Between Identities

Liminal Lesbian Spaces in American Literature and Culture of the 1950s

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Abstract

This thesis explores the liminal lesbian spaces established within heteronormative American society in the 1950s, both in the historical and literary context. It examines the spaces of suburban homes, sorority houses, women’s sport teams, and the women’s army corps, which created favorable conditions for the development of same-sex relationships. The theory of liminality and the concept of heterotopia are applied to these spaces to examine how the structure and the qualities of heteronormative environments contributed to women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities. This thesis explores the historical evidence of lesbian representation in American society in the 1950s, and presents its literary reflection in The Price of Salt by Patricia Highsmith and Spring Fire by Marijane Meaker—the lesbian fiction of the times. Throughout the analysis of historical sources and the close-reading of the novels, this thesis examines the liminal, lesbian spaces and their contribution to gay women’s process of reconciliation with their homosexuality. Eventually, this thesis demonstrates that liminal, gay microcosms provided essential space for gay women’s discovery and exploration of their homosexual identities.
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Chapter One:  
Introduction

While a thousand memories and moments, words, the first darling, the second time Carol had met her at the store, a thousand memories of Carol’s face, her voice, moments of anger and laughter flashed like the tail of a comet across her brain. And now it was pale-blue distance and space, an expanding space in which she took flight suddenly like a long arrow. The arrow seemed to cross an impossibly wide abyss with ease, seemed to arc on and on in space, and not quite stop.¹

When I first read *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, the novel gave me a sense of airlessness. It was not a physical airlessness built up with a tense plot that would take my breath away after scenes full of dramatic action. It was a mental airlessness, a sense of emotional suffocation that the protagonist experienced, and that was immediately transferred to me as a reader. Therese Belivet, the protagonist of the novel, seemed enclosed within her head, trying to find at least a small bit of space where she could finally be herself. Instead, she was overwhelmed with places, people, impressions, situations, and social expectations that for some reason—unknown to the reader at this initial stage of the book—she could not fit into. The lack of mental and physical space that this young woman living in America in the 1950s suffered from is thought-provoking, both before the reader finds out that Therese is gay, and after that. However, the climactic moment in the novel that encouraged me to do the research on the space of gay women in the 1950s was when Therese experienced a sense of mental liberation. This was the moment in the novel when the sense of overwhelming airlessness and stifling suppression was replaced by a liberating sense of space. Highsmith’s metaphor of Therese as an arrow flying through a pale-blue abyss of space, for the first time enabled me to see her free. Free in a physical sense, as a woman who did not have to submit to heteronormative norms that society had been imposing on her. But also free in a mental sense, as her mind finally became liberated from the pressure of expectations with regard to the way she was to perform gender and sexuality.

The state of transience that Therese is in, while being compared to an arrow, exposes the moment and space where this mental and physical liberation happens. This seems to be particularly intriguing in the context of gay women, who due to social

persecution of homosexuality in the 1950s, could not establish their own spaces that would be openly associated with same-sex love and desire. Therefore, I asked myself a question: where were gay women, and where did they go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities at a time of family-oriented Cold War ideology?

It is especially crucial to answer this question in the context of the culture of the 1950s. It was a time of socio-political conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. over political influence on the rest of the world, and especially in Europe. In spreading democracy across the countries threatened by communist invasion, American authorities saw an opportunity to establish the U.S.A’ position as world’s superpower. To do so, they needed a secure and stable policy on the home front, which is why they developed a family-oriented culture that was to create an image of solid, safe, and balanced society. This policy became especially important in the context of middle-class Americans, who due to their financial status, could afford to have the husband as the sole breadwinner, while the wife stayed at home and nurtured the family. Middle-class American women, from a social point of view, became the ideal women—faithful and loyal wives, loving mothers, and excellent housewives devoted to the navigation of home space. American suburbia became the perfect place to implement the pro-family policy. According to the U.S. Census, by 1960, 31% of the total U.S. population lived in the suburbs, which was almost equal to the percentage of Americans living in the central cities (32%).

The migration of American families to the suburbs underlined the distinction between private and public space, and exposed the separation of the sexes. Middle-or upper-class men who lived in American suburbia were still actively engaged in their social and professional lives in the cities, while their wives, were became bound to their suburban homes, and the roles of mother and wife that domestic lifestyle imposed on them. Although in this thesis, I will analyze the spaces navigated by white, American, middle-class women, it is also crucial to introduce the space of working-class women and women of color.

Although the model of the nuclear family living in American suburbia applied mostly to the upper- and middle-class society, in the 1950s, some working-class families could also afford to live according to middle-class standards. The G.I. Bill, which provided a range of benefits for the World War II veterans, significantly contributed to an upward mobility of blue-collar workers, especially in the financial context. Therefore, many

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working-class husbands were able to earn a middle-class income, which allowed their wives and families to live according to middle-class standards. The households of working-class families often resembled the suburban houses not only because of a sufficient income of working-class families, but also due to mass production, which contributed to the accessibility and affordability of various home appliances that earlier had been beyond the financial reach of working-class families. Although blue-collar women were not full-time housewives, with all amenities that became available for them, they got a sense of belonging to the middle-class space of ideal women. Despite major contribution of the G.I. Bill to the improvement of the situation of working-class families, women were still subjected to gender discrimination. According to Jacob Mincer and Solomon Polacheck’s 1967 research on women in the labor force, female workers took up lower positions than male workers within the same working environment. Women’s inferior positions at work were often justified by employers by claiming that women’s education was less valuable than men’s, and that women could not obtain full skill training because their working continuum after bearing children was less reliable, and therefore less worthy of company’s investment. Barbara Reskin and Heidi Hartmann, the sociologists writing on women’s segregation in the workplace, similarly to Mincer and Polacheck, underlined that social expectations of motherhood that were imposed on women led to the neglect of women’s education and training in the labor forces.

Another aspect that needs to be considered while analyzing the space of American women in the 1950s is race. Thomas Phelan and Mark Schneider, who gathered data on racial migration into suburban communities in the second half of the twentieth century. According to their research, in the 1980s, 47% of affluent African-Americans lived in the suburbs in the South, while in the North, it was only 8% (the low percentage of races other than white living in American suburbs was also reflected in the number of Hispanics and Asians, who made up 7,5% and 2,8% of suburban population). Since in the 1980s, the population of racially diversified groups in the suburbia did not reach 10%, it is reasonable to conclude that in the 1950s this percentage was significantly lower. Due to racial

segregation and social exclusion of black women from the ideals of womanhood, African-American women rarely took the role of full-time housewives. Most of them performed jobs either in rural industries, or in private, domestic environments. As Reskin and Hartmann’s concluded, in 1940, 70% of black women were employed within private, domestic sectors as domestic servants for white, middle-class, suburban families.\(^8\) Evelyn Nakano Glenn in her study supported this argument and claimed that “racial-ethnic women were accurately aware that they were trapped in domestic service by racism and not by lack of skills or intelligence.”\(^9\) Moreover, as Glenn noted, African-American women had almost no opportunities to obtain jobs in service, where physical and social contact with the public was required.\(^10\) Therefore, the term women’s space carried a different meaning for women of color than that of middle-class or working-class women.

This thesis is devoted to the space of middle-class, gay women living in America in the 1950s. It will explore how the separation of the sexes, the association of women and men with different social roles, and the persecution of homosexuality contributed to the limitation of gay women’s space in the 1950s. I will examine how the exclusion of homosexuals from the public space forced gay women to establish their lesbian microcosms where they could experience and reconcile with their gay identities within a heteronormative, family-oriented culture. I will analyze lesbian spaces established within suburban houses, sororities, women’s sport teams, and the women’s army corps in order to present how they contributed to women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities. The analysis of suburban houses and sororities will be carried out in two contexts: historical and literary, and I will treat the literary sources as valuable evidence for the history section of my thesis. Although the novels that I will use are the works of fiction, their detailed analysis enables the reader to notice many similarities between a literary and historical presentation of gay women’s spaces.

The literary presentation of the sorority house in \textit{Spring Fire} by Marijane Meaker and the domestic space in \textit{The Price of Salt} by Patricia Highsmith as environments where gay affairs occurred, reflects historical data on lesbian existence within these places. The use of literary sources as important, and often unique, historical evidence has its supporters and opponents in academic circles. I will draw from the study of John Fleming who argued that in a historical context, literature should be considered as a means that brings one

\(^8\) Reskin and Hartmann, \textit{Women’s Work, Men’s Work...}, 86-89.


\(^10\) Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work...,” 20.
epoch to another and testifies about the past events, he claimed: “literature’s participation in history is vehicular; it is the medium, or one medium, through which pass the great informing ideas binding one age to another. It is an index of cultural continuity and cultural change.” A similar approach to the contribution of literature to a better understanding of history was developed by Gordon Kelly, who argued that literary texts genuinely reflect society and the culture in which they were produced. He underlined that when analyzing literature, it is crucial to consider the factors that shaped the production and consumption of particular literary texts, as they are “the testimony of the times and the evidence of history.” This interdisciplinary approach to literature and history was developed in the 1980s by the scholars of New Criticism, who emphasized “the historicity of the text and the textuality of history.” In this case, if the factors that contributed to the production of Spring Fire and The Price of Salt are to be considered, both novels can be treated as significant, historical evidence of women’s gay spaces in the 1950s. Not only do the novels describe two of the most common female spaces in the postwar American society, but most importantly, they were written by lesbians who lived in the U.S. of the 1950s. The personal experiences of Patricia Highsmith and Marijane Meaker, who functioned in a heteronormative, homophobic society, certainly illuminate the historicity of the texts. The society, environment, and culture in which the authors lived must have influenced their writing processes, and shaped the plot and structure of the novels. Therefore, the analysis of the novels will allow me to fill the gaps in historical data on sororities and suburban houses as gay women’s spaces, as well as on the process of women’s reconciliation with their gay identities.

This thesis is structurally divided into two sections: historical and literary. This first chapter has introduced the theoretical framework of the concepts of liminality and heterotopia, which will be actively used throughout my thesis, both in the historical and literary section. Chapter two will begin the historical analysis of gay women’s spaces by analyzing the socio-political context of the times. It will explore the importance of home space for the U.S. politics as well as the enclosure of women within domestic environment, rooted in the American propaganda of family-oriented culture in the 1950s. Chapter three will focus exclusively on the analysis of semi-public, heteronormative spaces such as

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14 Here, I use the term semi-public to include suburban homes in the analyzed spaces. A home can be considered a place on the border of public and private space—on the one hand, everybody can enter the property, and on the other hand, the
suburban homes, sorority houses, sport teams, and the women’s army corps, which were navigated by both gay and straight women. These environments will be interpreted as heterotopias, which due to their multi-layered structure, enabled gay women to create liminal, structurally invisible lesbian microcosms where they could nurture their homosexual relationships, and go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities. Chapter four will begin the literary section of my thesis, which will analyze *The Price of Salt*, a novel written by Patricia Highsmith, featuring the story of two lesbians who create their liminal, gay space within a domestic environment. Highsmith shows how the home, which in the 1950s was an ideologized symbol of a heteronormative, family life, became a place where lesbian relationships were born and nurtured. At the same time, Highsmith demonstrates how the pressure of heteronormativity filters through the liminal, gay space that the protagonists established for themselves, and in consequence, forces them to search for another environment where this space can be transferred. Chapter five will be devoted to the analysis of *Spring Fire*, a novel written by Marijane Meaker, which tells the story of two lesbians who create their liminal, gay microcosm within the space of a sorority house. Similarly to the protagonists of *The Price of Salt*, the main characters of *Spring Fire* transform their sorority room, which is an element of heteronormative culture of the organization they are in, into a lesbian microcosm where they can nurture their lesbian desires. Meaker presents the sorority house as an element of American heteronormative culture, and exposes the social pressure within the organization that affects the protagonists’ process of reconciliation with their gay identities.

Both *The Price of Salt* and *Spring Fire* were published at the height of family-centered, heteronormative ideology, when homosexuality was a socially unwelcome subject of discussion. Moreover, the endings of both novels distinguish them from other lesbian texts published in the 1950s. As Highsmith claimed in the Afterword to *The Price of Salt*, the novel “was said to be the first gay book with a happy ending,” because the norm then was that all homosexual novels must end tragically. Highsmith explained that the social repression of homosexuality was so strong that the authors of lesbian fiction were required to end gay novels with a suicide or a mental breakdown of the protagonist in order to have their work published. Among other lesbian novels, *The Price of Salt* and *Spring Fire* remain the first of their kind as both Meaker and Highsmith manage to save individuals who are not acquainted with the family who lives there, are not welcome and often not permitted to enter the house. Therefore, home can be considered as a semi-public space.

their protagonists from suicide. Before these novels, Tereska Torres, a French writer published a gay novel *Women’s Barracks* that described intimacy among French female soldiers during World War II. The novel was based on real-life events, and contained explicit, sexual content, which caused the book to be accused of promoting pornography, and banned in the U.S.A. in 1953.\(^\text{16}\) However, the way Torres presents the space navigated by gay female soldiers, differs from the way Meaker and Highsmith present gay spaces that the protagonists of their novels occupy. *Women’s Barracks* takes place in the space of barracks, which is temporarily inhabited by female soldiers who fight in the war. As a result of navigating the same, female-only, space, these women naturally develop a close, physical and mental intimacy, which contributes to the establishment of intimate, sexual experiences between some of them. At the same time, both in *The Price of Salt* and in *Spring Fire*, the protagonists consciously establish their liminal, gay spaces in order to realize their same-sex love and intimacy.

Highsmith and Meaker were the pioneers of lesbian fiction genre, and their novels encouraged other writers to publish gay texts. In the late 1950s, Ann Bannon became one of the most popular lesbian fiction writers. Her series, *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, starts with *Odd Girl Out*, a novel with the same theme as *Spring Fire*, and tells the story of same-sex love of two sorority girls. However, in Bannon’s first novel, the protagonist is torn between homo- and heterosexuality, and eventually decides to leave the sorority and her female lover to go away with her boyfriend. Although *Odd Girl Out* and *Spring Fire* share a common theme, Meaker exposes the liminal, gay space that the protagonists of *Spring Fire* create for themselves, while Bannon focuses more on the presentation of the problems of homo- and heterosexual relationships in which her characters engage.

Considering the history of lesbian pulp fiction, *The Price of Salt* and *Spring Fire* are groundbreaking novels, especially in terms of their approach to gay women’s spaces in 1950s America. Both novels give significant, historical evidence of the existence of liminal, queer spaces established within heteronormative, postwar, American society. What is more, they provide the reader with valuable insights into the influence these spaces had on women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of liminality was coined by Arnold Van Gennep, who analyzed it in the context of rituals that occur within societies. By rituals, he meant the changing stages of people’s lives which are caused by the change of place, social position, age, and physical or mental condition of an individual, and which affect the way society is organized, and the way it functions. Van Gennep argued that every stage or ritual occurs in three stages: preliminal, which he associated with the separation of an individual from established social or cultural structures; liminal, which reflects the ambiguous condition of an individual, a stage where he or she is in between the past and upcoming stages; and incorporation, when an individual enters social structures again, yet with a completely new identity.17 Van Gennep’s concept of the rites of passage was taken up sixty years later by Victor Turner, who focused his analysis on the liminal period of individuals’ lives which he studied in the context of tribal communities. Turner’s concept of liminality is crucial for my argument as the attributes of liminal entities that he described enable me to argue that the liminal spaces established within heteronormative, public environments allowed some gay women to go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities. Turner defined liminal spaces as the entities that “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”18 Liminal spaces and liminal people, according to Turner’s definition, slip through the classifications and norms that establish cultural and social order. I will draw from Turner’s argument, and apply his interpretation of liminality to female homosexuality in 1950s America where heterosexuality was seen as the norm. Gay women, who engaged in same-sex intimacy and were simultaneously able to “pass” for straight, balanced on the verge of homo-and heterosexual world. They functioned in two spaces at the same time, yet they lived in neither of them. Turner, similarly to van Gennep, noted the transience of the liminal stage. In his understanding, everyone who enters the state of liminality is in a process of transition between a past self and a future self. In the context of homosexuality, the past self can be considered a heterosexual self—the self in a preliminary stage, living according to heteronormative standards, yet aware of the homosexual self. The liminal stage can be considered as the equivalent of a double-life—performing both homo- and heterosexuality. However, it is also the moment of approaching one’s gay identity, the time

of experiencing emotional and physical intimacy, and reconciliation with homosexuality. The liminal stage requires temporary isolation, secrecy, and invisibility—the attributes of liminal entities that Turner described and that I will analyze in the following paragraph.

While exploring the attributes of liminality, Turner underlined the state of non-being of liminal spaces—their condition of existing neither here nor there, but somewhere in-between. He argued that it is impossible to physically locate liminal spaces because they slip through socially established categories: “As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture.”\(^{19}\)

In the context of homosexuality, Turner’s argument explains the structural invisibility of gay environments that existed within the borders of heteronormative spaces in the 1950s. Suburban houses or sororities were certainly not the places where homosexuality was expected to be seen. As a result, many lesbians chose these environments to establish their liminal spaces where they could realize their same-sex love and desire. Within their liminal spaces, gay women no longer needed to pass for heterosexuals, and yet they did not have to face the social consequences of a coming out as gay. This is what Turner characterized as one of the attributes of liminality—being “at once no longer classified and not yet classified.”\(^{20}\)

The lesbian, liminal spaces established within heteronormative society allowed women to slip through gender classifications, and function in-between homo-and heterosexual identities. Both van Gennep and Turner described the liminal stage and spaces in the context of social structures. The individuals who were in the liminal phase of their identities recognition, initially separated themselves from cultural and social norms, and eventually, were to rejoin community that they have been living in, yet with their new identities.

In order to understand the specific of liminal spaces, it is crucial to discuss the social structures which accommodated them. In this aspect, I will draw from Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which was the scholar’s attempt to contextualize space. In the metaphysical sense, space was described by scholars already in the seventeenth century. Gottfried Leibniz, a German philosopher who attempted to contextualize space, argued that one should not think of space only in terms of a physical area where objects and individuals are located. Instead, he invited people to look at space from a broader and more abstract perspective, and consider it as a place where various object and individuals


interact in order to establish a set of relations among one another.\textsuperscript{21} This thought became the base for sociologists, who attempted to define space in the social context. Pierre Bourdieu developed Leibniz’s thought, and in “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” he argued that as a result of relations that occur between individuals who occupy a common space, these individuals gain various sets of properties, which not only differentiate them, but also define their social positions.\textsuperscript{22} Michel Foucault presented a similar approach to Leibniz and Bourdieu, and argued that the space that we live in is composed of various sites, which are built on multiple sets of relations between individuals and things: “We do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things … We live inside of a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.”\textsuperscript{23} Here, Foucault referred to the units of social structure which can be defined through various relations that occur within these units. For instance, as Foucault argued, local cafes, cinemas, and beaches can be defined as “the sites of temporary relaxation” because of the cluster of relations that the individuals created with these places. The space of home has a similar function—it is associated with the place of relaxation due to the relations that individuals created with certain sites of home such as a bedroom or a bed.\textsuperscript{24} This network of relations, as Foucault argued, contributes to the creation of social space. Moreover, because of the variety and non-homogeneity of these relations, the sites have different functions and may be used differently by various individuals. However, as Foucault argued, the diversity of social space should not be a reason for prioritizing some sites, and neglecting or diminishing the others. Therefore, he presented the concept of heterotopia, which he defined as a way of describing real places and spaces, which may appear homogenous, but are in fact composed of diverse, foreign to one another, sites that coexist within these single, real places. Foucault’s theory can be referred to the organization and structure of American society in the 1950s. In spite of the political encouragement to perceive American society as a homogenous nation, the social homogeneity was a myth. In the 1950s, American society was diversified not only culturally, ethnically, and racially, but also sexually. Therefore, Michel Foucault’s theory of heterotopia allows the reader to consider the social sites such as suburban houses, sororities, sport teams, or the army corps.


\textsuperscript{24} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.
as the places that were both homo- and heterosexual because of various relations that occurred among the individuals who inhabited them.

In the spatial framework, heterotopia describes a place, which lies in-between two opposing sets of values—these which are socially accepted, and these which do not fit into social norms, and are believed to be deviant. Therefore, the semi-public spaces that I will analyze in my thesis such as suburban homes, sorority houses, women’s sport teams, and the women’s army corps can be defined as heterotopias. In the 1950s, these were the real spaces which were subjected to heteronormative norms, yet inside, they were defined by the opposing sets of values. In order to explore the concept of heterotopia in the context of women’s gay spaces in the 1950s it is crucial to analyze some of the heterotopian qualities defined by Foucault.

The first quality that enables us to understand the importance of heterotopia for gay women’s spaces is the capability of juxtaposing several spaces or sites within one single, real place. In this case, Foucault referred to cinemas and theaters as heterotopias, which are capable of bringing imagined places, people, and things onto a single stage or a cinema screen. These places or people often remain foreign to one another, and certainly foreign to the context of time and space in which they are being shown to the audience, yet due to their heterotopian qualities they are able to coexist. In this aspect, a sorority house can be described in a similar way. As a single place, a sorority house was occupied by various individuals who created various relationships. Some of these relationships matched a socially accepted, heteronormative set of values, and others, as for instance homosexual relationships, did not fit into these values. Yet, the heterotopian qualities enabled the homo- and heterosexual world to coexist within a single, real place such as a sorority house.

Another quality of heterotopia that is significant to my research is its temporariness, or as Foucault argued, and individual’s awareness about an inevitable term of certain space. He gave the examples of fairgrounds and vacation villages, which were temporal spaces, and which existed within a limited amount of time. In this aspect, sorority houses can be considered as heterotopias. For some gay women, sororities were only temporary places that they occupied in order to find lesbian lovers and experience same-sex intimacy. In case of suburban houses the situation was different. Although housewives, who had lesbian inclinations, were usually actively engaged in lesbian affairs, many of them continued their heterosexual relationships for most of their lives because of the fear of losing their children or being socially excluded. However, for lesbians who eventually
decided to leave their families and commit to same-sex relationships, suburban homes were temporary spaces that enabled them to experience homosexuality and reconcile with their gay selves without being immediately, publicly exposed. The use of heterotopian quality of temporariness in the context of female, gay spaces allows the reader to perceive the stage of secrecy about one’s lesbianism as a temporary phase—as a process of separation from heterosexual norms, and being on the way to fully incorporate one’s homosexual identity.

The final quality of heterotopia that is crucial to my argument is its ability to be penetrable and isolated at the same time. As Foucault explained, the rites that happen inside the site are in most cases sheltered and hidden from the public view, even though the site itself is established within the public space. Therefore, only the individuals who occupy the site and participate in rituals that happen there are able to access the site, while the outsiders remain isolated from it. In this aspect, Foucault referred to a motel room as a popular place among couples wanting to have illicit sex. On the one hand, a motel is a public space, on the other, the access to the room where an illegitimate act happens is limited, which makes the room hidden and sheltered. Drawing from this example, sorority houses, suburban homes, the army corps and women’s sport teams can be considered as heterotopias, especially in the context of same-sex love which took place in the liminal sites of these spaces. For instance, a sorority room where a lesbian affair was nurtured was penetrable and isolated at the same time. On the one hand, other members of a house and its visitors saw the room as it appeared to them—as a regular room shared by two girls. On the other hand, they did not see the queer site of a room, which was isolated and visible only to the girls who were involved in a lesbian affair. At the time of postwar persecution of homosexuality, the isolation of queer spaces was crucial for gay women as it enabled them to nurture their lesbian relationships, and avoid mental repression. This trend was noted by Barbara Ponse, who analyzed the benefits of secrecy about one’s homosexuality: “the inclusive secrecy of the lesbian subculture creates an atmosphere for exploring lesbianism, provides a source of positive meanings for lesbianism, and helps sustain lesbian identity once it is established.”

Therefore, the secrecy about one’s lesbianism contributed to the isolation of heterotopian sites, and gave gay women time and space to reconcile with their identities without the pressure of unwanted, public exposure.

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The principles of heterotopia were also used by other scholars who applied them to various fields of studies. Kevin Hetherington looked at the theory of heterotopia in the context of modern society, and suggested to define heterotopia as spaces of alternate ordering of the social world—the ordering that was different from the way society has been ordered so far. He believed that heterotopia existed in the space between utopian and dystopian sphere and was the most favorable place, as only there the opposing values of utopia and dystopia had a chance to be balanced in a social context. Kevin Murphy analyzed the concept of heterotopia in the context of American resort culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Murphy’s research is closer to my analysis as he combined the issue of queer space that was a base of resort culture in the U.S. with the concept of heterotopia. He described various American resorts as places where single, white, middle-class men and women went in order to rest not only from the hustle of city life, but also from the pressure of heteronormativity. Heterotopian qualities of resorts such as the capability of juxtaposing various sites within a real, single place, the temporariness of the experience, and the isolation of resorts from the public view, enabled gay men and women to nurture their homosexual affairs away from the places of employment and social relations that could suffer if their homosexual inclinations would be uncovered. Although heterotopia has been used in various contexts, the critics agreed that in the spatial framework, it describes a place which lies in-between two opposing sets of values—these which are socially accepted, and these which do not fit into social norms, and are therefore believed to be deviant.

The analysis of the theories of Foucault and Turner in the context of gay women’s spaces established within heteronormative American society of the 1950s contributes to a more in-depth analysis of these spaces, and particularly of the processes that happened inside them. The use of both theories, in the historical and literary context, will allow me to argue that the creation of gay, liminal spaces was possible due to the heterotopian qualities of female, semi-public environments such as suburban homes, sorority houses, sport teams, and the army corps. The Foucauldian idea of heterotopia and the sociological concept of liminal spaces will enable me to look at the secrecy and invisibility of homosexuality as significant aspects of women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities.

especially in the context of hostile, homophobic American society in the 1950s. By using the term liminal space to describe the secret, private place where the recognition with one’s gay identity took place, I will attempt to present the stage of isolation of homosexuality as a process of exploring the women’s inner selves, yet without the limiting context of the closet. In my understanding, the liminal spaces were the environments where gay women could freely talk about their same-sex inclinations and express them, while the closet, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued, was associated with silencing their homosexuality and attempting to suppress it.\(^{28}\) Therefore, while analyzing lesbian spaces, I will focus on mental and physical opportunities that liminal, gay microcosms provided women with, and which eventually contributed to the increase of women’s self-awareness and confidence as lesbians.

**Social Space: The Critical Context**

Recent and past work on the question of gay women’s spaces has brought various arguments on were gay women functioned. However, in order to understand the characteristic of spaces navigated by gay women it is crucial to see how women’s space was defined by scholars not only in the context of the 1950s, but also much earlier.

In the 1950s, men’s access to the public space secured them a superior position to women, who had to adapt to seeing the world through the eyes of men. From a feminist point of view, Betty Friedan accurately targeted the problem of women’s position in the 1950s by describing the separation of the sexes as follows: “changeless woman, childish woman, a woman’s place in in the home, they were told. But man was changing; his place was in the world and his world was widening. Woman was left behind.”\(^{29}\) Her depiction of American women’s social status after the Second World War corresponds with the stance of social theorists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who believed that society is not a homogenous environment. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that the postwar propaganda promoting a comeback to traditional gender roles, placed American women back at home. The enclosure within spacious, suburban houses not only isolated women from social life, but also, as Friedan claimed, led to many identity crises caused by domestic boredom, loneliness, and the lack of any other purpose in life than nurturing the families and housekeeping.\(^{30}\) The way Friedan defined space and the position of women in

\(^{29}\) Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 82.
the 1950s resembles Barbara Welter’s description of the merits of true womanhood (piety, submissiveness, purity, and domesticity) which determined the identities of nineteenth-century women. In “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Welter claimed: “Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.”\(^{31}\) Welter, similarly to Friedan, argued that womanhood was defined by women’s commitment to the roles of mother and wife, which were supposed to give them a sense of happiness and fulfilment. This belief established women’s space within domestic environment not only in the nineteenth century, but also almost a hundred years later. Daphne Spain, who wrote on women’s social role and function, argued that the physical separation of the sexes maintained social stratification and greatly limited women’s access to the benefits of public space such as valuable knowledge, career development, or higher economic position.\(^{32}\) Similarly to Friedan, Daphne Spain noted that a privileged position of men in American society contributed to the inferior status of women at home, school, and work environment.\(^{33}\)

Elaine May, whose research is particularly valuable for my interpretation of women’s spaces, presented the continuation of Friedan’s argument on the enclosure of American women within domestic space, yet she put in the context of the Cold War ideology. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, May discussed how the heteronormative ideology of the times “contained women’s identities and bound them to their homes.”\(^{34}\) Although her study is more retrospective than Friedan’s, it gives valuable insights into the position and space of American women in the 1950s.

*Homeward Bound* brought up two significant concepts that are crucial for my interpretation of women’s enclosure within the heteronormative space of home, both in the historical and literary section of my thesis—sexual and domestic containment. These concepts embody women’s adaptation and commitment to their roles of mother and wife despite mental and physical sacrifice that they have to make, as well as many disappointments that they have to conceal. Although May used the concept of domestic and sexual containment in the context of American housewives, I will apply these ideas to the situation of gay women in the 1950s, who often had to adapt and commit to

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\(^{33}\) Spain, “Gendered Spaces and Women's Status,” 137-151.

\(^{34}\) May, *Homeward Bound*, 15.
heteronormative patterns, and engage in heterosexual relationships in order to hide their homosexual identities.

The presentation of the academic debate on women’s spaces is significant for my research as it exposes the home as a central space of white, American, middle-class women living in America in the 1950s. The scholars have shown that women’s enclosure within domestic space contributed to the limitation of their personal and professional possibilities, reduced their access to valuable knowledge and job training, and led to many identity crises.

The policy of sexual and domestic containment, which greatly relied on women’s commitment to a heteronormative, family-oriented culture, did not consider women whose sexual and gender identities differed from the normative, social standards. Gay women living in America in the 1950s navigated the same spaces as straight women, but because of social hostility towards homosexuals, the places where they could experience same-sex love and reconcile with their gay identities became significantly limited.

In the 1950s, homosexuality was considered as deviancy. However, as Jonathan Katz argued in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, the concept of homosexuality as an opposition to heterosexuality did not appear until the early twentieth century when sexuality became one of the determinants of one’s identity, especially within a society oriented towards the reproductive function of men and women. In the twentieth century, homosexuality became a serious obstacle to the social propaganda of the model of the nuclear family. Kate McCullough developed Katz’s thought and argued that gay men and women were socially excluded not only because they did not fit into established sexual norms, but also because they did not fit into the American, heteronormative narrative. This contributed to the fact that many gay men and women living in the U.S. in the 1950s had to maintain secrecy about their homosexuality, and pass for heterosexuals in the social context. Therefore, the limitation of space where gay women could explore their lesbianism, might have encouraged some of them to establish their liminal, gay microcosms within female environments such as sorority houses, sport teams, and the army corps.

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Back in the nineteenth century, the social perception of female intimacy was different. Close relationships or partnerships between women were tolerated because they were perceived as purely emotional. In New England, women who found partnerships with other women physically and emotionally more comfortable, could openly nurture them within the social space. These relationships, known as Boston Marriages, are significant elements of the history of lesbianism. The concept became recognized in the historical and literary circles after the publication of *The Bostonians*, a novel written by Henry James, which depicts the relationship of two unmarried women living together in Boston after The American Civil War. As a matter of fact, James’s sister stayed in a relationship with another woman for nearly twenty years, and she is believed to be an inspiration for her brother’s novel. The naturalness of female, same-sex relationships was also described by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who argued that love between women was a by-product of women’s isolation within the domestic environment, and their separation from the public, male world. By presenting the correspondence and diaries of women who were engaged in same-sex intimacy, Smith-Rosenberg exposed a nonhomogeneous and non-heteronormative side of the nineteenth-century American society, and gave recognition to women’s love. Sharon Marcus, who devoted her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* to the concept of same-sex marriages, drew from Smith-Rosenberg’s study, and supported her argument about the existence of female marriages in Victorian England: “The idea of female marriage was not simply a private metaphor used by women in same-sex relationships; it was also a term used by the legally married to describe relationships that were conducted openly and discussed naturally in respectable society.” While being aware that open, sexual relationships between women in the nineteenth century were seen as norm-breaking, the social acceptance of close female bonds, as well as the acceptance of two women living together made me wonder why this situation changed so drastically in the 1950s.

When gay men and women began to fight for the recognition of their sexual and gender identity in the second half of the twentieth century, the scholars began to analyze the concept of sexuality more carefully. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*

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37 James never used the term Boston Marriage in his novel, yet his writing is still believed to have introduced the concept.


expressed his concerns about the modern repression of discourse on sexuality. Not only were sex and sexuality reserved to marriage, but also the discussion of one’s sexual preferences and expectations was a social taboo.\textsuperscript{41} The issue of repression of female sexuality as well as women’s sexual and gender identity was also studied by Adrianne Rich, who sparked off the scholarly debate on the social pressure of women’s commitment to heterosexual relationships. By coining the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” Rich combined feminist and lesbian studies in order to disclaim Alice Rossi’s statement that women were naturally, sexually oriented towards men, and biologically towards reproduction.\textsuperscript{42} Rich’s study exposed how a heteronormative, male-dominated society rejected women’s sexuality as well as their gender and sexual identity. What is more, in her study, Rich touched upon the issue of women’s right to choose whether to commit to a heterosexual relationship or not—she questioned “whether in a different context or other things being equal, women could choose their heterosexual coupling or marriage.”\textsuperscript{43}

Considering Rich’s question in the context of the family-oriented American society of the 1950s, women’s lack of choice was even more visible. They were not expected to choose whether they preferred to stay single, get married to a man, or be in a relationship with a woman. Instead, they were assumed to be naturally interested in following the family path.

The issue of women’s right to choose will be developed in my thesis, yet not in the context of women’s ability to choose heterosexuality, but their ability to choose homosexuality, especially at the time of family-oriented, Cold War ideology. The concept of lesbianism as a choice entered the scholarly debate in 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir argued that some women chose lesbianism because they needed more liberty in their personal and professional lives. Beauvoir noted that some women preferred to abandon their heteronormative spaces and enter more liberating lesbian circles because being the second sex was too limiting. Her thought was continued by Alfred Adler, who in the early 1970s argued with Freud’s association of homosexuality with a previous distressing heterosexual experience that caused a psychological or emotional trauma.\textsuperscript{44} According to Adler, women did not envy men’s penises but their power, their access to various social advantages, and the sense of personal and professional liberty that their superior social position gave them. Therefore, for some women lesbianism appeared as the only means to

free themselves from the inferior social positions, as well as the strains of heteronormativity and gender roles.\textsuperscript{45} Adler’s thought was developed by Barbara Ponse, who in \textit{Identities in the Lesbian World} analyzed the process of establishment of gay identities. In her sociological research based on the interviews with women, Ponse defined five stages of lesbian realization and concluded that some women could assume lesbian identities after recognizing their distinctness from the heterosexuals. In Ponse’s study, some women admitted that their commitment to lesbian spaces resulted not in a sense of repulsion to male intimacy, but with repulsion to social expectations that went along with it.\textsuperscript{46} Beauvoir’s, Ponse’s, and Adler’s arguments were continued by Lilian Faderman who saw lesbianism not only as the identity of gay women, but also as a manifestation of female independency in the world that defined women’s roles and positions through their biological sex, regardless whether they were gay or straight.\textsuperscript{47} Although taking on a lesbian role in order to obtain mental and physical space is not the main aspect of my thesis, the understanding of the concept allows the reader to consider lesbian space from a different perspective—as an environment that gave both straight and gay women the sense of personal and professional freedom from the restraints imposed on them by a heteronormative, gender-oriented society.

In the 1950s, persecution of homosexuality was at its peak. The harassment of gays and lesbians caused by the social glorification of the model of the nuclear family, led to the repression of the public face of lesbianism.\textsuperscript{48} In the 1950s, lesbian bars were the only public spaces that apart from giving lesbians an opportunity to engage with one another, also gave public recognition to same-sex love.\textsuperscript{49} Leila Rupp in \textit{A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America}, argued that the 1950s-bar culture was a popular space among white, working-class lesbians who were not afraid to manifest their liberal attitude towards the performance of femininity and social conventions, which were rather restrictive for women living in 1950s America. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis presented a similar argument in one of the most popular academic studies on the space of lesbian bars: \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community}.

\textsuperscript{49} Kennedy, and Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold}, 30.
Community. The scholars described the contribution of lesbian bars to the development of lesbian culture and lesbian solidarity. However, Kennedy and Davis focused their research on entire bar community and gave little attention to individuals and their processes of reconciliation with their gay identities. Neither Rupp nor Kennedy and Davis analyzed the importance of the liminal space where gay women could go through the process of their homosexual recognition.

The academic debate on the meaning and function of gay spaces to a great extent relies on the concept of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in Epistemology of the Closet defined closetedness as “a performance initiated by the act of silence,” which accurately reflects the way gay men and women hid their queer identities. Silencing one’s gay identity was a common practice mostly because of the fear of social exposure and mental pressure that went along with it. By silencing their same-sex inclinations, many gay men and women enclosed their identities both physically—within the borders of their closets, and mentally—within the borders of their minds. Although I will use Sedgwick’s theory in the literary section of my thesis, I will not actively use the term closet throughout my paper. In my thesis, I will analyze lesbian microcosms that were occupied and navigated by two women, whereas the closets are usually associated with a secret kept by a single person. My interpretation aims to highlight the liberating qualities of the liminal spaces where gay women went through the process of reconciliation with their identities, while the term closet does not create the sense of liberation when it comes to the expression of one’s gay identity. Closetedness seems to stand for one’s state of being, instead of one’s transience between hetero- and homosexuality.

In my interpretation, I will argue that homosexuality, to a great extent, took place in the private, liminal environments which gave lesbians time and space to explore and reconcile with their gay identities without having to classify and publicly announce their sexual preferences. In this aspect, I will argue with scholars such as George Chauncey, who claimed that homosexuality took place in public environments such as bars, cafeterias, public parks, and dance halls where gay men and women had a chance to practice their culture, or Kennedy and Davis, who saw lesbian bar culture as a public place for manifestation of gender and sexual identities. Although, Chauncey and Kennedy and Davis agreed that the postwar, family-oriented ideology intensified gays’ persecution and

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50 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 3.
decreased the visibility of gay people, they did not analyze private environments where gay men and women recognized their homosexual identities. Contrary to Chauncey and Kennedy and Davis, Barbara Ponse believed that the secrecy about lesbianism helped gay women to reconcile with their identities: “Secrecy isolates the gay subculture from the straight world and offers refuge to those with lesbian identity through protection and validation.” According to Ponse, within secret spaces lesbians could explore their homosexuality, while in the social context they still functioned as heterosexual women, which enabled them to keep their jobs, maintain many friendships, and uphold good family relations—at least until they were confident about their identity and ready to come out as gay.

Steven Seidman, Chet Meeks, and Francie Transchen in “Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States” presented a more balanced perspective on the concept of homosexual secrecy within the heteronormative world. The scholars saw the secrecy around lesbianism as a strategy to accommodate and resist a social policy oriented towards the promotion of heteronormativity and the exclusion of homosexuality. They defined this strategy as “the closet.” Although I disagree with their understanding of secret lesbian spaces in the context of a strategy, I will draw from their study in terms of the significance of the private aspect of homosexuality which they referred to. To support their claim, Seidman, Meeks, and Transchen drew from Ponse’s argument about the importance of secrecy for lesbian identity recognition, and developed her thought on living a double life as one of the stages of gay realization. The scholars analyzed the function of the closet in the process of “normalization and routinization of homosexuality.” The former was defined as a process of acceptance of one’s gay identity, and the later as an attempt to incorporate homosexuality into the social life of an individual. Additionally, they argued that the way one’s homosexuality was managed, greatly influenced various aspects of his or her life: “The concept of the closet is compelling to the extent that the core areas of an individual’s life – work, family, and intimate ties – are structured by practices of managing homosexuality in order to avoid unwanted exposure.” This underlines that the process of managing one’s sexuality to a great extent takes place within private, secret spaces. In this aspect, I will develop

52 Ponse, Identities in the Lesbian World, 88.
54 Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen, “Beyond the Closet?” 19.
55 Ibid., 19.
Seidman, Meeks, and Transchen’s thought, and argue that temporary secrecy around lesbianism allowed women to explore and reconcile with their gay identities.

The academic debate on gay women’s spaces that I have introduced, underlines the scholars’ interest in a public performance of sexual and gender identity as a way of establishing the gay culture in the 1950s. Although scholars such as Ponse, Chauncey, Kennedy, and Seidman based their research on the testimonies of gay men and women who confessed how they handled homosexuality within private and public space, the scholars did not focus on the private aspect of reconciliation with one’s gay identity as a crucial stage of being or coming out as gay. This created space for my analysis of gay women’s environments which I will interpret in the context of Turner’s sociological concept of liminality and the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia. By using the term liminal spaces, I will distinguish my approach to the secrecy of homosexuality from the one that has been established by scholars, who associated it with the concept of the closet. The exposure of the state of transience—the state when an individual is no longer classified as a heterosexual and not yet as a homosexual—will bring a different perspective on where homosexuality took place.

To me, this thesis offers an alternative way of analyzing gay women’s spaces established within a heteronormative American society in the 1950s. It shows that at a time of social persecution of homosexuality, the fight for public recognition of lesbianism started in the liminal spaces created by gay women in-between two opposing sets of values—praised and accepted heterosexuality, and repressed and believed to be deviant homosexuality. Naturally, I acknowledge that my analysis is based on a limited number of examples of female gay spaces, however, the sources that I will present, both historical and literary, will serve as valuable evidence of the existence of gay spaces in the 1950s. For now, this thesis begins its examination of lesbian spaces turning to the analysis of American society in the 1950s.
Chapter Two:
The Portrait of Heteronormative American Society in the 1950s

When Winston Churchill, while delivering his “Sinews of Peace” speech, said: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent,” he defined the socio-political order established in Europe. The Iron Curtain became a metaphor of the antagonism between the Soviet Union and Western Europe, and a symbol of the separation of the capitalist West from the communist East. At the end of the Second World War, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics divided Europe between their spheres of economic, cultural, and military influences. However, both superpowers wanted more than their part of Europe. The pursuit of being better, more advanced, and more powerful became the subject of American and Soviet policies. For the U.S., coming into conflict with the USSR was not only an opportunity to expand their military, naval, and aviation industry—it was also a chance to present their highly-developed home front with technological advances, social welfare, a positive work environment, and happy nuclear families. America appeared as a stable and secure nation, both on the front line and at home. Capitalism was seen as the only guarantee of social and personal development, and its benefits were contrasted with the disadvantages of socialism, which relied on Soviet citizens’ hard work with barely any reward. As a result, capitalist propaganda became a ubiquitous element of American media in the 1950s.

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The advertisements promoting capitalism highlighted not only the U.S.A.’s technological progress, but also the value of family and gender roles. The cult of the nuclear family with a man working in the workforce and a woman dedicated to nurturing children became the definition of American society. The advertisements presented above reflect this trend. A Western Electric ad from October 1951 features a work environment where the majority of employees are men, which corresponds with the percentage of women in the labor force in the 1950. According to Miltra Toossi’s article, “A century of change: the U.S. labor force, 1950–2050,” only 34 percent of women were employed in the U.S. in 1950.59 The fact that men held most white- and blue collar positions corresponded with the social propaganda of the times, which promoted men as breadwinners, actively engaged in the workforce, and women as mothers and housewives devoted to domestic space.60 The brochure “Capitalism…Our Children’s Heritage” reflects this trend by showing an American family standing on the land located at the very top of the globe. The metaphor of America as the top-nation reflects the social confidence in the U.S. as a superpower. However, the way family is portrayed is also crucial: the man in the poster is standing slightly in front of his wife with his hands wide open as if he was protecting her, which suggests the superiority

60 May, Homeward Bound, 117.
of men over women in the 1950s, both in public and in private space. What is more, the frontal position of the man emphasizes the woman’s vulnerability, which may suggest that women are the weaker sex that needs to stay behind, and to rely on men’s physical strength and mental capabilities. The happiness, stability, and security of American families in the 1950s became the focal point of the country’s authorities, as it stood for the safety of the entire home front. Laura Belmonte in *Selling the American Way*, a book on American diplomacy in the 1950s and the role of propaganda, argued:

> According to USIA [United States Information Agency], families thrived in democratic capitalist societies. The agency presented carefully crafted images of American families emphasizing community involvement, rewarding employment, and material comfort.  

The social praise and protection of family values were to convince Americans about the importance of starting their own families. Not only did it enable men and women to achieve life fulfilment, but it also gave them the impression of active contribution to the growth of America. Establishing a family meant establishing a home, which from a social and political point of view was an equivalent of creating a safe and stable space where true American values were born. Therefore, the home became a place where the superpower of the United States had its roots.

**Home as a Politicized Space**

The well-being of the home and families that occupied the domestic space was crucial in order to claim the superiority of the American home over the Soviet home. As Belmonte argued, the democratic, domestic space provided American families with the two important values that the communist home could not provide: individual dignity and privacy. Contrary to the Soviet bloc, where big and overcrowded housing units in city centers aimed to promote social togetherness and common space for the labor force, middle-class Americans were offered spacious houses in the suburbs, where they could enjoy physical space and the sense of privacy. However, increased political interest in the well-being of home led to the politicization of domestic space. The political significance of the American home, both for national stability and international appearance of the U.S. as a superpower, contributed to the homogenization of homes across the country. Domestic

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space was not only an exhibit of American technological growth and economic development, but also a sanctuary for the heteronormative values of family and gender. President Richard Nixon during his visit in Moscow in 1959 underlined the importance of new technologies in house building, yet at the same time, he marked the main recipients of American investments in domestic space. He explained to Nikita Khrushchev:

I want to show you this kitchen. It is like those of our houses in California ... This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units ... In America, we like to make life easier for women ... I think that this attitude towards women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives.63

The presence of American women at home was a crucial element of the country’s politics in the 1950s. Thousands of houses that filled up American suburbs became workplaces for white, middle-class women, who were given responsibility for taking care of the spaces where the American superpower had its roots. Home was made for women, and women were made to be at home.

The politicization of home space concerned not only the issue of production and industrial development. Family became a significant value that American authorities in the 1950s perceived as a crucial factor in determining the well-being of home, and of the entire nation. As Elaine May argued:

In secure postwar homes with plenty of children, American women and men might be able to ward off their nightmares and live out their dreams. The family seemed to be the one place where people could control their destinies and perhaps even shape the future ... The home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok.64

The concept of the nuclear family guaranteed personal fulfillment and a sense of control in a world that was threatened with Cold War chaos. A happy marriage with two children became a trademark of American social policy. However, apart from a promise of safety and prosperity, the nuclear family model conceptualized strict gender roles, which set up the social boundaries of spaces in which men and women functioned. As Penny Edgell stated in her article on familism and gender ideologies, which structured various religious groups in the 1950s: “Family ideals are a primary source of gender ideology because they

64 Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound, 24.
define and rest upon men's and women's essential natures, the relational aspect of gender roles, and the connections between gender, sexuality, and reproduction." A belief in an indissoluble bond between biological sex and the ability to perform defined social roles, contributed to the establishment of the model of the nuclear family, which was based on a man utterly devoted to labor for the public sector, and a woman genuinely committed to the nurturing of home and children. The association of female sexuality with a biological, reproductive function determined women’s fundamental role as well as their social position.

Thus, as the home became the most stable and trustworthy element of American domestic security and international supremacy, women became the most reliable and secure elements of the American home. Their emotional and physical devotion to the maintenance of the home, commitment to marriage, and nurturing of children became the core values of the ideology of domestic containment. While explaining the concept, Elaine May underlined its connection to what “containment” meant in a strictly political sense—the national security and foreign anticomununism policies. She also explained the term in the context of domestic space, and analyzed its meaning from a social point of view as well as its impact on the everyday lives of Americans in the 1950s. She argued:

In the domestic version of containment, the ‘sphere of influence’ was the home … Domestic containment was bolstered by a powerful political culture that rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detectors. More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the home front, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home.

Women, as the main occupants of domestic space, became main targets of the ideology of domestic containment. They were expected to adapt to the home space as well as to the family culture that was promoted there, and which, as May argued, contained sexual fulfilment, financial stability, and satisfaction of spouses with gender-defined roles that they performed. She explained: “Compromise, accommodation and lowered expectations were solutions for many disappointed people who still clung to the ideal of domestic containment. These women and men often focused on the rewards of marriage and minimized the sacrifices.” For many American women, the reality of home and family

66 May, Homeward Bound, 14.
67 Ibid., 184.
life often turned out to be far from the promises of the idealized concept of the nuclear family. The lack of personal and professional development, domestic boredom, and lack of romance in marriage became the sources of disappointment for women. Additionally, the remoteness and spaciousness of American suburban houses effectively isolated women from other housewives, and precluded them from questioning whether their lack of promised fulfillment with domestic life was a common thing or an individual failure to adapt into the role of a wife and a mother. The social pressure to fit into the image of a happy family that was to bring joy and comfort, urged women to act as if motherhood and marriage gave them everything they needed in their lives, without focusing on the sacrifices that they had to make. Thereby, American women in the 1950s came back on the domestic path that their great grandmothers followed in the nineteenth century. The domesticization of women, encouraged by a belief in their exceptional role in building a powerful and stable nation, contributed to their enclosure, not only within the borders of their homes, but also within the borders of their minds. By convincing themselves that the personal and social benefits of marriage and motherhood were worth the sacrifice, many women closeted their independent and self-oriented identities for the sake of fulfilling the social ideology of domestic containment. Betty Friedan described the trend of defining women by the roles that they had been assigned to by the ideology of the times:

The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illness of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She found true feminine fulfillment.

Home was supposed to provide women with a secure space that separated them from political, economic, and social concerns of the outside world. Unfortunately, the utopian domestic environment with its abundance of amenities separated women not only from the concerns of public space, but also from its benefits, such as personal and professional development, a decent job, and participation in social life. By minimizing sacrifices, lowering expectations, and adapting to the values of home and family, women agreed to the isolation of their sex within the domestic space. Home, while being the nest of family joy, became the closet of suppressed dreams, fears, and concerns of American women, who for the sake of fitting into the ideology of domestic containment had to conceal their

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inner needs. The American housewife was not only a label that defined a woman’s social position, but in most cases, it became the identity of the American woman.

The Social Pressure of Compulsory Heterosexuality in the 1950s

The ideology of domestic containment, apart from enclosing women within the borders of their homes, also intensified the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality was popularized by Adrienne Rich and referred to a prevailing assumption that women were naturally, sexually oriented towards men. Although Rich described the trend in the 1980s, heteronormativity became an important element of family-oriented, Cold War ideology already in the 1950s. Heterosexual marriages were significant from a social and political point of view not only due to the fact that they guaranteed the development of stable nuclear families, but also because they were a testament to the stability of American society. Homosexuality was believed to destabilize the social order, and therefore it was repressed. According to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on mental disorders published in 1952, homosexuality was defined as a psychoneurotic disorder, which led to sexual deviations and psychopathic personalities. Those deviations in juxtaposition with religious beliefs that treated anything but opposite-sex relationships as sins, contributed to the association of homosexuality with crime against norms, religious beliefs, and the law. In fact, until 1962, same-sex inclinations were defined as criminal acts, as they were illegal in all states in the U.S. Therefore, social encouragement towards heterosexual relationships became a crucial element of American politics in the 1950s.

The establishment of sorority and fraternity houses next to boarding schools and colleges was one of the ways to enforce heteronormativity among young Americans. Sororities and fraternities aimed to pair up the children of social elites, who would foster the nuclear families right after they have left the organizations. As Alfred McClung Lee argued in Fraternities Without Brotherhood, a book on the structure of fraternities, dating a sorority or fraternity member was not only highly encouraged by the organization’s authorities, but also rewarded: “The fraternities and sororities apply considerable social pressure to the ‘dating’ of their members. One gets merits whether formally recorded or

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71 In 1962, the American Law Institute developed a Model Penal Code, which promoted uniformity in law-making, and contributed to the removal of consensual sodomy from the criminal code.
not, for dating with a co-ed of a high-ranking sorority, demerits for associating with an ‘independent.’”  

Women who committed to relations with fraternity men enjoyed greater popularity among other students, and gained other women’s respect as being in a relationship was a remarkable achievement for sorority students, and placed them significantly higher in the school rank. However, the benefits of being engaged in heterosexual relationships were more important for women, whose femininity, maturity, and social status were determined by the presence or absence of a life partner. Therefore, American women in the 1950s willingly and consciously committed to relationships, although many of them did not manage to find the promised fulfillment and satisfaction therein. Similarly to the way they accommodated to their domestic roles, women had to lower their expectations and adapt to their roles of wife and partner. Betty Friedan and Elaine May told the stories of women, who despite their failures to create strong, emotional bonds with their husbands, or to achieve sexual satisfaction in their marital beds, stayed in their relationships in order to meet the social, heteronormative expectations.

The concept of compulsory heterosexuality not only declared that women were naturally interested in men, but also that sex with men was for women a natural and indisputable source of satisfaction and intimate fulfillment. Although women’s sexuality in the 1950s was not given much recognition, the sexual behavior of spouses was. The pro-family ideology of Cold War propaganda had to homogenize sexual behavior that got out of control with a growing popular culture that unleashed sex. Women’s promiscuity, sexual liberation, as well as inclinations to “perversions” and same-sex contacts, were serious threats to the heteronormative order that was imposed on American society. Therefore, the ideology of sexual containment became a significant element of American social policy on the home front, as the authorities believed that “unlike sexual repression, [sexual containment] would enhance family togetherness, which would keep both men and women happy at home and would, in turn, foster wholesome childrearing.”

The increasing interest in sexual activities was directed towards marital beds. Not only was it supposed to strengthen the bond between spouses and family in general, but also to secure and stabilize the international position of the U.S., which greatly depended on the steadiness of the home front. Therefore, as women committed to domestic space, motherhood, and marriage, they had to devote themselves to marital, sexual lives.

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Similarly to the codes of domestic containment, the ideology of sexual containment was based on the adaptation to one’s sex life regardless the sense of satisfaction; all for the sake of maintaining a happy family. However, due to the lack of profound education about women’s sexual needs and desires, taboos around sex, and the pressure of early marriage, women did not know what sex was really about. In consequence, they had to adapt to the reality of marital sex, which often required that they significantly lower their expectations, and live sexually unsatisfied and unfulfilled. May explained women’s adaptation to the reality of sexual life after marriage on the basis of responses she had received from the interviewees in her study, “Report on Marriage to Research Partner:”

Healthy families were built upon the bedrock of good sex … Many respondents were able to settle into a sexual routine that they considered more-or-less satisfactory by scaling down their own expectations and concentrating on pleasing their spouses … These reactions illustrate the ambiguous legacy of sexual containment, which promises security against sexual chaos and fulfilment in an erotically charged marriage.74

Similarly to the way domestic containment enclosed women within the borders of their homes, sexual containment enclosed them with the borders of their heteronormative relationships. By promising women a sense of fulfilment, the policies of Cold War propaganda contained their needs, desires, and identities within the domestic space. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality imposed on women the devotion to family lives, and left them no choice and no opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with their sexual, personal, and social position. Women became enclosed not only physically within their domestic environments, but also mentally within their thoughts, disappointments, and the sense of dissatisfaction which they could not share with anybody. Many women sacrificed their individualism and otherness for the sake of fitting into social norms. However, the concept of compulsory heterosexuality and the necessity of adaptation to heteronormative norms was even more difficult for gay women. Therefore, many women with same-sex inclinations decided to search for liminal spaces where they could secretly express their desires and satisfy their needs away from the public view. Many of them established their homosexual spaces within heteronormative environments, which enabled them to preserve both their gay identities, and heterosexual appearances. The fact that they

74 May, Homeward Bound, 134.
functioned on the border of homo- and heterosexual world, gave them the time and space necessary to go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities.

The following chapter of this thesis will be devoted to the analysis of liminal, lesbian spaces established within semi-public environments such as suburban homes, sorority houses, women’s sport teams, and the women’s army corps. It will present how firmly the heteronormative ideology of the times was rooted in these environments, and how gay women used the heterotopian qualities of these, presumably heterosexual spaces, and managed to transform them into their liminal, lesbian microcosms.
Chapter Three:

Lesbian Spaces within Heteronormative American Society in the 1950s

In order to analyze queer spaces established within heteronormative American society in the 1950s, it is crucial to look at the issue of homosexuality first. Considering the fact that in the 1950s, homosexuality was defined as a psychoneurotic disorder, it seems reasonable to conclude that queer people were rather an inconvenient subject for American authorities. It is also reasonable to argue that since social recognition of homosexuality was limited, so was the recognition of physical space that would be available for gays and lesbians to function in. However, as Leila Rupp argued, lesbian bars that existed in America in the 1950s, significantly contributed to giving “a public face to female same-sex sexuality.”\textsuperscript{75} Lesbian bars, apart from being the places navigated by gay women, were also the places where women were free from heteronormative norms that limited their sense of personal liberty. In lesbian bars, concepts such as the inequality of the sexes, male superiority, and female obedience did not exist. On the contrary, freedom of behavior and loose social conventions were the values that built lesbian bar culture. This led to social perception of lesbianism as a threat to a stable country subjected to traditional norms and values. At the same time, lesbian bars were one of few spaces where heteronormative norms agitating for women’s commitment to domestic, family-oriented lives, simply did not apply. Therefore, lesbian space was perceived by some heterosexual women as the place that could give them opportunities that heterosexual spaces could not; it was the place where they could find freedom from an oppressive, heteronormative society that defined them by their gender, and not by their personal capabilities, skills, or knowledge. Thus, for some heterosexual women lesbianism appeared as a choice—not as a choice of sexual identity, but as a choice of lifestyle that promoted values enabling women to be physically and mentally free from the strains of compulsory heterosexuality and domestic commitment. The concept of lesbianism as a choice was defined by Simone de Beauvoir, who stated:

> In truth, homosexuality is an attitude that is \textit{chosen in situation}; it is both motivated and freely adopted. None of the factors the subject accepts in this choice—physiological facts, psychological history, or social

\textsuperscript{75} Leila J. Rupp, \textit{A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America}, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 149-163.
circumstances—is determining, although all contribute to explaining it. It is one way among others for woman to solve the problems posed by her condition in general and by her erotic situation in particular. In this aspect, Beauvoir noticed that some women deliberately and consciously chose to function in gay spaces as it enabled them to get free from the limitations that were imposed on them by social perception of their gender. Lesbian spaces permitted women’s personal and professional development as they provided them with a metaphorical “room of their own,” which served them as a physical space where they could focus on their inner selves—their needs, dreams, and desires. The physical and mental space that women could enjoy within lesbian environments were the qualities that they could not obtain within a gender-oriented, heteronormative culture. However, it is crucial to underline that de Beauvoir did not argue that women chose their sexual identities. She believed that lesbian spaces were alternatives for straight women who did not want to fold to the pressure of a heteronormative society that defined women as mothers and wives. Therefore, lesbianism appeared for some straight women as a choice to live their lives according to their consciences. Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, a book on the history of lesbianism, continued de Beauvoir’s thought, and explained the trend in the context of the 1970s: “Lesbians now [in the 1970s] see their lesbianism as a choice they make because they want to be free from prescribed roles, free to realize themselves.” Although Faderman referred to a later period in the history of the lesbian movement, her argument can be related to the situation of women in the 1950s. Some women decided to join lesbian communities not because they wanted to find lesbian love and realize same-sex desires, but because of a wider range of possibilities and the sense of personal freedom that those communities offered them. The freedom from prescribed gender roles was for many American women in the 1950s a value that they were deprived of. Instead of working towards the realization of their professional goals or personal dreams, they had to work towards the realization of a heteronormative, Cold War ideology. Therefore, queer spaces in America in the 1950s became significant elements for building a culture of independent women, who chose not to follow a heteronormative path, regardless whether their

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otherness rested in their queer, sexual identities, or in their quest for mental, personal, and professional liberation.

In my research I will not analyze gay spaces from the perspective of straight women who chose to function in lesbian environments, but from the perspective of gay women to whom the liminal aspect of lesbian spaces became crucial for the process of reconciliation with their homosexual identities. However, it is still significant to highlight the concept of lesbianism as a chosen situation. The understanding of straight women’s reasons for choosing to function in gay spaces allows the reader to acknowledge the values and qualities of lesbian microcosms which helped both homo- and heterosexual women in their search for their true selves. Gay spaces appeared as an alternative for homo-and heterosexual women, who in the family-oriented American society, did not have time and space of their own.

More liberated, heterosexual women associated lesbian culture with freedom to break gender-oriented traditions, but homosexual women perceived lesbian societies as a form of their cultural expression. In the 1950s, with an increase in the popularity of gay bar culture, women started to search for public spaces where they could meet other women like themselves. Leila Rupp explained this notion:

As men of all classes moved freely in the booming sexual underworlds, young, single, working-class women in urban areas began to challenge both older conceptions of their depravity and new ones of their asexuality to carve out a culture that had some chance of meeting their own sexual and emotional needs.78

However, considering the social repression of homosexuality in the 1950s, for many gay women a public coming-out as gay was too risky as it threatened their job positions or the relationships with their families and friends. Therefore, many of them decided to nurture their lesbian affairs within the secret spaces established within semi-public environments. In this research, I will be referring to these spaces as liminal, lesbian spaces, mostly due to their attributes described by Victor Turner in his theory of liminality. Within liminal spaces, two gay women could freely talk about their sexuality and experience it. At the same time, their microcosm was isolated from the public view, which gave them necessary time and space to recognize and reconcile with their homosexuality in order to be able to eventually leave the liminal space, and re-join the social structures with a new identity.

78 Rupp, A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America, 42.
Lesbians Under the Cover of Domesticity: Lesbian Wives

In the 1950s, an American home was a space navigated almost entirely by women. They were the ones who nurtured their families, looked after the children, and maintained their houses. However, an American home can be considered as an example of a semi-public space, especially considering its highly-politicized context. On the one hand, American suburbia was a trademark of privacy and individualism, but on the other hand, it was a tool in the hands of American authorities that used domestic values for the sake of their propaganda. Therefore, due to its political context, the home stood on the border of private and public space.

For many American housewives, the home was a private space of physical and emotional loneliness and abandonment that they experienced while spending their days at homes by themselves. The sense of desolation and an excess of time, which could not be filled with anything other than household chores, made women doubt their true identities. Their disappointment with domestic routines led to many identity crises, which were not only related to the fact that women did not achieve a promised life fulfillment, but also because they did not have anyone to share their concerns with. Spacious American suburban houses, instead of giving women space and a sense of freedom, enclosed them within the borders of their domestic space. Other women were often the only companions that they had in their everyday lives, which contributed to the creation of emotional bonds between many American housewives. Female friendships that were born in suburban houses were often based on mutual, emotional understanding between women who had to deal with loneliness, apathy, fatigue, and the lack of intellectual stimulus caused by being enclosed within domestic spaces. Some of these close bonds encouraged same-sex intimacy, which for some women, turned out to be the way to achieve sexual fulfillment. However, the sense of privacy and social isolation of suburban houses was especially significant for gay women. It enabled them to establish their liminal, gay microcosms within the borders of home without raising social suspicions about their close relationships with other women. On the one hand, they were married to men, which allowed them to function in a heteronormative space and preserve the appearances of heterosexuality, on the other hand, they could nurture their lesbian love and desire without leaving their safe home space. Certainly, the issue of limited mobility of American housewives also needs to be considered as one of the factors that contributed to the development of a domestic, lesbian space. Many middle-class women at the time were physically dependent on their
husbands, and joining gay communities that were established in the cities, was in most cases impossible. Therefore, lesbian wives—as Lauren Jae Gutterman referred to gay women married to men—created the space for lesbian love and desire within their heterosexual homes and marriages. In “‘The House on the Borderland’: Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household,” Gutterman explained the function of home as a lesbian space:

Home functioned as a lesbian space for married women; it served as the center of family life, yet it allowed access to lesbian communities and sheltered lesbian affairs … Within this reassuringly familiar and profoundly intimate space, wives were able to explore socially stigmatized sexual desires while insulated from the public's gaze.

The function of home as a shelter for same-sex intimacy from the public gaze that Gutterman noted, can be seen as having the qualities that Michel Foucault used to describe the concept of heterotopia. Historically, an American suburban home was a real, physical space inhabited by a nuclear family that was supposed to live according to the traditional values set by American authorities in the 1950s. However, the presence of lesbians within a presumably heteronormative, domestic space, means that the home was not a solely homogenous environment. Instead, it juxtaposed both homo- and heterosexual sites, which were navigated simultaneously by lesbian wives. Therefore, domestic space can be considered a heterotopia as it accommodated two, foreign to one another, worlds—a liminal microcosm of lesbian “perversion”, and a heterosexual, family-oriented macrocosm. This accommodation was possible due to another quality of heterotopic sites, namely their openness and closeness. The liminal space where lesbian wives engaged in same-sex intimacy, although established in a penetrable and open home space, was structurally invisible to family members, friends, or other people who for some reason had to enter the household. The queerness of this space was recognizable only to its members, who carefully isolated it from the public view. What is more, although Gutterman argued that for some gay women, home remained a secret, lesbian space until the late 1970s, its isolating function was rather temporary. With the emergence of the Gay Liberation movement in the early 1970s, many gay women decided to give a public face to their homosexual identities. They left their domestic, heteronormative spaces, ended their

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marriages, and fought for the recognition of same-sex love. However, the time when they nurtured their lesbian relationships within a home space was not wasted as it enabled them to experience lesbian intimacy, and recognize their gay selves. Under the shelter of heteronormativity, many lesbian women got the time and space that was necessary to go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities. Therefore, the analysis of domestic space in the context of heterotopia exposes the qualities of American home as a place that played a significant role in gay women’s liberation from the strains of oppressive heteronormativity.

Apart from the physical, heterotopian qualities of the gay site of domestic space, there was also a mental aspect of gay women’s process of reconciliation with their identities. In fact, the heterotopian qualities of suburban home contributed to the creation of liminal, lesbian space within domestic borders, which allowed lesbian wives to explore and reconcile with their homosexuality. It is worth looking at this process in the context of van Gennep’s and Turner’s theories of liminality. The home can be considered as a place where lesbian wives experienced two stages of their sexual recognition—preliminary and liminal. The preliminary stage can be observed when gay housewives decided to nurture their lesbian affairs at home. Although they fulfilled their roles of mother and wife, their emotional and physical engagement in homosexual affairs separated them from the heteronormative world. The liminal stage can be associated with the actual moments when lesbian wives engaged in same-sex intimacy. These were the moments when their husbands and children were off to work and school, and women could meet with their lovers. At that point, they experienced an identity loss—they were no longer heterosexual as they physically and mentally committed to their lesbian affairs, and not fully homosexual yet as outside their same-sex relationships, they were still subjected to the norms of heteronormative society. This reflects the attribute of liminality, which was defined by Turner as being simultaneously classified and no longer classified. In the liminal period of their identities recognition, gay women were in-between the homo- and heterosexual world; the former gave them emotional understanding and physical satisfaction that often were missing in their heterosexual marriages, and the later provided them with social status and a safe shelter from social persecutions for their queerness. Therefore, the liminal space was crucial for the women’s process of reconciliation with their queer identities as it enabled them to experience same-sex sexuality without exposing it to the public view. After having learned about their gay identities, and having chosen the
life they wanted to live, some lesbian wives were ready to re-enter social structures with their new identities, which was defined by van Gennep as the incorporation stage.

Moreover, many lesbian wives used their safe, domestic space to remotely fight for social recognition of their homosexuality. American suburbia became an efficient gender underground. As Gutterman explained, women used the space of home to interact with other gay women. From home, they corresponded with other lesbians, wrote anonymous articles to the newspapers about their sexual identities, and often engaged in long-distance relationships that they fostered via letters. She argued:

For some, the household was an intermediary space, a stepping-stone on a journey to visiting lesbian bars, publicly claiming a lesbian identity and building a new life. For others, the household was as much a lesbian space as they would ever know, the only place they would encounter a broader lesbian community through Martin and Lyon's letters, or kiss another woman's lips.81

Gutterman’s recognition of the intermediary value of the home sphere contributes to its interpretation as a semi-public, female space that enabled gay women to create their liminal microcosm where they could perform same-sex intimacy. For many lesbians living in postwar, suburban America, the domestic sphere became a passage between the compulsory heterosexual space that they functioned in, and a liberated, homosexual space that they did not yet have full access to. At the same time, the fact that gay women had a chance to function in the liminal space of their homosexual microcosm, and navigate it according to their needs, enabled them to distance themselves from the pressure of heteronormative society. Having a chance to focus on their gay identities at least for a while, made their process of reconciliation with their homosexuality much smoother than if they had tried to suppress their gay selves.

In the 1950s, suburban houses functioned as spaces where, under the cover of heterosexual reality, many women could hide their lesbian identities. Lesbian wives managed to transform the politicized space of home into a liminal, gay microcosm, which gave them shelter from social persecution, and at the same time, it allowed them to foster their homosexual affairs. However, lesbian wives were not just gay women trapped in the domestic world of compulsory heterosexuality. They were the women who transformed the

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heteronormative environment that persecuted otherness into a queer, liminal space where this otherness was fostered.

The private, domestic space of suburban houses was not the only environment that enabled gay women to nurture their same-sex relationships. In the 1950s, many lesbians decided to create their gay microcosms within the public space of American sororities, which will be analyzed in the following section.

**Female Friendships Allowed: The Liminality of American Sororities**

The establishment of the first sororities in the United States dates back to the late nineteenth century, when women expressed an increasing interest in obtaining an education and being an active part of college society. Sororities appeared as female alternatives for fraternities, which were male organizations developed within college communities, aiming to provide their members with personal development and social experience that was crucial for their future lives, yet could not be taught in class. The establishment of sororities and giving women an opportunity for intellectual development was then believed to be one of the major accomplishments in terms of women’s rights. Yet considering the ideology of sororities more carefully, the extent of their contribution to women’s liberation seems rather ambiguous. Under the cover of teaching women traditional values that were supposed to shape their social consciousness, the main goal of sororities was to prepare young American women for the roles of wife and mother through which they would contribute to the nation’s heteronormative, prosperous image. John Finley Scott in “The American College Sorority: Its Role in Class and Ethnic Endogamy” defined the American College Sorority:

The prototypical sorority is not so much the servant of youthful interests as it is an organized agency for controlling them; dominated by ascriptive groups and concerned to maintain their norms, it operates at a physical remove from these groups and in a larger and frequently hostile institutional setting.

Scott described a sorority as a public space that was created to maintain the heteronormative, gender-based norms that built America’s image. There are two terms that

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Scott used in his definition of the American College Sorority, which expose contrasting values that delineate what the sorority was in theory, and what it was in a practical sense. First of all, Scott referred to the main function of sororities, which as he argued, were supposed to be “the servants of youth purposes.” The fundamental role of female organizations in shaping young women’s consciences, promoting the values of their identities as women, as well as giving them the impression of social activism and contribution to college social life, was supposed to convince young women that they truly needed the help of sororities in becoming better versions of themselves. The morals of sororities as institutions were also described by Alfred McClung Lee in *Fraternities Without Brotherhood*, a book on the history of fraternity and sorority houses. Lee defined them as “society’s traditional aspirations and assurances of human rights,” and described their chief significance in “shaping the consciences of the young and thus the core of the consciences which function throughout life, and in providing the main staples for propagandists terms for glittering generalities and name-calling, of righteous justification and condemnation.”

What Lee defined as the morals of institution, Scott characterized as the inside principles of supervisory, dominant, and organized agencies that sororities and fraternities were. As Scott underlined, a true and publicly unmentioned ideology of sororities was based on sense of control, domination, and power that the organizations had over their members. Therefore, instead of serving young women in uplifting their social positions, and contributing to their educational development, sororities turned out to be faithful servants to the social and political agenda of American authorities in the 1950s.

The propagandist element of sororities’ principles was also discussed by Lee, who described the institution’s morals in the context of their “glittering generalities and name-calling” values, which stand for the principal techniques used in political, propagandist advertising. By presenting the virtues and ideals that sorority membership could provide, the institution’s authorities appealed to candidates’ emotions as well as their sense of sisterhood, belonging, and the values fostered at their homes. At the same time, not belonging to a sorority house not only emphasized one’s lower social status, but in many cases, it also deprived young women from a chance to date and marry middle- or upper-

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85 Single fraternity and sorority units were usually governed by active students, while several units were grouped in national or international organizations and were subjected to the federal authorities, which were governed by alumni members (graduate students).
class men. The name-calling values, which Lee referred to, can be recognized in the way sororities and fraternities defined the individuals who did not belong to the organization. A common term “independents,” which was reserved for those men and women who did not belong to the houses, carried a contemptuous and socially dismissive tone. As William Graebner explained in “Outlawing Teenage Populism: The Campaign against Secret Societies in the American High School, 1900-1960,” at the time of Cold War propaganda, independence was associated with juvenile rebelliousness, crime, and delinquency. Therefore, institutions such as fraternities and sororities had a significant role in socializing young men and women, as well as in protecting them from going off the right path. Thus, the propagandist language of sororities and fraternities contributed to labeling morals and establishing the role of institutions. However, the scholarly debate on general image of sororities, as well as the message that they sent, revealed their true image of organized agencies to control and dominate young women in order to maintain traditional, social norms.

For straight women, a sorority was not only a place where they could obtain higher education, but also where they had a chance to “date and mate” the fraternity men. The very process of dating and mating, apart from being an opportunity for a “timely marriage,” for many middle-class women was a chance of an upward social mobility by marrying wealthy fraternity students. However, for homosexual women, a sorority was a public space that due to its heterotopian qualities, contributed to the creation of liminal, gay spaces within its heteronormative borders. Similarly to suburban houses, sororities were subjected to traditional, heteronormative norms, which created the appearances of the institution as a homogenous space. However, in gay circles, sorority houses were known for their gay sites. Marijane Meaker, an American, lesbian pulp novelist, in an interview with Terry Gross for National Public Radio, admitted that gender-divided schools in the first half of the twentieth century were recognized as vivid gay communities filled with perversion. She confessed that as a lesbian at the beginning of her sexual self-recognition, she deliberately attended a boarding school as she had read about the gay underground.

88 “Dating and Mating” is a term used by Alfred McClung Lee in Fraternities Without Brotherhood to describe the process of pairing sorority girls with fraternity boys. Dating and mating was an important element of the social life of students, which not only helped them to find a husband- or wife-to-be, but also to increase their popularity among other students.
89 John Finley Scott underlines the significance of a timely marriage especially for women, who lose their attractiveness because of the passage of time. Finding a husband among the fraternity men gave them a chance to get married when they were young and attractive.
within the borders of the heteronormative school community. What is more, the study conducted by Douglas Case, Grahaeme Hesp, and Charles Eberly, who explored the experiences of gay women who were members of sororities, proves the existence of lesbian spaces within heteronormative sorority houses. Although the study was conducted in the 1990s, it examined the sorority experience of gay men and women, who at the time of the research were between 19 and 59 years old. This allows us to consider the study as a valuable source for the analysis of gay women’s spaces within sorority houses in the 1950s, as the age of some female respondents indicates that they were sorority members in the 1950s. Case, Hesp, and Eberly came up with the total of 38% of all female respondents, who admitted that they engaged in homosexual activities during the college period. This exposes the non-homogeneity of sororities, which can be related to one of the qualities of heterotopia that Foucault described as the ability to juxtapose several, often foreign to one another, sites within one, single place. In this aspect, sorority houses can be defined as heterotopias as they accommodated both homo- and heterosexual spaces within their borders. In the case of sororities, the process of accommodation of gay sites within heteronormative environment of the organization was relatively easier than in the case of suburban houses. Sororities were spaces inhabited and navigated entirely by women, which contributed to the fact that close and intimate relationships between women were believed to be even more natural than those created within the space of suburban houses. In fact, sorority rooms greatly contributed to the accommodation of homosexuality within the borders of heteronormative organization, and a simultaneous isolation of same-sex love from the public view. In this aspect, sorority rooms reflected the heterotopian quality of openness and closeness as under the appearances of regular rooms inhabited by sorority girls, they concealed their queer structure, which was penetrable to gay women who lived there, yet which was closed and invisible to other members of the institution. However, while thinking of sorority houses in the context of heterotopia, an inevitable term of this space needs to be considered. For both straight and gay women, sororities were only temporal spaces that gave them time and opportunities to find partners. This temporariness was even more significant for gay women as due to their young age, most of them were only at the beginning of their way towards the reconciliation with their gay identities. Therefore, sororities were for some gay women the first places to go in order to experience

same-sex love, and realize their homosexual desires before they decided to commit to serious relationships with other women. In the context of the times, sororities were the ideal places to experiment with one’s queer sexuality as they created favorable conditions to conceal lesbian affairs under the cover of close, female friendships that were the natural by-products of sorority life.

Similarly to suburban houses, sororities reflected not only the physical qualities of heterotopia, but also the attributes of liminal spaces described by Turner in the theory of liminality. In order to discuss the liminal aspects of sorority space, it is crucial to start with the presentation of how sororities reflected Arnold van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage. The preliminal stage, which was associated by van Gennep with the separation of an individual from the established social and cultural structures, could be observed at the very moment gay women decided to engage in same-sex affairs within sorority houses. By continuing their affairs, they entered the liminal stage where they no longer belonged to the heteronormative world, and yet, they still could not be fully classified as lesbians—they were in the process of transition between their hetero- and homosexual identities. This is the aspect of van Gennep’s argument that Victor Turner developed in his study of liminal spaces. He noted that individuals who are in the liminal stage of identity recognition are “at once no longer classified and not yet classified,” which resembles the condition of the gay women who were engaged in homosexual affairs within the heteronormative space of sorority houses. On the one hand, to some extent they freed themselves from the strains of the heterosexual world by breaking the pattern of compulsory heterosexuality, yet on the other hand, outside their liminal spaces, they still followed the rules of their heteronormative sororities. During the sorority period, gay women were in the state of transience between their past and upcoming selves, which not only gave them an opportunity to experience homosexuality, but it also gave them time to reconcile with it. Here, the transformation of sorority rooms into liminal, gay microcosms where homosexuality could occur, turned out to be crucial. Due to the fact that on the outside, sorority rooms appeared just as regular rooms inhabited by two girls, gay women could easily hide the queer structure of their spaces. In this aspect, Turner’s explanation of the impossibility of physical locating of liminal spaces within social structures seems to be a valuable justification for the invisibility of queer site of sorority rooms. Turner’s argument that members of society see what they have been taught to see, explains the fact that the

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sorority alumni perceived sorority rooms as regular rooms shared by two girls. Considering that the issue of homosexuality slipped through socially established categories, the queer site of sorority rooms was almost indistinguishable by the public view. In many cases, the liminal period was over when women were about to leave a sorority house. Having experienced, approached, and reconciled with their gay identities, they were ready to re-join social structures as homosexuals. In fact, Case, Hesp, and Eberly’s study on experiences of queer sorority members, seems to reflect the pattern described by van Gennep. According to the data presented by the researchers, 80% of interviewed women identified themselves as heterosexual upon joining a sorority house. However, upon graduation, almost half of these women considered themselves as exclusively or predominately lesbian. This shows that sorority houses played a significant role in the process of recognition of one’s homosexual identity. Not only did they give gay women necessary time to approach and recognize their homosexual identities, but they also gave them space that allowed them to reconcile with their gay selves, and leave sororities as women who were conscious of their homosexuality, and ready to sustain it. The use of the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia and Turner’s theory of liminality in the context of American sorority houses, allows us to consider sororities as public spaces that contributed to the inclusion of gay communities within the borders of heteronormative organizations. Both theories enable the reader to perceive sororities as non-homogenous institutions, which at the time of postwar homophobia, created ideal conditions for gay women to engage in lesbian intimacy, while still appearing to be heterosexual women. In this aspect, quoting Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen, the arrangement of gay environments within a heteronormative sorority house can be seen as the act of “accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of a society organized around normative heterosexuality.” On the one hand, gay women created a relatively safe shelter for their homosexuality, and on the other hand, the process of reconciliation with their gay identities that they went through in their liminal, structurally invisible spaces, allowed them to accept who they were.

The Liminal, Lesbian Space of Women’s Sports

In the 1950s, women’s participation in sport provoked considerable controversy. Not only was it a threat to traditional, family-oriented values, but also to the image of a true, feminine American woman. The establishment of the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women in 1949, challenged the social perception of women’s position and their role in society, and encouraged American women to join sport teams. However, this did not change social perception of sport as a strictly masculine space, which required the attributes of physical strength, persistence, and ruggedness—the attributes that were the opposite of femininity. Susan K. Cahn, a historian writing on gender in sport, argued that sport was known for its masculinizing effect, which contributed to the association of female athletes with mannish, failed heterosexuals. This in turn, created the image of female sport space as a lesbian environment that deprived women of their femininity. Certainly, it cannot be argued that sport was an exclusively lesbian space as according to the poll conducted by Amateur Athlete Union in 1954, 91% of former female athletes were married. Also, considering social repression of homosexuality in the 1950s, it seems hard to establish how many of these women had same-sex inclinations, but still were married to men due to the cult of heterosexuality. However, for many gay women, the sport environment in the 1950s turned out to be an open and free space, which was not subjected to the heteronormative norms of femininity.

In the twentieth century, an increasing number of women athletes drew social attention to the changing position of women. Susan Cahn explained the role that sport played in the lives of many American women who decided to take up athletics:

Skilled female athletes became symbols of the broader march of womanhood out of the Victorian domestic sphere into once prohibited male realms. The woman athlete represented both the appealing and threatening aspects of modern womanhood. In positive light, she captured the exuberant spirit, physical vigor, and brazenness of the New Woman.

98 Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’….” 345.
Not only did physical activities contribute to the improvement of women’s silhouettes, but they also enhanced women’s self-confidence in their possibilities and potential. And although, as Cahn noted, many sport leaders introduced various activities and practices that aimed to demonstrate the femininity and heterosexuality of female athletes, sport was still believed to awaken “masculine” qualities at women.\(^99\) The sense of physical and mental strength, liberation from the strains of heteronormativity, as well as freedom to be unfeminine were especially encouraging for gay women. Sportswomen did not need to appear as feminine and heterosexual as suburban housewives and sorority members did, which contributed to the popularity of sport space among gay women. As Cahn argued: “Sport could relocate girls or women with lesbian identities or feelings in an alternative nexus of gender meanings, allowing them to ‘be themselves’—or to express their gender and sexuality in an unconventional way.”\(^100\) Therefore, sport was a comfortable and convenient space for gay women, who wished to experience lesbianism, and avoid having to keep the appearances of heterosexuality. What is more, the sport environment can be considered as another example of space that reflected the heterotopian qualities. First of all, it was not a homogenous space—it accommodated both homo- and heterosexual sites. In this aspect, the oral testimonies of sportswomen gathered by Susan Cahn provide valuable historical evidence of lesbian existence within the sport space. As the interviewed women claimed, in postwar America, female sport teams became an alternative to lesbian bars, which at the time, were the only public spaces where gay women could find each other.\(^101\) Moreover, because the borders of gender expression within the sport environment were shifted, the isolation and closeness of liminal, gay spaces was easier than in case of suburban houses or sororities. Most of women who engaged in sport activities were socially perceived as lesbians due to their mannish appearance, whether they were gay or straight. Therefore, gay sportswomen were able to hide their affairs and isolate their liminal, lesbian microcosm much easier, as their physical, unfeminine appearance did not stand out more than the appearance of other sportswomen.

The interpretation of sport space in the context of heterotopia allows the reader to understand the physical structure of the sport environment, and its contribution to the creation of gay spaces. However, the space of sport also greatly contributed to the mental aspect of gay sportswomen’s process of reconciliation with their homosexual identities. In

\(^99\) Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’…,” 355.
\(^100\) Ibid., 361.
\(^101\) Ibid., 358.
this aspect, the sport environment can be considered as a liminal space, which provided gay women with mental and physical shelter both from the cult of compulsory heterosexuality, and from the social repression of homosexuality. The sense of freedom with which the sport space provided women to explore their gay identities was described by Susan Cahn:

The athletic setting provided public space for lesbian sociability without naming it as such or excluding women who were not lesbians. This environment could facilitate the coming-out process, allowing women who were unsure about or just beginning to explore their sexual identity to socialize with gay or straight women without having to make immediate decisions or declarations.\(^{102}\)

The freedom to explore homosexuality, as well as the opportunity to socialize with other lesbians without having to classify their gender and sexual identities, gave gay women mental and physical space to go through the process of reconciliation with their homosexuality. Here, Cahn’s argument reflects the quality of liminal state, which Turner described as a condition of being no longer classified, and not yet classified. For many gay women, the moment of joining the sport space was the moment of separation with heteronormative structures established by society. Once separated from the gender-oriented culture, gay sportswomen were able to create their liminal, lesbian microcosm where they could explore their homosexuality, both mentally and physically.

The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia and Turner’s theory of liminality enable the exposition of the gay site of sport space. In the 1950s, at a time of family-oriented culture, the sport environment became public space that contributed to a silenced development of lesbian culture. The secrecy and isolation of same-sex inclinations of sportswomen allowed them to explore and experience homosexuality before they were ready to publicly identify themselves as lesbians. Additionally, women’s participation in athletics challenged the social perception of women as the weaker sex. Sport activity not only increased women’s physical strength, but also increased their self-confidence, awareness of their physical capabilities, and the perception of their social role. Regardless their sexual and gender identities, women who decided to take up sport, made a big step towards the fight for women’s liberation from the strains of gender roles imposed on them by heteronormative, family-oriented society.

\(^{102}\) Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’...,” 358.
Homosexuality in the Women’s Army Corps

When the U.S. got involved into the World War II, the demand for army services grew enormously. Women were not omitted from the national enrollment to military forces, and contrary to social belief about women’s natural predestination to the domestic roles of wife and mother, they were encouraged to join the army. Although most women chose to join the nurse corps, which was believed to go along with their inborn, nurturing predispositions, a considerable number of women decided to step beyond the “feminine” war-professions, and take up training for the forces such as: American Aviation Organization, Naval Services, Airforce Service Pilots, and Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. The training centers for female soldiers aimed to prepare women for both combat and non-combat jobs:

The center’s mission is threefold as well as giving basic training to all like recruits, it retains from the ranks many women who will go on to specialist schools, here also are developed commissioned and noncommissioned officers … The army’s large designs seek to utilize women in an ever-widening variety of non-combat jobs contributing directly to nation’s defense.103

Being in the army gave many women an opportunity to acquire highly specialized knowledge, and enabled them to enter the public work environment. The wartime encouragement of women to take up jobs in the “male” fields empowered them both in a personal and professional sense by giving the servicewomen a sense of liberation, power, and independence, which stimulated their search for identities.

However, with the end of the war, women’s active engagement in military services was no longer necessary. According to the Cold War, family-oriented ideology, women were needed back at home. Their military positions did not fit into the country’s gender-based narrative which defined women as mothers and wives. The presence of women in the public sector was believed to be a threat to the heteronormative, social order, and led to the association of women’s active participation in the army forces with potential homosexuality. As Leisa D. Meyer argued, the mannishness of this profession was thought to attract “deviances” and encourage female recruits to explore same-sex intimacy.104

Although it cannot be claimed that the space of the army corps was entirely gay, it is reasonable to argue that the sense of personal and professional liberation encouraged many lesbians to enter military services.

Similarly to the space of sport, the heterotopian qualities of the army environment enabled gay women to conceal their homosexual inclinations, and go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities away from the public view. First of all, the army corps was not a homogenous space. Both Leisa Meyer and Lillian Faderman provided various examples of the testimonies of gay women who entered the army because they had known about lesbian communities that were established there. Meyer argued: “Lesbian servicewomen, like their heterosexual counterparts, also tried to create their own space within the WAC [Women’s Army Corps] … They developed their own culture and methods of identifying one another, although the risks of discovery and exposure remained.”105 This shows that the army space accommodated both homo- and heterosexuality within its borders.

However, as Meyer noted, the persecution of homosexuality within military services was especially intense, and it affected the possibility of a complete isolation of lesbian space from the public view. Lillian Faderman talked about the military witch-hunts of lesbians that were carried out by the military personnel, and included practices such as the investigations for lesbianism and threats with court-martial, discharge, or exposure to the parents.106 These practices encouraged gay women to be more careful with their lesbian affairs, which contributed to a greater isolation of liminal, lesbian spaces established within the army corps. As Faderman argued, many gay servicewomen learned how to maneuver themselves into a safe and secure site of lesbian spaces, and how to isolate their relationships from the view of hostile and suspicious military personnel.107 In this aspect, the isolation of gay microcosms from the view of military personnel corresponds with the heterotopian quality of space being simultaneously isolated and penetrable. On the one hand, the queer site of gay servicewomen’s liminal space was open and penetrable for them, and on the other hand, it was securely hidden and protected from the view of the outside world. Therefore, the heterotopian qualities of the army corps environment contributed to the creation of liminal, gay microcosm within its borders.

107 Ibid., 150-155.
The process of servicewomen’s reconciliation with their gay identities can be analyzed in the context of van Gennep’s stages of identity recognition. Their entry to the army corps can be considered as a preliminal stage of their identities recognition as it was the moment when they separated themselves from heteronormative norms and social structures. The military environment not only gave women an opportunity to develop physical strength, but it also empowered them in a mental sense as they broke the patterns of womanhood and femininity that defined women’s social roles and positions. The liminal stage was when women actively engaged in exploring same-sex intimacy, and when their experienced the identity loss, which was described by Victor Turner as one of the elements of the liminal phase. On the one hand, they were no longer heterosexual as they nurtured their lesbian relationships in their structurally invisible, gay microcosms. On the other hand, they were not fully homosexual yet as they kept the appearance of heterosexuality and participated in various campaigns promoting the femininity and heterosexuality of female soldiers, which were arranged by the military personnel. Therefore, the servicewomen with same-sex inclinations were in the state of being in-between homo- and heterosexual identity.

The military space was believed to be the biggest threat to the heteronormative social order of American culture, which led to the implementation of policies that aimed to detect and discharge lesbianism in the army.\(^\text{108}\) As Faderman argued, many gay women were eventually either forced to leave the army corps, or they chose to do so. However, the mental and physical space that the military space gave them greatly contributed to the process of reconciliation with their gay identities. This enabled them to incorporate to the social structures after their military experience was over, yet with new, gay identities.

This chapter has presented the historical evidence of the existence of liminal, lesbian spaces within semi-public, heteronormative environments of suburban homes, sorority houses, the sport teams, and the women’s army corps. It has given valuable insights into a homophobic culture of the 1950s, and the way gay women managed to maneuver themselves into the homo-and heterosexual social structures. The following chapter will begin the literary section of this thesis with the analysis of liminal, lesbian space established within the heteronormative, suburban house, depicted in the lesbian novel *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith.

\(^{108}\) Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*..., 151.
Chapter Four:
Lesbian Love Under the Cover of Suburban House in *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith

In *The Price of Salt*, first published in 1952, Patricia Highsmith presents the story of a homosexual relationship that is born within the heteronormative space of American home. Victoria Hesford, a historian who studied Highsmith’s works, claimed that the depiction of a lesbian affair nurtured under the conditions of an idealized domestic space destabilizes the borders that have been established by the Cold War ideology. She argued:

Highsmith's vision of the 1950s America turns the Cold War domestic ideology of the middle-class home as a source of national strength and normality inside out, revealing the undertow of violence and sexual unconventionality that both prop up the public function of the middle-class home and constantly threaten to tear it.109

In the 1950s, home was associated with the model of the nuclear family, and became a national symbol for the stability of political, economic, social, and cultural American welfare. Through the story of Therese Belivet and her older lover Carol Aird, Highsmith not only deconstructs, but also queers the values of the home as a heterosexual, private space. As a result of the social repression of homosexuality in the 1950s, many lesbian women chose domestic spaces as their lesbian microcosms where they could secretly nurture their lesbian relationships. Therefore, by setting the relationship of Carol and Therese within the space of home, Highsmith exposes the gay site of heteronormative, domestic environment. The depiction of the oppressive, homophobic, and heteronormative-oriented American society in the midst of the Cold War is crucial for the novel as it shows how firmly rooted the vision of domesticity was in the minds of Americans.

In order to analyze the gay space that Carol and Therese created for themselves, it is crucial to discuss the role and influence of a heteronormative society on the lives of the protagonists. Victoria Hesford explained that the values of the heteronormative world such as family, home, and domesticity formed the social space, which was clearly defined through masculine and feminine roles that men and women were supposed to take.110

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110 Hesford, “Patriotic Perversions…,” 218
the novel, Highsmith presents the values of heteronormative society such as domesticity, motherhood, and compulsory heterosexuality as the merits of womanhood. Throughout the story, the protagonists are being convinced that they can achieve personal fulfilment only by committing to the roles of wife and mother. Society that Carol and Therese live in, becomes the guardian of heteronormative order that reminds the women about their predestination to the domestic space.

**Society as a Guardian of Heteronormative, Social Order**

The pressure of commitment to the domestic life that society puts on women in order to protect traditional, gender-based values is especially visible in the case of Therese Belivet, who as a nineteenth-year old girl, is already exposed to the merits of family-life. When the reader meets Therese, she is in a relationship with Richard. She is not emotionally committed to him, but she stays with Richard because of the social expectations regarding the role of mother and wife that eventually, she is to perform. Throughout their relationship, Richard and his family introduce Therese to family, domestic rituals that she will be a part of as soon as she and Richard are married. The narrator notes: “Therese had visited the Semcos four or five Sundays afternoons. They had a big dinner around two o’clock, and then Mr. Semco ... would want to dance with her to polkas and Russian folk music on the phonograph.”¹¹¹ And then the narrator continues: “It wouldn’t be any different if they were married, Therese thought, visiting the family for Christmas Day.”¹¹² Not only does it show that Therese is emotionally detached from the family rituals at the Semcos’, but it also exposes the routine of domestic life, which Therese is clearly not interested in. However, she adapts to this lifestyle and bears on it for the sake of the well-being of her relationship with Richard. In this aspect, Therese to some extent already follows the ideology of domestic containment that Elaine May defined in *Homeward Bound*. Although she and Richard are not married yet, Therese tries to accommodate to the domestic routines in order to live up to social expectations about women’s commitment to the family life.

Therese’s life as Richard’s partner seems to be carefully planned. The narrator notes Therese’s submission to the plans of her husband-to-be: “Richard said she could be in France next summer. Would be. Richard wanted her to go with him, and there was really

nothing that stood in the way of her going with him.”

By using the phrases “Richard said” and “Richard wanted” to describe the future plans of spouses-to-be, the narrator depicts Richard’s dominance in their relationship. This is also visible when the narrator reveals Therese’s attitude towards her marriage with Richard: “Richard wanted to marry her … but she didn’t love him enough to marry him. And yet she would be accepting most of money for the trip from him, she thought with a familiar sense of guilt.” Similarly to their trip, their marriage also seems to be Richard’s plan and Therese has little to say in this matter. On the one hand, the reader can sense her indifference towards her future life with Richard, and on the other hand, the reader can see that this indifference stems from a limited number of possibilities that Therese has as a woman. Her life is planned and arranged according to the heteronormative values, and she is expected to submit to Richard’s decisions. Moreover, the depiction of Therese and Richard’s sexual intercourse shows that Therese’s sexual needs and expectations are neglected, and she adapts to the unpleasant reality of their sexual life. The narrator describes Therese’s impression when she and Richard had sex for the first time: “It had been anything but pleasant, and she had asked right in the middle of it, ‘Is this right?’ How could it be right and so unpleasant, she had thought.”

Although Therese does not find any pleasure in intimacy with Richard, she does not admit it, and continues having an occasional sex with him, which only increases her frustration and dissatisfaction with their relationship. Therese’s adaptation to an unfulfilling sexual life can be considered in the context of the ideology of sexual containment described by Elaine May in *Homeward Bound*. Therese is aware that sex is a fundamental and necessary element of a heterosexual relationship, and therefore she bears her frustrations and resentment. However, not only Therese’s personal, professional, and sexual needs remain unnoticed by Richard, but also herself as a person. The narrator observes the way Therese walks when she is with Richard, and the way it makes her feel: “Therese felt a throb of embarrassment as she walked along behind Richard, like a dangling appendage, because Phil and Dannie would naturally think she was Richard’s mistress.”

The fact that Therese walks behind Richard and his friends not only marks her inferior position, but also reveals social acceptance to it. She is aware that Phil and Dannie would naturally think of her as Richard’s mistress, which shows that she is not being considered as her man’s partner, but as his dangling, female appendage. The narrator’s use

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114 Ibid., 25.
115 Ibid., 47.
116 Ibid., 24.
of the term “dangling appendage” may suggest that Therese is perceived as a supplement to the male world, without the recognition of her own identity.

Therese’s emotional detachment and indifference towards Richard reveal the compulsoriness of their relationship. The fact that Therese adapts to the role of Richard’s girlfriend and bears the mental and physical sacrifices, shows that the cult of marriage and domesticity contains her identity within the borders of heterosexual relationship. In this aspect, by imposing traditional, family-oriented norms on Therese, Highsmith reveals the role of society as a guardian of heteronormative order.

Another value that society was to protect and convey in the 1950s was motherhood. Women were expected to bear children not only because it was believed to give them a sense of personal fulfillment, but also because it testified about the strength of American nation. This aspect is visible in the novel as both Therese and Carol are exposed to the values of motherhood. Carol already has a little girl, which makes motherhood an inseparable part of her life, and Therese, by being in a relationship with Carol is reminded that motherhood will always be present in the women’s homosexual microcosm. When the reader meets Carol, she lives alone as a result of separation with her husband Harge. However, as Victoria Hesford argued, Carol’s marriage and motherhood strongly marked her domestic space with heteronormative values, which made her house “a hollow monument for middle-class heteronormativity.”117 When Therese first enters Carol’s house, the narrator recalls: “There was a picture of Carol on the dressing table, holding up a small girl with blonde hair.”118 The reminders of Carol’s role as a mother fill out the physical space of her home, and show that despite her lesbianism, Carol will always remain a mother. Moreover, regardless of her same-sex preferences, she admits that motherhood is what she wanted: “I wanted a girl. I wanted two or three children.”119 However, she also reveals the other side of her enclosure within the heteronormative world. Even though a part of her wished to have children, after her daughter Rindy was born, Carol realized that motherhood did not help her to merge into heterosexual space: “I didn’t want any more children, because I was afraid our marriage was going on the rocks anyway, even with Rindy.”120 Even though Carol tried to fit into the heteronormative norms and commit to the role of a housewife, her gay identity was stronger than the appearances of heterosexuality that she attempted to maintain.

118 Patricia Highsmith, The Price of Salt, 56.
119 Highsmith, The Price of Salt, 76.
120 Ibid., 76.
Carol’s commitment to her lesbian affair with Therese becomes a serious threat for her role as a mother. From a historical point of view, as Daniel Rivers argued in *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States*, social persecution of gay fathers and lesbian mothers increased after the Second World War. Rivers claimed: “During the ‘sex crime panics’ of the 1950s, … demands that children must be separated from lesbians and gay men and the idea that the family is by definition a heterosexual institution have both been central underpinnings of antigay prejudice and homophobia”\(^{121}\) Rivers described various stories of gay parents, who lived under the threat of custody loss if their homosexuality was discovered, which led many of them to renounce their same-sex interests, and end their gay relationships. In this aspect, the way Highsmith presents Carol’s fight for maintaining the custody of her daughter can be considered as historical evidence of the social repression of homosexual parents. When Carol and Therese decide to leave the town in order to get away from the pressure of heteronormative society and continue their affair on the road, Carol’s husband decides to hire a detective, who is to follow the women and prove that Carol is engaged in a lesbian relationship, which would deprecate her as a mother. All evidence that is gathered by the detective to prove Carol’s lesbianism is used by Harge to punish her for stepping out of the heteronormative space. The trial over the custody of Carol’s daughter affects Carol and Therese’s relationship, and forces women to stay apart. In the letter to Therese, Carol describes the trial:

> The important thing now is what I intend to do in the future, the lawyers said. On this depends whether I would ever see my child again ... The question was would I stop seeing you (or others like you, they said!). There was a dozen faces that opened their mouths and spoke like the judges of doomsday—reminding me of my duties, my position, and my future.\(^{122}\)

By giving insights into the trial, Highsmith highlights social devotion to heteronormative values. The lesbian affair of Carol and Therese is treated as an offense to the national ideology of domesticity, and Carol as a lesbian is seen as a threat to the values of motherhood that she is supposed to teach her daughter. The fact that Carol uses indirect speech while recalling the court events, and underlines that it was *them* who *said*, *them* who *judged*, *them* who *questioned*, or *them* who *reminded* her about her duties as a

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\(^{122}\) Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 244.
woman, mother, and wife is a testament to Carol’s passive attitude during the trial. She had neither a chance, nor any valuable arguments to convince the judges that her homosexual identity did not have any influence on the way she would raise her daughter. The traditional approach and the social rejection of homosexuality makes her helpless in the face of law and regulations. At the trial, Carol’s emotional and physical space is invaded, and eventually, the social pressure makes her promise to end all homosexual relations.

The social protection of heteronormative order is visible not only in the way society promotes values such as domesticity, motherhood, or heterosexuality, but also in the way it invades Carol and Therese’s lesbian space. The women establish their gay microcosm within the space of Carol’s suburban house, which according to the ideology of the times, was supposed to provide its inhabitants with the sense of privacy, freedom, and security.\textsuperscript{123} However, when the women stay in Carol’s house, their privacy is often disrupted. When Therese visits Carol for the first time, the intimate atmosphere between them is interrupted by Carol’s husband who calls up to announce his coming. The narrator describes: “the telephone rang, sudden and long like the shriek of a hysterical woman in the hall.”\textsuperscript{124} The way his call is described, reveals the intrusion of heteronormative world into Carol and Therese’s gay space. The use of adjectives such as “long,” “sudden,” and “hysterical” suggests the roughness, viciousness, and intrusiveness of Harge’s call. Moreover, the association of ringtone with the shriek of a woman may refer to the voice of mother, which reminds women that they are crossing the borders of heteronormative space. Another time, after Carol and Therese spend a night together, Harge shows up with an unexpected visit and gives Carol flowers for their wedding anniversary. Even though Harge is aware that their divorce will be granted soon, he offers Carol flowers to underline that she still belongs to the heteronormative space.

Another example of the invasion of heteronormative world into Carol and Therese’s lesbian space is the constant presence of Carol’s maid in the house. Although Florence does not directly disturb Carol and Therese, she is an eyewitness of moments that women spend together. She sees them going to sleep and waking up together, which, as the narrator describes, is of great concern to Therese:

Florence glanced at Therese with a friendly smile and round blacked eyes … Therese could not establish her somehow, could not determine her

\textsuperscript{124} Highsmith, The Price of Salt, 63.
allegiance. Therese had heard her refer to Mr. Aird twice as if she were very devoted to him, and whether it was professional or genuine, Therese did not know. Florence’s presence in the house seems to be a relic of family life that Carol and Harge used to live. The intentions of the maid seem unclear to Therese, and Florence’s apparent neutrality towards the breakdown of Carol and Harge’s marriage, makes it difficult to estimate whether Florence is loyal to Carol, or to the heteronormative social order. As it turns out at the end of the novel, Florence has been informing Harge about Carol and Therese’s meetings at the house, which gives Harge another proof of his wife’s homosexuality. Therefore, Highsmith’s portrait of heteronormative society and its involvement in the protagonists’ lives, can be considered as valuable historical evidence of the social limitation of women’s space. Both Carol and Therese are exposed to the values of family-centered society, and are expected to contain their personal and professional dissatisfaction in order to fully commit to the roles of wife and mother.

**Home as an Indicator of the Social Status of Carol and Therese**

The way domestic spaces are depicted in *The Price of Salt* is crucial to the analysis of Carol and Therese’s liminal, gay space. By setting the lesbian story of Carol and Therese within the borders of American household, Highsmith deconstructs the heteronormativity of domestic space, and reveals its *other* site. Not only does she queer the most protected value of home, which was its contribution to the development of the concept of the nuclear family, but she also disputes the sense of space and privacy of home. Highsmith gives an accurate description of home interiors that Carol and Therese occupy, and shows that the arrangement of these spaces affects the process of women’s reconciliation with their gay identities. Linda McDowell, a feminist theory and methodology professor, explored the concepts of identity and home, as well as the influence of the public and private on the social status of women. She argued: “homes, in the sense of physical structures, are also concrete indicators of social position and status in both their external image and internal layout.” In *The Price of Salt*, the interiors of Carol’s and Therese’s houses correspond with the amount of mental and physical space that the women experience, both as individuals and as a lesbian couple. By setting Carol

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126 McDowell, “Place and Space,” 16.
and Therese’s lesbian affair under the cover of the traditional, American home, Highsmith presents women’s wandering between the borders of compulsory heterosexuality and their lesbian identities.

Therese Belivet’s home is barely described to the reader. It is not a place where she can cherish her privacy and find shelter from the hardships of everyday life. Therese’s home does not give her mental and physical space that would enable her to look into her own self, and consider her emotional needs and sexual desires. The frequent visits of Richard and his friends not only significantly limit Therese’s personal space, but also deprive her of the sense of exclusiveness of her domestic environment. As Victoria Hesford argued: “In Highsmith's Cold War novels, the space of heteronormative domesticity is often a space of dehumanization in which people are made into effigies of a controlled and functional masculinity and femininity.”

The dehumanization of Therese’s home space is especially visible when Richard stays in her apartment and spreads around the marks of heteronormative world. The narrator describes: “She took the overcoat he had dropped on a chair and hung it in the closet … Richard lay back on the studio couch.”

By spreading his clothes around Therese’s apartment, Richard fills up her home space with the traces of masculinity, and underlines that Therese’s home is subjected, controlled, and defined by the gender roles. Although the apartment belongs to Therese, Richard’s visits make her appear as a housewife rather than the owner of her home. His sense of freedom and comfort at Therese’s place creates the impression of him taking her private, home space entirely for himself. His behavior emphasizes the objectification and subordination of women, which dehumanizes not only Therese’s home, but also her identity. When Richard stays at Therese’s home, she stops being a woman who owns and navigates her space, and enters the role of a housewife.

The way Therese perceives her apartment reveals her emotional detachment from the space she navigates. The narrator highlights Therese’s resentment towards the arrangement of her home interiors by contrasting the dullness of her flat with an outstanding figure of wooden Madonna standing on the bookshelf:

> it was the one beautiful thing in her apartment, the wooden Madonna ... She wished there were a better place for it in the room than on the ugly bookshelf. The bookshelf was like a lot of fruit crates stacked up and

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painted red. She longed for a bookshelf of natural-color wood, smooth to the touch and sleek with wax. The fact that Therese wishes to change the color of the bookshelf from red to natural-color wood, shows that the arrangement of Therese’s home space does not correspond with her sense of identity. Her apartment seems to be stocked with objects that take up a lot of space and create a sense of mental and physical airlessness. This relates to Therese’s state of mind—she is overwhelmed by the values of heteronormative society that are imposed on her and do not correspond with her inner self. In this aspect, Therese resembles the figure of wooden Madonna, which stands out from the other objects that are placed on the shelf, but still needs to occupy the same space as they do. Neither Therese, a lesbian living in the heteronormative society, nor a delicate Madonna standing on the gaudy-color box, fit into the space that they have been given. Moreover, both Therese and a wooden Madonna are deprived of physical space where their otherness could be exposed and cultivated. Due to constant visits of Richard and his friends, Therese is unable to organize her home space without the impact of feminine and masculine social norms. Having her private environment filled with the values of heteronormative society, prevents Therese from approaching and examining her gay identity, both mentally and physically. The same concerns the figure of wooden Madonna that in spite of being different from anything else in Therese’s apartment, has no physical space for her uniqueness to be exposed and appreciated. In this aspect, both Therese and the wooden figure of Madonna, exist in a wrong space.

Although there is not much narration devoted to Therese’s house itself, its comparison to the house of Mrs. Robichek, Therese’s coworker from the department store, gives the reader an idea of the mood that it evokes. The narrator describes: “It was a house like the one Therese lived in, only brown-stone and much darker and gloomier. There were no lights at all in the halls.” Mrs. Robichek’s house creates an atmosphere of reluctance, sadness, loneliness, and anxiety. Its dark and gloomy surroundings deprive Therese from any sense of space. Where there is no light and no space, there is no perspective and hope. The fact that Therese’s apartment and the flat of Mrs. Robichek share the same sense of overwhelming, dull atmosphere may indicate that both women experience the limitation of physical and mental space within their home environments. Therese and Mrs. Robichek, as unmarried women who need to provide for themselves, neither can nor are able to navigate

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130 Ibid., 11.
the spacious suburban houses, and instead, they are bound to a confined space of tiny apartments located in the cities. The analogy between the house of Therese and Mrs. Robichek exposes the sense of dullness and overwhelming atmosphere that fills Therese’s space. Her mental and physical enclosure within the heteronormative environment, stimulates Therese’s search for a liminal microcosm where she could consider her identity without the overwhelming pressure of womanhood.

Contrary to Therese’s apartment, Carol’s house is presented in greater details, which allows the reader to notice that its interiors significantly differ from the interiors of houses inhabited by Therese and Mrs. Robichek. The narrator describes Therese’s impression of Carol’s house:

Therese followed Carol up the wide wooden staircase ... Upstairs, there was a short hall with four or five rooms around it ... Therese studied the simple room with its dark green carpet and the long green pillows bench along one wall. There was a plain table of pale wood in the center.\textsuperscript{131}

Contrary to the apartment of Mrs. Robichek, Carol’s house does not give Therese a sense of dullness. The wide staircase creates an impression of spaciousness, and a lighted hall enables her to see the surroundings right away. Moreover, Carol’s room is neat and organized, contrary to the messy apartment of Mrs. Robichek, which also contributes to the sense of comforting spaciousness that Therese experiences while visiting Carol. The narrator continues:

It had flowered cotton upholstery and plain blond woodwork ... There was a long plain mirror over the dressing table, and throughout a look of sunlight, though no sunlight was in the room ... And there were military brushes on the dark bureau across the room.\textsuperscript{132}

Although certain elements of the interior such as “dark green carpet,” “no sunlight in the room,” or “military brushes,” increase the sense of dullness of the house, Therese’s general impression of Carol’s home is less overwhelming than her impression of Mrs. Robichek’s apartment. The elements such as “plain blond woodwork,” “wide wooden staircase,” and “long mirror,” certainly contribute to the increase of spaciousness of the house and give Therese a sense of mental liberation. Here, Highsmith’s use of wood is also crucial. Wood as a material coming from a tree is associated with strength, stability, and the natural world. Therefore, the fact that Carol’s room has many wooden elements allows the reader

\textsuperscript{131} Highsmith, \textit{The Price of Salt.}, 56.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 57.
to interpret it as a place that gives Carol a sense of stability and strength. The spaciousness of the room is essential in the context of Carol’s lesbianism as it provides the woman with favorable conditions to mentally and physically approach her gay identity. Having a room that is relatively free from the strains of limiting and overwhelming values of compulsory heterosexuality, allows Carol to reconcile with her homosexuality.

**The Reflection of Heterotopia in Therese’s Search for Space**

Therese’s visit at Carol’s house is significant not only because she experiences a sense of mental liberation from heteronormative norms, but also because the spaciousness of Carol’s room is an actual representation of Therese’s set designs that she prepares for a local theater. Working as a set designer gives Therese an opportunity to present the vision of the world that she would like to live in. The narrator describes one of her ideas for a set: “On the way home, an idea came to her for a stage set, a house interior with more depth than breadth, with a kind of vortex down the center, from which rooms would go off on either side.”

Therese’s wish to bring more depth into the house interior reflects her search for space. By implementing a kind of vortex in the center of her set, Therese shows that she does not want to impose any limitations of the spatial arrangement of the house. However, her perception of space not only differs from the reality that she lives in, but it also does not fit into the traditional vision of home space that the theater’s director wants to promote. The narrator describes the changes that have been made to her project:

> [T]he new model hadn’t the movable section she had put into the first, which would have permitted the living-room scene to be converted into the terrace scene for the last act … by setting the whole play in the living room, a lot of the dialogue had to be changed in the last act, and some of the cleverest lines had been lost.

By designing a terrace as an extension of a living room, Therese extends the physical space of interior, which gives the characters of the play a broader sense of mental perspective. According to the theatrical perspective, a terrace or a balcony is associated with great revelations, catharsis, the moments of truth, and going out of the closet. Therefore, the

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134 Ibid., 105.
rearrangement of Therese’s set project and the removal of terrace may suggest that the revelation or the moment of truth will not happen. Taking the terrace away may be associated with trying to prevent the characters from reaching the truth about themselves. Therese’s design of a spacious set reveals her search for both mental and physical space where she could reach the truth about herself, and eventually go out of the closet.

However, Therese’s search for mental space is visible not only through the way she perceives the spatial arrangement of her home and the set designs that she prepares, but also through the way she perceives herself. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the moment when Therese tries on a dress at Mrs. Robichek’s home, and sees her reflection in the mirror:

Therese looked in the mirror ... It was the dress of queens in fairy tales, of a red deeper than blood. She stepped back, and pulled in the looseness of the dress behind her, so it fitted her ribs and her waist, and she looked back at her own dark-hazel eyes in the mirror. Herself meeting herself. This was she, not the girl in the dull plaid skirt and the big sweater, not the girl who worked in the doll department at Frankenberg’s. This is the first time when Therese sees her the other self. The mirror does not reflect the person who Therese appears to be in order to fit into the heteronormative standards, but the person who Therese is in the depths of her mind. In this aspect, Highsmith’s use of mirror to expose Therese’s double identity corresponds with the heterotopian quality of mirror that Michel Foucault discussed in “Of Other Spaces:”

the mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

Although the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia is usually used in the context of the spatial juxtaposition of various sites within the same environment, in case of Therese’s mirror experience, it underlines the mental juxtaposition of homo- and heterosexual identity within Therese’s mind. Foucault’s understanding of a mirror as an object that brings two different places within the same, real space, allows the reader to consider Therese’s mirror experience as a moment when she simultaneously occupies homo- and

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137 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24
heterosexual space. The mirror allows Therese to see herself existing in the other space—the space where she could be free from the strains of heteronormativity. The narrator describes Therese’s impression of the self that she sees: “She wished she could kiss the person in the mirror and make her come to life, yet she stood perfectly still, like a painted portrait.”\textsuperscript{138} Therese wants to bring the woman from the mirror reflection to life because she realizes that her otherness is true and authentic. The vivid thoughts and emotions that race through her mind when she sees the other self are contrasted with the physical stillness of her body, which underlines that Therese is in-between two identities. Mentally, she is a gay woman who stands out from the heteronormative social standards, yet physically she still belongs to the heteronormative world where she keeps the appearances of heterosexuality. As the narrator describes: “She didn’t want the dress. She tried to imagine the dress in her closet at home among the other clothing, and she couldn’t.”\textsuperscript{139} The fact that her dress would not fit into her wardrobe corresponds with the fact that homosexuality does not fit into the heteronormative society that Therese lives in. Therefore, the establishment of liminal, structurally invisible space where Therese could explore and cherish her otherness, seems to be the only way to become a woman from the mirror.

**Liminal, Lesbian Space at Home and on the Road**

Although Carol’s and Therese’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities starts within the space of Carol’s suburban house, to a great extent, it takes place on the road. Here, the use of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia is crucial for the interpretation of both environments in the context of mental and physical space that they give Carol and Therese. Foucault argued: “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.”\textsuperscript{140} In this aspect, Carol’s house can be considered as the place that combines two opposing sets of values—a traditional model of the nuclear family, and socially condemned same-sex love. The coexistence of homo- and heterosexual space within the domestic environment, enables Carol and Therese to wander between their lesbian microcosm and the appearances of heteronormativity that they need to maintain. Additionally, Carol’s suburban house reflects

\textsuperscript{138} Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 14.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{140} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22.
the heterotopian quality of being open and penetrable, and close and isolated at the same
time. On the one hand, the space of home is open to everybody—Florence, Harge, and
Abby, Carol’s former lover who often visits the house. On the other hand, Carol and
Therese’s gay space where they engage in lesbian intimacy, is isolated from the view of
visitors, who cannot see the queer site of Carol’s room, which becomes the women’s
liminal space. Therefore, the heterotopian qualities of the house contribute to the
establishment of gay microcosm where Carol and Therese can explore their lesbianism.

The room becomes the place where both Carol and Therese separate themselves
from the appearances of their heterosexual identities. Therese is no longer Richard’s
girlfriend and Carol is not Harge’s wife and Rindy’s mother—within their liminal
microcosm they are two women experiencing same-sex love. At the same time, they
cannot be defined as lesbians as they still have to perform their heterosexual roles outside
the liminal space of Carol’s room. The temporary loss of identity that Carol and Therese
experience within the borders of the room corresponds with Victor Turner’s definition of
the liminal stage of identity recognition. Within the borders of their room, the women are
in-between homo- and heterosexual identity, they are no longer classified as straight, and
not yet defined as lesbians. However, the invasion of heterosexual world into Carol and
Therese’s private, liminal space, forces them to move their gay microcosm, and re-
establish it on the road—within a public space of western hotels.

*The Price of Salt* displays the social repression of homosexuality and the limitation
of personal and social space available for gay women in the 1950s. In order to escape from
a controlling heteronormative society that invades Carol and Therese’s lesbian microcosm,
the women decide to drive off towards the West—towards freedom, the lack of restrictions
and control, but most importantly, towards each other. As Dayton Duncan argued: “People
have seen the West as the place to lose themselves, or find themselves; to save others’
souls, and sometimes risk their own; to get rich, get lucky, or get away; to chase adventure
and court danger; to be brave and free or left alone.”¹⁴¹ The symbolism of the American
West reflects Carol and Therese’s search for their gay space and gay identities. They wish
to lose themselves in their homosexual desire and to find themselves within the borders of
heterosexually-oriented world. They want to be free from social oppression and pressure of
heteronormativity, and to chase their happiness. Finally, they wish to be left alone—just

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the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo,” *Journal of Consumer
for one another. Being away gives Carol and Therese a sense of space, as on the road they are able to create their liminal microcosm where they can freely realize their lesbian desire and nurture their relationship.

As Carol and Therese drive towards the West, their sense of physical and mental space increases. The hotel rooms that the protagonists of the novel stay in, are brighter and more spacious. The narrator describes the first place that they stop by: “It was a luxurious tourist cabin, with a thick carpet and wood-paneled walls.” Here, Highsmith comes back to the motif of wood, which seems to give the protagonists a comforting sense of space. The presence of wooden decorations in the cabin may relate to the fact that Carol and Therese have finally found a space, which is not subjected to heteronormative norms, and where their homosexual relationship seems natural. The way the spatial arrangement of roadside hotels affects Therese is described by the narrator when the women reach Chicago: “Therese looked out the window at the light-bordered lake and the irregular, unfamiliar line of tall buildings against the still greyish sky ... She leaned on the sill, staring at the city, watching a distant car’s lights chopped into dots and dashes ... She was happy.” A window with the view on the city line gives Therese a sense of perspective that she has been searching for—finally, she is able to look further and see beyond the borders of overwhelming and limiting heteronormative bubble that she has lived in. What is more, the spatial arrangement of the room, partially reflects Therese’s set design. By placing a terrace at the end of the room, Therese wished to give the characters of the play a sense of perspective—an ability to look further, beyond the walls of the room. While being in Chicago and looking through the window, Therese experiences what she planned for the characters of the play. Moreover, in terms of space, the hotel room in Chicago is contrasted with the previous descriptions of public spaces that Therese occupied. For instance, the overcrowded cafeteria in the department store: “there was no room left at any of the long tables, and more and more people were arriving to wait back of the wooden barricades by the cash register.” A similar sense of suffocation and airlessness is depicted through the description of the subway: “She and Mrs. Robichek edged into the sluggish mob at the entrance of the subway, and were sucked gradually and inevitably down the stairs, like bits of floating waste down a drain.” The contrast between the past and current space that Therese occupies, highlights the change that she has gone through. The relationship with

142 Highsmith, The Price of Salt, 168.
143 Ibid., 174.
144 Ibid., 1.
145 Ibid., 10.
Carol allows her to experience a liberating sense of space, which enables Therese to consider her needs, desires, and identity as an individual, and not as a part of the heteronormative, social mass.

What is more, the sense of isolation that Carol and Therese experience while being in the hotel rooms, corresponds with Michel Foucault’s analysis of the qualities of heterotopian sites. Foucault argued that in the spatial context, roadside hotels and motels can be considered as heterotopias because they provide individuals with private, isolated space where they can freely perform inappropriate or socially condemned acts, without being exposed or judged.146 Drawing from his interpretation, the hotel rooms that Carol and Therese stay in, can be considered as heterotopias that create favorable conditions for women’s same-sex intimacy, and provide them with space where they can reconcile with their gay identities. What is more, the roadside hotels are the spaces that Carol and Therese occupy only temporarily. Their short stays at each hotel do not draw unwanted attention to their lesbian affair, and therefore, Carol and Therese can freely engage in lesbian intimacy within the liminal space of their hotel rooms. For instance, the narrator describes the moment when Carol asks Therese to bring her a bathroom towel that she forgot to take with her: “As she put the towel into Carol’s outstretched hand her eyes dropped from Carol’s face to her bare breasts and down.”147 Seeing Carol naked, without the fear of being noticed by somebody, is possible only within the space of roadside hotels and motels, which are not subjected to any norms. Therefore, Carol and Therese do not need to adapt to any rules and keep the appearances of heterosexuality. Within the liminal space of their hotel room, they are free from the strains of heterosexuality and the values of heteronormative society, which gives them freedom to perform same-sex intimacy.

The moment when Therese reconciles with her gay identity, which can be considered as her homosexual epiphany, occurs when she and Carol reach Waterloo, and have sex in the hotel room. The narrator describes the influence of same-sex intimacy on Therese, and the way it affects her sense of identity:

Carol’s hair that brushed her bare breasts, and then her body seemed to vanish in widening circles that leaped further and further, beyond where thought could follow … and now it was pale-blue distance and space, and expanding space in which she took flight suddenly like a long arrow. The

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Highsmith’s comparison of Therese to an arrow flying through the abys of expanding space, refers to Therese being finally free from the strains of heteronormative society. The flight reflects Therese’s process of transience—the condition of being in a liminal stage of her identity recognition, and finally, reaching the moment of realization that homosexuality gives her a sense of mental and physical liberation and fulfilment. At this moment, Therese is in-between gay and straight world—she has separated herself from the heterosexual identity that society imposed on her, and she is on her way to fully reconcile with her lesbianism. The moment of transience and the condition of Therese’s temporary identity loss, corresponds with Victor Turner’s analysis of the attributes of the liminal stage of identity recognition. The physical experience of same-sex intimacy ensures Therese that she is in the right space, which foreshadows her re-entry to the social structures as a gay woman.

Highsmith’s exposure of homophobic and family-oriented society proves that America in the 1950s offered no space for diversity and otherness. The values of motherhood, marriage, domesticity, and compulsory heterosexuality that American society imposes on the protagonists of the novel underline the limitation of the women’s personal and professional space. Moreover, by presenting Carol’s suburban house as the space that is invaded and controlled by heteronormative society, Highsmith deconstructs the concept of private and public space. Contrary to the social association of home with private space, Carol’s house does not give the protagonists a sense of privacy. Although her domestic environment can be considered as a heterotopia that enables the protagonists to vacillate between homo- and heterosexual spaces in order to explore their lesbianism, in fact, it is the public environment of roadside hotels that allows the women to fully reconcile with their gay identities. The liminal space that Carol and Therese establish—initially within Carol’s suburban house, and later in the roadside hotels—enables the women to explore their lesbian identities, and experience same-sex intimacy without the pressure of heteronormative society. The sense of mental and physical liberation that the liminal space offers Carol and Therese contributes to their acceptance of homosexuality, which results in a happy ending of the novel as the protagonists are together when the story comes to an end.

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Chapter Five:
The Literary Reflection of American Sorority in *Spring Fire* by Marijane Meaker

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the liminal space established by the protagonists of *The Price of Salt* turned out to be essential for their process of reconciliation with their gay identities, as well as their acceptance of homosexuality. However, as this chapter will show, not all women were able to approach and reconcile with their lesbianism. The analysis of *Spring Fire*, the novel featuring the story of lesbian love within the heteronormative sorority house, will allow the reader to see how the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality and the propaganda of the model of the nuclear family, affected the process of reconciliation and acceptance with one’s homosexuality.

*Spring Fire*, a lesbian pulp novel written by Marijane Meaker, was first published in 1952 under the pseudonym “Vin Packer.” At the time of family-oriented Cold War ideology, Meaker, as well as her publisher, could not afford to issue a book filled with homosexual perversion due to social persecution of same-sex love. What is more, the significance of sexual identity in the process of one’s identity creation was undermined, especially in case of women. Their sexual satisfaction and fulfillment were neglected mostly due to the association of women’s sexuality with their reproductive function. Therefore, Meaker’s novel, which exposed women’s sexual intimacy, was a threat to established heteronormative ideology. A publisher’s disclaimer at the beginning of the book states: “This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.” However, the story of Susan Mitchell and Leda Taylor’s lesbian relationship within a heteronormative sorority house raises the question of whether the text may have been based on real-life events. By depicting an intimate, same-sex relation of two sorority girls, Meaker presents the sorority house as a public space that enables young women to recognize their homosexual identities. On the one hand, the sorority creates favorable conditions for the development of same-sex relations, yet on the other hand, it allows women to hide their lesbian identities under the cover of the institution’s heteronormative structure, and encouragement towards heterosexual relationships. Meaker herself has frequently suggested that the story of Leda and Susan may have happened in a real sorority in the 1950s. In an interview with Terry

Gross, a host-interviewer in NRP, Meaker answered the question about how she wrote *Spring Fire*:

> I just came from college and before that I was in boarding school and I had a lesbian experience in boarding school and I thought I would write about that … I went to boarding school deliberately because I wanted to find out about the world that I knew I was a part of, and I had read that boarding schools were filled with perversion so I was very eager to go to boarding school and I was rewarded indeed.  

Although Meaker does not directly state that the same story happened when she attended boarding school, she strongly suggests that her school experience helped her to verify the idea of homosexuality within female institutions in the 1950s. Moreover, in Meaker’s *We Walk Alone*, a book on gay community in the 1950s published three years after the release of *Spring Fire*, she commented on what she experienced in college:

> I have seen the lesbians who live ostensibly as roommates, whether in a sorority house on a Midwestern campus, a rooming house in Salisbury, North Carolina, or an apartment house in New York City. They date men; often they double-date. Sometimes their dates are a defense against gossips; sometimes they are offered as a proof to themselves that they are not truly pure homosexuals, but bisexuals.  

The story of Leda and Susan accurately reflects Meaker’s experience. *Spring Fire* is a story of sorority roommates, who discover a mutual, sexual attraction towards one another, yet keep being involved in heterosexual relations in order to convince society and to some extent themselves, that they are not “pure lesbians.” In the 1950s, the choice of terminology used to describe one’s sexual and gender identity was crucial because of the social condemnation of queerness. As a result, women often chose to identify themselves as bisexuals, which was not associated with deviancy, and in fact, was treated as a natural remnant of close, female friendships born in boarding schools. Being bisexual was safe as it guaranteed women a place within heteronormative circles due to their relationships with men, while being homosexual classified them as suffering from mental disorder, and contributed to their social exclusion. Meaker reflects this problem in *Spring Fire* by exposing Leda Taylor’s wandering between her inner queer self, and the outer self that

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needs to represent heteronormative gender standards. Leda openly defines herself as bisexual, although throughout the novel she is being suggestive about her lesbian identity. She often underlines the roots of her same-sex inclinations long before she joined the sorority house, and that her contacts with men have never given her fulfillment and satisfaction, which may suggest her lesbianism. However, the fact that she never directly claims to be a lesbian may also suggest that Leda in truth is bisexual, and she is genuinely interested in both men and women. The lack of clear textual evidence of Leda’s bisexuality and of her lesbianism, may reflect social pressure around the subject of homosexuality in the 1950s. In the interview with Terry Gross, Meaker admitted that the way sexuality is handled in the novel may be confusing, but that this vague approach to girls’ sexual identities was necessary because of the strict censorship of the press in the 1950s. Meaker explained that in order to have her book published, she had to present a “happy, heterosexual ending” of the story. Here comes an excerpt of the interview where Meaker and Gross talk about “the happy ending” of Spring Fire:

Meaker: She [Susan Mitchel] goes to a doctor and he turns her into a heterosexual, and she realizes not only is she heterosexual, but she never really was a homosexual.

Gross: Right, so this made it safe to travel through the mails. How did you feel writing this phony ending?

Meaker: I laughed … I was delighted to have my first book published, and if that was the rule, I was willing to follow it.153

This shows that social condemnation of homosexuality in the 1950s concerned not only gay people, but also anything that contained queer content. Although the ending of Spring Fire does not directly disclaim Susan’s homosexuality, the vagueness of the ending suggests that the issue of sexuality in the novel may be complicated. Therefore, the vague way of handling Leda’s sexual identity as well as Susan’s “heterosexual outcome” may result from the social pressure of heterosexuality that was put on Meaker by the publisher. In my analysis of the novel, I will describe Leda and Susan’s relationship as a homosexual relationship and themselves as lesbians, although the textual evidence of that at many points may seem vague. However, in many cases Leda’s statements as well as her behavior clearly reflect that she exaggerates how much men mean to her, and underplays her interest in women due to the fear of social persecution.

153 Meaker, interview by Terry Gross.
The geopolitical strategy of containment that aimed to expose the superpower of the American nation, played a significant role on the home front in the 1950s. Social propaganda of family values not only clearly defined gender roles, but also had a considerable influence on shaping the identities of young men and women. In *Spring Fire*, Meaker queers the heteronormativity of sorority house, and deconstructs the ideology of institution by showing how superficial the values that built the sorority were, especially in the context of homosexuality. Meaker portrays the sorority as an organization driven by a strict gender policy, which aims to separate young men and women in order to underline their distinct social roles. Even though the organization’s authorities encourage relationships between sorority and fraternity members, same-sex friendships are also actively promoted. Meaker uses the value of sisterhood, which was one of the most precious kinds of female relations among sorority members, to queer heteronormative norms that shaped the ideology of the institution. Leda and Susan’s homoerotic relationship is nurtured because it does not raise suspicions as it is being hidden under the appearances of sisterhood and female friendship. Sharon Marcus described the history of same-sex friendships, which goes back to the Victorian period, in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. She argued:

> Victorian women in female couples were not automatically subjected to the exposure and scandal visited on opposite-sex couples who stepped outside the bonds of respectable sexual behavior. Instead, many female couples enjoyed both the right to privacy associated with marriage and the public privileges accorded to female friendships.

Although Marcus described female friendships in the context of nineteenth-century American society, the bond between Leda and Susan reflects the idea of same-sex, physical and mental intimacy. Similarly to Victorian women’s friendships, Leda and Susan’s intimacy is not subjected to a direct exposure because the sorority house serves them as a shelter from social ostracism, which could be unleashed if their relationship was discovered. The heteronormative sorority space provides Leda and Susan with a private, liminal space where they can nurture their intimate friendship, and at the same time, it remains a public environment that praises the values of close, female bonds. Therefore, by depicting Leda and Susan’s lesbian relationship within the heteronormative institution,

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Meaker uncovers the homosexual site of American sorority. From a public institution that is to prepare girls for their future roles of wife and mother, the sorority enables Leda and Susan to create their liminal, gay space where they can shape their gay identities.

**Sorority as a Guardian of Heteronormative, Social Order**

The sorority house in *Spring Fire* is not just the background of the story, but just like society in *The Price of Salt*, it assumes a significant role in defining Leda’s and Susan’s gay identity. However, in order to analyze the role of the sorority in the process of the shaping of girls’ identities, it is crucial to consider the heteronormative qualities of the Tri Epsilon sorority house. Meaker presents the devotion of institution’s authorities to the belief that heterosexuality and female-male relationships are the only social norm. The portrayal of Tri Epsilon house reflects the historical qualities of sorority and fraternity houses in the 1950s, such as the establishment of sorority and fraternity houses next to one another, the organization of parties where members and pledges of both houses could get acquainted, and setting up obligatory dating and mating routines among fraternity and sorority members. Having in mind John Finley Scott’s argument about the role of sororities as the “servants of youthful purposes,”¹⁵⁶ Meaker’s description of the sorority in *Spring Fire* seems to be an accurate reflection of the institution’s dominant and controlling role that Scott described. The role of sororities in shaping identities of young American women appears to be especially important in the Cold War era, when directing women to the path of domesticity and femininity was a significant element of propaganda. When the narrator of the novel describes the consideration of Susan Mitchell’s candidacy to the Tri Epsilon sorority house, its president claims: “the purpose of a sorority is to help a girl grow, and if Susan needs our help, it will be our privilege to give it to her.”¹⁵⁷ The use of the words “privilege” and “help” highlights the artificial, propagandist language of sorority, which promotes its image of the servant of youthful interests. However, the praise of the sorority’s aim to serve young women’s personal growth becomes a persuasive “newspeak” of the institution. Meaker exposes the power of sorority’s language, which becomes a tool of the institution to control young women’s minds, and which will eventually shape their sense of identity in order for them to accept their place in a gender-divided society. What is more, Meaker decodes the controlling ideology of the sorority by

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showing how valuable the membership is not only for young candidates, but also for their parents. The narrator describes Susan’s father’s expectations towards the outcomes of his daughter’s sorority affiliation: “You’ll grow up in college, you’ll be a real lady when you come home.” Not only does it reveal social trust and belief in the sorority’s promises, but also underlines the institution’s strong attachment to traditional gender roles as well as their significance for the process of identity creation of young American women. The language that the sorority uses, under the guise of help and service for women’s growth, reveals the need for control that the institution had established in order to maintain the political ideology that aims to uphold gender-divided society. Therefore, Meaker’s description of ideology of the Tri Epsilon house reflects the heteronormative qualities of sororities in the 1950s.

At the same time, Meaker queers these qualities by giving insights into the admission of pledges, who do not entirely match heteronormative standards. By presenting Susan Mitchel’s admission process, Meaker shows that in spite of the girl’s visible disparateness from heteronormative feminine ideals, which is underlined by her androgynous clothing style, she is admitted to the sorority house. Not only does it underline that the forms of hetero- and non-heterosexual representation may not be easy to distinguish, but also that the heteronormative Tri Epsilon house may contain space for queer women. When Susan’s application is being considered, the housemother of Tri Epsilon reads out Susan’s report, which states: “She is not beautiful, but she is wholesome and a fine athlete.” The girl’s physical otherness is being distinguished, as her appearance does not match feminine standards of the time. Moreover, Susan’s athletic skills that are mentioned in her report may suggest that because of her visible musculature, she appears to be more masculine than an average sorority girl. Also, another member makes a comment about Susan’s appearance: “She may be halfway attractive. After all, just because she is a sweat-socks [sic] is no sign that she is utterly repulsive.” The physical look of pledges seems to be a significant criterion when it comes to their acceptance to the house. However, despite the fact that Susan does not appear as feminine as it would be expected from her according to sorority standards, her look does not seem unpleasant or bothersome. Although Susan’s physical appearance suggests that she stands out from other sorority girls, they associate her otherness with being naturally less

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159 Ibid., 10.
160 Ibid., 13.
feminine instead of with being gay. In fact, it is Leda’s comment on Susan’s candidacy that may imply that girl’s otherness could be associated with queerness. She says: “What if she’s a muscle-bound amazon? Do we have to pledge the girl just because her father is worth a mint?”\footnote{Packer, Spring Fire, 10.} Even though, at this point Leda has not yet seen Susan, the fact that she refers to her as “a muscle-bound amazon” may suggest that she is aware that just as it is reasonable to associate otherness with unfemininity, it is equally reasonable to relate it to queerness. Especially, the reference to an amazon-like appearance seems crucial in this aspect, as according to Greek mythology, the Amazons were associated with masculinity and active resistance to heteronormative social order subjected to gender role-playing.

Herodotus, a Greek historian, in Prometheus Bound referred to the Amazons as: “the warlike race of Amazons, Haters of Men.”\footnote{Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound and Other Plays, (London: Penguin UK, 2003), Google Books, \url{https://books.google.no/books/about/Prometheus_Bound_and_Other_Plays.html?id=awV-6EhpBioC&redir_esc=y}, accessed April 9, 2017.} However, as long as it seems fair to call them warriors, Herodotus’s association of the Amazons with hatred towards men seems to be an exaggeration. Christine Downing in “Lesbian Mythology,” an article on women’s love for women, argued that the ideology of the Amazon community was based on “all lovemaking that is dedicated to mutual enjoyment (rather than to domination of another or to procreation) whether it be marital or adulterous, heterosexual or homosexual, between men or between women.”\footnote{Christine Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques 20, no. 2 (1994): 189.} Therefore, the Amazons cannot be clearly associated with either lesbianism or heterosexuality. On the one hand, they lived in women-only communities, which certainly encouraged same-sex intimacy and pleasure-seeking, on the other hand, they had sexual contacts with men to ensure that their community lasts. Another scholar, Lorna Hardwick, in her research on Ancient Greek and Rome explained why the Amazons were associated with the hatred of men: “[the threat] draws on the related themes of geographical remoteness, ‘otherness,’ and implicit or explicit rejection of Greek norms of female and therefore of social structure.”\footnote{Lorna Hardwick, “Ancient Amazons - Heroes, Outsiders or Women?” Greece & Rome 37, no. 1 (1990): 18.}

The physical isolation of the Amazons as well as their independence and strength contributed to the creation of Amazons’ image as homosexual women who hated men. Leda’s concern about Susan being “a muscle-bound Amazon” may suggest that she is aware that Susan’s unfeminine, outward appearance may represent her inward resentment towards heteronormative gender standards. Susan may be like the Amazons, who failed to find understanding, equality, and fulfilment in the heteronormative world, and decided to create their female microcosm where they could...
realize their needs and desires—the microcosm where they were neither the haters of men, nor the lovers of women. The fact that this comment comes from Leda is also crucial. Her same-sex inclinations may contribute to the fact that she can see more than other sorority members. Leda, who is queer herself, may have a greater understanding of the way gay and straight women perform their gender, which may help her to distinguish Susan’s queerness. When the narrator presents Susan to the reader, her unfeminine appearance is noticeable: “Susan Mitchell was wearing a green linen suit that clung on her large body heavily, a round white straw hat from which short pieces of blonde hair hung limply, and brown white shoes with low heels that made her long feet look larger.”165 Both Susan’s body and clothing reveal that her appearance does not follow a traditional, feminine pattern. Her “large body,” “short pieces of hair,” and “large, long feet” do not recall the feminine, hourglass figure that was desired by American women at the time. In addition, she seems to look rather clumsy in her suit, low heels, and a hat, which reveals that her clothes are incompatible with what her body stands for. However, the feminine attributes do not diminish Susan’s sense of inner strength and confidence. On the contrary, as the narrator describes, “her manner was sprightly and buoyant, and she lacked the poised reserve of the others who walked with her.”166 Susan’s energetic manner of walking reveals her confidence in her sense of self, which shows that even though she does not look like other sorority girls, she feels good and certain about who she is. Therefore, by associating Susan with a “muscle-bound amazon,” Meaker not only suggests her physical otherness, but also her mental strength, which makes her appear different from the world that surrounds her. Just like the Amazons, Susan is confident in who she is, without worrying about the standards that aim to define women’s social position as well as their identities.

The fact that Susan—a non-feminine girl—is accepted to the sorority house that promotes womanhood and femininity, shows how Meaker queers the heteronormative ideology of the organization. Eventually, Susan is accepted to the house because of her father’s wealth, which turns out to be more important than following the heteronormative standards of the institution. The girl’s disparateness from the codes of womanhood does not seem to bother other members, who in spite of getting clues about Susan’s otherness, do not assume that she may be a lesbian. This shows that although heteronormativity is a

165 Packer, Spring Fire, 4.
166 Ibid., 15.
crucial element of sorority’s policy, the non-heterosexual space is available within the borders of Tri Epsilon house.

Sorority Room as a Liminal, Lesbian Space

In order to analyze the lesbian space that Meaker portrays within the borders of the heteronormative sorority house, it is crucial to consider the factors that enable the establishment of this space. Here, Meaker’s description of the structure of Tri Epsilon house and the way it functions, allows the reader to consider the sorority as a heterotopia. The house is a vast environment where homo- and heterosexual sites coexist, which enable Leda and Susan to engage in lesbian intimacy within the heteronormative institution. This corresponds to Michel Foucault’s definition of the function of heterotopia: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”

On the one hand, Tri Epsilon house is a façade of heteronormativity as it creates space for sites such as co-educational classes, fraternity and sorority parties, and house dances, which aim to promote male-female relationships. On the other hand, the isolation of women within same-sex houses contributes to the establishment of lesbian spaces, where gay women create close sexual and emotional bonds with one another. Certainly, the lesbian spaces are incompatible with the heteronormative sites that are promoted by the sorority, but since they are built under the appearances of female friendships, they do not raise suspicions about women’s otherness or queerness. Therefore, the coexistence of homo- and heterosexual spaces within the Tri Epsilon sorority house enables it to be defined as a heterotopia. Additionally, the ambiguity of accessibility of heterotopian sites that Foucault noted, also enables Leda and Susan to nurture their lesbian relationship in the institution. As Foucault argued:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory ... or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.

Leda and Susan’s room space is one of various, heterotopic sites. The room functions as a place that is both open and close, penetrable and isolated, public and private, and yet, it

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168 Ibid., 25.
cannot be clearly classified as any of those. Physical accessibility of the room to various visits of Leda’s and Susan’s friends and family members, creates the appearances of its openness and ordinariness. However, the fact that outsiders can enter the room does not mean that they can get to know its secret. The room has both homo- and heterosexual site, and it is up to Leda and Susan who will be allowed to access each site. Therefore, the structural invisibility of Leda and Susan’s room gives the girls sense of freedom of gender performance. They are the ones who establish the norms of their space, and define its boundaries. Moreover, the sorority house is for the protagonists of the novel only a temporary place. In the context of homosexuality, both Leda and Susan use the sorority space to explore and experience same-sex love. The structural isolation and invisibility of their queer microcosm gives the girls time that is necessary to recognize and reconcile with their gay identities. Depending on the success of their process of reconciliation, after their sorority term is over, the girls have a chance to re-enter social structure with their new, gay identities, or to commit to the life under the appearances of heterosexuality.

In the novel, Leda and Susan use the heterotopian qualities of sorority to create their liminal, gay space within the heteronormative sites of Tri Epsilon house. Their sorority room becomes a gay microcosm established on the border of homo- and heterosexual space where Leda and Susan can nurture their lesbian affair without revealing their same-sex inclinations to the public view. Meaker’s description of the room corresponds with Victor Turner’s theory of liminality, especially when it comes to its form and attributes that it assumes. As Turner argued: “The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space … Liminal entities are neither here nor there.”\(^{169}\) Leda and Susan’s sorority room reflects this argument as it certainly slips through a classic definition. On the one hand, it is a visible, real place where the girls live, yet on the other hand, it assumes the role of a gay microcosm that is structurally invisible to other sorority members. However, the most crucial liminal attribute of the room is its state of transience. It is the only place where the girls do not have to label their sexual identities; where they are neither yet fully gay, nor entirely straight anymore. In the liminal space of their sorority room, Leda and Susan lose their heterosexual identities as they commit to lesbian intimacy, and yet, lesbian sexual acts do not make them entirely gay. In the room, Leda and Susan are in between hetero- and homosexual identities—they are in the passage between the

space of familiar, heteronormative codes established by society, and their homosexual microcosm that lacks any defined rules and norms, and is still undiscovered. Their room becomes the place where heteronormativity, financial status, and gender-based social norms are no longer the determinants of their identities. The structural invisibility of the other site of the room, detaches Leda and Susan from heteronormative social order, and lets them create their own set of norms that define their liminal space. What is more, the structural invisibility of girls’ liminal microcosm contributes to the process of reconciliation with their queer identities as it gives Leda and Susan time and space to experience their differentness in isolation from social pressure of heteronormativity.

However, balancing on the border of homo- and heterosexual space becomes for Leda and Susan a source of anxiety and tension. The fact that their liminal, gay microcosm is established within a heteronormative sorority house makes their sense of invisibility, privacy, and freedom to perform lesbian intimacy rather ambiguous. Although Leda and Susan engage in lesbian intimacy behind the closed door of their room, the fear of potential exposure limits their liberty and ease, especially when it comes to the way they talk about their affair. By giving insights into Leda and Susan’s conversations about their intimacy, Meaker shows how the ambiguous values of girls’ liminal room space contribute to the enclosure of their lesbian relationship. First of all, their freedom of self-expression is contingent. Through their brief and vague conversations, the reader can sense an atmosphere of secrecy around their affair. The pressure of being exposed is especially visible in Leda’s manner of talking. When Susan initiates a conversation about her feelings, Leda responds: ‘‘Go to sleep, darling,’ Leda said. ‘I love you, Mitch. This is between us. It’s ours, Mitch. Keep it ours and never tell it.’”

The sense of inappropriateness of their relationship and social ostracism that they would have to face if discovered, is underlined by Leda’s imperative sentences. By using short and commanding phrases she highlights the significance of keeping their affair in the closet of sorority room. Moreover, neither Leda nor Susan gives a name to the connection between them. Leda refers to their relationship as “this” or “it,” which reveals her emotional detachment from their lesbian affair. Later on, she explains: “I love you, you crazy kid! I don’t have to label my love, do I?” They both address their feelings by openly confessing love to one another, yet Leda refuses to identify herself as a lesbian. The visible haste Leda exhibits when their conversation drifts around their lesbian intimacy not only underlines her

170 Packer, *Spring Fire*, 143.
171 Ibid., 217.
anxiety of being exposed, but also stresses her wish to keep their gay affair in the closet. Leda’s fear of revealing their secret is also visible when Susan starts crying after another conversation about their relationship; the narrator describes: “The sobbing was too loud. Leda hurried out of the bed and into her pajamas. She turned her covers down, and when she tried to make Mitch stop crying, Mitch wailed louder. ‘Someone will hear us,’ Leda said, ‘and they’ll come.’” Leda’s concern about the secrecy and silence around their lesbian affair dominates her thoughts. The invasion of the outside world into their sorority room would not only expose their lesbian identities, but also their liminal space. In the novel, Leda frequently silences the subject of the girls’ lesbianism, which contributes to the closetedness of their gay identities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* explains this process: “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.” Leda’s performance of the act of silence is her usual response to Susan’s attempts to discuss their relationship. Although she engages in the conversations about what is between them and confesses her love to Susan, she then backs out as soon as Susan attempts to define their relationship and its potential future. By silencing the lesbian affair, Leda also silences her gay self, which in consequence leads to the closeting of her secret, as well as her identity. Furthermore, Leda’s silence about gay her identity within the room, corresponds with Victor Turner’s liminal interpretation of silence as a means of submission to the authorities, which stand for the entire community. Even within a relatively safe space, Leda remains silent about her queerness, which shows that she is committed to social, heteronormative rules, and is aware of the ostracism that she would have to face if her gayness was exposed. The consequences of Leda’s behavior correspond with Sedgwick’s argument on the dependency between sexual secrecy and closetedness: “The secret of having a secret, functions precisely as the closet. It is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret.” The fact that the sorority room is the only space where Leda and Susan expose their lesbian selves, contributes to the increase of pressure around guarding their homosexual secret. Therefore, the tension and nervousness that arises in Leda blocks the process of reconciliation with her gay identities, and encloses her in the liminal space of the sorority room. As the story continues, the reader observes the danger

of closeting one’s homosexual identity by seeing the damage that it does to Leda. Her mental and physical enclosure within her secret triggers pressure, and eventually leads to Leda’s mental breakdown.

Leda’s refusal to fully recognize her gay identity, both within and outside the liminal space of the room, brings up another quality of liminal spaces: the loss of identity. Throughout the story, the heterosexual world filters through the borders of the girls’ homosexual microcosm. The heteronormative qualities are being brought into Leda and Susan’s liminal space mainly by Leda, whose process of identity loss is particularly visible. Within the borders of the girls’ liminal, gay microcosm, Leda keeps underlining her attachment to the heteronormative qualities of the outside world. Yet, while being outside the sorority room, she expresses her longing for intimacy with Susan. Not only does it show that she is in between both identities, but also that she transfers the values of one space into the borders of the other. In the room, when Susan asks Leda to stop having sex with Jake, Leda wrathfully answers: “What do you think we are—engaged to be married? Are you going to propose now, and then settle down with me in a little goddamn vine-covered cottage and raise kids? Sometimes you’re Godawful thick in the head, Mitch.”176 Although the girls engage in lesbian, sexual intimacy, Susan’s request for Leda’s emotional and physical commitment invokes fear and anxiety over her possible detachment from the heteronormative space. By underlining the values of domesticity such as having a small household, children, and being settled down, Leda marks her attachment to the social advantages of the heterosexual world. She is aware that the relationship with Susan, which indeed brings her emotional and sexual fulfilment, cannot bring her personal stability or secure her social status. However, when the girls drive away from the sorority house, Leda expresses both her wish to get intimate with Susan right where they are, and her concerns about this intimacy being seen. She says:

Think of the way people would talk if they knew! Leda, the fraternity man’s little darling, and here she sits wishing all to hell she could reach over and kiss you. But she can’t because it’s not right. Not here in broad daylight. Not in the open. It’s right in the night. Then it’s right.177

Leda’s wish to perform lesbian intimacy in the public space reflects the fact that she is neither fully heterosexual in the heteronormative space, nor fully gay within the borders of liminal space that she shares with Susan. Her identity loss is also revealed through the way

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176 Packer, Spring Fire, 158.
177 Ibid., 134.
she distances herself from both identities by describing her needs and feelings with the use of a third person narration. By referring to herself as a “fraternity man’s little darling,” and saying “she sits,” “she could,” “she can’t,” instead “I sit” and “I could,” Leda creates the impression that the issue of homosexuality does not concern her directly. At the same time, she also seems to distance herself from the heteronormative space, as she uses the same form of expression to talk about her relationship with Jake. By expressing her desires and concerns as if they belonged to somebody else, Leda confirms that physically she is between both identities and both worlds, while mentally she is not in any of them. What is more, the fact that Leda underlines the rightness of their lesbian intimacy during the night and its inappropriateness during the day, appears as she sets the borders of their space. Night becomes a symbol that defines Leda and Susan’s liminal space—it increases the sense of invisibility, secrecy, and privacy, which shelters their lesbian affair. Therefore, their intimacy seems right in the night, when the girls are in the liminal space of their sorority room that protects them from the public exposure. However, by underlining that their relationship is “not right in the open,” Leda underlines the closetedness of their affair, which corresponds with the closetedness of her gay identity.

Thus, anticipating the potential consequences of breaking the heterosexual bubble that Leda has created around her lesbian self makes her restless. She explains Susan how she perceives her sexual identity: “I may be a little uncertain about it, but men come first with me … Men, as distinguished from women! Sure, I’ve got some bisexual tendencies, but by God, I’m no damn Lesbian!” Here the question of Leda’s identity that has been discussed at the beginning of the chapter returns. It is important to consider that what Leda says about her bisexuality may be true, and even though her relationship with Susan, as well as their liminal room space, are gay, she herself is not. However, the way she says it, suggests that she may be underplaying her interest in women due to the potential consequences of being uncovered. The fact that Leda claims that she is bisexual within the liminal space of the girls’ room, underlines her condition of being in-between homo- and heterosexual identities. In fact, Victor Turner defined bisexuality as an element of social and cultural transition of an individual who goes through the process of identity recognition. Leda’s bisexuality may be then considered as her condition of being somewhat lesbian and somewhat straight. Therefore, she is in the liminal stage of transition—she detached herself from pure heterosexuality, but she has not yet reached the

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178 Packer, Spring Fire, 158.
point where she would be able to claim who she is. What is more, Meaker presents bisexuality as a sort of lesbianism that in the 1950s was perceived as more appropriate, especially by straight society. In *We Walk Alone*, Meaker describes how society explained women’s same-sex inclinations in the 1950s:

Another sort of lesbian is so-called bisexual. In gay circles, she is said to be “double gaited.” “Straight” society often describes her as an oversexed female, bordering on, if not actually suffering from, nymphomania. She is thought to be half and half, and often presumed to be extremely promiscuous.180

Being associated with nymphomania or promiscuity was safer and more acceptable than being directly associated with lesbianism. Moreover, as Meaker recalls, there were many men who were attracted to bisexual women, and accepted their same-sex inclinations thinking that their interest in other women was only “a hangover from [their] boarding-school days.”181 Meaker’s perception of bisexuality as socially acceptable is reflected in the novel when Leda explains Susan the necessity to find balance between their homo- and heterosexual inclinations in order to make sure that nobody takes them for lesbians: “There are a lot of people who love both and no one gives a damn, and they just say you’re oversexed and they don’t care. But they start getting interested when you stick to one.”182 Leda’s association of bisexuality with being oversexed reflects the connection that Meaker makes in *We Walk Alone* between bisexuality and sexual unfulfillment. Although there may be many reasons why Leda defines herself as a bisexual, she certainly functions in-between homo- and heterosexual identity, and seems not to be ready yet to lose the privileges of any of them for the sake of choosing one.

The liminal values of Leda and Susan’s homosexual microcosm remain contingent. On the one hand, the invisibility, secrecy, and privacy of the room give Leda and Susan the freedom to engage in lesbian intimacy, and realize their lesbian desires. On the other hand, the fear and pressure of exposure leads to the closetedness of their relationship as well as Leda’s gay identity. The brief conversations about their affair, the vague and indirect language that they use to describe what is between them, as well as the continuous presence of the heterosexual world that filters through the borders of their liminal space contribute to the enclosure of Leda and Susan’s homosexuality within the gay microcosm.

181 Ibid., 101.
182 Ibid., 158.
that they established for themselves. However, by exposing the ambiguity of the liminal values of the girls’ sorority room, Meaker shows that it can have both good and bad impact on the self-reconciliation with their gay identities. For Leda, who is dominated by fear and anxiety of being exposed as a lesbian, the liminal space of the room creates the borders that protect her from the invasion of heteronormative society. However, the same borders preclude her gay self from leaving the closet, which generates fear and increases the pressure of living within the secret. Contrary to Leda, Susan makes use of the values of liminal space that enable her to discover and reconcile with her lesbian identity. The sense of invisibility, privacy, and freedom to explore her gay desires give her both mental and physical space to define who she is. Although in a letter to Leda, Susan confesses her wish to “straighten herself out,” she says: “Lesbian is an ugly word and I hate it. But that’s what I am, Leda, and my feelings toward you are homosexual.”183 Susan’s reconciliation with her lesbian identity is crucial as it contributes to her decision to leave the sorority, and become an independent. Despite the confusion with what homosexuality will mean and uncertainty about the consequences of leaving the safe space of sorority, Susan is aware that this space is not where she belongs.

The interpretation of Spring Fire in the context of the heterotopia of spaces depicts how the mental and physical wandering of Leda and Susan between homo-and heterosexual spaces contributes to their existence in two worlds of completely different ideas and values. By choosing the sorority room as their liminal gay space and showing the mutual, sexual interest in one another, Leda and Susan deliberately and consciously become the citizens of a homosexual world, which starts and ends within the borders their room. By living in the heterotopian sorority house, but inhabiting the liminal, lesbian world locked behind the door of their room, Leda and Susan keep balancing on the verge of homo- and heterosexual space. Eventually, they are exposed by two other sorority members who enter Leda and Susan’s room, and find them in an ambiguous, intimate situation. The very fact that their exposure is the result of leaving the door unlocked, relates to Foucault’s argument about a strong correlation of binary oppositions that define heterotopias. The intrusion of heterosexual world into Susan and Leda’s liminal space fractures the borders between open and closed, isolation and penetration, inclusion and exclusion. By leaving the door unlocked, Leda and Susan leave their isolated macrocosm wide-open to the penetration by excluded, heterosexual part of sorority’s community. The

183 Packer, Spring Fire, 205.
exposition of Susan and Leda’s liminal gay space uncovers various, inner, and unknown layers that make up the sorority’s image. Therefore, sorority functions as heterotopia, as it provides Leda and Susan with various spaces that they can function in. It gives them an opportunity to create a liminal, gay space where they can fulfil their intimate needs and desires, yet at the same time, it lets them function in the public, heteronormative space of the sorority house, and maintain the appearances of heterosexual women.

**Compulsory Heterosexuality in the Context of Heterotopia**

By presenting the heteronormative qualities of Tri Epsilon house, Meaker reveals the institution’s devotion to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. Although the idea was coined by Adrienne Rich in the 1980s, the heteronormative-oriented norms were enforced by patriarchal, American society already in the 1950s. The argument that Rich presented by saying: “women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation towards men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying and oppressive—components of their lives,” corresponds the ideology of the Tri Epsilon sorority house that Meaker describes in the novel. Shortly after Susan’s admission to the house, the institution’s pressure on heterosexual relationships among members is explained by the pledges’ director, who claims:

> All I can say is that you have joined a sorority because you have found that you’re in with a gang you can be mighty proud of. Most men join fraternities for the same reason. They want to pick a bunch that they know have high standards and high ideals. Now, to my way of thinking, it’s only logical to want to date that kind of guy.  

Considering the historical context, the role of American sororities in helping young women to find husbands-to-be was fundamental. This seems to be reflected in *Spring Fire* when the pledges’ director underlines that dating fraternity men is one of the elements of sorority life. However, compulsory dating and mating routines in the sorority house turned out to be especially crucial for Leda and Susan, who needed to cover their queer identities under the appearances of supposedly healthy, heterosexual relationships. The narrator describes the first conversation that Leda and Susan have about men: “Like men, Mitch? … I mean, really like them. Mitch’s lips were tired from the painful grins she had been stretching

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185 Packer, *Spring Fire*, 49.
them into all day. Leda laughed. ‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘You’ll learn. I used to think you just had to lie there and that was it. Then I learned better.’”

Through the way Leda describes the sexual aspect of female-male relationships, the reader can notice her relatively detached attitude to heterosexual intimacy. The vagueness of her explanation, as well as the phrase “you’ll learn” that she uses in order to underline that regardless if Susan likes men or not, she will experience sexual intimacy with them, indicates the compulsoriness of heterosexual relationships within the sorority environment. Moreover, later in the novel, Leda shares with Susan her mother’s opinion about women who do not have men around: “Jan [Leda’s mother] always thinks if you don’t have a man hanging around that you’re abnormal or something.”

Although Leda does not state outright that she agrees with her mother, she seems to follow this pattern by being in a relationship with Jake, which in fact, gives her nothing more than a higher status in the school rank. In addition, Leda again displays a rather detached approach to the issue of heterosexual relationships. The fact that she uses a phrase “a man hanging around” to characterize a relation between a man and a woman, shows how limited her perception of a female-male relationship is. Leda does not see a man as a woman’s partner, but as somebody that has to be around in order to determine the value of a woman. She sees the presence of men as necessary, as it defines the value of women and their social position.

In the 1950s, as Elaine May explained in *Homeward Bound*, the ideology of sexual and domestic containment became a significant element of American social policy, which was oriented towards the well-being and protection of families. However, this required the accommodation and adaptation of women to the reality of their heterosexual relationships and domestic routines, which often did not bring them any sense of satisfaction or fulfillment. May argued:

> For women, the rewards offered by marriage, compared to the limited opportunities in the public world, made the homemaker role and appealing choice. So women donned their domestic harness. But in their efforts to live according to the codes of domestic containment, they were bound to encounter difficulty.

Although Meaker does not present the story of Leda and Susan in the context of domestic life, the girls’, and especially Leda, play out a similar pattern when it comes to

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187 Ibid., 113.
accommodating to the norms of heteronormative relationships. Considering their queer identities and the persecution of homosexuality at the time, Leda and Susan are aware that a commitment to heterosexuality can protect them from social ostracism, and provide them with a secret space to engage in lesbian intimacy. Therefore, they decide to commit to relationships with fraternity boys even though neither of them finds emotional fulfilment or sexual satisfaction there. Especially the relationship of Leda and Jake reflects the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, as well as the ideology of sexual and domestic containment in the context of American sororities in the 1950s. Leda frequently underlines that her relationship with Jake is based on sexual intimacy which does not bring her any joy or satisfaction. She confesses to Susan: “Want to know what sex with him [Jake] is like? It’s like dry bread, that’s what it’s like. Like dry bread.”

Although Leda does not enjoy sex with Jake, she lowers her expectations and bears the discomforts of intercourse with Jake. She is aware that sexual containment is the only way to nurture their relationship as there is no emotional bond between them. Especially because being together contributes to the popularity and high status of both—Leda among the sorority girls and Jake among the fraternity boys. Leda explains Susan:

Want to know what Jake did tonight? … He took me back to the car. And after, Mitch, after it was over, Jake said ‘We’ll find some way to have this. They won’t stop this baby. He didn’t say ‘The hell with the whole goddamn bunch of them. They can’t keep us apart.’ He said, ‘We’ll find some way to have this.’ But I felt that way too … That’s all I want from him. I hate his guts and that’s all I want from him.

Leda and Jake’s relationship lacks an emotional bond, and it is visible through the way they refer to it. Both use a term “this” to describe what is between them, which highlights their emotional detachment from the relationship. Moreover, it is worth considering that Leda refers to her affair with Susan in the same way, which reflects not only her wandering between homo- and heterosexual space, but also her reluctance to identify with either of the worlds. When Leda admits that she hates Jake but needs to continue “this,” she underlines the compulsoriness of their relationship. However, its maintenance provides them with social status, which for Leda is especially significant as for the price of sexual commitment, she obtains a cover for her homosexual nature. May described this trend in the context of sexual containment: “Most of people were unwilling to loss of reputation …

190 Ibid., 74.
or the destruction of ‘togetherness’ that were likely to result if they strayed from the prescribed code … Many couples simply learned to live with sexual incompatibility or frustration.”

Leda seems to play out the same pattern—she chooses to bear sexual dissatisfaction than to lose her status of a campus queen, who dates the most popular fraternity boy. Although she is not happy with the way Jake treats her, she tells Susan that she needs to stay with him: “I know how men are, Mitch, how rough they are. Jake is rough too. You get sick of it … I’ve been through it and I don’t know why I go back, except that it just—You have to.”

Leda’s approach to her relationship with Jake reflects the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and women’s commitment to sexual and domestic subjectivity. Leda underlines that men are rough which may suggest that her previous heterosexual experiences had been similar to the one with Jake—shrouded with the atmosphere of male sexual domination. What is more, while justifying her agreement to being sexually overpowered, Leda says “just—you have to,” which not only highlights her helplessness in the face of an unfulfilling relationship, but also suggests that she has been raised in society where this pattern was a norm.

Although Leda openly declares her commitment to heterosexual space, deep inside she realizes that it is the bond with Susan that gives her a sense of fulfilment, peace, and comfort. She contrasts her homo- and heterosexual relationships:

But where Jake was plastic, Mitch--this feeling for Mitch was wood. It was wood and it could do everything wood should do--splinter, crack, and burn. Now it burned, deep near her stomach, and there was never that with Jake. There was a compulsion with Jake, a compulsion to be taken and used and discarded. With Mitch it was clean. It was impossibly clean.

The comparison of both relationships to plastic and wood exposes not only their nature, but also the emotions that they evoke. Meaker uses the contrast in texture of both materials to underline that Leda and Susan’s relationship, like wood, is natural, solid, and pliable. Like a tree, thanks to its strong wooden base, it has a solid foundation as it arises from their lesbian needs and desires, which are inseparable elements of their homosexual identities. Meaker, similarly to Highsmith in The Price of Salt, applies the symbolism of wood’s naturalness to indicate the purity, stability, and trueness of Leda and Susan’s bond. Moreover, she emphasizes the ability of wood to “splinter, crack, and burn,” which reflects

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191 May, Homeward Bound, 134.
192 Packer, Spring Fire, 113.
193 Ibid, 132.
the chemistry between Leda and Susan, and which can be seen in many intimate situations that they experience throughout the novel. The narrator describes the moment of sexual intimacy: “‘I want to love you,’ Leda said. She leaned over to kiss her lips and her forehead and the closed eyelids. She said her name and held her, feeling the fast beat in her pulse.” The chemistry that Leda and Susan have, sets an emotional fire between them—similarly to wood, it can burn and crack while being digested by the flames of love and desire. But also, the natural bond that they have, gives them heat in a physical and emotional sense, which is reflected by the narrator who describes the situations when Leda and Susan fall asleep hugging one another: “[Susan] pulled the covers back and lay beside Leda … When Leda’s arms came around her to hold her, she felt a warm aching that eased into peace and she slept,” another time the narrator reveals: “Long after Mitch was asleep, Leda’s hands stroked her arms, and Leda lay there … for now there was a restless peace in her.” Not only does it underline the comforting power of physical heat that grows when the girls cling to one another, but also an emotional heat that arises because of the naturalness of their bond. This mental warmth gives Leda and Susan a soothing sense of safety, security, and being in the right place. However, the sense of ease, harmony, and comfort of their lesbian relationship is contrasted with the artificiality of the bond that Leda has with Jake. Meaker compares their relationship to plastic, which contrary to wood that grows naturally, is just a synthetic material produced under controlled, laboratory conditions. Leda and Jake’s relationship seems to come into being in a similar way as it is created within the environment of the sorority and fraternity houses for the sake of fulfilling social expectations and the institution’s norms. The compulsoriness of heterosexual relationships within the organization contributes to the artificiality of Leda and Jake’s relation as it lacks the bond that it would have, if it had been born in a natural way. Moreover, the aspect of cleanliness of Leda and Susan’s relationship is also worth considering. It may refer to the fact that both girls are at the very beginning of their homosexual experiences, but it may also suggest that their relation gives them the sense of living according to their true, lesbian natures. Leda, who perceives her sexual contacts with Susan as clean, contrasts it with intimacy that she experiences with Jake, which she describes as “dry,” “rough,” and “compulsive.” Not only does it underline the unpleasantness of sex and its compulsoriness, but it also highlights the fact that there is no

194 Packer, Spring Fire, 218
195 Ibid., 77.
196 Ibid., 113.
emotional bond between them. Susan’s impression of men is similar, and the reader discovers it when she shares with Leda her hopelessness after she is being fooled by a dirty joke at the housewarming party: “I can’t help it. Everything is so dirty and nasty. I can’t understand.” At this point, Susan is not yet aware of the reason for her resentment towards men, but heterosexual closeness certainly disgusts her.

The way Meaker presents the nature of Leda and Susan’s gay relationship within the heteronormative environment of the sorority house, plays with the patterns that in the 1950s aimed to demonstrate homosexuality as a deviance. By presenting naturalness, comfort, sense of safety and fulfillment, as well as the emotional heat that same-sex relationships could offer both partners, Meaker contradicts the homophobic assumptions that defined gays in the 1950s. She contrasts Leda and Susan’s lesbian affair with the heterosexual relationships that both girls are involved in due to the social pressure of heteronormativity. As a result, she reverses the assumption that only the model of the nuclear family can provide women with the sense of stability, security, fulfilment, and satisfaction. The example of Leda and Jake’s relationship shows that although women’s accommodation to unsatisfying relations provided them with social status, it was not a guarantee of personal, emotional, or sexual fulfilment. By presenting the relationship of Leda and Susan, Meaker shows that a homosexual relationship can be for some women as natural, solid, and fulfilling as a heterosexual relationship is for others. This way of presenting Leda and Susan’s affair enables Meaker to expose the liminal space of their sorority room, which significantly contributes to the process of girls’ reconciliation with their gay identities.

The Reflection of Heterotopia in Susan’s Self-Perception

The impact that the concept of compulsory heterosexuality has on the heterotopian reading of the novel is crucial. Not only when it comes to the way heteronormative qualities contribute to the establishment of liminal spaces within the borders of the sorority, but also in the context of the mental vacillating of Leda and Susan between their gay and straight sense of selves. However, as they attempt to find a physical space for themselves in between the gay and straight world, the search for a mental space that would let them achieve full, emotional reconciliation with their homosexual identities. As the sorority house is the heterotopia of several homo- and heterosexual spaces, and so are

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Leda’s and Susan’s minds. Their psyches are torn between the sense of compulsory identification with the heteronormative world, and their homosexual identities that need to be embraced in order to enable the girls to achieve an inner reconciliation with their lesbian identities. Although both girls mentally slip between the categories of homo- and heterosexual identities, Susan’s struggle with her gay and straight self is presented to the reader in greater details. The concept of the heterotopia of identity is portrayed by the narrator when Susan stands in front of the mirror at the swimming pool, and realizes that her outside, heterosexual look significantly differs from what her inner sense of gay identity stands for. The role of the mirror in the process of one’s identity recognition is worth considering, as both Meaker and Highsmith use the device of an actual mirror to present their character’s reconciliation with their lesbian identities.

Although Susan is already aware about her same-sex inclinations upon her arrival at the sorority, it is only after she experiences an intimate relationship with Leda that she consciously acknowledges her lesbian identity. The heterotopia of spaces that the sorority offers Susan, enables her to go through the process of reconciliation with her gay identity more easily, as it provides her with the liminal space where she can experience homosexuality, and at the same time preserve her heterosexual, outward image. Susan fully embraces her lesbianism only when she realizes that although she is trying to hide her gay self under a heterosexual image, she still does not fully belong to neither of these worlds. The narrator describes the moment when Susan experiences the heterotopia of identity:

   Mitch zipped the side of her skirt and pulled the sweater over her damp head. With the towel around her shoulders, she combed and parted her hair and took the lipstick to the mirror ... In the mirror the wetness of her hair gave it a bobbed look, and the reflection was like that of a young boy.198

Susan’s reflection in the mirror reveals the duality of her identity. On the one hand, a skirt that she puts on, underlines the feminine values that establish her outward image through which she is perceived by society as a young sorority girl. On the other hand, a recent swim that Susan took exposes her natural, boyish look, which indicates her natural self which stands out from the social, heteronormative norms imposed on women. The symbolism of water is crucial here, as it is commonly associated with a cleansing and purifying power, which may refer to Susan’s lesbian self-discovery. Water cleans off the relics of Susan’s compulsory heterosexuality, and reveals her true self that so far has been

198 Packer, Spring Fire, 196.
isolated from the social view. While swimming, Susan’s body is in its natural shape and form, free from the physical attributes of femininity as well as the mental burden of traditional values attached to the gender roles that she is expected to follow. Water extricates her true self and the shape that she feels most comfortable in. However, when Susan leaves the water, she puts her skirt and lipstick back on to make sure her physical image does not differ from other sorority girls, and covers her “the other” self that she sees in the mirror. Susan’s discovery about both the feminine and the masculine values of her appearance make her reflect on the fact that her body and mind are torn between the heterosexuality that they should represent, and homosexuality that they stand for. Moreover, the way Susan perceives her mirror reflection reveals a sense of comfort and fulfilment with her lesbian self. The narrator describes: “Her face looked fresh from the swim, her eyes bright, the straight hair darker, and slicked back mannishly.”

Susan’s reflection on her image is significant because it reveals her content with the boyish look, and eventually leads to the reconciliation with her lesbian identity. The fact that she notices the freshness of her face, the brightness of her eyes, and the straightness and darkness of her hair, shows how much Susan’s look differs from the standards of compulsory female beauty of the 1950s. Susan’s natural appearance is far from the pin-up ideal that were defined by glamorous makeup and curled, stylized blonde hair. Her realization about the otherness of her appearance makes her understand that under the cover of compulsory femininity there is another self, which is visible only to those who will be permitted to enter the liminal, lesbian space of Susan’s mind.

What is more, while standing in front of the mirror, Susan realizes that the struggle between the heterosexual, outside appearance of her identity and her homosexual, inner self attempting to emerge, becomes noticeable to the outside world. After she has put her make up on, Casey, another sorority girl, enters the changing room and comments on Susan’s appearance: “hey, you look like Sonny Tufts with lipstick.”

The fact that Casey stresses that Susan looks like a man with the lipstick on may suggest that Susan’s position in between homo- and heterosexual space is no longer as stable as it has been so far. The lesbian experience might have made it more difficult for Susan to balance on the verge of two worlds, and in consequence, it might have impeded her decision to leave the heteronormative sorority space that she neither belongs to nor she is able to accommodate herself in. All in all, Susan’s moment of realization in front of the mirror demonstrates the

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199 Packer, Spring Fire, 196.
200 Ibid., 196.
mental and physical heterotopia of spaces that she functions in. On the one hand, she is physically standing in the public environment of the heterosexual world where her outward appearance, supported by the feminine attributes, matches the expectations of a heteronormative, gender-based society. On the other hand, Susan’s inner self represents her lesbian identity that filters through her outside image, yet cannot be fully revealed, since it does not match social standards. However, Susan’s recognition of the confronting values of the homo- and heterosexual world contribute to her reconciliation with her lesbian identity. Contrary to Leda, who until the very end of the novel, refuses to acknowledge her homosexuality, Susan defines who she is, and decides to search for her space outside the heteronormative sorority environment that imposes on her traditional, heterosexual, and gender-oriented values.

From a political point of view, the portrayal of American sororities as the nests of lesbian eroticism in the 1950s was not only a danger to the heteronormative ideology, but also to the stability of American society. The exposure of a homosexual underground within the institution that was to shape young American women and teach them how to commit to their gender roles, brings up the issue of women’s actual place in American society. The fact that Leda and Susan join the sorority already knowing that they have same-sex inclinations shows how limited possibilities gay women had at the time. In the heat of post-war propaganda of marriage and women’s commitment to the domestic space, the needs and desires of both homo- and heterosexual women were completely neglected. The establishment of an independent, and other than domestic, space for women was almost impossible, as any deviation from traditional norms was seen as an abnormality.

Spring Fire was not just a paperback novel of the 1950s that brought the issue of homosexuality into light. By setting the lesbian story of Leda and Susan in the heteronormative institution of American sorority, Meaker exposes how the public environment of traditional society enabled the creation of liminal spaces where gay women could fulfil their emotional needs and sexual desires, without being socially persecuted. The sorority becomes for Leda and Susan the heterotopia that enables them to vacillate between homo- and heterosexual spaces in order to achieve the reconciliation with their lesbian identities. By transforming their room into a liminal entity that is carefully isolated from a homophobic society, they manage to keep their lesbian secret safe. At the same time, they manage to keep the appearances of heterosexuality in order to accommodate to the rules of the sorority house. However, Meaker exposes how dangerous vacillating on the borders of homo- and heterosexual world can be, especially with the pressure of
compulsory heterosexuality that in the 1950s imposed on women an ideology of sexual and domestic containment. By silencing her lesbian identity for the sake of fitting into social categories, Leda encloses herself within the liminal space of her secret which impedes her process of reconciliation with her lesbianism. And although the novel does not end well for Leda, who stays in the mental institution, it brings hope to Susan who leaves the sorority house, and perhaps will find her space where she will not need to vacillate between her gay self and the oppressive, heteronormative, social norms.

The analysis of *The Price of Salt* and *Spring Fire* presented in this literary section, exposed the significance of liminal, gay spaces for the protagonists’ reconciliation with their lesbianism. However, the most striking finding of the analysis of both novels is the fact that their authors use the same motifs to explain the way their protagonists handle their homosexuality. The limited scope of this project does not allow me to do a thorough comparison of both novels, but the similarities between these texts may be significant, especially in the context of women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities. Both Meaker and Highsmith use the concept of wood to refer to the sense of mental and physical space that their protagonists experience. Moreover, both authors use the motif of a mirror to highlight the moment of their protagonists’ identity recognition, which also precisely corresponds with the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia that uses a mirror to present an individual’s state of being in two spaces at the same time. Therefore, the use of these two novels to present the liminal spaces of gay women living in America of the 1950s, gives the reader valuable insights into the way lesbians approached, explored, and reconciled with their identities. And most importantly, it allows the reader to perceive it as a process, and not as a change that happened overnight.
Chapter Six:
Conclusion

Carol raised her hand slowly and brushed her hair back, and Therese smiled because the gesture was Carol, and it was Carol she loved and would always love. Oh, in a different way now, because she was a different person, and it was like meeting Carol over again, but it was still Carol and no one else. It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell … Therese walked toward her.201

By the end of The Price of Salt, the sense of airlessness is gone. The final paragraph of the novel describes the protagonists, who are so familiar to the reader, yet so different at the same time. At the very end of the book, Carol and Therese’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities is over, and the women re-join social structures with their new, lesbian identities. When Therese and Carol meet in the final scene of the novel, Therese underlines that although Carol is the same woman she fell in love with, she is a different person now. The “new” Carol is a woman conscious of her gay identity, and ready to commit to a lesbian relationship. However, the way Therese perceives Carol allows the reader to notice that Therese has also changed. Her perception is wider, and her sense of space is broader. The Carol standing in front of her is not just her lover, but she becomes the embodiment of a promising future together— the future in a “thousand cities,” a “thousand houses,” and “in foreign lands.” The sense of space and the broad vision of life that Therese displays at the end of the novel, contrasts with the sense of physical and emotional suffocation that she experienced at the beginning of the book. She no longer appears to be overwhelmed by the environment that she functions in. The final scene of the novel presents Therese as someone who is confident not only about the space that she navigates and the perspectives that are ahead, but also certain about her lesbian identity.

The primary purpose of this thesis was to explore the heteronormative spaces established within American society in the 1950s in order to find out where gay women functioned at a time of postwar, family-oriented ideology, and where they went through the process of recognition and reconciliation with their lesbian identities. The analysis of the historical sources on the Cold War America demonstrated the role of the heteronormative propaganda of the 1950s, and the way it limited the possibilities and spaces of both straight

201 Patricia Highsmith, The Price of Salt, 276.
and gay women. The analysis of the literary texts, which described the environments that accommodated the liminal, lesbian spaces within their borders, allowed the reader to observe the stages of the process of gay identity recognition. Therefore, the literary sources can be considered as valuable historical evidence of lesbian culture in 1950s America. Not only did the novels correspond with the historical data on lesbian relationships nurtured within suburban homes and sorority houses, but they also matched the processes described by scholars and theorists, yet with more emphasis on the emotional aspect of gay women’s process of identity recognition. This thesis has shown that the heterotopian qualities of public environments such as suburban homes, sorority houses, sport teams, and the army corps allowed gay women to establish liminal spaces within the borders of these environments. This thesis has furthermore shown that liminal spaces can be considered essential places for some gay women’s process of reconciliation with their lesbian identities. The liminal, lesbian microcosms gave gay women time and space to explore homosexuality and reconcile with their identities without having to classify and publicly announce their sexual preferences.

The examination of the theories of liminality and heterotopia allowed me to define the space where gay women went through the mental and physical process of reconciliation with their lesbianism, both in the historical and literary context. The theories exposed the most important findings of the thesis— the contribution of the heterotopian qualities of heteronormative spaces to gay women’s process of identity recognition, and the significance of liminal spaces for gay women’s reconciliation with their identities. In 1950s America, environments such as suburban homes, sorority houses, sport teams, and the army corps became the heterotopian sites that provided lesbians with essential space for the discovery and exploration of their gay identities.

The most important, and simultaneously the most surprising finding of this thesis is that in the 1950s a marital home was an essential site for lesbians to nurture their homosexual relationships. As this thesis presented, the heterotopian structure of home contributed to the creation of liminal space where lesbians could explore their homosexuality. In this aspect, I found out that values such as secrecy, privacy, and isolation, which created the image of American suburban house of the 1950s, helped gay women to conceal their lesbian affairs within their marital homes. The domestic space became the place where homo- and heterosexual worlds coexisted. On the one hand, lesbians appeared to be devoted wives and mothers, and passed for heterosexual women, and on the other hand, they could nurture their lesbian affairs without being immediately,
publicly exposed. Therefore, the discovery that the home was an essential lesbian space in 1950s America is one of the most striking findings of this thesis.

Furthermore, this thesis highlighted the connection between history and what is being illustrated in the novels written by gay authors who lived in 1950s America. The examination of an oppressive, heteronormative society that imposed family values on the protagonists of both novels, exposed the limitation of gay women’s mental and physical space, and the way it affected the process of the women’s reconciliation with their gay identities. Moreover, the analysis of the heteronormative environments of home and sorority house in the context of heterotopia, exposed the liminal spaces established by the protagonists of both novels within these environments. Therefore, the literary sources can be considered as valuable, historical evidence of liminal, lesbian spaces created within heteronormative American society in the 1950s.

In case of The Price of Salt, one of the most important findings of the analysis home space is the fact that the bigger the social pressure of heteronormativity was, the more overwhelming the surroundings of the protagonists seemed, and the more limited their mental and physical space appeared. Therefore, it is Carol’s spacious suburban house, which due to its heterotopian qualities, provided the women with the liminal space essential for the discovery and exploration of their gay identities. However, a careful study of Carol’s and Therese’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities led me to another striking finding—that the politicization of home space and the control of heteronormative society over the lives of the protagonists, forced Carol and Therese to re-establish their liminal space on the road. Not only does this discovery deconstruct the concept of private and public, but also exposes the significance of liminal, gay space for the women’s process of reconciliation with their gay identities, as on the road, both Carol and Therese experienced a liberating sense of mental space, which gave them confidence as gay women.

One of the most interesting findings of the analysis of the sorority house in Spring Fire is that, similarly to the suburban home in The Price of Salt, the heterotopian qualities of Tri Epsilon house contributed to the creation of liminal, lesbian space within the borders of the heteronormative organization. The structural invisibility of the queer site of the protagonists’ liminal gay microcosm established in their sorority room, contributed to the temporary isolation of their lesbian affair from the heteronormative sorority’s sight, and gave them space and time to experience homosexuality. Therefore, the female institution that aimed to promote heteronormativity and a model of the nuclear family provided Leda
and Susan with the liminal space, which was essential for the discovery and exploration of their gay identities. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the protagonists’ approach to their lesbianism led me to another important discovery—that silencing one’s gay identity may impede the process of reconciliation, regardless of the secrecy and isolation of the liminal, gay space.

This thesis has limited itself to the analysis of lesbian, liminal spaces that existed within the heteronormative, public environments of suburban homes, sorority houses, women’s sport, and the army corps. Although the analysis of both historical and literary sources confirmed the existence of lesbian communities within these public spaces, I am aware that they do not give full and privileged insight into the lives of all gay women living in 1950s America. As we could see, the heterotopian qualities of these environments provided gay women with the liminal space essential for the discovery and exploration of their lesbianism. My analysis of the liminal, lesbian spaces that existed both in literature, and based on historical evidence, in real life, allowed me to conclude that for some women, lesbian microcosms established within heteronormative environments appeared as a possibility to explore, experience, and reconcile with their gay identities.

Writing this thesis as a young woman living in the twenty-first century, I could not avoid comparing the process of reconciliation with one’s gay identity in the 1950s and now. Having in mind the change that occurred in the way society has perceived homosexuality over the past sixty years, I realized that until now, most of the stages of exploration and discovery of one’s homosexuality happens within private spaces. Therefore, this research could be taken further and used as a starting point to the debate whether liminal spaces are still essential for gay women who go through the process of reconciliation with their gay identities in the twentieth-first century. In this aspect, it could be also considered whether we still live within heterotopian environments that on the one hand, are subject to the heteronormative norms, and on the other hand, juxtapose diverse sites, which can safely coexist because of socially promoted tolerance and respect towards racial, ethnic, and gender and sexual minorities. Moreover, it would be interesting to consider the change that occurred in the meaning of home for lesbian women, especially considering the legalization of homosexual marriages in many countries across the world. In this aspect, the term “lesbian wives” suggested by Lauren Gutterman, fundamentally changes its meaning as it refers to two married women, and not to women with lesbian inclinations married to men. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how the domestic environment of contemporary lesbian wives is arranged, and whether it gives them mental
and physical space to explore and nurture their relationships. The limited scope of this project does not allow me to consider all questions that could take this research further, yet I believe that liminal, lesbian spaces and their significance for women’s process of reconciliation with their homosexuality in the context of our times, is a subject to be explored further.
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