

Why We Need 'Reclaim Pride'

ROBERT BAEZ

IN JUNE 2017, I co-organized an oral history fieldwork trip to document the Equality March for Unity and Pride (EMUP) in Washington, D.C. It was one of many mass demonstrations taking place that year following the inauguration of Donald Trump. EMUP was organized to coincide with D.C.'s Capital Pride, but the two remained distinct events. In finalizing the schedule of events our group would attend over that weekend, I came across No Justice No Pride (NJNP). This grassroots trans- and queer-led organization was hosting a "QT Night of Healing and Resistance" with the Trans Women of Color Collective, another grassroots organization within the District. We met dozens of black trans women and learned about their experiences and used oral history methods to record their stories, which are now archived at the University of Florida.

This was one of the first times I so clearly identified the gaps within our communities and the LGBTQ+ movement more generally. Black trans women face intersecting systems of oppression within a structure of white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy. They are routinely marginalized, and so they turn to one another to find and build community.

At the same time, just a few blocks away from this event, thousands of people were celebrating at the annual Capital Pride Parade. People lined the streets to watch the decked-out corporate floats pass by, dancing and singing along to the songs that were blaring from speakers. Later that weekend Capital Pride was also hosting a star-studded concert and festival. This contrast is worthy of note: in one space a grassroots contingent, organized for and by trans women of color to provide room for healing and resistance within the context of the growing number of black trans women being murdered for simply existing; in the other space, thousands of LGBTQ+-identifying people and allies celebrating "gay pride." What does this disconnect between the two groups represent within our community? What is there to celebrate when members of our community continue to face structural oppression? How do we begin to transform the ways in which we build solidarities across difference to reach for liberation?

For the past few years I have conducted participant observations and interviews with trans/queer activist organizations in cities around the country to better understand how they interpret the answers to these questions and participate in building a trans/queer intersectional movement. By tracing the history of pride marches—how they have changed over the years and the work that activists in various cities have done to transform them—it is possible to imagine what an intersectional march would look like.

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FROM POLITICAL MARCH TO NEOLIBERAL PARADE

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn was raided by police, which resulted in several nights of street violence and militant resistance. Activists and community members used this momentum to collectively organize actions through a series of meetings and ultimately founded the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) on July 31, 1969. Numerous members of the GLF participated in adjacent social movements like the antiwar movement and the Black Power movement. Others, however, viewed this varied set of commitments as a distraction from the central GLF mission of sexual liberation. This difference in ideology produced a division within the GLF. Those who chose a single-issue approach to their activism broke off and formed the Gay Activist Alliance in December 1969. These tensions are similar to those existing within LGBTQ+ organizing today, as infighting over the importance of marriage equality and the inclusion of our community in the U.S. military, to name but two contentious issues, illustrate the different ways in which people imagine LGBTQ+ politics, whether through a homo-normative, queer, or other lens.

Many mark the Stonewall rebellion as what "sparked" the modern gay rights movement, but it is vital not to erase those people and moments that created a pathway for Stonewall to be remembered as it is. For example, the East Coast Homophile Organization (ECHO) had been holding an annual march each Fourth of July in Philadelphia beginning in 1963. ECHO decided in 1970 to transfer this annual march to New York City, joining New York organizers in a march that was named Christopher Street Liberation Day. While it was held a year after the Stonewall Riots, the name was supposed to re-center the struggle for gay and lesbian liberation while moving away from



Photo courtesy of Reclaim Pride Coalition.

the mafia-controlled Stonewall Inn.

Other sites of resistance that predated Stonewall, both in 1966, included the “Sip In” at Julius’ Bar in New York to protest the state Liquor Authority’s ban on serving “homosexuals” and the Compton Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco, which erupted after police harassed a trans woman and she resisted arrest by throwing coffee in an officer’s face. It is within this framework that activists of the ‘60s and ‘70s organized political marches to claim public space for sexual and gender nonconforming people and to insert their politics into the public sphere.

Over the years, however, these once politically charged marches have been transformed to accommodate the mainstream masses. Corporate sponsorships have had a commercializing effect, turning marches into parades. The radical political critiques associated with organized trans/queer marches are rendered invisible through an aesthetic of celebration. “Pinkwashing,” as defined by Sarah Schulman, describes the process by which marketing and political strategies aim to promote products or countries by appearing “gay-friendly” and progressive. This helps explain why banks try to get parade-goers to open new checking accounts at these events, why McDonald’s employees will toss you a rainbow handkerchief with an enlarged logo on it, and why Lockheed Martin—a top U.S. military contractor—has a military plane-themed float in the parade. These are not public displays that aid in the collective liberation of marginal people, but instead drape the imperial capitalist forces of the U.S. in literal rainbows.

LGBTQ+-identifying people in the U.S. and around the world are continually marginalized despite several “progress” narratives. By drawing attention to oppressive policing practices and the commodification of our communities, some organizations are trying to reorient the movement through the symbolic vehicle of “Pride.”

TRANS/QUEER ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS

Before discussing the current situation in New York City and the need for an alternative Pride event, let me introduce two critical incidents that occurred in other American cities—Columbus, Ohio, and Washington, D.C.—and their aftermath.

According to their website, the Black Queer & Intersectional Collective (BQIC) “is a grassroots community organization in Central Ohio that works towards the liberation of black queer, trans, and intersex people from all walks of life through direct action, community organizing, and education on our issues, and creating spaces to uplift our voices.” Based in Columbus, the collective grew from mobilization efforts to free the “Black Pride Four” or “#BlackPride4.” During the Stonewall Columbus Pride parade in 2017, a group of black trans and queer protestors and their allies blocked the parade to demand seven minutes of silence in protest of the acquittal of the police officer charged with killing Philando Castile. Shortly after stepping out into the street, protestors were shoved with bikes, maced, and pushed to the ground. Although the group included both black and non-black people, only black people were arrested, namely Ashley Braxton, Wriply Bennet, Kendall Denton, and Deandre Miles. Video of the scene shows white onlookers encouraging the police to

take action against the protesters. The #BlackPride4 faced several charges, and the chair of Stonewall Columbus testified against the activists. Following the arrests, BQIC called for a boycott of Stonewall Columbus Pride and have now chosen to organize their own Pride event, Columbus Community Pride (CCP), which centers black and brown communities as a way to bring Pride “back to our roots.” BQIC rejects corporate sponsorships and police presence at CCP. At their inaugural event in June 2018, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Stonewall rebellion veteran and trans activist, was the keynote speaker.

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As mentioned above, a second organization that took action during the 2017 Pride season is NJNP, based in Washington, D.C. According to their mission statement, “We exist to end the LGBT movement’s complicity with systems of oppression that further marginalize queer and trans individuals. Our members are Black, Brown, queer, trans, gender nonconforming, bisexual, in-

digenous, two-spirit, formerly incarcerated, disabled, white allies and together we recognize that there can be no pride for some of us without liberation for all of us.” NJNP got noticed when they targeted floats by Wells Fargo, police, and military contractors with direct action during the 2017 Capital Pride parade. But their efforts do not end with challenging the mainstream Pride parade in their city. In keeping with their intersectional politics, they work to support the multiply marginalized in their community. By creating what they call the

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NJNP Collective, they work to provide D.C.'s trans and activist community with safe housing. NJNP continues to push for the removal of police and corporate sponsors from the Capital Pride parade, while also training a new generation of grassroots trans organizers through their Trans Justice program.

COMING TO NEW YORK: A PRIDE ALTERNATIVE

The Reclaim Pride Coalition (RPC) began organizing in early 2018 as a contingent of the gigantic mainstream parade, Heritage of Pride (HOP). After making several ongoing demands to HOP that were never met, the coalition has since decided to break off and organize its own march. Some of these demands included restoring the historic march route, dropping wristband requirements to participate in the march, and receiving an apology from the New York Police Department for its raid of the

Stonewall Inn. Also demanded was an acknowledgement of ongoing oppressive tactics against marginalized communities and the need for systemic change. However, RPC received little to no feedback from HOP organizers.

The Queer Liberation March and Rally, which is to take place on Sunday, June 30th, pledges to be an "activist march, free of corporations, politicians, and police presence" to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion. States its website: "The Queer Liberation March is a people's political march—no corporate floats, and no police in our march. Our 2019 march is a truly grassroots action that will mobilize the community to address the many social and political battles that continue to be fought locally, nationally, and globally." RPC is made up of over eighty organizations and has received support from activists—like Masha Gessen, Jennicet

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Russ Lopez on the Long History of Boston Pride

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

"IN 1620 Provincetown was a barren strip of land. What would a group of wayfarers, seasick and starving after a two month voyage to escape from what they considered to be a perverse England, have thought if they had known that the sandy cove they were setting foot on would someday feature drag bingo? ... What would have happened if they had foreseen that their religious commune, known for its draconian anti-sodomy laws, would become part of a state (Massachusetts) that would be the first to legalize same-sex marriage? ... Could these settlers have dreamed that the Charles Street Meeting House ... would house the first national LGBTQ newspaper?"

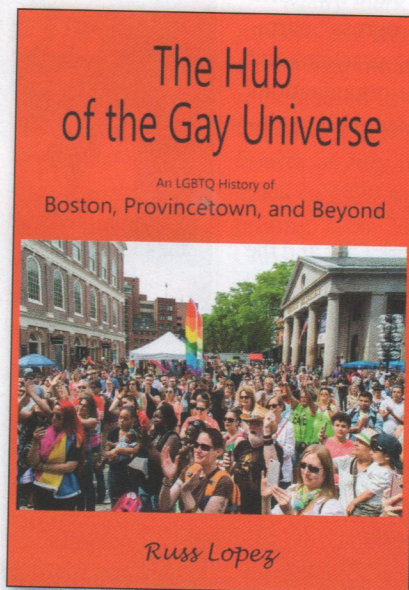
So begins *The Hub of the Gay Universe: An LGBTQ History of Boston, Provincetown, and Beyond*, by Russ Lopez, due out from Shawmut Peninsula Press in May 2019. From the Maypole of Merrymount in 1627 to the defeat of an anti-trans rights ballot question in 2018, the history, in Lopez' words, "includes lavish nightlife and nightmare repression." It has biographies of leading LGBT figures such as Ned Warren, who contributed his antique gay artifacts to the Museum of Fine Arts, and Blanche Lazzell and the other gays and lesbians who supported the Provincetown Theatre. It chronicles events like the secret Harvard tribunals of 1920 and the push for the anti-discrimination law that passed in 1989.

Lopez has studied, taught, and written about the urban environment, and has two previous books specifically about Boston, including *Boston's South End: The Clash of Ideas in a Historic Neighborhood*. He has worked in Boston City Hall and the

Massachusetts State House and has been active in politics and in LGBT issues. He is obviously the right person to have undertaken this history.

I conducted the interview with Russ, who is a friend, by e-mail.

Michael Schwartz: A central problem with writing LGBT history of earlier periods is documentation—finding and correctly interpreting the little evidence that has survived.



What is the earliest LGBT evidence you found where we have details like names, dates, and places?

Russ Lopez: Shortly before Europeans began settling in Massachusetts, a horrible epidemic killed ninety percent of the Native population. It is unlikely we will ever know that much about their pre-contact society. The Pilgrims settled Plymouth in 1620. The first mention of same-sex activity is in 1629,

and the first prosecutions were in 1636. The evidence presented in these first trials strongly suggest that there was a substantial underground of what we would call LGBT people by that time and most likely earlier.

MS: Another documentation problem is that most of what we have in earlier periods comes from white upper-class men and to a lesser extent women. We know about Harvard and Wellesley, but what evidence have you found relating to other LGBT communities in Boston?

RL: I was angered and saddened by the class, race, gender, and religion inequities in the evidence left by LGBT people, which don't really begin to lessen until the 1960s. Arrest records are some of the best sources for the non-elite, as are tabloids. Yet we also see glimpses of their humanity: two African-American men living together in the 1790s, men arrested on the streets around Scollay Square in a police crackdown in 1918, and people challenging gender norms in every era. There is some evidence, but the lack of it is a sign of the depth of inequality.


MS: The material about Harvard men and Wellesley women is wonderful in its detail, with tons of name-dropping. For example, in 1906, Abram Piatt Andrew, Jr., a Harvard professor, met Henry Sleeper, who designed for Joan Crawford and Frederick March. They were intimates of Isabella Stewart Gardner, while Henry James was welcome to stay at Andrew's Gloucester estate. Do you have a favorite well-connected couple from your research?

RL: The intellectual side of me wishes to have been a guest of Annie Fields and Sarah Orne Jewett. The dinner conversation about

Gutiérrez, Larry Kramer, and Chelsea Manning—and organizations from around the world.

The collectives in Ohio, D.C., and New York are doing similar grassroots work within their communities to challenge what has become the Pride Establishment. This activism is developing a social movement to “reclaim pride” by going back to our roots in recognizing that the struggle for liberation is far from over. Just as trans activist Sylvia Rivera led an alternative march in New York during “Stonewall 25” in 1994 to protest the exclusion of transgender people from the events, so too are these organizations pushing back against exclusionary practices within the activist community and commodification of the larger community as a marketing opportunity under capitalism.

The Queer Liberation March points to the future possibilities of trans/queer organizing by grounding its intersectional movement in radical traditions, most notably recognizing that identity categories are attached to specific life chances that need to be transformed through the power of community. With World Pride being organized by Heritage of Pride and taking place in NYC to celebrate “the beginning of the modern Gay Rights Movement,” it is more important than ever not to let our histories be reduced to a singular narrative, but instead to read them as a complex and continuous struggle for liberation.

The question is, will BQIC, NJNP, and RPC inspire the Pride Establishment around the country and around the world to focus more clearly on a collective liberation instead of choosing to celebrate the privileged gains enjoyed by only part of the community? 



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literature and the gossip about writers must have been rich! But the carnal side of me would want to be a guest of Piatt Andrew and Henry Sleeper. What gay man could resist parties and peepholes with such handsome men?

MS: There are also details scattered throughout that are especially delightful for anyone who knows Boston. For example, Charlie Gibson, who established the Gibson House Museum in Back Bay in the 1930s, liked to hang around the Park Street subway station to pick up shoeshine boys. Do you have any favorite details like that?

RL: My favorite political tidbit is that the 1971 Pride March stopped in front of St. Paul’s on Tremont to protest how religions treated LGBT people. Then in 2007, the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry met there before marching through the Common to support same-sex marriage. There are so many ironies in Boston history.

MS: You have a lot of details about Boston’s gay bars over the years. Any favorites?

RL: In the ’60s there was 12 Carver, owned by Phil Bayon, who liked to ride in a swing above the crowd. One man described it thus: “He’d get all juiced up and get in his swing. And she would sing ‘Summertime’ and she’d wear a big straw picture hat with

ribbons and bows ... and here she is, 300 pounds with this great big straw picture hat on.” Can you imagine staring up at a 300 pound drunk man on a swing?

MS: Of course, there are some non-delightful stories. The section on the secret Harvard tribunals of 1920 is heartbreaking.

RL: It is so hard to write about the tragedies of this history: the murders of trans women, the despair that led so many to drink or suicide, the AIDS years. I kept thinking of the bone-chilling fright those poor young men must have gone through, their terror as their futures collapsed when they were accused of being gay and then expelled. They were alone and no one would help them.

MS: I assume you used the historian’s customary source material—newspapers, memoirs, historical archives. Did you stumble across any surprising source material?

RL: There were amazing diaries and personal letters, but the most interesting was an unpublished novel by Frank O’Hara. It was mentioned by Brad Gooch in his biography of O’Hara, and I found a copy at the UC–San Diego Library. It’s not ready for print, it lacks an ending, but his description of life in Boston in 1948 is fascinating. Plus he couldn’t decide if one character should be a

he or a she. He kept crossing out and changing their pronouns.

MS: You’ve dedicated the book to Ann Maguire. Why?

RL: Not only has Ann been a friend and mentor (she was my boss at City Hall), but also she has done so much for so many people. I kept running across her name while I was doing my research. This is a modest thank you for her kindness to generations of LGBT people over the past decades.

MS: In your section on domestic partnership benefits in Boston, you mention Andrew Sherman, your husband.

RL: I was personally involved in much of the recent history covered in the book. I was working for the Mayor while Andrew, my partner, was volunteering his expertise to implement the benefits. I didn’t go to the hearing, as we didn’t want to suggest there was any potential conflict of interest. But several other aides came running back upstairs to tell me how Councilor “Dapper” O’Neill was grilling Andrew as to who Mr. Pro Bono was. We almost passed out from laughing so hard. Mayor Flynn teased me for a month.

Michael Schwartz is an associate editor of this magazine.