

**Exhibit Review: “At Home in Newark: Stories from the Queer Newark Oral History Project”****Chief Curator: Mary Rizzo****Open November 1-30, 2019 at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center****Open indefinitely in Conklin Hall, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 175 University Ave, Newark****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.202>**

Located in the Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, “[At Home in Newark: Stories from the Queer Newark Oral History Project](#)” presents a rich history of LGBTQ Newark to hospital staff, patients, and visitors. Powerful quotes from some of the sixty-six oral history interviews collected feature prominently in what would otherwise be a fairly generic hospital hallway. By placing their display in a hospital, the Rutgers students and local community members who curated the exhibit reclaim what has often been a tragic history of queer healthcare, due in large part to systematic discrimination and government neglect after the discovery of the HIV virus in 1981. As Bernie McAlister, a Newark house mother put it, “Reagan represents genocide to me.” “At Home in Newark” demonstrates how McAlister and many other queer people in Newark resisted the callous disregard of queer life. Longtime activist James Credle, for example, formed The Newark Revolutionary Pharmacy to share expensive medications and the AIDS Friendship Group to visit hospitalized patients. “At Home in Newark” reminds us that we must never forget this history, especially as AIDS continues to affect vulnerable communities around the globe. This exhibit, then, presents both a memory of the past as well as a vision for future activism.

Flanked by an MRI Suite on one side and the Department of Radiology on the other, the exhibit features nine panels with text, photographs, and weblinks. Each weblink prompts viewers to listen to audio samples of oral history interviews from the Queer Newark Oral History Project with their phones or on a preloaded MP3 player. From bars to balls and streets to churches, the exhibit explains both the centrality of violence and discrimination in shaping LGBTQ communities as well as the important legacies of grassroots resistance.

No queer history would be complete without a description of the local bar and club scene. More than spaces of leisure, bars like Zanzibar, First Choice, and Murphy's Tavern enabled queer people to forge community and a base for organizing. Bars hosted HIV prevention and education workshops. Along with two other bars, Murphy's Tavern took a case to the NJ Supreme Court in the early 1960s that essentially legalized gay bars in New Jersey. The ruling declared "well-behaved homosexuals cannot be forbidden to patronize taverns." The language – "well-behaved homosexuals" – gestures toward the rifts that existed within LGBTQ spaces. James Credle, a Black gay man, remembered being shot at after leaving the Other World Disco, a bar serving a primarily white clientele in the Italian North Ward in the early 1970s. Stories like these encourage viewers to think about how race was as important as gender and sexuality in the development of LGBTQ spaces, activism, and history.

Indeed, racism and transphobia intersected in ways that made gender variant people of color especially vulnerable to abuse, violence, and premature death. The exhibit highlights the stories of trans women and lesbians in Newark who incurred assault and harassment from straight men. Sakia Gunn, a 15-year-old masculine-presenting African American lesbian, for example, was murdered in 2003 after rejecting sexual advances from a man. In the same year, 31-year-old Shani Baraka and her partner, Rayshon Holmes, were fatally shot by Baraka's brother-in-law. Eyricka Morgan, a Black transgender woman who spoke on a panel at Queer Newark's very first conference in 2011, was killed in 2013 by her housemate. Centering these stories offers important correctives to LGBTQ histories that have often neglected the experiences of queer people of color.

"At Home in Newark" suggests that these historic conditions led to the creation of an inspiring cadre of LGBTQ leaders. The ballroom scene emerged in Newark in the 1970s amidst deep social and economic precarity. Alternative families organized in "Houses" provided

community, shelter, and nurtured self-expression for those rejected by their biological families and who struggled from economic insecurity. Today organizers host balls in spaces like the Terrace Ballroom, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), and the Robert Treat hotel. In 1995, “Black woman preacher” Jacquelyn Holland founded the Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church, which ran an HIV prevention drop-in center. After the murder of Sakia Gunn, activists demanded the creation of the Newark LGBTQ Community Center. Today, individuals like Peggie Miller serve on the board of the Essex County Reaching Adolescents in Need (RAIN) Foundation, which provides emergency shelter and services to LGBTQ youth. Some activist-artists like Jana Burton teach Capoeira and West African dance at the LGBTQ center. Calling these activists “truth tellers,” the exhibit reminds viewers that “too often the stories told by others are about shame in family, community and spirituality. But when LGBTQ people speak for themselves, they tell more complex stories emphasizing the diversity of their experiences.”

In this spirit, the panel on religion and spirituality displays a beautiful photograph of an adult baptism by LGBTQ photographer, poet, and reverend Shonda Nicholas. Standing in three feet of water, Alicia Heath Toby reaches out to the viewer, arm in motion, mouth agape. Like Heath Toby who rejects queerphobia in Christianity, “At Home in Newark” reaches out in a space that has not always been safe for LGBTQ people. But when queer people claim space and speak for themselves, through words, art, or scholarship, other people recognize the pain, vulnerability, precariousness, resistance, joy, and pleasure that makes up their lives. I asked a hospital visitor what he thought of the exhibit as he made his way through the hallway. He looked back at the blood-red panel titled “Am I Safe Here?” and simply replied, “It’s nice. It’s true too.” Something touched him and something, quite likely, will stay with him. His words offered a testament to the

exhibit's ability to speak truth to power and to move people, whether a part of the community or not. Public history at its finest.

**Leo Valdes**  
**Rutgers University**