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Gay Bars in Pre-Stonewall San Francisco: "Walk-In Closets" as the Source of a Surprisingly Divergent Queer Activism

Tegan Smith

In the 1960s, "You took your life into your own hands when you walked into a bar," said homophile activist Otto Bremerman.¹ While studying at Berkeley in the early 1960s, Bremerman took the train into San Francisco for weekend trips to the city's six gay bars. Initially, Bremerman avoided gay bars because he feared police raids, gay bashings, and being outed. Despite his concerns, he could not stay away. Reflecting on his first time in a gay bar, Bremerman mused, "I immediately realized I was home."² Bremerman's perspective echoes the experiences of many other gay men and lesbians during the 1960s.³ San Francisco gay bars were a central site for LGBTQ+ community and culture, though the purpose, function, and politics of bars were hotly contested within and outside queer communities. Gay bars were one of the few public places where LGBTQ+ folks were able to socialize, but patrons were still limited in the desires, gender presentations, and behaviors they exhibited. A primary reason for these limitations was the regulation of gay bars. Local authorities were under pressure to proscribe public homosexual behavior, and regulating gay bars minimized the public presence of queer people.⁴ Decades of efforts by local authorities, particularly the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) and the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board (ABC), resulted in closures and restrictions of one of the few

¹ Otto Bremerman (OB), interviewed by Everett Erlandson (EE), San Francisco, CA, August 1994, online transcript, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society of San Francisco (GLBTHS), 46.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Nancy C. Unger, "Role of Gay Bars in American History," *C-Span*, 16 Oct. 2016.

⁴ Christopher Agee, "Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco's Gay Bars, 1950-1968," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2006): 464.

semistable public gathering places for LGBTQ+ people.⁵ In response to these oppressive efforts, members of San Francisco's LGBTQ+ communities developed various organizations to combat their mistreatment. LGBTQ+ people, Bremerman included, joined these burgeoning organizations to challenge inequity, supplement (or even replace) bar-based organizing, and develop solutions to defy their subjection. Ultimately, the regulation (including policing and raiding) of San Francisco's gay bars in the 1960s was a key contributor to the proliferation of diverse LGBTQ+ activist organizations dedicated to the protection and advancement of the gay/lesbian community.

Considerable research has been done on San Francisco gay bars. Nan Alamilla Boyd's *Wide-Open Town* (2003) is among the most thorough works on San Francisco's LGBTQ+ history. Through her use of oral histories, legal documents, and manuscript collections from San Francisco and other California archives, Boyd tracks the development of gay/lesbian life in the city, specifically the evolution of gay bar culture and its impact on local communities. Similarly, Christopher Agee's pioneering article in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, "Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco's Gay Bars, 1950-1968," (2006) on the policing of San Francisco's gay bars, a topic that is as central to LGBTQ+ history as the Stonewall Riots, has been of indispensable importance to understandings of post-World War II gay/lesbian life. That research, along with the works of J. Todd Ormsbee and John D'Emilio, speaks to the significance of gay bars within gay/lesbian communities in 1950s and 1960s San Francisco. These communities, as argued by Christina Hanhardt in *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (2013) and Emily Hobson in *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (2016), spearheaded a multitude of countercultural activist initiatives rooted in multi-issue queer politics. This essay will add to existing

⁵ Ibid., 480.

historiography by explicating the links between gay bars and LGBTQ+ activism, as well as the role regulation played in generating new social and political organizations committed to protecting the rights and interests of the gay/lesbian community. Current historiography overlooks how the policing and raiding of gay bars transformed the discourses of existing homophile organizations, influenced the politics of emerging organizations, and contributed to the genesis of the gay liberation movement. This paper, based in secondary sources, as well as a unique mix of primary documents, synthesizes the history of gay bars, policing, and LGBTQ+ activism to demonstrate how reading these histories together offers new insights into the proliferation of LGBTQ+ organizing throughout 1960s San Francisco. This will broaden the depth and breadth of understanding of LGBTQ+ history, as well as the importance of activist organizing by and for marginalized communities.

The defining feature of the SFPD's regulation of gay bars in the 1950s and early 1960s was the discretionary authority afforded to police officers. As Agee has shown, due to the decentralization of the SFPD and the lack of police professionalization, police officers received no guidelines, methods, nor training to identify and judge criminal behavior. Resultantly, officers' own moral codes, desire to impress their peers, and yearning for respect from local communities influenced officers' perceptions of and responses to crime.⁶ John Mindermann, who joined the SFPD as a patrol officer in 1959, recalls "a lot of ad hoc, spontaneous, without form" responses and resolutions to issues officers faced on their beats.⁷ Gay bars and their customers experienced the unpredictable, varied policing described by Mindermann. As one patron remembers, bargoers were in danger of being beaten up or arrested if "you made the wrong kind of remark or lifted your

⁶ Agee, "Gayola," 464.

⁷ John Mindermann, interviewed by Christopher Agee, 29 March 2004 and 14 April 2004, quoted in "Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco's Gay Bars, 1950-1968," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2006): 468.

eyebrow in the wrong way.”⁸ However, “wrong” lacked a universal definition; police officers interpreted “wrong” however they saw fit, contributing to the range of responses to the policing of gay bars.

The discretionary authority of SFPD officers was backed by vague laws and loopholes upheld by the California Supreme Court.⁹ For example, loitering laws criminalized men walking alone or being in the street without a specific reason. Police officers could ask any man walking alone to justify his public presence, and the officer was free to decide if the explanation was acceptable. Officers’ discretionary authority was upheld in *Stoumen v. Reilly* (1951), which corroborated the state’s power to “regulate lewd behavior, which by legal definition, all homosexual behavior was.”¹⁰ Guy Strait, cofounder of The League for Civil Education (LCE) and founder of San Francisco’s first gay newspaper, *LCE News*, recalls that simply the verbal implication that two men might go home together could warrant an arrest for a lewd act.¹¹ This left gay bars and their patrons vulnerable to the perceptions and motivations of police officers.

City leaders were typically unconcerned with the officers’ degree of discretionary authority, as long as they criminalized the behavior of Black folks and homosexuals.¹² Consequently, police officers with gay bars on their beat developed their own responses to regulate gay bars: ignore, harass, or pursue payoffs. Aided by the lack of uniformity, these forms of regulation went largely uncriticized or unnoticed by the high brass of the SFPD, politicians, the press, and the general public as long as officers

⁸ OB, interviewed by EE, San Francisco, CA, August 1994, online transcript, GLBTHS, 47.

⁹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 109.

¹⁰ J. Todd Ormsbee, *The Meaning of Gay* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), 22.

¹¹ Merla Zellerbach, “Rights, Liberties and The Black Cat Closing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 Oct. 1963, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers, 41.

¹² Agee, “Gayola,” 464.

kept gay bars "out of the public eye."¹³ This left gay bars vulnerable to economic exploitation, arrests of their patrons, and closures if any homosexual behavior (e.g., same-sex hand-holding, flirting, dancing) was observed on the premises.¹⁴ However, once certain corrupt actions of police officers became known to the public, gay bars underwent a new era of regulation.

The structure and practices of the SFPD came under fire with the 1960 "gayola scandal": gay bar owners' public accusation that law enforcement officers were extorting them instead of closing, raiding, or making arrests in their bars.¹⁵ Though the accused officers denied any wrongdoing, the scandal made front page news and even precipitated announcements from Mayor George Christopher and Police Chief Thomas Cahill of changes within the SFPD made in response to the allegations.¹⁶ The negative publicity and growing skepticism surrounding the morality of the SFPD initiated a sizable shift in the regulation of gay bars, resulting in more centralized policing with the direct oversight of the police chief and mayor, as well as increases in entrapment, raids, and closures.¹⁷ Although officers' discretionary authority made it difficult for gay bars to develop universal strategies to challenge their regulation, some bars had benefitted from the security they received via the pay-off system. Their owners were able to protect their patrons, keep their liquor licenses, and earn a living. As post-gayola scandal policing became more centralized and regulating homosexuality became more politicized and standardized, it was increasingly challenging for gay bars to remain open. They faced more duplicitous forms of policing aimed at curbing gay/lesbian visibility, sociality, and inclusion, oppressions that would later become key rallying points in community organizing.

¹³ Ibid., 469.

¹⁴ Ormsbee, *The Meaning of Gay*, 22.

¹⁵ Agee, "Gayola," 465.

¹⁶ Charles Raudebaugh, "2 More Cops Involved in the Bribe Probe," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 May 1960, Readex: America's Historical Newspapers, 1; 10.

¹⁷ Agee, "Gayola," 479.

The most decisive change that enabled these more aggressive tactics was the partnership between the SFPD and the ABC. By supplying plainclothes officers to the ABC, the SFPD was able to arrest more gay bar patrons via entrapment. Undercover officers would lure suspected homosexuals into accepting their advances and then arrest them, allowing SFPD and ABC members to manufacture probable cause for patrons' arrests and the revocation of bars' liquor licenses.¹⁸ Entrapment aided the SFPD's and ABC's justification for raids because it gave them "proof" that the establishment had a predominantly gay/lesbian clientele and was therefore a site of illegal activity. The most popular example of this is the Tay-Bush Inn Raid in which 103 people were arrested for "lewd, indecent acts," including same-sex dancing, which undercover officers had observed over the three days prior to the raid.¹⁹

Surveillance and targeted arrests became cornerstones of the regulation of gay bars, contributing to the twenty-five gay bar closures made by the SFPD and ABC in just 18 months in 1961 and 1962.²⁰ Through forms of regulation like entrapment, the SFPD and ABC prohibited LGBTQ+ people's first amendment right to association, denied them equal protection under the law, and restricted their acceptance and inclusion in the city of San Francisco. Ultimately, post-gayola, centralized regulation provided gay bar owners and gay/lesbian activists alike with distinct targets to organize against and concrete examples of how the regulation of gay bars perpetuated injustice and discrimination against the gay/lesbian community.

In response to the regulation of gay bars, existing homophile organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society committed more of their time, money, and periodical space to combat police repression. Though the Daughters of Bilitis was

¹⁸ Ormsbee, *The Meaning of Gay*, 22.

¹⁹ "Big Sex Raid --- Cops Arrest 103," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 August 1961, Readex: America's Historical Newspapers.

²⁰ Agee, "Gayola," 479.

founded to provide lesbians with an alternative to gay bars, the group remained attuned to the issues facing bar-going homosexuals inside and outside the organization.²¹ In their periodical *The Ladder*, Daughters of Bilitis cofounders Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin condemned the SFPD's discriminatory practices. In multiple editorials Martin blamed Mayor George Christopher for his complicity in homosexuals' mistreatment and argued that the SFPD ought to abolish the use of entrapment.²² Similarly, Lyon demanded an end to unequal surveillance of gay bars versus straight bars.²³ Echoing the Daughters of Bilitis' increasing criticism of gay bar regulation, the Mattachine Society denounced the discretionary authority of police officers and the abuses enabled by the ABC, Mayor Christopher, and Police Chief Cahill.²⁴ Both groups focused on fighting entrapment and police harassment and gaining individual rights for gay men and lesbians.²⁵ Their commitment to these issues led them to collaborate with other homophile organizations and bar-based activists to develop a discourse of gay/lesbian civil rights and propose strategies to secure those rights.

Though the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society were not created to combat gay bar regulation, their politics and activism were greatly transformed by the countless instances of police repression of gay bars. As outspoken supporters of gay/lesbian civil rights, these groups would not stand idly by as their community's "primary social institution" became hubs for

²¹ Guillaume Marche, "Of Homosexualities and Movements," in *Sexuality, Subjectivity, and LGBTQ Militancy in the United States*, ed. Guillaume Marche, trans. Katharine Throssell (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 27.

²² Del Martin, "Officialdom's Logic," *Ladder* 4, no. 11 (1960): 4-5, LGBTQ+ Source; Del Martin, "Firehoses next?" *Ladder* 5, no. 12 (September 1961): 14-15.

²³ See Phyllis Lyon at Glide Memorial Methodist Church box 17, folder 14, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers (PLDMP), GLBTHS, 1.

²⁴ Christopher Wins, "'Organized Homosexuals': Issue in S.F. Election," *Ladder* 4, no. 2 (1959): 5-10, LGBTQ+ Source.

²⁵ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 172.

harassment, raids, and arrests.²⁶ Resultantly, the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society forged generative partnerships between established and emerging homophile organizations. They helped new generations of activists decide what they wanted to fight for, what they wanted to represent, and why their work mattered. The ability to critique and be in tension with established organizations provided emerging organizations with a baseline and model, allowing them to identify the strengths and shortcomings of their predecessors and formulate their own strategies, perspectives, and goals. Similarly, leaders of the established organizations were actively involved in creating and funding these new groups.

One of the first groups to emerge from the regulation of gay bars was the League for Civil Education (LCE) (1961). LCE was closely aligned with the politics and strategies of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society because of its moderate civil rights approach to ending police repression. By sponsoring community meetings for bar-based organizers, homophile activists, the SFPD, and the ABC, LCE aimed to foster cooperation and open dialogue. Purposes of these meetings ranged from identifying issues of harassment and denial of civil rights in bars to how to improve relationships with law enforcement.²⁷ However, two police officers at the first community meeting “denied the existence of police entrapment or police discrimination against gay bargoers.”²⁸ The SFPD’s refusal to recognize documented abuse thwarted any possibility for productive discussion or action across groups. LCE remained dedicated to protecting people from entrapment, discrimination, and arrest, but without the ability to hold the SFPD or any other law enforcement agency accountable, their aim to secure equal protection under the law went unmet.

²⁶ Alan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 271, quoted in Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (October 2006): 728.

²⁷ “League for Civil Education 1961,” box 23, folder 1, José Sarria Papers, GLBTHS.

²⁸ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 221.

Despite its shortcomings, LCE remains an important organization because, as Boyd argues, LCE laid the groundwork for the Tavern Guild (1962) and the Society for Individual Rights (1963).²⁹

Gay bar owners and employees began the Tavern Guild to eradicate the unjust regulation of gay bars, minimize the impacts of discriminatory policing, and promote effective social and legal change.³⁰ James Robinson, gay bar employee and founding member, stated that creating "a culture of standing up to police harassment" was central to the mission of the Tavern Guild. Consequently, the Tavern Guild adopted LCE strategies like distributing photos of undercover SFPD and ABC agents and holding community meetings to improve relationships between private citizens and law enforcement agencies. The Tavern Guild had a modest impact on these relationships. Since SFPD and ABC members did not attend the community meetings, it was challenging to initiate a dialogue for positive change. However, by signaling their willingness to work with authorities, sponsoring popular social events, garnering support from campaigning liberal politicians, and fundraising, the Tavern Guild demonstrated the social, political, and economic power of the gay/lesbian community.³¹ Showing this strength "got the government—the ABC and the police department—to leave us [gay bars] alone a little bit," said gay bar owner Charlotte Coleman.³² The Tavern Guild did not substantially improve the relationships between private citizens and law enforcement, but it did provide people with some additional protection from arrests and harassment. The Tavern Guild also started a phone tree so that when gay bar employees experienced police harassment, a raid, or an inspection, they could warn other Tavern Guild members in mere minutes.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁰ "Lest We Forget," box 23, folder 15, José Sarria Papers, GLBTHS.

³¹ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 226.

³² Charlotte Coleman, interviewed by Nan Alamilla Boyd, tape recording, San Francisco, 13 July 1992, Wide Open Town History Project, GLBT Historical Society, quoted in Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 226.

Knowing which bars were targeted and seeing photos of confirmed undercover agents helped gay bars avoid raids. However, if the phone tree or photos did not reach everyone before a raid or inspection, members knew specific legal loopholes they could point to in order to avoid closures.³³ Combatting the oppression of gay bars was central to the Tavern Guild's mission, and as their physical and financial resources grew, they were able to expand their goals and services.

The Tavern Guild's ability to effectively link gay/lesbian organizing and gay/lesbian culture was what made them the most successful of the early homophile organizations. As "the most public aspect of homosexual life," gay bars were popular places to socialize, which made them easy targets for raids and arrests.³⁴ The Tavern Guild's position within an essential part of gay/lesbian culture and firsthand experience of fighting oppression informed the growing mission of the organization. It understood the lengths to which the SFPD, ABC, and public officials would go to intimidate, ghettoize, and repress the gay/lesbian community. Additionally, the Tavern Guild recognized the centrality of gay bars to the facilitation of friendships, relationships, hookups, and a sense of community.³⁵ Both understandings shaped the trajectory of the Tavern Guild because it recognized that community organizing was indispensable to the protection of their rights and gay/lesbian culture. No other bar-based groups were dedicated to these issues, so the Tavern Guild created its own social and legal bulwarks. For example, it provided people with legal defense funds, developed and educated a queer voting bloc, and identified legal challenges to California's antigay statues.³⁶ Furthermore, the Tavern Guild joined other homophile organizations to host fundraisers and community events that would help people in bar-based communities become more politically active and people in

³³ Agee, "Gayola," 480.

³⁴ Armstrong and Crage, "Movements and Memory," 728.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Lest We Forget," box 23, folder 15, José Sarria Papers, GLBTHS.

homophile organizations become more socially active.³⁷ The blending of these two communities strengthened future groups' ability to organize because there were more people invested in achieving civil rights, preserving gay/lesbian culture, and developing unapologetic gay/lesbian communities.

One of the Tavern Guild's strongest partnerships was with SIR, another organization sprouting from the disbandment of LCE. Unlike LCE and the Mattachine Society, SIR was not run by a board of directors or corporate officers who set the organization's agenda or viewed members as donors more than active participants. Instead, SIR sought to recruit people who were committed to active political organizing and promoting social change that would ensure the "dignity, self-respect, and self-worth" of homosexuals.³⁸ By 1965 SIR had the largest membership of any homophile organization in San Francisco and established a range of committees to serve the varied needs of the gay/lesbian community.³⁹ For example, to protect members from arrest and harassment, the Legal Committee distributed "Pocket Lawyers" to educate people on their constitutional and legal rights with special advice for gay men facing entrapment.⁴⁰ Additionally, SIR's monthly magazine *Vector* reported on police brutality and the need for a police review board, changes to "idiotic laws on homosexuality," and a reformed relationship between gay bars and the law.⁴¹ In addition to their legal aid and publications, SIR developed social responses to the regulation of gay bars that aimed to provide alternative spaces for people to socialize.

Lieutenant Elliot Blackstone, member of the SFPD from 1953 to 1975, recalls that the gay/lesbian community "wanted the

³⁷ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 225-6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁰ Christina B. Hanhardt, "'The White Ghetto': Sexual Deviancy, Police Accountability, and the 1960s War on Poverty," in *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 123.

⁴¹ *Vector* 1, no. 3 (February 1965): 1, 3, 5, 10.

bars in such a way as to not get busted.”⁴² This led to gay bars forbidding same-sex dancing and public displays of affection, as well as excluding trans and gender non-conforming (GNC) people because they could draw additional attention to a bar’s queer clientele.⁴³ The fear of getting “busted” by the police compounded the preexisting discrimination against and exclusion of trans and GNC people.⁴⁴ However, SIR dances, drag shows, theater productions, and balls created inclusive environments that provided safer socializing opportunities.⁴⁵ Since these were irregular events at different venues, it was harder for law enforcement to regulate them. Therefore, attendees could act freely with less fear of police raids and harassment and be less concerned with being policed by fellow LGBTQ+ community members.

SIR’s private events welcomed people from queer, trans, and GNC communities, aiding SIR’s ability to forge a strong political movement and united community that upheld the dignity and respect of all members. SIR President Bill Beardemphel recalls these social events “fulfilling their [members’] life experience and making it good that being a homosexual is good.”⁴⁶ Through their committees, publications, and social events, SIR molded a cohesive “‘gay community’ into an effective political tool.”⁴⁷ Homophile organizations were now fighting for both individual

⁴² Elliot Blackstone (EB), interviewed by Susan Stryker (SS), Pacifica, CA, 6 November 1996, online transcript, GLBTHS, 18.

⁴³ Emily K. Hobson, "Beyond the Gay Ghetto: Founding Debates in Gay Liberation," in *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 19; EB, interviewed by SS, Pacifica, CA, 6 November 1996, online transcript, GLBTHS, 18.

⁴⁴ In August 1966, the management of Compton’s Cafeteria, a popular hangout in the Tenderloin for trans, GNC, and queer people, called the police to remove customers for allegedly loitering and deterring business. Upon arrival, police began to disperse and harass people, resulting in rioting inside and outside the restaurant. After the riot, the first recorded trans-led riot in U.S. history, people boycotted the business for enabling abusive policing.

⁴⁵ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 230.

⁴⁶ Bill Beardemphel and John DeLeon, interviewed by Paul Gabriel, San Francisco, CA, July 1997, online transcript, GLBTHS, 51.

⁴⁷ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 231.

and collective civil rights, positioning themselves as political, social, and communal organizations dedicated to civic engagement and protecting their community.

The Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) (1964) was also embedded in this culture of cooperative participation, though it sought to unite the gay/lesbian community, religious circles, and the broader public. Until the mid-1950s, few Christian scholars had questioned the church's prevailing view "that homosexuality was sinful and intrinsically evil."⁴⁸ Even after Anglican priest and theologian Derrick Sherwin Bailey's 1955 publication of *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*—which argued that the church's antihomosexual views were a result of poor theology, improper biblical exegesis, and an insufficient understanding of a text's historical context—few churches changed their perspective, making antihomosexual views commonplace in Christian teachings, theology, and ministry.⁴⁹ However, the Glide Methodist Church, founding member of the CRH, adopted Bailey's interpretation and was one of the few churches where religious leaders advocated on behalf of gay men/lesbians, educated religious communities on gay/lesbian issues, and ministered to local gay men/lesbians.⁵⁰ Glide's progressive politics, left-leaning clergymen, and commitment to urban ministry made them appealing to local gay/lesbian activists who wanted to combat homophobia prompted by Christianity. Subsequently, these once disparate groups founded CRH to promote dialogue "between homosexuals and the community at large—in the interests of increased mutual understanding" and to serve San Francisco's marginalized communities.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Patrick S. Cheng, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Liberative Ethics," in *Ethics: A Liberative Approach*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2013), 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Exhibit: The Council on Religion and the Homosexual," LGBT Religious Archives Network.

⁵¹ "S.F. Homosexuals: Clerics Blast Cops," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 Sept. 1965, box 18, folder 1, PLDMP, GLBTHS.

To develop a broad knowledge of the issues facing San Francisco's gay/lesbian community, CRH forged connections with leaders and members of the Mattachine Society, Tavern Guild, SIR, and the Daughters of Bilitis. By providing gay/lesbian activists with the opportunity to share their communities' concerns, CRH encouraged stronger alliances between the organizations and a more nuanced understanding of the wants and needs of the different branches of the gay/lesbian community. A result of these growing alliances was the 1965 New Year's Day Ball, which was intended to be a fundraising event for CRH and a celebratory event for the gay/lesbian community.⁵² However, the SFPD had other ideas.

On the day of the ball, the SFPD sent fifty-five officers to "intimidate, harass and make arrests; and to in any fashion destroy the ball."⁵³ Like most of their gay bar busts, the SFPD wanted to break up the New Year's Day Ball to fuel their interests in "embarrassing gay and lesbian people and disrupting their attempts to socialize in public view."⁵⁴ Members of the SFPD were instructed to photograph all attendees trying to enter, block the intersection in front of the ball, divert traffic, and engage in other intimidation tactics to prevent people from attending. During the raid, Rev. Cecil Williams said that a police officer, "looked at the rings on our [the Ministers'] fingers and said, 'We see you're married—how do your wives accept this?'"⁵⁵ Williams was one of twelve heterosexual ministers who sponsored the ball. Other straight people attended as friends and allies. At least one reverend was threatened with arrest, and, according to Rev. Ted McIlvenna, it took the SFPD "more than an hour to find anything wrong" after entering the ball and sweeping the building.⁵⁶ Ultimately, the

⁵² Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 232.

⁵³ "Private Benefit Ball Invaded," *Vector* 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1965).

⁵⁴ Agee, "Gayola," 486.

⁵⁵ Donovan Bess, "Angry Ministers Rip Police," *San Francisco Chronicle* (3 Jan. 1965): 1A.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

SFPD only arrested three lawyers who worked with SIR and one volunteer, all of whom were later acquitted.⁵⁷ The SFPD was suspicious of all attendees and committed to sabotaging the ball. It wanted to prevent gay/lesbian socializing and discourage straight people from displaying public support of the gay/lesbian community, but their intimidation tactics backfired.

The ball became a publicized example of police harassment and intimidation that generated some straights' sympathy and further mobilized homophile organizations. First, homophile organizations had a new legal opportunity to combat police persecution. CRH filed false-arrest suits upwards of one million dollars in damages, which prompted Police Chief Cahill to end large bar raids and stop providing the ABC with undercover officers, minimizing gay bar regulation and closures.⁵⁸ Second, there were more media opportunities to draw the general public's attention to gay/lesbian oppression. CRH's "A Brief of Injustices" states that, after its many confrontations with the SFPD, "It has become apparent that the police feel justified in doing whatever they want to do regardless of whether it is merited or not, wise, or even legal."⁵⁹ The brief cites social ostracization, inequitable enforcement of laws, intimidation, enticement, entrapment, and harassment as central injustices experienced by the gay/lesbian community. The document singles out gay bars as a primary locus of these injustices and whose regulation denies gay men/lesbians the right to assembly.⁶⁰ Compiling and documenting these injustices helped raise awareness of the issues faced by the gay/lesbian community and served as a decisive call to action against homophobia to be heeded by the religious community, politicians, law enforcement, and society at large. Additionally, the

⁵⁷ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 234.

⁵⁸ Phyllis Lyon, "Church Channel To Homosexuals," *Christianity Today*, box 18, folder 1, PLDMP, GLBTHS; Agee, "Gayola," 485.

⁵⁹ Council on Religion and the Homosexual, Inc., "A Brief of Injustices: An Indictment of Our Society in Its Treatment of the Homosexual" (June 1965): 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

media coverage of the New Year's Day Ball gave SIR and CRH more opportunities to condemn police harassment in the press, building on the civil rights discourse homophile organizations had been developing throughout the early 1960s.

The New Year's Day Ball came to symbolize the issues between the SFPD and the gay/lesbian community. It encapsulated the years of discriminatory policing experienced by the gay/lesbian community and the violation of LGBTQ+ public spaces. At the same time, the New Year's Day Ball became representative of the issues *within* the gay/lesbian community. The ball certainly functioned as a "catalyst for improvements in the situation of San Francisco homosexuals," but homophile organizations and emerging gay liberation organizations did not always agree on what improvements should be made nor how to achieve them.⁶¹ While homophile organizations clung to their moderate approaches focused on securing constitutional and civil rights, gay liberation organizations sought more substantial social change that would dismantle interconnected systems of oppression. The regulation of gay bars remained a cause for debate between homophile organizations and gay liberation organizations, leading to more opportunities for consciousness-raising and refining organizations' politics and goals.

Homophile groups wanted to cultivate a conformist version of the homosexual who sought to be integrated into society. Members were expected to obey the laws and conventions of mainstream society so that they could prove their worthiness of individual and civil rights.⁶² To reflect their assimilation to class and gender norms, homophile activists would participate in protests with the men wearing suits and ties and women wearing dresses.⁶³ Even after the New Year's Day Ball, an event welcoming people in drag and with non-normative gender presentations, groups like SIR clung to the idea of aligning

⁶¹ Armstrong and Crage, "Movements and Memory," 730.

⁶² Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 240.

⁶³ Hobson, "Beyond the Gay Ghetto," 19.

masculine homosexuality with prescribed gender norms.⁶⁴ Conformity garnered criticism from gay liberationists, activists of color, and the more progressive homophile activists. Due to the homophile groups' homogeneity and limited connections with other social and political movements, they had a narrow understanding of homosexuality that was informed by whiteness, middle-class standards, and gender normativity. Additionally, there was little attention to issues impacting trans, queer, and GNC people, who were often seen as inimical to the groups' assimilationist approaches. A moderate approach to change appeared the most appealing path because, as most members were not committed to fighting other forms of oppression, it seemed the most likely to succeed. The Daughters of Bilitis, Mattachine Society, LCE, Tavern Guild, and SIR were single-issue organizations almost exclusively dedicated to issues that exclusively impacted gay men/lesbians as gay men/lesbians.

Gay liberation groups of the mid-to-late 1960s surpassed the single-issue, assimilationist models championed by their predecessors because they did not want assimilation and conformity to be the routes by which they gained social acceptance. Instead, they worked to form inclusive organizations dedicated to serving people from diverse backgrounds experiencing a range of interconnected issues. Therefore, gay liberation groups fought for people's right to be *out* of gay bars more than their right to be *in* gay bars.

The "gay ghetto" was a salient concept in the discourses and publications of San Francisco's emerging gay liberation organizations. One meaning of gay ghetto drew a parallel between the shared experiences of people of color, particularly Black people, and gay people living in lower-income, heavily policed urban areas. The second meaning of gay ghetto pointed to how gay

⁶⁴ Betty Luther Hillman, "'The Most Profoundly Revolutionary Act a Homosexual Can Engage in': Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964-1972," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (2011): 167.

people were exploited by and isolated from society through the collusion of the SFPD, organized crime, and gay bar owners—as seen in the “gayola” scandal. Both meanings of gay ghetto pointed to how queer people were excluded from public life and relegated to marginal, precarious positions, both socially and geographically.⁶⁵

LGBTQ+ and labor activist Carl Wittman writes, “Ghettos breed self-hatred [sic]. We stagnate, accepting the status quo. The status quo is rotten. We are all warped by our oppression, and in the isolation of the ghetto we blame ourselves rather than our oppressors.”⁶⁶ Wittman’s words encapsulate many gay liberationists sentiments toward the gay ghetto, with gay bars functioning as potent symbols of gay exclusion. Because even if gay ghettos are “more diverse and freer than most ghettos,” capitalists still turn a profit, police still patrol them, and the government still decides if gays deserve tolerance.⁶⁷ Groups like Citizens Alert, Inc., Vanguard, and Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF) wanted to combat gay ghettoization perpetuated by mainstream society. However, they also sought to combat the “middle class bigotry and racism” of some homophile groups by taking multi-issue approaches to dismantling oppressive power structures and refusing to accept the status quo.⁶⁸

Citizens Alert was one of the few pro-gay multi-racial organizations in pre-Stonewall San Francisco. It was founded in 1965 to protect all people from police brutality, harassment, intimidation, and unequal enforcement of the law.⁶⁹ Like the homophile organizations, Citizens Alert emphasized civic education and legal empowerment, which it promoted via legal advice booklets and a 24-hour hotline to report police

⁶⁵ Hobson, “Beyond the Gay Ghetto,” 19.

⁶⁶ Carl Wittman, “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Perspective,” *Berkeley Tribe* 1, no. 25 (26 Dec. 1969 – 2 Jan. 1970): 13. Independent Voices.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hobson, “Beyond the Gay Ghetto,” 24.

⁶⁹ “Citizens Alert First Annual Report, August, 1965-December, 1966,” box 42, folder 24, PLDMP, GLBTHS, 1.

misconduct.⁷⁰ However, unlike its homophile predecessors, Citizens Alert worked to combat discrimination that could be experienced as a result of "income, color, national origin, sexual identification and minority status."⁷¹ By serving as a police watchdog for multiple forms of discrimination against many groups, Citizens Alert became a great vehicle for coalition-building among groups dedicated to critiquing and reforming the relationship between law enforcement and the general public.⁷² Citizens Alert looked beyond the regulation of gay bars to understand how violent police practices operated at all levels of society and across many marginalized communities. Yet, the genesis of the organization remains inextricably linked to the regulation of gay bars because of Citizens Alert's commitment to fighting discrimination in places of public accommodation and segregation in public facilities.⁷³

Similarly, Vanguard also broke away from the single-issue homophile organizations by including people of nonnormative gender presentations, more people of color, members of San Francisco's radical youth subculture, and sex workers.⁷⁴ Members of Vanguard were often unable or unwilling to assimilate to the norms of dominant society due to their identities and/or politics.⁷⁵ For example, members of the gay liberation movement sought sexual freedom that they thought could only be achieved by ending "militarism, racism, and police violence."⁷⁶ This led Vanguard to disagree with homophile groups' Americanist appeals on issues

⁷⁰ The National Lawyers Guild, "Citizens' Guide to the 1964 Civil Rights Act," American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, box 42, folder 28, PLDMP, GLBTHS.

⁷¹ "Citizens Alert First Annual Report, August, 1965-December, 1966," box 42, folder 24, PLDMP, GLBTHS, 1.

⁷² Hanhardt, "The White Ghetto," 67-68.

⁷³ The National Lawyers Guild, "Citizens' Guide," box 42, folder 28, PLDMP, GLBTHS, 4-9.

⁷⁴ Hillman, "The Most Profoundly Revolutionary," 162.

⁷⁵ Hanhardt, "The White Ghetto," 42

⁷⁶ Hobson, "Beyond the Gay Ghetto," 18.

like gay inclusion in the military or the right to privacy.⁷⁷ To Vanguard members, arguing for the right to privacy reified the ghettoization of the marginalized. Being able to congregate in private however one pleases (e.g., in drag, wearing androgynous clothing, showing same-sex affection, etc.) would not disrupt the “hostile social order in which all difference from the usual in behavior is attacked.”⁷⁸ Instead, Vanguard wanted public organizing and action free of guilt, police and capitalist exploitation, or “cowards and bullies” coming to the Tenderloin and “beating the shit out of queers.”⁷⁹ To achieve this, Vanguard wanted to join with other anti-imperialist and multiracial organizations who were against the capitalist state. They believed that the systems and structures of capitalism fueled gay oppression, which was inextricably linked to issues of sexism, racism, and classism.⁸⁰

San Francisco’s Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF), founded in April 1969 and renamed the Gay Liberation Front in August 1969, shared Vanguard’s critiques and concerns surrounding the gay ghetto and the gay bar’s role within it.⁸¹ Gale Whittington, cofounder of CHF, positioned CHF and its members as desirous of a cultural revolution. Whittington wanted to deliver the gay/lesbian community out of gay bars and away from organizations that “keep their people in a ghetto.”⁸² By hosting private parties in secluded places and charging entry to bars and special events, Whittington argued that SIR and Tavern Guild profited off the seclusion of the gay/lesbian community because

⁷⁷ Simon Hall, “Protest Movements in the 1970s: The Long 1960s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008): 665.

⁷⁸ Vanguard, Inc. “Statement of Purpose for Vanguard,” *Vanguard Magazine* 1, no. 1 (August 1966): 1, Digital Transgender Archive.

⁷⁹ Ray Broshears, “A New Found Art,” *Vanguard Magazine: The Magazine of the Tenderloin* 1 no. 2 (October 1966): 9, Digital Transgender Archive.

⁸⁰ Hillman, “The Most Profoundly Revolutionary,” 167.

⁸¹ Hobson, “Beyond the Gay Ghetto,” 26.

⁸² “The New Gay World of Gale Whittington,” *Tangents* 4, no. 1, 2, 3 (Oct.-Dec. 1969): 5. Independent Voices.

there was nowhere else for people to go. Whittington believed that this made some homophile groups resistant to change and the betterment of the gay/lesbian community because it would render it immune to economic exploitation. Further, CHF was against politics of cooperation championed by previous homophile organizations, especially the idea of working with the police. Whittington stated that "Mattachine has sold out to the police." By making deals with the police, they can "control you to the point where you don't do anything."⁸³ Negotiating rights and liberties within an unjust system did not sit well with Whittington. Instead, he wanted to create an organization composed of mutually reinforcing groups dedicated to combating interlocking forms of oppression. The conditions that created and upheld gay ghettos and their central institutions, like the gay bar, came increasingly under fire as the gay liberation movement continued to be influenced by the theory and praxis of Black liberation, Third World radicalism, and the New Left.⁸⁴

By August 1969, CHF morphed into GLF and took issue with the "Gay Establishment" as a whole. Some members called gay bars "walk-in closets" and critiqued Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis, Tavern Guild, and SIR for clinging to their "middle-class respectability" and tenuous commitments to social, political, and economic transformation.⁸⁵ Boyfriend of Gale Whittington and cofounder of CHF/GLF, Leo Laurence saw gay bars and private events like the holiday drag balls as hindrances to people's freedom of gender expression and gender transgression. People should feel free to do drag "not just twice a year, but every day; not just at a drag ball, but at work, school, church, and on the streets."⁸⁶ Further, Laurence envisioned a future where it was

⁸³ Ibid., 7-9.

⁸⁴ Hobson, "Beyond the Gay Ghetto," 21.

⁸⁵ John James, "Out of the bars and into the streets," *San Francisco Good Times* 2, no. 43 (6 Nov. 1969): 6-7, Independent Voices.

⁸⁶ Leo E. Laurence, "Wear Your Gown All Year Round," *Berkeley Tribe* 1, no. 17 (31 Oct.- 6 Nov. 1969): 8, Independent Voices.

acceptable for “two gay lovers to kiss in a bar, just as heteros do.”⁸⁷ Ultimately, gay liberation groups took less issue with gay bars themselves than the conditions that made gay bars feel like the only option. They sought to co-create a world with an expansive view of gender and sexuality that did not have to be limited to gay bars, controlled by the law, or regulated by the police. Gay liberation groups of late 1960s San Francisco fueled the genesis of the “gay left,” which would continue to pursue liberation for and solidarity among the marginalized.⁸⁸

Mid-to-late 1960s gay rights organizations envisioned a profoundly restructured society. Citizens Alert aimed to free people from state violence and social control, especially on behalf of sexual and racial minorities who were disproportionately impacted by abusive policing. To promote police accountability, Citizens Alert created coalitions between homophile activists and more than fifty other organizations including Black, Chinese, Japanese, and Latinx civil rights groups.⁸⁹ Although state violence and social control of marginalized communities continue today, Citizens Alert’s solidarity work remains impressive and demonstrates the importance of continuing to fight these injustices, as attempted by Vanguard and CHF/GLF. These groups realized that sexual oppression could not be the sole focus of their activism because heterosexism is entwined with other forms of privilege, power, and oppression like racism, classism, and sexism. Sexual liberation and freedom of gender expression could not be achieved without solidarity against the entire interlocking system of “isms.” Anti-racist and anti-capitalist goals were particularly salient among the more radical gay liberationists, leading to a broad spectrum of activism involved in but not limited to the Third World Strike, Black liberation, and the anti-war movements.⁹⁰ Whittington said

⁸⁷ “Gay Revolution,” *Berkeley Barb* 8, no. 13 (28 March-3 April 1969): 23, Independent Voices.

⁸⁸ Hobson, “Beyond the Gay Ghetto,” 41.

⁸⁹ Hanhardt, “The White Ghetto,” 68.

⁹⁰ Hobson, “Beyond the Gay Ghetto,” 24.

of the politics and practices of San Francisco's early gay liberation movement, "Our reactions will relate to the times and what's happening and specific injustices that occur."⁹¹ This reflects a dynamic activism dedicated to rising to the challenges of its time with sustained commitment to fighting injustice.

Efforts to protect the patrons of gay bars, actions once deemed radical even in San Francisco, by the end of the 1960s were increasingly spurned as cripplingly limited and conservative in scope. Whether fighting biblically backed homophobia or for the right to hold hands in public, homophile activists and gay liberationists were increasingly concerned with a wider range of issues of social justice. Although homophile rights organizations continued to prioritize securing individual rights for gay men/lesbians, gay liberation groups sought widespread social transformation for the betterment of many marginalized communities. The groups' different perspectives on similar issues engendered a broad spectrum of activism that contained diverse insights into how to achieve justice for the gay/lesbian community. Memories of previous activism informed the work of future activists by providing them with multiple blueprints for community organizing, generating publicity and direct action strategies to aid their causes.⁹² To preserve this history, as argued by Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crago, "Memory depends on the survival and continued relevance of commemorative vehicles."⁹³

Despite the limited scope of the activism centered on gay bars in the early 1960s, their sustained historical significance within LGBTQ+ history and activism make them appropriate memorial sites—as recognized in 2016 with the establishment of the Stonewall Inn as a national monument. However, physical preservation of gay bars in the United States may not be an option. From 2007 to 2019, U.S. gay bar listings have decreased by as

⁹¹ "The New Gay World of Gale Whittington," 8.

⁹² Hall, "Protest Movements," 672.

⁹³ Armstrong and Crago, "Movements and Memory," 746.

much as 37%.⁹⁴ The U.S. is experiencing an all-time low in the 40-plus years of gay bar history, a decline that only accelerated during the coronavirus pandemic. And while there may be many positive reasons that might account for these closures, such as increased social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, more LGBTQ+ social media and dating apps, and a wider range of accessible social activities beyond bar scenes, LGBTQ+ communities still suffer grave losses when gay bars close, especially in smaller cities and rural areas where gay bars are still the only non-virtual public option for LGBTQ+ gatherings. Gay bars were, and are, hubs for socializing, political organizing, and experiencing oneself as a joyous being connected to one's desired cultures, subcultures, and communities.⁹⁵ Additionally, they were sites of violence, exclusion, and discrimination.⁹⁶ Even if these spaces cannot be physically preserved as commemorative vehicles, their complex legacies should be sustained in archives, collective memories, and historiographies.

The history of gay bars offers valuable insight into how oppressed groups can be empowered by their own institutions to forge community, create alliances, evolve, and gain rights. The regulation of San Francisco gay bars in the 1960s shows how law enforcement, bar-based culture, homophile organizations, and gay liberation groups shaped and were shaped by one another. Although the Stonewall Riots in New York are generally understood to mark the beginning of the liberation of LGBTQ+ people, in the decade prior to these riots, gay bars in San Francisco were a generative locus for political debate, community-based organizing, and consciousness-raising. The regulation of gay bars was a key contributor to the creation of new LGBTQ+

⁹⁴ Greggor Mattson, "Are Gay Bars Closing? Using Business Listings to Infer Rates of Gay Bar Closure in the United States, 1977-2019," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5: 1-2 (8 Oct. 2020).

⁹⁵ Greggor Mattson, "Shuttered by the coronavirus, many gay bars – already struggling – are now on life support," *The Conversation*, 14 Apr. 2020.

⁹⁶ Hobson, "Beyond the Gay Ghetto," 18.

organizations and to the discourses, strategies, and publications they developed to combat oppression and promote liberation. Discriminatory policing and aggressive raids subjected gay bars and their patrons to the whims of local authorities. Existing homophile organizations identified this injustice and mobilized against mistreatment. Concurrently, nascent groups emerged both through and in opposition to existing active homophile organizations to combat similar issues. These incipient organizations extended beyond, and sometimes in tension with, the work of their homophile predecessors as they developed new strategies, goals, and sensibilities to respond to the struggles of their time. San Francisco in the 1960s beget an unprecedented array of LGBTQ+ activism that expanded queer politics beyond issues impacting the white, middle-class, gender-normative gay/lesbian community. Even prior to Stonewall, gay liberation organizations articulated an understanding of how related injustices were perpetuated by a racist, imperialist, and capitalist system. These groups were committed to multi-issue politics and diverse participatory action that cultivated broader solidarity across organizations and movements, thereby increasing the likelihood of social transformation. Throughout this progression, gay bars remained integral to LGBTQ+ history because of their sustained centrality to LGBTQ+ life. Gay bars are at once a nexus of pleasure and pain, of historical memory and embodied future, and of inclusion and exclusion, revealing that power and change can emanate from surprising sources.

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