Queer Bedfellows: Huey Newton, Homophobia, and Black Activism in Cold War America

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

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June 2012

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This thesis titled
Queer Bedfellows: Huey Newton, Homophobia, and Black Activism in Cold War America

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ABSTRACT

POSTON, LANCE E., M.A., June 2012, History

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This thesis explores the experiences of black gay activists in Cold War America. First, the project highlights the lives of black gay men like Bayard Rustin and Aaron Henry who were prominent leaders in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. After isolating the major issues these activists faced within black communities as a result of their sexuality, the remainder of the thesis focuses on a new vision of gay acceptance in radical black circles first presented by Black Panther leader Huey Newton in 1970. In short, Newton believed that blacks should form a radical coalition with gays as a way to strengthen both groups in opposition to the dominant social and political hierarchies of Cold War America. In the end, however, Newton was not able to form such a coalition because of notions of respectability that governed many civil rights organizations' agendas and the socially conservative nature of mainline black churches.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: From Baby-Rapists To Brothers</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: An Enemy Of My Enemies</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Pipe Dreams And Preachers</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“It's not good enough to support human rights for one's own race or culture and then be silent about injustices to other groups. As Martin once said, we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny, an inescapable network of mutuality. I can never be what I ought to be until you are allowed to be what you ought to be.”

-- Coretta Scott King, March 31, 1998

On June 6, 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy addressed a packed room of students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa’s capital city. As he looked across the audience of young faces united in opposition to their country’s oppressive system of apartheid, he was certainly reminded of similar faces back home -- both black and white -- that had gathered at sit-ins and marches throughout the United States in the past few years. In fact, young Americans from urban centers to small towns had succeeded in capturing the attention of the national media and taking their messages for peace and racial justice into millions of cozy and complacent Cold War homes across the country. Recognizing a similar zeitgeist of opposition and change among young South Africans, Kennedy remarked that “it is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is thus shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression.”

Looking back on the 1960s, it is hard to deny that the efforts of a diverse group of progressive organizations rocked the foundations of American society, creating ripples of

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1 Terry Wilson, “King’s Widow Stands Up for Gay Civil Rights,” Chicago Tribune, April 1, 1998.
2 Robert Kennedy, “Day of Affirmation Address”(speech given at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966).
hope and change that, while certainly not strong enough to obliterate completely the long-
standing towers of racial and sexual injustice, created large enough cracks in their
foundations to ensure they would never be as strong again. Although each group of
protestors had specific concerns and goals, it was their collective power that ultimately
qualified the 1960s as the quintessential decade of change in American history.

Following this idea that the true radical essence of the decade lay in shared goals and
collective actions, one of the most effective and fulfilling ways to explore the picket lines
and political struggles of the 1960s is through examining the intersections of the ripples
of hope Senator Kennedy praised.

Two central and iconic causes surrounding social protest and unrest in the 1960s
were the struggles for racial justice and sexual freedom in the United States. Beginning in
earnest in the mid-1950s, groups fighting to end the segregation and oppression
entrenched in Jim Crow America began organizations like the Southern Christian
Leadership Conference (SCLC) with the aim of tearing down racial barriers that relegated
black men and women to second-class citizenship. Collectively, groups like the SCLC,
the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became known as the principal
agitators and mouthpieces of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1966, about ten years after
the SCLC was founded, a new chapter in the struggle for racial justice began with the
creation of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, California. This group, founded by
Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, sought to bring about many of the changes that other
civil rights groups had fought for in the preceding decade. In contrast to earlier groups,
however, the Panthers relied more heavily on masculinist rhetoric and the possibility of violence to protect black communities and fight for social justice.

Although scholars often think of earlier nonviolent groups like the SCLC and later militant organizations like the Black Panthers as belonging to two separate historical eras in the struggle for racial equality, considering all of these groups as part of one overarching Civil Rights Movement allows for a more complete understanding of the changing dynamics of these activist organizations and of African American communities across the country. At first glance, it is clear that the SCLC, NAACP, SNCC, and the BPP were all founded to fight the hierarchy of injustice that relegated black Americans to second-class citizenship. Although each group adopted different strategies to bring about equality, their most fundamental goal remained the same. However, from the creation of the SCLC in 1955 through the height of Black Panther membership in 1969, the Civil Rights Movement and African Americans in general had weathered over a decade of closely wedded triumphs and defeats. With every successful boycott had come another Emmett Till. In the midst of these ups and downs of the 1960s, many activists and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement struck out against racial injustice in towns and cities across the country. These men and women came from different states with varying degrees of education and resources. Among the diverse groups of African Americans working together to secure their own civil rights were many gays and lesbians.3

Although even the most brief perusal of scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement produces explorations of the contributions of a variety of different individuals

3 For additional discussion of reasons for collapsing the civil rights/ black power divide, see Jacquelyn Hall’s “The Long Civil Rights Movement.”
from the brave women who joined together in the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the valiant young black men who resisted fighting in an army that did not consider them full citizens -- very little literature exists on the contributions of gay men and women who played crucial parts in the success of the movement. The few historians who have endeavored to tell the stories of black gay activists have used a variety of approaches, including writing biographies of openly gay individuals or analyzing homophobic and masculinist rhetoric to reconstruct a general sense of what life as a gay black person in the Sixties must have been like. Overall, though, this historical literature is limited for several reasons. First, the history of gay people -- often taking the labels of history of sexuality or LGBT history -- is relatively new as a subfield of the historical discipline. The founding scholars of the modern subfield include Allan Berube, Randy Shilts, John D’Emilio, and George Chauncey, all of whom began publishing major works of gay history in the late 1980s. These pioneers’ works, however, form a solid basis for new historical explorations of gays specifically in the Civil Rights Movement and more generally in Cold War America. These essential publications include Randy Shilts’s *Conduct Unbecoming* and Alan Berube’s *Coming Out Under Fire*. Both of these touchstone works about gays in the military during and following World War II were groundbreaking in their subject matter and historical approach.

Second, a lack of gay history of the Civil Rights Movement exists because most black gay activists -- like most gay men and women of all races -- simply lived in the closet. It is no accident that two of the first book-length works of gay history centered on military service. Although certainly only a small portion of gay men and women -- even a
smaller number who were black -- were soldiers in the last half century, military records of investigations and other proceedings provide the most accessible and extensive collections of American gay experiences at the time. One of the rare works centering on the life of a black gay civilian in the Civil Rights Movement is John D’Emilio’s *Lost Prophet.* This work chronicles the life of Bayard Rustin, an advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. and a prominent anti-war organizer who was openly gay. The experiences of other gay civil rights activists and leaders have to be pieced together from chapters or paragraphs of secondary works or constructed from between the lines of documents these activists left behind.

Beyond the well-documented issues that Rustin faced because of his sexuality, other experiences of black gay activists were deeply hidden by the closet door. In the last few years, however, new scholarship has begun to pull some of these queer experiences into the light. First, John Howard discussed the bisexual -- if not homosexual -- life of Mississippi NAACP President Aaron Henry in *Men Like That.* In this work on gay history in the South, Howard devoted a few pages to exploring the double life of Henry, a married black leader who also had an open relationship with another man. Also, the queer lives of activist writers like Audre Lorde and James Baldwin were mentioned briefly by their biographers, inferred through their personal writings, or presented through interviews later in life. Ultimately, though, the experiences of black gay activists in the
Civil Rights Movement have never been collected in one work or analyzed for common issues and themes.4

Due to the lack of information known at the time or preserved about black gay activists, this work will focus primarily on the relatively well documented experiences of Rustin and Henry as well as the homophobic language employed by black militant leaders in the late 1960s and new visions of gay and black cooperative organizing to reconstruct what it must have been like to be gay, black, and a civil rights activist in Cold War America. Also, juxtaposing the shared experiences of Rustin and Henry with homophobic as well as inclusive language from prominent black leaders of the day creates a common discourse that is representative of the same sorts of general issues faced by countless other activists whose stories have been lost to history. It is important to note that this study deals primarily with gay men and male sexuality in the Civil Rights and Gay Rights Movements. Not at all an editorial choice, this overwhelming male focus exists because of the primacy of men in both movements. In the end, the gendered hierarchies of Cold War America permeated even the most radical organizations, often relegating women to subservient positions as secretaries and homemakers.5

The best documented experience and ultimate marginalization of a black gay activist is that of Bayard Rustin. From his early days of anti-war activism in the 1940s through his time as one of King’s most prominent mentors, Rustin’s career was plagued by threats to discredit his abilities due to his sexuality. Although his contributions to the

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4 For information on Aaron Henry, see John Howard’s Men Like That. For information on James Baldwin, see David Leeming’s James Baldwin and James Campbell’s Talking at the Gates. For information on Audre Lorde, see Alexis De Veaux’s Warrior Poet.

5 For more on sexism in revolutionary groups, see Sara Evans’ Personal Politics and Hayden and King’s “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo.”
Civil Rights Movement were unrivaled -- even rising to prominence as the chief architect of the famous 1963 March on Washington -- Rustin was ultimately distanced from further public key leadership positions because he was gay.\(^6\)

Similarly, Aaron Henry was a central figure in civil rights activism in Mississippi. In fact, Henry was elected the president of the Mississippi NAACP in 1960. Even with his rise to prominence, however, Henry’s sexuality became a weapon that his opponents used against him and the Civil Rights Movement on multiple occasions. In 1962, for example, Henry was accused of picking up a hitchhiker and propositioning him for sex. This charge led to a long legal battle, a fine, and a short prison sentence.\(^7\)

In stark contrast to the exclusion and marginalization of these gay leaders through the late 1960s, however, was Huey P. Newton’s outright support of gay activism by the early 1970s. The first section of this thesis, therefore, focuses on Newton’s new vision of acceptance and cooperation between the two movements. Newton, one of the original founders of the Black Panthers, set out a new position in much of his writing after serving two years in prison for the death of an Oakland police officer in 1968. In his 1973 autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton described the development of the Panthers from experiences that led him to found the party in 1966 through ideological and political struggles that transformed it by 1970. He acknowledged that the group’s extreme militarism in its early years created an intimidating and exclusionary mindset among members and admitted that “perhaps our military strategy was too much of ‘a

\(^6\) Rustin’s experiences are well documented in John D’Emilio’s *Lost Prophet* and Jervis Anderson’s *Bayard Rustin*.
great leap forward.” A combination of this aggressive mindset and Newton’s incarceration from 1968 to 1970 empowered leaders with anti-gay sentiments like Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver had joined the Black Panthers in search of a symbol of black manhood yet was only able to see that embodied in violence and “either/or absolutes.” In his black or white world, gay men were a threat to black masculinity. Contrastingly, Newton realized that revolution was a process rather than an action, and had come to recognize the shared search for dignity between blacks and gays, even though they played no part in his founding of the Panthers a few years earlier.8

Although he certainly had more time to contemplate the connections between the movements while in jail, Newton’s new support of the “gay cause” was not the result of a miraculous prison epiphany. The second section of this project outlines the major social issues faced by both black and gay communities that ultimately contributed to Newton’s avant-garde position on the status of gays in the United States. On the whole, both openly gay men and women and racial minorities had faced social and political persecution and oppression since the nation’s founding. With the rise of many New Left groups during the 1950s and 1960s, however, Cold War America became the battleground where these wounds of social inequality finally festered, oozed, and drained. Revolutionary groups associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the movements for gay rights and liberation framed the plight of racial and sexual minorities as unconstitutional violations of civil rights. Ultimately, the shared experiences of these two groups that contributed to Newton’s new vision can be broadly categorized as prejudices in the military and workplace, harassment by police, and disillusionment with older generations of leaders.

Unfortunately, even with solid historical experiences motivating Newton’s call for cooperation, his efforts at solidarity building fell apart by 1972. No great coalition between blacks and gays ever developed. The ultimate demise of this vision was not, however, the result of a change in Newton’s personal perspective. The third section of this project explores two major roadblocks to progress that prevented any such cooperative groups from developing. First, Newton’s vision was limited by Cold War ideas of respectability that often determined boundaries on the distance to which black activist leaders were willing to go for solidarity building. In essence, even though evidence exists that urban black communities before World War II were much more open to homosexuality than their later Cold War counterparts, the intense disdain for homosexuality in postwar white communities, combined with black middle-class desires to gain white approval for the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately marginalized black gay men and women.

Cold War black churches were a second roadblock to coalition building. Due to the historical significance of religious life in black communities and the fundamentalist nature of the major black denominations that developed in Reconstruction Era America, black ministers became gatekeepers of morality and respectability for their parishioners. This relationship elevated conservative religious leaders to positions of prominence within black communities and the Civil Rights Movement, further reducing most chances black gay activists had to participate publicly in black activist efforts.

Looking back, some of the greatest legacies of Cold War America are the “numberless diverse acts of courage” that ultimately revolutionized the nation in many
ways. From struggles to end oppression based on skin color, gender, and sexual orientation emerged the more just and equitable American society that exists today. Although many of the era’s radical causes were championed by divergent activist groups, the true essence of the period was found in their moments of cooperation and connection -- the places where a generation’s ripples of hope joined collectively to wash a nation stained by inequity. Within these movements, however, existed hierarchies of oppression that limited their potential impact. The great contributions of black gays in the struggle for racial justice are undeniable. Many of their stories, though, have been lost to time. Their experiences were pushed into the closets of respectability and religious morality as these reformers were often forced to choose between sitting on the sidelines of activism or hiding their true selves. This project’s main purpose is to analyze the experiences of Rustin and Henry alongside both the homophobic and coalition-minded language of prominent civil rights leaders in an effort to underscore the contributions of black gays to the Civil Rights Movement and to aid a nearly forgotten group of Cold War revolutionaries in reclaiming their historical voice. After all, these men and women did not only stand up for the rights of African Americans. The tremendously valuable, yet often controversial, contributions of black gays in the Civil Rights Movement made them the central forbearers of Gay Liberation, the movement that carried the torch of human rights and equality into the next decade.
CHAPTER ONE: FROM BABY-RAPISTS TO BROTHERS

“Black people and oppressed people in general have lost faith in the leaders of America...The sacredness of man and of the human spirit requires that human dignity and integrity ought to be always respected by every other man. We will settle for nothing less, for at this point in history anything less is but a living death.”
-- Huey P. Newton, September 5, 1970

As explorations of the lives of black activists who openly deviated from the norms of heterosexual Cold War America proved, identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during the 1950s and 1960s often resulted in marginalization and exclusion from prominent leadership roles in civil rights groups. Exploring or claiming alternate sexualities served as ammunition for black leaders and civil rights opponents alike to cripple one’s activist potential. Regardless of the great contributions that Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Aaron Henry, and Audre Lorde made to SCLC and NAACP campaigns, they were ultimately labeled as outsiders and black sheep of the movement because of whom they loved. Making matters worse, the civil rights warriors focused on in the introduction were chosen for this study not only because of their significant activism in the face of such widespread homophobic adversity, but because their life stories provide four of the few documented instances of black gay activism in the Civil Rights Movement. Their experiences serve to create an idea of what life was like for hundreds or perhaps thousands of closeted black Americans who struggled to end racial oppression in organizations that simultaneously oppressed them because of their sexualities.

As the 1960s drew to a close, it seemed that black gay Americans had no place in the major civil rights groups that had continually expanded over the previous two decades.

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9 Huey Newton, To Die For the People(San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009), pp. 162-163.
or in the increasingly powerful but still marginalized black communities they represented. In the midst of pervasive homophobia in black organizations and communities, however, a new vision of acceptance and cooperation between blacks and gays -- including embracing individuals who fit both of those categories -- developed from one of the most unlikely persons: a founder of the militant and masculinist Black Panther Party.

Emerging from a two year prison sentence for manslaughter in early 1970, Black Panther cofounder Huey Newton quickly began articulating a vision of cooperation between radical groups in America and abroad that undeniably linked the past and current treatment as well as the future wellbeing of blacks and gays across the country and around the globe. Newton’s new vision was surprising and seemingly unlikely because of the Black Panthers’ founding principles and past actions that centered on promoting hyper-masculine images of black manhood as a way to claim freedoms and agency long denied them by white America.¹⁰

In the fall of 1966, Newton and fellow activist Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party (BPP) as an organization to end police brutality in their local community of Oakland, California, and to work in a broader sense to end racial prejudices that plagued black communities across the country. The Party’s goals in its first years of existence focused almost exclusively on gaining freedoms for blacks; they demanded the “power to determine the destiny of our Black Community” in the first lines of the BPP founding document. These early demands took the form of battles on economic and political fronts. As expressed in their original party platform, the Black Panthers were created to fight for

“land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace” for black Americans. To bring about these changes, they depended on masculine rhetoric aimed at recruiting young working-class black men who felt emasculated by the overarching white society. In 1968, Newton spoke about the frustration and hopelessness many young black men felt because of their inability to change cultural and social realities that relegated them to second class citizenship. Newton believed that many young black men felt they were “something less than a man...the white man is ‘THE MAN,’ he gets everything and knows everything.” In short, as an alternative to older nonviolent civil rights groups like the NAACP or SCLC, the Black Panthers offered young black men a new standard of revolutionary manhood that depended on masculine and militant posturing to achieve ultimately black liberation.\textsuperscript{11}

Even though this new approach broke from the older generation of civil rights activism in very distinct ways, it oddly augmented the importance of many traditional gender roles held by earlier black activist groups. These gender roles in early black activist groups were evident in an anonymous memorandum written by Casey Hayden and Mary King in 1964 and entitled “SNCC Position Paper: Women in the Movement.” In this document, Hayden and King pointed out that women in SNCC “who are competent, qualified, and experienced, are automatically assigned the ‘female’ kinds of jobs such as typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking, and the assistant kind of administrative work but rarely the ‘executive’ kind.” This oppressive division of labor extended beyond SNCC to the SCLC and other early key activist groups

\textsuperscript{11} Estes, \textit{I Am a Man}, p. 156.
as well. Following this trend, the Panthers cast revolutionary black men as the most capable and rightful leaders of the fight for civil rights.\textsuperscript{12}

While the Panthers did not prohibit women from joining the organization, the group’s masculinist stances caused significant issues for its female members. Historian Steve Estes pointed out that despite the similar training that both male and female members received, Panther women were often confined to secretarial roles and were generally referred to as “Pantherettes.” As one Panther put it, women in the group were mainly expected to “reproduce warriors so that there will be future generations to carry on the revolution, [and do] household duties, such as cleaning, caring for family, sewing, and cooking.” Ironically, the roles that women were expected to play in the organization were almost mirror images of the gender roles followed in the white communities that the Panthers so often despised. Similarly to white husbands and businessmen, Black Panther leaders reinforced the concept of the prevailing “feminine mystique” that placed the role of women squarely within the confines of subservient motherhood.\textsuperscript{13}

Although the Black Panther Party had no official position banning gays from membership in the late 1960s, the widespread sentiment of the group was evident through the use of gay epithets to describe their opponents. Recognizing the widespread disdain and disgust for homosexuality in black and white communities across the country, the Black Panthers used degrading gay labels to describe the politicians and police who opposed their aims. Until 1970, the Panthers referred to their adversaries with such labels


\textsuperscript{13} Estes, I Am a Man, pp. 163-165. For a further explanation of the Cold War “feminine mystique,” see Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique.
as “sissies,” “faggots,” and “dickless motherfuckers.” Although they were certainly not the only radical group of the time to employ such language, the prevalence of these slurs made clear that the Party was no place for gay men and women.\textsuperscript{14}

A prominent example of the widespread sentiment of the Black Panthers towards gays during the last half of the 1960s was the homophobic language of Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. Although Cleaver was not an original founder of the Panthers, he was one of the most prominent group members throughout the late sixties. During this time, Cleaver held powerful positions as the group’s Minister of Information and editor of the Panthers’ newspaper. In fact, while Newton was incarcerated from 1968 until 1970, Cleaver became the central mouthpiece of the Black Panthers. Unlike Newton, however, Cleaver had joined the Black Panthers specifically in search of a symbol of black manhood but was only able to see that embodied in violence and “either/or absolutes.” In his black or white world, gay men were a threat to black masculinity.\textsuperscript{15}

Ultimately, this homophobia was expressed through attacks he made on James Baldwin in \textit{Soul On Ice}. In this autobiographical collection of essays, Cleaver made clear that he believed Baldwin and other homosexuals were sick with a sexual disease similar to “baby-rape.” He went on to explain that homosexuality among black men was just yet another way that emasculated blacks subjugated themselves to white overlords. Relying again on images of rape and domination, Cleaver explained that “many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear

\textsuperscript{14} Estes, \textit{I Am a Man}, p. 162.
is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves -- though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man’s sperm.” In Cleaver’s mind, black gay men were selling out their blackness to be accepted by whites. Furthermore, they were trapped in a sick sexual cycle that would no more produce rights for blacks than it would a baby from anal intercourse. Ultimately, Cleaver believed that ideas of homosexuality only emasculated black men even more than they already were. In no way was a gay lifestyle compatible with the Black Panther aims in his mind.16

Even Newton participated in manly posturing before going to prison in 1968. Although he never proclaimed homophobic messages during the group’s early years, he worked to mold an image of the Black Panthers as aggressive black men who fit traditional gender stereotypes. For example, in one of the most famous photographs of Newton, taken just before he began his jail sentence in 1968, he exuded undeniably violent and macho themes. Sitting alone in a throne-like chair, Newton wore the standard Black Panther uniform of a black beret and dark leather jacket. The image also presented Newton as an instinctual male warrior and hunter, relying on the juxtaposition of an African tribal spear and shields with a modern rifle. Images like this one served only to further the Panther’s hyper-masculine image and exclude the open and full participation of women and gays.

In stark contrast to the Black Panthers’ negative views of homosexuals in the late 1960s, however, was their outright support of gay activism by the early 1970s. Although,  

by all accounts, Eldridge Cleaver never became a supporter of gay rights or a believer in
the importance of an alliance with gay activists, his decline from power after Newton’s
release from prison in 1970 signified a shift in Panther leadership and a corresponding
change in the way that the party viewed homosexuals. In his 1973 autobiography,
*Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton described this shift by acknowledging that the group’s
extreme militarism in its early years created an intimidating and exclusionary mindset
among members and admitted that “perhaps our military strategy was too much of ‘a
great leap forward.’” Even though a combination of this aggressive mindset and
Newton’s incarceration from 1968 to 1970 empowered leaders with anti-gay sentiments
like Cleaver, Newton made clear in 1970 that a new age of inclusiveness was one of his
top priorities.17

In August 1970, for the first time, Newton declared that all Black Panthers,
whatever “their personal opinions and…insecurities about homosexuality and the various
liberation movements among homosexuals…should try to unite with them in a
revolutionary fashion.” He went on to point out that Black Panthers “must relate to the
homosexual movement because it is a real thing. And I know through reading, and
through my life experience and observations that homosexuals are not given freedom and
liberty by anyone in the society. They might be the most oppressed people in the
society…a person should be able to use his body in any way he wants.” Black Panthers
could not relate to gays, however, until they dealt with the root of their homophobia.
Essentially, Newton believed that anti-gay feelings sprung from personal insecurities. He
thought that “we want to hit...homosexual[s]...in the mouth because we are afraid we

17 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, pp. 328-331, 294.
might be homosexual.” Furthermore, he claimed that these personal insecurities were the same motivations that many whites had for their racism. The great irony that Newton realized among his fellow revolutionaries was that at the same time they were fighting racial injustices, they were employing similar thought processes and insecurities to oppress another minority group. Newton’s belief in the interconnectedness of racism and homophobia was supported by Ericka Huggins, the longest serving female leader of the Black Panthers, in a later interview. Huggins remembered that to Newton, “It wasn’t just gay and lesbians are okay. To Huey, it didn’t make sense to oppress them any more than it made sense to oppress black people...Huey believed you couldn’t unhinge racism and leave homophobia hanging out in your being.” Clearly, to completely destroy the hierarchy of oppression that continued to support racism in Cold War America, blacks needed to “develop feelings for all oppressed people,” including gays.¹⁸

Newton did not, however, believe that the Gay Liberation Movement was flawless in its revolutionary activities. Understanding that many Black Panthers would ultimately have criticisms about gay activism, Newton made clear that the appropriate method for expressing those critical feelings was to take offense with a particular action or position without disqualifying the revolutionary potential of the entire group. Beyond limiting their attacks to specific issues with activists or tactics, it was also necessary for the Panthers to clean up their language. To create a dialogue with gay activists, he insisted “the terms ‘faggot’ and ‘punk’ should be deleted from...[Black

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Panther]...vocabulary.” No longer could derogatory gay labels be used as slurs against the Panthers’ opposition without endangering possibilities for cooperation.¹⁹

In the grand scheme of things, Newton not only saw gays as a similarly oppressed minority, he also viewed gay organizations as powerful potential allies. For members who still had personal hangups about homosexuality, Newton offered an additional motivation for supporting gay groups that went beyond ideas of morality and manhood. Quite simply, Newton saw potential revolutionary friends who could help support the causes he was fighting for. Gay activists were “potential allies, and we need as many allies as possible,” remarked Newton. To solidify an alliance and create a “working coalition,” Black Panthers had to start welcoming the full participation of gay activist groups at their conferences and demonstrations.²⁰

This newly articulated vision of cooperation was widely publicized and discussed in Black Panther circles. In the August 21, 1970, edition of the Black Panthers’ newspaper, a copy of Newton’s previously discussed comments about gay activism was prominently published as a full page article. On the same day, Newton was interviewed by a reporter who asked what kind of reaction he received from his comments about Gay Liberation. Newton responded that many gay activists were surprised but happy to see this shift in policy. He went on to discuss the importance of tearing down stereotypes and tackling issues of male chauvinism that were prevalent in black communities. In a similar vein, the Black Panther newspaper published a story a couple months later entitled “Women’s Liberation.” In this piece, the author noted that “right now too many women

¹⁹ Newton, To Die For the People, p. 155.
²⁰ Newton, To Die For the People, pp. 154-155.
are being tyrannized by the power of their bosses...right now 99% of women are working for men in offices, in institutions, and in the home because there are not other alternatives.” Ultimately, this oppression of women was enabled by chauvinism which supported traditional gender hierarchies that similarly oppressed gays. The piece ended with a call to all readers to look inward and work to eradicate personal prejudices that enabled such oppressive systems to exist.21

Newton and other Black Panthers not only made connections between the oppression of blacks, gays, and women in Cold War America. Ultimately, Newton believed that all radical groups working to tear down existing forms of oppression were intrinsically bound to one another. In essence, these groups should form alliances because of their common enemy: white heterosexual males who built and maintained traditional social hierarchies. In an interview on September 17, 1970, Newton stated that the future of the Black Panther party was to unite “with our fellow struggling brothers of oppression no matter what their color in America.” He continued by saying that the Panthers had already begun working with “the National Liberation News Service, the White Panthers, the Peace and Freedom Party, the Yippies...the Gay Liberation, Women’s Liberation, G.I.’s. We will work with any progressive group who is fighting reaction.” In Newton’s mind, it made perfect sense for all of these radical groups to create an alliance as part of a

worldwide revolution. This widespread coalition would cross boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, geography, economics, and political persuasion.\textsuperscript{22}

Beyond Newton’s already discussed stances on the common revolutionary tasks of blacks, gays, and women, he also expressed solidarity with Third World countries and anti-war activists in the early 1970s. In late 1969, Newton discussed the importance of anti-war activism in a letter from prison entitled “On the Peace Movement.” If anti-war activists were to win in their quest to end the Vietnam War, it would symbolize a significant defeat of the white controlled military industrial complex that wielded inordinate power in Cold War America. Ending the war would also signify triumph by revolutionaries over the old imperialistic dialectic of domination and development. This victory would be so significant that it could “revolutionize the basic economic composition of the country” by reimagining social power dynamics. By gaining control of the military, one of the most ancient symbols of national power and might, all revolutionaries would benefit.\textsuperscript{23}

Also, Newton saw Third World revolutionaries as part of his worldwide radical movement. Not only should the Black Panthers be supportive of domestic liberation groups, they should ultimately expand their perspective to include peoples of other nations who faced similar oppression from the white power structure. In August 1970, Newton wrote to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam to express revolutionary solidarity with their cause. He argued that the NLF and the BPP had a common enemy in American imperialists. Looking beyond national borders, Newton stated that he was

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Mark Lane on September 17, 1970, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, 57:10, Green Library, Stanford University(Stanford, Cal.).

\textsuperscript{23} Newton, \textit{To Die For the People}, p. 149.
“aware that while our oppressor has domestic problems these do not stop him from oppressing people all over the world.” Hopefully, through resisting oppression wherever it was found, the Black Panthers would have a better chance to reach liberation at home.24

Less than a month after Newton called for solidarity between Black Panthers and gay rights activists, over 10,000 people gathered at the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention at Temple University in Philadelphia. This convention was sponsored by the Black Panther Party to create a symbolic new United States Constitution that truly represented justice for all. Although this meeting reiterated many of the familiar demands for justice in black communities, it is significant because of the prominent role of gay activists.

Not only were black and white gay activists visible throughout the convention, but they also drafted a “Statement of the Male Homosexual Workshop” that connected their specific issues to the Black Panthers’ overall struggle. In a similar fashion to the Black Panther Platform, the statement made eighteen demands calling for the abolition of sexism and equal treatment of gays. These demands began by making clear that “The revolution will not be complete until all men are free to express their love for one another sexually.” After these opening remarks, the group went on to demand an end to sexism, male supremacy, and heterosexual chauvinism and “the right to be gay, anytime, any place.” Finally the workshop recognized “as a vanguard revolutionary action the Huey P. Newton statement on gay liberation.” Also, although not as well organized or celebrated as the gay male workshop, a lesbian workshop did take place during the convention as well. Similarly to its gay male counterpart, the workshop demanded “sexual autonomy”

24 Newton, To Die For the People, pp. 180-81.
and called for the “destruction of the nuclear family.” In all, to many activists for black or gay rights, the inclusion of homosexual groups on the agenda at this convention distinguished the Black Panthers as the “vanguard of the people’s revolution” in America.  

During the central plenary session of the conference, Huey Newton delivered an address that tied together the diverse groups of revolutionary individuals and ideas represented in the various workshops and panels. Throughout this speech, Newton reinforced the idea that an all encompassing umbrella of radical organizations must grow closer as allies in order truly to bring about the revolution they all desired. Reaching out to “oppressed people in general,” Newton labored to describe the common issues and treatment that bound them all together. This collection of oppressed people included groups as diverse as blacks, gay men, lesbians, Native Americans, feminists, students, G.I.’s, and Third World Peoples. However, the message for all of these different activists was the same. Although “the history of the United States, as distinguished from the promise of the idea of the United States, leads us to the conclusion that our sufferance is basic to the functioning of the government...our suffering has been too long, our sacrifices have been too great, and our human dignity is too strong to be prudent any longer.”  

In the end, it was clear that by 1970 Newton had crafted a new message for the Black Panthers that included respect for and cooperation with many diverse revolutionary individuals and ideas.

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26 Newton, To Die For the People, pp. 157-161.
groups in the United States and abroad, including activists from the Gay Liberation Movement. The inclusion of these groups in the 1970 Revolutionary Constitutional Convention represented a tangible expression of Newton’s new vision of cooperation between black and gays. Also, although the Panthers held a few similar conventions during the first half of the 1970s, none was as well publicized or discussed as this first meeting in Philadelphia. Throughout the summer and fall editions of the Black Panther newspaper were extensive advertisements and coverage of the event. One such advertisement appeared in the August 21, 1970, edition of the paper. This lengthy ad pointed out that “Most of us identify our particular oppression with a specific group. In order for us to come together around a common vision, we first have to understand each other’s grievances in relation to the system which produces them.” Further down on the same page, several different groupings of oppressed people were listed, including male and female homosexuals. Also, less than a month after the convention, an article was published testifying to the significance of what went on at Temple University. The two page spread proclaimed that “Not to believe in a new world after Philadelphia is a dereliction of the human spirit!” Both the extensive advertising leading up to the convention and the declarations of its impact after the event spoke to the true significance of the collection of “revolutionary people” in attendance and the spread of Newton’s vision of cooperation from himself to many other Black Panther members.27

As 1970 drew to a close, it seemed that a new dialogue had been created between blacks and gays in a way that would have been impossible only a couple years earlier.

27 “Not to Believe in a New World Order after Philadelphia is a Dereliction of the Human Spirit,” Black Panther, September 26, 1970, 4-5.
Through a new campaign to bring together various revolutionary groups under one umbrella of interconnected activism, Newton began to forge alliances and create understanding between black and gay activists. The potential for combining these two revolutionary forces was tremendous. Sadly, however, it quickly became evident that Newton’s vision of a black/gay alliance was a doomed pipe dream. Although Newton continued to support gay causes and search for common ground between the two groups on a personal level, a party-wide initiative never developed.

Over the next decade, Newton figured prominently in events such as the Stanford University Organizing Committee’s “Disorientation Week,” held from April 16 through 23, 1978. The event was organized with the aim of involving “Stanford and the outlying communities in an exploration of the diverse issues, analyses and activities of the progressive movement.” In many ways, the group’s goals mirrored Newton’s aspirations at the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention eight years earlier. Newton’s continued belief and interest in a cooperative alliance between blacks and gays was expressed at Stanford by the juxtaposition of his speech on personal activist experiences with a later speech by Harvey Milk, the first openly gay individual elected to a public office, on issues facing gay communities. After 1970, though, any mention of gay activism in Black Panther newspapers or in Newton’s official addresses is nonexistent.28

To develop a complete picture of the sudden birth and death of Newton’s vision, it is necessary to look both at the factors that motivated Newton to find initial solidarity with gay activism and the inescapable influences that ultimately crushed the dream. The

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28 Disorientation Week Document, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, 57: 2, Green Library, Stanford University (Stanford, Cal.).
following chapter will deal with particular motivations that influenced Newton to shift drastically the Black Panther Party’s position on gays after his release from prison in early 1970. Alternately, the third and final chapter will deal with the cultural traditions and tensions that ultimately led the two groups to take separate paths of activism and enabled major black civil rights organizations to continue marginalizing black gay activists for decades to follow.
CHAPTER TWO: AN ENEMY OF MY ENEMIES

I do not know enough about myself, because you do not
know enough about yourself. Would you help me know?
I met someone and he was a part of myself that I did not appreciate.
It is not that our ego is too large; the problem is that our ego is too small.
Love is more constant than light.
-- Huey P. Newton

Although he certainly had more time to contemplate the connections
between African Americans and gays while in jail, Newton’s new support of the “gay
cause” was not the result of a miraculous prison epiphany. Instead, changes in the black
militant movement were more directly related to a series of 1969 riots on Christopher
Street in New York’s Greenwich Village. These riots centered on the popular gay bar
called the Stonewall Inn, and were the result of several years of gay repression and
harassment. It is important to understand that in 1969, Stonewall was not just any gay
bar; it was the largest gay club in the country. Regardless of the fact that it was mafia
owned and operated, the Stonewall Inn drew in huge numbers of faithful patrons because
of its broad acceptance of not only gay men, but lesbians and transsexuals as well. The
club’s service to “all segments of the gay and lesbian community, including a strong
representation of the more marginal elements, defined the Stonewall Inn as a special
place in the homosexual world of greater New York, giving it unique status at the time.”

Author David Carter explained that at a time when “the laws in America were harsher on
homosexuals than those in Cuba, Russia, or East Germany,” this club was one place
where the gay community could often find some degree of respite from almost constant
persecution. In short, the Stonewall’s large size combined with the diversity of its patrons

29 Huey Newton, handwritten poetry, Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, 1:7, Green
Library, Stanford University (Stanford, Cal.).
to create what was probably the most accurate and open representation of the gay community in the United States at the time.

Taking the Stonewall’s iconic significance into account, it was clear to see that when rioting started after a police raid of the bar on June 28, 1969, it represented much more than a couple hundred disgruntled “faggots” and “queens” fighting back against the New York City Police Department for shutting down their favorite bar. Ultimately, it was the result of years of festering tension within the lives of gay men and gay communities across the country. The events of that fateful June night catapulted the Gay Rights Movement into a new era. The Stonewall protestors started a revolution that was more militant and unapologetic than it had been before. One gay activist, watching events in 1969 unfold, prophetically asserted that “when the black man became proud, he became more militant. The same power is starting to hit the homosexual movement.” Throughout the last half of the 1960s, many gays grew increasingly aware of and irritated by the constant harassment they faced. The militant attitude that groups like the Black Panthers preached as an alternative to nonviolent resistance eventually served as a model for disaffected gays. Although Newton and Seale had certainly not been thinking about homosexuals when they drafted the founding document of their organization, it proved to be a powerful influence on them anyway. After the Stonewall Inn Uprising made it undeniably clear to many Americans that a new militant gay trend was being born, Newton and other Black Panther leaders were able to recognize the common struggles that blacks and gays had shared in the United States for decades. This oppression came in
the form of military and workplace prejudice, police harassment, and generational divides in leadership.\textsuperscript{30}

The first connection between the Civil Rights and Gay Rights Movements was the similar prejudice they faced in the military service and the workplace. During the military buildup of World War II, many recruiting campaigns focused on enlisting blacks in the armed forces. Once enlisted, however, these young black men often found themselves as cooks or construction workers. Many soldiers considered these assignments embarrassing and yet another way in which they were relegated to second class citizenship. This embarrassment went even further in segregated military camps. In some instances, German prisoners of war were allowed to use base facilities with their white American captors while African American soldiers were forced to use inferior “colored” ones.\textsuperscript{31}

African Americans back in the United States did not fare much better. During the growth of wartime industries directly after the Pearl Harbor attacks, many new jobs were created. Although the percentage of black workers as well as white workers increased, African Americans were often restricted to the lowest paying jobs. In all, less than three percent of jobs in profitable wartime defense industries went to African Americans. Furthermore, most African Americans fortunate enough to find a job in one of the new industrial factories were relegated to positions as janitors and other lowly support staff.\textsuperscript{32}

In July 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 which mandated equal treatment of military personnel regardless of race. This order, however,

\textsuperscript{32} Estes, I Am a Man, p. 16.
did little to ease the institutionalized prejudice many black soldiers faced at the onset of the Korean War two years later. For the majority of the war, black soldiers served in segregated units that often received heavier casualties than their white counterparts. To make matters worse, these black units were largely led by white officers. In many cases, these officers believed the black soldiers under their command were “lazy, shuffling, and of low intellect,” which impeded unit cohesion and productivity. In the rare cases when black men were commissioned as officers, their posts were often shifted to insure they commanded no white soldiers.  

Only a few years after the Korean War ended, black soldiers were again deployed to a war in Asia. Although military segregation was officially ended before the start of the Vietnam War, many black servicemen still faced cultural issues within their units that relegated them to second class status. Throughout Vietnam, black soldiers also made up a disproportionately high number of combat fatalities. Although blacks only constituted little more than ten percent of the US population, they represented nearly a quarter of battlefield deaths during the first few years of fighting. Also, although many blacks fought valiantly for freedom and democracy, they returned home to find many discriminatory practices of Jim Crow alive and well even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.  

The situation of blacks at home and abroad was certainly on Huey Newton and Bobby Seale’s minds as they wrote the founding document and platform of the Black

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Panthers. Newton and Seale demanded that “all black men...be exempt from military service.” They believed that in a nation where black men were not full citizens, they should not have to die fighting for freedoms they did not fully receive. Newton and Seale went further by recognizing a link between blacks in America and people of color across the globe. They proclaimed that they would “not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America.” In many ways, these founding ideas of the Black Panthers both highlighted the plight of black workers and soldiers in the United States and the ability of the group’s founders to see commonalities with other oppressed races in different countries. Although these links were explored between different racial groups in the late 1960s, by the next decade they would be expanded to include different sexual orientations.35

In similar ways to black men, gay men faced extreme prejudice both as soldiers and government employees. At the same time that black men were being assigned to kitchens and custodial closets across Europe during World War II, many gay men and women were being excluded from service because, according to military policy, they had a “personality type unfit for military service and combat.” Different branches of the armed services used in-depth screening processes to keep many homosexuals from wearing a uniform, including stringent psychological evaluations. With the expansion of World War II, however, many procedures that weeded out gay people from service were suspended due to the urgency for more manpower. While this change reflected the nation’s dire need for more soldiers and inadvertently allowed more gays to enlist

unnoticed, it did not equate to more accepting policies. In fact, War Department policies excluding gays from service became even harsher during the war. Perhaps to combat increasing numbers of gays unknowingly admitted, these harsher policies resulted in a tripling of the discharge rate. These increased discharges not only embarrassed gay servicemen, it stripped them of many veterans’ benefits. 36

Even though gays in the military were persecuted during World War II, the period also ironically served as the birthplace of gay identity and large scale gay communities around the country. First, although psychiatrists and commanding officers sought to ferret out gays from many branches of the military, less than 5,000 of the 18 million young men who were drafted into service were discharged as homosexuals. Statistically, this meant that at least 650,000 of the 16 million American soldiers who served during the war were gay. This idea of widespread homosexual service during World War II is supported by historian John D’Emilio’s assertion that “although the military cast a wide net in order to meet its manpower needs, it preferred men who were young, single or with few dependents: a population group likely to include a disproportionate number of gay men.” Although this significant number of gay servicemen had to shield themselves with their closet doors from training camp to the battlefield, they also had some opportunities for meeting other gays and creating communities. For many of these soldiers, World War II was the first time they had identified as homosexual. These revelations took place in large part because of the new medical model of homosexuality that emboldened army psychiatrists to identify gays as pathologically sick. Rather than diagnosing homosexual

tendencies as isolated physical actions, this model taught that they were indicative of a condition that described the very essence of someone. Essentially, by identifying groups of draftees and soldiers as homosexual beings, the American medical community promoted their identification with one another as intimately similar.37

Also, beyond identifying with other gay men, many World War II soldiers were able to create communities because they were in close contact with other gays for the first time. Before the war, many gays from rural parts of the country could have lived their whole lives without coming in contact with another homosexual. On military bases, however, the concentration of people from diverse areas and backgrounds made it much easier for gays to interact with others like them. Also, during military furloughs and after the war ended, the country’s urban centers became hotspots for homosexuals who had been exposed to gay communities and refused to return to their former isolated lives. Large gay communities developed in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco that still exist today. The establishment of these urban communities not only provided networking and support communities for gays, but also served as the major centers of dissent and political uprising a couple decades later.38

Much of the same harassment that gay servicemen and women faced during World War II continued in many ways over the next few decades. In the early 1950s, as fear of communist infiltrations of the federal government led to witch hunts for possible double agents; anyone who did not conform to mainstream American culture became

38 D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, pp. 31-32.
more vulnerable to attacks on their reputations. This Red Scare that was augmented by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s inflammatory investigations into the personal lives and allegiances of many Americans translated into the persecution of soldiers who were suspected of being homosexual, and therefore thought to pose a national security risk as psychopaths or perverts. Throughout the Korean War, gay soldiers faced investigations and harassment that often resulted in dishonorable discharges. Although World War II era soldiers certainly dealt with institutionalized harassment within the military structure, the creation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1951 solidified and standardized the persecution of gays in all branches of the military. This code, designed to create legal consistency throughout the armed forces, included an article that mandated court-martialing for any “unnatural carnal copulation with another person of the same…sex.” Although this policy simply made persecution of gays that had occurred since World War II official, its inclusion in the Uniform Code showed a continued desire to identify and eradicate gay soldiers from all branches of the military.39

In similar ways to World War II, persecution of gay soldiers during the Korean War created situations where homosexuals had to either remain isolated by repressing their sexualities or run the risk of being harassed and dishonorably discharged. Jim Epstein, a naval pilot, remained in the closet around many of his military colleagues to avoid harassment and a possible court martial. After several productive years of service, however, Epstein’s sexuality was called into question because he wrote to another gay soldier who was under investigation for homosexuality. He remembered that Vern, the recipient, “left that letter out on his bed…His roommate found the letter and read it. Vern

39 Estes, Ask and Tell, p. 31.
was already under investigation by the air force, so when they found the return
address…they put me on the list.” Ultimately, Epstein was called in for interrogation,
forced to sign a letter confessing he was homosexual, and subsequently pushed out of the
Navy with a dishonorable discharge. His situation demonstrated both how even gay
soldiers who were careful about revealing their sexuality often still faced harassment and
discharges and how all branches of the military created lists of known homosexuals and
those who associated with them to develop new leads on possible violations of the
Uniform Code.40

Even if gay soldiers were able to keep their sexuality a secret during Korea,
however, they still faced isolation and other issues because they were gay. William Winn,
a gay man and naval physician during the Korean War, remembered how distraught he
was when asked to certify the sexuality of soldiers who were suspected homosexuals.
Although he was never charged with being gay, he was forced to be a part of the
military’s campaigns against homosexuals. Recalling how absurd he thought anti-
homosexual policies were, Winn described how prevalent discharges for homosexuality
were during the war. He noted that in some cases a “ship would lose in a period of six
months overseas as many as twenty or thirty men, just because they said or someone said
they were gay.” Overall, Winn’s experiences demonstrated how widespread persecution
of gays during the Korean War affected all gay soldiers in some way, regardless of
whether their sexuality was eventually found out or not.41

40 Estes, Ask and Tell, pp. 57-58.
41 Estes, Ask and Tell, pp. 39-45.
While not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, gay civilians during the 1950s faced similar harassment and dismissal from their jobs. Related to fears that communists had infiltrated the federal government, many governmental agencies followed Senator McCarthy’s lead by identifying and firing homosexual government employees. Although most gay civil servants did not have communist ties that called their loyalty into question, many people believed they were security risks. Essentially, even though a homosexual employee could have never had communist sympathies, he was believed to be highly susceptible to blackmail by Soviet agents. Similarly to alcoholics, it was thought that gays could be forced to divulge state secrets for fear that spies would expose their sexuality to their coworkers and families. Also, following the opinion of the American Psychiatric Association, many gays were seen as psychopaths with serious moral defects. In many instances, homosexuals’ moral deficiencies were believed to increase the likelihood that they would defect to the Soviet Union. In the pervading moral culture of the decade, hunting for homosexuals in the government quickly eclipsed searches for communists because they were much more easily identified. Outside of fears within the federal government, many state governments and private businesses also began firing employees who were thought to be gay. This crusade against gays who were employed in many different jobs throughout the country was even supported by many working-class Americans “who were concerned less about any risk to national security than about the simple moral implications” of homosexuality. In the end, regardless of the justifications for firing gay employees in government and private industries, these actions
ruined the professional and personal lives of many Americans who were often never able to find stable employment again.42

By the end of the 1950s, a new war had begun in Vietnam that would ultimately require the conscription of nearly two million young American men into the military. Throughout the 1960s, antiwar groups that were opposed to American military involvement in the country were promoting many different ways to dodge the draft. Among the most popular ways for men to avoid military service was by claiming they were homosexual. Even though this plea could bring great personal shame to those who used it, it was an effective way to avoid military service nonetheless. Although many people fought to stay away from Vietnam, thousands of gay men and women constantly struggled to keep their uniforms. The same forms of interrogations and investigations of suspected homosexuals that had taken place since World War II continued to plague gay soldiers. Judith Crosby, a gay navy nurse during the Vietnam War, was accused of being a homosexual and associating with other known gays. She was brought in for questioning by the navy’s intelligence service and grilled about her personal sexual habits and those of her friends and colleagues. Although she ultimately convinced the investigators that she was not gay, she recalled that all she could think about while being interrogated was “losing all my benefits, and I had been there two years taking care of the guys coming back from the war. I would have lost all of that, and plus my family would have been horrified.” Fortunately, Crosby was not discharged from the navy. Ultimately, though, many other gay men and women did not have such luck. Their experiences in Vietnam

both isolated them from their fellow soldiers and eventually ended in personal and professional disgrace.\textsuperscript{43}

On May 8, 1964, the Associated Press reported that a new Naval order underscored the risks that gays posed to national security as sailors. Hoping to avoid time consuming and costly courts martial to investigate and eradicate homosexuals, the order gave gay men and women the option to terminate voluntarily their military service without fear of legal repercussions. Beyond forcing some men and women to leave jobs they valued and depended upon, this voluntary separation also brought with it other issues. Ultimately, in order to resign, a sailor had to sign a statement acknowledging that he could lose his veteran’s benefits and that he might “expect to encounter substantial prejudice in civilian life.” In the end, military decisions like these did very little to save gay servicemen and women from the embarrassment as well as financial and social devastation that came along with military judicial proceedings.\textsuperscript{44}

A second point that both the Civil Rights and Gay Rights Movements reacted against was police harassment. In 1966, Police harassment and brutality had become so rampant in Oakland, California, that Huey Newton and Bobby Seale felt that the traditional non-violent tactics of the Civil Rights Movement were not enough to protect their families and friends. This was the main catalyst in their founding of the Black Panthers, an organization that began as a militia of armed black people who volunteered to follow and monitor police officers. Newton and Seale believed that they could “end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are

\textsuperscript{43} Estes, \textit{Ask and Tell}, p. 75.

dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality.”

Frustrated by continued instances of police brutality aimed at oppressing the black minority and maintaining the dominant social hierarchy and a lack of government response to black claims of police harassment, many people in black communities across the country felt that armed resistance was their only option.45

Tension over police harassment of blacks existed in communities across the United States. Throughout 1965, this tension erupted into race riots from New York to California. The largest clash of the year took place in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts, sparked by the beating of an African American by the Los Angeles Police Department. The riots which exploded into six days of looting, arson, and shootouts not only shook Californians, but worried many Americans that large scale race wars were inevitable. In the ashes of Watts, the governor of California formed the McCone Commission to investigate the main causes of the riots. In its final report, the commission noted that seven major race riots had taken place in 1964 alone. Although each of these clashes was prod by circumstances particular to each city, they all had in common “resentment, even hatred, of the police, as the symbol of authority.” All told, the commission heard over seventy cases of police brutality around Watts that had been ignored by city officials. Clearly, the residents of Watts had great reason to distrust the police. This distrust of the Los Angeles police continued in many ways throughout the

decade, eventually manifesting itself in the establishment of one of the first branches of the Black Panthers outside of Oakland.  

Also, although the Black Panthers’ official newspaper, *Black Panther*, covered various issues throughout the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of stories were directly related to police brutality. Whether this coverage recounted specific acts of violence or described police oppression in more philosophical terms, it was hard to find a page that did not mention local, state, or federal law enforcement officials -- often called “pigs” -- harassing members of black communities in some way. Examples of these stories include two full-page articles in the October 12, 1968 edition of the paper entitled “Oakland Pig Department Searches Nation For New Recruits” and “Federal Pigs Hassle Draft Dodgers.” The prevalence of this type of coverage further illustrates the severity of police brutality that blacks, both as activists and ordinary citizens, faced every day.

Gays across the country faced similar police harassment and brutality. Because homosexuality was so intensely scrutinized and disapproved of by mainstream American culture, it was always risky for gays to meet one another. Historian Carolyn Herbst Lewis describes Cold War America’s condemnation of sexual behavior outside the confines of monogamous heterosexual marriage, including homosexuality, as “just as threatening to American society as were the Soviets and their nuclear bombs.” Many Americans believed that homosexuals were perverts afflicted with a sickness that threatened to undermine not only the American family but society as a whole. Despite social stigmas

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associated with homosexuality, many gays found common places to congregate and meet each other within their own communities.\textsuperscript{48}

In many cities, and especially in Greenwich Village, favorite spots developed for gays to mix and create their own subcultures. These locations, however, also attracted significant police attention. Bars and restaurants that served gay customers were constantly threatened by the police and forced to pay bribes in order to keep operating. Even when establishments continually paid police officers to ignore their clientele, they were still sometimes raided. On the night of the Stonewall Inn Riot, the police had returned for a rare second consecutive night of raiding when the situation escalated. The second Stonewall raid was the result of a citywide effort to clean up crime in anticipation of the 1969 New York mayoral elections. Attempting to better his image in the midst of a tough battle for reelection, Mayor John Lindsay stepped up campaigns to save the city’s streets from drugs, prostitution, and homosexuals. Many Stonewall patrons believed “the pigs [had] decided to start playing political games…because when did you ever see a fag fight back?...Now, times are a changin’. Tuesday night was the last night for bullshit.” Police harassment took place numerous times during the raid. When transvestites would not claim that they were men, they were lined up outside of the women’s bathroom for embarrassing searches to determine if they were biologically male. Police were also particularly violent when arresting a lesbian who protested being taken to jail. The

combination of these instances of harassment and others resulted in the growing anger of the crowd and the eventual rioting.\textsuperscript{49}

Two years before the Stonewall Inn Uprising in New York, a similar riot developed in response to police harassment in the Sunset Boulevard area of Los Angeles. These 1967 riots formed after twelve plainclothes policemen entered a gay bar and gathered incriminating evidence of homosexual behavior before calling in their uniformed colleagues. Soon after these badge-wearing officers entered the bar, they began swinging their clubs, severely injuring several patrons and arresting sixteen others. In the aftermath of the police destruction, gay men and women rioted for several days. According to Professors Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, these riots never gained the iconic significance of the later events at the Stonewall Inn, however, because of the spread-out nature of Los Angeles and the isolated location of the bar that kept many passers-by from noticing the commotion. Even with little press coverage, though, these riots against police harassment in California demonstrated how widespread police brutality was in the United States during the 1960s.\textsuperscript{50}

Another common way that police would harass gay men was through entrapment. Many police departments, including the NYPD, would send handsome male officers into bars to bait gay men into soliciting them. Once they were solicited, the undercover officers would arrest the unsuspecting victim and cart him off to jail. A similar tactic was used in public restrooms. Police would be sent into these popular places for gay hookups to elicit gay activity and then make an arrest. However, the police often took these sting

\textsuperscript{49} Carter, Stonewall, pp. 119-143.
operations over the line. One gay organizer “heard over and over from those arrested that
the men they met in a toilet often not only were displaying their penises but also had
erections and were masturbating to look as inviting as possible.” Once the suspects were
taken to jail, police officers would commonly recommend overly expensive lawyers who
could bail them out pretty quickly. Many gay men who were victims of entrapment came
to realize that lawyers the police recommended charged such high fees because the police
were receiving kickbacks. A gay community organizer sarcastically summed up this
extortion as "grease…[on]…the wheels of ‘justice.’” Not only were the police entrapping
gay men to satisfy politicians, they were stuffing their own pockets at the same time.
Ultimately, this harassment was yet another way for police to dehumanize and degrade
gays.\textsuperscript{51}

Across the country in Los Angeles, gays faced similar entrapment by Los Angeles
Police Department officers. In some cases, the LAPD would even hire Hollywood actors
as bait for gay men. These “attractive would-be actors who failed to find work in the
movies, were employed by the vice squad to carry out entrapment scams,” using their
professional training to heighten the believability of their roles as gay men. Corrupt
lawyers also benefitted from the plight of gay men in California in the same way as their
counterparts in New York. In fact, one of the best known lawyers for defending gay men,
Harry Weiss, not only practiced law but also operated three gay bars in Los Angeles.
Weiss used his position as bar owner, however, to tip police officers off to the patrons of
his bars who had the most to lose from being arrested for gay related crimes. The
arresting officers then provided their victim with Weiss’s business card and funneled him

\textsuperscript{51} Carter, \textit{Stonewall}, p. 42.
clientele who sometimes paid as much as one year’s salary for his legal representation. Weiss, in turn, paid kickbacks to the officers, completing the corrupt cycle of harassment, entrapment, and extortion.\textsuperscript{52}

Sometimes police intimidation and harassment escalated into full on beatings. On March 9, 1969, Howard Effland, a young gay man in Los Angeles, was confronted by officers inside a predominantly gay hotel. Although eyewitnesses noted that Effland was not aggressive or defiant, they testified that “officers kicked...[him]...several times and seemed to be deliberately picking him up and dropping him to the ground.” Later that night, Effland died from the police beating in a local hospital. Also, in spite of the eyewitness accounts of police actions, no officers were ever reprimanded.\textsuperscript{53}

Beyond the embarrassment and risk of being fired that many gays dealt with after being arrested, they also faced hefty fines and absurdly long prison sentences. A 1964 research project by the Mattachine Society of New York outlined penalties for sex offenses in each state as well as the District of Columbia. Ultimately, this project revealed that sodomy was much more harshly punished than other sex crimes in almost every state. In Connecticut, a state where differing penalties were most obvious, a gay person could serve up to thirty years in prison for sodomy while fornication warranted only a one hundred dollar fine or six months in jail and adultery came in a distant third with up to five years behind bars. This nationwide trend further illustrated the severe harassment and demonization gays faced in every state.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Faderman and Timmons, Gay L.A., pp. 79-86.
\textsuperscript{53} United States Mission memo, Mattachine Society of New York Collection, 2:6, Schwarzman Building, New York Public Library (New York, New York).
\textsuperscript{54} Penalties for Sex Offenses, Mattachine Society Collection, 4:1.
In response to the daily harassment they faced, the Black Panthers and gay activists sought to reclaim some of their independence and dignity through their sexual practices. Both groups saw traditional monogamous heterosexual boundaries as ways to reinforce the social structure that oppressed them in so many other ways. Although a majority of Black Panthers were men, the party maintained an official position that “there are no sexual roles in the Black Panther Party.” Male and female recruits received equal training in handling firearms and self-defense as well as in revolutionary theory. Also, to combat the dominant social system and gain more self control, the Black Panthers introduced “the ideals of revolutionary manhood and free love.” Members would often go to bed with several different people because, “having multiple sexual partners avoided the chauvinistic aspects of ‘ownership’ that traditional monogamy often entailed.” Even though this policy sometimes led to men taking advantage of female recruits, the central purpose of this revolutionary sexual practice remained freeing blacks from the white man’s oppressive social structure.\(^5\)

Similarly, some gay activists were influenced by the English poet William Blake’s philosophy of love and sexual boundaries. One Greenwich Village activist agreed with Blake that a “vision of the recovery of sex is related to the struggle against imperialism and industrialism and the machine.” By struggling against society’s sexual standards, gays were both able to gain some control over their lives and take part in sexual interactions that set them apart in the first place. To many gays, the oppression they faced was a direct result of the dominant social system that stressed heterosexual supremacy and the importance of traditional families and sex roles. As historian John Estes, \(I\) Am a Man, pp. 162-165.
D’Emilio noted, “sex was just one more vehicle used to enforce the subordination and keep the system functioning.” Many activists ultimately sought to subvert the prevailing system through sexual expression.\textsuperscript{56}

Participating in expressions of sexuality and sexual intercourse, however, was not easy for homosexuals. They were not able to meet openly other gay men or women and were, instead, forced to have dangerous rendezvous. In Greenwich Village, many gays met up with each other in the backs of empty shipping trucks along the banks of the Hudson River. These cavernous trucks provided dark, secluded, and private spots for gay sex. The dangerous and dirty nature of the trucks, though, epitomized the marginalization of homosexuals. Recalling the trucks, one gay man commented that “there would sometimes be two or three hundred people in them…if we had our druthers we would have been happier checking into a hotel like any other couple, but that wasn’t always an option for us.” Harassed, degraded, and pushed to the margins of society, gay men across the country often went to dangerous meeting places because they had no other options.\textsuperscript{57}

Finally, many young civil rights and gay rights activists by the late 1960s were disillusioned with the older leadership in their movements. Scores of younger African Americans came to believe that the central non-violent approach of the movement that had guided activism and protests since the 1950s was inefficient and ineffective. An increasing number of activists thought that the only way to defeat a violently oppressive government was with similar violence. Many members of the black community saw King’s assassination in 1968 as the ultimate proof that non-violence could never change


\textsuperscript{57} Carter, Stonewall, p. 36.
the status quo for blacks in the United States. Some militant blacks, like Eldridge Cleaver, believed King’s death could not have come soon enough. Cleaver stated that “to black militants, Dr. King represented a stubborn and persistent stumbling block in the path of the methods that had to be implemented to bring about a revolution.” As a symbolic end to non-violent strategies, Cleaver believed that King’s death represented the beginning of an inevitable race war that was necessary to claim black freedom. He declared that “from that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red.”

Even before King’s assassination, however, increasing numbers of black youth had joined militant organizations, increasing Black Panther membership to nearly ten thousand by the end of the 1960s. In response to the growing lack of faith in the older generation of civil rights leaders, a new generation of leadership developed around figures like Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. These new leaders wanted to show young disaffected black men that other possibilities for their liberation existed than the sit-ins and marches of the previous decade. If they stopped listening to outdated and out of touch leaders like King and picked up their guns, they could help achieve justice for blacks.

Not only did their tactics differ from older elements of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Panthers also dressed differently. In contrast to the neatly pressed shirts and straight ties of Freedom Summer and earlier protests, Black Panthers often wore military style outfits accompanied by a beret. Although Tom Wolfe’s Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers presented the Black Panthers’ fundraising success in liberal white circles as a passing fad, it did offer a comparative white perspective on the

59 Estes, I Am a Man, p. 156.
different dress of the Black Panthers. After seeing a group of gun toting men in berets for the first time, one socialite declared that, “these are no civil-rights Negroes wearing gray suits three sizes too big – these are real men!” This comment summarized not only how the Black Panthers sought to portray themselves physically, but reinforced their split with the older generation.\textsuperscript{60}

During the late 1960s, gay activists also grew disillusioned with the established leadership of the Gay Rights Movement. To many gays, the homosexual organizations that existed focused far too much attention on educational programs while making few gains to better the situations of gay men and women across the country. One of the earliest gay rights organizations, the Mattachine Society, was founded by Harry Hay in 1950. Hay’s group organized first in Los Angeles with the goal of coming together to further gay rights in the United States. Although the society made modest gains in its first years of existence, Hay was forced to resign in 1953 after being scrutinized for his past communist ties, and quickly thereafter the organization lost its focus on political activism. Instead, Mattachine leaders focused on research and distribution groups aimed at providing the American public with accurate information about homosexuality. Through these education programs, leaders hoped to end prejudice against homosexuals. Throughout the following decade, passive educational programs and intellectual discussions became the dominant tactics that gay rights groups employed.\textsuperscript{61}

Even Mattachine groups that were more militant in their activism still focused a significant amount of time on scientific research as a way to change public perceptions of


\textsuperscript{61} Carter, \textit{Stonewall}, p. 19.
homosexuality. The New York chapter, for example, often worked with researchers by providing mailing lists for questionnaires and gay men for test subjects. Research projects supported by MSNY in 1969 included a New York University study on gay men “for whom homosexuality is integrated into a full and productive life,” and a California State University project on gay men in prisons.62

The growing unrest of young activists over the ineffective strategies of the older generation can be seen in their interactions with Mattachine Societies across the country. Young gays often came to believe that “members were either too frightened or brainwashed to fight for their rights.” These older members had been publishing similar newsletters and hosting forums and conventions for years with little change. One young gay activist remarked that “to be invited to Mattachine, you had to be wearing a Brooks Brothers three-piece suit. Those who were unusual dressers or had unusual hairstyles were not invited.” In most cases, rather than joining a movement they saw as a cowardly waste of time, young gays remained disconnected. In some instances, however, younger members effectively changed the focus of their older counterparts. In the 1965 elections for leaders of the New York Mattachine Society, two younger activists who wanted the organization to abandon its educational focus for a more militant stance succeeded in running a slate of militant leaders. After being elected, the new leaders pushed a fresh agenda focusing on public demonstrations and attacking claims that homosexuality was a mental illness. Although some younger gays succeeded in infiltrating the old guard’s mindset and introducing more aggressive activist agendas, they were often the exception.

that proved the rule. Frustration and resentment of gay rights leaders’ passive positions festered until the summer of 1969.63

The alternative activist philosophies younger gays adopted leading up to the Stonewall Riots were also expressed in contrasting dress with older men. A visible generation gap existed between “the older gay men in suits and ties...[who]...presented an image rejected by young gay hippies.” Respectable dress was so important to many older gay leaders that dress codes were included in many homophile protest brochures. For example, a flyer advertising a homophile picket in 1969 demanded that male protesters wear suits and jackets while females should have on a dress or business suit. This particular protest even created a three-person committee “to pass upon the appearance of persons marching on the picket line and to rule off the line those not meeting standards.”64

To many young activists, the straight laced appearance of their elders represented what was wrong in the Gay Rights Movement. The hippie garb and more flamboyant outfits that many young gays wore represented their increasingly unabashed embrace of their sexuality. In many cases, activists’ dress was an outward symbol of pride in their lifestyles that they would hide no longer. In fact, much of the fighting with police that went on during the first night of rioting outside the Stonewall was led by younger and more effeminately dressed men and transvestites. Reporter Lucian Truscott noted that many of the older gays who watched their younger counterparts riot, “had strained looks on their faces and talked in concerned whispers as they watched the up-and-coming

63 Carter, Stonewall, pp. 24, 40; Faderman and Timmons, Gay L.A., p. 113.
64 Carter, Stonewall, p. 113; Franklin Kameny, memo to Eastern Homophile Organizations, 4 July 1969, Mattachine Society Collection, 3:26.
generation take being gay and flaunt it before the masses.” Although the older generation was concerned about the scenes young gays were making, they could do nothing to stop it.65

In the end, the Stonewall Riots represented a break in gay leadership. The passive homophile groups of the 1950s and 1960s were increasingly replaced as mouthpieces of the movement by more radical and unapologetic youth. At the dawn of the 1970s, this shift in gay activism caught the attention of civil rights leaders in other struggles across the nation. Witnessing these events from behind bars, Huey Newton realized that the new militant tone of gay activists had developed in response to social pressures and norms that demonized homosexuality. Newton also discerned that much of the oppression gay activists fought against at Stonewall was shared by black Americans as well. Throughout the preceding decades, many gays and blacks had faced similar harassment by employers and police. Also, Newton’s Black Panthers symbolized aggressive leadership in response to the passivity of older generations in much the same way as gay leadership after 1969. Although these connections motivated Newton to express his support for gay struggles the following year, his newly articulated vision of acceptance never took root in many black communities. To understand this phenomenon, it is essential to examine notions of respectability deeply embedded in Cold War black organizing and religious experiences.

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65 Carter, Stonewall, p. 184.
CHAPTER THREE: PIPE DREAMS AND PREACHERS

“Bayard was of the generation of gay men for whom homosexuality was something to be lived and not spoken of.”
-- John D’Emilio

Although Newton’s visionary leadership resulted in the inclusion of gays in Black Panther activities in the first couple years of the 1970s, by the middle of the decade it was hard to find mention of gay activists attending Black Panther gatherings and even more unlikely to hear discussions of homosexuality in radical black circles. Newton’s ideas of cooperation and acceptance between black and gay communities disappeared almost as quickly as they materialized. No great racial-sexual alliances ever developed. The Vanguard of the People’s Revolution in America had forgotten about their radical brothers and sisters in arms. However, this change did not take place because Newton altered his personal position on the role of gays in tearing down institutionalized injustices that labeled some Americans as socially defective and second-class. In fact, Newton remained a steadfast supporter of gay rights and inclusiveness until his death in 1989. Instead, a model of acceptance and cooperation never gained a footing among civil rights activists because of social and political realities and tactics that gripped black communities from the 1950s onward. Although there were certainly many varying reasons for personal homophobia in black communities throughout the Cold War Era, two of the most significant forces working against black-gay alliances were notions of respectability in civil rights organizations and beliefs about the morally corrupt nature of homosexuality in black churches.

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The first roadblock to black acceptance of gays was directly tied to ideas of respectability. In contrast to the marginalization and quarantine of black gay activists by leaders in the Civil Rights Movement when their sexuality became a public spectacle, they were often tolerated or even accepted behind closed doors when they maintained low profiles or a heterosexual guise. Even with very limited accounts of prominent gay activists, a trend of private acceptance of homosexuality as long as it did not become a public spectacle was seen clearly in a comparison of the experiences of Bayard Rustin and Aaron Henry.

Rustin realized that he was sexually attracted to men at a young age. These sexual urges did not translate into physical advances during his youth, however, because Rustin understood the extreme taboos that were connected with being gay at the time. In later interviews, he often recalled his mother’s advice on keeping his sexual feelings in check: “You have a very good reputation so you should go around with people who have good reputations...People who do not have as much to lose as you can be very careless.” At its core, this motherly advice summed up much more than a parent’s aspirations for her child to live an honorable and successful life. More than a warning against engaging in immoral activities, these words conveyed how important it was in Cold War America to guard one’s perceived private flaws from becoming public spectacles by keeping secrets - - especially sexual ones -- far from the public eye. While Rustin followed this advice throughout his adolescence, by the time he went away to college and later started his...
activist career, a pattern of gay sexual encounters developed that would ultimately haunt him for the rest of his life.\footnote{D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, pp. 28 - 29.}

In the early 1940s, Rustin developed his first longterm gay relationship with Davis Platt, a white man several years his junior. Although gay relationships were illegal as well as socially taboo at the time, many of Rustin’s activist colleagues were very aware of his intimate relationship with Platt. In fact, Abraham Muste, Rustin’s closest mentor, was uneasy about the relationship but accepting nonetheless. Long after Rustin parted ways with his companion, Platt recalled that “Muste knew we were lovers. He tried to get me to desist, to leave Bayard and try to get Bayard to give it up...He tried to give me the impression that it was an unsatisfactory lifestyle that wouldn’t work. It wasn’t that it was wrong or evil, but it was not viable and if Bayard continued this way it could destroy him and hurt the movement.” Again, Platt’s remembering of Muste’s qualms about their relationship focused on the fact that it could harm Rustin’s reputation and the movement’s credibility rather than on issues of morality. Similar to the motherly advice Rustin received as a youth, appearances were everything to Muste. What went on in one’s bedroom could generally be overlooked as long as those rendezvous didn’t spill into the office.\footnote{D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, p. 71.}

Rustin did not, however, keep his romantic engagements or sexuality strictly in the bedroom. When he was imprisoned in 1943 for refusing to be drafted, Rustin began agitating for integration of prison facilities and activities. Although he achieved some results during his first year behind bars, Rustin was ultimately silenced by prison officials
after they collected details of his sexual encounters with other male inmates. News of these encounters not only isolated him from many members of the prison population, it also strained his relationship with Platt and Muste. After these accusations were made public, Rustin recoiled into solitude for the next several months, ultimately assuring those closest to him that he would not act on any future sexual urges with men.69

After emerging from prison in 1946, Rustin rejoined activist efforts for racial justice and pacifism on a full time basis. While working as an activist and political organizer during the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, his sexuality continued to be an issue. Historian John D’Emilio noted that “of all the pacifists interviewed who worked with Rustin in the 1940s and 1950s, every one of them said that they knew he was gay even while saying that, at the time, no one spoke about it.” Clearly the majority, if not all, of his colleagues understood that Rustin was gay but chose not to isolate or marginalize him because of it. In fact, stories often circulated among Rustin’s peers of his soliciting male staffers at activist conventions or cruising parks and gay neighborhoods for interested strangers during business trips. To many, it was clear that Rustin’s “frequent [business] trips away from home were occasions for advances toward men he encountered in the course of his work.” While some of his sexual adventures went unnoticed, a handful of publicity nightmares materialized around these events. For example, in 1946, Rustin was arrested in a New York park for soliciting someone to commit a lewd act. Later, he was arrested for being in a park known as a popular cruising

69 D’Emilio, Lost Prophet, pp. 93-120.
ground after curfew. In the end, however, the incident that ultimately came back to haunt Rustin and drive a wedge between him and civil rights leaders took place in 1953.\textsuperscript{70}

While on a business trip in Pasadena, California, on January 21, 1953, Rustin solicited two white men for oral sex in the early morning hours. While performing fellatio in the back of the men’s car, two policemen approached and arrested all three men for engaging in illegal sexual acts. While this incident caused immediate tension between Rustin and his colleagues, the full impact of this public display of homosexuality was not evident until 1960. In the short term, many civil rights leaders were able to overlook Rustin’s indiscretion and undeniable homosexuality while Muste was central in assigning Rustin to help the developing Civil Rights Movement in the South grow under a banner of nonviolent protest.\textsuperscript{71}

In 1955, Rustin began a professional relationship with King that included educating the young civil rights leader on ideas of Gandhian nonviolence that he had learned earlier as an antiwar activist. It was interesting to note that although King surely knew about Rustin’s sexuality and his arrest two years earlier in Pasadena, and although several southern black ministers and civil rights leaders objected to Rustin’s work as a key educator and organizer in the South, King overlooked Rustin’s past and others’ objections for nearly five years. Surprisingly, Rustin and King were nearly inseparable for the last half decade of the 1950s, organizing many events together as well as sharing in personal triumphs and defeats. This relationship came to an end, however, in 1960 with the concern of a New York Congressman about Rustin’s organizing protestors

\textsuperscript{70} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, pp. 108, 172.

\textsuperscript{71} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, p. 191.
outside the Democratic Party’s national convention. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., upset that Rustin was organizing protestors outside the convention without his approval, demanded that King stop Rustin’s efforts or face a fabricated story about a romantic relationship between the two men. Although King had stood by Rustin for the previous five years, this threat from Powell was too much for the head of the SCLC to handle. Shaken by the possibility of a story about his having a romantic relationship with Rustin, King accepted Rustin’s resignation from the SCLC in 1960 and personally distanced himself from his comrade. Neither their professional nor personal relationship recovered before King’s assassination in 1968, and Rustin never again occupied a public place of prominence in the movement.\textsuperscript{72}

In the interest of full disclosure, some scholars and civil rights organizers maintained that Rustin was ultimately pushed to the sidelines of civil rights activism not primarily because of his sexuality, but rather because of his earlier communist ties. With the political climate of the late 1940s and 1950s in mind, it seems logical that someone who had communist ties would be a dangerous liability to any public figure or movement, especially ones concerned with claiming full rights as American citizens. In many cases, accusations of communist ties went hand in hand with accusations of homosexuality. Upon closer inspection, however, it is rather clear that Rustin was not viewed as a threat because of his early political persuasions. Although Rustin had been a member of the Young Communist League during the 1930s, he broke away from the group in 1941 after a policy shift that called on members to stop agitating for racial justice. In fact, Rustin maintained that he had only joined the group in the first place

\textsuperscript{72} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, pp. 279-440.
because the YCL was one of the few national organizations fighting against racial injustices in his youth. Furthermore, D’Emilio pointed out Rustin’s minor role in communist activities in the 1930s as evidenced by his lack of appearance in any of the extensive FBI files on communist organizing. Also, if Rustin’s communist ties had been the real motivation for his exclusion from prominent civil rights activism, he would not have been able to fulfill many of his public duties with King and other black leaders throughout the 1950s. Finally, if communist ties on their own were such severe disqualifiers for prominent activism, staunchly socialist black figures like A. Phillip Randolph who, along with King, was ultimately publicized as one of the key architects of the March on Washington, would not have been able to contribute on such a public level. However, even with these pressures, at least one gay black leader was able to maintain power and prominence in his community and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.73

This prominent black gay leader was Aaron Henry. Juxtaposing Rustin’s story with Henry’s reveals very different gay activist experiences. Henry was a pharmacist and leading citizen in Clarksdale, Mississippi, throughout the 1950s, but rose to statewide celebrity after being elected as president of the Mississippi NAACP in 1960. Only two years after his election, on March 3, 1962, Henry was arrested and charged with soliciting a white male hitchhiker for sex. Authorities claimed that Henry picked up Sterling Lee Eilert on the side of the road and propositioned him for sexual favors. Although Henry continually denied asking Eilert for sex, he was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to pay a five hundred dollar fine and serve six months in prison. Even after appealing the

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73 D’Emilio, Lost Prophet, pp. 34-35; For information on Randolph’s socialism, see Paula Pfeffer’s A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement.
charges all the way to the United States Supreme Court, Henry’s conviction was upheld.

After serving his sentence, Henry maintained that the entire legal fiasco was nothing more than an attempt by the white establishment -- especially local officials -- to discredit him as a statewide leader and the Civil Rights Movement as an upstanding and viable force. Part of the court transcript includes a statement from Henry that he was convinced his accusers “were trying to destroy…[his]…effectiveness in a movement where most of the participants at the time were men...[and]...also to assassinate the character of the entire movement.”

Similar concerns for movement respectability and the close relationship between personal honor and activist potential were the very issues that drove Bayard Rustin away from King and out of the SCLC. Despite the similar conditions shared by Rustin and Henry, however, the latter was able to move beyond the 1962 incident personally and politically. In fact, two years after he was initially arrested, Henry was elected chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. This position not only placed Henry at the helm of a second formidable black activist organization, it also made him a national figure with televised speeches and appearances before the Democratic Party’s Credentials Committee over the next year. Although Henry had been convicted of a gay related crime, which certainly gave black communities reason to question his integrity and viability as a leader, black Mississippians did not seem to care. Whether his constituents truly believed that white officials completely fabricated lies about Henry’s sexuality to discredit him or whether they simply needed to doubt the authenticity of the stories on

some level to remain outwardly respectable while remaining loyal to him, they ultimately looked the other way.\textsuperscript{75}

In 1973, just over a decade after his first arrest, Henry was picked up by police in Washington, D.C., after soliciting two undercover male police officers for sex. In the days that followed, Henry found himself in another sexual scandal that called his respectability into question. Ultimately, the charges were dropped, but this did not stop media coverage of the event. Although reporters prodded him about the homosexual nature of the arrest and his earlier conviction, Henry confidently responded that neither event represented a gay issue. Instead, he maintained that while he had solicited men for sex in both situations, he was not the intended recipient of their services. In his version of the stories, Henry was soliciting men to have sex with his female companions rather than with himself. In the end, while soliciting individuals for sex in general was not socially desirable, the implications of heterosexual encounters were far less damaging than being caught in gay situations. Ultimately, Henry’s twists on the situations represented shrewd maneuvering to protect himself from gay baiting. Unlike Rustin who never hid or denied his sexuality in public, Henry kept his homosexuality hidden beneath a guise of heteronormativity.

Henry continued to serve as the president of the Mississippi NAACP until 1993 and went on to be elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1979. After moving to the capital and throughout the 1980s, Henry lived publicly with a male companion, Gullum Erwin. This situation confirmed the conjectures and name calling that had taken place over the previous twenty years. Henry was not, after all,

\textsuperscript{75} Howard, \textit{Men Like That}, p. 159.
heterosexual. Even after creating a life with Erwin, however, Henry remained close to his wife and supported her financially as he had since they were married.

Ultimately, the differing experiences and opportunities of Rustin and Henry depended on the visibility of their homosexuality. While it was clear to many associates of both activists that they did not fit the normal heterosexual model of black male leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, Henry was much more adept at playing the game of social acceptability by creating plausible deniability of his homosexuality for fellow activists and black community members. Unlike Rustin, Henry never publicly admitted to being a homosexual during the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s. On the contrary, Henry always denied soliciting Eilert for sex in 1962. Also, when faced with allegations of homosexual activity in 1973, Henry went on the offensive by casting the bad publicity in a heterosexual light. He readily admitted to soliciting the two police officers; however, Henry’s version of the story included the fact that he was soliciting these men to have sex with his female colleagues, allowing his supporters to consider the homosexual accusations as fabrications from white authorities aimed at derailing Henry’s credibility. A second important factor in maintaining Henry’s heterosexual guise was his marriage to his wife, Noelle. Throughout the sexual scandals and questions that surfaced in Henry’s life, he was always able to return home to his devoted and publicly supportive wife. Their relationship also furthered Henry’s public heterosexual persona and gave credibility to his claims of being straight.

On the other hand, Bayard Rustin never denied his sexual orientation. In fact, Congressman Powell’s threat to fabricate and publicize a homosexual relationship
between Rustin and King was especially dangerous to King and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole because Rustin had such an extensively documented and undisputed history of gay encounters. Also, unlike Henry, Rustin never had a wife or even a public girlfriend. In short, Rustin’s lack of discretion about his sexuality combined with his unwillingness to deny his sexual encounters or maintain a guise of heteronormativity through a female companion left black communities with few choices but to ostracize him in an effort to maintain respectability in the eyes of white America.

Although black leaders imposed standards of respectability in their communities, ideas of what was respectable or not were constructed by the overall culture of Cold War America, a culture that was held firmly in the grasp of white citizens. The stringent dress codes that black activists followed from the 1960 sit-ins at the Greensboro Woolworth’s department store to King’s last march in Memphis in 1968 are examples of the great lengths that leaders of the Civil Rights Movement went to insure that their activists met the respectability requirements of white society. Protesters at all of these events were expected to wear ties and jackets or dresses, ultimately expressing their common humanity with white citizens by donning their Sunday best. These efforts to maintain physical conformity with white America were also tied to similar Cold War ideas that stressed the importance of traditional gender roles and the nuclear family structure, all couched in moralistic language. At least on the surface, moral respectability for whites in
Cold War America centered on “taboos against premarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other forms on nonprocreative sex.”

Historian Thaddeus Russell argued that leaders of the Civil Rights Movement reinforced ideas in black communities that “in order to gain acceptance as full citizens, [blacks had to] adopt the cultural norms of what they believe to be the idealized American citizen--productivity, selflessness, responsibility, sexual restraint, and the restraint of homosexuality in particular.” In essence, to gain the rights they were fighting for, blacks needed to adopt the core moral and social values of middle-class white Americans to be seen as worthy of receiving full citizenship. These notions were further supported by an extensive study funded by the Carnegie Foundation in 1944 entitled An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. The aim of this study was to pinpoint the major roadblocks to attaining full rights for blacks, and it ultimately asserted that blacks would never be fully equal with whites unless they assimilated into the dominant white culture.

The ironic fact that King was often unfaithful to his wife yet remained the most central and recognizable civil rights figure until his death in 1968 was a testament to the extent that the civil rights community would tolerate discreet heterosexual infidelity while at the same time rejecting public displays of homosexuality. Thaddeus Russell asserted that “Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated no hostility toward homosexuality,

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76 Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 116. For more information on Cold War culture and gender roles, see Beth Bailey’s “Sexual Revolution(s).”

nor did he live according to the codes of heterosexual propriety...yet, in his public life, King launched a comprehensive attack on black queerness.” His public charge against black sexual impropriety, however, stemmed from his understanding that “the attainment of full citizenship for African Americans required the creation of a heteronormative black culture.” In the end, King believed that his split with Rustin was due mostly to the fact that Rustin “controls himself pretty well until he gets into drinking and he would approach...students and they started talking with people about it and there was something of a reflection on me so that was really the main problem.” This comment ultimately supported the fact that King and other civil rights leaders, regardless of their personal stances on being gay, were most concerned with public displays of homosexuality that threatened the movement’s respectability in the eyes of white America.78

Outside of seeking the approval and support of white society, leaders in the Civil Rights Movement also sought to conform to the dominant Cold War culture because they were working to overcome widespread stereotypes of black sexuality. The most prominent of these stereotypes revolved around the uncontrollable and animalistic sex drives of black men. This “black rapist” myth maintained that black men were incapable of settling into normal heterosexual relationships because of an unbridled drive to be with white women. For many black leaders in Cold War America, any deviation from heterosexual relationships served only to reinforce ideas about the uncontrollable and uncivilized nature of black male sexual desires.

78 Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” pp. 114-117. For more information on King’s infidelity, see David Garrow’s Bearing the Cross and Michael Eric Dyson’s I May Not Get There With You.
In *Black Sexual Politics*, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins noted that the “innocent or respectable Black male image is considered to be essential to Black civil rights agendas.” She went on to argue that “for both women and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as a lynchpin of racial difference.” Ideas about unnatural and uncontrollable black sex drives could be linked in many ways to the institution of slavery. Before slaves were emancipated in the 1860s, black men were considered the property of white slaveholders who depended on their physical strength to propel agricultural production and make money. To justify this system of physical and economic oppression, black men were thought of in terms of strong, muscular bodies and small, insufficient brains. This perceived combination of excessive strength and low intellect laid the groundwork for the manifestation of the myth of the black rapist. Similarly, black women during slavery were seen as the property of their white owners and were often raped by these men with no avenues for recourse. Later, this pattern of rape created images of black women as sexually wanton jezebels. In the century following emancipation, images of black men and women who were sexually uncontrollable and uncivilized grew into justifications for the social and political oppression of blacks in the United States.79

Throughout the first three quarters of the twentieth century, black men were often physically punished because they were seen as sexually uncontrollable and violent. Activist and scholar Angela Davis pointed out that “of the 455 men executed between 1930 and 1967 on the basis of rape convictions, 405 of them were black.” This

disproportionately high number of black men who were executed because they were believed to be rapists showed the very real fear in Cold War America that darker skinned males were sexually dangerous. Although no information exists to prove whether the number of black rape-related executions were inflated during this period due to the conviction of innocent black men or the propensity of officials to overlook white rapists, it is clear that images of deviant sexuality influenced the treatment of blacks in the United States. In addition to contributing to high incarceration rates, the myth of the black rapist also justified the economic oppression of blacks for the benefit of whites. Even though slavery was outlawed after emancipation, the idea that blacks were uncivilized kept them in the lowest paying jobs because they were seen as less sophisticated and valuable than whites. Finally, Angela Davis pointed out that the myth of the black rapist served to scare away possible white allies for black civil rights. In her analysis, it was clear that “as soon as the propagandistic cry of rape became a legitimate excuse for lynching, former white proponents of Black equality became increasingly afraid to associate themselves with Black people’s struggle for liberation.” In short, not only did these myths directly harm the economic and social wellbeing of blacks, they also hampered support for black civil rights from sympathetic whites, weakening the power of any potential or actual movement for racial justice. In many ways, the negative impact of this myth provoked a backlash from middle-class black leaders in the Civil Rights Movement that focused on disproving these sexual notions through maintaining a respectable outward appearance, including public condemnations of homosexuality.80

80 Angela Davis, Women, Race, and Class (New York: Random House, 1981), pp. 172, 188. For information on how the myth of the black rapist was used to create and maintain laws against interracial
Some scholars have even gone as far as saying that pervasive homophobia in black communities was largely a construction of the Civil Rights Movement. In their unyielding struggle to gain respectable status in the eyes of Cold War America, black leaders created a novel demonization of sexual practices that were deemed deviant. During the first half of the twentieth century, gay individuals lived relatively accepted lives in the black neighborhoods of urban centers like New York and Chicago. These men and women were considered valid members of their communities in spite of their expressions of sexuality. Soon after the conclusion of World War II and the development of groups like the SCLC, however, views of these gay men and women became much more negative and remained largely unchanged for the next several decades.

In *Gay New York*, historian George Chauncey referred to 1920s Harlem as a “homosexual mecca.” He affixed this label to one of the most vibrant black communities in the country at the time because of how open black working-class individuals and artists were to diverse expressions of sexuality. This acceptance was especially evident through the large number of prominent figures in the Harlem renaissance and blues scene who identified as gay or bisexual, one of the most famous being Langston Hughes. In fact, Thaddeus Russell went further than Chauncey by asserting that the acceptance of gay individuals and cultures by working-class blacks in the “capital of black America...created what may have been the most liberated public space in U.S. history.”

The openness of 1920s Harlem was also apparent in the large number and extreme popularity of drag balls held in the neighborhood. Furthermore, the popularity of

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these queer events was not limited to New York. In fact, Russell found that before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, “drag balls continued in black neighborhoods in Chicago and Harlem and became prominent parts of the nightlife in Detroit, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and San Francisco.” These late night pastimes that were celebrated from coast to coast truly represented sexual openness in black communities that was absent among their white counterparts. Also, while drag balls certainly took place in white as well as black neighborhoods, the complete lack of news coverage of those events by the white press, when juxtaposed with their extensive coverage in black newspapers and magazines, further illustrated the openness of black communities during the first half of the twentieth century.⁸²

Some historians have even uncovered evidence that white gays throughout the 1950s sought safe spaces and acceptance at drag balls and other queer scenes in urban black neighborhoods. Historian Kevin Mumford noted one account of a white gay man in the 1930s who viewed the black “speakeasy scene as a refuge from intolerance and as an enclave of community.” In the end, while certainly not all black communities were accepting of queer life before the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, black working-class urban spaces were clearly more open than their white counterparts at the time. With the birth of the black middle-class-led Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, however, many queer scenes and expressions were shunned and swept into the closet as calls for

respectability became one of the driving forces behind black activism for the next several decades.\textsuperscript{83}

Beyond being sacrificed on the altar of Cold War respectability, black gay activists also met an insurmountable opponent in the form of black churches. Although there were surely some black religious groups that supported gay members or simply chose to ignore their sexuality, these groups comprised a distinct minority. In fact, the evangelical nature of most mainline black Christian denominations in America created hyper-conservative congregations when it came to issues of social morality. These evangelical and fundamentalist black churches played a large part in reinforcing Cold War morality, but they were not simply products of post-World War II America. Instead, black churches were -- and continue to be -- more socially conservative than their white mainline counterparts because of their development during the Reconstruction Era and their roles as gatekeepers of morality and respectability in black communities.

In the wake of slavery, many white protestant churches in the South either sought to convert newly freed slaves or served as models from which blacks constructed their religious communities. For many former slaves, the less formal format of worship and fundamentalist approach to the bible endorsed by white Baptists and Methodists made these two denominations more popular as models for forming black churches. Episcopal theologian and scholar Horace Griffin noted that “since the majority of African American slaves became Christian through the evangelical efforts of Methodists and Baptists during the Great Awakening revivals and plantation missions, they also adopted the conservative

Christian traditions and strict adherence to the Bible characteristic of these
denominations.” These traditions continued to influence the development of major black
denominations from Reconstruction into the 21st century.84

Griffin also noted that, while several mainline denominations with predominantly
white membership adopted some sort of reaffirming position on homosexuality by 2005 -
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Church of Christ embraced progressive
stances on homosexuality in the 1990s followed by the first ordination of an openly gay
clergyman by the Episcopal Church USA in 2003 and the acceptance of openly gay
ministers in the Presbyterian Church USA in 2011 -- none of the seven major historically
black denominations had adopted similar stances. This same pattern of silence or
condemnation of homosexuality by major black churches certainly reflected their
institutional stances during the Cold War. However, neither the stances of major black
churches on homosexuality presently, nor their similar positions sixty years ago, can be
understood simply as products of their institutional birth during Reconstruction. For a
more complete understanding of the motivations behind their conservative moral stances
and the impact of those positions on black gay activism, one must also specifically
consider the historical role of the church in the lives of many black Americans and, more
generally, the Civil Rights Movement.85

Several historians, including Pete Daniel in Lost Revolutions, have argued that
due to the exclusionary nature of Jim Crow segregation that gripped the United States for
an entire century after the abolition of slavery, blacks had to assemble and live within

84 Horace Griffin, Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black
85 Griffin, Their Own Receive Them Not, p.16.
their own separate parallel society. This separate world encompassed shopping, entertainment, and religious expression among many other facets of life. Not being able to hold significant positions in white society, many blacks centered their world around church communities, which provided places for religious worship, social interaction, and economic exchange. In essence, freed slaves who stayed in the South after emancipation “were able to carve out lives with dignity in the belly of the beast” by participating in black church circles. This important role of church life to many blacks from the 1860s to the 1960s and beyond contributed to significantly higher rates of involvement in church life among blacks than whites and made black churches “the linchpin of African American communal life.”

Additionally, black churches historically served as spaces for activist organizing and were the largest institutions involved in struggles for racial justice during the Civil Rights Movement. Individual congregations or collective denominations often worked together to provide ready-made groups of activists and movement leaders. For example, the most famous civil rights organizer, Martin Luther King, Jr., rose to prominence as a Baptist minister and later helped organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The centrality of these churches in the lives of most black civil rights activists helped spread black middle-class ideas of respectability throughout their communities, making black churches and their ministers the gatekeepers of respectability and morality. In this way, while black churches were the chief vehicles for social activism and change in Cold War black communities, they were also the enforcers of heteronormative ideas and

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practices in these same communities. Whether or not particular members of a congregation were homophobic, mainline black churches of the time condemned gay behavior because they were “worried about protecting the community’s image within the broader society.”

Although no polling data on attitudes about homosexuality existed for mainline black congregations in the 1950s or 1960s, more recent studies showed the prevalence of homophobia in these churches, reaffirming the pervasiveness of conservative fundamentalist beliefs they held in earlier decades. In 2003, Gregory Lewis of Georgia State University combined several recent studies of black communities to create an often-cited article in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. After synthesizing several prominent polls, Lewis concluded that “blacks are substantially more religious than whites, more likely to be fundamentalist Protestants, and more likely to believe in a God who sends misfortunes as punishments.” In the end, he quantified that “blacks are 11 percent more likely than whites to condemn homosexual relations as ‘always wrong’ and 14 percent more likely to see them warranting ‘God’s punishment.’” While the participants in these studies are removed from the experiences of Bayard Rustin and Aaron Henry by several decades, they certainly represent the fundamentalist nature of mainline black churches that has, if anything, likely become more progressive since the 1960s.

As the experiences of Rustin and Henry illustrated, the forces that marginalized black gay activists in the Civil Rights Movement were neither few in number nor simple. While identifying as gay fueled yet another layer of oppression for black men and women

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in Cold War America, such individuals were not always confined to the sidelines of activism. Ultimately, discretion about one’s homosexuality could go a long way in insuring continued opportunities for prominent activism. Whenever an activist’s homosexuality became undeniably public, however, he or she was often shunned by colleagues and community members as a way to protect images of black communities as respectable and deserving of the rights of full citizenship. Throughout the Cold War Era, black middle-class leaders in the Civil Rights Movement and mainline black churches served as gatekeepers of sexuality and respectability, insuring many new rights for their straight constituents but ignoring many needs of gay brothers and sisters.
CONCLUSION

“I hope you will often take heart from the knowledge that you are joined with fellow young people in every land, they struggling with their problems and you with yours, but all joined in a common purpose; that, like the young people of my own country and of every country I have visited, you are all in many ways more closely united to the brothers of your time than to the older generations of any of these nations; and that you are determined to build a better future.”
-- Senator Robert Kennedy, June 6, 1966

Returning to Senator Kennedy’s 1966 speech at the University of Cape Town, it is clear that he believed the “tiny ripples of hope” emanating from young activist organizations around the globe were culminating in revolutionary forces that not only could end social oppression in many forms and places, but which could ultimately “build a better future” for all to enjoy. The Civil Rights Movement and Gay Liberation Movement were certainly two such activist forces working to end forms of oppression in the United States during the Cold War Era. However, even though both movements were struggling against similar hierarchical powers that deemed their constituents second-class citizens, they rarely combined efforts to strengthen their revolutionary potential. In fact, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, black activists and gay activists scarcely worked together because of preexisting social stigmas.  

One of the most significant of these divisive stigmas was the belief held by many prominent black middle-class leaders of the Civil Rights Movement that homosexuality was a crosscutting issue that threatened black claims to respectability, thereby risking one of the central arguments in favor of blacks receiving full citizenship. This fear of being associated with homosexuality resulted in the marginalization of black gay activists

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89 Robert Kennedy, “Day of Affirmation Address” (speech given at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966).
throughout the period. For example, Bayard Rustin and Aaron Henry, two black gay activists, faced extreme personal criticism from fellow activists over issues surrounding their sexuality. In both situations, these prominent leaders were forced to deny their homosexuality or risk being ostracized by their peers and pushed to the sidelines of civil rights activism.

However, in stark contrast to the pervasive homophobia of major black activist organizations in the 1950s and 1960s, was the clear support for gay activists that Huey Newton first articulated in 1970. This new vision of solidarity and cooperation between blacks and gays was seen both in Newton’s 1970 speech -- later published in *Revolutionary Suicide* -- and a Black Panther Party conference held at Temple University a few months later. While Newton’s speech called for black activist leaders to reach out to their gay activist counterparts and create a coalition for social change, the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia acted on Newton’s words by incorporating gay activist committees into the Black Panthers’ overall conference agenda. These two events signaled a distinct change in the way prominent black activists viewed gays. This shift in perspective represented a coordinated model of activism to end racial and sexual prejudice that was much stronger than the earlier divided models that both movements endorsed. Furthermore, although Newton founded the Black Panther Party in 1966, he did not initially call for solidarity with gays due to a lack of historical understanding of the similarities in treatment of the two groups.

After the Stonewall Inn Riots of 1969 catapulted gay activists into the national spotlight, though, Newton quickly realized the connections that black and gay
communities had with one another. These significant connections included facing similar prejudices in the military and workplace, harassment by police, and disillusionment with older generations of leaders. Newton understood that the firing of gay men and women during the Lavender Scare was closely linked to the segregationist practices that prohibited many blacks from obtaining meaningful employment in the same way that the police harassment of blacks during the Watts Riots of 1965 closely resembled the intimidation and coercion of gays during the Stonewall Riots. These examples of historical connections as well as others were the ultimate motivating forces behind Newton’s truly revolutionary vision of cooperation.

Sadly, no meaningful alliance between blacks and gays ever developed from Newton’s prodding. In fact, black and gay activist groups continued to work apart from one another, sometimes even working against each other, in the years that followed. This ultimate failure of Newton’s vision was due mostly to ideas of respectability that many black leaders endorsed and socially conservative ideologies that mainline black churches preached. First, middle-class black leaders worked constantly to maintain respectable appearances before whites as a way to show they were deserving of the rights of full citizenship. This obsession with respectability necessitated condemning the same actions and ways of life that whites found objectionable, including homosexuality. Black churches posed a second obstacle to Newton’s vision. Due to the fact that major mainline black churches developed during the Reconstruction Era, they took on many of the socially conservative positions held by the evangelical white missionaries who either helped organize early black congregations or served as accessible models for their
creation by freed slaves. In the end, these forces combined to divide black and gay communities and promote the harassment and marginalization of black gay activists.

Although Rustin and Henry died many years ago, their life stories are still valuable tools for learning about America’s past and shaping the future. Both men offer courageous examples of activism for racial justice in the face of seemingly insurmountable prejudice. Most important of all, however, are the insights that their two experiences give historians and modern readers into the situations of countless black gay men and women in Cold War America whose stories were never recorded. Following Newton’s example, understanding the interconnected layers of oppression between seemingly diverse groups -- like blacks and gays -- can also be an empowering and constructive force in American society. For example, if Newton’s cooperative vision had actually materialized into concrete and lasting alliances, the impact of AIDS on black communities during the 1980s could have been very different. As many scholars have pointed out, a major reason that AIDS devastated black communities in the first years after its discovery in 1981 was because many black leaders refused to openly discuss sexual issues in their communities. In many ways, the same reservations that black leaders had about discussing sex and homosexuality in the 1980s are direct products of similar reservations in the 1960s and 1970s that ultimately defeated Newton’s call for solidarity.  

In addition, understanding Newton’s motivations in 1970 can provide contemporary alliances for gays in their fight for marriage equality. In short, many of the

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80 For discussions of the impact of AIDS in black communities, see Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Sexual Politics and Jennifer Brier’s Infectious Ideas.
same arguments that are currently used to prohibit homosexual couples from legally marrying one another are nearly identical to arguments used to justify miscegenation laws until 1967. In the end, understanding these past and present connections between black and gay communities not only allows for members of both groups to better appreciate and respect one another, it also fosters alliances that could strengthen ongoing struggles for justice in both communities.91

91 For discussions of the similar tactics used to justify miscegenation laws and anti-gay marriage laws, see Peggy Pascoe’s What Comes Naturally and George Chauncey’s Why Marriage.
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