

*“To Stamp Out the Oppression of All Black People”: Ron Grayson
and the Association of Black Gays, 1975–1979*

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In Los Angeles, one October evening in 1975, an African American man named Ron Grayson addressed a crowd of 600 people in front of Hollywood High School.¹ Grayson, a local activist who was regarded as the “dean of the black gay community in Los Angeles,” was selected to speak at the gathering that preceded a march to the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Wilcox Avenue station where attendees demanded the removal of racist police chief Edward M. Davis.² Organized by leaders in L.A.’s gay community such as Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, the rally was planned as a demonstration of silent rage against Davis’s recent statements in the local press that supported a ban on gay people from joining the police force.³

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1. “Gays vs. Police,” *Come Out Fighting: The Newspaper of the Lavender and Red Union* 1, no. 7 (November 1975): 4.

2. “Pioneer Activist Grayson Ends 5-Year AIDS Battle,” *BLK* 2, no. 9 (September 1990): 35.

3. The Metropolitan Community Church was among the earliest religious institutions to embrace LGBT membership. See Troy D. Perry, *Don’t Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York, 1992).

Activists disagreed about how to respond. Conservative elite community leaders believed that submitting a report to the police would convince them to discontinue their discriminatory hiring practices. More rank-and-file and militant activists believed Davis's removal from the police force would bring an end to the harassment of gay individuals. Representing the newly formed Association of Black Gays (ABG), Grayson abandoned the initial call for silence during the rally by encouraging the crowd to chant "Dump Davis Now!" while they marched from the school to the police station. The crowd continued to chant slogans such as "Ed Davis, hear our voice, you are not the people's choice" for over two miles as they carried lit candles.⁴ Grayson's fervor unmuted the crowd until they reached the police station. Conservative leaders of L.A.'s gay community suppressed the crowd by urging them to reinstate the mute procession. Once the crowd acquiesced, Grayson and other militant organizers dispersed in defeat.⁵ These events revealed fundamental political divisions in L.A.'s gay community over the issue of police harassment. Over the next several years, clashes between the city's gay elite and rank-and-file activists exposed tensions over other issues such as the political direction of the gay movement, incarceration, and most notably racial discrimination at the city's gay bars and clubs. As a pioneer activist, Grayson became a central figure in the struggle to improve conditions for African American gays and lesbians in L.A.

This essay examines the political life and activism of Grayson and the ABG as an example of African American gay and lesbian organizing in L.A. during the period of gay liberation.⁶ Grayson's disruption at the rally represented a militant strain of gay and lesbian activists of color in L.A. during the 1970s. From 1975 to 1979, Grayson founded the ABG and led the group's fight against racial discrimination in L.A.'s gay community. Investigation into Grayson and the ABG continues the work of historians who have conducted research on the meaning of race in the gay past.⁷ Moreover, examining the ABG's activist leg-

4. "Gays and Cops: Do They Mix?," *Gay Liberator* (1975): 2.

5. "Gays vs. Police," *Come Out Fighting: The Newspaper of the Lavender and Red Union* 1, no. 7 (November 1975): 4.

6. For histories of gay liberation, see Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York, 1994); David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York, 2010); Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York, 2012); Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York, 2016).

7. Recent scholarship has investigated the historical and theoretical intersections between African American and LGBT history in the latter half of the twentieth century. See Kevin J. Mumford, "The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969–1982," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (June 2011): 49–72; Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, The Protest Era and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 90s* (East Lansing, MI, 2011); Kwame Holmes, "What's the Tea: Gossip and the Production of Black

acy illuminates how racial issues figure prominently in histories of the LGBT experience in L.A.⁸ Grayson and other members of the ABG understood the implications of making themselves and their struggles visible as African American gay men and women. Historian Kevin Mumford has noted that despite scholarly claims that champion the political efficacy of closeted gays and lesbians, there remains a set of actors who illustrate the need for African American gay men and women to come out and speak up against injustice in an effort to "remake black gay history."⁹ Grayson's status as an out African American gay man allowed him to publicly denounce racial discrimination in L.A.'s gay community and advocate on behalf of black gays and lesbians through a combination of direct-action protests and engagement with formal politics. In addition, archivists have called for research on understudied groups such as the ABG in order to expand the knowledge of key figures who strove for political and social change in black queer history.¹⁰

Grayson's activism not only brought racial dimensions to the foreground of gay politics in L.A. but simultaneously opened up contestation between elite-

"Gay Social History," *Radical History Review* 122 (May 2015): 55–69; Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia, 2016); Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White*; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, 2017); Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago, 2018).

8. For social and urban histories of the LGBT experience in L.A., see Moira Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics* (Philadelphia, 2001). Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York, 2006); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley, CA, 2007); C. Todd White, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights* (Urbana, IL, 2009). Historian Kevin Leonard has explored the relationship between racial ideologies and sexual identity during the Cold War in L.A.; see Kevin Allen Leonard, "Containing 'Perversion': African Americans and Same-Sex Desire in Cold War Los Angeles," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (September 2011): 545–67. Kai Green has examined black LGBT life in Los Angeles since 1981; see Kai M. Green, "Into the Darkness: A Quare (Re)Membering of Los Angeles in a Time of Crises, 1981–Present" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2014).

9. Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White*, 6.

10. Steven G. Fullwood notes that the Association of Black Gays is less known than other black gay organizations; see "Archiving Black Queer History: An Interview with Steven G. Fullwood, Founder and Project Director of The Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project," interview conducted by Douglas Spencer Cooper, in *Mighty Real: An Anthology of African American Same Gender Loving Writing*, ed. R. Bryant Smith and Darius Omar Williams (2011), 512–20. Historian Martin Duberman has mentioned the ABG's involvement in the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference; see *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS* (New York, 2014), 28. For literature on Grayson's activist legacy, see Fundi, *Trouble in Black Paradise: Catastrophic Legacy Worshiping the New World Politics of Saving Souls* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), 363.

conservative elements of the Gay Liberation Movement and militant constituencies at a more grassroots level. As African Americans and self-described Third World gays and lesbians, Grayson and other members of the ABG challenged police harassment of gay individuals, overturned racist entry politics at local gay bars and clubs, and advocated for sexual diversity in the African American and African diasporic community. Through the ABG's journal *Rafiki*, members questioned the efforts of L.A.'s white gay community leaders to adequately address the often overlooked concerns of the city's African American gay and lesbian population. As one of the earliest African American gay activist groups in L.A., the ABG's activism drew upon existing strategies of resistance in black nationalist and gay liberationist circles to grapple with issues of race and sexuality simultaneously.¹¹

Despite limited resources, the ABG overturned racist policies at gay clubs that routinely denied entry to people of color. The ABG also fought against the wrongful incarceration of black gay and poor individuals by establishing legal defense funds in order to ensure adequate legal representation. The intellectual production evidenced in *Rafiki*'s editorial and visual content established the ideological blueprint for the next generation of black gay and lesbian activists. Examining the ABG's Pan-Africanist approach to black gay identity illuminates their efforts to accomplish the dual task of building a black gay diasporic consciousness while improving the conditions for African American gays and lesbians through grassroots activism. Despite the group's brief existence, the ABG's collective of militant African American gays and lesbians reveals how Grayson's conceptual and practical vision for the association served as a viable avenue for black gays and lesbians to claim their fair share of the advances of L.A.'s burgeoning gay community since the Stonewall Riots.

RON GRAYSON

Ron Lloyd Grayson was born in Brooklyn in September 1946, the youngest of nine siblings. As a teenager, Grayson gained an understanding of his gay identity by reading James Baldwin.¹² During the late 1960s, Grayson moved to L.A. and enrolled in courses at Los Angeles City College while working as an in-

¹¹. There are conflicting accounts of when the ABG was founded. A self-published article states that the ABG was founded in 1975; Association of Black Gays, "A History of the ABG," *Rafiki*, August 1976, 7. However, in an interview Grayson stated that the group was formed in 1974; see Christopher Jones and Nick Bucci, "A Struggle within a Struggle," *TenPercent: The Newspaper of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center* 5, no. 4 (March 1984): 6; and Ron Grayson, "Unbridled Deceptions: Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Conference," *The Real Read*, no. 1 (April 1989): 33, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

¹². Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 9.

surance underwriter at the Automobile Association of America.¹³ Grayson's socialist political orientation was informed by his memberships in the New Alliance Party and the California chapter of the Peace and Freedom Party.¹⁴ After relocating to L.A., Grayson established his reputation as an activist in the city's gay community by volunteering at centers that provided gay social services. In the 1970s, amid national concerns over the institutional mistreatment of gays and lesbians, LGBT activists in major cities fought to establish themselves as serious political constituencies by founding institutions where a distinct gay culture could thrive.

In L.A., groups such as the Municipal Elections Committee of Los Angeles (MECLA) used their financial power as leverage to influence local politicians to address the needs of the city's gay community. Composed of mostly white upper-class gays and lesbians, MECLA helped to transform neighborhoods such as West Hollywood into urban enclaves with gay-friendly businesses. Through MECLA's political connections, leaders of the gay community garnered municipal support for the establishment of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center where Grayson volunteered part-time as a phone operator for the center's crisis hotline.¹⁵ Grayson's experience working at the center exposed him to the limitations of the social services for gays and lesbians that were created by the center's board of directors. Despite the center's affirmative action policy, Grayson observed that its mostly white staff lacked the cultural competency to adequately address the racism experienced by black gays and lesbians in L.A.'s gay community. Grayson also noticed that the services offered to the center's largely white clientele failed to reach the city's black gay and lesbian residents who needed additional counseling and housing.¹⁶ When the center resisted changing their protocols, Grayson decided to tackle the issue of racial inequality in L.A.'s gay community through more grassroots measures.

Grayson experienced firsthand the practice of racial discrimination in L.A.'s gay community. Gay discos in West Hollywood often denied entry to people of color by enforcing discriminatory policies that required them to show multiple forms of identification while white patrons were required to show none. One evening in 1974, Grayson went out with a group of white gay men to a popular gay bar called After Dark in an attempt to show his friends how frequently gay-friendly establishments denied entry to patrons based on race. After Grayson watched his friends enter the bar, he complied with the bouncer's

13. "Pioneer Activist Grayson Ends 5-Year AIDS Battle," *BLK* 2, no. 9 (September 1990): 35.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 6.

16. Grayson, "Unbridled Deceptions," 33.

request of him to show multiple forms of identification. Despite showing his driver's license and credit card, Grayson was denied entry. As Grayson refused to be turned away, the bar staff physically removed him and brought out German shepherds to keep him and his friends away.¹⁷ The following week, Grayson returned to After Dark accompanied by rank-and-file gays and lesbians and started a picket line that upset conservative leaders from the Metropolitan Community Church. Members of the church reacted by denouncing Grayson and his fellow picketers' actions as divisive to L.A.'s larger gay community.¹⁸

Grayson's experience of racial discrimination at After Dark propelled him to found the Gay Consumer Protection Committee (GCPC) shortly after. The committee's goal was to document specific cases of racial discrimination at L.A.'s gay establishments and report them to California's Alcohol Beverage Control board.¹⁹ Grayson and his associates had previously requested that the state board investigate consumer complaints from gays about discrimination at L.A.'s gay bars. In response, the board conducted their investigation into the complaints but found no evidence of racial discrimination at L.A.'s gay establishments. Through the GCPC, Grayson sought to help disgruntled gay consumers file formal complaints with the board. Grayson's strategy was to compile a significant number of consumer complaints to pressure the beverage control board to revoke the liquor licenses at gay bars accused of enforcing racist entry policies. To this end, Grayson solicited complaints of racial discrimination from gays and lesbians by placing GCPC ads in gay newspapers in L.A. and New York.²⁰ Despite Grayson's efforts, the GCPC dissolved because many gay consumers hesitated to file formal accusations out of fear of testifying in front of the board. Although the GCPC's existence was brief, Grayson's picket line at After Dark attracted the interest of militant gays and lesbians who were determined to expose community injustices. Grayson's activism through the GCPC generated the initial momentum for other radical gay activist groups to join in the fight against racial discrimination in L.A.'s gay community.

By 1975, Grayson expanded his activist network by joining some of L.A.'s militant gay and lesbian organizations such as the Gay Community Mobilization Committee (GCMC) and the Lavender and Red Union (L&RU).²¹ Composed of radical gays and lesbian feminists, Grayson's involvement with the

17. Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 6.

18. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, "Why Are We Here?," March 20, 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

19. "Bar Controversies Lead to New Group," *The Advocate*, August 28, 1974, 5.

20. "Here & There," *Gay People's Union News*, October 1974, 20; "News," *Lavender Opinion* 1, no. 6 (August 1974): 4.

21. For literature on the Lavender & Red Union, see Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Oakland, CA, 2016).

L&RU exposed him to classic Marxist works as he attended their communist study groups. If Grayson’s disruption at the LAPD protest and picket line at After Dark increased the tension between the city’s radical activists and conservative leaders, the sixth annual Christopher Street West Parade served as yet another battleground for their ongoing political clashes.

Held annually on June 29, the Christopher Street West Parade brought together L.A.’s gay community to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Prior to the 1975 parade, local gay newspapers reported that the Christopher Street West Association (CSWA), an elite group of gays and lesbians, had uninvited leaders from militant gay groups, including Grayson, from the parade.²² In response, the GCMC published a press release detailing the CSWA committee’s decision to uninvite Grayson and representatives of other radical gay groups from speaking at the parade. The L&RU’s members also created a Liberation Contingent composed of leftist gay organizations in L.A. in response to their exclusion. The L&RU’s members presented petitions to the CSWA’s parade planning committee requesting that a diverse group of leaders, including Grayson, be allowed to speak at the parade. The press release caught the attention of the CSWA committee, who agreed to meet with representatives from the Liberation Contingent to finalize the list of speakers. Among the chosen leaders was Grayson, who was to speak on behalf of the GCMC.²³

A few days before the parade, the Liberation Contingent received notice that the chosen speakers had been formally uninvited once more and banned from all future Christopher Street West events.²⁴ The committee claimed that militant groups within the Liberation Contingent posed the threat of violence that would disrupt the commemoration.²⁵ The conservatism of the CSWA’s parade committee members was reflected in their statement that claimed organizations such as the L&RU had no role in the parade, since “Communist nations had oppressed gay people” in the past.²⁶ The Liberation Contingent would re-

22. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, “Gay Community Mobilization Press Release,” June 20, 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

23. “LRU, Strikers Excluded,” *Come Out Fighting: The Newspaper of the Lavender and Red Union*, July 1975, 1.

24. Dave Johnson, “Gay Parade, Celebration Troubled,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, June 22–July 3, 1975, 7.

25. The CWSA planning committee requested that leaders of the L&RU, excluding Grayson, not be allowed to speak at the 1975 Christopher Street West Parade. The committee also considered requesting police presence to ensure the Liberation Contingent would march down a separate route. See Jim Kepner, “My First 65 Years of Gay Liberation,” May 22, 1979, box 6, folder 8, Jim Kepner Papers: Autobiographies Series 2, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

26. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, “Gay Community Mobilization Press Release,” June 20, 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

spond to their removal from the parade by hosting a separate rally at a nearby park away from the festival grounds.

On the afternoon of the parade, thousands of gays and lesbians congregated in West Hollywood despite rumored threats of police harassment and intracommunal rioting.²⁷ The Liberation Contingent marched separately with militant organizers along the parade route on Hollywood Boulevard.²⁸ The Liberation Contingent's counterrally offered Grayson the opportunity to address the militant organizers. Grayson spoke on several issues such as racial discrimination, police harassment, and the overwhelming political influence that elite white gays held over L.A.'s gay community. Appropriating the theme of the parade, "It's a Gay, Gay World," Grayson alerted the crowd to the fact that "it's not a gay, gay world when gay people are still being tortured and thrown in prison for being gay . . . when 50 to 60 gay people are busted and beaten up every weekend by the police . . . when the media persists in portraying gays as white, socially upwardly mobile, middle-class males."²⁹

Grayson's protest speech at the Christopher Street West parade reflected his sustained antiracist and anticapitalist critiques of the political and economic gains of gay liberation.³⁰ He used the opportunity to speak at the parade to draw attention to community injustices that affected gays and lesbians of color. Elite groups such as MECLA and the CSWA denounced the actions of militant protesters in the interest of preserving their newly won political clout. Like other militant activists, Grayson believed that direct-action protests were the most viable way to achieve racial progress in L.A.'s gay community. Grayson's grassroots activism in the GCPC and ideological training from L&RU study groups informed his racial and economic critique of L.A.'s gay elite. Although L.A.'s militant strain of gay activists were sensitive to racial issues, Grayson felt it necessary to form a group that would devote more attention to fighting racial discrimination in the city's gay community. The ABG became the outlet through which he foregrounded race in his critique of social inequality in L.A.'s gay community and beyond. Far from being a racially separatist group, the ABG was a manifestation of Grayson's repertoire as a black gay activist and became a pioneering space where he directed attention toward

27. Dave Johnson, "Christopher Street Liberation Day: Local Groups Hold Peaceful Parade, Rally," *Los Angeles Free Press*, July 1975, 7.

28. April Allison, "Liberation Contingent Upstages CSWA," *Sister: West Coast Feminist News-paper*, August 1975, 9.

29. Johnson, "Christopher Street Liberation Day."

30. For the full text of Grayson's speech, see Gay Community Mobilization Committee, "It's Not a Gay, Gay World," 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

challenging the specific issues that affected L.A.'s African American gays and lesbians.

THE ASSOCIATION OF BLACK GAYS

Grayson and his African American lesbian comrade Gloria Brown founded the ABG in July 1975.³¹ The new organization drew upon Grayson's previous organizing experiences in order to implement his practical vision to mobilize resources for black gays and lesbians in L.A.³² Other members of the ABG included Maxwell Royce Harris, a gay African American art student who also volunteered at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center with Grayson.³³ Steven Corbin, black gay novelist and ABG member, described the group as a "promising political outlet essential for Blacks to survive in a gay community where third world people are overlooked and consequently ignored."³⁴ Grayson envisioned the ABG as a space where African American gays and lesbians could speak openly about their lives. The ABG operated out of Grayson's apartment in Silverlake, where the group held men's, women's, and mixed-gender rap sessions to discuss racism and sexism in the gay movement.³⁵ Conceptually, the ABG operated as a collective similar to other radical gay activist groups that emerged during the gay liberation movement. Rather than appointing a formal leader, the ABG took measures to ensure that each member's viewpoint was considered in decisions affecting the group's political direction.³⁶ The ABG resisted sexism by appointing both men and women to cochair positions on various committees. The ABG also addressed issues such as internalized racism and homophobia in the black community during group meetings.³⁷

Members of the ABG shared Grayson's antiracist and anticapitalist critique of the larger gay movement. In addition to the discriminatory carding of people of color at gay bars, the ABG critiqued the lack of racial representation in mainstream gay periodicals such as *The Advocate*.³⁸ The ABG's members discussed not feeling fully included in mainstream gay organizations that overlooked the

31. Association of Black Gays, "A History of the ABG," *Rafiki*, August 1976, 7. ABG cofounder Gloria Brown publicized the ABG in feminist newspapers; see Gloria Brown, "Dear PBT," *Point-blank Times: A Lesbian/Feminist Publication*, December 1975.

32. "To All Black Brothers and Sisters," *Newswest*, October 1975, 4A.

33. Maxwell Royce Harris to Mayor Tom Bradley, "The Concerns of Black Gays," February 7, 1976, Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

34. Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 4.

35. Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 6.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 7.

political agenda of L.A.'s black gays and lesbians. The ABG's exclusion led members of the group to reject the single-issue politics held by L.A.'s white-led organizations that privileged their sexual identity over racial and class-based affiliations. As a result, Grayson and the ABG's other members carved their own space and began envisioning practical ways to implement strategies that would meet the needs of L.A.'s African American gays and lesbians.

The ABG combined grassroots activism, formal politics, resource mobilization, and intellectual production to improve conditions for the city's African American gays and lesbians. The ABG's members fought to end the double oppression of racism and homophobia by meeting with local politicians, organizing boycotts against gay bars that enforced racist entry policies, and establishing defense funds for incarcerated black gay individuals in need of adequate legal representation. The ABG also hosted social gatherings that included family-friendly picnics, potlucks, and breakfasts to raise money for their operating costs.³⁹

Grayson's belief that homophobia stemmed from a lack of information about homosexuality guided the ABG's community outreach. Members of the ABG lectured at local high schools and facilitated consciousness-raising sessions with gay students at nearby colleges.⁴⁰ In September 1975, members of the ABG delivered a presentation on racial oppression in the gay community at Long Beach State College. At a conference at Compton Community College, Grayson spoke again about the difficulties of being African American in a largely white gay community.⁴¹ The success of the ABG's consciousness-raising sessions, which focused on racial and sexual identity development, led the group to help design the curriculum of a graduate-level social science course at California State University, Los Angeles.⁴² Members of the ABG also lectured and made recommendations to the city's Board of Education to combat the bullying experienced by gay students in junior high and high schools.⁴³

The ABG's growing reputation as a militant collective of African American gays and lesbians heightened after the group's members made appearances on local radio and television stations. As a volunteer at KPFK, a community-sponsored radio station in Southern California, Grayson hosted a monthly afternoon segment, "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now," that focused on the life of Afri-

39. Association of Black Gays, "Association of Black Gays Picnic," 1976, and "After Hours Show & Breakfast," 1976, both in Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

40. Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 7.

41. Jim Kepner, "My First 65 Years of Gay Liberation," May 22, 1979, box 6, folder 8, Jim Kepner Papers: Autobiographies Series 2, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

42. Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 7.

43. Ibid.

can Americans in L.A.⁴⁴ Listeners to Grayson’s show heard him speak about the gay experience from an African American perspective and heard his interviews with local activists from organizations such as the Revolutionary Socialist League.⁴⁵ Grayson and other members of the ABG spoke on racism in the gay community during a segment called “Oppression in Double Time” on IMRU, a local gay radio collective.⁴⁶ Members of the ABG also discussed their community outreach on KCOP-TV’s “The Wednesday Morning Show” with Sally Fiske, a lesbian journalist and activist who campaigned for nondiscriminatory ordinances in West Hollywood.⁴⁷

The ABG’s increasing publicity helped establish the group’s presence as a formidable activist group in L.A.⁴⁸ As a recognizable activist group, the ABG strengthened their aims to increase the representation of African American gays and lesbians in the mainstream gay press and the city’s formal political body. Although Grayson believed in the efficacy of direct-action protests, the ABG’s other members drew upon more respectable strategies to increase the presence of gay African Americans in L.A.’s municipal administration.

MAYOR TOM BRADLEY AND THE ABG

The election of Tom Bradley, L.A.’s first African American mayor, occurred amid local concerns over the city’s treatment of its African American and gay population. Mayor Bradley was generally viewed favorably by L.A.’s gay community as he implemented several policies that responded to the demands of the city’s gay elite.⁴⁹ One such initiative was Mayor Bradley’s administration’s decision to appoint a liaison to the gay community in order to address their calls for an end to police harassment and discriminatory employment policies. The ABG’s members advocated that the liaison position be filled by an African Amer-

44. “The Volunteers,” *Folio* 22, no. 3 (March 1980): 3.

45. Ron Grayson, *Ron Grayson Interviews Members from Revolutionary Socialist League*, Open Reel Audiotape (Los Angeles, February 18, 1979), IMRU Radio Sound Recordings and Administrative Records, 1970–2011, Open Reel Audiotapes Subseries 1.1 1971–1999, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

46. Jim Kepner, “My First 65 Years of Gay Liberation,” January 18, 1977, box 6, folder 8, Jim Kepner Papers: Autobiographies Series 2, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

47. Association of Black Gays, “History of the ABG,” 7.

48. “ASSOCIATION OF BLACK GAYS” is listed under “Services” as one of many groups that provided medical, employment, rap groups, referrals, prisoner and parole resources, hot lines, counseling, and housing for gays and lesbians in L.A. Ron Grayson is listed as the contact person for the ABG and *Rafiki* as their official publication in Pat Rocco, “Services,” *Contact: A Directory of Gay, Homosexual, and Lesbian Feminist Organizations and Resources in Southern California*, box 18, folder 18.15, Pat Rocco Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

49. Faderman and Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 218.

ican person who would better understand the complexity of racial issues that divided L.A.'s gay community. Through correspondence and a series of meetings with Mayor Bradley, the ABG highlighted racial critiques of the unequal power structure in L.A.'s gay community.

In September 1975, the ABG member Eric Spencer wrote a letter to Mayor Bradley outlining the group's demand to have an African American fill the liaison position. Spencer argued that an African American gay liaison, at the intersections of racial and sexual oppression, would implement appropriate strategies to combat the frequent instances of racial discrimination at gay establishments and bring an end to the neglect of racial issues from mainstream gay political groups.⁵⁰ Moreover, the ABG believed that the appointment of an African American to the liaison position would signify the mayor's commitment to the advancement of African Americans in L.A. and inspire white gays to reconsider their racist attitudes, which divided the city's gay community.⁵¹ Spencer's letter on behalf of the ABG resulted in a meeting with Mayor Bradley that the group later described as unsuccessful. Despite this setback, the ABG's members resolved to reframe their approach to convince the mayor to appoint an African American liaison to the gay community.⁵²

In February 1976, the ABG member Maxwell Royce Harris wrote another letter to Mayor Bradley after an earlier meeting with him. Written as a follow-up to Spencer's letter that was sent a few months prior, Harris's letter more clearly reflected the group's sophisticated understanding of the implications of electing an African American to fill the gay liaison position. Specifically, the new letter highlighted that the demand for an African American gay liaison stemmed not just from the ABG, but a wide range of African American gay and lesbian individuals including radicals, conservatives, unemployed people, and union workers who desired more racial representation in the Mayor's administration.⁵³

Despite the ABG's willingness to make recommendations for specific African American gay candidates, Mayor Bradley's administration ultimately appointed a white gay male to the fill the liaison position. The ABG's correspondence and meetings with Mayor Bradley reflected their engagement with formal politics to increase the political legibility of African American gays and

^{50.} Eric Spencer to Ezunial Burts, Executive Assistant to Mayor Tom Bradley, "Gay Community Liaison," September 12, 1975, Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

^{51.} Ibid.

^{52.} Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 7.

^{53.} Maxwell Royce Harris to Mayor Tom Bradley, "The Concerns of Black Gays," February 7, 1976, Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

lesbians in L.A. The ABG believed that the appointment of an African American gay liaison would set in motion their subsequent plans to implement gay awareness workshops for the mayor’s staff, appropriate state funds for LGBT social services agencies, and increase nondiscriminatory housing and employment opportunities for gays and lesbians.⁵⁴ The ABG’s readiness to respectfully engage with L.A.’s political machine complemented their militant protest strategies. The ABG’s mixed tactics demonstrated the degree of complexity and versatility of their activism. As such, the ABG’s ability to persist despite limited political and financial resources served the group well during their fight to address African American gay individuals who fell victim to the institutional biases of California’s criminal justice system.

THE ERNEST MARSHALL CASE

The ABG’s striking ability to pool together resources was demonstrated during their activism around wrongful incarceration. The ABG sought to reverse court decisions that incarcerated African American gay individuals convicted on sodomy charges. Between 1975 and 1977, Grayson worked diligently for the release of Ernest Marshall, an African American maintenance worker convicted of sodomy and oral copulation with a white gay man.⁵⁵ Grayson argued that Marshall’s charges were unjust because his conviction occurred only three months prior to the passage of a bill that allowed all consenting adults to engage in sexual activity.⁵⁶ Grayson argued that Marshall’s conviction stemmed from racist and classist attitudes held by the jury. Despite Marshall’s several appeals in which he expressed not having proper legal representation, the jury declared him guilty and sentenced him to San Quentin prison until 1988.⁵⁷ Marshall’s incarceration stirred the ABG into action. Grayson, who was also a member of the People’s College of Law, mobilized lawyers who specialized in gay rights to assist with overturning Marshall’s case.⁵⁸ Along with other volunteers, Grayson prepared arguments to the appellate court that accused the

54. Association of Black Gays, “Letter to Mayor Bradley from the Association of Black Gays,” February 6, 1976, Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

55. “Free Ernest Marshall,” *Come Out Fighting: The Newspaper of the Lavender and Red Union*, February 1977, 8.

56. California governor Jerry Brown signed a bill legalizing gay sex in May 1975; see Faderman and Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 216.

57. “Free Ernest Marshall,” *Come Out Fighting*, 8.

58. The People’s College of Law school was a low-cost alternative to traditional law school that recruited gays and lesbians of color. Grayson was profiled as a student in the local press; see “Role for Gays in New Law School,” *The Advocate*, September 25, 1974; Naomi Feigelson, “Law School without the Bar,” *Ms.*, March 1976.

judge of failing to instruct the jury on the question of consent.⁵⁹ The judge dismissed Grayson and the volunteers' rebuttals and denied their petition to advance the case to California's Supreme Court.⁶⁰

As a result, the ABG established a defense fund to provide Marshall with adequate legal representation. As the fund coordinator, Grayson and the ABG's other members raised money to help cover Marshall's legal fees by hosting social events and soliciting donations through newspaper ads.⁶¹ Collectively, the ABG critiqued the outcome of Marshall's case as an example of the infliction of cruel and unusual punishment, infringement upon constitutionally guaranteed protection, and failure of the judge to instruct the jury on the implied consent of Marshall's sex partner.⁶² Grayson understood that Marshall's intersecting identities as an African American, gay, and poor laborer worked to his disadvantage during the legal proceedings and hindered his ability to garner support from L.A.'s gay elite, who had previously spoken out against legal injustices for white lesbians.⁶³ Despite not overturning the court's decision, Grayson and the ABG's members used Ernest Marshall's case to raise awareness of racial and class biases in California's criminal justice system.

STUDIO ONE BOYCOTT

While campaigning for the release of Ernest Marshall during the summer of 1975, the ABG staged their first boycott against Studio One, a popular disco in West Hollywood. In collaboration with the GCMC, the ABG's members observed that the club employed racially and sexually discriminatory entry policies.⁶⁴ In response, members of the GCMC wrote an open letter to the club's owner, Scott Forbes, that warned him of their plans to execute a boycott if he failed to remove the policies.⁶⁵ One month later, after the ABG had received no

59. "Free Ernest Marshall," *Come Out Fighting*, 8. Historian David Reichard notes how advertisements for the ABG's benefit for Ernest Marshall appeared in a 1976 issue of the University of California, Los Angeles's gay student newspaper; see David A. Reichard, "Behind the Scenes at the *Gayzette*: The Gay Student Union and Queer World Making at UCLA in the 1970s," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 112.

60. "Free Ernest Marshall," *Come Out Fighting*, 8.

61. Association of Black Gays, "After Hours Show & Breakfast," 1976, Subject Files, Association of Black Gays, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

62. Association of Black Gays, "Ernest Marshall Case," *Rafiki*, August 1976, 4.

63. "Free Ernest Marshall," *Come Out Fighting*, 8.

64. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, "Why Are We Here?," March 20, 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

65. Gay Community Mobilization Committee to Rev. Sandmire, Rev. Sirico, and Frank Zerelli, "An Open Letter," 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

response from Forbes, members of the GCMC and the ABG distributed leaflets outside Studio One that informed patrons of the club’s racist practices and encouraged clubgoers to join their impending boycott.⁶⁶ During a confrontation outside Studio One, leaders from the Metropolitan Community Church again denounced the ABG’s actions as divisive and denied support for their plans to escalate the boycott into a picket line.⁶⁷ Representatives from the church claimed that they had found no evidence of racial or sexual discrimination at Studio One after conducting their own investigation. Ministers from the church also demanded more concrete evidence of racial discrimination from the ABG and criticized their accusations of institutional racism as biased because of their affiliation with leftist organizations.⁶⁸

Despite opposition from the gay community’s religious leaders, the GCMC and the ABG viewed the initial boycott as a victory.⁶⁹ After the boycott, Forbes agreed to a meeting, during which he pledged to remove the policies.⁷⁰ Shortly after, rumors circulated that Forbes had put the racially discriminatory entry policies back into effect. Members of the ABG and the GCMC presented Forbes with another list of demands that requested he hire a door monitor and post a sign with a number for patrons to call if they experienced racial discrimination.⁷¹ Once negotiations between the ABG and Forbes collapsed, the association’s plan to picket went into action.⁷²

Although the GCMC and the ABG had previously overturned racist and sexist entry policies at other clubs, Forbes’s political and economic clout in L.A.’s gay community proved to be a serious obstacle to the organizers. Forbes threatened to have the protesters arrested during their first night of picketing.⁷³ Forbes made additional physical threats to the ABG’s members and spoke to the local gay press regarding their accusations of racial discrimination at his club. Forbes claimed that the selective entry policy was to ensure that the club’s mostly white clientele continued to have a positive experience.⁷⁴

66. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, “Why Are We Here?,” ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

67. Gay Community Mobilization Committee to Rev. Sandmire, Rev. Sirico, and Frank Zerelli, “An Open Letter,” ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

68. Ibid.

69. “Studio One Boycott Ends in Victory,” *Come Out Fighting: The Newspaper of the Lavender and Red Union*, May 1, 1975.

70. Ibid.

71. Association of Black Gays, “Disco Discontent,” *Rafiki*, August 1976, 9.

72. Gay Community Mobilization Committee, “Boycott Studio One!,” 1975, Subject Files, Gay Community Mobilization Committee, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

73. Ibid.

74. Jack Slater, “Discotheques Dance to Another Tune,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1976, G1.

When asked about the inferred quota of nonwhite clubgoers, Forbes attributed the presence of African Americans to an increase in sex trafficking and drug usage that had previously led him to temporarily shut down the club.⁷⁵ In response, the ABG criticized Forbes's racist comments and argued that their lack of support from power players in L.A.'s gay community such as the Metropolitan Community Church was because of Forbes's generous financial donations to the gay press and local gay institutions.⁷⁶ Despite ongoing protests, Studio One's exclusionary entry policy remained intact for several years.⁷⁷ The ABG's protests against Studio One revealed to the group's members that the real power to change exclusionary policies lay in the hands of L.A.'s financially and politically empowered gays and lesbians. In addition to protests against racial discrimination in the gay community, the ABG also used print media to raise awareness of community injustices facing the city's African American gay and lesbian population.

BUILDING A BLACK GAY CONSCIENCE IN *RAFIKI*

During the 1970s, as gays and lesbians advanced politically, a proliferation of newspapers, magazines, and journals created by gay activists coalesced to form a vibrant print culture. Print culture established networks of communication between gays and facilitated the exchange of knowledge about gay politics.⁷⁸ The medium of the journal became an important outlet for militant gay activists to publish in-depth analyses of community injustices. In addition to grassroots activism and community outreach, one of the main goals of the ABG was to build a "black gay conscience."⁷⁹ The ABG embarked on their project of building a black gay conscience through the group's official journal *Rafiki*.⁸⁰ Although *Rafiki* was created to raise awareness of issues that affected African American gays and lesbians in L.A., the journal also functioned as a site of intellectual production through the ABG's original research, editorials, and vi-

75. Ibid.

76. Faderman and Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 235–36.

77. Ibid, 237.

78. For more on gay print culture, see Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston, 1995); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago, 2006); Tracy Baim and Owen Keehn, *Gay Press, Gay Power: The Growth of LGBT Community Newspapers in America* (Chicago, 2012).

79. Association of Black Gays, "History of the ABG," 4.

80. A gay Pan-Africanist periodical that was similar to *Rafiki* was *Moja = Black & Gay*. The inaugural issue of *Moja* was published in 1978. In a 1979 issue of *Moja*, the National Coalition of Black Gays listed the ABG in its directory of Third World gay and lesbian organizations. See *Moja = Black & Gay*, April 3, 1979, 3.

sual content.⁸¹ Copies of *Rafiki* circulated locally and also reached readers in Atlanta and Washington, DC. In addition to African American gays and lesbians in L.A., *Rafiki* garnered the interest of social service agencies and sociology departments at universities across the United States. Despite *Rafiki's* classification as a race-themed publication, historically black colleges and universities such as Howard University and Morehouse College responded unfavorably to the journal's homosexual content.⁸²

For a suggested donation of fifty cents, readers of *Rafiki* could find articles about local organizing events, poetry authored by African American gays and lesbians, editorials about US foreign policy, recipes, and book features. Grayson's Pan-Africanist sentiments were reflected throughout the journal, including the title *Rafiki*, which is a Swahili word that means “friend.” In *Rafiki*, members of the ABG reported on issues beyond L.A. in research articles on same-sex practices in ancient Africa and editorials on the exploitation of black miners under apartheid in South Africa. Although other publications featured stories about gay people from different parts of the world, *Rafiki* stood out in comparison with mainstream periodicals that contained few references to Africa in their pages.⁸³ The ABG omitted individual bylines for longer articles in favor of establishing a collective voice. As a whole, *Rafiki* was an outlet for ABG's members to launch their sustained antiracist and anticapitalist critiques of gay liberation and theorize about black gay identity through a Pan-Africanist lens.⁸⁴

Rafiki's visual content reflected the ABG's understanding of themselves as situated at the intersection of the black nationalist and gay liberation struggles. The pages of *Rafiki* elucidated how ABG members viewed themselves first as black people with the goal of “one day joining the national black movement to help stamp out the oppression of all black people.”⁸⁵ The most striking visual representation of the ABG's desired solidarity between both the black and gay communities was reflected in the group's logo. Printed on ABG flyers and on the cover of *Rafiki*, the logo combined the iconic lambda symbol that represented gay activist organizations and the image of the raised fist most commonly associated with Black Power groups. The synthesis of iconography from both movements reflected the ABG's commitment to fighting racism and homopho-

81. *Rafiki* is considered to be among the first in a series of periodicals created by and for black gays and lesbians; see Kai Wright, “Documenting a Black Gay and Lesbian Literary Canon,” *Black Issues Book Review* 6, no. 4 (August 2004): 39.

82. Jones and Bucci, “Struggle within a Struggle,” 6.

83. Downs, *Stand by Me*, 270.

84. The launch of *Rafiki* was announced in local gay newspapers; see “Black Gay Journal Starts,” *The Advocate*, January 26, 1977; “Tidbits,” *Esplanade*, February 11, 1977.

85. Association of Black Gays, “History of the ABG,” 7.

bia. Moreover, the ABG's logo signified their belief that unification despite racial and sexual difference between black and gay activists could be actualized.

THE ABG AND PAN-AFRICANISM

Much of the editorial content published in *Rafiki* helped the journal's black gay readers develop a Pan-African understanding of their racial and sexual identity. The ABG's references to Africa and African cultural practices was emblematic of a larger Pan-Africanist sentiment that fueled black activist groups during the 1970s.⁸⁶ To help black gays and lesbians feel fully included in the larger black freedom struggle, Grayson led the ABG's initiative to conduct research on same-sex practices in ancient Africa.⁸⁷ In the first issue of *Rafiki*, which was published in 1976, an article titled "Homosexuality in Tribal Africa" informed readers on the same-sex practices that took place on the African continent prior to colonization. The ABG's historicization of same-sex practices in Africa affirmed *Rafiki*'s African American readers of their shared sexual past with Africans and reflected the group's goal of helping to "bridge the gap between our brothers and sisters in Africa."⁸⁸ The ABG presented their findings by listing the ethnic groups that engaged in various same-sex sexual practices. The article's text was visually complemented by a drawing of the African continent with markers that designated each group's geographic location. The article detailed each ethnic group's sexual practices and informed *Rafiki*'s readers that many of the acts were part of a long tradition of ceremonial rites of passage.

The ABG's article on same-sex practices in ancient Africa reflected the group's goal for *Rafiki*'s readers to understand how homosexuality was not a rupture in black sexual practices, but a form of desire with a rightful place in the history of peoples of African descent. The ABG encouraged *Rafiki*'s black gay and lesbian readers to view their sexual practices as part of a centuries-old tradition that they were drawing upon. Grayson believed that understanding the cultural roots of being black and gay would instill a sense of pride in African American gays and lesbians, who were often excluded from black nationalist

86. Historian Manning Marable notes that African independence movements spurred Pan-Africanist sentiments among black nationalists in the United States during the late 1960s. During the 1970s, several Left black groups, both straight and gay, held similar anti-integrationist politics; see "Black Nationalism in the 1970s: Through the Prism of Race and Class," *Socialist Review*, June 1980, 100. Historian Russell Rickford also discusses the uses of Pan-Africanist concepts in black political education during the 1970s; see *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (New York, 2016), 2.

87. Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 7.

88. Association of Black Gays, "Homosexuality in Tribal Africa," *Rafiki*, August 1976, 2.

circles because of their sexuality. The ABG understood their knowledge production on same-sex practices in Africa as a way to “reconstruct the unique history” of black gays and lesbians and to strengthen their connection to their ancestral homeland.⁸⁹

The ABG educated *Rafiki*’s readers on the history of same-sex practices in Africa as a way of bridging a perceived cultural divide. The group also aimed to raise awareness of current geopolitical issues that took place on the continent. Grayson’s decision to publish articles on Africa stemmed from his concern that young gay African Americans were dangerously disconnected from critical issues such as apartheid. In an article titled “South Africa,” the ABG launched an anticapitalist critique of US involvement in the exploitation of black miners. The ABG’s analysis underscored the links between the consumption of South African goods by Americans and the harsh working conditions of black miners, whose labor was exploited for the profit of corporations.⁹⁰ The article highlighted how African Americans in the United States consciously and unconsciously participated in the economic oppression of Africans and encouraged them to take responsibility for the miners’ suffering.⁹¹

By linking the fate between African Americans and Africans, the ABG understood themselves and *Rafiki*’s black gay readers as part of a global community of black people in the struggle for racial, sexual, and economic liberation. The ABG’s blend of Pan-Africanist and socialist politics were reflected in their writings on Africa’s same-sex practices and South African apartheid. The ABG’s intellectual production in *Rafiki* symbolized a more expansive political agenda than white-led activist organizations in L.A.’s gay community. *Rafiki* served as an outlet through which the ABG actualized the goal of building a black gay conscience by educating their readers on the diverse history of black sexual practices and laying the ideological plan for future activists to further discuss black and gay identity.

THE ABG, BLACK NATIONALISM, AND GAY LIBERATION

The ABG became inactive in 1979 after the association lent support to the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.⁹² Grayson attributed the ABG’s demise to an increase in the organizing and speaking requests made

89. Ibid.

90. Association of Black Gays, “South Africa,” *Rafiki*, August 1976, 3.

91. Ibid.

92. The ABG was listed as inactive in the National Coalition of Black Gays’s directory of Third World Gay and Lesbian organizations. See National Coalition of Black Gays, “3rd World Listing-O rganizations,” August 1979, 2.

of the group's members.⁹³ Similar to many grassroots activist organizations that relied on the unpaid labor of volunteers, the ABG's members believed they could no longer continue to hold protests, meet with local politicians, and publish *Rafiki* without additional support. Despite the ABG's brief existence, Grayson felt confident that, as a collective of militant African American gay and lesbian activists, it was still "an organization ahead of its time."⁹⁴ Grayson continued to build on the momentum of the ABG's activist and intellectual production by establishing other organizations dedicated to issues such as homelessness and HIV/AIDS prevention.⁹⁵

Grayson's experience as a working-class African American man in Left activist circles influenced his economic understanding of the Gay Liberation Movement. As an out gay man, Grayson observed how mainstream gay rights organizations often failed to adequately address the concerns of African American gays and lesbians in L.A. Grayson was propelled into action by experiencing firsthand the practices of racial discrimination at the city's gay establishments. Although Grayson's prior affiliations with Left gay activist groups informed his economic critique of gay politics, founding the ABG provided him the space to further investigate how racism pervaded L.A.'s ostensibly inclusive gay community.

As one of the earliest African American gay activist groups in L.A., the ABG's Pan-Africanist and socialist approaches to activism reflected their innovative use of existing political ideologies in radical gay liberationist and black nationalist circles. Moreover, the ABG's theorizations on the intersections of racism and homophobia resembled the intellectual work of black feminist organizations who understood their racial, sexual, and gender oppression as interlocking.⁹⁶

93. Jones and Bucci, "Struggle within a Struggle," 7.

94. Ibid.

95. After the ABG dissolved, Grayson continued advocating for black gays and lesbians by founding the L.A. chapter of the Committee of Black Gay Men and by serving as the Southwest Regional Director of the National Committee of Black Gay Men in 1980. See Ron Grayson to Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays, December 5, 1980, box 1, folder 2, Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays Records, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives; Ron Grayson, "Statement on CBS documentary 'Gay Power/Gay Politics,'" April 30, 1980, Pat Rocco Papers, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

96. For black feminist critiques of homophobia in the black community and racism in queer politics, see Amy Abugo Ongiri, "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination," *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (February 1997): 280–94; Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 437–65; Barbara Smith, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia and the Black Community," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Blacks, Gays, and the Struggle for Equality*, ed. Eric Brandt (New York, 1999), 31–44.

The issues the ABG organized against, which included racial discrimination at gay establishments and police harassment of gay individuals, represented the wide range of oppressions facing black gay people during the 1970s. The ABG staged direct-action protests, boycotts, and picket lines to counteract community injustices. The ABG’s efforts forced L.A.’s gay and lesbian elite to confront their racist practices. The ABG’s members refused to let issues facing African American gays and lesbians go unnoticed for fear of being labeled divisive by the city’s gay elite. Although the ABG understood the impact of protests, the group also strategized ways to respectfully engage with formal politics. The ABG’s meetings with Mayor Bradley and their campaign to nominate an African American to be the gay liaison for his administration demonstrated their commitment to increasing racial representation in L.A.’s formal political body.

In their activism around wrongful incarceration, members of the ABG shed light on how black sexuality was often criminalized by the state. The Ernest Marshall case signified the ABG’s understanding of the biases in the criminal justice system and how racial, sexual, and economic oppression overlapped in the legal realm.⁹⁷ Grayson’s decision to study law in addition to pooling resources for Marshall’s defense fund reflected the group’s willingness to advocate for the needs of African American gays and lesbians through grassroots measures.

Rafiki’s visual and editorial content reflected the ABG’s commitment to building a black gay conscience by offering a positive history of black homosexuality. Whereas black nationalist organizations gained inspiration from imagining Africa’s past as a racial utopia, the ABG utilized their knowledge of same-sex practices in Africa’s past as a way to affirm their sexual identities. Through *Rafiki*, the ABG celebrated the identities of their black gay and lesbian readers by educating them on the diverse history of black sexual practices. The ABG’s Pan-Africanist approach to understanding racial and sexual identity aided in bridging the cultural divide between African Americans and Africans by underscoring how people of African descent experienced similar racial, sexual, and economic oppressions. The ABG’s multivocal approach to gay activism differed from mainstream gay organizations that privileged their sexual identity over racial and class-based affiliations.

The ABG believed that there was “no limit to what we can do for the black gays and the entire community.”⁹⁸ Unlike other black gay activist groups that

97. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw has examined how the legal system responds to intersecting forms of racial and gender discrimination; see “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

98. Association of Black Gays, “History of the ABG,” 7.

held integrationist politics, such as the National Association of Black and White Men Together, the ABG built on black nationalist discourses of self-determination to bring gay and lesbian issues to the forefront. The ABG's unique political perspective illuminated their exclusion from the mainstream Gay Liberation Movement. Furthermore, the ABG's political agenda went beyond simply critiquing Black Power homophobia in order to challenge white understandings of the gay experience since the Stonewall Riots. To this end, the ABG succeeded in melding black and gay liberation.

The ABG's fusion of racial politics with gay politics enhanced their political agenda. The ABG also expanded the focus of local campaigns for gay rights to include the needs of L.A.'s black gays and lesbians. As a voice for L.A.'s black gay community, the ABG advocated for an end to racist practices at gay establishments and for adequate social services, including public housing and counseling. The ABG also included the experiences of L.A.'s working-class black gay residents in their fight to free Ernest Marshall from imprisonment on sodomy charges. The ABG's consistent engagement with L.A.'s white gay political establishment demonstrates how the group positioned race within local discussions about gay rights. The ABG's persistent meetings with Mayor Bradley to appoint an African American gay liaison also reflects the group members' willingness to employ more respectable strategies for political advancement together with direct-action protests, boycotts, and picket lines.

Composed of militant African American gay and lesbian activists, artists, and intellectuals, the ABG built upon Grayson's commitment to Pan-Africanism and socialism to form a unique political perspective. The ABG's innovative approach to politics and activism allowed the group to challenge the frequent practices of racist discrimination at L.A.'s white-owned gay bars and clubs. The ABG's political standpoint also served as a foundation for the group to challenge gay liberalism and integration, using the exclusion of black gays and lesbians from L.A.'s political body as evidence that the city's gay community was not as inclusive as mainstream gay rights activists had proclaimed. Through their activism, the ABG exemplified and merged important aspects of black nationalist and gay liberationist ideologies on a local level.

Grayson's disruptions at respectable rallies against the LAPD represented his larger disdain for community injustices that affected the gay community. Grayson rejected claims made by L.A.'s conservative leaders who suggested that his protests and boycotts were dividing the city's larger gay community. Grayson's commitment to racial and economic justice in L.A.'s gay community stemmed from his own experience of having been denied entry into the city's gay clubs. In founding the GCPC, Grayson addressed the grievances of gays and lesbians who experienced racial discrimination at local gay bars and clubs. Grayson's involvement with L.A.'s other radical gay and lesbian orga-

nizations enhanced his economic critique of gay liberalism as he was exposed to Marxist and communist literature. Grayson's insurgent praxis included using major gay-themed events in L.A. as crucial platforms to unite and mobilize disgruntled gays and lesbians of color who felt neglected by the city's mostly white political establishment. Grayson's speeches at these events further exposed the ways gays and lesbians of color were excluded from L.A.'s larger gay community.

As the founder of the ABG, Grayson steered the group's consistent engagement with L.A.'s gay youth by leading identity development workshops at local junior high, high school, and college campuses. The ABG's members raised awareness of racial inequality in L.A.'s gay community by appearing on local gay radio and television stations. The ABG seized every moment in the public eye to draw attention to the community injustices that largely effected L.A.'s black and gay residents.

Grayson's critique of racial inequality in L.A.'s gay community evolved to include black gay and lesbians in the African diaspora. Additionally, the ABG's efforts at reconstructing the history of black sexual practices in the journal *Rafiki* challenged narratives of racial struggle that obscured and marginalized the history of same-sex practices in Africa. The ABG used *Rafiki* to empower black gays and lesbians by publishing news articles, editorials, poetry, and artwork that challenged racism, homophobia, sexism, and imperialism. Using a Pan-Africanist framework, the ABG linked the struggles of its African American readership to political movements for sexual and economic liberation in Africa in order to "cut the barriers that divide us as blacks and come to an understanding of each other that we have not had in the past."⁹⁹

Through grassroots organizing, community outreach, and the journal *Rafiki*, the ABG's activism and intellectual work around issues affecting black gays and lesbians made the group's members pioneers in the struggle to illuminate the sexual dimensions of racial domination.¹⁰⁰ Despite the group's brief existence, the ABG's accomplishments under Grayson's leadership would later be honored by the next generation of black gay and lesbian activists in L.A.¹⁰¹ The ABG's grassroots activism and intellectual efforts to build a black gay consciousness highlighted the needs of African American gays and lesbians in L.A. and stand as their most important contributions to understanding the African American gay experience during the 1970s.

99. Ibid.

100. Robin D. G Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), 149.

101. The Black Men's Xchange, a cultural organization dedicated to the identity development of black LGBT people, presented the Ron Grayson Award to a number of young black gay activists in honor of Grayson's legacy; see "BLK People," *BLK* 3, no. 8 (August 1991): 7.