

Encountering Queer Intergenerational Memory at Admiral Duncan

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When initially brainstorming this project, I intended to investigate the history of Switchboard London. Switchboard London is an LGBTQ+ hotline that provides support to LGBTQ+ folks across London. Historically, Switchboard London gave queer Londoners trusted information and a confidential outlet to talk about their experiences. During the height of the AIDS epidemic, Switchboard London became a vital resource for LGBTQ+ folks to learn about the epidemic and join supportive community and activist organizations.

Although Switchboard London is a digital entity of queer history in London, I wanted to find the physical building to research how the organization understands itself in the queer history of London. I called the hotline, and a friendly voice picked up the phone. I told them about my interest in queer history, and I asked if I could visit their site. They informed me that Switchboard London's physical location is confidential, but they recommended I explore SoHo to find queer history. They cited the pub Admiral Duncan as an important site of queer history because of a neo-Nazi bombing in 1999. I decided to shift my focus to this pub to not only investigate the role gay bars play in London's LGBTQ+ history but also interrogate the tendency to situate LGBTQ+ history in bars and spaces of entertainment. I approached my site wondering where London's LGBTQ+ historical consciousness of community is physically situated and how the commercial gentrification of SoHo reconciles and represents this history of LGBTQ+ resistance. Our discussions throughout the semester about "challenging dominant assumptions about whose histories should be taught and commemorated," felt very present in this research as I also wondered how LGBTQ+ public remembrance manifests and materializes throughout London.¹

¹ Maerker, Anna Katharina, Simon Sleight, and Adam Sutcliffe, eds. 2018. *History, Memory and Public Life : The Past in the Present*. London: Routledge, 7.

I knew I was in the historically gay section of SoHo once every block I walked through was covered in pride flags. Under these pride flags, stood restaurants, gay bars, gay clubs, and sex shops. I thought about how gay history existed through and adapted to the commercial gentrification of this London neighborhood. As queer Londoners coalesced around the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement, bars like the Admiral Duncan in SoHo became a safe haven for the LGBTQ+ community. These community places, like the famous Stonewall Inn in New York City, were subject to police harassment and homophobic attacks. Knowing this neighborhood's history of both trauma and triumph, I feared the plethora of pride flags fed into rainbow capitalism and stripped the neighborhood of its politically queer history for profit. The pride flags and the gay businesses under them were obviously fun and cute to walk through, but I feared they ignored the historical gravitas that comes with the evocation of "pride" in London.

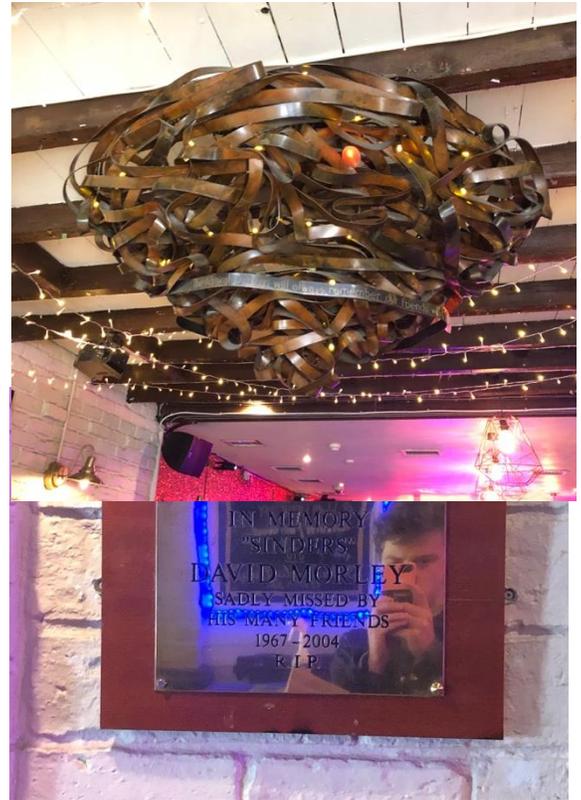
Once I found the Admiral Duncan, I was surprised by the lack of pride flags hanging from

its exterior. Beyond its ocean blue color and a portrait of its namesake 18th century Admiral Duncan, the pub appeared muted among its neighboring buildings. When I walked into the pub, I was greeted by a friendly (and hunky) bartender in his mid-thirties and four elderly queer men sipping on pale ales. I sat down and sparked a conversation with these men that turned into a



really beautiful experience of queer intergenerational memory. As we talked, my queer elders gave me a history of the Admiral Duncan and LGBTQ+ life in the SoHo neighborhood.

The Admiral Duncan has existed in SoHo since the mid-1800's. The pub was named after the British Naval Admiral Adam Duncan who became famous for his leadership in the French Revolutionary Wars. There is no recorded history of when the Admiral Duncan transformed into the gay bar it is today, but the men at the bar told me it became a visible and recognized LGBTQ+ place in the early 70's after Britain decriminalized homosexuality in 1967. The men told me that the bar is most well known for being targeted by a neo-Nazi terror attack in April 1999. The planted nail-bomb killed three people and injured 79.²



The bar honors the victims of the attack through a chandelier memorial above its entrance. Made from shrapnel collected after the explosion, the chandelier reads “The Admiral Duncan will always remember our friends who lost their lives on April 30th, 1999.” I think the chandelier memorial honors victims of the terror attack while also adding to the beauty of the space. A plaque on one wall of the bar honors David “Sinders” Morley who was a manager of the Admiral Duncan at the time of the 1999 attack. Sinders survived the attack, but in 2004 was murdered in a homophobic attack. The plaque is subtle, yet a powerful marking of Sinders’s impact on the Admiral Duncan and the London LGBTQ+ community.

² Carla Power and Susan H. Greenberg. “Three Die after the Latest Bombing in the Capital. Who Is Responsible for the Carnage?; Hatred in London.” *Newsweek* (May 10, 1999): 26.

The Admiral Duncan is a place to mourn LGBTQ+ people lost to the 1999 terror attack, AIDS, or other hate crimes, but the pub is also a lively place to celebrate our community. Although the pride flags dispersed across the neighborhood can be viewed as tacky to queers of younger generations, they fly them proudly to signify the cultural significance of these places and honor our community's history of resilience in this neighborhood. I also learned from the men that the Admiral Duncan was targeted by the conservative leaning Westminster City Council to ban pride flags from being flown from businesses SoHo in 2005, citing the flags as a violation the neighborhood's policy on advertising. The London LGBTQ+ community fought back against this ban "attacks gay identity" and eventually overturned the policy.³ These men told me that many flags are flown in this neighborhood in response to the council's attempts of removal.

My experience at the Admiral Duncan and other queer spaces in London made me critically think about LGBTQ+ intergenerational memory. When I talked to older LGBTQ+ people about London's queer history, they situated it in SoHo and mentioned bars like Admiral Duncan. When I talked to queer people my age, they told me to look beyond SoHo and to explore East London for authentic, inclusive queer spaces. In the spaces I visited, I did not observe a mixing of queer elders and younger queer people. I thought a lot about how younger queer people receive and learn our people's history if we are not developing relationships and communicating with our queer elders are a part of this history.

Bibliography

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³ Freeman, Alison. 2005. "Gay Flag Ban 'Attacks Identity.'" *BBC*, January 18, 2005.

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