A Community’s Response to the Problem of Invisibility: The Queer Newark Oral History Project

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The 300 people that gathered in Newark, New Jersey, on a fall day in 2011 were not the typical academic crowd. That day, LGBTQ activists and high school students, street workers and church leaders, politicians and university students, professors, administrators and university staff sat rapt, watching rare and stunning images of “New Millennium Butches,” resplendent in tailored suits of black, pink or purple, flashing before them on a thirty-foot screen. The images were curated by Peggie Miller, a Newark activist and businessperson who has been organizing New Millennium Butch fashion shows in Newark since 2000. The crowd also viewed a series of photographs of Newark’s LGBTQ leaders, produced for this event by Newark black lesbian photographer Tamara Fleming. Each photograph was accompanied by an epigraph describing her subject’s vision of social change.

“Mentorship is the key to our longevity as a community,” read the epigram by Sauce Leon, LGBTIQ commissioner of the City of Newark. “I want to see a community where we are all free and safe enough to unleash our unlimited potential,” urged Janyce L. Jackson, Pastor of Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church. “We must individually and collectively create, organize and establish viable institutions that speak truth and realness to our lives,” Newark activist...
James Credle advised. Through the medium of Fleming’s images, which conveyed power, openness, and profound inner strength, Newark’s grassroots LGBTQ leaders seemed to offer their blessing to the gathered crowd. It was a breakthrough moment in which black queer was beauty openly lauded in public space. By the time the photographic series concluded, many in the crowd were in tears.

Although all social histories are challenging to uncover, the histories of LGBTQ people are among the most difficult to preserve—and among the most important for historians to retrieve. LGBTQ people are a minority that exists both interdependent with and independent of the biological family. Therefore, each generation faces the task of inventing a life for itself, often without the help of family or extended relations. Although each generation of LGBTQ people tries to pass on its strengths, skills, cultures, and traditions to the next, in fact most youth grow up without knowledge of the histories of people like themselves, or with the awareness that people like themselves even have a history. This absence of a grounding history, and this sense that they are nowhere reflected in the history they learn in school, can add to the alienation that gay youth experience simply by virtue of growing up in heteronormative families, communities, and religious traditions.

For these reasons, documenting and preserving LGBTQ community histories can be literally a life-saving endeavor. Even thirty years into the writing of formal LGBTQ historical scholarship, queer history remains underdocumented. After all, as postcolonial critiques remind us, the archive itself “came into being in order to solidify and memorialize first monarchical and then state power.”¹ Yet literal and discursive antigay violence, as queer historian David Churchill notes, played a crucial role in modern state formation itself in North America and elsewhere.² Thus queer history has primarily survived in the interstices of texts and archives, until the very recent past.

Resistance to that erasure has generated a massive body of queer historical scholarship in recent years. The historical profession has slowly responded to what has turned out to be a strikingly intense demand for queer history on the part of queer people and even, increasingly, their straight friends and relatives. Likewise, undergraduate LGBTQ history classes continue to be scheduled with trepidation—will enough students be willing to have such a course appear on their transcripts?—but turn out to be routinely overenrolled. The lines of inquiry and recovery have not run evenly in this project. Instead, they have often built upon the very inequities sutured into the archive itself. Community studies, histories of activist groups, biographies, reconstructed sexual geographies, and other leading formats of LGBTQ history as it has been written have been
powerful and empowering. At the same time, the gaps that remain often compound the invisibility of already less-visible people and groups.

Newark, New Jersey, provides a case study in this erasure. Possessed of vibrant queer communities, it departs from the examples set in studies of New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Buffalo, and other cities that have drawn scholarly attention. Although those cities contain diverse populations, it has frequently been their white middle-class gay communities whose formal organizational activism in groups from the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis through ACT UP and Queer Nation left the archival paper trail through which their histories have been written. Newark’s history follows a different course: for the past half-century, New Jersey’s largest city has been both a black-majority, working-class community and, since the immigration reforms of the 1960s, also reshaped by transnational migration. Until the early 2000s, resistance to homophobia and heteronormativity was often enacted not through official activist groups, but through the formation of alternative communities: discos, ballroom houses, church-based communities, and other sites of solidarity and sustenance. The result is, on the one hand, a powerful counterexample to dominant LGBTQ historical narratives—and on the other, an elusive, often unrecorded history.

The Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP) was intended to rectify this omission. Founded by Darnell Moore, a Newark-based activist and writer, and Beryl Satter, a history professor at Rutgers University-Newark, the project was designed to intervene into the narrativization of the queer past, and put academics, activists, and community members into collaboration based on a model of shared authority. As such, its goal was scholarly, but not merely scholarly. It was designed to bridge gaps—those existing among generations of LGBTQ people, among LGBTQ advocacy groups in Newark, among programs interested in LGBTQ issues within Rutgers-Newark, and, finally, between Newark LGBTQ groups and the Rutgers campus community. The conveners decided to bring various, often disparate, bodies of people together, not only in conversation, but in a sharing of knowledge, skills, and resources. We are also committed to empowering LGBTQ youth, in part through the production of a more concrete sense of memory and queer genealogy. The statement of principles around which the project was organized largely reflect the aforementioned objectives. They are:

Statement of Principles
The Queer Newark Oral History Project is community based and community directed. We are committed to inclusivity and access. Our aims include the following:
Interview the full diversity of members of Newark’s LGBT community.

Engage LGBT Newark youth in interviewing each other as well as LGBT adult Newark community; mentor LGBT Newark youth to ready them for career and higher education opportunities.

Engage college and university students and faculty in interviewing, cataloging, transcribing, publicizing, organizing, or other tasks that will facilitate the growth of the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

Cement collaboration between Newark’s LGBT political, service, and faith organizations and Newark and Newark-area colleges and universities on the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

Encourage LGBT Newark and former Newark residents to donate their papers and other artifacts to our growing collection on Queer Newark.\(^4\)

Oral history has played a central role in the writing of LGBTQ history from the start, and continues to undergird much ongoing work. So we committed early on to a primary emphasis on oral history as a means of historical recovery. Yet, most oral histories are taken in private space, and read largely by other scholars. Given Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez’s recent claim that “something transformative” often occurs in the “social space of the queer oral history,” we purposely staged our first round of histories in the public sphere, using them not only to document the queer past, but also to celebrate, commemorate, and honor it in an open, collective setting—which would then become generative, inspiring further work.\(^5\)

Most important, our oral history project was committed to a process that involved \textit{listening} to the needs of the community, and using what resources we could draw from the university to \textit{respond} to those needs. In other words, as much as we remain interested in contemporary currents in queer historiography, the content of public events we create would not be determined by those currents. We had no interest in the too-common model whereby academics at a university, fired up by the latest scholarship, plan an event (filled with academic experts) and then invite community people to come. Instead, our model was to listen to the ideas that LGBTQ activists in Newark had about what sort of conference, event or histories they would most like to see. We then worked together with community activists to make their vision come true.

Such a collaborative model would only work if at least some of the event organizers came to the table with a preexisting knowledge of the many strands of LGBTQ activism in Newark. Darnell Moore had this knowledge, built from a few years of activist work in Newark. In order to empower the community to determine our first project’s direction, Moore called a meeting in June 2011.
Approximately fifteen longtime LGBTQ Newark activists attended, along with a few Rutgers-Newark faculty. Over several hours we went around the room, listening to each person’s vision of the queer history they felt would be most important for their community. The mix of activists who were present—including Ball House mothers and fathers, ministers of LGBTQ-welcoming local churches, heads of programs for LGBTQ youth, founders of the Newark Pride Alliance, gay and lesbian entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers, and photographers—was itself a testimony to the richness and vitality of queer life in Newark.

The excitement and energy in the room that day was palpable. Ideas flowed. Some wanted a program that would give youth the information they needed to protect themselves from HIV infection. Others spoke about the need to replace media myths with honest representations of both queer and black urban life. One participant suggested a conference on the needs of “AGs” (“aggressive” or butch lesbians), running the gamut from economics to spirituality to health. People spoke of the importance of publicly reclaiming our neglected history in the city of Newark, which could serve as a means of granting LGBTQ Newarkers the same legitimacy and visibility as every other community in the city. Some insisted that whatever we produce must include comprehensive information about local resources currently available for LGBTQ Newarkers. Others stressed the importance of recording and preserving some sort of community discussion that would demonstrate the full diversity of queer Newark life. Some wanted a program that would showcase the work of queer Newark artists. Everyone agreed that youth participation was key.

Building on these important insights, we continued to meet every two weeks for the remainder of that summer as we hammered out a program that would meet as many of these visions as we could. Some meetings were small and targeted towards dividing up specific goals. Others were larger and more focused on the generation of ideas. The group ultimately agreed on the following points:

- the City of Newark has a history of brutality against LGBTQ people, and of great courage and creativity among queer Newarkers, both of which need to be remembered;
- the preservation of this history would be an immensely important resource for Newark residents, for artists, and for historians locally, nationally, and internationally;
- the population we most wanted to reach was Newark’s queer youth; a cross-generational sharing of local queer history and knowledge was especially important at this moment, because the AIDS crisis had wiped out a whole
generation in Newark and left the next generation of queer youth with few people to turn to for guidance and mentoring.

Drawing on the ideas and resources that emerged from months of meetings and discussions, the Queer Newark Oral History Project created a full-day, public celebration of queer Newark history in November 2011. Our goal was to share knowledge across generations. No academic experts spoke. Instead, we shared images and photographs of the community; footage from a forthcoming film about Newark lesbians jailed for defending themselves from sexual harassment; and most of all, stories. Our first panel featured four queer Newarkers in their sixties and above; the second, people in their forties to fifties; and the third, young queer Newarkers in their twenties and thirties. Each panelist responded to questions posed by a moderator about topics that emerged from community discussion. These included childhood, schooling, and educational life; religion and spirituality; families and parenting; sexual worlds and practices; club scenes and ball scenes; and friendship, fashion, art, and music. The stories our panelists shared were gripping, entrancing, and sometimes heartbreaking. Three generations of LGBTQ Newarkers talked about their most memorable dates, and their most fashionable cruising outfits. Some discussed coming out as gay. Others talked about coming into the womanhood they always knew they possessed, rather than the male identity that society pressured them to accept. Each concluded by presenting advice, benedictions, or requests for the next generation.

The result was not only a celebration of queer Newark’s history. As the largest, most public intergenerational discussion of LGBTQ life in Newark’s history, it was a historic event in its own right. It received wide media attention, including a full-page, full-color spread in the Sunday Star-Ledger that heralded “Gays in Newark: Our Stories, Our Lives.” The conference functioned as a first step, in other words, towards preserving the history of LGBTQ Newark, thereby bringing these voices and experiences into our communal history.

The particular result, namely, that of making visible those black and brown queer and trans bodies otherwise invisible in the public imagination, mainstream (and queer) media, and some queer histories, proved vitally important for the Newark LGBTQ community in late 2013. Eyricka Morgan, a twenty-six-year-old black transwoman student at Rutgers University-New Brunswick and participant on our youth panel, was tragically murdered in September 2013. Following the murder, which rightly enraged and saddened many within the Newark LGBTQ community of which Eyricka was part, a reporter writing for New Jersey’s Star-Ledger referred to Morgan by her given name and used male pronouns to refer to her. Newark-based activists and trans-activists across the

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country began pushing the newspaper to correct its error and to properly name Eyricka’s preferred gender.⁷

As a result of the burgeoning protest, the reporter eventually corresponded with a few Newark-based sources, namely, Gary Paul Wright, executive director of the African American Office of Gay Concerns (an organization where Eyricka received a range of services) and Darnell Moore. Despite the reporter’s insidious request for “evidence” to corroborate that Eyricka indeed self-identified as a transwoman, the video from the QNOHP conference proved to be a vital source of such evidence. The video, which captures Eyricka describing, in her own words, her experience as a black transwoman in Newark, illuminates the force of and need for tools of self-representation and preservation in a society structured by systems that remain largely antagonistic to queer and trans people, especially LGBTQ people of color living within economically challenged communities like Newark, New Jersey. Thus, QNOHP profoundly enriched current understandings of Newark’s history, and represented an enormous step forward in the ongoing process of saving queer histories.

Sources of Queer Newark History

One reason for our choice to emphasize oral history as the methodological window in Newark’s queer past was the paucity of other available sources for this history. The steady march toward the digital arena as the focal point of knowledge-production in the twenty-first century has democratized some histories but failed to include others. Indeed, the history of Queer Newark remains largely unindexed, much less digitized, and despite the advances of the Internet era, historical research in Newark remains beholden to essentially the same methods used decades ago by Jonathan Ned Katz, John D’Emilio, and George Chauncey in early gay histories: poring over microfilm reels in search of news snippets, or seeking privately held documents from local community members.

To date, no full, systematic history of Queer Newark has been written. Canvassing the record left by the city’s best-known literary lights, we can see glimpses of a lost past: Amiri Baraka’s autobiography, recalling “sissies” and a friend’s “funny” cousin in the 1940s, novelist Nathan Heard’s 1968 novel Howard Street vividly depicting the milieu of the M&M, a barely fictionalized Third Ward gay bar with “fags,” “stud-broads,” and “queens with their ‘husbands.’”⁸ “Rutgers-Newark,” recalled the gay activist Arnie Kantrowitz, who later helped found New York’s Gay Activist Alliance, “housed a diverse crowd in an ill-assorted collection of converted office buildings, breweries, and factories scat-
tered around Washington Park in the downtown shopping district,” where he found “new sexual freedoms” that nonetheless seemed “more links in the same old chain.”9 Despite these authors’ varying degrees of sympathy toward their queer characters, in the absence of more substantive documentation, they preserve the traces of an otherwise hidden history.

The historical record of Queer Newark has remained subject to the double marginalizations of sexuality and race. Once an important destination of the Great Migration, Newark became an important center of black political empowerment in the 1970s, as the first East Coast city to elect a black mayor with Ken Gibson in 1970 (and only the third major city nationally, after Carl Stokes in Cleveland and Richard Hatcher in Gary). Yet the city’s LGBTQ life still has been neglected. None of the leading histories of Newark in this era include substantive discussion of queer life.10 Even as the 1970s witnessed a massive proliferation of gay print media after Stonewall, Newark appeared only in the pages of the campus newspaper at Rutgers-Newark, which reported on the founding of Rutgers Activists for Gay Education (R.A.G.E.).11 Recovering the history of Queer Newark requires us to seek out urban black communities even where their histories have been preserved by others. To take but one example, the Gay Activists Alliance of Essex and Union Counties met weekly at the Ethical Culture Society in Maplewood (adjacent to Newark), a more white and middle-class suburban enclave.12 Its newsletter rarely addressed Newark at all. And yet there are fleeting, valuable exceptions, such as a brief “Commentary on Being a Black Lesbian,” by Marie Teresa, published in 1972, in which Teresa challenged the antigay claims then being advanced by Baraka and other black nationalists. Because “we are burdened with the responsibilities of reproducing armies of black children,” she wrote, lesbians came under particular attack in the black community, for rejecting their imposed duty. The attack went beyond the banalities of conventional homophobia, to regard black lesbians “not only as a deviation, and a ‘sick’ behavior needing to be changed, but as a traitorship needing to be wiped out in order to save the pride of the Black Race.”13

It was precisely this history we sought to recover, and yet such moments are few and far between in the existing paper trail. Gary Jardim, for instance, has offered an important look at early disco and house music in Newark, critical sites of queer community formation. Yet what sort of archive has been left by Club Zanzibar, a central queer Newark institution of the 1980s? We have some photographic images, but to date no business records, no in-depth memoirs, and no oral histories outside of those compiled by Jardim in his invaluable collection Blue: Life, Art and Style in Newark.14 Not even the building itself to which Zanzibar was attached, the Lincoln Motel, still exists. Perhaps its richest docu-
mentation survives on a photo-and-discussion thread on discomusic.com, which contains the seeds of a vibrant community history, but in yet-inchoate form.\textsuperscript{15}

As we look forward into the 1990s and beyond, we begin at last to see increasing preservation of Queer Newark history, much of it accomplished not by historians, but rather anthropologists. The Mapping Newark initiative, led by Karen McCarthy Brown, a prominent anthropologist of religion at Drew University, spearheaded a major ethnographic undertaking to document religious life in Newark, with significant attention paid to queer religious practices. Brown published a pioneering study of gender performance in the predominantly black and Latino(a) ballroom houses of the city, capturing a community resisting homophobia and the AIDS crisis through its own chosen families and ethics of care.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, Brown’s student Peter Savastano began his scholarly work on the Mapping Newark project, and has since gone on to publish a series of valuable examinations of gay Catholic men in Newark and their long devotion to St. Gerard, the gentle icon commemorated in statute and annual feast at St. Lucy’s Church in the city.\textsuperscript{17}

Other work has followed suit, largely from social scientists—of particular note here are sociologist Ana Ramos-Zayas’s studies of “urban erotics and racial affect,” including an examination of the interwoven racial and sexual identity development of Brazilian and Puerto Rican youth in Newark’s high schools, as well as Zenzele Isoke’s urban studies work on black women’s activism, including a recent article on Black women’s queer activism following the murder of Sakia Gunn.\textsuperscript{18}

We honor this work, as invaluable contributions to the scholarly record of Queer Newark. Yet our vision differs slightly: our aims are more historical than those of scholars seeking to elucidate present-day queer social formations, and our goal is to create more accessible forms of history than those created for professional academic audiences. So as we formulated QNOHP, we were informed by these ongoing scholarly projects, yet set out in directions closer to those of earlier queer community historians such as Allan Bérubé, Susan Stryker, and Eric Wat.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{The Future of the Queer Newark Oral History Project}

The work of sustaining a fluid community-based oral history project is not simple. Challenges run the gamut from the technological (the mechanics of preserving digital material), to the legal (how to protect the rights of interviewees
while allowing the greatest possible access to their words and insights), from the fiscal (what browser service hosts the material, who pays for transcriptions and the proper “tagging” of interviews so that they become searchable), to the bureaucratic (how to tap university resources without becoming entangled in unwieldy university processes such as the dreaded “IRB” [institutional review board], which has the power to crush oral history research by treating narrators as “human research subjects”). Most important of all, how do we stay vital and relevant to the queer Newark community?

For now, we feel that relevance is best ensured by sticking to the core principle of fostering local intergenerational queer historical knowledge, with topics to be determined through the community listening process we pioneered with our 2011 conference, “Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories.” At a meeting last fall held at Newark’s newly opened LGBTQ Community Center, local artists and activists decided that our next project should be a history of queer club spaces in Newark. According to LGBTQ Newarkers, such spaces have long functioned as an ambiguous sanctuary—places of celebration, community, and cultural and erotic self-expression, on the one hand, and locations that sometimes encourage addictions and unhealthy relationships, on the other. We plan to chart the histories of Newark’s queer club cultures, including Murphy’s, Club Zanzibar, the Globe, the Fireballs of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the rotating club spaces of present-day queer Newark. We’re currently amassing photos and other personal documentation about these clubs. We’re organizing a public panel for fall 2014, at which club designers, managers, DJs, and club goers will come together to talk about the creation and meaning of these spaces. We also hope to use these public events to initiate intergenerational discussions on addiction, drug use, and HIV/AIDS in Newark. Finally, we are putting out a call for art, including film and poetry, on the topic of queer club spaces in Newark, that we will display at a month-long open house show in October 2014. The show will also include some of the magnificent holdings of Drew University’s “Mapping Newark” project, thus sharing these rare archival records of 1990s Newark ballroom performances with the community that produced them. Of course, we will record everything, thus enriching current archival holdings on our city’s queer history.

The work of QNOHP is driven by community needs and interests, but also informed by contemporary scholarly theorizing of queer memory work. For instance, our amassing of visual material from the history of Newark’s clubs is intended to be used in conjunction with the narrators who experienced these spaces; David Reichard has recently argued that oral history plays a crucial role in “animating” otherwise ephemeral or “transient” evidence of the queer past, and
QNOHP will embody his suggestion that the most vibrant history combines archival material with oral histories. In addition, Pascal Emmer has further proposed “meta-generational” approaches to recent queer history as a means of complicating more linear, bifurcated narratives of “older” and “younger” generations (which often collapse into triumphalism or declension), in his work on ACT UP Philadelphia. Like that group, the club spaces of Queer Newark hosted simultaneous, overlapping, interactive intergenerational contact and community, and thus even as our project takes chronological form as clubs emerge and close over time, it pays heed to the ongoing meta-generational sociality of these spaces.

We believe that by listening to local people, we will create both meaningful and accessible public history, as well as scholarly breakthroughs. This is because the stories that queer Newarkers tell about their lives have the potential to transform the ways we understand U.S. history. Their stories integrate categories that scholars have often place in separate boxes, such as sexuality, race, gender, spirituality, and economics. In the experience of queer Newarkers, these aspects are inextricably interconnected. By recording and preserving the insights of queer Newarkers, many of them working-class people of color who have spent decades giving time and energy to support their communities, the QNOHP has the potential to give us a real American history.

NOTES


Darnell L. Moore is a writer and activist. He is a fellow at the Center on African American Religion, Sexual Politics and Social Justice (CARSS) at Columbia University. He is also a managing editor of *The Feminist Wire* and cofounder of YOU Belong. He is on the board of directors at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York and he was appointed the inaugural chair of the city of Newark’s LGBTQ Advisory Concerns Commission by Mayor Cory A. Booker.

Beryl Satter is professor of history at Rutgers University-Newark. She received her PhD in American Studies from Yale University in 1992. Her BA is from Barnard College, and she also holds a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. Her book, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (Metropolitan Books, 2009), won the Liberty Legacy Award for civil rights history and the National Jewish Book Award in history, and was a finalist for the J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize and the Ron Ridenhour Book Prize.

Timothy Stewart-Winter is assistant professor of history at Rutgers University-Newark. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 2009. His first book, under contract with the University of Pennsylvania Press, traces the rise of urban gay politics in Chicago since the 1950s. His writing has been published in *Gender & History*, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and has received the support of the American Council of Learned Societies, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Jacob K. Javits and James C. Hormel fellowships. He serves on the Governing Board of the Committee on LGBT History, an affiliated society of the American Historical Association.