

## **Crafting an Image: Love, Confidence, and Representation in Leonard Fink's Photographs of the United States Gay Liberation Movement**

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### **Abstract:**

Leonard Fink (1930-1993) was an American photographer who documented the modern Gay Liberation Movement and inaugural Christopher Street Liberation Day marches in New York City that have since evolved into the Pride Marches we now know of today. This research addresses how Fink used photography as a form of personal expression, observation, and participation in the growing LGBTQ community as well as to document critical moments in modern queer US history. Prior scholars and research have looked at the Christopher Street Liberation Day marches and the role it had on the LGBTQ movement following the Stonewall Riots, however, little has been done on the individuals who worked behind the scenes in helping solidify and physically capture these game-changing moments of queer history taking place. I use the figure of Leonard Fink and his photographs to fill in these missing gaps, to show the major and influential role photography played within the late twentieth-century queer movement. This work centers around a much-understudied individual who had a major role in the modern LGBTQ United States movement; it showcases the ways he used photography to both document and express himself as well as capture and record the broader community around him.

## Introduction



**Figure 1**

*Christopher Street Liberation Day March, New York, Leonard Fink, 1972*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,  
[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

In the midst of a crowd gathered in Central Park on June 25, 1972 sit two men in an affectionate embrace (figure 1). With their arms and legs interlocked with one another, the two men gaze lovingly into each other's eyes, both with an affectionate smile and gaze solely focused on one another. A few of the surrounding people look over in curiosity, perhaps at the figures themselves or towards the photographer who decided to capture this scene out of everything taking place. Leonard Fink's photograph depicts a moment from the third annual Christopher Street Liberation Day march that took place in New York City on a hot summer day in 1972.<sup>1</sup> One of thousands, this photograph is part of an immense collection of works that Fink produced of the inaugural Gay Liberation marches that put the subject of LGBTQ rights and progress front and center in a changing American social and political landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Following Stonewall, Craig Rodwell (a gay rights activist and founder of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, the first bookstore dedicated to exclusively selling works by gay and lesbian writers), initially came up with the concept of a Christopher Street Liberation Day, not only to commemorate what had occurred during the summer of 1969, but to also demand change and fight for more rights within the LGBTQ community.<sup>3</sup> Amongst the crowds of people and participants that showed up at this first CSLD march in 1970, flooding the streets of New

<sup>1</sup> Moving forward, I will often use 'CSLD' to refer to Christopher Street Liberation Day for brevity.

<sup>2</sup> Although this language was not used during Leonard Fink's lifetime, I will use the terms 'LGBTQ' and 'queer' when broadly referencing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer history, movements, activism, lives, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBTQ Rights Uprising that Changed America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 260.

York City, was Leonard Fink, camera in tow, documenting the monumental event and the radical progress that queer people were fighting for. Himself a gay man, though primarily “closeted” and only out to close friends and acquaintances, Fink would have felt a personal connection to many of the participants marching and a part of the broader movement itself. Photographs attributed to Fink, such as *1975 Jeff, Pat, Mike & Me* (refer to figure 10, p. 66), reveals this relationship Fink personally had with the Gay Liberation movement and his dual role as both a photographer operating outside of the event and a participant and contributor to the event itself.<sup>4</sup> This perspective allowed future viewers to see firsthand what it was like to be a proud and participatory LGBTQ individual at this moment in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The focus of this paper is on the life and work of the photographer Leonard Fink. Specifically, I will be looking at Fink’s work that documented the CSLD marches that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. One of my chief goals is to discover how people like Fink saw themselves within this moment of queer history in the United States. It is important to note that Fink was living in a “glass closet” and like many of those who attended the marches and were a part of the LGBTQ community, were too fearful to *directly* participate in such an open and transparent way.<sup>6</sup> Many wanted to be politically active and participatory in the queer community but were too afraid of the possible work and social repercussions that could result from being an open homosexual. This is perhaps why Fink was so drawn to the camera and photography, because it provided him the opportunity to navigate the line between participant and observer. I argue that Leonard Fink, like numerous others at the time, was too apprehensive about being so public in regard to his sexuality, so instead, he used his camera as a vehicle for participation in the Gay Liberation movement and also as a form of observation, documentation, and expression for how he and the New York LGBTQ community wanted to be seen by others. I will support this central argument with analysis of Fink’s photographs that include various scenes of the CSLD marches as well as his self-portraits to show where Fink saw himself within the movement and how he wanted to represent both himself and his fellow community. This research and historical focus is significant because it offers insight into the public and “closeted” dimensions of gay life and calls attention to Leonard Fink, a figure who has been much understudied in the fields of the gay civil rights movement and queer history within the United

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<sup>4</sup> This specific photograph and conversation about Fink’s role and position in the marches will be discussed in more depth later within the paper and is also shown in Figure 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Weinberg, “Leonard Fink: Making a Scene,” in *Leonard Fink Coming Out: Photographs of Gay Liberation and the New York Waterfront*, ed. Judith Luks and Thomas Schoenberger (Biel-Bienne: Edition Clandestin, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Duberman, *Stonewall*, 344.

States. This work shines light on a personal figure who used his self-trained background in photography to create intimate, expressive, yet outwardly confident and representative photographs of himself and the New York LGBTQ community.

### Existing Literature & Historiography

The life and work of Leonard Fink has not been extensively analyzed since his passing in 1992. Numerous photographs taken by Fink have recently been used in digital magazine and newspaper circulations of the Gay Liberation Movement, however, little has been actually done in regard to who this photographer was, why did he photograph what he did, and what broader significance does he and his work serve in our understanding of queer history and progress in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The work *Leonard Fink Coming Out: Photographs of Gay Liberation and the New York Waterfront* has filled in some of these gaps, with the artist and art historian Jonathan Weinberg along with Rich Wandel and Thomas Schoenberger providing critical information regarding Fink's biography, range of subject matter, and reproductions of Fink's work.<sup>8</sup> While the publication serves more as a catalogue raisonné with short discussions about Fink rather than an in-depth analysis into his work, Weinstein provides an interesting perspective into how Fink's subjects *performed* for the camera with the intention of reaching and inspiring more LGBTQ audiences. Specifically, Weinberg's chapter in the work, "Leonard Fink: Making a Scene," along with the bibliographic information he gathered from interviewing Fink's surviving family and friends provides critical source material for my work and research on Fink and betters the understanding on this little-known, intriguing individual.

Regarding information on the broader LGBTQ community in United States history, Martin Duberman's work on the events and stories that preceded, occurred during, and followed the Stonewall riots puts forth a personal yet thorough account of how the summer of 1969 forever changed the queer community. Through the lives of Craig Rodwell (the man who came up with the concept of the Christopher Street Liberation Day), Yvonne Flowers, Karla Jay, Sylvia Rivera, Jim Fouratt, and Foster Gunnison, Jr., this work reveals the diverse stories of figures who had personal connections and involvement with the Gay Liberation Movement. What is of

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of Fink's photographs in recent circulations, refer to "A Visual History of NYC Pride in 10 Landmark Images," *W Magazine*, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/nyc-pride-march-photos-lgbt-history>; "How the Pride March Made History," *The New York Times*, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/gay-lgbt-pride-march-history.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Leonard Fink Coming Out: Photographs of Gay Liberation and the New York Waterfront*, ed. Judith Luks and Thomas Schoenberger (Biel-Bienne: Edition Clandestin, 2014).

special interest to my work on this subject was Duberman's section on the Post-Stonewall period in the United States and how this group of six were able to come together from all different backgrounds and form a *mostly* unified front in organizing a march that would propel the LGBTQ community into the spotlight of mainstream American thought.<sup>9</sup>

Karla Jay, one of the central figures in Duberman's work, published an anthology alongside Allen Young titled *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*.<sup>10</sup> This piece, published in 1972 soon after the first annual CSLD march took place, includes poems, journal articles, letters, manifestos, among other written works from a wide range of LGBTQ voices. The first work, a poem by Fran Winant titled *Christopher Street Liberation Day, June 18, 1970*, puts into perspective the overwhelming sense of community, pride, and transparency that was felt on that day and cements the sheer importance that this inaugural march had for the future of LGBTQ progress.<sup>11</sup>

George Chauncey's work *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, provides critical historical context on the homosexual male from the late nineteenth into the mid-twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The specific focus on early gay life in New York City proved especially helpful with my research, given the nature of Fink's life and career taking place in the city as well as it being the center of the emerging, revamped Gay Liberation Movement. Chauncey's research into the identity, social, and political aspects of gay culture as well as his focus in part two on the making of the 'gay male world' contributed meaningful insight into the urban lives and building of a social queer community that seems to be a prevalent theme throughout most of modern United States history.

Parts two through four of Lillian Faderman's *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* cover briefly the riots, politics, alliances, and issues that arose during the Stonewall years.<sup>13</sup> Faderman's work details how members of the LGBTQ community were not always on the same page and often times disagreed with each other on key issues and agenda items. It is important to note that there was not always a sense of perfect community or unity amongst the different groups and members of these LGBTQ alliances and organizations. As is the case with

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<sup>9</sup> Duberman, *Stonewall*, 263-345.

<sup>10</sup> Karla Jay and Allen Young, *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Douglas Book Corporation, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 4-6.

<sup>12</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 53-246.

the majority of movements in American history, humans are humans, and problems, disagreements, and differing opinions are bound to arise. Faderman's book assisted my work with these concepts and helped me better understand the true nature of how the CSLD marches and LGBTQ community got to where they were in that summer of 1970.

Amongst these scholars and their works on queer studies within the United States, Michael Bronski's *A Queer History of the United States*, Katherine McFarland Bruce's *Pride Parades: How a Parade Changed the World*, and Sophie Hackett's article "Queer Looking" all further served an important role in my understanding of the queer historical context leading up to the 1970s. Bronski makes it a point early on in his book that queer American history did not just begin with the Stonewall riots, but can actually be traced all the way back to the beginning of the northeastern American colonies.<sup>14</sup> Bruce covers how the concept of a pride parade revolutionized what the LGBTQ community could achieve and work towards by using the streets, often mainly used only for transportation and vehicles, for the advocacy of human rights and demands for change.<sup>15</sup> Hackett's research into queer visual history through analysis of Joan E. Biren's work *Lesbian Images in Photography: 1850 – the present* opens up the field of photography history and showcases how LGBTQ individuals sought to build their own visual record in post-1960s America.<sup>16</sup> Much like Biren, Fink used the medium of photography to capture queer lives and moments, adding to this new visual repository of a changing social landscape.

This work contributes to the field of queer history in the United States an analysis of how up until recently, the little-known figure Leonard Fink used the medium of photography to document and express his personal interest and broader involvement with the emerging modern Gay Liberation Movement. The first half will start on the micro-level to get a foundational understanding of who Leonard Fink was, what his photographs were about and how they tied into his everyday life, and his connection to the Gay Liberation Movement. I will then shift to more of a macro-level approach to show how these fit within the broader context of the United States at the time as well as the connection they have to themes of gay rights, politics, social lives, and gender and sexuality. Key aspects I will address through this analysis include the internal aspects of Fink's photography, the external aspects of Fink's photographs involving the movement, the focus on primarily men and the lack of female representation, how the

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 5-16.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine McFarland Bruce, *Pride Parades: How a Parade Changed the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Sophie Hackett, "Queer Looking," *Aperture*, no. 218 (Spring 2015), 40-45.

bystanders played a part in the marches, and, finally, the hyper-masculine and shifting multiple identities present in the majority of Fink's work.

### **About the Artist**

Born in New York City in 1930, Leonard Fink was raised on the West-Side of Manhattan by his father, who served as a physician in the army, and his mother, who was a housewife.<sup>17</sup> Fink was raised Jewish but later became non-observant as an adult. Growing up, he was a heavily involved boy scout alongside his older brother.<sup>18</sup> Fink attended Louisiana State University as an undergraduate and enlisted in the army soon after graduating in the 1950s, eventually becoming a sergeant. Upon returning home to New York, Fink wanted to become an architect, however, his parents were not keen on this choice, instead pushing him to enroll in the New York Law School. Following this, Fink spent the majority of his adulthood working as an attorney for the New York City Transit Authority.<sup>19</sup>

Based on this brief biographical information, it appears that Fink had two separate personalities; his first being used at work and around his family, with his second coming out through his photography, social life, and cruising escapades through the gay New York bar scene and downtown waterfront. Weinberg notes that Fink never publicly exhibited his photographs during his career and the only people who saw his work during his lifetime were close friends who received some of his more erotic photographs as holiday "greeting cards."<sup>20</sup> This is an interesting aspect to further consider when looking at Fink's work and analyzing how he saw himself in different ways: one within the broader LGBTQ movement and everyday public life, and another more private way, outside the marches, when he was making work with satirical and sexual undertones in his homemade darkroom for himself and his closest friends.

During this period of Fink's life, it appears that within the LGBTQ community Fink was quite open and transparent about his sexuality, commonly donning his camera and roller-skates, being so popular in the West Village that he was given the title the "Mayor of Christopher

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<sup>17</sup> The general biographical information on Fink that follows was collected by Jonathan Weinberg and published in *Leonard Fink Coming Out: Photographs of Gay Liberation and the New York Waterfront*, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Hence, many of Fink's photographs show himself in a boy scout uniform alongside his friends and out in public, making it clear that he was proud of his childhood accomplishments and participation in the organization.

<sup>19</sup> In Weinberg's interviews with Fink's surviving nieces, it was reported that Fink hated his job as an attorney and was always closed-off regarding his personal life and sexuality around his family. *Leonard Fink Coming Out*, 192.

<sup>20</sup> Weinberg, *Leonard Fink Coming Out*, 192.

Street.”<sup>21</sup> These tight-knit friendships and relationships that Fink was only able to find within the queer community is what allowed him to be his most authentic self around them, never feeling afraid or pressured to act or behave like something he wasn’t. Fink continued to live this duo-life as an attorney for the New York City Transit Authority and well-known photographer within the popular gay community of New York throughout the majority of his adult life. Leonard Fink passed away in 1992 as a result of complications from HIV/AIDS.

### **Fink’s Self Portraits & Expression through Photography**

Outside of his work and family life, according to his photographs, Fink loved, amongst other things, motorcycles, short denim shorts, a short-sleeve button-up, high socks, and a camera always within arm’s reach. A photograph that best encapsulates this is *Leonard Fink on Motorcycle* (figure 2). With a smile on his face and the sun beating down on him, Fink appears ready to cruise off, enjoying a nice day on his motorcycle alongside the waterfront. He could often be seen riding through the abandoned and worn-down highways of New York or walking up and down the piers, sunbathing, hanging out with friends, having a fling with an unknown lover, and almost always capturing each and every outing.<sup>22</sup> While there is a general feeling of joy and confidence within these photographs of Fink and his favorite settings, to the contemporary viewer, there is also a sense of desire and hope for something more. It is important to keep emphasizing the fact that Fink felt he could only behave, dress, and be his genuine self around a select group of people and in places that were predominately queer so there wasn’t as much of a chance of getting recognized or ostracized by non-queer identifying individuals. When considering this and relooking at Fink’s self-portraits and personal adventures, this cheerful overtone with more of a complicated, troubled undertone becomes more of a common theme present within his work.

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<sup>21</sup> Weinberg, *Leonard Fink Coming Out*, 192.

<sup>22</sup> While the focus of this paper is on Fink’s photographs of the CSLD marches, thousands of other photographs by Fink exist at the LGBT Community Center National History Archive, including scenes of the downtown waterfront piers, abandoned structures commonly used for cruising, and the New York gay bar scene.



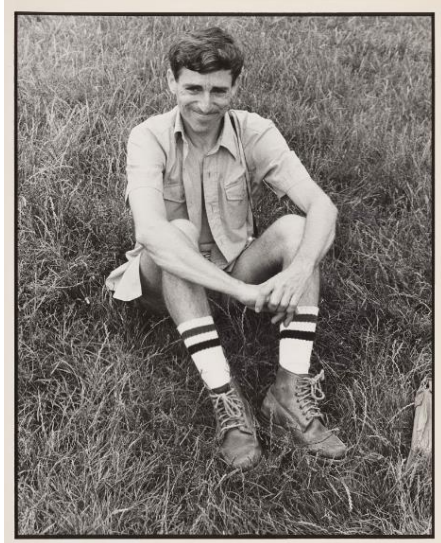
**Figure 2**

*Leonard Fink on Motorcycle*, Leonard Fink, date unknown, c. 1970s

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,

[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

**Figure 3**

*Leonard Fink Self Portrait, Sitting in Grass*, Leonard Fink, date unknown

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,

[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

Fink's photographs of himself reveal a multitude of different personality traits and physical characteristics of Fink. Contrasting *Leonard Fink on Motorcycle* (figure 2) with *Leonard Fink Self Portrait, Sitting in Grass* (figure 3), it's almost hard to recognize that this is the same man. In the first photograph of Fink on his motorcycle, there is a hyper-masculine tone within the piece, with Fink's body and motorcycle taking up the majority of the composition and his gaze looking right at us, the viewer. He supports himself atop his motorcycle with his right leg planted onto the cement and both his arms extended onto the front and back of the bike. The strong light highlights his figure and ride, creating shadows and strong contrast against the rest of the scene. The sleek, black motorcycle with its numerous exposed parts and bright steel exhaust pipe compliments nicely Fink's white striped tube socks, short denim shorts, short-sleeve button up, and belt featuring an American flag and keychain with numerous keys. Against the backdrop of the photograph is a large, docked ship with people waiting alongside the dock. This specific work is a celebration of American machinery, industry, patriotism, and

most of all, Fink himself. Within the second photograph, Fink sits casually in a field of grass, in a more awkward, casual position and a smile that feels almost forced or artificial. Wearing almost the same outfit in the previous photograph, his shirt is unbuttoned and Fink appears to be taking a break and relaxing in a parklike setting all by himself. Assumed to be taken within a couple of years of each other, Fink's demeanor and disposition is much different compared to how he appears in the previous photograph. His mustache is not present and he is much coyer, making him appear younger and more submissive, extremely different from the man smiling proudly atop his motorcycle.

These photographs are just some of the many self-portraits that Fink took of himself. Each one provides a new and different perspective of Fink, allowing the viewer to see his progression over time and the changes in his appearance, life, and personality over the years. These photographs also reveal a duo-personality that has an active sense in some works and a more passive sense in others. This is evident in the previous comparison of two of Fink's self-portraits, *Leonard Fink on Motorcycle* and *Leonard Fink Self Portrait, Sitting in Grass*. It brings up the question: which one most accurately reflects who Leonard Fink truly was? This range of emotions, environments, and visual characteristics that are present in each of Fink's self-portraits alludes to a different part of Fink's life and personality. This could perhaps be attributed to the fact that Fink was not openly "out" to his family or coworkers, and as a result, only had few opportunities or avenues to truly express how he wanted to be. Or it could also be attributed to Fink simply figuring out who he was as a gay man and how he wanted to portray himself in public. Whichever may be the case, whenever Fink had the chance to be a part of the New York LGBTQ community, whether it be the CSLD marches, bar scene, or waterfront, he took the opportunity to dress, act, and be whoever and whatever he best saw himself as in that moment.

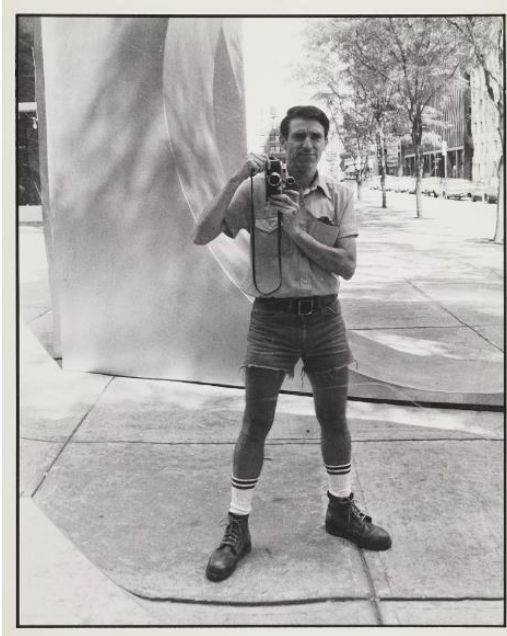


**Figure 4**

*My bikes & me*, Leonard Fink, 1970

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive, [https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).



**Figure 5**

*Leonard Fink, Self Portrait*, Leonard Fink, date unknown

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive, [https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

These multiple different sides and aspects of Fink’s life, personality, and way of expressing himself can be analyzed within the time and space in which he was living in—mid twentieth-century New York City. In his section on “The Making of the Gay Male World,” Chauncey observes that “The complexity of the city’s social and spatial organization made it possible for gay men to construct the multiple public identities necessary for them to participate in the gay world without losing the privileges of the straight: assuming one identity at work, another in leisure; one identity before biological kin, another with gay friends.”<sup>23</sup> This rings true with the contrast noted earlier in how Fink portrays himself; from his traditionally-male images such as *My bikes & me* (figure 4) to more intimate, personal, and passive representations of himself and his reflection in *Leonard Fink, Self Portrait* (figure 5), these photographs reveal a deeper and more nuanced perspective into the life and work of Leonard Fink.

### Photographing the First Christopher Street Liberation Day March

When describing firsthand what it was like attending the first CSLD march within his piece “Out of the Closets, Into the Streets,” Allen Young wrote:

In any case, some events bring us all together, at least momentarily. The first large mass action by gay people was June, 1970 Christopher Street Gay Pride March from Greenwich Village up the Avenue of the Americas to Central Park. Some 10,000 people participated, some of them members of gay groups, the vast majority coming from the disparate gay community. It was a big step for gay people to be in the street, and many of us recognized many more gay people

<sup>23</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 133-134.

watching from the sidewalk with an ambivalent look of fear and pride on their faces.<sup>24</sup>

This description of the first Gay Pride March sums up what it must have felt like for members of the LGBTQ community to come together as a group from all different walks of life, marching through the normally busy and crowded New York City streets, putting on a unified front to show society what being queer in the United States was really like and that progress needed to happen. It was unlike ever before seeing LGBTQ individuals, normally banished to the literal outskirts of the city, reclaiming the center of New York for themselves, all while being loud and proud about who they really were.



**Figure 6**

*First Christopher Street Liberation Day March, Leonard Fink, 1970*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,  
[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

Along with this written description of the inaugural CSLD march, we also have visual evidence from Fink's perspective that further illustrates what it would have been like to be a participant marching through the streets of New York on this momentous day for the queer community. Captured by Leonard Fink and appropriately titled *First Christopher Street Liberation Day March* (figure 6), the viewer is transported into the midst of the march, looking towards the throngs of participants moving forward down the street and towards your direction. Two men in the center of the scene hold up a makeshift banner with the print "Christopher Street Liberation Day 1970." These two figures look directly at the camera, no longer afraid or feeling obligated to hide in the shadows and conceal their identity. Hundreds of more people behind the banner, male and female, black and white, mill about socializing and congregating together in the middle of a summer day in 1970, showing the larger American society that they

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<sup>24</sup> Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 26.



belong and will no longer be complacent with the long continuing history of oppression against the queer community in the United States.

In front of this scene composed and captured by Fink, lie two parked police motorcycles. Now, while the process of getting police security and protection for this event was no easy task, the organizing committee that put on the first CSLD march were able to successfully secure a parade permit and have law enforcement presence for protection at the last minute.<sup>25</sup> This is quite different when compared to the police-LGBTQ relationship during the summer of 1969 at the Stonewall Inn. Organizers like Craig Rodwell and Foster Gunnison Jr. knew that in order to actually have change and drive home the message of what this march was truly about, they had to go through the proper legal and bureaucratic hoops to make sure the event went on as planned. In doing so, they were able to create and implement a safe and celebratory event (minus the few groups of people who showed up to protest) for queer individuals to attend and use their voice and agency for progress. The inaugural march was able to successfully parade through the streets, avenues, and boulevards of Greenwich Village up to Central Park, where the festivities and celebration continued until nightfall as the participants basked in their accomplishments.



**Figure 7**

*First Christopher Street Liberation Day March, 1970, Leonard Fink, 1970*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,

[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

While the first CSLD march appeared primarily as a successful event that was joyous, diverse, and game-changing for the modern LGBTQ movement in the United States, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Duberman, *Stonewall*, 339-340. This was all accomplished after numerous disagreements between the march organizing committee and the Police Commission, a last-minute judge ruling in favor of the organizing committee, and the permit finally being obtained the morning of the first march.

important to also be reminded that the organizers and groups that comprised the late twentieth century LGBTQ movement were not always on the same page, equally represented, or in agreement and unity all the time. “The events were not without their problems,” Katherine McFarland Bruce notes, “White gay men played a much more prominent role in both the planning and the execution of the marches than did lesbians or people of color.”<sup>26</sup> This can be observed in many of Fink’s photographs and choices of subject matter. The majority of Fink’s work outside of capturing the CSLD marches during the 1970s and 1980s were primarily of white, homosexual men and little else. There is an obvious lack of female and non-white representation that is missing from the picture. While there are exceptions like Fink’s photograph from the 1970 CSLD march of a black-appearing man and white-appearing man marching together with the same sign, “Gay Pride” (figure 7), this is just one of a couple of non-white or non-male subjects being the center focus of Fink’s photography. This evidence further supports Bruce’s claim that because of their economic and social status in the United States, white gay men were the dominant presence in the LGBTQ community and activism scene during this time.<sup>27</sup> This is something to keep in mind, especially when looking at the state of LGBTQ progress and advancement in the United States today, as queer Black, transgender, and other groups within the LGBTQ movement still get pushed to the side and ignored within the mainstream agenda.

### Post-1970 CSLD Marches & The Bystander as Participant



**Figure 8**

*Christopher Street Liberation Day March, New York, Leonard Fink, 1977*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,

[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

On the seventh annual CSLD march in New York City, leading a crowd of marchers is a unified group of men, linked with their arms around one another and posing as one cohesive group ( figure 8). Representing a diverse group of men (although no women appear present),

<sup>26</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 58.

this photograph by Fink further emphasizes the power that pride parades had within the LGBTQ community, regardless of the problems or tensions that existed between these different groups outside of the marches. Most of the men look directly at the camera, which for this time, 1977, was a powerful and bold gesture given the fact that appearing in a public event such as this would basically equate to a public “coming out.”<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, these men do not appear afraid, intimidated, or threatened by what might result from being photographed in this nature. Rather, they are bold, defiant, and direct with who they are, what they stand for, and what they want to see changed. This is a result of the prior CSLD marches being so successful and impactful; now seven annual marches in, this group photograph symbolizes America’s changing views of LGBTQ life as well as a growing sense of empowerment and strength within the LGBTQ community to be transparent, open, and honest.



**Figure 9**

*Christopher Street Liberation Day March, New York, Leonard Fink, 1976*

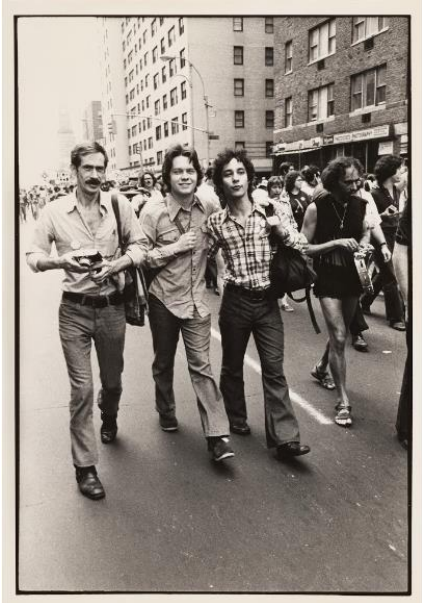
Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,  
[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

Like the line of men marching together towards progress, other groups of people and members of the LGBTQ community at the CSLD marches are present within Fink’s work. Photographed by Fink in front of an A&P shop, stand a couple of drag queens and/or transvestites, perhaps watching the march unfold or even participating in their own unique way (figure 9). Their flashy, elaborate clothing are filled with interesting patterns, ruffles, and designs, all of which helps draw attention to themselves being a primary and critical part of the movement. After all, some of the first individuals that are credited with the impetus of the Stonewall Riots were drag queens and transvestites, which helped pave the way for the future

<sup>28</sup> Duberman, *Stonewall*, 336-337.

Gay Liberation movement and the CSLD marches.<sup>29</sup> Much like the men also photographed by Fink arm in arm, these drag queens and transvestites are *performing* for the camera and for the public, using their identity, personality, and appearance to call to action change and acceptance.



**Figure 10**

1975 *Jeff, Pat, Mike & Me*, Leonard Fink, 1975

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive,

[https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

Also pictured on the streets during these CSLD marches was Leonard Fink himself (figure 10). Marching alongside a couple of friends, Fink appears with his usual camera in hand, ready to capture his next scene. While his companions seem joyous and enthused in the events taking place before them, Fink appears more business-like and methodological, thinking about what next best thing there is to photograph and cement in history before it goes away. This showcases Fink's duo-role as both a photographer operating outside of the event as well as a participant and contributor to the event itself. Photovoice, associated with and drawn from participatory photography, can be a useful method for analyzing the way Fink operates as a photographer at these CSLD marches. Photovoice is considered a nontraditional form of documentary photography and is centered around three goals: to record and reflect an individual's personal community, promote critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through discussion around their photography, and to reach lawmakers.<sup>30</sup> It is centered around a process by which individuals identify, represent, and enhance the community around

<sup>29</sup> Duberman, *Stonewall*, 242-243. Despite the nights and events of the Stonewall Riots being so chaotic, complicated, and simultaneous, it is important to note the role and presence that drag queens and transvestites had in this critical moment of modern queer history.

<sup>30</sup> Caroline Wang, "Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health," *Journal of Women's Health*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1999), 185-92.



them through the employment of photography.<sup>31</sup> Although originally developed as a methodology for public health research, photovoice has since become an interdisciplinary approach used by many humanities disciplines and incorporates feminist theory in its application. When applying this to Leonard Fink and his photography, it becomes evident that the majority of his work was centered around identifying, representing, and enhancing the LGBTQ community around him through the art and medium of the camera. While Fink's work never reached lawmakers, his work was seen by friends in the gay community and most likely had a positive effect in how they viewed and represented themselves as queer individuals.



**Figure 11**

*Christopher Street Liberation Day March, New York, Leonard Fink, 1973*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive, [https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

As much as the participants in the CSLD marches were the focus of Fink's photographs, so too were many of the bystanders who crowded along the sidewalks and observed what was taking place. In one photograph by Fink, we see two women and a man in the front-center of the composition, all with a look of curiosity and interest on their faces, glancing beyond the scene at what is assumed to be one of the CSLD marches (figure 11). They are all formally dressed for the afternoon, with nice shoes and purses accompanying their outfits. Contrasted with this, to the far back right of the same scene we see another man and woman, however, with a much different look on their faces as they witness the same scene taking place before them. The woman with the spherical up-do looks out the corner of her eye with a look of distaste, further emphasized by her crossed arms. The man standing next to her in the white, short sleeve shirt echoes this feeling, with a furrowed brow and puckered lip. Fink most likely had a comical

<sup>31</sup> Wang, "Photovoice," 185. Also refer to Gubrium and Harper's 2013 book, *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action*, specifically chapter 4, titled "Photovoice Research."

approach to capturing this particular group of bystanders, for their contrast and differences could not be more different and polar opposite. This composition displays perfectly the dichotomy between supporters and adversaries towards the broader LGBTQ community in America at this time. The general American public who attended these CSLD marches as non-queer identifying observers were most likely divided, with some feeling a mix of enjoyment and spectacle and others filled more with disgust and confusion.



**Figure 12**

*Christopher Street Liberation Day March, New York, Leonard Fink, 1973*

Photograph, black and white print

The LGBT Community Center National History Archive, [https://gaycenter.org/archive\\_item/leonard-fink-photographs/](https://gaycenter.org/archive_item/leonard-fink-photographs/).

Going along with this theme of bystander as participant, another theme that correlates with this in Fink's work is the idea of the CSLD marches as a form of spectacle—entertainment for people unfamiliar with what the LGBTQ community was like in the United States and where its movement was heading. A photograph by Fink that documents this theme is of two women in the center of the composition, intrigued by what is going on in the streets before them (figure 12). Both of the women carry a camera in their hands, with the one on the left appearing ready to capture an image. A sense of anticipation and excitement for what is about to come dominates the tone of this photograph as the two women wait for what's about to turn the corner and capture their attention. Another interesting aspect that this photograph brings to the forefront is the photographer capturing the act of photography. As shown previously in figure 5 and other self-portraits taken of Fink by Fink, he is always aware of how he is documenting both himself and the environment he surrounds himself with. I have argued that this is because of his desire to express himself in a more personable and transparent way that he could not do at work and around his family. Compared with the photograph of the two women with cameras, there is a more relaxed and spontaneous feeling to this work that isn't present in many other photographs taken by Fink of himself. This can most likely be attributed to the fact that Fink's work of the CSLD marches was more about capturing all the people, sights, activities, and movement going on rather than the focus on more of the artistic/aesthetic qualities of a scene.

## Conclusion

Leonard Fink's relationship with photography and his personal connection to the modern Gay Liberation movement has resulted in a treasure trove of work that was for too long hidden away in boxes and drawers, away from the public and historical record. Thanks to his estate, over 25,000 negatives taken by Fink were eventually transferred over to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center archive in New York a year after his death. Now, his work can be appreciated, studied, and better understood in a contemporary light. My work has attempted to shine a glimpse on this important historical figure who has been majorly understudied and what his photographs can reveal about this period of Fink's life and the broader landmark progress being achieved by the LGBTQ community in New York during the 1970s and 1980s.

Fink's approach to photography was multi-fold. He used the camera and lens for numerous purposes: to capture his personal life outside of work and family where he could be his more authentic self, to record his own multiple appearances and self-portraits that display a mix of confidence and mystery, and to document the beginning of the modern Gay Liberation movement through the Christopher Street Liberation Day marches and the participants, groups, bystanders and observers that were present. In doing this, the viewers gain a comprehensive look at not only Fink's personal life and interests, but also the larger queer community in New York at this time and the numerous political and social shifts happening within it.

The first major subsection of my evidence looked at Fink's self-portraits and how he used this expression through photography to display a multitude of personality traits and interests within himself. Through comparisons of his works, there was often contrasts between Fink representing himself in a hypermasculine form of sorts and in others as coy and shy. These self-portraits revealed a progression in Fink's life as he gradually discovered himself through photography as well as a duo-personality that often bordered between active and passive. The second central subsection focused on photographing the first CSLD march and how Fink's photography had the ability to transport the viewer directly into the march as if we, the viewer, were participants marching for change. His work from this first march also, at the same time, highlighted the lack of diversity and representation within the central Gay Liberation movement, with the figureheads who led and organized it often being white, homosexual males. This came across in Fink's choices of who he photographed, with little being included of lesbian women, transgenders, and/or African American voices. The third, and final main subsection homed in on the post-1970 CSLD marches and the theme of bystander as participant. Here, a

common theme of *performing* for the camera arose within Fink's photographs as well as his depiction of bystanders becoming a central subject matter. It seems that Fink's work focusing on the observers and bystanders were used to add satire and a comedic aspect to his photographs. They show the diverse reactions non-queer identifying individuals had when witnessing these CSLD marches and adds to the idea of these marches being a spectacle.

In all, the life and work of Leonard Fink provides critical context for what life was like for a queer individual living in New York in the later twentieth century as well as photographic evidence of what it was like on that momentous summer day in 1970, marching for LGBTQ change and progress a year after the Stonewall Riots. Fink was a unique character whose passion for the camera as well as motorcycles, men, and marches offers an exciting and transformative perspective into this period of queer history in the United States. There is still a lot more to be done on queer representation in media and art history studies, including this idea of participatory photography, gay figures representing the gay world around them, and the use of the camera as both observer and performer. My hope is that this work on Leonard Fink helps make a shift in that direction and inspires future work on figures and work such as Fink.

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