

“The Queer Eye for Nashville: How LGBTQ People form Community, and Make Spaces,
and Places...Like Everyone Else”

by
Philip Staffelli

A Thesis Submitted for Partial Fulfillment for Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts in History

Middle Tennessee State University
May 2021

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Carroll Van West
Dr. Ashley Riley-Sousa

ABSTRACT

In the past thirty years the LGBTQ community has become increasingly studied within academia. However, it is only in the past decade that their spaces and places have begun to be examined. When one narrows this down even further to New South cities, practically nothing exists. The LGBTQ community utilizes spaces to create communities like any other people, even in southern cities. This thesis examines how the LGBTQ community formed using space and places within the city of Nashville. The period of examination is decade before the AIDS crisis, and the AIDS crisis itself. The methodology of historic preservation, community, and oral histories are used throughout the argument.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II: CREATING THE STAGE: LGBTQ SPACE WITHIN MUSIC CITY, USA.....	9
The Jungle and Juanita’s.....	11
Watch Your Coat and Hat.....	14
The Glass Menagerie.....	16
The Cabaret Bar.....	18
Warehouse 28.....	20
Chapter III: THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN MUSIC CITY AND THE PEOPLE, AND PLACES, THAT PROVIDED HOPE.....	25
The Development of a National Emergency.....	28
Gay Shame.....	30
The AIDS Crisis in Nashville.....	34
Conclusion.....	41
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE POINT? LIMITATIONS, AND WHERE TO GO FROM HERE.....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of the Location of the Jungle and Juanita’s.....	11
Figure 2. The Jungle.....	13
Figure 3. John Bridges in front of the Jungle and Juanita’s Historical Marker.....	14
Figure 4. Map of the Location of Watch Your Coat and Hat.....	14
Figure 5. Joe Heathery and Jerry Peak in the Lobby of Watch Your Coat and Hat.....	15
Figure 6. Map of the Location of the Glass Menagerie.....	16
Figure 7. Map of the Location of the Cabaret Bar.....	18
Figure 8. Map of the Location of the Warehouse 28.....	20
Figure 9. The Warehouse 28 decorated for New Year’s Eve.....	20
Figure 10. Circa 1980s Warehouse 28 Staff Photo.....	22
Figure 11. Image of Hank Williams.....	36
Figure 12. Image of Tina Louise.....	37
Figure 13. Nashville CARES Logo.....	38
Figure 14. Image of Michael Dolly Wilson.....	40

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Gay Pride Parade in Nashville left me awestruck. I thought back to Michael Dolly Wilson, one of the founders of the Nashville Pride parade. I could not believe that this joyous event was started because a group of people decided to join and make a strong unique community and culture. Even in the face of adversity people can form community. Those truths propelled my thesis project.

This study explores the spaces and places of Nashville that make the city unique in amplifying the more silent narrative of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community. It will use the methodology of space and place as well as community studies to argue that the act of the organizing within space is political. This examination will follow through the city from the 1970s into the early 1990s through using such key defining community institutions as Jungle/Juanita's, Cabaret/Watch Your Coat and Hat Saloon, Warehouse 28, as case studies. I explore these places chronologically to enable the case studies to demonstrate how the city changed as LGBTQ people built their community.

People form a sense of community often through spaces both public and private. Historian James Scott, in his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, argued that “every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant.”¹ According to Scott, four transcripts are involved: a public and a hidden from both the dominant and the subordinate. The hidden transcript of the subordinate is largely an

¹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), x.

emotionally fueled response to domination; the practice of domination creates the hidden transcript. This theory can be applied to space. The control of space can be both public and private. Those in the dominate power can utilize space as they see fit as the subordinate groups secretly utilize space to congregate and live their lives out of the prying eyes of the dominate. Within these spaces subordinate groups can form communities and organize against the dominant power.

The LGBTQ community has been able to form a sense of community despite vast differences between them. Historians such as Benedict Anderson have argued that the idea of community, even at the national level, is imagined. According to Anderson, community “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet it in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”² His theories raise questions of how communities form a unique identity together despite differences and not knowing each other.

How did the LGBTQ community in Nashville form despite differences?

Communities can form over a multitude of issues or a singular issue. In “*Civilizing*” *Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City. 1889-1930*, Teresa Meade argued that the local elites’ decision to pursue urban renewal met with considerable, and unexpected, resistance from a heretofore divided community because the need to fight dispossession

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), p 6.

helped groups to set aside differences to join together to fight against the policy.³ Historian Robert Self also demonstrated how a disunified community can unify over space. His *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* is about the evolution of physical space, the ideas that gave them form and meaning, and the racial class politics within the boundaries. He argues space as “both a metaphor and an analytical hinge can be abstract.” Therefore, he makes it clear that space is more than just the built environment but instead “space as property, space as social imagination, and space as political scale.”⁴

The LGBTQ community in Nashville has a strong unique culture unlike any other community. They have congregated in private places such as night clubs and bars and in such public spaces as community centers and parks. The power of place has the ability, as Dolores Hayden, would argue,

to nurture this more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is tied to memory both our personal...and the collective memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities...the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory-remains untapped.⁵

³ Teresa Meade, “Civilizing” *Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City. 1889-1930* (University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

⁴ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17.

⁵ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

The Queer community has a shared, vibrant past that has been present within the built environment within American towns and cities for decades, even if the presence is not acknowledged or recognized.⁶

Cities as areas of dense, diverse populations and as trading hubs, marketplaces, and cultural centers have been a powerful lure for defining LGBTQ space. Studying San Francisco in the early 1990s, anthropologist Kath Weston wrote that cities result in a “sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community.”⁷ The city was a practical home for LGBTQ people because of the cover of anonymity and social contact which it provides across the population. Each community be it urban, suburban, or small town can form their own unique identity and culture. These different types of community therefore form their own sense of place within the built environment as people associate themselves with certain locations, buildings, or even spaces within buildings and create memories of their own.

The patterns of urban growth as it relates to the LGBTQ community dates to the white flight to the suburbs in the mid-twentieth century.⁸ The shift to the suburbs induced a re-norming of the heterosexual family, which, in turn, made it necessary for LGBTQ people to move into cities and cluster.⁹ This cluster formed neighborhoods, or

⁶ I am using Queer interchangeably to refer to not only individuals that identify as queer but to refer to the LGBTQ community.

⁷ Jen Jack Giesecking, “LGBTQ Spaces and Places” in *National Park Service’s LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Washington: National Park Service, 2016), ch. 14, 7.

⁸ Emily Kazyak, “Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality,” *Gender & Society* 26, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 825-848.

⁹ Giesecking, “LGBTQ,” 7.

“gayborhoods.”¹⁰ These gayborhoods are, simply defined, residential districts where queer people have historically congregated.¹¹ Gayborhoods have played an active role in patterns of historic preservation and gentrification within the twenty first century.¹²

Money also played a role in the development of LGBTQ communities. Historian John D’Emilio identified a second important patterns of change. He argued the rise of a system of wage-based labor in the mid-20th century had allowed for individuals to detach from their prescribed roles within heterosexual families.¹³ The expansion of wage based labor allowed for Queer people to detach themselves from their homes as their increased wages created independence. This independence came in the form of affording private living or living with likeminded people. This mobility allowed for the Queer communities to congregate and form gayborhoods as they stepped out of their daily lives and discovered themselves.

A third not so often acknowledged LGBTQ pattern was the reaction to urban disorder and riots in the mid- to late 1960s. Property owners increasingly perceived gay tenants --mostly white and middle class--as preferable to working-class African Americans.¹⁴ In 1970s and 1980s, the idea of the gay and lesbian communities in gay districts would begin to consolidate into what would become in the lingo of the real estate

¹⁰ For more information on the emergence of the term “gayborhoods,” see: <https://www.phillyvoice.com/philadelphia-was-first-city-have-gayborhood/>

¹¹ Gregory Rosenthal, “Make Roanoke Queer Again: Community History and Urban Change in a Southern City,” in *The Public Historian* vol. 39 no. 1 (February 2017): 46.

¹² *Ibid*, 8.

¹³ John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100-113.

¹⁴ David Rothenberg, “Can Gays Save New York City?” *Christopher Street*, September 1977, 6-10.

industry, a “niche” market.¹⁵ Jen Jack Giesecking argues that LGBTQ people found their place in cities just as these places were declining by the heteronormative flight to the suburbs, which were seen as “normal.”¹⁶ The gay community was left with the revitalization efforts of these cities, which created clubs, bars, and restaurants to cater to this community. In some instances, this change led to political redistricting that led to the election of gay officials, one example being Harvey Milk in San Francisco.¹⁷

However, social theorist Miranda Joseph reminds us to think carefully and reconsider what this concept of community actually meant. The often-celebrated gayborhoods of San Francisco universalized difference, or celebrated and accepted differences, and thus obscured the power dynamics of social relations. She argues that the idea of communities is often romanticized, and that these dynamic spaces risk masking conflict and minimizing the role of the marketplace.¹⁸ Community in Joseph’s way of thinking is not just about who it includes but who it leaves out.¹⁹ Often the Queer community has left out bisexuals, transgender, and the queer identity based on race, gender, and class.

Understanding intersectionality--the recognition that categories of difference such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion/creed, generation, geographic location, sexuality, age, ability/disability, and class intersect to shape the experiences of individuals and impact

¹⁵ Christina Handart, “Making Community: The Places and Spaces of LGBTQ Collective Identity Formation,” in *National Park Service’s LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Washington: National Park Service, 2016), ch. 15, p. 6.

¹⁶ Giesecking, “LGBTQ,” 7.

¹⁷ Handart, “Making Community,” 16.

¹⁸ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Handart, “Making Community,” 4.

diverse identity—is key to understanding patterns in the historic preservation of a group’s heritage.²⁰ The LGBTQ community is not necessarily one distinct community. The very acronym itself stands for multiple communities joined together as a single category, ignoring the basic diversity between the different groups. By recognizing that different facets of identity formed and influenced many LGBTQ communities and histories, we can ensure that the richness of these multiple voices—including ones often silenced—can be represented.²¹ This understanding of diversity within the LGBTQ category is important to the historic preservation of LGBTQ sites because it allows for multiple voices to be heard and acknowledged within the historic narrative.

Public historians have only in the past twenty years begun to explore sites of commemoration and preservation within the LGBTQ community. This change is because only in recent decades have attitudes towards discussions of gender and sexuality become more positive within federal agencies and scholarly institutions. Cities like New York and San Francisco have received extra attention because of their large clusters of LGBTQ population. The geographic region of study has been focused on mainly coastal cities, while others such as Atlanta represent an outlier that fall into the category of New South cities.

This thesis focuses on another New South city—Nashville—that needs greater attention. This is because historians often overlook LGBTQ history in southern cities as non-existent, and this study aims to show that LGBTQ history does exist outside of

²⁰Megan E. Springate, “A Note about Intersectionality,” in *National Park Service’s LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Washington: National Park Service, 2016), ch. 7, 1.

²¹Ibid, 18.

coastal cities. The study has four chapters, including this historiographic introduction. The second chapter overviews four primary spaces created by and for the LGBTQ community of Nashville in the second half of the twentieth century. This chapter serves as an introduction to the LGBTQ built environment in Nashville. A subsequent chapter explores the AIDS crisis within the city, which raised both consciousness and activism with the community. The conclusion explores current issues in Nashville's LGBTQ community and identifies areas of historic preservation need and future questions that may drive the effort to document, preserve, and interpret this vital history.

CHAPTER II: CREATING THE STAGE: LGBTQ SPACE WITHIN MUSIC CITY, USA

In the early 1950s the gay community of Nashville was treated as any another minority within Eisenhower's America, poorly. Gay residents of Nashville faced discrimination and hostility. This discrimination came in the form of laws and city ordinances that prohibited being gay in public, medical diagnoses, and even criminalization. For many opinion leaders and decision makers, Christian morality justified the exclusion of the gay community. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s that changed perceptions of and eventually discriminatory practices against African Americans slowly impacted Nashville's gay community. By the 1950s and into 1960s, Nashville's gay community began to congregate carefully in spaces and places of their creation. Public historians have the responsibility to help identify these places and to tell their stories. Their documentation can lead to designation in the National Register of Historic Places and lead to commemoration in the form of historic markers and other types of public interpretation.

Nashville bars have played an important role in facilitating community building for LGBTQ people. According to historian Christina Handart,

bars and nightclubs have played an important role in building LGBTQ community and in some places functioned as an anchor for later residential concentration. Indeed, long before the LGBTQ movement had taken form, bars provided a place where LGBTQ people could openly express affection, socialize with friends, and network with others without fear of punishment or shame. For all these reasons and more, many scholars argue that gay bars should be considered among the first LGBTQ

activist spaces, emphasizing that their patrons and owners often advocated on behalf of the most stigmatized and despised.²²

Nashville reflects this pattern, as drag queens who worked together also lived together in gayborhoods. They lived together for the camaraderie, and the financial support. They provided protection and support for each other. They would help each other prepare for shows and give each other tips. According to Tina Louise, local drag queen, “It was safety in numbers.”²³

Nashville had several gay bars from 1973 to 1990; some lasted longer than others. While they all were influential in their own way, it was difficult to find sources that would provide context to their significance to helping LGBTQ people build a sense of community and space outside of the words and histories shared by members of the community. The case studies below were selected due to the interviews I conducted with people who lived through the period examined in this thesis, 1973-1990. If the scope studied was expanded and more evidence readily available more bars may have been identified.

²² Handart, “Making Community,” 8.

²³ Tina Louise, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, November 2019

The Jungle and Juanita's

713/715 Commerce Street Nashville, TN 37203

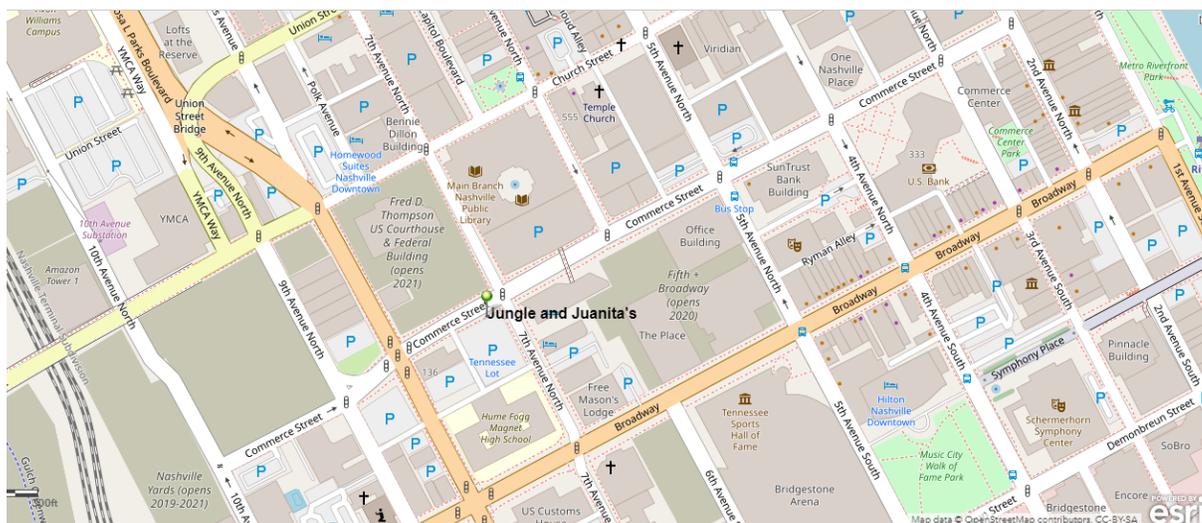


Figure 1. Map of the Jungle and Juanita's Source: Author generated map from esri.com.

In 1952 Warren Jett opened the Jungle, a bar and nightclub in downtown Nashville, located near the James Robertson Hotel. He hired Juanita Braizer to run the bar next door, which they called The Leopard. Both properties quickly attracted a consistent, but closeted, gay clientele. In 1955, Juanita named the bar after herself. Jerry Peek remembers how at Juanita's he felt "at home right away. She (Juanita) helped a lot people who were thrown in jail, picked up by the police at one of the bars. She would bail them out and never expect to be repaid. She was an amazing woman a powerhouse."²⁴ Gays within Nashville in the 1950s faced criminal charges for so-called disorderly conduct and for openly displacing physical affection in public. Juanita Braizer was an

²⁴ Jim Ridley, "Last Call at Juanita's: The Untold Story of Nashville's oldest gay bar" *Nashville Scene*, October 19, 1995.

early Nashville defender of Gay rights. If someone hostile to gays threw a brick through her window, she simply picked the brick up, dusted it off, and displayed it on the shelf over the bar. “On occasions when police officers stormed in and hauled all of her customers away to the hoosegow, sometimes because one man had been seen touching another man’s shoulder, Miss Juanita would storm down to the police station and post bail for the entire gang.”²⁵ According to the *Tennessean*, Jett sold the Jungle in 1960 after his brother Leslie E. Jett was elected sheriff. It remained a gay bar under new ownership.

As part of the major construction project of a new Nashville convention center, developers in the mid-1980s demolished the two buildings to make way for expanded parking near the convention center hotel. In December 2018, with funding from the H. Franklin Brooks Fund of the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, the Metro Nashville Historical Commission installed a historical marker at the buildings’ location to commemorate the two bars and their impact on LGBTQ history. Tim Walker, director of the Metro Historical Commission, described the marker as “part of the commission's work to make sure all aspects of our history are being recognized.”²⁶

So many of Nashville’s LGBTQ sites have either been demolished or repurposed during Nashville’s construction boom in the last 30 years. Historical markers root the history of the Queer community at the place, connecting place and history in important

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jessica Bliss, “A place 'where you felt safe': Nashville's first gay bars remembered with Historical Marker,” *The Tennessean*, 6 Dec. 2018.

ways. But it would be a mistake to limit the historical markers to just one location. Across the city are significant places associated with the city's LGBTQ history.



Figure 2. The Jungle, c. 1970, Tennessean.com

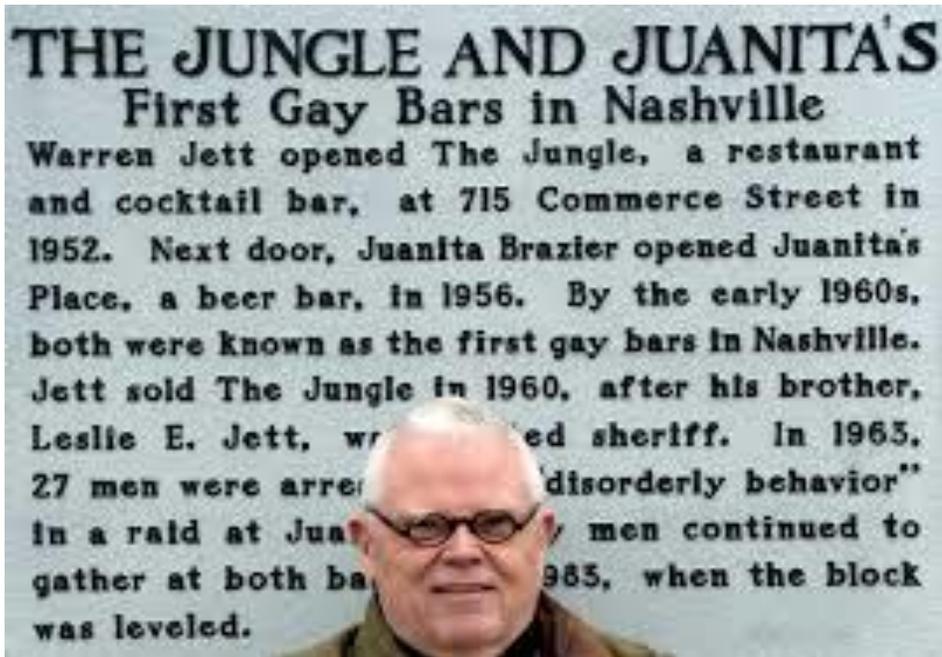


Figure 3. John Bridges in front of the Jungle and Juanita's Historical Marker. Source: *The Tennessean*, 6 Dec. 2018

Watch Your Coat and Hat

239 Second Avenue North, Nashville, TN 37201

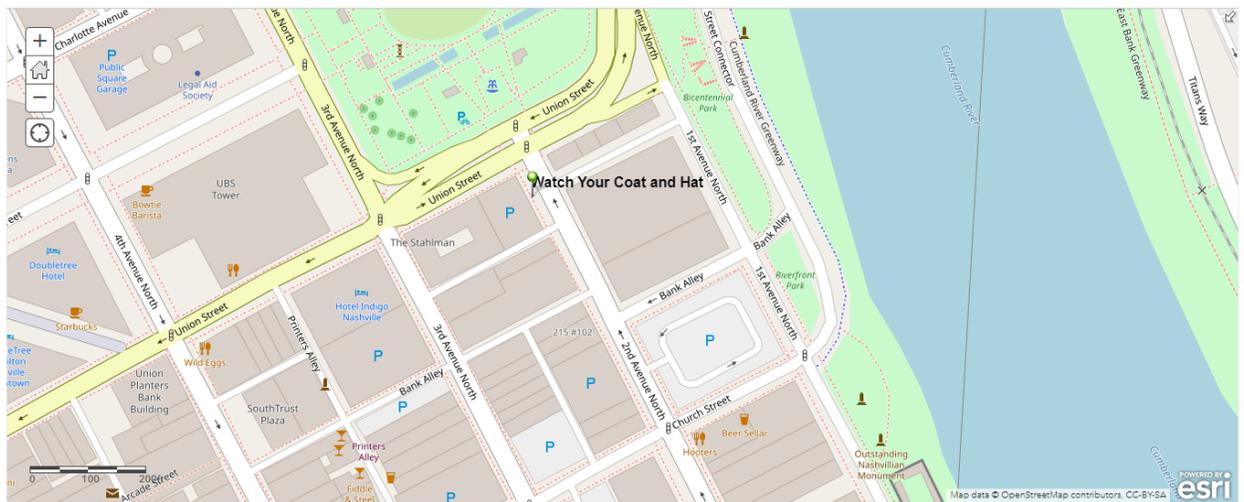


Figure 4. Map of the Location of Watch Your Coat and Hat Source: Author generated map from esri.com.

In 1971 Jerry Peek opened Watch Your Coat and Hat Saloon—a drag bar—located on Second Avenue North in Nashville. At that time, this area of old historic warehouses was neglected, and real estate was cheap. A generation later that same street would be at the center of Nashville’s booming tourism industry. When the bar opened in 1971 a line of people waited to get in. The word on the street that the new saloon would be a drag club. Peek and his investors did not advertise their bar hoping to avoid unwanted attention. But the clientele loved what happened at Watch Your Coat. According to fellow owner, Joe Heatherly, “it was a real show. Not like the shows you see now. We had an opening, middle production, and comedy spread in-between.”²⁷ Here Jerry Peek started the first Miss Gay American Pageant. This pageant is now a national contest between female impersonators.²⁸



Figure 5. Jerry and Joe in the Lobby of Watch Your Coat and Hat. Source: Jerry Peak’s Facebook Page

²⁷Jerry Peak and Joe Heatherly, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

²⁸ Ibid.

The idea of the Miss Gay America Pageant, according to Jerry Peek, came to him while he watched the Miss America Pageant in 1970. He held a pocket size book called the “David” that listed all the gay bars in the country. He wrote each of them that held drag shows. Soon he had applicants from all over the county. In order to prevent bias, the judges came from the straight community: a hairdresser, make-up artist, and a clothing buyer. He wanted to make sure no one thought the judging was biased. Norma Kristie, the first winner, performed "Diamonds are Forever," the title song from a James Bond movie of the same name and originally performed by Shirley Bassey.²⁹

The Glass Menagerie

112 16th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212

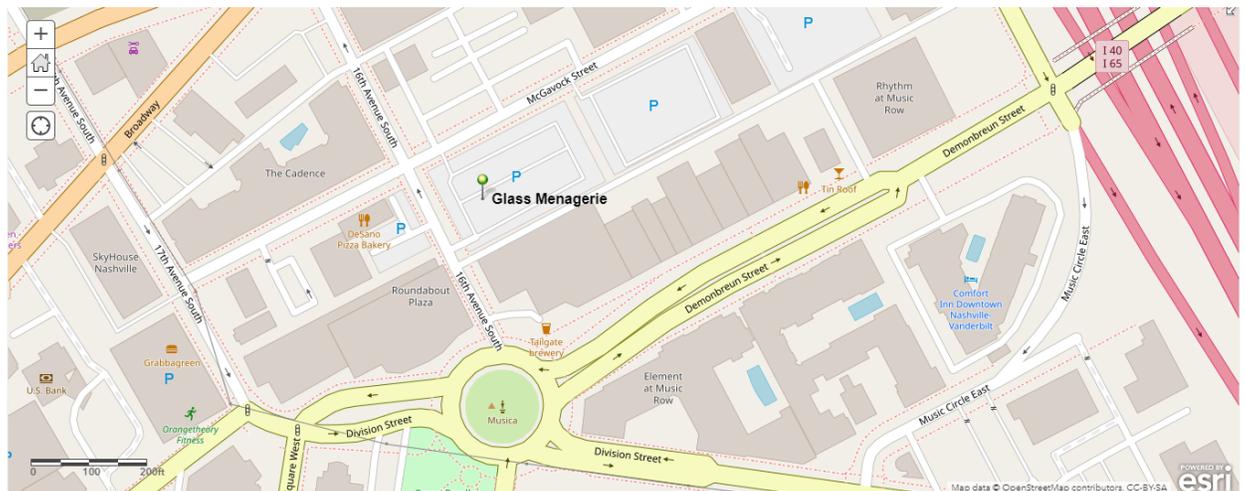


Figure 6. Map of the Location the Glass Menagerie Source: Author generated map from esri.com

²⁹ Ibid.

The next year Jerry Peek decided that pageant needed a bigger venue for the expected turnout. Peek and his investors rented a club called the Glass Menagerie, located on 112 16th Ave South. According to Peek, the club was “huge and beautiful and available to rent. It was expensive...it had to be the biggest and best and I spared no expense in making it so. It would come to be an amazing contest.”³⁰ The new location for the contest, interestingly, was on the city’s fabled Music Row next to recording studios and music industry offices. Over \$8,000 in prizes were given out, with the winner receiving \$1000 and a 1973 automobile.³¹ Jerry wanted to donate proceeds to the United Givers Fund and the Kidney Foundation, yet they both refused to accept money from the contest charity fund because they defined it as “gay” money. Peek stated in an interview that “they hurt themselves more than they hurt us” and their attitudes were twenty or thirty years out of step with time.³²

The fact that the first Miss Gay America Pageant was held in Nashville highlights the size of the Gay community at that time as well as its wealth and contacts. The pageant was a community-based event, as queens performed together and got to know each other. It also speaks to Nashville’s stage and entertainment history. Several ended up living together according to Tina Louise, a local drag queen. She got her major start in the business during the 1973 Miss Gay America Pageant. During the performance she got into contact with people who would get her number and book her for events. The

³⁰ Jerry Peaks interview, sent to the author via John Bridges.

³¹ “Miss Gay America Meet Slated Here” *The Tennessean*, May 4, 1973.

³² Kathleen Gallagher, “Field of 27 Starts ‘Miss Gay’ Event” *The Tennessean*, May 11, 1973.

pageant nurtured and expanded the presence and visibility of the city's Gay community to other cities and towns.³³

The Cabaret Bar

210 Printer's Alley, Nashville, TN 37201(1973-1975)

1711 Hayes Street, Nashville, TN 37203 (1975-?)

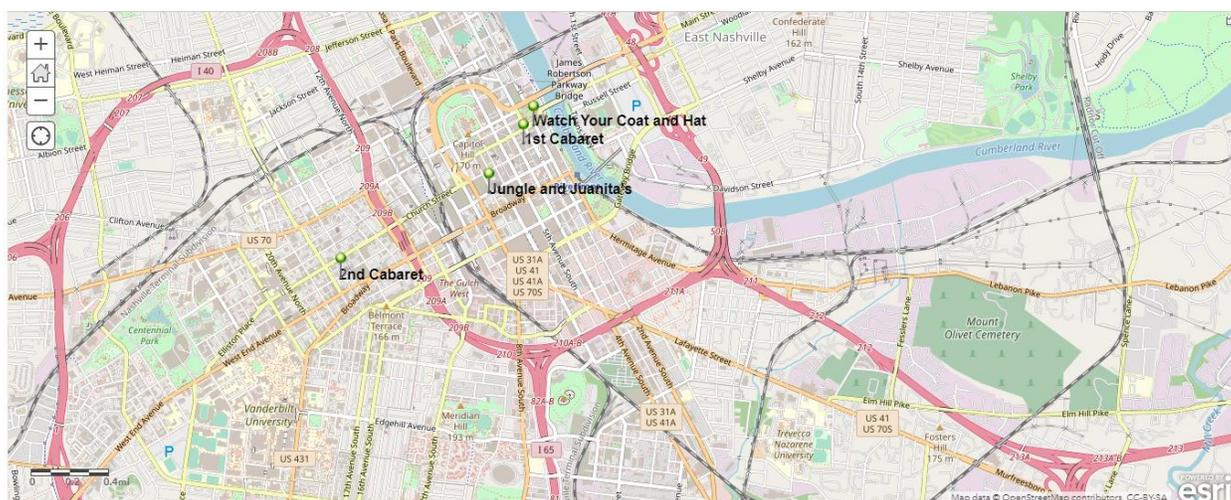


Figure 7. Map of the Location of the Cabaret Bar Source Author generated map from esri.com.

Watch Your Coat and Hat Saloon burned in 1973. Therefore, the drag scene moved to the Cabaret in Printer's Alley, at that time a major downtown adult entertainment area. This alley once linked to newspaper print shops was not only the setting for a gay bar, but exotic dancers for tourists as well. According to Jerry Peak, Mayor Beverly Briley would bring guests from out of town into the bar for shows. The fact that straight people came into the bar is important because it shows how easily they accepted female impersonation as an art form, but highlights their hypocrisy as well. If

³³ Ibid.

these individuals were out on the street in drag, the police would have fined or arrested them due to ordinances forbidding men to wear women's clothing. Out of the public eye, however, straights enjoyed the performances.³⁴

After two years in Printer's Alley the Cabaret moved to 1711 Hayes Street, Nashville. This location was much different than Printers Alley. West of the downtown, the building was a block north of West End Avenue, in an area of light industrial buildings and warehouses. Here, away from the glare of downtown tourism, the owners operated the Cabaret strictly as a gay bar. According to Tina Louise, who worked there for years, it had "the same professional performance but was more open to the community."³⁵ She was referring to the fact that the gay community immediately embraced the bar as a safe place because Hayes Street was more secluded than the downtown business district

³⁴ Jerry Peak and Joe Heatherly, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

³⁵ Tina Louise, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, November 2019.

Warehouse 28

2529 Franklin Pike, Nashville, TN 37204

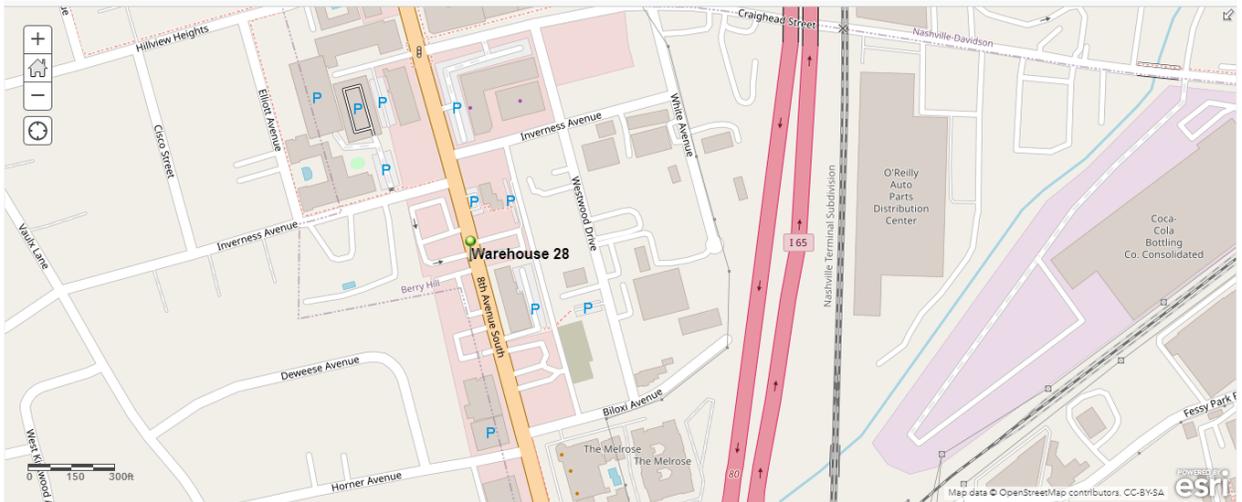


Figure 8. Map of the Location of the Warehouse 28. Source: Author generated map from esri.com.



Figure 9. Warehouse 28 decorated for a New Year's Eve Party. Source: I Partied at the Warehouse 28 Facebook Page accessed 10/10/2019.

Steve Smith and Michael "Dolly" Wilson were a long-distance couple. Steve lived in Nashville attending Vanderbilt Law school, and Dolly lived in D.C. One Halloween Steve invited Dolly down for a party at a Nashville mansion called Breeze Hill. According to Wilson, a group of queens lived there in what a sort of informal gay compound. After the party Smith and Wilson discussed moving to Nashville permanently and opening a club. "Nashville was in need of one," commented Dolly Wilson.³⁶ Smith and Wilson acquired an old warehouse at 2529 Franklin Pike; the business was originally a tire repair store. The bar was away from downtown Nashville and the tourist industry in the Berry Hill neighborhood. Once again, the lack of prying eyes, and the rather nondescript warehouse building, made it easier for the owners to use the property as a nightclub—with a disco focus—for the LGTBQ community. Smith and Wilson opened the nightclub on April 13, 1979 with the name Warehouse 28 chosen for the date Steve and Michael met, the 28th.

Smith and Wilson soon had to attract investors after they ran out of money during the construction process. When these initial investors objected to having drag at the club, Smith and Wilson did not hesitate. They bought out the other investors and operated the club as they wished. The interior and programming for Warehouse 28 generally followed a club in Washington D.C. called the "The Club House." Dolly stated his mission was to

³⁶ Michael Dolly Wilson, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

"recreate the Club House" in Nashville.³⁷ Thus the interior was open but infused with an industrial aesthetic and the concrete block walls reverberated music to be loud and enveloping.



Figure 10. Warehouse 28 Staff photo ca. 1980s
Source: I Partied at the Warehouse 28 Facebook Page

The third month the bar was open someone threw a fireball into the back of the building. Dolly thought “This is it, we lost everything.” The fire damaged but did not destroy the building. The owners got help from the surrounding community, and the bar was able to reopen within three days. People would get off work and come into the bar, paint, and do whatever was needed to fix the bar. This community-driven repair work is another demonstration of how quickly the Warehouse 28 became a center of the gay community in Nashville.

³⁷ Michael Dolly Wilson, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

By 1984 Warehouse 28 had captured the attention of the larger Nashville entertainment community. Robert K. Oermann, a respected music historian and writer for the Nashville *Tennessean*, hyped the appearance of Zoe Walker at Warehouse 28 in late 1984. Oermann wrote: “The musical menu at Warehouse 28 is being considerably broadened tonight with an evening of entertainment that includes gospel, comedy, Broadway tunes, pop songs, r&b, and a little jazz” from chanteuse Zoe Walker and the gospel group One Word. Oermann added that the two artists would perform “this pot pourri of styles to the venue, which normally features lively, pulse-quickening disco and techno-pop music.”³⁸

The bar became a vocal point for the gay community during the AIDS crisis thanks to the strong leadership of Michael Dolly Wilson and Steve Smith. In 1984 *The Advocate*—a LGBT magazine—selected Michael “Dolly” Wilson and his partner Steve Smith as among the top 500 gay leaders in America.³⁹

These four Nashville places are among the first to be identified as important to the rise of the LGBTQ community. Further research will identify additional properties that highlight gay spaces and places within the city. Largely invisible to most Nashville residents, these places were highly visible to the Gay community and as they provided places for them to congregate and feel safe. These places provided a system of support during times of crisis, and places of celebration and affirmation when times were better. Spaces were central to the development of relationships between members of the LGBTQ

³⁸ Robert K. Oermann, “Homegrown Zoe Walker Adds Variety to Warehouse 28 Menu,” Nashville *Tennessean*, December 2, 1984, p. 176.

³⁹ Wilson interview.

community. In addition, The Watch Your Coat and Hat bar has national significance, as the place where a decades-old national contest began and that still takes place every year at venues across the nation

CHAPTER III: THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN MUSIC CITY AND THE PEOPLE, AND PLACES, THAT PROVIDED HOPE

As I sat at a table with Hank Williams, former owner of the business Balloons High in Nashville, he recalled his experiences during the 1980s. He cried a bit as he choked on his words “I lost friends, lovers, and family.”⁴⁰ To Mr. Williams this was personal, he continued to state how he was still angry with the Reagan Administration. This chapter will follow the logic of Deborah Gould, arguing that the political is personal. Gould observed: “Feelings and emotion are fundamental to political life, not in the sense that they overtake reason and interfere with deliberative processes, as they are sometimes disparagingly construed to do, but in the sense that there is an affective dimension to the processes and practices that make up ‘the political,’ broadly defined.”⁴¹ I adopted this line of Gould’s logic because it fits the people and events in Nashville during these years. I also utilize interviews conducted with those involved in the Nashville Gay scene during the AIDS crisis. As these individuals watched their family and friends die as federal, state and local governments did nothing, they decided to act. This decision to act made the political personal as they took to the streets, raised money, and took inaction and made it action.

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) causes the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, commonly referred to as AIDS. The 1980s saw the introduction of AIDS into the public sphere. Mass panic spread from the media into the

⁴⁰ Hank Williams, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

⁴¹ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

general population as people received constant typically misleading and biased news coverage. The initial media coverage of the disease claimed it was a gay disease or a “gay cancer” as many of the victims identified themselves as homosexuals. Panic led way into homophobia as the gay community came under attack. Meanwhile, the administration of President Ronald Reagan stood on the sidelines not publicly addressing the disease until over five years into the epidemic, as if aligning themselves with the conservative right—some of whom believed that the disease was God’s revenge on homosexuals--was more important than aiding the sick.⁴²

While the media fumed and politicians stood aside, seemingly afraid to even address the issue, the gay community took action, building support networks, pushing medical professionals to actively seek cures, and carrying out a vigorous public information campaign to counteract the distortions that passed for authoritative news. In 1987 community members formed AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an organization dedicated to improving the lives of people with AIDS through direct action, medical research, treatment, and working to change legislative and public policies.⁴³

Nashville officials and the vast majority of citizens were no different than those in the rest of the nation in their response to AIDS crisis. They saw a wave of panic take over the city as misinformation took center stage. Anger spread throughout the gay community as state and local government officials failed to act in the interest of the people.

⁴² Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988) remains one of the best secondary sources on the media hysteria and political inaction of the 1980s.

⁴³ Joe Wright, “Only Your Calamity: The Beginnings of Activism by and for People with AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103(October 2013): 1788-1798.

Therefore, in the early stages of the epidemic, like in major urban areas, grassroots organizations formed to fill the gap of official inaction and public indifference. Nashville CARES formed in 1985 and the Vanderbilt AIDS Project formed in 1987. Both organizations sought to combat the disease in the city. As more information became readily available these groups sought to educate the general population about the realities of AIDS, for example how one becomes infected with the virus. Forming an alliance with editors and reporters at *The Tennessean* these groups received positive news coverage that allowed by the late 1980s for the free flow of accurate information to the general public and decreased the national panic that had descended upon the people of Nashville.⁴⁴

This chapter analyzes AIDS crisis activism in Nashville, as people joined together to overcome hardships. Historian John D' Emilio argues that the standard gay narrative within academia is the "heroic narrative," or the narrative that the gay community always bands together in the face of adversity.⁴⁵ D'Emilio warns that this narrative has its dangers because it does not encompass the complexities of the individual experience. This chapter acknowledges that fact, but it looks at organizations and the community that formed to combat the epidemic rather than individual stories. Gay Nashvillians experienced adversity then came together as a community to overcome that adversity, in the process creating organizations, events, and places that still shape gay life in Nashville

⁴⁴ For example, see: Diane Bartley, "'Portfolio' Examines AIDS," *The Tennessean*, May 5, 1985; Laura Milner, "AIDS fighters tells what's needed here," *The Tennessean*, October 15, 1987; Laura Milner, "State AIDS cases likely to double," *The Tennessean*, September 14, 1986; Laura Milner, "Teens seek frank answers to AIDS," *The Tennessean*, July 3, 1987.

⁴⁵ John D' Emilio, *In a New Century: Essays on Queer History, Politics, and Community Life* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), pp?

today. Their heroism in the face of a largely indifferent public is important to acknowledge and commemorate. Therefore, I chose to expand upon the heroic narrative because that is what happened in Nashville.

The Development of a National Emergency

In the early 1980s the AIDS epidemic came silently but quickly. Long before the general population, the gay community realized that there was a major health problem. Historian Deborah Gould summarizes: “Gay men in particular were suffering extreme and multiple losses as close friends, lovers, ex-lovers, acquaintances, neighbors, and co-workers died painful and early deaths; by this point, some gay men had lost their entire social circle to AIDS.”⁴⁶

The news coverage of the AIDS crisis as it first emerged in 1983 created fear and hostility as the media was reporting on the new epidemic, yet doctors did not have any answers. An April 1983 article in the *New York Times* raised the public profile of the illness. Media coverage of AIDS took off after the *Journal of American Medical Association* on May 6, 1983 published an interview with Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Dr. Fauci raised the possibility that AIDS might be transmissible to the entire population. As soon as it seemed that AIDS might extend beyond the gay community news coverage expanded and concerns became much more public.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 49.

⁴⁷ Dorothy Nelkin, “AIDS and the News Media” *The Milbank Quarterly*, 69, No.2 (Year): 297.

Too many early concerns were morality tales where the “bad guys” were gay people. The press labeled AIDS a “sexually transmitted disease” like syphilis.⁴⁸ A series of articles appeared in national journals and magazines that addressed alleged homosexual promiscuity, emphasizing the number of daily contacts gay men had. The only suggested solution for this “gay plague,” as it was frequently referred to was monogamy or abstinence. The solution was not medicine but individual change—if not, then gay people only had themselves to blame. National media hammered away; it attributed blame for the disease to dangerous lifestyles, immoral behavior, illegal drug use. Yet, other articles continued to cause panic such as a *Life* story that proclaimed, “AIDS breaks out of high-risk groups...No one is safe from AIDS.”⁴⁹ A *Time* magazine article headline read “A scourge spreads panic.”⁵⁰ Other publications called AIDS a “deadly new epidemic” or “the public health threat of the century.”⁵¹ In reaction, many straights called for drastic actions, with punitive laws and measures such as quarantine and even the tattooing of people with HIV-positive readings being suggested. Some Christian Right leaders even depicted AIDS as divine retribution for the “sin” of homosexuality.⁵² The Conservative right exacerbated the fear that AIDS was a gay disease.

Attention to the disease grew in the fall of 1985 as celebrity movie star Rock Hudson came down ill with AIDS. Gerald Rivera of ABC News stated on air: “Can there be any doubt about it? AIDS has gotten more publicity since Rock Hudson was declared

⁴⁸Nelkin, “AIDS,” 299.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Gould, *Moving Politics*, 50.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Nelkin, “AIDS,” 300.

⁵² Marc Stien, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 146

an AIDS victim than it has in the previous two years, in my opinion.”⁵³ On September 20, 1985 celebrities gathered in Hollywood for an AIDS benefit called “Celebration of Life.” Yet, the death of Rock Hudson in late 1985 brought intensified attention to the “threat” of AIDS.⁵⁴ As more people became aware of AIDS the more information they demanded, and falsehoods of all sorts soon flooded into this information gap. Misinformation about AIDS continued to be spread, as people believed it was airborne, spread through kissing, sneezing, even talking. Panic not solutions dominated publications and the airwaves.⁵⁵

Gay Shame

The media played into this notion of “gay shame,” or what I would define as the internalization of negative emotion and fear of rejection based on one’s sexuality. At the start of the AIDS crisis with the cause of the disease unknown, the media and opinion leaders suggested the possibly homosexuality itself was the culprit. When interviewed in 1994, Peter Groubert, a gay man living in San Francisco, remembered those early years: “People were afraid of themselves. They were afraid of everyone else. Fear truly gripped the city.”⁵⁶ It seemed as if the disease was striking gay men, and thereby reinforcing the anti-gay rhetoric of the right that linked the disease to gay identity. Feelings of doubt crept into the minds of gay men as they began to question their everyday routines and way of life. Michael Lynch, a reporter for *The Body Politic*, argued that “Within the

⁵³ *CNN’s The Eighties*, A documentary directed by Jack Kney, New York: CNN, 2016; Michael Fitzpatrick and Don Milligan, *The Truth about the AIDS Panic* (New York: Junius, 1987).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Hilda Bastain, “Airborne? Memories of Another Virus and Panic’s Rise,” *Scientific American*, Vol (October 26, 2014). Also see, Stella Z. Theodoulou, ed., *AIDS: The Politics and Policy of Disease* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1996).

⁵⁶ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 59.

hearts of gay men” there was already “a persistent, anti-sexual sense of guilt, ready to be tapped. . . deep within ourselves lingered a readiness to find ourselves guilty. We were ripe to embrace a viral infection as a moral punishment.”⁵⁷

These feelings of guilt made the gay community turn inward debating their sexual practices and ways of life. David Goodstein, the editor of the *Advocate*, pronounced, “Whether we like it or not, the fact is that aspects of the urban gay lifestyle we have created in the last decade are hazardous to our health. The evidence is overwhelming.”⁵⁸ Goldstein was referring to the bathhouses and bars where gay men would meet to have sex with each other, sometimes anonymously. This response was widespread throughout the gay community, as leaders attempted to shame them for their sexual practices. For example, Gould has written about a San Francisco gay man who recalled the blame game of the early 1980s: “those first years of the disease, the conversations over dinner and at the bars were basically denial. You know, ‘So and so I know has got the gay cancer but he was a slut.’ It was that kind of a reaction, ‘He deserves it.’ It just reinforced what we had been told.”⁵⁹

Shame and moralizing condemnation were apparent as well in the following statement from a gay doctor: “Perhaps we’ve needed a situation like this to demonstrate what we’ve known all along: Depravity kills!”⁶⁰ To gay men, free sexual expression was central to the meaning of being gay. The Gay community had fought for gay sexual liberation in the 1970s and, while sexual freedom might threaten mainstream acceptance,

⁵⁷ Michael Lynch, “Living with Kaposi’s Sarcoma and AIDS.” *Body Politic*, November 1982, 1.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Gould, *Moving Politics*, 73.

⁵⁹ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 74.

⁶⁰ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 75.

it remained at the heart of gay male politics. This issue of what it meant to be gay motivated them to challenge those who questioned their sexual practices. They fought back against arguments rooted in so-called science, or the lack of information about the spread of the disease, in part due to the medical profession's history of pathologizing homosexuality. It was necessary that people "in the community questioned the accuracy and panic-mongering of medical reports."⁶¹ They were right to argue that there existed a homophobic misrepresentation in medical reporting and how the state misused the issue. The state, media, and conservatives used these reports to attack homosexuality. These fears were well-founded, as the Reagan Administration considered a mass quarantine in 1985.⁶² Some members in the Gay community called for the closing of the bathhouses, but a large volume of people protested that claiming the closure of the bathhouse would lead to attack on sexual practices in bedrooms. For example, some held signs like "Today the Tub, Tomorrow Your Bedroom."⁶³

While some in the gay community distanced themselves from the AIDS epidemic, other gay groups faced the shame game head on. Early organizations like the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), established in 1983, created pride and instilled early substance to the heroic narrative of the early activist movement. Certain organizations used the language of unification within the community. Paul Popham, GMHC president, proclaimed at an early fundraiser: "we can get things done, that we can act responsibly, and that we do care about each other"⁶⁴ This affirmation of the gay community provided

⁶¹ Ibid., 76.

⁶² Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Gould, *Moving Politics*, 75-77.

⁶³ Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 447.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Gould, *Moving Politics*, 85.

an umbrella for other groups to marshal their pride in community and focus their anger not on the victims but of the inaction on the federal government. As journalist Masha Gessen has recently observed, “One lesson from AIDS was about the power of communities coming together to take care of one another, to touch one another, to act, using bodies—often frail bodies, always endangered bodies, sometimes even dead bodies—to fight.”⁶⁵

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was a grassroots organization with branches across the entire country that often led those fights. Formed in March 1987, ACT UP members used direct action civil disobedience in many of their demonstrations. ACT UP changed the face of the AIDS crisis. They occupied buildings, made confrontational art, and shouted at public speakers who questioned the seriousness of the epidemic. Their mission was to end the AIDS crisis. They called for more AIDS treatment, insisted on public awareness about the effects of AIDS, and an end to homophobia, racism, and sexism. ACT UP took on the federal government and pharmaceutical industry, which ultimately transformed the development process for drugs, and changed the clinical definition of AIDS so it would include women. It orchestrated the expansion of housing for people with AIDS, and in general made the AIDS crisis visible through “conscious and consistent manipulation of the popular media.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Masha Gessen, “What Lessons Does the AIDS Crisis Offer for the Coronavirus Pandemic?” *New Yorker*, April 8, 2020 (online edition).

⁶⁶ Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 157.

The AIDS Crisis in Nashville

In 1985 *The Advocate* selected Michael “Dolly” Wilson and his partner Steve Smith as among the top 500 gay leaders in America. They operated Nashville’s best known gay club, Warehouse 28, located at 2529 Franklin Pike, but their national recognition came from their early and loud voice for AIDS activism. Early in the AIDS crisis Georgetown University invited Wilson and Smith along with gay leaders from across the nation to a symposium where doctors wanted to inform them about the new “gay cancer.” Wilson waited silently until the question-and-answer section, and asked “Can any of you doctors tell me how a cancer knows you are gay?”⁶⁷

After that meeting Wilson and Smith decided they needed to spread the word, and used their Nashville business as a way to do so. Steve Smith decided that everyone who came to Warehouse 28 needed correct information about AIDS. He also began to share what was known with the larger public, if they cared to listen. The business became more than a nightclub; it was a hub of information for HIV and AIDS concerns. At the club Dolly Wilson would have people come up to him and ask him about the disease. They would relay their symptoms to him and he would urge them to go to the doctors and seek assistance. The need for Warehouse 28 to provide basic medical information and guidance highlights how the nation’s health professionals failed to provide adequate information about the disease, but it also highlights that from the very beginning the

⁶⁷ Michael Dolly Wilson, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

Nashville gay community was fighting back, thanks to strong leadership within the community.⁶⁸

In 1982 Lifestyle Health Services opened in Nashville, under the leadership of Bob Keller. They offered cheap and effective STD testing and education.⁶⁹ Bob Keller quickly became a local expert on AIDS throughout the crisis and offered education to people. His business too became a community hub for gay Nashvillians. When the tests for HIV became readily available in 1985 his clinic offered them immediately. Michael Wilson would carry around Bob Keller's business card and hand it to people who asked him for help. Keller appeared in several numerous different local television interviews to talk about AIDS. This television outreach included a panel series entitled "Portfolio" on Nashville's public television station 8, where other local leaders joined such as Gary Swinger M.D., assistant state epidemiologist; Adelisa L Panlilio, M.D., acting director of the American Red Cross, Nashville region; Terry L. Davidson, R.N., director of venereal disease control for the Nashville-Davidson county.⁷⁰

According to Hank Williams, founder of a local business called Balloons High, "If it wasn't for the drag queens and the lesbians, the AIDS virus would have been everywhere."⁷¹ Within the city of Nashville, the Drag Queens raised money and gave it back to the community. They held fundraising events at Warehouse 28 and other venues safe from harassment. According to one interviewee "we would raise the money (Drag Queens) and they (lesbians) would get the work done." Wilson recalled how lesbians

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Vickie Kilgore East, "Lifestyle Clinic Provides Alternatives," *The Tennessean*, June 21, 1982.

⁷⁰ Diane Bartley, "'Portfolio' Examines AIDS," *The Tennessean*, May 5, 1985.

⁷¹ Hank Williams, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

would advocate for the Queer community and worked getting information out and would even donate their blood.⁷² This advocacy took the form of protesting, passing out of informational flyers, and more.



Figure 11. Hank Williams. Source: Hank Williams Facebook Page

Tina Louise, a local Drag Queen, recalled that friends and/or family took care of people she knew who came down with the disease until they died. She felt safe knowing she was in a relationship, but she felt like she needed to do something. She began doing benefit shows and asking her friends to do shows with her. “There was no pay of course,

⁷² Michael Dolly Wilson, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

but you did it because you wanted to.”⁷³ She held benefit shows at a Cabaret gay bar on Haynes Street (discussed earlier). For her the work was personal as many of her close friends were getting sick and dying. They would raise money for individuals or for Nashville CARES.⁷⁴ Several other queens shared similar experiences. These queens would sacrifice their paychecks, their very livelihood, to help the gay community fight the disease, largely by providing better information than any other public source.



Figure 12. Tina Louise. Source: Tina Louise’s Facebook Page

In August 1985 this alliance of largely informal community organizers led by Steve Smith and others took the first steps to creating a more formal organization at a meeting at Bob Keller’s Life Styles Health Clinic. They decided in October 1985 to

⁷³ Tina Louise, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, November 2019.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

adopt the name Nashville CARES or the Council on AIDS, Resources, Education and Support. The same month they incorporated the organization as a section 501c nonprofit organization.⁷⁵ It is important to note that the Nashville organization existed for two years before the founding of ACT UP. Nashville CARES provided massive support for the gay community of Nashville. It sent out brochures inviting people to join their public social service. One person remarked to the *Tennessean* in 1986 that Nashville CARES was “most active community group in the state.”⁷⁶ Nashville CARES would host numerous fundraisers, some hosted at Warehouse 28, where they would have different activities and shows. For example, the play *Normal Heart*, an AIDS related drama came to Nashville; Friday ticket sales for the event went to Nashville CARES.⁷⁷



Figure 13. Nashville CARES Logo. Source: Nashville CARES website found at <https://www.nashvillecares.org/about/>

Nashville CARES would launch numerous different educational outreach programs throughout the 1980s. One of these included a \$5,000 grant gifted to the

⁷⁵<https://www.nashvillecares.org/about/>, accessed 10/15/2019

⁷⁶ Laura Milner, “State AIDS cases likely to double,” *The Tennessean*, September 14, 1986.

⁷⁷ Clara Hieronymus, “Acclaimed AIDS drama, ‘Normal Heart,’ opens Friday,” *The Tennessean*, November 30, 1986.

organization to mount an AIDS awareness campaign on Nashville public buses.⁷⁸ The outreach from Nashville CARES to the local community would affect how people perceived AIDS within the city. In 1987 alone Nashville CARES distributed over 25,000 pieces of literature on AIDS.⁷⁹ It allowed for the general population of Nashville to understand how AIDS was spread, what it was like to live with AIDS, and help people make a connection to those infected with the disease. Furthermore, it allowed for those who were infected to seek help and gain a level of support while they combated the disease.

In 1987 the city's medical profession stepped up by creating its own support program The Vanderbilt AIDS Project to combat the diseases and educate the general population about AIDS. Dr. A. Gene Copello, a professor of medical ethics at the Vanderbilt University Medical School, led the effort. This organization would not only research AIDS but sought to educate people of all ages. Copello stated that teenagers asked frank and honest question and their responses to him revealed that "we need to continue reaching people in the age group."⁸⁰ Vanderbilt's program warned that the spread of AIDS was a worldwide health emergency that demanded immediate attention. They called for widespread education efforts to combat ignorance and fear about AIDS.⁸¹

In the summer of 1987 AIDS activists announced a March on Washington, scheduled for October 11, 1987, to bring national attention to the epidemic and the needs

⁷⁸Sheila Wissner, "United Way to fund AIDS Agency," *The Tennessean*, August 27, 1987.

⁷⁹ Laura Milner, "AIDS fighters tells what's needed here," *The Tennessean*, October 15, 1987.

⁸⁰ Laura Milner, "Teens seek frank answers to AIDS," *The Tennessean*, July 3, 1987.

⁸¹ Bridget Kelley, "Worldwide AIDS education advocated at VU program," *The Tennessean*, February 5, 1988.

of the gay community. Michael Wilson was the coordinator for the Tennesseans who planned to join the march on Washington. According to Wilson, every state had a coordinator for the march at which the unveiling of the AIDS quilt occurred.⁸² The grassroots efforts within the city were like elsewhere in the country as over 200,000 people attended the unveiling of the AIDS quilt. Participating in the march was important as it showed that the southern gay community cared about people with AIDS, and they were fighting back with their northern brothers for lobbying for change.



Figure 14. Michael Dolly Wilson, taken ca. 2019, when he was in his early 70s. Source: Michael Wilson's Facebook Page

⁸² Michael Dolly Wilson, Interview by Philip Staffelli, recording in possession of author, Nashville, TN, June 2019.

Conclusion

Nashville's gay community in the 1980s were like many, many others across the nation. They faced homophobia as the outbreak of the "gay cancer," took hold and as federal, state, and local governments did nothing to combat the disease or educate the general population about AIDS. Nashville gays faced adversity and fought it head on. They banded together forming grassroots organizations like Nashville CARES to combat ignorance about AIDS and sought to educate the people of Nashville about AIDS, while providing low cost to free testing and providing a system of support for those infected with the virus. They developed their own system of support since they knew no one else would do it for them in a city still rife with discrimination. The community enacted the heroic narrative, as John D' Emilio has identified, as different groups and neighborhoods came together to create institutional strength and to establish their own place in the city.

Hank Williams and Michael Wilson still advise people to be careful of their sexual practices. When I interviewed the both of them, they both advised me to be careful of my sexual practices, to wear condoms, and be careful who I slept with. They advise all sorts of people to be weary of who they slept with. Wilson is still involved with politics. He watches the news daily, and is still involved with gay politics. When watching the most recent Nashville Pride coverage, an event he started in the city in 1988 he stated "oh, to see the seeds I sowed."⁸³

John Bridges, active member of the LGBTQ in Nashville, former writer for *the Tennessean* and current member of the Metro Historical Commission, was another

⁸³ Ibid.

individual I interviewed. I spoke to him about Trivida, an HIV preventive medicine. He advised that I beware of the medicine because the side effects were unknown. He advised that it was best to still not trust people and to be weary of these new drugs that claim they are preventative because you do not know how effective they are. John Bridges was a gay man and writer for the *Tennessean* during the AIDS crisis. He is the man who got me in to contact with everyone interviewed in this paper, and his advice is something this writer values.

Today the spread of AIDS is commonly understood. We have drugs that prevent the spread of HIV and provide treatment for AIDS that prolong life for years. In 2015 the U.S. Supreme Court case legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States. Same sex couples were able to finally be in the same room as their loved ones without going through any complications. But the need for community and awareness is still with us. Several of the individuals highlighted in this study for their activism 30 years ago are still advocating for the younger generation. It would be easy for them to simply admit they had advocated enough in the past, but that is not the case. Their experiences made them who they are, and their experiences in the AIDS crisis made them more cynical of trusting people within the bedroom or from medical field. The sense of community they achieved in the 1980s still provides a way forward some 30 plus years later.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE POINT? LIMITATIONS, AND WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The LGBTQ community within Nashville, has not previously been studied, therefore silences exist. Silences, or absence of mention or fact, exist within the historical narratives and are systemic. According to Trouillot, “silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation...the moment of fact assembly...the moment of fact retrieval...and the moment of retrospective significance...”⁸⁴ These silences therefore exist in every moment of historic creation. The moment a historic event occurs, individuals in the event become either narrators of events, or people who heard that event the happened, or storytellers, people who saw the event happen.⁸⁵ These multiple perspectives shape representation and analysis, and with time those problems effect the cultural impact of historic analysis. Trouillot’s theory allows historians to move past their defined role and reexamine cultural differences in the present. These cultural differences and silences exist in established systems, and the existing historic voice prohibits the abolition of these systematically. By understanding that our historic voice, or established historic narrative within historiography, does not show the whole picture, you allow yourself the ability to ask critical questions. Asking these questions about the past allows individual to ask them in the present.

This thesis has explored these silences. The LGBTQ community is still underrepresented within academia. Their stories are not told and are often overlooked,

⁸⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 5-8.

even hidden. Nashville is one such place. Nashville's LGBTQ community has not been explored in great detail; therefore a large portion of this thesis was uncovering information for the first time. A large portion of the evidence for this paper is primary as a result, mainly oral interviews with members of the Nashville LGBTQ community from the 1980s to the present.

This thesis argues that the political is personal. That in doing so the LGBTQ residents were able to form a sense of community in a city that had yet to embrace them. These desires to form community led members to create spaces where they felt safe and able to be themselves and create an identity for themselves. In the earlier years places like the Jungle and Juanitia's pathed the way for future spaces to prosper. This progression also led to the creation of spaces like Watch Your Coat and Hat, where the first Miss Gay America pageant was held. Or spaces like Warehouse 28 where drag shows raised money in the 1980s to help those afflicted with AIDS or to raise awareness about the disease. These spaces also spotlight some of Nashville's early leaders like Michael Wilson and Steve Smith. Wilson led efforts to inform the LGBTQ community about the AIDS crisis, helped organize the Tennessee's March on Washington, and helped create Nashville's first Pride Parade in 1988. Smith created Nashville CARES, an organization still operating, that helped thousands of people infected with HIV since its creation and educated the Nashville general population.

These people and institutions pathed the way for the current state of Nashville's LGBTQ community. Nashville currently has numerous gay friendly businesses and restaurants. Some are particularly for the LGBTQ community, though, like bars Tribe,

Canvas, Tracs and drag bar Play. The city hosts a large Pride Parade every year. Numerous organizations exist in Nashville now to help the LGBTQ community, like PFLAG, and a variety of resources linked to Vanderbilt University. The Nashville Public library has begun archiving numerous histories of the LGBTQ community for future scholars to explore. Nashville CARES still exists and helps those infected with HIV. Other organizations like Music City Prep Clinic provides services, free to those who can not afford it (the author being one of them), to the LGBTQ community such as STDs and STIs, HIV testing, and free medicine like PREP, a drug designed to reduce the possibility of infection of HIV by about 99%.

I would like to acknowledge some of the absences in this thesis. Firstly, the absent of voices of people of color and women. I found it difficult to locate individuals of color for interviews; they certainly existed but this project centered on institutions—places—where gays could gather. White men controlled and owned these properties and their stories dominate the narrative, meaning there is much more work to come to explore the fuller story of the LGBTQ community in Nashville. Other sources do exist but due to the time in which the project was researched were unavailable to the author, such as the Nashville Public Library's Brooks Foundation LGBTQ Project. This is because a large portion of those interviewees did not want their words misrepresented, therefore, the collection has strict copyright law. Lastly, the covid-19 epidemic, and the closing of many libraries and archives, shaped the gaps in this thesis published in May of 2021.

The omissions do not take away from what I found in gay life properties in late twentieth century Nashville. This thesis highlights gay spaces and places within the city

of Nashville. These places were highly visible to the community and served as beacons of hope for the gay community as they provided places for them to congregate and feel safe. These places provided a system of support during times of crisis, for example, during the AIDS crisis the Warehouse 28 owners would provide information and support to those infected with AIDS.

I have several public history recommendations for next steps. First, a preparation of a National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Nomination Form for Historic LGBTQ Places in Nashville, c. 1950 to 1990. What buildings associated with the formation of the modern Gay community still exist? What are the conditions of these properties? Do they merit inclusion in the National Register? This type of National Register overview could provide the basis for a published driving tour of historic LGBTQ landmarks in the city.

Second, if the properties no longer stand, the place still exists. Interpretive markers, similar to those for Juanita's on Commerce Street, should be installed. This is the next area of commemoration that the city of Nashville needs to add to its commemorative landscape, the Warehouse 28. A marker honoring the club's commitment to helping the city's LGBTQ population during the AIDS crisis. The Metro Historical Commission has a historic marker program—locating significant properties would help to “landmark” the LGBTQ story on the present cityscape. The published tour could also be translated into a robust website, that would be adapted to mobile phones and tablets.

A small traveling exhibit about the history of the LGBTQ community could be developed in partnership with various institutions. The Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University has developed many of these over the years. The exhibits could be displayed at Gay community institutions. They also could be installed at properties such as the city's system of public libraries and at such historic parks as the Parthenon at Centennial Park.

Organizing and digitizing important collections is also important. John Bridges Collection is a collection I organized the details of the life of John A. Bridges. It includes his correspondence, personal papers, and other details surrounding his life. In this collection I categorized his correspondence by person, removing staples and placing them into folders. For other documents I categorized them based on periods of his writing or where he was working. Other documents were separated based on type, such as photos. These folders were then all placed into Hollinger boxes for storage. This collection was organized through funding from Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation with materials provided by Rutherford County's Archives. The collection, according to John Bridges, will be housed at the Nashville Public Library. It will provide insight into the life of the man and Nashville. This a perfect example of a partner project that can help eliminate silences for future historians.

The point of this thesis is to highlight some of silences currently within the historic narrative. The LGBTQ community has not been explored in New South cities, specifically Nashville in detail. It uses oral histories and historic preservation to explore LGBTQ spaces. This study is the beginning of something larger than this project itself. It

is the hope of the author that others will pick up this thesis up and be inspired to illuminate silences that the author was unable to address.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Newspaper Sources:

- Bartley, Diane. 'Portfolio' Examines AIDS' *The Tennessean*. May 5, 1985.
- Bliss, Jessica. "A place 'where you felt safe': Nashville's first gay bars remembered with Historical Marker." *The Tennessean*. December 6, 2018.
- East, Vickie Kilgore "Lifestyle Clinic Provides Alternatives," *The Tennessean*, June 21, 1982.
- Hieronymus, Clara. "Acclaimed AIDS drama, 'Normal Heart' opens Friday." *The Tennessean*. November 30, 1986.
- Kelley, Bridget. "Worldwide AIDS education advocated at VU program," *The Tennessean*. February 5th, 1988.
- Louise, Tina. Interview by Philip Staffelli. recorded in possession of author. Nashville, TN, November 2019.
- Lynch, Michael. "Living with Kaposi's Sarcoma and AIDS." *Body Politic*. November 1982.
- Milner, Laura. "AIDS fighters tells what's needed here." *The Tennessean*. October 15, 1987.
- Milner, Laura. "State AIDS cases likely to double." *The Tennessean*. September 14, 1986
- Milner, Laura. "Teens seek frank answers to AIDS." *The Tennessean*. July 3, 1987.
- Peak, Jerry and Joe Heatherly. Interview by Philip Staffelli. recorded in possession of author. Nashville, TN, June 2019.
- Oermann, Robert K. "Homegrown Zoe Walker Adds Variety to Warehouse 28 Menu." *Nashville Tennessean*, December 2, 1984.
- Wilson, Michael Dolly. Interview by Philip Staffelli. recorded in possession of author. Nashville, TN, June 2019.
- Williams, Hank. Interview by Philip Staffelli. recorded in possession of author. Nashville, TN, June 2019.
- Wissner, Sheila. "United Way to fund AIDS Agency." *The Tennessean*, August 27, 1987.

Wissner, Shelia. "Miss Gay America Meet Slated Here" *The Tennessean*. May 4, 1973.

Secondary Sources:

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

Brier, Jennifer. *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

CNN's The Eighties. Streaming. Directed by Jack Kney. New York: CNN, 2016.

D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

D' Emilio, John. *In a New Century: Essays on Queer History, Politics, and Community Life*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.

Dubrow, Gail "The Preservation of LGTBQ Heritage." in *National Park Service's LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*. ch.5 (2016).

Epstein, Steven. *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

Ferentinos, Susan. *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

Giesecking, Jen Jack. "LGBTQ Spaces and Places" in *National Park Service's LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ch. 14 (2016).

Gould, Deborah B. *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight Against AIDS*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Handart, Christina "Making Community: The Places and Spaces of LGBTQ Collective Identity Formation," in *National Park Service's LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ch.15 (2016).

Hayden, Dolores. *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

Holloway, Pippa and Elizabeth Catte. "Rural" ch 13 in *Routledge History of Queer America*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Kazyak, Emily. "Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality." *Gender & Society* 26. no.6. December 1, 2012.
- Meade, Teresa. "*Civilizing*" *Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City. 1889-1930*. University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.
- Miranda, Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002
- Nelkin, Dorothy "AIDS and the News Media" *The Milbank Quarterly* vo. 69 No.2.
- Rosenthal, Gregory. "Make Roanoke Queer Again: Community History and Urban Change in a Southern City." in *The Public Historian* vol. 3 no. 1. February 2017.
- Rothenberg, David. "Can Gays Save New York City?" *Christopher Street*, September 1977.
- Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990
- Self, Robert. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003
- Shilts, Randy. *And The Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.
- Springate, Megan E and Caridad de la Vega "Nominating LGBTQ Places to the National Register of Historic Places and as National Historic Landmarks: An Introduction." in *National Park Service's LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*. ch.30 (2016)
- Springate, Megan E. "A Note about Intersectionality," in *National Park Service's LGBTQ America: Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ch.7 (2016)
- Stien, Marc, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Wright, Joe "Only Your Calamity: The Beginnings of Activism by and for People with AIDS." *American Journal of Public Health* 103. October 2013.