Between July 1954 and June 1955, the New York City Police Department swept through Times Square in a series of carefully orchestrated raids designed to rid the area of its undesirables. As the action unfolded, Edward Melcarth, a radical artist who had exhibited paintings at New York’s left-leaning ACA Gallery, drafted an essay voicing his objection to the police’s effort to crack down on drug users, gamblers, sex workers, homosexuals, and other dissidents.1 Titled “Guerilla Warfare,” Melcarth’s essay attacked the “latest ‘Search and Kill-joy’ operation in the Times Square zone,” which, he complained, had recently “netted fifty bodies.” This “War on Undesirables” was conducted by “special forces of policemen and police-women acting as entrapment agents” who “dropped [in] at bars[,] counters of cafeterias, and even into men’s lavatories.” This elite brigade had been “trained in purse-swinging, solicitation, shooting crap, etc.” They made up a “highly dedicated group” who “disguise themselves by day as businessmen, professors, actors, hostesses and Seventh avenue models,” while “after dark they don black leather, bright shirts, low-cut blouses, boots and other para-sexual uniforms to set up ambushes along some of the main highways of Mid-town and Greenwich Village.” While “undesirables” made up a large portion of the New York populace, “under no circumstances, will a ‘habitual user’ be returned to the City Council by Greenwich Village nor Times Square be represented in Congress by a bearded female impersonator.”2 Sexual dissidents and other undesirables, in Melcarth’s
analysis, constituted a disenfranchised group that was targeted by the police while remaining excluded from American political institutions. Their deviance cast them as enemies of the state, and their undesirability placed them outside political channels conceived as legitimate.

As a former Communist Party member, long-time fellow traveler, and full-time homosexual who had himself been targeted by the FBI (an informant advised the bureau that Melcarth “was a Communist and makes no effort to conceal his feelings”), Edward Melcarth had little tolerance for—and well-tuned sensitivity to—the state suppression of undesirables. Having grown up in privilege, Melcarth was radicalized by a number of scenes witnessed during his childhood travels—a trajectory that, in his recounting, “started with the bread-riots I saw as a kid in Vienna, with the General strike in 1926 in England and of course with the depression when I returned to the United States. In other words the only politics that I could see led me to sympathise with the aims of the Left.” While Melcarth acknowledged that if he “were asked what I was in the thirties and early forties, I should have begun by saying a ‘liberal’ and perhaps by 1939 ‘a socialist,” several events “turned me further and further towards the Communists.” Among these were his visits to New York during college, which, he noted, “were not entirely devoted to learning to ‘Lindy’ and looking for sex and at pictures.” He had also visited the Soviet Union with a male companion, and during that trip, Melcarth “had not been unfavorably impressed.” More significantly, the “Spanish Civil War was the first real pressure” that impelled him to “contribute quite a bit of time and what little money I might to encourage the ‘loyalists.’” He determined that “[o]nly the Communists seemed sincerely anti-fascist and serious about a socialist economy.” Shortly thereafter, Melcarth joined the Merchant Marine, at which time he became very impressed by the way The N.M.U. [National Maritime Union] was run . . . it was then Communist dominated. It was the first time that I had seen party members on a day to day basis and their devotion and idealism was particularly noteworthy at a time in which the great American slogans were ‘liberate’ meaning steal and ‘kick the shit out of’ meaning more often than not little kids begging in Naples or the Coolies desperately trying to augment their fifteen cents a day wages.

Melcarth joined the Communist Party in 1944 and remained an active member until 1948, when he departed due to a minor disagreement with the official line on Yugoslavia, where Melcarth had visited in 1938.
After leaving the Party, Melcarth remained a dedicated fellow traveler, committing himself to working “with Communist Fronts” on issues such as supporting the Trenton Six, an important civil rights case in 1948 concerning six Black men accused of murder that was taken up by the Communist-affiliated Civil Rights Congress. He wrote to *Life* magazine complaining of anti-Communism in their coverage of Willie McGee, a Black man convicted of assault on a white woman. “If *LIFE* hoped by this article to suggest that Negroes condemned to death should abjure Communist support,” Melcarth wrote, “*LIFE* has merely succeeded in suggesting that only the Communists make a serious and concerted effort to abolish or abrogate our infamous Southern Law code.”

He also remained committed to an anticolonial program in the United States. “[L]op off our arms race, our colonies official or otherwise,” he wrote, “and capitalist prosperity will collapse.”

As an artist, Melcarth explored themes connected to labor, class, and sexuality. While he included many classical themes in his paintings, he was also, like many artists on the Left, interested in the art of social concern. In 1946, for example, he sketched a National Maritime Union strike in New York City. One of these drawings featured two men, one tenderly touching the sandwich-board sign of the other (figure 1). Another sketch from this time, labeled “Picket Line,” depicted a jumble of indistinguishable bodies in a writhing mass, while a third featured two prone men being beaten. Violence among workers fascinated Melcarth, as further evidenced in a 1945 painting, titled *Fight in Central Park*, depicting sailors and men in working-class clothes midbrawl. An avid photographer, Melcarth took many pictures of striking workers. Later, his repertoire expanded to include hustlers and drug users, suggesting that his interest in undesirables was not reducible to his homosexuality.

He continued producing images of labor unrest, as in a 1948 painting of a demonstration on a city street—an image that included a prone man in its foreground. Melcarth was fascinated by urban landscapes, including among his sketches one of an “old woman pissing” and another of two men in various stages of undress in a beach changing room, and his photographs included images of a red-light-district peep show.

Two 1951 paintings, *Sit Down Strike* and *Construction*, show that his interest in labor themes continued past the 1940s.

Though he was committed to the Left, Melcarth was also open about his homosexuality. He had affairs with various men, which he wrote about in poems that he kept in his personal papers:
No hustler
  With a sullen face,
Sellin love
  In the market-place
can ever e-rase
  the memory of you
No pocket
  With a bulgin’ hand
No promise
  Of a one night stand
can ever disband
  the memory of you
Those bad things . . . were good things
  when I did them with you

The distance between good things and bad things was a significant pre-occupation for Melcarth, who conceived wage theft, racism, crack-downs on homosexuality, and policing as bad, and leftist resistance to them good. He enjoyed spending time with hustlers, drug users, and queers more than respectable company anyway.

Under McCarthyism, Melcarth remained unapologetic about his history with the Communist Party. “[A]s long as the Smith Act remains on the books,” he wrote in a letter criticizing the 1940 legislation that criminalized membership in the Party, “we Americans cannot castigate the Communists. The difference is only one of degree.” Though he was no longer a Communist Party member when the red scare reached its peak, he remained committed to the good things for which he continued to fight. “I will be damned if I will ‘clear’ myself under the present stipulations,” he continued;

I may not be as fanatical as you suppose about turning America into a carbon copy of Soviet Russia past or present . . . but I am fanatical about seeing to it that America does not become a nation of Stool-pigeons. Fortunately I am not marrying Marilyn Monroe . . . I merely stand to lose a three thousand a year teaching job . . . no Hollywood contracts . . . no civil service seniority . . . no kids of mine are forced to starve . . . I can afford the rarest American privilege today . . . I can say what I think . . . unfortunately I may be almost unique.

In accounting for his impassioned refusal to remain silent as the United States descended into anti-Communist hysteria, Melcarth pointed to both his artistic career and his nonprocreation as reasons for his radical resistance. He did so with good humor, contrasting his bachelor life
with that of Arthur Miller, the latter of whom was caught up in a very public affair with Marilyn Monroe. Melcarth’s deviance impelled his commitment to social justice.

Though he might not have realized it, Melcarth was not as unique as he believed. His history as a gay Communist who cast his lot with undesirables connects his personal and political history to a motley assortment of sexual dissidents on the Left before 1960. By developing sensitivity to class inequality, moving into clarity about the ways this was exacerbated by the Great Depression, participating in radical labor campaigns, sympathizing with the Soviet Union, contributing to the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, opposing police and state harassment, resisting racial discrimination, and aligning himself with the dispossessed, Melcarth trod a well-worn path. Like him, a broad cross-section of sexual dissidents, especially culture workers who eschewed normative family structures, took advantage of their space on the margins of American society to throw themselves into leftist campaigns. His evident willingness to “not conceal his feelings,” rather than presenting himself as an upstanding American citizen, further links him with his fellow travelers. Whether they were themselves straight, gay, or otherwise queer, many leftists, like Melcarth, brought sexual dissidence and the Left into conversation.

That conversation is the subject for this book. *Love’s Next Meeting: The Forgotten History of Homosexuality and the Left in American Culture* reconsiders the relationship between radical anticapitalism and homosexuality in the United States. Throughout, I revisit a relationship often characterized as a series of misgivings, betrayals, dismal disappointments, and interpretive dead ends. Much of the prevailing scholarship on queer history discounts the Old Left due to its perceived homophobia, suggesting that emerging gay subcultures were more historically significant than movements that did not centralize LGBT identities. Though my book does not ignore the failures of the Left to build a cultural movement centralizing sexual dissidence as a political concern, *Love’s Next Meeting* explores a counterhistory where possibility, visibility, and resistance converged at the intersection of homosexuality and the Left.

I also consider the impact of both sexual conservatism and anti-Communism on overly simplified narratives about homosexuality and the Left, suggesting that at least some of their narrative friction has been generated and maintained through a capricious application of McCarthyism and historical amnesia about sexual politics before 1969. The powerful effect of a century’s worth of red scares, state-sponsored
repression, cultural opprobrium, moral condemnation, police harassment, and FBI surveillance would be hard to overstate. These forces have further restricted the availability of sources documenting this history, providing a significant stumbling block to historians attempting to write about it. “There is no evidence current that you loved me,” wrote the Black gay leftist poet Owen Dodson in a 1946 poem, “Or witnesses: there was fire for the letters, / And those I told are promised, sealed.” “Chrisesakes, man,” wrote Harry Hay in a letter to Jonathan Ned Katz in 1974, “who among us Reds was stoopid enough to keep records through TWO Witch-hunts.”

Who indeed? One would certainly be hard-pressed to find a central repository dedicated to collecting material relating to sexual dissidence and the Left before 1960. Yet if imagining the history of an intimate relationship between homosexuality and the Left has been challenging, it is not entirely for want of evidence. As Regina Kunzel writes in a different context, “[W]hile deviant sexuality—forced out of hiding, interrogated, surveyed, and policed—leaves a paper trail, the normal covers its tracks.” Cultural works such as novels, poems, autobiographies, and short fiction reveal unique aspects of the Left that were central to participants but not necessarily found in the official records of the Communist Party—the political hub of the Left especially after the onset of the Great Depression. It is within cultural spaces that homosexuality was most visible. At speakeasies, nightclubs, and cabarets; within bohemian spaces such as Chicago’s Dil Pickle Club and private parties; on the outskirts of, and sometimes deep inside, public parks; within working-class and transient communities; and in incipient political parties and organizations, leftists engaged, sometimes willingly and sometimes unwittingly, with sexual dissidents in their midst, blurring the line between these categories. In the process they laid the foundation for building a radical movement through which homosexual lives and experiences were given shape and new political identities were constructed.

Though its primary concern is with homosexuality, Love’s Next Meaning explores the cultural logic that linked sexual dissidents with radical working-class politics in ways that challenge the homo/hetero binary. In discussing male prostitution, for example, leftists often foregrounded work rather than pleasure, and the practice of buying and selling sex frustrated efforts at connecting sexual behavior with identity. Same-sex object choice among male hustlers did not necessarily speak to desire as much as economics. Yet this linking of sex and economics further suggests how entwined sexuality was with the political economy—a topic
Kevin Mumford points to in his discussion of “interzones,” those urban spaces where “cultural, sexual, and social interchange” occurred. Radical writers such as Willard Motley, a best-selling novelist in the 1940s, refused to treat sex workers as abject or tragic figures who sublimated erotic pleasure as they made their money. Instead, in concert with other leftists, Motley explored the affective relationship between sex, class, race, and work.

Though the Left consisted of a variety of anticapitalist organizations and movements, members of the Communist Party were especially adept at balancing homosexual desire and leftist commitment, in part because they were already cast as sexual and political outsiders within American society. As one leftist member of the National Marine Cooks and Stewards, a radical labor union, described the situation, many were “drawn to the Party, to Marxism, simply because it was a rebellious group working for recognition and acceptance. And that, fundamentally, was the same thing that a homosexual—as we used that term in those days—as a gay person was working for.” The act of joining a revolutionary party seeking to overthrow the government of the United States pushed against the boundaries of respectability, morality, and decency that governed American life. It also threatened the dominance of bourgeois values. Homosexuality was associated with a similar refusal to submit to American norms, creating discursive overlap between sexual dissidents and leftists that blurred the line separating one group from the other. “Doctor, I’m a gay fellow, so what do I care about social position?” wrote a homosexual to the sexologist David O. Cauldwell in 1949. “I don’t want to go to any tea parties.”

The impossibility of assimilating into mainstream American society primed many gay women and men to reject mainstream politics in favor of radical liberation. Their experiences as outsiders further informed gay leftists’ capacity for tolerating situations where antipathy toward homosexuality appeared within the Communist Party, just as their skillful navigation of public and private sexualities made it possible for them to commit themselves to a political movement where they maintained some circumspection about their personal relationships. Arthur Laurents, a self-identified “Jew and a homosexual,” found himself drawn into the orbit of the Depression-era Communist Party because leftists were “friends to the outsider.” Similarly, in a 1938 letter to sexologist William J. Fielding, a self-described homosexual noted that “peculiarities that go with this are an intense love of life (I have never taken the life-blood of anything),” as well as “pacifism” and “social-
ism." Leftist belonging attracted those inclined toward transgression. As literary scholar Glyn Salton-Cox succinctly puts it, “Communists are queer creatures.”

In an influential essay dissecting the post-1960s New Left, cultural critic Stuart Hall describes how “the crisp distinction between socially and politically deviant behavior is increasingly difficult to sustain.” Political deviants privilege activities that “tend to fall outside the consensual norms which regulate political conflict, and they are willing to employ means commonly defined as ‘illegitimate’ to further or secure their ends. In life-style, attitude, and relationships they are socially unorthodox, permissive, even subversive.” Hall’s analysis of deviance offers tremendous explanatory power for understanding iterations of the Left appearing in earlier decades of the twentieth century. Sexual values never emerged wholly from sexual identities. The lived experiences of sexual dissidents on the Left illuminate how the state-sponsored act of defining deviance shaped American sexual and political values in uneven ways.

The distance between sexual dissidents and leftists was further diminished through the shared institutions, tight spaces, and intersecting communities that brought them into close contact with one another. Just as the policing of homosexual behavior produced spaces for homosexual contact in working-class neighborhoods, prisons, and other places that were already considered outside the bounds of respectable middle-class life, the Left emerged from within industrial workplaces, working-class communities, and public spaces similarly located on the peripheries of polite society. Many who aligned with the Left or were targeted by Communist organizers had already been exposed to sexual diversity through population density, urban zoning, and sex districting, as well as the porous borders of public and private spaces. The YMCA, for example, was a significant site of homosexual-Left intersection. A 1928 exposé by George Jarrboe in the leftist magazine *New Masses* reported that among “lady-like boys” using the facilities, “obscene pictures were freely shown. ‘Queer’ men summoned those interested in trysts, with delicate whistles one to the other.” Meanwhile, “now and then came a whiff of politics,” and, Jarrboe notes, “to my amazement I discovered advocates of communism, Reds!” Cafeterias, urban parks, boxcars, prisons, working-class bars, skid rows, and slums all represented spaces where both Communists and homosexuals could be found. Though working-class communities were subjected to police harassment and surveillance, sexual dissidence was more visible in areas catering to economically disadvantaged populations. The organization
of modern urban spaces segregated by class produced vice districts in poor and working-class neighborhoods that fell between the cracks of the law and attracted radicals seeking to organize—and sometimes rub against—the lawless.

Until 1924, the Communist Party was organized into underground cells where members remained invisible even to one another—a structure that precluded public identification with the Party and prevented members from defending themselves against slanderous attacks. Draconian laws policing sexuality ensured that sexual dissidents were similarly relegated to subterranean corners at this time. In spite of such obstacles, many leftist sexual dissidents exploited these coalescing forces to resist the machinery of oppression: urban marginalization led to the building of counterpublics; criminalization produced solidarity among outlaws; enforced silence introduced subcultural codes that built alliances. As Michel Foucault famously writes, “[T]here is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” Neither homosexual nor Communist silence was ever absolute, and sexually dissident leftists were especially versatile in negotiating the restrictions on forbidden features of their American lives by stitching together shreds of political discourse that incited them to speech.

In a US context, the intellectual scaffolding that connected sexual dissidence with leftist politics derived most clearly from efforts to combat racism. Particularly beginning in the 1920s, leftists worked to theorize race, challenge racism, build momentum around antilynching laws, and advocate for Black Americans. These campaigns emerged out of a longer history of Black Marxism that critiqued racial capitalism from an internationalist perspective, connecting racism to a global history of colonization, enslavement, and diaspora. The commitment to radical antiracism adopted by many American leftists suggests how attention to the meanings of racial identities for collecting power, resisting capitalism, confronting inequality, and organizing working women and men sometimes opened the door to reflexivity around sexual dissidence as a political category. There was, to be sure, much conflict and debate as leftists struggled to work out antiracist politics within a movement that too often replicated racist structures and practices. Yet the sensitivity of leftist writers to marginalized identities; the shared geographies for leftists, homosexuals, and African Americans in urban spaces; and an emphasis upon representing the brutality of the American way of life for people of color opened avenues of discourse that aligned antiracist and sexually dissident perspectives within leftist culture. Though the