

**You May Not Get There With Me:  
How the Memphis Civil Rights Movement Left the LGBTQ Community Behind**

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**Civil Rights Foundations**

Memphis became a well-trod battleground for black civil rights in the mid-twentieth century South. The city bordered three states, making it a strong strategic location for the movement. It was here that, while planning a Memphis sanitation worker's strike in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. This tragedy and the city's importance to the movement led it to be nicknamed "the home of civil rights." While this title may seem dubious considering its origin in death and continuing signs of racism, Memphis has been a significant platform for civil rights. The city was able to muster up enough protestors to affect productive strikes, sit-ins and marches, pushing forward equality legislation and drawing many white moderates to take a stand next to their black brothers.

In socio-political and moral debate, it is easy to focus on two sides in direct opposition. This paper seeks to challenge the simplicity of this binary, but first I want to reference a third group that becomes strategically essential in these contests: the neutral or moderate section of the population with little investment in either side. In political elections, these are the swing voters. In civil rights battles, these are the people who must be wooed and spurred into action. In "Letters from Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate" who is, "more devoted to 'order' than to justice." This assertion of 'order' over justice hints at a basic societal bias towards the status quo I will address later. This prejudice, which leans heavily on a synthesis of apathy and fear, enabled the empowerment of the Nazi party, and this

combination is consistently what makes possible politically strong prejudice. Dr. King's letter went on to say, "I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used their time much more effectively than the people of good will." Social reprimands such as this gave moderates less shadow to hide behind. Crucial to black civil rights in the sixties and GLBTQ rights now is stirring those with less emotional investment from their apathy.

Collusion among oppressed minorities is necessary to affect change, but is made difficult by numerous societal tendencies. First, it is hard for an oppressed group to deal with challenging extra oppressions beyond its own. Not only are other groups often viewed with less personal investment, but balancing two or three equality/liberation battles is an arduous task. When there is collusion, there is often a dissonant transposition of values in the overlap, with each group putting their personal values atop the hierarchy. During the 1980s portion of the feminist movement, many white, radical women were rallying for "the right to work." They would seek out black women for this "women's cause." Many of these black women had little interest in this right, having already been working from a young age. With collusion, it seems that one cause often tries to subsume the other within it to create a universal cause. This universalism would end up stifling a matrix of social experiences. The Homophile and Gay movements of the fifties, sixties and seventies were often accused of ignoring the distinct identity of lesbians, who reacted by cultivating a more personal discourse. While the expansion of the discourse was positive, some of the discourse extended malice to gay males, quite possibly in reaction to a perceived dismissal in previous gay discourse. While minority collusion poses difficulties, these difficulties are often excellent at extending the conversation and highlighting weaknesses and oversights in the movement. Frantz Fanon had a philosophy professor tell him, "When you hear

someone insulting the Jews, pay attention: he is talking about you” (101). While oppressed groups face many unique problems that do not always overlap, there are still the foundations of dignity, liberty and equality we can all stand upon together.

The two broad movements I wish to explore are the black civil rights movement (specifically of the 60s) and the current sexual civil rights movement.<sup>1</sup> The West has consistently placed a heavy importance in the power dynamics within and between sexuality and race. This power stands upon the strength of the historical-socio-symbols that current society inherits from its predecessors. The goal of civil rights is, at its most minimal level, to clear the fog of these prejudiced symbols from the eyes of the law so that it may treat individuals with an equal dignity and right to personal liberty. At its secondary level, civil rights hopes to achieve a mental liberation of the populous. While civil rights and liberation overlap and have reciprocal influence, it is important to recognize their distinctions. Civil rights focuses on the litigation aspect of prejudice. Dr. King’s peaceful protests, sit ins and boycotts focused primarily on overturning legal discrimination. While he aspired to change the prejudices of the population, legal desegregation and equality were his primary goals.

The more violent turn that many black advocates took toward the end of the sixties can be seen as a more liberationist model. This was due to frustration with the slow speed of change. The late sixties/early seventies gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. has been

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<sup>1</sup> By sexual civil rights movement I mean a middle ground between the gay and lesbian civil rights movement and the queer movement. I find gay and lesbian to be an oversimplification, misrepresentative of the movement. Queer is theoretically useful but its displacement of identity makes it difficult to use in a civil rights sphere. When referring to individuals I will use GLBTQ or gay when appropriate.

referred to as the liberationist model. Annamarie Jagose explains, “Liberation politics aimed at freeing individuals from the constraints of a sex/gender system that locked them into mutually exclusive homo/hetero and feminine/masculine roles” (59). The strength of liberationist politics waned in the 1970s and civil rights re-asserted its dominance in the sexual/political advocacy field. This was primarily due to the grand scale of the liberationist goal to strip humanity of its dependence on normative structures. Civil rights became the primary strategy, mental liberation the ideal goal.

The black civil rights movement has made huge strides and now focuses more on mental liberation and institutional prejudice. Legally, African-Americans now have racial equality. Whether written law is honestly demonstrated in legal action is more complicated and it is a large portion of the goal of mental liberation. The sexual civil movement is still working toward the crux of civil rights. It now generally takes on the “ethnic model” set out by black civil rights.

Obtaining civil rights does not eliminate social discrimination. This inequality usually takes a less concrete form in institutional prejudice, efficiency of the status quo, latent bias and subconscious prejudice—among other things. As a civil rights movement progresses, more and more power filters from overt levels into these subdivisions. Until these subdivisions are sanded down, civil rights cannot unite with its ultimate goal of mental liberation.

But speaking in terms of erasing prejudice is discussing the effect before evaluating the cause. It is nearly impossible to completely erase prejudice because it is grounded in judgment. The human mind constantly judges people and situations to function, and along

the way it picks up plenty of small prejudices. People disagree over the vegetarian diet, whether Michael Bay is a good director, and Bigfoot's existence, yet these debates do not garner violent power struggles. How did race and sexuality become imbued with a strong enough symbolic worth to warrant these passionate conflicts? I would argue that diet and reading take up as much or more of many people's leisure time as the act of sex, yet I have never seen collective groups filled with oppositional hatred come to blows over these liberties.

### **Taking a Step Back from the Matrix**

In her article "Thinking Sex" (1992), Gayle Rubin dubbed this elevation of sexuality the "fallacy of misplaced scale" (151). She discusses its origins in the same chapter, writing: "Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful...Such notions have by now acquired a life of their own and no longer depend solely on religion for their perseverance" (150). She further implicates Christianity, saying it focuses "on sexual behavior as the root of virtue, everything pertaining to sex has been a 'special case' in our culture" (151). While religion is an easy straw man to accuse, the explanation is more complicated. Within the Bible, homosexual acts are only mentioned in the book of Leviticus and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In these it is still referenced obliquely. It is not one of the Ten Commandments Moses brought down directly from God, yet for many believers its importance has surpassed the commandments forbidding adultery, lying, coveting, and sometimes even killing. How did a sin hardly mentioned in the Bible garner so much attention from Christians?

I ask this question to set up an answer, but also to alert the reader early on in this paper to be wary of scapegoating and disproportionate blame placement. Throughout this paper, I mention numerous events and times where racially or sexually oppressed groups are made the symbolic scapegoats for social issues or whimsies of the time that either relate obliquely or hold no rational relationship to the group. In advocating civil rights or liberation it is important not to make the same mistake. It is easy to turn prejudice into a good/bad binary, whitewashing, excusing and justifying one side and alienating each act of the other. As previously mentioned, one strain of 1980s feminist literature gave a serious and detailed criticism asserting that gay men were as much the enemy of lesbians as of heterosexual male misogynists. Simplistic oppositional movements such as this one slow progress and ignore the greater sphere. Christian heritage is an incredibly influential and frequently restrictive power over sexuality, but the deployment of power surrounding sexuality is much more intricate than large, single sources. We must learn to look past the obvious power deployment sources if we wish to identify the overarching power matrix.

Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976) engages with the convolution of sexuality's deployment throughout history, investigating many of the variables that affect its social development, parameters and change over time. His analysis turns away from a traditional view of social repression of sex. He asserts that power is "the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (93). This definition cautions against simplifying power relationships. A president or official is an easy vassal in which to place this power, but to do so in excess is to ignore the matrices of power at work. "In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (89). It is easier to "blame the king" by attributing all discrimination to a political party, specific

leaders or other large, monolithic power structures. In doing this, one becomes blind to all the influence happening at all levels. Holding simplistic answers up as explanations is a form of scapegoating and perpetuates the problem it hopes to eradicate. This is not to say that targeting specific institutions is not a practical civil rights strategy, but ignoring the rest of the web's role in the deployment of sexuality hurts progress. The Queen is imbued with symbolism, but Parliament is invested with the power. Likewise, we must be cautious to not get distracted from complexity by flashy symbols.

Sexuality must not be looked at as opposed to power but "it appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young and old people, parents and offspring...an administration and a population. Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality" (103). While these relationships are constantly in flux, Foucault identifies some of the primary sexual power relations of the last three centuries as the affirmation of the body and sex's relationship to Marxist economic efficiency.

Before elaborating on these two strains, it is important to note some guidelines when looking at power and the deployment of sexuality. First, is the inclination to view power as a repressive mechanism. A power that is purely repressive "only has the force of negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce...it is basically anti-energy...it is incapable of doing anything, except to render what it dominates incapable of doing anything" (85). Instead, we must look at its productive capabilities. It has the power to *produce* class, identity and social order. The power to repress is the most visible one, since it permeates the legal system. Law is not the only player. Society produces norms

through many outlets—media focus, education and family dynamics among them. This power produces “norms.” But a norm can only stand against a non-norm. Wealth only makes sense in relation to poverty, intelligence requires unintelligence to exist, and the heterosexual identity can only exist through opposition to the homosexual identity. With this in mind, we should look at power as producing and reifying norms rather than being oppressive.

Foucault also cautions against seeing the “uniformity of the apparatus” (84). Power over sex is not homogeneous throughout all segments and classes of society, nor do the matrices of its transposition remain the same in different sections of deployment. He notes that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the deployment of sexuality had much stricter parameters for the bourgeoisie than the lower classes. Recognizing this is important not only because it further complicates power, but because it calls into question the traditional top-down idea of power. “There is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled...rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (94). I believe Foucault does not give the higher castes and law enough of the strength in power dynamics. However, power does come from many directions, including the lower classes. The head of the monarch must be cut off if we are to see clearly that power has a highly democratic element.



## **The Power of Blood**

The symbolism of blood has proven a tricky obstacle in race and sex relations. Foucault attributes its magnified import doubly to “to the way it functioned in the order of signs (to have a certain blood, to be of the same blood, to be prepared to risk one’s blood), and also to its precariousness (easily spilled, subject to drying up, too readily mixed, capable of being quickly corrupted)” (147). The intersection of symbolic importance and the physically tenuous quality of blood and bloodlines turns this symbol into a precious, delicate jewel that must be carefully guarded and reified. Fear of weakening bloodlines was used to advocate racial segregation. This argument has historically been substituted for the actual fear many white men had of the seemingly increased sexuality they placed on African Americans and their corresponding fear of having their white women “stolen.” It is important to notice these argument substitutions—legitimizing red herring arguments cloaks deeper social reasons. Certainly, this fear was a real one among white men, but it does not explain the importance placed on blood that is its foundation.

Blood has a significant symbolic history dating back millennia. Kingdoms and feudal systems depended upon blood for inheritance and class establishment. The significance of blood was not initially “repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that ‘ruled’” (Foucault, 123). It stood as the affirmation of one class, not the enslavement of others. At a basic level, discrimination against homosexuals and homosexual acts was simply a logical extension of the importance placed on heredity. Since there is no reproduction, homosexuality is damaging to this all-important bloodline.

Initially, blood affirmation mattered almost exclusively to the bourgeoisie. How did these prejudices infiltrate the whole of the system? Before answering, I wish to re-emphasize the need to look beyond the “uniformity of the apparatus.” Blood symbolism is not equally important to all classes. However, widespread discrimination could not have occurred in non-despotic nations without a vein of this prejudice running throughout the system. One explanation is rooted in the trickle down effect usually applied in economics. This is the tendency for the lower classes to emulate trends in the upper classes, either because they aspire to rise into this class or due to a personal lack of knowledge on the matter being emulated. A common example is that clothing trends of the upper classes often become popular with lower ones. This theory is often challenged as over-simplified and blind to trends started by middle and lower classes that are picked up by the greater population. Regardless, it seems clear that the heightened importance of bloodlines began in the upper class to re-affirm status and, over time, other classes began to latch onto the symbolism of blood.

Blood’s symbolic importance is heightened by how delicate and unpredictable genetics is. A disability in the family can be blamed on a sexual betrayal of blood. Perhaps a member reproduced with someone with “tainted blood” or wasted his or her sexuality in a non-reproductive way. Through these and other explanations, imperfections in the bloodline can be blamed on sexual “deviancies.” These deviancies then take the brunt of the blame for class dissatisfaction. While this is not an all-inclusive explanation of the origins of discrimination, nor does it encompass all classes equally, the elevation of blood and its relationship to class tensions and personal identity have opened up large windows for sexual and racial scapegoat discrimination.

## **Marxist Homeostasis**

Foucault also addresses the Marxist relationship of power to class and sex. Some have asserted that capitalism is obsessed with the health of the body of production. It depends upon a large, healthy labor force to function and, consequently, disparages all non-normative activities that damage its human machine. This sounds logical, but rarely do the lives of the low class labor force receive this value in Western societies. The expendability of the labor force, crucial to a Marxist analysis, directly contradicts this idea. Therefore, a subtle increase in efficiency does not seem to warrant a normalization of sexuality and persecution of its deviancy. Foucault notes that economic power deployment is “attuned to the homeostasis of the social body” (107). A chief objective of economic efficiency is “to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them” (106). It is not the health of the productive body with which capitalist economies are concerned, but the status quo. Our economy isn’t prejudiced against sex—It is prejudiced against change. Simplicity and a lack of change are more easily managed and, in the short-term, appear more efficient. A capitalist economic system is not discriminating against various sexualities as much as it is using them as a strong transfer point for power relations to normalize the population into a more manageable tool. To look at it through Foucault’s positivistic power relations model, capitalist institutions are not prejudiced against sexual deviants as much as they are biased toward reifying norms. The symbolic strength of blood can make community identity norms seem natural, imbuing them with a false ontological authority.

### **Race and Sex Identity, Psychology, and Visibility**

*“Here was the Negro teacher, the Negro physician; as for me I was becoming a nervous wreck, shaking at the slightest alert. I knew for instance that if the physician made one false move, it was over for him and for all those who came after him. What, in fact, could one expect from a Negro physician? As long as everything was going smoothly, he was praised to the heavens; but watch out—there was no room whatsoever for any mistake” (Frantz, Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks, p. 97).*

Consistent with many large U.S. cities, Memphis’s sexual civil rights movement was kicked off primarily by the New York Stonewall rebellion in 1969. Prior to this, very little can be found on cohesive efforts to represent the gay populous. This movement formed with some distinctive differences to the black civil rights movement. Discussion of black civil rights focuses on the 1960s, where aggravated tensions and protests resulted in large legislative progress. The movement itself, however, had currents running back through the Civil War. The legal progress of the 1960s was the cultivation of a much larger historical movement. The gay movement has a minimal history of cohesive resistance. The origin of the homosexual as an identity is located around 1868. The Oxford English Dictionary does not record any use of the word before 1892. Even now, the identity of the homosexual is challenged on both sides. Many opponents of gay rights have historically and still reject homosexuality as a genuine identity, preferring to categorize it as a psychological disorder or simply a sinful lifestyle of choice. The de-pathologization of homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1973 did much to help homosexuality escape the medical realm that held power over its identity since its origins. A psychiatric mental overhaul did not immediately come with this removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. The book’s 1980 edition incorporated a

new pathology, “ego-dystonic homosexuality.” This “mental illness” was categorized by either:

(1) a persistent lack of heterosexual arousal, which the patient experienced as interfering with initiation or maintenance of wanted heterosexual relationships

(2) persistent distress from a sustained pattern of unwanted homosexual arousal.<sup>2</sup>

Many saw the creation of this new illness as a political compromise. Furthermore, many gays go through an initial “dystonic” period as they come to terms with their non-normative identity. The APA officially recognized “ego-dystonic homosexuality” as a social, not medical phenomenon in 1986 and removed it from the *DSM*. The homosexual identity was first constructed medically and society’s opinion on it has been heavily influenced by psychiatric analysis of it since then. With APA de-medicalization, homosexuality can more effectively distance itself from the stigma of neurosis that has clung to this identity since its origins.

Black civil rights advocates also fought against prevalent and caustic psychiatric discrimination. Psychologists have fabricated numerous studies throughout the last two centuries challenging African-American intelligence, maturity and physicality. These frequently fell in line with stereotypes of the time and supported by poor data. One psychiatric prejudice black citizens never had to face though was the medical denial of their identity and the relegation of this identity to a neurosis. They fought and still fight for equal rights for their racial identity. But the GLBTQ community’s fight against psychiatric prejudice is elevated. Gay advocates not only fight for civil rights, but also for their existence as a “real” identity and a category that can even qualify for these rights. This

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<sup>2</sup> [http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts\\_mental\\_health.html](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts_mental_health.html)

difficulty recalls the constructivist concept of “blood” mentioned earlier. The civil rights movement can be over-simplified to the argument that “our blood is equal to your blood.” GLBTQ people do not have a bloodline to reify their existence. This is an incredibly difficult obstacle to overcome since, as I have shown, the symbolic power of blood is one of the strongest forms of identity foundation and association. GLBTQ individuals cannot overturn this portion of oppression by using the master’s tools as civil rights leaders did, because GLBTQ individuals do not have the master’s tools. They must create their own and convince the population of these new tools’ legitimacy. This is an arduous task when power structures maintain a bias toward homeostasis.

The majority of the black population was visibly implicated in the battle for civil rights by their skin tone. Black citizens could abstain politically, but their appearance implicated them in the struggle. Gays and other sexual “deviants” do not automatically have this visible identity. This complicates their movement in a variety of ways. First, the option to “stay in the closet” not only damages potential numbers, it also hides and misrepresents the diversity within their community. Heidi Williams, MGLCC vice president, told the Memphis Flyer “The only gay people that some straight people think are out there are the ones who fit the stereotype and are flamboyant” (Phillips, 2005). Many GLBTQ individuals are “flamboyant.” However, many are not and this pigeonholing enables oversimplified views of these identities to profligate with ease. African Americans have battled numerous and strongly held stereotypes. They have often had to overcome these stereotypes in a society that creates a “truth” due to institutionalized prejudice. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would not have been difficult for a citizen to believe the slur “blacks are dumber than whites.” The extreme disparity in educational opportunities between races

perpetuated this. However, when individuals analyzed a prejudice against blacks, numerous black citizens with different backgrounds and different personalities were visible to challenge this view. This is not to say that the multiplicity of individuals within the African-American community did not often go ignored but, at the very least, it was visible to the willing eye.

This social exposure is fundamental to the sexual civil rights movement's progress. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes that the automatic portion of the human mind "excels at constructing the best possible story that incorporates ideas currently activated, but it does not allow for information it does not have," and extrapolates that "it is the consistency of the information that matters for a good story, not its completeness" (85,87). He dubs this the "what you see is all there is" (WYSIATI) phenomenon. This theory supports the Marxian economic prejudice toward the status quo on a social level. Gays, even now, are consistently put in the effeminate, flamboyant box and viewed as real-life stock characters. Without exposure to the diversity of these individuals, stereotyping and dismissal of the movement becomes an easy and natural task.

If this is the case, coming out is crucially important to progress. But the danger of coming out far exceeds social stigma. Tennessee is one of the twenty-nine states that does not have workplace sexual orientation anti-discrimination laws. While President Clinton's Executive Order 13087 (1998) now prohibits discrimination due to sexual orientation in the federal civilian workplace, the public sector of Tennessee has very little recourse to legal job safety. If a woman rising through the levels of her company declares herself a lesbian the company can legally fire her and a wrongful termination lawsuit will have very

little footing. If an individual makes a good salary, it is hard to ask that person to jeopardize her financial security for the movement. Wealthy GLBTQ citizens have the farthest to fall by coming out. This is a huge difficulty for the movement since its most potentially powerful players are often those most handcuffed by legal fears. “Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*” (2002) reveals that cities with the highest populations of “bohemians, immigrants, and gay and lesbians” are also the cities with the highest-paying high-tech jobs. His book further asserts that gays and lesbians hold a high percentage of these lucrative positions relative to their percentage of the population. This is a frustrating Catch-22 for sexual civil rights. The success of any movement is greatly assisted by players with money and power. Yet, while many gays and lesbians have obtained both, their success often comes with an asterisk forbidding them to use it for the sexual liberation of the community.

Potentially influential gay sympathizers are also often restricted. Referring back to a Marxian analysis, those in positions of power are often held to a more conservative standard. Teachers are a stronghold of power over the direction of future generations and, as a consequence, have strict parameters on what knowledge they can dispense. This is partly due to societal prejudice towards the status quo, but also due to outcome and hindsight bias. The status quo or current norm is known, while the effects stemming from changes in the system are unknown. This not only leads litigators and politicians away from dramatic political moves, but “because adherence to standard operating procedures is difficult to second-guess, decision-makers who expect to have their decisions scrutinized with hindsight are driven to bureaucratic solutions—and to an extreme reluctance to take risks” (Kahneman, 204). Fear of accountability for the unknown leads many power structures towards conservatism and bureaucracy—both detrimental to progressive



movements. But society asks for this when we hold politicians hands to the fire retroactively for decisions that could only be second-guessed with the help of hindsight.

Furthermore, this “what you see is all there is” phenomenon combines with lack of visibility to make the relevance of gay rights seem less important to moderates. Multiple studies have estimated the gay population to hover around ten percent (Gebhard, 1977: Kinsey, 1948)<sup>3</sup>. Alfred Kinsey qualifies this number, due to his belief in a fluid continuum of sexuality and time. Regardless, this number has been held up as the most accurate estimate and consistently shocks many who believe it to be much smaller, simply because they cannot easily identify that percentage when its numbers pass them on the street. Ten percent of the population is a large enough number to command political respect—when visible. But, since sexual orientation identity often isn’t nearly as visible as African-American identity, it is essential that it take steps to make itself visible. If a significant portion of the “ten percent” is invisible, it becomes easy to overlook the importance of this portion of society.

Historically this issue has been problematic for the sexual civil rights movement both from outside and within. Not only were GLBTQ individuals often unrecognizable to the general populous, but they have had difficulty finding each other. Fear of being out-ed and a lack of knowledge of where to look for support and companionship has plagued this group. Technology and the internet in particular have played a large role in mitigating this issue, but difficulties still remain. A large part of this revolves around the difficulty and fear of visibility—a legitimate one—which was a non-issue in black civil rights.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/Gebhard\\_1977.html](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/Gebhard_1977.html)

## The Bar Scene's Role in Social Order

Before I continue, I would like to give a brief historical overview of Memphis LGBTQ activities and culture since the Stonewall Rebellion. As previously mentioned, visibility was difficult, making the few places recognized as gay or “gay friendly” central to all efforts. A fundamental hub was the bar scene. While there were a few quasi-lesbian-friendly bars open for short periods throughout the forties and fifties, the first gay bar, “The Famous Door,” opened in 1969. It had first opened in 1960 as “The Twilight Lounge” by a man known now only as “Lou.” It’s recorded that Lou encouraged the gay crowd because “they were a well behaved crowd and they spent money and they kept coming” (Astor, 1989). This bar was bought by George Wilson in 1969 and was known as “George’s,” though it officially changed its name numerous times. In 1979, the bar was moved to Marshall Avenue where, over the next ten years numerous other gay and gay-friendly bars cropped up and closed down, designating Marshall the unofficial gay street of the city. In 1989, George’s bar closed down after lasting twenty years—much longer than any other gay friendly location in Memphis at the time. However, a new gay club, “Spectrum,” has recently opened up in its old location<sup>4</sup>. This paper won’t discuss the other clubs open at this time because few lasted longer than one year. Conversely, what is significant is the incredibly large role they had in shaping the city’s gay movement. Gay bars were often the only “safe zone” for their constituents. Alice, a lesbian interviewed for Daneel Buring’s *Gay and Lesbian Memphis: Building Communities Behind the Magnolia Curtain*, recalls that once she

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<sup>4</sup> There is a long and interesting history of Memphis gay and lesbian bars that I do not have time to flesh out here. Vincent Astor published a brief history in the April 1989 edition of *Gaze*. He always so re-published it online at this website:  
[https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=122734227761951](https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=122734227761951)

was old enough to attend bars, she “lived in them” (138). This was quite common. Not only were these bars safer, they were the primary way GLBTQ individuals could meet without compromising their invisibility to the populous or facing consequences for being out. This is not to say that these bars did not face harassment. There were frequent police raids and bars were constantly being shut down temporarily or permanently for violating obscure public ordinances which included no drinking while standing, no same-sex dancing, no alcohol after midnight, and city cross-dressing ordinances (over-turned in 1971) among other things.

While the bar scene has done much to help support the Memphis GLBTQ community and still does, its existence as a foundation of the movement has some drawbacks to the movement’s progress. A 2005 article in the Memphis Flyer stated that there was a collected agreement that “the bar scene is the most progressive aspect of gay Memphis.” Current gay civil rights activist Maynard (first name not identified) notes, “The gay community here is almost in a ghetto of gay bars and gay churches. I’m more interested in politics and civil rights...it just seems like most people in the community are more interested in socializing in the bars and clubs” (Flyer, 2005). This weakness is not exclusive to Memphis gay culture, but does have a very legitimate role in shaping it. Bars can work against gay advocacy in a number of ways. By virtue of the title, they are inherently social institutions. They can be a point of advocacy, but many bar-goers attend to take refuge and avoid sexual prejudice, not to plan out attacks on it. This corresponds to the lack of visibility that has plagued the sexual civil rights movement. It is frequently at its strongest at points where its exposure is the least.

Furthermore, the constituency of these bars was not immune to other social troubles. Race and class tensions did not disappear beneath the flag of shared sexual discrimination. The terms “snow queen” and “dinge queen” were pejoratives coined by the gay community to refer to interracial black and white dating showing “that the prejudices of mainstream society are, indeed, reflected in gay communities” (Buring, 115). These prejudices have stymied unity in gay communities and are difficult to overcome. A gay white male has one battle against identity oppression to face. Meanwhile, a black lesbian has to cope with race, sexuality and gender. A multiplicity of alliances not shared homogenously throughout the GLBTQ community makes consensus on issues and balancing advocacy interests much more delicate and complicated than the black civil rights movement.

### **Gay Press and Issues Within the Movement**

This difficulty is illustrated in the survival struggles of Memphis’s gay organizations and newspapers. *Gaiety*, Memphis’s first gay newspaper, began in 1975 and lasted fewer than five years. Gary Poe, one of its creators claimed lack of support and general apathy led to its demise. Vincent Astor, a key actor in the Memphis sexual civil rights movement wrote “It was too progressive for its time. It made people who came out to forget remember instead” (*Triangle*, 1990). While short-lived, this newspaper did much for the gay community. Besides covering social events, it was the first paper to give serious attention to gay bashing and violence in the city. Before this, hate crimes against LGBTQ individuals were frequently ignored or de-valued. Because of *Gaiety*, unlawful acts toward gays were finally being recorded and read by the Memphis public. The “Raincheck Lounge,” a known gay hangout, was burned to the ground in 1975 and *Gaiety* followed the proceedings and

suspects so closely that the alleged arsons fled town in fear—a fear that probably would've been unwarranted before this newspaper began.

After *Gaiety's* demise, *Gaze* was created in 1979 by co-editors Bill Johnson and Rick Sullivan. Its first article was titled "Why Rock the Boat?" and set the tone for the entire publication. Author Bill Johnson wrote, "Oppressive hatred...grows and festers when left unchallenged. We can no longer live under a sense of false contentment...We are not safe, inside the closet or out" (*Triangle*, 1990). The paper did much for the gay community, focusing on political and human rights issues, while giving the larger spectrum of gay life a place within its pages. But the resignation of editor and co-founder Bill Johnson in November of 1982 demonstrated how difficult rallying this diverse community could be. His final editorial appeared in the November issue and was titled "For all the Lonely People." Here he writes:

"Being a Gay activist has been very rewarding for me...I have been rewarded by having the vast majority of Lesbians and Gay men tell me that I am nothing more than a self-serving troublemaker...I am tired of guarding my every step in order to please those who are intent on publicly criticizing and sabotaging my work...I guess I am just tired...I realized recently that I have never felt more alone."

This statement mirrors the frustrations of many sexual civil rights advocates. The agenda of this movement is more splintered than most. In February of 1988, *Gaze* published the results of a reader survey asking likes, dislikes, and what readers would like to see more or less of. Editor John Stillwell's response to the survey results is telling: "From the responses, I can only say that no one will ever be happy with this newspaper. One person's likes fall into another person's dislikes" (Astor, 2005). Only thirteen people had responded to the survey. *Gaze* continued until 1991 when four key board members quit in frustration. The new staff was not up to the task and the paper quickly folded. However, it was replaced by

*The Triangle Journal*, a monthly publication funded by the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) that began in 1990 and lasted till 2000 when the center decided to cease publication due to "a decreasing cultural reliance upon printed media and a subsequent dwindling of advertising revenues"<sup>5</sup> (Phillips, 2009).

Conflict in the mainstream sexual civil rights movement was a primary cause of the termination of at least two of these papers. It has also caused the conclusion of many social advocacy groups. It was particularly difficult to balance race and sex in these groups. Two all-black gay groups were started in the 1980s. The Memphis Committee was founded in 1981 to combat racism in the Memphis gay community and Black Gays and Lesbians for Allied Dignity (B-GLAD) was founded in 1990. Both groups ceased to exist within two years. Member explanations ranged from "lack of leadership," to "a splintering over whether to become more political" (Buring, 113-114). The Memphis chapter of Black and White Men Together (BWMT) and the Memphis Coalition, both started in the 1980s, had more political success. In 1990, the Memphis Coalition transitioned into the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center, which still does excellent GLBTQ advocacy and support work today.

A critical struggle for these groups was the surfacing of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s. The external prejudices placed on GLBTQ individuals by society during this time are well-known. The epidemic also stirred up serious racial and class tensions within the movement. Dr. Wayne Greaves wrote in a 1987 article that mainstream groups such as the Memphis Coalition "have done little to change the myth, prevalent in the black community, that AIDS is a disease of white gay men" (Buring, 117). This myth was perpetuated by a lack of AIDS educational outreach to the black gay community of Memphis. Eugene, a member of BWMT recalls that some members "pounded their fists on the table in the state capital...and said that we needed racially sensitive material, racially sensitive outreach" (Buring, 119).

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<sup>5</sup> The Triangle Journal contains a well-written history of gay Memphis and gay Memphian press in Vincent Astor's monthly "A Memphian's Memoir."

The extreme social and physical dangers imposed on the GLBTQ community by AIDS caused the formation of more radical protest groups. Notable among these are Act Up and Bash Back. Act Up's primary focus was AIDS assistance for the gay community. They made a name for themselves in 1989 when seven members chained themselves to the VIP balcony of the New York Stock Exchange to protest the high price of the only approved AIDS drug, AZT. While they never had a strong Memphis chapter, their actions were effective in exposing the GLBTQ community needs in the face of this epidemic.

Bash Back was less organized and more radical. The group consisted primarily of teenagers and has made a name through antagonizing conservative churches by pouring fake blood on congregation-members or locking congregations inside their churches during service. While Bash Back has done little for the progress of the movement, due to its sensationalist acts, it garners significant media attention. This has been detrimental in two ways. First, referring to the "what you see is all there is" phenomenon I mention earlier, these acts end up speaking louder in the media than more moderate sexual civil advocacy. They give a one-sided view of this community as extraordinarily radical. This works to typecast the movement the same way the comparably extreme visibility of flamboyant gays versus closeted ones does. Society misses the spectrum of diversity, substituting what is placed sensationally before its eyes. The second detrimental aspect stems from "one bad apple spoils the bunch" philosophy. Due to its visibility, some of the general public might view Bash Back as a symbolic representation of the greater GLBTQ community. Violent acts can send individuals wavering on civil rights scurrying away from assisting the movement.

However, Bash Back should not simply be dismissed due to these reasons. Its constituency is primarily those who have suffered the most directly from prejudice. Much of the membership consists of teenagers who have been disowned by parents. Many members face day-to-day discrimination at a more raw level than other advocates, sleeping on the streets and squatting in abandoned buildings due to an extreme lack of resources and support. And, as a twenty year Stonewall-commemoration article in the 1989 June issue of BLK magazine states, "it took those who had the least to lose, the black and latino drag queens, to forego 'acceptable behavior' and reject obedience to authority to become catalysts for the birth of the modern gay pride movement." This movement was started in

violent protest against discrimination. While it is dubious whether violent acts of protest can do much to add to the movement as it currently stands, we must not simply dismiss their actions as ill-thought out and deleterious to the greater social movement. It was Dr. King who criticized the individual who “paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom” (Letter From a Birmingham Jail).

I’ve quickly run through only a handful of Memphis organizations in this section, ignoring numerous others. This is not because those unmentioned are unimportant to the movement. This section is not meant to be a history of organizations, but an illustration of the complex splintering this diverse movement has experienced.

### **Duanna Johnson**

On February 12, 2008, Duanna Johnson, a forty-three year old black, transgender woman was arrested in east Memphis for soliciting prostitution. At the station, the arresting officer, Bridges McRae referred to her as heshe, faggot and Dwayne (her birth name), while demanding that she stand up and approach him to be fingerprinted. Duanna refused to do so until he referred to her as “Duanna.” Incensed, Officer McRae wrapped a pair of handcuffs around his fist and struck her six times while another officer sprinted over to assist in holding her down. Officer McRae finished his act of violence by spraying Duanna with pepper spray<sup>6</sup>. This was certainly a vile act of prejudiced violence and a reflection on the character of these two officers, as well as an abuse of police authority, an authority citizens must trust and depend upon in a functioning society. Both officers were placed on suspension the following day and quickly fired.

One must not always blame a whole organization or set of institutions for one individual’s neurotic and violent acts. However, due to a speckled history including multiple documented abuses of power, police actions are constantly being monitored by video surveillance. Officer McRae had been on the force over five years when he committed this act. Consequently, it is almost impossible that he did not know that the waiting room at

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<sup>6</sup> A video of the violence against Duanna can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IAPTk69XPo>



his precinct contained multiple constantly running cameras. Presuming he knew his actions would be taped, his mindset during the act could have only gone in two directions: 1) his hatred and contempt for Duanna were felt so strongly at such a deep level that he did not care about the personal consequences of his actions or 2) his assessment of the atmosphere permeating his job led him to believe that he would not receive extreme penalties and sanctions for this act. While Officer McRae clearly demonstrated hatred and contempt for Duanna, I do not believe he would have acted without a belief in his own legal security. The question that must be asked then, is “What reasons, however misguided, did Officer McRae have to believe he would be secure after his violent act?” For now, I leave this question on the table for discussion. As I write this, I have scheduled multiple Memphis police ride-alongs hoping to flesh out this question and its factors that contribute to what is certainly a complex answer.

It is disconcerting that Officer McRae’s belief in his personal security was not unfounded. It took multiple trials extending over three years before Officer Bridges was sentenced to two years in a minimum-security prison on May 17, 2011. In order to obtain this guilty charge and punishment, the prosecution also had to dig up the fact that Officer Bridges owed the federal government over 18,000 dollars in unpaid taxes. Even with all this evidence, the case ended in a plea bargain with the defendant. In a case where the evidence was clearly documented on a video camera, two trials ended in a hung jury before the addition of tax evasion forced Officer McRae to accept some legal responsibility. His statement on the day of his sentencing was, “I’m ready to get this behind me and get on with my life”—a statement in which remorse was completely absent (Blaze, 2010).

Another aspect of this story is that in November of 2008, seven months after experiencing violence at the hands of MPD, Duanna Johnson was found shot to death in the street. Today, over four years later and after an investigation led by the federal government, there are still no convictions, leads, or even suspects in the murder. One must not automatically blame MPD for the murder or failure to find the perpetrator. Duanna had no family in Tennessee and few identifiable social ties, making it a difficult case. I say this to call attention to the lonely and desolate lifestyle she had been living. It is presumptuous and disrespectful to her memory to simplify her struggles and attribute them exclusively to

her transgender status. To do so disrespects the full complexity of her humanity. Nevertheless, her reality is not an uncommon one for “sexual deviants” who cannot easily hide their “otherness.” The memory of Duanna Johnson should stand not only as a cry against police prejudice and brutality, but also as a reminder that everyone in society is implicated in creating the normalized culture that spurned Duanna and many others, leaving them lonely and defenseless on the streets. Duanna’s life was a struggle against discrimination before her arrest and almost no one in Memphis would have known or cared enough to act before she became a headline for police brutality. Therefore, we must not take all blame and place it on the police force. To do so is to excuse our personal responsibility for an ongoing problem that extends far beyond the Memphis Police Department and permeates our entire social body.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This paper does not contain a thorough post-WW2 history of the Memphis sexual civil rights movement. A superficial history would still take well over 100 pages. I also only lightly discuss litigation on sexual civil rights—a crucial component of any movement. Once again, a thorough investigation of this is beyond this paper’s scope. In many ways, this paper may appear negative. I discuss struggles within the movement due to racial, class, gender and personal tensions. There is much to be proud of in the movement. Tremendous steps have been taken and the future appears to hold a positive tune of progress. Many progressive laws have recently been passed and the crucial remainders are now being avidly and openly discussed.

I critically dissect the sexual civil rights movement to give it humanity. GLBTQ individuals are not simply the “good guys” in this story. The individual who believes this misses one of the fundamental aspirations of the movement: to be a human being of which sex is a part, not the whole. This is the right to make a mistake, commit a crime, or succeed *as an individual*, without these acts automatically symbolically representing an entire community. This paper seeks to remind advocates that a just cause does not whitewash the decisions of an entire movement. We must not justify and defend decisions based on the flag they float under, but maintain a critical inward eye. Most social movements begin with

noble intentions and, due to arrogance, many do not end quite so nobly. In my mind, this is the most complex social movement our country has experienced. It overlaps the United States' two other large social movements, civil and women's rights, creating a multifaceted, overlapping Venn diagram of power that varies person to person. While sexual civil rights is extremely complicated, so is a well-made car or a broccoli casserole—and there are numerous ways to make both of these. One must not forget that the battle over sexuality is fought on a field of socially elevated importance. While the movement must fight oppression on this elevated plane, we must remember that this importance is not natural, but socially constructed. Sex is an act, but sexuality is now (only recently) an identity. It is only due to this symbolically heightened importance that it is socially noteworthy enough to start a movement. Texts stemming from Judith Butler and de-construction theory question the existence of concrete identities such as “gay,” and “straight” but, in order to fight for rights, these identities are legally important. This poses the difficulty of forming “strategic identities” that must be implemented for action, but are themselves oversimplifications of personal identity. Those involved must not, in the heat of the moment, forget to ask themselves, “How did sexuality and race become so important?” Foucault writes:

“Perhaps one day people will wonder at...how a civilization so intent on developing enormous instruments of production and destruction found the time and the infinite patience to inquire so anxiously concerning the actual state of sex; people will smile perhaps when they recall that here were men...who believed that therein resided a truth every bit as precious as the one they had already demanded from the earth, the stars, and the pure forms of their thought” (158).

When stripped of their symbolism, disagreement over race and sexuality might not be strong enough to warrant a social movement.

It is easy to blame conservatism in the form of “rich, old folk clinging to old values.” To do this is to blame the Queen for Parliament's decision. Our economic, institutional and social structures are not biased toward the past as much as the status quo. Politically, taking chances is risky. It is much safer to favor what is already in existence or

submit the risk to the foggy funhouse of bureaucracy. But “normal” citizens are equally implicit in this system. Our hindsight bias and tendency towards “what you see is all you know” thinking, and constructing stories to fit this thinking reify the status quo.

Bayard Rustin, a black, gay man who helped lead the 1963 civil rights March on Washington said in a 1986 speech that, “The new ‘niggers’ are gays. . . . It is in this sense that gay people are the new barometer for social change. . . . The question of social change should be framed with the most vulnerable group in mind: gay people” (Osagyefo, 2009). He is right and wrong. The barometer for social change permeates all aspects and individuals in society. It is a shame that the barometer is most visible in our lack of recognition given to the heartbeat of whole communities. Memphis has made large progressive strides. As early as 1980, it held the Southeastern Conference of Gay men and Lesbians, which hosted over 500 attendees. Stonewall is still celebrated annually and there are numerous support groups for GLBTQ individuals and their families throughout the city. MGLCC is one of the strongest GLBTQ organizations in the state and many religious institutions, traditionally the opposition in this movement, have become openly supportive (most notably, Holy Trinity, Temple Israel, and First Congregational Church). Nevertheless, events like Duanna Johnson’s police-beating show that in parts of our society an atmosphere of prejudice still permeates so strongly that it feels no need to even disguise itself. It is easy to blame the officers, but we must not forget to challenge the cultural atmosphere that fertilizes these acts of hatred. The tip of the iceberg did not sink the Titanic. We must be constantly vigilant to see below the water—though it blurs our vision—at what this tip stems from. If we can do this, then perhaps eventually, “people will ask themselves why we were so bent on ending the rule of silence regarding what was the noisiest of our preoccupations” (Foucault, 158).

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