

Queer Newark: Stories of Resistance, Love, and Community**Whitney Strub, Editor****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024****320 pages****ISBN: 9781978829220****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v1i1.384](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v1i1.384)**

Queer Newark: Stories of Resistance, Love, and Community, edited by Whitney Strub, charts an alternative history of LGBTQ+ life in America, highlighting the essential and often overlooked contributions of working-class people of color. Drawing from a range of ethnographic and archival sources, this collection's authors uncover central actors from Newark's queer past and the importance of queer sites, such as bars, discos, ballrooms, and churches, that underlie the identity, social life, and activism of queer culture. These essays reveal how, through resistance, the queer community in Newark continues to combat violence, poverty, and homophobia and offers a sorely needed correction to the straightwashing of urban history, not only in Newark, but in smaller cities suffering a similar confluence of challenges.

The LGBTQ+ community is often viewed as monolithic, but in contrast, this edited edition features eleven chapters covering a broad range of issues and variant experiences in an effort to represent the complex, diverse, and intersectional nature of Newark's queer community and the trajectory of its queer history. With data collected largely through Queer Newark Oral History Project, and rare archival sources like vice squad accounts, Newark, with its historically black, immigrant, and majority POC population, is insightfully analyzed as a unique site for ethnographic research, and as a vibrant and resilient community that continues to fight for visibility and equality. Though internal conflicts are revealed through accounts from a variety of strongly felt identities, the efforts and failures made to organize and unite the community for the purpose of improving LGBTQ+ life in the city are told with compassion and honesty.

The “stepchild” of New York City and its more famous communities in Greenwich Village and more recently Hell’s Kitchen, Newark is revealed to be an epicenter of queer life on its own. Newark’s many gay bars and nightlife serving different segments of the gay community are detailed in the chapters by Lvovsky (the bars along Market Street) and Avivi (queers in the Brazilian Ironbound district), and Scorsone notes the importance of bars in identity expression, queer culture, placemaking, and as central locations for resistance—in particular, for the trans community. In 1967, two years before the Stonewall Riots, three New Jersey bars, One Eleven Wines in New Brunswick, Val’s in Atlantic City, and Murphy’s in Newark, sued the Alcoholic Beverage Control commission in New Jersey for harassment and won a supreme court case that ended the legal harassment and imprisonment of queer folk and the closure or suspension of liquor licenses to bars where queer people were deemed to be present. Yet this important moment in LGBTQ+ history is unknown to most people, whether they be queer or not.

Two historical episodes mark pivotal moments of queer identity formation: the Newark Uprising (race riots) in 1967 and the murder of Sakia Gunn in 2003. Following the riots which left 26 dead, initiating a middle-class exodus, *Harper’s* named Newark “America’s Worst City.” But much like Atlantic City, which was also declared an economic and social wasteland in the 1970s—despite a vibrant and prosperous bar scene centered around New York Avenue—Scorsone documents Newark’s thriving majority black, queer, and transgender community that came together to build a vibrant queer subculture with a thriving economic engine.

On May 11, 2003, Sakia Gunn, a 15-year-old African American lesbian, was stabbed to death on the “G corner,” a major intersection and meeting spot for queer youth in downtown Newark. Out of her death several grassroots organizations arose committed to fighting against homophobia, sexism, and racism to safeguard the lives and futures of gay youth. Dowell notes in

their essay the important and often unrecognized role that queer women of color play in LGBTQ+ social activism and community building. Stories of community building, resilience, love, and perseverance are, in fact, at the heart of this compilation, as are the social, political, and economic realities that led to Sakia's death and the violence perpetuated on many other LGBTQ+ POC before and after. Most tellingly, it is noted that only five years earlier, in 1998, the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard (a blond, white, cis-gendered, young gay man) received more than 30 times more mentions in press coverage, made national news, and remains imprinted on the minds of Americans. Sakia Gunn is only known locally by virtue of the continued efforts of the queer community in Newark and stands as an example of the power of advocacy and activism even in the face of erasure.

Queer Newark offers a dispassionate and well-researched accounting of Newark's queer community. The essays are complimented by "oral history excerpts" that provide first person accounts of these historical analyses, and it is within these ethnographic testimonies that the reader may find the most compelling narratives of the experience of queerness. *Queer Newark* is an important contribution to the restorative history of Newark and the LGBTQ+ community, especially those in smaller cities overshadowed by a larger neighboring metropolis. Like all restorative histories these accounts are not additions to history, but a corrective; they restore the important stories, events, and voices that have been silenced in official hegemonic recountings. They bring to light the entrenched and institutional racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia that distort our understanding of historical events and credit those important figures who have shaped a vibrant, yet often maligned city as crime ridden, bereft, and unable to function without neoliberal and capitalist interventions. Contrary to this narrative, *Queer Newark* illustrates through meticulous scholarship and ethnographic accounts that community

development has largely come as the result of individual efforts by passionate and determined members of the queer community itself.

Laurie Greene

Stockton University