Telling Hoosier Stories

Digital Queer Public History in Indiana and the Nation

ERIC GONZABA

ABSTRACT: The *IMH* interviews Dr. Eric Gonzaba, assistant professor of American Studies at California State University Fullerton, about his digital history projects, Wearing Gay History and Mapping the Gay Guides, and about doing digital queer public history in Indiana and the United States.

KEYWORDS: *Damron Address Books*; Bob Damron; digital archives; digital history; Indiana; Indianapolis, Indiana; LGBT; LGBT culture; LGBT material culture; material culture; midwestern history; public history; queer archives; queer history; queer spaces

Eric Gonzaba received his Ph.D. in History and Women & Gender Studies from George Mason University. He is Assistant Professor of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. His research interests center on the cultural politics of race and gender in late twentieth-century America, particularly the politics of leisure and gender. He is founder and director of the digital history site Wearing Gay History (wearinggayhistory.com) and Co-Project Director, with Dr. Amanda Regan, of the digital history site Mapping the Gay Guides (mappingthegayguides.org). IMH associate editor Dr. Dawn Bakken interviewed Prof. Gonzaba about the development of his research interests and his ongoing digital public history projects.

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IMH: You began looking at T-shirts as a way to study gay culture when you were an undergraduate at Indiana University Bloomington. What prompted your interest and what did you learn from this first curated collection?

EG: When I started my undergraduate studies at IU Bloomington in Fall 2008, I had zero idea of what I wanted to study or do with the rest of my life. I always loved history in grade school, something I attribute to my mom and dad taking my brother and me on long road trips when I was a kid. My parents would stop off at random historical sites, like old stagecoach stops and Civil War battlefields. I'm sure my parents were curious about those sites, but they were also free places to take the kids when my parents were tired of us in the minivan. Something about those stops really interested me. Seeing folks talk about a totally different world of the past dressed in historical costume probably spoke to me as a young gay kid. But I never really thought about becoming a historian.

As luck would have it, my very first course at IU was an 8 a.m. class in the basement of Morrison Hall taught by Michael McGerr—a general U.S. history survey since 1865—and I point to that opening lecture as when I fell in love with history as a field. I learned how much history impacted not just how people understood the past in a general way but how history was often a way to learn more about one's current political climate and community. This was fall 2008, right in the middle of the gay marriage debates taking place across the country. Just a few months into my freshman year, I would watch Barack Obama win election to the presidency on the same night that Californian voters would approve a ban on same-sex marriage in their state constitution. Not all historical interests have to come from direct participation with a community, but I can't deny that the political climate and my own identity as a gay man influenced my interest in gay history.

I came out as a gay man as a sophomore in high school and spent my first years "out" trying to fit in in my small southern Indiana hometown. I developed one goal in high school—to get out of my hometown. It's not that I didn't (or don't) love Corydon, Indiana, but I felt like I was the only queer person in all of Harrison County. I figured that if ever I was to find my own community, it was going to be outside of southern Indiana.

I got lucky while in undergrad to find work at both the *Indiana Magazine of History* and the GLBT Support Services office, and I had an idea to try my hand at public history for the first time at the GLBT office. I wanted to do some research on Indiana gay history and prove to myself, and to

others, that I had been wrong before coming to college—Indiana did have a queer history, even if all I had ever read about was queer people living on the Coasts, in San Francisco or New York. I hoped this research would result in a small museum exhibition somewhere on campus that might highlight moments of gay political activism in the Hoosier state.

I traveled to the Chris Gonzalez Archives in Indianapolis, open only one day a week (and now closed). The archive served as the main LGBT repository on Indiana and was run by community volunteer archivist Michael Bohr. I initially set out looking for what I (a novice historian) thought was the main source for "doing" history—textual archival documents. Maybe, I thought, there was a trove of records from an early gay campus organization or from AIDS activist groups in Indianapolis. During my initial search for such records, Bohr showed me dozens of cardboard boxes on the floor. He told me that they were full of t-shirts that he had collected over many years or that were donated, all somehow related to LGBT people in Indiana. I opened them up and, to my surprise, the t-shirts weren't all about activism or politics, about fighting for gay marriage or rallying for AIDS activism. There were t-shirts denoting TV watch parties for the Ellen DeGeneres coming out episode, t-shirts honoring transgender people violently murdered because of their identity, shirts from gay parents' groups and for gay bars. That first hour of going through admittedly old, stinky t-shirts changed how I understood my community's history. By looking at a source not often utilized by historians (t-shirts), I learned so much about how dynamic Indiana queer history actually was. I eventually picked twenty of my favorite shirts, did some rudimentary public history work, and made signs providing context for them. I put the shirts on mannequins loaned from the campus textiles department (my first lesson in how vital collaboration is in public history) and put the small exhibition of gay Indiana t-shirts on display at the GLBT Student Support Services office.

IMH: Tell us about the Wearing Gay History project.

EG: After a few weeks of the exhibition at the GLBT office, I packed up the t-shirts and returned them to the Chris Gonzalez Archives. I hoped that my little exhibition made an impact on those who saw it, but I won't lie—I was definitely bummed that the project would not live on, beyond some photos I took.

What did live on, I soon realized, was my passion for LGBT history. Following graduation, I headed to George Mason University to get my Master's degree and eventually enrolled in their doctoral history program

T-shirt of The Gay People's Union of Indiana, an early 1970s political action group. Originating in Bloomington, the group also had a chapter in Indianapolis.
Wearing Gay History, photo by the author

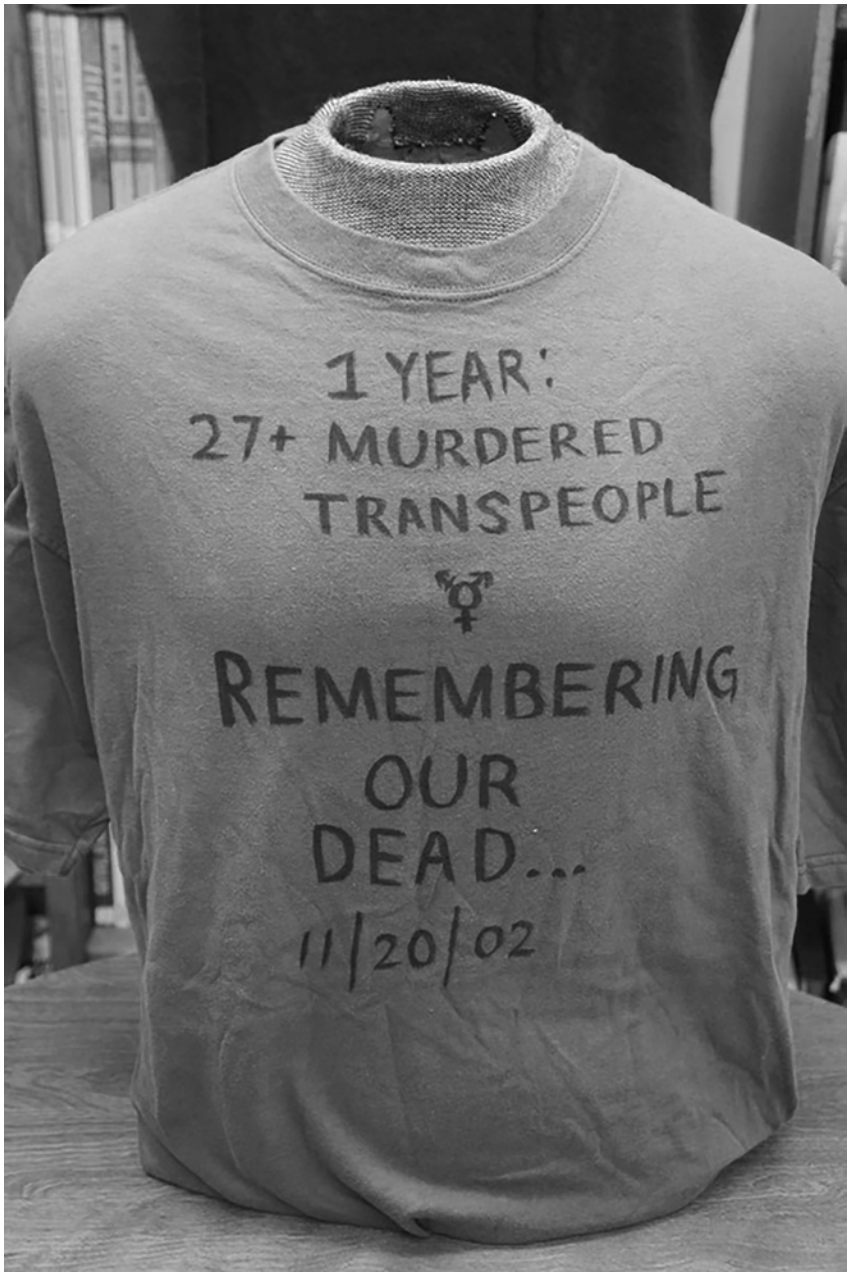
in fall 2014. I soon discovered that George Mason's history department was well known for pioneering the field of digital history. While I grew up in the age of the internet, I was no expert on technology or computers, so hearing my advisor tell me that digital history courses were a requirement for the PhD program really scared me.

For my final project in my first digital history graduate course, I got to thinking about the t-shirt exhibition at IU: maybe this was a way I could bring that small Indiana gay history exhibit to a wider audience. I flew to Indianapolis to photograph and digitize all 300+ t-shirts in the Chris Gonzalez collection and create a database and exhibition site that allowed users to view these historical t-shirts and read more about their context. The project got some great feedback from the class, and despite finishing the course, I had the urge to keep the project going. I applied for small travel grants here and there, and the site, called Wearing Gay History, grew from one archival partner and 300 t-shirts to twenty-three archival partners with almost 5,000 shirts on the database. We have shirts representing every state and more than sixty nations, shirts representing queer history in communities from Harlem to Amsterdam to Namibia to Shanghai. I hope the site grows even more in the coming years with collections added from archives around the globe.

IMH: What have you learned about the importance of material culture collections for documenting gay history?

EG: The Wearing Gay History project initially taught me to think of sources beyond textual documents when trying to understand history more broadly. It makes sense that historians look to newspapers, letters, and documents first. The written word is so helpful in getting the perspectives of those who lived before us. Material culture can add even greater nuance.

But for gay history more specifically, I think t-shirts are especially invaluable sources. Their very existence combats a major stereotype of gay history—that the queer American past was all suffocating for LGBT people. When gay history is discussed or taught (if it's even taught), it's often framed as gay people having to remain invisible so much of their lives because of threats of violence and danger. Gays and lesbians, we are often told, were stuck in the closet for fear of losing their social status, their families, and perhaps even their lives. I don't want to suggest that being an LGBT person in the 1960s or 1970s was by any means easy, but the very existence of so many historical queer t-shirts shows us that many LGBT people from all parts of the U.S. had no interest in being stuck in



T-shirt from a 2002 rally highlighting violence against trans people, found in the Chris Gonzales Archives.

Wearing Gay History, photo by the author

the metaphoric closet. These folks were bravely wearing their pride as gay, lesbian, trans, or bi people quite literally on their sleeve. The t-shirts on the Wearing Gay History database are tangible evidence of queer people's existence, experiences, struggles, and celebrations; they help counter historical invisibility, especially for people like me who thought that places like Indiana had no gay history.

IMH: One of your exhibitions on the Wearing Gay History website focuses on Indianapolis. As you note, in the 1960s and 1970s, the city was often called "Naptown," yet it also was the site of more gay bars than other midwestern cities such as Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio. Was there something particular about the city's, or perhaps state's, culture that contributed to this?

EG: That's such a great question. I'd like to be able to say that there's just something about Hoosier culture that made it much more hospitable to gay life in the later 20th century, but I can't say that with certainty. My gut feeling is that Indianapolis's geographic location helped its development as a haven for so many LGBT Hoosiers. I mentioned earlier how so much American gay history is written about queer communities on the Coasts (the famed Stonewall Riots in New York and the Castro gay village in San Francisco). I teach my students that one of the reasons gayborhoods developed there was a queer diaspora that took place in the middle of the century. Following World War Two, when so many queer people met each other in the military or via sex-segregated occupations on the home front, gays and lesbians thought they might find more acceptance in larger cities by living close to one another, creating the first gayborhoods. But while many queer folks did move to the big cities on the coasts, many had no desire, means, or interest in moving that far. For Missouri gay men who had grown up near the Ozarks, perhaps St. Louis was where they could find safe gay spaces. So too did Indianapolis become a more centralized "bigger" city in which to find acceptance, vs. Chicago or even Detroit. By the early 1980s, a gay newspaper in Indianapolis estimated a queer population of some 80,000. The city itself was able to maintain a gay business association to support not just gay bars but gay restaurants, political organizations, etc. It's also possible that in smaller cities, gay businesses and communities held more political clout. For example (for those who like numbers), the gay press estimated that Los Angeles in the mid-1980s supported some 120 gay bars (in a major city with over 8 million people). Indianapolis hosted just 10 gay bar spaces, but that's about one gay bar for

every 60,000 people vs. 80,000 in Los Angeles. A single gay establishment likely had a much larger impact on a smaller gay community like the one in Indianapolis.

IMH: The Wearing Gay History site notes the importance of smaller archives across the country that have collected and preserved local and regional queer history often neglected by larger institutions. Do you see a reciprocal relationship between these archives and online history sites?

EG: Just in my experience—definitely. Most of these smaller or regional archives are working with really small budgets (if any) and to have folks willing to help get their materials publicized and reach a wider audience is a major goal. But I want to emphasize how much historians of LGBT Americans are indebted to archivists and community members dating back to the 1970s, who began saving "stuff" (as I affectionately call all the sources that make up the historical record). For so much of the twentieth century, many Americans viewed queer people as "perverts," and major archival institutions did not think that collecting artifacts, ephemera, and documents related to LGBT people was a worthy pursuit. Beginning in the 1970s, it was queer people themselves who made conscious decisions to save their stuff in the hopes that one day their wider community might think of them as a legitimate class of citizens. This was especially important during the AIDS crisis. When thousands of gay people were dying, families of queer people, for a variety of reasons, often destroyed items that connected a loved one to their LGBT communities. There were lots of reasons for families to do this: they might have thought that keeping a loved one's stuff was too painful, or perhaps they deliberately tried to erase a dead loved one's queer connections. No matter what the reason, it was historical groups founded by queer people themselves that helped preserve so much of the material that is the foundation of queer historical research to this day.

IMH: What do Indiana and midwestern queer history contribute to the larger story of queer history in the United States? How would queer history be incomplete without considering the Midwest?

EG: It's become fashionable of late to say that everyone lives in their own bubble, and certainly in this politically divided time that understanding feels true. But I also think acknowledging this can help us forge a new framework for understanding the queer American past. I've already touched on the fact that the Midwest has long been underrepresented in historical

T-shirt from Indianapolis's Aesop's Tables event celebrating the coming out episode of Ellen DeGeneres's TV sitcom.

Wearing Gay History, photo by the author

research. So many folks don't think that Indiana, or Illinois, or Wisconsin was where queer history happened. But not only were queer people out, visible, and often organized in the Midwest, they also had a unique history that is not yet fully understood. One way to examine this is to understand what being known as "flyover country" by East and West Coasters does to queer communities in the Midwest. How did gay communities develop when safety in numbers, as there was in Los Angeles or San Francisco, did not seem so apparent?

The term "flyover country" implies an oversight, suggesting that the true essence of American life resides only on the coasts. Yet, this inadvertent oversight of the Midwest in the queer historical narrative is, in fact, a missed opportunity to recognize the resilience and adaptability of queer communities in this region. Without the overt liberal bastions of the East and West Coasts, queer individuals in the Midwest had to innovate and create their own safe havens, their own modes of communication, and their own grassroots movements. This led to more tightly knit communities, where reliance on one another was paramount.

The isolation from the more recognized queer capitals necessitated a distinctive kind of resilience and self-reliance. Establishments such as local bars or community centers became more than just social hubs; they transformed into lifelines for queer individuals seeking understanding, acceptance, and solidarity. Furthermore, the challenges faced in the Midwest, often characterized by more conservative viewpoints, meant that queer activism here was not just about visibility but survival. It instilled a deep sense of purpose and community bonding. By overlooking the Midwest, we miss out on tales of determination, innovation, and the true spirit of community that formed the heartland's queer narrative.

It's also important to note that we risk falling into a similar trap if we define "the Midwest" too narrowly. Take Indiana specifically—it's one thing for me to claim that Indianapolis is a bastion of queer midwestern life by the 1970s, but Indianapolis is not all of Indiana. What of the much more rural towns of Corydon, Orleans, or New Harmony? LGBT midwestern culture is as much about those who lived far from Indianapolis and its gay bars, restaurants, health programs, youth groups, and queer community organizations as those who lived just a few blocks from Monument Circle. The experiences of those from rural Indiana (with much harder to find historical sources that reflect their lived experiences) can offer all of us a vastly expanded understanding of what it meant to be an LGBT person in America.

IMH: Tell us about your online project Mapping the Gay Guides.

EG: Mapping the Gay Guides is my newest digital history project that I co-founded with one of my best friends from graduate school, Dr. Amanda Regan, now an assistant professor at Clemson. I wrote my dissertation about gay nightlife culture in the Mid-Atlantic cities of Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia, and one of my chapters focused on the culture of gay Black bars in these cities. Lots of my research focused on oral histories with gay men who went to bars, baths, cinemas, and cruising sites, but for this chapter, I kept hearing names of popular Black bars, but couldn't really keep track of all the different spots. In order to get a better grasp of the number of Black gay bars, I turned to a popular gay travel guide first published in the mid-1960s called the *Damron Address Books*. These travel guides listed gay-owned or gay-friendly establishments in every U.S. state, which was sort of a lifeline to many gay men in the 1960s and 1970s, an era when homosexuality (via sodomy laws) was effectively illegal in much of the country. What really made the Damron guidebooks (named after their founder Bob Damron) so great for my dissertation project was that Damron didn't just list bars: he often included coded letters next to the establishments' names that provided readers more information about the site. For example, if there were pool tables at the bar, Damron included the letters PT; if a bar had more of an older clientele, he included the letters OC. For my Black bars chapter, then, I looked for spaces that included the coded letter B with the addresses, which told me that those sites were where "Blacks predominated."

After my dissertation defense, Amanda Regan came up to me and asked if I would be interested in collaborating on a larger project using the guides. She suggested that I was perhaps looking at the guides too narrowly. She wondered (because she's probably one of the country's finest digital historians) if we could learn much more about the wider LGBT community if we didn't look at these lists in isolation. She wondered what looking at these sites en masse on a map or via machine learning could teach us, and what new questions might this process help us uncover. Despite being on opposite coasts, we built a prototype of this new project, which we called Mapping the Gay Guides, and we eventually found support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We are creating a database of every American listing of a site Damron mentions in his guides between the years 1965 until 2005. We are then publishing this data for users to see on Mappingthegayguides.com via the database itself or a map.

SPRINGFIELD
GEE-I * 212 N 5th
TWO BROTHERS (M) 309 E Monroe

INDIANA

EVANSVILLE
BLUE BAR (M-S) 8 N 5th St
MENA CAFE * Division St (will be torn down after October 1965)
TOWN ROOM (PE) Hotel Vendome 24 NW 3rd St

FORT WAYNE
HENRY'S 536 Main St
VAN ORMAN HOTEL (M-PE) 128 W Berry (piano bar)

GARY
BAMBOO (M) 579 Massachusetts
RON-DA-VOO (M) 520 Washington
TREMONT BAR * 8 mi E on U S Hwy 12

INDIANAPOLIS
ALPS * 20 N Delaware
BETTY K (S) * 1808 N Central
BETTY'S (G) 508 S Alabama
CLAYPOOL HOTEL BAR (M-PE) 14 N Illinois
HUDDLE RESTAURANT (C) 2034 N Meridian
KING COLE (M-PE) 7 N Meridian
LINDSAY BATHS 400 blk Mass Av
PONDEROSA Washington St
VARSITY LOUNGE (M)* 1517 N Penna

22

First page of the Indiana listings from the 1965 *Damron Address Book*. The 1965 edition included just 24 listings of gay or gay-friendly establishments throughout the entire state. By the end of the 1980s, Damron listed more than 120 such sites.
Damron Address Book, 1965

This is no small undertaking; we anticipate that over these forty annual editions of the Damron travel guides, there are likely well over 100,000 listings. Thankfully, our NEH funding is helping us hire awesome graduate students to build this database, transcribe these guides, and write helpful reflections on our findings.

IMH: What can historians learn by studying and understanding the particularity of queer spaces?

EG: One of the project's main goals in many ways harkens back to Wearing Gay History. If Wearing Gay History was aimed at trying to fight a bicoastal

bias of LGBT history, Mapping the Gay Guides shares this goal. Despite so many listings coming from the "gay meccas" on the coasts, we learned very quickly just how dynamic queer history was across the whole United States. In addition, we think we can gain lots of insights about queer spaces by using Damron's fascinating letter coding system. For example, Damron would eventually include codes for religious institutions: can we learn something about where those religious sites are concentrated? Perhaps we can also track changes in the LGBT community during dynamic periods in American history. We wonder, for example, what happens to the gay communities during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s? Will we see the uptick in health establishments in the guides, or will we see a decline in the overall listings? One thing building digital projects has taught me (and it's a good framework for any type of historical project) is that while it's good to have hypotheses going into your research, one should embrace the unexpected but also be content that you'll probably have more questions than when you started your project. That's one of the reasons Amanda and I are committed to forever making our data available for the public to use. We want other historians to take the Damron data and do their own research, create their own projects, ask and answer more questions about the dynamic history of LGBT Americans.

IMH: Tell us about some of your experiences with using online exhibitions for teaching U.S. history and for teaching queer history in particular.

EG: I've really loved hearing how my colleagues at other universities and at high schools have used Wearing Gay History or Mapping the Gay Guides in their classrooms. I like to use the mapping project with my survey students after we finish talking about postwar gay experiences. They learn about the Lavender Scare in the 1950s when thousands of gays and lesbians working for states or the federal government were either fired or forced to resign for fear of being outed. I pair this lesson with having students then look at the Damron travel guides and the listing presented on the Mapping the Gay Guides map. I'm a transplant here in Southern California but most of my students know this area quite well. Every semester the assignment sometimes shocks them; they find they live or work near the site of a now-shuttered gay bar or bookstore. They are surprised that such queer institutions had once existed near places they pass by on their daily commutes and yet they had no knowledge of such spaces. They sometimes reflect on how they wish there were markers or signage that tells more of their community's history. I think what makes digital public history exciting is that it's not just words on a page. Don't get me wrong, I love

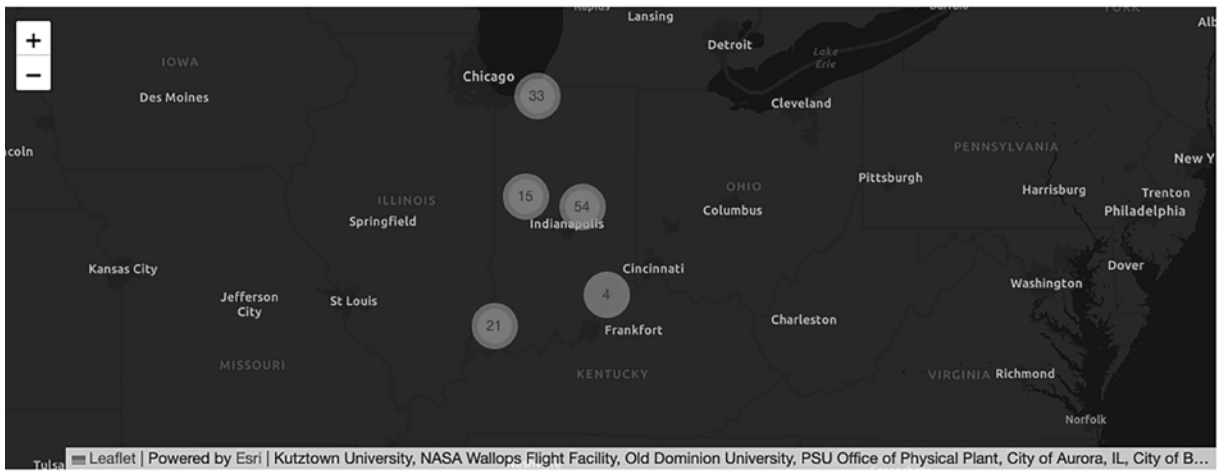
to read. But we live in an age where media consumption (including reading) is not constrained just to traditional books anymore. Digital public history projects can allow historians to reach a broader public by offering people ways to interact with history on their own terms. My students in California, for example, can learn about queer historical sites they grew up near, while those interested in focusing on Black bars in Chicago can filter the results to explore their own questions. I think the digital humanities also allow students to engage with history on their own terms. Many of our students aren't going to be able to get to community archives to explore the incredible, rich primary sources housed there. Providing these sources digitally and then providing context for these items, to link them to other related items, digital history sites offer so many ways for students to pursue their own individual historical interests. Any historians reading this know how frustrating it is sometimes to get students excited about history. Our students have been told that history is boring, that it's all about memorization, or that it's not an important field compared to STEM. We historians can't change economic conditions or anything like that, but we do have a responsibility and a duty to make history as engaging as we can and to prove just how valuable learning about the past is to understanding, sustaining, and hopefully improving our democracy and way of life.

IMH: Finally, over the last year and across the country, we've seen right-wing attacks on teaching U.S. history and crusades to remove books from libraries and classrooms. Are there ways in which public history, including online history, can challenge these attacks?

EG: Americans seem to be fighting yet another set of culture wars, especially involving how and when to discuss LGBT people and queer issues in our textbooks, libraries, and in our public discourse more generally. These debates are too complex to summarize here, but I will say that on the surface, the backlash to age-appropriate LGBT history curriculum being taught in American schools (or the inclusion of LGBT literature in public or school libraries) can often seem surprising. After all, it's 2023; same-sex marriage is legalized in every state of the Union; corporations flood the market with rainbow merchandise every June for Pride Month. And yet, there are rising calls to restrict LGBT representation from public life. To answer your question directly, I think what public and digital history projects can do is make accessible histories being deliberately hidden from us by lawmakers or other activists. Online exhibitions can readily add context and nuance to public discussions. For example, it's hard for folks

Mapping the Gay Guides

Each year Bob Damron's Address Book expanded and added new locations, updated entries, and provided readers with a refreshed guide exploring LGTBQ America. The interactive map below displays each of the locations listed in the Damron Guides by year. The filter controls below the map allow users to filter the data by year, type of location, and by the amenity categorizations that Damron used each year. For more details on the variables below, see our methodology which explains each category in depth.



In 1989 there were 128 locations that match the query criteria.

Indiana map from Mapping the Gay Guides, depicting 128 mapped locations from the 1989 Damron guide.

to seriously claim that the concept of "LGBT people" is somehow new or novel when digitized gay guidebooks or t-shirts representing decades of LGBT history can be readily accessed. I've never been fully comfortable with completely tying history to activism; activism has its place, but our research and projects, while never fully neutral, ought to tell and show diverse perspectives and minimize bias. Wearing Gay History and Mapping the Gay Guides are not celebratory projects, for example. If this sort of public history work does any activism by itself, it's rooted in the fact that these projects amplify the idea that queer existence is nothing new, be it in California, New York, or my beloved home state of Indiana.