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A Forgotten "Riot":

Discovering the Black Cat Tavern Raid's Place in Queer History

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Conventional historical knowledge states that the American Gay Liberation movement started with the famed Stonewall riots. While still a monumental event for the LGBTQ+ movement, Stonewall was not the first major act of queer resistance. At the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1967, plain-clothed police officers raided the Black Cat Tavern in Los Angeles, arresting many of its gay patrons. What ensued was an organized—and peaceful—resistance movement that forever altered the trajectory of the fight for LGBTQ+ civil rights. Despite their significance, however, the events surrounding the Black Cat Tavern raid are almost forgotten within the greater context of the long 1960s—a clear disservice to the retelling of the queer rights movement's history

Police brutality was a reality for queer Americans throughout the 1960s. Forced into living in the shadows, the few supposedly safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals were under constant threat of being raided by the police. Nevertheless, a small cluster of gay-friendly businesses established themselves in Los Angeles' Silver Lake neighborhood. To avoid police harassment, most bars had code words to warn patrons when known plain-clothes police officers entered the premises. In 1967, the Black Cat Tavern was unprepared when police initiated a raid

as queer partygoers rang in the New Year with a traditional kiss.¹ The police immediately destroyed the bar's decorations whilst beating and arresting patrons and staff. Those who were able to escape rushed to warn the nearby New Faces bar, but they were too late: as they arrived, they too were beaten by plain-clothed police officers. New Faces' female owner, Lee Roy, who was mistaken for a man in drag due to her name, was hospitalized and Robert Haas, a waiter, suffered cracked facial bones, severe bruising, and a ruptured spleen in the violence.² By the end of the night, police arrested a total of 16 people at the two bars. Those arrests included Haas, who was charged with felony assault of an officer. While Haas and several patrons were either acquitted, pled *no lo contendere* and paid fines, or had their cases dismissed, six men were convicted of lewd conduct and were required to register as sex offenders—a lifelong designation.³

There was little contemporary media coverage of the event due to its involvement of queer Americans.⁴ While radical underground publications, including the *Los Angeles Free Press*, were sympathetic to victims of the raid, mainstream media coverage played a pivotal role in labeling the raid as a riot—a misconception that still prevails today.⁵ In a press statement, the

¹Ben Ehrenreich, "Before Stonewall: How a Brutal Police Raid in 1966 at Silver Lake's Black Tavern Ignited the Nation's First Gay Rights Rally," *Los Angeles Magazine*, June 26, 2015, <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/before-stonewall/>.

²Mason Funk, "Alexi Romanoff," *OUTWORLD Archives*, March 21, 2018, <https://theoutwordsarchive.org/interview/romanoff-alexei/>.

³Wes Joe, "The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance," *Alexander Street*, 2008, http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2791194?account_id=12768&usage_group_id=100172.

⁴Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, "Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006): 724-751, . <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100502>.

⁵Jerry Schmid, "Four Police Raids End 'Truce' with Homosexual Taverns," *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 13, 1967.

Tavern Guild Southern California, a coalition of gay-friendly bars, affirmed that victims of the raid were peaceful.⁶ Conversely, a *County Courier* article entitled “Tavern Charges Police Brutality” quoted the area police commander claiming that bar patrons “took violent exception” to the raid and that an officer was “kicked, beaten, and stepped upon” and had to be “hospitalized for nine days.”⁷ There is no evidence this occurred; yet, as one of the only mainstream media outlets to cover this event, the *Courier*’s article serves as the impetus for how the Black Cat Tavern raid is remembered.⁸ The police succeeded in shifting the narrative away from a brutal police beating of individuals simply looking to ring in the New Year to the police being heroes who saved society from a group of violent queers. While the raid itself was far from historic, this narrative is, perhaps, a cause as to why the events following the raid are largely forgotten, despite the historical significance they hold.

In an epoch that saw radicalism in the form of the Black Freedom Struggle and protests against the Vietnam War, queer Americans laid the foundation for a movement that strove to affirm their humanity and dignity—their own civil rights movement. The Black Cat Tavern raid marked a new area in relations between the Los Angeles Police Department and local establishments. The raid broke a two-year truce between gay establishments and police and, in the following weeks, there were two other documented raids of gay bars in the Silver Lake neighborhood. Don Slader, the editor of a gay magazine entitled *Tangents*, remarked that “these were the most violent raids which [the community had] seen in years.” The timing of the

⁶Tavern Guild of Southern California, “Press Release regarding the Raid of the Black Cat Bar New Year’s Eve, 1966,” *Wayback Machine*, November 15, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150427062657/http://www.tangentgroup.org/history/BlackCat.html>.

⁷County Courier, “Tavern Charges Police Brutality,” *County Courier*, January 19, 1967, Final Edition.

⁸Michael Bedwell, “The ‘Black Cat gay riot’ is well-known...it’s also a myth,” *LGBTQNation*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/10/black-cat-gay-riot-well-known-also-myth/>.

reinvigoration of tensions between the police and gay community is significant as the Black Cat Tavern raid occurred almost as soon as Republican Ronald Reagan was sworn in as Governor of California.⁹ Reagan's election represented a return to a strict "law and order" philosophy, giving determined police extraordinary license to violently demonstrate their commitment to enforcing the law. As a heavily stigmatized group, gay men were specifically chosen because they represented an easy target.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the queer community was determined to maintain the progress they had made and unwilling to allow the police to start harassing them once again.

Members of Los Angeles' gay community, who organized under the name PRIDE (Personal Rights in Defense and Education), decided to come together in order to plan a protest against police brutality. While similar demonstrations had occurred in the past, they were all rather small.¹¹ There was a major risk in planning and participating in a protest for gay rights: if identified, the protesters could have their names published in the newspaper and could lose their families and careers.¹² PRIDE capitalized on a wider issue, electing to make the protest not specifically about police brutality against gay individuals, but about police brutality in general. While many African Americans and Latinos were skeptical to ally with LGBTQ+ Americans due to religious and societal reasons, they still did find some allyship in these groups and the burgeoning anti-war movement as the recent increase in police brutality was a far-reaching issue. Leaders of these groups elected to stage several protests throughout Los Angeles on February 11,

⁹Jerry Schmid, "Four Police Raids End 'Truce' with Homosexual Taverns."

¹⁰"LGBTQ History Made in Los Angeles: Cooper Do-Nuts and the Black Cat Tavern," *Los Angeles Almanac*, March 31, 2021, <http://www.laalmanac.com/history/hi712.php>.

¹¹Michael Bedwell, "The 'Black Cat gay riot' is well-known...it's also a myth."

¹²Gerard Sullivan, "Discrimination and Self-Concept of Homosexuals Before the Gay Liberation Movement: A Biographical Analysis Examining Social Context and Identity," *Biography* 13, no. 3 (1990): 203-221, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23539517>.

1967. The one staged outside the Black Cat Tavern was by far the largest.¹³ A poster promoting the protests' headline reads "CRISIS: Police lawlessness must be stopped!" and the call to action elaborates that they are fighting against "[arbitrary arrests, illegal search and seizure, police perjury in courts, entrapment, and abuse of peoples' rights and dignity]."¹⁴ This approach took the unprecedented step of inviting straight America into the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

The protest itself was surprisingly uneventful, but historic nevertheless. Building an intersectional protest movement was a departure from the previous strategy of an intellectual-driven movement that fought for the right to exist in secret and the post-Stonewall strategy of flaunting one's sexuality while existing outside the mainstream altogether. PRIDE's strategy employed the Black Civil Rights movement as a model, promoting self-empowerment and assertion of their sexuality whilst still having every desire to be a contributing segment of society.¹⁵ Alexi Romanoff, the only living organizer of the protests and former co-owner of the New Faces bar, described how PRIDE organizers notified the mainstream press of the movement but were actually relieved when they did not attend because they feared the repercussions of being outed publicly.¹⁶

By all accounts, however, the protest was a massive success. An estimated 300-600 individuals protested outside the Black Cat Tavern.¹⁷ Among them were queer individuals, allies, including at least four ministers, and plain-clothed police officers, including the police Sergeant

¹³Mason Funk, "Alexi Romanoff."

¹⁴Wes Joe, "The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance."

¹⁵Wes Joe, "The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance."

¹⁶Mason Funk, "Alexi Romanoff."

¹⁷Wes Joe, "The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance."

who led the original raid. While the police waited for any possible excuse to break up the rally, the protesters were determined to share their message without interference. Romanoff detailed the extent to which the protesters were willing to go in order to keep the protest peaceful via describing how they rushed to pick up any flyers thrown onto the ground so the police could not “bust [them] for littering” and how they continually moved up and down the block to avoid charges of loitering.¹⁸ The police never intervened, something that some accounts attribute to the presence of the ministers.¹⁹ The successful organization of this protest in defense of civil rights served as a major stride for the entire LGBTQ+ movement.

A study of early gay rights protests conducted by the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives found that, at the time, no other demonstration in the United States had ever matched the size of the Black Cat Tavern protests. The sheer violence of the raid brought the entire Los Angeles queer community together. Through the Tavern Guild, they managed to raise \$3,400 to pay the legal fees of those willing to go to trial.²⁰ Two of the men required to register as sex offenders, Charles Talley and Benny Baker, bravely elected to challenge their convictions. Their lawyer, Herb Selwyn, cited the 14th Amendment of the Constitution to argue that LGBTQ+ individuals had equal protection under the law to kiss whom they chose. This was the first time this argument was ever used in a case involving gay rights. While the Supreme Court refused to hear the case, this bold strategy paved the way for future queer rights cases, including *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), which decriminalized gay sex nationwide, and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015),

¹⁸Mason Funk, “Alexi Romanoff.”

¹⁹“Guilty as Charged,” *Alexander Street*, http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/embed/token/06bcqoj5c9i7och70sj6d9p?account_id=12768&usage_group_id=100172 frameborder="0" width="600" height="600" allowfullscreen allow="encrypted-media *;"></iframe>

²⁰Wes Joe, “The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance.”

which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide.²¹ Another major development in the LGBTQ+ movement that arose out of the Black Cat Tavern raid and subsequent protests, was the creation of *The Advocate*, the country's oldest and largest gay periodical. Originally founded as PRIDE's newsletter, it was converted into a proper newspaper the summer following the raids. The publication became national in 1969 and continues to exist today.²² Despite the major impact the Black Cat Tavern raid has on queer history, this event is completely overshadowed by the Stonewall riot.

Optically, the reaction to the Black Cat Raid is an exceptional origin story to the queer civil rights movement: it was an organized response to systematic oppression that followed the non-violent model of the Black Freedom Struggle. Other than openly proclaiming their sexualities, those who participated in the protests were by no means radical. They were everyday people with nine to five jobs who, against all odds, sought to protect themselves from bigotry.²³ The few photos of the protest show calm individuals dressed conservatively.²⁴ These individuals are a seemingly better representation of queer activism for straight America than the directly confrontational individuals who participated in the Stonewall riots. Nevertheless, the Stonewall

²¹Jason McGahan, "Before Stonewall, the Queer Revolution Started Right Here in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/before-stonewall-gay-pride-history/>; Krystyna Blokhina Gilkis, "Lawrence v. Texas," Cornell Law School, September 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/beyond-bostock-future-lgbtq-civil-rights/#:~:text=In%20Romer%20v.,specify%20a%20level%20of%20scrutiny.&text=And%20while%20the%20Supreme%20Court's%20decision%20in%20Obergefell%20v.>

²²Liz Highleyman, "What is the history of the Advocate?," *Wayback Machine*, September 14, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20080518032727/http://www.camprehoboth.com/issue09_14_07/past_out.htm.

²³Mason Funk, "Alexi Romanoff."

²⁴Elijah Chiland "50 years ago the first major gay rights demonstration happened in Silver Lake," *Curbed Los Angeles*, February 8, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/2/8/14554806/black-cat-silver-lake-lgbt-gay-rights-protest>.

riots are representative of the start of the movement and the Black Cat Raid is only remembered by a select few who are exceedingly knowledgeable on queer or Los Angeles history.

In an article deconstructing why Stonewall was the event selected to represent the start of the LGBTQ+ movement, sociologists Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage argue that Stonewall was chosen because it simultaneously was highly commemorable and had a mnemonic capacity. In their case study of the Black Cat Tavern, they conclude that, while the raid had a major long-term impact on the community, bringing with it a strong mnemonic capacity, it largely petered out in the short term, rendering it difficult to commemorate. They continue by arguing that Stonewall was more visual on a national level and was perceived as an immediate success that served as a call to action for queer Americans everywhere.²⁵ While this reasoning is compelling, I will argue that Stonewall was selected because it better fits the narrative that has come to shape the historical perception of the 1960s.

The 1960s are remembered as a decade of radicalism: from the Black Freedom Struggle to the Summer of Love, it appears as if most young Americans became involved in some leftist protest or countercultural movement.²⁶ The media even attempted to portray victims of the Black Cat raid as rioters. This decade, however, was far more complicated than the conventional narrative suggests. The 1960s also saw smaller-scale and seemingly less radical activism.²⁷ The Black Cat Tavern raid is one such event that became eclipsed by Stonewall, which is now seen as

²⁵Armstrong and Crage, “Movements and Memory.”

²⁶“The 1960s History,” History.com, May 25, 2010.
https://web.archive.org/web/20080518032727/http://www.camprehoboth.com/issue09_14_07/past_out.htm.

²⁷David Farber, Review of *The Radical Sixties*, *Reviews in American History* 39, no. 4 (2011): 712–717,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41348930>.

a far more impactful moment. While the spontaneity of the Stonewall uprising speaks to an era known for its radicalism, it was earlier activists that paved the way for its existence.

In January 1969, mere months before Stonewall, *The Advocate* published a piece entitled “‘Black Cat’ Revisited” written by Mel Holt, a victim of the Black Cat Tavern raid. The article warns readers of future police brutality and calls for a unified gay rights movement.²⁸ At this point, the publication had a readership in the thousands.²⁹ Given that it was one of the only gay publications of its time, and by far the largest, it is surmisable that it reached New York’s queer community—perhaps even the future Stonewall rioters. While I will not argue that the Black Cat Tavern protests directly inspired the events at the Stonewall Inn, I will postulate that the reaction to Stonewall was magnified because of the Black Cat Raid. *The Advocate*, which spread news of the Stonewall uprising to LGBTQ+ individuals nationally so that they could plan further action, is a direct by-product of the Black Cat Tavern protests.³⁰ Stonewall would likely not have occurred without the knowledge of previous actions against police brutality in cases such as the Black Cat Tavern raid. These events, while far less famous, still deserve their place in history because they made the movement that followed Stonewall possible.

The minimal public recognition of the Black Cat Tavern raid does not mitigate the impact of the event. It is largely ignored because it occurred in a decade where more flashy events, such as Stonewall, have come to represent the historical narrative. Regarding Stonewall’s lasting impact on the queer community, Alexi Romanoff remarked:

²⁸Mel Holt, “‘Black Cat’ Revisited,” *Los Angeles Advocate*, January 1969, 17, <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fblack-cat-revisited%2Fdocview%2F2370988994%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12768>.

²⁹Wes Joe, “The Black Cat Bar, 3909 Sunset Boulevard: Historical Significance.”

³⁰Carmen Rios, "Stonewall, As It Seemed Then: The Advocate Remembers Best," *Autostraddle*, July 2, 2012, <https://www.autostraddle.com/stonewall-as-it-seemed-then-the-advocate-remembers-best-140608/>.

“I’m proud of Stonewall, which was a wonderful riot. The difference between Stonewall and our demonstration, we were an orderly demonstration, but Stonewall is a pride to me. I am so proud of that because finally, we’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore. If you’re not going to accept our rights that we are guaranteed by our constitution, then damn well riot.”³¹

Romanoff accepts that, although the legacies of and protest tactics employed in these two events are vastly different, they were both key to building the queer liberation movement.

While giving proper recognition to the Black Cat Tavern protests and other pre-Stonewall demonstrations like it would provide a more accurate historical account of the history of gay rights in America, reflecting this in the narrative is not absolutely necessary because these events served their purpose. They laid the foundation for a similar event to get major media coverage, jumpstarting the movement on a national level. What should change in the historical depiction of these events, however, is portraying the Black Cat Tavern raid as either a riot or a less radical movement. The bravery that those protesters showed by engaging in an organized, restrained, and peaceful protest is something that should be remembered as completely radical.

About the author

Katelyn “Katie” Nash is a student at New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study where she is pursuing a concentration that combines political science, history, philosophy, journalism, and urban studies into a “practical political education”. She enjoys research and writing. After completing her undergraduate degree, she hopes to pursue a PhD focusing on political history.

³¹Mason Funk, “Alexi Romanoff.”

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