

From the Couch to the Pulpit: Antihomosexual Psychiatry, Love in Action, and the
Transformation of Conversion Therapy in the 20th Century United States

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Introduction

In August 2020, after months of silence, Anthony Quintal posted a strange, 41-minute video to his YouTube page. The twenty-one-year-old— better known by his longtime screenname, Lohanthony (a portmanteau of Quintal’s name and that of his celebrity idol, Lindsay Lohan)— had risen to Internet fame nearly a decade earlier. Yet the videos which had earned him millions of followers as a high schooler in the 2010s, short vlogs where Quintal discussed his life and pop culture and showcased his wonderfully flamboyant, foul-mouthed online persona, had vanished. Once one of the most prominent young, gay figures on the Internet, Quintal now declared that he had renounced his homosexuality to pursue a life of “Christian celibacy.”¹

“When I entered middle school,” Quintal, lacking his usual theatricality, explained to the camera in the now-deleted video. “I began what would be my decade-long search for gay love that would ultimately end with disappointment toward the solace I thought I was bred to solely find in men. A void which would later be filled by Jesus Christ.”²

To many of those who had become acclimated to the old Lohanthony— the one whose most viewed clip featured him in sunglasses and suspenders chanting “Calling all the basic bitches! Calling all the basic bitches! There is a new announcement: You’re basic.”³ the one who, at fifteen, *New York Magazine* described in a glowing profile as “a savant of camp;”⁴ the one who considered RuPaul and Beyonce as his top role models⁵— Quintal’s transformation into a devout, anti-gay Christian was nearly incomprehensible. Twitter and message boards buzzed

¹Kat Tenbarge, “YouTuber Lohanthony Was Once an Openly Gay Internet Star. Now, He’s an Advocate for Christian Celibacy, an Ideological Cousin of Conversion Therapy,” *BusinessInsider.com*, August 2020.

²Brittney McNamara, “YouTuber Lohanthony Said He’s Practicing ‘Christian Celibacy’ in a Video That Concerned Fans,” *Teen Vogue*, August 26, 2020.

³Rich Juzwiak, “Lohanthony Has a Brighter Future Than Lindsay Lohan,” *New York Magazine*, April 14, 2014.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Mike Miller, “Lohanthony Twerks, Talks About Coming Out on YouTube at VidCon,” *People.Com*, July 23, 2015.

with speculation as to the cause of Quintal's strange diatribe. Was Quintal playing a prank? Had he been kidnapped? Bought out?

Others, including fellow YouTuber and outspoken gay activist Tyler Oakley, saw in Quintal's jarring transformation and rhetoric the fingerprints of a widely discredited yet pervasive type of program aimed at forcibly changing the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBT people: conversion therapy.⁶ Though Quintal has never confirmed or denied undergoing conversion therapy, his announcement nonetheless reignited online discourse about the practice and the "ex-gay" movement, which reached peak ubiquity in the 1990s and early 2000s. In that period, ex-gays appeared on countless talk shows, assumed high-power roles in right wing lobbying organizations like Focus on the Family, and even graced the cover of *Newsweek*.⁷ While almost every mainstream medical organization, including the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration have formally disavowed therapies aimed at modifying or changing sexual orientation or gender identity,⁸ the practice remains remarkably pervasive: in 2019, researchers from the Williams Institute at the University of California Los Angeles reported that an estimated 698,000 LGBTQ adults in the United States had undergone some form of conversion therapy in their lifetime. Of these adults, over 350,000 of them had undergone conversion therapy as adolescents.⁹

⁶ "It's Still Happening: A Report on Practitioners of So-Called Conversion 'Therapy' in the U.S." (The Trevor Project), December 12, 2023; Tyler Oakley, "Calling All the Anti-Gay Bitches... (Lohanthy Promoting Conversion Therapy)," September 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqx1s056SXU>.

⁷ Schlanger Zoe and Wolfson Elijah, "Ex-Ex-Gay Pride," *Newsweek*, May 1, 2014.

⁸ "New SAMHSA Report Underscores the Harms of Conversion Therapy & Importance of Affirmation for LGBTQ Young People's Mental Health," National Center for Lesbian Rights, accessed March 24, 2025; "The Lies and Dangers of Efforts to Change Sexual Orientation Or...."

⁹ Christy Mallory, Taylor N.T. Brown, and Kerith J. Conron, "Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth" (Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, June 2019).

Since the 1980s, conversion therapy has been largely synonymous with quixotic efforts to “pray the gay away.” In 2023, The Trevor Project reported that of the 1,320-odd conversion therapy programs identified in the United States, over 700 were operating in a ministerial capacity.¹⁰ While over 600 practitioners hold active professional licenses, few, if any, of these contemporary conversion programs operate outside religious frameworks.¹¹

For those of us who grew up in the era of Proposition 8 and the Westboro Baptist Church, it may feel easy to assume that organized resistance to LGBT people, including projects aimed at “normalizing” queer sexuality or gender expression, was *always* primarily religious in nature. However, prior to the 1970s, most Americans, secular and religious alike, tended to consider “the issue” of homosexuality in the valence of *medicine*, not religion.¹² As the historian Regina Kunzel wrote in her recent book, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis: Psychiatric Power and Queer Life*:

It is hard to overstate psychiatry’s dominance over the understanding and regulation of homosexuality [between World War II and the 1970s]. More than an aggregate of practitioners, clinics, and institutions, psychiatry represented a new epistemology and a new operation of power.¹³

The 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s marked a postwar “golden age” of what I call “antihomosexual psychiatry:” the broad network of practices, theories, and institutions which promoted the definition of homosexuality as a mental disturbance, characterized by a distinct set of sexual and non-sexual symptoms, that could be “treated” or even “cured” using various tools

¹⁰ “It’s Still Happening,” 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

¹² Regina Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis: Psychiatric Power and Queer Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024), 88-89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

and techniques from the psy-sciences— including talk therapy, electroshock, aversion therapy, and group therapy. Coinciding with what has been described as the “golden age” of psychoanalysis¹⁴ and a postwar moment in which “a homosexual-heterosexual binary...was being inscribed in federal citizenship policy,”¹⁵ these decades saw psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts emerge as the hegemonic authorities on homosexuality’s definition, classification, and—critically— treatment.¹⁶

Then, in the early 1970s, the paradigmatic form of conversion therapy began to dramatically shift. In December 1973, after years of agitation on the part of gay and lesbian activists, the board of the American Psychological Association voted to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness— a move which marked the formal start of psychiatric conversion therapy’s descent into the scientific fringe.¹⁷ Simultaneously, a new, Jesus-powered conversion therapy movement began to coalesce in the sun-bleached hills of Marin County, California.¹⁸ Indeed, the very same month the APA voted to declassify homosexuality, Frank Worthen— a small business owner who, after nearly two decades living as an openly gay man in San Francisco, renounced his homosexuality and devoted his life to Jesus — founded Love in Action (LIA), the first ministry in the United States dedicated to offering “freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ Over the next years, Worthen and his partner, a seminary-trained pastor named Kent Philpott, developed what would become the basis of religious conversion therapy.

¹⁴ Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁵ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3; for more see Canaday, “‘With the Ugly Word Written across It’: Homo-Hetero Binarism, Federal Welfare Policy, and the 1944 GI Bill.”

¹⁶ “Homophobia’s Durability and the Reinvention of Psychoanalysis,” in *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes*, by Dagmar Herzog (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 55–86.

¹⁷ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 150.

¹⁸ Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 22-23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Despite the close temporal proximity of these two events, the relationship between the decline of psychiatric conversion therapy and the rise of Love in Action has received limited scholarly attention.²⁰ In this thesis, I attempt to articulate a more nuanced narrative of this “changing of the guards” by orienting psychiatric conversion therapy’s decline and religious conversion therapy’s emergence within their common cultural and political contexts. Paying close attention to the way in which these two movements asserted their authority over the definition and treatment of homosexuality, courted gay and lesbian clients, and legitimized their programs in the face of persistent failure and skepticism, this thesis argues that the factors which led to the collapse of antihomosexual psychiatry— homosexuality’s coalescence into a politically meaningful minority identity, the emergence of a sprawling, consumer-facing therapeutic marketplace, the development of “self-help” culture, and American’s declining trust in large, state-aligned institutions— were the very same factors which enabled Love in Action’s ascension.

While the historiographical landscape in the 1980s and 1990s generally emphasized queer *responses* to legal and social oppression, the last two decades have seen a renewed scholarly interest in antigay movements and mobilizations in the United States, particularly within the context of the Christian Right.²¹ However, these investigations tend to frame these mobilizations as struggles between heterosexual crusaders like Anita Bryant and an undifferentiated “gay community,” reinforcing a false binarism between conservative politics and LGBT identity. An increasing number of scholars, Neil J. Young chief among them, have

²⁰ Stephen Vider and David S. Byers, “A Half-Century of Conflict Over Attempts to ‘Cure’ Gay People,” *Time*, February 12, 2015.

²¹ See: Johnson, “Anita Bryant Leads a Moral Crusade.”; Williams, “The Grassroots Campaign to Save the Family”; Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*; Dowland, “Gay Rights.”

attempted to complicate this neat narrative by chronicling LGBT people who have participated in or aligned themselves with Right, reactionary, or even explicitly antigay political movements in the United States.²² This thesis hopes to build upon this scholarship: though Worthen and other Love in Action leaders worked to obfuscate the political dimensions of their ministerial work, the emergence of ex-gay-led conversion therapy ministries, I argue, nonetheless represents a critical development in the history of the “gay Right.”

Considering the movement’s pervasiveness and consequentiality, the body of historical research into the Christian conversion therapy movement remains strikingly sparse. The bulk of the scholarly and popular works on the Christian ex-gay movement were written during the 1990s and 2000s by sociologists, journalists, activists, psychologists, and scholars of religion. Many of these articles and volumes— including gay activist and journalist Wayne R. Besen’s 2003 book, *Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth*, and psychiatrist Jack Drescher’s 2002 book, *Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical, and Research Perspectives*— primarily focus on debunking false or misleading made by ex-gay groups or documenting the harms of conversion therapy on program participants.²³ Additionally, numerous survivors of conversion therapy programs have written books detailing their experiences, the best known of which is *Boy Erased*, Garrad Conley’s memoir about his time at a Love in Action program in the early 2000s.

The two most comprehensive studies of the ex-gay movement are perhaps *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (2006) by religious scholar Tonya Erzen and *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-gay*

²² Neil J. Young, *Coming Out Republican: A History of the Gay Right* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024).

²³ Michelle Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 21.

Christian Men (2006) by sociologist Michelle Wolkomir. *Straight to Jesus*, an anthropological study of conversion therapy groups, primarily draws on the research Erzen conducted while embedded in the year-long residential treatment program of New Hope, the name which Frank Worthen's Marin-based ex-gay ministry adopted after Love in Action was taken over and relocated to Memphis by John Smid. Erzen's work provides a substantial anthropological account of New Hope's doctrine, practices, and culture, incorporating the rich information Erzen collected through extensive interviews with ministry leadership (including Frank Worthen) as well as current and past conversion therapy program participants. While Erzen does provide a general overview of Love in Action's history and development, her work primarily endeavors to document the ex-gay movement as a contemporary phenomenon and orient their religious and therapeutic practices within broader currents of American evangelical Christianity versus to historicize ex-gay therapies. *Be Not Deceived*, on the other hand, compares the ex-gay umbrella organization Exodus International to the Metropolitan Community Church, a pro-gay Church founded by Pentecostal pastor Troy Perry in 1968.²⁴ Wolkomir argues that both groups "present solutions at opposing ends of a spectrum of how homosexuality might be handled within Christianity."²⁵ Similarly to *Straight to Jesus*, *Be Not Deceived* is a social scientific study of a contemporary phenomenon (*contra* historical study) and is primarily interested in the religious or spiritual dimensions of conversion therapy ministries.

The thesis, in contrast, aims to situate Love in Action within a broader socio-political and cultural framework, challenging the tendency to compartmentalize religious conversion therapy programs by examining them solely within the context of evangelical subculture. While evangelical Christianity was undoubtedly the backbone of Love in Action, focusing exclusively

²⁴ Michael Durham, "Homosexuals in Revolt," *LIFE*, December 31, 1971, 70.

²⁵ Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived*, 6.

on Love in Action's religious dimensions often obscures, I argue, what exactly made the organization so successful: their ability to bridge the gap between conservative Christianity and secular therapeutic culture. Furthermore, the thesis attempts to parse out Love in Action's relationship with psychiatric conversion therapy, illuminating the continuities between religious and medicalized efforts to regulate and "cure" homosexuality and gender nonconformity. By blurring the divide between secular and religious forms of antigay policing, this thesis attempts to move beyond simply chronicling sexual orientation change efforts throughout the 20th century and instead clarify why *particular articulations of conversion therapy succeeded at specific historical moments*.

In preparation for this work, I have reviewed hundreds of pages of instructional materials, newsletters, books, pamphlets, fliers, and personal testimonies written or published by Love in Action leaders, including Frank Worthen and Kent Philpott, and maintained in digital or physical archives. Many of the internal documents, pamphlets, and program workbooks cited in this thesis were located in The Mattachine Society of Washington's "Love in Action" Collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center. The collection, which is comprised of material donated in 2017 by *Boy Erased* author Garrad Conley and John Smid, who acted as the executive director of Love in Action's Memphis offshoot from 1989 to 2008, have not been the basis of extensive research. While the Mattachine collection provided a rich portrait of life inside Love in Action, the ONE Archives at USC Libraries' subject files on the ex-gay movement, conversion therapy, and evangelicals contained extensive fliers, articles, and pamphlets about Love in Action written by gay and lesbian activists in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Put together, these two archival sources provide a clear sense of how Love in Action

shaped the lives of its members, interacted with the gay community, and situated themselves within a broader political discourse around gay identity.

The first chapter will focus on the postwar period and the development of what I call “antihomosexual psychiatry,” the broad network of practices, theories, and institutions which promoted the definition of homosexuality as a mental disturbance, characterized by a distinct set of sexual and non-sexual symptoms, that could be “treated” or even “cured” using various tools and techniques from the psy-sciences— including talk therapy, electroshock, and aversion therapy.

The second chapter will assess how developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s— including the coalescence of gay identity politics, the antipsychiatry movement, the rise of “self-help” culture, and the dramatic growth of charismatic Christian movements— simultaneously precipitated the demise of antihomosexual psychiatry and the birth of conversion therapy ministries, such as Love in Action. Ultimately, this comparison works to illuminate the degree to which Love in Action’s success was predicated on the fact that their model of religious conversion therapy was able systematically neutralize the existential threats posed by the gay community, gay-affirming religious organizations, and, above all, the irreproachable fact that sexual orientation change efforts do not work. This thesis seeks to demonstrate, therefore, how Love in Action’s pervasiveness and longevity did not ultimately hinge on the *quality* of their therapeutic model *per se*, but the *resilience* of their therapeutic model in the face of unremittent failure.

Chapter 1: “There Are No Healthy Homosexuals”

Martin Duberman, the diarist and historian, landed on the couch of “Dr. Weintraub” in 1955 in the wake of a failed relationship.²⁶ “Those were the years when— for the privileged, particularly those living on the Eastern Seaboard— the decision to enter therapy seemed logical and valid,” he recounts in his 1985 work of history and memoir, *Cures*. “In a culture that had grown apolitical and conservative, analyzing the inner life had become a primary, praiseworthy enterprise. For intellectuals and egotists especially, it was the elective choice of the moment, *the* certified path to self-knowledge.”²⁷ Widespread as psychotherapy’s appeal may have been, Duberman’s decision to enter treatment was not spurred by a desire to explore the recesses of his inner life. He already *knew* who he was, already knew the source of his mental afflictions, his failed relationships. He was a homosexual, that “ungrown, truncated version of humanity,”²⁸ inescapably “disordered and diseased.”²⁹ And he knew that a psychiatrist could be the one to help.

Between the 1940s and 1970s, psychiatry was a ubiquitous presence in the lives of gay, lesbian, and gender nonconforming Americans. During these decades, thousands of queer people underwent compulsory or voluntary psychiatric treatment in hopes of curing or “adjusting” their sexual orientation or gender expression.³⁰ Bolstered by enormous cultural prestige and institutional power and operating under the auspice of scientific objectivity, American psychiatrists cemented themselves as the preeminent public authorities on sexuality, lending their voices to criminal proceedings and glossy magazine profiles in equal measure. In addition to

²⁶ For Duberman’s full account of his experience in psychoanalysis during the 1950s, see Martin Duberman, “Gay In The Fifties,” *Salmagundi*, no. 58/59 (1982): 42–75.

²⁷ Martin B. Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1991). 32-3.

²⁸ Duberman, *Cures*, 20.

²⁹ Duberman, *Cures*, 24.

³⁰ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 1.

directly shaping the lives of patients who underwent treatment, psychiatry provided the language and logic through which the American public— gay and straight alike— came to understand homosexuality and the increasingly visible gay community.³¹

Already an outsider in the WASP-y, conservative world of New England academia, Duberman recognized, likely accurately, that tacking on “known homosexual” to the list of his unsavory characteristics would be a bridge too far, upsetting the balance of “deviancy” and “acceptability” in the eyes of his colleagues.³² Beyond the harassment and humiliation to which open or suspected homosexuals were subjected, Duberman surely also understood the probable *material* cost if his sexuality were to be exposed. In his memoir, Duberman recalls an episode in the late fifties where a young faculty member and friend at Yale, after reciprocating a male student’s advance at a party, was confronted after the student reported the incident to his dean.³³ The administrators indicated that, if the young academic were to plead ignorance about the affair and pin the blame on the student, Yale would do their best to make the problem go away. Faced with the dilemma of either “demean[ing] his own nature” and leveraging his power at the expense of the student or maintaining his dignity at the expense of his job, the young professor— in a move that Duberman noted as being highly uncommon for the time— chose the latter.³⁴ The administration, having given the faculty member what, in the fervently homophobic atmosphere of the fifties, might have been considered a humane option that would permit him to keep his position, expressed their disappointment in the faculty member’s refusal to participate in the scheme. The faculty member paid for his uncommonly courageous act of self-assertion with his

³¹ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 11-14.

³² Duberman, *Cures*, 1.

³³ Duberman, *Cures*, 43.

³⁴ Duberman, *Cures*, 43.

career. Yale fired him, and the professor, resentful of his mistreatment by the “prudes” of the academy, never sought another academic position.³⁵

If the possibility of life “outside the closet” remained downright unthinkable for most queer Americans living in the post-war years, the “double life” seemed like an imperfect alternative.³⁶ Though it is imperative to avoid painting the pre-Stonewall years in overly grim terms, it remains the case that many queer people, particularly queer people living outside of major urban areas, remember their necessarily clandestine personal lives as being permeated with intense loneliness, shame, and anxiety. For many, romantic encounters were limited to seedy (and often mob-run) gay bars and anonymous hookups.

The threat of arrest was, likewise, omnipresent. Police departments across the country launched coordinated programs to entrap gay men at known cruising spots, sending their youngest, handsomest officers to loiter in parks, subway stations, and lookout points. Victims of such schemes frequently recall the undercover officers themselves initiating the encounters which landed them in handcuffs. In cities like New York, police frequently raided gay bars, slapping patrons with spurious felony charges of “disorderly conduct” or “public indecency” more or less indiscriminately.³⁷ Even if a queer individual *wanted* to keep their sexuality hidden, government vigilance made the enterprise an uphill battle.

At a time when most gay men were faced with the choice between celibacy and safety or connection and constant risk, psychiatrists presented an intoxicating, third option: change.

³⁵ Duberman, *Cures*, 43.

³⁶ For a more extensive discussion on “The Double Life,” see: George Chauncey, “The Double Life, Camp Culture, and the Making of a Collective Identity,” in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 283–312.

³⁷ George Chauncey, “The Forgotten History of Gay Entrapment,” *The Atlantic*, June 25, 2019.

Duberman's path to the analyst's couch was, far from overdetermined, the result of contingent and strikingly recent developments in the psychiatric profession. This chapter endeavors, first and foremost, to situate antihomosexual psychiatry's development within historical context. Identifying and describing the material, social, and political conditions which prompted psychiatrists to identify homosexuality as a key clinical concern, shaped the content of antihomosexual theory and practice, and led to psychiatrists becoming the premiere public authorities on homosexuality will ultimately help clarify how and why specific developments in late 1960s and early 1970s led to the *collapse* of antihomosexual psychiatry and the *emergence* of religious conversion therapy.

How and why did the language of *disease* come to dominate the way Americans understood homosexuality during the postwar period? How did psychiatrists, a group which had been historically marginalized within the medical community, establish themselves as the definitive authorities on homosexuality? How, despite dismal success rates and continuous challenges from other branches of science, did psychiatrists convince the American public that they could "cure" homosexuality?

All-American Freudians

Critical to understanding psychiatry's outsized role in mid-century gay American life and public consciousness is understanding how and why a group which, in the decades preceding the war, had, as Regina Kunzel argues, been typified by "custodial jobs in asylums and state institutions overseeing chronically mentally ill and elderly dementia patients and battled public skepticism about their professional status as medical doctors" managed to, by the 1940s, 1950s,

and 1960s, innovate “careers that were fully integrated into American medicine and American public life.”³⁸

This transformation was, as Kunzel, Dagmar Herzog, and other historians of psychiatry have written, ignited by political, cultural, and demographic shifts brought on by the two world wars and perpetuated by Cold War domestic politics.

The aftermath of World War II played a crucial role in elevating psychiatry's status and expanding its influence in American society. As the historian Rebecca Schwartz Green outlines in *Breaking Point*, the Second World War saw a moment in which psychiatry, once shunted to the margins of medicine, found itself poised to confront an issue of national importance: the mental wellbeing of troops.³⁹ In 1940, with America’s involvement in the burgeoning Second World War still on the horizon, the director of the Selective Service tapped American psychiatrist Henry Stack Sullivan to develop comprehensive guidelines for psychological screening of potential service members to root out mental infirmity.⁴⁰ Though Sullivan was in a same-sex relationship for much of his adult life, these guidelines listed homosexuality among the conditions which disqualified inductees from service— a policy remained in place for decades to come.⁴¹

The symbiotic relationship between psychiatrists and the state that emerged in this period likewise persisted long after the end of the War. “Enveloped in a climate of catastrophic global militarism and divisive national debate over the realization of racial and sexual equality,” argues Ellen Herman, “psychological experts [during the postwar years] shaped the direction and texture of public life deliberately, with results that were striking and unprecedented.”⁴² Maturing

³⁸ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 12.

³⁹ Rebecca Schwartz Greene, *Breaking Point: The Ironic Evolution of Psychiatry in World War II*, (New York, USA: Fordham University Press, 2022), 1.

⁴⁰ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 32.

⁴¹ Schwartz Greene, *Breaking Point*, 2, 13-46.

⁴² Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 5-6, quoted in Lawrence R. Samuel, *Shrink: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in America*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), xxi-xxii.

alongside the managerial, technocratic structures described by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The New Industrial State*, American psychoanalysts positioned their discipline as a means of “rationalizing” human relations. Replacing individuals’ “irrational behaviors” and “distorted values” with “a hierarchy of genuine moral ideals which would have obligating powers for his life as an individual and in his relatedness to the group in which he lives” could, they argued, “become the foundation for keeping the superpowers from blowing each other up.”⁴³

The rise of Hitler in Germany and the Anschluss in 1938, meanwhile, precipitated the immigration of hundreds of (largely Jewish) psychoanalysts and psychiatrists from Vienna and Berlin to the United States. As psychoanalysis’s institutional center of gravity began to shift from Europe to America, the theory and practice of psychoanalysis shifted as well.⁴⁴

While the organized practice of psychoanalysis had existed in the United States since Ernest Jones founded the American Psychoanalytic Association in 1911,⁴⁵ and psychiatric medicine and psychoanalysis had substantially overlapped in terms of demographics and practice, the sudden influx of European analysts to America in the 1930s and 1940s precipitated a period of profound psychoanalytic dominance in psychiatric medicine.⁴⁶ While some American analysts towed close to the line of psychoanalytic tradition, others, particularly William Menninger, who acted as APsaA president in the late 1940s, attempted to “Americanize, medicalize, and popularize” the profession.⁴⁷ Menninger’s campaign attempted, as historian Rebecca Jo Plant contended, “to redirect the insular psychoanalytic community away from its theoretical concerns and intensive focus on the individual unconscious by advocating

⁴³ Samuel, *Shrink*, 73.

⁴⁴ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 24.

⁴⁵ James J Putnam et al., “The American Psychoanalytic Association Was Founded on May 9, 1911, in Baltimore, Maryland by the Following Charter Members,” 2007.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Jo Plant, “William Menninger and American Psychoanalysis, 1946–48,” *History of Psychiatry* 16, no. 2 (June 2005): 181–202, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X05046166>, 182.

⁴⁷ Plant, “Menninger,” 183.

assimilation with psychiatry and stressing practical applications.”⁴⁸ Dissolving the divides between psychoanalytic and psychiatric practice and shaking the profession’s radical legacy, association with Jewish intellectuals, and ambiguous status within medicine ultimately yielded a formulation of psychoanalysis congenial to the cultural and political atmosphere of postwar America.⁴⁹

The decades between the Second World War and the Vietnam era represented what scholars generally recognize as American psychoanalysis’s “golden age.” As newer, cheaper, and more efficient forms of psychoanalysis found a receptive audience amongst America’s rapidly expanding middle class, an expanding volume of psychoanalytic literature written for lay audiences helped diffuse psychoanalytic language and concepts into mainstream conversation.⁵⁰ Placated by unprecedented economic and material security, postwar Americans “shifted [their] attention from national and global problems to [their] individual selves.”⁵¹ The desire to understand the *self* at the most granular level became not only acceptable, but “a permanent feature of our national ethos.”⁵²

As astounding as this ascension may have been, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts continued to struggle for scientific legitimacy. The American psychoanalytic community’s self-conscious attempt to slough off its reputation as a ponderous, expensive, and often maddeningly inconclusive means of exploring one’s inner life and rebrand the practice as a pragmatic, scientifically legitimate means of “cure” remained an ongoing project, even as psychoanalysis boomed in popularity.⁵³ Seizing on a Cold War culture in which “the state increasingly promoted

⁴⁸ Plant, “Menninger,” 183.

⁴⁹ Plant, “Menninger.”

⁵⁰ Samuel, *Shrink*, 68.

⁵¹ Samuel, *Shrink*, 71.

⁵² Samuel, *Shrink*, 74.

⁵³ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 22.

homosexuality as a national ideal and denounced homosexuality as a security threat,” psychiatrists’ claims to expertise regarding homosexuality and its treatment helped to solidify psychiatry’s reputation as not only “real medicine,” but a lynchpin in the maintenance of public order.⁵⁴ The following sections will assess how psychiatrists’ promotion of “curative” therapies and positioning of themselves as experts in popular discussions of homosexuality enabled them to cement their status as hegemonic authorities on the issue of homosexuality and, ultimately, transform broader legal and social perspectives on sexual minorities.

Headshrinking the Homosexual

Decades before any Evangelical preacher boasted of their ability to successfully convert homosexuals to heterosexual Christians, American psychiatrists staked their careers on the claim that they, through the powers of modern science, could “cure” homosexuality. Though perspectives on the nature of homosexuality and the possibility of sexual conversion diverged wildly in the prewar, European psychoanalytic and medical communities,⁵⁵ American psychiatrists, beginning in the 1940s and continuing, with increasing boldness, until the 1970s, espoused the view that homosexuality represented a treatable mental illness. Kunzel, summarizing the transformation, writes:

Psychoanalysts confronted a European sexological tradition that diagnosed homosexuality as a hereditary condition, sited its locus in the human constitution, and for the most part, argued for sympathy and tolerance rather than cure. Despite the efforts of some early adherents of psychoanalysis to treat “inversion,” the skepticism of Freud and others about conceiving of homosexuality as a curable disorder prevailed for nearly four decades. However, American

⁵⁴ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 31.

⁵⁵ For a more extensive discussion on psychoanalytic perspectives on homosexuality, including its curability, see Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

analysts were more enthusiastic about the curative potential of psychoanalytic treatment generally, and about the possibility of curing homosexuality in particular, than were their European predecessors.⁵⁶

On an issue where Freud had once expressed wariness,⁵⁷ Americans went full throttle. In the 1940s, American psychoanalysts like Freud disciple Sandor Rado began recruiting ideas drawn from scientific disciplines like endocrinology and evolutionary biology to argue, in direct contradiction to Freud's perspective, that homosexuality constituted a pathology.⁵⁸ Many of the psychoanalysts who trained under Rado— particularly Charles Socarides and Irving Bieber— would become ferocious proponents of antihomosexual psychiatric practices, publishing books and establishing clinical practices that combined dogmatic belief in homosexuality's fundamentally pathological nature and, crucially, “therapeutic optimism about the possibility of conversion and cure.”⁵⁹ Bieber and Socarides, alongside fellow analysts Edmund Bergler and Benjamin Karpman, helped solidify psychoanalysis— or, at least, its results-driven, medicalized, American form— as the preeminent treatment for homosexuality during the post-war period.

In works such as Bergler's 1956 book, *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* and Bieber's 1962 best-selling *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study*, analysts presented lay audiences with complex, and at times, contradictory, theories about homosexuality's cause and cure. Both books self-consciously position psychoanalysis as a countervailing force to the “permissiveness” of Alfred Kinsey, whose “statistics on homosexuals, which fantastically exaggerated their actual numbers...are widely used as an exonerating argument by homosexuals.”⁶⁰ Characterizing

⁵⁶ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 25.

⁵⁷ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 21; Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 58-59.

⁵⁸ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 25.

⁵⁹ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 25.

⁶⁰ Edmund Bergler, *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1956), 7; and Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 57-58.

themselves as brave dissidents, dropping scientific truth-bombs on deluded homosexuals as well as the complacent public, these psychiatrists described homosexuality in almost hysterically grave terms. “Homosexuality,” Bergler wrote, “is not the ‘way of life’ these sick people gratuitously assume it to be, but a neurotic distortion of the total personality.” Harsh as it may be, the truth, according to Bergler, was unavoidable: “there are no healthy homosexuals.”⁶¹

Interspersed between such bleak assertions was the promise of cure. Though prognoses varied—ranging from Bergler’s ecstatic pronouncement that “today, psychiatric-psychoanalytic treatment can cure homosexuality” with a success rate of up to ninety-nine percent,⁶² to Irving Bieber’s more reserved claim that “27% of the homosexuals in his study led normal sex lives after analysis⁶³—the vast majority of psychiatrists believed that psychiatric intervention was a necessary precondition for a homosexual to live a healthy, happy life.

Though antihomosexual psychiatrists passionately promoted the *idea* that homosexuality was “curable,” they were often painfully vague when it came to describing the specifics of *how* these miraculous changes could be brought about. Kunzel notes how Irving Bieber’s book revealingly “devoted its 350 pages to detailed descriptions of the pathological permutations of family relationships they believed caused homosexuality in men and not a single paragraph to the methods they claimed could successfully treat it.”⁶⁴

Most of the homosexuals who sought psychiatric intervention for their homosexuality in private clinics were treated with some variation of classic, mid-century psychotherapy: clients lying on leather couches; buttoned-up, typically male psychiatrists scribbling down notes with an

⁶¹ Bergler, *Homosexuality*, 9.

⁶² Bergler, *Homosexuality*, 9.

⁶³ Ernest Havemann, “Scientists Search for the Answers to a Touchy Question: Why?,” *LIFE*, June 26, 1964, 80.

⁶⁴ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 38.

inscrutable expression.⁶⁵ James Coleman, reflecting on the fourteen years he spent therapy as a young man from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, described his treatment as one constituted by lots of “exploration” and little “revelation.”⁶⁶ Indeed, while psychoanalysis represented the most ubiquitous method of “treating” homosexuality throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, psychoanalytic treatments for homosexuality were often ill-defined, backed by highly dubious clinical evidence, and wildly inconsistent from practitioner to practitioner.⁶⁷ Throughout these decades, psychoanalysts struggled to resolve the intransigent contradictions between their unwieldy psychoanalytic methods and the overwhelming pressure to deliver relatively expedient “cures.” The practice of psychoanalysis— characterized by the use of techniques like free association and dream analysis to excavate memories and subconscious thoughts— was not developed as a means of bringing about a “cure” for discrete mental disturbances. In fact, the psychoanalytic principle of neutrality— the idea that analysts should maintain an impartial and non-directive stance, avoiding personal biases or interventions that could influence the patient’s thoughts or elicit shame— seemed directly at odds with the premise of psychiatric conversion therapy.⁶⁸

Though most psychiatrists used some version of talk therapy in their practice, many also incorporated or relied entirely on techniques derived from Pavlovian psychology. These treatments, commonly referred to as “aversion therapy,” attempted to apply the principles of classical conditioning to human sexuality.⁶⁹ Essentially, these therapies worked by pairing a negative physical stimulus (usually an electric shock administered to the patient’s genitals) with

⁶⁵ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 39.

⁶⁶ James Coleman, “Surviving Psychotherapy,” *Motive* 32, no. 2 (1972).

⁶⁷ “Fixing Queerness,” in Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 38–69.

⁶⁸ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 39–40.

⁶⁹ M.P. Feldman, “Aversion Therapy for Sexual Deviations: A Critical Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 65, no. 2 (February 1966): 63–75.

erotic homosexual content, which would eventually “teach” the homosexual to avoid sexual encounters with other men.⁷⁰

The impacts of these new psychiatric paradigms around sexuality extended far beyond the clinic. Psychiatrists’ claims about homosexuality’s curability must be understood, at least in part, as something that both *responded to* and *actively perpetuated* the criminalization of homosexuality. Though some psychiatrists characterized their medicalized theories of homosexuality as a “sickness” and their therapeutic practices as humane alternatives to carceral paradigms around sexual difference,⁷¹ other psychiatrists, in addition to legislators, law enforcement, and much of the public, saw an intrinsic connection between psychiatric conversion therapy and rehabilitative models of correction.⁷² Around the same period antihomosexual psychiatric theories began to harden into medical dogma, criminal courts, correctional facilities, and parole boards attempted to reorient correctional practices away from “punishment,” instead promoting “the idea that the state, with its professionalized administrative agencies and armed with a cadre of experts following the most modern and objective social scientific research, could handle inmates’ deep individual pathologies.”⁷³ Rather than attempting to eliminate moral vice,

⁷⁰ “Farrall Instruments Visually Keyed Shocker Manual,” ca 1960, Aversion Therapy Subject File, ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

⁷¹ Socarides, in an essay defending the classification of homosexuality as an illness, wrote: “Let us bear in mind that psychiatrists have been in the forefront in helping homosexuals. It was Freud who opened the gates of freedom and humanity to the homosexual. And it was others after him—investigators who dared, who were not afraid of homosexuals, who had no “homophobia” of which we are accused—who could therefore treat homosexuals who want to be treated. I urge that all persecutory laws against the homosexual be abolished at once. It is unthinkable that homosexuals be persecuted for something over which they have no choice. Such laws are a direct contradiction to psychiatric as well as humane values.” Robert J. Stoller et al., “A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 130, no. 11 (November 1, 1973): 1213.

⁷² For a longer discussion on the relationship between the criminal justice system and antihomosexual psychiatry, see “Regina Kunzel, “Sex Panic, Psychiatry, and the Expansion of the Carceral State,” in *The War on Sex*, ed. David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe (Duke University Press, 2017), 229-246.

⁷³ Garrick L. Percival, *Smart on Crime: The Struggle to Build a Better American Penal System* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 33.

these experts— criminologists, psychologists, social workers, and, of course, psychiatrists— aimed at treating or even curing the underlying causes of the inmates' criminality.⁷⁴

While statutes criminalizing sexual impropriety existed long before the emergence of antihomosexual psychiatry, the postwar period saw a marked intensification in the criminalization of homosexual sex and gender nonconformity. In the 1940s, state and local legislators, propelled by sensationalistic media portrayals of sex crimes and grassroots advocacy, began introducing measures which, though ostensibly targeting sex crimes against children, effectively criminalized consensual sex between men.⁷⁵ Keen to take advantage of the criminal justice systems' newfound demand for their expertise, psychiatrists "agreed to serve as expert assessors of sexual psychopathy, oversaw the carceral institutionalization and treatment of people committed under the new laws, and certified the success of recovery and "cure" for safe release as required by law."⁷⁶ Within this milieu, psychiatric treatment became a ubiquitous aspect of the criminal justice system's approach to homosexual offenders— a population which, amidst increased policing efforts throughout the 1950s and 1960s, came to encompass an unthinkable large proportion of homosexual people overall. Indeed, though many individuals, like Duberman, voluntarily sought out private psychiatric treatment for their homosexuality, countless others forcibly underwent psychiatric conversion therapy in carceral contexts— in prisons, asylums, or at the behest of parole officers.⁷⁷ It was within a carceral context, moreover, that some of the more infamous techniques of conversion therapy— so-called "somatic" treatments like electroshock, drug-induced shock therapy, and lobotomies— were most frequently deployed.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Percival, *Smart on Crime*, 33.

⁷⁵ See George Chauncey, "The Postwar Sex Crime Panic," in *True Stories from the American Past*, ed. William Graebner (New York: McGraw-Hill 1993), 160-78.

⁷⁶ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 33-34.

⁷⁷ See Kunzel, "Sex Panic, Psychiatry, and the Expansion of the Carceral State," 229-246.

⁷⁸ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 54-69.

Sexual psychopath laws created a palpable demand for a cure for homosexuality within the criminal justice system and the public; at the same time, psychiatrist's promulgation of the idea that homosexuality was a "treatable illness," as opposed to neutral deviation in sexual behavior, helped to usher in a new era of antihomosexual laws aimed at "rehabilitation." The process of criminalization and pathologization was, in this sense, symbiotic.

Though most of the people who pursued treatment in private clinical settings were, given the high cost, wealthy and white, the institutionalization of conversion therapy within the criminal justice system and public, psychiatric hospitals meant that large numbers of working-class, poor, or nonwhite people also underwent psychiatric conversion therapy during this era. While those in the latter group entered treatment at the direct command of judges or parole officers and those in the former group did not, it would be a mistake to draw too neat of a distinction between "voluntary" and "coerced" ingresses into conversion therapy.⁷⁹ Countless homosexuals, particularly teenagers and young adults, were forced into psychiatric treatment by parents, wives, siblings, or other family members. Many other homosexuals, including Duberman, recount entering into therapy because they feared losing their jobs or being arrested under the laws which antihomosexual psychiatrists helped pioneer. Others chose to enter into treatment because they had, without stepping foot into the clinic, picked up and internalized psychiatric theories about homosexuality circulating in the media.

Though treatments that attempted to convert homosexuals into heterosexuals were, without question, a hugely important facet of antihomosexual psychiatry, so too were the wellspring of ideas about homosexuality. Generally speaking, psychiatrists, drawing upon Freud's theory of psychosexual development, tended to understand homosexuality as a kind of "arrested

⁷⁹ Kunzel, "Sex Panic, Psychiatry, and the Expansion of the Carceral State."

development” wherein the patient, as a result of faulty parenting or other injurious conditions during childhood, failed to progress through the “homosexual” stage of psychosexual development into mature heterosexuality.⁸⁰ Bergler and Bieber upheld the position that homosexuality was likely the consequence of a familial dynamic defined by an overbearing mother and inattentive father—a theory which was often repeated in newspaper and magazine reports.⁸¹ Some analysts opined that homosexual-object choice suggested a fear of the opposite sex; others conjectured that an over association with the opposite sex was to blame.

Most psychiatrists believed, however, that same-sex attraction itself represented just one aspect in a broad array of pathological characteristics. Bergler, for instance, claimed that some specific “neurotic defenses and personality traits that are partly or entirely psychopathic are specifically and exclusively characteristic of homosexuals” and cited “ten unconscious factors” which typified the homosexual.⁸² Antihomosexual psychiatrists promulgated elaborate theories which tied homosexuality to narcissism, masochism, commitment issues, immaturity, hypersexuality, impotence, hypermasculinity, effeminacy, megalomania, schizophrenia, hypochondria, jealousy, passive-aggression, and persistent unreliability—to name only a few.

Accounts by homosexual individuals who underwent psychiatric treatment at this time are indicative of both the extent to which practitioners took the universality of these characteristics for granted (whether or not the patient’s actual behavior supported their conclusions) as well as the centrality of these non-sexual characteristics in antihomosexual theory and practice. In diary entries written during his time in treatment, Duberman, parroting psychiatric dogma, often

⁸⁰ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 54-69; Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 57-65

⁸¹ See Ernest Havemann, “Scientists Search for the Answers to a Touchy Question: Why?,” *LIFE*, June 26, 1964; “Homosexuals Can Be Cured.,” *Time*, 85, no. 7 (February 12, 1965): 44-46; “Behavior: The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood,” *Time*, October 31, 1969.

⁸² Bergler, *Homosexuality*, 15.

interpreted ostensibly banal behaviors as evidence of his unremittent pathology. Reflecting on a fight with his boyfriend in 1956, Duberman ruefully wrote: “What a goddamn mess I am. Simply not capable of love. Can anything be worse than a life of promiscuity, of objects not people? That’s what I’m faced with and have to accept.”⁸³

The idea that homosexuality was constituted by a “constellation of signs and symptoms,” including but also extending beyond sexual behavior, should not be treated as auxiliary to the overall project of antihomosexual psychiatry; rather, it must be understood as the *crux* of the movement’s legitimization and institutionalization. Examining the “globalized pathology” theory of homosexuality from this angle, moreover, clarifies how the social and institutional conditions in which antihomosexual psychiatrists maneuvered informed their practices and theories.

First, and perhaps most consequentially, the idea that homosexuals suffered from general pathological disturbance was the primary justification for homosexuality’s classification as a mental illness within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) standards for the classification and treatment of mental disorders. The DSM’s system of classification, though used and interpreted as a definitive expression of psychiatric consensus, has long been the focus of intense debate. As the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Judd Marmor intoned in his contribution to the famous 1973 symposium on homosexuality’s status in APA nomenclature, the lines which divided designations of pathology and normative, moral judgement were often dubiously thin. Rebuking what he saw as a prevailing tendency within the APA, he contended that “we do not have the right to label behavior that is deviant from that currently favored by the majority as evidence per se of psychopathology.”⁸⁴ Marmor believed that “[s]uch labeling tends to define normality in

⁸³ Duberman, “Gay In The Fifties,” 50.

⁸⁴ Stoller et al., “A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” 1208.

terms of behavioral adjustment to cultural conventions rather than in terms of ego strengths or ego-adaptive capacities, and it puts psychiatry clearly in the role of an agent of cultural control rather than a branch of the healing arts.”⁸⁵ That homosexuality represented a deviation from the statistical norm was not enough to justify its place within the medical literature as a mental disturbance. The presence of pathological personality characteristics, in effect, enabled antihomosexual psychiatrists to transform homosexuality from a *neutral variant* of human sexuality to a clinically significant, diagnosable *pathology*.

Homosexuality’s classification as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” consecrated its status as a sickness amongst psychiatrists, establishing antihomosexual psychiatry as standard industry practice. But classification wrought consequences that extended far beyond the clinic: insurance companies, lawmakers, the criminal justice system, pharmaceutical companies, and researchers all used the DSM as a guidebook, using its standardized diagnostic criteria and treatment recommendations to inform policy, budgets, and the status of individuals within their institutions.⁸⁶

Psychiatrists and gay activists similarly recognized the importance of the DSM in shaping the American public’s attitudes towards homosexuality and, by extension, psychiatric treatments geared at “fixing” it. Irving Bieber warned that removing “the term from the manual would be tantamount to an official declaration by APA that homosexuality is normal,” a shift he suggested would “interfere with effective prophylaxis.”⁸⁷ He griped that, if homosexuality were to be declassified, “young men in conflict about their sexual direction may be discouraged by seeking treatment by those who would reassure them that their homosexual proclivities are normal and

⁸⁵ Stoller et al., “A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” 1209.

⁸⁶ Hannah S. Decker, “A Crisis in American Psychiatry and the Development of DSM-III,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*,

⁸⁷ Stoller et al., “A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” 1211.

that it is only ‘society,’ with its outmoded value system, that makes them reject a homosexual preference.”⁸⁸

The “globalized pathology” theory of homosexuality also helped psychiatrists circumvent their widespread failure to convert gay men and lesbians to heterosexuality. Though many Americans accepted the sensationalistic success rates which psychiatrists promulgated in public, others, absent of information to substantiate these claims, expressed skepticism. As one journalist memorably quipped: “Everybody knows of a cured homosexual, but no one knows his or her name or can introduce you.”⁸⁹

Some psychiatrists explained the discrepancy by shifting blame away from their techniques and towards the patients themselves, arguing that “the young homosexual who is strongly motivated to change his sexual orientation has an excellent chance of success”⁹⁰ and attributing poor treatment outcomes to homosexuals’ resistance.⁹¹ Unable to genuinely achieve the results they had boasted and unwilling to forfeit the authority and prestige which their proclaimed ability to “cure” homosexuality had proffered, many antihomosexual psychiatrists chose to move the goalposts. Facing these difficult circumstances, “at least some psychiatrists in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s pursued the goal of *adjustment*, working to help people accept their homosexuality rather than convert to heterosexuality,” argued Kunzel.⁹² Although Kunzel’s definition assimilates the concept of *adjustment* with *acceptance*, it would be a mischaracterization to define therapies geared towards adjustment as indicative of a non-pathologizing, let alone affirmative, stance on homosexuality. Therapies geared towards

⁸⁸ Stoller et al., “A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” 1211.

⁸⁹ Raube Walters, “Can Homosexuality Be Cured?,” *Unknown*, 1950s, Aversion Therapy Subject File, ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

⁹⁰ Jane E. Brody, “More Homosexuals Aided To Become Heterosexual,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 1971.

⁹¹ “Homosexuals Can Be Cured.,” *Time Magazine* 85, no. 7 (February 12, 1965): 44–46.

⁹² Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 50.

adjustment, like those geared towards heterosexual conversion, were based in the belief that homosexuals were constitutionally sick and needed to undergo a profound, medicalized process of transformation to be healthy. In the parlance of midcentury antihomosexual psychiatry, treatments geared towards the goal of “adjustment” sought to ameliorate the effects of the homosexuals’ emotional and personality disturbances *contra* “fix” same-sex attraction.⁹³ Reorienting therapeutic intervention towards adjustment, therefore, enabled psychiatrists to promote conversion therapy’s utility and efficacy without having to directly account for their failure to produce heterosexuality in their patients.

Often, antihomosexual psychiatrists’ use of *adjustment* to neutralize critiques of the ineffectiveness of conversion therapy was rather explicit. Bieber, in his famous book on homosexuality, instructed readers that “[m]ost [homosexuals] do not become heterosexual, but most resolve many other problems in their lives such as those related to self-esteem, assertiveness, work effectiveness, and social relationships.”⁹⁴ Bieber, reiterating heterosexual conversion as the ideal outcome, immediately, and somewhat contradictorily, follows his consolatory promises about *adjustment* with a reiteration of the fact that a “substantial number do become and remain heterosexual.”⁹⁵

Though what exactly *adjustment* entailed varied from practitioner to practitioner, it was often employed, in lay as well as medical usage, as shorthand for *respectability*. One *Life* article, for instance, contrasted a young homosexual professional who expressed “rancor” towards straight society with “better adjusted” homosexuals who “hold good jobs in business, the professions, or the arts. Many of them have apparently strong heterosexual relationships, get

⁹³ Kunzel, *In the Shadow of Diagnosis*, 52

⁹⁴ Irving Bieber, *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytical Study*, ed. Society of Medical Psychoanalyst, 1st Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), xxiii.

⁹⁵ Bieber, *Homosexuality*, xxiii.

married and have children. They go to church, engage in civic activity, see their psychiatrists.”⁹⁶ In contrast to the “flagrant” homosexuals prowling the bars of Greenwich Village and Hollywood Boulevard in “fuzzy sweaters and sneakers” or the hyper-masculine leather daddies lurking in “so-called S & M bars,” homosexuals who “succeeded” in psychiatric adjustment were virtually indistinguishable from their heterosexual counterparts. “The only difference between them and the ‘straight’ world,” Welch contended, “is the fear of exposure and their troubled consequences.”⁹⁷

It would be remiss to overlook the way in which the idea of adjustment intersected with midcentury America’s exaltation of political and cultural conformism. As the documentarian Adam Curtis evocatively detailed in his 2002 series, *The Century of the Self*, the theory of “ego adjustment”—the idea that failure to conform to society brought about mental anguish and, correspondingly, that tempering one’s libidinal desires and conforming to prevailing morays would alleviate this mental anguish—inadvertently assimilated the categories of “health” and “normalcy.” It is no coincidence that this schema for conceptualizing mental suffering surged in popularity in the era of Godfrey Hodgson’s “postwar liberal consensus”—a time in which politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, academics, and everyday people alike seemed in agreement that “theirs was an affluent society bereft of ideology and personified by the ‘organization man,’ a conformist society in which suburbs were increasingly spreading their bland homogeneity.”⁹⁸ As would be noted time and time again in the critiques of postwar psychiatry published in the following decades, psychiatrists’ and psychologists’ deployment of

⁹⁶ Paul Welch, “Homosexuality in America,” *LIFE*, June 26, 1964, 71.

⁹⁷ Welch, “Homosexuality in America,” 72.

⁹⁸ Michael Heale, “Historians and the Postwar Liberal Consensus,” in *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era*, ed. Robert Mason and Iwan W. Morgan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017.), 30.

“adjustment” effectively ascribed these conformist pressures with a positive medical meaning. In this sense, the category of adjustment both responded to and actively reinforced the “postwar liberal consensus” by pathologizing deviancy.

Confronting a public which, in the absence of verifiable accounts of successful psychiatric conversion and the growing visibility of queer activism, was growing increasingly suspicious of the legitimacy and efficacy of antihomosexual psychiatry, psychiatrists like Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides became increasingly reliant on justifying their conclusions through empirical data. Despite obvious methodological problems to Socarides and Bieber’s scientific studies,⁹⁹ they nevertheless upheld their findings as evidence that psychoanalytic explanations for homosexuality were empirically rigorous. Antihomosexual psychiatrists freely offered their “objective” theories to journalists, bureaucrats, and lawmakers, enabling them to recast moral paternalism as disciplined concern for public health. As homophile activists began promoting the idea that homosexuality represented a morally neutral variation of human behavior and that, correspondingly, government attempts to prohibit homosexuality represented a breach of individual liberty,¹⁰⁰ psychiatric opinion, and the auspices of empiricism it provided, became an increasingly central basis upon which antihomosexual laws— such as laws prohibiting “lewdness” and bans on homosexual service in the military— were justified.

⁹⁹ The sample size was limited to 106 homosexual and 100 heterosexual men, all of whom had already sought out and underwent some amount of psychoanalytic intervention; information was provided by the patients’ analysts as opposed to the patients themselves; the questionnaire that provided the bulk of the data was comprised of vague, highly subjective questions such as “Was the mother regarded as puritanical?” Irving Bieber, *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytical Study*, ed. Society of Medical Psychoanalyst, 1st Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 19-33.

¹⁰⁰ For a more extensive discussion on the homophile movement, see “Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence,” in *Gay Power: An American Revolution*, by David Eisenbach (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006).

One gay journalist, commenting on Bieber's book a few years after it was published, opined that "far from being a vivid diatribe, it strives to satisfy the most demanding and sophisticated methodological requirements of modern science. The book even has a somewhat dry, scientific air."¹⁰¹ Though Bieber's marked emphasis on empiricism may be understood as a manifestation of psychoanalysis's gradual pivot towards medicalization, the journalist's commentary also hinted at the way anti-homosexual psychiatrists used the trappings of science—numbers, charts, jargon, and tables—to remold subjective moral judgements into the image of objective truth. "It is a relief," the gay journalist quipped, "to be able to keep the old prejudices and at the same time to feel that one has modern scientific justifications for them. Hence the almost indecent haste with which moral conservatism is reorienting itself on psychiatric premises."¹⁰²

Chapter 2: Conversion Therapy, Born Again!

Dr. Irving Bieber, sitting on stage at the 1970 APA annual conference in San Francisco, was visibly flustered. What had begun as a panel discussion on the relationship between transsexualism and homosexuality was quickly devolving into a grizzly showdown. Seated in the audience was not the coterie of like-minded peers dressed in suits and ties he had, perhaps naively, been hoping to see, but a group of shaggy-haired men and women in blue jeans and button-covered jackets. The Gay Liberation Front had descended onto the convention hall, and now—much to Dr. Bieber's chagrin—they had found their primary target.

The voice of Gary Alinder, a young activist and journalist, pierced through the audience's cacophonous booing: "You are the pigs who make it possible for the cops to beat homosexuals:

¹⁰¹ Earl Stokes, "Earl Stokes Meets Dr. Bieber," *Vector*, February 1972, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

¹⁰² Stokes, "Dr. Bieber."

they call us queer, you— so politely— call us sick. But it’s the same thing. You make possible the beatings and rapes in prisons, you are implicated in the torturous cures perpetrated on desperate homosexuals. I’ve read your book, Dr. Bieber, and if that book talked about Black people the way it talks about homosexuals, you’d be drawn and quartered and you’d deserve it.”¹⁰³

“I never said homosexuals were sick,” Bieber responded. “What I said was that they have displaced sexual adjustment.” The audience erupted into laughter.

“That’s the same thing motherfucker!” someone shouted out.

Bieber, flailing, tried again: “I don’t want to oppress homosexuals; I want to liberate them, to liberate them from that which is painning them— their homosexuality.”¹⁰⁴

The psychiatrist’s efforts to rehabilitate psychiatry’s image as a “humane” approach to homosexuality would ultimately be in vain. Beginning in the late 1960s, a new generation of gay activists, inspired by the minority-rights rhetoric and militancy of Black Power and Women’s Liberation and more outwardly oppositional in their stance towards mainstream, “straight” culture, began to coalesce in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City.¹⁰⁵

Embracing a politics of “affirmation” *contra* “assimilation,” the gay liberationists, as they would come to be known, advocated for something beyond the type of tentative, qualified tolerance that the *Life* journalists offered only the most inconspicuous of his homosexual subjects. Rather, this new generation of militant activists, many of them arriving to the gay liberation movement as having already cut their teeth in radical political movements during the 1960s, reified homophile activist Edward Sagarin’s call for homosexuals to assert themselves as

¹⁰³ Gary Alinder, “Gay Liberation Meets the Shrinks,” *Come Out!*, 1970, Gale Archives of Sexuality & Gender.

¹⁰⁴ Alinder, “Meet the Shrinks.”

¹⁰⁵ David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006), 117-126.

a distinct sexual minority worthy of respect on its own grounds.¹⁰⁶ Where previous generations of homosexual activists often referred to themselves with euphemistic terms such as “homophile” and moderated their political platform to appeal to sympathetic liberal politicians, gay liberationists embraced the label which homosexuals used to refer to one another— gay— and openly aligned their movement with black radicalism through slogans like “Gay Power.”¹⁰⁷ Bob Martin, a key figure in the development of gay liberation, described the meaning of this new rallying cry:

What is Gay Power?... It is demanding to be recognized as a powerful minority with just rights which have not been acknowledged; it is an insistence that homosexuality has made its own unique contribution to the building of our civilization and will continue to do so; and it is the realization that homosexuality, while morally and psychologically on a par with heterosexuality, does nonetheless have unique aspects, which demand their own standards of evaluation and their own subculture.¹⁰⁸

Though earlier activists within the homophile movement had long recognized psychiatry as a primary engine of antihomosexual sentiment, it was activists within the gay liberation movement who harnessed this inchoate discontentment into a unified campaign aimed at overturning antihomosexual psychiatry. In December 1973, after years of continuous agitation by gay activists and behind-doors maneuvering by sympathetic (or, perhaps, *politically minded*) psychiatrists, the trustees of the American Psychiatric Association voted to eliminate homosexuality from the DSM’s nomenclature.¹⁰⁹ Though antihomosexual psychiatry has

¹⁰⁶ Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁷ Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 123-124.

¹⁰⁸ Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 122.

¹⁰⁹ Richard D. Lyons, “Psychiatrists, in a Shift, Declare Homosexuality No Mental Illness,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1973.

persisted, in various forms, to this day,¹¹⁰ declassification marked the start of the discipline's gradual descent into the institutional fringe.

At the exact same moment antihomosexual psychiatry was entering its twilight, a new form of conversion therapy was coalescing in San Francisco.

Frank Worthen was, by some regards, an unlikely man to take up the mantle. The co-owner of a small chain of variety stores in the Bay Area, Worthen lacked not only the formal certifications required to practice psychiatry, but any advanced degree whatsoever. While antihomosexual psychiatrists had substantiated their bold claims about the nature of and cure for homosexuality with opaque statistics and appeals to scientific objectivity, Worthen, a devout Evangelical Christian, preferred to traffic in Bible verses and the promise of redemption. Most baffling of all, Frank Worthen was, up until mere months before starting his ministry, gay *himself*.

Born to middle-class parents in the then-rural Bay Area town of San Jose in 1929, Frank Worthen moved to San Francisco in the early 1950s, shacking up in a YMCA with an older male lover.¹¹¹ Though Worthen embraced Evangelical Christianity in his early teen years following the death of his father, he left the church at twenty-three, feeling his to be faith irreconcilable with his sexuality.¹¹² He spent the next two decades peripherally involved in the gay scenes in San Francisco and Marin, a scenic, suburban county on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge.

¹¹⁰ 46% of the 1,320 conversion therapy practitioners identified by researchers held active professional licenses to provide mental health care. However, fewer than 30 of these practitioners were medical doctors—the vast majority of licensed practitioners held qualifications as Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs), Licensed Marriage & Family Therapists (LMFTs), or Licensed Social Workers (LSWs). Though regulations surrounding the practice of conversion therapy vary by state, the APA adopted a resolution in 1998 formalizing their opposition to psychiatric “reparative” or conversion therapies. “Resolution on Appropriate Affirmative Responses to Sexual Orientation Distress and Change Efforts”; “It’s Still Happening: A Report on Practitioners of So-Called Conversion ‘Therapy’ in the U.S.”

¹¹¹ Frank Worthen, *Destiny Bridge: A Journey Out of Homosexuality* (Winnipeg: Forever Books, 2010), 15, 89.

¹¹² Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 148.

By Worthen's telling, everything changed in 1973, when he returned to work after a months-long trip and saw one of his employees, a "hippie boy" with "long, stringy hair and tattered clothes," now completely unrecognizable.¹¹³ The young man, Mike, explained that he had been hospitalized with testicular cancer and, while he was in the hospital recovering from surgery, a pastor from a local "Jesus People" church had gone to pray over him. After accepting Jesus into his life, Mike had healed from cancer and was now living in the pastor's home.¹¹⁴

Worthen, who, despite co-owning and operating the store with a man with whom he had once been romantically involved and now shared a home, insisted that, at work, he "had always played it straight, and assumed that only other homosexuals realized I was gay."¹¹⁵ Though he was shocked when Mike told him he had gotten his whole church to "pray for his gay boss," the sentiment struck a chord. "I became more and more aware of the contrast between the purity of Mike's life and the degradation of mine," Worthen recounted in his self-published memoir, *Destiny Bridge*.¹¹⁶ He was forty-three, stuck in an unsatisfying relationship with a younger man, struggling to keep his businesses afloat. Though Worthen, by his own admission, had always been a bit awkward looking, he now found himself getting routinely rejected from gay bars and bathhouses due to his age and physical appearance.¹¹⁷ He was suffering from daily panic attacks and contemplated suicide. "I was washed up in the gay life," he explained. "I was beginning to question my very existence."¹¹⁸

On May 25, 1973, while leaving his office to visit a bathhouse, Frank Worthen received a revelation:

¹¹³ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 142.

¹¹⁴ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*.142.

¹¹⁵ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*., 142.

¹¹⁶ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*.143.

¹¹⁷ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*.139.

¹¹⁸ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*.144.

There was no bright shaft of light, but suddenly I had another flash-back. I was fourteen again, kneeling at the altar, asking God to be my Father. I had just watched my own father take his last breath and I was feeling so completely alone, so lost. I had wanted to die that day, too. I realized I was experiencing those same lost, hopeless, abandoned feelings once again. Now, as I walked down the long corridor outside my office, I heard an audible voice speak to me, ‘I want you back!’”¹¹⁹

Frank Worthen accompanied Mike to a chapel on the grounds of the Southern Baptist-affiliated San Francisco Theological Seminary in Marin, where the employee’s congregation, the Agape Fellowship, met. There, Worthen repented for his “evil lifestyle” with a “sinner’s prayer” led by Mike. After repenting for “everything Mike thought I might have done in the gay lifestyle,” Worthen decided to rededicate his life to Christ.¹²⁰

After several brushes with temptation and a rather spectacular deliverance, Worthen began to describe himself as a “former” homosexual.¹²¹ Though initially eager to leave the memories of his former life in the past, Worthen was encouraged by Mike and other members of Agape to record an audio-taped version of his testimony that could be distributed to other men hopeful of finding a way “out of the homosexual lifestyle.”¹²²

Mike and Worthen attempted to place ads for the tapes in local queer outlets but were rejected from all but the *Berkeley Barb*, a left-wing weekly underground newspaper with a large gay and lesbian readership. The first advertisement ran on December 7, 1973— less than a week before the APA announced their decision to declassify homosexuality.¹²³ “Let Jesus break the

¹¹⁹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 150.

¹²⁰ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 151.

¹²¹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 158.

¹²² Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 164.

¹²³ “Brother Frank Ad,” *Berkeley Barb*, December 7, 1973, sec. Classifieds, JSTOR.

chains of homosexuality,” the promotion, nestled amongst advertisements for seedy massage parlors and mail-order pornography, read. “Have you hit bottom and need a way out? Brother Frank Tells how Jesus changed his life. Send for the tape on free loan...”¹²⁴

The response to the advertisement was overwhelming. Dozens of gay men who had read the ad in the *Barb* wrote to Frank Worthen, inspired by his story of transformation and hopeful to follow his trajectory. Three months after he had begun advertising his tapes, Frank Worthen was in regular correspondence with thirty men— “and they all wanted to meet ‘Brother Frank.’”¹²⁵ Frank Worthen rented a conference room at the Hotel Durant in downtown Berkeley where, on March 2, 1974, about thirty-five men, looking for a path out of the “gay lifestyle” showed up.¹²⁶ The group began meeting regularly, blossoming into a tight-knit community.

That year, Kent Philpott and Frank Worthen formally joined forces, establishing Worthen’s ministry— now operating under the name Love in Action— as an outreach program under the aegis of the Church of the Open Door. In 1975, the duo published *The Third Sex?*, a book which featured the testimonies of six of their “ex-gay” counselees.¹²⁷ The paperback became somewhat of an unexpected hit in the underground Christian publishing world. Soon, they discovered that they were not the only ones preaching the conversion therapy gospel— in 1975, Michael Bussee and Jim Kaspar, two “ex-gay” Christians affiliated with the Melodyland Christian Center in Anaheim, California, created EXIT (“EX-Gay Intervention Team”).¹²⁸ In 1976, Philpott, Worthen, Bussee, Kaspar, and leaders from other “change” ministries from

¹²⁴ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 165; “Brother Frank Ad,” *Berkeley Barb*, December 7, 1973.

¹²⁵ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 171.

¹²⁶ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 171.

¹²⁷ Kent Philpott, *The Third Sex? Six Homosexuals Tell Their Stories* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975).

¹²⁸ Michael Bussee, “Statement of Apology by Former Exodus Leader,” *BeyondExGay.Com* (blog), June 27, 2007, <https://beyondexgay.com/article/busseeapology.html>.

around the country agreed to come together to form a loose-knit coalition of ministries housed under a unitary umbrella organization, which they named Exodus.¹²⁹

Though charismatic Christianity remained at its core, Love in Action's doctrine became increasingly therapeutic in its orientation as its emphasis shifted away from its ministerial work—which mostly consisted of organizing support groups for “former homosexuals,” distributing the taped or written testimonies for low or no cost, and street witnessing in San Francisco neighborhoods with large gay populations—to fellowships—structured programs wherein hopeful “ex-gays” lived in Love in Action's group homes and progressed through an intensive, weeks- or months- long curriculum geared at sexual orientation change.¹³⁰

By the mid-1990s, Love in Action's novel model of religious, group-oriented conversion therapy programs had taken over the globe. Exodus-affiliated ministries both in the United States and abroad cemented religious conversion therapy as the preeminent means by which individuals or parents attempted to cure their or their children's homosexuality.

The dramatic simultaneity of these two events has often led commentators to assume that Love in Action emerged as an intentional, one-to-one “replacement” for the newly defunct apparatus of antihomosexual psychiatry.¹³¹ This narrative, while accurate in some regards, falters in two major ways: one, it presumes that the transition between antihomosexual psychiatry and religious models of conversion therapy was quick and decisive; and two, it obscures the ideological, demographic, and organizational distinctness of Love in Action relative to earlier conversion therapy movements.

¹²⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 31; Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 189.

¹³⁰ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 183.

¹³¹ Chris Babits, “Kent Philpott and the Charismatic Roots of Contemporary Conversion Therapy,” *Journal of Faith, Education, and Community* 3, no. 1 (2019): 12.

As we have seen, particular conditions within the postwar context precipitated the ascendancy of psychiatric forms of conversion therapy. Love in Action, like antihomosexual psychiatry, took hold in the United States at the moment it did because *its* ideology, organizational structure, and political dimensions were congenial to the broader ideological, political, and material currents of *its* time. What sorts of changes transpired in the late 1960s and early 1970s that made it so religious forms of conversion therapy were suddenly more viable than their secular counterparts?

In the following chapter, I argue that Love in Action was not a response to the collapse of antihomosexual psychiatry as such. Rather, Love in Action was a movement which was born out of the very same social, material, and political developments which precipitated declassification and the gradual decline of antihomosexual psychiatry. In other words, the very factors which led to the delegitimization of antihomosexual psychiatry—specifically, the coalescence of the gay community into a distinct political bloc, the antipsychiatry and radical psychiatry movement, and the dissolution of a postwar consensus politics into a political culture that was generally more suspicious towards the state and traditional authorities—were some of the same factors which enabled charismatic Christian conversion therapy groups like Love in Action to take hold.

This chapter will also attempt to illustrate how and why the APA's decision to declassify homosexuality, alongside other successes by the gay rights movement, did not make it so people stopped trying to convert homosexuals to heterosexuals, but gave rise to a new and organized form of antigay hostility.

“Putting Off/ Putting On”

As discussed, the late 1960s saw the emergence of a new type of radical gay politics, distinct from earlier movements in its insistence on separatism over assimilationism, close

ideological and organizational ties with radical left politics, and emphasis on increasing the visibility of the gay community by “coming out.” Gay liberationists, upholding a perspective first popularized during the “homophile” era of gay activism, advocated for a reconceptualization of gays and lesbians as a distinct “minority,” bound together by a common identity, material interests, and political aspirations. Often recruiting intellectual and legal frameworks developed during the Civil Rights movement and drawing parallels between gayness and Blackness or Jewishness, gay militants asserted that “homosexuals needed to identify themselves through a gay political bloc, a gay community, and a gay culture.”¹³²

While the groups most closely associated with the gay liberation movement only lasted a handful of years, their redefinition of the gay and lesbian community as a discrete cultural and political bloc has more or less persisted. How did homosexuals, once deemed a disparate population unified only by a common *affliction*, establish themselves as a minority group, unified by a common *identity*? How did this transformation change the discursive landscape around gay political issues, including homosexuality’s classification as a mental illness? Finally, how did the redefinition of gayness as a minority identity affect not only the form, but the *significance* of “conversion therapy”?

First, we shall look at how this transformation occurred. Crucially, the coalescence of gay people into the modern “gay community” was an intentional, self-consciously political endeavor: the blossoming of gay and lesbian newspapers, social clubs, community spaces, support groups, artistic workshops, and travel agencies in the late 1960s, though shaped by external factors, were nonetheless deliberate efforts to bring gay people into contact with one another and build out a distinct “gay world.”

¹³² Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 122.

The evolution of gay media played a pivotal role in this community-building process, serving as both a catalyst and a reflection of the emerging gay consciousness. While gay media in the pre-Stonewall era had been limited to small but influential publications such as *One* and *The Ladder* (the organs of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, respectively), the relaxation of anti-obscenity laws in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to the blossoming of a rich and expansive queer print media ecosystem.¹³³ Prior to this development, most, if not all, of the books or articles one would be able to find written on the subject of homosexuality in libraries or bookstores were those written by or parroting the opinions of psychiatrists.

Underground papers also aided in the development in a rich, parallel “gay world.” Under the subheading “Gay Grooves,” readers of the *Berkeley Barb* could find opportunities to play alongside other musicians at a gay open mike night, attend a gay film festival, practice Tibetan Buddhist meditation with other gay seekers, celebrate Shabbat alongside Chutzpah, a gay Jewish group, take part in a gay improv troupe, or, as one report from 1971 put it, “learn just enough karate to get away if attacked.”¹³⁴ One could similarly find numbers for 24-hour legal aid, emergency shelters, health and counseling services, and draft assistance. Then there were, of course, the ubiquitous “consciousness raising” groups. Originating in the Women’s Liberation Movement, consciousness raising groups were events where individuals with similar backgrounds came together to share their experiences with one another and discuss political issues relating to their identity. In the *Berkeley Barb*, one could find on offer consciousness raising groups of every flavor imaginable; they had groups for drag queens, for youths, for

¹³³ For a more detailed discussion on the rise of queer/ underground print media, see John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹³⁴ Michael Durham, “Homosexuals in Revolt,” *LIFE*, December 31, 1971, 67.

transvestites.¹³⁵ These spaces, events, and groups all provided opportunities for gays to connect with one another, build solidarity, and share political ideas.

Critically, gay print media and community events exposed countless gays and lesbians who had undergone psychiatric treatment or internalized psychiatric dogma about homosexuality to alternative explanations for their unhappiness. Though many politically conscious gays and lesbians of previous generations had long expressed skepticism about the psychiatric status quo, David Eisenbach has argued that in queer print media, “[t]he same ideas that had been heard for years in speeches and barroom conversations suddenly gained a new weight. To people who saw the media as a filter that separated the extraneous and false from the pertinent and “newsworthy,” publication bestowed credibility upon ideas. If something was worthy of being published, it was worthy of discussion and consideration.”¹³⁶ Gay newspapers, on the other hand, acted as a medium for gay people to assert *themselves* as authorities on homosexuality and establish gay-affirming or pluralistic conceptions of sexual difference as legitimate alternatives to psychiatric dogma.

Given the intense secrecy with which many gay men and women conducted their lives in the postwar period, a psychiatrist was often the only person with whom they had ever openly discussed their homosexuality. Gay community spaces and consciousness-raising groups provided gays and lesbians with an opportunity to talk openly about their sexualities without the fear of exposure— though not subject to the same constraints as doctor-patient relationships, consciousness-raising groups rested on an expectation of mutual trust and confidentiality.¹³⁷ It should come as no surprise, then, that many patients who had spent years in antihomosexual

¹³⁵ “Gay Grooves,” *Berkeley Barb* (Berkeley, CA: Max Scherr, November 2, 1973), JSTOR; “Berkeley Barb.” “Gay Grooves,” *Berkeley Barb* (Berkeley, CA: Max Scherr, November 23, 1973), JSTOR.

¹³⁶ Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 25.

¹³⁷ Women’s Action Alliance, “Consciousness-Raising Guidelines” (Pamphlet, Chicago, 1975).

psychiatry cite experiences in gay consciousness-raising groups or exposure to gay print media as what finally compelled them to end their quest for “cure.”¹³⁸

Paradoxically, however, the same concentrated networks and communication channels that fostered liberation and community among gay individuals also created new vulnerabilities. The clustering of gay populations in urban enclaves and the development of dedicated gay media—while essential for building solidarity—inadvertently provided efficient pathways for those seeking to target these communities.

In fact, Frank Worthen and other ex-gay members of Love in Action’s familiarity with Los Angeles and San Francisco’s gay scenes enabled the group to appropriate their communication and social networks towards their own ends. Every Friday and Saturday night, Love in Action preached on the Castro and Polk Streets in San Francisco, spreading their conversion therapy gospel to the neighborhood’s predominately gay clientele.¹³⁹ However, by launching into antigay and overtly Christian messaging straight out the gate, Love in Action’s street preachers tended to alienate more gays and lesbians than they managed to attract.¹⁴⁰ Love in Action’s cadre was met with ridicule and anger: one street preacher, Lori, described one episode where a gay man to whom she had been talking told her “You Jesus freaks come out here to Polk Street because you like the attention, just like everyone else.” The man then picked up Lori and “proceeded to carry [her] off to who-knows-where, probably somewhere [she]’d be less offensive.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Ronald Gold, “‘Stop It, You’re Making Me Sick’ in A Symposium: Should Homosexuality Be in the APA Nomenclature?,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 130, no. 11 (November 1, 1973): 1211–2; Martin Duberman, “A Gay Consciousness Slowly Evolving: Diary Excerpts (1970-1974),” *Gaysweek*, no. 43 (December 12, 1977): 2-.

¹³⁹ “Gay Crusader Correspondence,” *Raymond Broshears Papers, 1965-1984: Series 2: Correspondence, 1970-1984*, 1984 1978, 89; Tim Reiterman, “Bringing the Bible to Gay Parts of Town,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 28, 1977, Ex-Gay Subject File, ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

¹⁴⁰ Ray P. Coneau, “Holy War on Polkstrasse,” *The Voice*, December 12, 1979, Exodus Subject File, ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

¹⁴¹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 217.

Throughout the 1970s, Love in Action primarily advertised their ministry in underground newspapers with large gay and lesbian audiences, attempting to target non-Christian gays actively “in the lifestyle” as opposed to Christians struggling with their homosexuality. In their earliest, “Brother Frank Tape” days, Kent Philpott and Frank Worthen’s advertisements had broadcasted their organization’s ideological and religious orientation— underground papers were, generally speaking, in no position to be turning down advertiser dollars, even from organizations to whom they might be ardently opposed. However, the people who responded to these more forthcoming ads, like those who responded to Love in Action’s street evangelism, were generally those who were already amenable to Love in Action’s core doctrine— in other words, people with prior involvement in evangelical Christianity and/or people who believed homosexuality to be morally problematic.

Love in Action was, by and large, unsuccessful in their persistent efforts to recruit from San Francisco or Los Angeles’s gay activist communities. Even Philpott himself noted that the six Love in Action members featured in *The Third Sex?* were never “especially militant,” nor had any of them “participated in demonstrations.”¹⁴² Notably, all six individuals profiled in *The Third Sex?*— and, indeed, the vast majority of Love in Action’s rank-and-file— grew up in deeply religious Christian households,¹⁴³ experienced profound personal struggles with loss, trauma, or addiction during their lives,¹⁴⁴ and felt ambivalent about their sexualities long before joining the “change” ministry.¹⁴⁵ One participant recalled having the sense as a teenager that his “Christian life was a normal existence, and my sexual life was something else. It was like playing two

¹⁴² Philpott, *The Third Sex*, front flap.

¹⁴³ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, 9-10, 35, 62, 84, 114, 138-9.

¹⁴⁴ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, 24-5, 40, 61, 98, 107, 142.

¹⁴⁵ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, 10-11, 39, 68, 95, 112, 148-9.

roles— stepping back and forth from one to the other.”¹⁴⁶ The biographies of Love in Action’s earliest participants suggest that the ministry drew in members by exploiting or reifying individuals’ *pre-established* attitudes toward their sexualities and faiths versus by indoctrinating politicized gays and lesbians in an unfamiliar, antigay Christian doctrine.

In the mid-1970s, however, Love in Action began placing ads which deliberately obscured or misrepresented the character of their organization. Love in Action’s London outpost “created an intriguing sticker, which they posted in telephone booths near gay bars, in rest rooms, and even on park benches. It read simply, ‘Want Out?’ and included the ministry’s telephone number.”¹⁴⁷ Cutting back on the Bible-talk and portraying their ministry as a generic counselling organization seemed to work: the London branch’s sticker campaign became “the most effective of all their outreaches.”¹⁴⁸ In 1979, the Los Angeles-based magazine *Lesbian Tide* discovered that they had mistakenly ran an advertisement for Love in Action, “which the advertiser described as ‘a counselling service for gay women.’ When readers called the “Love in Action” number they discovered that the counselling service was a sham.”¹⁴⁹ The editorial staff of *Lesbian Tide* reported that because the “ad in question was personally brought to our office by a woman who looked like any other dyke we might see at a community dance or in our study group” and they had never “been approached by right-wing advertisers before,” they credulously accepted the advertisement without calling the number.¹⁵⁰ The advertising head’s mistake was understandable. Not only was Love in Action’s advertisement exceedingly vague— its copy was limited to the single line “When you’re feeling down...” — but its hand-drawn design and use of

¹⁴⁶ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, 63; Ralph Blair, “Holier-Than-Thou Hocus-Pocus & Homosexuality” (Homosexual Community Counseling Center Concerned, 1977), 13.

¹⁴⁷ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 218.

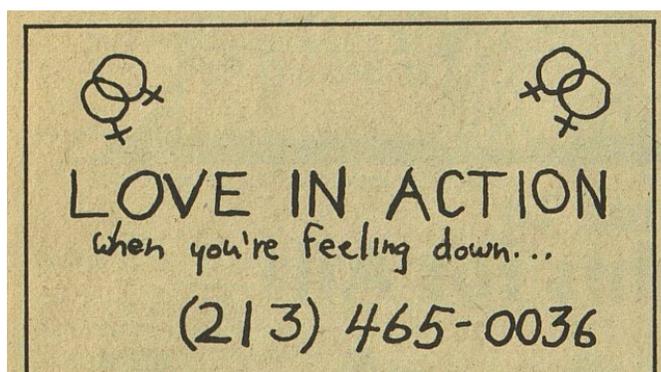
¹⁴⁸ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 218.

¹⁴⁹ Sharon McDonald et al., “No Love in Action,” *The Lesbian Tide* (Los Angeles, CA: The Tide Collective, February 1978), JSTOR.

¹⁵⁰ Sharon McDonald et al., “No Love in Action.”

interlocking Venus symbols seemed to intentionally emulate the DIY advertisements made by gay and lesbian activists.¹⁵¹ The advertisement was, essentially, a Trojan horse. To the editorial staff, Love in Action's attempt to place the misleading advertisement in the *Lesbian Tide* was nothing short of an attempt at "infiltrating our movement;" yet another "example of how our enemies are using our words, and publications and demonstrations against us."¹⁵²

As the previous section detailed, psychiatric treatments for homosexuality were often aimed at modifying not only the patient's sexual habits, but their personality, interests, manner of speech, style of dress. In this sense, conversion therapy practitioners prior to 1973 *did*



The *Lesbian Tide* (Los Angeles, CA: The Tide Collective, January 1, 1978), JSTOR.

conceptualize "conversion" as a process of identity or cultural transformation as well as sexual transformation. However, Love in Action's program material tended to consider this process of identity transformation—of replacing one's "gay" personality traits, tastes, attitudes, habits, and political or cultural affiliations with "Christian" or "Godly" ones— as the *primary aim* of conversion therapy. The workbook from Love in Action's three-month long residential program, *The Source* (which, though created in the late 1990s, was based on ideas developed in the 1970s and early 1980s by Frank Worthen), encouraged program participants to "continually pray, evaluate, and discuss" their struggle with "false images," the term the group uses to denote any

¹⁵¹ *The Lesbian Tide* (Los Angeles, CA: The Tide Collective, January 1, 1978), JSTOR.

¹⁵² Sharon McDonald et al., "No Love in Action."

“any items or behaviors that are of the old life.”¹⁵³ The workbook dictated that “Belongings, appearances, clothing, actions, or humor that connect [the participant] to past behaviors, attitudes, or relationships must be put away” and underlined the ministry’s conviction that, in the process of religious conversion, “God is renewing our minds and lives.”¹⁵⁴ Love in Action leadership preached that adopting a new Christian identity and Christian theory of sex could “displace” old ways of being. This process of displacement— “putting off” or “putting away” one’s former, gay identity and “putting on” a Christian one, as Worthen often described it— was understood to be the mechanism by which religious conversion could bring about a change to one’s sexual orientation.¹⁵⁵

In *Steps Out of Homosexuality*, the 1984 book which outlined Love in Action’s core treatment philosophy, Frank Worthen encouraged his followers to overturn their conception of themselves as a part of a broader, gay collective. In a near perfect inversion of Gary Alinder’s celebratory definition of Gay Power, Worthen wrote: “Within [gay] identity was a linking with others, a mutuality which now must be broken. The gay life is a subculture with its own rules and morality...this programming must now be expelled and replaced by Scriptural principles. The identity held comfort and security, but now it must go.”¹⁵⁶ During orientation, participants of The Source were instructed to avoid visiting “known and/or obvious homosexually-oriented/ ‘pro-gay’ establishments or businesses/ organizations (including churches) that cater to people who embrace homosexual behavior.”¹⁵⁷ One flier published by the San Francisco activist group People for Lesbian and Gay Love Participants in 1978 reported that gays and lesbians living at

¹⁵³ Love in Action, Inc, “The Source Residential Program Manual” (Program Manual, Memphis, Undated), AC 1428, Box 1, Folder 22, National Museum of American History Archives Center.

¹⁵⁴ Love in Action, Inc, “The Source Discipleship Program Manual” (Program Manual, Memphis, August 2007), AC 1428, Box 1, Folder 25, National Museum of American History Archives Center.

¹⁵⁵ Frank Worthen, *Steps Out of Homosexuality* (San Rafael, CA: Love in Action, Inc., 1984), 111-120.

¹⁵⁶ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 119.

¹⁵⁷ Love in Action, Inc, “The Source Residential Program Manual.”

Love in Action's "conversion homes" were "required to conform to total alienation from the outside world and the Gay Community" as well as "break up with their lovers and not communicate with Gay people." The residents' mail was, likewise, "screened and censored." They likewise detailed how "Reading, socializing, music, art work, writing, working, etc. not cohesive with the rehabilitative process has found some unfortunate Gay people suddenly kicked out of these 'homes' with no place to go."¹⁵⁸ While contact with "anyone involved in unrepentant emotional dependencies or inappropriate sexual behaviors" represented grounds for program dismissal, forming close interpersonal relationships with *anyone*, even other program participants, was strongly discouraged.¹⁵⁹ Though the degree to which these mandates were actually *enforced* by Love in Action leadership seemed to vary from program to program, the importance of alienating oneself physically and emotionally from the gay world remained a common thread throughout Love in Action publications and program material.

As a gay man living in the Castro district of San Francisco during the 1960s and early 1970s, Worthen would have been acutely aware of the changes transpiring within the gay community.¹⁶⁰ Worthen's insistence on denuding his gay followers' *sense of themselves as a part of a larger collective* indicated a clear cognizance of the threat which these networks, and the gay-affirmative ideas they might engender, posed to conversion therapy programs— as was made evident by calamitous effects wrought by gay liberation and gay print media on antihomosexual psychiatry. By isolating program participants from people who might plausibly

¹⁵⁸ "Gay Crusader Correspondence," *Raymond Broshears Papers, 1965-1984: Series 2: Correspondence, 1970-1984*, 1984 1978, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CHKWDE293619672/AHSI?sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=24198b40&pg=89>.

¹⁵⁹ Love in Action, Inc, "The Source Discipleship Program Manual."

¹⁶⁰ Though Worthen makes no explicit mention of participation in gay activism of any type at this time and was several years older than most people involved in gay liberation, he did recall attending parties with other gay people, cruising in bath houses, and dating multiple men.

challenge the ministry's doctrine, including other program participants, Love in Action ameliorated the possibility of dissent, incredulity, or resistance towards their program's doctrine.

Unlike psychiatrists, who, due to the official prohibition on licensing homosexual psychiatrists, frequently derived their convictions about the "pathological" gay world from second-hand information or post-hoc analysis, Frank Worthen had twenty-five years of gay experiences from which to draw. His analysis of the "gay lifestyle," while laden with homophobic caricatures and hostile language, often yielded deeply sensitive, insightful, and astute observations about the function of identity and community in gay life. He believed that individuals chose to enter the gay lifestyle not because they were sick or perverted, but because it "reduced the pain of rejection," "provided human contact," "was exciting," "provided acceptance and raised self-esteem," and "provided identity."¹⁶¹ He conceded that the gay lifestyle was genuinely enticing, typified by an "exhilarating tempo... an erotic rush."¹⁶² Worthen was, likewise, profoundly familiar with the social isolation and hostility which gay people encountered in mainstream society— his mother had harshly rejected him when she discovered he was gay, and their relationship remained icy even years later.¹⁶³

In contrast to antihomosexual psychiatrists' stated goal of "adapting" their homosexual patients to mainstream society— ultimately transforming the overt homosexual into someone indistinguishable from a "normal" heterosexual— Worthen and his followers believed that lasting change could only be brought about if one replaced their gay lifestyle with another, particularistic identity. According to Worthen, Paul the Apostle "knew that it is impossible to simply put something out of our lives without another thing taking its place... It is not enough to

¹⁶¹ Love in Action, Inc, "Garrad Conley's 'Source' Program Manual" (Program Manual, Memphis, 1999), AC 1428, Box 13, Folder 1, National Museum of American History Archives Center.

¹⁶² Love in Action, Inc, "Garrad Conley's 'Source' Program Manual."

¹⁶³ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 120-1.

say do not be overcome by evil. If there is a vacancy there, evil will fill it.”¹⁶⁴ Tanya Erzen, writing about Love in Action, noted that conversion therapy ministries “provide the material conditions for community in addition to a more diffuse sense of religious and sexual belonging and kinship.”¹⁶⁵ Love in Action offered, in other words, a viable alternative to the “gay lifestyle.”

While the development of gay media, consciousness-raising groups, and community spaces provided unprecedented solidarity and collective power for gays and lesbians, their coalition rested on the presupposition that those who identified as gay or lesbian necessarily shared the same political objectives. Love in Action was able to exploit this vulnerability by situating themselves within the gray area of gay identity politics, presenting themselves as insiders with authentic lived experience of the “lifestyle” and, simultaneously, as outside belligerents committed to this groups’ dissolution. The next section will analyze Love in Action’s emergence in relation to the broader anti-gay reactionary politics that emerged in reaction to declassification and the gay rights movement.

Declassification

The historian Abram J. Lewis has provocatively argued that the declassification of homosexuality, rather than precipitating a broader collapse in psychiatric power, “helped enable psychiatry to reassert social and scientific authority by incorporating a previously disavowed form of minority difference. Affirming homosexuality allowed psychiatry to reestablish itself as an impartial expert discourse and a proponent of social diversity at a time when it was being increasingly publicly criticized as moralizing and outmoded.”¹⁶⁶ Despite the revolutionary aspirations of early participants in the gay liberation campaign against institutional psychiatry,

¹⁶⁴ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 112.

¹⁶⁵ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 17.

¹⁶⁶ Abram J. Lewis, “‘We Are Certain of Our Own Insanity’: Antipsychiatry and the Gay Liberation Movement, 1968–1980,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016), 86.

the APA's decision to declassify homosexuality ultimately hinged on arguments which "construed the homosexuality diagnosis as an outlier of bad science that could be corrected through improved standards of scientific rigor and impartiality."¹⁶⁷

While the APA's declassification of homosexuality was generally embraced by those within or sympathetic to the gay community and, perhaps, *did* help psychiatrists reassert their social and scientific authority amongst mainstream Americans in the long-term, immediate reactions both within and outside the psychiatric community were hardly laudatory.

Many psychiatrists, particularly those from the psychoanalytic community, vehemently opposed declassification, ultimately petitioning the APA to hold a referendum where nearly 10,000 voting members would be able to vote either for or against the board's decision. While 5,854 psychiatrists voted in support of the board's decision, 3,810 voted against it.¹⁶⁸

Though the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* both presented the APA's decision in a relatively favorable light in articles published in the immediate aftermath of the announcement in mid-December of 1973, the following months saw the publication of a slew of op-eds, articles, and essays criticizing gay liberation's successes as premature, misdirected, and overzealous. Just one week after running the headline "Psychiatrists, in a Shift, Declare Homosexuality No Mental Illness" on the front page of the *New York Times*, the editorial board seemed to backtrack.¹⁶⁹ "The Issue is Subtle, The Debate Still On," the headline of a follow-up declared.¹⁷⁰ The article underneath the cautious warning was a return to the pre-Stonewall journalistic cliché, consisting of a civilized discussion between Dr. Robert Spitzer, a heterosexual

¹⁶⁷ Lewis, "We Are Certain of Our Own Insanity," 86.

¹⁶⁸ Neel Burton, "When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder," *Psychology Today*, June 24, 2024.

¹⁶⁹ Richard D. Lyons, "Psychiatrists, in a Shift, Declare Homosexuality No Mental Illness," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1973.

¹⁷⁰ Robert Spitzer and Irving Bieber, "The A.P.A. Ruling on Homosexuality," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1973, sec. Archives.

psychiatrist who sat on the APA nomenclature committee and had been instrumental in the declassification decision, and Dr. Irving Bieber.

Throughout the article, Spitzer distanced the American Psychiatric Association from radical gay activists. “[T]he reason that this new proposal was unanimously passed,” Spitzer asserted, “is not that the American Psychiatric Association has been taken over by some wild revolutionaries or latent homosexuals. It is that we have to keep step with the times.” While Spitzer affirmed that activist’s perception of psychiatry as “an agent of social control” had “some justification,” a key aspect of his defense of the APA decision rested on his contention that declassification need not bring about an end to homophobia. “[I]n no longer considering it a psychiatric disorder, we are not saying that it is normal, or that it as valuable as heterosexuality,” the psychiatrist clarified.¹⁷¹

An essay run in the *New York Times* in April 1974 marshalled a similar plea for moderation: while the writer affirmed his belief that gay people should “be given a legal means to combat social stigma,” he bristled at the way “many homosexuals [who have gained the courage to come ‘out of the closets and into the streets’] have proceeded to overstate their case.”¹⁷²

Intimating that the APA decision and the successful passage of gay rights ordinances in Washington D.C. and Minneapolis reflected the will of only a small, radical minority, the journalist pronounced that “To be gay is to be engaged in an activity that both moral absolutists and moral relativists would label ‘immoral,’ with both Scripture and sociological statistics on their side. The majority who consider homosexuality to be a mental problem to be corrected, or a

¹⁷¹ Spitzer and Bieber, “The A.P.A. Ruling on Homosexuality.”

¹⁷² William Safire, “Don’t Slam the Closet Door,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 1974, sec. Archives,

moral decision to be castigated, are not to be dismissed or benighted as a bunch of bigots.”¹⁷³ As backwards as the “majority” might deem homosexuality to be, the journalist rightly recognized the unsavory implications of top-down attempts by the state or other, large institutions to regulate personal morality. “The question then becomes,” he concluded, “How can this abnormality be contained in a way that does not abridge personal freedom?”¹⁷⁴

Ironically, the APA’s board *had* attempted to strike a balance between the conflicting demands of protecting personal liberty and maintaining public morality. Contrary to some reporting, the APA decision did not fully remove homosexuality from its nomenclature; rather, the APA effectively replaced the old diagnosis with the more circumspect classification of “sexual orientation disturbance,” created to describe homosexuals who were “in conflict with” their sexual orientation and sought psychiatric treatment.¹⁷⁵ In practical terms, declassification meant that homosexuals who did not wish to seek psychiatric treatment for their sexualities were no longer categorized as “sick,” a change which ideally prevented patients being forced to undergo conversion therapy *involuntarily*. However, the APA’s decision did not introduce any formal measures to limit, let alone ban, the practice of conversion therapy—Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides, for instance, both continued to practice, write about, and advocate for psychoanalytic models of conversion therapy until their deaths in 1991 and 2005, respectively.¹⁷⁶

For all of its positive effects, the 1973 APA decision left the architecture of psychiatric conversion therapy largely intact. Curiously, as the *New York Times* journalist’s consternation

¹⁷³ Safire, “Don’t Slam the Closet Door.”

¹⁷⁴ Safire, “Don’t Slam the Closet Door.”

¹⁷⁵ Decker, Hannah S. "A Crisis in American Psychiatry and the Development of DSM-III." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology. 25 Mar. 2021; Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.
<https://oxfordre.com/psychology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.001.0001/acrefore-9780190236557-e-631>.

¹⁷⁶ Steven Lee Myers, “Irving Bieber, 80, a Psychoanalyst Who Studied Homosexuality, Dies,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1991, sec. New York; Margalit Fox, “Charles W. Socarides, Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst, Is Dead at 83,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2005, sec. New York.

over the decision suggested, many people outside the world of medicine, insurance, and criminal justice construed the APA decision as an institutional endorsement of homosexuality, the gay liberation movement, or both. In the eyes of many concerned commentators, including but not limited to those affiliated with Love in Action, the APA's move to declassify homosexuality evidenced that psychiatric establishment as a whole had been commandeered by the gay activist agenda. Paradoxically, the tentative endorsement of gay-affirmative ideology by large, state-aligned institutions, rather than enhancing the legitimacy of gay activists, at turns diminished the authority of the institutions themselves or substantiated the notion that gay activists were at the forefront of a coordinated, successful effort to upend traditional sexual morality.

Reflecting on the origins of Love in Action decades later in *Destiny's Bridge*, Frank Worthen identified the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disturbance as the chief impetus for his starting an ex-gay ministry. "The year 1973, when God called me to ministry, was... the year of the American Psychiatric Association's declaration that homosexuality is normal."¹⁷⁷ Contrary to its intended purpose, which was to enable the continuation of psychiatric conversion therapies, Frank Worthen interpreted the creation of the category "ego-dystonic homosexuality" as pronouncing "anyone not completely satisfied with his/her homosexual nature to be disordered. In other words, if you didn't like being gay, something was wrong with you!"¹⁷⁸

Taking up a similar deflective posture to antihomosexual psychiatrists, Love in Action leaders charged the gay community with intolerance, insisting that it was they, the ex-gays, who represented the genuinely marginalized group. Despite the fact that laws criminalizing same-sex sexual acts lingered in various local and state legal codes until 2003, when the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in the decision of *Lawrence v. Texas*, Worthen insisted that the

¹⁷⁷ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 290.

¹⁷⁸ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 290.

APA decision “radically changed the world we live in. Most governments responded to this decision by removing all laws against homosexuality and placing homosexuals in a minority class with special rights.”¹⁷⁹ He likewise warned that “Some pastors, steeped in psychology, are now agreeing with the viewpoint of the American Psychiatric Association. They apply the label ‘disordered’ to the individual who is not completely satisfied with the gay lifestyle and seeks a way out.”¹⁸⁰

Positioning acceptance or even tolerance of homosexuality as antithetical to the Bible’s moral teachings, Worthen suggested that, by accepting gay-affirmative theology, Christians “have left the door open to deception and heresy.”¹⁸¹ Reiterating the oppositionality of Biblical truth and the APA decision, Worthen characterized declassification as evidence of a profound spiritual crisis: “Many times in Scripture we are told that times will come when men abandon their faith and follow deceiving spirit. It is high time we wake up and defend God’s word against those who would change its meaning and contradict its clear teaching.”¹⁸²

Though the fight to “restore” America’s sexual morality would be spearheaded by activists, politicians, and preachers associated with the Christian Right, Christians groups like Love in Action’s opposition to gay civil rights was hardly heterodox.¹⁸³ Despite gay rights activists’ achievements in top-down institutional and legal reforms and increased representation in mainstream media, public attitudes towards gay people remained overwhelmingly negative throughout the 1970s. A General Social Survey conducted by NORC in 1973 reported that over 76 percent of respondents believed sexual relations between two adults of the same sex to be

¹⁷⁹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 290.

¹⁸⁰ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 22.

¹⁸¹ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 14.

¹⁸² Worthen, *Steps Out*, 14.

¹⁸³ See Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America’s Debate on Homosexuality*, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America’s Debate on Homosexuality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

“always” or “almost always” wrong.¹⁸⁴ In defiance of the APA’s bold *volte-face*, this statistic stayed more or less stagnant for the rest of the decade. In fact, the share of respondents who indicated that they believed homosexuality was “always wrong” was *higher* in 1980 than it had been seven years prior. The onset of the AIDS epidemic in 1982 would cause this statistic to balloon even further— in 1987, NORC reported that a whopping 75 percent of respondents believed that same-sex relations were “always wrong,” with an additional 10 percent of the population believing that it was either “almost always” or “sometimes wrong.” Indeed, rather than curtailing antigay beliefs, the gay community’s enhanced visibility and remarkable political successes in the early 1970s seemed to initiate an era of profound reactionary blowback.¹⁸⁵

Of course, antihomosexual psychiatrists and ex-gay ministers like Frank Worthen were also motivated by their commitment to what they saw as scientific or religious truth and a desire to “help” a needy population. However, it remains the case that those running conversion therapy ministries like Love in Action, as well as antihomosexual psychiatrists, had a direct incentive to stoke the flames of antigay hysteria— without a reliable supply of gay people who felt negatively enough about their sexualities to pursue dubiously effective and often expensive treatments, their organizations could not succeed.

And stoke the flames they did: clients’ testimonial accounts of their prior experiences in the “gay lifestyle” published by Love in Action conjured a nightmarish image of the gay community. The gay lifestyle was one defined by transactional sexual relationships, chaos, financial and sexual predation, drug abuse, superficiality, thievery, and— in a somewhat bizarre departure from traditional homophobic tropes— extreme violence. It was, in the words of Frank

¹⁸⁴ Alan S. Yang, “Trends: Attitudes Toward Homosexuality,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1997): 477–507.

Worthen, “a bizarre world of fantasy, reverse thinking and distortions of every shape, size and color.”¹⁸⁶

Throughout its five-decade-long existence, Love in Action consistently marketed their ministry as an antidote for the moral decline wrought by gay activism. *The Third Sex?*— the book co-written by Kent Philpott and Frank Worthen in 1975, while Love in Action was still in its infancy— explained on its front flap that “Until rather recently homosexuality was a pretty hush-hush matter... Today it is blandished across the daily newspapers as with strident voices many homosexuals are proclaiming themselves a suppressed minority.”¹⁸⁷ Demonstrating their clear cognizance of the gay community’s coalescence into a formidable political bloc, the authors described: “They demonstrate for Gay Liberation with public marches and, in 1972, nearly succeeded in gaining themselves a place in the Democratic national platform. The old image of shameful secrecy is being supplanted by a shouted self-assertiveness.”¹⁸⁸ The implications of these developments, while not stated outright, were clear, given the book contained six stories of “successful” conversions: gay people were a problem, and Kent Philpott and Frank Worthen offered a solution.

In this sense, then, the emergence of Love in Action may be thought of as one manifestation of a wider reactionary pushback against gay liberation and the declassification of homosexuality. Though gay identity and community certainly encouraged more people to embrace their sexual orientation, the perseverance of antigay discrimination, particularly within American conservative Christianity, resulted in a continued demand for conversion therapies.

Touchy-feely Conversion Therapy

¹⁸⁶ Worthen, *Steps out of Homosexuality*, 63.

¹⁸⁷ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, front flap.

¹⁸⁸ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, front flap.

In some ways, gay liberationists' timing could not have been more opportune. Psychiatrist's reputation as elite, conservative professionals dedicated to upholding the public order— carefully and intentionally constructed to align with the social and cultural expectations of the postwar United States— was, by the late 1960s, becoming a liability. Their close relationship with the state, particularly their continued collaboration with the United States' defense apparatus during the Cold War, invited intense scrutiny in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and student protest movements. This was no longer the America of *Leave it to Beaver* and Joseph McCarthy— the 1960s had brought about profound changes to the intellectual fabric of the United States, nowhere more than amongst the young, educated, bourgeois populations amongst whom psychotherapy had historically been popular. Psychiatrists' faith in the idea that conforming to social norms could alleviate mental suffering felt starkly discordant with a moment defined by libertarian ideologies and shifting cultural norms. The conceptualization of suffering as a product of individual pathology seemed similarly out of place in a political milieu characterized by critiques of “the system.” The fancy degrees, jargon, and empiricism that had once conferred upon psychiatrists the status of venerable experts, likewise, now marked them as decidedly out of touch.¹⁸⁹

Though Gary Alinder was certainly more suspicious of the psychiatric establishment than those in the political or cultural mainstream, his description of the APA convention still speaks to the interconnectedness of young left-wing Americans' disenchantment with institutional psychiatry and broader, late-1960s critiques of the postwar United States:

The main convention meeting looked like a refugee camp for Nixon's silent majority. It was 99 and 44/100 per cent white, straight, male middle-aged, upper middle class. They

¹⁸⁹ Decker, “A Crisis in American Psychiatry and the Development of DSM-III.”

are the insulated ones— separated in their immaculate garb, cars, country clubs, planes, expensive hotels— protected from emotional involvement by a gibberishy vocabulary which translates humanity into “scientifically” quantifiable and “objective” terms...A week after Kent and Cambodia, the psychiatrists had come to discuss business as usual.¹⁹⁰

Alinder’s juxtaposition of the psychiatrists’ commitment to conformism with the senseless violence of the United States’ engagement in Southeast Asia underlined the absurdity of adjustment as the paradigmatic goal of psychiatric treatment— what good was “adjusting” to the prevailing norms of a society that was *itself* malignant?

Though gay activists’ critiques of the psychiatric establishment were rooted in a particularistic political concern, they may also be understood as articulations of the broader intellectual and activist movements of “anti-psychiatry” and “radical psychiatry.” Closely associated with the work of Michel Foucault, R.D. Laing, and Thomas Szasz as well as the North Dakota-based journal *The Radical Therapist*, these two, overlapping movements posited that hegemonic definitions of normalcy and illness in psychiatry perpetuated existing power structures by individualizing socially-constructed problems, pathologizing deviance from societal norms, and obscuring the role of systemic inequalities and institutional hierarchies in psychological distress.¹⁹¹ Szasz and other contributors to *The Radical Therapist* believed that what psychiatrists typically identified as “mental illness” was a fundamentally social issue that should be dealt with via interventions to society itself, as opposed to individualized treatment.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Alinder, “Meet the Shrinks.”

¹⁹¹ Lucas Richert, *Break On Through: Radical Psychiatry and the American Counterculture* (The MIT Press, 2019), 37-65.

¹⁹² Mervat Nasser. “The Rise and Fall of Anti-Psychiatry.” *Psychiatric Bulletin* 19, no. 12 (1995): 743–46.

“The establishment school of psychiatry,” argued a leaflet distributed by the Chicago Gay Liberation front at the 1970 American Medical Association conference, “is based on the premise that people who are hurting should solve their problems by ‘adjusting’ to the situation.”¹⁹³ The predominant forms of psychotherapy, they asserted, “places the burden on each individual homosexual to learn to bear his torment. But the ‘problem’ of homosexuality is never solved under this scheme; the anti-homosexualist attitude of society, which is the cause of the homosexual’s trouble, goes unchallenged.”¹⁹⁴ Paraphrasing ideas popularized by Thomas Szasz, the gay activists contended that it was not homosexuals who were sick, but *society*. Linking the oppression of sexual minorities to the oppression of ethnic minorities and women, gay liberationists proffered that “the key to our mental health, and to the mental health of all oppressed people in a racist, sexist, capitalist society, is a radical change in the structure and accompanying attitudes of the entire social system.”¹⁹⁵

The declassification and radical psychiatry movements and represented just two aspects of a many-more-pronged assault on the psychiatric establishment. Kennedy- and Nixon-led efforts to dismantle the asylum system in response to concerns over intransigent patient abuse—a phenomenon which was dramatized in popular works like Ken Kesey’s 1960 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*—effectively dismantled what had been one of psychiatry’s main sources of institutional power. Salacious accounts of the horrific abuses, deprivation of freedom, and coercion endured by patients at the hands of psychiatrists working at state-run mental health facilities did little to help the medical profession’s public image. The psychoanalyst-dominated psychiatric establishment’s legitimacy was further undercut by the precipitous rise of the

¹⁹³ Chicago Gay Liberation Front, "A Leaflet for the American Medical Association," (1970), reprinted in *Out of the Closets*; Voice of Gay Liberation, eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young (N.Y.: Douglass, 1972), p. 145-47

¹⁹⁴ Chicago Gay Liberation Front, "A Leaflet."

¹⁹⁵ Chicago Gay Liberation Front, "A Leaflet."

neurobiological theory of mental illness and subsequent boom in psychopharmacology. Bolstered by the wellspring of ideologically diverse critiques from scientists, activists, and writers as well as mainstream concern over psychiatric abuse, the historian Michael Staub has argued that the social movement era marked a moment in which “a significant portion of the populace... believed madness to be a plausible and sane reaction to insane social conditions, and that psychiatrists served principally as agents of repression.”¹⁹⁶

Love in Action and other religious conversion therapy organizations were largely unfettered by such baggage. Though gay activists generally identified “the Church”—defined as a vague, monolithic entity—as a source of antigay oppression in the early 1970s, the small evangelical churches from which most Exodus-affiliated ministries emerged lacked, prior to the late 1970s, significant connections with large institutions or the state, as such. Though Kent Philpott and several other figures critical to Love in Action’s development attended a Southern Baptist seminary, Love in Action and Church of the Open Door were a part of a wider proliferation of independent churches in the United States.¹⁹⁷ Nondenominational churches, unlike “mainline” churches like the United Methodist Church or Presbyterian Church, “are not under the oversight of a denominational board” and thus are not “constrained by the institutional framework and theological dogma of their parent organization.”¹⁹⁸ Church of the Open Door and many other non-denominational churches eschewed “many of the symbols of organized religion” and rejected “the formalism and liturgy of traditional churches,” instead embracing a zeitgeist-

¹⁹⁶ Michael E. Staub, *Madness Is Civilization: When the Diagnosis Was the Social, 1948-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 10.

¹⁹⁷ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 26.

¹⁹⁸ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 26.

friendly style of contemporary worship featuring Christian rock music and a healthy dose of pop-psychology, humor, and self-help principles.¹⁹⁹

Though some leaders, like pastor Kent Philpott and his successor, Mike Riley, did undergo formal seminary training, Open Door strongly valued lay leadership and encouraged members of the congregation to “participate in sermons and exercise their feelings at almost any time by giving testimony, shouting, participating in a call and response, or raising their arms in the air.”²⁰⁰ This dynamic allowed Love in Action to position itself as a compassionate alternative to state-backed psychiatric treatment, offering a more relatable and less threatening approach to those struggling with their sexuality—a stark contrast to the clinical, coercive institutions that had come to define mental healthcare in the public imagination.

The fact that Love in Action leaders had *themselves* gone through the programs for which they advocated also helped jettison conversion therapy’s association with psychiatric abuse. In contrast to the clearly delineated and overtly hierarchical patient-doctor relationship, the line between “participant” and “practitioner” was, in the case of Love in Action, hazy. Unlike institutional psychiatry, Love in Action was founded on the principle that those best equipped to treat homosexuality in other people were those who had dealt with and, by some measure, *overcome* homosexuality themselves. In *The Third Sex?*, Kent Philpott suggested that “it is hard” for a heterosexual to “counsel and give guidance to a homosexual,” explaining that a heterosexual counselor might heighten the homosexual’s fear of rejection and that “The homosexual will feel the counselor either will not or cannot understand him.”²⁰¹ An ex-gay like Frank Worthen on the other hand, “wasn’t like the other counselors and pastors...Because [he]

¹⁹⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 26.

²⁰⁰ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 26.

²⁰¹ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, 182.

had walked in [his homosexual client's] shoes...[he] understood what [the client] was saying. It may have been the story of countless other young men, but it was [his] story, too."²⁰²

Tellingly, pamphlets, advertisements, and newsletters aimed at non-Christian gays often played up the degree to which Love in Action leaders were “one of them.” In one Love in Action newsletter from December 1975, “Brother Bob” Davies, one of Love in Action’s charter members, wrote that the ministry’s “main purpose is to reach out to *other gay people* in order to show it is possible to deal with the many problems facing them— from a Christian point of view— by people who have been through *the same things* and are still going through difficult times, but dealing with these burdens with new strength and victory.”²⁰³ Despite Love in Action’s generally hostility towards “the gay lifestyle,” Davies seemed to describe himself, using active tense, as a member of the gay community. Davies also insinuated himself in the reader’s shoes, anticipating and then responding to their yet-to-be-vocalized concerns: “Hard? Fanatical-sounding? Unreasonable? Yes, but *true*... A lot religious hogwash you say? That is the choice you have to make, and the risk is all yours. We’ve made ours. The joy and peace that is ours, despite the burdens, far surpass anything we pretend we ‘might have been.’”²⁰⁴ His advocacy for conversion therapy, he intoned, was not rooted in ignorance, but acute understanding. As Davies wrote in Love in Action’s newsletter from January 1976, “We are not afraid of the gay community, because we were a part of it and understand all of its many sides too well.”²⁰⁵

“The Problem of Change”

²⁰² Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 13

²⁰³ Italics mine. Love in Action Newsletter from December 1975 reprinted in Kent Philpott, *The Gay Theology* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1977), 143.

²⁰⁴ Philpott, *The Gay Theology*, 148.

²⁰⁵ Philpott, *The Gay Theology*, 148.

Paradoxically, at the same time as the DSM faced criticism for its obtuseness towards the subjective, social, and political dimensions of mental health, activists, insurers, government agencies, and even other psychiatrists publicly contested the empirical legitimacy of psychiatry as well. In 1973, *Science* published “On being sane in insane places” by David Rosenhan, a Stanford Professor of Psychology and Law. The profoundly controversial article detailed an experiment wherein Rosenhan and seven other participants with no histories of mental illness were instructed to show up at mental hospitals claiming they were hearing voices and, once admitted, instruct their doctors that they were no longer symptomatic and return to their normal behavior. The participants were invariably admitted as inpatients and given diagnosis ranging from manic-depression to schizophrenia, leading Rosenhan to conclude that “we cannot distinguish the sane from the insane in psychiatric hospitals.”²⁰⁶ Though the empiricism of Rosenthal’s findings has since been called into question, the article nevertheless received extensive coverage and sparked a widespread debate regarding the legitimacy of psychiatric nosology.²⁰⁷

During the declassification movement, the outpouring of essays and articles written by gays and lesbians who had previously underwent psychiatric treatments for their homosexuality casted aspersions on the veracity of antihomosexual psychiatrists’ claims about the efficacy of conversion therapy treatments. This presented obvious problems for psychiatrists, whose pronouncements about homosexuality often directly opposed the subjective experiences of gay people themselves. For instance, psychiatrists had historically attributed their failure to convert homosexual patients to some flaw in the patients themselves. Getting together with other gay

²⁰⁶ Andrew Scull, “Rosenhan Revisited: Successful Scientific Fraud,” *History of Psychiatry* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 180–95.

²⁰⁷ Scull, “Rosenhan Revisited: Successful Scientific Fraud.”

people and comparing notes about their experiences, many former psychiatric conversion therapy patients recognized that, contrary to psychiatrists' claims, virtually *no one* actually "succeeded" in becoming a heterosexual through therapy. The ineffectiveness of treatment, it turned out, was no fault of their own. Psychiatrists' increasingly modest claims about their success rates suggested their growing recognition of an uncomfortable truth: therapeutic attempts to change people's sexuality simply did not work.

Similar to antihomosexual psychiatry, the key to understanding how Love in Action ultimately succeeded is deciphering how they *contended* with the unflattering fact that their programs did not actually make their clients "heterosexual."

Prior to about 1979, Worthen and other ex-gay leaders "operated on a principle of blind faith in the efficacy of being born again as Christians to heal homosexuality" and produce a "full change to heterosexuality."²⁰⁸ Bussee's highly publicized departure from Exodus intensified remaining members' pessimism regarding their prospects of ever experiencing heterosexual attraction.²⁰⁹ Worthen and other ex-gay leaders responded by reframing "change" as a difficult, continuous journey, parallel to the exodus out of Egypt, rather than an instantaneous "fix."²¹⁰ "Society most often views things in a black/white context," Worthen wrote. "If change is not instant and total, then no real change has taken place. No allowance is made for the process of growing into a new identity...Not only the world at large, but the Christian world, also, expects immediate results. Christians want to hear of instant healings. We long for the day when, in a twinkling of an eye, we will be changed into new creations."²¹¹ He similarly underscored that "Becoming ex-gay does not exempt us from ever stumbling. As true for every Christian, we must

²⁰⁸ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 33.

²⁰⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 34-5.

²¹⁰ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 35.

²¹¹ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 2.

be cleansed daily from tempting thoughts.”²¹² Incorporating “backsliding” or “falls” (Love in Action parlance for illicit same-sex activity) into the definition of conversion therapy worked to prevent these situations from being used as evidence of conversion therapy’s inefficacy.

In contrast to earlier conversion therapy movements and other ex-gay ministries, Love in Action’s leaders set forth a relatively circumscribed definition of “change” from the get-go, preemptively neutralizing of the critiques or negative experiences of former program participants and the gay community. Worthen affirmed that, regardless of one’s actual sexual orientation (or, in Love in Action lingo, one’s “psychic response”), by accepting the ex-gay label and “a new position in Christ,” the ex-gay person “is freed from his sin by the power of the atoning blood of Jesus on the Cross...God no longer sees him as a homosexual.”²¹³ Worthen promised his clients that, even if they still experienced homosexual attraction or even had the occasional “backslide,” Love in Action’s program was nonetheless still changing one’s “attitudes, desires, relationships with others.”²¹⁴

Antihomosexual psychiatrists’ legitimacy ultimately stemmed from the assumed symmetry between “scientific opinion” and “objective truth.” While psychiatry’s reputation as an impartial, objective science facilitated the discipline’s postwar ascension, it also lay the groundwork for its demise: because the authority of psychiatrists rested on the empirical validity of their theories or treatments, gay activists’ efforts to “debunk” antihomosexual psychiatry—to dramatically exploit the incongruousness between “scientific opinion” and “objective truth”—effectively undermined antihomosexual psychiatrists’ authority as a whole.

²¹² Worthen, *Steps Out*, 3.

²¹³ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 2-3.

²¹⁴ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 2.

Pertinently, Love in Action did not operate under the auspices of medicine. Therefore, they were not necessarily held to the same standards as medicine in regard to the efficacy of their program in “curing” the condition they aimed to treat. Though Love in Action often did substantiate their claims using outdated or overtly biased scientific studies,²¹⁵ whether or not their theories about homosexuality were “true” in a scientific sense was irrelevant. Despite Love in Action’s contemporary elements, they nevertheless rejected the claim that their pro-conversion, anti-gay stance was rooted in worldly political concern, personal opinion, or ambition. Instead, they saw themselves as simply upholding God’s eternal “standard of righteousness and holiness,” as clearly and literally outlined in the Bible.²¹⁶ Regardless of progressive theologians’ or gay activists’ attempts to “alter the prevailing interpretation of the Scriptures dealing with homosexuality” or challenge Biblical literalism with science, the truth—in the eyes of Worthen—remained unchanged.²¹⁷ “Whatever new scientific evidence comes to light can’t change God’s basic plan for man.”²¹⁸

The core doctrine of Love in Action was not based on theories that could be validated or invalidated with statistics or studies, but on *spiritual* or *personal* truths revealed through Scriptural analysis, prayer, and, critically, first-hand experiences. In fact, Tanya Erzen has suggested that at Church of the Open Door, like other non-denominational evangelical churches, “personal experience validates religious belief and commitment, and experience and testimony supersede doctrine and scripture.”²¹⁹ The efficacy of their program, in other words, need not be

²¹⁵ In *Steps Out*, which was published in 1984, Worthen cited findings from the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States from 1970. (*Steps Out*, 4). Another Worthen-penned pamphlet from the early 2000s, “The Components of Homosexuality,” cited work written by Irving Bieber and other antihomosexual psychiatrists such as Ruth Barnhouse and Lawrence J. Hatterer from the 1960s and 1970s.

²¹⁶ Worthen, *Steps Out*, Introduction.

²¹⁷ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 10.

²¹⁸ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 13.

²¹⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 26.

demonstrated through opaque statistics or anonymized case studies— as ex-gays themselves, Love in Action leaders could vouch first-hand to the transformative power of their ministry.

Testimonies, personal accounts of leaders’ and program participants’ journeys “out of the gay lifestyle” and into Love in Action represented a crucial means by which the ministry legitimized their program and neutralized attempts by gay activists to “debunk” conversion therapy.²²⁰ *The Third Sex?*, a book which helped transform ex-gay ministries into a national phenomenon, centered around the testimonies of six Love in Action members at different stages of their spiritual journeys. Simultaneously relatable and aspirational, Love in Action leaders paired salacious depictions of their old, gay lives with breathless affirmations of the program’s efficacy.²²¹ “[M]y whole life is changing”— Bob Davies wrote in a newsletter in late 1975— “and so will yours, if you’re willing to put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ... Take my word for it. Better yet, take *His* word for it.”²²² By incorporating unflattering or intimate details, personal anecdotes, and casual language, those providing testimonies imbued the claims of Love in Action with their personal credibility.

Worthen saw ex-gays as having “experienced what the world considers impossible— a change of orientation,” and frequently cited their “changed lives” as the ultimate proof of homosexuality’s vincibility.²²³ Though Love in Action’s conception of what actually constituted successful conversion was a bit more specious, Worthen nonetheless confirmed that at least some ex-gays reported “a complete and total orientation change (where the person is never again tempted by same-sex people and now has an active interest in the opposite sex).”²²⁴

²²⁰ For a more extended discussion on the use of testimony in New Hope (FKA Love in Action) programs, see Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 171-9.

²²¹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 173-5.

²²² Philpott, *The Gay Theology*, 144.

²²³ Frank Worthen, “Homosexuality and the Issue of Change” (Booklet, San Rafael, CA, Undated), AC 1428, Box 2, Folder 17, National Museum of American History Archives Center, 1.

²²⁴ Worthen, “Homosexuality and the Issue of Change.” 22.

Conveniently, Worthen had no need to outsource validation of his claims to medical or psychiatric authorities— his personal testimony was the ultimate proof of concept. “Can gays change?” the back cover of Worthen’s autobiography asked. “Find the truth for yourself. Read this book.”

Michael Bussee, one of the founders of EXIT and Exodus International, later hypothesized that, of the hundreds of people he counseled at EXIT, “not one” had become straight.²²⁵ Ex-gay leaders and program participants left their ministries with striking regularity, especially between the second and third Exodus conventions.²²⁶ In 1979, less than three years after founding Exodus, Michael Bussee and one of his colleagues, Gary Cooper, announced their decision to leave the ex-gay movement— and their wives. “For years,” Bussee explained in a blog post in 2007, “we had both firmly believed that the EXODUS process would make us straight. Instead, we realized we had fallen in love with each other.”²²⁷ Bussee and Cooper were but one of many such cases. The frequency with which program participants (and even other leaders) slept with each other was one of the major issues ex-gay leaders confronted in the early years of Exodus.²²⁸ Unsanctioned and unintended dating was so common amongst members of Love in Action’s original weekly support group that Worthen jokingly referred to Love in Action as “Lots of Action.”²²⁹

Remarkably, considering their successful expansion in the following decades, the inefficacy of Love in Action’s program was more or less apparent from the outset: Jake, a young, “flamboyant” gay man, had joined Love in Action in its infancy in 1974, offering his home as a

²²⁵ Bussee, “Apology.”

²²⁶ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 205.

²²⁷ Bussee, “Apology.”

²²⁸ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 205; Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 34.

²²⁹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 27.

venue for the group's Bible study sessions.²³⁰ Worthen was openly disdainful of Jake's energetic persona and campy sense of humor, perceiving his antics as evidence of the young man's refusal to give up his old, gay ways. Worthen eventually called a meeting with Kent Philpott, Bob Davies, and Jake where he harshly criticized his client's attention-seeking behavior.²³¹ According to Worthen, Jake "could not tolerate our advice or correction, and responded with an explosion of anger and hostility." The rank-and-file of the group evidently saw the rift in a slightly different light: almost every single member of the Bible study sided with Jake, who, alongside another former Love in Action participant named John Evans, founded another Bible study session.²³²

Free to discuss their sexualities and Christian faiths outside the supervision of Love in Action leadership, participants of this rival study group began to fall away from the "ex-gay" movement. Within a short period, Love in Action's group attendance "slipped to a handful of people."²³³ Worthen was further enflamed when Evans joined leagues with Dr. Ralph Blair, a pro-gay evangelical preacher and founder of pro-gay ministry Evangelicals Concerned. Evans opened up the Bay Area chapter of Evangelicals Concerned and, with the coordination of several people who moved from Love in Action to his group, released a statement. It revealed that four out of the six people who provided testimonies for *The Third Sex?* had already gone back to "the homosexual lifestyle"—before the book had even landed on shelves.²³⁴ By 1979, the other two charter members of Love in Action had also left ex-gay ministries.

Even Worthen, a true believer and ostensible success story, fell short of a heterosexual ideal: the ex-gay leader was, remarkably, still living with his former business partner and ex-

²³⁰ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 180.

²³¹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 180.

²³² Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 181.

²³³ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 181.

²³⁴ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 180-1; Evans, "John Evans to Dan Malachuch," May 5, 1979.

boyfriend, Hal, until as late as 1980.²³⁵ Unlike antihomosexual psychiatrists, ex-gay leaders struggled to keep hold of the media narrative: gay media outlets around the Bay Area and Los Angeles published scathing exposé after scathing exposé about Love in Action and other Exodus-affiliated ministries throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

If so few participants of Love in Action achieved the nominal goal of heterosexuality, then how did leaders define success? What did it mean to be 'changed'? How did Love in Action persuade participants to accept this alternative definition?

From “Cure” to “Self-Actualization”

As historians of psychiatry such as Lucas Richert and Michael Staub have described, the declining appeal of traditional, medicalized, psychoanalytic therapies coincided with and, by some turns, were precipitated by, the emergence of new paradigms around mental health.²³⁶ For much of the 20th century, mental health was predominately understood through the medical binarism of normalcy and sickness. In this schema, therapy was understood as a means of normalizing the patient by ameliorating the symptoms of their particular neurosis or illness.

By the early 1970s, the goal posts had changed. People were looking for something *more* out of their therapies than a return to statistical baseline. “A larger number [of Americans] are becoming alienated,” explained Alfred Yassky, executive director of the American Psychotherapy Seminar Center in Manhattan. By his estimation, Americans were no longer arriving to therapy in hopes of curing discrete problems, but “are hungering for a sense of meaning, identity,

²³⁵ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 228.

²³⁶ See Michael E. Staub, "Radical," in *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, Edited by Timothy Aubry, and Trysh Travis (eds). (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Lucas Richert, “Breakthrough of the Mind: New Age Therapies in the Medical Marketplace,” in *Break On Through: Radical Psychiatry and the American Counterculture* (The MIT Press, 2019).

happiness, and even salvation. We are wanting more from therapy and therapists.”²³⁷ It was no longer enough to be simply “not-ill”—Americans wanted to be *well*.

Certainly, undergoing analysis was, at varying times, vogueish—a way of marking oneself as a member of a particular in-crowd. However, save for a few exceptions, prior to the mid-1960s, therapy was an individual pursuit that remained more or less autonomous from one’s public persona. Psychotherapy was understood as a tool to *enhance* one’s pre-existing life and relationships versus provide them. The therapeutic or self-help movements of the 1970s, as the journalist aptly described, provided participants with a particularistic identity and conceptualized their treatments as holistic lifestyles.

Free from the constraints of denominational or institutional oversight and operating in the capacity of a 501(c)(3) religious organization,²³⁸ Love in Action leaders worked diligently to develop a model of conversion therapy that, while unable to produce a change in sexual orientation, could nevertheless appeal to the new tastes of young, American therapeutic consumers.

“We’re a group of people [pause] that have discovered through [pause] warm fellowship and talking and opening up to each other that we are able to change our sexual orientation,” boasted Bob Davies in the pre-recorded message which played when unsuspecting callers rang the number listed on one of Love in Action’s guerilla advertisements.²³⁹ Love in Action seemed to have repackaged the core of antihomosexual psychiatry—therapeutic sexual orientation change—in the community-centered, touchy-feely dressing of 1970s radicalism. It was like an “encounter group” turned inside out. Yet, Davies was careful to differentiate Love in Action’s

²³⁷ Quoted in Richert, *Break On Through*, 73.

²³⁸ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 45.

²³⁹ Jim Peron, “True Facts About The ‘Ex-Gay’ Movements” (Evangelicals Concerned, June 21, 1979), Ex-Gay Subject File, ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

approach from either of its predecessors. ““We’ve discovered that this [pause] group kind of atmosphere that we have at Love in Action *is more powerful than a psychiatrist’s couch*. We’re able to pray for each other, to talk about our deep problems, to share our loneliness and our fears [italics added].” Through this transformative, community-centered therapeutic ministry, Davies intoned, they were able to change not only their sexualities, but become “more functioning part[s] of society,” “the kind of person that deep down inside [they] always wanted to be.”²⁴⁰

Breaking from the binarism of “illness” and “health” or “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” Worthen and other leaders of Love in Action set forth a highly spiritual definition of conversion as a continuous, non-linear “journey” to a better, truer, more efficient self.²⁴¹ What is perhaps most striking about Love in Action’s literature, in fact, is the degree of similarity between their rhetoric and approaches and those of mainstream, secular self-help groups. While prayer, Bible study, and group worship remained the backbone of Love in Action’s residential programs, clients were also expected to exercise three times a week, hold down jobs, stay on time with bills, journal, and participate in social-emotional training workshops.²⁴² By hitching “dysfunctional” characteristics to homosexual identity and “optimized” characteristics to Christian identity, Love in Action drew conspicuous parallels between sexual orientation change and optimization. In *Steps Out*, Worthen detailed the story of one client who, while “in the lifestyle,” was friendless, “felt like a prostitute,” “saw his responsible nature melting away as he overslept and was late for work,” and “was in the pig-pen and was beginning to see that he was going nowhere.” After joining Love in Action, “he developed meaningful friendships. His body was not required in exchange for attention...[his] low self-esteem is mostly gone. He looks

²⁴⁰ Peron, “True Facts.”

²⁴¹ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 161.

²⁴² Love in Action, Inc, “The Source Residential Program Manual.”

forward to the day he will marry and raise a family. He still has a distance to go, but he has come a long way.”²⁴³ These “before-and-after” style testimonies highlight Love in Action self-conscious efforts to redefine conversion therapy as a generic self-help process.

Junkies and Jesus Freaks

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a moment in which hundreds of thousands of people, longing to escape the noise and chaos of hyper-consumeristic, media-saturated, stress-filled urban life, “sought out communal alternatives to advanced industrial society and wanted to live more authentic, connected, and spiritual lives.”²⁴⁴ By 1970, one *New York Times* investigation identified nearly 2,000 intentional communities scattered across 34 states.²⁴⁵ Blurring the line between therapeutic practice and everyday life, many of these movements set up retreats and intentional communities where seekers could live amongst one another and fully commit themselves to personal transformation. In the early 1970s, few places were as strongly associated with such countercultural “experiments in living” than Marin County.

In the late 1960s, as the general mood of Haight-Ashbury devolved from psychedelia to paranoia, counterculture’s center of gravity shifted north. As a wave of young, wealthy, and open-minded young professionals— drawn by Marin County’s stunning coastal landscapes, year-round sunshine, inexpensive rural property, and bohemian history— laid down new roots, the enclave solidified its status as the epicenter of 1970s American wellness and commune culture. Existing alternative health and therapy groups from elsewhere in California like the Esalen Institute and Synanon opened sprawling new campuses alongside fledgling up-starts. By 1970,

²⁴³ Worthen, *Steps Out*, 81.

²⁴⁴ Mark S. Ferrara, *American Community: Radical Experiments in Intentional Living* (Bucknell, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2019), 146.

²⁴⁵ Bill Kovach; Special to The New York Times, “Communes Spread as the Young Reject Old Values,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 1970, sec. Archives.

the *New York Times* reported the presence of at least “several dozen hippie-style communes” as well as plans for a “city of 20,000 for those who wish to live communally” in Marin.²⁴⁶

This is all to say, Frank Worthen and Kent Philpott were not the only people in Marin building a residential program where young people, hopeful to transform their lives, could immerse themselves in intensive therapeutic programming and live communally alongside fellow travelers. Nor, it turns out, were they the only people in Marin interested in *uniting* formal elements of counterculture and alternative therapy culture with charismatic Christianity.

In the late summer of 1967, a small Christian nonprofit called Evangelical Concerns, Inc. opened a storefront on Page Street, a block north of the intersection of Haight and Ashbury streets in San Francisco. By that time, the conditions in the surrounding neighborhood were becoming untenable. An estimated 75,000 young people from across the country had made their way to the Haight that summer, far more than the neighborhood’s infrastructure or social services could adequately accommodate. Those who were unable to find or afford a place to crash slept outside in the thick fog. What began as a culture of free-wheeling, psychedelic experimentation had given way to something bleaker as amphetamines and heroin usurped LSD as the drug of choice.²⁴⁷ Food was scarce, sexually transmitted infections, robberies, and rape rampant. Run-down Victorian mansions crumbled from disrepair.

Born from an unlikely partnership between John MacDonald, the Wheaton College-educated pastor of the First Baptist Church of Mill Valley, and Elizabeth and Warren “Ted” Wise, a recently converted, acid-dropping bohemian couple from Sausalito, Evangelical Concerns was established to address the material and spiritual needs of San Francisco’s hippie population.

²⁴⁶ Times, “Communes Spread as the Young Reject Old Values.”

²⁴⁷ Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29-30.

Using a strategy long used in skid row missions, Evangelicals Concerned “traded food for a chance to expose their clientele to the gospel.”²⁴⁸

In February 1967, Kent Philpott, then twenty-five and a student at the Southern Baptists’ Golden Gate Seminary in Mill Valley, embarked on his own, parallel attempt to evangelize the Haight after hearing Scott McKenzie’s song “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)” on the radio.²⁴⁹ Philpott’s first successful convert was David Hoyt, tawny haired hippie who, while incarcerated in a California state prison for drug smuggling, “had become a jailhouse guru of sorts” and joined the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.²⁵⁰ Hoyt and Philpott, banding together with a handful of Philpott’s seminary classmates, began evangelizing to hippies on the streets of San Francisco. The two men soon united with Wise and MacDonald at Evangelicals Concerned. From these two groups’ early efforts at “evangelizing the Haight” blossomed a new religious movement: the Jesus People.

Kent Philpott speculated that part of the reason the Jesus Movement became so popular was that it emerged at a moment in which more secular people were interested in spirituality. “Transcendental Meditation, Satanism, Zen Buddhism, and more were common topics of conversation, particularly among young people,” Philpott explained. “So was Jesus. There was this hunger, perhaps a curiosity, almost like a fad, and the sight of someone holding a Bible was sure to start up some interaction.”²⁵¹ At the same time, leaders within the Jesus People movement deliberately blended charismatic Christianity with hippie counterculture aesthetics and practices, adopting contemporary music, communal living, casual dress, and anti-establishment rhetoric to create a spiritual alternative that could appeal to disaffected youth while rejecting the sexual

²⁴⁸ Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, 31.

²⁴⁹ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 5.

²⁵⁰ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 6.

²⁵¹ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 68.

permissiveness and drug use of mainstream counterculture.²⁵² The capacity of charismatic worship—a style of prayer characterized by intense emotionalism, speaking in tongues, shouting, jumping, and even rolling on the floor—to induce altered states of consciousness established an unexpected area of continuity between psychonautic culture and evangelical Christianity.²⁵³ From 1967 to about 1972, swathes of young people across the country, seemingly out of the blue, swapped acid for Ecclesiastes. “Jesus is alive and well and living in the radical spiritual fervor of a growing number of young Americans,” announced *Time*’s profile of the movement, which ran as a cover story on June 21, 1971. “The Jesus Revolution” had arrived.²⁵⁴

Following a similar pattern to alternative therapy movements in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Jesus People promoted Christianity as a kind of holistic lifestyle. Rejecting the archetype of the “Sunday Christian,” Jesus People believed their lives should revolve around “an intense personal relationship” with “an awesome, supernatural Jesus Christ.”²⁵⁵ At communal “Christian houses,” like Solid Rock in Marin, converts lived amongst one another, abided by strict rules (“up early, to bed by ten or eleven, assigned chores, a certain number of mandatory Bible readings or prayer gatherings”), and fully committed themselves to their spiritual growth.²⁵⁶ Though these communal houses were based on the first Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles, their likeness to other, secular communal living arrangements was hardly coincidental.²⁵⁷ Christian houses were, like many aspects of the Jesus People, products of movement leaders’ self-conscious effort to build a “hippie-friendly” version

²⁵² Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, Introduction.

²⁵³ See De Vol, Thomas I. “Ecstatic Pentecostal Prayer and Meditation.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1974, pp. 285–88. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505254>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2025.,

²⁵⁴ “The Alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Christ,” *Time*, June 21, 1971.

²⁵⁵ “The Alternative Jesus,” 58.

²⁵⁶ “The Alternative Jesus,” 68.

²⁵⁷ Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, 37.

of Christianity by fusing evangelical Christian theology and worship with elements of California counterculture.²⁵⁸

In 1968, Kent Philpott convinced the pastor of Lincoln Park Baptist Church to let him convert two Sunday school rooms into a “combination shelter and halfway house” that could provide those he encountered while ministering on the streets of San Francisco shelter and spiritual supervision.²⁵⁹ He named it The Soul Inn. Though they continued to “street witness,” Philpott and Hoyt found their niche running interdenominational, communal Christian houses around the Bay Area. After the closure of the Soul Inn, Kent Philpott and his family moved to San Rafael and, in their rental house, opened another Christian house called Zion’s Inn.²⁶⁰ “We didn’t care much about permits,” he explained. “[W]e only cared that it worked.”²⁶¹ Philpott, always clean-cut and by then a married father of two, established strong connections with Marin County and City of San Rafael officials, including a Marin County judge who began “sending girls to us as a kind of diversionary practice, rather than sending them to jail.” Philpott and Hoyt’s network of communal Christian houses grew, thanks in no small part to Philpott’s connections within city government and a steady stream of court-provided stipends (the judge had, somewhat mysteriously, encouraged Philpott and Hoyt to take in some of the wayward girls as foster children. The money was ostensibly reimbursements for their care).²⁶²

While many within the Jesus People movement “had serious personal difficulties before their conversions,” the intensity and rigid structure of life in the Christian houses proved particularly attractive to former addicts.²⁶³ Philpott and Hoyt opened two Christian Houses

²⁵⁸ Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, 37.

²⁵⁹ Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, 49; *Memoirs of a Jesus Freak*, 30.

²⁶⁰ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 33.

²⁶¹ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 34.

²⁶² Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 35.

²⁶³ “The Alternative Jesus,” 58.

especially for drug addicts and alcoholics in San Rafael which similarly operated in the capacity of private diversionary programs.²⁶⁴

Larry Eskridge, scholar and former participant of the Jesus People movement, reported that over a quarter of those involved in the Jesus People were either regular or occasional LSD users prior to their conversion or rededication.²⁶⁵ Just under one half of those surveyed reported regular or occasional use of cannabis.²⁶⁶ “The path to the movement, in or out of communes,” the *Time* profile affirmed, “is often littered with drugs.” Core to the Jesus People’s ecclesiology was the idea that “even the most marginalized elements of society were potential Christian converts. Whereas other mainstream denominations may have been squeamish about ministering to drug addicts, homeless people, and hippies,” the Jesus People actively sought them out.²⁶⁷

By the time he teamed up with Frank Worthen in 1973, Kent Philpott was the President of House Ministries, Inc., a conglomerate which operated fifteen halfway houses, four Christian bookstores, and a counseling center in Marin, mostly servicing addicts and alcoholics.²⁶⁸ Fatigued by the unreliability and frequent criminality of typical clientele and looking for a place to house the ex-gays who arrived to his office (which also acted as Love in Action’s makeshift headquarters) with suitcases and nowhere to stay, beginning in 1976, Philpott hastily transitioned one of his communal Christian homes to “ex-gay” residences.²⁶⁹ When that one filled up, Worthen converted one of the several residential buildings he owned into an additional “ex-gay” house.²⁷⁰ In this sense, Love in Action’s adoption of the residential model of treatment and eventual development of a 12-step approach to “healing” homosexuality were largely the result

²⁶⁴ Philpott, *Jesus Freak*, 35.

²⁶⁵ God’s Forever Family, 291

²⁶⁶ God’s Forever Family, 290

²⁶⁷ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 27.

²⁶⁸ Philpott, *The Third Sex*, Backflap.

²⁶⁹ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 196.

²⁷⁰ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 203.

of happenstance— an application of the techniques, approaches, and concepts which Philpott and Worthen had available to them.

It was a lucky accident nonetheless: communal living arrangements and the transformation of conversion therapy into a “recovery” movement in the model of Alcoholics Anonymous proved to be two of Love in Action’s most enduring innovations to the field of conversion therapy. As was the case with Love in Action’s integration of self-help principles, religious orientation, and ex-gay leadership, these two elements endured largely because they assisted the ministry’s continued efforts to mitigate the fact that conversion therapy does not work. First, unlike previous, out-patient approaches to conversion therapy, Love in Action’s residential model dissolved the boundaries between one’s “real life” and their treatment. Residents of Love in Action’s ex-gay houses were expected to follow a rigid schedule dictated by the program leaders, work in the ministry’s offices, worship regularly at the Church of the Open Door, and socialize only with other LIA-affiliates.²⁷¹ This crucible-like environment, typified by a constant reinforcement of Love in Action doctrine and surveillance, was actively nourished by Love in Action leaders in an effort to mitigate “sexual backsliding.”²⁷² Borrowing techniques and concepts from Alcoholics Anonymous, Love in Action leaders advised program participants to keep themselves and each other “accountable” by closely monitoring, documenting, and publicly confessing instances of “sexual or emotional misconduct.”²⁷³ Underscoring the necessity of “absolute truthfulness and openness,” leaders instructed clients to fill out a weekly “Moral Inventory,” a document in which they dutifully divulged, described, and prayed over any feelings of lust or sexual temptation they might have experienced.²⁷⁴ Implementing the residential system

²⁷¹ The Source Program handbook

²⁷² Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 176.

²⁷³ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 169-170.

²⁷⁴ Love in Action, Inc, “The Source Discipleship Program Manual.”

and ritualized system of accountability enabled Love in Action, in short, to establish a system whereby their program participants were isolated from their identity outside the program, subjected to a system of constant, panoptic surveillance, and completely dependent upon the ministry for housing, food, and employment.

Despite Worthen and other ex-gay leaders' efforts to recalibrate their client's expectations regarding conversion therapy outcomes, even the promise of optimized Christian celibacy was nevertheless viewed as meager alternative to what the vast majority of ex-gays really wanted: to become heterosexual. While Christian celibacy offered a way out of sin, it nevertheless fell short of the standards of heterosexual Christian society. As Ralph Blair quipped, mainstream antigay churches and churchgoers "are really not much interested or impressed with what appear to be complicated distinctions between acts and orientation...To many non-homosexual church members, evidently queers are queers — practicing or not— and that's that."²⁷⁵ Worthen's acknowledgement of the difficulty of the change process, likewise, did little to assuage the guilt, pain, and anger their clients felt when they, without exception, fell short of the heterosexual ideal— feelings which were exponentially worsened in the toxic environment of the ex-gay residences. As Michael Bussee recounted:

"[M]any of our clients began to fall apart— sinking deeper into patterns of guilt, anxiety and self-loathing. Why weren't they 'changing?' The answers from the church leaders made the pain even worse: 'You might not be a real Christian.' 'You don't have enough faith.' 'You aren't praying and reading the Bible enough.' 'Maybe you have a demon.'

²⁷⁵ Ralph Blair, "Holier-Than-Thou Hocus-Pocus & Homosexuality" (Homosexual Community Counseling Center Concerned, 1977).

The message always seemed to be: ‘You’re not enough. You’re not trying hard enough. You don’t have enough faith.’”²⁷⁶

Isolated from old support networks in the gay community and burdened by profound feelings of shame and failure, many conversion therapy clients turned to self-destructive behavior. “One young man got drunk and deliberately drove his car into a tree,” Bussee recalled. “Another (a fellow leader of the ex-gay movement) told me that he had left Exodus and was now going to straight bars— looking for someone to beat him up.”²⁷⁷ He said the beatings made him feel less guilty— atoning for his sin.” Yet another client, “Mark, took a razor blade to his genitals, slashed himself repeatedly, and then poured drain-cleaner on the wounds— because after months of celibacy he had a fall.”

In 1977, less than a year after leaving Love in Action, Jake committed suicide. In a note sent to Philpott and Worthen, the young man explained how as he had come to reaccept the truth of Love in Action’s teachings, he began to see his own homosexuality in increasingly fatalistic terms. He wrote: “It is the constant failure that has made me make the decision to terminate my life here on earth... If I remain it could possibly allow the devil the opportunity to lead me away from the Lord. I love life, but my love for the Lord is so much greater, so the choice is simple.”²⁷⁸ The pro-gay evangelist Ralph Blair likewise remarked that Jake “was convinced that, in his own words to me, ‘I’m going to hell in a bucket so I’d better get it over with before I sin anymore.’”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Bussee, “Apology.”

²⁷⁷ The man was likely an LIA counselee. Worthen describes a very similar incident in *Steps Out*, 83; Bussee, “Apology.”

²⁷⁸ Worthen, *Destiny Bridge*, 192-3.

²⁷⁹ Blair, “Holier-Than-Thou Hocus-Pocus & Homosexuality.”

Ultimately, Love in Action and other religious conversion therapy programs failed by even their own circumscribed criteria for change.

Conclusion

Conversion therapy does not work.

This is a reality which has been borne out in the fudged numbers of antihomosexual psychiatric studies, in encounter groups and the pages of underground gay newspapers, in the ceaseless parade of documentaries, investigative accounts, and blog posts detailing the grim reality of religious conversion therapy groups, in a growing body of scientific research, and in the lives of the hundreds of thousands of gay, lesbian, and transgender people whom conversion therapy failed to “fix.” John Paulk, the Love in Action veteran who graced the cover of Newsweek with his ex-lesbian wife, Anne, stepped down from his position at Exodus in 1998, after being photographed exiting a gay bar in Washington DC. Love in Action shuttered in 2008, after a series of blog posts written by Zach Stark, a gay teenager who was sent to Love in Action Memphis’s “Refuge” program by his parents after they discovered his sexuality, sparked international outrage.²⁸⁰ Three years later, John Smid, the former executive director of Love in Action Memphis, apologized for the harms caused by his ministry and announced that he, like “99.9 percent” of those he had treated in his ministry, was still homosexual. Two years later, Alan Chambers, the president of Exodus International, used his address at the annual conference to repudiate the Exodus’s mission and announce his decision to shut the organization down.²⁸¹

And yet, despite all odds, religious conversion therapy continues to persist. Frank Worthen, always an outlier, was one of the only Exodus founders who remained steadfast in their commitment to the religious conversion therapy doctrine until the very end: he remained married

²⁸⁰ Alex Williams, “Gay Teenager Stirs a Storm,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 2005, sec. Style.

²⁸¹ <https://www.npr.org/2013/06/20/193965227/group-that-claimed-to-cure-gays-disbands-leader-apologizes>

to his wife, Anita (who herself has an openly gay son), and actively involved in conversion therapy ministry until his death in 2017.²⁸²

By positioning conversion therapy's fundamental inefficacy not as a revelation, but as a starting point, this thesis has attempted to illustrate how this fact, rather than deterring efforts to change sexual orientation through pseudotherapeutic interventions, was, counterintuitively, often the force which propelled the discipline's rearticulation into newer, bolder, and more resilient forms. The very inability of conversion therapy to fulfill its nominal purpose catalyzed its transformation from one inadequate modality to another.

While most analyses of conversion therapy have presupposed its identity as either a primarily medical or religious phenomenon, respectively, this thesis has deliberately approached conversion therapy as one continuous history, positioning antihomosexual psychiatry and religious conversion ministries as two, overlapping articulations of the same phenomenon rather than entirely distinct enterprises. By tracing the continuities in how both psychiatric and religious conversion proponents responded to similar challenges, adapted to changing cultural contexts, and responding to the development of gay political activism, this analysis this analysis attempts to illustrate the remarkable permeability between secular and religious responses to homosexuality.

This thesis fails, however, to present a comprehensive account of conversion therapy. There remains a startling paucity of historical research on religious conversion therapy and the ex-gay movement, despite the movement's longevity, tremendous impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ Americans, and consequential role in anti-gay political mobilizations throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. There are two main elements of Love in

²⁸² Tim Rymel, "The 'Father' of Ex-Gay Ministry Dies," HuffPost, February 12, 2017.

Action which, while beyond the scope of this paper, call for further scholarly investigation. First, while this analysis is largely centered on the experiences of gay men, the group to whom most conversion therapy was catered, the role of gender in the theory and practice of conversion therapy, particularly the role of the ex-lesbians, heterosexual wives of ex-gay men, and trans people within conversion therapy ministries and the ex-gay movement. Second, this thesis almost exclusively discusses Love in Action and Exodus's operations within the United States, though Love in Action and Exodus International both conducted extensive missionary work abroad, generally in poorer or decolonizing regions such as the Philippines and West Africa.

"It's easy to dismiss Frank as a religious crackpot," reflected Tim Rymel, an ex-ex-gay who acted as the Outreach Director of Love in Action for over six years. "But Frank, like most conversion therapy leaders, was much more complicated than that."²⁸³

There is temptation, likewise, to dismiss religious conversion therapy as nothing more than zealotry, dismiss ex-gays as simply "lying to themselves." Given the tremendous damage which conversion therapy ministries have wrought in the lives of so many LGBT Americans, this is an understandable impulse. But the fact that these groups have been able to not only survive, but thrive, in an era marked by such tremendous improvements in the legal and social conditions of LGBT Americans belies that people are drawn to conversion therapy for reasons far more complex than mere homophobia or religiosity. Contemporary conversion therapy, much like the man who pioneered it, is much more complicated.

AI Disclosure:

Note, this thesis utilized artificial intelligence tools (ResearchRabbit, Claud, and Perplexity) to assist in brainstorming, organization, research, and revision. **Note: none of the writing in this thesis was produced by a large language model.** It was all produced (very tediously I may add!) by yours truly ☺ These tools were utilized as a part of an ongoing lab led by my thesis

²⁸³ Rymel, Tim. "The 'Father' of Ex-Gay Ministry Dies." HuffPost, February 12, 2017.

seminar professor, Matthew Connelly, and if you have any questions or want further clarification, do not hesitate to reach out to either of us.

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