

(Ava) Clark

Difficult Heritage / Dark Tourism

Quentin Drew & Lester Mason

26 March 2023

Difficult Heritage and Dark Tourism Portfolio: An In-Depth Look at Stonewall

INTRODUCTION

Though the Stonewall monument and memorial may be a lighter example of difficult heritage and dark tourism, its presence is rooted in the complex and often turbulent history of the Queer Rights Movement in the United States. Today, Stonewall exists as a powerful symbol of dissent and LGBTQ+ pride, standing as a physical reminder that those who have fought for the rights, recognition, and respect of queer individuals will not be forgotten, and more importantly, that queer activists today will continue where their predecessors left off. Over the course of this essay, I will cover an in-depth investigation on the Stonewall monument in an effort to provide an accurate overview on how Stonewall came to be recognized as a national monument as well as explore the current focuses of contestation surrounding it and subsequently, highlight the ideas that have been presented regarding re-negotiation efforts.

CONTEXTUALIZING STONEWALL

In order to develop an accurate understanding of why the Stonewall riots were so significant at the time, it is necessary to first recognize how the riots came to be. This requires a deeper look into the socio-political and historical context of the time, particularly in regard to queer lives. The Stonewall riots took place in 1969 at a time when it was exceedingly dangerous to even be perceived as potentially queer. The 1950's brought about a violently strict and systematically enforced social policy to maintain accepted normative behavior, and as such, any form of deviance was seen as grounds for a certain degree of criminalization. This "fear campaign" is most notably referred to as the red scare, in which anyone with communist sentiments or any perceived communist behaviors were arrested, black-listed, or altogether demonized (Walsh

2019). Considering queer individuals were widely recognized as sexual deviants, they posed a threat to the accepted norm as well, and the paranoid political attacks on queer lives at this time became known as the lavender scare (Walsh 2019). One notable example of this was when thousands of people lost their jobs in 1953 due to perceived sexual orientation as a result of President Eisenhower's executive order banning homosexuals from federal employment as they posed a security risk, which fell into line with the military's anti-homosexual policies as well (Walsh 2019). Of course, at the time, homosexuality was categorized as a mental defect by the American Psychiatric Association and still outlawed in all fifty states (Gozemba 1985; HISTORY 2018; Walsh 2019). By 1969 in places like New York, queer people either hid in plain sight if they could get away with it or became part of city's underbelly as it was nearly impossible to get a job or rent a place to live in if you were noticeably queer, and it was very common for queer youth to find themselves homeless if their family found out. Additionally, as serving queer people alcohol was illegal, mafia-run bars like the Stonewall Inn often let in queer people and essentially became recognized as the only gay bars in New York City (The New York Times 2019). One of the main issues that queer people faced day-to-day, however, was the police; not only did they raid these bars on the regular and arrest visibly queer individuals for promoting homosexuality, but the police were also notoriously violent and dismissive of queer lives no matter where they were or what they were doing (The New York Times 2019). Stonewall veteran Martin Boyce described the police's behavior toward queer people pre-Stonewall as a "rite of humiliation," and that even if they didn't arrest you, they wouldn't leave until they humiliated you, often through acts of violence (LGBTCenterNYC 2019, 3:22). Naturally, it all came to a head in what became known as the Stonewall Riots.

In the early hours of June 28th 1969, the Stonewall Inn was raided by the police. As various queer people were being detained and arrested, one lesbian in particular yelled out to the crowd to do something as she was being taken away, and this sparked the beginning of the riots (Walsh 2019). It should be noted that there remains quite a bit of mystery around who exactly was there as this happened, who threw the first thing at the start of the riots, as well as what that item may have been. The common narrative says it was a brick thrown by a drag queen, likely grieving the death of queer icon Judy Garland whose funeral many drag queens attended earlier that day, but that has been somewhat debunked in recent findings (The New York Times 2019). In fact, there

is no evidence that confirms bricks in particular were thrown, and that various other things such as drink glasses, purses, shoes, or even rocks were much more likely utilized to fight back against the police (The New York Times 2019). The first person to throw something will also most likely remain a mystery, as there are too many conflicting accounts of the night, and from what we can gather, the riot began rather suddenly and gained numbers as the days went on. Additionally, according to various Stonewall veterans, while there were many drag queens at Stonewall that night, Judy Garland's death had little to nothing to do with the riots, and was actually often used as a point by the media in an effort to trivialize the movement (The New York Times 2019; Walsh 2019). Ironically enough, one fact that is often brushed off as myth yet has been confirmed by multiple eye-witness accounts are the multitude of Rockettes-style kicklines that were formed to hold off the police, and even included a song to go with where the drag queens referred to themselves as the Stonewall Girls (The New York Times 2019, 6:39). Many particulars such as this in the Queer Rights Movement in the United States have been lost to history as a result of queer lives and contributions being continually dismissed and erased; queer history was rarely recorded without extreme bias, was never taught in schools, never seemed to hold much value to people outside of the community, and as writer and filmmaker Tourmaline states, "how do we tell a history of something when our lives aren't in archives?" (The New York Times 2019, 8:23). What we do know is that the riots themselves lasted for about a week in and around the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, and unintentionally acted as the catalyst that sparked a significant increase in participation and support of the Queer Rights Movement in the United States.

Following the Stonewall Uprising, there were numerous queer activism organizations created, although the most well-known one at the time in New York was the Queer Liberation Front who initiated the first pride march on the first anniversary of Stonewall. In June 2016, the year after same-sex marriage was legalized in the United States, President Obama recognized Stonewall as an official National Monument and added Christopher Park, which is situated directly across from the Stonewall Inn, to America's National Park System (Leiro 2016). Most notably in the park is the George Segal art installation from the 1990's that is titled 'Gay Liberation,' and has since been a focal point for both heavy discourse and tourism. Today, the Stonewall Inn remains a fully functional bar and is widely recognized as a queer memorial and safe-space, co-owned by

two queer activists – Kurt Kelly and Stacy Lentz – who also founded the non-profit organization for queer individuals living in unsafe areas called The Stonewall Inn Gives Back Initiative (Stonewall Initiative n.d.). Stonewall continues to play an active and supportive role in the community, more-so now than ever before. It is a well-respected and highly visited queer tourist site, while still maintaining its identity as a gay bar. In 2016, after the Pulse Nightclub shooting which left 49 people dead and 53 injured at the aforementioned gay club in Orlando, the Stonewall Inn held a vigil that prompted thousands of people to show up and pay their respects, even catching the attention of city and state officials who eventually made an appearance to give a few words and publicly remember the names of those lost (Smothers 2016). Alternatively, Christopher Park now fully functions as a federally funded National Park, monument, and tourist destination. Park rangers are there to provide tours and information on the Stonewall Uprising as well as keep the area clean and respectable. The Park is open to the public, and for those who cannot visit in person, the National Park Service website provides a virtual interaction tour as well as a fifteen-part video series on Stonewall from then to now that was organized to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the park being recognized as a National Monument (National Park Service 2022).

POINTS OF CONTESTATION AND IDEAS FOR RE-NEGOTIATION

The most noticeable and widely argued point of contestation regarding the Stonewall monument and memorial has to do with the George Segal art installation. Titled ‘Gay Liberation,’ it was placed in Christopher Park in 1992 in an effort to memorialize the Stonewall Uprising (Earnest 2018). However, many current queer activists find this particular art piece to be incredibly tone-deaf, and it has been interpreted as a rather transparent symbol of the whitewashing and cis-washing that the Queer rights movement and queer history in general has been subjected to over time. Of course, the current discourse stands in stark contrast to the original contestation that occurred over the installation when it was created, which was fueled by homophobia (Earnest 2018). The installation includes two life-size same sex couples, in which the two women are sitting together on a bench in Christopher Park and the two men are standing nearby, both seemingly engaged in peaceful conversation. The statues themselves are bronze and painted over entirely in white, which has been a point of discourse in itself considering there could not be a

more clear example of how mainstream media and retellings of Stonewall have contributed to the mass erasure and dismissal of trans people of color and their contributions as queer activists throughout history by essentially re-painting the past through a cisgender, white lens. Moreover, as Segal's work was placed in the park following the AIDS epidemic, which "ravaged New York City and radicalized its queer communities," the "white cast figures" were described by the local queer community as "ghostly" and "resigned" (Earnest 2018). Acclaimed as a representation of gay liberation as well as an attempted memorialization of the Stonewall Riots, the peaceful statues – created and installed by a white cisgender, heterosexual man – are increasingly and understandably offensive, especially considering the instillation is now a central part of the National Stonewall Monument and a sought-after queer tourist site. In situations such as this, it is imperative to recognize that "monuments are one way we anchor the fluidity of our cultural memory, even as our needs for them are always shifting, invalidating, and revising their meanings. In a city like New York, where public space is increasingly dominated by private capital, there is a new urgency to think about how we can represent and remember human life within it" (Earnest 2018).

Many queer activists today are refusing to be silent or inactive on this matter, which should be unsurprising when taking into account that queer history has worked to solidify the belief that maintaining silence on matters such as this does active, if potentially indirect, harm to the community. In 2015, two anonymous queer activists vandalized the Segal instillation "by painting the [two male] statues' faces and hands brown and dressing them with wigs, bras and scarves," with a sign proclaiming 'Black & Latina Trans Women Led the Riots / Stop the Whitewashing' (Browning 2015). Of course, this did not remain for long and the statues were reverted back to their original look as quickly as possible. While there remained no attempts by officials to consider removing or replacing the instillation, 2019 witnessed the city of New York announcing they would be putting in a new monument near Stonewall, with the new one intended to honor two of the most iconic transgender activists and icons in queer history in the United States, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (Carlson 2019; Jacobs 2019). However, it should be noted that this piece will not join Segal's in Christopher Park, it has yet to be commissioned, and due to the unexpected breakout of COVID-19, has been presumed to be put on hold as it was planned to be put in place by 2021 and we have yet to hear any major updates

on the matter since then (Carlson 2019). The community “took the matter into their own hands” in 2021, installing a bronze bust of Johnson with her iconic flower crown and a plaque commemorating her contributions with one of her very own quotes: “History isn’t something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities” (Carlson 2021). The art piece was installed in celebration of what would have been Johnson’s 76th birthday, had she not been found dead in the Hudson River, coincidentally, about a week after the Segal Installation was put in place (Carlson 2021). The Johnson art installation no longer sits in Christopher Park, but the artist was recognized and supported, and the piece has now been safely moved with the intention of being put on display at The Center – a queer community organization for support and advocacy in New York City (Leonard 2022).

Arguably the largest project pushing for a serious and effective attempt at re-negotiation for the Stonewall monument and memorial, particularly and cohesively criticizing the Segal installation, can be attributed to artist Chris E. Vargas – the director of the “semi-fictional institution,” The Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art (MOTHA) (Earnest 2018; Flavelle 2019, 17). Vargas organized an exhibition titled “Consciousness Razing – The Stonewall Re-Memorialization Project” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, which contains twelve separate alternative Stonewall Monuments from twelve different queer artists that were designed specifically to be placed in Christopher Park, and replace the Segal installation (Flavelle 2019). Flavelle (2019) takes a deep dive into Vargas’ project, highlighting key aspects of the current Stonewall monument installation that need to be addressed and considered, ultimately illuminating why the current statues should be re-negotiated and replaced. Beginning with a critical approach to monuments in general, Flavelle (2019) raises a noteworthy point that “questions of authority and power are raised when considering who pays for monuments, who the intended audience is and how monuments work to contextualize or de-contextualize historical events” (Flavelle 2019, 17). In the case of Stonewall, Flavelle (2019) goes on to comment that “the *Gay Liberation* monument...actively quells Stonewall as a site of complex queer community and revolutionary energy through a heteronormative framework of intimacy and coupling,” making reference to the “[quiet] socializing” that Segal’s statues engage in, therefore contributing to the act of reframing the Stonewall narrative and erasing the actual

history and current struggles of the Queer Rights Movement (Flavelle 2019, 17). Those involved in the movement today are very aware of the continual attempts at whitewashing, cis-washing, and various other efforts to undermine and sanitize queer history, subsequently dismissing the ongoing fight for civil rights that many queer people still actively face; “it is more important than ever not to let our histories be reduced to a singular narrative, but instead to read them as a complex and continuous struggle for liberation,” a sentiment that many queer activists are pushing for the Stonewall monument and memorial to reflect (Baez 2019, 1; Van Kessel & Van Leeuwen 2019).

CONCLUSION

Altogether, despite the Stonewall memorial and monument being celebrated as the birthplace of the Queer Rights Movement in the United States, this popular tourist spot has a rich and oftentimes convoluted history with several points of contestation that give it credit as a dark tourist and difficult heritage site. Current queer activists are calling for aspects of the monument to be re-negotiated in an effort to re-memorialize the Stonewall Riots in a way that realistically contextualizes and addresses the lived experiences of the queer community and the struggles of the Queer Rights Movement – an undertaking that brings the socio-political function of monuments and their impact on accepted historical narratives into focus, ultimately necessitating a critical consideration of future heritage, how we go about remembering significant points in history, and how these decisions influence the collective memory of an event.

Reference List

- Baez, R. (2019) 'Why We Need 'Reclaim Pride'', *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 26(3), pp. 22-25.
- Browning, B. (2015) 'Vandals Paint Stonewall Statues to Protest 'Whitewashing'', *Advocate*, 19 August. Available at: <https://www.advocate.com/stonewall/2015/08/19/activists-vandalize-new-york-city-stonewall-monument-protest-whitewashing#toggle-gdpr>.
- Carlson, J. (2019) 'Two Transgender Activists To Be Honored With Permanent Monument in Greenwich Village', *Gothamist*, 30 May. Available at: <https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/two-transgender-activists-to-be-honored-with-permanent-monument-in-greenwich-village>.
- Carlson, J. (2021) 'Activists Install Marsha P. Johnson Monument In Christopher Park', *Gothamist*, 25 August. Available at: <https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/marsha-p-johnson-statue-bust-christopher-park>.
- Earnest, J. (2018) 'Does NYC's 'Gay Liberation' Monument Whitewash Stonewall? The New Museum Proposes Replacements', *Vulture*, 28 November. Available at: <https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/is-nycs-gay-liberation-monument-too-white.html>.
- Flavelle, G. (2019) 'Not One Monument but 12: Re-memorializing the Stonewall Riots', C: *International Contemporary Art*, (142), pp. 14-19.
- Gozemba, P.A. (1985) 'Before Stonewall: A Proud 70-Year Heritage', *Gay Community News*, 12(46), pp. 14-15.
- HISTORY (2018) *How the Stonewall Riots Sparked a Movement* | *History*. 1 June. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9wdMJmuBIA>.
- Jacobs, J. (2019) 'Two Transgender Activists Are Getting a Monument in New York', *The New York Times*, 29 May. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/arts/transgender-monument-stonewall.html>.
- Leiro, S. (2016) 'President Obama Designates Stonewall National Monument', *obamawhitehouse.archives*, 24 June. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/06/24/president-obama-designates-stonewall-national-monument#:~:text=Summary%3A,the%20broad%20LGBT%20equality%20movement>.

- Leonard, L. (2022) 'The first transgender activist sculpture in New York City Parks', *OutInJersey*, 25 March. Available at: <https://outinjersey.net/the-first-transgender-activist-sculpture-in-new-york-city-parks/>.
- LGBTCenterNYC (2019) *Stonewall Forever – A Documentary about the Past, Present and Future of Pride*. 3 June. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjRv7dJTync>.
- National Park Service (2022) 'Stonewall Celebrates its 5th Anniversary', *nps.gov*, 27 March. Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/ston/stonewall-celebrates-its-5th-anniversary.htm>.
- The New York Times (2019) *The Stonewall You Know is a Myth. And That's O.K.* | *NYT Celebrating Pride*. 31 May. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7jnzOMxb14>.
- NowThis News (2019) *Why We Must Honor Stonewall as a Turning Point 50 Years Later* | *NowThis*. 23 June. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esxztbimQqw>.
- Smothers, H. (2016) '10 Moving Quotes From the Stonewall Vigil for Orlando Victims', *Cosmopolitan*, 14 June. Available at: <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a59883/stonewall-inn-orlando-vigil/>.
- Stonewall Initiative (n.d.) *The Stonewall Inn Gives Back Initiative – Initiatives/Our Work*. Available at: <https://stonewallinitiative.org/our-impact>.
- Ulrikke Voss (2020) *Walk'n'Talk with Annalisa Bolin – a science talk about difficult heritage and cultural signifiers*. 9 April. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BLnRYl4Sf4>.
- Van Kessel, L. & Van Leeuwen, F. (2019) 'In the end, we always have to call institutions to account', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, 22(3), pp. 285-297.
- Walsh, C. (2019) 'Stonewall then and now', *The Harvard Gazette*, 27 June. Available at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/06/harvard-scholars-reflect-on-the-history-and-legacy-of-the-stonewall-riots/>.