

Jynx Boyne

*We Exist*: Trans-Atlantic History of Sexualities final project

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*We Exist*

*A Reflection on the Erasure of LGBT+ People from History and*

*Why We Should Never Settle for “Normal”*

**In the Beginning:**

I came into the *Trans-Atlantic History of Sexualities* class with a certain amount of preconceived notions. I knew that as someone pursuing their degree in engineering, not history or gender studies, I was going to have a harder time than most digesting and discussing the readings and doing the research required for our assignments. I knew that things we researched were going to make me angry, sad, or confused. I knew this course—and the lessons I learned from it—were going to be difficult.

But something I did not expect was the lost feeling I experienced when dealing with the histories themselves. The readings, art pieces, monuments, and spaces came with many barriers: perhaps they were presented in a sort of code that you needed to be educated to see, perhaps they focused almost exclusively on gay men and not the rest of the acronym, perhaps the LGBT+ identity was not there at all but had to be inserted by the observer due to prior knowledge. I was ready to face the erasure within history of the LGBT+ community; however, I was unprepared to face the many layers within that erasure.

I found myself watching a vicious cycle that has long plagued the histories of the dominant heterosexual society. A history told by the victors, the loud ones, the ones that are most visible, instead of an encompassing history of all people involved. While LGBT+ people fought the dominate society to exist within history, a fight within the community itself occurs for the history to reflect all parties. And the cycle thus repeats itself.

Despite knowing that this course would have a focus on the Gay and, to some extent, the Lesbian histories—or, really, the ones we have the “most” access to—I still searched almost in vain for representation of the other members of the acronym. George Chauncey stated in his book *Gay New York* that “we should never presume the absence of something before we have looked for it”<sup>1</sup>. The problem is that people need to actually look.

Drawing from readings and the experiences I had personally from traveling abroad, this reflection seeks to highlight and celebrate some of the successes that Gay and Lesbian identified individuals and their allies have made in carving into stone a still developing history of a marginalized community, while also warning of not falling into the complacency of “normal.” That is, stopping before the whole story is told.

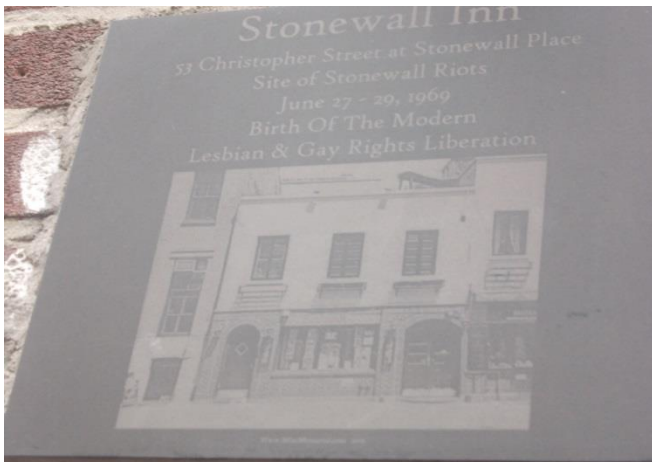
So here’s to never stopping.

**New York: More to History than Christopher Street, and How to Remember a Lost Generation**

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, page 12. Chauncey’s points on understanding histories was what started the thought process for this whole reflection.

“We are just in the beginning stages. A lot of material is coming in and we are in the process of sorting it,” reads the first newsletter from the Lesbian Herstory Archives back in June



Plaque Reading "Stonewall Inn, 53 Christopher Street at Stonewall Place, Site of the Stonewall Riots, June 27-29, 1969, Birth of the Modern Lesbian and Gay Rights Liberation." But is that last line true? *Personal Photo, New York City, New York*

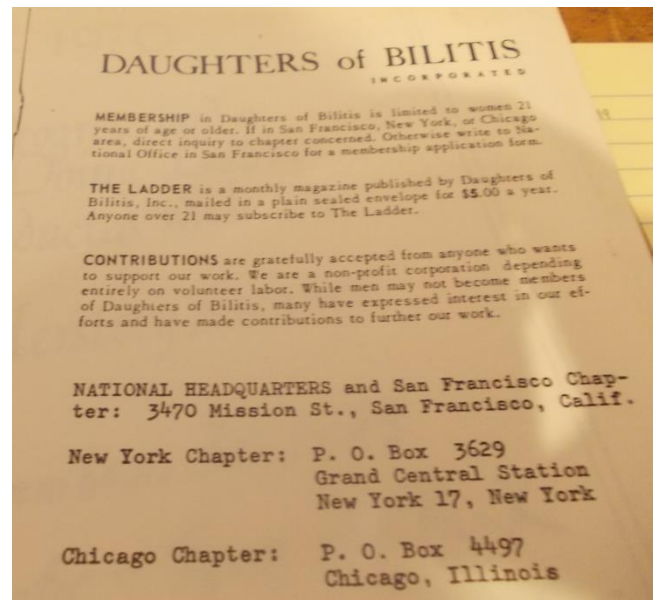
of 1975<sup>2</sup>. And what better way to describe the feeling after stepping off the shuttle from Newark Airport in to the hustling, bustling, loud New York City. Though I felt out of place, I knew the importance of being in the city where everyone thinks Gay Liberation started.

I will admit, before taking this class, I did think

the Stonewall Riots were the start of everything. I was

wrong, but that also points out a common erasure that is upheld by society and the LGBT+ community together. There is more to the history than just what happened at Christopher Street.

There were various organizations that existed before the Stonewall riots that worked towards what we call “Gay Liberation.” The Daughters of Bilitis (D.O.B) and the Mattachine Society were two of the most prominent. The D.O.B was formed to allow for a place for Lesbians to meet “free of public hostility.”<sup>3</sup> The organization was



A photograph of one of the Daughters of Bilitis Newsletters, taken in the Lesbian Herstory Archives

<sup>2</sup> Direct quote removed from the Herstory’s newsletter. These newsletters are available on the Herstory’s main site.

<sup>3</sup> Daughters of Bilitis article in the Encyclopedia Britannica.

smaller, and the very act of getting national attention led to it and its main publication, *The Ladder*, being shut down.<sup>4</sup> The Mattachine Society came about four years before the Daughters, in 1951, and were more radicalized. That is, this group would engage in pickets of the White House or marches to show public support of homosexuality (at the time, this was known as the Homophile movement)<sup>5</sup>.

Stonewall was not the first set of riots or public defiance that showed unrest within the LGBT+ community. However, Stonewall was the one that had both “high commemorability and mnemonic capacity,” according Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Cragé.<sup>6</sup> So, while other uprisings, like that in Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco, show the stirrings of the “Gay Liberation”, Stonewall is ultimately what is remembered. Interestingly enough, something like Compton’s potentially is not as memorable to the community because it was an uprising by primarily people of color and transgender people. Because this uprising was not representation of the “dominant” (or white, cisgendered) group, it was not seen as inspiring.<sup>7</sup> I am not insinuating that Stonewall does not hold importance, simply stating that it does not tell a complete story of the movements up to the tipping point that it was. It shows that even in the fight to gain visibility and history, an almost incomplete memory is formed or certain groups are erased or deemed less important.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Lesbian Herstory Archive had many of the D.O.B publications that I didn’t think to look into, but they also had many of the audio interviews from members and the founders, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon.

<sup>5</sup> Information gained from the NYPL archives page and from listening to the speech by the curator Jason Baumann.

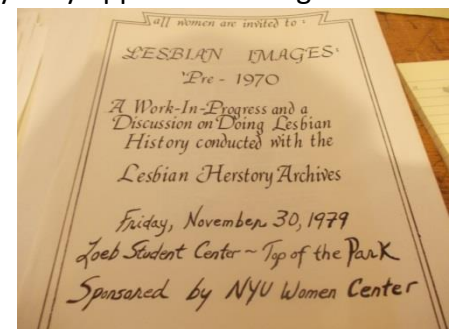
<sup>6</sup> “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth.” Pages 724-751.

<sup>7</sup> “Movements and Memory,” Page 733.

<sup>8</sup> Another look at history, which brings into play the Compton’s Riot, is featured in “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity” by Susan Stryker

Granted, that did not make listening to Tree Sequoia telling his stories about Stonewall any less *cool*. It just made me wish I could give the privilege of hearing that tale and celebrating that life to others who experienced similar, but are not remembered in such a prominent way.

How information and memory in the LGBT+ community is preserved—and by whom—shows another form of inclusion and erasure. Here, in fact, I am drawing a comparison between the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the New York Public Library LGBT+ Archives. While both archives seek to increase public knowledge on the community, the way they approach it brings about two different but equally important histories. The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) seeks to be one with the community, serve that community, and requires no credentials to be viewed.<sup>9</sup> The LHA



A newsletter sent out about the Lesbian Herstory Archives, from 1979. Taken in the LHA

also seeks to tell stories and histories of the Lesbian population—in the “broadest sense of the word Lesbian.”<sup>10</sup> With no barriers to entry and activity in breaking down elitism and non-inclusion, the LHA actively fights the normal erasure that happens with institutionalized archives.

The NYPL Archives are institutionalized, and that presents a different view into LGBT+ history than the LHA. First, what is kept and accessible has to be determined by the library and collection coordinators like Jason Baumann. Because of the care they put into keeping all of the archived material preserved, what is allowed into the archive must come from someone or something of note in the LGBT+ community. This is completely different than how the LHA works, where “if it was written by a Lesbian, has to do with a Lesbian, or, perhaps, if a Lesbian

<sup>9</sup> The LHA’s Mission Statement and Statement of Purpose sets it apart from basically all institutional archives.

<sup>10</sup> This sentiment was shared with us many times by Deborah Edel during our time at the LHA.

even touched it, it has a place [at the LHA].”<sup>11</sup> To access the NYPL archives, you need to file for permission through the library, and what level of credentials you need depends on what you want to see. While it is more open and free than most other archives, there are still heavy academic barriers to let you in: you cannot just ask to



see something without having a concrete reason

[A side by side comparison of the display of archived material.](#)

why. So while history is being preserved, what

[Left is the New York Public Library, Right is the Lesbian Herstory Archives](#)

history and how it is shown and to whom is heavily regulated, bringing forth this worrisome trap that happens with “normal” history. The stories of the dominant, most powerful group remains the ones in the historical archives (well, not if the LHA has anything to say about that, but still.).

A main part of class—and of our time in New York—was spent talking about what has come to be the most important part of LGBT+ history and present: The AIDS epidemic. While many people think AIDS is at a controllable level (I was one of them), the research presented to us by ACTUP/NY members told a different story. With more than 50,000 new infections each year, and the age group affected my generation, it seems that there is a complete lack of urgency when maybe there should be panic.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Edel jokingly said this when referring to how the collection grew so large.

<sup>12</sup> The article from GA Voice, “HIV/AIDS activists accuse CDC of ‘plodding’ response to rising HIV infection rates among gay men, trans women” by Patrick Saunders, is just one of the many that quotes Jim Eigo and friends when they spoke out against the CDC, and in that article they use the same startling statistic.

The AIDS epidemic erased a whole generation of people. And while I knew this before I started the class, and it was reinforced by watching *How to Survive a Plague*, it really did not hit home until sitting in on the ACTUP/NY meeting.<sup>13</sup> When you talk to people who actually

survived, it makes the whole thing more real, and dissolves any detachment you may have.

The organization is not perfect, of course. Peter Cohen argues that ACTUP is an organization of privilege in his piece against the group, and even *Plague* seems to focus on a predominately white gay man's take on the epidemic.<sup>14</sup> However, the striking contrast to me is that

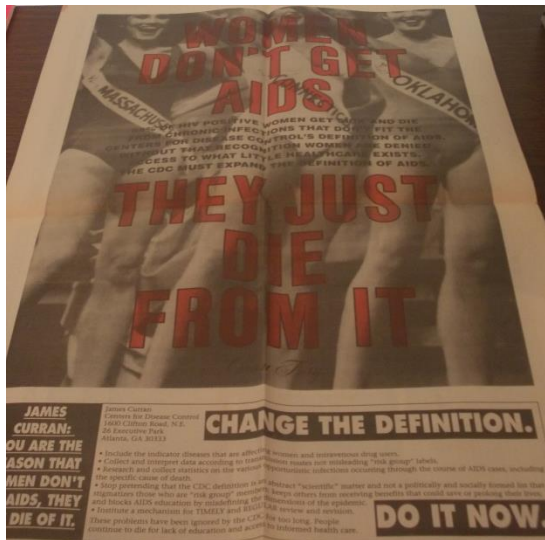
even though this erasure has occurred within the larger community, the remaining ACTUP/NY group is fighting

for equal care and representation *by all groups*. While we worked for them in New York, their

Atlanta Principles were revised to include more emphasis on trans\* and people of color populations.<sup>15</sup> Elliot Blackburn's

"Count Us All" became a rallying slogan. While the running history may not portray everyone and every group involved, the

active group is working to fight for representation and care for the groups normally forgotten.



ACTUP/NY activism poster declaring "Women don't get AIDS, They Just Die From It." Made in response to the definition of AIDS not including Women. Picture taken in the New York Public Archives



The "Count Us All" Banner made by the Trans-Atlantic Cohort For ACTUP/NY

<sup>13</sup> *How to Survive A Plague* documents ACTUP/NY and TAG as they fight to stop the AIDS Epidemic in America during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>14</sup> "'All They Needed': AIDS, Consumption, and the Politics of Class" by Peter Cohen.

<sup>15</sup> The Atlanta Principles were drafted by ACTUP/NY members and the contact person is Jim Eigo.

### **Amsterdam: Don't you Know You're Standing in a Monument?**

Unfortunately those thoughts from New York circulating in my mind did nothing to combat the jet lag and travel fatigue that came from the seven or so hour plane ride from Newark, New Jersey to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. Our time in Amsterdam was short, but it, to me, was the most impactful part of the trip. Because in one moment, I was in the most visible and yet most invisible monument I had ever seen.

I am talking about, of course, The Homomonument.

The Homomonument is made up of three triangles of pink granite, and is located right next to the Anne Frank House. The three triangles are at different levels—one flat with the surface of the street that points to the Anne Frank House, one in the canal that points to the War Monument in Dam Square, and one raised podium triangle that points to the CoC, the longest running gay organization in Europe.

“‘SUCH AN ENDLESS DESIRE FOR FRIENDSHIP’ ('naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen')”

The triangle that points to Anne Frank's secret annex reads.<sup>16</sup>

It was not mentioned when we took the Canal Tour of the city, and I did not even notice when we walked right past to go to the Anne Frank House ourselves. In fact, the many people were waiting in line to tour the house were waiting in the very middle of the monument. While my classmates noted the fact that people were not paying respect to a monument they probably did not even realize was there, I thought of all the people in the community who face this kind of erasure regularly. While there is a certain degree of visibility to being Gay or even Lesbian, the further in the acronym you tread, the less visible you become to both the

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<sup>16</sup> The line was taken from the poem “To a Yong Fisherman” by Jacob Israel de Haan



dominant community and the LGBT+ community itself. The thought crossed my mind, 'how



"Don't you know you're standing on a monument?"  
Photograph of the inlaid triangle of the  
Homomonument, plus part of the line of for the  
Anne Frank House.

does it feel to be invisible?'

The monument was not an easy thing to get, if the website devoted to the monument and the information provided by the Pink Point of Presence are anything to go off of.<sup>17</sup> And while the monument was designed to be a part

of the landscape, where the podium could be used as a place of reflection or demonstration, I could not help but

wonder if the monument was *too* hidden. Granted, people

who wanted to destroy the monument had no trouble finding it, otherwise I would not now own a piece of pink granite, broken off from the most recent vandalizing attempt. But we had to search for it, and we just wanted to visit it to pay our respects.

That seemed counterproductive to me.

The Pink Point of Presence, a little kiosk at the tip of the podium triangle, offers information, PRIDE paraphernalia, and an overall welcoming environment, but the overall monument—the only one of its kind, there to remember all those who were persecuted for their sexuality—is actively being erased from the city.

Though expected in some respects, it is also surprising for how open and accepting Amsterdam seems. It all falls to an issue of memory: how are things remembered and portrayed for others to see. Amsterdam wants to be perceived as welcoming, despite the fact that Homosexuals were scapegoated as being aiding Nazism or that publically gay people were

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<sup>17</sup> Please see Works Cited for links to both the Pink Point and the Homomonument's websites.

still murdered in their streets.<sup>18,19</sup> This leads to a different form of erasure: one that comes through complacency.

The Dutch Resistance Museum actually echoed the worry of what complacency does to a population, as it brought forth the concerns of *what would you do?* and through that question, told the stories of different Dutch residences and their reaction to the war. While the stories told were moving, and brought about many emotions, I was unsurprised (but



The picture above was taken in a display in the Dutch Resistance Museum. Note that the men are wearing Pink Triangles on their jackets. There was no explanation of what the triangles meant.

disheartened) to see that there were no discussions of homosexuality. An act of complacency—what would you do? Nothing, obviously.

There was a brief mention to the unit of Dutch Resistance fighters who blew up the Amsterdam registry building. However, no mention was made to the member Willem Arondeus, who was an openly gay man fighting in the

unit. His request before his execution was that his testimony was “homosexuals are not cowards.”<sup>20</sup> Such a powerful and

important sentiment to be all but forgotten from the history

of Dutch Resistance; I cannot help but wonder what reasoning they chose to explain why they excluded it.

### Paris: The Selective Memory of a Nation.

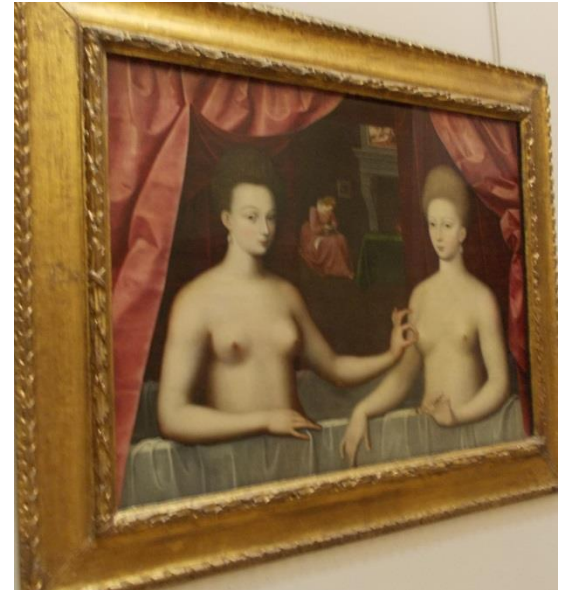
<sup>18</sup> Referencing Harry Oosterhuis “The “Jews” of the Antifascist Left”

<sup>19</sup> Referencing Ian Buruma and Joanne J. Myers’s “Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance”

<sup>20</sup> From the records at the Holocaust Memorial Museum, United States.

Up to this point, I have not really discussed museums and their sterilization of collections. That could be a whole other paper.<sup>21</sup> However, I will take a moment to compare the Louvre and its art collection to the musée de l' érotisme (The Erotic Museum).

While the Louvre hosts its wildly impressive art collection, there are many pieces that contain homoeroticism or homosexual themes that are glossed over. Surprisingly to me, the painting *Gabirelle d' Estrées and Her Sister* (photograph shown right) was featured right on the museum map. However, its location was as far away from the “main” museum pieces like *the Mona Lisa* and *Venus de Milo* as you possibly could get without being outside of the building. So it is a bit of a hike if you want to see it, or any of the other possibly “lesbian” pieces (thought



*Gabirelle d' Estrées and Her Sister*  
Photograph taken in The Louvre.

they are not framed that way, nor is there any mention to the explicit overtones in the descriptions.). Despite scholarly claim to the Renaissance being the time of expressing ones homosexuality through art, the Louvre's choice in what pieces to display or how to display them underplay the importance of this movement.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Though, if you are interested, “When Erotic becomes Illicit: Struggles over Displaying Queer History in a Mainstream Museum” by Jill Austin, Jennifer Brier, Jessica Herczeg-Konecny, and Anne Parsons gives an interesting take on the sterilization of history in museums.

<sup>22</sup> “Homosexuality in the Renaissance: Behavior, Identity, and Artistic Expression” by James M. Saslow



A picture found on the wall in the Erotic Museum. There was no explanation given.

On the flip side, you have the Erotic Museum, which displays the history of sexuality in a more open yet educational way. While it shows a more unbiased approach to sexuality—not removing pieces about homosexuality—it still heavily favored the heterosexual history and offered more explanation

to those pieces than the homosexual ones. That being said, the museum did devote a whole room to French

Prostitution, and made sure to mention that “lesbianism” was rampant among the working girls in the brothels, but it also made a point to have a period piece condemning all homoerotic acts right next to any of those pieces. It is both visibility and erasure in one descriptive plaque. Bravo, museum, bravo.

Moving away from museums and back to the hands of those making history, we made a quick stop to ACTUP/Paris’s headquarters, where they were in the process of moving out. This is due to the fact that they are being sued for slander by public servants of the French Government<sup>23</sup>.

ACTUP/Paris is like its cousin in New York in the way that the organization acts on shock factors and is not afraid to call out bogus legislations or public officials who are not doing their job. However, in Paris, ACTUP is a business with employees and volunteers, and they did get money from the health administration to speak about HIV/AIDs awareness and safe sex practices. ACTUP/Paris has been working in recent



The wall in the old ACTUP/Paris office.

<sup>23</sup> Information gathered from ACTUP/Paris’s report on the lawsuit and the Gay UK article “Act Up Paris Faces Closure After Lawsuit”

years to lower the infection rates of the fringe groups in the far reaches of the city, where health and education are not as widespread.<sup>24</sup>

While Tom Craig, member of ACTUP/Paris, assured us that he would remain working to fight AIDs in Paris should the organization close, the onslaught against the organization brought about another sort of erasure: the erasure of resources that lead to visibility for the minority groups. Since this organization has been working to help those in prostitution as well as homosexual minorities, the death of the organization runs the risk of these groups being invisible again.

France's stance on homosexuality is in a constant state of flux, or it has an "elastic closet," according to Scott Gunther.<sup>25</sup> Tamara Chaplin, in her review of the book, reinforces his claims that how homosexuals are received is not always reflective of what laws are in place for or against them.<sup>26</sup> This constantly shifting public and political opinion makes the historical and modern visibility a challenge, because homosexuals are constantly fighting *not* to be the villains.

The idea of shifting French Memory is nothing new. We were warned that France is still coming to terms with its role in World War

II. There are two types of plaques that are in various locations around



**1**Two different commemorative plaques from around Paris. The one on the left mourns the loss of life from a nursery school due to "the Barbary of the Nazi regime and the complacency of the Vichy Government." The one on the right commemorates a woman who was tortured and killed by the Nazis. Interestingly enough, the one on the right (older than the one on the left), does not blame the French government at all.

<sup>24</sup>Tom Craig, speaking about ACT UP's goals on June 12th

<sup>25</sup> "The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-present," by Scott Gunther.

<sup>26</sup> H-France Review Vol. 12 (January 2012), No. 5



the city: type one show the slight denial of the French involvement and blame completely on the Nazi regime, while type two blames both Nazism and the Vichy government. The plaques commemorate the lives lost fighting for the Resistance or those who were deported, always saying “because they were Jewish.” There were no mentions of the thousands that were deported for any other reason, such as being deviants or Roma or not French.

There is also the Deportation Museum, which was the only museum so far that I have visited that actually made reference to the pink triangles being the symbol of homosexuality, as well as the black triangle for deviance. This was shown by the commemorative display in front of the museum. The actual museum was locked,



The Plaque in front of the Deportation Museum. Photo  
Curtsey of Lowell Kane

despite being told it as going to be open. We could find no information if the museum would be open during our trip. Dr. Pitts and Lowell Kane told us that they had tried to go to the museum many times before and it had never been open during their visits. I found it interesting that a nation that struggles with the memory of its involvement in World War II cannot bother to open the doors to the museum that commemorates the lives lost. Once again, they both acknowledge and erase the identities of these people.

### **Home: Strive to not be Normal**

Normal is an incredibly relative term. In the sense I use it here, it is what is widely accepted as the majority action in society. So, in this case, heterosexuality is “normal.” I will argue that homosexuality and the others in the LGBT+ community are just as normal, the

amount of erasure and subjugation one who identify as such make me believe this is not a shared ideal. While LGBT+ is becoming more and more “normalized,” it is a hard fought battle and one that will not come without consequence. My greatest hope is that the consequences do not include the same as the “normal” history’s problems. If LGBT+ people want their history to be told, I hope that it is done in such a way that includes all groups. Many strides have been made to show Gay and some Lesbian perspectives in history, but it has only been recently that other members of the community’s histories are coming into play. Some communities, like those of the Asexual, Pansexual, or Gender-non-binary groups, have no history older than a few years.

For the history of the LGBT+ community to be told, a few things need to happen. Acceptance and support from the “normal” population needs to occur, and that is something that the community fights for daily. But another thing is that we must strive to *not* be normal. When fighting the erasure of our past, we must strive to not erase members of our own community. We must not make a normal history; instead, we must make a complete history.

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