

# History Happens



GLBT  
Historical  
Society  
museum & archives

March 2021

Portrait of Jiro Onuma (center) with friends, ca. 1930s.



## Queer Kinship Among the Seen & Unseen: Exploring Japanese American LGBTQ Lives

by Mark Sawchuk

A new online exhibition provides a pathbreaking look at LGBTQ lives and culture in the Japanese American community in the United States. Curated by Stan Yogi and Amy Sueyoshi, a frequent GLBT Historical Society collaborator, *Seen And Unseen: Queering Japanese American History Before 1945* is a project of J-Sei, a Japanese American community organization in Emeryville.

The show draws on a variety of sources, including some of our archival collections, to unearth a hidden past when same-sex relationships and female impersonation were accepted parts of nikkei (Japanese American) immigrant culture. The exhibition also explores how, over time, the nikkei community's attitudes came to mirror white American fears of same-sex intimacy and gender nonconformity. We interviewed Stan and Amy to learn more about how they curated *Seen and Unseen*.

**Q: The theme of “kinship” among issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants) is an important one. What does it mean in the greater context of nikkei?**

**Stan:** Generational identity has been a defining factor of the nikkei community in the U.S. As we move farther away in time from the issei generation, we run the risk of forgetting that early immigrants were overwhelmingly male. There's evidence that some had emotionally (not necessarily physically) intimate relationships. Many of us who identify as queer Japanese Americans have been unaware of ancestors who were involved in intimate same-sex relationships or defied gender roles. We hope that our exhibition reveals and informs the larger nikkei community, and queer-identified Japanese Americans specifically, about the rainbow branches of our collective family tree.

**Amy:** Issei arrived in the U.S. during a time of intense anti-Japanese sentiment. Before the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, which allowed more Japanese women to enter the country as wives, the community was overwhelmingly male. One cannot adequately underscore how much these men relied on each other for companionship and comfort as they made their way in a new land, in a new language, under the brutality of immense animus from whites. Immigrant poet Yone Noguchi wrote that when he tramped to Los Angeles, he was welcomed along the way at any Japanese person's home for a meal or a night of lodging.

**Q: The show uses a lot of literary and newspaper sources; can you tell us about how you located and interpreted these?**

**Stan:** Literary scholar Andrew Leong, a contributing curator to the exhibition, shared his research about issei leaders who urged compatriots, many of whom led vagabond lives, to settle in America, marry and raise families. He has revealed the queer subtext in creative literature written by issei authors, several of whom depicted men who rejected the call to enter heterosexual marriages and maintained emotional intimacy with other men.

**Amy:** In the absence of oral histories, written texts are often the only sources we have, and they are often sparse since many queers could not afford to leave such materials. Literary sources and newspapers are among the few available materials. When I first started my dissertation in 1996, I had to read each newspaper day-by-day, page-by-page to find a queer nugget. Now many of the newspapers are digitized—even the Japanese American press—so it was easier to put together this exhibition, particularly in the context of the ongoing shelter-in-place.

**Q:** How does the exhibition change our understanding of LGBTQ history in the United States through 1945?

**Stan:** Our exhibition helps audiences understand that early Japanese immigrants came from a culture in which male same-sex relationships and female impersonation were accepted. Their children, the nisei, came of age when white Americans' harshly negative judgements of homosexuality and gender nonconformity were crystallizing. Nisei adopted those attitudes and beliefs. Although issei weren't necessarily celebrating what today we consider queer sexuality and gender expression, they were more accepting than subsequent generations. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II accelerated the community's desire to prove itself "American," which included conformity to rigid gender roles and condemnation of same-sex intimacy.

**Amy:** A number of scholars, such as Siobhan Somerville, have shown that racism breeds homophobia and transphobia, even within marginalized groups themselves. Many Japanese Americans are terrified of coming out to their families, and postwar Japanese immigrants or shin issei think being queer is an American phenomenon. Most are unaware that our grandparents or great-grandparents were likely more queer-friendly than our parents. Learning about this might reshape how queer Japanese Americans think of themselves.

**NOTE:** *Seen and Unseen* is available through the end of June.

*Amy Sueyoshi is dean of the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University.*

*Stan Yogi is a writer who has coauthored numerous books and essays, which have appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Daily Journal and academic journals and anthologies.*

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## At the Museum

### Making a Global Impact, Even During a Pandemic



by Gerard Koskovich

The year 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the GLBT Historical Society Museum — a birthday worth celebrating. The global health crisis has not pushed aside our desire for LGBTQ history. Instead, the concerns caused by the pandemic have sharpened our need to stake a distinctive claim in the passage of time and to find lessons

for the present in the queer past.

As a founding member, former board member and ongoing consultant for the Historical Society, I've become more aware than ever in the past year of the significance of the museum for people around the world. Individuals who have not yet visited our space in the Castro District are

attuned to the society's work, viewing online exhibitions and participating in programs remotely. I've had the privilege of joining colleagues in curating one such [recent exhibition](#) and in presenting several programs. The response has been extraordinary, with a striking number of international attendees.

## Sharing Principles & Best Practices

Just as important: Professionals in museum studies and sister organizations in LGBTQ public history have looked to us to share our principles and best practices. For instance, the guest editors of an "LGBTQI+ Museums" [special double issue](#) of the journal *Museum International* invited Amy Sueyoshi, Don Romesburg and me to discuss our observations as stakeholders who have curated several exhibitions at the museum. In their introduction, the editors praise the society as an organization whose "transformative work is based on grassroots strategies and the personal involvement of community members."

For a public history example, we can look to the [Collectif Archives LGBTQI](#), the association working to open a queer archives in Paris, whose members have cited the GLBT Historical Society in making the case for their project. I helped the Collectif draft [an open letter](#) arguing that LGBTQ community-based organizations are uniquely qualified to document and display our past. Endorsed by 45 queer museums, archives and history groups in 22 countries, the letter appeared in January in the daily *Libération*. Shortly thereafter, the Paris City Council voted unanimously in favor of the Collectif's proposal.

Even as we look forward to the day the society can reopen its galleries to exhibit tangible objects of our history and to welcome visitors in person, our members and supporters can take pride in the global reach of the museum we have created together. The pandemic may be keeping those of us who love the queer past apart physically, but it can't stop us from crossing borders to share our dream of an ever-growing family of LGBTQ public history organizations worldwide.

*Gerard Koskovich is queer public historian and rare book dealer who customarily divides his time between San Francisco and Paris. For a sampling of his publications, visit his page on [Academia.edu](#).*

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## Upcoming Online Events

### [Author Talk](#)

### [Last Night at the Telegraph Club: A New Novel](#)

Saturday, March 6

4:00–5:30 p.m.

Online program

[Free](#) | \$5 suggested donation

Award-winning young-adult author Malinda Lo



**AUTHOR TALK**  
WITH MALINDA LO

**Last Night at the Telegraph Club**

Saturday, March 6  
4:00 PM Pacific

GLBT Historical Society  
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will read selections from and discuss her new novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (Dutton Books, 2021), a queer coming-of-age story set in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1950s. The story traces the blossoming of love between seventeen year-old Lily Hu and her friend Kathleen Miller in a Chinatown beset by Red-Scare paranoia and deportation threats. Lo will share details from her research into the

midcentury LGBTQ community at the GLBT Historical Society's archives, and discuss the novel and its historical inspirations with historian Amy Sueyoshi. Register online [here](#).

## Queer Culture Club Catching Up With Shayne Watson

**QUEER**  
Culture Club

FEATURING:  
**SHAYNE WATSON**

Thursday, March 11  
7:00 pm PST

Thursday, March 11  
7:00–7:30 p.m.  
Online program  
Free | \$5 suggested donation

In this month's installment of the Queer Culture Club, GLBT Historical Society Executive Director Terry Beswick will interview architectural history and historic preservation planning consultant

Shayne Watson, the owner of Watson Heritage Consulting. Watson coauthored the *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco* (2016) and, with Beswick, was a cochair of the *San Francisco LGBTQ+ Cultural Heritage Strategy* (2020). Queer Culture Club is our monthly series each second Thursday that focuses on LGBTQ people who are defining the queer culture of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Each month, Beswick interviews queer culture-makers, including authors, playwrights, historians, activists, artists and archivists, to learn about their work, process, inspirations, hopes and dreams. Register online [here](#).

## Book Launch Street Sex Photos

**AUTHOR TALK**  
WITH MARK I. CHESTER

**Street Sex Photos**

Friday, March 19  
6:00 PM Pacific

GLBT Historical Society  
Preservation & Archives

Friday, March 19  
6:00–7:30  
Online program  
\$10 | No one turned away

Legendary San Francisco gay "radical sex" photographer Mark I. Chester will present a live slideshow presentation and discuss his recently published book of contemporary photography,

*Street Sex Photos* (2021). The book documents gay men's sexual lives in the South of Market district of San Francisco in an era when the neighborhood was, in Chester's words, "like a giant supermarket of the sexual underground." The book also is an elegy to the changing social

world of SoMa since the 1980s, as the darkened alleyways give rise to new development that threatens to extinguish what is left of a gay subculture that flourished for decades. The book is available for purchase in two sizes; contact the author directly by text at (415) 613-0939, or by email at [sfphotou@yahoo.com](mailto:sfphotou@yahoo.com). Register online [here](#).

## Community Event Anniversary Party & LGBTQ History Trivia Night

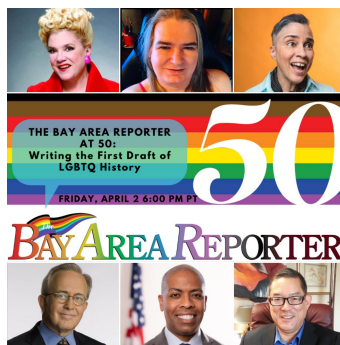


Friday, March 26  
6:00–7:30 p.m.  
Online program  
\$5 | Free for members

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of the opening of the GLBT Historical Society Museum and the 36th anniversary of the GLBT Historical Society's foundation, we are hosting a virtual LGBTQ

history trivia evening! Participants will mix and mingle with other queer history buffs and show off their knowledge of our vast queer past. The top-scoring teams will win fabulous prizes, including a private museum tour, complimentary memberships and limited-edition merchandise. All ticket sales go directly to supporting our archives, museum and public-history programs, furthering the society's mission to preserve and share LGBTQ history. A good time for all is guaranteed! Register online [here](#).

## Living History Discussion The BAR at 50: A First Draft of LGBTQ History



Friday, April 2  
6:00–7:30 p.m.  
Online program  
Free | \$5 suggested donation

For a half-century, the *Bay Area Reporter* (BAR) has provided coverage of San Francisco and the Bay Area's LGBTQ community. In this special discussion commemorating the 50th anniversary of the publication that has become the community's newspaper of record, a group of activists, writers and culture-makers will recount their relationship to and history of the BAR. The panel will be moderated by Terry Beswick, executive director of the GLBT Historical Society, and panelists include Gwen Smith, "Transmission" columnist for the BAR; Hank Plante, an award-winning, veteran Bay Area journalist; Paul Henderson, executive director of the San Francisco Department of Police Accountability (SFDPA); Marga Gomez, an award-winning Latinx performer and comic; Sharon McNight, a Tony-nominated singer and performer; and Michael Yamashita, the BAR's publisher. Register online [here](#).

# Current Online Exhibitions



## Empowerment in Print: LGBTQ Activism, Pride & Lust

A look at how queer periodicals have been used to form social networks, create culture, express desire and inspire activism.



## Legendary: African American LGBTQ Past Meets Present

A showcase of the dynamic history of Bay Area Black LGBTQ lives, reflecting themes of art, belonging, justice and sexuality.



## Angela Davis: OUTspoken

Rare posters and ephemera from a private collection highlight the journey of Black lesbian activist Angela Davis.



## Reigning Queens: The Lost Photos of Roz Joseph

Evocative color photographs depict San Francisco's epic drag and costume balls of the mid-1970s.



## Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride

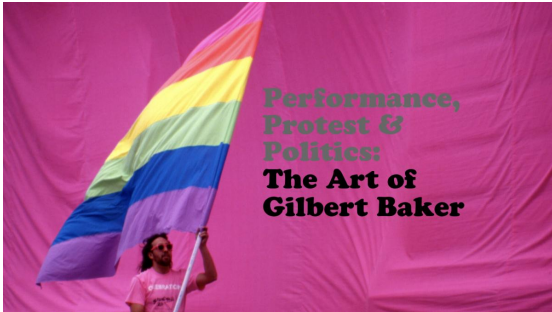
Learn how San Francisco forged the internationally renowned annual celebration that would come to be known as Pride.



## AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story

Explore the rise and growth of the treatment activism movement in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and 1990s.





### Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker

Examine how rainbow-flag creator Gilbert Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer.



### 50 Years of Pride

This photography exhibition documents the evolution of San Francisco Pride over the past half century.

**Queer History Books We Love**

A row of five book covers is displayed on a white banner. From left to right: 'WE ARE EVERYWHERE' by Nicole R. Hill & Jordan Saper; 'PAPER BULLETS' by Jeffrey H. Jackson; 'BLACK ON BOTH SIDES: A RACIAL HISTORY OF TRANS IDENTITY' by C. Riley Snorton; 'QUEER: A GRAPHIC HISTORY' by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele; and 'When Brooklyn Was Queer' by Hugh Ryan. The GLBT Historical Society logo is in the top left corner of the banner.

**Shop for books and support**  **GLBT** Historical Society  
museum & archives

## Visit Us & Online Resources

The museum and archives are online-only until further notice. Archives staff members are still available to work with researchers; please contact us at [reference@glbthistory.org](mailto:reference@glbthistory.org).

**Online exhibitions:** Our online exhibitions are available here.

**Online archives resources:** Browse dozens of digital collections.

**Upcoming events:** More information about all of our online events.

**Past events:** Video footage of a large number of our past programs.



## THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

### Exhibitions & Programs

4127 18th St.

San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

[www.glbthistory.org/museum](http://www.glbthistory.org/museum)

Temporarily online-only

## DR. JOHN P. DE CECCO ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

### Research & Public History Center

989 Market St., Lower Level

San Francisco, CA 94103

(415) 777-5455

[www.glbthistory.org/archives](http://www.glbthistory.org/archives)

Temporarily online-only

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CREDITS. FEATURE: Photographer unknown; Jiro Onuma Papers (2000-27), GLBT Historical Society. AT THE MUSEUM: A patron at the GLBT Historical Society Museum; photograph by Gerard Koskovich. EVENTS. 3/6 Author Talk: Headshot of Malinda Lo, 2017; photograph by Sharona Jacobs. Cover for *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* courtesy of Dutton Books. 3/11 Queer Culture Club: Portrait of Shayne Watson courtesy of same. 3/19 Author Talk: Headshot of Mark Chester and cover image of *Street Sex Photos* courtesy of Mark Chester. 4/2 Living History Discussion: Headshots of Marga Gomez, Paul David Henderson, Sharon McNight, Henry Plante, Gwen Smith and Michael Yamashita courtesy of same.

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## Back Issues

