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THE SOUTHERN FRONT: GAY LIBERATION ACTIVISTS IN THE U.S. SOUTH AND
PUBLIC HISTORY THROUGH AUDIOVISUAL EXHIBITION

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of Southern Studies

The University of Mississippi

By

Hooper Schultz

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

This project expands upon the historical work done in the master's thesis "The Carolina Gay Association, The Southeastern Gay Conferences, and Gay Liberation in the 1970s South," and builds on its work through an examination of public history's impact for LGBTQ+ southerners. The audiovisual exhibit, both physically and online, investigates queer southern activism within the context of the Carolina Gay Association and its subsequent conferences, the Southeastern Gay Conferences. The public history work uncovers how activists remember their own involvement within the organization and how they were connected to national conversations surrounding gay liberation. The photography portion of the project represents the activists as they are today, some 50 years after the founding of the CGA, and places them within the present-day conversation on queer activism in the South, as well as the blurred line between public activism and domestic space. The paper stimulates conversation on how documentary processes can assist in historiography and archiving.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the activists of the Southeastern Gay Conferences, and especially to Tom Carr, Maria Helena Dolan, David Haltiwanger, Dave Hayward, Susan Johnston, and Dan Leonard.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Dr. David Wharton and my committee members, Drs. Jessica Wilkerson, Brooke White, and Andy Harper. I could not have financed my studies without the assistantship provided by the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies through a partnership with the Invisible Histories Project. I would also like to thank the Center for The Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi and the Southern Documentary Project.

Lastly, I acknowledge the steadfast support of the parents and siblings. Thank you for standing beside me always.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the two-year period during which I worked researching and writing my Southern Studies MA thesis on gay liberation in the American South, I thought often about a way in which to present this history to non-academic audiences, the broader public. In the 1970s, gay liberation took hold in the minds of many young lesbians, gay men, and other queer people across the United States. Part of a broader movement for the rights of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups, gay liberation pushed the boundaries of American society and changed the fabric of public life and family concepts in the U.S. in the late twentieth century. In the American South, the Southeastern Gay Conferences (SEGCs), later the Southeastern Conferences of Lesbians and Gay Men (SECLGM), were one such mechanism through which gay men and women organized culturally, politically, and socially in this moment of heightened optimism about the queer future of America. As part of my master's thesis work on "The Carolina Gay Association, The Southeastern Gay Conferences, and Gay Liberation in the 1970s South," I conducted six oral histories with activists who were involved in these developments.

Begun by the students of the Carolina Gay Association in 1976, the Conferences changed the Southeast by organizing one of the first public and open spaces for out gay men and lesbians to congregate, overtaking state-owned spaces like the Porter Graham Student Union at UNC-Chapel Hill. They also laid the groundwork for a multitude of cultural groups and Pride organizations. Ultimately, the conversations and political organizing led to a number of ordinance pushes in towns and cities across the Southeast, mirrored by similar legal appeals

nationwide. Their organizing faced immediate and concerted backlash. For instance, the gay activists of Miami and Dade County, Florida, emboldened by their workshops and conversations at the SEGCS, passed an ordinance to which Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" (SOC) campaign responded. Save Our Children contributed greatly to the anti-gay family rights rhetoric of the Religious Right in the late twentieth century. It also served as what David Haltiwanger referred to as a "shot in the arm for the gay community,"¹ uniting gay men and lesbians across the country against homophobia. The Florida Citrus Commission publicly announced its support for what had been Bryant's personal project, the Save Our Children campaign, in late 1977. Local groups who had National Gay Task Force (NGTF) connections then organized a national boycott of Florida orange juice. The national networks that had been formed by gay liberation organizing at the Southeastern Gay Conferences as well as media connections held by southern gay newspapers made the concerted effort against Bryant and Save Our Children possible.

For my MFA thesis project, I arrange portions of these oral histories to tell the story of the conferences, and of gay liberation, through a number of themes complemented by portraiture of the activists as they are today. This portraiture will be a new step outside of my work as an oral historian, allowing for a more nuanced examination of interviewer-interviewee relationships, and hopefully shedding light on the activists as shareholders and participants in historical documentary work. Through this audio-visual project, I connect the present to the past and show that the gay liberation activists of the 1970s South remained, for the most part, in the South and led full and complex lives.

This thesis connects the historical, academic work of "The Carolina Gay, Association, The Southeastern Gay Conferences, and Gay Liberation in the 1970s South," to the efforts of

¹ Haltiwanger, David. Interview with Hooper Schultz. December 12, 2018.

public history projects, historical exhibits, and documentary art as historical education. First, I give a brief analysis of the Carolina Gay Association and the Southeastern Gay Conferences, placing the six narrators within their temporal, political, and geographic contexts. Next, I examine the value of public history as a methodology for disseminating the work of historians in the academy. Finally, I discuss the photographic, audio, and web-design work that went into the creation of my thesis exhibit, “Pushing The Limits: A Southern Gay Liberationist Retrospective.”

Building upon the master’s thesis, I offer analysis of southern queer movements and subsequently American LGBTQ history by telling the story of lesbian and gay activists connected to the Southeastern Gay Conferences in three areas of the South—Atlanta, Georgia, the Triangle of North Carolina, and Miami, Florida—in the 1970s. Its starting point is 1970 with the Triangle Gay Alliance’s formation in Raleigh.² Paying close attention to the founding of the Carolina Gay Association in 1975 and the subsequent Southeastern Gay Conferences (SEGCs), I explore an alternative to the metro-centric understanding of queer activism in the 1970s and 80s. I connect the attendance at conferences to the Triangle Gay Association, Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, and other locally-organized activist groups from North Carolina to Florida to show that rather than being “lonely hunters” without political or social goals, queer southerners were in fact developing tactics to extend their rights and stake their claim to their homes in the Southeast.³ Finally, I discuss how the public history portion of this project, and the documentary work necessary to produce an exhibit, is part of the continued work of rendering gay liberation

² Other than one article published by the Oral History Review, (T. Evan Faulkenbury, Aaron Hayworth; The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina, *The Oral History Review*, Volume 43, Issue 1, 1 April 2016, Pages 115–137, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv073>) and my own masters thesis, these organizations and events have not been studied or written about.

³ James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

activist history legible as part of the civil rights history of the U.S. South, while simultaneously drawing attention to the living activists whose stories have been, up until now, largely left absent from the historical record.

Scholarship on LGBTQ activism in the South, let alone queer lives, remains limited. While some oral histories have been collected, less is understood about the connectivity of the movement between various groups across the region, and the shared resources that made living as queer folks in the South possible. Recent works by historians have begun to recognize the historiographical bias of queer history towards the bicoastal metropolises of San Francisco and New York City, but continue to view early queer activism as a distinctly urban phenomenon.⁴ I hope to expand this new trend of queer history critique by focusing on the actions of queer activists in a region largely thought of as backwards, conservative, and devoid of discernible queer communities in the twentieth century. This research examines cross-state coalitions built by student organizers and other activists, focusing specifically on the Carolina Gay Association and its predecessors and contemporaries in the Triangle area of central North Carolina. It then examines how the Southeastern Gay Conferences created by these groups functioned to spread ideas and community foundations throughout the region. Some of these local actions resulted in national attention.⁵

The National Council on Public History defines public history as “the many and diverse ways in which history is put into the world.”⁶ We can understand public history through efforts

⁴ Timothy Stewart-Winter. *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

⁵ Bob Kunst, a Miami gay liberation activist, attended SEGC workshops on non-discrimination ordinances, which ultimately led to the passing and subsequent repeal of the Miami-Dade non-discrimination ordinance, which rose to national attention through Anita Bryant’s “Save The Children” campaign. I will explore this further through oral histories collected with several activists.

⁶ “What is Public History?” National Council on Public History. <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/> (March 2020)

such as museum exhibits, colloquia on historical topics, public lectures, battlefields, television documentaries, memorials and public archives. It includes “the myriad ways that history is consumed by the general public,”⁷ meaning, non-academics. Public history on the Queer U.S. South is, similarly to queer historiography, under-funded and sparse. This is not only true in the region, but in national examination of the history of queer organizing across the United States. Organizations such as the Invisible Histories Project⁸ based in Birmingham, Alabama, and the LGBT+ Archives of Louisiana in New Orleans⁹ are working to publicize the historic and present-day contributions of queer southerners and organizations in the U.S. South.

Frameworks and Methodology

Throughout the thesis, I consider how queer suburban sensibilities, as queer studies scholar Karen Tongson has explored, influenced a sense of action and willingness to take up space for young student activists in the South and lesbian-feminists in Atlanta.¹⁰ I take up how the realities of living outside of major coastal urban industrial centers exerted influence on the development of queer networks in the South, making use of the work of Scott Herring and Doreen Massey, among others.¹¹ As Jaime Harker says, “‘Sense of place’ has often been a traditional way of understanding the distinctiveness of the South, but feminist and queer geographers have shown that space is anything but natural; the organization and imagination of space is deeply implicated in existing power structures and ideologies.”¹² Oral history interviews

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Invisible Histories Project.” Invisible Histories Project. [Invisiblehistory.org](https://invisiblehistory.org) (March 2020)

⁹ “LGBT+ Archives Project of Louisiana,” LGBT+ Archives Project of Louisiana. <https://www.lgbtarchiveslouisiana.org/> (March 2020)

¹⁰ Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. New York City: NYU Press, 2011.

¹¹ See Doreen Massey, *For Space*. London: Sage Publications, 2005. and Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

¹² Jaime Harker, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2018.

have provided me with one route to understanding activists approaches to organizing, and how they understood themselves as both members of local communities as well as individuals in a far larger national moment.¹³

Oral history interviews helped me to understand activists' memories, experiences, and stories as part of a broader historical context. I conducted a total of twelve interviews with activists and organizers for various groups in the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, NC) as well as in Atlanta and Florida. Some of these activists grew up in the region, while others moved to the region for higher education or to tap into activist communities. I focus on the area of Atlanta, the Triangle, and Miami within the South because they were the locations of a range of queer organizations that were tied directly to the SEGCs, as well as nationally publicized political actions concerning LGBTQ rights. I used resources and information available through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Oral History Project (SOHP) and Student Activities Archives to contact potential interviewees, and then followed their direction to find others. I would be remiss to not thank Chris McGinnis, a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the 1990s, for his extensive work recording the oral histories of gay men in the Triangle. I have relied heavily on the insights of now-gone gay rights activists featured in his interviews, which are housed at the SOHP. The oral histories that I have made throughout the course of this project reappear both in the physical exhibit as well as online as a part of the audiovisual exhibit.

I also use archival sources including newsletters, conference programs, pamphlets, organizational foundation documents, and records compiled at Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill, along with personal papers and more information about the CGA and SEGC from

¹³ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?" *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 45-58.

interviewees' personal collections, which I am collecting to donate to the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library. Local gay newspapers such as Triangle-based *The Front Page* and the Charlotte *Free Press*, magazines such as *Lambda*, and others provide more regional details about how actions were being perceived by the broader queer community. They also point to how gay men and lesbians in the region were interconnected, imagining themselves as part of not only local and regional communities that cared about one another and had similar goals, but party of a national movement that pushed simultaneously for wins at the federal level and gains at the municipal level. Major regional newspapers such as the *News and Observer* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* provide context outside of queer organizing. The *Daily Tar Heel*, UNC-Chapel Hill's student newspaper, provided a wealth of coverage about the early days of the CGA, "gay issues" of the time in general, and the formation and straight reception towards the SEGCS on UNC's campus in 1976 and '77.

I was aided in photographic portraiture for this project by the Southern Documentary Project program at the Center of the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Documentary portraiture of the narrators, who were gay liberation activists at the Southeastern Conferences, helps to situate them as living actors in the continued struggle for LGBTQ+ as well as other human and civil rights in the U.S. South. For the purposes of this project, I used environmental portraiture, portraiture that seeks to encapsulate the subject within their personal world. The aim of environmental portraiture is to give the viewer, in this case the public, a sense of the portrait subject beyond their physical being.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into two distinct chapters. First, I summarize my master's thesis's historical work, tracing the founding of the Carolina Gay Association (CGA) At the University

of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, its coalescing with other gay liberation and lesbian-feminist activist groups in the Southeast at the Southeastern Gay Conferences, and outcomes of the first three great convergences of queer Southern activists. The narrative is organized chronologically. This first chapter provides a brief backdrop of national gay liberation and the political climate that led to the formation of various queer groups as well as opposition to their formation, either by student government, the North Carolina General Assembly, or related institutions. It then lays out how the CGA activists pushed hard for recognition and protection in their community, and how they decided to put on the first SEGC, before turning to focus on the Southeastern Gay Conferences of 1976, 1977 and 1978. I examine the events that occurred during these conferences as well as the issues that emerged from them.

The second chapter recounts the choice to reevaluate the usefulness of this work as a strictly academic research project, and the merits of public history and documentary work to raise awareness about the contributions of gay liberation activists in the U.S. South. I argue this through a review of the theoretics of public history and objectivity in documentary arts. Finally, I discuss the successes and failures of the documentary project. Through this public chronicling of a major organizing conference for gay liberation throughout the Southeast, I seek to show community members how local and regional organizing gives us context for understanding how gay men and lesbians in the South understood themselves as part of a national movement and also a distinct local movement with site-specific goals. The practical result of this, I hope, will be to remember, and by remembering, inspire. I also shed light on how individual gay liberationists and lesbian-feminists were (and are) imagining themselves and their region in the face of conservative rhetoric that fronted the South as the bastion of “family values.” Through our work together, the narrator/subject and I work to bridge the false dichotomy between values of family

life and the dream of a queer future in the South. The narrator/subjects continue, through their contributions to this project, to aim their activism towards altering the course of American society.

CHAPTER I

THE CAROLINA GAY ASSOCIATION & THE SOUTHEASTERN GAY CONFERENCES

In the accepted narrative of the gay rights movement in the United States, New York City's Stonewall Riots are a watershed moment. “*Something* had happened, was happening, all around us.”¹⁴ However, this event did not occur out of thin air. Stonewall was the result of community frustration, the last straw after nights of raids on New York City gay bars, where patrons would be shown on the nightly news and booked at the local police station for various crimes, such as no same-sex dancing, disturbing the peace, and cross-dressing. As activist Tom Carr, who grew up in a New York suburb, said: “The riots didn't just happen, you know, one night. Over the course of many months leading up to the riots there were raids on all these bars and as a teenager you know, night after night, I would see on the evening news coverage of people being busted in bars and dragged away in paddy wagons.”¹⁵

The new gay liberation ethos growing out of leftist organizing across the nation, especially the Deep South's civil rights movement as well as older homophile political organizing along the east coast, had spread a heightened sense of momentum through the bars and informal social networks of gay men and women in the 1960s and early '70s. In the cities of Raleigh and Durham, and the university town of Chapel Hill — North Carolina's Triangle area — gay men and especially lesbians found a place to establish their communities and engage in an

¹⁴ John D'Emilio, Preface to *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

¹⁵ Tom Carr. Interview with Hooper Schultz. August 9, 2018.

arts community bolstered by the liberal-leaning academic environs and state government jobs. They were among numerous gay and lesbian communities that thrived in the South, especially in its working-class cities such as Birmingham, its port cities such as Charleston, and the many college towns dotting the southern states. In Chapel Hill, Carolina Gay Association (CGA) activists saw overcoming the silence surrounding homosexuality as fundamental to their struggle for rights. “Probably the biggest problem that we face is the invisibility of being gay,” said CGA chairperson Don Chauncey in a 1975 interview with the *Daily Tar Heel*, UNC-Chapel Hill’s student newspaper.¹⁶

Gay men and women organizing in opposition to the late 1960s’ repressive climate founded the Duke Gay Alliance (DGA) in 1972 and its Lesbian Rap Group, which split off to become Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists or TALF in 1973.¹⁷ The DGA announced its intent to form as a result of similar Gay Liberation Front groups organizing at schools such as Columbia and Michigan.¹⁸ The DGA was not able to self-sustain—it folded after its first groups of students left and restarted a number of years later. TALF, however, continued for many years. In February of 1974, the Carolina Gay Association (CGA) formed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—the oldest still-functioning student group of its kind in North Carolina and one of the oldest in the nation.

Birthered early in the spring semester of 1974, the CGA had its roots in a gay awareness rap group. Rap groups were loosely organized student-led groups that focused on mutual

¹⁶ Dave Duckett, “Homosexuality: The controversy of the shadowy sex might not be over yet.” *Carolina*, October 23, 1975. Box 1, Clippings, Carolina Gay Association Records #40491 Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ “Notes Toward a History,” *Feminary* 9, 1 (1978): 26-28, 56, as cited by James T. Sears in *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 346.

¹⁸ “Duke Gay Alliance,” *Student Organizations of Duke University [1972-1973]*, pg. 25, News Service Subject Files, 1930-[ongoing]., Duke University’s University Archives, 1st 9: D Box 118, Durham, NC.

support, peer counseling, and working on the shared problems of a group of individuals. One of many such consciousness-raising groups popularized by the women's movement of the time, it was officially recognized by Dean of Student Affairs Donald Boulton on Friday, September 6, 1974. The group wasted no time in getting things started, holding a "Grand Opening" party ten days later in the basement of the graduate dormitory, Craige Hall.¹⁹ Students also distributed posters around campus that, in a coy nod to Greek Life, featured three of the Greek letter lambda, λ. "RUSH to the Carolina Gay Association OPEN HOUSE," said the poster, another play on Greek fraternity and sorority rush processes. The next line encouraged readers to "come out" to Craige Green Room, another double entendre imploring gay students to be proud of their identities. Speakers were advertised and refreshments were promised.²⁰

The CGA's founders included a number of graduate students. Tom Carr was a first-year graduate student in botany at the time, beginning his first semester in the fall of 1974. Carr saw one of these first flyers, a yellow eight-by-eleven sheet of paper stuck to his dormitory wall. "I think it was for the gay awareness consciousness raising [group] which Dan Leonard was instrumental in. It may have been for Carolina Gay Association." Carr was newly out of the closet and eager to make new friends after moving to North Carolina from New Jersey. He immediately got involved with the new organization. "At any rate it was for something, so you know I went to the first meeting which was very conveniently located in the graduate dorm.... Same place I lived."²¹

CGA members recognized the group's unique historical and political position. Two of the members of the CGA had gone to Rutgers University in New Jersey where the Rutgers

¹⁹ "Gays recognized by Dean Boulton" *The Daily Tar Heel*, September 10, 1974.

²⁰ CGA poster reprinted in *The Daily Tar Heel*, Vol. 83, No. 12. September 13, 1974. p. 1.

²¹ Tom Carr. Interview with Hooper Schultz. 9 August 2018.

University Homophile League (RUHL) had been active since at least 1970. “There were some graduate students from New Jersey – who they knew exactly what they were doing,” remembered one local politician who was sympathetic to the CGA and impressed with their effectiveness.²² Emboldened by the victory and quick mythology of the Stonewall Riots, activists encouraged by youth movements began to found groups across the country.

Later, historians would see the gay liberation and homophile movements as distinct and often opposing threads of gay rights activism. However, the CGA’s student activists involved themselves with and borrowed from both, oftentimes seeing them as one continuous movement. Framing themselves in the liberation model popularized by Black Power and Civil Rights organizers as well as the women’s movement, the CGA’s application for recognition stated about gay students: “This sizable – but often unseen – minority can benefit from University recognition in the same ways as the Association of Women Students and the Black Student Movement benefit women and Blacks [sic] respectively.”²³

The CGA’s founders recognized that the men in their rap group at the Campus Lutheran Center craved recognition as a group worth their salt. “Such a group needs the dignity and legitimacy which comes with formal University recognition as a valid organizational entity,” they wrote in their application to the Dean of Student Affairs. They saw themselves as filling an explicit need for fellowship, camaraderie, and mutual support at UNC. According to the numbers, they were right. The CGA grew quickly, from 25 rap group members in the spring of 1974 to between 75 and 100 CGA members in its first year.²⁴ Despite early resistance, the CGA

²² Interview with Joseph A. Herzenberg by Joseph Mosnier, 27 July 1995. A-0381 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²³ Application for Recognition, July 29, 1974. Carolina Gay Association Records. Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁴ “Gay Society Triples Growth” by Tim Pittman. *Daily Tar Heel*, September 3, 1975.

remained an integral part of student life on campus, despite name changes and the inevitable turnover of student activists every four years. In the mid-1990s, a local gay politician asserted that the CGA remained “the most important gay organization in the state.”²⁵

Yet the CGA did not grow to be the institution it became without a fight. Before funding had even been allotted to the group, other entities on campus questioned whether they should be allowed to receive funds from student government. Less than a week after the CGA’s admittance as a campus organization, Student Body President Marcus Williams told the *Daily Tar Heel*, UNC’s student newspaper, “an organization composed of anonymous members requesting SG [Student Government] funds ‘might be sorely disappointed,’” referring to the CGA’s practice of respecting the privacy of members who may not be out to all friends, coworkers, and family by not providing the university with official membership lists.²⁶

Within, the CGA continued to struggle with issues of racial diversity and gender inclusion. White women became more substantial participants by the organization’s third year, including a president, Karen Peterson.²⁷ In its early years, there were no Black student leaders in the CGA. As time wore on, this whitening of the organization, coupled with the history of segregation in the South, led few if any Black UNC students to join the ranks of the CGA. Black gay students at UNC describe “pressure to make a choice,”²⁸ to identify as either Black *or* gay. Many chose the Black Student Movement and its male choir, known as a haven for Black gay

²⁵ Interview with Joseph A. Herzenberg by Joseph Mosnier, 27 July 1995. A-0381 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁶ “Gay association faces problems getting funds,” by CB Gaines, *Daily Tar Heel*, September 13, 1975.

²⁷ *Lambda: The Newsletter of the Carolina Gay Association*, Vol. 2, No. 3. May 1977. in the Carolina Gay Association Records #40491, University Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁸ Randall Kenan, interview by Turner Henderson, February 20, 2014, N-0032, in SOHP Collection #4007, SHC.

students, instead of the CGA.²⁹ Although not specifically named as a white organization, queer spaces and organizations are oftentimes marked as such in other ways. As other scholars have noted, many homophile and gay liberation spaces were white and difficult to access for queers of color. “Gay rights” organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign today continue to be named and created in ways that are coded as white and middle-class.³⁰ Despite its relative racial homogeneity, the CGA continued to support Black students on campus, and dialogued at various conferences about the need its members saw within the group for racial diversity. However, the CGA’s well-intentioned efforts did not always garner results.

The CGA faced a number of obstacles as it grew and asserted itself within its first year as an official student group. Before the fall semester began in 1975, it grappled with the position of gay women within its organization, critiqued male-centric leadership, struggled with funding and other institutional hurdles, and saw little to no coverage of its meetings or events by any news source other than the *Daily Tar Heel* and other campus affiliates. The activists worked hard to rectify these problems, many of the graduate students neglecting their studies to pour themselves into the fledgling group. But not all of these problems came from outside the group or UNC-CH gay community.

Women’s issues were a major sticking-point for the early organization of the CGA, whose founders were mostly white males. However, lesbian-feminists organized to make their concerns known, and the CGA responded openly. On a Monday in February of 1975, about 10 student members of TALF, the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists, arrived at a CGA meeting.

²⁹ Evan T. Faulkenbury, Aaron Hayworth; The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina, *The Oral History Review*, Volume 43, Issue 1, 1 April 2016, Pages 115–137, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv073>

³⁰ Anne Balay. *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018

Their party composed a substantial number for a meeting of forty in total. The TALF members were there to protest perceived exclusion.³¹ We can imagine that the women accused the political and social wings of the CGA of misogyny, and of focusing solely on the needs of gay men to the detriment of women students. Such conversations happened often over the course of the 1970s in southern gay liberation circles, Susan Johnston and Minnie Bruce Pratt remembered.³² By the end of the meeting, the all-male, all-white organization of the CGA had recognized and accommodated the concerns of the lesbian-feminists. Nonetheless, the TALF members rejected their offer for inclusion, instead saying that they would continue to work separately as they still felt oppressed by the men of CGA.³³

At the end of its first year, CGA helped to pass one of the first non-discrimination ordinances in the country. Despite the historic nature of the event, their efforts received no press at the time, and seemed even in the minds of activists remembering their days at the CGA to be a blip. Yet in September of 1975, Chapel Hill's town council passed an employment non-discrimination ordinance that protected gay men and women explicitly in public employment. Several CGA students simply showed up to the town council meeting, sitting in the audience, and when the time came for commentary on the proposed improvements to the current ordinance, which did not include sexual orientation, asked that "sexual and affectational preference" be added to the list of protected identities. At the time, only three municipalities in the nation—East Lansing and Ann Arbor in Michigan, and Washington, D.C.—had passed any protections for LGBTQ people.

³¹ Tim Pittman, "CGA notes some progress," *The Daily Tar Heel*, February 5, 1975.

³² Susan Johnston, Interview with Hooper Schultz. August 9, 2018. and Minnie Bruce Pratt. Interview with Hooper Schultz. March 9, 2019.

³³ Ibid.

The Southeastern Gay Conferences were the largest and most ambitious of all of the myriad actions that the CGA and other affiliated gay liberation student and community groups worked towards in the early years of North Carolina's gay rights movement. One of the most far-reaching in terms of size and geographic reach, it started quite humbly in the Quaker Friends Meeting House in Chapel Hill with a group of graduate students. A Human Sexuality Information Counseling and Services (HSICS) rap group's 12-week-long cycle was ending. At the final meeting, Tom Carr proposed a new event to bring their discussions public—the Southeastern Gay Conferences.

Carr, a white CGA member and botany graduate student from New York, had been at Rutgers as an underclassman when the Rutgers University Student Homophile League had organized a series of conferences for gay students and other gay people in the Tri-State area. The first of these conferences was called the "Conference on Gay Liberation."³⁴ Carr carried the formatting for his new conference directly from what he remembered in New Brunswick. "Same basic layout of a weekend conference with Friday night registration and various social events either, you know, dance, cabaret, that kind of thing," he said. "Meetings, workshops, speeches, symposiums, displays all day Saturday, and on Sunday more recreational things like barbecues and picnics, what have you."³⁵ The rest of the CR group, including Dan Leonard, Susan Johnston, and other activists, agreed to the idea, and shortly thereafter, planning began, with Carr as Conference Coordinator.

The Southeastern Gay Conferences (SEGCs) would come to be one of the most influential of the CGA's myriad actions, projects, and political moves, continuing throughout the

³⁴ Tactics For Change: Results of a Conference on Gay Liberation (April 30 – May 2, 1971), 1972. Rutgers Student Homophile League. MssCol 18814; b.6 in International Gay Information Center Collection. Publications and typescripts, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

³⁵ Tom Carr. Interview with Hooper Schultz. August 9 2018.

1980s into the 1990s in one form or the other, traveling to cities and college campuses throughout the Southeast, and involving gay activists from across the country. In the space of the conference radicals, progressives, and more conservative gay people would convene and interact to form a multitude of other political organizations, social clubs, gay cultural forces, and individual connections that fed gay life in the South in the late twentieth century.

In the fall of 1975, at the last meeting of his consciousness-raising group, Tom Carr proposed a new conference event for the Carolina Gay Association. The CGA members present would emulate a similar conference put on by the Rutgers University Student Homophile League since 1970.³⁶ Although at least one member expressed concern—weren't things difficult for them as it stood?—the remainder of the group approved and in Carr's words, "insanity prevailed."³⁷ The CGA hoped to put on the conference in less than three months' time. The group set a date for the first weekend in April 1976. Organizing and hosting an openly gay public event was an admirable goal and astonishing triumph for the CGA less than two years into their controversial existence as a student group. "We were excited to do it," remembered Susan Johnston. "We thought it was cool and it appealed to our contrariness."³⁸ The Southeastern Gay Conferences (SEGCS) would prove to be one of the most powerful organizing spaces for the gay liberation movement in the Southeast in the 1970s, and their capacity to create synergistic new cultural and political formations represent a unique moment in pre-AIDS gay rights activism.

The first Southeastern Gay Conference in 1976 was a success, with at least 300 attendees, according to the CGA and other groups.³⁹ The *Daily Tar Heel* reported on the conference,

³⁶ Tom Carr. Interview with Hooper Schultz. 9 August 2018.

³⁷ "Program of the Third Annual Southeastern Conference of Lesbian and Gay Men," *Rainbow History Project Digital Collections*, accessed February 12, 2019, <https://archives.rainbowhistory.org/items/show/1348>.

³⁸ Susan Johnston. Interview with Hooper Schultz. July 28, 2018.

³⁹ Nancy Mattox, "SE Gay Conference: Gays Discover Identity in Society," *The Daily Tar Heel*, April 5, 1976.

erroneously stating that the total attendance was only 20 persons. They corrected the numbers at the back of the next day's issue. The CGA newsletter *Lambda*, which was a result of the first conference, mentions the excitement of the conference planning committee in its October 1976 issue. Spirits were high as the activists headed home to their towns with encouragement, new friends, and new organizations to work with. The planners expected bigger crowds and better programming at the second annual Southeastern Gay Conference.

At the end of the second Southeastern Gay Conference, the Atlanta contingent, led by the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA), offered to host the next year's conference in their home city. The ALFA women had experience planning conferences through their 1975 Great Southeastern Lesbian Conference, themed "Building a Lesbian Community."⁴⁰ The Atlantans started by establishing a non-profit corporation to assist in fundraising and divest the conference process from its beginnings as an offshoot of the CGA. With the creation of a corporation called SEGC, Inc., the conference would officially and legally become "the people's conference." The non-profit also enlisted the support of a number of gay Atlanta lawyers to deal with any potential legal issues. By the time of the third conference in 1978, however, cracks were beginning to show in the façade of unity between the lesbian-feminists, radical faeries, and other gay people involved in conference planning, particularly the religious gay and lesbian groups like the Catholic gay organization Dignity. One such issue was the growing strength of separatism within lesbian women's circles. Lesbian-feminists began to assert their individual identity and did not want to be subsumed under gay men. They did not want to be called gay women any longer, instead choosing to be called lesbians in order to express their separate power away from gay

⁴⁰ Minnie Bruce Pratt. Interview with Hooper Schultz. March 8, 2019.

men.⁴¹ The planning committee changed the title of the conference to the Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men to reflect this ideological and lexical shift.

Activists later recalled how the conferences were not only necessary because of their political timing and efficaciousness — the fact that students and other activists in the Southeast saw themselves as a contemporaneous part of the rising tide of gay liberation, but because they afforded a new and equally radical social opportunity. They let gay men and lesbians from across the region meet others like themselves, forge new relationships, and for many, experience sexual encounters. Jim Baxter of the *Front Page* recounted how he remembered Dan Leonard, an early organizer, describing the feelings of togetherness that were fostered at the early SEGCS. “No matter what your organization's ostensible purpose, no matter how political, no matter whatever, the need for social contact,” Baxter recalled Dan saying, “the need for socializing in the gay and lesbian community is so strong, that that is always going to a subtext to everything you do no matter what else you are doing.”⁴² Quite simply, Baxter and many others felt, people were going to do what they could to meet other people like them. It was at the SEGCS that they were able to do just that.

The conferences have been described by some attendees as being important for the formation and coalescing of the nascent gay and lesbian community of the Southeast — a place where young gay men and lesbians met for the first time, learned about each other, and recognized their common political and social goals. Other key players in southern gay political activism, such as Bob Kunst of Miami, Florida, presented workshops.⁴³ Over the years, the

⁴¹ Tom Carr.

⁴² Interview number K-0840 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

⁴³ Southeastern Gay Conference program, April 1-4, 1977, Box 34, Folder “Carolina Gay and Lesbian Association, 1974-1985,” Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

conferences evolved significantly. All three conferences were political in nature and sought to organize queer southerners under the group banner of gay liberation activism, yet their relationship to gay politics as a cohesive group changed over the years. As different queer and political identities coalesced and grew as a result of the conference's capacity to connect individuals, those groups began to organize themselves and did not always see the value of working together. However, the conference organizers continued to seek to accommodate all of their wide range of attendees. Considerations towards diversity were made concerning class (Homosexuality and the Blue Collar Worker, in the Frank Porter Graham Student Union Lounge), kink (The Leather Scene, in room 213), and recovery (Gays and Alcoholism, in room 207), while the topic of race was conspicuously absent on the first conference's finalized schedule.⁴⁴ This definite lack of racial consciousness reflects the makeup of the Carolina Gay Association for many years, a predominantly white organization. However, by the second year of the conference, groups such as ALFA had increased the racial diversity of the organizing efforts of the SEGC, and the attention to race in the conference planning clearly shows this change in inclusion and outlook. For the conference's first three years, there were no major schisms over race as the activists of color either felt that their needs were met or felt as though their numbers were not large enough within gay liberationist circles in the South to voice their concerns in a way that was heard.⁴⁵

Records #40124, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁴ Southeastern Gay Conference program, April 1-4, 1977, Box 34, Folder "Carolina Gay and Lesbian Association, 1974-1985," Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Records #40124, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁵ Dan Leonard. Interview with Hooper Schultz. July 26, 2018.

Political organizing, however, factored heavily into the slots of the breakout scheduling. According to *The Barb*, an Atlanta paper that advertised itself as “the news monthly for southern gays,” political organizing and the fact that 1976 was an election year was not lost on the SEGC’s planners. “It’s time we make our politicians realize that the issue of gay rights is a very real one in the Southeast,” Tom Carr told *The Barb*.⁴⁶ Similar articles advertising the SEGC in other gay newspapers across the Southeast. Perry Dean Young, as a much older journalist from North Carolina who had covered David Kopay’s public coming out, showed the depth of the conference and its reach to older and more established gay southerners who were not necessarily part of the liberation movement.

The organizers made sure to assuage the fears of non-activist gay men and lesbians that they would be putting themselves at unnecessary risk of being outed to their employers and families at the conference, but they also promoted a very pro-self-image vision of gay people. A reminder sent out from the conference organizers stressed that the list of registrants was kept strictly confidential reflects the continuing worry by lesbian and gay people at the time that they would be outed and subsequently lose their jobs or homes. The purpose of the conference had become clearer by the second conference, which billed itself “a celebration of the gay lifestyle,” a very dated phraseology from the standpoint of today.⁴⁷ Language about homosexuality, queer identity, and “lifestyle choice,” has evolved from a question of whether homosexuality is a socio-sexual choice to one wherein queerness is more often regarded as an immutable biological or in-born trait.

⁴⁶ “Carolina Gay Association Hosts S.E. Gay Conference,” *The Atlanta Barb*. March, 1976.

⁴⁷ Southeastern Gay Conference program, April 1-4, 1977.

The conference grew, and with its growth came an assertion amongst the CGA and other Triangle activists that the SEGC should not become a fixed local conference. A month out from the second conference, Karen Peterson, conference coordinator and later President of CGA, announced that more than double the number of registrants had signed up for the event than the year before. However, there was concern that many more would show up to register at the door. “There’s strength in numbers,” said Karen Peterson, “Outside of places like Atlanta or Miami, gays in the Southeast are more or less isolated. The size of the conference may be a revelation.”⁴⁸ The second conference was even larger than anticipated, and the organizers were extremely pleased with the geographic reach. However, from the outset of year two, they insisted that the conference not become tied to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. “Ideally,” wrote Karen Peterson in the Welcome statement, “it should move around the southeastern region to participate in the [sic] to organize the conference.”⁴⁹ The organizational load of the conference itself had increased. The student activists knew that the conference was too large an undertaking for the CGA to organize on their own, and that it should not stay in Chapel Hill year after year.

The conference organizers recognized their place in history, mentioning the historic nature of their part in Chapel Hill’s gay anti-discrimination ordinance, as well as mentioning repeatedly the “citrus holocaust,” referring to Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign, which was born in response to the non-discrimination ordinance passed in Dade County, Florida.
⁵⁰ Conference attendees and speakers Bob Kunst, Bob Basker, and Irving Weinsoff were explicitly part of the group of gay activists responsible for getting the Florida ordinance passed,

⁴⁸ *Lambda* Vol. 2 No. 2 March-April 1977, Folder “Lambda newsletter, 1976-1983 (bulk 1976-1980)” Carolina Gay Association Records, 1974-1983, #40491, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁹ Southeastern Gay Conference program, April 1-4, 1977.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

and as it was repealed due to Bryant's efforts, they shored up support from the Southeastern Gay Conference networks as well as nationwide.⁵¹ Groups such as the North Carolina Gay Union organized car-pool systems and in some cases rented buses to make the trip to Atlanta.

Gay liberationists and lesbian-feminists positioned themselves in coalition with other oppressed minorities, offering workshops on this issue at the conference and stating their belief that they were all working together in the welcome. Over and over throughout the literature of the conferences, the organizers and participants point to their alliances with other marginalized groups and their growing consciousness of what we would now call intersectionality.⁵²

The group mailed out an after-conference review from Atlanta and gave a one-page overview on how the organizers and attendees felt the weekend had gone. More than 650 gay men and lesbians had made the trip to the Atlanta conference, slightly fewer than the previous year. This decrease in total attendance numbers may have also been an outcome of the divisions that had rocked the coalition of gay groups. The report also reflected on a "heated Sunday morning feedback session" where issues such as getting men and women to work together, sexism, and non-activist gay inclusion were all discussed. Gay men's sexism and their refusal or inability to accept feminism ideals remained the most contentious issue of the conferences, as it had been for the two previous conferences.⁵³ By the end of the session, the lesbians and gay men in Chapel Hill and Durham, NC had again assumed responsibility for the conference. However, they were committed to finding a location in a state that had ratified the ERA, which excluded their own home state. Tennessee and Texas looked to be the possible locations.⁵⁴ The

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Combahee River Collective Statement was published in April 1977.

⁵³ Program of the Third Annual Southeastern Conference of Lesbian and Gay Men.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Southeastern Gay Conference, later the Southeastern Conferences of Lesbians and Gay Men, would continue to be a regional force into the 1990s, drawing individuals from all over the country and holding vast networking and political power.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men eventually transformed into the Southeastern Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual College Conference, which reentered the national news spotlight in 1996, when then Alabama Attorney General sought to stop the activists from meeting at the University of Alabama under a state law passed in 1992 that made it illegal for public universities to fund in any way a group that promotes "actions prohibited by the sodomy and sexual misconduct laws." <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/01/politics/kfile-jeff-sessions-lgbt-conference/index.html>

CHAPTER II

DOING QUEER SOUTHERN PUBLIC HISTORY

As I worked to record the oral histories of gay liberation activists connected to the CGA and the SEGCs in their current homes throughout the Southeast, I was struck by how the historical process served to disconnect them from the activism they had been involved in, and in some cases, in which they were still involved. They became, in the process of writing history, “historical actors,” rather than authorities on the subject, who were remembering. As Michael Frisch has said, I was searching for “shared authority.”⁵⁶ One of the great impulses of this project was my personal desire to push back against cultural imaginaries and accepted queer narratives that re-inscribe what Don Romesburg has called the “repressive-hypothesis-to-pride trajectory,”⁵⁷ a historical narrative that rather lazily places LGBTQ+ Americans within a neat movement from abject, repressive, and rural landscapes, i.e. the U.S. South, towards the urbane, liberated, and progressive city, i.e. New York and San Francisco.

Through this collaborative multimedia project, I hope to push against that narrative, through a combination of oral history and photographic portraiture, “towards a more broadly democratic practice” of doing historical documentary work and archiving.⁵⁸ Together, the narrator/subjects and I show that many of these gay men and lesbians moved from Northeastern

⁵⁶ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, State University of New York Press:Albany, 1990.

⁵⁷ Don Romesburg, “Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum,” *The Radical History Review*, Issue 120 (Fall 2014) pg. 132.

⁵⁸ Linda Shopes, “Sharing Authority,” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2003, pg. 103.

cities to the South. As a whole we examine how the history is more complex, relying on what the Lesbian Herstory Archives asserts is the queer “will to remember” a varied past with inconclusive memories that conflict with heteronormative, metro-normative master narratives.⁵⁹ I see myself as part of a larger history of social historians aligning themselves with marginalized groupings, hoping to expand those communities’ belongingness despite of national and local efforts to exclude and/or silence them.⁶⁰

In her essay “Another World Possible: Radical Archiving in the 21st Century,” Kim Schwenk declares: “History isn’t always filtered through published academic theory. It can also subsist as a personal narrative, reaction, or an explosive rant from a source not recognized within the scope of historical content.”⁶¹ I have had this sense, not so eloquently articulated, bouncing around my head since the early days of this project, as I have sought to tease out the nuances of gay liberationist experiences in North Carolina and beyond. Challenging master-narratives remains one of the goals of this project. This goal includes not only the inclusion of LGBTQ+ histories within southern landscapes, but also documenting the home as a radical space, showing that activists made use not only of public space, but their own homes to create the world they envision. As Rebecka Taves Sheffield argues for in her essay on “The Bedside Table Archives,” I want to complicate the idea of private versus public, of the private, domestic lives of these activists and their time after having participated in a major public activism organization. As Sheffield has said, this work seeks to “arouse acknowledgment that the line that divides the

⁵⁹ Kim Schwenk, “Another World Possible: Radical Archiving in the 21st Century,” *The Progressive Librarian* #36/37. pg. 55.

⁶⁰ Kwame Holmes, “What’s the Tea: Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History,” *Radical History Review*, Issue 122 (May 2015) pg. 56.

⁶¹ Kim Schwenk, “Another World Possible: Radical Archiving in the 21st Century,” *The Progressive Librarian* #36/37. pg. 55

public from the private, the intimate from the distant, is less crisp than we often draw it.”⁶² The domestic worlds that many of the narrator/subjects have constructed with their partners are radical in their queerness, and oftentimes directly reflect and celebrate their public roles in queer radicalism in the South as well. Photos of narrator/subjects such as Maria Helena Dolan’s collection of buttons and other political ephemera, and Susan Johnston’s Venus symbol ring illustrate quality this in the exhibit. The individuals’ personal affects reflect their politics and their public lives, and the items gathered in their public lives become a part of their domestic decorating.

One of the major goals of public history is to find a way to engage the community, to encourage investment from the wider public as well as from the subgroup about which the project or historical exhibit is focused. This is important in a geography such as the campus of the University of Mississippi, from which LGBTQ+ representation has been conspicuously absent up until the 21st century. Representation can be revelatory,⁶³ and it is a radical act in and of itself to present gay and lesbian activists as the focus of an exhibit in the Center for the Study of Southern Culture’s Gammill Gallery. Explicitly, this placement includes these activists in what is deemed “southern culture.”

My desire is to not only honor the past of the queer South, but to create “new possibilities for queer recognition” for the audience, as well as for the participants. The language of “belonging” was important to gay liberationist self-understanding in the 1970s,⁶⁴ and through

⁶² Rebecka Taves Sheffield, “The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture,” *The Radical History Review*, Issue 120, (Fall 2014) pg. 116.

⁶³ Don Romesburg, “Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum,” *Radical History Review* Issue 120 (Fall 2014).

⁶⁴ Stephen Vider, “‘The Ultimate Extension of Gay Community’: Communal Living and Gay Liberation in the 1970s,” in Raffaella Sarti (ed.), *Men at Home*, Special Issue of *Gender & History*, Vol. 27 No. 3 November 2015, pp. 865-881.

this exhibit, I will complicate what it means for LGBTQ+ elders to “belong” to both LGBTQ+ life and to southern history today. Anna Conlan writes that museum exhibits “can demarcate[e] who is legitimate or illegitimate; acceptable or unacceptable; worthy of grieving or not worth or grieving.”⁶⁵ As historians have complained about at least since Michael Frisch’s foundational book *A Shared Authority*, deep investment in a project or history is often a hard sell for Americans.⁶⁶ Here, I hope to widen that pool of belonging and legitimacy, and in the process encourage new investment in historical narratives of activism and of southern political participation.

As I began to imagine and execute this project, I wanted to be sure that I was presenting queer history to the public in a way that did not replicate the white supremacist and patriarchal tendencies of our society at large. I felt that it was important to acknowledge the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. South. Like the radical archive, public history work can have liberatory and revelatory implications for the audience, encouraging “collective memory to the extent of sustainability and continuity,” and promoting a more egalitarian, accessible, and inviting space for history to continue to be made and interpreted within the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. South.⁶⁷ However, this self-imposed mandate to honor diversity proved to be extremely difficult, given the realities of the CGA’s makeup at UNC and white privilege’s hand in the willingness of activists to be public about their sexuality in North Carolina in the 1970s. All of my interviewees are white, or white-passing, and four of the six are men. As Romesburg has said, “Without constant and specific diligence, however, holdings will always veer toward

⁶⁵ Anna Conlan, “Representing Possibility: Mourning, Memorial, and Queer Museology,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin, (New York: Routledge 2010) *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 261.

⁶⁶ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority*.

⁶⁷ Kim Schwenk, “Another World Possible: Radical Archiving in the 21st Century,” *The Progressive Librarian* #36/37. pg. 54.

those most likely to have the space, time, and sense of entitlement to claim a place in history — often well-connected white, gay men.”⁶⁸

Part of this project’s outcome has been the importance of acknowledging its limitations, and simultaneously the segregated nature of spaces such as college campuses and organizations in the United States. De facto segregation occurred during the time of the Southeastern Gay Conferences, but continues to be a problem in both college spaces and LGBTQ+ spaces nationwide today. As Dawoud Bey asks in *On Photographing People and Communities*, “How do you create something that empathetically cuts through that outsider-ness so that subjects are viewed as more than ‘look how different they are from me, the photographer, and you, the viewer.’”⁶⁹ My hope was to invite in the viewer, be that someone from the LGBTQ+ community or not, and recognize that the narrator/subjects I have worked with are not only individuals who have claimed the U.S. South as their home, but who have aged here, who have staked their lives and community here. Historians of gay and lesbian movements have worked to make queer history relevant by emphasizing certain places, sometimes sacrificing nuance of location or commemorating specific points in life, as Alison Oram has pointed out.⁷⁰ The narrator/subjects with whom I worked found themselves questioning the location-based narratives of gay liberation history as it is nationally known during our conversations. During more than one oral history, they remarked on the casualness of their activism at the University of North Carolina, while also recognizing that many in an imagined audience would find their existence surprising.

68 Don Romesburg, “Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum,” *Radical History Review* Issue 120 (Fall 2014).

69 Dawoud Bey, *on Photographing People and Communities: The Photography Workshop Series*, (New York: Aperture 2019). p. 23.

70 Alison Oram, “Going on an Outing: the Historic House and Queer Public History,” *Rethinking History* Vol. 15 No. 2, June 2011, 189-207.

I wanted to show that rather than being part of a disjointed, distant, or severed past, these individuals are still living in the southern communities they worked hard to change, rather than moving to other major metropolises in California or the Northeast. I continue asking the questions that Bey has posed in his photographic books: “Does one have to be gay and white in order to speak legitimately about [a white, gay] experience? Is it possible to make work with some common denominator that transcends lines of difference?”⁷¹ I believe that it is.

I hope to draw viewers in through my photography and invite the audience to sit with the oral histories and to consider the human memories therein, as they view the images of the narrator/subjects. My thought process behind this two-step immersive process is that making a photograph — more so in some ways than making an oral history — is, as Bey says, “inserting [one]self temporarily into other people’s lives, careful that the evidence and the breadth of their living [is] not completely disrupted by my stepping into their space with a camera.”⁷² I attempted to do so with both facets of my project, getting to know my narrator/subjects over a long course of time, such that they felt comfortable with me in their home as a friend rather than as an artist or documentarian.

This is critical for me as both an oral historian and a maker of images, because I believe that the recordings, both auditory and visual, are primarily the property of the narrator/subject. Investing in a relationship with the individuals I make this work with is both a duty and a pleasure. Learning from older LGBTQ+ southerners not only helps to inform me as a scholar, but as an individual and queer southerner myself. I am making these images and choosing these recordings out of a desire to preserve history and learn from the past. Part of that desire is to

⁷¹ Dawoud Bey, *on Photographing People and Communities: The Photography Workshop Series*, p. 23.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 36.

share knowledge with others. Specifically, I would like to share this knowledge to the community outside of the academy, which is where the public and documentary portion of my historical work becomes so important to me.

In this project, the portrait is a performance of self for each narrator/subject, both as a historical actor and as an LGBTQ+ person in the present day, as an elder, as a member of the community in which they live. During this process, I was conscious that the idea of collaborative work, while attractive and egalitarian-seeming, is actually “personally and intellectually demanding, requiring an ability — even the courage — to deal with people and situations that can be difficult.”⁷³ Each of my narrator/subjects agreed to pose for their portraits with distinct purpose, choosing their location, understanding that they were part of a larger project series. In our conversations prior to photographing, I was conscientious in invoking the words “activist,” “elder,” and “LGBTQ” as ways to relate how I was seeing them. They also have used these words in their own interviews, showing their self-concept of identity within the community. There is a narrative being invoked, regardless of whether or not it is “authentic.”

The narrator/subjects have been a part of the creation of the historical text through the making of their oral histories and the reading of my thesis drafts, so their understanding of the previous iterations and conclusions made by the project brought a certain sense for each individual to the way they wanted to be seen in their portraits. Through this effort, I am seeking to broaden the scope of what is recorded, knowing that “the collection of records, papers, and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure.”⁷⁴ Hopefully, through this project and through close

⁷³ Linda Shopes, “Commentary: Sharing Authority,” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Winter – Spring, 2003) pg. 106.

⁷⁴ Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*, (New York: Seven Stories Press 1997) p. 523.

relationships with the narrator/subjects, I begin to complicate the fact of the biased archive in the U.S. South.

Maintaining relationships with the people I photograph and make oral histories with has been instrumental to the work that has resulted from the project.⁷⁵ I have maintained contact via phone calls, email, and text messages throughout the two-and-a-half year period in which I have been working on their histories. Oftentimes I call them, but they've also called me, checked in with questions about my progress and my writing, and even sent me their thoughts on my work in the mail. This has affected the narrative I've created, putting these actors in the forefront of my mind as I write, as I craft a narrative for a non-academic public, and as they ponder and push against my follow-up questions. The narrator/subjects' own thoughts on representation come to the forefront within the portraiture, where each individual shows how they thought of the photo-interview through their dress, their interaction with the camera, and their choice for setting, whether in their home, or in the case of Dave Hayward, not.

The relationship between the photographer/documentarian and the narrator/subjects has been an important part of my work. Each of the narrator/subjects within this project knew me throughout the course of my three-year project. We met periodically, and exchanged emails and Christmas cards, but not until the final months of the project did I make any photographs with them. (Minnie Bruce Pratt is the exception to this rule. We met at the Southeastern Women's Studies Association's annual conference at the University of Mississippi, and made an oral history recording there. I did not photograph her for the exhibition.)

Each photograph has both visual and narrative weight, some stronger than others. I have made choices to include or exclude photos of narrator/subjects in varying amounts due to the

⁷⁵ Dawoud Bey, *on Photographing People and Communities: The Photography Workshop Series* p. 62.

influence I see each photo or session having upon the overall series and audiovisual project. Each narrator/subject is represented in four images; however, the way that these images present the individuals or their lives is not identical in form or practice due to the collaborative nature of the project. For “Pushing The Limits: A Southern Gay Liberationist Retrospective,” I chose 24 total digital photos, four each from the six narrator/subjects who worked with me on the project. I chose a variety of images, each a portrait in some sense, portraying the interior life of the narrator/subject. The number four was chosen because I felt that it gave me a degree of control over the images being presented to the audience, but also showed more complexity in the interaction with the narrator/subject, helping the audience to see how I engaged with the subject and their environment.

The photos show clear physical and environmental differences between the narrator/subjects, begging questions as to how their lives diverged after the years of their involvement in the Carolina Gay Association and the Southeastern Gay Conferences. A critical aspect of my work as the photographer is allowing the subject to lead the image. Therefore, I did not specifically choose to photograph a particular moment to highlight or fit the narrative of the oral histories or the history of the CGA, but rather to provide context for how historical actors live today. This is important to the overall project in that it seeks to complexify the individuals who have made history, presenting them as regular people rather than as flattened characters who can serve a moral or narrative function in histories of the 1970s. The function of the photograph is to provide context to the interview portions in which the narrator/subject reflects on their own past and how it has affected their life to the present.

Each portrait attempts to give the audience more information with which to process the oral history clips, and through which to understand the collective action of the group while

seeing them distinctly as individuals with their own separate backgrounds and life trajectories, which simultaneously inform and limit their positionalities. The photographs do freeze them at this particular point in time. That is, scholars and/or audiences revisiting this project in the future will see these individuals as interpreted through this project. A viewer would see the image of the individual as they are now, rather than being able to see the longitude of their life, or see them, within this project, in their youth. The image of them in their old age is the image that is presented in the project.

All six sets of photos feature traditional environmental portraiture of the narrator/subjects facing the photographer. Five of the six are photographed within their homes, surrounded by objects that give the audience evidence of their life and interests. However, some images feature the physical individual, some their hands only, and some images show only the interior of their home. I made this choice for a number of reasons. The variety of images provides interest and diversity for the viewers. Interior shots of the homes of the narrator/subjects show how their activism in gay liberation translated itself into the domestic space, blurring the line between public and private. I chose the term “narrator/subject” to bridge the gap between the narrator position in an oral history recording and the subject as the focus of portraiture is often called. The slash within the term is meant to describe the duality of the individuals who I have interviewed and made portraits with. They are both the narrator AND the subject. I would not like to privilege either term, or documentary form, over the other.

Additionally, the circumstances of the project itself changed. I had planned to return to the homes of some of the narrator/subjects. I was planning to photograph them in more intimate spaces, or to photograph them again after acquainting them more with the idea of being in front of the camera. However, the coronavirus in the United States quashed these plans, made travel

impossible, and made the endangerment of the narrator/subjects, all older, too risky for the project to continue in the form of more photography.

As to the oral history portion of the project, I spent most of my time after making second, follow-up oral histories with my narrator/subjects editing and producing the audio clips from those oral histories that I wished to be included in the final exhibit. Editing oral history is a tenuous endeavor, as Michael Frisch has pointed out in his collection *A Shared Authority*, but one which I believe has merit, especially for a project such as this, which is less concerned with “supply-side” oral history, that is oral history specifically or fundamentally for an archival project. The follow-up oral histories which I made, in fact, are more specifically for this exhibitionary project and for the interpretation of public history. The individuals oftentimes situated themselves within the dominate narrative of gay life in the United States, along an abject-to-enlightened continuum that pointed to the move to bigger cities and college towns as a liberatory turning point for personal activism. However, their personal histories oftentimes contradicted or complicated this story. Many of them had already begun to engage with gay liberation prior to leaving their home states, and for some, their entrée into liberation theory was actually counseling, not public protest.

Narrator/subjects, despite their best intentions, oftentimes veer completely out of the standard “life-history” form of oral history recording, giving their in-depth thoughts on the politics of the present, interpersonal gossip concerning individuals whom I may or may not know, and their own day-to-day interests, which, while nonetheless important and an integral part of the oral history in its entirety, are not useful in a public history project, or, perhaps, in the making of history as I, a “historian” see it. Interpretive selections and attendant decisions as to what is “important” must be made for the sake of the legibility of the project. I learned this more

directly as I continued with the project. What snippets of the recordings, some over two hours in length, best represented the ideas I wished to convey? What pieces of the interview connected best back to the images I have selected from the portraits we made together? My hope is that the exhibit itself, primarily its online life, will call on these viewers, academic and non-academic alike, to question the impulse to view them statically or only as the sum of what is presented.

The oral history portion of the exhibit will feature selections from eleven separate oral histories that I made with the narrator/subjects. Two will be from each individual except for Dave Hayward, who only has one interview session. The selections will be roughly connected from one narrator/subject to the next, but I have not wedded the photo selections too specifically to named themes or topical groups. I chose to let the narrator/subjects speak for themselves, without naming themes, in the hope that the audience would make connections between the thoughts and experiences of each narrator/subject on their own. My hope is that the selections are different enough from one another that they help to imply the individuality of the narrator/subjects, showing that collective action does not mean identical experience. The audience will be able to listen to each audio clip through their smartphone, or through audio equipment provided with the exhibit, with the different individuals' selections listed and numbered alongside their portraits. Each set of portraits will occupy its own space within the exhibit, giving clear indication of the individuality of the narrator/subject at hand, and demarcating which audio goes with which portraiture grouping. The institutional space of the museum is not neutral or apolitical, although “[i]t could be the site of protest and also play an important role within the community where it sits.”⁷⁶ This has important implications for public

⁷⁶ Dawoud Bey, on *Photographing People and Communities: The Photography Workshop Series* p. 43.

history. The documentary artist can recognize the power not only of the image, but the location in which the image is presented to the public.

Upon entering the exhibit, an explanatory plaque will outline the project, the history of gay liberation in the U.S. South as seen through the context of the Carolina Gay Association and Southeastern Conferences, and the limited nature of the exhibit in contextualizing the experiences of activists and LGBTQ+ Southerners. Audience members will be encouraged to consider what questions remain unanswered to them as they walk through the exhibit, and asked to write submissions for further research, either through their phones, or on paper, as they exit. An online iteration of this exhibit will also offer space for visitors to volunteer to be interviewed for continued oral history recordings on the Carolina Gay Association and SEGC, arming community members with the means to disrupt “traditional archival practice that sees records creation as a passive activity,” and give archival power back to the individuals who have experiences to contribute to a broader understanding of gay liberation movements, as well as ephemera and other traditional archival materials.⁷⁷ In this way the archive becomes active and cooperative, rather than institutional and hierarchical. In the end, perhaps this project will encourage a new generation of historians, archivists, and activists to, as Howard Zinn has said, “take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, [and] needs of ordinary people.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Rebecka Taves Sheffield, “The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture,” *Radical History Review*, pg. 112.

⁷⁸ Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest.” pg. 528.

CONCLUSION

The Southeastern Gay Conferences and their later iteration, the Southeastern Conferences of Lesbians and Gay Men, were an important development for gay liberation in their region and in the nation. The “Southeasterns,” as they were often called in passing, were a way of disseminating information, gathering individuals from disparate areas together, and providing channels of communication and spurring wider community development, along with which came political awareness and shared vision of the national gay liberation movement. Individuals in the southeast were made to feel less marginalized, less isolated, and more part of a greater community through these conferences, as Steve Stone of Virginia Beach said in his letter to the CGA.⁷⁹ The groups coming together—although largely white— were from diverse cultural, religious, ideological, and geographic backgrounds within the Southeast and beyond. They held a multitude of different political identities in tension, allowing space for sometimes fraught discussion. Through intentional work and much practical theorizing, they worked to create radical space in the South. Gay liberation activists at the SEGCs argued about Marxism, violent resistance to patriarchy and capitalism, separatism, and other radical political standpoints while also devising plans for political action within the current governmental systems available to them.

⁷⁹ Steve Stone. “Letter to Howard Fradkin (*Lambda*),” *Lambda* Vol. 2 No. 3 May 1977 Special Conference Edition.

Additional oral history collections, especially concerning non-white attendees, non-activists, and a broader range of lesbian-feminists who attended the conference, will help in the future to understand the tensions among gay liberation activists and coalitional drives that allowed them to bridge their differences for the conferences. Archival work at the ALFA and James Sears records in the Rubenstein Library at Duke University will assist in answering future in-depth questions about what major organizations felt were impactful workshops at the conferences and how attendees responded to the speakers. Insight into the motivations and experiences for non-activist gay men and lesbians who attended the conferences are of particular interest to me, as learning about the feelings of activists showed that although many of them saw themselves as part of a broader national political movement, they also recognized that most attendees were more concerned with social and local aspects of the meetings. More general research into the Southeastern Gay Conferences, their impacts in their local communities, and the outcomes of workshops, panels, and meetings is needed. The conferences serve as an origin point for so many significant cultural and political queer American fixtures, including, possibly the Radical Faeries.

Throughout the project of translating this historical research into a legible public history project, my goals remained clear. They necessarily narrowed considerably as I began to understand the scope of the project and the possibilities that remained given temporal, spatial, and otherwise limitations. I hoped to create a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ southerners and for LGBTQ+ people in the South by exploring the history of one group of gay liberation activists through a public exhibit. The history of the Carolina Gay Association, a student-founded, community-led gay liberation conference series in the U.S. South, remains a powerful vehicle, in my opinion, for exploring the contributions of gay liberation activists in the region as well as the

national gay liberation movement through cross-country communication and gay liberation ideology's place on college campuses. The power of public history to explore this topic as well as to inspire and engage the public is a clear reason for this project's continuance, not only for the purposes of reclaiming the archive for southern gay liberation activists, but to encourage the community to question established narratives about the political and social history of the region and their place in national conversations.

In its execution, this project ran in to a number of hiccups relating back to the novel coronavirus or COVID19 outbreak in the late winter and spring of 2020. I was unable to revisit two of the narrator/subjects to make more photographs and visit the home of one due to the dangers of the virus and viral transmission, especially given the age bracket of the narrator/subjects. The changes to the University of Mississippi's physical campus due to the coronavirus outbreak also had major implications for the execution of the public history and gallery walk-through portion of this project. With the campus closed, the physical exhibit's launch has been postponed indefinitely for the time being, with hopes of a physical opening in the fall of 2020. The narrator/subjects and I as the exhibitor have been in communication as these choices have been made in response to the campus closing and the current public health situation. As it stands, I will work to create an online version of the exhibit, but the hope, in the end, is to still have the physical exhibit, as proposed within this essay. The physical space is important to the conceptualization of the project in its entirety and to the queering of the physical space of Barnard Observatory on the University of Mississippi's campus, reflecting the long history of gay liberation in the South through the presence of historical acknowledgement in the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.

Regardless of the problems associated with this unforeseen outcome, the historical and documentary progress on the project thus far has already begun its work of “queering the archives” and of providing an entry point through which the narrator/subjects can conceive of themselves as historical actors and members of a broader movement in the U.S. South for expanded human and civil rights. Through networks of gay liberation cells, cross-state travel for meetings and conferences, and a thriving mail-order literature circulation, gay liberation activists in the 1970s South created space through which LGBTQ+ people in their communities could find companionship, solidarity, and voice. This portraiture project intends to serve the same purposes as the conferences and individuals that it examines have served, as inspiration for LGBTQ+ southerners to stake a claim to their community through the taking up of space. This exhibit intends to build on the work of the narrator/subjects and create something new, a public history project that can inspire and inform, not only in the physical space of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture’s Gammill Gallery, but online as well, as a teaching tool and inquiry space for communities across the U.S. South and beyond.

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