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# Gay New York: From Bars to Bathhouses

Ben Roberts

*The College at Brockport*, [brobe1@brockport.edu](mailto:brobe1@brockport.edu)

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# Gay New York: From Bars to Bathhouses

*This project is an analysis of the manner in which gender identity development was experienced by non-heteronormative people in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the experiences of gay men, with particular focus on the life of Anthony (Tony) Mascioli, a Rochester native and 1954 graduate of the Brockport State Teacher's College, now The College at Brockport. Tony's journey from a lower middle class, socially conservative, and mostly closeted lifestyle, to an upper class, extremely liberal, and totally open gay lifestyle sheds light on the manner in which American society's view of homosexuality has evolved and on how heterosexism and classism intersect in both Tony's life and in the formation of gay male identity as a whole. This research includes analysis of gay history, theories of gender identity and development, and personal experiences of identity as related in interviews and personal histories.*

## Opening Thoughts

Imagine living in upstate New York and being a gay, white, lower middle class male in the 1940s. Could you be out with this identity, or would you feel the need to stay closeted? What would life be like if you did choose to live openly as a gay man? These questions are central to understanding the life of Tony Mascioli, a gay male who grew up in western New York and lived there for most of the period from 1930 to 1954 when he graduated from the Brockport State Teacher's College, now The College at

Brockport. This paper looks at Tony's life with a particular focus on the history of gay life and knowledge about gender and sexual identity as it evolved in American history.

### **Introduction**

When many people think about the current state of gender and sexual identity in America, they see a climate that is problematic, but one that is moving toward a state of greater acceptance. One way to measure this is the legal status of gay couples in the United States. Between 2012 and 2013, six more states made gay marriages legal, bringing the total from eleven to seventeen (States, 2013). The general feeling is that we have made leaps and bounds from a previous (and original) state of hostile intolerance, making the current hodgepodge of acceptance and hate at least a step in the right direction. This feeling betrays an ignorance of varying levels of tolerance and acceptance of non-heteronormative lifestyles, both throughout history and in the relatively short history of the United States of America. In his text *Gay New York*, George Chauncey states "heterosexuality was an invention of the late nineteenth century" (1994, p. 100) and asserts that the identification and demonization of homosexuals was a

result of an identity crisis among middle class American men of that era. Men believed that middle class masculinity was under assault not just from homosexuals but from other economic and social issues. The rise of the corporate business structure deprived many middle class men of their identity as independent breadwinners. Women were fighting for the right to vote and leading temperance movements and other campaigns against "male vices" (p. 112). Chauncey further writes that "heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives" (p. 117) were growing, reaching their peak at the end of the first third of the twentieth century. This environment, the emphasis on heteronormative gender and sexual identity as normal behavior, and the stigmatization of homosexuality as abnormal, is the climate into which Tony Mascioli was born. Given this setting, this project uses a combination of historical documents, theoretical frameworks, and personal interviews to explore how gender and sexual identity development was experienced by one man in 1930-1950s America, focusing on the life of Tony Mascioli.

### **A Discussion of Homosexuality through the 1950s**

One of the many factors that problematize frank discussion of non-heteronormative genders and homosexual identity in our culture is the presumption that these are relatively new and newly perverse ideas. Conservatives of all stripes assail the recognition of non-heteronormative genders and the acceptance of homosexual behaviors as a sign of the growing corruption of our world. A current example of this is the manner in which FOX News columnist Todd Starnes leapt to the defense of David and Jason Benham, conservative Christians whose show on the Home and Garden Network was cancelled after David Benham's anti-gay beliefs were revealed through statements like "we have pornography and perversion; we have a homosexuality and its agenda that is attacking the nation... we even have allowed demonic ideologies to take our universities and our public school systems" (Starnes, 2014). The main problem with this criticism is that both non-heteronormative genders and homosexual behaviors have been a part of human society for millennia, even if those terms did not exist to describe them. I am particularly fond of David Halperin's (1990) analogy to the ancient world's experience of gravity. He explains that even though neither the

concept of gravity nor the term itself existed, gravity was a force present in the lives of the ancients. In the same way, non-heteronormative gender and homosexual behaviors were present, even if they were not identified with those terms. Halperin cites Plato's *Symposium*, a 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. treatise on the nature and meaning of love, which is primarily concerned with love and sex between men, as proof of this.

Skipping ahead to the Renaissance, James M. Saslow states that homosexuality was by this time (around 1400 C.E.) "a widely observable and documented social phenomenon" (1990, p. 90). Moving to the 1800s and the United States, several authors noted that homosexual relationships and people who expressed gender in non-normative ways existed, with the implication that both of these things were more common than they are mentioned in current history books, which is usually not at all. Martin Duberman (1990) writes of "writhing bedfellows" (p. 153) in 1826 South Carolina, while Robert K. Martin (1990) analyzes "male love" as seen in writings from *Moby Dick* and *Calamus* to the "popular fictions of mid-nineteenth-century America" (p. 169).

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth

marked a disturbing turn in both our culture's awareness of and its discussion about gender and homosexual identity. I narrow my temporal focus to that time period and my geographical focus to the state of New York, because these are the times and places most important to the gender and sexual identity of my subject, Tony Mascioli. They mark a sea change in the discussion of human sexuality, as New York was one of only two prominent areas where relatively open acknowledgement and discussion of homosexuality existed. As mentioned previously, Chauncey (1994) states that the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" only came into use as descriptors of sexual identity in the late nineteenth century. Chauncey describes a tremendous amount of confusion about whether gay or bisexual men should be primarily classified based on their preferred gender (male or female) or their choice of sexual object (man or woman). Chauncey's description of the debate includes "queer" men "who identified themselves primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status;" he also makes reference to "gender persona" (pp. 100-101). I believe that the behavior of these womanlike gay men, known as "fairies," was what Judith Butler (2007) calls gender

performance and what would later, due to repetition of gender behavior over time, become known as gender performativity. This concept is particularly relevant here as the repetition of stylized actions which gave these non-heteronormative men their labels underscores the performative nature of gender.

Butler (2007) described a similar disconnect between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance, drawing a clear distinction between, for example, a man who desires to have sex with men and a man who behaves as though he is a woman (Butler, 2010). Julia Serano reinforces the difference between gender identity and sexuality, making the further distinction that gender identity is less subject to cultural and societal influence. Speaking of gender and sexual identity, she states "While the latter is heavily influenced by language, culture, and ideology, the former appears to exist somewhat independent of one's culture and socialization" (2013, p. 149). The distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and sexuality is important because, prior to the twentieth century, homosexuality was almost exclusively understood as a physical sex act. To quote John D'Emilio, "Homosexual *behavior*,

however, is different from homosexual *identity*” (1993, p. 470). D’Emilio is describing colonial America as a place where there was “no ‘social space’... that allowed men and women to be gay” and “society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person” (p. 470).

Whether or not a gay man was a “fairy,” a “queer” or “trade” (this latter category being comprised of the “nominally ‘normal’ sexual partners of queers”) was important because in the early twentieth century, these were the only options. (Chauncey, 1994). The majority of gay men of that time were

characterized as queers, but the flamboyantly effeminate fairies captured the “dominant public image” of gay men. The relative tolerance of these categories of gay men was firmly tied to their economic and social class. Chauncey states that “men at the highest and lowest social strata... were more likely than those in the middle class to tolerate other men’s homosexual activity” (p. 110) This class aspect of gay identity is highlighted in the graphic below, taken from the online version of *The Atlantic*: (Gritz, 2014).



**Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Sarah Ome Jewett**

Pictured above we have a president, a legendary poet, and a wealthy writer who were “writhing bedfellows” like

Duberman mentioned earlier, and all members of the social or economic elite (1990, p. 153). Whether or not the

physically intimate same-sex relationships that the three people pictured above had with their close companions were explicitly sexual, they undoubtedly had more freedom to pursue those relationships than those of the middle class. While gay men from the lower socioeconomic class may have not had the power to freely engage in homosexual relationships, these men were freer from the threat of social or economic consequence from their actions than gay men that the middle class absorbed (Chauncey, 1994).

Middle class American men came to perceive homosexuality as either the privilege of a debauched elite class or the depredations of an immoral lower class. In the midst of this dichotomy, they also felt a “growing antipathy... toward both fairies and queers at the turn of the century [that] was closely tied to their growing concern that the gender arrangements of their culture were in crisis” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 111). This concern was caused by a number of factors. The emergences of the corporate business model emasculated many middle class men, as they were no longer working for themselves but were subservient to other men (Chauncey, 1994). D’Emilio (1993) notes that the emergence of capitalism “gradually undermined the material basis of the

nuclear family by taking away the economic functions that cemented the ties between family members” (p. 473). Not only were men no longer in charge of their financial destiny, the economic conditions that made a traditional (father-mother-children) family necessary were dissolving. Middle class men also felt threatened by women’s actions in the form of the women’s suffrage movement, temperance movements, other campaigns against “male vices,” and the growing fear that women taking over early education would “eliminate the role of men in the socialization of youth and threaten to produce a generation of sissified boys” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 112). In addition to these specific threats, there was also a perceived threat to their status and prerogatives as men (Chauncey, 1994). This led to a climate where “preoccupation with threats to manhood and with proving one’s manhood became central to the rhetoric of national purpose,” exemplified by President Theodore Roosevelt, who made the “quest for manhood central to his speeches” (p. 113). The cumulative effect of these threats was the rise to prominence of “heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives,” which enabled middles class men to claim normalcy simply because they were

heterosexual (p. 117). The degree to which heterosexuality had become enmeshed in middle class identity is revealed in a 1930 *New York Times Book Review* which referred to society as a place where “young people” could “develop *normally* (italics mine) to heterosexual adulthood” (Katz, 1990, p. 19). So thorough was this association that “Homosexuality, a new gender-sex category, had been distributed from the narrow, rarified realm of a few doctors to become a nationally, even internationally cited aspect of middle class life” (p. 19-21).

The final ingredient to the heteronormative soup brewing in the first third of the twentieth century was the emergence of “hetero-homosexual binarism in middle class medical discourse” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 120). Chauncey implicates doctors in the value judgments made against gay men, as they belonged to a “professional class whose manliness seemed increasingly in question” (p. 121). Fairies were labeled as sexual inverts. Scientific arguments at the time relied on the supposed universality of physical differences between men and women.

Men who desired men must be hermaphroditic in some way or simply “less than men” (p. 122). Some doctors went so far as to declare fairies an “intermediate sex between men and women” for whom attraction to men was normal (Chauncey, 1994, p. 122). These men were then classified as inverts, while otherwise normal men who sexually responded to fairies were classified as perverts. The difference here is crucial as incarcerated inverts were to be medically treated while perverts were to be punished for their behavior (Chauncey, 1994). All of the above circumstances led to a world in which gay men were lumped into the single, monolithic category of homosexuals and subjected to harassment and hostility. This is the world into which Tony Mascioli was born in 1930.

### **Anthony (Tony) Mascioli**

Tony Mascioli was born on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1930. Born into a Catholic-Italian family, Tony knew he was gay at an early age. In his own words:



I was sexually motivated from the time I was six. And I'll... I just- I kind of knew a couple of people that I thought were in the club, so to speak, in high school. But we never really got too thick. I had my own friends. I was very much in love with a straight guy, but it seems like I got out of high school and I was old enough to get served – 18. then – I started going to the Glass Bar I'd go in there and buy one drink and within five minutes I'd have five or six beers, that's [sic] was the style back then. People were sending me all different -- I was a hot little ticket.

(Bailey, 2013)

Tony came out as gay in 1948, when he was 18 years old, “at the earliest possible moment when I got out of high school” (Bailey, 2013). It is important to note that this coming out did not initially include his family. Tony was terrified of his father and worried that his mother would be unable to cope with the news. Tony was so afraid of his family finding out about his gay identity that, after absconding to Canada with a steelworker he had met (before he left Rochester for New York City), he hid out for a week in a room over a bar after his brother-in-law spotted him with his lover. This story coincidentally underscores the unsubstantiated and often fabricated link between gay bars



**Tony Mascioli, unknown location, circa 1950**

or clubs and criminal activity, as Tony mentions that his brother-in-law was rumored to be associated with the mafia, and thus, had contact with people in the establishments Tony frequented. These associations are an example of the way in which homosexuality and other forms of criminal behavior were often connected in the public mind. Later in life, Tony gained economic power and social influence to engage in some extralegal activity of his own, using the money and connections acquired through his social networks to keep several New York City clubs that he came to operate

open when similar clubs were forced to close.

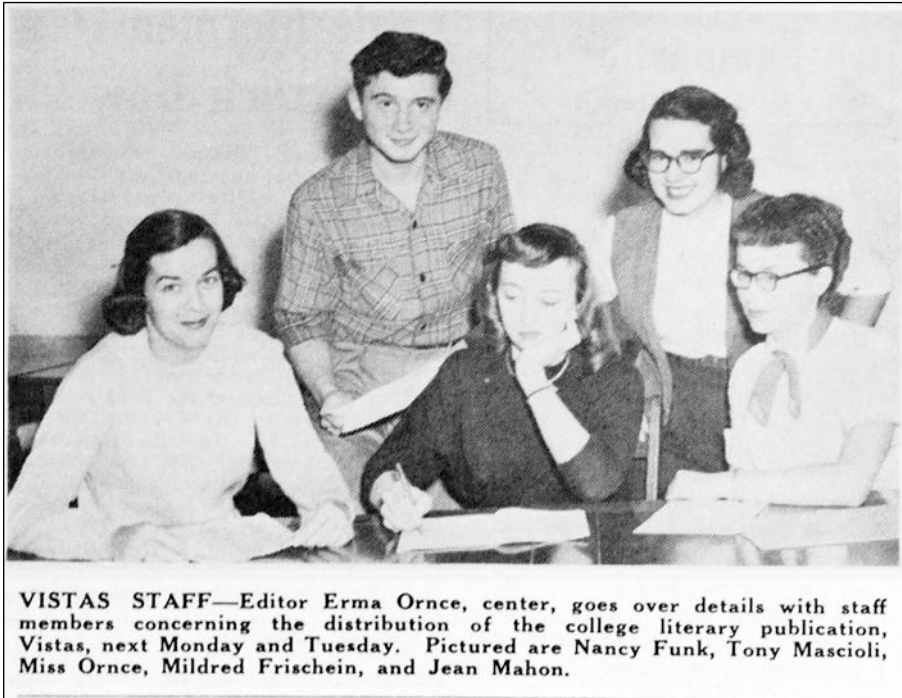
As a young gay man finding his way in the world, Tony's choices were limited. Staying with his family would have meant continuing to, at least outwardly, conform to their heteronormative expectations. Like many young men with limited economic and social options, Tony decided to try and make it in the big city. Tony's decision to leave Rochester was likely influenced by his desire to no longer need to perform a heteronormal male gender on a daily basis. As Chauncey (1994) tells us, the lower middle class society that Tony belonged to was growing increasingly intolerant of gay men, fashioning the labels of heterosexual and homosexual to clearly define what was normal and what was not. In spite of this pressure and despite the lack of any social forces shaping his homosexuality, Tony knew that he was gay, aware of what Serano calls his "subconscious sex" (2013, p. 149). Had Tony remained in Rochester, he would have faced much greater pressure to conform to gender and sexual norms, regardless of his class status. Unable to fit in at home, Tony sought both a more open social setting and the economic means to live as he wished in New York City.

Tony left Rochester for New York City in the latter part of the 1940s. He was motivated not just by the "gay scene," but by the possibility of a career in the dramatic arts. Tony wanted to become a playwright. Unable to make it in show business and facing a draft board for service in the Korean War, Tony returned to Rochester in 1950 or 1951. In an interesting side note, Tony's father insisted that he bring x-rays of his flat feet to his physical examination. This resulted in a 4-F (physically unqualified for service in the Armed Forces) rating. It is entirely possible that Tony's father was motivated purely by concern for his son's safety and that his insistence on bringing the x-rays was no different than the desire of any parent to keep their child out of harm's way. That being said, I cannot help but wonder if Tony's father knew on some level that his son was gay and that military service during that era could have been even more dangerous for him as a result. Having fully expected to be drafted, Tony was now back in Rochester without a plan, and once again, his individual socioeconomic circumstance and that of the Rochester area in general placed limitations on his identity expression. Although it is unlikely that Tony explicitly pursued power and

wealth, he sought to find a way to improve his class status, and thus, his freedom to live as he chose, by climbing

the economic ladder. His first step would be earning a college degree.

### The Brockport Years



*The Stylus*, January 18, 1952, p. 4

Tony attended The College at Brockport, State University of New York, then known as Brockport State Teacher's College, from 1951-1954, graduating from an accelerated three-year program. While at Brockport, Tony served as a reporter for the *Stylus*, the school newspaper, first as a reporter, and then as a feature reporter writing an entertainment column entitled "Doing the Town." Tony was

also on the staff of BSTC's literary magazine "Vistas," serving as Editor-in-Chief his senior year, and given credit for saving the magazine from extinction that year.

In his senior year, Tony was involved in a censorship battle with one of the senior class faculty advisors for the play *Hangover Breakfast*, which he had written and directed for the senior class. Other than "a minor concern" that "Tony's

play was not up to the quality of some of Broadway's smash hits," the "major objection to this play was that it included too much sex" (Hangover Breakfast Goes on Uncensored [Editorial], 1954). The author of this editorial believed that the decision by Dean Drake to let the play be performed uncensored "could prove a turning point in the history of this college" by breaking "a tradition of antirealism and hypocrisy... a tradition

of stifled thinking where the basic issues of life are concerned" ("Hangover Breakfast' Goes on Uncensored" [Editorial], 1954). Though there is nothing to suggest that the sex mentioned in Tony's play was anything but heterosexual, I believe that Tony's fight to put on this play was part of a broader struggle to bring controversial aspects of sexuality to society's attention. Tony was by this point well aware of his sexuality, but



**Bev Powers and Helen O'Hara have leading feminine roles in play "Hangover Breakfast" written and directed by Tony Mascioli. Play goes on tomorrow night in auditorium.**

The Stylus, May 4, 1954, p. 1

any play or literary work featuring homosexuality would have been dead in the water in 1950s Brockport. The fact that the play was allowed to be presented illustrates a trend toward “greater heterosexual freedom” that Jonathan Katz argues was used to combat the “dire threat of homosexuality” of the time (1990, p. 19). As was typical in that era, there is little if any evidence of Tony’s sexuality being publicly known while he was a student at the Brockport State Teacher’s College. According to Chauncey’s (1994) description of the time period, Tony was still not free to be openly gay. He was still required to perform, sometimes literally, a gender that was not his own.

### **The Bathhouses**

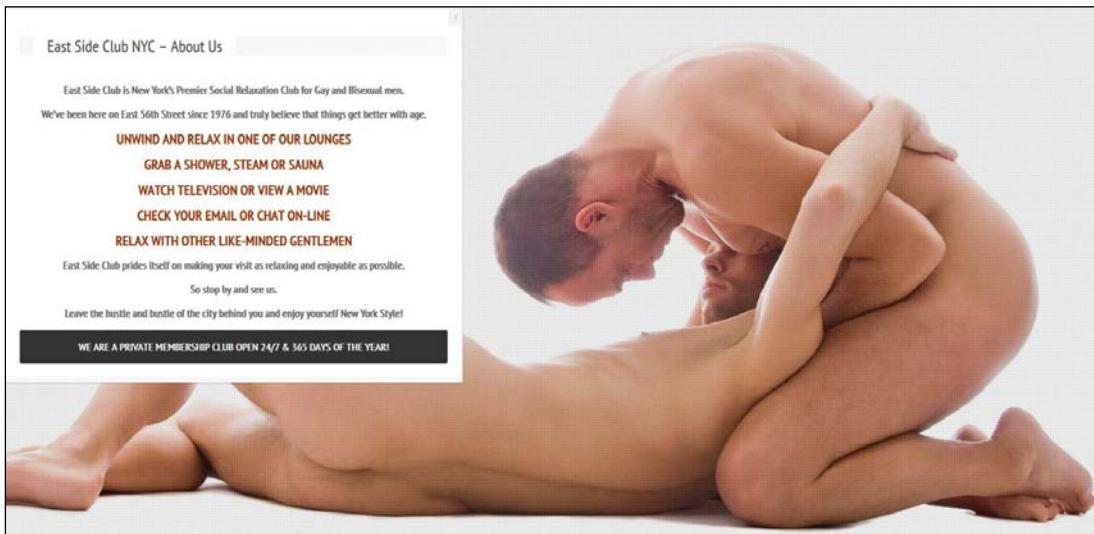
After graduating from Brockport, Tony attended Columbia University in New York City, where he obtained a Master’s degree in Drama. After moving around a bit, in 1964 Tony returned to New York City. Though he took full advantage of the limited opportunities for gay men in the Rochester area, Tony was irresistibly drawn to “the high life” of big city living (Bailey, 2013). In 1974, following a period of “little stupid jobs,” Tony and his cousin Bob (Robert DeBenedictis) opened the Wall Street

Sauna, a small club where men could meet and have sex. Tony was forthright about his reasons for opening the club: sex and money. Tony liked businessmen, and he knew that there was a demand for a safe, protected space for gay men to meet and have sexual encounters. Tony describes a world in which gay men furtively sought each other’s company in the stairwells and bathrooms of New York’s financial district. He created the Wall Street Sauna to cater to the needs of men who did not have the time, because they had to catch the five o’clock train home to their wives, or the inclination to visit the larger, more party-oriented bathhouses of that period. Tony’s business took off and in 1976 he opened the East Side Sauna, also known as the East Side Club. Tony’s club intentionally catered to a high-class clientele by providing touches like Juilliard-trained musicians playing music in the sauna room. It is important to note that, while Tony unquestionably provided a needed service by providing gay men a safe place to meet, his establishments were not entirely legitimate businesses. Socialization and relationships were not the only goals; these were clubs where men went for sex, and this focus on sex as the primary goal increased over time.



One example of the shift that occurred over time is the difference in the way the clubs advertised. Tony described an early club advertisement in a gay magazine that showed only a dejected woman sitting alone at her dinner table while the text explained that she was

pinning for her husband, who was spending his time at one of Tony's clubs (Mascioli, 2011). In contrast, the following is one of a series of sexually charged images that adorns the current website of the East Side Club:



(Image from eastsideclubnyc.com, March 13th, 2014)

Having a positive attitude about or being open about one's desire to have sex is not in any way shameful, but these clubs operated with an almost willful ignorance of the dangers of sexually transmitted infections. For example, a manager of the Wall Street Sauna claimed that "crazy sex acts" were not happening in the club in 2004, and a manager of the contemporary East Side Sauna stated, "we do not condone multiple-partner sex" while

simultaneously describing a room designed for groups of men as "the orgy room" (Friends of Ours, 2010). Perhaps even more damning, an entry in the 2003 *Betty and Pansy's Severe Queer Review of New York* describes the contemporary East Side Club as a place where the management makes announcements against drug use and provides condoms, yet many patrons engage in drug use and unprotected sex (Friends of Ours, 2010). Tony did not

publicly address his attitude towards safe sex practices or the AIDS crisis among gay men that emerged in the 1980s, other than a statement in which he described agreeing to inspections and monitoring as a condition of staying open, as well as a statement that he volunteered to help with “blood draws” (Bailey, 2013). On a positive note, Tony’s success in the bathhouse business enabled him to invest in real estate on Long Island where he operated several establishments that catered to gay men (Bailey, 2013). Taken together, these ventures made him a wealthy man and enabled him to make large donations to organizations that had touched his life, notably the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley and The College at Brockport. Towards the end of his life, Tony finally began to slow down and returned to Rochester for the sake of his health. To use his own words, “To be honest with you, New York just got to be too much for me” (Bailey, 2013).

### **Current Status of Gay Identity**

It is interesting to consider Tony’s life within the landscape of gay identity today. The first thing that must be said about the current status of gay identity is that homosexuality no longer stands alone as the primary Other to

heterosexuality. Beginning in the 1990s and 2000s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer movements have emerged to challenge the old concepts of heteronormativity and the gender binary (Stein, 2012). For example, the term queer now represents not a narrow, pejorative classification of men that have sex with men, but a nearly limitless range of gender and sexual identity. There is also growing awareness of the statistically significant number of intersexed individuals in our society (Bloom, 2002; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). I believe the explosion of movements supporting non-heteronormative people can be traced in large part to thinkers and theorists that directly attacked the concept of the gender binary, challenging the assumption that our only choices were gay or straight or male or female. My touchstone for the fight against heteronormativity continues to be Judith Butler’s (2010) concept of gender performativity. Specifically, I follow her argument that a person’s anatomical sex, their perception of their own gender, and the way in which a person chooses to act out that gender are three irreducible factors that *are not necessarily related* to sexual desire (Butler, 2010). This creates a multitude of gender and sexual identities that renders the hetero-

normal Othering of male homosexuality almost quaint.

The failure of the suddenly heteronormative middle class to come to terms with the gender-performing “fairies” of early twentieth century New York, and the resultant rigid categories of gay, straight, male, and female, contributed to the formation of a society in which men like Tony Mascioli were left without choices and forced to gather outside of heteronormative culture. The continuing existence of the East Side Club as an outlet for mostly casual sex is an enduring testament to this fact. Tony’s rise through the middle and upper classes drastically increased his choices and opportunities for homosexual and homo-social interactions. His education and his ability to master the capitalist process gave him wealth, and his choice of clientele gave him powerful customers. His wealth eventually enabled him to live comfortably and openly as a gay man. Had Tony not been an educated white male with the ability to pull himself up the economic ladder, his choices and his lifestyle would have been far more limited. Tony’s rise through the middle class enabled him to choose more freely where and how he would live, but he continued to seek out gay-friendly

spaces. It appears that Tony was not able to completely avoid the need to code-switch from being an openly gay man in New York City while remaining largely closeted to family and straight society in the Rochester area, until he had climbed all the way to the upper class. This class-based inequality reflects the stratification of status and wealth that Chauncey (1994) describes in *Gay New York*, and it helps us understand the degree to which class and wealth continue to impact ways in which gay men and other non-heteronormative people are free to be true to their own gender and sexuality.

### **Conclusion**

While there are still many challenges facing gay men, society has begun to accept gay identified individuals as valid. Federal law now recognizes gay marriage. Many states have formally recognized gay unions, and many states have legislation protecting gay marriage that preceded federal statutes. The battle is not over, but the world is changing. Rochester, a place Tony Mascioli once thought of as woefully lacking in opportunities for gay men, has become a place with a rich history of LGBTQ culture and organizations, such as the Rochester Gay Liberation Front (1970) and the Gay Alliance of



the Genesee Valley (1973) (Jordan, 2012). In interviews given for the film, *Shoulders to Stand On* (2011), Tony marveled at the fact that gay marriage was legal in New York and commented on the “extraordinary progress” made in terms of gay rights (Bailey, 2013). Tony stated that he personally was “not in the shadows” anymore, that everything was wide open, that he

thought many more people were comfortable with being “out” (Bailey, 2013). Most tellingly, Tony saw that “gay and straight society are mingling” (Bailey, 2013), signaling an end to the “heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 117) that characterized the New York of his youth.



(Tony Mascioli on Nov. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Image from *Shoulders to Stand On* documentary)

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