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Hot fun in the summertime: micro and macrocosmic views on the Summer of Love

Michael J. Kramer

History and American Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

This keynote address delivered at the “Revisiting the Summer of Love, Rethinking the Counterculture” conference in July 2017 argues that we can better remember, historicize, and understand the “Summer of Love” by glimpsing its oscillations between micro and macrocosmic perspectives. Trying for what Sly and the Family Stone would eventually call “hot fun in the summertime,” participants reoriented scales of temporal and spatial perception as they also probed the vexing links between innocence and experience in pursuit of radically pluralistic, democratic modes of selfhood, community, and citizenship in the modern world.

KEYWORDS

Summer of Love; counterculture; San Francisco; Haight-Ashbury; the Diggers; The Oracle; Human Be-In/Gathering of the Tribes; Sly and the Family Stone; the Communications Company

Essay

On Thanksgiving day in 1966, a “Meatfeast” took place in San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury district. In the innovative underground newspaper published in the neighborhood, *The Oracle*, just into its fourth issue, writer Steve Leiper described the event, making much of the fact that there was a front and a back room at the Meatfeast. The front was filled with ecstatic, abundant, harmonious joy as attendees dug into a Thanksgiving meal served for free; the back, by contrast, was suffused with an edgy, dissonant, troubling atmosphere. Over 50 years later, we can return to the Meatfeast as a way to make better sense of the larger San Francisco “Summer of Love” phenomenon. Here is a moment from its early days that might serve as a master metaphor to help us understand what happened – and why it matters.

Participants, observers, historians, the public as a whole all still struggle to grasp the significance of the Summer of Love, and the 1960s counterculture of which it remains a symbol. What led to the explosion of so-called countercultural activity at this time? Was it driven by hope, or was it all just hype?¹ Why did the

Haight Ashbury in San Francisco become an epicenter for the counterculture? What difference did any of it make?

Some insist that the Summer of Love marked a revolution in consciousness, one that extended to the rest of the world with new ways of doing politics through lifestyle, embodied action, and renewed spiritual exploration.² Others deride the Summer of Love as the season when decadence undercut conservative American values with an anything-goes hedonism.³ Still others describe the Summer of Love as a bill of psychedelic goods sold to a generation, a “rebel sell.”⁴ Many maintain a kind of fall from Eden narrative, in which an initial paradisiacal burst of idealism gave way to sin and the original hippies were cast out of the garden.⁵ Others call for a “long 1960s” approach in which the activities of the 1970s to construct lasting countercultural institutions, businesses, and attitudes take center stage in a kind of long autumn after the Summer of Love.⁶ Most are just baffled: it is far easier to comprehend the significance of more conventional political protest and reaction, to mark elections won or lost, to note laws put in place or upended, to track upticks or downturns in the overall economy, to watch wars escalate or turn into quagmires.

The embrace of oscillating views and psychedelic perspectives within the Summer of Love itself makes this history even more confusing. Up close, it can look like a hot mess, or heaven on earth, or, weirdly, both at the same time. From a distance, it can look like a radical change in American life, or merely a blip on the radar, or a sideshow to the larger post-World War II history of domestic and geopolitical turmoil in the United States and the world. Was it a swirl of pot smoke signifying nothing, or an acid trip from which we are still recovering? Was the Summer of Love a moment of world-historical spiritual arrival, an example of the triumph of consumer capitalism, or the moment when, slouching toward Bethlehem, some rough beast’s anarchy and blood-dimmed tide were loosed on the world, vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle?⁷ With the cosmos itself (as well as a lot of trouble and strife) seeming to arrive at the previously nondescript neighborhood street corner of Haight and Ashbury in San Francisco by 1967, and participants reimagining the City by the Bay as the new Mecca of an international youth movement, the Summer of Love phenomenon remains fundamentally disorienting.

Stepping with Steven Lieper across the threshold into the Meatfeast’s two rooms allows us to perceive the significance of it more clearly, both up close and at a distance, both micro and macrocosmically. The Meatfeast was put on by the Diggers, a group of street-theater community activists. They had broken off from R. G. “Ronnie” Davis’s San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1966 and taken the name of a millenarian Protestant English radical sect from the seventeenth century. Often working anonymously, the Diggers sought to transform the world around them through “life acts,” festive guerrilla theater events that asked participants to embody revolutionary experiences.⁸ Entering the Diggers’ Page Street storefront on Thanksgiving day of 1966, Leiper described how the front room was “filling

up with beautiful people, full of smiles and amazement.” They “flowed around and through themselves, happy, grooving, eating, smiling, turned on, digging each other and what was happening.” As “food was brought out from the back room,” there were, Leiper noted, “slabs of roasted meat, pieces of chicken, loose-leafed lettuce, sprouts of Brussels, globs of sweet potato, chunks of baked taters, nuts, candy, tobacco.” To Leiper, “there was more than enough for all in this slow, writhing meat feast/dance.” It was impossible, he remarked, “not to feel the spirit, to partake in it, to add to it. Whatta gas!” But when Leiper stepped into the back room, he found “a totally different spirit ... a dark one.” Five or six of the Diggers stood there, as Leiper “took in the ooze of garbage, a collage of chicken bones, vegetable matter and flesh on the floor, extending up to the walls, a solid layer of mire.” He felt that “the vibrations and visual scene took me to the flipside of what I had felt in the outer room, and to the brink of cosmic horror.”⁹ Two rooms: one out front, boldly welcoming the public to offerings of cosmic joy, to a place of sustenance, abundance, plenitude, ease, discovery, good vibrations, community, peace, pleasure; the other room deeper within, a darker, more ominous space within strewn with carcasses, blood, rot, mire, death, and bad vibes. In the hippie Haight Ashbury from its inception, ugliness was always there alongside the utopianism, the ideals mingling with many pragmatic approaches to the profound dilemmas of modern American society. There was always a potent mix of oppositions, an interest in storms alongside sunshine, the chilly fog as well as the glimpse of a rainbow on the horizon.¹⁰

Zooming in on events such as the Meatfeast we glimpse no simple, naïve vision, but rather an investigation of the complex intersection of play and work, innocence and experience, light and darkness, peace and war, community and commerce, sobriety and debauchery, disciplined action and passive spectacle, harmony and dissonance, the global and the local, the religious and the secular, the otherworldly and the quotidian, the weird and the conventional, politics and culture, life and death – most often probed as a *combination of the two*.¹¹ Stay in one room, enjoying the cosmic joke of the Digger Meatfeast, and you miss the doorway that connected it to the other room, “on the brink of cosmic horror.” Linger on the bad vibes alone, saddled with *those ol’ kosmic blues again*, and you miss the powerful politics that emerged in the party of seemingly spontaneous ecstasy and joy.¹²

One key to understanding the Summer of Love is to notice how its participants themselves did not choose between either room.¹³ People such as Steven Leiper were deeply attuned to the fact that both existed. They were often most interested in the wild oscillations of scale *between* the two rooms and what they symbolized: the front with its macrocosmic desire to spread a message of joy to the world; the back with its microcosmic details of just how difficult it would be to get it done. The psychedelic experience at its best lent itself to this kind of radically pluralistic, multidimensional awareness and thinking.¹⁴ As the Jefferson Airplane sang, “One pill makes you smaller and the other makes you tall.”¹⁵ Here was an effort, through disorientation, to *reorient* perception, understanding, and

consciousness – to bring together in new formulations the interplay between the intimate, private, even the infinitesimal, and the grand, publically minded, and world-historical. The personal *was* political in this case, just as it had been in the more political thinking of the Civil Rights Movement and student New Left during the early 1960s; just as it would be in the Women’s Liberation movement and other identity-based emancipatory politics by the early 1970s.¹⁶ For many, at least these dizzying shifts of scale offered better prospects than what existed in mainstream cold war America, where, to continue with Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane, the pill that mother gave you didn’t do anything at all.

It is analytically productive, then, to consider the Summer of Love through the framework of the micro and macrocosmic, glimpsing how, most of all, the two kaleidoscopically shot through each other like so many swirling streams of liquid at a psychedelic light show. One room could fill you with towering joy; but, as Leiper discovered, it was never far from another room in which you flinched grimly with worry and concern. We might most of all understand the micro and macrocosmic oscillations that defined the Summer of Love as good examples of what happened when large groups of people embraced the pursuit of “hot fun in the summertime,” as Bay Area rock and soul superstars Sly and the Family Stone called it in their 1969 hit.¹⁷ Hot fun, as Sly rather slyly labeled it, could be as innocent as a day at the “country fair,” but it also perhaps alluded to the urban unrest among African-Americans, including in San Francisco, where the National Guard marched down Haight Street after protests against a white police officer shooting and killing a 17-year-old African-American teen, Matthew Johnson, Jr., in the Hunters Point neighborhood in September of 1966.¹⁸ As with so many Sly Stone compositions, hot fun was no simple thing: it also had the two rooms of the Meatfeast in it.

Not only Sly’s lyrics, but also his song’s musical elements suggested combinations and intersections of opposing elements. He merged a heady mix of Little Richard rock-and-roll piano boogie-woogie triplets with something more artsy, avant-garde, and savvy, like as startling chord change from a basic C to an A-flat-major as the voices male and female, low and high, sang, committed to the ensemble, yet each musician also finding a way to shine with individualistic distinction. Here, even in a pop hit from the Bay Area, was tension and release, the self and society as a whole, the everyday and the cosmic, issues of concern to black lives in particular and a sense of communion with humanity as a whole, brought together for a moment in sound before being set loose, free, in the world. If we make Sly and the Family Stone’s “Hot Fun in the Summertime” the anthem for the Summer of Love rather than “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair),” the drippy jingle written for the Monterey International Pop Festival by Scott MacKenzie and John Phillips, we begin to sense better the explosive compounds of social energies that made the Summer of Love what it was. The song reaches for macrocosmic ecstasy, but never elides the lurking, microcosmic costs of doing

so. This was what Leiper noticed with the Diggers and what one might hear in “Hot Fun in the Summertime” as well.¹⁹

Hot fun was also what Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart would later refer to as “serious fun,” which he and other participants in the Summer of Love valued above all else.²⁰ The Grateful Dead, and kindred souls in the Haight, possessed an abiding curiosity about – a passion for – discovering whether pleasure might provide a path to social change – whether fun, if done right, might be transformative. “Revolution for the Hell of It,” as Yippie Abbie Hoffman would famously declare by the end of the 1960s, borrowing many of his ideas for political activism from the San Francisco Diggers themselves.²¹ This was a very different sort of take on party politics – or what we might call partying politics.

Critics, however, often make the mistake of overlooking the work it took to generate the heat of hot fun. As Steve Leiper learned when he entered the back-room of the Digger Store on Page Street, the Meatfeast was no free lunch. Yet, as he was quick to notice, it could produce tremendous delights – and just as crucially, important insights. The extensive planning and labor necessary for creating the conditions for hot fun, serious fun, fun with a purpose, were essential to the Summer of Love. The stage had to be set, the meat carved up, to honor the ethos of the impulse. So too, the goal of it all was not only spontaneity, but also a search for new modes of tackling the problems of the world (“new forms ... and new order ... closer to, probably, what the real order is,” as Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead remarked of the infamous Acid Tests he and others participated in during 1965 and 1966).²²

Why was this amalgamation of pleasure and labor, bliss and burdens, so potent in San Francisco? Why did the Bay Area become the epicenter for the Summer of Love? To be sure, there were other outposts of what would become known as the counterculture: New York’s East Village, Los Angeles’s Sunset Strip and Laurel Canyon, Detroit’s Cass Avenue corridor, Swinging London, the portable sounds of rock music on radio stations and phonograph record players around the world. One answer, I argue in my book *The Republic of Rock*, intriguingly lies in the connections of San Francisco to the Vietnam War.²³ With President Lyndon Johnson’s dramatic increase in ground troops in 1965 through the use of the draft, the Vietnam War reached from afar into the intimate lives of individuals across the United States. San Francisco, however, was different. The war was present in ways it was not elsewhere.

The Bay Area served as a central location from which the US military directed its efforts. Vietnam seeped into the very visions of the Summer of Love. While on an acid trip, one active participant in the Haight Ashbury scene, Reg E. Williams, thought he glimpsed an armada passing through the fog under the Golden Gate Bridge, en route to South-East Asia. “The clearing fog stretching across to Marin reveals destroyers, cruisers, aircraft carriers convoying scores of troop ships,” he recalled. “This vast armada has to stretch all the way back to the Bay Bridge ... Thousands of troops heading for Vietnam. Christ. Thousands. Poor sons a

bitches.”²⁴ And maybe he did. The Oakland port sent some 37 million tons of materiel to Vietnam during the first 8 years of the war.²⁵ Between 1965 and 1968, over 200,000 GIs shipped out to and returned from the theater of war at the Oakland Army Base, some of them stopping at either end of their one-year tours of duty to catch a glimpse of the scene in the Haight Ashbury.²⁶ Eventually there were hippie GIs in Vietnam itself, as well as fleeting little Haight Ashburys popping up at Non-Commissioned Officer’s clubs, Entertainment Branch talent shows, and in the seedy nightclubs of Saigon. In 1971, there was even a Saigon International Pop Festival modeled on events such as the Monterey International Pop Festival held just south of San Francisco in 1967 and the even larger Woodstock Festival a few years later in 1969.²⁷ As a letter to the underground newspaper, the *Berkeley Barb* succinctly put it: “There probably would be no Haight Ashbury without the war.”²⁸ These two “rooms” – San Francisco’s Summer of Love and the Vietnam theater of war – were inextricably connected.

The political crisis brought on by the war permeated the Summer of Love in the Bay Area, inspiring attempts to discover and realize radical alternatives that might leap up from immediate activities close at hand to the world as a whole. To be sure, there was already fervent antiwar activism at the University of California in Berkeley, culminating in marches on the Oakland Army Induction Center from 1965 onward, but over in the Haight, the war was powerfully present as well.²⁹ Reg E. Williams remembered doodling imagery that combined the war with scenes from the Haight Ashbury. “Early this morning,” he told a friend at the time, “I did a drawing that blew my mind. It was like I was over Vietnam and still here all at the same time. It was raining death. Death resurrecting death on parade.”³⁰ Community activists such as the Thelin Brothers, Jay and Ron, who ran the Psychedelic Shop on Haight Street, noted how the War’s destructive presence suffused the Summer of Love at events such as the January 1967 Human Be-In/Gathering of the Tribes in Golden Gate Park, lending its Great Awakening-like spiritual thrust an urgency. “It’s all related,” Jay Thelin remarked at a press conference, “psychedelics, the war, the protesting, and the gap in the generations.”³¹ His brother Ron, along with their friend Allen Cohen, one of the editors of *The Oracle*, were of the same mind. “Ultimately,” Ron Thelin and Cohen wrote of the Human Be-In in a letter to the *Los Angeles Free Press*, “the energy generated in gatherings like this could shift the balances enough to end the war in Vietnam and revitalize many dead hearts.”³²

The energy of the war could even penetrate to the molecular level. As Great Society guitarist Darby Slick put it, the interest in hallucinogenic drugs was not naïve or innocent. He and other participants in the Summer of Love used psychedelics for sensory overload, to come close to the edge of trauma. The counterculture acknowledged, and included, pain, suffering, an awareness of all that was flawed in America and the world in the 1960s. LSD and other drugs were, in Slick’s words, “our Vietnam, the Battle of the Brain Cells, and drugs were the weapons, the transport ships, the airplanes, and people were the weapons too.”³³

When conditions worsened on Haight Street over the course of 1967 and it began to look only like the back room at the Digger Meatfeast with no trace of the front room's rapturousness, sometime Digger Chester Anderson angrily portrayed it as a "scale model of Vietnam."³⁴

It is within the looming presence of Vietnam as the Meatfeast backroom to the front room of San Francisco's psychedelic parties in the streets that the more famous narrative of the Summer of Love should be located. That more well-known story has its origins at myriad starting points: with a visit to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore and the existential bagel stores and coffeeshops of the North Beach neighborhood, where one could soak in the legacy of the Beat Generation from 1950s San Francisco.³⁵ Or one might look to the painters at the San Francisco Art Institute, who modeled avant-garde art making and bohemian living for a younger generation coming of age in the 1950s and 60s.³⁶ There was also the fertile world of leftwing activism in the Bay Area, from the socialist Dubois youth clubs to the 1960 anti-HUAC protests, to the boycott to desegregate San Francisco's hotels in 1962. The Free Speech Movement and the growing political and cultural dissent at Cal in 1964 offers yet another stream of influence.³⁷ Or one might notice the loose networks of young students at San Francisco State who began to live in the large, cheap Victorians of the Haight Ashbury neighborhood and were curious in equal parts about New Left political activism, beatnik art making, folk music, the Beatles, and casual pot smoking.³⁸ You could certainly extend the historic lens much more than that, to the bohemian labor traditions of the ILWU and the Wobblies, and the particular constellations of working-class life in Northern California.³⁹ Or one could advance still further into the past to notice the traditions of laissez-faire port town libertarianism in San Francisco that date back to the Gold Rush if not earlier.

One can also widen the lens to note the liberal consensus of postwar America, a commitment to broad-based affluence that was undercut by cold war anti-communist ideologies, an alienating pressure for conformity, and frustrations with full progress on civil rights justice – not to mention the constant threat of nuclear annihilation.⁴⁰ This liberal consensus was particularly potent in California, where the military-industrial engines of aeronautics, electronics, and early Silicon Valley firms created a brand-new world of space age suburbia all around San Francisco.⁴¹ It rapidly shifted people from agricultural landscapes of orchards and fruit-packing plants and timber groves and mills to treeless vistas of split-level housing developments, parking lots, and office buildings.⁴² As the very first issue of the *Oracle* newspaper put it, "California is the center of radical change in every form, from the space race and automation to a whole new way of life."⁴³

More immediately in the years right before 1967, one could stop in at an Acid Test with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, or take a summer road trip out to the Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada, to listen to the Charlatans and hang with Chandler Laughlin, later known as DJ Travus T. Hipp.⁴⁴ We could attend the earliest psychedelic dances of the original Family Dog promoters, mostly San

Francisco State College students with bohemian leanings, or go to the Appeal concerts organized by Bill Graham for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, whose members had been arrested for their provocative free theater in San Francisco's parks.⁴⁵ By January 1966, we might take in the freak scene at the Trips Festival at Longshoreman's Hall or hang out in the Golden Gate Park Panhandle at one of the myriad free concerts such as the Love Pageant Rally to mourn/celebrate/protest the illegalization of LSD, held in October of that year. By the start of 1967, we might read the latest issue of *The Oracle*, or maybe not read it so much as gawk at its breakthroughs in psychedelic design. We might tune in the new free-form style of radio on FM station KMPX. We could attend the Human Be-In/Gathering of the Tribes in January 1967 or, a few months later in June, trek down to the Monterey Pop Festival. By the Summer of Love itself, we might dodge the Gray Line "Hippie Tour" buses to wander among the onslaught of youngsters, curiosity seekers, runaways, and others meandering around Haight Street. By October 1967, the microcosmic scene was very much fraying. It was time to join the Death of Hippie/Rebirth of Man Parade staged by the Diggers.⁴⁶

Within these events were a plenitude of fascinating figures: a movable Meatfeast of bohemian participants, artists, activists, hustlers, and hard workers from novelist turned acid guru Ken Kesey, with his band of Merry Pranksters, to Holocaust survivor Bill Graham to Digger tricksters such as Emmett Grogan to Human Be-In organizer/*Oracle* editors such as Allen Cohen and Michael Bowen to LSD guru and Grateful Dead patron and sound designer Owsley Stanley.⁴⁷ There were many important women in the scene whose efforts often go unacknowledged. Not just the Texas transplant Janis Joplin, but also people like SF State student Lucy Lewis, who performed with Anna Halprin's pioneering Northern California contemporary dance company and helped shape the music and vintage Edwardian look of her boyfriend George Hunter's band The Charlatans.⁴⁸ Or Luria Castell and Ellen Harmon, political and cultural activists who helped to design the Family Dog's earliest dance concerts along with friends such as poster artist Alton Kelley.⁴⁹ Or Ami Magill, staff artist for *The Oracle*, who was among those to reimagine the possibilities of color printmaking in innovative ways.⁵⁰ These women remind us that the Summer of Love helped to foster reimaginings of gender, sexuality, and identity even as the Summer of Love milieu tended to reiterate, if not exacerbate, gender inequalities. Once again, it might be worth noticing both of the Meatfeast rooms: the reach for transformation, and the stubborn hold of the existing order of things. Indeed, Digger Peter Coyote speaks of how powerful he found the women among the Diggers themselves, who were, as he put it in an interview years later, "the real back-bone of the whole deal." But he readily admits this does not mean that the gender politics of the Summer of Love scene were not profoundly flawed and full of "bad vibes."⁵¹

Less studied but equally important is the role of race and ethnicity in hippie enclaves such as the Haight Ashbury.⁵² It was, after all, a multiethnic neighborhood close by the Fillmore District's African-American population, as well as

Latino/Latina-American and Asian-American parts of the Bay Area. As young, middle-class whites flooded the neighborhood and attempted to break away from social norms, tensions ensued. Chester Anderson of the Communications Company argued in a leaflet, "Haight/Ashbury is the first segregated bohemia I've ever seen."⁵³ At the same time, the very willingness to pursue more open, experimental modes of living did make spaces for a more pluralistic understanding of ethnic and racial identities. There were a good number of participants who arrived in the Haight from different corners of the American polity, even from around the globe. Darby Slick noted of African-Americans in the Haight and surrounding neighborhoods that, "Many black people seemed somewhat bemused to see the hippie hairstyles and clothes, although, there were, of course, many black hippies."⁵⁴ So too, Sherry Smith reveals the very real political alliances formed between Native American activists and Haight hippies around the protests at Alcatraz in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁵ Blackness, whiteness, redness, other essentializations - they did not disappear during a period of growing identity politics, but a more technicolor conceptualization of race fleetingly flickered too: not colorblindness, but something like a radical appreciation of difference and commonality. Nor did structures of inequality magically vanish, but the goals of constructing ground-up, transformative community suitable for maximizing individual liberty and self-discovery also created possibilities for new, if tentative affiliations and coalitions across barriers of race.

Questions of class identity are worth considering too. The Summer of Love is typically portrayed as a fundamentally middle-class affair. But this was a scene that also was radically open to a wider range of class origins. The spirit of inclusivity was not without its Meatfeast backroom, to be sure, particularly in the case of white, working-class members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle club who became deeply involved in Summer of Love activities. Their always problematic relationship with hippies soured even more after the debacle of their violence at the 1969 Altamont Festival, but prior to that there were moments of connection, tolerance, and peace between certain Hell's Angels and hippies in the Haight.⁵⁶ Similarly, teen runaways came to the Haight from many class backgrounds.⁵⁷ And musicians such as Jerry Garcia and other participants in the beatnik scene that gave birth to the Summer of Love came from San Francisco families with long-running involvement in the labor movement. Garcia's grandmother, who partly raised him, was one of the founders of the laundry workers' union in the Bay Area. Garcia would later adamantly refuse to cross picket lines during various protests that took place at the emerging rock concert halls of the region.⁵⁸ Class, race, gender, sexuality - these were far from simple, straightforward factors in the Summer of Love.

These are just a few of the events and figures from San Francisco's Summer of Love, and they are but the public wireframe for the many moments of individual psychedelic exploration, musical communion, fellow feeling, and political impulses that flowed through them and gave them life. The microcosmic levels

of one city, one neighborhood, one street corner, one person, contained within them still smaller galaxies – and connected, in unhierarchical ways, outward in myriad directions. How does one historicize *that*, exactly? One way to do so is to notice how clear-eyed many participants were about what was happening around them even from within – or maybe because of – the psychedelic maelstrom they sought to establish. This stands in contrast to the typical reporting by the mainstream press of the time, in which hippies were clueless, drug-addled fools or starry-eyed utopians or cynical exploiters.⁵⁹ Those characterizations often continue to appear in histories of the period.⁶⁰ They leave out the consciousness that many possessed of the challenging project they wanted to pursue in places such as the Haight Ashbury. For instance, the members of the Communications Company, who printed up cheap fliers on their Gestetner mimeograph machine, were among many who, to little avail, urged the city government of San Francisco to help them prepare crash pads, health facilities, food, and supplies for the influx of people expected to arrive in the Haight Ashbury during the summer of 1967. They knew that the neighborhood was going to face unprecedented demographic pressures as people flocked to its streets. “Huge Invasion! Hippies Warn S.F.,” one *Communications Company* flier declared, printed on 27 March 1967.⁶¹ They also asked the city to relax its constant police raids of neighborhood houses and focus on providing services for the area as its population increased. Upward of 100,000 people did show up, and many suffered because the city did not listen.⁶²

Participants in the Haight also turned to their own devices, self-organizing through groups such as the HIP Merchants and the Council for a Summer of Love. While their efforts did not fully come to fruition, often breaking down in disagreements about what they sought to accomplish with limited resources and an unfriendly government, the intentions bear remembering. Here was the imagining of a communitarian approach to address the alienations of modern society. “Already, individuals and groups who have seen deeply into the situation are making preparations,” the *Oracle* explained:

Kitchens are being made ready. Food is being gathered. Hotels and houses are being prepared to supply free lodging. The Council for a Summer of Love expects to receive a huge tent, larger than a football field, which will be put up by the Haight Ashbury community, and will be open all Summer.

But that was not enough. The *Oracle* argued:

These physical structures do not exhaust the needs of the new generation, nor the capabilities of our people. There is an even deeper spiritual need. To help fill this need, there will be great celebrations all Summer long ... celebrations which affirm the universal values of Life, Love, Peace, and self-knowledge. There will be small centers for meditation and discussion, and there will also be large festivals ... of the young and festivals of the old ...⁶³

What became known as “The Kiva” was another effort to self-organize in the face of the challenges and opportunities brought on by the Summer of Love. As with the notion of calling the Human Be-In a Gathering of the Tribes, the Kiva

marked the earnest interest in appropriating Native American models of community and social organization. As an *Oracle* article explained, the term was borrowed from the Hopi Indians. It was to be, as the *Oracle* put it, “more than a meeting hall, a building, or a function. It is a broad, all-inclusive matrix for liberation.” Here was another attempt to build structures that might sustain living joyously in the Now. The hope was that the Kiva could become “one more of the positive elements in a Haight Ashbury self-renewal that is already one of the spectacularly non-government supported neighborhood improvements in existence.”⁶⁴ The Kiva was quite the utopian endeavor and many active in the Haight Ashbury, even those asked to serve on its so-called “tribal council,” were immediately dubious. Chester Anderson, co-publisher of the Communications Company leaflets, and others were quick to critique the willingness among Summer of Love organizers to tolerate the commercialization of the scene, for their lack of a more radical extremism, and for their overly optimistic views on Haight Ashbury street life. Fierce debates ensued, which we might understand on the one hand as indicative of the Summer of Love’s almost instant spoilage, but also, on the other, as a sign of how seriously participants took deep democratic deliberation and participation.⁶⁵

We must, of course, recognize that the Summer of Love ultimately did not live up to the hype. With insufficient resources to handle the influx of people searching for a different life, the challenges of allowing for drug experimentation, the quick appearance of sexual exploitation under the guise of free love, and growing violence and murder, the Haight fell into disarray. Hot fun could burn. But we might also notice the awareness of this, and the attempt to confront it, within the scene itself. There was plenty of “peace, love, and flowers” talk, but also just as much cantankerous discussion, questioning, and working through of issues. There emerged, in the Haight a profound consciousness that making the Meatfeast writhe with pleasure would be no easy endeavor. As the Communications Company hilariously but also quite righteously scrawled across one of its leaflets in criticism of how the Summer of Love was unfolding by June of 1967, “What is this crap?”⁶⁶ The back room that Stephen Leiper glimpsed would have its way. Many began to take the long view. As Richard Honigman wrote in the *Oracle* about life in the Haight, “It takes time and experience to reintegrate these new forms of knowledge and personality into a comfortable living pattern.”⁶⁷ The shortcomings of the Summer of Love are important to recognize, but we might also glimpse them as part of a self-conscious, self-critical attempt to change what it meant to be American, human, and a democratic self pursuing worthwhile modes of community and citizenship in a confusing modern world full of possibility and problems in dizzying arrays of size and scale.⁶⁸

As historians, one way to do so is to grasp something that only a few scholars, such as Timothy Miller, have pointed out: the Summer of Love was not, in the end, an outright rejection of the postwar liberal consensus, as many thought at the time, and most histories still suggest.⁶⁹ It was, rather, an effort to realize the most radical democratic implications of liberalism in its modern American

form. The Summer of Love very much possessed a historical consciousness, its participants often investigating how their immediate lives related to core ideals, language, stances, and rights articulated in the American past, to Declarations of Independence, to liberty, life, and the pursuit of happiness. What did Allen Cohen and Michael Bowen title a manifesto about the 1966 Love Pageant Rally? “Prophecy of a Declaration of Independence.” In the document, they wrote of how:

When in the flow of human events it becomes necessary for the people to cease to recognize the obsolete social patterns which have isolated man from his consciousness and to create with the youthful energies of the world revolutionary communities of harmonious relations to which the two-billion-year-old life process entitles them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind should declare the causes which impel them to this creation. We hold these experiences to be self-evident ...⁷⁰

American ideals mattered to the counterculture.

So too, many participants in the Summer of Love investigated how they might better honor and value older cultures from around the world, many of which bore the brunt of centuries of Western imperialism. To be sure, the Summer of Love included endless moments of problematic essentialization, appropriation, and distortion, but it also opened new spaces of potential realignment and solidarity that should not be discounted. The pages of key publications such as *The Oracle* or the *CommCo* leaflets welcomed the voices of non-middle class white Americans, made a point to try to speak, if sometimes awkwardly or imperfectly, across lines of identity and hierarchy as defined in post-World War II America.

As they located themselves macrocosmically within history, the thousands who flocked to the Haight Ashbury neighborhood in 1967 in search of personal and collective transformation also themselves made history. They were curious about taking hallucinogenic drugs, experiencing the possibilities of free love, and participating in new kinds of popular art such as rock music and light shows not simply as leisure, but as hot fun. Could entering into these experiences reconfigure social affiliations, from the family to the artisanal business to larger senses of community, fellowship, citizenship, humanity? In exploring this question, participants fostered many linked experiences through which one could pass, back and forth from the festive writhing dance in the front room to the mess of bones, blood, and bad vibes in the back. And when millions more associated San Francisco with an international youth counterculture, they too found themselves moving through Leiper’s two rooms. They discovered not escape from history but an entrance into all its fraught complexities.⁷¹

This is why it is worth remembering the Summer of Love now. In the current winter of our discontent, the Summer of Love remains, for some, a mythical moment, a kind of year zero for the countercultural vision, a glorious, ecstatic time when, as Jerry Garcia put it, the door cracked open a moment on what life might be like before it quickly slammed shut again, or, as poet Gary Snyder wrote, “it seemed like the world might head a new way.”⁷² Others return to the Summer of Love to remember the liabilities of a politics of pleasure, which can

just as easily lead to commodified hip consumer rebellion as an actual revolution, or, far worse, create environments for easy pickings by ominous figures such as Charles Manson. But whether one celebrates the lost opportunities of the Summer of Love or bemoans its tragic flaws and failures, the period to which they refer was one that itself was saturated by historical consciousness, by the sense that the microcosmic dimensions of daily life mattered to the macrocosmic bigger picture, and that the pursuit of utopian ideals and festive thanks giving in the front room had to emerge only from an awareness of tragedy and pain, the mire, meat, and bones in back.

And then, perhaps, most crucially, there are today's younger people. For many of them, the Summer of Love sparks no memory, no response, at all. It is merely something vague and unknown from the past: didn't that happen "sometime in the 1950s?" as one student recently asked me.⁷³ For this danger of forgetting alone, it is worth keeping the embers of the Summer of Love's hot fun, in all its micro and macrocosmic confusion, with all its star-like twinkle and ashen crumble, glowing for inspection.

Notes

1. Echols, "Hope and Hype in Sixties Haight-Ashbury."
2. Hill, *San Francisco and the Long 60s*; Grunenberg and Harris, eds., *Summer of Love*; Auther and Lerner, *West of Center*; and Blauvelt and Castillo, *Hippie Modernism*.
3. See, for instance, many of the essays in Macedo, *Reassessing the Sixties*.
4. Heath and Potter, *Rebel Sell*. See also Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*.
5. Michael Frisch skillfully dissects this lurking narrative in histories of the Summer of Love and 1960s counterculture as a whole. See Frisch, "Woodstock and Altamont."
6. Farber, "Building the Counterculture, Creating Right Livelihoods."
7. Joan Didion titled her essays of grim reportage on the Haight *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, after a line in the famous 1919 William Butler Yeats' poem "Second Coming."
8. For more on The Diggers, see Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia"; Cavallo, "It's Free Because It's Yours"; Martin, "The Diggers: Politicizing the Counterculture"; and the wonderful resources of The Diggers Archive, maintained by Eric Noble. On the San Francisco Mime Troupe, see Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*; Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions*; and Vaneta Mason, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*.
9. Leiper, "At the Handle of the Kettle," 71.
10. See Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius*, for illuminating research that brilliantly recovers from archival traces the stories of teen runaways who arrived in the Haight in droves. For an overarching history of the Haight Ashbury, from its earliest days as an integrated working-class residential neighborhood through the years of the Summer of Love, see Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*.
11. Big Brother and the Holding Company, "Combination of the Two."
12. Janis Joplin, *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!*
13. One historian who h arguing this point are Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*.
14. Bromell, *Tomorrow Never Knows*. As Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle write,

The countercultural mode reveled in tangents, metaphors, unresolved contradictions, conscious ruptures of logic and reason; it was expressly anti-linear, anti-teleological, rooted in the present, disdainful of thought processes that were circumscribed by causation and consequence. Countercultural knowledge can't be accurately represented by a straight line, or even the squiggly line; a more evocative figure would be the matrix, or perhaps the concentric circle. Yet by disciplinary convention, historical accounts are linear, chronological, and teleological.

See Braunstein and Doyle, "Introduction," 13.

15. Jefferson Airplane, "White Rabbit."
16. This, of course, became a key phrase in the Women's Liberation movement, emerging from an essay written by Carol Hanisch in 1969 and first circulated as a memo entitled "Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie's Thoughts on a Women's Liberation Movement," and republished as "The Personal Is Political" in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, eds. Firestone and Joedt. The idea of the private being public can be glimpsed in the New Left more broadly as well in everything from *The Port Huron Statement* published by Students for a Democratic Society in 1962 to C. Wright Mills' writing in *The Sociological Imagination*. See Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity* for one version of this history.
17. Sly and the Family Stone, "Hot Fun in the Summertime."
18. On the unrest in San Francisco after Matthew Johnson, Jr.'s shooting, see Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 90, and Callahan, *Explosion of Deferred Dreams*, 85. On urban unrest and uprisings among African Americans nationally, see, on the 1965 Watts Uprising, Horne, *Fire This Time*; on the Newark Uprising of 1967, Curvin, *Inside Newark*; and Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation*; and on the 1967 Detroit Uprising, Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*; Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*; Stone, *Detroit 1967*; and Kurashige, *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*.
19. Scott MacKenzie, "San Francisco," written with John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas, produced by Lou Adler, and released in part to publicize the Monterey International Pop Festival of June 1967 that Adler and Phillips organized. The song went to number four on the United States Billboard charts and number one in the United Kingdom and throughout much of Europe. See Kubernik and Kubernik, *A Perfect Haze*, for the story of how MacKenzie and Phillips wrote the song.
20. "Serious fun is what the Grateful Dead is up," Mickey Hart, quoted in Gans and Simon, *Playing in the Band*, back cover.
21. Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It*. For The Diggers' influence on Hoffman, see Raskin, *For the Hell of It*, 100–28.
22. Quoted in Garcia, Reich, and Wenner, *Garcia: A Signpost To New Space*, 101.
23. Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*.
24. Williams, "Fillmore Nights."
25. Eymann and Wollenberg, *What's Going On?*, 6.
26. Eymann and Wollenberg, *What's Going On?*, 4.
27. See Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*.
28. N.A., "From the Haight," 363.
29. See Rorabaugh, *Berkeley At War*.
30. Williams, "Fillmore Nights."
31. KRON TV raw footage, c. 1968, San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189594>.
32. Thelin and Cohen, "Letter to Art Kunkin, Editor."
33. Slick, *Don't You Want Somebody To Love*, 62.

34. Anderson, "Uncle Tim's Children."
35. See Agee, "North Beach Beat: Bohemians, Patrol Officers, and Cultural Pluralism," in *The Streets of San Francisco*.
36. See Cándida-Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*.
37. See Cohen and Zelnik, *The Free Speech Movement*; and Rosenfeld, *Subversives*.
38. See Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury* for much of this history.
39. This is a point that Matt Callahan makes in *Explosion of Deferred Dreams*, 18, 19.
40. See Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*.
41. Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.
42. Starr, *California*.
43. N.A., "The 'Oracle' is an Attempt . . .," 2.
44. On Kesey, see Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. On the Red Dog Saloon, see Selvin, *Summer of Love* and the documentary film *The Red Dog Saloon*, directed by Mary Works.
45. See Selvin, *Summer of Love*; Gleason, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*; and Graham and Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*.
46. See Selvin, *Summer of Love*; Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*; and Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*.
47. On Kesey, see Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. On Graham, see Graham and Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*. On Grogan, see his memoir, *Ringolevio*. On Owsley Stanley, see Gissen Stanley and Davis, *Owsley and Me: My LSD Family* and Greenfield, *Bear*.
48. See Newton, *The First Few Friends I Had*; Callahan, *Explosion of Deferred Dreams*; and Bernstein, *The San Francisco Tape Center*.
49. See Gleason, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*.
50. See Cohen, "Additional Notes on the SF Oracle."
51. Quoted in "Peter Coyote: Interview by Etan Ben-Ami."
52. One book that begins to carefully study this topic is Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco*. Additionally, an excellent study of race at play in the rock music of San Francisco is Burke, "Tear Down the Walls."
53. Anderson, "Two Page Racial Rap."
54. Slick, *Don't You Want Somebody To Love*, 65.
55. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 78–113. 56.
56. See Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests*; Selvin, *Altamont*.
57. Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius*.
58. On Garcia's grandmother Tillie Clifford, see Brightman, *Sweet Chaos*, 53, among other sources. On Garcia's refusal to cross picket lines during events such as the Light Artists' Guild Strike in 1969, see Kramer, *Republic of Rock*; Selvin, *Summer of Love*; and McNally, *Long Strange Trip*.
59. See reportage such as Von Hoffman, *We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us Against*, and Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, among many other negative reports on the Haight-Ashbury.
60. See, for instance, Rorabaugh, *American Hippies*.
61. N.A., "Huge Invasion! Hippies Warn S.F."
62. See various leaflets published by the Communications Company or CommCo, as it was known: "A Request," 12 April 1967; "Unite or Die," 16 April 1967; "A Petition for a Haight Street Mall," April 1967; "Haight Ashbury Survival School" advertisement for classes on how to "stay alive on Haight Street," April 1967; and others available at the *CommCo* pages of the Diggers Archives, <http://www.diggers.org>. Perry's *The Haight-Ashbury* remains the best history of the ground-level civic calls for municipal participation in handling the influx of people to the neighborhood.

63. Council for a Summer of Love, "Message from the San Francisco Oracle," *The Oracle* 8, 33.
64. N.A., "Kiva," *The Oracle* 8, 14.
65. Anderson, "Uncle Tim's Children"; N.A., "Public Acts Are Public Knowledge: Love Is What You Do Not What You Say."
66. N.A., "What Is This Crap?"
67. Honigman, "Flowers from the Street."
68. In this way, the Haight and the Summer of Love take a place alongside the Civil Rights Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, and other social movements of the 1960s as an effort to pursue radically democratic community in the modern United States. Among the many books on democracy and the civil rights movement, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; Hogan, *Many Hearts, One Mind*; and Polletta, *Freedom Is An Endless Meeting*. On SDS, see Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*.
69. Miller, *The Hippies and American Values*.
70. Cohen and Bowen, "Prophesy of a Declaration of Independence."
71. In this sense, the Summer of Love participants do not quite fit into the mold of "prefigurative politics" that Gregory Calvert, Wini Breines, Todd Gitlin, Doug Rossinow, and other historians contend defined much of the youth movement of the 1960s. Yes, they sought to "prefigure" what social relationships might be like after revolutionary political by simply starting to live as if the revolution had already arrived; but they were also deeply aware of the challenges involved in this pursuit, hence Steven Leiper noticing the two rooms at the Digger Meatfeast. See Calvert, *Democracy from the Heart*; Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*.
72. Garcia quoted in interview for *Rock & Roll*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVkkbJ_KI2Y. Snyder, "Finding the Space in the Heart."
73. Questions of the relationship of history to memory continue to loom large when interpreting the 1960s. Key books even make the relationship between memory and history their touchstones. See, for instance, Farber, *The Sixties: From Memory to History*.

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Notes on contributor

Michael J Kramer works at the intersection of historical scholarship, the arts, digital technology, and cultural criticism. He is the author of *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (Oxford University Press, 2013; paperback, 2017).

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