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GAY LIBERATION 40 YEARS OUT OF THE CLOSET

Longtime activists share stories about the movement and discuss nowadays militancy



TILL CHURCH DO THEM PART

In June, 1969, gays, lesbians and transvesties fought policemen back in the Stonewall Riots. The conflict motivated the gay liberation movement and the creation of the activist group Gay Liberation Front. In demonstrations, militants yelled “Smash the Church! Smash the State!”, institutions thought as sexist and oppressive. Nowadays, gay parades all over the world pay tribute to the Stonewall Riots. However, the gay movement in the United States followed another path. If they once wanted to smash the Church and the State, now they want to get married and be open in the Army. The conservatives felt as if they were being challenged and they’re in the battle as a strong opponent.

FERNANDA DUTRA

The show Dimension Five never had an audience like in October 5, 1974. The motive: that night’s guest debaters were Gay Alliance and Lesbian Alliance activists. In the countryside of Iowa the majority of people hadn’t yet seen an openly gay person. Betty Lou Varnum, the show’s host, asked viewers to send questions in – and they quickly arrived in large numbers. Uncomfortable, inside a striped pink suit and a ruffle collar blouse, Varnum waited about half an hour to make the question she was bothered to ask.

“Our viewers would like to know if you are implying that there’s nothing abnormal in being a homosexual.”

“There is nothing abnormal in homosexuality.”

“And you all agree? Let’s put it clear: you all believe there is nothing wrong with homosexuality?”

“Homosexuality is a viable lifestyle for one to choose.”

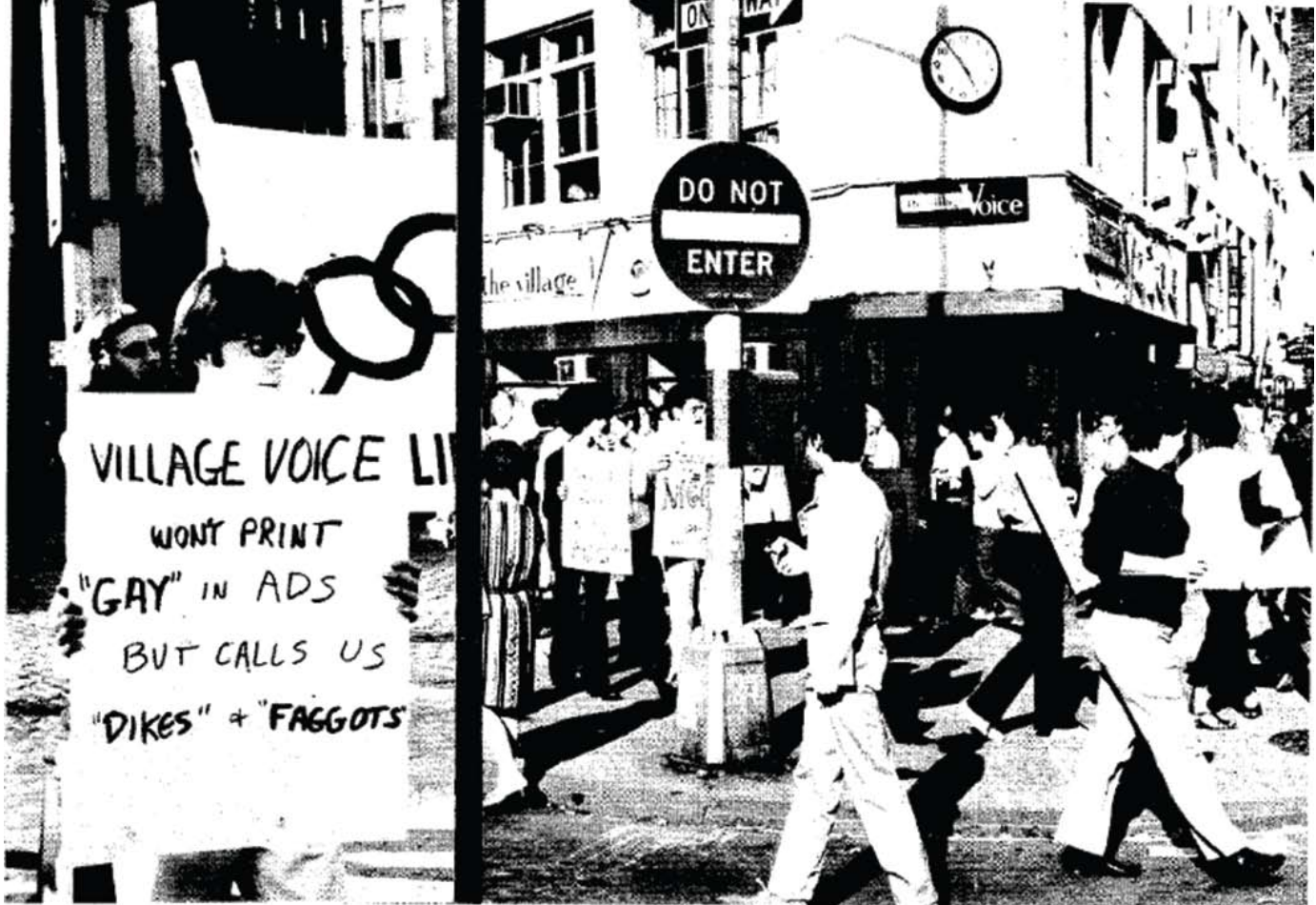
The host insisted. She wanted answers as objective as scientific principles. Varnum, a pioneer in Iowa’s broadcasting, felt modern; she understood modern themes as homosexuality. At least she thought so. But in giving voice to such questions from the viewers, it was clear she had the same doubts.

The eight guest speakers, who were 20 to 25 years old, adopted a daring way of talking, typical of rebellious teens.

If questions sounded offensive, they replied ironically. “I also feel there’s nothing abnormal about heterosexuality”. Varnum tried to fake a smile. They looked disarmed when confronted with personal interrogations. “Do you want children?” or “Do homosexuals seek long-time relationships at all?” were tough questions for those who had started their sex life two or three years before.

Marriage seemed distant, more related to their parents’ unhappiness than to their own future. Having kids, almost impossible. A viewer asked the lesbians how they pictured having a longtime relationship and a family – if they actually wanted these, Varnum emphasized. Kay Scott, wearing grey aviator sunglasses in the studio, answered: “I like kids. But I’m not interested in being a heterosexual in any shape or form, which is what it’d have to happen if I wanted to have a child”. Gay men answered the question, even though Varnum hadn’t asked them. Jim Osler said: “I’d like to have children at some point. And I don’t see why I couldn’t have kids, I really like kids”. Varnum went for the objective reply. “Are you speaking of adoption?”. “Probably yes”, Osler sustained, even though he knew that at the age of 20-something and in 1974 Iowa that’d be utterly impractical.

Laws hindered Scott and Osler from having a family like their parents’.



But they wanted something else. Being out of the closet in the 70's meant instant affinity with the gay liberation movement. Like other minorities that struggled for civil rights in the late 20th century, gays yearned for having their own space, based on sexual revolution and freedom of choice. To erase discrimination, activists had the ambition to overthrow heterosexual behavior patterns determined by gender. Images of motherly women or bread-winner strong men, examples of these patterns, had to go because these were means used in discriminating against gays and lesbians. Believing that the Church and the State reinforced this kind of behavior, activists criticized these institutions.

Four decades later, activists struggle for other reasons. Even the name of the gay movement has changed: now it's called LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender). Young people take the streets demanding lawful recognition of families formed by LGBT couples. Technology and laws make possible to choose between adoption, insemination with known or unknown donor and even surrogacy. According to the United States 2000 Census, more than a third of lesbian households have kids. Among gay men, the number is smaller, equivalent to 20%. There are 1 to 12 million kids in the custody of gay couples – the number

is inexact because there isn't a specific form for these families to fill. The demographic explosion of queer spawns, as kids raised by homosexual couples call themselves, is referred to as gay baby boom.

The rise of new families motivated the fight to legalize gay marriage in the United States. The most common strategy among activist groups is trying to win the right through state ballots. Last year, five states approved gay marriage, including Iowa. The negative reaction was stronger: 30 states denied it. In November, Maine rejected gay marriage. The result had a broad impact, although it was a statewide election, because citizens voted on a law already approved by Legislative state power and Executive – previous ballots were about propositions. The law never came into effect because religious institutions gathered enough signatures to consult the population before that.

The first significant defeat for gay marriage activists happened last year, the Proposition 8, a suggestion of constitutional amendment to California. The Constitution didn't specify the sex of the couple to whom was allowed marriage – the conservative proposition meant to do that. Both sides raised a total of 83 million dollars, a record in the history of Californian referendums. The documentary 8: *The Mormon Proposition* (2009) conjectures that 75% of the money was donated

by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS). The ballot's result restricted the right to heterosexual people. Chances are that next year marriage will be on the Californian ballots again. But little shows changes in the results. Polls indicate that less than 50% will vote yes to gay marriage. The decision of going for another ballot in 2010 was made by the gay community: more than 70% supports the marriage struggle. Statewide recognition makes it easier to get health insurance for the family and joint adoption, for example. Without the federal approval, however, gay and lesbian couples are alienated of more than a thousand benefits which are managed by the nation, such as social security.

In the last elections, the gay community fully supported the Democrat Barack Obama, hoping George Bush's conservative era would end. Before his mandate began, Obama got activists angry when he called anti-gay minister Rick Warren to give a speech at his inauguration ceremony. Another deception was his not appointing gays and lesbians to important offices. In June, the Justice Department issued a document reinforcing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), first passed during Bill Clinton's mandate to hinder gay marriage. The words used by the Department of Justice suggested that gay people could marry, as long as they chose someone of the opposite

sex – “Section 3 of DOMA does not distinguish among persons of different sexual orientation, but rather it limits federal benefits to those who have entered into the traditional form of marriage”, says the document.

Last October, Obama gave a speech at the Human Rights Campaign benefit, one of the most traditional gay organizations in the country – on the day before the National Equality March. It was the first time he sounded like when he addresses the entire nation – optimistic and enthusiastic. “I’m here with you in that fight”, he said. It seemed like a one night truce. He was interrupted with applause 56 times in 25 minutes on the microphone. The Democrat, who has partisan majority at the Congress, promised to sign the bill that includes discrimination against gender and sexual orientation in the hate crimes law. Two weeks later, the bill was approved by the Senate and signed by Obama. He also declared his support to the Domestic Partners Benefits and Obligations Act – a civil contract that allows almost the same rights as marriage. And he said soon gay men would be able to serve openly in the Army, although he hasn’t mentioned when these promises would become reality.

Among compliments to activists and promises of change, the president’s speech paid an implicit tribute to the first out gay man elected for an office in the country, Harvey Milk. On the platform, the San Francisco politician always hinted at a regular kid, who lived in a small down, anguished of being gay. Milk called everyone to come out of the closets to build an equalitarian society for that kid. Obama did the same. “I believe the future is bright for that young person”, he concluded.

Gay men (though not all) enjoy a bright present thanks to people like Harvey Milk and decades of activism. Nicknamed Gay Mecca, San Francisco is proud to have the highest percentage of out gay men and lesbians in the country – 15,4%, according to research done by the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. At the Castro neighborhood, of which Milk proclaimed himself the mayor, the rainbow flag is more popular than the country’s. In the early 70’s, when the politician moved there, the Victorian houses were not well conserved and business was low. The new inhabitants were fleeing from abusive situations at home or work, had little money and hoped to find in San Francisco a liberal society and, in the Castro,

cheap rent. The neighborhood now has one of the highest property values in the city because of the revitalization of the commerce, now targeted at gay people, and of the Victorian houses. Ironically, high property value is the main reason why people like the first inhabitants of the neighborhood in the 70’s don’t move there anymore.

A typical summer Sunday at the Castro: some enjoy the centenary movie theatre homonymic to the neighborhood on the main street. Beside the theatre, there is a small store called Hot Cookies. It always has a line. Every tourist wants to buy the most popular product of the candy shop, the penis cookies. Three men just bought theirs. One of them bites the tip first, leaving the balls intact. The other one begins with the bottom. They look at each other and burst out laughing. Then they stop so they won’t spit flour and sugar. No one is surprised at the picture. As nobody is astounded by the bars showing up their sturdy patrons or the clubs with balconies, so one can also flirt with those walking by on the streets.

In a Sunday article, the *San Francisco Chronicle* joked about each neighborhood’s style in the city. About the Castro look, reporter Peter Hartlaub defined it “tight and bright”. The color scheme goes beyond rainbow. It includes some that don’t appear in nature. According to Hartlaub, Castro residents wouldn’t be caught dead in baggy jeans, cheap flip-flops or a conservative haircut. Leaving stereotypes behind, the story makes clear that looks have changed a lot since the first gay men arrived in the neighborhood. The pioneers had hippie influences. And those who couldn’t speak about politics, culture or were unfamiliar with Jean-Paul Sartre were out of the group. Now the Castro clone look, described by the newspaper, prevails. But hippies and ex-hippies who cannot fit in labels still have a guaranteed space and they used it to discuss the 40th anniversary of the gay movement.

Upset with the disappearance of a radical perspective in the gay movement, Tommi Avicoli Mecca – he considers himself an anarcho-socialist – decided to edit an anthology of articles about the early years of gay liberation. The name of the book is a reference to one of the chants yelled in demonstrations: *Smash the Church, Smash the State!*. He wanted to bring gay liberation ideas up to discussion also to make a point in his critics to the LGBT movement.

Mecca decided to promote his book only in independent bookstores, like Books, Inc in the Castro, holding the event this particular night. He doesn’t resemble the young activist depicted in the book’s introduction. In the picture, his hair, trimmed with a flower, touches his shoulders. He wears a mini cardigan, that leaves his navel at sight. He seems to keep steady all facial muscles, staring at the camera seriously. He doesn’t wear feminine clothes anymore. This Friday, he has short hair, and covered belly and looks anxious at the audience, chairs are wanted. Mecca climbs the high stool with difficulty – not because he’ll be 58 years old tomorrow, but because he’s less than 5.2 tall. He reads the book’s introduction. “My own coming out had all the drama of an Italian opera. How appropriate, considering I come from a working-class, immigrant, southern Italian family in South Philly”. The audience laughs, then get serious again as Mecca narrates an episode in which he was questioned by the Office of Student Affairs because of his activist group.

“You’re not helping your cause by doing things like this”, said the administrator.

“What cause is that?”, he asked.

“To be accepted as normal.”

“But we weren’t trying to be ‘normal’! Forty years later, I find that being ‘normal’ is more popular than ever”. Mecca disagrees with the path the gay movement has taken. He rejects the idea that gay marriage will bring equality. “In many ways, the new millennium gay movement is the antithesis of the early 70’s gay liberation”. According to the activist, the gay movement tried to point out what was wrong with society to change it. Now, it wants to be a part of society. “I think it has to do with normalization and recognition. People want to be accepted just like anybody else. We were different 40 years ago, we didn’t want to be normal. But I don’t think we were the majority before, we were the most vocal ones. A lot of folks would’ve jumped at the chance to be normal back then”.

His hoarse voice cracks when he reads. After years giving speeches in demonstrations, he’s still nervous speaking in public. Maybe because he knows that even among fellows his opinion is rejected by most of them. The next guests soothe the mood. Mark Freeman confesses he was less preoccupied about revolution than with how many men he’d sleep with. Pam Mitchell says first she got excited about gay liberation then she found out she was attracted to women. When the evening is over it’s

like everyone was anxious for the end so they could greet each other. Even living in the same city, these long time friends don't see much of each other. Activism brought them together in the 70's and still does, with looser bonds.

In order to get to Mecca's house, one has to climb a hill worthy of San Francisco – and Steve McQueen's car chases in his movies. The one bedroom apartment is cozy. Mecca doesn't care about beds, his mattress lies on the floor. The guitar is standing by. Hanged on the wall, pictures with friends. The sunny day (and the cat) invite us to the balcony, a collective space in the condo. Mecca tries to make a TOP 5 most radical moments in his life list, but ends it with four – because “four is a cool number as well”.

In chronological order: 1) standing up to a nun that said offensive things about southern Italians in his catholic school, at 10 years old; 2) coming out of the closet, at 18; 3) debating aversion therapy on TV, at 18; 4) coordinating Assemblyman Tom Amniano's, out gay man, campaign for mayor as a write-in candidate in 1999, at 48. Amniano got to the runoff election and lost by 20% of the votes.

Mecca calls these his shiny moments. He underestimated the importance of confronting the nun until his mother retold the story and said: “I know why you became an activist. You could never stand for injustice”. At 16, he used to go to anti-war demonstrations. Mecca found an oasis of liberalism in the neighborhood he grew, Little Italy in Philadelphia: Angie's house. The divorcée immigrant opened the doors to her daughter's friends: weed, music and sex at ease. Then Mecca got into college so he wouldn't be drafted to the Vietnam War. At Temple University, Philadelphia, he found out about Gay Liberation Front – that's when number 2 on the list happened.

Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was created in New York after conflicts that took place in the Stonewall Inn bar, at New York, in June 28, 1969. A lot of folks like to say they were there that night. In fact, about 2,000 people were. However, happenings are still a bit fuzzy, as it was a hot summer Friday and so many were involved. In the middle of the night, policemen came, closed the bar, pushed the patrons out. Coins were thrown at the police, the first sight of a rebellious demonstration. “Is that good for the bribe?”, customers provoked. A group of transvesties kept having fun. They sang and danced



cancan. The lyrics to the song: “We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls. We don't wear underwear. We show our pubic hair”.

About a couple weeks before, something alike had happened. If things kept going this way, maybe Stonewall Inn would close its doors for good. Patrons were sick of police aggressiveness. Some say the riots broke when a woman resisted being arrested. Others say it happened when someone threw a bottle to the ground. Suddenly, Stonewall regulars – most of them street kids, prostitutes, transvestites, blacks and immigrants – angrily attacked. The neighbors took the patrons' side and went to the streets to fight with them. The policemen, outnumbered, barricaded themselves inside the bar. They heard Molotov cocktails explosions. They felt the thud of the parking meters, uprooted, hitting the doors.

Even after reinforcements arrived, the riots continued for hours. In the following days, hundreds of people went back to the Stonewall Inn in pro-

test. The bar became a national historic landmark. In 1970, a year later, the first gay parade set the date for a tradition that spread across the world.

When Martha Shelley – one of the contributors to *Smash the Church, Smash the State!* – noticed the repercussion of the Stonewall Riots, she decided to act. The energy that made so many gays, lesbians and transgender fight back couldn't be wasted. She helped creating GLF, the first activist group created after the riots, in June 1969. Nowadays she lives in Portland, OR, with Sylvia. They got married two times, one in Canada (“a civilized country”, according to Shelley), one in California, where they lived until 2005.

She liked private parties better than bars as the Stonewall Inn. Shelley knew the bar was popular and the raids were common. She was showing the city to two out-of-town women when they passed by Stonewall on the night of the riots. But she didn't realize then how important that moment was. “It's just a



riot, we have them in New York all the time”, she told the women.

Graduated and working as a secretary, Shelley had time left for activism. She went to feminist, Union and anti-war demonstrations. She took the spokesperson position of the group Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) because she could risk losing her job. “It wasn’t like I had a big fancy career and I was afraid of losing that. I wasn’t a school teacher, where they really persecuted you”, Shelley explains. There weren’t any laws prohibiting discrimination against sexual orientation at the time. DOB, the oldest lesbian organization, was part of the homophile movement – name adopted by socializing groups before the word gay became popular. Shelley didn’t identify with their conservative political orientation. She also hated to dress up to join demonstrations, in which she was always one of the youngest. Still, she took advantage of her position as spokesperson to suggest a march after the Stonewall riots.

She gathered support and got a committee to help her organize it. More than two thousand people marched the Village in New York in a peaceful demonstration. The committee became the Gay Liberation Front. The name was a reference to the Vietnamese Army (National Liberation Front of North Vietnam), the USA enemy in the war. It made a clear statement about the group’s political orientation. Martha doesn’t remember who came up with the name. “I have to confess I had been drinking. What I do remember is that I suddenly got excited and started pounding on the table saying ‘That’s it! We’re the Gay Liberation Front!’. And

all of the sudden my hands are bleeding, I looked down and I was pounding my hand on the beer top. So I do remember that part”.

Before the first GLF official meeting, the committee received a call from the alternative college Alternate U. They had classes on Marxism, Maoism and Cuban Revolution along with classes on how to run a mimeo-machine and karate – everything a leftist organization needed to know. The left, however, was still considered sexist. Gays and lesbians in the left wing were told to keep their sexual orientation to themselves so the whole movement wouldn’t be seen as a group of perverts. On the other hand, leftist gays and lesbians in homophile groups were told to keep their politics to themselves because they were supposed to present this image of “regular Americans”, says Shelley. GLF was founded by these people, whom either had hidden their sexual or political orientation.

More than the theoretical study, the consciousness raising groups shaped the GLF thought. In the meetings, people sat on the floor, in circle, and talked about a specific subject. It could be anything, mainly personal: relationship with family, friends, lovers, sex, childhood, religion etc. Little by little, myths created by the Church or by intellectuals were deconstructed. Unlike Freud implied, most hadn’t had a dominant mother and distant father. They were not the stereotypical *Boys in the Band*, suicidal and depressed. Being attracted to someone of the same sex did not cause depression. Hiding it did.

The conclusion might now seem obvious. But the alternative newspaper RAT gave headlines to “Gay is good”, the title chosen for a manifesto that Shelley had written. She began by explaining to heterosexuals what meant to be gay. This identity was not inside her; it was a label society used to differentiate itself from what it considered a sin. Gays felt different because they were perceived this way. Tolerance was not enough anymore. “Your friendly smile of acceptance – from the safe position of heterosexuality – isn’t enough. As long as you cherish that secret belief that you are a little bit better because you sleep with the opposite sex, you are still asleep in your cradle and we will be the nightmare that awakens you”.

Shelley got rid of a burden she and others carried. Their guilt and low self-esteem were now on the shoulders of society. The gay cultural revolution wanted to end behavior patterns determined by gender, such as men having to be bread-winners and not allowed

to cry or be sensitive. Or women with the sole purpose of becoming mothers. GLFers believed the Church and the State reinforced these patterns – without their influence, there wouldn’t be reasons to discriminate people over sexual orientation. The idea seemed attractive to young people in the midst of a war, nuclear threat, rising divorce rate and Nixon’s corrupt government.

Giving the imposed identity, GLF wanted to recreate it positively. They’d change the label and take upon themselves the authorship. To start with vocabulary: activists adopted words that originally had a negative semantic for their groups and manifestos, like dykes and queer. They wanted to reverse the meanings. Another attitude was coming out of the closet, which became a rite of passage among gays. It was like thinking “before someone accuses me of being gay, as if this was a bad thing, I’ll come out and show I’m proud of it, and then no one will have a reason to discriminate against me”. In demonstrations, GLFers yelled “out of the closets, into the streets”.

Harvey Milk begged in his speeches for gays to come out. He knew about living in secrecy – he had lived this way for 40 years. Milk believed the society would change when people realized the injustice of prejudice. Every parent, child, teacher, waiter, policeman had to become aware that gays were everywhere and they weren’t that much different. “If a bullet should enter my brain, let the bullet destroy every closet door”, he used to say. Milk was murdered in 1978 (his story can be seen in the movie by Gus Van Sant, *Milk*, 2008).

The personal became such a strong political weapon for gays that many decided to change the regular discourse about the origins of homosexuality. Homophiles and LGBT activists rather

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say they feel attracted by the same sex because they were born this way. While in the 70's, gays and lesbians said they had chosen this life style. They struggled for freedom of choice instead of the right to live.

Shelley finished her manifesto "Gay is good" by pointing out the potential of gay identity. "The really important thing about being gay is that you are forced to notice how much sex-role differentiation is pure artifice, is nothing but a game". GLFers questioned patterns. That concerned heterosexuals as well. Shelley interrogates them. "It's difficult for me to understand how you can dig each other as human beings - in a man-woman relationship - how can you relate to each other in spite of your sex roles. Is love possible between heterosexuals or is it all a case of women posing as nymphs, earth-mothers, sex-objects, what-have-you; and men writing the poetry of romantic illusions to these walking stereotypes? I tell you, the function of a homosexual is to make you uneasy".

Soon the ideas of GLF-New York were all around the country. The anarchic structure of the group contributed to that: each group had numbers of cells, each responsible for organizing activities such as group studies, consciousness raising groups, dances and demonstrations. Besides, to open a GLF chapter in another city, an authorization was not required. Boston, Philadelphia, Berkeley, San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and even the midwest had their gay activist group. GLFers helped each other as they could: hitchhiked and slept on the couch to discuss the gay movement, always improvising.

Besides the connection between GLF chapters, the groups supported other minority movements, like the black's, the latino's, the asian's and the feminist's. For lesbians, it seemed easier to relate to straight women than gay men. In the following years, lesbians decided to create their own groups, some of which tried radical separatism and living in alternative communities in the woods. The Black Panthers also had strong connections with GLF. One of the actions the New York chapter discussed in the first months was donating 500 dollars to the Black Panthers. Huey Newton, one of the main black leaders, wrote a letter to his fellows recognizing the gay revolutionary potential.

These were controversial connections inside GLF. Only the movement against the Vietnam War found unanimous support. One of the first divisions

in the movement occurred between gays and lesbians. Afterwards, in the mid-70's, more divisions formed smaller groups that represented minorities such as black gays, Asians, American Indians etc.

During the 70's, the struggle for civil rights was based on identity politics. What oppresses women or blacks should be fought by women, black and gay groups - in that sense, black lesbians felt only someone who was discriminated by gender, color and sexual orientation could understand them, for example. "While identity politics succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of Americans to struggle for social change, it also pulled those forces in separate directions. Early gay liberation was a special, even if brief, time when men and women, whites and people of color, were engaged in struggle together - against an oppressive society and with each other for the purpose of revolutionary change", analyses John D'Emilio, History professor at the University of Illinois, on the book *Out of the Closets - Voices of Gay Liberation*.

"GLF emphasized this ideological paradigm, which they had gotten from the New Left. Our attitude was that gay liberation was not fitted in anybody's paradigm. It doesn't fit into any philosopher's ideas, it doesn't fit into any religion's views, it doesn't fit into the New Left, the conservatives. We just don't fit. So we're going to have to create a whole new way of looking at the world. And we'll do that existentially", said Arthur Evans while eating organic cereal bars in his apartment right at the famous hippie corner, Haight St & Ashbury Street.

When he found out about GLF, Evans got thrilled about the news. He had gone to Mattachine Society events - a men's homophile group - and thought it was like Sunday school. Even learning about GLF was exciting. "I was walking down on Christopher St. with my lover on a foggy night and someone came out of the fog and gave us a leaflet that said 'a new group is formed, the GLF'. And we felt 'wow, this sounds like what we're looking for'", narrated Evans. The fog could've been just a dramatic effect as summer still warmed New York up.

In the first meetings, Evans, his lover and friends got together for a cell called Radical Study Group, but as time went by he got tired of long meetings, too much conversation and, to him, too little action. Evans wanted more than holding books, even if it was Sartre's.



He wanted to live. So he created, along with his study group colleagues, the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA). They privileged experiences of life, influenced by the existential philosophers.

Besides the disagreements already pointed out by Evans, another reason why GAA was formed out of GLF was the purposes of actions. GLF was multifocal, making alliances with other activist movements and organizing actions not directly related to gay issues, while GAA members thought efforts should be focused strictly on gay struggles - something closer to how LGBT groups work nowadays.

GAA invented a direct action kind of protest, called the zap. "We confronted politicians in their personal lives because their decisions affected ours". The mayor of New York, John Lindsey, was the main target. "Lindsey used to call himself a liberal, but he would not support a bill to outlaw job discrimination against gay people neither the bill outlawing housing discrimination. And he called himself a liberal!".

The GAA prepared for a luxury run-in with Lindsey. In September, the Metropolitan Opera celebrates its opening season in a gala ceremony. The event gathers important New Yorkers. They stand on the grand staircase waiting for the mayor and his first lady to come in. Then people applaud and everyone goes inside for the opening of the curtains. That night, GAA activists, dressed in tuxedos, started to yell when the mayor arrived. "End police harassment on gays! End police harassment on gays!". It took a while until the guards found the activists spread out in the crowd. Lindsey was shocked and didn't know how to react.

During the first gay liberation years, activists thought less about getting



rights than ending restrictive laws or rules. The first struggle was against the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which considered homosexuality a disease. After GLF interventions in their events, the APA took it out of the list of psychiatric diseases in 1973.

Things were more complicated when it came to laws. The New York state, for example, prohibited men to wear feminine clothes and vice-versa. It also hindered bars of selling alcohol to gay people. Through government orders, the police eventually stopped arresting people on these laws until they were changed. The process is even slower nationwide. Only in 2003 the sodomy laws were removed from the books.

The marriage movement strategy is based on winning the rights state by state because activists consider unlikely to pass a federal law without jurisprudence and popular appeal. Other struggles, however, are only possible on a national scale, such as serving the Army as an open gay person.

San Francisco's gay population swelled during and after the II World War. The city had one of the main military bases in the Pacific Ocean. And many discharged soldiers decided to stay there. Away from the family, in a liberal place, they could lead the life that pleased them. Robbie Robinson, now a barber at the Castro, must have been responsible for many of these migrations. He didn't get into college and was glad to leave his hometown for anywhere the Army located him. Robinson ended up stationed in Alaska. His job was to discharge gay guys. Robinson is gay. But he kept his secret while in service. "Somehow it was good because I helped people. I used to advice them during interviews. They were worried about what they'd tell their parents.

And I told them to just say they had been transferred to Seattle or San Francisco, get a job and go on with their lives".

The nation saw the II World War as an honorable battle. Gay people also approved the cause and had a stronger reason to do so: they were fighting a leader, Adolf Hitler, who had set up concentration camps for homosexuals. But the homophiles couldn't think about serving openly when being a homosexual was forbidden. During the Vietnam War, the pacifist movement grew strong; young people emphasized their will to end the war, nuclear weapons and even the Army. The draft motivated activism. In the next wars, the government learned the lesson: stopped drafting people, started to attract them with big sums of money. The struggle to end Don't Ask [if he's gay], Don't Tell [you are] (DOMA) policy started in the 90's. Gay people wanted to be in the Army.

Nowadays, the militarist movement is only behind the marriage one in popularity. It seems gays are going to get the right to serve before the right to marry. Obama guarantees he studied the issue with the Pentagon and soon will have a decision. *The Wall Street Journal* has been covering the subject in recent articles. The British Army magazine, *Soldier*, had a gay English soldier that fought the Iraq War on the cover. He showed support to end DOMA. In Europe, gays can openly serve since 2000.

Martha Shelley is sorry that Obama will open the doors for gay people in the Army while still restricting benefits. "They will allow us to kill and die for the profits of the oil companies but they won't allow us any of the benefits that straight people get, like marriage.

I can't say I'm surprised". Even though she wants to see the war end, Shelley supports the militarist movement. "There's young people who don't even know what they are and get caught up in the military. And they have the right to serve openly and live their lives without being persecuted and thrown out without their benefits".

"I don't know, I've always wondered what his sexual orientation was. Joey Nascella... Because we almost had sex one night. We were kind of flirting and both stoned. We almost. But he ended up marrying her. She was one of my best friends. That's Camilla". Mecca goes through two boxes of pictures he brought to the balcony to give a little taste of the *spirit du temps*. Back then, young hippies like Mecca were just hanging out with other guys without feeling this was something one had to admit as a sexual orientation. When gay activism arises, it brings an implicit social demand for everyone to come out of the closet. The word gay is suddenly everywhere, as Mecca's pictures show.

"Here's everyone at the gay coffeehouse".

"What was the name?"

"Gay Coffeehouse. We weren't very creative". (He also shows pictures of the Gay Beach and one article in his book mentions the Gay House)

The trend among Mecca's friends in the 70's was dressing as genderfuck, as in "meant to mess up with your gender notions". He matched feminine and masculine clothes. For example, pink blouse and military boots. The activist shows pictures of a night in which he insisted his boyfriend dressed as genderfuck; the guy is frowning in all of them. Mecca brags about his natural black

power, admired by his friends. Genderfuck looked good on him. Mecca resembled – prominent nose, thin figure, curly hair and outrageous looks – the actress Sarah Jessica Parker, who played the main character in *Sex and the City*.

“I don’t know why I started or why I stopped [*dressing like this*]. For political reasons, I think. It was like ‘we got to do this social change and we got to hammer on society’. This is the way: just being out there and dialoguing with people all the time. Once I was riding the bus and a little old lady looked at me and went ‘are you a man or a woman?’ and I answered ‘both!’. She was like ‘you can’t be both, what are you trying to prove?’. And then we started a conversation. I thought we’d change the world with our ideas, music, demonstrations. And we did! Just not enough”.

Changing majors every other semester, not very interested in college, Mecca dedicated all his free time to the GLF in Temple University, Philadelphia. One of the main struggles in GLF-Temple was against the financing of aversion therapies – the university funded a nearby clinic. Director Stanley Kubrick showed a lighter version of classic conditioning treatments in the *Clockwork Orange* (1971). Behaviorist psychology inspired this therapy to repress homosexual attraction. Therapists would give electroshocks in the patients’ genital organs once they showed images of naked men. A local network station called Mecca to debate the subject with a therapist. He accepted the invitation.

Mecca told his mother the night before and asked her not to tell his father. But after being on the TV screen wearing blue eye shadows, everyone in Philadelphia knew he was gay. His uncle, a cop, saw the show and told Mecca’s father, who threw him out the house. They spent the next 15 years not talking to each other. On the other hand, Mecca’s mom and siblings stood by him.

He moved to a collective. “We borrowed the idea from the hippies. I mean, lots of us were hippies. But then we started living collectively, gay men. And it was really popular because many of us had been kicked out of our homes”. Instead of throwing her son out, a Jewish lady decided to open the doors to his friends. Mecca was invited in. Some stayed a few days, until they found another place. There was always a newcomer. There were always weeds – one of the roommates used to sell it. And there was always sex. “This woman was exceptional, she was like our mother. And she’d always run into someone having sex. She used to say ‘can you please put a door between us?’, just kidding. She was very accepting”.

The collectives were created as an alternative to the nuclear family. Instead of biological bonds, political and intellectual bonds. Also in Philadelphia, Paola Bachetta lived with her friends of the radical lesbian group DYKETACTICS! They were not politically separatists and joined demonstrations organized by various other groups in the city. But when it came to their collective, men were not allowed to go inside the house. Not even the gas meter readers. Bachetta called the company demanding they send a woman, she thought she’d get more jobs for women. Instead, the company shut the gas down and the house rule changed: just the gas meter reader.

As an activists home, they tried putting in practice political ideas. For example, how to be comfortable with their bodies? “We tried out many ways of living within our bodies fully. Bodies that come in all shapes and sizes. All colors. All ages. We tried sitting together in nude to get comfortable with ourselves and each other”, says Bachetta. A popular practice among lesbians was using natural sponges as a replacement for pads or tampons. Once, Barbara – one of the collective’s poets – decided to use a blood-saturated sponge to write a poem on the bathroom tiles.

After that, Bachetta painted her bedroom and the bathroom tiles white so they could easily write with their menstruation blood. “We all began to look forward to every new period: it meant new poetry, art, imaginings, life”, wrote Bachetta on her article to *Smash the Church, Smash the State!*.

They lived together for a couple of years in the 70’s and are still very close. “I definitely am a person who’s profoundly impacted and formed through that experience. It’s the most supportive space that I’ve ever been prior to that and since that”. Bachetta now is an Associate Professor in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies at UC Berkeley.

Mecca doesn’t find any pictures of his collective inside the photograph boxes. He’s still in touch with one of his roommates. “Well, they’re all dead, except one. That’s what I mean: everybody died! Most of my gay liberation friends are gone. That’s why I freaked out”. Mecca is part of the generation that first dealt with AIDS. The ones who survived the epidemics feel like war veterans. “You don’t expect that at 30 years old you’re going to start losing all your friends. It’s not in your consciousness. I’d never thought I’d live past 30”.

In the years before the AIDS epidemics – late 70’s – the gay movement had split in various organizations, separated by class, color, sexual habits etc. The diversity also opened the path for health oriented actions. Although most of sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) were curable, the gay community worried about it because many wouldn’t go to the doctor if they were sick, afraid that they’d get harassed.

Even talking about sickness, activist groups tried making it fun. The sexual health workshop, Journey to the center of your anus, made a reference to the Jules Verne book, inviting men for a profound investigation. Oriented by Dr. William Garrard, they explored



their own anus and each other's, using instruments for proctological examinations. Besides lessons on STDs – no one had had sex education while in high school –, the workshop's program also had tips about erotic points.

Mark Freeman became a nurse because of the gay movement. He was hired by a STD clinic to go to bars and baths to inform people. He also helped organize many workshops for Bay Area Gay Liberation Front (BAGL).

But when the first cases of AIDS/HIV were diagnosed, no one was ready to deal with that. In December, 1981, 24 cases were diagnosed in San Francisco. In the following year, 118. A research made in 1985 found that 37% of gay men in the city were infected with the virus. The disease was called gay plague. Freeman didn't work in AIDS units during this period. "It was very hard staying home with all my friends sick and then going to work. I couldn't deal with it". Even though he worked in the health system, he did not trust it. "We assumed that we were positive. But we thought that if we got tested, the government would know who we were. And there was a real fear that all the people who were HIV positive could be rounded up and put in concentration camps". There were reasons to think that. In 1986, Californians voted on a ballot that would put all HIV positive in quarantine. It didn't pass.

The first help programs were local, set up by the City Hall and private organizations in San Francisco. The president and former actor Ronald Reagan did not say the word AIDS until 1985, when Rock Hudson, a Hollywood long-time friend, declared he was sick. In the same year, a 10 year old boy, Ryan White, became the positive's face in ad campaigns. He was infected during a blood transfusion.

"Look at all the queers, they got what they deserved. They're dangerous. What if it spreads to innocent people? I.e. Gay people are not innocent. They deserve what they get. That's

how people looked at us", says Freeman. During the AIDS epidemic, hate crimes against gay people rose. "Every time, every week someone was sick, someone was dying. I was a journalist throughout the first decade of the epidemics. And it was really rough on me", Mecca shares. Freeman mentions a research done in New York among gays. "People became very closed in, they'd go to piano bars. The only bar they would go is to just sit there and have a drink and somebody played piano and sang. But most people stayed home and worried".

At first, activist groups drew back. Then in 1985, Harvey Milk's friends were organizing the annual demonstration in honor to the politician when one of them had an idea. Cleve Jones asked the demonstrators to bring a piece of cloth sewed with the names of friends and relatives that had died of AIDS. These cloths became a quilt that Jones hanged on a building next to the City Hall. He founded the Names Project – AIDS Memorial Quilt and took it to the National Gay March in 1987, in Washington D.C. Back then, 1,920 pieces of cloth represented AIDS deaths. In 2001, the quilt became the largest communitarian art work, with 44,000 contributions – that is 19% of AIDS deaths in the United States.

Jones numbered changes in the gay movement ever since. "First of all, it brought gay men and lesbians together – they had been really distant throughout the 70's. And second, to take care of our sick friends, we had to have an expensive infra-structure. The movement became more corporatist. We used to get 3,000 dollars for Milk campaigns. In the 80's, we were handling millions". AIDS ended up narrowing connections between gay groups and other movements. Gay organizations became more focused in gay rights and benefits.

An exception to that trend was AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), created in 1987. ACT-UP activists

thought black patients were not treated the same ways as the white, poor patients were not treated the same way as the rich. They wanted to fight not only for health issues, but also for race, gender and class. In 1987, Freeman still hadn't got tested, but he started working on AIDS units in a clinic for homeless and drug-addicts. "I never thought I could live the late 60's again. And in 1989 until 1991, I felt everything once more. I had started dating a 20-year-old guy. He used to tell me 'this sucks, you had all the fun and ruined it all for us. Everyone is afraid to have sex!'. And I just answered 'Enjoy this, be glad you're a part of this'".

Mecca hadn't thought he'd see the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) or the election of a Democrat after twelve years of Republicans (two mandates for Reagan and one for George W. H. Bush). In the early 90's, Mecca had lost many friends. Around the same time, both of his parents died because of other health issues. "I was 30 and suddenly losing my friends. My family is Italian, I used to watch my aunts crying in funerals as if they were actresses. It was different with AIDS. I started to feel there was no outlet. Except to run away. So I ran away". In 1991, Mecca moved to San Francisco. AIDS was still a major concern for the city – about 61% of deaths among young people were caused by the disease. But local initiatives had created a strong infra-structure and reshaped the gay movement. "When I was 40, I moved out here and it was great. I thought: 'Hey, I'm alive. Well, I guess I'm going to be old'. It was a new life."

Sooner or later, they all came to San Francisco. Mecca, 1991. Shelley, 1974. Evans, 1974. Freeman, 1967. Bachtetta, 2003. The 40th Stonewall and GLF anniversaries brought them together last June during the Pride parade in San Francisco. Mecca and Shelley organized the veterans' contingent, which marched right behind Dykes on Bikes. "I got there and thought: 'who are all these old people?'" jokes Shelley. They don't go out much to events like these anymore. Evans writes books on philosophy and history, besides working with the Haight & Ashbury Improvement Association to stop drug dealing and drug abuse in his neighborhood. Bachtetta dedicates herself to teaching in UC Berkeley. Freeman still works as a nurse. Mecca helps the Housing Rights Committee and the Amigo Spanish Speakers, organizations for immigrants in San Francisco.



Little by little, Mecca is moving further from the gay movement. "Why can't we do things through e-mail? It's so easy! Just tell me what needs to be done and I'll do it. But I don't want to go to meetings. I've gone to too much meetings!". Contrary to Shelley, Evans and Freeman, Mecca and Bachetta disagree with the marriage or the militarist movement. Bachetta admits that the family is not as oppressive as it was in the 60's, but she believes gays and lesbians have the potential to go beyond marriage or monogamy. She and Mecca are friends ever since they lived in Philadelphia and both barely feel excited about the latest happenings in the LGBT movement.

Shelley just got back from the National Equality March in Washington, the fifth in history, and feels slightly optimistic about the new generation of gay activists, nicknamed Stonewall 2.0. The event had been questioned by local leaders that back up the state-by-state strategy, it'd distract efforts in the marriage campaigns. Cleve Jones, the idealizer of the march, called for it about five months in advance. No one knew how many would show up for the march, which Jones insisted in throwing with not much money.

In October 11th, Sunday, more than 200,000 people marched through Washington and gathered to hear hours of speeches. Pop stars, like singer Lady Gaga and actress Cynthia Nixon (who starred in *Sex and the City*), joined activists such as Lt. Dan Choi and Cleve Jones himself to discuss more than marriage or the military – longtime activist Urvashi Vaid stands for the crash of the right wing in the country. Lady Gaga had less than four minutes to speak. She used her opportunity to yell at the president, who wasn't at the event. "Are you listening Obama?". The singer emphasized her impatience for the passing of inclusive laws.

Jones also commented on Obama's speech at the Human Rights Campaign, on the night before. "You heard our president give a beautiful speech, he delivered it well. But he did not answer the question when. And there are those who say that we must wait for our president and give him some time because we've got wars and an economy in a tail spin. But we remember eight years of peace and prosperity under another Democrat named Bill Clinton, who went to our parties, who took our checks, who wrote flowery proclamations and gave some of us great jobs. And what did we get out of that? We get Don't ask, don't tell and



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the Defense of Marriage Act. We say no more, no more!". Jones suggested a national strategy. He called everyone in the march to set up groups in the 435 congressional districts to elect politicians in favor of civil rights.

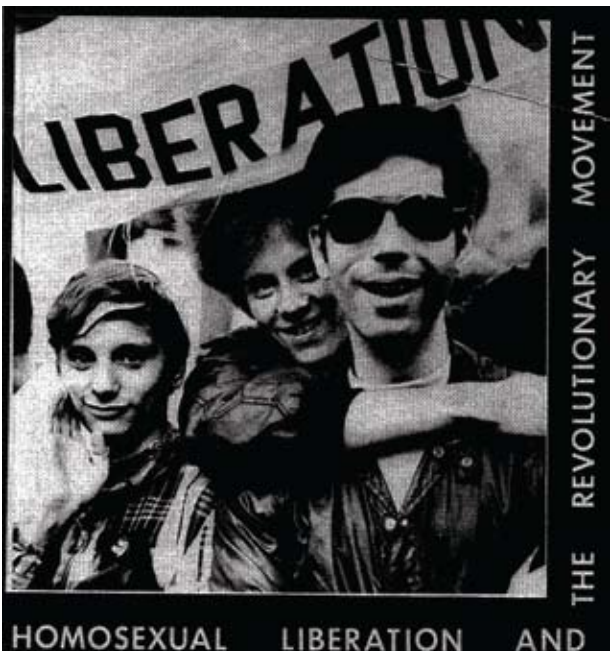
When he finished his speech, Jones heard a reporter telling him "do you realize you just split the movement in two?". On one side, 20 to 35 year old activists organize through the internet, with little money. They have no patience to wait for changes. On the other side, big organizations make alliances with the government and big companies. They advise being cautious and moving slowly. Jones nodded and grinned. Rex Wockner, a journalist that covers the gay movement for decades, believes Jones is the leader the new generation of activists needed. Living in Palm Springs, Jones kept himself out of the spotlight. Until he saw himself back in the media after working as a historical consultant for the movie *Milk*. (He is also a character, played by Emile Hirsh, the one who keeps calling everyone to marches and protests)

Shelley thinks the new generation is a little tamer. "They don't have to fight as hard as we did against a world in which we were almost without exception considered insane, criminal, immoral, or all three. It is a different time". The new activists don't seem to have many historical notions – they barely started to act, most of them motivated by Prop 8, the first time they ever felt defeated in the movement. Twenty five year old activist

Tanner Efinger introduced Jones in the March and created an organization called "Postcards to the President", in which he keeps sending mail to Obama demanding his rights. Efinger confessed in an interview he had to google what DOMA, Defense of Marriage Act (1996), meant.

Mecca didn't see a point in joining the March. He even dislikes the official name, National Equality March. The activist thinks gay people are trying to fit in heterosexual norms and in middle class. The ambition for most is to get married, have kids and live in a beautiful house with a lavender picket fence, Mecca criticizes.

However, one can't call young gay people numb anymore. Their disbelief in big organizations is increasing and prompts them in creating new, smaller groups, using the internet. The improvisation reminds the first gay liberation years. Mecca has an advice for those who have the ambition to move beyond passing laws and actually making the revolution the GLFers thought about doing. He follows the advice every day when he reads the note on his office table. "Question everything". ☘



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