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Exhibition Review: Mount Vernon:
Baltimore’s Historic LGBT Neighborhood

By Amanda Castro and Blanca Garcia-Barron

Before John Travolta played Edna Turnblad in the 2007 remake of John Waters’ Hairspray (1988), the actress known as Divine played the famous role first. Divine, born Harris Glen Milstead, had been John Waters’ muse for twenty years prior to his most famous and successful film, Hairspray, in 1988. As a filmmaker, Waters has had a reputation for making underground satirical films set in the Baltimore, Maryland area that have often been deemed obscene. In the early 1960s and 1970s, Divine played many of the titular roles in films like Pink Flamingos, Female Trouble, and Polyester. Central themes of the films were fetishes, ennui in suburbia, and Baltimore. Deconstructed, Waters’ films reflected an exaggerated portrayal of the repressive attitudes toward homosexuality and sex in 1950s America.

Both Divine and Waters grew up in Baltimore, and eventually became icons within the city and the gay community. Divine, widely regarded as one of the most recognizable drag queens, passed away in 1988. Waters continued to direct films well into the 2000s. He currently resides in Baltimore’s Mount Vernon neighborhood. Not only did he film some scenes of his early films in Mount Vernon, he also first screened Pink Flamingos at the Emmanuel Church. Over the years, the cultural contributions of Waters and Divine within the neighborhood’s community have been significant enough that local residents started a campaign to fund a monument, “A Divine Monument,” dedicated to the memory of Divine and the legacy of John Waters’ films. As of February 2016, the proposed monument received unanimous approval from the Public Arts Commission in Baltimore.¹

The historic Mount Vernon neighborhood in Baltimore currently stands as the cultural center of the city. It is home to the Walters Art Museum, The American Visionary Art Museum, and the prestigious George Peabody Library of the John Hopkins University. The architecture of the neighborhood consists of numerous churches erected in the 18th century that feature Neo-Gothic facades. At the center of the neighborhood is Mount Vernon Place, where the first and oldest George Washington Monument stands. The center includes four small square parks, and features other prominent monuments, such as the one dedicated to the Marquis De Lafayette, the French military officer who fought on the American side during the Revolution against the British.

Most notably, locals promote Mount Vernon as the “gayborhood” in Baltimore. The annual Pride festival takes place in Mount Vernon, and is home to many of the city’s most popular gay bars and businesses. Beyond the contributions of John Waters and Divine, Mount Vernon has a rich LGBT history and active
community. The neighborhood served as one of the walking tours offered at the 2016 conference of the National Council for Public History. The “Mount Vernon Pride Walking Tour,” provided conference attendees an opportunity to explore various places and events that shaped Baltimore’s diverse LGBT community. It was organized by Baltimore Heritage, Inc., and led by Kate Drabinski of the University of Maryland as well as other community members.

One of the first sights of importance during the tour was the home of John Work Garrett, president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. After his death in 1915, his daughter, Mary Elizabeth Garrett, inherited the thirty-room mansion (no longer standing) located across Mount Vernon Place on Washington Monument Street. Garret also inherited her father’s immense wealth that made her one of the richest women in the 20th century. Along with other wealthy elite women like Julia Rogers, Bessie King, Mammie Gwinn and Martha Cary Thomas, they helped establish the John Hopkins University School of Medicine in 1893. They had also helped to establish the Bryn Mawr School, a college preparation school for girls, in 1885 that currently stands in North Baltimore. Garrett, Gwinn, and Thomas were lesbians who used their wealth and family name to fund and promote women’s rights and education. Along with Rogers and King, the women had an
instrumental role in Hopkins being the first school to accept women.

Other historical homes of LGBT icons included the home of Gertrude Stein during her time at the John Hopkins School of Medicine. She attended the school in 1897 but left in 1901 after losing interest in the medical field, but most importantly, due to the anti-Semitism and sexist attitudes that persisted within the school. Stein was most famously part of the literary group, *The Lost Generation* that included Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald during the 1920s. Her most famous work, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, was a memoir written in the perspective of her life partner, Alice B. Toklas. During her time in Baltimore, she rejected the gender conformities of femininity. One of her earliest books, *Fernhurst* (1904), is a fictionalized account a love triangle between Mary Cary Thomas, Mamie Gwinn, and Alfred Hodder, the latter who was a friend of Stein’s.

The tour also focused on the political history of the LGBT community. Mount Vernon Place served as a pivotal site during the strife and fight for gay rights in the 1970s that has come to define a different aspect of public memory of the space. For example, The Washington Monument was at the center of rallies in 1975 and 1984. In 1975, the first pride rally was held at the foot of the Washington Monument. This rally centered on the attempts to pass a “gay-rights bill” in the Baltimore City Council. This bill would officially ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations for people in the LGBT community. The second major rally took place in September of 1984. A crowd of 300 gay rights supporters gathered in Mount Vernon Square in support of the 1975 bill. Some of the community members and supporters wore masks while participating in the rally. The demonstrators took the rally through the community and down to the Inner Harbor where they held a candlelight vigil in front of the Maryland Science Center. The struggle to gain basic human rights culminated in the City Council bill becoming law in May of 1988 with the help of Baltimore’s gay and lesbian community members and its supporters. These two rallies are now seen as the foundational events in Baltimore for the annual pride celebrations and events that now take place every year in June.
At the center of the square of the Washington Monument, the juxtaposition of diverse historical and public memory contexts is indicative of the diverse history of the neighborhood. Different groups within the community have been able to claim a space and become more than symbolically visible. The history of women transcends Mount Vernon place, as they were responsible for the construction and inclusion of women at the Hopkins school. The area has remained the site of the annual gay pride celebrations and has hosted important rallies in the fight for equal rights in the last forty years. While it celebrates this history, colonial memory is represented through the various statues dedicated to Revolutionary and Civil War heroes. This coexistence defines the multiplicity of identities and meanings of various groups within the community. However, as popular and important the Mount Vernon neighborhood is, many of the older LGBT establishments and businesses have begun to close down. This has presented a new issue in the preservation of history within the community. As corporations begin to take over small businesses, the history and visibility of underrepresented groups, like the LGBT community, declines. Efforts to preserve and capture stories of important events, like the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, are being aided by the Gay and Lesbian Center of Baltimore and the University of Baltimore. New archives and oral histories that encompass stories

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2 Kate Drabinski, “Recording the Rainbow Revolution: As Gay Bars in Baltimore Shut Their Doors, Activists Work to Document LGBTQ History,”
of the fight for equal rights, discrimination, and how the 1980s AIDS epidemic affected Baltimore, take a conscious effort to preserve the history.

Physical sites of significance, however, are often times lost. The fight to save The Hippo bar in Mount Vernon proved to be a failure as CVS will be moving into the former bar. The bar opened in 1972 and became a center for political organizing and a safe space for the gay community. More than a bar, it helped fund numerous nonprofit causes, including early AIDS fundraisers. Although stories can be collected, and are valuable, physical spaces represent more tangible representations of public memory and history. It also allows different and underrepresented groups to be equally and visibly represented among the monuments honoring the dominant historical narratives.

The Hippo, as it stands today, Photo by Amanda Castro, 2016.

Conference attendees who participated in the walking tour were able to experience Baltimore through an interactive experience. The topics of LGBT local history, legacies of colonial history, and women’s history within the Mount Vernon neighborhood came to life with the help of tour guides and

beautiful scenery. It is important to remember that without a walking tour, it would be difficult to get such rich information about the “Gayborhood.” Tours held by the Baltimore Heritage organization provide an insider’s perspective that is valuable to the work, history, and preservation efforts of various community groups. Inclusivity of public spaces is an important aspect of a community’s heritage and story. Historical organizations and cities must find a way to connect with the public, and more importantly, they must connect with their own community. The possibility of having a monument dedicated to the memory of Divine, a 300 pound drag queen, that would coexist with monuments of George Washington and Lafeyette, would be a pivotal step in changing the historical landscape of Baltimore. Most importantly, it challenges communities and local governments on how they want to represent their history; it reframes and contests the question of who and what exactly deserves visible space.

Mount Vernon Place Methodist Church and Asbury House, Baltimore, Maryland, Photo by Blanca Garcia-Barron, 2016.
Author Bios

Amanda Castro received her Bachelor’s degree from CSUSB in public and oral history. She is currently a graduate student at CSUSB in the social and behavioral sciences program with an emphasis in public history. In the fall of 2015, she became Project Manager at the Patton State Hospital Museum and Archive where she is helping to create an accessible archive for researchers. Amanda has an interest in community-based projects and outreach where her knowledge of public history helps to organize and carry out such projects.

Currently, Blanca Garcia-Barron is a public and oral history major, and is finishing her last quarter at CSUSB. In the fall of 2016, Blanca will begin a doctorate program at the University of Texas, El Paso. UTEP’s unique concentration in the history of the U.S. Borderlands will offer Blanca an opportunity to continue her research in local and national Mexican-American history, social movements, and community formation. Blanca’s studies at CSUSB were integral in preparing her to advance to not only graduate study, but doctorate level studies as well.