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# The Invention of Gay Community in San Francisco, 1960–1970

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## Abstract

Though historians have often traced the evolution of LGBT ‘communities’ in the United States, they have left the genealogy of queer ideas of ‘community’ underexamined. This article begins to address this lacuna by charting the bifurcated early history of these ideas in the nation’s ‘gay capital’, San Francisco. It identifies homophile activist José Sarria’s 1961 campaign for San Francisco city supervisor as the event that introduced the notion of a ‘gay community’ to lasting effect into local homophile organizing. Sarria’s camp mobilized the idea as a resistance tool for the fight against state repression. In the following years, the concept established itself across local homophile activism. Simultaneously with the rise of ‘gay community’, some homophile leaders also developed coalitional visions of ‘community’. These were inspired by Black freedom organizing and prioritized building community with other marginalized groups. Only a mid-1960s struggle over the orientation of the country’s first homophile community centre led to a lasting sidelining of this coalitional tradition. The reconstruction of this bipartite history challenges enduring myths of a monolithically conservative homophile movement, and helps explain the subsequent success of a homonormative gay politics in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Over the last fifty years, LGBT historians have generated an extensive literature on the evolution of homoerotic social life in the United States. Their work has recovered the shapes queer social formations have taken across centuries and the country’s various regions, in rural spaces, small towns, suburbs, and cities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For general overviews of US LGBT history, see Leila J. Rupp, *A desired past: a short history of same-sex love in America* (Chicago, IL, 1999); and Michael Bronski, *A queer history of the United States* (Boston, MA, 2011). Marc Stein, ‘Theoretical politics, local communities: the making of U.S. LGBT historiography’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 11 (2005), pp. 605–25, reviews important early contributions to this literature. For surveys of the history of US LGBT activism, see Lillian Faderman, *The gay revolution: the story of the struggle* (New York, NY, 2015); Marc Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement* (New York, NY, 2012).

But while these works have often understood themselves as histories of LGBT ‘communities’, they have had little to say on the genealogy of LGBT ideas of ‘community’ themselves.

Historians’ reticence to scrutinize ‘community’ has left a rich intellectual and political history largely untouched. When so-called ‘homophile’ activists first began claiming the concept for themselves amidst the virulent anti-gay oppression of the 1960s, they conducted vibrant conversations over the form, roots, membership, and scope of what they variously referred to as the ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’, or ‘homophile community’. Lesbians, gay men, queer street children, and their allies debated on what basis gays might be termed a ‘community’, whether they formed a ‘community’ of their own, belonged to a larger ‘community’ of marginalized groups, should build ‘community’ on a local or national level, and how best to realize their visions of ‘community’. Their speeches, letters, articles, newsletters, pamphlets, fiction, and oral histories all attest to the vivacity of their discussions. Questions concerning the meaning, reality, and possibilities of community have continued to occupy LGBT activists and thinkers ever since.

This article contributes to a fuller recovery of these conversations by charting the invention and consolidation of gay ideas of community in 1960s San Franciscan homophile activism. Thitherto, US representations of non-normative sexual and gender populations as ‘communities’ had primarily appeared in medical, sociological, and anti-gay publications.<sup>2</sup> Since at least the early twentieth century, medical authorities had occasionally described gender and sexual dissidents as ‘a community distinctly organized’ with meeting places, ‘words, customs, and traditions of its own’.<sup>3</sup> Chicago school sociologists first began examining gay subcultures in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Mid-century sociologists then rediscovered homosexuals as one of several marginalized urban ‘communities’ to investigate.<sup>5</sup> Where sociological accounts could aim at destigmatizing homosexuality, invocations in the anti-gay press of homosexuals as a ‘huge, well-organized, wealthy, defiant, politically powerful, intelligent community, spreading across national borders, with loyalty to no country, no law or no code’ served to justify ongoing oppression.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1960s, San Franciscan homophiles began to join these groups in designating themselves a ‘community’, while also putting this idea to novel political uses.

As the homophobic newspaper article indicates, homophile claims to community had to negotiate a paranoid, fiercely individualistic Cold War intellectual climate – a context in which any bonding, let alone mobilization of an

<sup>2</sup> For an exceptionally early gay reference, see the discussion of Robert Duncan’s ‘The homosexual in society’ (1944) below.

<sup>3</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Sexual inversion* (Philadelphia, PA, 1915), p. 351. Ellis cites a US informant.

<sup>4</sup> Chad Heap, ‘The city as a sexual laboratory: the queer heritage of the Chicago school’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 26 (2003), pp. 457–87.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Maurice Leznoff and William Westley, ‘The homosexual community’, *Social Problems*, 3 (1956), pp. 257–63; Evelyn Hooker, ‘The homosexual community’, in John H. Gagnon and William Simon, eds., *Sexual deviance* (New York, NY, 1967), pp. 167–84.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Mattachine letter rates blast from columnist’, *Mattachine Review*, 6/9 (Sept. 1960), p. 32.

outsider group risked being branded as communist agitation, potentially totalitarian in nature, and an attack on the nation and its values.<sup>7</sup> Homosexuals in particular had long been subject to such insinuations. During the so-called Lavender Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, 400 State Department employees had been fired as 'security risks' on the basis of their ostensible vulnerability to communist sympathies and blackmailing.<sup>8</sup> Anti-gay redbaiting would continue through the 1960s, such as in the work of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee that sparked 'the dismissal of sixteen black teachers and unquantifiable terror'.<sup>9</sup> In this atmosphere, many homosexuals disapproved of the idea of a 'gay community'. They included such intrepid champions of gay civil rights as San Franciscan poet Robert Duncan. In his pioneering 1944 essay 'The homosexual in society', Duncan warned that the homosexual 'community' he had participated in with its 'secret language, the *camp*', was a 'cult' which wrongfully served the interests of a 'special [group]' instead of dedicating itself to 'human freedom' in its universality.<sup>10</sup> 'The majority of gays', homophile activist-historian Jim Kepner noted, had originally 'considered the very wording "community"...communistic', and, therefore, objectionable.<sup>11</sup>

In pronouncing themselves a community, homophiles encountered not only resistance but also positive role models in the 1960s United States. Most notably, they were following in the footsteps of African Americans in seeking to overcome public images of pathology and deviance and recast themselves as an oppressed political minority.<sup>12</sup> The San Francisco Bay Area witnessed Black freedom organizing throughout the decade. Local grievances at persistent discrimination, state neglect, and white terror inspired a series of direct-action protests between 1963 and 1966, the 1966 Hunter's Point Uprising, and the founding of the Black Panther's Party in Oakland two months later.<sup>13</sup> Deployments of 'community' featured in both national and local Black

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston, MA, 1998); David Johnson, *Lavender Scare: the Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the federal government* (Chicago, IL, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Lavender Scare*.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Jones, "'Until I talked with you": silence, storytelling, and Black sexual intimacies in the Johns Committee Records, 1960–5', *Gender & History*, 30 (2018), pp. 511–27, at p. 512.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Duncan, 'The homosexual in society', in James Maynard, ed., *Robert Duncan: collected essays and other prose* (Berkeley, CA, 2019), pp. 5–18, at pp. 10, 8, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Kepner interview by John D'Emilio, 23–30 Sept. 1976, New York Public Library (NYPL), IGIC Audiovisual collection, part 8.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal time: television and the civil rights movement* (Urbana, IL, 2017); Jennifer Jones, *Ambivalent affinities: a political history of Blackness & homosexuality after World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> On the direct-action protests, see Daniel Edward Crowe, *Prophets of rage: the Black freedom struggle in San Francisco, 1945–1969* (New York, NY, 2000), pp. 125–8; Paul T. Miller, *The postwar struggle for civil rights: African Americans in San Francisco, 1945–1975* (New York, NY, 2010), pp. 75–87. On the Hunter's Point uprising, see Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin, 'A forgotten community, a forgotten history: San Francisco's 1966 urban uprising', in Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis, eds., *The strange careers of the Jim Crow north: segregation and struggle outside of the south* (New York, NY, 2019), pp. 211–34. On the founding of the Black Panther Party, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against empire: the history and politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), pp. 17–62.

activism. Martin Luther King Jr advanced the idea of a ‘beloved community’ as a guiding ideal for the nation.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, San Francisco’s African American press, Black organizers, and gay activists converged with national Black leaders in invoking the concept of a local ‘Negro community’.<sup>15</sup> The visions of ‘community’ San Franciscan homophiles developed were always informed by the convergence of racial and sexual agitation.

Most immediately, the idea of a homosexual community built on burgeoning conceptions of homosexuals as a political, social, and cultural minority. Gay intellectual Edward Sagarin’s book *The homosexual in America* (1951) is often recognized for introducing this notion.<sup>16</sup> ‘We who are homosexuals are a minority, not only numerically, but also as a result of a caste-like status in society’, Sagarin asserted.

Our minority status is similar, in a variety of respects, to that of national, religious, and other ethnic groups: in the denial of civil liberties; in the legal, extra-legal and quasi-legal discrimination; in the assignment of an inferior social position; in the exclusion from the mainstream of life and culture.<sup>17</sup>

At a time of amplifying pro-Jewish and pro-African American political mobilization, this gay Jewish writer with an interest in Black male sexual partners translated a familiar political concept into a new context.<sup>18</sup> In the process, he helped smooth the path for the ascent of a related idea, ‘gay community’.

San Francisco offers an especially fruitful site for an analysis of gay community’s early history. Home to a sprawling network of gay bars and many of the leading homophile groups of the post-Second World War era, the city held a reputation as the country’s ‘gay capital’.<sup>19</sup> It has also long been associated

<sup>14</sup> On King’s idea of ‘beloved community’, see for example Michele Moody-Adams, ‘The path of conscientious citizenship’, in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To shape a new world: essays on the political philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), pp. 269–89, at pp. 270–5.

<sup>15</sup> The San Francisco-based Black newspaper *Sun-Reporter* referred to the local ‘Negro community’ throughout the 1950s and 1960s. For the first mentions in *The Ladder* and *Vector*, see respectively ‘Picketing’, *The Ladder*, 9/12 (Sept. 1965), pp. 4–8, at p. 7; and Jim Hardcastle, ‘Supervisory election analysis’, *Vector*, 2/1 (Dec. 1965), pp. 1, 12, at p. 12. For an example from local Black activism, see Dunn-Salahuddin, ‘Forgotten community’, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance John D’Emilio, *Sexual politics, sexual communities: the making of a homosexual minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (2nd edn, Chicago, IL 1998; orig. edn 1983), p. 33; Stein, *Rethinking*, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Sagarin (pseud. Donald Webster Cory), *The homosexual in America: a subjective approach* (New York, NY, 1951), pp. 3, 13–14. Sagarin’s observation that ‘[some homosexuals] come back to the same street frequently; they know each other, give a nod of recognition, then talk, form a community’ (p. 116) is the only reference to an incipient gay collective self-understanding as a ‘community’.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Murray, ‘Donald Webster Cory (1913–1986)’, in Vern L. Bullough, ed., *Before Stonewall: activists for gay and lesbian rights in historical context* (New York, NY, 2002), pp. 333–43, at p. 336.

<sup>19</sup> San Francisco was notoriously declared the US ‘gay capital’ by Paul Welsh, ‘Homosexuality in America’, *LIFE Magazine*, 26 June 1964, pp. 66–80, at p. 68.

with the birth of ideas of 'gay community' in particular. Some homophiles, like Angeleno activist Cassandra, credited San Franciscans with '[making] popular' this 'ridiculous term'.<sup>20</sup> Kepner considered the San Franciscan Society for Individual Rights (SIR, 1964–78) the first homophile group with a 'highly developed philosophy' – a philosophy that was 'specifically concerned with building a gay community'.<sup>21</sup> In their rare comments on the subject, later generations of historians, too, have tied the emergence of gay ideas of 'community' to 1960s San Francisco. Influential works like John D'Emilio's *Sexual politics, sexual communities: the making of a homosexual minority* (1983) hinted at SIR as the first gay speakers of 'community'.<sup>22</sup> On D'Emilio's account, ideas of 'community' emerged as a natural reaction to an expanding San Franciscan gay life and, especially, gay bar culture. In his words, the 'significantly different shape' San Francisco's gay life 'was assuming [by the mid-1960s]...from its counterparts in other urban areas' led to the formation of a 'self-conscious gay community'.<sup>23</sup> D'Emilio further suggested that homophiles uniformly gravitated toward one way of parsing 'community', that is, toward imaginaries of (homo-)sexual community. As D'Emilio contended, a "'community" was...forming [in 1960s San Francisco] around a shared sexual orientation'.<sup>24</sup>

In a departure from D'Emilio, this article makes the case for a longer, bifurcated history of homophile ideas of community in San Francisco. It proceeds in two steps. The first section reconstructs the arrival and consolidation of 'gay community' within homophile organizing. It shows how members of the League for Civil Education (LCE, 1961–4), SIR's predecessor organization, were the first homophile activists to introduce the concept to lasting effect. Its circulation during LCE activist José Sarria's pioneering 1961 campaign for San Francisco city supervisor was owed less to immediate structural changes in gay lives than to activist intention and genius. Sarria's supporters deliberately remade the notion of a homosexual 'community' into a weapon against state repression. In subsequent years, other local groups – most prominently SIR, but also the Tavern Guild of San Francisco (1962–93), Daughters of Bilitis (DOB, 1955–95), and Mattachine Society (1953–67) – followed LCE in taking up the concept.

The second section analyses the coalitional conceptions of community San Francisco's gay bar activists developed alongside their ideas of gay community. LCE and SIR coalitionists argued that only action on behalf of a broadly conceived 'community' of various disadvantaged groups (including, for example, African Americans, sex workers, and immigrants) could win the political changes homophiles were fighting for. Their claims were informed both by the oppressions of multiply marginalized gay subgroups and hopes of profiting from the civil rights movement's breakthroughs. Ideas of gay and

<sup>20</sup> Cassandra, 'Comments', *The Aware News* (Christmas 1963), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Kepner interview.

<sup>22</sup> D'Emilio, *Sexual politics*, pp. 190–5. See also Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-open town: a history of queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA, 2003), pp. 227–31.

<sup>23</sup> D'Emilio, *Sexual politics*, pp. 195–6. My emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

coalitional community were not mutually exclusive with many coalitionists also seeing themselves as members of a gay community. Nevertheless, the relationship between activists defending a narrower, sexual and those favouring a wider, coalitional homophile politics became increasingly conflictual by the mid-1960s. Their conflict over the orientation of the SIR community centre, the country's first homophile community centre, led to a lasting sidelining of more inclusive, coalitional imaginaries of 'community'.

This article offers a revised genesis of 'gay community' in part to unsettle the historical habit of uncritically describing pre-1960s gay social formations as 'communities' when they did not use this term themselves. But more than that, it is motivated by two other aims. First, the article challenges enduring myths of a monolithically conservative homophile movement. Historians like D'Emilio, Marcia Gallo, Joseph Plaster, and Marc Stein have underlined the prominence of coalitional activism and thought in the homophile movement.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the movement continues to be maligned for an ostensibly uniform commitment to a single-issue gay politics, 'not [working] in coalition with other social justice movements', and 'resisting [the] radicalizing influences' of the Black Freedom struggle in particular, including in San Francisco.<sup>26</sup> This article chips away at such one-sided representations by underlining the ideological pluralism of two of San Francisco's gay bar-based groups. Neither LCE nor SIR simply 'exemplified the moderate center of the "homophile" movement'.<sup>27</sup> Their leadership harboured advocates of a gay-only politics and promoters of a multi-issue orientation. Many of the latter sought to make common cause with African American organizers around what Jennifer Jones has termed their 'shared estrangements', in particular their shared struggle against discriminatory policing.<sup>28</sup> While a new generation of so-called 'gay liberationists' would bring unprecedented visibility and strength to gay coalitionist thought from the late 1960s onwards, their multi-issue organizing was not carving an entirely novel path. In San Francisco, calls for a coalitionist politics had been building within the homophile movement since the early 1960s. And at least as far as their visions of community were concerned, homophiles at times followed more radical tracks than their celebrated liberationist successors.

<sup>25</sup> John D'Emilio, *Queer legacies* (Chicago, IL, 2020), pp. 19–23; Stein, *Rethinking*, pp. 50–1, 68–71; Marcia M. Gallo, *Different daughters: a history of the Daughters of Bilitis and the rise of the lesbian rights movement* (New York, NY, 2007), pp. 130–6; Joseph Plaster, *Kids on the street: queer kinship and religion in San Francisco's Tenderloin* (Durham, NC, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Bronski, *A queer history*, p. 202; Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, 'Movements and memory: the making of the Stonewall myth', *American Sociological Review*, 71 (2006), pp. 724–51, at pp. 730–1. See also Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe space: gay neighborhood history and the politics of violence* (Durham, NC, 2013), pp. 1, 55–7; Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and red: liberation and solidarity in the gay and lesbian left* (Oakland, CA, 2017), pp. 17–41; Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the culture wars: style and the politics of self-presentation in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lincoln, NE, 2015), p. 94; Aaron Lecklider, *Love's next meeting: the forgotten history of homosexuality and the left in American culture* (Oakland, CA, 2021), pp. 260–98.

<sup>27</sup> Hobson, *Lavender and red*, p. 17. Hobson refers to SIR only. See also Hanhardt, *Safe space*, pp. 55–7.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Ambivalent affinities*, p. 4.

Second, a better grasp of ‘community’s’ intellectual history also helps explain the success of a homonormative strand of gay politics in the post-Stonewall years that remains influential to this day. Multiple studies have traced the rise in the late 1960s and 1970s of an increasingly mainstream, assimilationist gay politics driven by the demands of white, middle-class, adult gay men. In their requests for public space or separatist land, safety from homophobic violence, and general inclusion into the US state project, this less disadvantaged gay segment pursued a politics which at best ignored and at worst exacerbated the needs of more marginalized, lower-income, racialized, indigenous, transgender, and/or underage LGBT populations.<sup>29</sup>

Some foundations of these politics are well understood. Several historians have shown how the scientific authorities which crafted the new category of the homosexual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries already marked it as prototypically white.<sup>30</sup> What has not yet received scholarly attention is how the insurgence of a post-Stonewall homonormativity built even more directly on the recent solidification of gay ideas of community in homosexual hubs like San Francisco. After ‘gay community’ had attained hegemonic status, it became easier to construct a homosexual politics centred around a narrow set of ‘gay-only’ concerns that in truth primarily reflected the needs of white, middle-class, adult gay men.

In reconstructing ‘gay community’s’ intellectual and political history, I have found it useful to adhere to certain terminological conventions. The article follows mid-century activists in using ‘gay’ as an umbrella term for a broad spectrum of sexual orientations and gendered embodiments that includes gay women and gender-nonconforming gays.<sup>31</sup> Some women homophile activists preferred the term ‘gay women’, others ‘lesbians’. This often depended on whether they wished to emphasize their similarity to or difference from gay men.<sup>32</sup> For the sake of clarity, this article consistently uses ‘lesbian’. It also treats ‘gay community’, ‘homosexual community’, and ‘homophile community’ as synonyms, even though the terms carried slightly different connotations. ‘Gay’ was most at home in the less respectable gay bar milieu where it had historically functioned as a codeword to communicate homoerotic desires. ‘Homosexual’ had historical roots in clinical discourse and foregrounded the stigmatized sexual dimensions of same-sex relations. To mitigate this

<sup>29</sup> Hanhardt, *Safe space*; Hobson, *Lavender and red*, pp. 34–9; Kevin J. Mumford, ‘The trouble with gay rights: race and the politics of sexual orientation in Philadelphia, 1969–1982’, *Journal of American History*, 98 (2011), pp. 49–72; Plaster, *Kids on the street*, pp. 135–6.

<sup>30</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, ‘Was the homosexual made white? Race, empire, and analogy in gay and trans thought in twentieth-century Germany’, *Gender & History*, 31 (2019), pp. 91–114; idem, *Racism and the making of gay rights: a sexologist, his student, and the empire of queer love* (Toronto, 2022); Siobhan B. Somerville, ‘Scientific racism and the emergence of the homosexual body’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1994), pp. 243–66; idem, *Queering the color line: race and the invention of homosexuality in American culture* (Durham, NC, 2000); Jennifer Terry, *An American obsession: science, medicine, and homosexuality in modern society* (Chicago, IL, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Stein, *Rethinking*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>32</sup> Gallo, *Different daughters*, pp. 3, 131–2.

stigmatization, many post-war activists began referring to themselves as 'homophiles' (lovers of the same) and their movement as the 'homophile' movement.<sup>33</sup>

As historians like D'Emilio, Gallo, and James Sears have shown, the idea of a homosexual minority was ambivalently received by 1950s San Franciscan homophile groups. The communist founders of the first homophile organization, the Los Angeles-based Mattachine Foundation (1951–3), made the idea of an oppressed gay minority a core tenet of their organizing.<sup>34</sup> However, in 1953, a bloc of conservative members successfully channelled anti-red hysteria to oust the founders. The new leaders of the rebranded Mattachine Society promoted the homosexual's full integration into mainstream American society. Rather than belonging to a cohesive minority, 'the sex variant', they claimed, 'is no different from anyone else except in the object of his sexual expression'.<sup>35</sup> From 1956, Mattachine Society advocated these beliefs from their new San Francisco headquarters. Formed in that same city in 1955, the first US lesbian political group Daughters of Bilitis was more open to minoritarian language.<sup>36</sup> DOB encouraged lesbians to participate 'in the steadily-growing fight for understanding of the homophile minority'.<sup>37</sup> Like the Mattachine Society leadership, however, they were initially invested in an assimilationist politics. DOB's statement of purpose listed as its first goal to '[educate] the variant...to enable her to...make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic, and economic implications', including, notoriously, in matters of dress.<sup>38</sup> If the lesbian was a member of a minority, DOB also encouraged her to assimilate fully into the hegemonic culture.

The idea of a gay community would not find its first homophile advocates in these groups, with Mattachine even positively hostile toward it. Both instead initially deployed the term 'community' in established, mainstream fashion as a synonym for the wider society into which they wanted homosexuals to integrate themselves. In an emblematic passage, the Mattachine 'Aims and principles' declared that homosexuals 'as individuals' should 'actively affiliate with community endeavors, such as civic and welfare organizations, religious activities, and citizenship responsibility, instead of attempting to withdraw into an invert society of their own'.<sup>39</sup> In a 1962 article, the DOB leadership

<sup>33</sup> Stein, *Rethinking*, pp. 5–6; José Sarria interview by Paul Gabriel, 15 Sept. 1996, San Francisco, CA, GLBT Historical Society (GLBTHS), oral history collection; José Sarria et al. interview by Randy Alfred, 12 Apr. 1980, GLBTHS, *The Gay Life Radio* series.

<sup>34</sup> On Mattachine's history, see James Sears, *Behind the mask of the Mattachine: the Hal Call chronicles and the early movement for homosexual emancipation* (New York, NY, 2006); D'Emilio, *Sexual politics*, pp. 57–126.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Burns to Dale Jennings, 1 Mar. 1954, cited in D'Emilio, *Sexual politics*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> On DOB's history, see Gallo, *Different daughters*.

<sup>37</sup> Phyllis Lyon [pseud. Ann Ferguson], *The Ladder*, 1/1 (Nov. 1956), p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> 'Daughters of Bilitis – purpose', *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> 'Aims and principles', *Mattachine Review*, 8/10 (Oct. 1962). pp. 19–20.



promised to help homosexuals ‘accept themselves and the society in which they live and so become productive citizens of the community’.<sup>40</sup> Despite discussing academic texts and reprinting British and US newspaper articles which described homosexuals as a ‘community’, Mattachine and DOB eschewed the concept in their own writing until the early to mid-1960s.<sup>41</sup>

The first gay champions of the idea of a homosexual community emerged instead from the more radical world of the city’s gay bars, the major public institutions of post-war gay life. In particular, documents link its genesis to José Sarria’s 1961 run for San Francisco city supervisor. The son of Latin American immigrants was a seasoned gay activist and a waiter, chef, and performer at the local Black Cat Café. From 1958 until the Cat’s forced closure in 1963, Sarria starred in hugely popular weekly camp operas that made him a subcultural star. Sarria used his stage to disseminate information about upcoming police actions, review gay-related news, and ‘preach’ a proud gay politics to hundreds of spectators every Sunday.<sup>42</sup> In spring 1961, Sarria and other activists co-founded the League for Civil Education, the first political organization coming out of the city’s gay bars. LCE conducted a wide range of activities in its attempt to build a mass movement to end anti-gay policing. Plans to include a pro-gay electoral politics soon birthed Sarria’s decision to stand for one of five open city supervisor seats at the upcoming November municipal elections.<sup>43</sup> It was the first time an openly gay person would compete for US political office.

Sarria’s campaign was motivated by a series of objectives that extended beyond winning a seat. Most importantly, it sought to deliver a message of gay power to the political authorities by conducting an unofficial census of the city’s gay population. A decade after zoologist Alfred Kinsey’s bestselling report on *Sexual behavior in the human male* (1948) and its astonishing figures on the prevalence of homosexual behaviour, Sarria aimed to prove that there were as many as ‘ten thousand voting queens’ in San Francisco who were ready to cast their weight behind a pro-gay politics.<sup>44</sup> With this goal in mind, Sarria’s campaign focused on attracting gay voters only.<sup>45</sup> Equipped with campaign postcards, posters, and LCE’s new, biweekly publication, *L.C.E. News*, they visited the city’s gay bars and cruising spots to collect campaign

<sup>40</sup> ‘The dare of the future’, *The Ladder*, 6/8 (May 1962), pp. 4–10, at p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> For newspaper articles, see ‘Wolfenden shelved in British parliament’, *Mattachine Review*, 6/1 (Jan. 1959), pp. 4–12, at p. 10; G. Desmannes, ‘The gay bourgeoisie’, *The Ladder*, 7/7 (Apr. 1963), pp. 4–7, at pp. 5, 7; and n. 10 above. For academic texts, see R. E. L. Masters, ‘Remarks on the homosexual revolution’, *Mattachine Review*, 8/4 (Apr. 1962), pp. 4–8, at p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> On Sarria, see Boyd, *Wide-open town*, pp. 20–4, 56–61; Joe Castel, *Nelly queen: the life and times of José Sarria* (2020); D’Emilio, *Sexual politics*, pp. 186–9.

<sup>43</sup> For the earliest surviving record of LCE’s electoral plans, see LCE newsletter of 15 Apr. 1961, GLBTHS, José Sarria papers, box 23/folder 1.

<sup>44</sup> José Sarria interview by John Lockhart, 2000, [https://archive.org/details/casdla\\_000046](https://archive.org/details/casdla_000046) (accessed 27 Feb. 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Mori Reithmayr, ‘Community before liberation: theorizing gay resistance in San Francisco, 1953–1969’ (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 2023), p. 127.

contributions, give speeches, and win potential voters.<sup>46</sup> By October, Sarria's camp claimed to have registered over 10,000 new voters.<sup>47</sup> Not all of the city's homosexuals, however, appreciated Sarria's efforts. Many feared that they might draw more attention to their lives and spark a further increase in anti-gay repression.<sup>48</sup> Others resented the idea of being 'represented [to] our supervisors by a drag queen'.<sup>49</sup>

Sarria's supporters attempted to win over their critics in part by trying to transform how San Francisco's homosexuals understood themselves as a group. For years, Sarria had worked to instil a proud gay identity amongst his Black Cat patrons.<sup>50</sup> Now, some of his supporters argued that the city's gender and sexual non-conformists not only all were 'gays', but that they in fact formed a gay 'community'. This conceptual revolution is reflected once in Sarria's scarce extant campaign writings. In a letter to two co-habiting, presumably lesbian well-wishers, Sarria cited his 'pride in your community' as one of his qualities.<sup>51</sup> The shift to 'gay community' is better preserved in the issues of *L.C.E. News*. The bar rag was edited by Sarria's friend, the white, working-class salesman and fellow LCE co-founder Guy Strait (his birth name), known as 'the Senator' among the gay bar set for his firebrand political speeches.<sup>52</sup> Unlike *The Ladder* and Mattachine's monthly magazine *Mattachine Review*, which functioned only on a subscriber model, Strait also distributed *L.C.E. News* directly in the bars. With its reports on events across the cities' gay bar life, the publication further strengthened a nascent sense of collectivity developing amongst the hundreds of same-sex desiring patrons who drank, ate, talked, flirted, went home, and, often, were arrested in communion every week.<sup>53</sup>

Strait's publication used veiled references to 'the community' to introduce its readers to the new collective self-understanding. The first issue of 16 October 1961 promised to 'report the day-to-day happenings in the "community"', praised the registration of 10,000 new voters in 'the "community"', and voiced its hope that the publication would 'serve a useful purpose in the "community"'.<sup>54</sup> The quotation marks used in each instance signalled Strait's departure from the concept's standard interpretation. *L.C.E. News's* issue did not spell out that it was referring to the idea of a gay community. It relied

<sup>46</sup> Castel, *Nelly queen*; GLBTHS, Sarria papers, 25/9, passim; photograph of Sarria delivering a campaign speech at an unidentified bar, Oakland, CA, Oakland Museum of California, José Sarria collection.

<sup>47</sup> *L.C.E. News*, 1/1 (16 Oct. 1961).

<sup>48</sup> José Sarria interview by Randy Shilts, n.d., San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), Randy Shilts papers, 31/22, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Craig Daley interview by Paul Gabriel, 19 Feb. 1995, GLBTHS, oral history collection, p. 105.

<sup>50</sup> Mori Reithmayr, 'Homosexuality inverted: José Sarria's performance archive and the making of nelly queens, 1958–1963', under review.

<sup>51</sup> Sarria draft letter to Betty Shea and Jessica Stratton, undated, Sarria papers, 25/7.

<sup>52</sup> Guy Strait interview by unknown interviewer, 30 Nov. 1986, GLBTHS, oral history collection.

<sup>53</sup> On the importance of gay bar publications, see Bill Plath interview by Paul Gabriel, 18 Sept. 1996, GLBTHS, oral history collection.

<sup>54</sup> *L.C.E. News*, 1/1.

instead on context to convey the message. Each of 'the community's' reported 'happenings' were events of the gay male bar scene. *L.C.E. News's* allusion to 10,000 newly registered voters in 'the community' followed upon LCE's attempts to register gay voters for Sarria's campaign. And the paragraph in which *L.C.E. News* shared its hope to 'serve a useful purpose in the "community"' closed with an iconic Sarrian motto, 'UNITED WE STAND DIVIDED WE WILL SURELY FALL'. Surviving testimony, though scarce, suggests that gay readers had little trouble with decoding 'the community' as a euphemism for 'homosexual community'.<sup>55</sup>

The concept's invention in this particular context cannot be explained solely, or even primarily, through structural shifts in the city's gay subculture. Even if the San Francisco gay bar scene was vaster and better-connected than in other cities, it simply did not resemble more of a community in 1961 than it had in previous years. The city's gay bars stagnated in the early 1960s. Police oppression kept their number flat despite a rapidly rising gay population.<sup>56</sup> To account for the coinage of 'gay community', we have to instead look more closely at the political work the concept allowed Sarria's supporters to do. In other words, we must pay attention to how Sarria's camp used the concept of a gay 'community' not merely to capture the world as it already existed, but also to make it anew.<sup>57</sup>

The euphemistic references to 'the community' on the one hand protected LCE's advertisers, distributors, and members.<sup>58</sup> But the introduction of the notion of a 'gay community' also dovetailed neatly with the campaign's specific objectives. It enabled Sarria's supporters to argue that the city's homosexuals held responsibilities to their 'community' that encompassed voting for Sarria. This idea was advanced in the first *L.C.E. News* issue. There, Strait called on citizens to defend their 'rights and liberties' themselves in the face of local government's failure to protect them. The main form he suggested this should take was an electoral politics. 'It is the first duty of every citizen to register to vote, then to vote.' But if this was a general duty all citizens owed as citizens, it was also a particular duty that members of oppressed groups owed to these groups. For, it was '[o]nly by being vocal' and making its voice heard that 'a group...[can] make their [weight] felt'.<sup>59</sup> In the second issue, published just a few days before the elections, Strait again linked community membership to expected electoral participation. He expressed his hope that the publication

<sup>55</sup> 'Breakthrough - when will it come', *Mattachine Review*, 10/4-9 (Apr.-Sept. 1964), pp. 4-24, at p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> The most comprehensive source on the number of San Francisco gay bars remains the Bill Walker database, housed at the GLBT Historical Society. It lists 53 gay and gay-friendly venues for 1961, the same number as in 1955. By 1965, this number had expanded to 76, by 1969 to 125. On the post-war growth of San Francisco's gay population, see Martin Meeker, 'Come out West: communication and the gay and lesbian migration to San Francisco, 1940s-1960s' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Southern California, 2000), p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Amia Srinivasan, 'Genealogy, epistemology and worldmaking', *Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society*, 119/2 (2019), pp. 127-56, at p. 145.

<sup>58</sup> 'The league', *The News*, 3/4 (25 Nov. 1963), pp. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> *L.C.E. News*, 1/1.

of *L.C.E. News* would ‘give the “community” new incentive to develop a more civic-minded attitude’. The empathic next line, ‘VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE’, spelled out how he thought this ethos should express itself in the contemporary context.<sup>60</sup>

In the end, this appeal met with only moderate success. Sarria won 5,613 votes to place twenty-ninth out of thirty-three candidates. A total of 81,615 votes would have been necessary to overtake the fifth-placed candidate.<sup>61</sup> While many of Sarria’s supporters were still thrilled with this achievement, Sarria’s immediate reaction was bitter disappointment.<sup>62</sup> Four days later, police officers entered the Black Cat to arrest Sarria on a spurious charge.<sup>63</sup> Persistent police persecution illustrated that the campaign had represented only one step toward a brighter future.

The idea of a ‘gay community’ survived Sarria’s campaign. After Sarria resigned from LCE in March 1962, Strait became the League’s undisputed leader.<sup>64</sup> Under his combined editorialship and presidency, references to ‘the community’ remained a recurrent feature of LCE’s publications. Strait for the first time printed the term ‘the homosexual Community’ in February 1964.<sup>65</sup> Later renamed *The News*, *Citizens’ News*, and finally, *Cruise News and World Report*, *L.C.E. News* was the most widely read homophile publication of the early 1960s, with circulation figures allegedly exceeding 10,000 copies.<sup>66</sup> While it remained in print until February 1967, LCE itself dissolved in May 1964 amid allegations of financial mismanagement and dictatorial leadership.<sup>67</sup>

After LCE had introduced the concept of a ‘gay community’ into local homophile activism, other gay bar-based organizations soon followed suit. Extant records of the Tavern Guild of San Francisco, a powerful group of gay bar staff and owners, first cite the term ‘homophile community’ in early 1964.<sup>68</sup> The notion became most closely associated within mid-1960s homophile activism with the Society for Individual Rights, the first US homophile organization with a large, active membership. In summer 1964, the SIR founders, many of whom were former LCE activists, took the language of ‘gay community’ with them to their new group. SIR’s Statement of Purpose pronounced it ‘an organization formed within the Community working for the Community’, while its constitution declared ‘the creating of a sense of community’ one of the

<sup>60</sup> *L.C.E. News*, 1/2 (n.d.), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle* (8 Nov. 1961), p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> For the supporters’ reaction, see Herbert Donaldson interview by Paul Gabriel, 2 Sept. 1996, GLBTHS, oral history collection, pp. 10–11; James Robinson, *My story, one gay’s fight: from hate to acceptance*, 2017, SFPL, MS GLC 197, p. 85. For Sarria’s, see Plath interview.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Candidate booked on sex charge’, *San Francisco Examiner (SFE)*, 12 Nov. 1961, p. 21; ‘Candidate arrested’, *L.C.E. News*, 1/4 (n.d.), p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> On Sarria’s resignation, see Sarria to LCE Board of Directors, 5 Mar. 1962, GLBTHS, Sarria papers, 23/1; ‘José resigns’, *L.C.E. News*, 1/12 (19 Mar. 1962), p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Parks & sex’, *Citizens’ News*, 3/10 (24 Feb. 1964), pp. 1–2, 11, at p. 11.

<sup>66</sup> ‘The league’, D’Emilio, *Sexual politics*, p. 189.

<sup>67</sup> Reithmayr, ‘Community before liberation’, pp. 192–9.

<sup>68</sup> Meeting minutes of 6 Feb. 1964, Tavern Guild Records, GLBTHS, 1/13.

Society's core goals.<sup>69</sup> By winter, when SIR began publishing its newsletter *Vector*, it had settled on openly referring to its constituency as the 'homosexual' or 'homophile community'.<sup>70</sup>

SIR's emphasis on serving 'the homosexual community' reflected the single-issue politics of its initial presidents. Bill Beardemphl, SIR's first president, his successors Dorrwyn Jones and Larry Littlejohn were all supportive of, if not actively engaged in, various other political causes, including anti-Vietnam protests, and the civil rights, hippie, and women's liberation movements.<sup>71</sup> But in defining SIR's politics, these white, middle-class gay men favoured a focus on those issues they regarded as strictly gay concerns.<sup>72</sup> Beardemphl, for instance, proclaimed himself 'a firm believer that combining the homophile, homosexual revolution...with the black community or the Asian community or with anything else or any other level except homosexual rights is wrong. You don't have time in your life to do anything else but that.'<sup>73</sup> Littlejohn thought that only a focus on 'those common interests that unite us all' would ensure that SIR appealed to a membership of all races, classes, genders, and political affiliations – a goal that this predominantly white, middle-class male organization would never quite meet.<sup>74</sup>

As 'homosexual community' gained further traction within gay life, non-bar-based homophile groups like the Daughters of Bilitis and Mattachine Society, too, came around to adopting the concept. DOB's magazine *The Ladder* printed its first references to 'gay community' by a regular contributor in March 1963 and by an editorial staff member in June 1964.<sup>75</sup> Thereafter, its articles employed the term on a regular basis. Mattachine with its firmer assimilationist commitments urged homosexuals not to consider themselves 'a community apart, but rather an integral part of the total community everywhere' as late as 1965.<sup>76</sup> But a year later, even Mattachine began using the term.<sup>77</sup> The language of 'gay community' had come to be spoken by some of its fiercest assimilationist critics.

<sup>69</sup> 'S.I.R.'s statement of policy', *Vector*, 1/1 (Dec. 1964), p. 1; 'SIR by-laws', GLBTHS, Collection of Society for Individual Rights papers, folder 'Constitution, Articles, Bylaws'.

<sup>70</sup> For *Vector*'s first reference to 'homophile community', see 'Private benefit ball invaded', 1/2 (Jan. 1965), p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> William Beardemphl, 'President's corner', *Vector*, 1/10 (Sept. 1965), p. 2; idem, 'President's corner', *Vector*, 1/12 (Nov. 1965), pp. 2, 10; idem, 'Being hip is a very old cool', *Vector*, 3/9 (Aug 1967), p. 13; Dorr Jones, 'President's corner', *Vector*, 3/6 (May 1967), p. 7; Don Collins, 'This month: interview with Dorr Jones', *Vector*, 5/9 (Sept. 1969), pp. 20–1, 30–1; Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/woman* (Volcano, CA, 1991), p. 257.

<sup>72</sup> For Jones, see Collins, 'This month', p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> William Beardemphl and John DeLeon interview by Paul Gabriel, July 1997, GLBTHS, oral history collection, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Larry Littlejohn, 'President's corner', *Vector*, 5/6 (June 1969), p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Jody Shotwell, 'Magazine review: the furtive fraternity', *The Ladder*, 7/6 (Mar. 1963), pp. 16–18, at p. 17; Del Martin, 'The church and the homosexual', *The Ladder*, 8/12 (Sept. 1964), pp. 9–13, at p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Mattachine Society Board of Directors, 1965, Durham, NC, David Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library, James Sears papers, 174/'Town Talk'.

<sup>77</sup> 'Calling shots', *Mattachine Review*, 12/1 (July 1966), pp. 2–3, at p. 3.

## II

In addition to 'gay community', early 1960s gay San Francisco also witnessed the articulation of a second, popular tradition of theorizing community. Contributors to this coalitional tradition, too, might understand themselves as members of a 'gay community'. But they felt uncomfortable with following narrow, gay-only agendas, pursued partnerships with other social movements and constituencies, and believed that only action on behalf of an expansively conceived 'community' of various oppressed groups would stand a chance of winning genuine liberation. Their stubborn advocacy contradicts the common narrative of a monolithically conservative homophile past.

The forgotten coalitional tradition can be traced back to the very moment of 'homosexual community's' emergence in San Francisco: Sarria's 1961 campaign. Many of Sarria's supporters disagreed with his focus on attracting gay voters only. They saw the campaign as a promising window toward a wider coalitional politics between various marginalized groups. A backer by the name of Sal, for example, urged Sarria to visit Spanish-speaking bars, cafes, and stores, and place advertisements in Hispanic newspapers.<sup>78</sup> Another supporter, Hortense, suggested for Sarria to campaign in the Big Glass, a Black-patronized gay bar in the African American Fillmore district.<sup>79</sup> At this stage, coalitionists did not yet couch their ideas in the emerging language of 'community'. But only a few years later, they would begin to do just that.

Impressed by the Civil Right Movement's 1963 Birmingham Campaign, none other than Guy Strait became invested in a coalitional politics that sought to serve a 'total minority community' of African Americans, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups. A previously infrequent commentator of the Black freedom struggle, Strait's coverage of anti-Black police violence surged during the Birmingham, Alabama events.<sup>80</sup> Strait began identifying the fight against police repression as the common ground on which homophile and African American activism might intersect. Where he had before often spoken of the separate struggles of 'negroes' and 'social variants' (i.e. homosexuals) with police harassment, from spring 1963 onwards he increasingly framed it as the shared persecution of 'minorities' or 'minority groups'.<sup>81</sup> When San Francisco police officers brutalized African Americans, they attacked 'members of a minority group'.<sup>82</sup> When they harassed gay venues, they targeted 'bars where members of minority groups are congregated'.<sup>83</sup> The appearance of a particularly violent police squad made 'the minorities cringe', while

<sup>78</sup> Sal to Sarria, n.d., GLBHTS, Sarria papers, 25/6.

<sup>79</sup> Hortense to Sarria, 10 Oct. 1961, *ibid.*; Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the bay: a history of queer culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco, CA, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> 'Hypocrites', 'Brutality', and 'White man's best friend', *The News*, 2/16 (13 May 1963), pp. 1-4, 6; 'The parade', *The News*, 2/18 (10 June 1963), pp. 2-4.

<sup>81</sup> For references to 'negroes' and 'social variants', see, for example, 'It can happen to you', *L.C.E. News*, 1/19 (25 June 1962), pp. 1-2; 'Open letter to the US Civil Rights Commission', *L.C.E. News*, 2/9 (3 Feb. 1963), pp. 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> 'White man's best friend'.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

the African American and gay activists fighting state harassment formed 'the leaders of the minorities'.<sup>84</sup> Strait proposed for African Americans and gays to unite in contesting the laws which undergirded police harassment.<sup>85</sup> Reaching beyond coalition toward an intersectional politics, Strait also expressed outrage over the particularly egregious treatment African American gay men experienced from police officers.<sup>86</sup>

The autumn 1963 San Francisco municipal elections offered the chance to put budding ideas of a Black-gay political alliance to the test. In the election run-up, Strait published nine articles on the opportunities elections presented.<sup>87</sup> Strait's advocacy was governed by two competing logics. On the one hand, he urged gays to the polls by invoking the notion of a gay bloc of voters which could decide elections on its own. Strait emphasized that 'the minority groups individually hold the balance of power'.<sup>88</sup> However, Strait evinced limited faith in this rhetoric as his repeated appeals to a nascent, coalitional logic demonstrated. In this rationale, the 1963 elections harboured special promise because they delivered candidates who appealed to multiple minorities. Strait particularly enthused over the mayoral campaign of Public Defender Edward Mancuso, a long-standing LCE ally. Strait stressed that Mancuso's work had 'endured him to many of the minorities' and that his proposed policies 'undoubtedly would make for a better life for the minorities'.<sup>89</sup> The League was not the only homophile organization attracted by Mancuso's perceived appeal to Black voters. DOB likewise only came to support Mancuso after they had been 'favorably impressed' by his positive views on the rights of 'other minority groups'.<sup>90</sup>

Strait's turn toward multi-issue strategizing found further expression in his advocacy of broad, coalitional conceptions of 'community'. In the same elections, Strait also promoted the city supervisor candidacy of African American organizer Percy Moore. Moore campaigned on an expansive coalitional platform that sought to appeal to low- and middle-income voters of all racial backgrounds. He argued that it was to their advantage to ignore racial prejudices and 'vote for non-white qualified candidates on a common interest' basis.<sup>91</sup> Moore won endorsements from the city's leading Black newspaper, various labour and Democratic clubs, and the Mexican-American Political Association.<sup>92</sup> It was Moore's coalitional vision that attracted Strait. He lent

<sup>84</sup> 'SS', *The News*, 2/25 (16 Sept. 1963), p. 3; 'The parade', p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> 'To live as free Americans', *The News*, 2/20 (8 July 1963), pp. 1, 4.

<sup>86</sup> 'SS'. See also, 'Heil! Seig [sic] Heil!', *L.C.E. News*, 1/18 (11 June 1962), p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> 'We can elect', *The News*, 2/23 (19 Aug. 1963), p. 1; 'Frog still jumps', *The News*, 2/24 (2 Sept. 1963), pp. 1, 4; 'Roundup', *The News*, 2/25 (16 Sept. 1963), p. 6; 'If they wanted to', *The News*, 3/1 (14 Oct. 1963), pp. 1, 7; 'Unity', *ibid.*, pp. 1-2; 'T day', *The News*, 3/2 (28 Oct. 1963), p. 1; 'Elect', *ibid.*, p. 2; 'Bloc vote', *ibid.*, p. 3; 'Dewey elected', *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> 'We can elect'.

<sup>89</sup> 'Roundup'.

<sup>90</sup> Minutes of 18 Oct. 1963 DOB Board meeting, GLBTHS, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin papers, 2/6.

<sup>91</sup> 'Supervisor candidates', *SFE*, 11 Oct. 1963, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> On the *Sun-Reporter's* support, see 'Editorial opinion: an opportunity for reciprocity', *Sun-Reporter*, 24 Aug. 1963, p. 12; 'Editorials: reflections on the mayoralty race', *Sun-Reporter*, 9

his support after learning of Moore's promise to act as '[a] voice sensitive to the attitudes of the total minority community'.<sup>93</sup> While it is unclear whether Moore meant to include the city's homosexuals in this vision, that is certainly how Strait interpreted it. Strait's embrace of the idea of a 'total minority community' came as the culmination of months of activism in pursuit of a Black-gay political alliance.

In 1963, coalitional visions did not yet carry the weight to decide political elections. Mancuso's 17,581 votes placed him a distant third to Democrat winner John Shelley at 120,560 and Republican runner-up Harold Dobbs at 92,627 votes. Mancuso's failure to attract Black voters was a factor in his heavy defeat, with Strait reclaiming him as a gay-only candidate in his election write-up.<sup>94</sup> Built on more solid coalitionist foundations, Moore's campaign fared noticeably better. Moore came in tenth in the competition for six open positions with a total of 60,773 votes, approximately 40,000 votes short of sixth place.

After LCE's demise in spring 1964, prominent SIR activists carried the gay coalitional tradition forward. While SIR's presidents were promoting a gay-only politics, other leaders pushed the group toward a multi-issue direction. One of SIR's most vocal mid-1960s coalitionists was Nancy May, the inaugural chair of its Political Committee and only woman on SIR's initial board of directors. Convinced that 'whenever the rest of society persecutes any individual or member of a minority group, this is also my problem', the white, heterosexual woman had come to SIR through her bisexual husband and SIR founding member Bill May.<sup>95</sup> Nancy May saw the social movements of her time as inextricably connected. She believed that the fate of each minoritarian struggle hinged in part on the success of the others. 'When one minority group gains anything from the majority group', she noted, 'you find that a greater battle has been won than you started out to fight.'<sup>96</sup> May urged her fellow SIR members to think broadly, stand in solidarity with civil rights protests in Selma, resist the criminalization of topless waitressing, and support environmental activists.<sup>97</sup>

SIR's multi-issue advocates soon revived coalitional visions of 'community'. The most significant figure in this respect was May's colleague Mark Forrester. A young, white gay man, Forrester had been living an itinerant life before settling in San Francisco in 1961.<sup>98</sup> As SIR's first secretary, Forrester had co-drafted its constitution with its emphasis on serving the gay community.

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Nov. 1963, p. 12. For Moore's other endorsements, see 'An indorsement for Shelley', *SFE*, 14 Aug. 1963, p. 9; 'Split in labor politicking', *SFE*, 19 Sept. 1963, p. 20; 'Political notes', *SFE*, 3 Oct. 1963, p. 52; 'Demo group backs Dobbs', *SFE*, 16 Oct. 1963, p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> 'Elect'. The provenance of this quote is uncertain. Its earliest mention in a newspaper appears to be 'Moscone and McCarthy win', *SFE*, 6 Nov. 1963, pp. 1, 3, at p. 3.

<sup>94</sup> The election', *The News*, 3/3 (11 Nov. 1963), pp. 1-2. For Mancuso's failure to attract Black voters, see Fred Martin, 'A negro on jobs board', *SFE*, 12 Nov. 1963, pp. 1, 18; 'Dewey elected'.

<sup>95</sup> Eric Marcus, *Making history: the struggle for gay and lesbian equal rights, 1945-1990* (New York, NY, 1992), p. 139; Nancy May, 'Speaking out', *Vector*, 1/6 (May 1965), p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> May, 'Speaking out'.

<sup>97</sup> May, 'Speaking out...cont. from last month', *Vector*, 1/7 (June 1965), p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> Mark Forrester interview by John D'Emilio, 9 Dec. 1976, NYPL, IGIC Audiovisual collection.



However, when the opening of the SIR community centre in April 1966 sparked debates over its orientation, Forrester made the case for a broad, multi-issue focus and an expansive register of 'community'.

The community centre had originated as Forrester's project.<sup>99</sup> In late 1964, Forrester began soliciting homophile support for the creation of a residential home for members of the city's most marginalized gay subgroups. Any gays who did not 'fit into society's general idea of a productive citizenship' – the 'young and confused', the 'old and useless', the 'homosexual dope addicts', the unemployed – would find food, shelter, medical care, clean clothing, and an 'accepting, loving environment' at the halfway house.<sup>100</sup> Forrester expressed particular concern for the plight of Black and other gays of colour.<sup>101</sup> With its intent to serve a broad clientele, Forrester's proposal was warmly received by SIR's other multi-issue advocates, including May.<sup>102</sup>

As the proposal proceeded through SIR's committees, however, its character began to shift dramatically under the assault of single-issue advocates. Littlejohn and Beardemphl in particular steered the project toward its final, more conservative form.<sup>103</sup> It opened as the SIR community centre on 17 April 1966, the first homophile community centre in the United States.<sup>104</sup> The centre no longer drew its core mission from assisting the most marginalized gays. Instead, it acted as a 'social center, information center, and community services center' for ostensibly all homosexuals.<sup>105</sup> In reality, it would mostly serve SIR's comparatively less disadvantaged membership.

During the project's co-optation, Forrester had grown ever more distant from SIR. Even before his stint as secretary elapsed in early 1966, he had increasingly devoted his attention to two new groups, the Tenderloin Committee and the Central City Citizens' Council.<sup>106</sup> A diverse coalition of residents of the deprived Tenderloin district formed these partner organizations: white homosexuals, sex workers, homeless and other transient populations, drug users, Filipino families, elderly residents, dockworkers, African Americans, and new immigrants.<sup>107</sup> Their purpose was to promote the integration of the zone around the Tenderloin into the San Francisco Economic Opportunity Council's (EOC) programmes, the local arm of President Lyndon Johnson's national War on Poverty. The activists termed this zone, which included the SIR community centre, 'Central City'. The council eventually

<sup>99</sup> See also Plaster, *Kids on the street*, pp. 119–20.

<sup>100</sup> Forrester, 'A halfway house', n.d., GLBTHS, Lucas papers, 11/4.

<sup>101</sup> Forrester interview.

<sup>102</sup> May, 'Speaking out'; idem, 'Speaking out...cont.'.

<sup>103</sup> 'Community house proposed', *Vector*, 1/6 (May 1965), pp. 1, 6; 'Prospectus for community house, 5/5/1965', Sears papers, 185/'Society for Individual Rights'.

<sup>104</sup> 'Community center opens', *Vector*, 2/6 (May 1966), pp. 1–2.

<sup>105</sup> 'Community center to be discussed', *Vector*, 1/8 ([Jul.] 1965), p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> On the election of a new secretary, see J. H., 'Secretary's corner', *Vector*, 2/4 (Mar. 1966), p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Don Lucas interview by Paul Gabriel, 30 Dec. 1996 – 28 Feb. 1998, GLBTHS, oral history collection, pp. 241–51; Hanhardt, *Safe space*, pp. 36, 40.

hired Forrester as a community organizer when its bid for EOC recognition succeeded.<sup>108</sup>

When the SIR centre opened, Forrester briefly returned his attention to SIR for a final attempt to reroute the centre toward a multi-issue orientation. His letter to SIR's newspaper *Vector* did not attack the idea of a community centre per se, nor did it seek to resurrect the project of a halfway house. Instead, it pursued a different tactic. It advanced a new claim for the type of community the centre might serve, and how it might do so. Forrester framed the present as a uniquely propitious moment for grassroots activism. Aided by newly available federal funds, several minority groups, in particular African Americans, were organizing 'for real political power'. Like the Black-dominated Fillmore and Hunters Point district where African American activists had formed committees and won federal grants, Central City harboured vast political potential as 'a body of unorganized power'. If galvanized successfully, it 'may very well be the fulcrum upon which whole elections turn' in the future, benefiting whichever organization had played this part. This, of course, was the role Forrester urged SIR to play. 'Using its Community Center as a base', he proposed, 'SIR could organize the North and South of Market [i.e., the centre's surrounding area] in a potent way.'

As this last sentence indicated, Forrester thought that SIR could assume this role without relinquishing its community centre ambitions. The communities it should serve, however, were not to be limited to the gay community. Forrester's broad understanding of community shone through in both his descriptions of the community members the operation would seek to galvanize and of the activists who were to lead it. Forrester insisted that the 'organization of a community' in Central City would have to advance 'on a street, block, or intra-community level', mobilizing not just homosexuals, but also the other local populations within the centre's vicinity. This required the involvement of both homophile and other grassroots organizations. The latter's engagement would transform the action into 'a broad based community organization in which SIR would be but one focal point'.<sup>109</sup> The SIR community centre would retain its purpose as a hub for community organizing, but serve an expansively conceived, coalitional community.

The letter's broad understanding of 'community' was partly inspired by Forrester's recent experiences with Tenderloin organizing. Forrester had first articulated wide conceptions of community in his 'Workplan for community organization', a document he had crafted to guide the Citizens' Council's work and which he proposed in his *Vector* letter should serve as a blueprint for SIR organizing in Central City. The workplan presented Central City as home to a diverse 'Inner City Community' made up of different marginalized groups whose 'sense of community' Forrester advised the council to

<sup>108</sup> The Tenderloin Committee, 'Proposal for confronting the Tenderloin problem', GLBTHS, Lucas papers, 15/1. For more on the history of the Tenderloin groups, see Hanhardt, *Safe space*, pp. 35–80; Martin Meeker, 'The queerly disadvantaged and the making of San Francisco's War on Poverty, 1964–1967', *Pacific Historical Review*, 81 (2012), pp. 21–59.

<sup>109</sup> All quotations from 'Letters', *Vector*, 2/6 (May 1966), pp. 7, 11.

strengthen.<sup>110</sup> The *Vector* letter also acknowledged Forrester's intellectual debts to the influential theories of radical organizer Saul Alinsky. Alinsky had imparted on Forrester the importance of creating 'mass-based' organizations which drew their 'strength, leadership, and funds from as many small minority groups as possible'.<sup>111</sup> Forrester's letter translated these teachings to the context of homophile activism to revitalize gay imaginaries of coalitional community.

Challenges to the SIR community centre's narrow orientation were, however, unable to sustain themselves. In the subsequent weeks, single-issue advocates used their commanding position within SIR to entrench ideas of homosexual community. The simmering ideological disagreements between Forrester and Beardemphl boiled over at an explosive one-on-one meeting in the new centre. Beardemphl announced that SIR would not host Forrester's community projects because they 'were not gay projects'.<sup>112</sup> Feeling deeply betrayed, Forrester cursed Beardemphl as he left both the building and SIR for good.<sup>113</sup> Other coalitional stalwarts like May shared Forrester's dissatisfaction with SIR's increasingly inward-looking direction and soon left the Society as well.<sup>114</sup>

The resolution of the community centre conflict did not end debates over the prospective merits of single- versus multi-issue activism. As the then-president Littlejohn noted in 1969, 'many discussions' continued to take place within SIR on 'the question of taking political stands on issues other than those directly related to homosexuality'.<sup>115</sup> A new generation of so-called 'gay liberationists' soon filled the gap Forrester and May left behind as SIR's most prominent coalitionists. These included most notably Leo Laurence, who briefly served as *Vector* editor in 1969.<sup>116</sup> Forrester's halfway house, too, eventually found sufficient support to materialize in a slightly modified form in 1967 as 'Hospitality House', an institution aimed at providing vulnerable Tenderloin street youth with food, health care, clothing, social space, guidance, and a 'substitute for a family'.<sup>117</sup>

However, even if the SIR community centre's single-issue orientation could not exorcize coalitional thought, it had a lasting influence on how local activists imagined community. After 1966, even such stubborn challengers of a narrow, single-issue gay politics as Laurence could only conceive of themselves as members of a 'homosexual community'.<sup>118</sup> Their project hence became

<sup>110</sup> Forrester, 'A workplan for community organization', 24 May 1966, GLBTHS, Lucas papers, 15/4.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*; *idem*, 'Alinsky says "act"', *Vector*, 1/12 (Nov. 1965), p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> Beardemphl and DeLeon interview, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4; Forrester interview.

<sup>114</sup> Marcus, *Making history*, p. 145; 'Chatter matter', *Vector*, 3/2 (Jan. 1967), p. 7; J. Bradley, 'Election', *Vector*, 3/4 (Mar. 1967), p. 12.

<sup>115</sup> Littlejohn, 'President's corner'.

<sup>116</sup> 'Letters to the editor', *Vector*, 5/1 (Jan. 1969), pp. 27–8.

<sup>117</sup> Plaster, *Kids on the street*, p. 146. Hospitality House continues to support local youth to this day.

<sup>118</sup> 'Editorial', *Vector*, 5/4 (Mar. 1969), p. 4.

building bridges to other marginalized communities. The possibility that community could also be conceived differently and more ambitiously, as a shared political project that brought together a variety of constituencies in coalitional struggle, was largely no longer imaginable to this later generation. Within the space of just a few years, a radical homophile tradition of theorizing community had for the most part become discredited, if not forgotten. In its place, a new generation discovered ‘liberation’ as a novel register in which to articulate broader, multi-issue political imaginaries.<sup>119</sup>

### III

In 1960s San Francisco, LGBT ideas of ‘community’ underwent a formative period. José Sarria’s 1961 campaign for San Francisco city supervisor introduced the notion of a ‘homosexual community’ into homophile activism as a conceptual tool for the battle against state and especially police harassment. Over the subsequent years, it gradually took hold within gay bar-based and non-bar-based activism. And yet, the claim that homophiles should solely focus on supporting a narrowly defined ‘gay community’ remained hotly contested across the decade. Some homophile activists contended that such a community did not exist and that gays should focus their attention on assimilating into heteronormative society. Gay coalitionists, on the other hand, argued that only building bridges to other marginalized groups would deliver the political changes gays urgently needed. This belief encouraged them to advance new visions of ‘community’ in which, to borrow from Cathy Cohen, ‘one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades’.<sup>120</sup>

Attention to the bifurcated early history of gay ideas of community can help us move toward a more complex picture of the homophile past, a period marked by the confluence of opposing gay intellectual streams, and ‘the buzz of political conflict’ their meeting engendered.<sup>121</sup> It also helps us better grasp the intellectual foundations on which an exclusionary, homonormative politics would solidify in the post-Stonewall years, and brings more firmly into view the generative effects civil rights movement victories could have on the development of a coalitional, and at times even intersectional gay politics.

Though gay coalitional imaginaries of community waned by the end of the 1960s, they would never entirely disappear. Queer of colour thinkers in particular have continued to make the case for reimagining community as something that can be woven across divergent lives and social positions. In her famous comments ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s

<sup>119</sup> Hobson, *Lavender and red*; Samuel Galen Ng, ‘Trans power! Sylvia Lee Rivera’s STAR and the Black Panther Party’, *Left History*, 17 (2013), pp. 11–41.

<sup>120</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, ‘Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: the radical potential of queer politics?’, *GLQ*, 3 (1997), pp. 437–65, at p. 438.

<sup>121</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, ‘The liberal 1950s? Reinterpreting postwar American sexual culture’, in Karen Hagemann and Sonya Michel, eds., *Gender and the long postwar: the United States and the two Germanys, 1945–1989* (Washington, DC, 2014), pp. 295–317, at p. 311.

house', Audre Lorde reminds us that 'community must not mean the shedding of our differences', that other kinds of communities than those built on identity and sameness are possible.<sup>122</sup> We might think of Lorde's communities of difference as finding a continuation in the queer politics Cathy Cohen advocated, or the 'open community' of inter-racial solidarity Kevin Mumford has more recently urged historians to create.<sup>123</sup> This article has suggested that these ways of theorizing community have a long history that stretches back to the very invention of gay ideas of community.

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<sup>122</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: essays and speeches* (revised edn, Berkeley, CA, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>123</sup> Cohen, 'Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens'; Kevin Mumford, 'The lessons of Stonewall fifty years later', *QED*, 6 (2019), pp. 85–90, at p. 89.

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