2011

Ghent Gayland: A Case Study of the Gay and Lesbian Community and Media of Norfolk, Virginia

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Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-a8dd-tm31

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Ghent Gayland: A Case Study of the Gay and Lesbian Community and Media of Norfolk, Virginia

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

The College of William and Mary
January 2011
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Protocol number(s): 2010-01-26-6399

Date(s) of approval: 02.08.2010
This thesis offers a corrective to the history of Norfolk, Virginia by documenting the city’s gay and lesbian history between the 1970s and 1990s which is absent from current historiography. It illustrates the various ways in which Norfolk’s gays and lesbians engaged in local politics in an effort to increase their visibility in the city, despite a conservative city government. This thesis also shows how a local newspaper, Our Own, was at the forefront of this political activity. Articles and images in Our Own revealed a great deal of racial and gender exclusion within the gay and lesbian community of Norfolk as well as the conflicts that shaped the political arguments regarding visibility. In the process of establishing their visibility, readers and editors used Our Own to argue for an ideal image of Norfolk’s gays and lesbians which exposed divisions within the community.
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Acknowledgements:

I gratefully thank Leisa Meyer, Cindy Hahamovitch, William Jahnel, Thomas Linneman, Patrick Bradley and Jerry Logan for their comments and suggestions on multiple drafts. I would also like to thank John C. Cassada for the use of his mapping software. Finally, I would like to thank the staff at the Old Dominion University Archives for their assistance and putting up with my frequent visits.
Introduction:

In an episode of the Simpsons, Homer confronts the fact that his new friend is a gay man. His response is blustering and homophobic. When Marge tries to reason with Homer and tells him he is overreacting, he claims he had been deceived because he was not aware of his friend's orientation until Marge told him just moments before his rant. Finally he exclaimed “Marge, I like my beers cold, my T.V. loud and my homosexuals flaming.”¹ Not only does this scene provide a glimpse at Homer's oafishness, it broaches the complications involved in the creation of a “gay” or “lesbian” identity, the visual aspects of presenting the self and the idea that ambiguity is unnerving.

Debates on these issues in gay and lesbian communities have existed for a long time and they remain unresolved today. Competing strands of thought struggle to define what an appropriate gay or lesbian identity is. Who represents a more positive image of gay identity?: the impeccably dressed Will Truman from Will & Grace or Lafayette, the confrontational gay cook from True Blood? One emphasizes his similarity to the heterosexual population that surrounds him while the other confronts the heterosexual population that surrounds him with his difference. Although these are starkly contrasting images, they are representative components of the historic discourse on gay and lesbian identity.

Discussion of these issues was prevalent even in Norfolk, Virginia, between the late 1970s and to the late 1990s. Ghent, a district of Norfolk adjacent to the downtown area, was home to a large population of gay men and lesbians as well as the center of

¹ The Simpsons. Episode no. 168, first broadcast 17 February 1997 by Fox. Directed by Mike B. Anderson and written by Ron Hauge.
operations for *Our Own*, the newspaper that served this population. Started under the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus in 1976, *Our Own* was dedicated to gay and lesbian issues until it ceased production in 1998. What began as a paper focused on local gay issues in Norfolk and adjacent cities eventually came to encompass a large portion of southern Virginia. In the pages of this publication, contributors - staff writers as well as readers – debated various issues that surrounded gay and lesbian identity and questioned what an appropriate visual presentation of sexuality was, what a gay/lesbian identity included, who was included in their community, and what community meant in Norfolk. Like Homer, many writers felt uneasy about an ambiguous identity that did not outwardly appear to be gay, whether it was how a particular individual acted or how the local gay and lesbian community appeared.

It was Ghent’s ambiguous identity that eventually led to my interest in these issues. After living in Ghent for almost two years I discovered that Ghent had once been a gay ghetto, home to a significant concentration of gay men and lesbian women. Although there is a substantial number of gays and lesbians still living in Ghent, the current concentration is smaller than that of the 1970s and 1980s. How, I wondered, did Ghent come to be the site of a gay ghetto and what sparked this change over time? These initial questions led me to larger questions about how people conceive ideas of community and identity and act upon them.

Ambiguity has been a central component of “queer theory,” which explores ideas of sexuality and gender instead of accepting simple normal/deviant binaries. By using queer theory, scholars examine gay and lesbian issues as well as other non-
heteronormative sexualities that are viewed by many as abnormal. In the words of Joshua Gamson, queer theory protests “not just the normal behavior of the social but the idea of normal behavior.”\(^2\) In his work *Freaks Talk Back*, Gamson describes the conflicts involved in presenting queer identities in daytime television talk-shows and argues that organizations like GLAAD (Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) tried to control gay visibility in this medium by training potential talk-show guests. GLAAD bristled at the sight of flamboyant queens arguing with audience members. What GLAAD endeavored to do on talk-shows was to highlight an image of gay men and lesbian women that would not cause controversy but instead emphasize their similarity to heterosexuals.

Gamson's work inspired my own in many ways, but my project also engages the historiography surrounding gay and lesbian issues in America. The issue of “visibility” has been a frequent topic of study in this field. George Chauncey found in his work *Gay New York* that, as early as the 1890s, a community of gay men had been a visible part of the population in New York City, contrary to the assumption that, before the end of World War II, gay populations were invisible or hidden from plain sight. Although gays and lesbians were quite visible in some places in earlier periods, gays and lesbians across the country sought to increase their visibility in the public sphere after the Stonewall Riots. This issue is currently more prevalent in scholarship regarding urban areas however. In other times and places, gay and lesbian visibility was not their goal. John Howard and E. Johnson's work on gay men in the South, both of which focus on rural locations and small

tours, suggests that the performance of “Southerness” (politeness, religiosity and coded speech) allowed men to solidify their positions with heterosexual Southern and African American society. Instead of projecting a visible difference in rural locations of the South, these gay men blended into their communities.

Although Norfolk is a southern town, smaller than most major urban areas, I have found very little similarity between the experiences of gays and lesbians living in Norfolk and those of the individuals from smaller towns and rural communities in the South who Howard and Johnson discuss. Instead, the Norfolk experience seems to resonate more with the scholarship examining major urban areas. Marc Stein’s work on Philadelphia, which identifies similar issues to those that I have found in Norfolk, argues that gay men and lesbian women often diverged along gender lines and that physical spaces of the city such as bars and dance clubs often focused exclusively on either males or females. In addition, political activity was often divided on gender lines and Stein argues that conflict and misogyny often led gays and lesbians to reinforce gender stereotypes. The literature on these issues tends to focus on the experiences of people in the North or West; little attention has been given to cities in the South.

In discussing issues of space, my work engages the academic field of “queer” geography which explores the relationship of queer theory to spaces, real and imagined, as well as the process of constructing space. Larry Knopp has done extensive work on the geography of the gay and lesbian community in New Orleans where he argues that the

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creation of a gay ghetto was the result of class interests. Gay, white middle-class men facilitated the increase in gay and lesbian tenancy and home ownership in the Marginny neighborhood of New Orleans by working with heterosexual professionals who sought to renovate the area. Other scholars have shown different processes by which queer space is created. Tamar Rothenberg's work on Park Slope in New York argues that a substantial lesbian community grew in the area through personal social networks. In Norfolk, queer space was produced through a process of working-class displacement by city officials and police activity that pushed gay and lesbian bars out of the downtown area. These spaces moved to peripheral locations, most often to the adjacent neighborhood of Ghent, and local gay and lesbian followed them.

Before outlining this project, there are some terms that require clarification. The word “community” is problematic because it can have various meanings. In this study I use several definitions. First, when discussing the lesbians and gays who lived in Ghent, I often use the word community to describe them as a group that shares non-heteronormative sexualities. This phrase emphasizes their common location in Norfolk and distinguishes them from other gays and lesbians in other parts of Virginia as well as the surrounding heterosexual population. Yet the term community can also refer to a collective consciousness based on a feeling of connection to a gay and lesbian “community” of queer sexualities, regardless of locality. For these people, personal struggles based on sexuality are universal not regional and they express a connection to gays and lesbians all over the nation and in some cases, the world. Finally, I also employ the term “community” to describe an abstract idea that gays and lesbians competed with
one another to define. Conflicting ideals about what residents thought the gay and lesbian community, local or worldwide, should be surfaced in the gay and lesbian spaces of Norfolk and pages of Our Own. Should it, for example, include transgendered people or bisexuals?

In the course of this project I eschewed the use of the acronyms LGBT, GLBT or GLBTFQ because they are anachronistic. In pages of Our Own, the phrase used to describe a group of homosexuals was invariably “gays and lesbians,” terms that almost always appeared in tandem. The use of “gay” or “queer” as a catch-all for non-heteronormative sexualities was rare. Thus, to describe a group of homosexuals, I most often use the phrase “gay and lesbian.

My project is divided into three sections. The first section discusses gay and lesbian political and social life in Ghent, showing that it was indeed a gay ghetto and what motivated its residents to formulate a political consciousness. Norfolk was the site of significant political action in the 1970s and early 1980s and the UUGC and Our Own functioned in many ways as a focal point for this activity. “Visibility” - raising awareness of and education about gays and lesbians - was a central component of these political activities and here I argue that various methods, such as demonstrations, consumer activism and marketing campaigns were employed to achieve it. In Norfolk, city officials and police complicated the goal of gay visibility in a variety of ways. Norfolk’s vice squad brought the police into gay and lesbian bars. Local businesses, schools and libraries prohibited the distribution of Our Own, and the Norfolk Housing and Redevelopment Authority purchased and demolished downtown gay bars. For those gay
men and lesbian women in the armed services, living and loving in Norfolk was even more difficult because of military authorities.

The second section delves into the history of *Our Own* and provides a content analysis of the newspaper. Although it was initially started by the Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus, a gay activist group, the newspaper eventually became incorporated and even began selling stock. After it became incorporated, numerous logistical changes were made in the publication of *Our Own* and while the page numbers of each issue increased over time, the creative portions (original articles, editorials, letters to the editor, etc.) did not. This paper provided valuable information resources for gays and lesbians living in Norfolk and also contained information that was otherwise inaccessible.

The third section deals with more complicated questions about identity, visibility and community. Although visibility was a more general goal, voices competed with each other to determine what gay/lesbian visibility would look like. Some activists made calls for “unity” and expressed a desire to create a homogeneous community based on alternative sexualities. However, in the physical spaces of Norfolk and the imagined space of *Our Own*, homogeneity often meant segregation based on race and gender. In addition, there was significant division about how individuals’ sexuality should be portrayed. Writers who tackled this issue generally fell into two categories: one espoused a “celebration” model of queer identity that emphasized their sexuality and difference from the heterosexual population. The proponents of the other model, referred to as the “cult of respectability,” sought to accentuate the fundamental “sameness” of homosexuals and heterosexuals.
I conclude this project by discussing the state of life in Ghent today, ideas for future study on this topic and the broader implications of this work. Although the gay ghetto has diminished, a substantial number of gay men and lesbian women remain in Ghent and several bars still occupy peripheral locations. As rent and property prices increased in Norfolk, the population of adjacent Virginia Beach grew in the 1990s and the campaign to loudly express difference based on one's sexuality decreased in Ghent. Since then, the gay and lesbian community was subsumed by a more general identification with the white middle-class residents who currently dominates the area.

On the surface, this project delves into the history of gay and lesbian life in Ghent and Norfolk. Even having lived in Ghent for nearly two years, I was unaware of this past. Recovering it is a worthy endeavor in its own right. However, this project addresses issues applicable to nearly any gay community in the South. Gay and lesbian visibility was a common cause for urbanites across the country but competing ideas about what this visibility would or should look like, as heard through the voices of local residents, illustrated the problems with the concepts of community and identity. By considering Norfolk's gay and lesbian spaces and print culture this study contributes to the scholarship on the construction of gay and lesbian identities, visibility and the production space.
Section 1

Gay Norfolk: Life in the City

Situated along the coast of the Chesapeake Bay, in the southeastern corner of Virginia, lies the city of Norfolk. A major port city since the colonial period, Norfolk has always been a commercial hub for the South and, after World War II, the city began to experience major changes. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel opened in April 1964, making travel to Norfolk more accessible to cities on the peninsula to the north. Major investments in infrastructure continued well into 1990s, further integrating Norfolk with the surrounding cities that made up the Hampton Roads region (Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Newport News, Suffolk, Chesapeake, Poquoson, Williamsburg and Norfolk). Until the 1990 census, Norfolk was the most populous city in Virginia when it was surpassed by Virginia Beach. The navy contributed significantly to this population because Norfolk contained the largest naval base on the East Coast. The city's prosperity has also depended heavily on the Navy in the past, which contributed immensely to the economic and population growth during and immediately after World War II as well as the Reagan Era defense spending of the 1980s. Since then the Navy has remained a significant component of the Norfolk economy, although its importance has continued to decline. The Ford assembly plant was also a key component of Norfolk’s economy in the post war period. Purchased from the navy in 1946, the Ford plant employed over 2,500 people in 1977, the combined salaries of which reached $58 million.\footnote{Parramore, p. 387.} In the 1950s and 1960s Norfolk’s city government began to undertake massive redevelopment efforts
which continue to this day. Through the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the Norfolk city government appropriated large pieces of land to initiate ‘desirable’ social changes in Norfolk’s downtown area. As Thomas Parramore, Peter Steward, and Tommy Bogger argue, this revitalization has often been characterized as a “manipulation to perpetuate segregation”⁵ because Norfolk invested heavily in expensive high-rise apartments in downtown which displaced housing available to the working-class. By decreasing low-income housing in the downtown area, Norfolk’s city government and developers hoped to make downtown whiter.

At the same time, integration in Norfolk public schools was an explosive issue that attracted national media attention. In 1956, after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, Virginia passed a law which forced schools attended by both black and white students to be closed and removed from the school system. Norfolk gained national media attention when, on September 27, 1958 six white schools in Norfolk were closed after a U.S. District Court Judge’s order compelled Norfolk’s school board to enroll 151 African American students in all-white schools. The decision to close the schools ultimately came from Governor J. Lindsay Almond Jr. who had campaigned heavily for massive resistance to integration in Virginia schools.⁶ The Norfolk city council was inundated with letters and complaints from parents, particularly from families transplanted by the Navy and numerous petitions, including one published on January 26,

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1959 by the *Virginian-Pilot* signed by local business owners and professionals. On February 2, 1959, the same six schools reopened with several black students in attendance. Norfolk Students were also politically active through such groups as the SDS at Old Dominion University, but racial tensions continued to be problematic in Norfolk well into the 1980s, especially in schools. A 1982 study conducted by sociologist David Armor concluded that the Norfolk school system suffered greatly from "white flight" to private and suburban schools and that busing in Norfolk had a negative impact on education. These developments show that racism and discrimination have played a significant role in Norfolk’s history in the post-war period. In seeking to engineer a city more attractive to tourists and investors, Norfolk’s city government sought to make undesirable populations invisible, or at relegate them to the margins.

Racial discrimination and the struggles for African American civil rights in Norfolk have been well documented, but gay and lesbian political action has received little treatment from historical works such as *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries* or Earl Lewis’s, *In Their Own Interests*. Yet Norfolk’s gay ghetto was there. Although gays and lesbians had likely lived in Ghent in the 1960s and 1970s, their population was clearly increasing during the 1980s. Gay and lesbians businesses moved away from downtown and became centered in and around Ghent between the 1970s and 1980s (see appendix). In April 1981, "Ghent Gayland" declared its independence from Norfolk and the United States. "The former fashionable gay ghetto was formerly recognized by the United Nations today..." began a tongue-in-cheek April fool’s day news story. It continued, "A

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7 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
long legal battle was won only last week when the U.S. Supreme Court recognized as a separate and independent state following Ghent’s secession from the Union last year…

[And now] Ghent becomes the world’s first out-of-the-closet gay nation."^{8} Although it was a joke, the piece is striking because it reveals a sense of gay and lesbian isolation and ghettoization in Ghent. A variety of factors drew lesbians and gays to Norfolk. In 1978, the UUGC conducted a survey, distributed through Our Own, UUGC meetings and local bars. Most of the men surveyed were either students or “government employed,” showing the importance of local colleges such as Old Dominion University and Virginia Wesleyan and the centrality of the navy in the Norfolk labor force. In addition, approximately half of the men and women surveyed lived in Norfolk and nearly half came from the surrounding cities in Hampton Roads. From at least the 1960s, if not earlier, to the mid-1970s, gays and lesbians from the surrounding area often came to the city to socialize because the nearest gay and lesbian bars were located in downtown Norfolk.^{9} By the mid-1970s, gays and lesbians began moving into Ghent, restoring Victorian-era buildings and homes, gentrifying the neighborhoods.

During World War II, Ghent was a middle-class neighborhood in decline, which made it an attractive project for redevelopers. In 1967 the Secretary for the Housing and Urban Development, Robert C. Weaver, united federal and local forces for revitalization of the area and Ghent became part of the federal Model Cities Program, supplying substantial funding for the project. The project, confined mostly to the eastern side of Ghent, displaced many families. New construction was completed at a slow pace. The

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8 Our Own. April 1981.
Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority eventually won the Urban Land Institute’s Special Award for excellence for developing the “Ghent Square” neighborhood. “West Ghent,” Parramore, Steward, and Bogger write, “…enjoyed something of a renaissance in chic regentrification as preservationists moved into some of the grand old homes and put them in mint condition.” In the downtown area, every gay and lesbian bar located in downtown was closed by 1990. At the behest of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, buildings for gay bars such as the “Paddock” and “Nickelodeon” were purchased, demolished and turned into parking structures and many bars moved away from downtown to Ghent and the adjacent area. Both Greater Norfolk and Ghent were in the midst of extreme changes, yet the standard narrative makes no mention of the “Ghent Gayland” that sarcastically seceded from the Union in 1981. At the same time that it was experiencing racial tension, fights for civil rights and undertaking vast infrastructure and redevelopment projects, Norfolk was also the site of intense political and social activity of a population nearly invisible in historical accounts of the city.

In the mid-1970s, the media darling of Florida orange juice, Anita Bryant, was making waves as an anti-gay crusader. Bryant’s 1976 appearance in Norfolk prompted a group of local gays and lesbians to form the Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus. Their political/social manifesto proclaimed that:

We devote ourselves to the improvement of gay life through increased positive visibility. Our minority is unique in that we are not outwardly visible unless we allow ourselves to be. We can be noticed in any number of ways, i.e. stereotypically, detrimentally or productively...Gay is good

10 Parramore, pp. 381-383, 413.
when we first accept it for ourselves and better when we educate the public.\textsuperscript{12}

In Ghent and Norfolk, this campaign for “positive visibility” took a variety of forms, including conferences, demonstrations, as well as the founding of numerous organizations, clubs, and churches, and other social activities.\textsuperscript{13} The “Greater Tidewater Area Gay Conferences” were annual events organized by the UUGC and held in the summer. In June 1977, the first conference was held at the Unitarian Church and featured speakers from New York and reportedly attracted visitors from Pennsylvania and Tennessee.\textsuperscript{14} The following year, the conference was moved to Old Dominion University where it remained until the last conference convened in 1980. Attendance had peaked at an estimated audience of 500 in 1979 before dipping to an estimated 300 in 1980.\textsuperscript{15} These conferences featured notable speakers like Mel Boozer, the openly gay, African American and University of Maryland professor nominated Vice President by the Socialist Party. Topics of discussion included gay and lesbian civil rights, feminism, marriage and health.\textsuperscript{16}

Visibility of local gays and lesbians was further increased through various protests organized through the UUGC. Group trips to Richmond were regularly organized to protest the existing Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control laws, which forbade issuing liquor licenses to gay and lesbian bars. At historic Jamestown, the UUGC protested the removal of a plaque that mentioned gays and lesbians among the first European settlers in

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Our Own}, Sept. 1976.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Our Own}, Sept. 1976.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Our Own}, June 1976.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Our Own}, June 1979, July 1980.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Our Own}, July 1980.
North America. These protests were not confined to specifically gay and lesbian issues however. For example, in 1979 the UUGC organized a protest against a Ku Klux Klan “recruiting rally” in Virginia Beach. These protests and conferences, while not always successful at achieving political change, were effective in addressing the stated goal of the UUGC and increasing local gay and lesbian visibility, but the UUGC did rely solely on the gathering of crowds to this end and in their most creative campaign, they turned to local business.

Collecting data on the consumption and purchasing power of local gays and lesbians was a particularly ambitious method of increasing visibility adopted by activists in Norfolk. Aptly titled the “Positive Gay Visibility Campaign,” the UUGC and Nickelodeon, a Norfolk gay bar, began collecting sales receipts from “hamburger stands, concerts, grocery shopping etc.” from local gay and lesbian consumers to show businesses what buying power the gay community represented and “…to reveal [gay and lesbian] existence in a very ‘real’ way.” In addition to the collection of receipts, the UUGC helped organize events with the same aim of demonstrating gay and lesbian buying power. The “Giant Blitz,” held at Giant Open Air Market in Ghent October 14, 1977, was one such event that highlighted gay and lesbian visibility through grocery shopping. Writing an article titled “Gay Dollars in the Marketplace,” Mark Hiers of Our Own explained to readers that large corporations such as Warner Bros. increasingly

17 *Our Own*, July 1981.
19 *Our Own*, March 1977.
recognized the potential of catering to a gay and lesbian market.\textsuperscript{21}

These consumer campaigns and demonstrations were only a part of the gay and lesbian political activity in Norfolk; a myriad of social clubs and organizations also comprised an important element of this community as well. Many social clubs were organized for sports. In April 1979, the UUGC advertised their intention to form a softball team, to play other gay and lesbian teams in a national league. Volleyball games in Ghent were also organized and advertised through \textit{Our Own} as well, in addition to a car club, motorcycle club and a beach club for lesbians. Religion was also a significant bond that brought gays and lesbians in Norfolk together. The United Universalist Gay Caucus was founded by members of the Unitarian Church in Ghent. Although this church widely accepted homosexuals, several other religious organizations in Norfolk sprang up as well. “Dignity” was a local chapter of Catholics that delivered “affirmative” sermons to gays and lesbians that formed in 1977 and the Metropolitan Community Church, which was connected to a national organization of gay and lesbian affirming churches, formed in Norfolk that same year.\textsuperscript{22} Although Pat Robertson’s televangelist empire, the Christian Broadcasting Network, was rising in Virginia Beach, Norfolk saw a simultaneous proliferation of gay and lesbian affirming churches, but gay and lesbian visibility was often hampered by state and local government, the navy and local police.

In conjunction with an effort by local government officials to improve and revitalize downtown, Norfolk police and military police arrested gay and lesbians often for sexual offenses in the downtown area. Bars were regularly raided by the Norfolk Vice

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Our Own}, Aug. 1981.
\textsuperscript{22} “Dignity Announces Formation of a Tidewater Chapter” in \textit{Our Own}. October, 1977.
Squad. For example, in March 1978, seven men were arrested at the “Continental,” a gay bar downtown. The men were charged with a violation of city ordinance 31-18/1 sub paragraph 2, frequenting a place “for the purpose of lewdness, assignation, prostitution or illicit sexual intercourse,” a charge usually referred to as “frequenting.” In court, one officer testified that he had seen two male customers “holding hands, hugging and kissing,” prompting their arrests in the bar, to which the judge responded “well, they could have done that anywhere, couldn’t they?” and the charges were dismissed.

Reports of arrests outside of bars were frequent as well. A small area of downtown Norfolk on Freemason Street was also the site of many arrests. Although it was a reputed “cruising” area for gay men in Norfolk, among several others, Freemason was a constant target of the Vice Squad well into the 1980s, eventually leading police to announce a “crackdown” on the area for such activity.

Efforts by local police often went beyond downtown Norfolk as well. The “Oarhouse,” a gay dance club in Ghent, was cautious about attracting attention from police, so much so that “During the day it is by appearance a straight restaurant and all newspapers, flyers posters and anything ‘gay’ are put away.” Employees of the Oarhouse also requested that an editorial discussing this issue and police harassment in gay and lesbian bars not be printed, fearing retaliation from police. In December 1979, two men were arrested outside of the bar for possession of marijuana. Although this seemed to be a fairly common offense, what made this particular interaction unique was

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23 *Our Own*, March 1978.
24 *Our Own*, March 1978.
25 *Our Own*, May 1983.
the fact that men were questioned about their sexuality and they both confessed that they were gay. The arresting officers then took this information to the bar’s owner, Dick LeDonne, with instructions that he could no longer serve these two individuals; otherwise his establishment would be cited for allowing “known homosexuals” to meet.27

Although local police were the most likely agency to arrest and investigate gays and lesbians, the substantial naval population in Norfolk often dealt with the military police as well. The UUGC was active in supporting men and women discharged from the navy for homosexuality, even creating a monthly workshop in response to a “…rash of discharge proceedings initiated against gay navy people.”28 For example, in 1978, the Blue Fish, a Norfolk-based submarine, discharged seven men for homosexuality.29 Later that year, a sting operation at a Navy Exchange store bathroom led to the arrests of several servicemen for “solicitation.”30 Gay and lesbian Norfolk sailors often wrote to Our Own about the difficulties of leading a double-life in the Navy. The actions of both local police and military police had the effect of decreasing gay visibility in Norfolk, causing many to fear being seen in or around local gay bars, but the city government also had a large impact on this as well.

Downtown revitalization was a project with the purportedly benevolent intent of improving downtown to make it more attractive to investors and tourists, but that came at a cost for local gays and lesbians. While police raided bars and arrested men and women on the street, the Norfolk city government purchased downtown bars, often turning them

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28 Our Own, Sept. 1977.
29 Our Own, March 1978.
30 Our Own, Sept. 1978.
into parking structures. This issue galvanized gay and lesbian business owners, particularly once Steve Brown’s bar, “Nickelodeon,” had become the target of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority in 1978.\textsuperscript{31} Shortly after, the Business Alliance of Tidewater (B.A.T.) was formed by owners and employees of the gay bars Cue, Late Show, Mickey’s, Nickelodeon, Oar House, Paddock, Ghent Society, Nutcracker and the lesbian bar Shirley’s for the purpose of protecting members from “extra competitive forces while serving the community.”\textsuperscript{32} Despite their ambitious effort, only a single gay bar remained in the downtown area by 1982, where five had previously stood three years before. Business owners continued to operate, but the police and redevelopers continually pushed them to relocate and Ghent was increasingly the popular alternative to downtown.

The visibility of people and spaces were not the only problems faced by gays and lesbians in Norfolk. Gay and lesbian media also faced substantial obstacles as well. Norfolk even achieved renown for censorship nationally. In 1982, Norfolk police seized the film “Taxi Zum Klo,” a German film depicting the contemporary gay male culture of West Berlin, from the Naro Theater in Ghent. Although it had aired in several theaters in the United States, this was the first seizure of the film in the United States.\textsuperscript{33} Bookstore owners were often arrested for selling gay and lesbian material. For example, the owner of “Henderson’s” bookstore was sentenced to 30 days in jail and a $100 fine for selling an “obscene,” gay magazine called “Screw.”\textsuperscript{34} In September 1978, Rose Knickerson was

\textsuperscript{31} Our Own, Aug. 1979, Nov. 1982.
\textsuperscript{32} Our Own, April 1979.
\textsuperscript{33} Our Own, Nov. 1982.
\textsuperscript{34} Our Own, Aug 1978.
convicted of “possessing obscene material” for which she received a three year jail sentence and a three thousand dollar fine. On March 31, 1978, approximately 30,000-40,000 books related to homosexuality were seized from Budget Books and the Guild Book warehouse in Norfolk. Business owners were not the only ones affected by censorship either. Local navy personnel were prohibited from entering Admiralty Books and Shore Drive Books in 1983 because they “distributed obscene material.” Throughout many areas Norfolk, access to and the visible presence of gay and lesbian media was stifled.

The local gay and lesbian newspaper Our Own also had significant problems with distribution and censorship. Our Own was not publishing long before the newspaper was banned from the Norfolk library system in 1978. Very little information was given about the decision, but when Our Own was banned from the Virginia Beach library system, it received significantly greater coverage. In 1980, a small but vocal group of citizens demanded that Our Own be banned from Virginia Beach libraries after reading an issue that contained lewd cartoons re-printed from National Lampoon. The city government quickly prohibited distribution in libraries. A group called the “Citizens for the Family” sponsored a referendum on whether or not to permit “…a publication whose primary purpose is to depict or advocate, through picture or word, homosexual acts, [to] be displayed, distributed or received into the libraries of Virginia Beach.” After it was banned, the UUGC brought suit against the city, but later dropped the lawsuit when

36 Our Own, May 1978.
Virginia Beach public libraries agreed to treat *Our Own* like other free periodicals. Legal wrangling did not end there however and city officials sued the UUGC seeking compensation for the legal fees incurred by the previous suit. The matter was finally settled in 1982 and the city officials lost their suit.39

*Our Own* also had problems with distribution elsewhere. The *Virginian-Pilot*, a major Norfolk-based newspaper, regularly rejected advertisements from *Our Own*. In 1978, the *Virginian-Pilot* and its sister publication *Ledger Star* in Portsmouth rejected an advertisement for the UUGC survey which read “Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus conducting lesbian/gay community survey, complete five minute questionnaire by calling 625-1130, 6 – 10 pm,” because, as Classified Advertisement manager Floyd Dormire claimed, the proposed advertisement did not “meet our standard for community acceptance.”40 A similar incident occurred only a year later when both newspapers rejected advertisements for a benefit concert hosted by the UUGC.41

These incidents show that gay and lesbian visibility continued to have problems finding outlets. From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, gay and lesbian spaces, people and media faced many obstacles in Norfolk. Although *Our Own* had many problems with distribution, it managed to continue publishing from 1976 until 1998, a successful run by any standard, a career even more extraordinary for a gay and lesbian newspaper. *Our Own* worked hard to establish gay and lesbian visibility but it also addressed other concerns about life in Norfolk, showing the importance political solidarity and religion for local gays and lesbians.

Section 2

Gay and Lesbian Times: Content, Politics and Visibility

When I first heard that *Our Own* would soon cease to publish, it struck me like the death of a friend. But if there is anything positive that can come from the closing of this Virginia institution, it is that wonderful memories will stay with me for the rest of my days. I hope readers out there feel the same way. Think about a personal ad you answered, an event you attended that was in the community calendar, a story that made you laugh or a story that made you cry. *Our Own* will continue in our hearts as long as we keep those memories. – Patrick Evans-Hylton, Editor-in-Chief, 1992-1994, stockholder

The above reads like an obituary dedicated to *Our Own*, the newspaper that served the gay and lesbian population of Norfolk, Virginia and eventually, all of southern Virginia for 22 years. The newspaper enjoyed a long period of publication, even in a city with a conservative local government. Norfolk police frequently raided bookstores and businesses that contained gay and lesbian material. For over fifty years, Norfolk banned tattoo parlors that “lured World War II-era sailors” within the city, a policy that only recently changed in 2007.\(^2\) Despite this, *Our Own* gave gays and lesbians in Norfolk their own publication filled with news articles to stimulate the mind and photos to titillate the eyes. Many readers wrote the editors to express their enthusiasm for the newspaper. As one man wrote from Blacksburg, Virginia, he thought of *Our Own* as the “major source of Virginia gay news.”\(^3\)

The gay and lesbian press has generally received some attention from academic scholarship. Rodger Streitmatter produced the most comprehensive study on gay and

\(^2\)“Tattoo Parlor to open in Norfolk today” in *The Virginian-Pilot*. June 2, 2007.
\(^3\)“Letter to the Editor” in *Our Own*. December, 1984.
lesbian press to date in his work *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America*. He focuses specifically on twelve publications for each decade he studies to fully develop the personalities of several writers. To supplement these primary sources he also draws on FBI investigations of gay and lesbian activist groups. Streitmatter presents a chronological account of the development of homosexually-oriented newspapers, beginning in 1947 with inception *Vice Versa*, a Los Angeles-based magazine produced for lesbians, and concludes with gay press in the 1990s. Streitmatter addresses the issues of identity, separatism, gender, class and health within the gay and lesbian press while leading his readers through time. He states that the purpose of his work is to ”introduce readers to a little-known genre of journalism while also serving as a reference work for further study of it.”

Streitmatter develops the political issues that gay and lesbian newspapers encountered throughout the post-war period. He also discusses significant challenges that gay and lesbian publications faced, focusing mostly on the invisible hand of the market and censorship. Though some papers precipitated their own censure for nude images, many simply could not make enough money through advertisements and subscription. His work is a significant contribution to the study of alternative journalism in the twentieth century and gay and lesbian studies, but there is room for more work to be done on this topic.

Streitmatter generally takes more information from wealthy publications with the widest circulations, although he does give some time to short-lived publications. This

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45 Ibid., XIII.
section adopts a more focused approach by examining the Norfolk-based gay and lesbian newspaper *Our Own*. This narrow approach will illustrate not only national concerns generally held by gay and lesbian readers but also provide an examination of the local and regional concerns of the readership that this paper addressed in particular, at both city and state levels. I have divided this section into three parts, beginning with a section on the creation of *Our Own Community Press* and its publication history. Next, I will provide a content analysis that will explore the concerns of *Our Own*’s readership, including issues of local law enforcement, safety, health and politics. In concluding this section, the third part will summarize the most salient points that speak to the importance of this publication, not just in terms of its value to its consumers, but its academic value as well.

The first issue of *Our Own* appeared in the fall of 1976. It was first published as a newsletter for the United Universalist Gay Caucus which was based out of the Unitarian Church in the historic district of Ghent in Norfolk, located near the Hague Building on Yarmouth Street. Their operations, including the publication of *Our Own*, were made possible by the Unitarian Church who donated vacant office space in their building.46 From the beginning, the UUGC made its political stance clear. In regards to the local gay and lesbian community, *Our Own* and its editors were dedicated to a campaign for “positive visibility,” a campaign which came to assume many forms and became a divisive point of contention for readers as well as editors in the future.

To this end, the UUGC not only used *Our Own* to increase gay and lesbian

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46 “Key Issue” in *Our Own*, September, 1976.
visibility but also to organize public demonstrations, social activities and organized sports as well. The most common social activities organized in the first years of publication were “coffee houses,” where gay men and lesbian women met at the Unitarian Church on a bi-weekly basis to gather for coffee and discussion religious, social or political issues regarding their lives. The first Christmas after its inception the UUGC organized a caroling group that traveled through Ghent.47 Christmas songs aside, the listings for local activities were sparse at first, but in the next few years the newsletter began to grow in size by adding more pages as well as advertisements. By 1979, issues of Our Own included a directory which listed local clubs, churches, gay-owned and gay-friendly restaurants, organizations and a map of Norfolk’s gay and lesbian bars. The headline of one map read “Tidewater After Dark,” which provided a deft illustration of how Norfolk was seen as the gay and lesbian center within the greater Tidewater area.48 As the infamous “Diana Ross” said (the local drag queen, not the Soul music sensation), “I ran to Norfolk immediately after high school. It was necessary...Norfolk was the big city...”49 Local information offered in Our Own also made it a nexus for the local gay community because they were the only gay/lesbian-oriented press at the time and this was certainly not information covered in Norfolk’s local paper the Virginian-Pilot. Jim Early, an editor during the first decade of publication, wrote “[I] always felt that every gay organization...had Our Own as its nucleus. The people who started new gay organizations either met while working at Our Own or were brought together through our

49.“Interview with Diana Ross” in Our Own. April, 1981.
articles or news stories.\textsuperscript{50}

Our Own continued to evolve in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Pictures began to be included in the newspaper, starting with the July 1978 issue.\textsuperscript{51} The page numbers of each issue increased quickly, going from six to twelve pages in 1978 alone.\textsuperscript{52} At the same time, staff problems already began to plague the newspaper before 1980 because a regular staff could not be maintained for more than a few months at a time. In October 1981, the editorial staff noted that the publication's size was decreased for the month because they were operating with a smaller staff.\textsuperscript{53} This was a trend that would ebb and flow throughout the duration of its publication, ultimately contributing to its demise in the end. In November, 1982, Our Own became officially separated from the United Universalist Gay Caucus. No longer operating under the auspices of the UUGC, Our Own marched forward as an independent business venture, increasing the space dedicated to advertisements and even offering stock, selling two thousand shares in the company for five dollars each.\textsuperscript{54}

Operating independently now, the staff of Our Own pushed to make the newspaper more profitable. Advertisement space for businesses increased significantly and the classifieds section – added in April 1981 with significant reluctance on the part of the editorial staff because it purportedly did not conform to the newspaper's mission statement – expanded as well.\textsuperscript{55} Subscriptions were also offered to readers.

\textsuperscript{50}"Farewell: Our Own closes after 22 years in" in Our Own. Retrospective, 1998.
\textsuperscript{51}Our Own. July/August, 1978.
\textsuperscript{52}Our Own. February – December, 1978.
\textsuperscript{53}Editor's Note in Our Own. October, 1981.
\textsuperscript{54}"Our Own Begins Selling Stock" in Our Own. July, 1983.
\textsuperscript{55}Classifieds in Our Own. April, 1981.
increased significantly, varying from city news to international stories, although the latter were often re-printed from other publications. Reader submissions were also widely accepted. These usually took the form of letters to the editor, but Our Own also contained gendered reader-submission pages for artistic entries: "Lesbians: Front & Center"\textsuperscript{56} dedicated to women and "Menspace" for men.

Overtime, the advertisements made it clear that Our Own was increasingly focusing on a gay, white male readership. Most images were of white males. Furthermore, the personals contained in the classifieds section were similarly dominated by gay white males. Advertisements also consistently featured images of half-naked white men, even for non-gender specific businesses such as restaurants and greeting card shops.\textsuperscript{57} The images used to advertise x-rated films, local bars and hotlines almost exclusively drew on similar imagery.

Local gay bars were perhaps the newspaper's single largest source of advertising revenue, at least until the late 1980s, as well as the largest base of distribution throughout the publication's history. Our Own was also distributed through a variety of independent businesses located in Ghent such as laundromats, haircut parlors and restaurants. In July, 1983, the newspaper announced that it would begin covering Roanoke and Richmond, in addition to the Tidewater area in Virginia and news articles increasingly focused on state-

\textsuperscript{56}``Lesbians: Front & Center'' changed to ``Wommon's Wings'' in May 1981. In October 1983 the gendered reader submission pages were collapsed into a single, two-page spread entitled ``Inner Limits'' because 
``...it was decided at a recent Our Own staff meeting that these creative pages should be combined, since men and women can accomplish more by working together. After all, we do have a common cause and some of our best friends are of the opposite gender.'' in Our Own. October, 1983.

\textsuperscript{57}``Just For You Card Shop'' advertisement in Our Own. March, 1985.
wide and national politics.\textsuperscript{58} Distribution in these cities also increased in the mid 1980s and the paper was widely distributed through southeast Virginia.

The newspaper grew under the leadership of Alicia Herr who assumed the role of publisher in 1991 and became the president of Our Own inc.\textsuperscript{59} By the early 1990s, issues of \textit{Our Own} carried twenty-eight pages, eventually reaching forty-eight pages near the end of the decade. Despite the increases in the breadth of distribution and success, the invisible hand turned against \textit{Our Own}. Facing increased rent fees, dwindling advertising revenue (down forty percent in the last three months) and the continued problems in retaining staff, the newspaper was forced to file chapter seven bankruptcy on August 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1998.\textsuperscript{60}

One of the most important functions that \textit{Our Own} served was the dissemination of information that might have been otherwise unattainable for many gay and lesbian consumers. Directories and maps contained in the end of each issue provided phone numbers and addresses for both local and national gay and lesbian businesses and organizations. The desire for information on gay and lesbian was clear in the advertisements contained in the newspaper. A “gay information line” was heavily advertised in \textit{Our Own}. This project was a free service provided through the UUGC. Started in 1977, the gay information line provided information on local bars and organizations and provided counseling as well. As one young navy servicewoman who had recently moved to Norfolk commented in a letter to the editor, “I was so glad when I found the number of the gay information line. It eased the tension quite a lot. Being new

\textsuperscript{58}“Our Own Now Covers Roanoake and Richmond” in \textit{Our Own}. July, 1983.
\textsuperscript{60}“Farewell: Our Own closes after 22 years in” in \textit{Our Own}. Retrospective, 1998.
to the area is difficult and it was important that I knew someone was there to answer my
questions about the community and give me support at a time when I felt alone and
lost. "Guild Guides" similarly provided a source of local information on gay and
lesbian bars, clubs and bookstores as well. The UUGC also advertised the lending
library that it established which offered books focused on gay and lesbian issues. *Our
Own* provided support for UUGC's library in several capacities. In one issue, for
example, an editorial note asked for book donations for the UUGC's library.63
Advertisements for the Nickelodeon (a downtown gay bar) also informed readers that
they could donate books at the bar. In addition to the library, several advertisements
featured book lists and mail order catalogs that sold access to gay and lesbian literature
not found in most local bookstores, such as "Womankind Books," which specialized in
lesbian and feminist literature.64

Finding spaces to obtain this kind of literature in Norfolk was difficult and this
was reflected in the pages of *Our Own*. The traditional venue to obtain this kind of
literature was the gay and lesbian bookstore but no gay and lesbian bookstore existed
until 1990 when Pride Books arrived in Ghent.65 Generic bookstores also offered little in
the way of gay and lesbian literature in Norfolk, mainly because they were often not
allowed because bookstores that sold gay and lesbian material were often hit with fines
levied by local officials or possibly raided. In May, 1978, six hundred copies of the
“Guild Guide” were seized from Budget Books in addition to other materials that were

63 "Editors Note" in *Our Own*. October, 1977.
64 "Womankind Books" advertisement in *Our Own*. December, 1990.
“homosexual in theme” by Norfolk police.66 One article even contained a story about local gay men being harassed in a bookstore on Freemason Street in downtown Norfolk.67 Our Own further endeavored to provide readers with information on gay and lesbian literature by offering book reviews in nearly every issue, even interviewing authors on occasion.68 Local libraries also provided limited access to these materials as well. One article reviewed a pamphlet called Censored, Ignored, Overlooked, Too Expensive? How to Get Gay Materials into Libraries which discussed strategies for groups or individuals to pursue to push their local libraries to purchase gay and lesbian books.69

The pages of Our Own often offered much more than local business information or methods to obtain gay and lesbian literature. Police harassment of gays and lesbians in the late 1970s and early 1980s was common in urban areas across the country and Norfolk was no exception. In response to downtown arrests, bar raids and police harassment, Our Own offered some assistance to their readership in various ways. The most common response was a column entitled “You and the Police,” a piece that was reprinted several times throughout the duration of Our Own's publication “...in a wallet-size form that, if desired, could be cut out, folded and saved,” providing readers with a portable legal guide.70 This piece admonished readers to maintain a polite demeanor, cooperate with a search of one's person, not agree to further search in a car or home, and

68. “Interview with E. Lawrence Gibson” in Our Own. December, 1978. Gibson was the author of Get Off My Ship, a title that chronicled the author's experience as a gay man in the navy.
above all, to exercise their right to remain silent during arrest.\textsuperscript{71} In addition, several lawyers also advertised their services to assist gays and lesbians targeted by the vice squad.

When \textit{Our Own} was operated by the UUGC, several articles reflected the UUGC's efforts to confront the Norfolk Police Department about harassment. Jim Early, a member of the UUGC, along with two other activists, visited the Deputy Chief of Operations John L. Andrews and the Assistant to the Chief to "complain about police actions directed at Norfolk's gay bars."\textsuperscript{72} In 1982, the UUGC arranged an interview with the Chief of Police in Virginia Beach in response to a spike in arrests for solicitation.\textsuperscript{73} During the interview, Chief of Police Charles Wall was asked what the purpose of vice squad operations were, to which he answered "...from my personal point of view—I don't want to see a place where people are solicited. I have no personal problem with people meeting."\textsuperscript{74} The primary concern for Wall was the public display of sexuality. Helping gays and lesbians avoid arrest however, was just one part of the significant efforts that \textit{Our Own} undertook to speak to the concerns of their readership.

Articles in \textit{Our Own} often spoke to the health concerns of readers and physical health was a paramount issue that received considerable attention. The first article covering AIDS appeared in 1982.\textsuperscript{75} The coverage of the disease was relatively sparse in the early 1980s. Only two cases had been reported in Norfolk in 1983.\textsuperscript{76} Several local

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\textsuperscript{71} "You and the Police" in \textit{Our Own}. December, 1979.
\textsuperscript{72} "Granby Mall Cleanup Affects Gays" in \textit{Our Own}. December, 1979.
\textsuperscript{73} "OUR OWN Talks to Wall: Charles Wall, Chief Virginia Beach Police" in \textit{Our Own}. March, 1982.
\textsuperscript{74} "OUR OWN Talks to Wall: Charles Wall, Chief Virginia Beach Police" in \textit{Our Own}. March, 1982.
\textsuperscript{75} "New 'Gay Diseases' Affect Men" in \textit{Our Own}. June, 1982.
\textsuperscript{76} "AIDS Cases in Norfolk" in \textit{Our Own}. May, 1983.
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organizations formed in response to the disease which endeavored to raise funds for victims and educate the public. The Tidewater AIDS Community Taskforce, an organization dedicated to victims of HIV and AIDS that currently serves Norfolk came to life in this period. Some articles were original pieces by the editors, but many AIDS-related articles were reprinted from other publications such as the *Gay Community News*, a successful Boston-based newspaper. Later in the decade, AIDS coverage increased dramatically as local mortality rates rose. Discussion of safe sex also increased at the same time and *Our Own* briefly ran a cartoon campaign for it.\(^7\) In addition to AIDS and HIV, *Our Own* regularly featured articles on other sexually transmitted diseases in their “Health Corner” segments. Gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis frequently made it into these segments, but other conditions without explicit sexual connections, such as lice, scabies and yeast infections were also discussed.\(^8\) Physical well being, while perhaps the most dominant focus of these sections, was not the only health concern that *Our Own* addressed either.

Psychological health was a common theme addressed by articles and many services advertised in the pages of *Our Own*. Alcoholism received special attention and perhaps the single most prominent psychological issue was this form of addiction. First addressed in July 1982, articles admonished readers to seek professional help if they had drinking problems. The 1982 piece included a questionnaire for readers to use as a guide to determine whether someone they knew was an alcoholic.\(^9\) Following this article and questionnaire, a directory of services catering to alcoholics was provided. Among the

\(^7\)“Inez Says” in *Our Own*. February, 1987.
various outpatient programs an Alcoholics Anonymous program “for Gay Men and Women” was provided by Sacred Heart Church located in Ghent, Norfolk. Advertisements for counseling services also addressed alcoholism. One advertisement for “Perspectives,” a counseling group operated by Roger Volk, asked “Are Alcohol and Drugs the substance of your life?” and informed readers that their organization could help them. These articles and advertisements also exposed a tension within the pages of Our Own. Indeed, consumers must have been confused by reading advertisements for Alcoholics Anonymous only to find their reading supplemented with no less than eleven advertisements for gay and lesbian bars in the same issue. Stress and depression were also psychological issues frequently addressed through articles and advertisements for social workers. Our Own also offered “coming out” stories and advice articles to help their gay and lesbian readers as well.

Spiritual health was also a fundamental concern that Our Own addressed in earnest. The founders of Our Own, the United Universalist Gay Caucus did, after all, operate from an office in the Unitarian Church which widely accepted homosexuals. Several other gay and lesbian affirming congregations were also prominently featured in the directories of the newspaper. In addition, Our Own featured a variety of articles penned by various pastors who focused on topics of love and commitment. Our Own not only informed their readership about local options to express their spirituality, they also informed their readership why they needed gay and lesbian affirming churches. Letters to the editor from seething, anti-gay Christians occasionally appeared in issues of the

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newspaper. One anonymous letter read “How can you call yourself a church when the very Word of God condemns homosexuality—Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10.” An advertisement for the New Life Metropolitan Community Church asked readers “Have you ever wondered...How is a Gay Christian supposed to live?” Showing both venomous invective and positive encouragement, these examples show the variety of ways that spiritual tensions caused by homosexuality could be presented to readers.

Residence in Norfolk exposed local gays and lesbians to conservative religiosity; the Christian Broadcasting Network and Pat Robertson’s entourage were located in the adjacent city of Virginia Beach. In addition, the early 1980s saw the increased backlash against gay and lesbians who had made progress in the post-Stonewall years by increasing their visibility and lobbying for the repeal of sodomy laws. Although Anita Bryant marked the beginning of a vehement anti-gay crusade in the late 1970s, her limelight was quickly usurped by Reverend Jerry Falwell who eventually begot Pat Robertson. In response to these local pressures, both Our Own and the multitude of gay affirming churches in Norfolk provided a spiritual sanctuary from hostile agents of Christianity.

Religious controversy over homosexuality was at once both a spiritual and a political issue many times, but secular political issues were important as well. Although Our Own editors frequently wrote pieces that denigrated the Religious Right and fiery, anti-gay pastors but they also produced political pieces that had nothing to do with

83.“Letters to the Editor” in Our Own. February, 1980.
84.“New Life Metropolitan Community Church” advertisement in Our Own. July, 1986.
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religion. Stories tended to focus on local developments but by the early 1980s, especially after the newspaper became incorporated, more national stories appeared and these stories tended to focus on court cases in other states that involved gays and lesbians. As the locus of state politics, Richmond received a significant amount of attention in the newspaper as well.

*Our Own* offered information but it also offered an apparatus for political action for local gays and lesbians. In 1977, the newspaper called on readers to write to President Jimmy Carter demanding their civil rights. In addition, information in the last pages of the paper began to carry the addresses and phone numbers of the offices of state congressmen and local officials in the hope that their readership would write into their representatives. While the UUGC organized conferences and demonstrations that targeted the local population, they used *Our Own* to get Norfolk residents to become politically active beyond their own city.

A handful of political candidates even used *Our Own* to increase their profile. Most notable among these were Mel Boozer and Debbie Lass. Mel Boozer was a famous gay, black candidate for the Vice Presidency in 1980 for both the Socialist and Democratic parties. In the early 1980s, *Our Own* featured several articles on him and he spoke at the fourth annual “Lesbian and Gay Conference” which was held at Old Dominion University in 1980 and organized by the UUGC and the Gay Student Union at ODU. Gay and lesbian politicians were becoming increasingly popular in this period as well. Harvey Milk made national headlines after being elected to serve on San

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85. 4th Conference at ODU” in *Our Own*. July, 1980.

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Francisco's City Council in 1978. In a similar vein, Debbie Lass came into local prominence when she ran for a Norfolk City Council seat in 1984 with a platform pushing for a fair housing ordinance in the city to prevent discrimination against gays and lesbians.\textsuperscript{86} Unfortunately she finished the campaign with the least number of votes. Although she never achieved the same renown as Harvey Milk, \textit{Our Own} treated her like a star, printing several interviews with her, donating advertising space and including articles that covered her local appearances.

For the local readership, \textit{Our Own} was more than just a newspaper. Besides the political, health, religious and police-related information that it disseminated, it provided connection. Directories, maps, advertisements, social organizations, community calendars, local events and gay affirming churches all made use of \textit{Our Own}. In utilizing this newspaper they were able to reach local gays and lesbians and in turn, help them reach each other. Although the presence of \textit{Our Own} was contested, especially in libraries, the newspaper provided a voice and an image for gays and lesbians in the public sphere in Norfolk, a place where they were otherwise invisible in the local media.

Lamenting the bankruptcy of \textit{Our Own} in August, 1998, Debbie Lass wrote “I sit proudly and sadly. A void fills our community now. What voice speaks for us?”\textsuperscript{87} Today there currently is no gay and lesbian newspaper in Norfolk. Another publication, \textit{Out and About}, ran for a few years after the demise of \textit{Our Own} but it is currently defunct. The fate of these newspapers has been shared by other gay and lesbian oriented businesses in Norfolk. There are no more gay and lesbian bookstores and only a

\textsuperscript{86}“Debra Lass” advertisement in \textit{Our Own}. April, 1984.  
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Our Own}, August, 1998.
handful of bars, which have dramatically decreased in number since their heyday in the 1980s. Indeed, much like Rodger Streitmatter argues in his work, the invisible hand of the market has continued to haunt the gay and lesbian businesses of Norfolk. A few fortunate businesses have continued on but the majority shared a fate similar to Our Own and they have been left behind. In its 22 year career Our Own addressed a wide variety of concerns for local readers but above all, the most important function that it served – the one identified by Debbie Lass – was giving gays and lesbians in Norfolk a voice and visible presence.
Maps of Ghent were often included in the last pages of Our Own issues. These maps informed readers about the gay and lesbian bars in the local area, in addition to restaurants businesses that were gay-owned or gay friendly. These locations offered chances to meet other people in the hopes of finding companionship, love or perhaps just a night out with friends. Although these maps tantalized readers with a cornucopia of locales, they failed to show where a particular reader would not be accepted.

Advertisements and tradition often worked to limit the geographic opportunities for the gays and lesbians who lived in or visited Norfolk. Activists and writers for Our Own espoused an idyllic picture of “unity” to describe what gay and lesbian life should be in these spaces. The anxieties shown by staff writers for Our Own and echoed by several letters to the editor implied that racism, sexism and exclusion did not or should not exist within the Norfolk gay and lesbian community. Unfortunately, their expectations for “unity” often fell short; most queer spaces in the city reinforced distinctions and boundaries between gender and race. One dominant feature of gay life in Norfolk was one perhaps held by the rest of the state: separation and segregation.

In print, the terms “gay” and “lesbian” often appeared in tandem. While today the phrase commonly used to describe any community that is comprised of non-heteronormative sexualities is “GLBT” or “LGBT,” but in the 1970s and 1980s, the term used to describe such a community was “gay and lesbian.” The latter phrase assumes, or at least implies, a sense of cohesion, that gays and lesbians constituted a single group or
community. However, the Norfolk experience suggests otherwise.88

Contributors to Our Own (staff members and readers) often wrestled with the concept of "unity" and what it meant in Norfolk. As D.L. Fronek wrote in an editorial, "Everywhere you go, racism and sexism shows it's [sic] ugly head! And the gay community is not exempt."89 He did not confine his indignation to the faults of gay white men either. He asked "How can a gay black male discriminate against a gay white male or female; or a gay female against a gay male?"90 One editor explored the issue of white racism against blacks through a 1984 editorial written in response to a letter from a gay black man that claimed that the newspaper's staff and the gay liberation movement in general were racist. Perhaps he was naïve or aloof, but the editor balked at the letter's emphasis on "...division within the community..."91 "Is the gay community racist?" he asked. He answered his own question by writing, "Yes, there's prejudice in Virginia...But the Archie Bunkers are a dying breed; they have no place in the 80's."92 He denied the charge of racism in Our Own and finally concluded that the gay community of Norfolk should not be divided into smaller segments of a loosely affiliated group of people sharing alternative sexualities. He asked rhetorically, "if we let our community be divided into two, or four, where will it stop? 'Left-Handed Handicapped Gay White Males.'"93

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88 The word bisexual did not actually appear in Our Own until February 1990. A section was briefly added to the paper in 1991 entitled "Bi-ways," and this section was devoted specifically to bisexual issues. Still a point of contention to this day, transgendered people as group or part of the gay community is rarely addressed until the mid1990s and these silences further underscore the tensions inherent in the moniker "gay and lesbian."


Several letters appeared the following month to rebut the editor's denial of racism in Norfolk. One man wrote “Archie Bunkers may be a dying breed, but racism is not dead.”94 He continued:

There is probably not a black person reading this letter...who has gone to an 'open' meeting for one organization or another only to find that hardly anyone talked to them. The 'Welcome' that white groups extend to black individuals, even in our gay community, is quite often a welcome in word more than deed.95

Another respondent argued that racism was still prevalent in the gay community of Norfolk but he offered some optimism for the idyllic notion of “unity.” “I share Mr. Duff's plea for unity,” he wrote, “but I would rather it be a real unity that celebrates our diversity than a make-believe one that pretends we're all the same and that all is well.”96 He shared the editor's ideal of a unified community, but his ideal called for “education and true acceptance between the races” rather than a simple declaration unity already existed.97 Although it appears to have never fully materialized, an advertisement was included in an issue of Our Own for a group called “Umoja United” that proposed a local organization for gay African Americans.98 These arguments offered readers a dialogue on race but also a discussion about what an ideal community would look like. All of these writers agreed that racism in Norfolk was deplorable, but they also revealed conflicting conceptions of how their community should overcome them.

While discussing racism, this editor also broached the issue of gender separatism.

In responding to the “division” between blacks and whites, the editor stated “This sort of

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95Letters to the Editor. In Our Own. September 1984.
boundary-drawing is not limited to race...I grew up thinking that 'gay' meant same-sex oriented people; but in Tidewa...
who looked like they had just stepped out of a Charles Atlas magazine. Other advertisements made their gender orientation more explicit by using the “male symbol,” a circle with an arrow pointing upwards and to the right.\footnote{Nutcracker Advertisement. In \textit{Our Own}. March, 1979.} Pictures of male models described an ideal clientele or what a reader might find if he were to come out for a drink. The male symbol served as a signpost not only to welcome men, but to exclude women as well. In 1979, a letter to the editor explained a situation of lesbian exclusion at the gay bar “Nutcracker.” The woman who wrote explained to the editor that after the closing of the local lesbian bar “Pinch's,” she, like many other local lesbians, had begun to spend time in the Nutcracker. After describing several incidents that she characterized as harassment from gay men, her experiences culminated in a rather abrupt confrontation with a gay man who told her “...you and your friends don't belong here!”\footnote{Letters to the Editor. In \textit{Our Own}. March, 1979.} The incident she described occurred in February 1979 and her letter was printed the following month in \textit{Our Own}. That same month, the advertisement for the Nutcracker had changed its appearance from the only image that had run for months previous and now prominently displayed two overlapping male symbols.\footnote{Nutcracker Advertisement. In \textit{Our Own}. March, 1979.} It is unclear whether this change was a result of the particular incident described in the March letter to the editor. More likely, it was the result of the influx of lesbians after the demise of Pinch's that she described in her letter. Nevertheless, it is clear that following these events, the Nutcracker maintained a gay male clientele and forcefully delineated whom the establishment would exclude.

Male oriented bars were not the only participants in this segregating trend. Bars catering to lesbian women often engaged in similar behavior as well. Though such

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establishments were far less numerous than their gay counterparts, the advertising for lesbian bars rarely made a pretense of entertaining a mixed-gender crowd. On March 4, 1983 the Hershee bar opened its doors for business and the first advertisement it ran informed readers that Hershee's was a “Womon's Bar,” using feminist language to show that the bar was for lesbians. The language included in the advertisement went far beyond the announcement of a space that welcomed women however. It went on to tell readers that men were “not welcomed Wednesday through Saturday.”

The division between lesbian space and gay space was readily visible in the advertisements for bars and dance clubs. Beneath the surface, another division lurked within these spaces. Although racial discrimination appeared less overtly, at least to those not directly affected by it, the treatment of African Americans in Norfolk’s gay and lesbian bars was contentious. Whether real or perceived, instances of racism in Norfolk bars showed that the “community” was not a homogenous group based on non-heteronormative sexualities but rather a loose confederation of smaller groups. In a variety of ways, African Americans experienced harassment and exclusion in the physical spaces of Norfolk's gay community.

Letters touching on this issue often reached the pages of Our Own. One man described an incident of discrimination at the College Cue Club, a bar located near Old Dominion University. He said that after spending some time in the bar, he was asked to leave if he was not going to buy another drink. Not having enough money on hand for another drink, he was escorted off the premises after discussing the issue with the

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106 Hershee Advertisement. In Our Own. April, 1983. The spelling of the word “woman” in this advertisement reflected one of the various contemporary feminist spellings of the word at the time.
107 Hershee Advertisement. In Our Own. April, 1983.
manager. The author of this letter wrote that although his expulsion from the Cue Club was couched in business terms, he felt that the real cause for his removal was that the color of his skin. Another letter claimed:

Here in Norfolk, there is living proof of racism. The white gay bar owners treat Black Gays differently from whites. They charge us a higher admission, often allowing white Gays to come into the clubs for free while charging Black Gays. They ask Black Gays for many ID's while whites are hardly ever hassled. The word 'capacity' has become a newly-used word for bar owners to keep out Blacks.

These letters reveal an underlying tension that existed in the gay bar scene of Norfolk and represented a substantial contrast to the ideals of “unity” espoused by others.

Perceptions of racism in Norfolk were not limited to gay bars either. In a letter printed in May 1987, G. Harris wrote to the editor to express her disappointment that the admission policy had changed at the lesbian bar named Stella Street. When she was denied entrance, she wrote that she “...took it personally because I'm Black.” A response from Stella Street's owner, Shirley Pritchard, was printed next to Harris's letter. Pritchard defended the admission policy as the prerogative of a business-owner saying that “...if people don't support the bar during the week, I don't want them here on weekends.” Pritchard went on to say that both black and white women had been denied access to the club on the weekends. While it is not clear whether or not this was actually an incidence of racial exclusion, complaints similar to G. Harris's are found in other issues as well and this incident is representative of a broader story shared by several

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Although African Americans were often marginalized within spaces, gay men and lesbian women were often separated by the physical spaces in which they socialized. But spatial segregation can occur both in the real world spaces of bars and the imagined spaces created in the print media of *Our Own*. In this latter context, *Our Own* can be examined as an imaginary space for socializing which further elucidated the exclusive tensions found and perceived in Norfolk's gay and lesbian community. In this way, pages of this newspaper had a geography of their own that mirrored the lived experiences of Norfolk's gay and lesbian residents.

The most striking continuity was the division of space for gay men and lesbian women. As previously discussed, the advertisements in this publication illustrated the gender division of physical locations through symbols and images. In addition, the articles and poetry submitted to *Our Own* occupied gendered sections of the paper. This trend started early in the newspaper's publication history. In 1979, less than two years since *Our Own*’s first issue, a new section appeared entitled “Lesbians – Front & Center,” which catered specifically to a lesbian readership.\(^{112}\) Staff members were separately recruited for this segment of the paper, which never exceeded two pages in any issue. This section of the paper came to include reprinted news articles from other publications, poetry, letters to and from the newspaper's staff and local articles. Various lesbian singer/song writers were also frequently profiled in this segment as well. In January of 1980, a gay male counterpart made its way into *Our Own*, which featured reader-

\(^{112}\)Lesbians – Front & Center. in *Our Own*. March 1979.
submitted poems and reflections that focused on men and generally consisted of a single page.

By May 1981, "Lesbians – Front & Center" had changed its name to "Wommon's Wings" and increased its focus on reader-submitted poetry and lesbian artists.\textsuperscript{113} With this change in title, this gendered section moved closer to the front page, but decreased in size. For example, in May 1981, this section consisted of a single page and varied in size, between one and two pages until it was ultimately discontinued in October 1983.\textsuperscript{114} The focus on artists and gender created and/or reflected an imagined lesbian community for readers and at the same time it reinforced the division between gays and lesbians along gender lines. What is significant about this segment is that while "Wommon's Wings" allowed Our Own to address lesbian readers directly, one implication of needing a separate space was an admission that the paper's content was primarily focused on gay men, not "gays and lesbians."

After Our Own became incorporated in 1982, several elements within the pages of the paper indicated that there was an increasing focus on male readership. Personal advertisements in the "Classifieds" section of the paper consistently reveal a preponderance of male readers. For example, in the August 1986 issue, ten out of the eleven total personals were from men.\textsuperscript{115} What these personals also tended to share was the acronym "GWM," which stood for "gay white male." This most often described the author of the personal but it also indicated the race and gender of appropriate respondents. Similar to the reader-submission sections that included poetry, the

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\textsuperscript{113}Wommon's Wings. In Our Own. May 1981.
\textsuperscript{114}Inner Limits. In Our Own. October 1983.
\textsuperscript{115}Classifieds. In Our Own. August 1986.
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"Classifieds" section of the paper started under a single moniker, but it was eventually divided into separate spaces organized by gender.116

Advertisements for businesses in Our Own also revealed an increasing focus on males. Considering the advertisements placed for gay and lesbian bars, this was an unsurprising development. Lesbian bars almost exclusively featured images of women or pictures related to females, and gay bars followed the same formula with males. In the early issues (circa 1977-1978), only five gay bars existed, and they were located in downtown Norfolk. By 1982, two lesbian bars had opened up and, taking the cities that surrounded Norfolk into account, there was never a sustained period when more than two lesbian-focused bars existed. Looking at these numbers, it is clear why the majority of the advertisements for bars in Our Own would feature images of men. Although this is to be expected when comparing gender specific businesses, the tendency to advertise with male imagery was also prevalent among what are assumed to be more gender neutral businesses. For example, a store in downtown Norfolk named “Just For You” was a gift/card shop that initially advertised with cartoon penguins and turtles.117 By the mid-1980s, advertisements for the shop followed the trend of other advertisements in Our Own, featuring shirtless men with large muscles. Although the model of near nudity was not followed by most businesses without a gender focus, restaurants, antique shops and second-hand clothing stores also frequently used pictures or cartoons of men as well.

Another feature that the majority of the images found in Our Own shared besides gender was race. Nearly all advertising with photographic images featured white men.

116Classifieds. In Our Own. October 1986
Illustrations followed the same trend. The few images of African Americans that did make an appearance generally fell into two categories: photos of Mel Boozer and photos of drag queens. A politician and academic, Mel Boozer was a gay black man who advocated for gay rights in the late 1970's and 1980's. He was even a vice-presidential candidate for the Socialist Party and Democratic Party in 1980. Several photos of him were featured in the June 1980 issue of Our Own which contained an interview with him. A few subsequent issues featured pictures of him as well. Photographs of drag queens, on the other hand, seldom appeared. If there happened to be a photo of a black drag queen, it was likely the only photo of an African American in the entire issue. The marginal visibility of African Americans in the pages of Our Own spoke to the anxieties reflected in the letters to the editor regarding unity and racism in Norfolk's gay community.

Risqué photos used in advertising garnered a number of negative responses. Although they comprised a smaller proportion of Our Own's audience, the focus on male imagery in advertisements did not go unnoticed by the lesbian readership of the newspaper. By the 1990s, one form of “adult” entertainment that was heavily advertised was the pay-per-minute hotline. In the November 1990 issue of Our Own, four consecutive pages were dedicated to a plethora of hotline advertisements, featuring numbers such as “1-900-933-MANN.” An incredulous lesbian reader, Susan Altenhein responded to the throngs of hairless muscle-men in thongs, writing to the editorial staff that “I was literally revolted to have my reading interrupted with four full pages of

\[\text{Conference News. In Our Own. June, 1980.}\]
\[\text{Advertisements. In Our Own. November, 1990.}\]
exploitive [sic] and tacky ads for phone sex."¹²⁰ She continued:

 Being assaulted with these ads disgusted me – not because I'm some prudish advocate of censorship, or because it insulted my intelligence (although it did that), or because it offended my lesbian sense of aesthetics (although it did that too). It disgusted me because it took up four whole pages of our newspaper that could have been used for self- and life-affirming articles, poetry, letters, stories or other examples of our diversity and instead bombarded us with crude solicitation.¹²¹

 Altenhein's entry showed not just her frustration at offensive images: it also revealed conflict over the presentation of the gay and lesbian community. For her, Our Own served as more than a newspaper, it was the visual embodiment of the local lesbian and gay population. Altenhein wrote, “It's no wonder that a majority of straight society believes that homosexuality is an emotion-less perversion, that we are obsessed with identifying ourselves with a sex act. We need to seriously consider the messages we send to the rest of the world....”¹²² The sexualized nature of these provocative advertisements reinforced negative stereotypes in Altenhein's eyes. For her, the ideal image of the gay and lesbian community was one that did not express itself or its visibility through overt sexuality.

 The response offered by the advertising director of Our Own exposed a fundamental conflict in how gays and lesbians thought of their community and what a gay/lesbian identity meant. The reply from the advertising director read “Phone sex can be viewed as a healthy variety of sexual celebration.”¹²³ This particular phrase, “celebration,” was frequently used by gays and lesbians who wanted to express and

¹²³Note from Advertising Director. In Our Own. September 1990.
highlight their difference from heterosexuals. The advertising director further espoused this sentiment using Altenhein's own words, writing "I also want to add that while it is important to not only think in terms of sexual acts, it is equally important not to be obsessed with avoiding identification with a sex act...The message we need to send to the rest of the world and to ourselves is that their judgment is irrelevant, and that we need not seek its approval."\footnote{Note from Advertising Director. In \textit{Our Own}. September 1990.} The debate here transcended the question of lewd imagery; it was about the identity of gays and lesbians, or rather, what the identity of the gay and lesbian community should be.

The conflicts and competition for space in the physical locations of Norfolk and space in the pages of \textit{Our Own} thus embodied more elemental questions about identity. Gays and lesbians expressed a wide array of opinions on what their community should look like but their views often fell into two categories. The first group, represented by individuals like the advertising director discussed above, thought that "celebrating" sexuality meant a defiantly public expression of sexuality and love. Mark Demma, for example, was an advocate of the "celebration model" of a gay and lesbian community who balked at what he called "internalized homophobia."\footnote{Letters to the Editor. In \textit{Our Own}. June 1991.} Anticipating a demonstration on the Norfolk Naval Base, the author criticized personal fears held by others, sarcastically asking "What if I'm on T.V.?" and "[What if I] lose my job?"\footnote{Letters to the Editor. In \textit{Our Own}. June 1991.} He concluded by asking "With people in our community saying these things who needs Jesse Helms and Lyndon LaRouche?"\footnote{Letters to the Editor. In \textit{Our Own}. June 1991.} For Mr. Demma, a small turnout for this public
demonstration was just what social conservatives wanted: silence. Unfortunately, the fears mocked by Demma proved true for one serviceman. Gary Hendricks, a marine who had participated in the demonstration, was recognized at the event and subsequently investigated for homosexuality.128

Other gays and lesbians adopted a different vision of what a gay/lesbian identity should look like. Like Susan Altenhein, they wanted to downplay their difference from heterosexuals and instead express their similarities. One contributor wrote a piece about the possibility of frontal nudity in *Our Own*. In denying the appropriateness of nudity in the publication, David Duncan succinctly summed up the vision of the other dominant model of community, the “cult of respectability” model, by saying “To be respected, one must be respectable.”129 In direct contrast to the “celebration” model's focus on sexuality, members of the “cult of respectability” espoused modesty and politeness. As Duncan himself asked “...are we advocates of ‘anything goes?’ Or do we have standards?” before admonishing readers that “The success or failure of our movement hinges on questions like these.”130 Reverend Jim Roche of the Unitarian church expanded on these ideas in terms of visibility. He wrote that it should be easy for heterosexuals to accept gays and lesbians because “...for the most part, we are just like them.”131 In Roche's opinion piece, he further emphasized how homosexuals and heterosexuals were the same in multiple ways. He ended his piece with the logical conclusion of the expression of sameness by saying “We are the same as you...We are nearly invisible and therefore discrimination

Both proponents of celebration and the cult of respectability sought to increase the acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals but their strategies were different. By increasing gay and lesbian visibility through public demonstrations and public displays of affection, celebrants of gay liberation hoped to inspire tolerance for homosexuals by increasing the familiarity of local heterosexuals with their presence. At the same time, these public displays were also meant to reinforce the perception of a substantive difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Followers of the cult of respectability adopted a fundamentally different approach to visibility which argued that blending into the surrounding heterosexual population was the key to increasing tolerance for gays and lesbians. This approach constituted at once a visible display of similarity and a denial of discernible difference. These competing ideologies show that a positive gay visibility was not an objective goal that everyone agreed on. Even within a small city such as Norfolk, the goals of and desired strategies for achieving visibility were disputed. These conflicts over unity and propriety that found their way into Our Own thus encompassed conflicts over whose idea of positive gay and lesbian would prevail.

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Conclusion:

The postwar period was a tumultuous time for Norfolk, Virginia. In the midst of redevelopment and massive infrastructure projects, rocked by racial tension and violence, adjacent to the acrimonious Pat Robertson and his “700 Club” and an epicenter of the modern military-industrial complex, Norfolk was. Despite this, a significant gay and lesbian community existed and proliferated, although its stories are not likely to be included in standard narratives about Norfolk’s history. Norfolk was at once central to the Navy on the East Coast and central to gay and lesbian life in southeast Virginia. Today, the centrality of Norfolk for both of these groups has decreased since the 1990s. For the former, the end of the Cold War decreased military spending and Norfolk’s economy is now less dependent on the navy and, for the latter, the explosion of development and population in Virginia Beach has drawn many away from the gay ghetto in Ghent. By 1960, Norfolk had become the most populous city in Virginia, surpassing Richmond. In 1970, the population of Virginia Beach was 172,000 and the population of Norfolk was 307,000 but by 1980, their populations were nearly equal. Virginia Beach became the most populous city in Virginia when its population reached 393,000 and Norfolk’s population had declined. In 2000, Virginia Beach saw a much less dramatic growth than the previous decade but the city’s population nearly doubled the population of Norfolk. Combined with increased property prices and rent in the 1990s and a

134 Norfolk’s population in 1970 it was 307,000, in 1980 it was 267,000, in 1990 it was 261,000 and in 2000 it was 234,000. The population of Virginia Beach in 1970 172,000, in 1980 was 262,000, in 2000 it was 425,000. U.S. Bureau of the Census, “QT-H1. General Housing Characteristics: 2000. Census
declining population in Norfolk, gays and lesbians began to leave the area, taking their businesses followed (see appendix).

Gays and lesbians in Norfolk experienced a flurry of political and social activity from the mid-1970s through the 1980s and though this paper has covered a considerable portion of this material, there is certainly more that could be said on this topic. The substantial redevelopment projects in Norfolk could be a fruitful avenue to continue investigating the displacement of gay and lesbian businesses in downtown. Records for these projects exist in substantial quantities, but obtaining these records may be difficult and most likely requests through the Freedom of Information Act. Another substantial source-base could be found in interviews of Norfolk residents, gay, lesbian or straight, because many are still living. Not only could they provide further information on gay and lesbian life in Ghent, but they could tell us more about Norfolk as a whole during this period as well. Finally, the impact of AIDS on Norfolk’s population is an important issue that another study could address.

On the surface, gay and lesbian life seems less visible in Norfolk and more diffuse across Hampton Roads today, although it is certainly not gone. There are fewer LGBT businesses in the area and, in episode reminiscent of the late 1970s redevelopment projects, Old Dominion University recently purchased the property where the gay bar “Skip’s” recently stood. In addition, there is no local gay newspaper, although there has also been a general decline in free, local press as well. But there is still a gay and lesbian presence in Norfolk and some degree of political activity has continued up to the present.

After the passage of Proposition 8 in California, Old Dominion University became the site of an impromptu protest for LGBT civil rights. With the military’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy hopefully on the way out the door, gay and lesbian life in Norfolk could potentially see some sort of renaissance and possible return to “Ghent Gayland” and political demonstration, however unlikely the prospect.

Several trends show that the gay and lesbian history of Ghent speaks to a larger narrative of gay and lesbian life in the South and in the United States. Large cities in the South, such as Norfolk and Atlanta had substantial gay and lesbian populations that grew as young gays and lesbians moved from peripheral locations. This history of Norfolk also connects to a larger, national movement advocating for civil rights, which was itself a flashpoint in fight for integration of public schools in the late 1950s. Gay activists such as Harvey Milk, Mel Boozer and Reverend Troy Perry inspired lesser-known gay and lesbian politicians, such as Norfolk’s own Debra Lass, to join the struggle for gay and lesbian civil rights. Strikingly, the tensions and experiences of Norfolk’s recent history suggest that the “Ghent Gayland,” which seceded from the Union in 1981, was not an island, a land unto itself. In trying to create their own space in Norfolk, local gays and lesbians revealed their substantial connections to the rest of Norfolk and the multiple ways they were influenced by it. Racism, substantial religiosity, and support for naval servicemen and women could be found all over Norfolk, including Ghent. Ghent was not on the margins of Norfolk. Rather, it was just as much a part of Norfolk as it was a product of it. Sanctuary in Ghent did not represent a flight from conservatism in the South; it was merely another piece of it.
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