

Imagined Conversations and Activist Lineages

Public Histories of Queer Homeless Youth
Organizing and the Policing of Public Space
in San Francisco's Tenderloin, 1960s and Present

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On the night of May 14, 2011, a group of homeless queer youth pushed large brooms down the streets of San Francisco's gay Castro neighborhood, chanting, "We won't be swept off the streets" and "Housing equals safety." The tongue-in-cheek street sweep, referencing the police sweeps to which homeless youth are sometimes subjected, was part of a day of actions meant to bring attention to budget cuts to social service organizations, to demand housing and employment opportunities, and, most pointedly, to put an end to the controversial "sit/lie" ordinance that criminalizes sitting and lying on city sidewalks between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m.¹ But, as part of a public history project called "Vanguard Revisited," the street sweep also made a conscious effort to link past to present, as it recreated a 1966 action organized in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood by the organization Vanguard, a group of street youth who protested police sweeps and a lack of housing and employment opportunities—as well as laws criminalizing homosexuality that have subsequently been struck down. Photos distributed at the 2011 action showed 1960s youths holding brooms and signs that read, "All Trash Before the Brooms." "We're considered trash by much of society," Vanguard's president explained in a 1966 press release

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Vanguard “Fall Clean Up,” 1966. *Vanguard Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, October 1966. Courtesy of the GLBT Historical Society



accompanying the photos, “and we wanted to show the rest of society that we want to work and can work.”²

The lives of today’s queer homeless youth share remarkable similarities to those of the Vanguard organizers half a century ago. But the historical and political context, especially as it relates to popular understandings of homosexuality, has shifted considerably. Since the 1960s, the United States has witnessed a transition from rhetoric linking homosexuality with economic degeneracy and crime to a new, “modern” articulation of the economically productive homosexual citizen. This transition is reflected in historical narratives of gay progress that trace a monolithic community from the ghetto to respectable citizenship. Paradoxically, narratives of gay pride and progress can engender feelings of alienation and shame in young people whose lives do not reflect these newfound freedoms, essentially rendering



Vanguard Revisited “Sweep-In,” May 14, 2011. Courtesy of Matt Baume

retrograde the lives of today’s homeless youth. They are seen as an anachronism—vestiges of a shadowy past when queerness was associated with social stigma, poverty, and drug addiction—to the extent that they are seen at all.

By connecting homeless youth with a history stretching back half a century, the Vanguard Revisited project encouraged them to imagine their lives and political organizing as part of a different historical lineage, one in which young people mobilized to confront the poverty and stigma they experienced on the streets of San Francisco. But instead of simply transmitting history *to* contemporary queer homeless youth, Vanguard Revisited sought to enlist today’s queer homeless youth in documenting the past—indeed, to enter into conversation with that history and to position themselves as part of that lineage. Youth broadcast their own stories and organized political actions in the spirit of the original Vanguard, prioritizing economic justice at a time when representations of GLBT life increasingly revolve around privatized family life and conspicuous consumption.³

As an independent historian affiliated with San Francisco’s GLBT Historical Society (GLBTHS), I conceived of the Vanguard Revisited project after discovering in the GLBTHS archive a run of *Vanguard Magazine* (1966 to 1969), a youth-produced journal chronicling life on the streets and activism in the Tenderloin—the city’s vice district and a crucible of 1960s homophile organizing. Young adults in the 1960s flocked to San Francisco because of its reputation as a haven for outcasts. Attracted by the Tenderloin’s cheap housing, economic support through the Tender-

loin's prostitution and narcotics economies, and the anonymity of these interstitial central city areas, many youth pooled their money for food and housing, banding together for survival. Original Vanguard members began organizing their peers in an effort to protest police harassment and economic exploitation; to mitigate tension between neighborhood business owners and street youth; and to create new families of choice, many of them having been rejected by their families of origin.

Disenfranchised people continue to be disproportionately represented in today's Tenderloin: transgender women, immigrants, people of color, and young people without high school degrees or higher education. The youth who made up the Vanguard Revisited project reflected this demographic: most were people of color and/or transgender women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, often escaping from abusive or discriminatory families and hometowns. Many lived in emergency housing or single-room-occupancy hotel rooms subsidized by social service and homeless youth nonprofits. While today's youth have access to a wider array of services, many nonetheless feel that they are deemed undesirable by those with political power, and policed as such, in ways that echo the Vanguard youth of the 1960s.

Vanguard was created by a unique collaboration of street youth, urban ministers, and homophile organizers, animated in part by the community organizing tactics of Saul Alinsky and based on the premise that people living in poverty could most effectively agitate for their own needs. While the original Vanguard presented itself as wholly youth led, it in fact grew out of years of work by a determined coalition of urban ministers and homophile organizers—and, in particular, their protracted battle for federal War on Poverty funds in 1966. Indeed, this coalition fostered youth-led activism in part to fulfill the War on Poverty's guidelines calling for the "maximum feasible participation of the poor," enabling them to win federal support, in May 1966, for the establishment of a variety of innovative, Tenderloin-based institutions. These included Hospitality House, a 24-hour drop-in service center for street youth (1966); the nation's first transsexual organization, Conversion Our Goal (1967); a mobile health van; and Vanguard, thought to be the nation's first queer youth organization (1966).⁴ On a much smaller scale, I won the support of contemporary funders and organizations by proposing a public history project that promised to replicate this "bottom-up" community-organizing model by providing a platform for today's youth to advocate for their own needs.

I partnered with the Reverend Megan Rohrer, the executive director of a faith-based Tenderloin nonprofit that provides social services to the homeless while also stressing political engagement and community empowerment. Through the San Francisco LGBT Center's Youth Program, we worked with the project's paid youth intern, a formerly homeless transgender organizer. While adults raised project funds and created the organizational structure, we asked youth participants to take



Vanguard Revisited project masthead combining photos of Vanguard youth from the 1960s and those involved in the Vanguard Revisited project. Courtesy of the Rev. Megan Rohrer and Don Lucas Collections, GLBT Historical Society

leadership positions by proposing and following through with project components, facilitating meetings, and defining project parameters and goals. Additionally, Mia Tu Mutch, the youth intern, co-led discussions and presentations and spoke as part of the national tour.

Youth participants in the project began by examining *Vanguard Magazine*, a youth-produced journal touching on themes of poverty and social stigma; isolation and loneliness; artistic expression; and political action. Rev. Megan Rohrer and I presented the magazine to a core group of today's homeless youth at weekly meetings at Larkin Street Youth Services and then asked youth to respond to specific essays and art from the 1960s by creating their own stories, art, and poetry on similar themes. In a sixty-page publication, *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, material from the original magazine was reprinted alongside submissions from the youth of today. In this new magazine, youth drew historical and genealogical connections between themselves and youth in the 1960s, illuminating both continuities and discontinuities in the lives of homeless queer youth over the past fifty years.

One participant summarized the project through an imagined letter back in time to the 1960s Vanguard youth: "Before I lived in the T.L. I lived in a place where the rebel who speaks to you now was confined with no way to express so much of what I feel. . . . No street legends to speak of . . . until I heard of 'The Vanguard

Boys' and what you stood for during your own era of oppression and rebellion. . . . I read your words and heard your voices in the depths of my soul, and now I wish to give you mine To be a part of what you started long ago. To see our hearts collide on paper."⁵

The magazine reveals family rejection, economic deprivation, and social stigma as structural continuities between the Tenderloin vice economy of the 1960s and that of the present-day neighborhood. A 1966 article, reprinted in the *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, described the "economic system which youth can enter into very easily" in the Tenderloin, including prostitution, "drug abuse, and theft [which] may be considered by-products of a situation which begins by being without a family, without money, and without employability."⁶ Similarly, "the Tenderloin's above and underground economies," wrote one 2011 contributor, "are designed to feed off of the loneliness, destitution and desperation of the lonely souls who have been thrown away by families, society and in some cases their congregations."⁷ The persistence of such conditions offers a stark counterpoint to rhetoric that circulates widely today of dramatic improvements in the lives of queer young people.⁸

Indeed, the writings by contemporary queer youth reflect a sharp contrast between the lives of the authors and the newer public image of the normative homosexual and the rhetoric of gay progress. In "Open Letter to the People," a young man acknowledged that GLBT issues are now in the "public eye," but writes that people still consider homeless youth in the Tenderloin to be "a thing of darkness and of the night" or a "perversion." He continues: "Our young people are suffering dearly. If you don't have HIV, you have a serious drug addiction. . . . I will show the world we are all not fallen angels susceptible to perversion and drug addictions, but angels who rise and achieve like any other like or unlike us."⁹ The material covers divisions of race, class, gender, and age within GLBT communities. "What I don't like about S.F.," wrote one young man, "is the power of dehumanization that the older gay community has on the younger generation."¹⁰

This tension was a major topic of conversation during the creation of the magazine and in subsequent programming: weekly discussion groups, intergenerational conversations with elders who experienced the Tenderloin of the 1960s firsthand, documentary screenings, and interactive tours of the Tenderloin. Many of these youth saw little change in the lives of Tenderloin youth of the 1960s and today. "There's still your [single-room-occupancy apartments], there's still your heavy drug traffic, there's still your hustling," said one youth. A young sex worker felt that the original *Vanguard* was created to respond to "very similar issues" that he faces today. "Power dynamics haven't changed, drug abuse hasn't changed," he said. "My story isn't that much different than what [Vanguard youth] went through a long time ago." If youth felt disempowered by these similarities, they seemed to find hope in the histories of mutual help and families of street youth.¹¹ *Vanguard* was about "struggle and sense of family," one youth said. "Everyone's been through so much hardship, and what it really gets down to is hardship, integrity, the ability to survive, and giv-

ing a shit about other people.” Through *Vanguard Revisited*, he was able “to be part of that story, of that history in some way.”¹²

Youth descriptions of life in the Tenderloin don’t merely echo stories from youth in the 1960s—they also resonate with “earlier” rhetoric linking homosexuality with vice and crime. San Francisco’s Tenderloin, and the queer populations who gather there, remain a visible manifestation of associations with vice, crime, and disease that the movement has worked to scrub clean over the past fifty years. Before a wide range of people began proclaiming their sexual identities publicly, during the gay liberation movement that arose in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, the low-income Tenderloin was the epicenter of San Francisco’s queer life, and the homeless youth who gathered there were among San Francisco’s most visible manifestations of homosexuality. As it became more socially acceptable for more GLBT people to openly proclaim their identities, wider arrays of people have done so, facilitating the emergence of a new kind of “normative” gay subject and a mainstreaming of queer politics.

Young adults felt alienated not only from the heteronormative environments from which they escaped, but also from the mainstream gay spaces in the city that some scholars have described as “homonormative.”¹³ “It seems like there’s more realization towards queer people,” said one youth, “like oh, this is good they’re coming into the mainstream more, and even though that’s changing for the better, it’s also stayed bad, like with homeless youth.” A young bisexual woman at one meeting remarked, “It’s the same people being targeted [through police sweeps in the 1960s and today], but in different ways. And sometimes it’s our [GLBT] community doing the targeting. . . . There’s just not a sense of what happened to their social history.” The GLBT community “is fragmented in many ways,” said one young man. “The primary one being forgetting about bad things that are going on in your community, be it HIV, drug addiction, or homelessness. They cut themselves off from it.”¹⁴

Similar conflicts were evident in the 1960s. *Vanguard*, and Tenderloin street youth in general, were major points of contention in the San Francisco homophile movement. While some homophile organizers were instrumental in funding and helping to found *Vanguard*, other organizers felt that *Vanguard* portrayed an “undesirable image” that evoked associations of homosexuals with vice and crime.¹⁵ One of the major successes of 1960s organizing was the popularization of a “productive” homosexual identity separated from associations with crime and degeneracy. The delinking of homosexuality with associations of crime has facilitated GLBT entry into the mainstream institutions of American life. And yet many of the youth associated with the project feel left out of this mainstreaming of GLBT identity and politics. While media representations of the mainstream movement stress marriage equality, service in the military, and other efforts to gain access to institutions from which gays and lesbians are excluded, issues of queer youth homelessness garner less media attention, though studies show that queer youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population.¹⁶

Ultimately, the project was designed to inspire activism around these concerns and pride in the Tenderloin community. The supposed breaches of social norms that were—and remain—hallmarks of the Tenderloin made it a site of policing but also facilitated the birth of alternative cultures and opportunities for an array of challenges to normative assumptions about sexuality, gender, and ability. Megan Rohrer, Mia Tu Mutch, and I often opened meetings by presenting archival documents or oral history audio describing conflicts in the 1960s familiar to Tenderloin youth today—police street sweeps, antivice campaigns, and the use of lewd-vagrancy and other laws to criminalize homosexual use of public space. The original Vanguard’s successful efforts to foster community dialogue, police cooperation, new social service organizations, and activism to decriminalize homosexuality suggested alternatives to contemporary policing of public space.

Discussion about the policing of 1960s vice often led to discussions of contemporary policing of public space, focusing especially on the notorious sit/lie initiative, which criminalizes sitting and lying on city sidewalks between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. Sit/lie originated with business and neighborhood complaints about street youth in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood but soon became a proxy for discussion of homelessness in the city as a whole. The *Wall Street Journal* framed sit/lie as an effort to “take back [the] streets” from “aggressive young vagrants.”¹⁷ *San Francisco Chronicle* editorialist C. W. Nevius opined about “deadbeats who loiter on the city’s sidewalks,” quoting a letter to the editor that read, “How can you expect people to pay to come into a city that is awash in filth and slime?”¹⁸ The *Chronicle* defended the sit/lie ordinance as a “necessary stand for civility and public safety.”¹⁹ Fifty-four percent of San Francisco voters approved the ordinance in November 2010.²⁰

By placing these debates against the backdrop of 1960s policing of public space and criminalization of homeless queer youth, the Vanguard Revisited project sought to contextualize sit/lie and encourage youth to question the ways in which the law had been created and supported. Police in the 1960s routinely raided gay bars and coffeehouses under the cover of different laws, effectively containing the area as a vice district.²¹ Underpinning this action was the belief that homosexuality was inextricably linked to crime: a form of disease and degeneration that, if left unchecked, would “infect” other parts of the city. A 1966 Vanguard flyer decries “being called ‘queer,’ ‘pillhead,’ and being placed in the position of being outlaws and parasites when we are offered no alternatives to this existence in our society.”²² In discussions, we explored the ways in which these debates share rhetorical maneuvers that cast the subjects being policed as unhealthy and disruptive, and their criminalization and incarceration as necessary to public safety.

Many of the youth felt especially hurt by the Castro neighborhood’s support of sit/lie: the Merchants of Upper Market and Castro supported the sit/lie ordinance, as did openly gay District Eight Supervisor Scott Wiener during his successful bid for office to represent the Castro.²³ Many youth came to San Francisco

in part because popular accounts of the Castro, one of the world's best-known gay neighborhoods, presented an image of a GLBT community that was expansive, united, and welcoming. Many instead reported that their marked class, race, and nonnormative gender presentation position them as outsiders in a neighborhood they had imagined as their "mecca." One transgender youth described an outside seating area in the Castro neighborhood, unthinkable only fifty years ago, in which gay men can socialize in a public setting. "Whenever youth try to access that space . . . they routinely get harassed by upper-middle-class gay men in the Castro," she said, "and also by the police who say you don't belong here."²⁴

For many youth, San Francisco's Castro district served as a screen onto which to project their disappointments with the larger GLBT movement. Youth proposed a number of political actions in the Castro neighborhood, including a performance in whiteface to highlight racial discrimination in the neighborhood and an action involving cardboard boxes to dramatize the need for improved housing. Ultimately, youth decided on a culminating march from the Tenderloin—the gay ghetto of the 1960s, and still a ghetto for many disenfranchised queer individuals—to the Castro neighborhood. This day of actions included the re-creation of the 1966 Vanguard street sweep. "Across the country, queer youth flock to the Castro," said one youth, but in the neighborhood "poor homeless people have a very bad rap and they get harassed constantly by shopkeepers. . . . We were there to show, this is our neighborhood too. We have an investment in this community, [and] we're going to sweep the streets of the trash, not of the people." Recreating an action that took place fifty years prior was "moving," she said, but also "annoying that we're still protesting against laws that keep poor people down and keep queer people down in the one city in the US that's supposed to be our safe haven."²⁵

Through the 1966 street sweep, Vanguard youth not only protested police sweeps—they also rejected popular associations linking homosexuality with moral and economic degeneration and instead positioned themselves as productive citizens. Through the contemporary street sweep, youth demonstrated against similar efforts to criminalize use of public space and rhetoric casting them as unhealthy. Through this recreation of the street sweep, however, they were also implicitly asking the residents and business owners in the Castro—and, by extension, the GLBT movement—to recognize their historical associations with criminality and to rethink the ways in which they support the criminalization of homeless youth in the present. The march from the Tenderloin to the Castro acknowledged and confounded historical narratives of gay progress that trace a monolithic community from the ghetto to respectable citizenship. Youth positioned themselves as part of a historical lineage that began in the Tenderloin and continues with their own activism—demanding that they be heard and refusing to let their community, or their history, be swept away.

Notes

This essay was developed for *Radical History Review*. I am grateful for the comments from Jason Ruiz, Jeremy Melius, Martin Meeker, and Jason Alley. I am especially grateful to Timothy Stewart-Winter, whose incisive comments substantially improved this essay.

1. San Francisco Police Department, "Civil Sidewalks Ordinance," sf-police.org/index.aspx?page=3619 (accessed July 15, 2011): "On November 2, 2010, the voters of the City and County of San Francisco passed Proposition L, 'Sitting or Lying on Sidewalks.' Proposition L added Section 168, 'Promotion of Civil Sidewalks,' to the San Francisco Police Code. Section 168 prohibits individuals, with certain exceptions, from sitting or lying on the City's public sidewalks between the hours of 7 AM and 11 PM."
2. *Vanguard Magazine*, October 1966, 4. Quotation attributed to J. P. Marat, president of Vanguard.
3. On past and present queer homeless youth activism, see Stephan L. Cohen, *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Megan Davidson, "Rethinking the Movement: Trans Youth Activism in New York City and Beyond," in *Queer Youth Cultures*, ed. Susan Driver (New York: SUNY, 2008), 243–60.
4. Organizations enabled by War on Poverty funds included the nation's first transgender organization, Conversion Our Goal (1967); the first mobile urban health van in the United States; and the multiservice center Hospitality House (1967), which exists to this day. While Vanguard dissolved as an organization after less than a year, Tenderloin youth organizations with similar goals soon emerged to fill its place, and "families" of street youth have been a part of San Francisco until the present day. On 1960s Tenderloin activism, see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 193–95; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Martin Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: The Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s–1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 78–116; Members of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, "MTF Transgender Activism in the Tenderloin and Beyond: Commentary and Interview with Elliot Blackstone," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4 (1998): 349–72.
5. Gotti, "What's Going on Here," *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, February 2011, 1.
6. "Summary of the Tenderloin Problem," *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, February 2011, 7, reprinted from *Vanguard Magazine* 1, no. 9, c. 1967.
7. Megan Rohrer, "Tenderloin in the Loneliness," *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, February 2011, 8.
8. See, for example, Ritch C. Savin-Williams, *The New Gay Teenager* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Dan Savage and Terry Miller, eds., *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (New York: Dutton, 2011).
9. Gotti, "Address to the People," *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, February 2011, 17.
10. A. E. , "What I Don't Like about San Francisco," *Vanguard Revisited Magazine*, February 2011, 25.
11. "What I really liked about my gay friends," remembered Joel Roberts, an original Vanguard member of the 1960s, "the core group which was the very early Vanguard, if you turned a trick, you spent that money on your other friends. It was an incredibly horrible time, and yet it was an incredibly wonderful time. Because I had the family I never had before." Oral history by the author, Palo Alto, CA, July 25, 2010.
12. Young Adult #1, oral history by the author, San Francisco, June 2011. The names of interview subjects are not revealed in order to protect their identities.

13. See, for instance, Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
14. Young Adult #2, oral history by the author, San Francisco, June 2011.
15. See Martin Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability," 78–116; Betty Luther Hillman, "The Most Profoundly Revolutionary Act a Homosexual Can Engage In: Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964–1972," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 (2011): 153–81. Additionally, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that homophile organizations were unhappy with Vanguard, quoting one unnamed organizer who "thought the publicity [about same-sex dances and prostitution] would tend to perpetuate in the public mind a stereotype of the homosexual as irresponsible and sexually permissive." "A 'Secularized' Church Pursues Its Mission in Unorthodox Causes," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 1967. Vanguard organizer Mark Forrester noted that the publicity around the organization was "a matter of some controversy in the homophile movement," with many feeling it portrayed an "undesirable image." "Minutes of Board Meeting of CRH Held on March 29, 1966," box 9, folder 10, Don Lucas Papers, San Francisco GLBT Historical Society.
16. In 2007, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimated that between 800 and 1,600 of the approximately 4,000 homeless youth in San Francisco are GLBT, a calculation based on research that demonstrates that 20 to 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as GLBT. Nicholas Ray, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness," National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and National Coalition for the Homeless, January 30, 2007.
17. Heather MacDonald, "San Franciscans Try to Take Back Their Streets," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2, 2010. "Even the liberal mayor is backing an initiative that would make public spaces safe again from the homeless industry and young thuggish vagrants."
18. C. W. Nevius, "City Citations Show Need for Sit/Lie Law," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 2010.
19. "Stand Up for Public Safety on Sit/Lie Ordinance," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 2010.
20. City and County of San Francisco Department of Elections, "Results Summary November 2, 2010—Consolidated General Election," www.sfelections.org/results/20101102/ (accessed July 15, 2011).
21. John D'Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 456–73; Christopher Agee, "Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco's Gay Bars, 1950–1968," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2006): 462–89. Laws included "obstructing the sidewalks," "contributing to the delinquency of a minor," Municipal Ordinance 440 (forbidding wearing the apparel of the opposite sex with intent to deceive), and California Penal Code 650 (openly outraging public decency). See, for instance, Guy Strait, "Chukkers Routed," *Citizen News* 4, no. 10, c. March 1965.
22. Vanguard, "We Protest," c. 1966, box 11, folder 17, Don Lucas papers, San Francisco GLBT Historical Society.
23. "Scott Wiener, District 8, Castro—San Francisco Supervisor Candidate Profile," *San Francisco Chronicle*, www.sfgate.com/district8-scott-wiener/ (accessed July 15, 2011). "I support Prop L, the proposed sit/lie ordinance. I am the only major candidate in the District 8 race to support this proposal."
24. Young Adult #3, oral history by the author, San Francisco, June 2011.
25. Young Adult #3, oral history by the author, San Francisco, June 2011.