

Undeniable Conjecture: Placing LGBT Heritage

At a time when studies show American public opinion beginning to bend in favor of rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, the historic preservation movement does not sufficiently reflect this cultural shift. While the preservation field has otherwise begun to embrace social diversity, integrating the histories of ethnic minorities into a broader cultural heritage, marginalization of the history of LGBT people continues. It has been over a decade since New York City's Stonewall Inn—site of the 1969 riots widely considered the catalyst of the LGBT civil rights movement—became the first site added to the National Register in recognition of significance to LGBT history, yet Stonewall remains alone in this distinction. Although certain professionals in the preservation field have observed the need for documentation of sites emblematic of LGBT heritage, as well as for improved interpretation at LGBT-related sites already preserved for other historical significance, there has been no organized effort to ensure this work. As Moira Kenney asks (a question no less relevant for the fact she is referring to the planning field), “How can a history so poorly understood and skeptically approached be easily integrated into a field that...has only recently begun to explore the experiences of...other marginalized groups whose oppression is more universally acknowledged?”¹ Indeed, the nature of LGBT heritage poses a new set of challenges that preservationists must face in order to

¹ Moira Rachel Kenney, “Chapter 5: Remember, Stonewall Was a Riot: Understanding Gay and Lesbian Experience in the City,” *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, ed. Leonie Sandercock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 121.

incorporate this marginalized history into an encompassing heritage more representative of American diversity.

These challenges are exemplified by the Alice Austen House, also known as Clear Comfort, on Staten Island. Clear Comfort was the home and studio of Alice Austen (1866-1952), who has been called the “earliest American woman of importance in photography”²—as well as the home of her partner of over fifty years, Gertrude Tate. The house has been recognized for both its architectural and cultural significance; it was designated a New York City Landmark in 1971 on the basis of its architectural interest in addition to its having been the residence of the notable photographer. The designation report describes the building’s progressive transformation from a c. 1700 Dutch farmhouse, purchased in 1844 by Alice’s grandfather, to the picturesque Gothic Revival cottage it has remained since the time of Alice and Gertrude.³ The 1992 National Historic Landmark Nomination report provides a much more detailed account of Clear Comfort’s various alterations, as well as an extensive statement of Alice’s importance in the American photographic canon. The report observes that, in addition to the exceptional skill with which she documented New York life around the turn of the twentieth century, what set her apart from other contemporary photographers was that “many of Austen’s pictures explored not only conventional Victorian morals, but also gender roles,” including showing female friends in intimate poses and encouraging them to cross-dress and assume masculine poses. Speculating that, “perhaps her rebellion against conventional Victorian

² Jill S. Mesirow and Page Putnam Miller, “National Historic Landmark Nomination: Alice Austen House,” *United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service*, 23 June 1992, 30 Nov 2010 <<http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/70000925.pdf>> 12.

³ “Alice Austen House,” *Landmarks Preservation Commission*, 9 Nov. 1971, No.1, LP-0371, 30 Nov. 2010 <http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/db/bb_files/ALICE-AUSTEN.pdf>.

standards explains the fact that Austen never married,” the report notes that Alice and “friend Gertrude Tate formed a fifty-year partnership in which each complemented the other.”⁴ Little attention seems to have been paid to Alice and Gertrude’s relationship until the house was “thrown into a cultural war” in 1994, when a New York Public Library exhibition, in honor of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, included one of Austen’s homoerotically suggestive photographs and, even more significantly, identified her as a lesbian. This identity had not previously been included in the house’s interpretation, and the house museum’s caretakers were unwilling to espouse it. In fact, the museum’s board threatened to close the house as a debate swelled over whether Alice’s supposed lesbianism was being intentionally suppressed, or whether it was a fact irrelevant to the interpretation of Clear Comfort’s historic significance.⁵ The debate was marked by a 1994 protest at the house held by the Lesbian Avengers—a group whose manifesto proclaimed “creative activism: loud, bold, sexy, silly, fierce, tasty and dramatic”⁶—that was captured on film by lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer for her film *The Female Closet*.⁷

In the years since the LGBT community first claimed Alice, the question of her lesbianism seems to have had little effect on the house’s official interpretation. Today, visitors to the house museum enter the vestibule to find hung on the wall—amid a collection of Alice’s photos, several of them subtly suggestive of homoeroticism—a “welcome” sign that provides a brief overview of Alice’s life, describing her independent

⁴ Mesirow 14-15.

⁵ Carl Rutberg, “A ‘Boston Marriage’ on Staten Island – Introduction,” *Historic House Trust Newsletter* (Fall 2010): 6.

⁶ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “Lesbian Organizations,” *The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History*, Ed. Wilma Mankiller et al. (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1998): 332.

⁷ Linda Lopez McAlister, “The Female Closet: A Film Review,” *The Women’s Show: WMNF-FM 88.5, Tampa, FL*, 1998, 30 Nov. 2010
<<http://www.mith2.umd.edu/WomensStudies/FilmReviews/fem-closet-lm>>.

personality and focusing on her legacy as a photographer. The sign does make reference to Gertrude, though in the negative context of leaving—not living in—the house: “In 1945, Alice Austen and Gertrude Tate, her companion, were forced to leave their beloved Clear Comfort.” One of the several brochures used to advertise the house museum also mentions Gertrude, this time in the context of Alice’s general unconventionality: “Austen broke away from the constraints of her time...She never married, and instead spent fifty years with Gertrude Tate.” The same brochure declares that, “The best way of honoring Alice Austen is not by creating a mausoleum filled with the past but by infusing her house with creativity, excitement, fun, and a willingness to take risks. Which is what we try to do with all the activities we present.”⁸ These activities—including photography programs at the house for schoolchildren—are indeed an appropriate means of honoring Alice and infusing the site with contemporary relevance. However, the interpretation of the house itself has a mausoleum-quality stagnancy. The majority of presented information about Alice’s life derives from a twenty-minute video that visitors are invited to view, and a biography of Alice by Ann Novotny available along with a collection of Alice’s photographs for visitors’ perusal; both resources, while informative and engaging, date from the mid-1970s and provide an incomplete version of Alice’s story. The video does not even include mention of Gertrude, though she spent decades with Alice in the house; instead, in the context of Alice’s unconventionality and being “very much of a personality,” the video tactfully notes that, “Alice Austen was never to marry,” though she “had no shortage of suitors.” Similarly,

⁸ “Alice Austen House Museum: Visit, Participate, Engage,” Alice Austen House Museum brochure, 2010.

the house's website provides a "complete, illustrated biography of Alice Austen"⁹ that makes no intimation at Gertrude's existence; she is mentioned once on the website in "A History of the House" as Alice's "longtime friend."¹⁰ Although the house museum's few references to Gertrude certainly contribute to a more accurate picture of Alice's life, the dominant interpretation is the remnant of a period when Alice's relationship was deemed detrimental to her historic reputation or else unworthy of mention. Clear Comfort thus exemplifies the need for reconsidering sites in a changing contemporary light, ensuring that their connections with LGBT heritage do not remain hidden; it is Alice and Gertrude's house and its significance that should be preserved, not the house's outdated interpretation.

In Fall 2010, the Historic House Trust (a nonprofit partner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation that supports the preservation of twenty-three historic houses located in the city's parks—including the Alice Austen House) published an issue of its quarterly newsletter based on the theme, "Owning History: Making room for controversy, opinion, rumor and conjecture." In his opening note, the Historic House Trust's Executive Director, Franklin D. Vagnone, questions "what things would be like if we as preservationists actually owned the rumors – imbedded the controversial and questionable into our tours and stories...Is it authentic to tell the whole story, or is it better to frame the story in a way that may exclude conjectural or controversial aspects?"¹¹ Demonstrating such potential ownership of controversy, the newsletter's cover juxtaposes

⁹ "Alice Austen: Her Life and Times," Alice Austen House, 30 Nov. 2010
<<http://www.aliceausten.org/alice/index.html>>.

¹⁰ "Clear Comfort: A History of the House," Alice Austen House, 30 Nov. 2010
<<http://www.aliceausten.org/house/history.html>>.

¹¹ Franklin D. Vagnone, Historic House Trust Newsletter (Fall 2010): 2.

two images: one a tableau of a tennis party photographed by Alice Austen in 1886, the other a 2010 restaging photographed by Steven Rosen. Based on hints at “gender, class, and social standards” believed to have been choreographed into the original photograph by Alice, Rosen “magnifies these signs...to produce new images full of conjectures about interpersonal relationships in 2010.”¹² Rosen’s cover photograph provides a much more overtly suggestive vision of the tennis party, including two same-sex couples kissing and embracing. Inside the newsletter is a restaging of one of Alice’s images of herself and two friends dressed as men, alongside an article on “Alice Austen and Gertrude Tate: A ‘Boston Marriage’ on Staten Island.” The article—which begins with an introduction by Carl Rutberg, executive director of the Alice Austen House since 2002—contrasts the “acknowledged history” of Alice’s life with her relationship with Gertrude, which “has generally been suppressed from history—not by Alice herself but by those who have wished to ‘save her reputation.’”¹³ Rosen’s photographs are a striking visual representation of this differentiation between acknowledged history and a contemporary reconsideration of heritage that accepts uncertainty and includes conjecture. According to Vagnone, “every bit of this newsletter was orchestrated because we knew what it needed to say in a way that people wouldn’t be so offended.”¹⁴ Despite this caution, which might indeed be necessary as preservationists attempt to incorporate LGBT issues into the field’s mainstream, the newsletter is an effective display of the reinterpretation needed at historic sites.

¹² Historic House Trust Newsletter (Fall 2010): 1.

¹³ Lillian Faderman, “A ‘Boston Marriage’ On Staten Island,” Historic House Trust Newsletter (Fall 2010): 7.

¹⁴ Franklin D. Vagnone, Phone Interview, 10 Dec. 2010.

Antoinette J. Lee, one of the first scholars to focus on diversity in historic preservation, asserts that, “history is malleable: it can be rewritten, rethought, reinterpreted, reinvigorated, and resuscitated to illuminate contemporary challenges.”¹⁵ Although she does not address LGBT preservation, her exploration of the means by which the preservation field has been adjusted to include other minority groups provides useful precedents. For example, she discusses recommendations that federal preservation procedures shift to include not only specific historic properties but also the cultural environments valued by American Indians; she concludes that, “We should recognize that an enhanced understanding of cultural diversity may require an expanded or adjusted template.”¹⁶ This observation is fundamental to considering how best to preserve LGBT heritage, which needs to be rewritten—or in many cases written for the first time—to reflect a current understanding of its largely conjectural nature. According to David Lowenthal, all heritage is by nature fabrication; it “exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error.”¹⁷ Lowenthal draws a distinction between history and heritage in their capacity to be rewritten and in the communities privy to them: “Historians’ revisions must conform with accepted tenets of evidence. Heritage is more flexibly emended...History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and endurance, endowing us alone with prestige and purpose.”¹⁸ According to this distinction, LGBT history is very limited; social stigma prevented the LGBT past from being recorded so

¹⁵ Antoinette Lee, “From Historic Architecture to Cultural Heritage: A Journey Through Diversity, Identity, and Community,” *Future Anterior*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 2004): 15.

¹⁶ Lee 19.

¹⁷ David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” *History & Memory*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1998): 7.

¹⁸ Lowenthal 7-8.

as to leave us with much evidence free from uncertainty, especially before the watershed of the Stonewall Riots. Preservationists are tasked with reconciling the need to further develop LGBT heritage, which is by its nature exclusive, with the need to incorporate it within a broadly inclusive American heritage that continues to be preserved. In doing so, they should keep in mind that they are not preserving history as Lowenthal defines it—the mere fact that Alice Austen shared her life with a woman named Gertrude Tate—but rather heritage. This heritage is a construct going beyond acknowledgment of Alice and Gertrude’s relationship, to include the fact that it has been labeled as “lesbian,” the contrast between this label and the house’s interpretation, and the consequential significance to the history of preservation itself.

The fabrication that Lowenthal describes can work in a place’s favor; according to Andrew Dolkart, coauthor of the 1999 nomination that resulted in Stonewall’s inclusion in the National Register, it was possible to prove the site’s national significance (a requirement for nomination since Stonewall did not meet the 50 year age limit otherwise necessary) because it “has developed to be a site of mythic importance,” with its legendary symbolic value among the LGBT community perhaps outreaching the impact that the Stonewall Riot itself had on the equality movement.¹⁹ As opposed to historical significance, heritage significance is not limited by the amount of existent evidence but has the potential to expand by spinning out of itself. It is worth noting that the Stonewall nomination also serves as an example of pushing the boundaries of preservation procedure to incorporate new forms of heritage. Because the authors lacked a prototype for the Stonewall site, which would include not only the Stonewall Inn but also certain streets where the action of the

¹⁹ Andrew Dolkart, Personal Interview, 1 Dec. 2010.

riot took place, they used the guidelines for civil war battlefields to frame the nomination.²⁰

It is this type of innovative spirit that preservationists should adopt as they adjust the preservation template to allow for the peculiarities of LGBT heritage.

According to Paula Martinac, author of the first national guide to gay and lesbian historic sites, *The Queerest Places* (1998),

When I was researching my book, I was struck by how many Americans who had made invaluable contributions to our culture and society have not been acknowledged as queer, even by their biographers. Mainstream historians and biographers have excused these omissions by claiming that homosexuality is not "relevant" to people's accomplishments, and yet heterosexual behavior/activity is always included as a part of history/biography - the classic double standard.²¹

She points out another double standard in many historians' reaction to speculation about notable figures' sexuality, which fills the void left when such information has been dismissed as historically irrelevant: "In trying to uncover a past that was criminalized, we don't always have the kind of evidence that some scholars would accept. But then, why is 'proof' of gay or lesbian sexual relations required to reclaim a historic figure as gay, when 'proof' of heterosexual intercourse is not required to name a person as straight?"²² The fact that the sexuality of important people has not been recorded throughout history, either because it was considered irrelevant or because of the corresponding stigma, is one of the key factors that distinguishes LGBT history from the histories of other minority groups. Another challenge is that the vocabulary of sexuality has changed through time; for better or for worse, sexual identity has not always been as clearly defined as it is by today's labels.

²⁰ Dolkart, Interview.

²¹ Paula Martinac, Email Interview, 30 Nov. 2010.

²² Paula Martinac, "The Queerest Places: The Challenges of Finding & Documenting Historic LGBT Sites," *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, June 2009, 30 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/diversity/lgbt-heritage-in-preservation/queerest-places.html>>.

In Alice Austen's time, partnerships between women were referred to as "Boston marriages," a term coined in the 1880s as a result of the prevalence of such relationships among independent, educated women in eastern cities. According to lesbian historian Lillian Faderman, such women

rejected the term 'lesbian' for themselves because it was associated in their day with lower-class outlaw behavior and perversity. Had they lived in our day, however, when the stigma against gays and lesbians has been hugely diminished and federally-legalized same-sex marriage may soon become a reality, it is probable that these women, who committed themselves to one another for life, would not have eschewed the term 'lesbian' to identify themselves.²³

The heteronormativity that Martinac points out, and the ways in which the sexuality lexicon has developed, highlight the fact that sexuality is as much a construct as the heritage it produces. As LGBT historian Gail Lee Dubrow postulates, "the power of gay and lesbian history ultimately may reside in its ability to reveal the ways in which heterosexuality is socially enforced and culturally constructed, a perspective that draws attention away from gay and lesbian landmarks and, instead, brings a wide range of locations into focus."²⁴ In order for that broader revelation to take place, preservationists must first single out LGBT heritage because of its unique characteristics, then reinsert it, in a more fully developed state, into the wider American heritage. In Martinac's opinion, "In general, I think the same holds true for queer history as for women's history—that we have to first compartmentalize it and deal with it as a distinct entity, get people to recognize accomplishments through time and how sexual orientation impacted them, and then

²³ Faderman 7-8.

²⁴ Gail Lee Dubrow, "Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: Improving the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian Heritage," *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation*, Ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003): 295.

incorporate our history back into mainstream history.”²⁵ There is much work to be done: a survey should be made of LGBT-related sites that have gone unrecognized by official preservation procedures, but those places that have already received landmark designation for other reasons (such as the Alice Austen House) are “perhaps the most obvious places to begin remedying the omissions and distortions in the presentation of gay and lesbian history.”²⁶ In presenting historical figures as significant to the LGBT community, preservationists usually must consider an element of uncertainty in whether the person was verifiably queer in affectational or sexual orientation, and in what terms he or she would have used to self-identify; this speculation, if honestly presented as such, has a definite place in significance.

In the case of Alice Austen, that she spent fifty years with Gertrude as her partner is not conjecture; what is up for debate, rather, is whether she would have identified as a lesbian, and whether her sexuality is relevant to her museum. Regardless of the label she might have preferred for herself, the fact that she has been called identified as a “lesbian” and the resulting controversy is now a part of her story. And her apparent lesbianism does, in fact, have relevance: Alice shared the now landmarked house with Gertrude; their relationship is a reflection of Alice’s unwillingness to conform to societal constraints that is otherwise celebrated at the museum; her challenge to gender stereotypes is notably captured in her photography; and then there is the simple fact that queerness—just like any element of a person’s identity—affects one’s view of world. According to the house’s executive director, Carl Rutberg, “When we stopped debating the ‘L-word’ and started to talk about what we knew of Austen, the disagreements disappeared. Today, we do not

²⁵ Martinac, Interview.

²⁶ Dubrow 286.

claim that Austen was a lesbian, and we do not hide Gertrude Tate. Instead, we present what we know and let the visitors make up their own minds.”²⁷ This honest conveying of the facts of Alice’s history, in Lowenthal’s sense of the word, is an improvement over hiding or denying Alice’s relationship as in the film played at the house, but does not tell the whole story of the Alice Austen House’s significance to LGBT heritage. The Historic House Trust’s Vagnone firmly believes that Alice’s sexuality is no longer “maliciously suppressed” as it most likely was in the museum’s earlier days. Instead, he attributes reluctance to acknowledge assumptions made about her sexuality to a “fundamentally conservative view of scholarship deeply embedded into historic sites and historic house museums,”²⁸ one that rejects conjecture and clings to verifiable truth (despite the fact that “most preservation is to a good degree conjectural.”²⁹ On a side note, the oral history and personal memory often included in preservation are no less conjectural than speculation regarding sexuality.) Acknowledging the role of conjecture in a site’s interpretation, even if not supporting that conjecture, and presenting not only historical significance but also a contemporary understanding of heritage significance, “would infuse our sites with a great deal more relevancy.”³⁰

Finding a means of incorporating a minority’s heritage into the broader heritage protected by preservationists does not guarantee that the public will be receptive. For example, Ned Kaufman compares the success of “preservation’s celebratory power” in recovering history at the African Burial Ground in New York City, with the controversy over

²⁷ Rutberg 6.

²⁸ Vagnone, Interview.

²⁹ Vagnone, Interview.

³⁰ Vagnone, Interview.

preserving the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, where the divisive figure Malcolm X was assassinated. Kaufman says,

Correcting the historical record has its own rightness and is an important goal. Yet these two contrasting stories should give pause to those who argue that being included in the picture equates with empowerment. Heritage victories, unless accompanied by significant victories in the area of property values and political power, are likely to be essentially symbolic. When a preservation victory not only opens up the canon of heritage celebration but also changes the balance of wealth and power (even in a small way), then heritage politics will have achieved a real measure of empowerment.³¹

It would be naïve to believe that increased equality in preservationists' attention translates to increased tolerance of a minority group by the general public; in fact, "the levers are more likely to work in the opposite direction."³² However, to underestimate the potential impact on public awareness would be to disregard the preservationist's role in contributing to the construction of heritage. Laurajane Smith defines heritage as "a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present."³³ As such, "all heritage is uncomfortable to someone, not only because any meaning or message about a heritage place may 'disinherit' someone else, but because heritage has a particular power to legitimize – or not – someone's sense of place and thus their social and cultural experiences and memories."³⁴ The compartmentalization of heritage is by nature exclusionary; incorporating references to LGBT heritage into the interpretation of historic sites will undoubtedly cause discomfort for those members of the public who remain unwilling to accept legitimizing the place of LGBT people in American history. This effect can be mitigated if preservationists include LGBT heritage in the

³¹ Ned Kaufman, "Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Preservation," *Places*, Volume 11 Issue 3 (Berkeley: 1998): 64.

³² Kaufman 64.

³³ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006): 44.

³⁴ Smith 81.

broader American heritage—more accurately reflecting the current reality of a gradually more inclusive society—by first pursuing it on an exclusionary basis guided by its characteristic features: the conjecture of sexuality, relevance, and vocabulary. Not simply compartmentalizing minority heritage, preservationists should reinsert this heritage into the broader American story in a way that acknowledges that it—and all heritage—is a construct and significant as such. Preservationists have the unique power to bring LGBT issues to a broader public attention, while contributing to LGBT people’s communal sense of place-based cultural inheritance, by clarifying that they are not constructing history—an act that would necessitate the denial of conjecture—but, rather, writing heritage.