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# History, Narrative, and Sexual Identity

## Gay Liberation and Postwar Movements for Sexual Freedom in the United States

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Throughout the post–World War II period in the United States, movements for social justice and sexual freedom battled over the management of queer sexuality. These struggles manifested themselves in a series of competing narratives of identity and meaning. During this historical moment, a narrative of queer sexuality as pathology proliferated in American society. Activists fought to shift the terms of discourse over queer sexuality toward liberatory understandings built on links with the era’s other movements for personal freedom and social justice, including civil rights, women’s liberation, and the antiwar movement. Yet, with every ensuing progressive discourse, a reductionist narrative followed which sought to relink queer sexuality with pathology.

This chapter reviews competing narratives of queer sexuality during the postwar years. It begins with the intermingling Cold War red and lavender scares over communism and sexual perversion, juxtaposed with calls for civil tolerance of homosexuals by the Mattachine Society and other early homophile groups in the 1950s. By the 1960s, narratives had shifted from treatment of homosexuals as second-class citizens—based on criminal and mental illness models—toward civil rights discourses centered on citizenship. By the 1970s, narratives had shifted toward a more assertive call for personal and sexual freedom. A backlash followed as liberationist

narratives competed with conservative story lines linking homosexuality with deviance, especially pedophilia. Throughout this era, panic narratives linking queerness with pathology seemed to follow each advance of progressive story lines for queer life.

With the dawn of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic in the 1980s, narratives of gay life shifted once again, as homosexuality was again linked with images of illness. Activists sought to turn this story line on its head. By the 1990s, panic narratives had become part of the ongoing debates about AIDS, sex, and pleasure as conservative and radical camps debated the contemporary meanings of queer sexuality. Within this debate, radicals accused assimilated gays of advancing a normative, commercialized form of citizenship that “whitewashed” any sense of difference out of their queerness.

Recognizing that the process of personal narrative construction relies upon larger discourses of identity, this chapter reviews the evolution of contested historical narratives of queer identity. The chapter explores a schism dating back to the earliest days of gay liberation. At its heart, this debate concerns questions about the very nature of queer identity and its social meaning. Do queers simply engage in same-sex sexual behavior or is queerness a fundamental critique of social, sexual, and political expectations and participation? The struggles of this period highlight core dilemmas about identity and historical change in a participatory democracy, illustrating the ways in which historically based narratives of sexuality influence the development of individual sexual identity.

While no one narrative or grouping of narratives speaks comprehensively to the shifting social and cultural context of same-sex desire, an analysis of competing narratives reveals the ways in which constituencies fought to define and redefine practices in queer community building. With the contestation of historical meta-narratives over the past 70 years, shifts in practices of the queer self have resulted in differing forms of same-sex social practices, expanding social networks, reduction of social isolation, and vitality within social movements for sexual freedom. The result is a shifting historical context for competing narratives of the queer self.

### It Takes One to Know One

Throughout the 1930s, practices of queer life remained an uneasy, secretive part of American life in cities from San Francisco to Washington (Boyd, 2003). Shortly after Franklin D. Roosevelt became president, Prohibition came to an

end. With its passing, a new era of social tolerance took hold in Washington. New Deal Washington would become a boomtown. Federal agencies created thousands of new jobs as the population doubled. Some 700,000 people—many young and single—descended on the nation's capital. Some stayed at the YMCA, and others met after work at Lafayette Park to enjoy the thriving queer culture that had become part of the New Deal openness (Johnson, 2004)—until the queer purges began in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Over the next two decades, competing narratives of queer life would shift between Cold War propaganda linking homosexuality to communism and Mattachine narratives calling for acceptance of same-sex desire. Discursive struggles between those who quietly expressed same-sex desire and those who viewed such practices as dangerous and worthy of investigation characterized much of the 1950s and 1960s. The political landscape shifted as the federal government began screening alleged “sex perverts” for employment (D’Emilio, 1983). The Cold War and the Kinsey Report (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) focused nationwide attention on the specter of “otherness” represented by both communism and homosexuality.

By 1950, the Republicans had been out of power for some 18 years. Unable to locate actual communists in the federal government, homosexuals served as the more accessible “security threat” that could be targeted in the Democrat-controlled government. The McCarthy era purges of “perverts” from the government based on morality charges were a way for Republicans to exact political revenge (Johnson, 2004). Historians such as George Chauncey (1993), Martin Duberman (1991), Estelle Freedman (1989), John D’Emilio (1983, 1992), and David Johnson (2004) have outlined the narrative links between the homosexual “sex crime panics” and the queer purges of the McCarthy years. Johnson, for example, notes that the 1950s’ fixation on sex perverts built upon the hysteria of the World War I-era Red Scare, in which large numbers of immigrants and anarchists were targeted and deported at will.

In the 1950s’ discourse, communism, homosexuality, and sexual perversion were linked into a single deviant story line. Within this narrative, outsider status signified criminality. Queers and communists were thought to recruit those who were weak, disturbed, or ill, as well as those who lived outside traditional norms. Many suspected that the two groups were actively collaborating to subvert the U.S. government.

Throughout the 1950s, communists were thought to be “infecting” the American body politic—and especially American youth. Their point of entry: homosexual desire. Yet, this line of thinking was anything but new. From the spring of 1919 through 1920, the U.S. Navy dispatched squadrons of enlisted men to investigate “immoral conditions” reported at the Naval Training Station in

Newport, Rhode Island. Volunteer decoys were sent to find the true “queers” operating at the station. Under oath, these decoys testified that they submitted to the queers’ sexual advances in order to rid the station of their presence. In fact, they dedicated inordinate enthusiasm to the task, and many volunteered for multiple assignments. During a trial, the defense cross-examined the one such volunteer:

- Q. You volunteered for this work?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. You knew what kind of work it was before you volunteered?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. You knew it involved sucking and that sort of thing, didn’t you?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. And you were quite willing to get into that sort of work?
- A. I was willing to do it, yes, sir.
- Q. And so willing that you volunteered for it, is that right?
- A. Yes, sir. I volunteered for it, yes, sir

(Chauncey, 1989, p. 306)

Many of the entrapped men testified that the decoys had initiated the sexual encounters. By 1920, the Navy gave up on the investigation (Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, 1989).

The problematic relationship between the investigator and his object of scrutiny is a dominant feature within the hysteria of the lavender scare years. This attraction/repulsion relationship has a distinguished history within U.S. political thought. The sentiment finds expression in a fixation with things one is taught to dislike. In Newport, right-thinking prosecutors fixed their gaze on homosexuals in the Navy; during the 1950s lavender scare, the glare extended to queers in government. Throughout these panics, moral guardians claimed to be protecting the public from a predator, either communist or homosexual. While feeding erotophobia, such Cold War scares brought out the propensity in U.S. politics to define American citizenship in terms of what one is *not*, in terms of “other” (Heale, 1990; Orr, 2006; Schrecker, 1998; Shepard, 2007).

This attempt to construct identity through “othering” is by no means merely an American phenomenon. A brief review of German antihomophobic discourses during the pre–World War II period is instructive. The specter of guilt, questions about sexual performance, and accusation were key ingredients of fascist propaganda. In his paper “National Socialism or Bolshevism,” Adolf Hitler’s propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels (1925/1995), used the association

of communism with homosexuality and lack of virility to rally Germans against the Soviets. Here, antiqueer narratives served a psychic economy that disavowed deviant forms of pleasure.

For the Nazis, the appropriate role of sexuality was in the service of power, control, and (re)production (D'Emilio, 1993). As with the U.S. lavender scare, communism and homosexuality—along with Jewishness—were identified as specters that could devour or dissolve the national will (Theweleit, 1989). The Nazis felt compelled to shut down most of Berlin's pulsating gay public sexual culture—including destroying the books and artifacts in Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science—during their first days of power in 1933 (Gordon, 2000).

While many U.S. servicemen were able to experience same-sex contact throughout the Second World War, a similar backlash linked homosexuality with pathology. "There was a constant threat of being found out and cashiered out of the service," Stuart Loomis, a World War II veteran, recalled (quoted in Sadownick, 1996, p. 34). By the early 1940s, army psychiatrists began to establish elaborate screening processes for queer and deviant behavior among men in the armed forces. In 1942, the army began to differentiate between the "normal" and "persons habitually or occasionally engaged in homosexual or other perverse sexual practices" (Sadownick, 1996, p. 35). In the following years, narratives of queer life in the United States would become more and more reductive.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) chief J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joséph McCarthy saw desire through a lens of contagion. For those such as Hoover, queer desire was something that, if left unchecked, could overwhelm the nation's imagination. As D'Emilio (1983) notes, "Homosexuality became an epidemic infecting the nation, actively spread by communists to sap the strength of the next generation" (p. 44).

The process began with a chance revelation during hearings on the loyalty of government workers. On February 28, 1950, Undersecretary of State John Peurifoy testified to a government committee that 91 government officials who had been fired for moral turpitude were also homosexuals (D'Emilio, 1983). In so doing, the secretary tapped into a well of American sexphobia.

Senator McCarthy, who was just beginning his career as an anticommunist crusader, spent months railing about the dangers of "sexual perverts" in the government. He charged that the State Department had reinstated countless known queers, despite threats to national security. Others followed suit, accusing the executive branch of an inexcusable lack of resoluteness in weeding out spies and queers from the federal government. The District of Columbia issued a report stating that thousands of "sex deviants" had infiltrated the government. Word of a new "homosexual angle" at play swirled around capital. For many, "sex perverts" represented a threat as great as the communists

themselves. In June 1950, the Senate authorized a full investigation of homosexuals and “sex perverts” in the U.S. government (D’Emilio, 1983).

What ensued was a grotesque example of the full Senate putting a premium on conformity, as tolerance for difference was lost for a generation (Duberman, 1991). The 81st Congress Senate Document, 2nd Session, No. 241, outlines the Senate subcommittee’s position on “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government.” The subcommittee sought to establish how many perverts worked in the federal government and to examine useful ways to establish a solution to the “problem.” The subcommittee defined sex perverts as “those who engage in unnatural acts” and queers as “persons of either sex who as adults engage in sexual activities with persons of the same sex” (cited in Duberman, 1991, p. 182). They noted that “most authorities believe sex deviation results from psychological rather than physical causes” (p. 182). The subcommittee argued that “those who violate moral codes and laws and the accepted standards of conduct must be treated as transgressors and dealt with accordingly” (p. 182). Hence, official social and political discourse argued for the need to exclude queers from the government, and individuals with same-sex desire were framed as moral and political threats.

By this time, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) had defined homosexuality as a pathology. Freud’s “Letter to a Young Mother,” decrying condemnation of homosexuality, was withheld from the standard edition of his collected works. Indeed, Freud clearly noted that queer sexuality was neither something to celebrate nor something to condemn (Freud, 1935/2001). Yet, the APA distanced itself from the more progressive elements of Freud’s thinking (Danto, 2005).

From 1947 to April 1950, dismissals of suspected queers from government service averaged five per month. Eisenhower’s addition of “sexual perverts” to the loyalty security program cost suspected queers their jobs at a rate of forty per month. More than 12,600,000 workers—a fifth of the U.S. labor force—faced loyalty investigations simply for subscribing to certain magazines or enjoying friendships with other suspects. And more people lost their jobs for being homosexual than for being communist during the Lavender Scare (D’Emilio, 1983; Johnson, 2004). As with so many panics, fear of difference was frozen into law. Yet, even then, counternarratives were beginning to emerge.

### The Birth of the Gay Rights Movement

The Mattachine Society—the nation’s first homophile group—formed in 1950 to fight the antihomosexual panic. At the time, most homosexuals in

the United States were just trying to get by. Few conceived of the treatment of homosexuals in the State Department or in the culture at large as a social problem that needed to be addressed. Much of the vitality of this movement was incumbent on connecting isolated experiences or even yearnings for same-sex desire with broader, more liberatory narratives of the queer self.

Theorists of narrative have long suggested that communities need stories, just as narratives require an audience to find expression. The relationship between narrative and community is thus reciprocal (Plummer, 1995). These stories help social actors find meaning, coherence, and a way of connecting their story with larger social forces. Outside of community, the ambitions of such lives are pursued in isolation.

Consider the experience of lesbian activist Barbara Gittings, who mused about the feelings of isolation she experienced before joining the movement: “I had a lot of problems coming to terms with myself as a young lesbian. The stigma about homosexuality made me feel bad about it for a long time” (quoted in Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 205). Her story existed in a vacuum. “My main problem was that I suffered terribly as a young lesbian from a lack of intelligent information” (p. 206). At the time, medical narratives linked same-sex desire with sickness; so Gittings was treated by a psychiatrist.

She took for granted that change was what I wanted and so did I. It was part of the culturally accepted outlook that if you had homosexual tendencies, this was a great misfortune and should be corrected. (p. 207)

It was only after reading stories of other lesbians that Gittings connected with the nascent movement, joining the Daughters of Bilitis in 1958 and editing a movement magazine, *The Ladder*. The aim of *The Ladder* was to spread a different story of queer experience—one that debunked narratives linking homosexuality with pathology.

Much of the power of the new movement involved the ways it built on the daily lives, practices, social ecologies, reading habits, networks, and friendships of early members. Sociologist Peter Nardi (1999) suggests that friendships often function as the nexus between personal membership and connection with broader macrocommunities and movements. There are few better examples of this than the early Gay Liberation organizing. When organizer Harry Hay moved to Los Angeles, he knew no one, except for a small list of contacts from friends. After making a few calls in his new town, Hay started to form a network, which became the foundation for the first U.S. gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society. Through informal contacts and practices rather than formal political networks, the U.S. gay rights movement was born (Foucault, 2005; Nardi, 1999).

Before Mattachine, Hay had been a member of the Communist Party. Thus, he was quite familiar with strategies for organizing. After a failed attempt at marriage in which his attraction to men never waned, Hay devoted himself to organizing a nascent movement of homosexuals. To begin, he wrote a manifesto with which to organize his new group. “We, the Androgynes of the world,” the manifesto stated, “have formed this responsible corporate body to demonstrate by our efforts that our physiological and psychological handicaps need be no deterrent in integrating ten percent of the world’s population towards the constructive social progress of man” (Hay, 1997, pp. 60–61). In his manifesto, he compared the mass arrests of queers in the State Department to the treatment of homosexuals in Nazi Germany only a few years earlier (Faderman & Timmons, 2006). And Hay started looking to connect with sympathizers.

On August 10, 1948, Hay organized a meeting near the University of Southern California, but no one attended. It was not until July 1950 that Hay found others to help start Mattachine. From April to October 1950, 382 homosexuals were dismissed from their jobs due to morals charges, up from 192 the previous two years (D’Emilio, 1983). The second Mattachine meeting was held on November 11, 1950, in a private residence in the Echo Park/Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. Five men attended. The blinds were closed and the door was locked; one man served as a lookout for the police. Those who had come were worried that they could be arrested simply for attending such a meeting. “We didn’t know,” Hay recalled in Schiller and Rosenberg’s 1985 film *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*:

None of us knew at that point that there had ever been a gay organization of any sort anywhere. We had no knowledge of that. So we felt that we had to be very careful with everything we did, very careful. Or we could make a mistake. Get in the papers for the wrong reasons. We could hurt the idea of a movement for years to come. We were terrified of that.

At the November meeting, the men detailed a plan for organizing homosexuals, which linked their cause with those of other progressive movements. It would take five months before the group gave itself the name “Mattachine,” after a medieval French secret society of unmarried men. And it was just in time: By December, the federal government would formalize its policy on “The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts” (Faderman & Timmons, 2006; Hay, 1997; Kenney, 2001; Schiller & Rosenberg, 1985).

So, the group started to organize. Hay recognized that the group could be most effective if it followed basic organizing principles of reciprocity: votes for

politicians in exchange for support. If the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace would support privacy protections for homosexuals, Mattachine would support his presidential bid. At the time, this was an outlandish proposition. After all, suspected homosexuals could be arrested simply for being accused of looking for sex, and homosexual gatherings were completely prohibited. Yet, Hay had the foresight to grasp the innovative idea that queers represented a distinct cultural minority. For Hay, homosexuality was a deeply spiritual disposition capable of unifying multiple aspects of an individual. In contrast to the *homophile* position of the era, which stipulated that homosexuals were just like heterosexuals, Hay suggested that homosexuality offered a distinct cultural perspective from which heterosexuals could learn a thing or two. Yet, Hay would clash with the more timid view of homosexuality that came to characterize the Mattachine approach, and his active participation in the group did not last (Bronski, 2002).

Other homophile groups also formed in the 1950s. The Daughters of Bilitis, founded by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in San Francisco in 1955, published the first-ever American magazine for lesbians, *The Ladder* (Gallo, 2006). ONE, Inc., a Mattachine offshoot founded in Los Angeles in 1952, also published a magazine, entitled *ONE* (Faderman & Timmons, 2006). All of these publications helped spread a more humanistic narrative of queer experience. They were part of a broad shifting story line.

### Howling at the Panic

An early reader of *ONE* was the poet Allen Ginsberg. A leader in the Beat movement, Ginsberg was inspired by the literary quality and political perspective of the new publication. Such advocacy for free thought was exactly what he thought the movement—and the country—desperately needed. The publicity would continue when *ONE*, which sold some 5000 copies per month during the mid-1950s, successfully defended itself against obscenity charges by the U.S. Postal Service. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled that stories of queer life were not obscene and could legally be sent through the mail in 1958 (Faderman & Timmons, 2006).

For Ginsberg, the 1940s and 1950s were a time when homosexuals such as himself were just beginning to think that they did not need to be intimidated by the Nazis or the McCarthys of the world, “who did not know anything about life anyway,” as he proclaimed in Schiller and Rosenberg’s (1985) film. By the middle of the decade, he would create considerable notoriety with his own poetic narratives of cultural resistance.

Throughout the 1950s, San Francisco was becoming the center of a new literary and cultural explosion. The city had always been a place where social outsiders had come to reinvent themselves. Wave after wave of dreamers—from those panning for gold during the rush of 1849 to the Beats a century later—created new lives in “Baghdad by the Bay.” World War II radically influenced urban queer politics, including those in San Francisco (D’Emilio, 1983). After the war, in which same-sex contact was common, many planted roots in the port city of San Francisco rather than return home (Sadownick, 1996). In between waves of outcasts, a different kind of story line of queer life found expression. Much of this vast civil society found expression within an underground bar culture, cross-dressing, performance, and conviviality. Over the decades to come this community became an enduring political constituency and a movement recognized around the world (Boyd, 2003; Shepard, 1997).

Among the waves of dreamers to find their way to San Francisco was a group of writers who came to inspire a new movement for freedom. According to Regina Marla (2004), editor of *Queer Beats*, the Beats were queer in the fullest sense of the word. Their fluid sexuality challenged both sexual and romantic conventions of the era. For most of those in the movement, sexuality was not a primary motivation or concern. Queerness was neither condemned nor a topic with which to be obsessed. Instead, the Beats celebrated the streets, jazz, and the road connecting ideas and possibilities within a “holy America.” While Ginsberg was known to be homosexual and William Burroughs bisexual, others, such as Jack Kerouac, were known as heterosexual—although this did not stop some of the more heterosexual members of the movement from sharing their beds with Ginsberg, as he famously recounted in the poem “Many Loves.”

Perched in a smoky coffee house deep in San Francisco’s North Beach, Ginsberg would contribute to this burgeoning queer civil society of the era. He first read, performed, screamed “Howl” at the Six Gallery on October 7, 1955. The first lines are now familiar enough, yet from the vantage point of 1950s America, they are striking: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix” (Ginsberg, 1956).

While “Howl” does not explicitly speak out about gay liberation, its striking imagery openly expresses a longing for another way of being in the world. The poem’s heroes are those who struggle to live authentically, those who could feel, those who “broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,” those who “shrieked with delight in police cars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication” (Ginsberg, 1956). The poem refers to police

enforcement of blue laws and harassment of homosexuals, those arrested for partaking in the public sexual culture of queer meeting spaces such as subways, parks, and streets—all historic cruising grounds for gay men (Munoz, 1996; Turner, 2003).

Throughout the poem, Ginsberg refers to the “heterosexual dollar.” In so doing, he links capital with heterosexuality in a manner queer theorists of a generation later would describe as *heteronormativity*; herein, the opposition is to *normativity*, not necessarily heterosexuality itself (Warner, 1993). “Howl” reflects themes that would accompany many of the narratives of gay liberation: a call for an end to attacks on public sexuality, an appreciation for the spiritual potential of Eros, and a critique of consumer culture. For Ginsberg, the problem is “lacklove.” Lack of love is a critique of capitalism and its own perversions.

The Beat movement and the San Francisco Renaissance that inspired it would provide a bridge between the “quiet” homophile movement represented by organizations like the Mattachine Society and the “loud” Gay Liberation era to come. The attacks on “Howl,” the legal battles and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to ban the work—combined with the unsuccessful attempt to prohibit distribution of *ONE* magazine—contributed to publicity for the movement that helped spread its message and connect fellow travelers (Schiller & Rosenberg, 1985; Tobin & Wicker, 1972). The result was a proliferation of abundant narratives of queer experience.

### Camp Arias and Police Batons

Within walking distance of the coffee shops, the jazz bars, and the Six Gallery where Ginsberg first read “Howl,” a different, albeit no less significant, type of queer political performance was taking place at the Black Cat, a bohemian bar in San Francisco Ginsberg once dubbed “the greatest gay bar in America.” José Sarria, a fixture in San Francisco’s social and political scene for half a century, began working at the Black Cat after World War II. Dressed in heels, his accompaniment of the arias from Bizet’s *Carmen*, mixed with camp and even a little politics, drew legions.

Sarria’s performances included observations of the pulse of Baghdad by the Bay. “I started to preach that gay is good” (cited in Boyd, 2003, p. 23). In the face of arrests of homosexuals and raids on gay bars, Sarria defied the oppression with a high-octane dose of humor. “There is nothing wrong with being gay—the crime is getting caught,” he argued while disseminating a far more affirmative narrative of queer life (Feinberg, 2005). “United we stand, divided

they catch us one by one,” Sarria exclaimed in an early expression of queer solidarity (Feinberg, 2005).

Sixteen years before Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Sarria’s 1961 campaign for the Board of Supervisors marked the first such run for public office by an out gay individual. His run from the counterpublic of the Black Cat into the center of the city’s public life garnered some 5600 votes. It was an impressive display of the burgeoning political power of the queer community, and it was the first time many noticed that homosexuals could wield political clout in the city. It is no stretch of the imagination to link Sarria’s groundbreaking run with Milk’s 1977 success (Shepard, 1997; Shilts, 1982).

In the years after his campaign Sarria stayed involved, turning his eyes outward to the ongoing harassment taking place at gay venues throughout the city (Boyd, 2003). The harassment continued, but now with greater public visibility. In June 1964, a coalition of progressive Christians, civil rights activists, and homophile advocates formed a new coalition called the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CORH). On January 1, 1965, the group held a fund-raiser at California Hall in San Francisco. At the time, the police would arrest men who appeared in public dressed in women’s clothing. And as was the case at many big events in San Francisco, this is exactly what happened. Police sought to shut down the event, arresting a few attendees, shining lights and photographing attendees, as the clergy watched in horror. While many had heard stories of such raids, the gap between hearing and witnessing the infringement of the most basic human rights was profound. The following day, CORH held a press conference at Glide Memorial Church and issued a press release chastising the San Francisco Police Department and the city itself for allowing such treatment to be part of official policy. The group served as a corroborating witness for complaints by queer activists, and their position as witnesses served as a vital source of support for the burgeoning movement (Shilts, 1982; Stryker & Van Buskirk, 1996).

Stories of queer resistance floated up and down the California coast. For example, “[I]n the Black Cat Bar in Los Angeles, at the stroke of New Year, plainclothesmen who had infiltrated the bar throughout the night started humiliating and beating the celebrants there,” John Rechy (2006) recalls. “Subsequently 200 gay men and women gathered in the Silver Lake district to protest the raid before squadrons of armed police, stunned by the sudden resistance.” A few months later, a similar event took place in the Bay Area after one too many insults from the police. In response, a group of queer patrons at Gene Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district trashed the cafeteria and a police car before torching a nearby newsstand. The Compton

riot signaled the emergence of a newly radicalized queer community (Lee & Ettinger, 2006; Stryker, 2005; Stryker & Van Buskirk, 1996).

Flash points lit up gay politics throughout these years, yet they were the exception rather than the norm. For much of the 1960s, the Mattachine Society maintained a politics of apology. Mattachine politics were disconnected from the affirmative tone of a new, liberating narrative. Yet, over time, the movement's narrative shifted tone from apologetic to transgressive. By the end of the decade, a mass of liberationist narratives coalesced to a crescendo.

### Stonewall and a Different Story Line

In June 1969, a riot outside the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village helped to transform Gay Liberation into a national movement. Marty Mumford, a member of New York's Gay Activist Alliance, was present at the riot. "It was beautiful," he recalled in an interview conducted shortly thereafter. He described the distinctly queer approach taken by those who fought back. "As the TPF [tactical police force] riot squad came down the street, about twenty-five gays broke into a chorus line. It was defiant camping" (quoted in Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 173).

The use of joy, play, and camp to organize queers would become a defining characteristic of the movement (Shepard, 2005). "It's sassy, arrogant, determined, headstrong, gonna win!" Mumford proclaimed (quoted in Tobin & Wicker, 1972, p. 167). With Stonewall, narratives of queer experience took a far more self-confident, assertive tone. The result was a dramatic shift in story lines of queer experiences of self and community. A good example of this shift is represented in Lige Clark and Jack Nichols' 1972 autobiography, *I Have More Fun with You Than Anybody*. The book—with a cover featuring affirming photos of the two men in Washington Square—was published by the mainstream St. Martin's Press. It offered a profound corrective to the narrative linking homosexuality with illness and tragedy typically witnessed in popular cultural representations of queers in films or other literature (Russo, 1987).

Gay Liberation fought the culture's persistent negative reaction to queers (Weeks, 1985). Among its goals, the movement aimed to free sexuality, to transform the family as an institution, to end anti-queer violence, and to develop a new vocabulary of the erotic (Altman, 1972). It was a social movement built on public visibility, exploration of personal growth, and an understanding that oppression based on sexual identity took place within a broad social context (Bronski, 1998).

Throughout the 1970s, gays helped build a public sphere for conversation, pleasure, and the free exchange of ideas. Titles such as *Orgasms of Light*, a gay poetry anthology from 1977, speak to the optimism and openness of “the new gay dawn” (Leyland, 1977, p. 7). New public spaces, including bathhouses, bars, movie houses, and tea rooms, for the practice of sexual liberation, and bookstores full of literature on the movement, functioned as profound cultural resources for the new movement. According to Winston Leyland, the editor of *Gay Sunshine*, a San Francisco gay literary magazine, the Stonewall riot “was followed by the publication of newsletters and newspapers which acted as vehicles for the spread of movement ideas” (1977, p. 7). Notable examples include New York’s *Come Out!*, Detroit’s *The Gay Liberator*, Philadelphia’s *Gay Dealer* and *Lavender Vision*, and Boston’s *Fag Rag* (Leyland, 1977). These papers helped spread the liberationist storyline of Gay Liberation across the nation.

This new narrative of Gay Liberation constructed a new reality for sexual consciousness. Eric Rofes, who worked at *Gay Community News* in Boston in the 1970s, said in a 2005 interview, “I think that came out of Gay Liberation. I feel like I got that from my years at *Gay Community News*, from being next door to *Fag Rag*, which was putting that out really boldly.” Means and ends overlapped within the production of the stories of the new movements for sexual freedom.

“What could it mean that after we did layout on Thursday night, the guys would be in Herbe’s Ram Rod Room on their knees suckin’ dick all night? Was that, an informal part of it, something to be ashamed of?” (Rofes, 2005).

As Rofes’ personal narrative reveals, Gay Liberation helped advance a corrective to the sex-phobic narratives that had been so omnipresent: “Sexual pleasure had not been on anyone’s agenda.”

With Stonewall, the story line of the gay movement shifted from homophile calls for tolerance to a new defiant gay call for the total transformation of a society that harbored anti-sex attitudes, restricted sex roles, and institutionalized racial hierarchies. In the weeks after the June riots, gay activists adopted a new term for the movement—*Gay Liberation*—and sought to organize around a call for solidarity with movements for freedom taking place around the world. By mid-July, a flyer was plastered up around Greenwich Village: “DO YOU THINK HOMOSEXUALS ARE REVOLTING? YOU BET YOUR SWEET ASS WE ARE,” the flyer declared.

With that flyer, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was born. “I’ll never forget seeing that flyer,” an early member of the group, Bob Kohler, recalled in an interview three decades later (Kohler, 2002). GLF would last for only a few months, but its call for a universalist discourse linking multiple forms of oppression was profoundly influential. The movement’s call for struggle

against injustice anywhere echoed similar sentiments of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Eugene Victor Debbs.

For others, however, this universalist attitude was not appealing (Tobin & Wicker, 1972). Many decided to take a different path within the burgeoning Gay Liberation movement, forming a new group to address strictly gay issues. GLF members condemned the new group as overly white and reformist, while the new Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) suggested that they had enough work to do just fighting homophobia. Harry Hay was initially inspired by the early Gay Liberation organizing, yet he worried that groups such as the GAA were overly fixated on assimilating into mainstream society rather than continuing the struggle to dismantle the oppressive forces that furthered homophobia (Bronski, 2002). The central tension would continue to involve a conflict between *assimilation* and *cultural transformation*. These competing story lines would follow the debates over the meaning of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender liberation for decades to come (Shepard, 2001; see also Duberman, 1993; Warner, 1999).

The militancy of the early 1970s marked a stark contrast with the homophile calls for equality and tolerance that characterized groups such as the Mattachine Society and the early Daughters of Bilitis. A new ethos of direct action was part of the story line for Gay Liberation. This ethos of activism would contribute to the movement for the next two decades, providing continuity from GAA to the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).

Part of what these activists later brought to the AIDS struggle was an understanding of how to use direct action to shift social mores, create power, and alter political story lines (Gamson, 1991). It was a lesson they carried from one of the signature victories of Gay Liberation: the battle over psychiatric narratives of queer sexuality as illness. Throughout the early 1970s, Gay Liberationists borrowed from the lessons of antiwar groups such as Science for the People, which sought to disrupt the normal mechanisms of science (Moore, 2008). To do this, they pushed, prodded, disrupted meetings, zapped, and disrupted the daily mechanisms of psychiatric power until, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) rescinded their categorization of homosexuality as pathology.

The victory was a prime achievement of the burgeoning Gay Liberation movement. The rejection of narratives linking queer sexuality with pathology offered the marker of a new self-understanding. A vital element of this new consciousness was a rejection of the ruthless clinical logic of the pre-Stonewall world. For Gay Liberationists, it was that rationalized worldview that had consigned homosexual existence to the realm of mental illness and psychiatric wards (Foucault, 1978). After Stonewall, this worldview was largely rejected

(although many conservatives continue to hold such a view). With this shift in the definition of same-sex desire, a proliferation of competing narratives found their way into public life.

### Competing Narratives of Gay Life

With the successes of the Gay Liberation years, queers would start to draft different stories, cultivating differing experiences, practices, and meanings of queer life in the post-Stonewall era. While activists hoped to push the movement to continue fighting oppression wherever it manifested itself, others sought to build on the new visibility by marketing to a distinct gay community. Debate over the meaning of same-sex desire and community unfolded in gay papers across the country. At issue was the core question: Is queer sexuality normal, as the Mattachine society insisted, or did it represent a radical critique of heterosexuality and patriarchy, as the GLF suggested (Bronski, 1998, D'Emilio, 1993)? What emerged was a series of competing narratives of gay life to be hashed out in the gay press, academic conferences, and street actions over the next four decades (Shepard, 2001).

In 1976, Lionel Biron published an essay in *Gay Sunshine* in which he attacked the *Advocate*, a national gay magazine, for its blatant consumerist approach. "During the past year the *Advocate* has been transformed into a show place of white, middle-class gay America," he wrote. "Features on travel, fashion and entertainment suggest an affluent, carefree lifestyle in which Gay means little more than fun and chic." Biron's (1976) primary critique was of the distance the *Advocate* was putting between itself and Gay Liberation politics. "Editorial statements, lashing out at the Gay Liberation Movement, have promoted a myopic gay politics whose sole end is the passage of gay civil rights legislation." Rather than achieve protections only for gays, the point was to fight to create a better world for all. After all, Biron suggested, few could argue that "all will be well with gay America once anti-gay discrimination laws are enacted." Instead of a single-issue politics, Biron noted, Gay Liberation involved multiple overlapping narratives of queer experience. To think otherwise was "an affront" to gay communities of color and to "all other minority group gays who must struggle against oppression on *more than one front*."

By the late 1970s, the movement had jettisoned much of its radical edge for a more limited gay civil rights agenda. In response, Harry Hay sought to create a different model of gay politics, forming the Radical Faeries in 1979. Rather than seek policy changes, the Fairies practiced community-building

through rituals, environmentalism, and a view that queer sexuality offered spiritual possibilities unimaginable for those caught up in restricted gender norms or enforced social reproduction. “Harry was worried that gay life was too much about bars and drinking,” New York Radical Faerie Donald Gallagher explained in a 2006 interview. Hay hoped that the Radical Faeries could contribute to a gay politics of difference. Over the next thirty years, the Faeries would be just that—a group of wild, often nude, outlandish queer men and women who embraced both male and female aspects of themselves, loved the earth, and participated in an egalitarian “genderfuck” in which social hierarchies were rejected in favor of a far more socialistic, utopian view of life (Bronski, 2002).

While radical queers struggled with assimilationist gays throughout the late 1970s, both camps were forced to contend with a larger social backlash to the advances of the gay rights movement. Here, dueling narratives of gay life confronted an ongoing debate over the meanings and appropriate policy responses to the issue of homosexuality. While San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk called for gay people to come out and speak out as citizens and participate fully in public life (Shepard, 1997; Shilts 1982), antigay crusader Anita Bryant had other ideas: “Behind the high-sounding appeal against discrimination in jobs and housing”—which Bryant suggested was not a problem for closeted homosexuals—she proclaimed that queers hoped for a social blessing for “their abnormal lifestyle” (Romesburg, 2000).

Bryant sought to stymie the narrative of liberation—the coming-out stories that had become the core underpinning for the still-nascent gay rights movement (Plummer, 1995; Rofes, 1998). And Bryant was by no means alone in advancing this line of thinking. “Homosexuality is not a civil right,” wrote conservative columnist Pat Buchanan. “Its rise almost always is accompanied, as in the Weimar Republic, with a decay of society and a collapse of its basic cinder block, the family” (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting [FAIR], 1996). For her part, Bryant sought to relink discourses connecting queer sexuality with pathology and pedophilia. Since homosexuals cannot reproduce, “they can only recruit children,” she proclaimed, “and this is what they want to do. Some of the stories I could tell you about child recruitment and child abuse by homosexuals would turn your stomach” (Romesburg, 2000).

Bryant deployed the most reductive anti-queer narratives to make a case that civil rights advances should be overturned across the country, antisodomy statues should be retained or reinstated, and queers should be barred from teaching in the schools. When Boston sixth-grade teacher Eric Rofes heard Bryant’s rant, he was so upset that he had to pull his car over as he trembled and fought tears (Rofes, 1998). Yet, instead of cowering or turning away, Rofes

helped organize the first national Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. He would spend the next three decades struggling against Bryant's pathologizing narratives. It is hard to overemphasize the influence of such struggles on individual lives such as Rofes or Barbara Gittings, as well as on the movements in which those such as Rofes and Gittings found an outlet and a refuge.

While queers successfully contested many of these attacks during 1970s, the tenacity of narratives linking queer sexuality with pathology would gain momentum during the AIDS years to come. The 1970s would end with stories of political assassination, riots, and ongoing narratives of political redemption for gay people (Shepard, 1997).

### Sexuality = Contagion

While "Gay Is Good" and sexual freedom represented central narratives of gay life in the 1970s, by the 1980s and 1990s such themes were challenged by narratives that relinked sexuality with pathology and contagion (Munoz, 1996). With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, prohibitive narratives from the 1950s, which linked nonprocreative sexuality with sexual deviance and criminality, found their way back into the center of public consciousness.

Many of these narratives took hold within the public spectacle of the Reagan-era Meese Commission on pornography and its chair's advocacy of "family values" at the expense of other, more diverse forms of sexual expression. Much of the commission's logic dates back to the 1940s and 1950s sex crime panics, as well as to attempts to ferret out homosexuals and "sex perverts" in the U.S. government and to censor different forms of sexual expression, such as *ONE* magazine. All the while, new antisex narratives gained momentum. In one example, a generation of antipornography feminists attempted to ban forms of sexual expression in the name of feminism (D'Emilio, 1992). In another case, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms conflated homosexuality with obscenity (Hunter, 1995). A central stage for this cultural front was the Meese Commission hearings. The hearings began after Reagan decided that he was unsatisfied with the 1970 Johnson administration report on pornography, which concluded that pornography had no effect on behavior and called for the repeal of obscenity laws. In 1984, Reagan argued, "We have seen reports suggesting a link between child molesting and pornography. And academic studies have suggested a link between pornography and sexual violence against women" (Nobile & Nadler, 1986, p. 16). Therefore, he announced, he would call for a new commission to study the effects of pornography (Nobile & Nadler, 1986). And queers, who had witnessed multiple attempts to ban their

literature by labeling it obscene, were particularly aware that censorship was bad for everyone.

Carole Vance witnessed the Meese Commission hearings firsthand, noting: “If these were the McCarthy hearings of sex, they were scripted by *Saturday Night Live*,” she wrote. “The report and its two volumes, and 1,960 pages, faithfully reflects the censor’s fascination with the things they love to hate” (quoted in Watney, 1997, p. 69). The Commission brought together materials found in sixteen adult bookstores—725 books, 2325 magazines, and 2370 films—listing them in alphabetical order, beginning with *A Cock Between Friends* and ending with *69 Lesbians Munching* (Watney, 1997). Meese had put together perhaps the greatest porn database ever compiled.

The Meese Commission hearings linked 1950s Cold War fears of contagion with a new series of antisex narratives. Opponents argued that such anxieties of contagion were manufactured to uphold social roles and gender hierarchies (Kipnis, 1992). Noting that social control was a latent aim of the hearings, anti-censorship feminists successfully outlined the ways the Meese Commission deployed fear to manipulate the populace (Hunter, 1995; Shepard, 2007).

## AIDS Narratives

A primary ingredient in 1980s antisex narratives was the AIDS crisis. From its earliest days, stories of the AIDS epidemic would intersect with any number of competing narratives of queer experience (Treichler, 1988). The onset of the disease was heralded by a barrage of competing representations and high-contrast story lines: clean or dirty, hetero or homo, natural or immoral, pure or impure. Themes of morality and retribution, death and decay dominated stories cast with injection drug users, sex-crazed fags, whores, victims, disease carriers, and crack babies (Gamson, 1991). “The poor homosexuals they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is extracting an awful retribution,” Pat Buchanan declared in 1983. Linking homosexuality with retribution; he declared in 1992 that “AIDS is nature’s retribution for violating the laws of nature” (quoted in FAIR, 1996). These scripts privileged heteronormative cultural practices while utilizing the full administrative technology of the state to punish anything that deviated from them. All the while, legal and medical discourses utilized science to categorize people with AIDS in terms of deviance and stigma (Gamson, 1991).

ACT UP, and its offshoots such as Queer Nation, aimed to turn this story line on its head. The mantra “sexuality equals life” became a kernel of AIDS activism. Faced with court losses, bathhouse closures, and AIDS phobia, ACT

UP sought to reverse a cultural narrative that defined AIDS through a moralizing lens (Shepard, 1997).

Narratives of survival became an intimate part of queer life with the onset of the epidemic. In June 1990, an anonymous unsigned broadsheet bearing the words “Queers Read This” was distributed throughout the crowd during the New York City gay pride march. “How can I tell you. How can I convince you, brother, sister that your life is in danger,” the broadsheet began: “That everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and a functioning human being, you are committing a rebellious act,” it declared. “You as an alive and functioning queer are a revolutionary. There is nothing on this planet that validates, protects or encourages your existence. . . . You should by all rights be dead.”

Echoing Frederick Douglass’ old adage that power conceded nothing without a demand, the manifesto continued: “No one will give us what we deserve. Rights are not given; they are taken, by force if necessary.” Within this call for self-determination, a narrative of a different sort of queer citizenship found its expression in the old Gay Liberation adage that an “army of lovers cannot lose.” Such a brand of queer citizenship involved multiple overlapping layers of social and cultural experience: “. . . It is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred.” From here, the broadside suggested queer life integrated any number of subversive cultural experiences. “Being queer means leading a different sort of life. . . . It’s about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it’s about gender-fuck and secrets, what’s beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it’s about the night.”

“Queers Read This” offered an outline of a queer life narrative that had far more to do with a 1970s brand of gay liberation than the antisex narratives that increasingly dominated the AIDS years. It also defiantly celebrated pleasure, even in the face of the epidemic, suggesting queers cultivate a brand of citizenship involving connections among bodies and polymorphous engagement with difference rather than interest-group politics.

Within narratives such as that of “Queers Read This,” the stigma of the label “queer” waned (Berlant & Freeman, 1993). Along the way, a generation of sexual and social justice movement activists would seek to bring this voice to the fore. “Queers Read This” challenged homogenizing forms of gay experience, calling for resistance rather than assimilation. “So we’ve chosen to call ourselves queer,” the broadsheet read. “Using ‘queer’ is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized.”

The 1990s were characterized by conflicts between assimilationist gay politics and a radical queer approach to community-building (Shepard, 2001; Warner, 1999). The core of the debates involved narratives of the queer self. The implications of these shifting narratives continue to impact queer practices of self in the twenty-first century.

### Normative Sexuality?

The competing narratives of queer sexuality explored in this chapter address the parameters of normal sexuality (see Warner, 1993). Within debate over the meanings and practices of same-sex desire, core questions about pluralistic democracy unfold. Can one choose a partner and enjoy intimacy without risking arrest, unemployment, or invasion of one's home (Rofes, 1998)? Should queerness be understood as a simple private act or as a fundamental critique of capitalist mores, as Harry Hay long suggested (Bronski, 2002; D'Emilio, 1993)? Are same-sex narratives part of a discourse linked with core notions of freedom of assembly and pursuit of happiness?

Harry Hay finally passed in 2002. He was 90 years old. The following year, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the U.S. Supreme Court distanced queer sexuality from criminality by repealing state sodomy statutes. Hay would have appreciated the irony that Southern segregationist Strom Thurmond died the day of the ruling. While many cheered *Lawrence*, a bad taste was left for those whose lives failed to fit into the bourgeois mold of those who have sex only at home, as protected by the *Lawrence* decision. Once again, those on the margins—"kinky" queers and the economically marginalized, as well as those who make use of public sexual space for contact—were left to fend for themselves (Califa, 2004). Some suggested that the case only reminded them how close queer sexuality remained to criminality. After all, one of the judges who supported *Lawrence* stepped down shortly after the 5–4 decision, only to be replaced by a conservative who surely would have reversed the ruling (Rechy, 2006). Still, the decision amounted to a step forward for a progressive narrative of queer sexuality, one of countless intermingling stories and never-ending discourses of desire and regulation at the heart of a sixty-year debate over the meanings of queer sexuality in American life.

The interplay among narratives of the queer self, culture, and historical moment are contingent upon just such shifting discourses of queer experience. Few discursive terrains are more reflective of social flux than the narratives of the queer self over time. Diverse narratives of queer experience have resulted in the advance of a social movement for sexual freedom felt around

the world. “[W]hat is being globalized about the international gay and lesbian movement,” sociologist Peter Nardi (1998) writes, “is the creation of a political self based on sexuality and community” (p. 583).

Yet, the foundation on which stories of same-sex desire interact in the public arena remains precarious. Recall Barbara Gittings’ personal narrative. While the story of Gittings’ same-sex desire began with seclusion in the 1950s, she broke through this isolation, helping to disseminate narratives of queer experience that transformed understandings of same-sex desire for decades to come. By the time of her death, Gittings was viewed as a heroine, even if the *New York Times* took over a month to finally run her obituary (see Fox, 2007). And even that institutional recognition came only after prodding from Larry Kramer, who lamented the lack of an obituary during his March 13, 2007, ACT UP twentieth anniversary speech: “When the *New York Times* does not run an obituary on quite possibly the most famous lesbian in modern times, Barbara Gittings, then we are in trouble.” Queer life stories continually reflect such struggles for recognition rather than social oblivion.

From Freud to Hoover, Newport to *Lawrence*, Mattachine to SexPanic!, the way these narratives have found expression became a primary story of life in the twentieth century, influencing countries the world over. These story lines are anything but settled. From the Cold War to Gay Liberation, competing narratives and definitional conflicts over the meaning of queer experience have intermingled, as contrasting struggles between social acceptance or criminality, health or pathology, liberation or retribution, connection or isolation, celebration or melancholia. They reflect ever shifting story lines of queer life experience, historical change, and a radically altered social ecology.

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