

Make Roanoke Queer Again

Community History and Urban Change in a Southern City

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores intersections among urban history, queer history, and public history in a gentrifying southern city. I show how queer cultures flourished in Roanoke, Virginia, in the 1960s and 1970s only to be displaced by a combination of police repression, urban planning, and gentrification starting in the late 1970s and 1980s. Seeking to “Make Roanoke Queer Again,” the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project is a community-based history initiative committed to researching and interpreting the region’s LGBTQ history. This essay argues that queer community history projects can be a form of resistance to gentrification and a means to preserve our history from “queer erasure.”

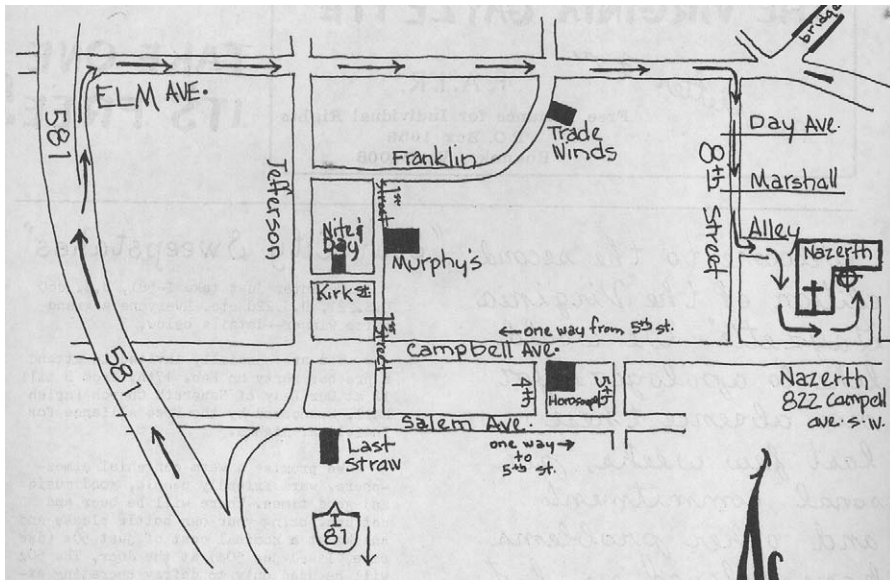
KEY WORDS: urban renewal, gentrification, community history, queer history, southern history

Introduction

On a Friday night in downtown Roanoke, Virginia, about twenty people and I stand outside of the former site of Murphy’s Super Disco, a short-lived gay dance club here in the late 1970s. Today it is Martin’s, a straight bar. Two big burly bouncers also stand outside, listening haphazardly to our conversation. I begin to read:

Oh it was fun. You’d walk in and there was a huge sign on the front door and it was the ABC laws: “You can’t serve known homosexuals, drug addicts, prostitutes . . .” and it was right there at the door when you walked in. And we’d dance and Donna Summer was the deal. And the owner of Murphy’s . . . we’d be cuddled up a little bit, and he would shine a light on you, a flashlight, and he’d say, “You can do it in your car, but you’re not gonna do it in here.” So we’d be hugging or maybe a kiss, but nothing past that. And so every night it would close . . . Last Straw, Donna Summer would play, I’m sorry “Last Dance” by Donna Summer would play, and you knew when he played that song Murphy’s was closing. And so the song would go off and

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A 1978 bar map published by the Free Alliance for Individual Rights (FAIR), a gay activist group in Roanoke, Virginia. Excerpted from the *Virginia Gayzette* 3, no. 2 (February 1978).

he'd flip the lights up and it would be dead silence, and you knew, "Out." It was time to go home.

I am reading from an oral history interview with Peter Thornhill, an African American gay man, who, when Murphy's opened its doors in either 1977 or 1978, was still a teenager.¹ Thornhill would pile into a car with his friends from Lynchburg, fifty-five miles away, and they would drive to Roanoke several times a week to visit the city's gay bars and dance clubs. They went to The Last Straw, Murphy's, and The Park, a dance club that opened in late 1978 to such rave reviews that it, according to one oral history narrator, "put Roanoke on the map."² Roanoke was a queer city.

That night, we were carrying our own maps. I had distributed photocopies of a February 1978 bar map published by the Free Alliance for Individual Rights (FAIR), a gay activist group based in Roanoke in the late 1970s (see map on page 36).³ The 1978 map shows the locations of five gays bars open in downtown Roanoke in February of that year. It was our plan to visit all of them. We'd show

¹ Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Oral History Interview with Peter Thornhill," Virginia Room Digital Collection, Roanoke Public Library, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/ThornhillPeter>.

² "Oral History Interview with Peter Thornhill"; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones," Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/JonesDan>.

³ This map is from *Virginia Gayzette* 3, no. 2 (February 1978). Our project's annotated, updated version of the map is available in the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project papers, LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

up, talk about queer history, then grab a drink at each place—well, at those that still existed. One gay bar is now demolished; another is a church; another is a luxury apartment building; two are straight bars. Today, Roanoke has only one or two “gay” bars left, depending on who you ask, and both of these postdate FAIR’s 1978 map.

As I finished my interpretation in front of Murphy’s/Martin’s, we made our way to the bar’s front doors. I was wearing pink nail polish, glitter eyeliner, short shorts. Many of us wore hats with the words “Make Roanoke Queer Again” printed on them. The bar’s two bouncers stopped us at the door. “IDs please.” As we made our way inside, they admonished each of us in turn to “keep it cool. Okay? This is a family establishment.” We received a welcome similar to Peter Thornhill’s experience thirty-eight years earlier when he encountered a sign at the entrance of this same building reading “We can’t serve known homosexuals.” While we were allowed inside, we were also warned not to be demonstrably queer. We had to leave our history and our identities out on the street.

Our #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl, held on Friday, April 29, 2016, was organized by the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, a community-based history initiative that I cofounded in September 2015. To date our project has involved over fifty people from the local community—including students and workers, cisgender and transgender individuals, gay, straight, bisexual, queer, and questioning folks—in an ongoing exploration of community history in both theory and practice.⁴ In this essay, I examine the early successes and challenges of this project as a case study in doing queer public history in a gentrifying small southern city. Although not all queer history is urban history, Roanoke, Virginia, offers an important case study in how histories of urban renewal, displacement, and gentrification intersect with public history and public memory, especially regarding the queer past.

Long referred to as the “Magic City” because of its phenomenal growth as a railroad industrial center, the city’s fortunes reversed as the post–World War II era brought deindustrialization and suburbanization. Roanoke experienced significant urban decline in the 1960s and 1970s, as demolition, displacement, white flight, and the spread of crime and “vice” led to population loss as well as the marked movement of people and capital away from downtown and inner-city

4 In this essay, I use the term “queer” in at least two different ways. First, and most often, I use it as a synonym for the umbrella designation “LGBTQ,” which in our project’s name we also use with a plus sign (signifying that there is more to this acronym than just five letters). Used in this way, queer is not the same as gay; rather, queer recognizes that people’s experiences of gender and sexuality are fluid and fall on a spectrum. There are as many different genders and sexualities (and combinations thereof) as there are letters in the alphabet or colors in the rainbow. On the other hand, “queer” itself is a specific identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and I occasionally use “queer” in this manner. I myself identify as queer. I do not identify as gay or straight, and I reject similar binaries as related to gender and sexuality, and so “queer” very accurately describes where I fall on these spectrums and how I relate to the larger LGBTQ community. Queer also has political connotations, suggesting an affinity for radicalism and social justice activism. Also note that the term “cisgender” refers to a person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth. It is the opposite of transgender.

neighborhoods. By 1970 the city had a population of ninety-two thousand persons, a 5 percent decline from ten years earlier. The city annexed considerable territory in the following decade to stem population loss, nearly doubling its municipal footprint from twenty-six to forty-three square miles; however, population remained remarkably stagnant, briefly hitting one hundred thousand persons in 1980 and still falling slightly below that figure as of 2010.⁵ Amid these changes, LGBTQ peoples stepped up their political organizing, consciousness-raising, and social and economic activity in and around downtown. This was a period that I call “queer flourishing.” The decline of downtown and the inner city created new arenas for LGBTQ peoples to claim space. This brief period was followed, in the late 1970s and 1980s, by successive waves of urban planning and police repression intended to “clean up” that space—making downtown safe for gentrification—leading not only to the displacement of queer peoples from public view, but ultimately to the erasure of queer history from public memory, including within the LGBTQ community. I refer to this subsequent period as “queer erasure.”⁶

By linking urban history with queer history, I argue not only that queer public history intersects with histories of urban renewal and gentrification, but also that the application of community history practices focused on reclaiming urban space as queer space can be an effective form of resistance to the erasure of LGBTQ peoples and our histories. Our #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl is just one example of how community history projects can make cities queer again by renaming and reclaiming urban space, thereby resisting a gentrification that threatens to erase the queer past.

Genealogies of Queer Public History

LGBTQ peoples have long looked to the past for clues to unlocking their own identities as well as a sense of intergenerational community. It is a relief to know that you are not the first person to have experienced something, and it is empowering to realize that queer people have always existed. Early homophile groups such as the Mattachine Society (founded in 1950) and the Daughters of Bilitis (founded in 1955) displayed queer historical consciousness in the creative naming of their organizations, in essays published in their newsletters, and in courses such as “Homosexuality in History,” a seminar offered at the ONE Institute in Los Angeles in 1957–58. The roots of queer public history as an ongoing community-based practice, however, can be traced to the gay liberation movement

5 Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia, 1882–1912: Magic City of the New South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007); US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population of Urbanized Areas Established since the 1970 Census, for the United States: 1970* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1976), 22.

6 The terms “queer flourishing” and “queer erasure” originated in the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project’s process of creating a downtown Roanoke walking tour, an initiative discussed later in this article. Our #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl was a unique one-off activity separate from the proposed downtown walking tour.

of the 1970s. Gay liberation sparked a broad interest in history, and a search for roots, among many LGBTQ Americans. It also led some activist-scholars to organize the earliest queer community history projects in the United States.⁷

Jonathan Ned Katz laid out the links between gay liberation and the search for a gay past in his classic *Gay American History* (1976). This book perhaps has parallels with Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Seeking a past long denied them, Katz and Haley inspired queer and black peoples, respectively, to begin to do their own research into personal, familial, and community histories.⁸ Katz himself was inspired by the gay liberation movement, which held the promise that gays and lesbians could develop a collective consciousness of themselves as an oppressed class with a discernable, shared past. In *Gay American History* he wrote: "For long we were a people perceived out of time and out of place—socially unsituated, without a history," but now "we experienced ourselves as initiators and assertive actors in a movement for social change. We experience the present as history, ourselves as history-makers. In our lives and in our hearts, we experienced the change from one historical form of homosexuality to another. We experienced homosexuality as historical."⁹

Out of the gay liberation movement came the earliest queer community history projects. Lesbian scholar-activists took the lead, with Joan Nestle and others founding the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York in 1974 and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis founding the Buffalo Women's Oral History Project in 1978. On the West Coast, Allan Bérubé and others founded the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project in 1978 or 1979 (later renamed the GLBT Historical Society). In 1979 Bérubé went on the road giving illustrated "slide show" lectures on gay and lesbian history to LGBT audiences. A group of gay activists in Boston were at one such lecture and decided to form their own group, the Boston Area Lesbian and Gay History Project, founded in 1980 (later renamed simply The History Project).¹⁰

7 Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 22, 66–69. On the programmatic initiatives of early homophile groups and the ONE Institute, see W. Dorr Legg, ed., *Homophile Studies in Theory and Practice* (San Francisco: GLB Publishers, 1994).

8 Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976). On Haley's approach to the past, see Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy" (1973), in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 22–32. Katz's and Haley's works sparked a renewed interest in historical research in the 1970s, but black historical consciousness has deeper roots that go back at least to the nineteenth century in the United States. See Fath Davis Ruffins, "Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820–1990," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 506–611; and Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

9 Katz, *Gay American History*, 1–2.

10 These genealogies are traced in Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1993), xv–xvii; The History Project, *Improper Bostonians: Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland*



History Project members march in the Boston Pride Parade, June 2015. (Photograph by the author)

These early queer history projects employed creative bottom-up methodologies. For example, Horacio N. Roque Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd have argued that as a “grassroots community historian,” Allan Bérubé (and the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project) was “not beholden to an academic history department—but also without access to its financial resources.” As such, and unlike Katz, who relied primarily on top-down governmental documents to shed light on subaltern histories of homosexuality, “Bérubé was able to conceive and carry forth a multi-dimensional and engaging public history and oral history project” that did not “privilege the papers and collections of the literate and the archived.” Indeed, queer community history projects such as the Buffalo, San Francisco, and Boston projects built their own archives through a bottom-up process of soliciting physical materials and conducting oral histories with community members.¹¹

Following in the footsteps of these early queer history groups, the twenty-first century has seen a flourishing of locally based queer community history projects, from the Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project (founded in 2003) to the LGBT

(Boston: Beacon, 1998), 200–202; John D’Emilio, “Allan Bérubé’s Gift to History,” *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (May–June 2008): 1013; Horacio N. Roque Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Close Encounters: The Body and Knowledge in Queer Oral History,” in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, eds. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–4; Libby Bouvier, The History Project, e-mail communication with the author, May 16–17, 2016.

¹¹ Ramírez and Boyd, “Close Encounters,” 4; Bouvier, e-mail communication.

Center of Central Pennsylvania's LGBT History Project (founded in 2012), to the Virginia Tech LGBTQ Oral History Project (founded in 2014), and the William & Mary Mattachine LGBTIQ Research Project (founded in 2015).¹² One notable shift in queer community history practices, however, is the increasing role of college and university faculty and staff in such "community-based" projects. With the exception of the central Pennsylvania project, which is run out of an LGBT community center, many of these projects are now based at institutions of higher learning. Professional, academically trained public historians have taken leadership roles in these endeavors, challenging the very concept of queer public history as a bottom-up grassroots process. This is also the case with the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, specifically in the ways I combine roles as cofounder and project leader with that of assistant professor at Roanoke College.¹³

The genealogy of queer public history as a community-based practice should also take into account parallels between the queer public history movement and other public history movements of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ For example, in her award-winning book *From Storefront to Monument*, Andrea Burns has shown that the first black museums in the United States were founded by African American civil rights activists rather than by academic historians or museum professionals. The creation of autonomous black museums in predominantly black neighborhoods, built upon collections crowd-sourced from community members, was, in Burns's view, an extension of the theory and practice of Black Power.¹⁵ In a broader sense, community history as a strategy for liberation, democracy, and consciousness-raising has roots in this same era within organized labor and workers' cooperatives, which were the engines for a movement centered on "people's history."¹⁶ That we can place LGBTQ communities alongside organized labor and the Black Power movement as part of a shared origin story of community history as

¹² Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project, ed., *Queer Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania History Project, <http://www.centralpalgbtcenter.org/lgbt-history-project>; Virginia Tech LGBTQ Oral History Project, <https://digitalsc.lib.vt.edu/exhibits/show/vtlgbtq-history>; William & Mary Mattachine LGBTIQ Research Project, <http://www.wm.edu/sites/lgbtiqproject/index.php>.

¹³ Much has been written on the ethics of community-university collaborations, as well as the practice of sharing authority. See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 146–77; Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011).

¹⁴ On the radical origins of public history as a movement in the United States in the 1970s, see Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 8–16.

¹⁵ Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Jim Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). On the origins of community history in the United Kingdom, see Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 113–46.

a strategy for taking back history from white, straight, cisgender male elites speaks to the important place of queer public history within the national public history narrative. In all of these cases, grassroots activists took the lead in conducting research and interpretation about their own communities.¹⁷ It is notable that many of these 1960s- and 1970s-era community history projects began in cities. Andrea Burns focuses on Chicago, Detroit, Washington, and Philadelphia in her study of the black museum movement, and gay and lesbian activists started the earliest queer history projects in New York, Buffalo, San Francisco, and Boston. Glaringly absent from both of these genealogies is an entire region of the country: the South.

Queer History South

In the summer of 2016, historians, archivists, and activists from across North Carolina invited folks from thirteen states to attend what was billed to be a groundbreaking conference on southern queer public history. The gathering was called Queer History South. Along with my invitation I received a document articulating Queer History South's vision as a "convening of archivists, oral historians, public historians, academics, activists, storytellers, neighbors, performers and more." The organizers framed this project as an embrace of "the direct connection between sharing our stories and inspiring present-day activism," stating that "[w]e cannot organize people who are invisible so this is a first step to mobilizing southern queers in our fight for liberation and justice." It was clear, forty years after Katz's work on gay history in New York City, and twenty years after the first major exhibitions on queer history in New York and in Boston, that queer public history's day had finally come in the South.¹⁸

But then, statewide and national politics intervened. In February 2016 the city of Charlotte passed a landmark antidiscrimination ordinance protecting the rights of all people to use public facilities (including restrooms) that match their gender identity. In response, the state legislature and governor of North Carolina approved HB2, the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, which effectively prohibited local governments from enacting their own antidiscrimination measures and mandated a statewide rule that people must use public facilities that match their biological sex regardless of gender identity or gender expression.¹⁹ In the face of this blatantly antitrans legislation, Queer History South organizers made the difficult decision

¹⁷ Further examples of community history projects include John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, *Museums and Communities*, 285–326; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Queer History South, "QHS overview," Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project papers, LGBTQ History Collection. The first major exhibitions were *Becoming Visible* (1994) at the New York Public Library and *Public Faces/Private Lives* (1996) at the Boston Public Library. See Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 111; History Project, *Improper Bostonians*.

¹⁹ Dave Philipps, "North Carolina Bans Local Anti-Discrimination Policies," *New York Times*, March 23, 2016.

that they could no longer go forward with the planned conference, due both to the danger that HB2 creates for transgender participants as well as in solidarity with an ongoing nationwide economic boycott of North Carolina that started in response to the legislation.²⁰

These current events shed light on the unique struggles of doing queer public history in the South, a region that lags far behind the rest of the country not just in protecting LGBTQ rights but also in the public engagement of queer history in museums, historic sites, public spaces, and public memory.²¹ Scholars who have studied queer history in the South, such as John Howard and James Sears, have shown that there are several unique aspects to southern queer history that differ from the histories of LGBTQ peoples in other parts of the United States. These include, above all else, the significance of racial segregation and racism in shaping queer geographies and cultures, which E. Patrick Johnson shows in his oral history collection of gay black male narrators, *Sweet Tea*. Rurality, John Howard argues in *Men Like That*, has also shaped southern queer history. Southern queer geographies are not only racially delimited, but also decidedly antiurban. Rather than flocking to cities to find queer safe havens, gay men, Howard argues, made roads, highways, bus stations, and other transportation corridors the queerest places in the South.²²

Queer History Meets Urban History

Despite John Howard's assertion that southern queer history is less about cities and more about highways and rural roads, cities are an ideal laboratory for doing queer public history. Cities are places of congregation, not just for queer people but for everybody. Diverse peoples move through these streets. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, cities are one of the last places where people still get out of their cars and walk. Many cities have a combination of museums, historic sites, heritage trails, memorials, monuments, plaques, and other historical structures that are accessible to public viewing if not active participatory engagement. With such a large and diverse audience of both locals and outsiders, queer public history projects can utilize cities as living laboratories for the exploration of the queer past.²³ But more than this, cities themselves are an important documentary source for interpreting

²⁰ Josh Burford, Queer History South, e-mail communication with the author, May 19, 2016.

²¹ Note, for example—with the exception of Wesley Chenault's groundbreaking work on queer public history in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 2000s—that Susan Ferentinos's award-winning *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* does not discuss any queer public history projects in the South.

²² John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

²³ On cities as laboratories for public history, see Hayden, *Power of Place*; Stanton, *Lowell Experiment*; and also Rebecca Solnit's cartographical explorations of urban history and memory in *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010) and *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

queer public history. The built environments of cities speak to multilayered queer pasts. In bars, bathhouses, motels, parks, alleyways, cinemas, and bookstores, diverse sexualities have flourished in the urban cityscape.²⁴

Cities also change, and in narratives of urban historical transformation are also narratives of queer flourishing and queer erasure. The rise and fall of cities is linked to the public histories and memories of queer pasts, or the lack thereof. For example, The History Project has shown that mid-twentieth-century urban renewal campaigns to “clean up” Boston had the consequence of destroying much of the city’s historic gayborhood and queer nightlife. At least one Boston official went on record in 1965 in favor of cleansing the city of these “incubators of homosexuality.” Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s ruthless campaign to “clean up” Times Square in New York in the 1990s had a similar effect of displacing and erasing queer histories from the cityscape, as evidenced in Samuel Delaney’s beautiful elegy for the men who used to have sex together in Times Square’s pornographic movie theaters.²⁵ Even in Roanoke, Virginia, there is ample evidence of a historic interplay between processes of urban change and queer erasure.

In the late 1970s, a major urban planning initiative, Design ’79, targeted Roanoke’s historic Market District for gentrification. The objective was to regenerate and celebrate downtown in advance of the city’s centennial year in 1982. Design ’79 came immediately on the coattails of two years of police repression of both gay male cruising (men meeting other men for anonymous sex, often in public places) and trans* prostitution, both within the city’s downtown core.²⁶ In 1977, the Roanoke City Council proposed a citywide ordinance to ban cross-dressing in public, specifically targeting transvestite sex workers along Salem Avenue in the Market District (whom the newspaper derisively, if imaginatively, referred to as “market queens”).²⁷ In their design catalog presented to the city in 1979, the urban planning company Moore Grover Harper argued that “[t]he feel of the Market District is transformed by nightfall, the time when commerce slows down and the farmers depart. Nighttime in the Market District brings fear of crime to many Roanokers.”

24 John Howard, “The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post-World War II Atlanta,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 107–31. For the theory that homosexuality and cities are linked in public consciousness from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, see Julie Abraham, *Metropolitan Lovers: The Homosexuality of Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

25 History Project, *Improper Bostonians*, 190–93; Samuel R. Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

26 Since we cannot ask historic sex workers about their gender identity, I alternate here between using the term “transvestite” (meaning someone who wears the clothes of the opposite gender), which was the term used in local media at the time, and the term “transgender” (meaning someone who identifies as a gender that differs from one’s biological sex). The term “trans*” with an asterisk signifies that there is a diversity of gender identities, expressions, and experiences that people have across the gender spectrum.

27 John Witt, “City May Outlaw Market ‘Queens,’” *Roanoke Times & World News*, September 18, 1977.

These experts blamed “the increased visibility of loiterers”—gender-nonconforming streetwalkers among them—as the culprit behind Roanokers’ fears. They argued that the Market District needed “to assume a lively nighttime character,” that is, a lively atmosphere of activity by gender-normative, heterosexual people who would ultimately outnumber and displace the queer nightlife.²⁸

Design ’79’s ethos was influenced by the “festival marketplace” paradigm then fashionable in urban planning. Boosters of festival marketplaces—early examples include Boston’s Quincy Market and New York’s South Street Seaport—imagined historic urban centers preserved of architectural history yet scrubbed of social history, all in the service of promoting family-friendly urban spaces for shopping and entertainment.²⁹ Roanoke’s Design ’79 as well as other planning initiatives both before and after it targeted queer spaces for this kind of urban renewal.

In Roanoke, police crackdowns and urban planners not only conspired to make the Market District “safe” through the erasure of public displays of sexuality and nonnormative genders, but municipal leaders also sought to clean up the city’s downtown green space, Elmwood Park, which happened to be the epicenter of gay male public life since the 1960s. Gay male cruising was centered upon Bullitt Avenue on the north side of the park, as well as in the restrooms of the Greyhound bus station and at the Downtowner Motel (both also on Bullitt Avenue).³⁰ Concurrent with Roanoke police department vice squad efforts to crack down on cruising—which resulted in the arrests of hundreds of gay men over the course of the 1970s—the city also turned to urban redevelopment as a means of “cleaning up” the park and its surrounding areas.³¹ By the early 1980s, changes included: demolition of the Greyhound bus station; demolition of the Elmwood Diner (around the corner on Jefferson Street), where gays gathered and chatted long into the evenings; and closure of Bullitt Avenue to vehicular traffic, which effectively barred gay men from parking and cruising there.³² In a 1977 article about the gay scene in Roanoke, one gay man, referring to the 1974 demolition of the bus station, noted that “[t]his crackdown on gay life has happened before. They tore down the Greyhound bus station thinking that would end the traffic, but it just moved.”³³ Indeed, even after

28 Moore Grover Harper, *Roanoke Design 79 Catalog* (Essex, CT: n.p., 1979).

29 On the “festival marketplace” paradigm, see M. Christine Boyer, “Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport,” in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 181–204; Hurley, *Beyond Preservation*, 14–15. On gentrification and the need to erase a place’s “social history” in order to make it marketable, see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27.

30 “Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones”; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, “Oral History Interview with Larry Bly,” Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/BlyLarry>.

31 On the city’s crackdown on gay cruising, see “Out of the Closet, Onto the Newstand,” *Virginia Gayzette* 3, no. 3 (March 5, 1978); “The Heat Is Never Off,” *Virginia Gayzette* 3, no. 3 (March 5, 1978).

32 “Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones”; Mag Poff, “Facelifting Begins for Elmwood Park,” *Roanoke Times & World News*, June 23, 1982.

33 Stefan Bechtel, “What It’s Like to be Gay in Roanoke,” *Roanoker* (Holiday Issue, 1977): 25.

the city “cleaned up” both the Market District and Elmwood Park in the 1970s and 1980s, queer uses of public space simply moved elsewhere in the city: to Highland Park, Wasena Park, shopping malls, and suburban hotels.³⁴ And still police and city planners followed, so that in an oral history conducted in 2016 one white gay man, Rodger Saunders, drew parallels between that earlier period and today by noting that “[o]ne sheriff took over several years ago and cleared all the brush up the side of Highland Park overlooking the railroad track by the dog park so that guys couldn’t go over there in the bushes or if they did they’d be seen. So they were doing everything they could to eradicate gayness like they couldn’t do that but they just wanted to get it out from in the open and off the streets so to speak.” This was in the 2010s, as the construction of dog parks and a bicycle-friendly greenway have continued a decades-long process of queer erasure.³⁵

Indeed, the city of Roanoke’s simultaneous antivice campaigns and urban renewal fantasias are two sides of the same coin. They both speak to geographer Neil Smith’s concept of the “revanchist city.” In the 1970s, white people, following decades of flight to the suburbs—which Julie Abraham has linked to the defense of heterosexuality and patriarchal gender norms—became angry at minority populations for “stealing” and devaluing choice urban properties. Straight white people believed that they were the rightful owners of the city. The roots of gentrification, Smith argues, lie in this “frontier” ethos by which the revanchist city seeks to reclaim urban space from an undeserving population.³⁶ Roanoke’s history, as seen in the city’s use of police repression, demolition, and capital infusion to “reclaim” the Market District and Elmwood Park, supports this theory.

Beyond downtown, queer history is also either remembered or destroyed in the preservation of gayborhoods. In *There Goes the Gayborhood?* sociologist Amin Ghaziani has charted the history of the rise and fall of gayborhoods in the United States. These are, simply defined, residential districts where queer people have historically congregated. Almost every American city has one, or used to have one, including Roanoke.³⁷ Ghaziani argues that gayborhoods are a post–World War II phenomenon; before the war only “scattered gay places” existed in American cities. World War II was then a great “coming out” moment for millions of American men and women who had their first homosexual experiences during the war. Thousands of discharged men refused to go back “in the closet,” instead migrating to

34 Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, “Oral History Interview with Ron Davidson,” Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/DavidsonRon>; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, “Oral History Interview with Virginia Lindsey,” Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/LindseyVirginia>; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, “Oral History Interview with Rodger Saunders,” Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/SaundersRodger>.

35 “Oral History Interview with Rodger Saunders.”

36 Smith, *New Urban Frontier*, xviii, 6, 44–47; Abraham, *Metropolitan Lovers*, 170.

37 Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

queer-friendly cities such as New York and San Francisco.³⁸ This was followed by the “great gay migration” of the 1970s. In the wake of the Stonewall Riots and the expanding gay liberation movement across the United States (which erupted in southwest Virginia in early 1971), unprecedented numbers of young queer people “came out” and moved to cities.³⁹ Complicating our understanding of LGBTQ peoples as victims of urban renewal and gentrification, Ghaziani argues that queer migrants to gayborhoods were the urban “pioneers” who turned around inner-city neighborhoods and began fixing up old buildings. In an era of white flight and urban decline, LGBTQ migrants—but particularly queer white people—reversed these trends through active participation in what some scholars have referred to as “gay gentrification.”⁴⁰

Roanoke’s urban history presents a complicated and troubling case study of urban renewal and gentrification in inner-city neighborhoods. In the 1950s and 1960s the city tore down hundreds of homes and displaced thousands of residents in the predominantly black neighborhoods of Gainsborough and Northeast Roanoke. Mindy Fullilove, writing from a public health perspective, argues that Roanoke’s urban renewal initiatives enacted financial, social, and political costs on the African American community, costs that disadvantaged them even more so than Jim Crow segregation.⁴¹ At the same time as the city’s “modernization” of historically black neighborhoods was underway, the city’s Old Southwest neighborhood—the nearest historically white neighborhood to downtown—was experiencing abandonment and neglect. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stately mansions had been sliced into apartments now rented out to tenants by slumlords.⁴² Queer migrants made Old Southwest a gayborhood at least as early as

38 Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, 8–15; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 167–75.

39 Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, 16. Southwest Virginia’s first gay liberation group was a student organization founded at Virginia Tech in January 1971. The first community-based gay liberation group was the Gay Alliance of the Roanoke Valley (GARV), founded in Roanoke’s Old Southwest neighborhood in spring 1971. GARV published the region’s first gay newspaper, the *Big Lick Gayzette* (1971), available in the Edward F. “Gerry” Jennings Jr. Papers, LGBTQ History Collection.

40 Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, 18. On “gay gentrification,” see Mickey Lauria and Lawrence Knopp, “Toward an Analysis of the Role of Gay Communities in the Urban Renaissance,” *Urban Geography* 6, no. 2 (1985): 152–69; Abraham, *Metropolitan Lovers*, 238–53. Christina B. Hanhardt, in *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), argues that gay gentrification was also a racial project. In San Francisco and New York, white LGBTQ gentrifiers were complicit in the criminalization, policing, and displacement of queer people of color who were seen as threats to the gayborhood’s social order and the politics (and optics) of respectability.

41 Mindy Thompson Fullilove, “Root Shock: The Consequences of African American Disposition,” *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 78, no. 1 (March 2001): 72–80. A fascinating digital humanities initiative grappling with this history is Philosophy, Inc.; “The Gilmer School Project: Histories of Urban Renewal in Roanoke,” <http://philosophyinc.com/gilmerschoolweb/index.html>.

42 On the postwar decline of Old Southwest, see City of Roanoke, Virginia, Department of Planning, Building & Development, *Old Southwest Neighborhood Plan* (Roanoke, VA: City of Roanoke, 2009), 10.

the 1960s. In the 1970s, Roanoke's first gay liberation organizations were founded in apartment buildings in the neighborhood. Political organizing joined with social soirees inside the old, crumbling mansions. In gay newspapers of the era, residents referred to Old Southwest as the "gay ghetto." One man, in an anonymous phone call placed to me regarding the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, said that he and his comrades used to call it "homo heights." In other words, queer people were conscious of the neighborhood's status as a gayborhood as early as the 1970s.⁴³ In the 1980s, the city designated Old Southwest a historic preservation district, the largest such urban preservation district in southwest Virginia. This led to an influx of white people (queer and straight) with capital. They took advantage of historic preservation tax credits to rehabilitate the old mansions and begin a process of neighborhood regentrification.⁴⁴

As urban "pioneers," Old Southwest's queer white community was instrumental in this process. Ghaziani, however, points out that the gay gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods was followed in the 1990s by a second wave of redevelopment: the straight gentrification of gayborhoods. In a "post-gay world," which he dates as beginning in the late 1990s, "distinctly gay institutions" are disappearing or have already disappeared. These include bars, bookstores, and other spaces, including gayborhoods. Many have argued that the Internet has played a significant role in the demise of physical queer spaces: people date (and cruise) online rather than in parks, in bars, and in bookstores. Straight people are also attracted to gayborhoods because of their perceptions of queer white communities as "safe" and "fun." The assimilation of queer culture into the heteronormative culture means that straight people go to gay bars and gay people go to straight bars, and it is no longer clear what urban spaces, if any, remain queer.⁴⁵

43 "Political Action—At Last!!" *Virginia Gayzette* 2, no. 7 (April 15, 1972); "Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones"; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Oral History Interview with Gerry Jennings," Virginia Room Digital Collection, <http://www.libraryjunction.com/virginiaroom/document/JenningsGerry>.

44 The historic preservationists, however, have been complicit in erasing Old Southwest's queer past. For example, a recent city council-approved neighborhood plan (2009)—drafted in collaboration with Old Southwest, Inc., a neighborhood advocacy group—says that in the 1970s "the neighborhood's original fabric and status declined until it was primarily inhabited by renters. . . . By the 1970s, crime and blight came to define the neighborhood." But then, "[i]n the early 1970s, with the assistance of a federal grant, a small group of people committed to turning the neighborhood around with a permanent renaissance formed the Old Southwest Neighborhood Alliance." City of Roanoke, *Old Southwest Neighborhood Plan*, 10–12. This association of "renters" with "blight" is also an association with "homosexuality," as Julie Abraham argues in *Metropolitan Lovers*, 169–218, for post-World War II Americans believed that detached single-family homes promoted stable, nuclear, heterosexual families while urban density, and apartment living, fueled the spread of queer sexualities. The Old Southwest neighborhood plan also fails to acknowledge the significant role of LGBTQ peoples in buying and fixing up old homes, a key element of the celebrated urban "renaissance."

45 On these trends, see Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, 2, 24–25, 29–30, 57–60; also, Petra L. Doan and Harrison Higgins, "The Demise of Queer Space? Resurgent Gentrification and the Assimilation of LGBT Neighborhoods," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31, no. 1 (2011): 6–25.

In summary, police repression, urban renewal, gentrification, and assimilation—both economic and cultural forces—have led to significant changes for Roanoke’s LGBTQ population. Today, not only have queer people been erased from public space, but queer history is made illegible and thereby erased from public consciousness. In response to these changes, queer public history projects are a crucial form of resistance to ongoing queer erasure. In fact, queer public history projects are beginning to grapple with narratives of gentrification and urban change in both research and interpretation. For example, on a walking tour of Boston’s historic Bay Village gayborhood in 2015, tour guides from The History Project pointed out the sites of several historic gay bars that are now no longer there. Queer people no longer feel the need to live in “gay ghettos,” they explained, and the history of these places is fast disappearing. On a walking tour of Baltimore’s historic Mount Vernon gayborhood in 2016, our tour guides pointed out the recently closed site of Hippo’s, one of the city’s most famous gay dance clubs. “It is slated to become a CVS store,” one tour guide remarked, to audible boos from the tour participants. I have been taking queer history walking tours in many US cities over the past several years. (I also personally led a queer history walking tour of Greenwich Village in New York City for several years as a contract tour guide with Big Onion Walking Tours.)⁴⁶ I am interested in the ways that queer pasts are not really past, but are actively unfolding amid an ongoing “back to the city” movement of rich people and their capital. Or, to borrow Sharon Zukin’s language from *Naked City*, built upon ideas first articulated by Henri Lefebvre, I am curious whether today’s urban pioneers will actually grant LGBTQ people and their history the “right to the city”—the right to inhabit places “authentically” queer—or will these newcomers simply “consume” queer history as an “experience,” even as real queer people and queer places are displaced and destroyed?⁴⁷

Walking tours represent just one tactic in a growing arsenal of strategies that public historians, public humanists, grassroots organizations, and activists are using to resist gentrification—not just in the LGBTQ community but across an array of communities. In San Francisco, for example, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is using oral history and digital humanities to map thousands of peoples and families displaced by tech-driven gentrification. This project is a model of collaboration between on-the-ground activists and academically oriented scholars who use histories of urban renewal and gentrification to give voice to the dispossessed and point out the heartlessness of the gentrifiers. Meanwhile in New York, several grassroots organizations are engaged in an ongoing struggle with the Brooklyn Museum, calling out the museum for its support of the city’s real estate interests and demanding that the institution provide physical space to antigentrification activists for a forum on displacement and what the museum’s role should be in

46 The History Project, LGBTQ Freedom Trail Tour, June 6, 2015, Boston, Massachusetts; Mount Vernon Pride Walking Tour, March 17, 2016, Baltimore, Maryland; Big Onion Walking Tours, <http://www.bigonion.com>.

47 Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xii, 6.

this conflict. The Brooklyn Museum is located in Crown Heights, which is on the frontlines of gentrification, home to the Crown Heights Tenants Union, a model of multiracial tenant organizing. Public historians elsewhere in New York are also employing site-specific practices as well as oral history methods to facilitate front-line conversations about gentrification: examples include the Laundromat Project, which facilitates conversations and art projects in neighborhood laundromats, and the Brooklyn Historical Society's *Voices of Crown Heights* oral history initiative, providing a platform for beleaguered residents to stake their claims to a place in the face of rapid demographic and economic change.⁴⁸

Queer activists can, and are, using similar methods—utilizing social media and direct action—to disrupt public consciousness and jostle public memory about the long queer past in our cities. For example, “guerrilla queer bars” originated in San Francisco at the turn of the twenty-first century and are now employed in cities large and small across the United States. These are social media-driven gatherings at which LGBTQ people descend en masse upon a straight bar and make it queer for the night. If applied to a historically queer bar, as we did in our #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl, this can be an effective form of public history as direct action. Repo-History's campaign placing pink triangles outside of historic LGBTQ spaces in New York City in the 1990s is another example of guerrilla-style queer public history.⁴⁹ Queer public history projects may have to adopt an “all of the above” approach, utilizing varied methodologies, including direct action, to resist the tides of gentrification, displacement, and queer erasure. It is in this context of urban change and queer historical amnesia that we founded the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project in 2015.

The Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project

The Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project began in September 2015 at a meeting that I hosted at the Roanoke Diversity Center, southwest Virginia's only

48 Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, <http://www.antievictionmap.com>; The Laundromat Project, <http://laundromatproject.org>; Brooklyn Historical Society, *Voices of Crown Heights*, <http://brooklynhistory.org/projects/crownheights.html>; Michelle Chen, “Gentrification and Occupation at the Brooklyn Museum,” *Nation*, May 11, 2016. For a summary of the ongoing work of academic/activist/community collaborators in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York on the front lines of gentrification, see Conor Tomás Reed, Manissa McCleave Maharawal, and Alma Sheppard-Matsuo, eds., “You Can't Evict a Movement: Strategies for Housing Justice in the United States,” *Viewpoint Magazine* (October 2015), <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/01/you-cant-evict-a-movement-strategies-for-housing-justice-in-the-united-states/>.

49 “Guerrilla queer bars” are most often interpreted as an effort among younger LGBTQ people to break out of the confines of the gayborhood, but this tactic can also be used to reclaim historic queer spaces. Unfortunately, this movement seems to be going in a more commercialized, assimilationist direction. See Mireya Navarro, “Gay Social Activism, with the Accent on the ‘Social,’” *New York Times*, July 22, 2007; Gretchen Rachel Blickensderfer, “Guerrilla Queer Bar Co-Founders Criticize New Incarnation,” *Windy City Times* (Chicago), October 8, 2014; Gail Lee Dubrow, “Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: Improving the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian Heritage,” in *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation*, ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 281–99.

LGBTQ+ community center. I had just moved from New York to Roanoke one month earlier. As a cisgender man who identifies as queer, I initially made contact with the Diversity Center for personal rather than professional reasons: I wanted to know if there were other queer people around here! When I asked the board of directors if I could host a workshop on the topic of LGBTQ history, they enthusiastically said yes. At that September 2015 meeting, eighteen of us founded the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project. We came up with two priorities for the project: to establish a permanent archive for local historical LGBTQ materials and to record oral histories with elders in the community.⁵⁰

We spent the fall of 2015 working on establishing our archives. We began, first, by holding monthly meetings, initially at Roanoke College, but then more successfully in a meeting room at the Roanoke Public Library. Attendance at meetings often ranged from five to ten persons. Although attendance at our first organizational meeting in September 2015 reflected a wide diversity of identities—cis, trans, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, straight, black, white—those who continued on with the project in the fall, and into 2016, tended to be older white cisgender gay men. The dominance of white cisgender gay men in ostensibly “LGBTQ+” spaces—ranging from political organizations to the bar scene to history projects like our own—is both a truism of queer history as well as a reflection of an ongoing and current stumbling block to unity. In Roanoke, as elsewhere throughout the United States, white cisgender gay men dominate contemporary LGBTQ organizing as well as historical storytelling about the queer past. As a white cisgender man myself—queer, but not gay—I am part of the problem, and our Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project quickly became a space for white cisgender men to tell stories about themselves. Interestingly, though, our archives initiative from the very beginning attracted the participation of more cisgender and transgender women than men.

After several months of debate regarding where to establish our archives, we ultimately decided to collaborate with the Roanoke Diversity Center as a drop-off point for materials and the Virginia Room—a regional archive located within the Roanoke Public Library—as the final repository for archival materials. In December 2015 we held our first archives collection event at the Diversity Center. One institutional donor, the Diversity Center, contributed historical materials, plus three individual donors—one cis gay man and two trans women—contributed items to the collection. Since then we have continued to hold archives collection events in locations throughout the city. Twice we have held collection events in gay-friendly churches and invited congregants to contribute materials to the archives. Once we held a collection event at The Park, Roanoke’s last remaining gay dance club, founded in 1978. We titled the event “Reunion” and invited community members who used to dance at The Park back in the day (1970s-90s) to return and participate

⁵⁰ Minutes of all Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project meetings are available at <http://lgbthistory.pages.roanoke.edu/minutes/>.

in a storycircle, to share memories about the space. Our storycircle was scheduled to last thirty minutes but continued for over two hours. We have found that these archives collection events, while sometimes netting new donors and materials for our archive, also seem to function as social events for queer seniors. Many older members of the local LGBTQ community are no longer interested in going out drinking and dancing, and so History Project meetings and events may provide a new gathering space for this community: a place for folks interested in sharing and hearing stories about the queer past.

Our oral history initiative has had similar successes and failures. By relying on those who regularly attend our meetings—mostly white cisgender gay men—to recruit interview subjects, we began with a list of potential narrators that was overwhelmingly comprised of older white cisgender gay men. Following discussion at several successive project meetings, we made some improvements to the list, diversifying the racial, gender, and sexual identities of our oral history narrators. By the end of phase one of the project in May 2016, we had completed recordings and transcripts with fourteen storytellers from the LGBTQ community. There were seven cisgender white gay men; one cisgender black gay man; four cisgender white women (ranging from lesbian to bisexual to straight); plus two transgender white women. For the most part, undergraduate students at Roanoke College completed these interviews and transcripts, but several community members also helped with the transcriptions.⁵¹

Beyond our initial goal of establishing an archive for historical LGBTQ materials and conducting oral histories—both of which are ongoing—we have also begun to foray into interpretive activities. These include the development of a Downtown Roanoke LGBTQ History Walking Tour, as well as the development of an online exhibition on the history of gay liberation in Roanoke in the 1970s. In late 2015 and early 2016 we conducted three test runs of the walking tour. In each instance, the majority of attendees were young straight and queer women. The tour content, on the other hand, influenced as it is by the historical evidence found in our archives and oral histories, is biased towards the stories of white cisgender gay men. Predictably, feedback on the walking tour has included consternation and frustration regarding the tour's lack of women's history ("where are the lesbians?") as well as a shortage of stories about transgender and gender nonconforming people. Another critique focuses on the tour's insufficient attention to local histories of the AIDS crisis. Our exhibition, focused as it is on the history of the gay liberation movement in Roanoke in the 1970s, is similarly weighted toward stories of white cisgender gay men. In fact, in order to bring out the voices of queer women and transgender individuals, we have been forced to read against the grain of the

⁵¹ Several authors in Boyd and Ramírez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence* discuss the apprehensions that queer people of color feel when talking to white oral historians about their gender and sexuality, and that queer women feel talking to oral historians about their sex lives. See Ramírez and Boyd, "Close Encounters," 13; Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Talking about Sex: Cheryl Gonzales and Rikki Streicher Tell Their Stories," 95–112.

dominantly white gay male archive that we have established in order to rescue these lost voices. When seen this way, queer women and transgender people are the subalterns of white gay male history. Patriarchy reigns within queer public history.

I struggle greatly with the concept of sharing authority if that means merely opening the doors to whoever wants to participate. For, just like in electoral politics, democracy is not fair when some people have more power, and louder voices, than others. Because of the dominance of white cisgender gay men in Roanoke's LGBTQ community, our "public" meetings are not representative of Roanoke's actual queer publics. Beyond throwing open the doors, we need to do more to actively reach out specifically to queer women, transgender individuals, and queer people of color. Sharing queer authority means being particularly attentive to working across the LGBTQ+ spectrum, not just with the most vocal majority.⁵²

On the other hand, this critique may be too harsh, in that some of the most steadfast supporters of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project—including project participants, donors to the archives, and oral history narrators—are several transgender women as well as a coterie of young queer and straight cis women. Indeed, this was the case with our bar crawl, so much so that when people saw us wearing our "Make Roanoke Queer Again" hats that evening, what they mostly saw was an army of women marching forward to reclaim the city's queer past.

#MakeRoanokeQueerAgain

A young cisgender queer woman on one of our test runs of the Downtown Roanoke LGBTQ History Walking Tour came up with the slogan "Make Roanoke Queer Again." It was after two hours of walking around downtown—after having pointed out at least six gay bars that used to exist in downtown Roanoke in the late 1970s—that she said, "you know, Roanoke used to be more queer than it is today. Your slogan should be Make Roanoke Queer Again." Of course, this is a play on Donald Trump's phrase "Make America Great Again" from the 2016 presidential campaign. Soon, I was printing up scores of trucker hats with this slogan on it, and some of us began wearing these hats around the city: in the grocery store, at the farmer's market, in straight bars. The hats themselves are a type of guerrilla public history, forcing people to wrap their heads around this statement and the many questions that it raises, such as "was Roanoke ever queer?" "What does it mean to 'Make Roanoke Queer Again?'"

On April 29, 2016, we held our first-ever #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl. A student at Roanoke College and I brainstormed the idea in early March as a way to bring the 1978 FAIR bar map to life (see map on page 36). This map shows five gay

⁵² For a different articulation of "sharing queer authorities," see Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Sharing Queer Authorities: Collaborating for Transgender Latina and Gay Latino Historical Meanings," in Boyd and Ramírez, *Bodies of Evidence*, 184–201.



The author wearing a “Make Roanoke Queer Again” hat. (Photograph by the author)

bars in downtown Roanoke in February 1978. The map is accompanied by an essay describing each of the bars in turn: its demographics, music, dancing, the clothes people wore, the price of a beer, and whether or not the bar was supportive of the FAIR coalition.⁵³ When we brought the bar crawl idea to History Project meetings and introduced it on our e-mail listserv, there was silence. Perhaps the older queer community did not see the bar crawl as either helpful or hurtful to our project’s mission of “researching and telling the stories of LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations in our region.” On the other hand, there was palpable excitement among drinking-age students at Roanoke College. When we finally did the bar crawl, we attracted about twenty-five participants, mostly young white queer and straight women, plus a few young cisgender men and a few transgender friends. A reporter and photographer from the local newspaper, the *Roanoke Times*, also accompanied us.⁵⁴

While it is not necessary to describe the entirety of the bar crawl here, I will point out a few key stops and some of the unexpected interactions (and altercations) along the way, so as to give a sense of what we talked about and what we learned on this urban adventure. Our bar crawl stopped at the sites of six historic

⁵³ “A Bar Critique,” *Virginia Gayzette* 3, no. 2 (February 1978).

⁵⁴ Amy Friedenberger, “History Project Strives to Empower Southwest Virginia LGBT Community,” *Roanoke Times*, May 3, 2016.

gay bars and dance clubs. At each stop on the tour, we also entered (or attempted to enter) the nearest contemporary bar so that we could grab a drink. The tour began at seven o'clock in the evening inside the City Market building. Following introductions and a discussion of ground rules, we stepped outside onto Salem Avenue and talked about the history of the transvestite sex workers who used to work on this block. Then we visited Billy's—a straight bar and restaurant—for our first drink. At eight o'clock we exited Billy's and wandered down one and a half blocks to the site of The Last Straw (c. 1973–93), Roanoke's second-ever gay bar. (The first gay bar in the city was The Trade Winds, c. 1951–83, demolished in 1991.) Today this building houses a church—even as the original bar and bar stools from The Last Straw are still visible in the front room. Standing outside, I read from FAIR's 1978 assessment of the bar: "Neighborhood type bar. Usually open Wed. thru Sa., but this could be anyones [sic] guess. Worth a try anytime, though. Pinball machines and juke box. Good place to meet other pinballers; dress is levis, or what ever you have on, proper gender please." I also read from some oral histories we had conducted earlier that year. Peter Thornhill, the African American gay man quoted at the beginning of this essay, had this to say about The Straw: "Well, The Last Straw had the jukebox . . . and that long bar . . . and that's where the questioning straight boys would go . . . so that was a lot of fun, you know playing with them and so that was a whole different atmosphere, it was a cruise bar."⁵⁵ At some point during this interpretation we were interrupted by a small group of men either on their way into or out of the church. One man engaged our group, saying "that's not right. That's not right." But then he clarified, saying "it's not right that people are treated differently because of who they love." Everybody needs a place they can call their own, he said.

As we walked from The Last Straw to our next stop, Corned Beef & Co., one transgender woman in the group referred back to FAIR's assessment of The Last Straw and asked me what I thought about the "proper gender please" comment. I replied, "unfortunately we will see that again throughout the night." This is because many of Roanoke's gay bars in the 1970s were fiercely antitrans. The gay newspapers, as well as our oral history interviews, have confirmed that almost every queer space in the city at that time—from the cruising scene at Elmwood Park to The Trade Winds to the dance bars—was dominated by cisgender men who were afraid to allow people in "drag" to coexist in those same spaces. "Drag," they feared, would attract police attention. Cross-dressing was only allowed on Halloween, as one cisgender man put it to me.⁵⁶

At Corned Beef, the bartender was pleased to see our group with our "Make Roanoke Queer Again" hats. "The LGBT community is *totally* welcome here," he said. From there we wandered a few more blocks to the site of Lucky on Kirk

⁵⁵ "Bar Critique"; "Oral History Interview with Peter Thornhill."

⁵⁶ "Letter to Herbie," *Big Lick Gayzette* 1, no. 5 (November 5, 1971); "Bar Critique"; "Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones"; "Oral History Interview with Peter Thornhill."



#MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl participants stand outside of the former site of The Last Straw (c. 1973–93), Roanoke’s second-oldest gay bar. (Photograph by Don Petersen, used with permission of the *Roanoke Times*)

Avenue. In the late 1970s this was Nite & Day, a short-lived gay bar and restaurant. Outside I read from FAIR’s 1978 critique: “No disco music and no dancing, either. Georgetown atmosphere which should attract those in to [sic] conversation and art.” FAIR also noted “No established crowd, neat dress and no drags, please.”⁵⁷ When we then attempted to enter the bar, we were turned away by the hostess who had been eyeing us warily through the window just minutes before. She told us that there was not enough room for our group. Dejected, and lingering outside of the bar, I shared with the group the story of the 1966 Sip-In in New York City. The Sip-In was organized by Mattachine Society activists who went on a similar type of bar crawl: they visited bar after bar in Greenwich Village, sitting down and announcing that they were homosexuals and that they intended to buy a drink. They were thrown out of several of them. Similarly, sporting our “Make Roanoke Queer Again” hats, we were entering bars and saying “We’re queer, we’re here, serve us a drink.” Lucky turned us away, but every other bar eventually allowed us inside.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “Bar Critique.”

⁵⁸ Jim Farber, “Before the Stonewall Uprising, There Was the ‘Sip-In,’” *New York Times*, April 20, 2016.

From there we wandered another two blocks to Murphy's Super Disco, a gay dance club, which is now Martin's, a straight bar as discussed in the introduction of the essay. Many drinks later, at ten o'clock, we were ready to go on, so we marched to the site of The Horoscope, Roanoke's first gay dance club (c. 1975–78). Today this building houses a salon and luxury apartments. We were getting into the dancing mood ourselves, but our next stop was the Backstreet Café (founded c. 1982), down the hill from The Horoscope. Backstreet is still a bar. The manager, Deanna Marcin, is a transgender woman, and she was standing at the door as we approached. When I told her about the bar crawl, she stood with us on the sidewalk for about fifteen minutes telling us her story, as well as the story of Backstreet. There was a hate crime shooting here in 2000 that left one dead and wounded six. But there are other stories about Backstreet, too. It is the second-longest-operating "gay" bar in all of southwest Virginia. Actually, LGBTQ people here are not sure Backstreet is still "gay," but it is open, which is more than you can say about the other places.⁵⁹

From there we took our dancing feet to The Park. Opened in 1978, it is southwest Virginia's oldest still-operating gay bar. Outside I read from some of the oral histories. Almost all mentioned The Park. Indeed, many people in the LGBTQ community can't think of anything "gay" in Roanoke besides this place, which perhaps shows the extreme depth of queer erasure on the collective consciousness of our community. One oral history narrator noted that The Park immediately began to attract a straight crowd upon opening, because it was just "one of the best dance bars" around. Today, many in the older LGBTQ community complain about The Park. As one white cisgender gay man put it, "Now The Park is really not a gay bar anymore, not the way it was." One transgender woman said "I used to go to The Park, but god that music is just so loud. I'm good for maybe ten minutes, but that's it." An older white gay man said, "The Park, I haven't been in several years. I don't like the new music. Most everybody there, I could be their grandfather." And, quite pensively, Peter Thornhill put it this way: "[I]t has changed in good ways, challenging ways, I wouldn't say bad ways, but it has evolved. It has had to, it has had to cater to a wide variety of people. All money is green, and you can't exclude a certain group of people and pay the bills. You have to broaden your horizons, broaden your base in order to keep the lights on."⁶⁰

We went inside and danced for several hours. People trickled home, and the bar crawl was over.

59 Friedenberger, "History Project Strives to Empower Southwest Virginia LGBT Community"; Mason Adams, "Gays in Roanoke Used to Hide Who They Were—Until a Deadly Bar Shooting," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2015.

60 "Oral History Interview with Daniel Jones"; "Oral History Interview with Gerry Jennings"; "Oral History Interview with Virginia Lindsey"; "Oral History Interview with Ron Davidson"; "Oral History Interview with Peter Thornhill."

Conclusion

Queer history is not a stable narrative. Before the 1970s, as Jonathan Ned Katz wrote in *Gay American History*, most gay people didn't even know they had a history. Queer community history groups began to form in large metropolitan areas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Queer public history, as a community practice, did not come to the South, however, until the twenty-first century. In Roanoke there is little consciousness of the queer past. At the first organizational meeting of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project in September 2015, one transgender woman responded during a discussion of gay liberation that "We transgender people are not part of that history. What about us?" To which I countered, "But transgender people were at the forefront of the Stonewall Riots! We have forgotten that. We need to change the way we tell these stories." As I have learned more about Roanoke's queer past, I have also become more sympathetic to this woman's critique. Where are the lesbians in Roanoke's queer history? Where are the transgender people? Where are the people of color?

As a baseline, queer history does not exist in southern cities such as Roanoke because it has been so thoroughly erased from public memory. Urban decline in the 1960s and 1970s led to what I have called "queer flourishing." Queer people moved into Old Southwest, fixed up the crumbling mansions, and helped turn this neighborhood around so that by the mid-1980s it was the largest landmarked urban preservation district in all of southwest Virginia. Queer people also moved into businesses, opening gay bars, restaurants, dance clubs, and bookstores. In 1978, Roanoke had as many as six gay bars within walking distance of one another. Today there are only two—or one—depending on who you ask. The city's police department cracked down on gay male cruising in the 1970s. Undercover vice squad officers entrapped and arrested hundreds of gay men in spaces such as Elmwood Park. Simultaneously, the city executed an unceasing campaign of urban redevelopment. Following the wholesale demolition of historically African American neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s, the city next turned to "cleaning up" the Market District and Elmwood Park, two of the city's most visibly queer spaces. By the 1980s, new migrants brought capital to Old Southwest and engendered a second wave of gentrification, erasing the gayborhood's queer history; likewise Elmwood Park and surrounding Bullitt Avenue were sanitized of their queer pasts. The city envisioned a corridor between the Market building and Elmwood Park, a "festival marketplace," safe for white cisgender straight people and their bulging wallets.

The Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project bills itself as a community-based history initiative comprising a broad spectrum of people, yet in its first year it was largely dominated by the voices of white cisgender men, including me. We have sought to "Make Roanoke Queer Again" by renaming and reclaiming urban space as queer space. We refer to Old Southwest as the "gay ghetto." Lucky is Nite & Day. Martin's is Murphy's Super Disco. We take back the city by putting our demonstrably queer bodies into historically queer spaces: outside a church that

was once a gay bar; inside straight bars that were once queer; on a street corner where gender nonconforming streetwalkers once conducted their trade. But the nostalgic queer past that we resurrect is also a past dominated by racism, sexism, and transphobia. None of these urban spaces were as important to lesbian and bisexual women. Gay people in these spaces were often antagonistic towards gender nonconforming and transgender individuals. So when we say “Make Roanoke Queer Again,” is this really a past that we want to bring back?

All communities seek a useful past. And although white cisgender gay men have dominated the behind-the-scenes work of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, we are now confronting this dynamic and actively dismantling the power structures within our group that privilege cisgender white male voices over others. In August 2016, we initiated a Lesbian Herstory Initiative, which has so far netted the donation of several issues of Roanoke’s earliest lesbian newspaper, *Skip Two Periods*, as well as the completion of several new oral herstory interviews focused on queer and trans women’s experiences. We have also committed, at our annual meeting in September 2016, to begin a QPOC (Queer People of Color) History Initiative to commence in 2017. Attendance at our meetings, as well as at events, including the #MakeRoanokeQueerAgain bar crawl, now comprise a female majority. These women have found a way to claim Roanoke’s queer past as their own, even as the version of history that we present sometimes does not look like them or reflect their understandings of what it means to be “queer.” Queer history is changing, and it is time for women, people of color, and trans individuals to be our movement’s storytellers. The city of Roanoke, too, is changing. Real estate values are climbing, particularly downtown as the city engages in its latest urban renewal campaign to encourage loft living in former industrial and commercial buildings. Gentrification is palpable in the growing presence of heteronormative “bros” inhabiting the bar scene. Consequently, many in the queer community have experienced homophobia and transphobia among this new urban populace. In the face of ongoing gentrification, we desperately need queer spaces. Over several decades we have lost ground to heavy-handed policing, urban renewal, the rise of the Internet, and the erasure of queer history from public memory. It is now an urgent moment for the theory and practice of queer public history. Let’s make Roanoke queer again, but in a new way, a better way: for people of all races, all genders, all sexualities.

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