overlooked in the history of queer identities during the postwar era. While both political and cultural histories can be hyper-focused on organizations and institutions, these monographs nicely synthesize individual stories, local organizations, and national networks. As historians attempt to integrate the history of LGBTQ identity formation more fully into a larger national narrative, works like *Her Neighbor's Wife* and *Buying Gay* can serve as cornerstones, exemplifying the complex ways in which a national queer community developed in tandem with larger institutional forces, sometimes via unexpected avenues.

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, xiii.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 16-17, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Gutterman, *Her Neighbor's Wife*, 5, 47, 122, 143-4.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 71.