

Facade of Respectability;

20th Century Queer Survival in San Antonio, Texas

This research project analyzes the queer history of San Antonio, Texas in the 1970s and early 1980s, and reveals how LGBTQ+ life was shaped by a politics of respectability that reconstituted explicitly queer spaces as palatable to heteronormative society. I analyze the politics of respectability through three case studies. Through archival research, I document a 1973 court case that challenged US military homophobia. With participant observation, archival documents, and interviews, I contextualize the unique spatial and architectural landscape of San Antonio's oldest queer nightclub, the Bonham Exchange. In addition, I will use *testimonios* (testimonies) of Latinx queer seniors to challenge the legacy of racialized erasure in San Antonio's queer history.

San Antonio's large military presence dates to the colonial era and grew considerably in the 20th century.¹ San Antonio's LGBTQ+ community is inextricably linked to the military as many service members were, and are, queer.² While the military instigated much of queer life in San Antonio, military police perpetually raided and harassed 'off limits' LGBTQ+ nightclubs.³ In 1973 gay entrepreneurs Gene Elder and Hap Veltman challenged these raids in court by arguing that their civil rights were being violated while simultaneously agreeing to expel any 'known homosexuals' from their queer nightclub, the San Antonio Country. This court case demonstrates the tensions of a community fighting for dignity yet acquiescing to the homophobic demands of the military. If funded by the Gay and Lesbian Review (G&LR) Writers and Artists Grant, I will write an article for the G&LR analyzing this unique court case.

In 1981, Veltman opened the queer nightclub Bonham Exchange, still a pillar of San Antonio's LGBTQ+ community today. The landscape of Bonham Exchange is spatially and architecturally distinct from other LGBTQ+ nightclubs in San Antonio due to the club's location, blocks from the infamous Alamo, and historic Victorian building dating to the 1890s. Veltman's bar thrust queer space into heteronormative downtown San Antonio, yet achieved respectability

¹ Gohlke, Melissa. "Off-Limits and Out-of Bounds, World War II and San Antonio's Queer Community." Top Shelf: A Blog About Special Collections at the UTSA Libraries. February 25, 2013. <https://utsalibrariestopshelf.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/off-limits-and-out-of-bounds-world-war-ii-and-san-antonios-queer-community/>.

² Bérubé, A. (2010). Coming out under fire: The history of gay men and women in World War II. Univ of North Carolina Press.

³ Gohlke 2013

through the facade of classically wealthy, white, and unthreatening architecture and decor. An article about Bonham Exchange's complex, queer history is currently under review in the journal *Gender, Place & Culture*. Sadly, Veltman died of AIDS in the late 1980s, Elder passed in 2017, and Veltman's partner, Kenneth Garrett, passed in 2019. Their deaths underscore the urgency of documenting these stories.

The impact of the military and the uniqueness of Bonham Exchange are essential to the queer history of South Texas, yet this research is incomplete. I am applying to the G&LR Writer and Artist Grant to fund on-the-ground research in San Antonio for 3 weeks in summer 2023. The University of Texas San Antonio (UTSA) LGBTQ+ special collection has archived the 1973 court transcripts, but many important archival texts are only available through in-person appointments. Bonham Exchange houses the Happy LGBT Archives, an amalgamation of personal documents from Gene Elder and Hap (Happy) Veltman. While some of the Happy LGBT Archive has been digitized and preserved by UTSA, but much remains to be sorted, cataloged, and appraised - these funds will, in part, go toward preserving this valuable and one-of-a-kind archive. These funds will also support necessary research at UTSA's LGBTQ+ special collection and the Happy LGBT Archives to understand the motivations, aims and goals of this unique court case.

Bonham Exchange and this 1973 court case are important components of San Antonio's LGBTQ+ history yet represent a narrowly racialized and gendered perspective of queer life. In the documentary "Hap Veltman's San Antonio Country" the interviewees were largely gay, white men - much like Veltman and Elder.⁴ Furthermore, much of the queer archives in San Antonio focus on the experience of white queers. Given San Antonio's history as a majority Mexican-American city, this record of LGBTQ+ history remains narrow and incomplete.⁵ The next stage of this research challenges this racialized narrowness by gathering *testimonios* (testimonies) from LGBTQ+ Latinx elders. *Testimonios* differ from oral histories by embracing collective memory and allowing community-members to give voice to their community, many of whom have passed. I use *testimonios* to allow queer Latinx elders, who have survived LGBTQ+ violence, AIDS, and COVID-19, to share testimony on both their lives and community in the

⁴ (2019). Hap Veltman's San Antonio Country. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90Ot1EZQXMc>.

⁵ Arreola, D. D. (2010). *Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province*. University of Texas Press.

1970s and early 80s. As I develop relationships with Latinx queer elders through personal connections with LGBTQ+ organizations, the G&LR grant will support this element of my research by enabling in-person community-based participatory research. With this project I seek to honor the lived experience of queer elders by illuminating an understudied era of queer history and bringing marginalized voices to light.

Biographical Sketch

I come from a tradition of love overcoming prejudice. My maternal *abuelitos* caused a scandal when my norteña (northern Mexican) abuelita married my more *indigino* (indigenous) abuelito. My parents' interracial Mexicana-Yankee love overcame strife as well and, as a proud member of the queer community, I continue this legacy. However, despite these unions, as a child I saw this disparity between my *abuelitos* (brown, poor, and Spanish speaking) and grandparents (white, middle class, and English-speaking). This lived experience inspired me to research and support marginalized communities by challenging structural inequalities.

In 2015 I began working with community development and affordable housing organizations across the US, including community-based nonprofits, LGBTQ+ housing agencies, and tribal officials, to support underserved communities through capacity building and facilitation. During this time, I also volunteered as a financial literacy Spanish translator and co-chaired the Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) committee. While working full time I completed my master's degree in 2020 and began a PhD at the University of Arizona in 2022. As a PhD student, much of my scholarship centers on San Antonio's LGBTQ+ history. As a bilingual and queer *Tejano* with a background in facilitation and community development, my research challenges entrenched marginalization by uplifting community voices and providing advocacy tools. For the last few years, I have been conducting queer archival research to document San Antonio's unique queer history. With this project I honor the legacy of queer advocates—namely trans folks of color—who paved the way for my liberation.