

Beyond the Gay Ghetto

Founding Debates in Gay Liberation

In October 1969, a group called Gay Liberation Theater staged a street performance entitled “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer.” These activists brought their claims to two distinct audiences: fellow students at the University of California, Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza and fellow gay men at a meeting of the San Francisco-based Society for Individual Rights (SIR). The student audience was anti-war but largely straight, while SIR backed gay inclusion in the military and exemplified the moderate center of the “homophile” movement—homophile being the name for an existing and older network of gay and lesbian activism. Gay Liberation Theater adapted Muhammad Ali’s statement when refusing the draft that “no Viet Cong ever called me nigger,” and, through this, indicted a society that demanded men kill rather than desire one another. They opposed the Vietnam War and spoke to the self-interest of gay men by declaring: “We’re not going to fight in an army that discriminates against us. . . . Nor are we going to fight for a country that will not hire us and fires us. . . . We are going to fight for ourselves and our lovers in places like Berkeley where the Berkeley police last April murdered homosexual brother Frank Bartley (never heard of him?) while cruising in Aquatic Park.” Frank Bartley was a thirty-three-year-old white man who had recently been killed by a plainclothes officer who claimed that Bartley “resisted arrest” and “reached for his groin.”¹ In highlighting Bartley’s case, Gay Liberation Theater pushed back against the demands of assimilation and respectability and linked opposition to the Vietnam War with

support for sexual expression. The group termed it “queer, unnatural and perverse” to “send men half way around the world to kill their brothers while we torment, rape, jail and murder men for loving their brothers here.”²

“No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Queer” encapsulated three founding elements of gay liberation: a break with existing homophile groups, a demand for sexual freedom, and a claim that such freedom would be won only through radical alliance against militarism, racism, and police violence. This chapter details how these tenets structured Bay Area gay liberation and laid the groundwork for the gay left. It contextualizes this history by tracking the shifting meanings of the “gay ghetto” in the homophile movement and gay liberation. In the mid-1960s, homophiles used the concept of the gay ghetto to describe the urban geography of antigay oppression and to theorize sexuality as analogous to race. By 1969, gay liberationists altered the meanings of the gay ghetto by using the concept to criticize homophile activism, to defend everyday gender and sexual transgression, and to link sexual liberation to the anti-war movement and black liberation. When self-declared “gay nationalists” schemed to take over California’s rural Alpine County, more radical gay men rejected that project on the grounds that it would replicate the exclusions of the gay ghetto. They used that break to align themselves instead with a more multiracial and socialist agenda. Through these responses, gay leftists began to theorize radical solidarity as central to sexual liberation and to organize accordingly.

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Gay liberation emerged both against and in debt to the homophile movement, which stretched from 1950 through 1970 and worked to normalize the status of homosexuality in psychiatry and medicine and to curtail legal and police persecution. Homophile activists formed local and national organizations (the two best-known being the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, though these were joined by many others) and circulated national and international publications. Harry Hay, until that point a member of the Communist Party in Los Angeles, founded the Mattachine Society in 1950, and while Mattachine soon turned away from Hay’s leadership, members around the country remained bold and militant against state persecution.³ Homophile groups and publications varied in their politics and approaches, and historian Marc Stein questions a “canonization of homophile sexual respectability” that emphasizes the influence of the publications *Mattachine Review*, *The Ladder*,

and *One* over the more openly erotic and widely circulated *Drum*.⁴ But divisions did appear between many homophile groups and the working-class, gender-transgressive, and racially diverse queer life of gay bars, house parties, and cruising grounds. Nan Alamilla Boyd has found these divisions to be significant in San Francisco, and other scholars have made similar observations for other sites.⁵ Differences also emerged between local and national agendas. By the later 1960s, homophile activists in San Francisco, Chicago, and other cities posed strong challenges to police abuse, but the national homophile movement's pursuit of military inclusion and liberal civil rights fell out of step with growing anti-war and black liberation struggles.⁶ Further, by this point many homophile activists' efforts toward gender and class norms—at protests, men wore suits and ties, women dresses—stood in contrast to androgynous and casual styles among radical youth.

Although many gay radicals came to perceive homophile activists as out of touch, the earlier movement influenced gay liberation in multiple ways. One of these was through the concept of the “gay ghetto.” The term was frequently used in homophile publications and activism and by the mid-1960s held two principal meanings. First, the concept of the gay ghetto was used to communicate the idea that gay people and people of color, especially black people, shared parallel experiences in urban life. This highlighted the segregation of queer life in heavily policed, working-class, multiracial “vice” districts, yet imagined race and sexuality as parallel or analogous rather than intersecting—making it difficult for queer people of color to place themselves within gay politics. A second definition of the gay ghetto argued that gay people were isolated and exploited by collusions between police, organized crime, and the owners of gay bars. Across the 1950s and 1960s, many gay and lesbian bars upheld rather than challenged antigay laws. They enforced bans on same-sex dancing and affection, made police payoffs to minimize raids, charged high prices, and hired few gay staff.⁷ The concept of the gay ghetto thus also became a way to name queer people's confinement within a narrow and abusive geography of public life.

San Francisco's queer life held unique characteristics that shaped the ways activists understood and used the concept of the gay ghetto locally. On the one hand, an unusually high number of the city's gay and lesbian bars were gay or lesbian owned—by 1964, as many as a third.⁸ These owners formed the Tavern Guild and built the organization into an influential and comparatively conservative force in the homophile movement. At the same time, the exploitation of queer life remained widely

apparent, most especially in the Tenderloin—a “red-light” neighborhood near downtown known for its cheap housing, sex economy, and high concentration of gay youth and transgender women. Those who lived in and visited the Tenderloin were frequently arrested or harassed by police on charges of prostitution, cruising, gender transgression, vagrancy, and drug activity, and as Susan Stryker observes, police frequently left transgender women there following arrests elsewhere in the city. Some residents were homeless or precariously housed “street kids.” By the mid-1960s, daily existence in the Tenderloin became ever more difficult as urban redevelopment displaced residents from the surrounding neighborhoods of the Fillmore, Western Addition, and South of Market and made the area’s housing more crowded.⁹

Although some homophile activists rejected Tenderloin dwellers as embarrassments, others organized with and for gay and transgender people against poverty and harassment. By 1965 homophile activists worked in the Tenderloin through two key groups: the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, an alliance of left-liberal clergy drawn from across the city; and Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, located in the heart of the Tenderloin and headed by the African American preacher Reverend Cecil Williams. As Christina Hanhardt has detailed, homophile activists drew on these networks to win funding for a project they termed the Central City Anti-Poverty Program. They wrote a report detailing the discrimination and poverty experienced by gay and transgender residents, giving their document the official title “The Tenderloin Ghetto” and the unofficial name “The White Ghetto.” As the terms “Tenderloin” and “white” served as placeholders for “gay,” the label of whiteness both described the Tenderloin’s dominant demographics and set up a parallel between sexuality and race. Homophile activists in San Francisco also drew parallels between sexuality and race through their responses to police, forging alliances in which they defined their interests alongside those of communities of color. In 1966 Reverend Williams founded Citizens Alert, a police accountability organization that homophile activists helped to staff and that brought homophile efforts into coalition with black, Latina/o, Chinese, Japanese, and other civil rights groups.¹⁰

By spring 1966 another organization had formed in the Tenderloin. Called Vanguard, it sought to mobilize gay and transgender youth and in July helped to stage a protest in front of Compton’s Cafeteria, a Tenderloin diner that had begun to call the police on its queer patrons. On a weekend night in August 1966, officers attempted to arrest a transgen-

der woman inside Compton's. She fought back, and a multiracial mix of queens joined in by throwing dishes, smashing the windows of the cafeteria, and then moving into the streets of the Tenderloin where they fought back physically against police and damaged a police car. Susan Stryker estimates that fifty to sixty Compton's customers, plus police and passersby, joined in the riot, which she terms the "the first collective, organized" queer resistance to police harassment in US history.¹¹

The Compton's riot preceded the Stonewall Riots by nearly three years but failed to prompt activism on the scale that followed the 1969 protest in New York. Indeed, Compton's remained little known until Stryker resuscitated it in 2005 as a foundational account in queer history. The riot's principal outcome was to accelerate the creation of transgender-affirming programs in San Francisco, including access to job training, the selection of a liaison within the San Francisco Police Department, the first known transsexual support group in the United States, and a public health program (the Center for Special Problems) that provided counseling, hormone prescriptions, surgery referrals, and accurate ID cards.¹² Nonetheless, many gay and lesbian activists—both liberal and more radical—formulated sexual identities and politics in ways that marked boundaries between themselves and transgender people.¹³

Moreover, even as Tenderloin organizing grew, San Francisco's queer life expanded beyond that neighborhood. Gay men and lesbians also found each other in the motorcycle scene of South of Market, the bohemian spaces of North Beach and the Haight, and residential communities of the Castro and Polk.¹⁴ The Castro emerged as the most middle-class and gender-normatively masculine of all of these areas, and by 1971 nearly a third of all Castro businesses (not only its gay bars) were gay-owned.¹⁵ By the late 1960s San Francisco's gay scene was second only to that of New York City, and the Bay Area was increasingly seen as a queer haven. Although the concept of the gay ghetto still resonated with many, it seemed less tenable as a description of San Francisco's geography because queer life was increasingly widespread. In addition, black liberation and Third World radicalism began to inspire activists to use the concept of the gay ghetto to analyze sexual identity at scales beyond the urban neighborhood.

Black liberation held a central place in the 1960s Bay Area because of three interwoven factors: the Oakland formation of the Black Panther Party, the Party's rootedness in local black community, and the strength of the student left. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party on October 15, 1966, initially naming it the Black Panther

Party for Self-Defense, and the organization grew by mobilizing southern black migrants to Oakland, Richmond, South Berkeley, and San Francisco's Fillmore and Hunters Point neighborhoods. Donna Murch argues that Newton, Seale, and other early Party leaders and members bridged "campuses and streets" in a "convergence . . . inseparable from the vast increase in educational access among poor youth" in 1960s California: by the end of the decade the Bay Area and Los Angeles claimed higher rates of college attendance among youth of color than anywhere else in the United States.¹⁶ In addition, the internal diversity of Bay Area Latino and Asian communities fostered pan-ethnic internationalism and contributed to the linking of student activism and urban protest. These trends inspired activists around the country and heightened both the local and the national significance of the Panthers along with other Bay Area groups.

While the Black Panther Party was born in the Bay Area, its political imagination stretched much farther. As Murch states, "The Oakland Party drew its inspiration from a rural movement in Lowndes County, Alabama [the first to use the black panther as symbol] while internationally it embraced the Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese revolutions as its own."¹⁷ Moreover, the Party's early police patrols "translated" a key idea becoming widespread across Black Power: that black people were an "internal colony" within the United States.¹⁸ Other uses of the internal colonialism thesis defined US police violence as interconnected with the war in Vietnam and named the exploitation of US communities of color as a facet of US imperialism. Through these and other aspects of its thought, the Black Panther Party contributed to an ongoing redefinition of blackness as not only a racial category but also a source of political power and a transnational ideological formation.

In May 1967 a contingent of Black Panther Party leaders and members traveled to Sacramento to protest the Mulford Bill, a measure that expressly targeted Panther police patrols by banning the open display of loaded weapons. Entering the state capitol bearing their legally owned, registered, and loaded rifles, the Panthers won substantial media attention and cemented their public image of armed black radicalism. The California legislature's passage of the Mulford Act in July 1967 compelled the Party to end its police patrols and, combined with the growth of new Black Panther Party chapters in Richmond, San Francisco, and East Oakland, led to a sharp uptick in police harassment.¹⁹ On October 28, 1967, Oakland police officer John Frey pulled over Huey Newton and another Panther member. A series of disputed events left Frey dead, another officer and Newton wounded, and Newton painfully shackled

in a local emergency room. When Newton was charged with three felonies and faced the death penalty, the Party responded with a campaign to “Free Huey.” As Donna Murch observes, the campaign’s “most striking claim was not [only] that Newton was innocent but that a fair trial was impossible.”²⁰ During 1968, the Black Panther Party grew nationally through the Free Huey campaign and its newspaper the *Black Panther*, which reached a weekly circulation as high as 139,000. This campaign continued through August 1970, when Newton’s conviction was reversed and he was released.

Amidst the Free Huey campaign, students at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) launched the Third World Strike. Extending from November 6, 1968, through March 21, 1969, the strike was born as a coalition between the campus Black Student Union and Latino and Asian American organizations, which collectively adopted the name the Third World Liberation Front and forged an alliance with the local, white-led Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Among the Third World Strike’s key demands were the admission of four hundred new first-year students of color, the creation of nine positions to be filled by faculty of color, and the elimination of campus ROTC training. Following extended protests and record mass arrests, the college president, conservative S.I. Hayakawa, partially conceded to the Strike by creating the School of Ethnic Studies.²¹

As Daryl Maeda argues, the Third World Strike aligned with black radicalism by redefining race as an ideological identity and a basis for coalition. Asian American radicals played a central role in the Strike and, by countering the conservative Japanese American president of the college, constructed a new pan-Asian identity that oriented itself through alliance with black radicalism rather than assimilation into whiteness.²² Latina/o radicalism was fostered by the convergence between the Strike and the case of Los Siete de la Raza, seven young men who, following their activism in favor of ethnic studies at the College of San Mateo, found themselves charged in a fatal police shooting (casting suspicion on the charges, four of the men were not present at the shooting itself). The Black Panther Party gave prominent support to the Third World Strike, to the Asian American radicalism that grew from it, and to the Los Siete case.

The growth of black liberation and Third World radicalism influenced gay politics in multiple ways. Shifts within the black freedom struggle were echoed in the transition from homophile to gay liberation politics, while the Black Panther Party’s openness to nonblack allies and the development of the Third World Strike offered evidence of ways people might

redefine their identities through radical commitment. Adding a new layer to the concept of the gay ghetto, the Panthers' use of the internal colonialism thesis encouraged gay radicals to see links between their exclusion by the military and their exploitation by police. Gay activists thus drew inspiration from the solidarities multiplying around them. At least two Third World Strike supporters became important in local gay activism: San Francisco State student Charles Thorpe and faculty member Morgan Pinney, who was fired in retaliation for his backing of the Strike. As activists began to declare gay liberation, they defined it as a vehicle for and expression of the alliances summoned in the Free Huey campaign, the Third World Strike, and the anti-war movement.

Gay liberation emerged definitively in spring and summer 1969, as marked by a set of key events in San Francisco and New York. In San Francisco in March 1969, Leo Laurence, a young white man who served as editor of the homophile SIR's publication *Vector* and worked with Reverend Williams's Glide Church, held an interview with the counter-cultural newspaper the *Berkeley Barb*. In an article entitled "Homo Revolt: Don't Hide It!" Laurence challenged SIR to join the broader left movement, especially by abandoning gay inclusion in the military in favor of opposition to the Vietnam War. He urged gay and lesbian radicals to see links between sexual liberation and support for the Black Panthers, and he lambasted SIR and the Tavern Guild for "middle class bigotry and racism," in part because of the Guild's refusal to work with Citizens Alert against police abuse.²³

The *Barb* illustrated its article with a front-cover photo of Laurence embracing a shirtless Gale Whittington, Laurence's boyfriend and a clerical worker for San Francisco's Steamship Lines Company. A copy of the *Barb* made its way to the Steamship Lines office in the Financial District and Whittington was promptly fired. Meanwhile, SIR pushed Laurence out of *Vector* and declared itself a resolutely "one-issue" organization addressing only "those issues that pertain to the homosexual as a homosexual."²⁴ Laurence and his comrades responded by creating a new and more multi-issue group, the Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF), which began lunchtime pickets of antigay discrimination at Steamship Lines, Tower Records, Safeway, Macy's, and the Federal Building. These protests lasted throughout April and much of May and received wide, though generally mocking, coverage in local media.²⁵ CHF issued calls for multisector alliance, with one broadside urging supporters to attend an upcoming Free Huey rally and stating that the "CHF is in the vanguard of homosexuals who know they must form coalitions with the Move-

ment.”²⁶ Laurence termed gay freedom “the same as ‘Black is Beautiful,’” while the CHF’s fliers held that “our condition is a part of the oppression which blacks, chicanos, and—yes—the Vietnamese have known.”²⁷

Meanwhile, another local gay radical, Carl Wittman, began to write and circulate an essay, “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto,” that furthered calls for alliance and comparisons between sexuality and race. Wittman had been an important leader in the era’s leading anti-war organization, SDS, first as a student at Swarthmore College and then as a member of SDS’s national council. He left SDS in 1966 after experiencing sharp antigay hostility, then married Mimi Feingold the same year; they moved to San Francisco and continued to lead anti-war work.²⁸ Wittman came out as gay in 1968, wrote and circulated drafts of his “Gay Manifesto” throughout spring 1969, and finalized it in May. The essay began, “San Francisco is a refugee camp for homosexuals.”²⁹ This proclamation marked gay geography through both oppression and escape. In naming all of San Francisco rather than just one neighborhood, Wittman acknowledged the distinctiveness of gay life in the city, but also held that San Francisco was “a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs.” Rather than simply proposing a takeover of property, he argued that gay liberation required deep transformation in structures of power, including “police, city hall, capitalism.” He echoed Leo Laurence’s call for gay activists to join with other radicals and stated Laurence’s analogies in cruder terms: “Chick equals nigger equals queer. Think it over.”³⁰ From summer 1969 forward, Wittman’s essay circulated as a stand-alone broadside and was published across the radical and gay press. His ideas met both acclaim and critique, with some holding that his analogies between race and sexuality undermined goals of alliance. As one lesbian activist noted in December 1970, “Naming revolutionary groups—blacks, chicanos, Indians, women, gays—in this linear fashion” made it difficult to discuss overlapping agendas or to understand “gay” as inclusive of anyone other than white men.³¹

Gay liberation expanded dramatically following the Stonewall Riots in New York’s Greenwich Village. This uprising began on June 28, 1969, when a multiracial mix of queens, gay men, and lesbians, most of them people of color and many of them “street kids,” fought back against a routine police raid at the gay bar the Stonewall Inn. Conflict continued on the streets for two full nights and grew through the support of other radicals, including some who were straight. By July 31 a group of gay, lesbian, and transgender radicals—some of them riot participants, others

not—formed the first Gay Liberation Front, or GLF.³² News of the Stonewall rebellion and of the GLF spread through the radical and underground press, and within months other Gay Liberation Fronts formed around the country. Significantly, although New York’s GLF began as a mixed-gender group including lesbians and transgender people along with gay men, it was soon fractured by tensions over gender, race, and political viewpoints. Multiple New York groups began as GLF caucuses and then became independent; for example, white lesbian feminists formed the Radicalesbians and Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and other trans radicals founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. But in contrast to New York, GLFs in the Bay Area formed directly out of previous gay men’s organizing, and both began and remained composed primarily of white men. Transgender organizing linked to Glide Church and the Center for Special Problems remained largely separate from gay liberation, though some forms of gender transgression overlapped, as through the countercultural performance group the Cockettes.³³

By August 1969 San Francisco’s Committee for Homosexual Freedom changed its name to the Gay Liberation Front, and in October the group began to picket the *San Francisco Examiner* for using antigay language to report on earlier protests against the Steamship Lines.³⁴ One of the group’s fliers layered the words “Gay Liberation Front” against an outline of three figures standing with raised fists, two wearing Afros, who symbolically evoked Black Power (figure 2).³⁵ On the left side of the flier, a heavyset, balding white man held a bayonet and a weapon that combined a fountain pen and a spiked club. This figure of military violence and media power threatened two younger, racially ambiguous men, standing on the genitals of one while the other—gagged by a cloth—shielded his crotch with his hand. Here, as in other statements, the San Francisco GLF represented gay masculinity and sexual autonomy as threatened by establishment authority yet recuperable through alignment with the black freedom struggle.³⁶

Amidst this rhetoric, gay liberationists also shifted their view of the gay ghetto. Increasingly, rather than naming any specific location, they used the concept of the gay ghetto to describe a wide-ranging social system that constrained sexuality and gender. Activists especially developed this analysis through their critiques of sex and gender norms. For example, radicals attacked homophile groups for demanding normative gender presentation in everyday life while limiting drag to special occasions.³⁷ They held that SIR sought “total integration within the establishment” through suits and ties and that “passing for straight is SIR’s

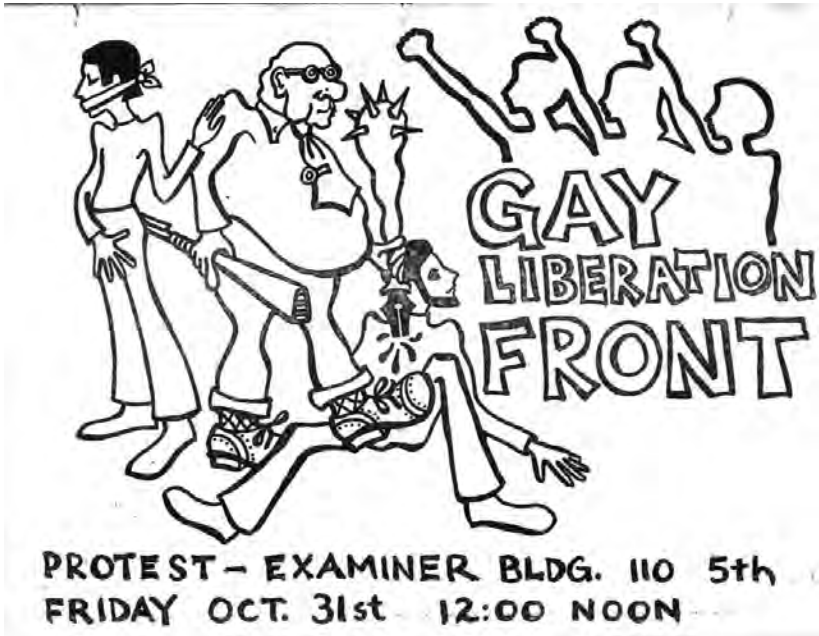


FIGURE 2. Committee for Homosexual Freedom/Gay Liberation Front flier, San Francisco, 1969. Courtesy of Ephemera Collection—LGBT Groups, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS).

ideal.”³⁸ Further, in fall 1969 the San Francisco GLF called for a picket of the Halloween and New Year’s drag balls organized by SIR and the Tavern Guild. Far from welcoming the “street queens” of the Tenderloin, these balls required tickets, occurred behind closed doors, and demanded formal gowns and tuxedos. The GLF held that “these balls are being promoted by the same Gay Establishment who promote the ‘Gay Bars’ and other Ghettos,” and argued that true freedom would be won not through privacy but rather by enabling gender transgression and same-sex affection “*in the road, in the streets.*”³⁹ As Betty Luther Hillman has shown, many gay liberationists preferred “political drag,” or undermining gender by mixing its norms—for example, wearing a beard with a dress or feminine jewelry over a masculine shirt. Within a few years this style would be termed genderfuck.⁴⁰ Yet political drag did not necessarily entail a full recognition of transgender expression, as some gay radicals who praised political drag held that transsexuals and “street queens” replicated stereotypes.

Broadly, the San Francisco GLF linked a remaking of gender expression with anti-capitalist and anti-racist goals. By terming gay bars “ghettos,” activists suggested that gay bars exploited their customers by enforcing antigay laws. They also continued parallels made by earlier homophile activists by comparing “homosexuals in the Tenderloin . . . [to] Black children in the Hunters Point Ghetto.”⁴¹ Their statements illustrated a view of the gay ghetto as simultaneously localized and ever present. They named isolation, poverty, and policing in the Tenderloin not as neighborhood problems that could be swept away in a cleanup, but as the consequences of imperatives that sexuality be either private or commercial and that gender transgression only be enacted on stage. Increasingly, gay radicals used the concept of the gay ghetto to distinguish a minoritarian, assimilationist view of homosexuality from an expansive, universalizing vision of sexual and gender liberation.⁴²

Anti-war politics were central to this universalizing vision because the draft compelled young men of all sexualities to declare themselves straight. This pressure grew with the Vietnam War itself. The military expanded the draft multiple times, easing its standards in 1968 and then opening a draft lottery from December 1969 through 1972. Draft boards demanded that men acknowledge any “homosexual tendencies,” and those who were discovered to be homosexual in the service risked the denial of veterans’ benefits and up to five years’ imprisonment. Working-class men and men of color, who were drafted and faced combat at disproportionately higher rates, often found their indications of homosexuality overlooked.⁴³ Meanwhile, men recorded as homosexual at induction were excluded both from the military and from civil service jobs and were placed on file with the FBI. They also risked public stigma, and revelations of their homosexuality could place others in danger, especially in smaller communities where members of draft boards might know their lovers as well as their relatives, employers, and friends.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, as draft resistance grew, a small but growing number of men began to choose the risks of sexual stigma over participation in the war. The Los Angeles GLF produced brochures with advice on “revolutionary homosexual draft resistance,” marking a decisive break with the homophile goal of military inclusion.⁴⁵ In turn, the military demanded stricter proof in the form of letters from lovers and psychiatrists and stereotypically effeminate behavior.⁴⁶ Public awareness of these phenomena became evident in *The Gay Deceivers* (1969), a Hollywood comedy about two straight men pretending to be gay to evade the draft. The vast

majority of those who declared themselves homosexual before draft boards were indeed gay or bisexual, so *The Gay Deceivers* misrepresented “homosexual draft resistance” to play it for laughs. Nonetheless, the film hinted at mainstream awareness of a more radical truth: activists were remaking gay identity by “coming out against the war.”⁴⁷

In reframing their sexuality in anti-war terms, gay liberationists resisted antigay hostility from both the government and the straight left. As Ian Lekus has shown, by the late 1960s the US state used “tactical gay-baiting,” particularly against men, to discredit and divide radical groups. The FBI worked to foster homophobia in the Venceremos Brigades, the Black Panther Party, and anti-war organizations, and during the Chicago Seven trial—which targeted leaders of protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention—US Attorney Thomas Foran characterized witness Allen Ginsberg and the defendants as part of the “freaking fag revolution.”⁴⁸ Many straight radicals reversed the charges, describing politicians as closeted “fags” or homosexuality as bourgeois.⁴⁹

Gay liberationists pushed back against both the US state and their fellow radicals by politicizing homosexuality and effeminacy as means to resist the war. At their campiest, they riffed on the call to “make love, not war” with slogans such as “send the troops to bed together” and “suck cock to beat the draft”; more earnestly, they reframed gayness not only as a sexuality but also as a politics of opposition to US militarism and empire. In summer 1969 the San Francisco GLF set up shop in an office shared with the War Resisters League; that fall, the Gay Liberation Theater performed its play “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer.” On October 15, 1969, gay men formed a contingent in the San Francisco march for the Vietnam Moratorium, and one of the arguments they presented was that repressed homoerotic desire led to military violence and that sexual liberation would allow peace.⁵⁰

By early 1970 the Gay Liberation Theater became the Berkeley Gay Liberation Front. The group held its meetings at a house rented by activist Konstantin Berlandt, and this site also became home to the commune that launched the influential newspaper *Gay Sunshine*.⁵¹ UC Berkeley students and alumni were well represented in the Berkeley GLF and *Gay Sunshine*, and Berlandt brought journalism experience as the previous editor of the university’s student newspaper, the *Daily Californian*. Gay liberationists built another home base a few miles away in North Oakland through the “People’s Alternative,” a recurring dance party hosted at the apartment of activist Nick Benton.⁵² Echoing rhetoric from the San Francisco GLF, Benton and others termed the People’s

Alternative a direct substitute for the “gay ghetto”—especially the nearby gay bar the White Horse Inn, which refused to distribute *Gay Sunshine* and barred same-sex couples from kissing or holding hands.⁵³ In September 1970 GLF members picketed the White Horse and the San Francisco bar Leonardo’s for these restrictions, and their comrades in Los Angeles and other cities engaged in similar battles.

Activists won changes in bar policies over the next several months and in the meantime built a counterculture that challenged social marginalization instead of profiting from it. Their collective households offered emotional support, fostered sexual discovery and the gender transgressions of “political drag,” and became venues for political dialogue including consciousness-raising practices modeled on women’s liberation.⁵⁴ At the same time, as participant Hal Tarr later noted, the gay counterculture produced “a huge gap between GLF men and the much larger number of guys who socialized in gay bars.”⁵⁵ Against the stated intentions of gay liberation, such a gap furthered racial and class divides.

Aware of such segregation, though rarely questioning the dominant construction of gayness as white, many gay liberationists sought to act in solidarity with the Black Panther Party. These efforts met controversy within the broader gay movement, in part because of the antigay rhetoric of Eldridge Cleaver, who had served as the Party’s de facto leader during much of 1968 while Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were imprisoned or jailed. (Newton and Seale regained more prominent leadership after their charges were overturned and they were released in 1970 and 1972, respectively.) Cleaver’s prison writings, published in the radical magazine *Ramparts* and in book form as *Soul on Ice*, had won wide circulation and admiration, but his avowed hostility to homosexuality and his views of rape as “insurrection” incurred criticism.⁵⁶ Cleaver’s influence in the Black Panther Party began to be contested after he and Kathleen Neal Cleaver, his wife and a fellow Panther leader, went into exile following the police murder of Oakland Party member Bobby Hutton. The Black Panther Party dropped the term “Self-Defense” from its name and turned greater attention to “survival programs” such as free breakfasts for children; these shifts drew more women into Party chapters and fostered greater discussion of women’s liberation both within the Party and among its allies.⁵⁷

In November 1969, the New York GLF’s declaration of support for the Black Panther Party prompted the more moderate Gay Activist Alliance to split off and become an independent organization.⁵⁸ New York’s GLF continued as a radical network with multiple offshoots, including

two socialist groups formed by summer 1970, Third World Gay Revolution and Red Butterfly. The first of these was a people of color group and the second primarily white; both actively supported the Panthers and held that the “bourgeois nuclear family as the basic unit of capitalism creates oppressive roles of homosexuality and heterosexuality.”⁵⁹ Yet as these groups coalesced in New York, another radical group became infamous for its antigay policy. The Venceremos Brigades, formed in 1969 as a project of SDS, organized activist trips to Cuba in violation of the US travel embargo. When a multiracial gay and lesbian caucus formed on the second brigade in August 1970, the group opposed it and termed homosexuality a capitalist and white phenomenon.⁶⁰ The Brigades justified these exclusions through Cuban antigay policy, including the imprisonment of homosexuals in work camps, and stated that gay liberation was part of “a cultural imperialist offensive against the Cuban Revolution.”⁶¹

Against this backdrop, gay radicals sat up and took notice when Huey Newton praised women’s and gay liberation. Newton was released from prison on August 5, 1970, after a California appellate court reversed his conviction for voluntary manslaughter in the death of Oakland police officer John Frey. On August 11, in an interview on the Berkeley leftist radio station KPFA, Newton stated that the Panthers “would like to have unity with the homosexual groups who are also politically conscious” and that gay people were “oppressed because of the bourgeois mentality and the bourgeois treachery that exists in this country that tries to legislate sexual activity.”⁶² Four days later he gave a speech to Black Panther Party members that was published in the *Black Panther* and by late August began to circulate across the gay and radical press.⁶³ In this statement, titled “A Letter from Huey Newton to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” Newton called on his fellow Panthers to confront their “insecurities” about women and gay men, to reject sexist and homophobic language, and to include gay and women’s groups in events. He questioned the idea that homosexuality was the result of the “decadence of capitalism” and most famously stated: “There is nothing to say that a homosexual cannot also be a revolutionary. And maybe I’m now injecting some of my prejudice by saying ‘even a homosexual can be a revolutionary.’ Quite the contrary; maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary.”⁶⁴ As Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin Jr. observe, Newton’s statement made the Black Panther Party “the first major national black organization to embrace gay rights.”⁶⁵

Gay liberationists around the country responded enthusiastically to Newton's letter, with the Los Angeles GLF calling it a "vanguard revolutionary action."⁶⁶ In New York, Panther leader Afeni Shakur contacted the GLF to request a meeting, and three GLF members journeyed to a gathering at Jane Fonda's penthouse on the Upper East Side. Newton told them that "while in prison he had become acquainted with gay brothers who talked to him at length and were largely responsible for a change in his thinking about gay people," and he proposed that the GLF and the Black Panther Party organize "joint demonstrations . . . in the months ahead."⁶⁷ The meeting heightened support for the Panthers in the New York and other GLFs. When Philadelphia police raided Panther offices, arresting fifteen members and conducting a public, naked strip-search, local gay newspapers and gay liberation groups issued sharp protests.⁶⁸ The FBI took note.

With their relationship to the Panthers shifting, many gay and lesbian radicals looked to the Black Panther Party's Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC) as a means to imagine a new society. Through the RPCC, the Party called for "all progressive forces" to join in crafting "a true people's constitution . . . that takes into account the ethnic and pluralistic nature of this society, and that guarantees proportional representation to all of its people in a society free of the exploitation of man by man."⁶⁹ To fulfill this goal, the Panthers held a "plenary session" over Labor Day weekend (September 5-7, 1970) in Philadelphia that drew an estimated ten to fifteen thousand people. The conference drew activists from around the country; it was approximately two-thirds black, with a significant number of white allies and a handful of international representatives from African, Latin American, and Palestinian liberation movements and the German left.⁷⁰ The Party planned to follow the Philadelphia conference with a second that would finalize the new constitution in Washington, DC. Ultimately, however, the Philadelphia conference turned out to be the largest and best-known RPCC event. The RPCC's disappointments reflected a rising factionalism splitting the Black Panther Party apart even as allies placed heightened hope in its leadership.

Self-declared gay and lesbian activists constituted a small percentage of participants at the Philadelphia RPCC, just a few hundred among thousands, with gay men most prominent. But, with large GLF contingents from Philadelphia and New York joined by others from "cities across the nation, including many from Boston, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Chicago, Lawrence [Kansas], Tallahassee, and other places in between," the

conference was “in effect the first national gay liberation gathering.”⁷¹ The gay men’s contingent, a few-hundred strong, made a grand entrance at the RPCC by marching into the opening session chanting, “Gay, gay power to the gay, gay people! Black, black power to the black, black people! Power to the people!” The thousands of others in the hall rose to their feet and joined in, adding “Red, Brown, Women, Youth, and Student” groups to the chant.⁷² The gay men’s contingent was further noted for its racial diversity. It held a meeting at the RPCC on Saturday, picketed against racism at local gay bars on Saturday night, and on Sunday finalized a collective statement that received strong applause—though also some giggles—at the conference’s closing event. The *Black Panther* included a note on gay participation in its reports on the RPCC, and a number of the conference’s nongay workshops—especially those on women, on children, and on health—listed sexual freedom and respect for gay and lesbian people as elements of their platforms for change.⁷³

Gay men’s experiences at the Philadelphia RPCC stood in contrast, however, to those of lesbian feminists, whose contingent was overwhelmingly white and led by the New York Radicalesbians. The women in this contingent had sought to contribute to RPCC planning, but on arriving at the conference, found one of their workshops canceled, and ultimately met independently and left early.⁷⁴ Although a women’s workshop termed homosexuality and bisexuality to be basic “rights,” the conference report ignored the Radicalesbians’ demands for the “abolition of the nuclear family” and a “women’s militia.”⁷⁵ The Radicalesbians issued sharp critiques of their experiences at the Philadelphia RPCC, and gay men’s otherwise positive reports on the conference called for greater inclusion of lesbian feminism in upcoming RPCC meetings.⁷⁶

Further RPCC plans were hampered by broader tensions fracturing the Black Panther Party’s work. A “Regional RPCC” held in Berkeley in early November drew only a few hundred participants, almost all of them white; local gay and lesbian radicals attended but termed it unsuccessful and came away without concrete plans.⁷⁷ The final RPCC gathering was held over Thanksgiving weekend in Washington, DC, and drew nearly five thousand people, but was seriously weakened by disorganization as Party leaders faced a new onslaught of state repression and internal disputes. The conference was left in real disarray when the location where it was to be held, Howard University, suddenly canceled its venues. Some workshops and events were nonetheless held, and notably, the women’s meeting issued a critique of lesbian feminists’ exclusions in Philadelphia while also holding that the

Radicalesbians' demand to "abolish" the family "invalidat[ed]" black women.⁷⁸ Gay men's participation, again multiracial, numbered about 150 men, and activists adapted Panther style to gay terms with "brightly colored, hand-crocheted berets" and the chant "Homo, homo, homosexual, the ruling class is ineffectual."⁷⁹ Yet, more broadly, participants experienced the conference as markedly disorganized and left with little to no follow-up.⁸⁰

Although the RPCCs sparked excitement within gay liberation, they did little to ground formal gay alliance with the Black Panther Party. Nonetheless, the visions sparked by the conferences informed Bay Area gay radicals' responses to a separate project that fall: a so-called gay nationalist project to take over California's Alpine County. In debating the Alpine project, gay radicals re-energized their critique of the gay ghetto and affirmed the centrality of radical alliance to sexual freedom.

In June 1970 Los Angeles activist Don Jackson had issued a proposal in the *Los Angeles Free Press*: "I imagine a place where gay people can be free. . . . A place where a gay government can build the base for a flourishing gay counter-culture and city. . . . The colony could become the gay symbol of liberty, a world center for the gay counter-culture, and a shining symbol of hope to all gay people in the world."⁸¹ Jackson proposed that this "colony" occupy California's sparsely populated Alpine County, located in the Sierra Nevada south of Lake Tahoe. He called for gay men and lesbians to move by the hundreds to Alpine and build a "Gay homeland" or "Stonewall Nation."⁸² Only about 500 people lived in Alpine County in 1970, including some 150 in Markleeville, the county seat and largest town.⁸³ Roads into the area traversed 7,000- to 8,000-foot mountain passes frequently snowbound in winter. But, because the California Supreme Court had recently cut the residency requirement for voter registration to ninety days, a few hundred newcomers could quickly constitute the majority of voters, hold a recall, and take political power.⁸⁴ Jackson stated that Alpine promised a "gay territory . . . a gay government, a gay civil service, a county welfare department which made public assistance payments to the refugees from persecution and injustice."⁸⁵

Jackson's proposal remained just an idea until October, when a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who had noticed the *Free Press* article phoned the Los Angeles GLF. Activist Don Kilhefner answered the call and told the journalist he was in luck: the GLF would be holding a press conference about the Alpine project. Kilhefner was bluffing, but he and others sprang into action; when the reporter arrived at the "press conference"

on October 18, Kilhefner and two other GLF members described Alpine project plans and declared that three hundred people had signed up. The *Los Angeles Times* ran an article on the project the next day.⁸⁶ Both the alternative and mainstream press took note of the Alpine story, and throughout late October and November coverage expanded to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, and radical newspapers. Bay Area radicals began to discuss the project, with some declaring an “Alpine Liberation Front” independent of the San Francisco and Berkeley GLFs. Charles Thorpe, who had been a white student supporter in the Third World Strike, declared the formation of another Alpine support group: Bay Area Gays for Unification and Nationalism, or BAGFUN. By late November the *London Observer* reported that Alpine was attracting hundreds of potential migrants, verifying 479 from Los Angeles and as many as 1,179 overall.⁸⁷ Los Angeles activists claimed 128 financial backers offering more than \$250,000 in capital, sought consultations from architectural and financial firms, and planned a trip to Alpine over the Thanksgiving weekend.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Dr. Carl McIntire, a radio evangelist and pro-war organizer, called for “missionaries” to stop the takeover.⁸⁹ *Time* reported that members of the Alpine County Board of Supervisors traveled to Sacramento to meet with an advisor to Governor Ronald Reagan but came away “despondent and empty-handed” and were told “there was nothing they could do to stem the gay tide as long as the G.L.F. complied with the law.”⁹⁰

As the bravado of the press conference suggested, the Alpine County project was mostly a stunt, a bit of political theater used to define gay and lesbian identity as a question of oppression and power rather than pathology or deviance. Some of Don Jackson’s earliest proposals neglected to name Alpine County at all, promoting only the general idea of a gay county takeover.⁹¹ A publicity photo taken in Los Angeles featured a long-haired, barefooted young white man with a guitar case and small dog, hitching a ride at a freeway entrance with a sign reading “Alpine County—or other appropriate destination.”⁹² Measured in media terms, Alpine was massively successful: articles about the project said nothing about psychiatry and instead quoted activists speaking about legal recalls, voter registration, and police repression.

The centrality of media helps to explain the Alpine project’s shallow treatment of race. Although project leaders made frequent reference to alliance with the Panthers, they did not take part in the RPCC and had no working relationship with any chapters of the Black Panther Party. Don Jackson spoke out about antigay oppression in prisons, jails, and

mental institutions, yet, even when addressing this topic, failed to draw links to black or other Third World liberation movements.⁹³ Charles Thorpe, echoing his earlier claim that his gayness made him a “white Negro,” compared the Alpine project to Native American activism: “It’s like the Indians, if they take Alcatraz and stay, it’s theirs.”⁹⁴ This ignored the point that the occupation of Alcatraz Island, which had been launched by the group Indians of All Tribes in November 1969 and was ongoing, reclaimed already stolen land.⁹⁵

Indeed, Alpine project leaders aimed to supersede racial liberation. Don Jackson claimed that while slavery had ended for black people, “gay people are still slaves today. . . . Huey Newton spoke truth when he said that Gay People are the most oppressed minority of all.”⁹⁶ In implicit and explicit ways, Jackson and other project leaders described gay people as the Panthers and others were describing people of color: a colonized group inside the United States whose liberation could overthrow the establishment from within. The analogy implied building gay power through global alliance, but it marginalized people of color in order to claim a vanguard status for white gay men. Thorpe’s San Francisco State group proposed an “ambassador of Stonewall Nation to Algeria,” where Eldridge Cleaver lived in exile.⁹⁷ Don Kilhefner posited gay liberation as the model for radicals of color, calling the Alpine project “a scheme every oppressed minority could latch on to—there’s an Alpine County in every state in the union.”⁹⁸

Blending the rhetoric of settler colonialism, global decolonization, and radical masculinity, Alpine project spokespeople described gay migrants as “pioneers” and the mountain county as “open land.”⁹⁹ A *Berkeley Tribe* article promoting the project stated: “There will be hostile natives. Chopping wood, drawing water from a stream, severe Alpine winters, living in tents and Quonset huts. . . . A Gay city will rise from the huts and tents . . . [with] camaraderie and brotherhood.”¹⁰⁰ Kilhefner compared it to a TV Western and described project participants enthusiastically as “a new breed of hardy, outdoor homosexuals.”¹⁰¹ Ostensibly this new “breed” could include people of color and white women; a project flier depicted three white men, one black man, and two white women over the headline “WANTED: FOR SEEKING REFUGE AND FREEDOM. ‘THE ALPIONEERS’” (figure 3). Yet Alpine signups were almost entirely men, the leadership was entirely white men, and the language of “pioneer” was all but explicit in its racial and gender meaning.

Alpine was “open” only in project leaders’ imaginations: it was home both to Anglo residents and to a few hundred members of the Washoe



FIGURE 3. Alpine County poster, 1970. Courtesy of Gay Liberation Front/Los Angeles Records, ONE Archives, University of Southern California Libraries.

tribe, whose land straddles eastern California and northern Nevada. Alpine leaders declared themselves friends of Washoe people even as they sought to conquer Washoe land. From October through December 1970, articles in the gay and radical press proclaimed “AlpLib for Washos Too” and “Gay Radical Says Alpine Indian Turf.”¹⁰² When the project sent an “Alpine County Penetration Committee” over Thanksgiving, the *San Francisco Examiner* quoted Los Angeles GLF member Morris Kight as saying, “The Washoe Indians have a private alliance with us.”¹⁰³ This claim was false. In an internal project letter, Don Jackson proposed a meeting with Washoe people and wrote that “they are a primitive tribe . . . we can make no presumptions until we study them. It would be an immense asset if we could find a couple of Gay Indians

to take along, but caution must be used that they are not from a tribe that is an ancient enemy. . . . The underground press will eat up a story of peace talks between Gays and Indians with photos of gift exchange etc.”¹⁰⁴ Jackson’s comments revealed his anti-Native racism, his ignorance of both Washoe history and pan-Indian radicalism, and his orientation toward media spectacle. Alpine project leaders never met with Washoe leaders and, in attempting to cull information on Washoe culture, emphasized peyote and traditional pine nut harvesting because “health food people and hippies dig” both.¹⁰⁵

By November 1970, the Berkeley GLF formally opposed the Alpine project, rejecting it in a two-thirds vote that the national gay magazine *The Advocate* termed “the first major split . . . of the West Coast Gay Liberation Movement.”¹⁰⁶ The split was both ideological and regional, dividing the largest Bay Area gay liberation group from the one in Los Angeles. A Berkeley GLF representative argued that Jackson’s proposal for a gay-Native gift exchange and treaty was nothing more than “buying people. And I think it would be a much better approach if someone asked the Indians how they felt about our coming up there.”¹⁰⁷ Activist Nick Benton termed the project “racist, sexist, impractical and counter-revolutionary nationalist.”¹⁰⁸ He and others argued that Alpine threatened to reproduce the “gay ghetto,” establishing another site of isolation and exploitation rather than a transformed society. As one article stated, “Even if we seize the county, we cannot outlaw private property or keep out the Tavern Guild or the money of organized crime.”¹⁰⁹ *Gay Sunshine* added, “Among Gay people there is resentment and fear of . . . [Alpine project leaders], who somehow have the Gay world by the balls, who somehow understand the Establishment ‘mysteries’ of County government, mass media manipulation, and land financing and development.”¹¹⁰

Alpine leaders responded with a shallow vision of diversity: Alpine would be for “gays and straights, men and women, black and white and red and brown and yellow, young and old alike in a spirit of peace and fellowship. It is, indeed, a gay project for spreading freedom all over the world and to all kinds of people.”¹¹¹ The Bay Area Alpine Liberation Front issued a resolution of support for Washoe people and called for the majority of the Alpine County Board of Supervisors to be gay and lesbian people of color.¹¹² Yet these responses ignored the substance of critics’ opposition, which held that gay nationalism co-opted gay liberation by making gay people colonizers in the US West.¹¹³ Assailed by critics, the Alpine project lost steam by March 1971, and no gay group ever moved in.¹¹⁴

Alpine did, however, have at least one lasting effect: it prompted clarification of the differences between gay nationalism and a gay left. The radicals who rejected the Alpine project held that gay nationalism stood in conflict with Third World solidarity and that it replicated the gay ghetto. By contrast, they argued that sexual liberation could be achieved only through anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist revolution. Thus, in opposing the Alpine project, gay leftists crystallized their own goals.

In January 1971 a group of gay men of color, Third World Gay People, formed out of the Berkeley GLF. The group was prompted in large part by a police assault at the Stud, a gay bar in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood that was popular with both white and black men.¹¹⁵ Police surrounded the bar at closing time on December 11, 1970, and fired on a young white man trying to drive away.¹¹⁶ Third World Gay People member Michael Robinson described the Stud shooting as an example of police violence against gay men and argued that only a multiracial alliance against the police could end such violence. Robinson asserted that most white men who frequented the Stud "have failed to deal with their racism" and urged white gay readers of *Gay Sunshine* not only to rally against the Stud shooting but also to support "Bobby Seale, [the] Seattle 7 . . . John Cluchette, or any of the powerful Indians of Alcatraz," since white gay people needed "the people of the world fighting with them" to achieve liberation.¹¹⁷ Indeed, *Gay Sunshine* reported in February 1971 that members of the San Francisco and Berkeley GLFs had attended "solidarity days" for Panther and prison activists Bobby Seale, Ericka Huggins, Angela Y. Davis, and Ruchell (Cinque) Magee.¹¹⁸

Gay liberation also continued to make significant inroads in anti-war work, particularly the veterans' and GI movement, in which activists defined sexism as a tool of military control.¹¹⁹ By 1971 GI newspapers gave positive coverage to gay sailors' and soldiers' concerns, GI bookstores stocked gay liberationist newspapers, and GI organizing centers hosted gay discussion groups.¹²⁰ Some leaders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, most prominently Vince Muscari, came out as gay, and in fall 1971 Muscari took a Vietnam Veterans Against the War contingent to a national gay conference in Madison, Wisconsin.¹²¹ Gay radicals organized large contingents in anti-war marches held nationally on April 24, 1971, and in a protest in the US capital on May Day. In such efforts, activists identified military masculinism as a gendered "role" that held deadly consequences.¹²² Similarly, a reflection in *Gay Sunshine* held that the anti-war movement allowed gay people to come

out in broad daylight rather than only in stigmatized “gay ghettos.” In this article, activists contrasted the freedoms of a march with the alienation they observed in San Francisco’s Tenderloin and stated that “this bright Saturday afternoon, marching under the many banners and a transformed lavender and purple Viet Cong flag . . . we demonstrated to ourselves and everyone else that we are no longer hiding and apart.”¹²³

Adding to these efforts, by 1973 gay radicals produced a new organization in Oakland, the Gay Men’s Political Action Group. Rooted in a collective household, the Political Action Group drew a mix of white and black gay radicals who focused on supporting the campaign of Black Panthers Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown for Oakland mayor and city council.¹²⁴ Seale and Brown had announced their candidacies on May 13, 1972, nearly a year before municipal elections. Their campaign confronted the city’s Republican- and white-dominated political machine and reflected a national push for black candidates to elected office as well as the contraction of the Black Panther Party’s work to the Bay Area. During spring and summer 1972 the Oakland Party promoted electoral power through food giveaways that combined voter registration with the distribution of groceries to thousands of people. While both Seale and Brown ultimately lost, Seale forced the incumbent mayor into a runoff, drew over a third of the total vote, and galvanized unprecedented voter turnout that laid groundwork for the 1977 mayoral election of black moderate Lionel Wilson.¹²⁵

As Donna Murch notes, Seale and Brown’s campaign “cultivated a broad range of alliances” that included gay groups.¹²⁶ Members of the Gay Men’s Political Action Group conducted voter registration and outreach in gay bars and community sites and met with Seale, Brown, and other Black Panther Party leaders, while the *Black Panther* reprinted the Political Action Group’s flier. This piece of publicity stated, “Gay men and women, who reject the definition of homosexuals as mentally ill, are another part of the population who have been oppressed by and invisible to the Readings, the Kaisers, and the Oakland Tribune,” and noted that as “an inter-racial group, [the Political Action Group] is aware of the connection between racism and sexism.”¹²⁷ Seale and Brown opposed antigay discrimination in employment, housing, and by the police and backed a city measure to end such bias; supported city funding of a gay community center and clinic; and called for the reform of laws affecting gay and lesbian people in child custody and adoption, mental hospitals and prisons, and taxation and inheritance. At one Political Action Group event, one hundred gay men and lesbians met

with Ericka Huggins and other Black Panther Party leaders to discuss “prison oppression of gay people, women and Third World peoples, and the stand of the Black Panther Party on prostitution and transvestism.”¹²⁸ Although the Gay Men’s Political Action Group faded after Seale and Brown’s electoral defeat, its members remained active in forging ties with the labor movement for the next several years.¹²⁹

Thus, far from representing only a brief upsurge of gay liberation, the early 1970s marked the start of a new political current: a gay left. Over the next few years gay leftists began to seek alliances with lesbian feminists, and by the end of the decade, activists built a gay and lesbian left that pursued multiracial and anti-imperialist solidarity. The path toward this future would run through lesbian feminists’ autonomous organizing—a form of activism that developed simultaneously with gay men’s politics but that responded specifically to women’s experiences of sexual repression, gendered violence, and radical struggle.