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**Stonewall National Monument Scholars' Workshop:  
Report on Historical Context and Symbolic Significance**

Stonewall was not just one event: whether we call it an “uprising,” “rebellion,” or “riots,” we name multiple days and nights on the streets of Greenwich Village, followed by the months-long growth of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and other groups (including the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, Gay Activist Alliance, Third World Gay Liberation, and Radicalesbians). In addition to encompassing a range of activity, Stonewall was the product of many converging forces – both structures of repression and movements for change. This layered context, combined with the length and range of the uprising, means that Stonewall contained a multiplicity of experiences and meanings. It holds a similar multiplicity today.

Leaders from the homophile movement experienced the rebellion differently than did gay liberation activists. Some participants were present from the first hour forward, while others showed up on the second or third day; others joined in later by forming GLF and other groups. The stakes of the rebellion held different weight depending on race, class, gender, gender expression, and politics. Further, participants’ own social networks shaped who they perceived as taking part. Most accounts describe the uprising as led by radical youth and “street kids,” including trans women of color Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera alongside white gay men such as Martin Boyce and Bob Kohler. Other narratives displace Johnson or Rivera; and disputes over participation marked Stonewall almost from its inception. An honest accounting of Stonewall must foreground the uprising’s complexity, including its conflicts.

Complexity does not make it impossible to make sense of Stonewall. Rather, it makes Stonewall important to wider array of people, not only by prompting wider representation at the site, but also by enabling recognition of inequality – a reality often shut down in heroic portrayals of the past. Stonewall’s complexity also makes the site into an entry point for deeper engagements with history. It asks visitors to consider how historical narratives – specifically, those of LGBTQ life, people of color communities, urban development, policing, and social movements – weave together. Stonewall was catalyzed by a police raid, an action then fairly routine at gay bars; it took place in Greenwich Village, a site with a longtime bohemian history; it occurred in June 1969, a moment of widespread radicalism; and it was driven forward by

sexual and gender minorities, most of them young, working class, and/or people of color, all of them longstanding targets of marginalization.

In 1969, Stonewall Inn was considered more “seedy” than some gay bars, and more open to queer “street kids” and gender non-conforming people. These factors heightened police harassment, and at the same time, seemed to leave many bar-goers with less to lose. As this suggests, Stonewall was by no means the first time LGBTQ people had confronted harassment at bars, restaurants, or other sites. Homophile activists had posed court challenges across the 1950s, winning important rulings before the California Supreme Court that affirmed the rights of bars serving gay and lesbian people to hold liquor licenses (*Stoumen v. Reilly*, 1951), as well as the rights of gay and lesbian people to congregate in bars (*Vallerga v. Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control*, 1959).<sup>1</sup> Other actions ranged from individual resistance, to spontaneous riots, to organized protests. The best-known events include the Cooper’s Donuts uprising (May 1959, Los Angeles), the Dewey’s sit-in (April 1965, Philadelphia), the Compton’s Cafeteria riot (August 1966, San Francisco), and protests following police raids at the Black Cat (February 1967, Los Angeles).<sup>2</sup> Given such context, Stonewall’s first few hours might be seen as somewhat ordinary. Yet the length, scale, and reception of the rebellion soon dramatically outpaced past LGBTQ protests.

So what made Stonewall different? Three key factors were the responses of Greenwich Village passersby, significant numbers of whom joined the riots for some period of time; the breadth of press coverage, which came to include the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*, as well as the radical and gay press; and most of all, the broader politics of the moment, which was so widely and deeply marked by protest. Many participants in gay liberation marked both 1968 and 1969 as key turning points catalyzing their movement. They identified 1969 with Stonewall, and 1968 with the wide array of uprisings across the United States and globally: in Paris, Mexico

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 48, 61. See also Marc Stein, *Sexual Injustice: Supreme Court Decisions from Griswold to Roe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For a primer on these events, see especially Stein, *Rethinking*; Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Basic Books, 2006); and Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman, *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria* (Independent Television Service, 2005).

City, Prague, and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Though homophobia was widespread across the New Left, the street protests of the late 1960s were not sharply divided from queer life. Many were fueled by the counterculture, and at least one rebellion – the 1968 riots in Washington, DC – was sparked by police harassment in a “vice” district.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of “gay liberation” developed across the late 1960s, and had begun to be voiced in the radical and gay press a few months before the Stonewall uprising began.<sup>5</sup> Hotbeds for the development of the movement could be found in several cities, including but not limited to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Early proponents of gay liberation saw themselves as pursuing something rather different from the existing homophile movement, which was rooted in goals of civil liberties and legal rights, and connected especially to networks of literature and progressive psychology. Significantly, several figures in the broader culture bridged homophile and gay liberationist politics; among these were public intellectuals such as Paul Goodman, James Baldwin, and Allen Ginsberg, whose writing spoke for sexual freedom and homoeroticism, and who linked their challenges to normative masculinity with other forms of political dissent. But the homophile movement was generally older, more professional, and more moderate than the emerging movement for gay liberation, which developed at the crossroads of the New Left and the counterculture – two radical movements rooted in urban and youth life.

Though not the only origin point for gay liberation, Stonewall dramatically fueled the growing movement. Within a month of the start of the Stonewall uprising, participants in New York City formed the first Gay Liberation Front, or GLF – a group that borrowed its name from the National Liberation Fronts of Algeria and Vietnam. The interplay between Stonewall and its broader historical contexts can be seen through the circulation and impact of news of the uprising, which disseminated quickly through the radical and underground press. Within months,

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this citation of 1968 can be seen in *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, directed by Mariposa Film Group, New Yorker Films (1977).

<sup>4</sup> Kwame Holmes, “Beyond the Flames: Queering the History of the 1968 D.C. Riot,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 304–322.

<sup>5</sup> Vanguard, which played a role in the Compton’s Cafeteria riot, contributed to the articulation of gay liberation. Perhaps the best known early articulation was Carl Wittman’s “Gay Manifesto,” written during spring 1969 and first circulated in early May of that year. See Wittman, “A Gay Manifesto,” in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 380–390.

other GLFs formed around the country. In some cities, the name “Gay Liberation Front” replaced the moniker of an earlier group, while in others it named a new organization. News of Stonewall thus both helped to disseminate a model for activism, and to legitimate or name gay and lesbian radicalism that was already brewing.

The Stonewall Inn and Greenwich Village were stratified spaces, known to wide numbers of LGBTQ people yet fractured by race, class, gender, and gender expression; they were not always experienced as welcoming spaces by people of color. The uprising seemed to bridge such fractures, but perceived unity was fleeting. New York’s GLF produced an array of offshoots that spoke to experiences subsumed under the gay, normatively white and male, umbrella. These groups included the Radicalesbians, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, Third World Gay Liberation (a people of color group), and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA, which was largely composed of white gay men, but split from the GLF because it opposed lending support to the Black Panthers). Similar debates emerged in other cities, and reflected patterns that were neither caused nor redressed by Stonewall itself.

Throughout and following the uprising, gay liberationists sought to redefine sexuality by embracing the principle of revolutionary self-determination. Rhetorically, gay liberation remade a homosexual person into someone who was free – indeed, someone who had seized power to free themselves. Gay liberationists rejected existing sexual and gender norms and sought to replace them through new ways of living, forming relationships, and expressing gender and desire. Many gay, lesbian, and other LGBTQ radicals moved into collective households; many rejected monogamy; and all debated how to overturn gender and sexual “roles” (a key term of the time, roughly equivalent to the usage of “norms” today). Some embraced trans identities as crucial to collective liberation, but others saw them as “imitative” of heterosexual norms – a view that became used to justify harsh exclusions. Many activists debated sex acts: If penetration had been defined through patriarchy, did liberation mean no penetration at all; that both partners might, or should, take turns; or that the psychic weight of penetration might be lifted entirely, leaving everyone free to do – or not do – whatever they chose, without implying particular political meanings for sex? These and other questions were hotly debated within gay liberation, though not always in the movement’s most public forums.

More visibly, gay liberationists embraced a politics of popular democracy, including by seeking control of bars, parks, and other spaces of queer and urban life. Many defined gay

liberation as intrinsically linked with solidarity against racism, sexism, and war – in part because the anti-war and Black Power movements had lent the language of self-determination, and in part because police harassment targeted gay, lesbian, and trans people along with working-class people and people of color. The Vietnam War draft proved a crucial factor, and as gay liberation expanded, efforts to use gay identity to evade the draft grew. GLFs distinguished themselves from homophile groups by opposing the Vietnam War, rather than backing military inclusion; in addition, gay caucuses and leadership formed in Vietnam Veterans Against the War and GI anti-war groups.<sup>6</sup> Gay liberationists forged alliances with the Black Panther Party, especially after August 1970 when Huey Newton made statements in support of gay liberation and gay radicals joined defense of Panther chapters.<sup>7</sup> Well after the Stonewall uprising was over, gay liberation, lesbian feminism, and an array of other LGBTQ activism proliferated.

Stonewall took on symbolic meaning quite quickly – certainly by the first anniversary of the inception of the riots (June 1970), when activists in New York and Los Angeles led public marches marking a year since the event. By this time, activists were also beginning to use the term “Stonewall” to evoke “gay liberation”; for example, radicals in Los Angeles and San Francisco cited their dreams of gay political power by calling for a “Stonewall Nation.”<sup>8</sup> The term “Pride,” now commonly used for events marking the anniversary of Stonewall, was not widely adopted until the early 1990s. Instead, in the 1970s and 1980s, organizers typically referred to their events with names such as “Gay Freedom Day” (eventually expanded to “Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual”; the inclusion of “transgender” was won at approximately the same time as the shift to “Pride”). Commemorations during the 1970s and 1980s were also more often labeled as “marches” than “celebrations.”

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<sup>6</sup> Justin David Suran, “Coming Out Against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam,” *American Quarterly* 53:3 (2001): 452-88; Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California, 2016), 39-40.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Abugo Onigiri, “Prisoner of Love: Affiliation, Sexuality, and the Black Panther Party,” *The Journal of African American History* 94:1 (Winter 2009): 69-86; Marc Stein, “‘Birthplace of the Nation’: Imagining Lesbian and Gay Communities in Philadelphia, 1969-70,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves*, 253-88; Jared Leighton, “‘All of Us Are Unapprehended Felons’: Gay Liberation, the Black Panther Party, and Intercommunal Efforts Against Police Brutality in the Bay Area,” *Journal of Social History* (2018), 1-26.

<sup>8</sup> See references by the Alpine County Project in Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 34.

Stonewall's symbolism became further constructed as it became used to name LGBTQ political agendas. The first Stonewall Democratic Club was founded in 1975 in Los Angeles; the name eventually became the most typical label for gay, lesbian, or LGBTQ caucuses in the Democratic Party, from local to national levels. At the same time, activists used "Stonewall" to index radicalism, critiquing more moderate (including liberal or Democratic) agendas. The slogans "Stonewall was a riot" and "Stonewall means fight back" became popular by the mid-1970s, appearing on buttons and banners. Coalitions of LGBTQ radicals often took the name "Stonewall Contingent" when they assembled together for marches or issued statements. Participants in San Francisco's White Night Riot – the May 1979 protest against the lenient sentence of Harvey Milk's assassin Dan White – saw their actions as recapturing Stonewall's spirit. Similar reclamations occurred at the height of the AIDS direct action movement, voiced by activists in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).<sup>9</sup> Through such acts of naming, activists and advocates sought to define the heart of LGBTQ freedom through reference to Stonewall. Meanwhile, the creation of other markers of LGBTQ identity – Gilbert Baker's rainbow flag, the pink triangle and black triangle, the labyris – constructed a field of symbolism into which "Stonewall," as a heroicized and debated origin story, could fit.

The field of LGBTQ history records activism, including origin points for gay liberation, well before June 28, 1969. Yet Stonewall remains critical both as uprising and as symbol. Today, the site accrues new meanings with each way it is used: as a gathering point for celebration; as a location for mourning – over HIV/AIDS, over the Pulse nightclub shootings, over the deaths of trans people of color; as a place claimed for national histories. Its commemoration can either recognize, or gloss over, the differences and conflicts that structured the uprising. Certainly, some visitors to the Stonewall National Monument will demand a single meaning from the site. But historians, docents, and other interpreters seeking to reflect the site's history will be most honest when they direct sightseers away from the urge for simplicity, and towards insight into the uprising's many catalysts, varying experiences, and contested meanings.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Douglas Crimp's construction of a historical timeline in Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (winter 1989): 3–18.