

LAUREL and Harvey: Screening militant gay liberalism and lesbian feminist radicalism circa 1980

Christina B. Hanhardt*

Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, MD, USA

This essay examines U.S.-based lesbian and gay activism from the turn of 1980 with a focus on tensions between models of activism based in unapologetic demands for visibility versus concerns about the contradictions presented by the recognition of lesbian and gay identities within a punitive political order. The author crafts this historical narrative alongside and through readings of Gus Van Sant's 2008 film *Milk* and Lizzie Borden's 1983 film *Born in Flames*. The essay analyzes how *Milk* showcases the politics of gay liberalism at its most militant, while *Born in Flames* highlights a variety of radical feminist activisms. The essay also looks at how the styles of each film bring into focus some of the ways in which liberal and radical lesbian and gay movements of the period limited their engagement with race and racism. The essay then considers how both films thematize the uses of communicative media in the production of social movements. It concludes by asking how these films might provide an opportunity to think about activist history today.

Keywords: lesbian and gay activism; *Milk*; *Born in Flames*

In 2002, while doing research at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco on the history of lesbian and gay political organizing against violence, I came upon the papers of Meg Barnett, whose collection includes the meeting minutes, fliers, and other ephemera associated with Lesbians Against Police Violence, a group founded in San Francisco's Mission District in 1979. Alongside fliers announcing direct actions, scripts for skit performances that the group staged throughout the neighborhood, and relevant clippings, were pages of lined notebook paper on which someone – presumably Barnett, who also goes by the name Maggie Jochild – had meticulously recorded meeting minutes and traced circular phone trees.¹ One set of notes was dedicated to a debate about the organization's future, be it as a legal defense committee for two lesbians who had been harassed and arrested by the police or as a group focused on police violence in general or as one dedicated to the broad framework of anti-fascist organizing.² The minutes suggest that the women brainstormed names of imaginary groups they might become, since scrawled in those notes were the names of non-existent

*Email: hanhardt@umd.edu

organizations such as Bay Area Dykes Against Stupid Shit (BADASS), Oppressed Dykes Organizing Resistance (ODOR), and Lesbians and Unicorns Resisting Every Limit (LAUREL).³

Needless to say, LAUREL grabbed my heart. Its name captured the perfect balance of a politics based in identity and a refusal of it, in same-sex desire and magical animals, in organized social movements and utopian resistance. The name evoked both Audre Lorde's 1978 collection of poetry *The Black Unicorn* as well as the title of the last novel, *Laurel*, written by Isabel Miller, author of the lesbian classic *Patience and Sarah*.⁴ My friends and fellow activists embraced the name, and my girlfriend constructed a stencil for t-shirts and bags (See Figure 1). We began to share it among our friends, comrades, and students.⁵ Indeed, LAUREL has been especially useful to me in the classroom. Towards the end of my queer studies classes, I have stripped off my button-down shirt to reveal my LAUREL t-shirt. It is the end-piece of a semester that has combined LGBT history with queer theory, and critiques of identity with analyses of multi-issue social movements. My students tend to love it (my shirt, that is). But I have often feared that our love of the name is not the same; that while for me, Lesbians and Unicorns Resisting Every Limit is a complementary opposition of lesbian identity and queer unicorn possibility, it is, for many them, either a relation of equivalence, in which lesbians and unicorns are both the kitsch of the 1970s, or of ironic opposition, in which the backward unfashionability of 1970s lesbian feminism is redeemed by the retro-styling of the unicorn-emblazoned.⁶

That is, of course, to be glib, and to sell both fashion and my students short. But it was a thought to which I returned when I saw Gus Van Sant's 2008 film *Milk* and heard the mostly enthusiastic response. Based on the life of the late gay San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk, in particular the 1978 defeat of the so-called Briggs Initiative (Proposition 6, which sought to ban lesbian and gay schoolteachers and their supporters in California), *Milk* is a biopic, structured around the life of a single man. Despite this genre consideration, the film's almost non-existent representation of lesbians, as well as gay men of color, both of whom were central to the defeat of Proposition 6, is noteworthy, since, as I detail later, the film sets up the life of Milk – a white, middle-class man, who was California's first out gay elected official – as analogous to that of the lesbian and gay movement writ large. Furthermore, insofar as *Milk* is presented as an allegory for the gay movement, the film also served a pedagogical purpose for many audiences about lesbian and gay activist history, as commentators contrasted the successful challenge to Proposition 6 in 1978 with the failed defeat of Proposition 8, California's anti-gay-marriage bill, in 2008.⁷ (The film also modeled its fashions, as one of the film's stars, James Franco, arguably contributed to the moustache's revival.⁸)

To name the above exclusions in *Milk* is to be serious in the call for a politics of representation, to be earnest ... to be, dare I write, a lesbian.⁹ But, in fact, these elisions provide a useful way to understand debates within lesbian and gay politics from the late 1970s and early 1980s that still resonate today. For example, Proposition 6 was not the only contested item on the 1978 ballot. Less remembered is Proposition 7, which cemented the reinstatement of California's death penalty and was also sponsored by Briggs. Radical lesbian and gay activists argued that the social norms and economic order that propped up the anti-gay Proposition 6 were also behind Proposition 7 (ideals that would also support the election of Ronald Reagan as president two years later), and they critiqued liberal

gay activism that focused on state inclusion over structural transformation. Unlike the successful campaign against Proposition 6, the fight against Proposition 7 was not won.

In fact, the period between the supposed decline of gay liberation in the early 1970s and the founding of the AIDS activist group ACT UP in 1987 saw the growth of numerous radical grassroots organizations alongside the consolidation of a national lesbian and gay civil-rights model. Many radical groups argued that the expansion of lesbian and gay empowerment alongside ongoing currents of racial and economic disenfranchisement called for critiques of racism, sexism, and imperialism that they felt were ignored by a mainstream lesbian and gay movement gathering momentum. Yet since many of these groups were small or short-lived or as committed to cultural as they were to direct-action strategies or as identified in membership and goals with other identities and movements as they were with those named *gay* or *lesbian* – such as Black Power, radical feminisms, Marxist-Leninism – they have been mostly occluded in the popular historiography. This is despite the fact that this period saw the explosion of lesbian/feminist print culture and queer media production: the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (1983) and the documentary *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977) are but two of numerous examples.¹⁰ And one of the most spectacular representations of these kinds of political mobilizations can be found in Lizzie Borden's 1983 semi-experimental film *Born in Flames*, about feminist activism after an imaginary social-democratic revolution.

This essay considers the legacy of lesbian and gay politics circa 1980 with a focus on the tensions between models of activism based in unapologetic demands for the increased visibility of lesbian and gay people in the public sphere versus concerns about the contradictions presented by the recognition of lesbian and gay identities within a punitive and privatizing political order. I approach this historical narrative alongside and through readings of *Milk* and *Born in Flames*. These films are, in many ways, inversions of each other: *Milk* is a contemporary film about the years leading up to 1980; *Born in Flames* was made at the start of that decade, about an imagined future. *Milk* showcases gay liberalism at its most militant; *Born in Flames* adopts a feminist lens to highlight some of the contradictions of such a position. *Milk* casts its title character as leader; *Born in Flames* features collective action coordinated by many. *Milk* tells its story of the past via masterful verisimilitude; *Born in Flames* provides future fantasy with a winking veneer of *vérité*. Despite these differences, the two films also bear much in common. In the second half of this essay, I look at how the styles of each film – an effort at mimetic historical realism in *Milk* and a social realism set in a speculative future in *Born in Flames* – conjure how liberal and radical lesbian and gay movements often did not address race and racism in majority-white political environments, and lesbianism within gay male and largely heterosexual feminist contexts. The essay concludes with a discussion of how each film thematizes the uses of communicative media. Together, these two films provide an opportunity to think about the representation of – and the uses of representation in – the making of activist history.

It is important to note, though, that although this essay provides historical context to, in part, set the record straight (so to speak), I do so with tongue in cheek, both gestures that can look . . . pretty gross. Narrative history and claims to the archive – as calls for visibility and acts of recovery – can obscure how they set the limits of that which they seek to represent.

Furthermore, the ironic and often queer tongue-in-cheek form does not always carry with it critique. By opening this essay with LAUREL – a group that never came to be and inclusive of a mythical being tamed only by a virgin – I want to acknowledge how the hailing of the archival find might function as a kind of primal scene that signals the decidedly unstable place between history and fantasy.¹¹ Thus the citation of LAUREL might be considered both a symptom of my unabashed commitment to social history at the same time as it is a projection of social movements, their history, and their future.¹² It is also for this reason that an analysis of film can be so useful, given debates about its indexical and time-based features; *Milk*'s historical narrative paired with *Born in Flames*' experimental future give opportunity to consider some of these dynamics in social-movement history.¹³ Nonetheless, this essay does produce a set of contradictions that puts history alongside and against its representations, calls for inclusion while critiquing the end goal of visibility, and finds utopian promise in organizations that have never (and might not ever) come to be seen.¹⁴

Gus Van Sant's *Milk* follows the final eight years in the life of Harvey Milk (played by Sean Penn), the first out, gay politician to be elected in California, who, in 1978, was murdered by fellow supervisor Dan White (played by Josh Brolin). The film's first scene adopts a flashback framing, opening with Milk presciently recounting into a tape recorder a summary of his life and directives should he be assassinated: "It's a very real possibility you see, because in San Francisco we have broken the dam of major prejudice in this country ... I wish I had time to explain all the things that I did, almost everything was done with an eye on the gay movement ..." Cut in this last sentence is original news footage of Supervisor Dianne Feinstein announcing the murders of Milk and Mayor George Moscone, affirming Milk's prophetic tale. This sequence is, then, a condensation of Milk the man and *Milk* the movie and what will be told as his and the gay movement's path from closet to empowerment, on a steady if not secure path. While not all details of Milk's life – and thus the movement's trajectory – are included, it explains, most relevant are those that help the viewer to understand the years following gay liberation, on the eve of a new form of electoral power.

The short scenes that follow establish Milk's earlier conventional and apolitical life in New York and his move to San Francisco's Castro neighborhood. The film then traces Milk's rise and fall as he builds a political base and serves a term as supervisor before being murdered; throughout, Milk is figured as the motor for many lesbian and gay political wins, from the defeat of Proposition 6 to the passage of a gay rights bill. Along the way, we see Milk's moving exhortations for others to come out, his election as an out gay politician, and the drive to make the Castro area into a gay territory. In this drama, visibility is cast as leading to violence (on the streets or in City Hall), which, in turn, calls for more visibility so that safety – and by extension, community – might be won.

In telling this story, the film effectively highlights how, during the 1970s, the now common call for visibility became an overarching frame for mainstream lesbian and gay activism, realized in three primary arenas: the call to come out, electoral politics, and gay-neighborhood growth. The merging of electoral politics and neighborhood expansion as a means of realizing visibility are clearly asserted in the film's emphasis on the Castro where Milk would settle and build a constituency. In voiceover, Milk explains that

San Francisco had long been a place for those escaping conformity and that by the early 1970s, drugs and crime in the counter-cultural area known as the Haight had made the Castro, a shrinking working-class white ethnic area, into a destination for these “refugees.” The film thus cites a sentiment shared by many gay activists of that era. As Carl Wittman wrote in 1970 in his famous “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto”: “To be a free territory, we must govern ourselves, set up our own institutions, defend ourselves, and use our own energies to improve our lives.”¹⁵

Yet the growth of places like the Castro was not conflict-free; as *Milk* shows, many merchants and residents rejected the new tenants of businesses and homes alike.¹⁶ Despite this opposition, Milk and many gay activists did succeed in using business to build power; in the film, Milk explains his new enthusiasm for gay politics as linked to the importance of value-neutral markets. In response to the confusion expressed by his lover Scott Smith (played by James Franco) in the face of Milk’s prior Republican affiliation, Milk replies: “I am a businessman, Scott. And businesses should be good to their customers even if their customers are gay ... We should have at least one block in one city, right? We’ll start there and then we’ll take over the neighborhood.” As the film notes, it was redistricting – a strategy for racial-minority representation during the 1970s – that aided Milk’s election by consolidating the area in and around the Castro as a gay voting bloc.

Arguably, this process did not only aid gay owners; the growth of areas like the Castro in the 1960s and 1970s provided symbolic value for many and initially fostered some class diversity through a renter economy. Nonetheless, the continued development of gay neighborhoods in the 1970s paralleled other social and political economic shifts that had incontrovertibly stratifying impacts. Spatial and economic restructuring increasingly provided a shared grammar for gay activists and municipal leaders, as certain identities were cultivated to develop neighborhoods for niche markets for retail commerce or real-estate speculation. In addition, things like safe-streets patrols – represented in *Milk* by a fallen whistle – melded with a renewed call for law-and-order in U.S. cities, as the economic crisis of the 1970s provided an explanation for the kinds of undifferentiated violence so often cited by private interests.¹⁷

Insofar as *Milk* stands for the gay movement, Milk’s self-actualization upon arrival to San Francisco – in which his political and personal history is treated as less relevant – suggests that the gay movement gained meaning in the moment in which a long-standing political struggle was congealed into a rights- and place-based project based in the tenets of self-possession, publicity, and electoral power. Indeed, neither far to the left nor modest in their liberal visions, during these years, activist groups tackled issues that they thought to affect *all* gays and lesbians such as street violence or the need for neighborhoods, and they combined the militancy and performativity of liberation politics with a gay-focused, reform agenda more associated with gay liberation’s homophile predecessors. It became a dominant model for gay organizing across a political spectrum in the 1970s and 1980s that insisted that the militancy of uncompromised demands was as defining as the goals for which they fought.¹⁸

This is not to ignore that Milk did rally a range of lesbian and gay activists and stood far to the left of many elected politicians then and since: his support of organized labor, small businesses, and public services as well as his opposition to unchecked real-estate speculation and tax protections for the rich were rare. But Milk’s campaigns built upon the long-standing work of left-identified lesbian and gay organizations, such as Bay Area

Gay Liberation, the Stonewall Coalition, and Lesbian School Workers. These organizations often pursued reforms at the service of more radical – usually socialist-identified – ideals. In *Milk*, Milk is at the center of these campaigns and electoral power is the main goal. Furthermore, Milk’s network is represented as overwhelmingly white and male, despite the fact that lesbians and gay men of color were key to these as well as Milk’s own campaigns. This is not to emphasize the errors of *Milk*’s representation as much as to point to its distilment of those aspects of Milk’s activism, such as a focus on rights or its limited demographics, that would be most readily replicated by liberal gay activism in years to come. It is also to name that which is absorbed by *Milk*’s allegorical function: those political visions that tried to account for what was lost as other things were won.

It is that very question – of what is lost in the face of wins – that propels Lizzie Borden’s 1983 film *Born in Flames*. Made over a five-year period, the film originates in the same year as *Milk/Milk* ends: 1978. Unlike *Milk*, which looks to the past as a path to the present, *Born in Flames* is about a speculative future in which the past remains present even as some hail progress. Specifically, a social-democratic revolution – “The War of Liberation” – has prevailed in the United States, but gender, racial, sexual, and economic inequality persist. Based in New York City, feminists debate the proper line of response and the film highlights the differences between the community-organizing and direct-action styled Women’s Army, two radio shows (Radio Phoenix, anchored by an African American woman, Honey [played by Honey], and Radio Regazza, led by the white punk Isabel [played by Adele Bertei]), and a staid socialist paper edited by white women. The founder of the Women’s Army, Adelaide Norris (played by Jean Satterfield), is a black lesbian, and most of the other groups feature or are suggestive of lesbian participation. All of their activist campaigns refute a supposedly reformed system: among the central objects of critique are race- and gender-stratified workforces and the racism and sexism of organized labor as well as street violence against women and state violence against protesters. Among the political strategies featured are Norris’ efforts to link the Women’s Army to feminist, anti-imperialist struggles in Algeria, the Women’s Army and Radio Phoenix’s commitments to engage women in their everyday life worlds, and Radio Regazza’s in-your-face refusal of any claims to participation and inclusion. Despite differences, the groups eventually unite to reclaim media control by blowing up the television tower atop the World Trade Center. Indeed, while *Milk* has been cited for the uncanny resonance between the campaigns against the voter propositions of 1978 and 2008, *Born in Flames* might be noted for its prescient image of a World Trade Center under attack.

As the history summarized earlier indicates, around the start of 1980 many strands of radical lesbian and gay politics across the country were so diverse and dispersed, concerned less with electoral politics in designated territories (like the Castro campaigns of Milk), than with networks of solidarity and power. Although these activists often identified with new gay enclaves, they also sought to unmoor lesbian and gay politics from the grounds of neighborhood, emphasizing the fundamental inequality of land as commodity and the discriminatory nature of predominantly white gay institutions and areas. While geographer Manuel Castells’ famous contention that lesbians in the 1970s were “placeless” due to their affective and social networks rather than land claims overstates the issue, race and gender do shape one’s access to city space and the areas most associated with lesbians and gay men of color were more spread

out and overlapped with neighborhoods home to other marginalized communities.¹⁹ In addition, the activism that arose in these contexts not only named the goals of visibility in the real-estate market or electoral politics as limited, but it also questioned the radical potential of organized labor or small-business promotion.²⁰

This varied and distributed model of politics is envisioned in *Born in Flames* through a mix of aesthetic strategies and locations: fast-cut scenes of punk-rock refusal, hand-held visions of base-building, and social-realist-styled settings of street landscapes and workplaces. The explicit juxtaposition of mainstream news footage against images of women at work and leisure figures making a life (and, often, women making out with each other) as outside dominant modes of representation. The film locates these everyday activities in the literal movements of women, so that it is in action and affection rather than location that identities and political solidarities are developed. Unlike *Milk*, *Born in Flames* does not introduce characters by way of background or point of view; instead, they are situated via political position or social relation. Although many scenes in *Born in Flames* do take place in recognizable neighborhoods – for example, semi-industrial parts of SoHo and tenement buildings of the Lower East Side – scenes of conversations and sex in the interiors of domestic space and general shots of the city predominate. The valuation of mobility is most literalized in a scene in which a group of women quickly appear and then disappear on bicycles – seemingly out of nowhere – to fight men who are attacking a woman on the street. Coming from all directions and converging in a circle, the women blow whistles until the men run away.

The bicycle scene is also significant for how it represents the threat of violence on the street. In many ways, *Milk* and *Born in Flames* showcase a shared concern: both highlight the inadequacy of state systems of protection from street violence and use the symbol of a whistle to represent community safety. But while *Milk* rests on an image of Milk confronting the police for their inaction – reflected in a whistle's metallic surface as it lays in a pool of blood – *Born in Flames* cuts between visual images of an attacked woman and a female bicycle brigade, set to overlaid sounds of the woman screaming and the others blasting whistles in unison. The scene is followed by a voice-over of a newscaster describing police reports of “well organized bands of 15–20 women on bicycles attacking men on the street.” In fact, gay, lesbian, and feminist organizations during the period organized safe-streets patrols and watches, but they offered varied interpretations of the role of the police: from those centered around calls for increased officer responsiveness to those based in alternatives outside the law. Furthermore, although the feminists in *Born in Flames* debate the strategic use of revolutionary violence, they stand united in an analysis that the law is structured against them due to their status as women.

The fight against Propositions 6 and 7 in California provides another example of how radical lesbian and gay activists highlighted the vexed goal of state recognition and/as protection, and the linked campaigns against the two propositions – often led by lesbian feminists – relied strongly on strategies based in building support through on-the-ground, door-to-door campaigns. Activist Amber Hollibaugh writes of going to Teamster locals, churches, and community centers, where she would debate local ministers and reach to out to women about “what it means to be a sexual outlaw.”²¹ The claim to being an “outlaw” was echoed by activists who questioned not only the police, but also

lesbian and gay calls for inclusion in state institutions. Groups like Lesbians Against Police Violence, the Alliance Against Women's Oppression (a multi-racial off-shoot of the Third World Women's Alliance), and the Third World Gay Coalition in the San Francisco Bay area or Dykes Against Racism Everywhere, Salsa Soul Sisters, and, later, the Coalition Against Racism, Anti-Semitism, Sexism, and Heterosexism in New York (among many others) fought the assault on women's reproductive rights, prison expansion, and police violence by refusing the terms of criminalization or by allying with those so designated.²² Through an explosion of small-press publications, activists took on the gender, racial, and sexual politics of private property and law-and-order and critiqued the white supremacy and masculinism of many leftist alternatives. Moreover, these interventions were often made in forms that did not always look so "political": performances, poetry, and collectives whose bar outings, back-room dances, softball games, potlucks, and pooled child care were often regarded by others as "non-movement" activities.

Born in Flames captures these places and events as sites of activist possibility, but not without contestation. For instance, Radio Regazza's punk sensibility celebrates defiance yet questions the everyday sociality valued by the Women's Army. The film showcases women expressing their ambivalence about formal movement participation, alienated by both direct-action and reform-oriented strategies or pessimistic as to their utility. These scenes are intercut with images of women doing forms of work both valued and not – for instance, wrapping bulk-processed chicken with plastic wrap and a penis with a condom – and with visuals of women playing sports, skipping rope, and sitting on street corners. By doing so, *Born in Flames* blurs the outlines for the assumed places of politics, locating activity outside the conventional representational (electoral and media) field then centered within militant gay liberal visions.

Moreover, *Born in Flames* conjoins a feminist valuation of the domestic and the everyday with a left internationalism, envisioned in particular by the Women's Army's efforts to forge solidarity with women activists in the western Sahara. Such a perspective was consistent with radical lesbian and gay politics from the period that, despite a sustained wariness about – and active challenges to – homophobia, sexism, and racism, were a part of a broad network of solidarity movements on the left. Activists especially extended concepts and tools key to Maoist-inflected politics popular in the U.S. in the 1970s, including that of continuous revolution, secondary contradictions, criticism/self-criticism, and critiques of U.S. imperialism that set national liberation alongside class struggle.²³ And while some gay activists moved to constitute gay politics as a sort of national liberation movement – naming gay neighborhoods and rural areas as liberation zones – it was more often than not feminists, many lesbians and of color, who challenged gay nationalism as they sought to remedy lesbian and gay politics to include an intersectional and/or alliance-based anti-racist/anti-imperialist framework. In their analysis, this involved examining not only the primary antagonism of proletariat versus bourgeoisie, but also included looking at unevenness within social formations, such as racism, sexism, or heterosexism. Activists also approached contradiction in the sense associated with anti-foundationalist feminisms that at once embraced and rejected experience so as to refuse totalizing political claims. This tension is highlighted in *Born in Flames* by the observation of the white socialist-party women that the Women's Army might be based not only in an ideological critique but in

women's own experience as well. In sum, activists recast the field of politics, challenging the exclusion of culture and of identity among leftists and of race, class, and gender in gay liberalism.²⁴

Yet many of these formations manifested inconsistencies of their own: lesbian and feminist groups with a majority of white women often remained detached from those identified with the Third World Left as well as from organizations of women of color. Like the militant gay liberal politics featured in *Milk*, white lesbian/feminist movements often obscured or contained racial antagonisms. Although these dynamics are not explicitly addressed in each film, they are conjured via their respective aesthetic strategies: *Milk's* mimetic realism manifests and then defuses the racism and sexism of white gay liberal activism, while *Born in Flames* defers a consideration of internal conflict through a utopianism made possible by a kind of fantastical social realism.

Milk's historical realism is achieved in many ways, most significantly via its heavy borrowing from Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*.²⁵ *Milk* appropriates much of its footage and replicates its establishing shots of Castro Street and its early clip of Dianne Feinstein announcing the murders. (In turn, both the documentary and the film draw on Randy Shilts' 1982 biography *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*.²⁶) This realism is most tightly secured by Sean Penn's Oscar-winning performance, which many considered an uncanny mimicry of Milk's flamboyant gestures and distinctive speech, aided by prosthetic nose and teeth. Castro Street is a perfect replica built not in Hollywood, but on Castro Street, and activists from the time period can be found in the background of many scenes and occasionally play themselves.²⁷ The end result is, as reviewers have noted, Van Sant's most conventional film since the liberal uplift melodrama *Finding Forrester* (2000).²⁸

Milk's effect of perfect verisimilitude was also heightened at the time of its release through the popular proclamation that the past had returned to the present. As I noted earlier, this was not only because the fashions of 1978 seemed so stylish again in 2008, but also the parallels viewers drew between the successful fight against Proposition 6 in 1978 and the failed defeat of Proposition 8 in 2008.²⁹ The force of this 30-year connection is strengthened by the many reviews that repeat the biography of Milk, the man, as the description of *Milk*, the film.³⁰ This link between history and *Milk/Milk* is further secured in early scenes of the film, as the viewer sees the Castro as an object of both a broad cultural history and of Milk's own vision. The frame moves between shots of Milk snapping photos on the (staged) street, which are then presented in actual archival still images and moving film footage that come alive. In other words, the character of Milk gives us a living history as archived footage provides both the film's background and is the object of Milk's intradiegetic gaze. As the movie progresses, the ability to differentiate between original and recreated footage becomes more difficult, as diegetic cameras' points of view and television screens include both types of footage, distinguished mostly by tint or grain or the distinctive mug of Penn or Franco.

The film also tries to capture the fact the Harvey Milk was known to be funny, not just as a *queer* but also as a humorous character. In the beginning of the film, Milk remarks that he often would use jokes to connect with those different than he; the most famous was his catchphrase: "I'm Harvey Milk and I'm here to recruit you." His flirtations are teasing

and self-deprecating as he signals his insider and outsider status: among other gay men, politicians, or Castro business owners. This is in line with biographical materials that describe Milk as a campy character; indeed, if there are any limits to Penn's impersonation it may be that he is a bit too controlled. Given this, the scenes in which Milk calls his assistant Michael Wong (played by Kelvin Yu) "lotus blossom" or the high drama of his second lover, a Latino man named Jack Lira (played by Diego Luna), who is referred to as "Taco" and represented as manipulative and melodramatic, may appear to be simply *in character*.³¹ Randy Shilts' *The Mayor of Castro Street* explains that once Milk dubbed Wong by that name, all of Milk's team called him by it. Shilts describes the office as having a "Marx Brothers ambiance" full of name-calling, but he also admits that not everyone appreciated this and that Milk "could never resist doling out ethnic slurs" even as he worked in solidarity with many minority interests in the city.³²

This dynamic is also apparent in the film's representation of women; when Milk welcomes the one lesbian character, Anne Kronenberg (played by Alison Pill), as his new campaign manager, she voices the assumption that Milk and his comrades "don't like women." He responds that she would help round out their group, which already includes a "tinkerbell," men in three-piece suits, and a "lotus blossom." My point here is not to simply highlight Milk's own casual use of racial slurs or the supposed accuracy of the melodramatics of Lira, even as I note that to set in-group anti-gay slurs as a balance to out-group racism or sexism is a too-common display of unequal power. (In another exchange, Milk teases Wong, insisting that he must have "someone's laundry to do," to which Wong retorts, "Shouldn't you be at a hairdressing convention?") Instead, I want to argue that by featuring these moments of racism or sexism, the film contains them. Joshua Clover describes *Milk* to be "as good as American Sentimental Realism gets," and an ideal example of how the genre of biopic's "claim on verisimilitude" often betrays its own kind of "dishonesty."³³ Many reviews complain about the film's hagiographic and sanitizing tendencies that make little space for Milk's ironic and caustic humor and raunchy sexual escapades.³⁴ But the film is not only biography since Milk is also cast in the role of the gay movement. What, then, does the performance of Milk's campy racism or sexism do?

Ann Pellegrini writes that: "As irony, camp opens up distance between represented and real, forging a space for an altered political and ethical relation."³⁵ Thus to read the form of camp as intrinsically counter to politics is reductive, and risks flattening this dynamic. Pellegrini points to the problems of juxtaposing that which is considered "serious" against camp's irony and she demonstrates the ambivalent and changing status of camp and its reception. Following this, although the space opened by irony may make possible critique, the fact of distance does not guarantee it: camp depends upon context to understand its use of repetition. In this way, the fact that *Milk* does *not* represent the broader context of Milk as unable to "resist doling out ethnic slurs," and instead limits the inclusion of racist terms, is one of the key means by which the film presents the gay movement as not racist. The power of irony is that it affirms the opposite of what it says. By calling Wong "lotus blossom" – what might be read as racism – the film says the opposite for Milk: that by using a racist term he asserts that he is not racist. This is not unlike including the character Anne Kronenberg's suggestion that Milk and his compatriots might be sexist as well as the inclusion of his response that the only reason to work with women would be market diversification. This is different than saying it sincerely (forms of racism and sexism that would need to be

addressed by a film directed to a liberal audience), or to not say it at all (which would leave the film open to the criticism of *Milk's* nearly all-white, all-male filmic world), or to say it all the time (which would make it less manageable). *Milk* thus showcases the very dynamics by which a gay liberal politics of race and gender might operate through a selective set of exclusions and inclusions (made via claims to historical accuracy) that set the parameters of the movement (via allegory) and the eligible space of conflict (with ironic humor).

In contrast to *Milk's* representation, *Born in Flames* features black women and lesbians prominently and – via the black lesbian character, Adelaide Norris, in particular – as the primary representative agents of revolutionary transformation. As Borden explained many years later, she saw the two biggest issues of feminist politics at the time to be divisions between black and white women and the marginalization of lesbians.³⁶ Yet what *Born in Flames* also demonstrates are the difficulties many radical feminist organizations had accounting for the operation of racism and homophobia – or the expression of affirmative non-white racial and/or lesbian identifications – within such organizations, even those that claimed multiracial participation and avowed anti-racism and a commitment to fight homophobia. In much the same way as *Milk's* supposed faithfulness to the historical record helps to outline the terms of its political representation, so too does *Born in Flames'* more hybrid styling and speculative perspective reproduce the politics that it frames.

Born in Flames combines original and found footage to mobilize diverse forms of documentary aesthetics, from interrogation to observation, direct address to montage. It is almost entirely unscripted with non-professional actors and the low-budget quality of the film makes it hard to discern between found and original images. It adopts a shifting point of view that moves between the surveillance of a suggested state power accompanied by a disembodied voice-over to an observational mix of vérité and montage set to a mixtape musical score. Although, like *Milk*, *Born in Flames* culminates in a dramatic end, it does not suggest a neatly chronological temporal structure for political development based in the life cycle of maturation, even as it does manifest a dialectical relationship between (multiple) opposing forces. And despite the film's final synthesis, the vast majority of the film is disjunctive and seemingly impossible: multiple stories are told at once and the film is a spectacle of social contradictions, mobile power, political aspirations, and creative response. In fact, a majority of the film is simply dedicated to images of women in debate. Its scenes in which feminists take over the media airwaves might appear to some as implausible. In an interview conducted soon after the film's release, director Borden explained that the film's combination of documentary and idealized but as-of-yet unrealized political vision makes it, in part, science fiction.³⁷

Born in Flames is also romantic: a quality of much utopian fantasy that also accounts for the film's renewed popularity. The fantasy of *Born in Flames* is not only of an imagined activist struggle but also of black-white feminist harmony that uses black bodies to code revolutionary authenticity. Furthermore, the film's open eroticism and humor stand in contrast to claims that lesbians are sexless or committed to a doctrinaire literalism. It thus serves to reroute feminism from its association with white, middle-class, heterosexual women by highlighting the contributions of women of color, working-class women, and lesbians. While this is an important feature of the film that accounts for its rightful appreciation – its

leading figures are rare for representations that circulated as *Born in Flames* did – the film’s vision nonetheless removes race or sexuality as a primary site of identification or conflict, and its singular focus on black lesbian militancy can border on caricature, both dynamics common to organizations in that era.³⁸

In other words, *Born in Flames* rarely explicitly names the group-congealing identities of its feminist protagonists beyond that of *woman*. The film thus figures lesbianism through scenes of eroticism and racial difference is signified via the (supposed) legibility of race (primarily blackness) rather than avowed identities. The fact that the film’s leading groups are significantly black and lesbian is only directly stated by state surveillance in the opening scene. On one level, this might suggest that *Born in Flames* offers an alternative to the visibility logic of gay liberal politics and poses the role of movements – and media – to exceed representation. Again, the fact that characters are introduced by their political position rather than biographical background is significant. Yet for that counter-visibility strategy to work would require sustaining it; instead the film includes short scenes that are suggestive but left undeveloped. For example, in one conversation two black women debate whether or not “sisters” would participate in the mode of activism represented by the bicycle brigade, but stop short of detailing why they might not. The fact that the men attacking the woman in the bicycle scene are speaking Spanish (and appear cast as Latino), would provide ample opportunity for an analysis of the racial politics of feminist antiviolence activism; instead, the open-ended inquiry works to the opposite effect.

This is not to say that the film presents identification with difference as wholly undesirable; when Norris expresses concerns after a women’s march that was “divided,” the activist lawyer Zella Wylie (portrayed by the famous feminist and civil rights activist Florynce Kennedy, who was well known for moving between many different communities of affiliation) reassures her that 500 mice are more powerful than a single lion. The two radio collectives are each a majority black or white; nonetheless, their eventual merging with the multi-racial Women’s Army essentially remediates those identifications. In fact, the majority of explicit racial identifications are made in the context of women’s *unification* (as in Honey’s call to “black women, be ready, white women, get ready, red women, stay ready, for this is our time”) or through the naming of racism as a feature of sexism; this is similarly the case with its treatment of lesbianism and homophobia.

There are a few ways to interpret this move. One is that the film idealizes feminism through the film’s status as fantasy, and that it uses the film’s fiction of a social-democratic revolution to substitute gender for class and argue that the fight against patriarchy might eliminate all other forms of subjugation. Indeed, despite the fact that the featured characters mostly disapprove of a socialist denigration of women’s separatism, the unification of all the groups ultimately proffers gender for the class analysis of the ruling party by asserting workplace gender segregation, violence against women, and other forms of gender inequality as primary. This dynamic is also realized as the film stitches its stars into a network of feminist internationalism through its brief scenes of Saharawi women training as part of the Polisario Front in the late 1970s Western Sahara. Here, too, the film visually focuses on the fact of women at arms rather than the movement’s anti-colonial dimensions.

Another perspective might hold that the film’s speculative approach casts feminism *itself* as a fantasy; in other words, as that which is impossible.³⁹ This is not to suggest that the film

(or the celebration of it) does reparative work for the reputation of 1970s feminism. It has become common to argue that exclusionary feminisms were not so; but this move is more often than not done by asserting white or heterosexual or middle-class or gender regulative feminists' supposed other intentions.⁴⁰ Instead, *Born in Flames* might suggest that radical feminism is, in fact, the process of crafting that which is "not yet," and a means to imagine identity and politics "otherwise."⁴¹ This interpretation depends upon the film's close attention to communicative media as a force that might at once undo and galvanize.

Despite their differences, both *Milk* and *Born in Flames* are self-conscious about their status as media representations and the construction of social movements and their history. As described earlier, each film opens through the lens of the dominant media with documentary-style and archival images. In *Milk*, the first minutes feature black-and-white archival police footage of men arrested during raids of gay bars in the U.S. during the 1960s. The setting of some of the footage, Miami, foreshadows a character to come: celebrity Anita Bryant, whose Florida anti-gay campaign inspired Briggs' anti-gay initiative. To a dramatic orchestral score, the men hide their faces, trying to escape the exposure that will follow their arrests. A scattered few return the camera's gaze and one man throws his drink into the lens, his eyes blacked out by an anonymity bar. In turn, *Born in Flames* opens with fictional news coverage of the revolution mixed with a documentary montage of women at work, many of whom return the gaze of the camera as well. Set to a mix of women's music, this sequence is intercut with a dislocated voice-over of an information-gathering state agency. The return of the gaze in each film and the presence of a point-of-view associated with state surveillance highlight the constructedness of the story they tell while also insisting that the so-called war of images is a central part of political struggles.

Milk and *Born in Flames* both include extensive representation of communication technology, including photography, film, television, and the telephone, all of which are cast as foundational to the effective realization of social movements. In *Milk*, young people use the telephone to connect with Milk, who, in turn, uses phones and television, among other technologies, to get his message out. One effect of this is to set social movements – and, via a reversal of the Milk-as-movement allegory, Milk himself – as *made* via representation and retelling. Such an analysis might loosen my reading of the work of irony in the film, and allow for other alternate interpretations of the film as well.

Milk's aesthetic strategies are, for the most part, in contrast to Van Sant's other films, in which realness is always an approximation. The last two films of his "Death Trilogy" are also based in real events, yet *Elephant* (2003) reworks and leaves open-ended the Columbine High School murders and in *Last Days* (2005), Michael Pitt evokes rather than imitates Kurt Cobain. *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Elephant*, and *Paranoid Park* (2007) are dream-like mash-ups that move time through drifting clouds, mix-and-match stories, and stall progressive narrative development. As Kathryn Bond Stockton describes, the forward and backward of time, elongated shots, and repetitions in *Elephant* refuse the logics of clear meaning and causation.⁴² By contrast, in *Milk* every action portends a joyful win or a soul-crushing loss; the melodramatic score (which ends with the opera *Tosca*) directs the viewers' somber emotional response, and the film's tight framing makes it hard to imagine much else outside it. But, as Martyn Pedler contends, *Milk* does *not* fully succeed at verisimilitude in part for its very reliance on found footage.

Furthermore, the film does repeat some familiar strategies; Harry Benshoff points to Van Sant's signature use of slow motion, split-screen images, steadicam shots, and inclusion of non-professional actors.⁴³

In addition, although *Milk* strays from Van Sant's more ethereal, open-ended film strategies, it does share an overlap with one film, *Psycho* (1998), which is a shot-by-shot remake of the original. Although itself not an exact replica, *Milk* nonetheless matches the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* so extensively as to reinforce its own artificiality. Also telling is that the few scenes that do slow down, pull back, drag along, or decenter the image are mostly of foreshadowing encounters between Milk and his future killer, Dan White, and of the murder itself. Van Sant's artful use of reflections in the film feature violence or death; for example, the image of White in a television screen or of Milk and a cop in a blood-framed whistle. It is Van Sant's promises of death that provide for different views and pull at the film's narrative seams. Taken together with the film's uses of the media, *Milk* might suggest a more cynical view after all, in which the death of Milk is not in fact the beginning (as the first scene announcing his death might suggest) but, in fact, an end. In this metaphor of the gay movement, the pinnacle is not *Milk's* election and his death making him into an icon for more to come, but, instead, his death is a marker of the limits of that model of political organizing. As Nathan Lee notes in an analysis of *Milk* as a death film, it is no accident that *Milk* does not include the activist riots that followed White's minor conviction for manslaughter (which were a part of the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* that *Milk* does not imitate).⁴⁴ The riots provided the basis for many forms of radical mobilizations; for example, members of Lesbians Against Police Violence used their experiences in the riots to help them develop an analysis of police violence. This reading of the film does not suggest that *Milk* provides a sustained critique of the gay liberal political model, but it does consider that the film might not be an unconditional celebration.

Born in Flames also treats the media as a means for movement building; this is the explicit claim of the character Zella Wylie as well as the goal of the final group action to blow up the World Trade Center's rooftop media tower. Two of the leading political forces in the film are radio collectives, and even the white socialist women are based in a newspaper. Towards the end of the film, the different political factions join so as to expose state lies about the death of Norris by smuggling in a broadcast recording of Wylie that is played over live news coverage of the president. *Born in Flames* points to the media as always in the making; for example, women discuss representational ethics within the film, such as when the socialist-party women debate if the publication of a picture of Norris after she has died in state custody is exploitative. Furthermore, the scene in which the state contends that Norris has killed herself upon return from training in armed resistance evokes the contested murder/suicide of Young Lords member Julio Roldan in 1970, soon after the Young Lords had taken up arms; this debate was publicized through the well-known 1971 activist documentary *El Pueblo Se Levanta*.⁴⁵

While *Milk* was recognizable to many viewers as a parable for the present, one of the most powerful features of *Born in Flames* is how it captures a time when both the hegemony of national media but also of national lesbian and gay politics did not feel quite so foreclosed and activists insisted that there were other scripts still to be written. That *Born in Flames* casts its future as familiar and also forecasts what would become a defining event (the blowing up of the World Trade Center) further pulls this past into our present.

This is in contrast to the path promised by *Milk's* diaristic audio recording about his death to come. In her discussion of Elizabeth Subrin's 1997 film *Shulie*, a near-replica of radical feminist Shulamith Firestone's 1967 documentary of the same name, Elizabeth Freeman asks: "If *Shulie* demonstrates the impossibility of fixing something securely in the past, it recognizes the same unlocatability of the present, for where is the feminist, lesbian, or even queer 'now' in 1967, in 1997, or whenever you are reading this sentence?"⁴⁶ In the case of *Born in Flames*, it is not only the film's final scene or styles that make the film seem so present, but that it suggests the future is still in the making. As a member of the collective of the 1970s, third-world-lesbian-identified softball team Gente in Oakland, California once explained: "I don't see it as a utopian world. I see it as a really long process and a continual struggle. Anytime we stop struggling, we're gonna be sitting just like fat cats do in Washington. We just can't sit."⁴⁷

In the title poem of Audre Lorde's collection *The Black Unicorn*, she writes: "The black unicorn was mistaken/ for a shadow or symbol." As the poem continues, Lorde substitutes the voice of the first person for the black unicorn, and she describes the context of this misrecognition and scorn as, "where mist painted mockeries/ of my fury."⁴⁸ To open and to close with unicorns must avoid romantic symbolism; to repeat, there are numerous reasons to disrupt or disavow some feminist histories, and irony can risk being mockery even as it also might provide for an alternate view. In her review of *The Black Unicorn* in 1979, poet Lorraine Bethel described how the poem challenged white lesbian feminists' identification with the figure of the unicorn, including their reliance on "European colonists' distortion of African folklore."⁴⁹ Bethel's piece is cited by Linda Garber, who argues that the poem is an ideal example of "identity poetics" – a mode of critique that she finds within "working class/lesbian of color" intellectual and cultural production that draws on as it challenges identity-based formations, and which she contends should be considered part of the historical genealogy of queer theory.⁵⁰ Relatedly, it is important not only to seek histories that are inclusive, but to reroute the assumed genealogies of feminism and lesbian and gay activism in general. Mimi Thi Nguyen describes the limits of an "interventionist" mode of understanding women-of-color feminisms and she proposes instead that "we should *allow* the intervention to become an interval in which we linger – not as a past that must be explained neatly or reproduced faithfully, but as a past that continually presses us to imagine a 'something else to be'."⁵¹ By placing the political movements circa 1980 in, say, unicorn relief, this essay has hoped to propose the possibility of social movement history as a process of continued remaking. In the rejection of the social-democratic revolution's claim to progress and its optimism for the future, *Born in Flames* suggests to the viewer of 1983 (and 2013) that "revolution" is, in fact, continuous and ongoing. As such, social movements and critique might not bound and contain concerns as those of the past but craft images of the future, many of which we might then reject. For example, a future without racism need not be a future without racial identification; and this very essay has tried to demonstrate how its analyses of *Milk* and *Born in Flames* might be read against themselves. Lesbians and Unicorns Resisting Every Limit is but one collective identity that names its mythical status, promotes a utopianism that appeals for and is limited by its impossibility, and allows for a leftist politics that takes identity seriously.

There is one feature of lesbian feminism and radical politics that might be worth generalizing about: a proclivity for what is often called *processing*. In *Born in Flames* women are mostly talking, debating, and making plans. For anyone who has been to such a meeting, you likely have experienced that moment of clarity when, four hours in, you realize that this might go on forever and there really will be no future. But at the end of an individual campaign that may or may not have been won, the process of making arguments and of building a group can feel like a win even if the world at large can prove to be worse than it was when you began. This is what is less imaginable in *Milk's* gay liberalism, in which individuals and groups make quick decisions, small gains lead to bigger ones, and phone trees spread out in exponential boxes (as visualized in the film) that lead from small town to city hall. We might instead consider the phone tree archived in the Lesbians Against Police Violence collection, cited in this essay's introduction: shaped not like the branches of a tree but in a circle, it will also keep going, again and again.



Figure 1. LAUREL logo. Image courtesy of Eva C. Hageman.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Craig Willse and Dean Spade for their hard work on this special issue; extra thanks go to Craig for his above-and-beyond support and patience. Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers whose comments were incredibly generous and helpful. I would like to recognize the wonderful work of Atalanta Willcox at Taylor & Francis. I would also like to acknowledge individuals who gave crucial feedback on parts and versions of this paper, in particular Mimi Nguyen, William Cohen, Jordana Rosenberg, Dana Luciano, Carla Marcantonio and Regina Kunzel. All errors of interpretation are my own. Finally, thank you to Eva Hageman who designed the LAUREL logo with the help of Kyle Goen and is always my number one comrade.

Notes on contributor

Christina B. Hanhardt is an associate professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland. She is the author of *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* forthcoming from Duke University Press in 2013.

Notes

1. Maggie Jochild authors a blog featuring fiction, political commentary, autobiography, and humor, including her own history of Lesbians Against Police Violence, at <http://maggiesmetawatershed.blogspot.com/>. I am grateful for these materials, as well as for her generosity in our interviews and other exchanges.
2. On 21 January 1979, as they left the lesbian bar Amelia's in San Francisco's Mission District, Sue Davis and Shirley Wilson were harassed, arrested, and detained by the police who charged them with disorderly conduct. This case was one of the sparks for the founding of Lesbians Against Police Violence, which continued to provide legal and other forms of support for the two women.
3. Untitled notes circa April/May 1980, LAPV meeting minutes, April–October 1980 folder, Meg Barnett [LAPV] papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, CA. By this time in the organization, members were debating the saliency of a focus on police violence and were also considering the economy, draft, and threat of nuclear war.
4. Lorde (1978); Miller (1972); Miller (1996).
5. In 2002 I began to circulate LAUREL on social-media sites and some of my students and I started groups. It was also taken up as the name of a project done by artist Lynne Chan, which she performed in New York in 2006, Poland in 2007, Australia in 2008, and Philadelphia in 2009. This project later became LES FUN, which is discussed in Tongson (2011).
6. For more on lesbian unfashionability, see Herring (2010) and Tongson (2005).
7. Articles that make this connection – albeit to varied ends – include Hoberman (2008); Turan (2008); Benschhoff (2009); Rich (2009); Anderson (2008).
8. See Colman (2009). The lead photo for the article is James Franco in *Milk*.
9. For an analysis of lesbian earnestness see Tongson (2006). For lesbian feminism as anachronism see Freeman (2010) and Dinshaw et al. (2007). I will add that while a critique of representation risks sounding like a lesbian – and I am as charged – analyses that end there tend to be named liberal, a label I'd like to dodge. An analysis of the political stances associated with the identification of lesbian warrants more serious treatment than I give here, although my effort to historicize radical lesbian feminism is intended to be part of such an inquiry.
10. Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983); Adair et al. (1977). For two recent treatments of these texts, see Hong (2006) and Youmans (2011).
11. This observation about the “archival find” was inspired in part by Kunzel (2011).
12. In other words, when one claims a (lesbian) identity, or a lesbian and gay history, what might be the effect? If done in irony is that a disavowal of identity itself and thus the claim can be made and undone at once? Or is there something about being a “lesbian” – like writing history – that can only be earnest?
13. For a discussion of film and new media's relationship to history, see Sobchack (1996).
14. Anjali Arondekar offers a key reminder that even critical orientations to the archive tend to “still cohere around a temporally ordered seduction of access, which stretches from the evidentiary promise of the past into the narrative possibilities of the future” (2005, 12).
15. Wittman (1992, 339). In the manifesto, originally published in 1970, Wittman critiqued the gay “ghetto,” but saw it as a necessary step; he also maintained the ideal of territorialization.
16. See Stewart-Winter (2009).
17. The whistle in the film gestured to an actual murder in 1977 and activist response. For a history of the safe-streets patrol that was founded by activists, see Hanhardt (2008).

18. For a more detailed history of the movements summarized here, see Hanhardt (forthcoming 2013).
19. Castells (1983, 140).
20. For example, lesbian activist Ruth Mahaney remembers storming into Milk's camera shop, indicting his "Buy Gay" pins as off-message and the members of the Gay Latino Alliance refused to hold gay rank when they voted for the straight Latino candidate in a contested district election. The Ruth Mahaney quote is from the panel "*Milk* Skimmed" held on 19 February 2009 and hosted by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco (http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=316AEE215E628BC4). Horacio Roque Ramirez (2003) discusses the Gay Latino Alliance's support of Gary Borvice over the favored candidate of most white gay organizations, Carol Silver, in the 1977 election; Silver is also represented in *Milk*.
21. Hollibaugh (2000, 58).
22. See Meg Barnett/Lesbians Against Police Violence Collection, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, CA; Alliance Against Women's Oppression Collection, Women of Color Resource Center, Oakland, California (now in the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College); Salsa Soul Sisters and Dykes Against Racism Everywhere Organization Collections, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
23. For a discussion of Maoism and/or the uses of criticism/self-criticism in the feminist movement, see Wolf (1980); Echols (1989); Cardea (1990); Segrest (2002). For other writings on the influence of Mao on U.S.-based activism in the 1960s–70s see Kelley and Esch (1999); Elbaum (2002); Ross (2005); Pulido (2006); Young (2006); Wolin (2010).
24. Given the influence of Mao among French scholars associated with the development of what would later be called queer theory, this activist genealogy is also key for queer critique. For an analysis of the influence of Maoism on Louis Althusser in particular, see Robcis (2012).
25. Epstein and Schmiechen (1984).
26. Shilts (1982).
27. Almost all of the main characters who are still living have cameos in the film: Anne Kronenberg, the one lesbian character, appears as a court stenographer; Cleve Jones, Milk's sidekick, is on the stage of a rally; the Teamster leader of the Coors boycott, Allan Baird, plays himself; and Milk's speechwriter is in a group cheering scene. (It is worth also noting here the gendered casting of the one woman as court stenographer versus the male rally organizer.)
28. As one essay noted, a trailer for *Milk* promised a conventional film by reminding viewers that Van Sant is the director of another mainstream melodrama, *Good Will Hunting*; see Rapold (2009).
29. As Bradshaw notes in his review of *Milk* in *The Guardian*, sartorial choice marks political development in the film (2009).
30. Although the majority of essays about and reviews of the film repeat Milk's biography as presented in the film, some highlight extensive supplementary biographical materials. Examples include: Corliss (2008); Denby (2008); Ebert (2008); Holleran (2009).
31. Throughout the film, Jack Lira is shown as drunk, frivolous, and a distraction to Milk; Lira's subsequent suicide is represented as much as a manipulation as a loss.
32. Shilts (1982, 137, 204).
33. Clover (2009).
34. One exception here is Scott (2008), who calls Milk an "ironist" who is not a "shiny liberal saint."
35. Pellegrini (2007, 171).
36. Lassinaro (2011).
37. Sussler (1983). Also see Friedberg (1984).
38. Many of these dynamics are detailed in Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) and Smith (1983), among other sources.
39. Many thanks to one anonymous reviewer whose comments helped me to think through this section.

40. This is a project that has been taken on in subcultural and academic contexts in recent years regarding 1970s lesbian feminism, but might also be said of other radical feminisms of that period as well. A prime example was at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies conference, "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: Lesbian Lives in the 1970s," (October 8–10, 2010): <http://www.70slesbians.org/>.
41. On the "not yet" see Muñoz (2009); on "imagining otherwise" see Chuh (2003).
42. Stockton (2009).
43. Pedler (2009); Benshoff (2009).
44. Lee (n.d.) also concludes that the film is, ultimately, hagiography and he ends his review on a more optimistic note.
45. Newsreel (1971).
46. Freeman (2010, 76).
47. sudi mae (1974).
48. Lorde (1978, 3).
49. Cited in Garber (2001, 108).
50. Garber (2001).
51. Nguyen (2012, 196).

References

- Adair, Peter, and Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, Rob Epstein, Lucy Massie Phenix, and Veronica Selver. 1977. *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*. Film. San Francisco: The Mariposa Film Group.
- Anderson, Melissa. 2008. "Milk." *Time Out: New York*, 27 Nov.–3 Dec.
- Arondekar, Anjali. 2005. "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (1–2): 10–27.
- Benshoff, Harry M. 2009. "Milk and Gay Political History." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 51 (Spring). <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/Milk/index.html>.
- Bradshaw, Peter. 2009. "Milk." *Guardian*, 21 Jan. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/jan/22/milk-film-review-gus-van-sant-sean-penn>
- Cardea, Caryatis. 1990. "Lesbian Revolution and the 50 Minute Hour: A Working Class Look at Therapy and the Movement." In *Philosophies and Cultures*, edited by Jeffner Allen, 193–217. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 1983. "Cultural Identity, Sexual Liberation and Urban Structure: The Gay Community in San Francisco." In *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*, 138–169. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chuh, Kandice. 2003. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Clover, Joshua. 2009. "Based on Actual Events." *Film Quarterly* 62 (3): 8–9.
- Colman, David. 2009. "Inching Its Way Back Onto the Lip." *New York Times*, 7 Jan.
- Corliss, Richard. 2008. "Milk: It's Good, and Good for You." *Time*, 26 Nov.
- Denby, David. 2008. "True Love: Milk and Twilight." *New Yorker*, 1 Dec.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn, and Lee Edelman, Roderick Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang. 2007. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ* 13 (2–3): 177–195.
- Ebert, Roger. 2008. "Milk." 24 Nov. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/milk>.
- Echols, Alice. 1989. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Elbaum, Max. 2002. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*. New York: Verso.
- Epstein, Rob, and Richard Schmeichen. 1984. *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Film.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Friedberg, Ann. 1984. "An Interview with Filmmaker Lizzie Borden." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 1 (2): 37–45.
- Garber, Linda. 2001. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hanhardt, Christina B. 2008. "Butterflies, Whistles, and Fists: Gay Safe Streets Patrols and the New Gay Ghetto, 1976–1981." *Radical History Review* 100 (Winter): 60–85.
- Hanhardt, Christina B. 2013 (forthcoming). "Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence." Durham: Duke University Press.
- Herring, Scott. 2010. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: NYU Press.
- Hoberman, J. 2008. "Gus Van Sant's *Milk* Recaptures California Intolerance at Exactly the Right Time." *Village Voice*, 26 Nov.
- Holleran, Andrew. 2009. "If They Know Us ..." *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 16 (2): 18.
- Hollibaugh, Amber. 2000. *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hong, Grace Kyungwon. 2006. *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kelley, Robin D.G., and Betsy Esch. 1999. "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution." *Souls* 1 (4): 6–41.
- Kunzel, Regina. 2011. "In Treatment: The Queer Archive of Mid-Twentieth Century Psychiatry." Paper delivered at the University of Maryland, 29 April.
- Lassinaro, Kaisa. 2011. "Interview with Lizzie Borden." *Occasional Papers*. <http://www.occasionalpapers.org/wp-content/uploads/LB-KL-interview1.pdf>.
- Lee, Nathan. n.d. *Milk* Review. *Film Comment* (Film Society of Lincoln Center). <http://filmlinc.com/index.php/film-comment-2012/article/milk-review>.
- Lorde, Audre. 1978. *The Black Unicorn: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- sudi mae. 1974. "We Have to Be Our Own Spark: An Interview with "Gente" Third-World Lesbian Softball Team." *Tide* (July): 6–7, 25.
- Miller, Isabel. 1972. *Patience and Sarah*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Miller, Isabel. 1996. *Laurel*. Tallahassee: Naiad Press.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. 1983. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Newsreel. 1971. *El Pueblo Se Levanta*. Film. New York: Third World Newsreel.
- Nguyen, Mimi Thi. 2012. "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival." *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22 (2–3): 173–196.
- Pedler, Martyn. 2009. "Fake Politics for the Real America." *Metro Magazine* 160: 182–186.
- Pellegrini, Ann. 2007. "After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies*, edited by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 168–193. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pulido, Laura. 2006. *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rapold, Nicolas. 2009. "Come with Us." *Sight and Sound* 19 (2): 28–30.
- Rich, B. Ruby. 2009. "Ghosts of a Vanished World." *The Guardian*, 15 Jan. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/jan/16/harvey-milk-gus-van-sant>.
- Robcis, Camille. 2012. "'China in Our Heads': Althusser, Maoism, and Structuralism." *Social Text* 110 (30/1): 50–69.
- Roque-Ramirez, Horacio N. 2003. "That's My Place!": Negotiating Racial, Gender, and Sexual Politics in San Francisco's Gay Alliance, 1973–1983." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12 (2): 224–248.
- Ross, Andrew. 2005. "Mao Zedong's Impact on Cultural Politics in the West." *Cultural Politics* 1 (1): 5–22.

- Scott, A.O. 2008. "Freedom Fighter in Life Becomes Potent Symbol in Death." *New York Times*, 26 Nov.
- Segrest, Mab. 2002. *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Shilts, Randy. 1982. *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Smith, Barbara, ed. 1983. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian, ed. 1996. *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*. New York: Routledge.
- Stewart-Winter, Timothy. 2009. "Origins to the Age of Milk." *Lesbian and Gay Review Worldwide* 16 (1): 12.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond. 2009. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sussler, Betsy. 1983. "Lizzie Borden [Interview]." *BOMB* 7 (Fall): 29.
- Tongson, Karen. 2005. "Lesbian Aesthetics, Aestheticizing Lesbianism." *Nineteenth Century Literature* 60 (3): 281–290.
- Tongson, Karen. 2011. *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. New York: NYU Press.
- Tongson, Karen. 2006. "Tickle Me Emo: Lesbian Balladeering, Straight-Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect." In *Queering the Popular Pitch*, edited by Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, 55–66. New York: Routledge.
- Turan, Kenneth. 2008. "Review: Milk." *LA Times*, 26 Nov. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-milk26-2008nov26,0,5778683.story>.
- Wittman, Carl. 1992. "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto." In *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, 20th Anniversary Edition, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young, 330–342. New York: NYU Press.
- Wolf, Deborah Goleman. 1980. *The Lesbian Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wolin, Richard. 2010. *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Youmans, Greg. 2011. *Word is Out: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Young, Cynthia. 2006. *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*. Durham: Duke University Press.