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Review: Mapping the Gay Guides

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Project

Mapping the Gay Guides: Visualizing Queer Space and American Life

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Project URL

<https://www.mappingthegayguides.org/>

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Project Overview**Amanda Regan and Eric Gonzaba**

Mapping the Gay Guides (MGG) is a digital history project and website aimed at mapping the data contained within Bob *Damron's Address Books* to examine change over time. Named *Bob Damron's Address Books*, these travel texts became almost survival guides to gay and queer travelers across the United States.¹ First published in an era when homosexuality was illegal in nearly every state and classified as a psychological disorder, these travel guides helped gays and lesbians find bars, cocktail lounges, bookstores, restaurants, bathhouses, cinemas, and cruising grounds that catered to people like themselves. The Damron guides are a crucial source for scholars seeking to study and track the development of a gay and lesbian civil rights movement in the United States. In both major cities with large gay communities and in small rural towns, *Bob Damron's Address Books* provided gay Americans with a resource for identifying spaces where community building could take place. Currently, MGG includes data from 1965-1980 and allows users to explore this data on an interactive map, through a series of vignettes and through the raw data itself.

To create the project's data, the MGG team transcribed each entry listed in the Damron guides. We then used the Google Maps API to programmatically assign GPS coordinates to each location. For locations that had "unclear addresses" we have attempted to find those by hand and have noted where general city coordinates were used in place of exact locations because the location could not be found. A more in-depth discussion of our methodology can be found on the [MGG website](#).

A key component of MGG is the map. Drawing on our dataset, the Shiny app allows users to filter the output based on a number of variables including: location, year, amenity feature, and location type. Amenity features and location type provide two of the most interesting insights on the data for scholars. Amenity features are not our team's creation; rather, these classifications were actually a part of the original listings during publication. The Damron publishers used a series of mostly letters (i.e. (D) for dancing) to denote that certain establishments included particular features. The *Mapping the Gay Guides* team cannot verify whether all of these amenity features are necessarily accurate, nor do we know Damron's methodology in adding these letters to particular listings. However, the addition of these amenities features allows users to more thoroughly investigate the gay world the way thousands, perhaps millions, of gay men understood it via these travel guides. "Location type" does not appear in the original data and is added with the intention of capturing types of locations that Damron did not categorize. For example, locations such as baths, advocacy organizations, or churches are included in the guides but not categorized or marked in any way. Adding this field makes it possible for researchers to identify such locations and will aid in mapping these important spaces.

Mapping the Gay Guides is co-directed by Amanda Regan and Eric Gonzaba; both have PhDs in history from George Mason University and are alumni of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Regan is a specialist in digital history and an expert in 20th century women's history. She leads the technical development of the project including developing the data model and building the visualization. Gonzaba is a specialist in African American history and LGBT culture. He's currently completing a book on the culture and politics of gay nightlife in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia since 1970. Gonzaba brings expertise in LGBT culture to the project, manages project outreach, and supervises our graduate student collaborators at California State University Fullerton who did a large portion of the transcription for the current dataset.

The project launched in February 2020 with an initial dataset focused on the Southern United States and batches of data were rolled out throughout 2020. In August 2020 we released the final batch. The site now includes just over 34,000 entries covering the entirety of the United States from 1965 to 1980.

Our audience for this project includes public historians, specifically local museums and historical societies who want to incorporate local LGBTQ history into their programming; students; and historians who may use our data to further

historiographical interpretations. In the near future, the project hopes to secure grant funding to expand our outreach to these communities as well as expand our data to cover the years 1980 to 2000.

Project Review

Katherin Tairo-Quispe

Mapping the Gay Guides: Visualizing Queer Space and American History (MGG) is a historical representation of queer geographies from 1964 on. MGG provides access and invites community contributions to data that facilitates the study of LGBTQ spaces. Over almost six decades, the travel guides produced by Bob Damron provided travelers with readily available information on queer-friendly spaces. These sites of community, pleasure, and politics were published as "Bob Damron's Address Books," notebooks that MGG has transformed into data that can be plotted geographically.

Built using Leaflet, a Javascript library, MGG offers us a well-illustrated map of the U.S. in which the user can find information about the history of LGBTQ spaces, historical context, and analysis of its changing landscapes. Visualized as orange, yellow, and green dots that are distributed across a map of the U.S., each location dot shows the main characteristics such as name, description, amenities, type (a bar, a club, a hotel, and so on), and finally the status of the geographical location (Google Verified Location). Users can observe the quantity of these spaces, see connections between locales, and consider changes over time. For instance, there were 785 locations in 1965, 1752 locations in 1972, 2800 locations in 1975, and finally 4400 locations in 1980 (one can find detailed information for each year on the site). Categories for exploration are based on the original guide and include "After Hours"; "Bring Your Own Bottle"; "Dancing"; "Hotel, motel, resort, or other"; "HOT — dangerous—usually fuzz" (indicating police presence); and so on.

Users might also explore the data through the "Vignettes" section, where individual contextual articles have been posted. These short pieces provide mini-histories of locations and include photographic and video clips. Hyperlinks within the vignettes point users to a wealth of other digital resources including digital exhibits, archival holdings, and other pertinent historical materials. The authors are to be commended for including originally published and last modified information on each vignette. Often, digital public history resources like these become outdated; with relevant date information, those who wish to cite these vignettes will have an easier time

understanding how they fit into other published scholarship. Particularly useful as well is the methodological section included with the site that explains how the dataset was created, outlines editorial decisions made in relationship to standardization, and provides links to the “raw” data that powers the visualization.

Future iterations of the project may wish to consider broadening the dataset beyond the Damron Address Books. As they acknowledge, Damron’s books primarily represent a white gay men’s perspective and one viewed as a traveler from coastal San Francisco. Additional contributions from the public may help them address trans and other queer communities that are less represented in Damron’s books. Even with this consideration, MGG and its project team is to be commended for raising the profile of this rich historical resource. It serves as a model of how queer life can be situated within cartographic traditions and digital humanities.

Footnotes

1. The guides were originally called *Bob Damron’s Address Books* but later were called *The Damron Men’s Travel Guide*. We also refer to them as the Damron guides throughout. [↵](#)