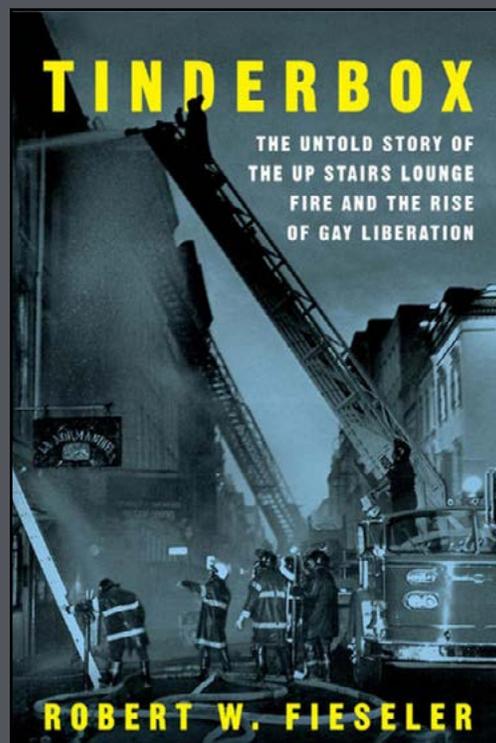
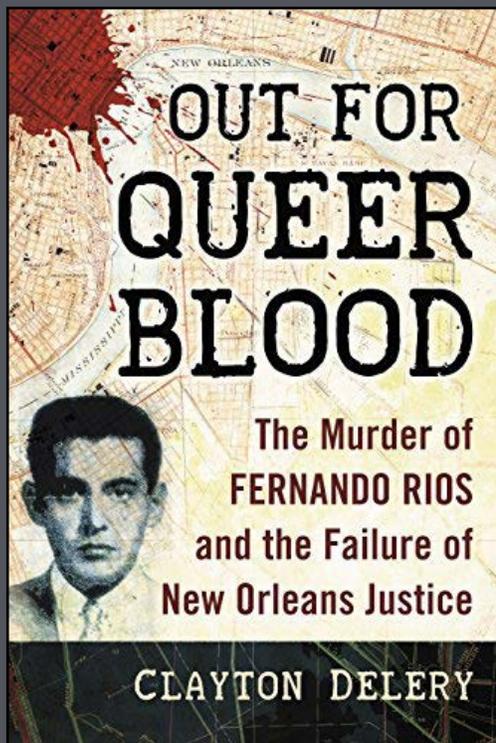
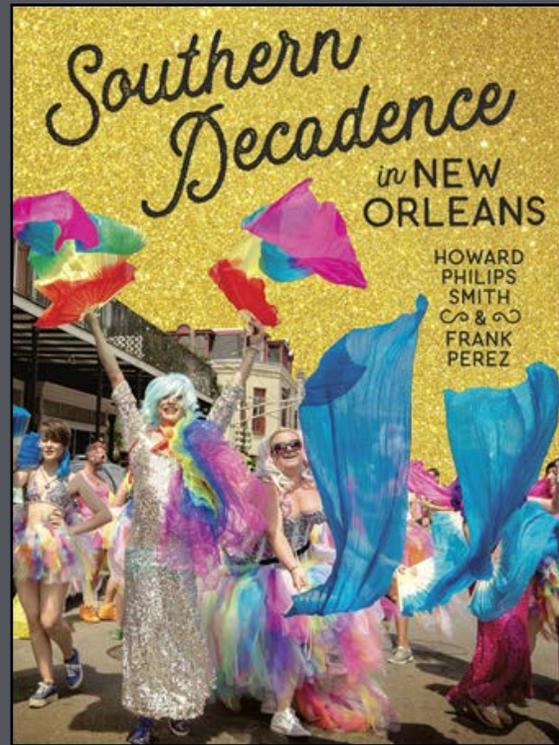
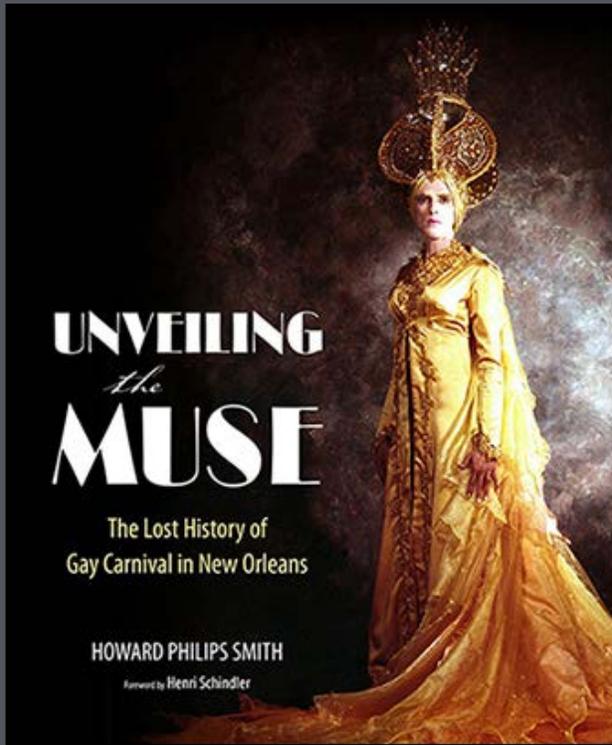


LOUISIANA HISTORY

The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association

REVIEW ESSAY BY ROBERT AZZARELLO



Review Essay

OUT FOR QUEER BLOOD: *The Murder of Fernando Rios and the Failure of New Orleans Justice*. By Clayton Delery. Foreword by Robert L. Camina. (Jefferson, NC: Exposit, 2017. 234 pp. Foreword, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Softcover \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-4766-6884-0).

TINDERBOX: *The Untold Story of the Up Stairs Lounge Fire and the Rise of Gay Liberation*. By Robert W. Fieseler. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018. xx, 343 pp. Preface, introduction, notes, acknowledgments, index. Paper \$26.95, ISBN 978-1-63149-164-1).

UNVEILING THE MUSE: *The Lost History of Gay Carnival in New Orleans*. By Howard Philips Smith. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. xviii, 346 pp. Foreword, introduction, afterword, epilogue, acknowledgments, glossary, sources, index. Cloth \$50.00, ISBN 978-1-4968-1401-2).

SOUTHERN DECADENCE IN NEW ORLEANS. By Howard Philips Smith and Frank Perez. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018. xiii, 261 pp. Foreword, note, introduction, acknowledgments, appendixes, notes, index. Cloth \$36.00, ISBN 978-0-8071-6953-7).

The rich history of New Orleans has provided an endless source of material for historians. Academics and the general public alike have been drawn to the development of the city's music, literature, festivals, and foodways, as well as to its unique cultural traditions such as second lines and Mardi Gras. From macro-level studies of the city's political economy

and tourism to more focused examinations of individual neighborhoods and streets, the slave trade and the civil rights movement, historians have produced a steady stream of texts on a vast array of subjects. Sex and sexuality, too, have figured prominently in the historical research with special attention often given to the regulation of sexual relations, especially between the races, and the nebulous legality of prostitution. Despite the great diversity of topics condensed within the singular city of New Orleans, focused consideration of the city's LGBT population has not been a mark of the historiographical record. Somewhat surprisingly in a city such as New Orleans, a city that has often been hailed or derided as a gay mecca, LGBT history has received relatively little notice from historians.

That omission, however, has changed significantly with the recent publication of four new books all devoted to various aspects of LGBT New Orleans. Two of these books focus on profound tragedies in this history (the lethal gay-bashing of a young man in 1958 and the deadly Up Stairs Lounge fire in 1973) while the other two focus on more joyful celebrations of the city's theatricality (gay Mardi Gras and Southern Decadence). While these four books are each distinct in form and content, together they represent a major contribution to the historical scholarship on New Orleans. They track the unique struggles of LGBT people in the city: sometimes their subtle erasure and banishment to the closet, sometimes their active oppression by the police and government officials. Despite these challenges, however, LGBT New Orleanians survived to form a vibrant culture, and they represent a major force in the city during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In *Out for Queer Blood: The Murder of Fernando Rios and the Failure of New Orleans Justice*, Clayton Delery tells the story of a gay Mexican tour guide named Fernando Rios who was killed by three Tulane students in 1958. Accompanying a group of Mexican doctors and their wives on a tour of the city, Rios

separated from the others one night and went alone to Café Lafitte in Exile, a gay bar. There he met an undergraduate named John Farrell, and after some conversation, the two young men left the bar together. Unbeknownst to Rios, however, Farrell was in the bar specifically to find a “queer to roll,” as the expression went at the time, and he was also being followed by two of Farrell’s classmates at Tulane, David Drennan and Alberto Calvo. Outside of St. Louis Cathedral in Père Antoine Alley, the four men came together. Although the exact details of what followed cannot be known, medical records show multiple and powerful blows to Rios’s head and body. The lethal one was a crack to his skull which was probably caused as Rios’s head hit the pavement after being knocked unconscious from a blow to the face. Alive, albeit unresponsive, a bloody Fernando Rios was found by a passerby in the alley the next morning, but he succumbed to his violent injuries and died in the hospital a few hours later. Back on campus, the three assailants bragged about what they had done to other students, although at the time they did not know that their victim had died, and they were arrested two days after the murder. The evidence presented during the trial clearly pointed to a lethal gay-bashing committed by the defendants, but the three students were found not guilty. “When the verdict was announced,” Delery writes, “the courtroom cheered.” (p. 21)

The strength of Delery’s book is his careful attention to the details of the trial and its aftermath, as well as the way it played out in the newspapers and other media. Politicians, of course, were careful not to extend sympathy for the dead Fernando Rios, and the trial coincided with a crackdown led by the mayor and chief of police to rid the French Quarter of its homosexual element, which was often associated with crime, communism, and other “subversive” politics. Bringing a deep understanding to his subject matter, Delery situates the tragic story of Rios within the context not only of homophobia but also of racism and xenophobia that was so

prevalent in New Orleans and the nation at large during the 1950s. Additional chapters on the history of hate crimes and the gay panic defense help to provide even more context, although these histories could have been weaved more seamlessly into the narrative of the trial. Despite this last criticism, *Out for Queer Blood* is a major achievement. In fact, it is a second major achievement for Delery who comes to this book after having previously published in 2014 *The Up Stairs Lounge Arson: Thirty-Two Deaths in a New Orleans Gay Bar, June 24, 1973*, one of the few treatments of the tragedy before Robert W. Fieseler's *Tinderbox: The Untold Story of the Up Stairs Lounge Fire and the Rise of Gay Liberation* appeared in 2018.

Like Delery, Robert W. Fieseler focuses on a major tragedy in the history of LGBT New Orleans and narrates the events surrounding a major fire in a French Quarter gay bar that killed thirty-two people in 1973. In almost excruciating detail, Fieseler recounts the fire and its horrific aftermath. The fire, which Fieseler describes more like a fierce and fiery explosion, spread across the bar within a matter of seconds. Most victims died immediately from the intense heat that charred their bodies; others died in the hospital after suffering for days from their mortal wounds. One person was scorched sitting on his barstool; others perished running towards or trying to escape from second-story windows that were tragically barred shut. While the story of the fire is horrifying in itself, even more heartbreaking was what came after as the friends and lovers of the victims found themselves unable to express their loss and sadness because, trapped in the closet, they risked their jobs, homes, and families if they came out. It is hard to imagine this part of the story, the horrible sweep of homophobia, from today's vantage point. It almost seems like an impossible possible world, a world of fiction, in the context of New Orleans. But it happened: compassion was fragile and ignorance widespread. Many of the people killed in the fire were disowned by their families because they were gay, and many politicians stayed

silent, fearing a homophobic backlash if they expressed sympathy for the victims.

Fieseler contextualizes the fire, almost certainly started by Roger Nunez, an extremely troubled gay man who later committed suicide, in terms of larger trends in local and national LGBT history. Fieseler's book demonstrates a real knack for moving seamlessly between scales, combining vivid portraits of key figures in the fire—musician Bud Matyi, for example, pastor Bill Larson, and bartender Buddy Rasmussen—with the broader situation facing LGBT people in the city, the state, and the country. Despite the tragic nature of the disaster, Fieseler finds some silver lining in this story of homophobia and pain. For him, the Up Stairs Lounge fire encouraged gay people across the country to come together as a collective voice “aligned with America's larger civil rights story.” (p. xx) After the fire, many LGBT people chose to stay silent and hidden and to grieve quietly and alone, but many more chose a different path: to come out proudly, show solidarity with the victims, and join a burgeoning movement boldly steered towards their due rights and respect.

In New Orleans, one key channel and occasion for LGBT pride and celebration has been Mardi Gras, and in *Unveiling the Muse: The Lost History of Gay Carnival in New Orleans*, Howard Philips Smith tracks that vibrant history from the 1950s to the present. The first LGBT krewe, the Krewe of Yuga, formed in 1958 by “mimicking and at the same time mocking the traditional old-line krewes and their presentation of royalty.” (p. 3) This was a time of intense homophobia, however, and LGBT people were under constant threat of surveillance. The fifth annual Yuga ball, for example, was raided by police in Metairie and could have easily been the end of the tradition. Simply dressing in drag, a staple of gay male theatricality, was illegal in New Orleans on every day of the year except for Fat Tuesday at that time, but Yuga and the other gay male krewes learned what they had to do to survive. This included not dressing in drag, at least for the

balls, and involving enough female friends and relatives in the party in order to pass as straight—or perhaps more realistically—to appear less gay.

Especially valuable in this major book are the colorful photographs of costumes, floats, and memorabilia. Indeed, unlike the other three books considered in this review, Smith's *Unveiling the Muse* proceeds primarily in a visual format and resembles an exhibition catalog. It is a big book, measuring in at over 12" by 10" and heavy. The result of over three decades of work on gay Carnival, *Unveiling the Muse* tracks thirteen of the major gay carnival krewes, each one given its own chapter, as well as the many other smaller ones, and will be a great resource for academics and general audience alike.

In *Southern Decadence in New Orleans*, Howard Philips Smith and Frank Perez chronicle the history of Southern Decadence, one of the nation's largest LGBT festivals, which takes place in New Orleans every Labor Day weekend. The story begins in 1972 when a small group of friends—gay and straight, men and women, black and white—were congregating in an old dilapidated house in Tremé they called Belle Rêve after Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. These friends, Smith and Perez write, had just lived through the 1960s; they were thus experiencing a "rift in society, especially the roles of men and women" and were "exploring alternative modes of sexuality and expression." (p. 41) Channeling Williams and other writers, the friends planned a party in which they would all dress up as decadent southerners such as Blanche DuBois. The next year the party happened again (how could it not?), and it became a much anticipated event that got bigger and bigger as the years went on. At present, Southern Decadence draws an estimated crowd of over 250,000 people from outside New Orleans and has an economic impact of over \$300 million for the city.

Smith and Perez's book includes an introduction that situates Southern Decadence within the history of New

Orleans and its reputation for sexual promiscuity and indulgence. It also examines the annual festival within a number of important contexts: gay culture, French Quarter bar culture, the emergency of AIDS, tourism, and Mardi Gras. Researchers may find especially useful the author's compilation of data such as the estimated number of attendees, economic impacts, lists of grand marshals, official colors, and themes organized by year. *Southern Decadence 2016* is given especially detailed attention. Smith and Perez chronicle the yearlong planning, fundraisers, and parties that all lead up to the Sunday parade of Labor Day weekend. The book also includes many pictures from the long history of *Southern Decadence*—from its beginning in 1972 to the present—as well as interviews with key figures such as Robert Laurent, Errol Rizzuto, and Rip and Marsha Naquin-Delain. While Smith and Perez's work is praiseworthy, the tone may sometimes strike the academic historian as too informal, perhaps symptomatic of the participant-observer who participates too much, as in this kind of sentence: "The Saturday night before the day of the parade was more or less reserved for hitting the bars." (p. 35) This criticism notwithstanding, *Southern Decadence in New Orleans* will prove to be a central book for LGBT history in the city and will greatly aid all future research on the subject.

Because of the longstanding gap in the scholarship on LGBT New Orleans, the appearance of these four books in such a small space of time is pleasantly surprising. Indeed, their virtually simultaneous publication represents a watershed moment in the historiography of the city. These four books should thus be read and carefully studied by historians. It is interesting to note, however, that while these books will be of great value to historians not one of their authors is an academic historian. While two of the books are published by university presses, the authors themselves are not institutionally affiliated with the academy. One author is a librarian by profession, and the other three are independent researchers

and writers. It is difficult to speculate why this is the case, why most academic historians are drawn to the many other subjects that call out for research in New Orleans to the neglect of the city's LGBT inhabitants, but perhaps these four books will encourage specialists to delve deeper into this important and relatively understudied aspect of the city's social life.

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