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“Save Our Children” Research Reflection

I became interested in the topic for my essay “Save Our Children: Florida’s LGBTQ Panic from the 1950s to Today” during my first year writing course What’s in a Name, taught by Jeannine Johnson. In March 2022, the governor of Florida passed what came to be known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which sparked debate nationwide. Media coverage of the Don’t Say Gay bill, much of which depicted children smiling, class projects, and symbols of innocence started to blur before my eyes and transform into the 1960s campaigns against gay rights, of Anita Bryant and her orange juice, of groups with names like the Foundation for the American Family, and white picket fences. When we then had an assignment to explore a framework for an issue, how it had changed and developed, and what reframing is required to help to solve it, I started my research in looking for those images that have characterized the last century of anti-LGBT organizing. I didn’t end up using all of these motifs in my paper, but they provided a valuable starting point for diving into the project.

One persistent misconception around LGBT issues is the belief it is necessary to protect children from the gay agenda, grooming, and predation from LGBT adults. The parallels I saw between the current debate about the Florida bill and a long history of anti-LGBT rhetoric and action were clear, but combining them posed several research challenges. The fact that one half of the issue was still unfolding in the present meant that my sources for the modern context had to come from sound bites, newspaper excerpts and interviews. These are all much harder sources to evaluate for bias and credibility than books or peer reviewed papers. I ended up relying on name recognition, using NPR and the Wall Street Journal for a final attempt at balanced sources.

The few books that have been written on LGBT history in America were rarely specific, but gave important context on which the primary sources rested. Gay Rights and Moral Panic: the Origins of America’s Debate on Homosexuality was particularly useful and one I was lucky enough to find as physical copies in the stacks. As I focused in on my topic, I had to piece together a climate and environment using these primary sources that hadn’t been synthesized or achieved much attention. Much of the history of LGBT communities prior to the 1980s can only be found in small circulation zines, a handful of queer newspapers, and in memoirs written years after the fact, due to social stigma.

While tricky to find, these sources are fascinating. I used the online library ebooks available through Super Search on Clapp’s website, as well as databases such as Proquest and Gale Online. I was able to find several scanned pamphlets from many different perspectives, things that I had not been looking for, but mentioned one name that was cross listed in another resource I had looked into several days earlier, which I then had to track down again. This frenetic hunting and gathering took up the majority of my research time. I then had to integrate the personal stories being shared in many of these resources with the news stories and legislation of our current climate.
My passion for this topic and my interest in LGBT history carried me through my early research, but I struggled to keep in mind that the question I was supposed to be answering was one of framing. The somewhat stressful conclusion to my research process made me hone in on when you should keep digging on an issue, and when you need to pull back and regroup. There are so many resources available, both through the research librarians, archives, stacks and online databases, but it is equally important to focus on the why behind your research. History is critical to understanding an issue, but having a scientific backing for claims is also essential. When combining the two, what is the most important component of the research and how can I clearly and effectively deliver that information? I still don’t feel like I have a handle on the right answers, but I have learned that they need to be kept in mind as you explore the broad implications of a project.