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*Happy Holidays from the
Center!*



CRE Hosts Roundtable on Queer Newark

On Friday, October 21, several of the organizers of the *Queer Newark: Our Voices, Our Histories Project* came to New Brunswick to discuss their work at a roundtable hosted by the Center for Race and Ethnicity. Among the subjects they discussed was their first conference, an oral history conference examining gay life in Newark, which took place on November 12 at Rutgers-Newark.

Both the conference and the larger project (<http://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/>) are a result of sustained collaborative work between members of the Rutgers Newark faculty and activists from the local community. The conference, which attracted more than 300 people, featured panels of academics, activists, and community members who discussed their experiences in Queer Newark across three different generations, as well from comments from Mayor Cory Booker and Rutgers-Newark Chancellor Steven Diner, displays of work by local artists, and performances by local musicians. The conference showcased the fascinating personal stories that are currently being documented by that initiative, as well as the rich history of Newark that emerges as we attend to that city's queer history.

The panel at the Center for Race and Ethnicity offered its New Brunswick audiences a preview of both these themes and the conference itself.

Our panelists, who played central roles in both events, were Professor of History at Rutgers-Newark, **Beryl Satter**, who moderated the panel, and four speakers: **Margaret Woods**, President and CEO of Independence, A Family of Services, Inc. (a Newark-based social service agency); **Darnell Moore**, who is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at NYU; **Peter Savastano**, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Seton Hall University and a Newark native; and **James Credle**, activist and long-time



L-R: *Queer Newark Roundtable* speakers Margaret Woods, Darnell Moore, Peter Savastano, Beryl Satter, James Credle

Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at Rutgers-Newark.

Over the course of the Roundtable, all the panelists spoke passionately and personally about the oral history project and conference, the current state of the queer community in Newark, and how each of the participants come to this project as agents of change, or as Margaret Woods put it about her own activism, “if you occupy space in this world, you have to be about social justice.”

The speakers described Queer Newark as an ongoing project designed to improve the lives of queer people, and particularly queer youths of color, in Newark, by providing their community with public recognition, protection from homophobia and antigay violence and a documentary record of Newark’s rich history of queer life and activism.

Peter Savastano described some of this history. A Newark-native with a Ph.D. in anthropology, he has both personal and professional experience in Newark’s queer communities. In the early 1990’s, while completing his doctorate, Savastano conducted

ethnographic research on spirituality in queer communities in Newark. Once part of a larger research initiative entitled *Mapping Newark*, his work documented Newark’s tradition of ballroom houses, which still exists today.

“If you occupy space in this world, you have to be about social justice.”

--Margaret Woods, Independence, A Family of Services

Predominately black and Latino, the houses bring together self-made families of LGBT people, and are typically led by house mothers or fathers, who serve as parents to house children. Although house families are often virtual today, Savastano pointed out, in the past they often included groups of people, who lived together in a real house, and sheltered homeless gay teenagers. Both then and now, the houses typically have served as a source of community and emotional support for LGBT people, many of whom experience rejection or hostility from family members as a result of their sexual orientation.

Sites for pleasure and creativity as well as refuge, the houses showcased the talents of members in regular ballroom dances, in which members of different houses competed for dance and drag performance titles.

However, the history documented in *Mapping Newark* was not widely circulated, or carefully preserved, and the city’s queer history has been largely neglected since.

Accordingly, the question of “Why Newark, Why Now?” was one theme all the panelists addressed as they sought to explain the genesis of their project. Margaret Woods, who has lived in Newark for many years, characterized the project as originating in a “perfect storm,” created by the convergence of the right people at just the right moment, coming to together to create something meaningful in Newark.



James Credle marching in Newark

Their work is, in part, inspired by Newark itself, which the panelists all described as a beloved and uniquely stimulating city, despite its beleaguered past. Moore noted that one of the characteristics of Newark that made it possible to do a project like this is its politicized and politically-active populace. He noted that unlike in many communities, the citizenry of Newark is remarkably persistent, no matter how

long it takes they “just keep showing up at a council meeting every week until change happens.”

Moore and the other panelists also noted that they are committed to incorporating the concerns of Newark’s queer community into the design of the Queer Newark Project. Anxious to avoid the traditional research model in which scholarly “experts” come into communities to collect information and tell the research subjects what they need, the panelists have designed Queer Newark in collaboration with members of the city’s queer community, and are eager to do constructive research that will benefit this community.

In doing so, however, they have to figure out how to best address the needs of the city’s racially and ethnically diverse LGBT population, which is composed of a variety of distinct and overlapping communities that have changed over time. In talking about his experiences of moving through Newark for over forty years, Peter Savastano expressed his awareness of the city’s changing demographics by invoking the image of transparent maps laid on top of each other. When he walks through the city, he said, he see Newark both “as it was and as it is, and at points in between.” He remembers Italian neighborhoods in areas now largely populated by blacks and Latinos. The city’s changing demographics continue to shape “the way queer identity is formed in all its complexity,” Savastano stated. “You can’t separate

race, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality—they all inform identity.”

Recording the history of Queer Newark, Savastano and the other panelists emphasized, will require researchers to capture not one history, but a variety of histories, while also making their research useful to communities with different social needs and political priorities.

The current oral history project, aims to do just that by embracing inclusivity, even when it gets “messy.” Darnell Moore notes that the Queer Newark project takes “an intersectional approach to activism” that “provides space for counter-narratives.”

Moreover, all the panelists emphasized that the project’s goals go well beyond the production of traditional scholarship. In documenting and showcasing the multifaceted history of Queer Newark, the project’s leaders hope to provide an accounting of the past, recognition of the present, and a space for identifying future goals and initiatives.

“You can’t separate race, gender, ethnicity or sexuality—they all inform identity.”

--Peter Savastano

But panelists also acknowledged that they still face many challenges in accomplishing these

goals. Satter and Moore noted that even addressing community concerns about making sure that oral history collected by the project is accessible is far from easy. Such materials might be best preserved in the special collections department of the Rutgers Newark Library, or at another library in the state University system, but are such public institution actually accessible? While academics tend to assume that an openly accessible archive equals general accessibility, community members who have a tenuous relationship with institutions might see this as co-opting valuable artifacts.

Panelists also underscored that this particular historical moment has opened up new possibilities for queer activism in Newark. Although not uncritical of Newark’s Mayor Cory Booker, the panelists were unanimous in acknowledging the Mayor has been willing to support measures to improve the lives of LGBTQ Newarkers. During his tenure, the Newark Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Concerns Advisory Commission,



Beryl Satter and Darnell Moore at a meeting of the Queer Newark Oral History Project team.

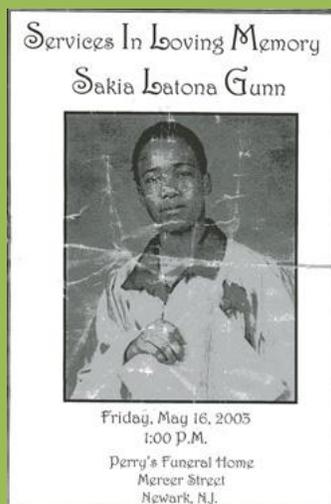
the city's first official organization specifically for the LGBTQ community, was formed.

Moreover, recent federal legislation focused on anti-bullying measures, as well as the large donation aimed at improving education in Newark by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, has also provided other new resources for improving the lives of young queer people of color in Newark. Led by local activist groups such as the Newark Pride Alliance, a number of initiatives are in process. One is the establishment of the Hetrick-Martin Institute-To-Go Program, an after-school program for LGBTQ youths. Another new initiative, which is scheduled to open its doors in the fall of 2012, is the Sakia Gunn High School for Civic Engagement. Named after 15-year old lesbian Sakia Gunn, a Newark resident who was killed there in a gay-bashing attack in 2003, the school is open to students of all sexual orientations. But it aims to create “inclusive learning community” for students of “race, sexual orientation, gender/gender expression, religion or disability.” Designed to honor the memory of Sakia Gunn, the school will provide a safe and nurturing space for young people who may have been subject to violence, harassment, or threats—often due to their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

The panelists closed by stressing that the persistence of hate crimes such as the attack that took Sakia Gunn’s life, as well other forms of homophobia, make queer activism more important than ever. In an emotional appeal,

Who Was Sakia Gunn?

A fifteen year-old Newark resident, Sakia Gunn was murdered on the evening of May 11, 2003. That evening, Sakia and several other young LGBTQ women had just arrived home from an evening out Greenwich Village, and were waiting for a local bus in downtown Newark, when they were propositioned by two men. They declined the men’s advances, explaining that they were gay, at which point one of the men attacked them. Gunn fought back, and was fatally stabbed. Although prosecuted as a bias crime, Gunn’s tragic death went largely unnoticed in both local and national media. But her memory has become a rallying point for LGBTQ activism in Newark and has also inspired the film *Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Film Project* (2008).



activist and RU-N dean James Credle noted that in this struggle lives are at stake, that there are "too many people that we have lost in this world for no good reason." LGBT activism is required to continue the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic, to secure safe spaces for young people to learn, and to expand the visibility of queer culture in Newark. Such measures will improve the lives of “real people facing real challenges,” Credle noted. The Queer Newark oral history conference was one such initiative. A celebration of the city’s challenging queer past and present, it created a focal point for people to place themselves in this struggle, be recognized for their work, and become energized and knowledgeable about how to move forward.

See the links below for more information about the conference and the organizations mentioned in this article:

Queer Newark Oral History Project:
<http://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/>

Independence: A Family of Services:
<http://www.ifsnj.org/>

Hetrick-Martin Institute:
<http://www.hmi.org/>

City of Newark Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Concerns Advisory Commission:
http://www.ci.newark.nj.us/government/mayor_booker/the_mayors_lgbtq_com_mission.php

Call for Proposals: 5th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity

**Deadline for submissions: Friday,
January 20, 2012**

**Event date: Friday, February 17,
2012**

The Graduate Assistants at the Center for Race and Ethnicity are pleased to announce the 5th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity. This event brings together Rutgers M.A and Ph.D. candidates to take part in a cross-disciplinary conversation about graduate research related to the study of race and ethnicity.

Students from all levels of study (from 1st year graduate students to ABDs) and from all schools at Rutgers are welcome! This event is part of the Center for Race and Ethnicity's ongoing initiative to promote interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration.

At the event, panelists will provide a brief 5-7 minute presentation of their work. Formal papers are not required for participation. Well-developed projects and papers in progress are welcome. Each panel will be followed by informal, cross-disciplinary dialogue exploring future directions for research.

The submission deadline is January 20, 2012. Please send submissions to CREgradforum@gmail.com, and include:

1) your name, year in school, department, campus, and email address;

2) a 150-250 word description of your presentation and argument;

3) a brief 1-2 line biography.

Additional event information will be available shortly. For more information about this forum, visit

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>.

The Center for Race and Ethnicity

Mailing Address:

**Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,
191 College Avenue, 1st Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901**

Telephone: 732/932-2181

Fax: 732/932-2198

Email: raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu

Website: raceethnicity.rutgers.edu

Director: Mia Bay (History)

Assoc. Director, Ann Fabian (American Studies/History)

Senior Program Coordinator: Mia Kissil

Graduate Assistants/Editors: Isra Ali (Journalism and Media Studies); Jahaira Arias (History); Christopher Hayes (History); Shatima Jones (Sociology); Wendy Wright (Political Science)