



# From gay liberation to backlash: producing pride and New York's LGBTQ public culture on *The Emerald City*

Lauren Herold <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gender and Sexuality Studies, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, USA

\*Corresponding author: Lauren Herold. Email: Herold1@kenyon.edu

## Abstract

This article explores how *The Emerald City* (1977–1979), an LGBTQ public access cable television show, represented the evolving sociopolitical and geographic contexts of New York City in the 1970s and mediated the concept “gay pride.” Tracing its emplacement in New York alongside the development of cable television, this article discusses how the series played a role in producing dominant queer cultural imaginations of the city. Combining analysis of the show's episodes with archival research and interviews with *The Emerald City* co-producer Steven Bie, this article argues both for the potential of public access to produce liberatory affective experiences of pride, as well as its role in idealizing a gay imaginary of New York limited by racialized and classed hierarchies. This article demonstrates how public access in the US provided opportunities for marginalized producers to experiment with creating gay television, as well as the structural constraints that limited its political promise.

**Keywords:** cable television, LGBTQ, pride, affect, New York.

In the 1970s, LGBTQ activism emerged as a powerful movement that helped to shift social, political, and sexual norms in the US—and this revolution was televised.<sup>1</sup> The gay liberation movement, as it was then called, was catalyzed by the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 and similar uprisings in the 1960s, protests motivated by increased frustration with police harassment and legal discrimination against LGBTQ people. The gay liberation movement sparked the growth of LGBTQ services, newspapers, businesses, social outlets, and advocacy groups—as well as public access cable television shows. These organizations acted as key forums in which LGBTQ people could discuss and debate intra-community issues. As a result of gay liberation-era activism, LGBTQ people experienced a wave of political successes in the 1970s: 20 states legalized sodomy, 40 cities passed gay rights legislation, and the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness. Yet by 1977, backlash began to emerge. The rise of the New Right in the late 1970s was part of a larger wave of conservatism across the US that threatened the progress achieved by LGBTQ activists (Stein, 2012). This article explores how one gay liberation-era cultural forum, the public access series *The Emerald City* (1977–1979), engaged image, affect, and archive to represent the evolving sociopolitical context of the late 1970s and mediate “gay pride.”

One of the oldest LGBTQ public access shows, *The Emerald City*, covered arts and entertainment, nightlife, business, and travel in and around New York City. The show aired twice a week, on Mondays at 9 pm and Thursdays at 8:30 pm, on the leased access Channel J on both Manhattan and Teleprompter Cable, the two systems providing cable service to New York in the 1970s. The series was the brainchild of film professor Eugene Stavis and former professional ice skater Frank O'Dowd, two friends both interested in the potential of cable as a new medium. O'Dowd's romantic partner Steven Bie later joined the team as a producer. Its

producers designed *The Emerald City* to be self-sustaining with support from its sponsors which it promoted during the show: gay bars, bathhouses, bookstores, restaurants, discos, and more. O'Dowd, the host of the show, opened every episode with a short monologue and interviewed many of the show's guests himself. Throughout production, Stavis and Bie remained largely behind the scenes, filming segments and scouting advertisers.

Newcomers to film and television production, Bie, O'Dowd, and Stavis relied upon the resources of alternative media centers in New York, which provided filmmaking equipment to public access programs in the city. Access to new video technologies provided LGBTQ people and other groups historically underrepresented on television the opportunity to create their own programming (Heitner, 2013; Herold, 2021; Wald, 2015). In the 1970s, media activists organized to hold television, film, and news media accountable for reproducing stereotypes about and pathologizing LGBTQ people, aiming to shift homophobic attitudes amongst the mainstream viewing public (Gross, 2001; Montgomery, 1991). Producing local television created by and for LGBTQ people, however, was a novel idea.

This article explores how *The Emerald City* circulated prevailing queer “structures of feeling” in the 1970s (Williams, 1977), particularly queer experiences of pride, which emerged as the dominant effect of the gay liberation movement in the US. David Halperin and Valerie Traub describe gay pride as: “liberation, legitimacy, dignity, acceptance, and assimilation, as well as the right to be different: the goals of gay pride require nothing less than the complete destigmatization of homosexuality, which means the elimination of both the personal and the social shame attached to same-sex eroticism” (2009, p. 3). Scholarship attuned to the way in which affect, feeling, and emotion circulate through and are “archived” in media texts suggests that we can trace the formation of structures of feeling through visual culture

(Cvetkovich, 2003). Ann Cvetkovich situates “cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (2003, p. 7). The study of mediated archives of feeling is particularly important to the study of minoritarian histories: local and independent media can provide accounts of LGBTQ life that are often absented in institutional archives. In its episodes, *The Emerald City* circulates feelings of pride through an affirmation of homoeroticism and support for LGBTQ activism.

As Hollis Griffin suggests, “The affective experience of gay and lesbian media is often one of normativity,” reflecting a desire for “freedom and belonging ( . . . ) a flush of recognition and a fantasy of generality” (2017, pp. 1–2). Queer theorists have long critiqued the normative cultural politics of gay pride, arguing that a focus on pride, particularly during Pride Month events, has sanitized the radical politics of gay liberation as companies signal support for LGBTQ communities via marketing campaigns without investing in shifting their material conditions (Halperin & Traub, 2009). A tension runs through this article between the problematics of capital “P” Pride and lowercase “p” pride, the former as a normative political project and the later as an affect with liberatory potential. Rather than reproduce this conceptual binary, I demonstrate how *The Emerald City* circulates both the normative and radical politics of pride in its various segments. I explore how the series’ homoerotic advertisements both depicted gay male sexual culture free from homophobic stigma, yet idealized and commodified a hegemonic White masculinity, participating in the racialized “gay marketplace of desire” (McBride, 2005). I then demonstrate how *The Emerald City*’s footage of Christopher Street Liberation Day Parades in New York celebrated coalitional queer activism against the New Right, while neglecting to discuss the tensions between different LGBTQ community groups of the time. This investigation demonstrates how the normative politics of pride impact the representational dynamics on the show, but do not entirely determine its affective significance.

As *The Emerald City* televises its segments, it simultaneously tethers pride to the ideological and geographical centrality of New York in the LGBTQ imaginary. The title of the show evoked queer readings of *The Wizard of Oz* as well as Judy Garland’s status as an icon of gay culture. O’Dowd explained in one interview, “Dorothy and the characters she met along the way were going to Emerald City because they thought they could get something there that they could get nowhere else. Tens of thousands of people flock to New York City for the same reason. They’re in search of their dreams” (Herschberg, 1978, p. 14). *The Emerald City* references and reproduces “the mythos of queer New York,” or the idea that New York City and Manhattan in particular are cultural and political centers for LGBTQ life and migrational destinations for LGBTQ people around the country and the world (Giesecking, 2020, p. 11).

As I analyze the series, I trace its geographical emplacement in New York, examining how it mediated depictions of New York’s gay neighborhoods. Understanding public access television requires an analysis of how “the local” and related terms like ‘community’ and ‘place’ are intertwined (Ali, 2017, p. 21). Public access production, distribution, and reception “play a role in struggling over who and what a place represents” (Parmett, 2025). Local television contributes to the ways geographic and (sub)cultural communities are

represented and understood on a wider scale, helping to produce the “geographical imagination” of particular places (Giesecking, 2020, p. 9). In this article, I analyze *The Emerald City* by combining textual analysis of the show’s episodes with archival research and information from a series of interviews with *The Emerald City*’s last remaining co-producer, Steve Bie. I argue that *The Emerald City*’s mediation of LGBTQ pride played a role in producing “the mythos of queer New York.” In doing so, I articulate both the potential of public access to produce liberatory affective experiences of pride, as well as its role in reproducing normative cultural imaginations of the queer city that still circulate today via the series’ digital afterlife on YouTube. This article demonstrates how public access provided opportunities for marginalized producers to experiment with creating gay television, as well as the structural constraints that limited its political promise.

### Cable comes to New York City

The history of public access television is closely tied to the political, industrial, and geographic history of New York City. In 1970, New York became the first major city wired for cable (Parsons, 2008). Progressive policy and community media activists imagined that cable television could interrupt the traditional “one way” nature of broadcast programming by offering a way for individuals to create their own television (Howell, 2017). Public access channels provided this opportunity: these channels were imagined as an “electronic soapbox” or televisual town square that could cultivate a democratized form of communication (Linder, 1999).

Manhattan cable did indeed televise a diverse set of local programming otherwise unseen on broadcast television. In its first two years of operation, a *New York Times* article reported over “1500 hours of programming” on these channels produced by and starring New York residents, including school board meetings, protests, experimental art, and children’s media (Harrington, 1973). By the mid-1970s, sexually explicit content on Manhattan cable began to cause controversy after the introduction of Channel J, a leased access channel (Harrington, 1973).<sup>2</sup> Critics and cable operators argued that late-night shows featuring nudity and explicit discussion of sexual activity “distorted” the purpose of cable access as a community forum. These shows, such as *Midnight Blue* (1974–2003) and *The Robin Byrd Show* (1977–1999), included advertisements for phone sex hotlines, condoms, sex toy stores, and other erotic businesses, which helped fund production, but drew anger from viewers and critics. While sexually explicit programming “confirmed the opinion of many in the heartland that Manhattan was a den of iniquity” (Linder, 1999, p. 10), their producers believed that discussions about sex were not inherently obscene and that discussing sexuality without stigma was a part of the democratic project of public access.

The reality of public access distribution quickly fell short of its democratic promise. While Manhattan residents began to receive access to cable television in the late 1960s, the residents of the outer boroughs had to wait another 20 years before receiving cable service. Select areas of upper Manhattan and neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, historically populated by people of color, were not wired for cable until the mid-late 1980s (Verhovek, 1988). It wasn’t until the mid-1990s that every New York City neighborhood was wired for cable (Barron, 1994). Because access to cable

depended upon one's neighborhood, its reception reflects the wider political, financial, social, and racial inequities across the city's boroughs. Most likely, public access TV was primarily viewed by the select few who could access and afford a cable subscription: primarily White and middle to upper middle-class residents of central and lower Manhattan. The piecemeal and inequitable distribution of cable television in New York demonstrates how local media "are shaped by broader social, cultural, and material geographies as well as media policy and infrastructures" (Parmett, 2025). As I discuss below, these specificities—the cultural and political diversity of New York, its sexual cultures and commerce, and its demographic and geographic inequalities—shaped the content, production, and politics of *The Emerald City* in the late 1970s.

### Televising pride on the *Emerald City*: homoeroticism and sexual commerce

*The Emerald City* circulated and amplified images of New York City as a sexually liberated urban space by televising the city's gay sexual subculture. Amidst the broader sexual revolution and in response to the repeal of anti-sodomy laws across the US in the 1970s, LGBTQ people embraced "sexual activities as political statements" (Streitmatter, 1995, p. 194). For many gay men specifically, an embrace of gay pride meant leaving behind the silence and stigma they internalized growing up in a sex-negative and homophobic culture. On *The Emerald City*, advertisements for erotic businesses provide a window into 1970s gay sexual culture and commerce: its symbiotic relationship to gay liberation as well as its racialized hierarchy of desire.

A feeling of sexual suggestiveness pervades *The Emerald City*. The show's title sequence highlights images and video clips of New York's gay neighborhoods and cruising spots, depicting gay couples holding hands and dancing in Central Park and the West Village. The title sequence is accompanied by gay composer Cole Porter's song "Anything Goes," including the lyrics "In olden days, a glimpse of stocking/Was looked on as something shocking/But now, God knows/Anything goes," which characterize the atmosphere of sexual freedom depicted on screen. The show's segments made room for discussion about gay sexual practices. In one episode, journalist Vito Russo interviews Larry Kramer about his controversial book *Faggots* (1978), pressing him on his critiques of promiscuity, partying, and drug use among urban gay men. Interviews with gay professionals—bathhouse owners, pornography producers, sex toy shop owners—explore how gay entrepreneurs relied upon sexual culture for business. The production team filmed excursions to gay-friendly enclaves such as Miami and Atlantic City, promoting the local resorts, bars, and bathhouses on screen. In a review of the show, journalist Ronn Mullen wrote, "On *Emerald City* everyone is gay, and that is an unstated springboard from which a genuine discussion of ideas can take off" (Mullen, 1978, p. 56). Guests on *The Emerald City* could openly discuss gay sexual culture because the show was created by and for LGBTQ people. These frank conversations were uncensored on Manhattan Cable's racy Channel J, airing alongside the sexually explicit series mentioned above.

Advertisements on *The Emerald City* best represent the series' embrace of homoeroticism. Commercials provided financial income for the show, necessary since *The Emerald City*

needed to raise money to pay for their timeslot on Channel J and other expenses involved in production. Much like in the gay print press, which "served as a guide to a clandestine network of gay businesses," viewers watching *The Emerald City* could learn about the businesses serving gay customers while watching its commercials (Downs, 2016, p. 123). This was significant for businesses involved in sexual commerce, which relied upon uncensored advertisements in the gay press to reach their customers because they were stigmatized in the wider culture and often subject to police surveillance. The promotion of gay entrepreneurship in the press demonstrated the "symbiotic relationship between gay liberation and gay business" (Streitmatter, 1995, p. 208). As Johnson argues, "The business of producing and disseminating homoerotic images helped forge a movement" (2019, p. 291). Participating in gay consumer culture was a political act of gay pride that showed support for local gay communities.

A recurring 30-second commercial for Man's Country, a popular bathhouse in lower Manhattan, demonstrates how these advertisements marketed their businesses to clients by referencing gay sexual culture (sjb10014, 2018b). Bathhouses were a key site of gay erotic encounters in the 1970s and early 1980s because they provided a private space for men to socialize and have sex with other men. This advertisement opens on an establishing shot outside of the bathhouse, prominently featuring its name on the awning of the building. The ad takes the viewer through the experience of visiting Man's Country: the camera follows one man—a proxy for the audience—as he enters the building and various other rooms, including a locker room, a weightlifting room, and a private room, before exiting the building at the end of the commercial. Inside the bathhouse, male guests are depicted on screen in partial undress: many are shirtless or just wearing towels, exposing their chests. As the visitor moves through each room, a voiceover narrates:

Come to Man's Country. See what we're all about and what we have to offer. Man's Country is a full facility multilevel complex that was designed to feature something for everyone. Come to Man's Country to develop your body or a friendship with somebody else's. Visit us once and you'll come again and again. For the best workout in town, it's Man's Country.

The voiceover narration, spoken by someone with a deep and masculine voice, is full of sexual innuendo (such as "come again and again"). While no sexual contact is shown on screen, it is implied via visual cues and narration, particularly as the visitor enters the private room. A medium shot depicts the visitor closing the door to the room while he looks directly at the camera, suggesting the illicit aspect of what goes on inside; the camera even zooms into the image of the now-closed door, implying that something significant but unrepresentable is happening. As the visitor makes his way back through the locker room and exits the building, Salsoul Orchestra's disco song "Nice n Nasty" plays in the background, heightening the advertisement's sexual suggestiveness.

Commercials for erotic businesses on *The Emerald City*, combined with the series' related sexual content, helped eliminate shame and stigma associated with queer desire. *The Emerald City*'s affirmation of gay male sexuality connected deeply to the goals of gay pride: what Halperin and Traub (2009) describe as the destigmatization of homoeroticism.

The “culture of affirmation of the erotic arts in the 1960s and ‘70s was a key part of gay liberation and sexual revolution-era activism in the U.S.” (Waugh, 1996, p. 10). Depicting homoerotic images on screen was central to this political project. Waugh argues, “the consumption of erotica was without question political” (1996, p. 217); on *The Emerald City*, its production and distribution were political as well.

Significantly, every individual portrayed in the ad for Man’s Country, as in the ad for the pornographic bookstores, is White and normatively masculine. The ad, designed to attract gay male customers, emphasizes physical beauty, defined by White norms, as its selling point. The emphasis on anatomy—chest, buttocks, penis size—draws a connection between the sexual experiences available at the bathhouses and the physical attributes of the customers. In this way, *The Emerald City*’s advertisements contribute to what Dwight McBride calls “the gay marketplace of desire,” which describes the “dominant logics” that “construct and constitute what we come to accept, and in some cases to celebrate, as our value” (2005, p. 88). McBride demonstrates how the “centrality of whiteness” in the gay marketplace of desire—a principle by which Whiteness increases one’s desirability to other men, White or otherwise—leads to the fetishization, hypersexualization, and dehumanization of Black gay men and other gay men of color (2005, p. 125). *The Emerald City* reproduces these power dynamics in the gay marketplace of desire by privileging White masculinity on screen. Few men of color appear on the show, and none appear in the advertisements for commercial and sexual businesses. The absence of men of color on screen indicates that they are barred from the normative category of “desirable,” amplifying racial hierarchies in the community.

As Johnson suggests, “the relative dominance of gay male consumer culture in the early formation of a gay community provides a potential answer to why the movement, from its inception, was dominated by White men. It may help explain why gay White men perceived that they constituted the movement, since they had created the market on which it depended” (2019, p. 43). On *The Emerald City*, marketing the show to White gay male consumers was perhaps necessary to secure funding from its advertisers. This strategy helps explain the centrality of White masculinity on the show. The show depended upon the financial support of White gay men; consequently, these men appear as the dominant representation of desire in its commercials. These representational dynamics on screen are reproduced behind the camera. The three White men who created the show—O’Dowd, Stavis, and Bie—relied upon their social networks to fund production, networks likely made up of other White gay people.

Marketing the show to White gay consumers additionally makes sense when considering the geographic neighborhoods in which these erotic businesses were located. Most of the ads for the show feature businesses located in Manhattan’s downtown neighborhoods: Chelsea, Greenwich Village, the East Village, and the Meatpacking District. These neighborhoods have been “the center of Manhattan’s clusters of LGBTQ life” since the mid-twentieth century (Giesekeing 2020, p. 48). These neighborhoods are demographically populated by White and wealthy people: residents of the Village have been 85% White since 1980 (Giesekeing, 2020, p. 53). As stated earlier, these are also the neighborhoods that were first wired for cable; residents of these neighborhoods were

among the few who could watch cable TV at the time. Consequently, the images on-screen in advertisements for *The Emerald City* match the desired resident of these neighborhoods as well as the typical viewer of the show.

By televising commercials for Manhattan’s gay-oriented businesses, *The Emerald City* helped establish “the queer potential of cable access” (Howell, 2017). With the introduction of the series to Channel J, and amid the gay liberation-era activism fighting for sexual freedom, public access became a televisual forum with the potential to affirm gay pride. The show’s title sequence tethers the geography of New York City to its locations for gay erotic encounters: on screen, we see images of the piers and bathhouses rather than the emblematic tourist attractions typically associated with images of the city. The history of New York helps us understand the limitations of this political project. The industrial, demographic, and geographic realities of cable television narrowed the distributional reach of the series, creating conditions in which participating in the racialized “gay marketplace of desire” became central to the series’ financial viability. Perhaps the title of the show is fitting: as the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* is a fantasy where people arrive “in search of their dreams,” as O’Dowd put it, *The Emerald City* so too produces a fantastical image of New York (or at least specific neighborhoods in Manhattan) as a sexually-liberated urban space where LGBTQ people could experience erotic encounters free from the stigma of homophobia, reproducing the “mythos of gay New York,” a mythos often limited to White gay men.

### Televising pride on *The Emerald City*: LGBTQ activism in midtown Manhattan

*The Emerald City*’s relatively narrow focus on downtown White gay Manhattan expands when the show covers broader sociopolitical issues. Several episodes acknowledge the shifting political context in the US, expressing concern about a growing movement of conservative and religious activists spouting anti-LGBTQ bigotry. The campaigns of the New Right “contributed to an environment of hate and hostility”: reports of hate crimes and arsons targeting LGBTQ people and businesses peaked in the late 1970s (Stein, 2012, pp. 140–141). The Florida campaign in particular garnered national attention: anti-gay activist Anita Bryant led a successful campaign to repeal Dade County’s antidiscrimination ordinance by calling on Miami voters to “Save our Children,” inspiring conservative activism around the country (Capsuto, 2000, pp. 130–132). While the country’s rightward shift threatened civil rights for LGBTQ Americans, it simultaneously galvanized a new wave of activism. Consistent coverage of Bryant’s campaign on network news kept gay and lesbian issues present in national discourse and energized activists enraged by the erosion of newly won civil rights (Alwood, 1996).

*The Emerald City*’s coverage of New York’s Pride parades in 1977 and 1978 offers a look at this new wave of activism. Each event—then known as the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade—drew tens of thousands of people to Manhattan to march from Sheridan Square (across from the Stonewall Inn) to Central Park. During both episodes, O’Dowd and a camera crew follow the progress of the march from morning to evening. Each episode also features interviews with people participating in the march and post-parade rally, including

activists, business leaders, drag queens, police officers, and first-time visitors. While most episodes were filmed indoors, and most segments focus on interviews with prominent community members, these episodes were filmed outdoors on the street and portray a wider segment of the community and the city itself. These episodes connect a sense of pride in LGBTQ activism to a sense of pride in the production of the show itself, as well as a more expansive vision of New York as a center for LGBTQ political life.

Crowd shots of each march portray a diverse community ready to organize against the New Right. Footage from both the 1977 and 1978 marches frequently highlights the vastness of the crowd participating in the parade. Shooting from a distance and from windows in apartment buildings above the crowd, *The Emerald City's* cameras capture the length of the march on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan; in both episodes, it appears to stretch for many blocks. In the episode that covers the 1977 parade, O'Dowd introduces the show by saying, "Tonight on *Emerald City* we have over 100,000 guest stars" (sjb10014, 2018a). O'Dowd makes a similar comment in the episode on the 1978 march, noting, "When they started walking up 5th Avenue, it looked like the set of a Cecil B. DeMille film" (sjb10014, 2018b). DeMille, a classical Hollywood director, was known for directing thousands of extras in large-scale scenes in his films. O'Dowd's commentary emphasizes the size of the crowd—he's so impressed with the turnout that it is as if the participants were hired to be there. Like network coverage of the 1968 March on Washington, *The Emerald City's* pride coverage "emphasized the sheer spectacle of the huge crowd" to highlight both its diversity and number of participants (Bodroghkozy, 2013, p. 95). Cameras capture a wide variety of social and activist groups participating in the march, including Lesbian Feminist Liberation, BDSM groups, Dykes and Tikes, the Gay Teachers Association, Gay Youth, and Gay Catholics. Shots of the parade include numerous women and people of color—groups less represented on the show. One memorable shot from the 1977 march features Marsha P. Johnson, co-founder of the influential trans activist group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. While she appears for only a moment, she is one of the few transfeminine people on screen in the series.

Writing about gay liberation documentary, Dyer suggests, "The stress on diversity is there principally to reinforce the sense that, despite all the differences, homosexuality represents a unifying identity" (1990, p. 244). The crowd shots in these episodes create a sense of solidarity amongst marchers, whether real or imagined. This sense of solidarity is heightened by the audio in these clips: the crowd chants phrases like "gay rights now!" in unison as marchers make their way uptown. Of course, despite the diverse array of organizations and people presented from shot to shot, no unity existed between these groups. Tensions among many of them, often along the lines of race and gender, continued to produce divergent factions in the movement (Stein, 2012). At times, lesbian feminist groups critiqued sexist patterns of behavior in the broader gay rights movement; LGBTQ people of color protested the racism they experienced in gay and lesbian community spaces; and transgender people and drag queens pushed back against the gender normativity encouraged by newly formed assimilationist organizations (Stein, 2012). The imagined unity created by footage of protest marches fails to

"grasp the nettle of divisions" amongst the diversity of groups participating in these movements (Dyer 1990, p. 267).

While *The Emerald City* does not discuss these internal conflicts, its episodes emphasize unity and diversity to respond to the homophobic rhetoric of their contemporary Christian conservatives. Filmed on streets in neighborhoods across the city—from downtown Manhattan up to midtown—these Pride episodes showcase a more expansive view of Manhattan itself than typically available on the show. The visuals in these episodes queer the city by rendering it a space of LGBTQ activism. Locations emblematic of New York—the tourist districts of midtown Manhattan and Central Park—become sites of queer protest. As queer and feminist scholars have long discussed, the public sphere is a gendered space often imagined as the domain of cisgender, heterosexual White men (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Namaste, 2006). As the marchers enter the public sphere and reclaim the city streets as a site for LGBTQ activism, *The Emerald City* footage—particularly the aerial shots of the marches—produces Manhattan as a locus of LGBTQ politics.

It's worth noting that such large-scale filming projects were relatively rare on early cable access television shows, as they were primarily shot inside studios with low-cost props and equipment. A decade later, with access to cheaper and lightweight video technology, AIDS media activists would frequently film their protests throughout the city (Hallas, 2009; Juhasz, 1995). These episodes provide a precursor to the AIDS video activism of the 1980s and 1990s; indeed, public access was one forum through which AIDS video activism was later distributed (Herold, 2021). That *The Emerald City* team could capture and edit together such a variety of individual and crowd shots amidst a parade of thousands walking across Manhattan speaks to the team's technical prowess, dedication, and innovative work, akin to the aesthetic and technological capacities of network journalism of the era. By spotlighting activism in these episodes and throughout the series, *The Emerald City* conveys a sense of pride in its expansive vision of LGBTQ politics necessary to confront homophobia. Simultaneously, O'Dowd's voiceover conveys the team's pride in their ability to utilize cable television to capture these historic events. Together, these episodes envision Manhattan as a space for diverse groups of queers to reclaim the city as the space for pride and liberatory activism.

### ***The Emerald City's* digital afterlife, 1979–Beyond**

*The Emerald City* stopped production in January of 1979. The show never achieved its goal of being self-sustaining. In an interview with *Gaysweek* magazine, O'Dowd admitted, "We simply got too big for our britches" (Edwards & Peduto, 1979, p. 14). While no longer producing new episodes, into the 1980s O'Dowd, Stavis, and Bie often screened episodes for friends during dinner parties (S. Bie, personal communication, August 2019).<sup>3</sup> After O'Dowd died of AIDS-related complications in 1988, Stavis took *The Emerald City* tapes from O'Dowd's apartment and donated them to the LGBT Community Center in New York. Stavis died at the age of 70 in 2014, making Bie the last remaining member of the show's production team. Over the years, Bie has helped steward *The Emerald City* collection at the Center's archives. With an increasing desire to preserve its history, Bie decided to make his own digital copies of *The*

*Emerald City* tapes and uploaded them to his YouTube channel for public consumption in 2018, which made it possible for me to watch the show.

I spoke with Bie several times between 2019 and 2021 over the phone, in person, and via email to learn more about the production history of the show, his experience working on it, and its digital afterlife. Throughout our conversations, Bie consistently argued for the cultural importance of the show in the face of institutional devaluation of public access TV and LGBTQ history. He emailed me newspaper articles about the famous guests who appeared on the show and shared his own archival records with me: photos, correspondence, and news clippings. Bie was proud that his preservation efforts are paying off: “I get a list of how many people looked this up. And I’m like, wow, that’s getting up to the thousands of people looking at different things! The comments, they can’t believe that there’s footage like this around anywhere. We all knew it was really good stuff. Even back when it was first on,” he told me. Bie’s felt sense of pride in his historical preservation efforts resonates with the feelings of pride circulated by the show itself: as the gay liberation movement made a case for the legitimacy of LGBTQ identity and sexuality, *The Emerald City* and Bie’s efforts to preserve it affirm the value in archiving and digitizing queer local television.

Bie’s preservation of the show exemplifies what Juhasz has described as “queer archive activism” (2006). She explains, “Because we lost but lived, we wish to spare others this pain while we take pleasure in sharing this memory. We can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now” (Juhasz, 2006, p. 326). When we spoke about O’Dowd and Stavis, Bie grew reflective about his decades in New York. After living in the Village for 40 years, he says he feels “sweetly haunted” by memories—especially those of his friends who died of AIDS. “I’ve always felt that my presence was something that was to be offered, the wonderful people that I knew and died far too young,” he shared. Bie, sweetly haunted by memories of those who have passed away, many because of the institutional neglect of people with AIDS, does not want them to be forgotten and feels a duty to honor their legacy. As a queer archive activist, Bie honors his friends by advocating for the preservation of *The Emerald City* and sharing it with contemporary audiences, creating the possibility for viewers to discover the LGBTQ history archived on the show.

Because of Bie’s efforts, the series does now reach a wider audience. Several recent documentaries—such as *I Am Divine* (2013)—include footage from *The Emerald City*. Episodes have accumulated thousands of views on YouTube. Contemporary viewers are typically both surprised and grateful to watch the show: one YouTuber commented, “A wonderful time capsule. Thanks for sharing” (Gruber, 2018). The ads for bars and bathhouses generate a significant number of comments. As one person shared, “The ads add to the essence of the time. Much appreciated for the inclusion” (Gibson, 2019); another comments, “these ads for all these gay clubs are so good lol. Funny and creative” (SJ, 2021). These comments epitomize what Joseph DeLeon calls “the queer archive effect”: the ways in which digitized historical content can capture individual and communal queer experiences (2020). DeLeon argues, “YouTube can reanimate video and video archives, building on nostalgic spectatorship online to help audiences claim their queer history and feel a part of a queer

community across time and space” (2020, p. 16). Nostalgic attachments to pre-AIDS gay culture and 1970s New York “can draw attention to urban and rural changes, gentrification, and disinvestment; struggles over who gets to lay claim to a place; and to the roles media culture and ownership play in that struggle” (Parmett, 2025). In this case, the gentrification of downtown Manhattan from the 1980s to the 2000s, in combination with the closure of many gay erotic businesses as the result of city ordinances designed to reduce the spread of HIV, radically changed the sexual cultures that flourished in those areas. Nostalgic attachment to *The Emerald City* draws attention to the tremendous loss of life that occurred shortly after the series aired as well as the gentrification of New York’s gay neighborhoods.

My analysis of *The Emerald City* reveals how independent production on public access in the US allowed producers to experiment with television at a moment in which LGBTQ culture was the subject of national backlash, gesturing towards the ways AIDS activists would utilize the medium in the years to come. Public access TV has historically circulated structures of feeling about place and space. As Adeyemi writes, “race and feeling are entangled with the geography of the neoliberal city” (2022, p. 4); on *The Emerald City*, gender, sexuality, class, and race and feeling are similarly entangled with the geography and cable infrastructure. Specifically, the series circulated and amplified feelings of pride in queer sexuality and activism, intertwining these feelings with locations in New York City: the city’s subcultural network of gay erotic businesses as well as the city’s streets and parks that became spaces of LGBTQ activism. Simultaneously, its limited cable distribution and its focus on midtown and downtown Manhattan reproduce the “mythos of queer New York,” often only accessible to White gay men. The series does not cover much of LGBTQ life in the other areas of the city or the outer boroughs; events significant to queer history, such as the formation of the house ball community in upper Manhattan in the 1970s, are not mentioned (Bailey, 2013). This limited representation of New York is now remediated online via YouTube and in documentaries that utilize the series’ footage. The show’s representational absences reveal the constraints of its political project due to the impacts of gentrification, segregation, and inequitable cable distribution. Bie’s preservation of the show allows contemporary viewers, scholars, artists, and activists to understand how public access television has historically mediated both liberatory queer structures of feeling as well as the structural conditions that limited its democratic promise.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my writing group (Rebecca Ballard, Katharine Mershon, Nicole Morse, Rebecca Oh, and Allison Page) for their unwavering support of my research and writing. I would also like to thank Steph Herold, Helen Morgan Parmett, my dissertation committee members Lynn Spigel, Nick Davis, and Aymar Jean Christian, as well as the anonymous reviewers and editors at *Communication, Culture, & Critique*, for their feedback and encouragement that helped shape my writing and ideas in this article for the better. Finally, I would like to thank Steve Bie for his time and generosity as well as his stewardship of *The Emerald City* archives, all of which made my research possible.

## Data availability

The television episodes analyzed in this article are publicly available at the hyperlinks provided in the references. Archival information was provided to the author via Steve Bie's private collection.

## Funding

This research was supported by a Northwestern University School of Communication Graduate Student Researcher Grant.

*Conflicts of interests:* I have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

## Notes

1. I alternate between the terms "LGBTQ," "queer," and "gay" in this article. I use "LGBTQ" to describe the scope of the content of *The Emerald City* and activism of the era, because the breadth of the identities included in the acronym mirrors the range of identities of those who produced and consumed the series and participated in the movement. I also use "queer" as an umbrella term for LGBTQ people of all genders and sexualities and to reference scholarship in the tradition of queer theory. I use "gay" when referring to specific moments or movements of the era generally limited to gay men.
2. There are four types of access channels: noncommercial public, educational, and government (PEG) access channels, and leased access channels. Airtime on PEG channels has historically been offered to the public on a first-come, first-serve basis, whereas producers have to purchase airtime for leased access and in exchange can run advertisements during their shows.
3. Further quotes from this interview.

## References

- Adeyemi, K. (2022). *Feels right: Black queer women and the politics of partying in Chicago*. Duke University Press.
- Ali, C. (2017). *Media localism: The policies of place* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Alwood, E. (1996). *Straight news*. Columbia University Press.
- Bailey, M. M. (2013). *Butch queens up in pumps: Gender, performance, and ballroom culture in Detroit*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.799908>
- Barron, J. (1994, April 10). "Cable TV: The Big Picture. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/10/nyregion/cable-tv-the-big-picture.html>
- Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 546–566. <https://doi-org.libproxy.kenyon.edu/10.1086/448884>
- Bie, S. (2019, August). Interview with the author [Phone].
- Bodroghkozy, A. (2013). *Equal time: Television and the civil rights movement* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Capsuto, S. (2000). *Alternate channels: The uncensored story of gay and lesbian images on radio and television*. Ballantine Books.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An archive of feelings: Trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- DeLeon, J. (2020). Nelson Sullivan's Video Memories: YouTube Nostalgia and the Queer Archive Effect. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 86, 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8603>
- Downs, J. (2016). *Stand by me: The forgotten history of gay liberation*. Basic Books.
- Dyer, R. (1990). *Now you see it: Studies in lesbian and gay film*. Routledge.
- Edwards, S., & Peduto, S. (1979). Emerald City" is leaving air. *Gaysweek* 3(101), 14. Archives of Sexuality and Gender.
- Gibson, J. (2019). DIVINE (John Water's) on Emerald City TV 1978. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3b1u9ETkhl>
- Gieseking, J. J. (2020). *A queer New York: Geographies of lesbians, dykes, and queers*. New York University Press.

- Griffin, F. H. (2017). *Feeling normal: Sexuality and media criticism in the digital age*. Indiana University Press.
- Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. Columbia University Press.
- Gruber, J. (2018). Emerald City TV 1977 #52 John Waters. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrQecT7NH4>
- Hallas, R. (2009). *Reframing bodies: AIDS, bearing witness, and the queer moving image*. Duke University Press.
- Halperin, D. M., & Traub, V. (Eds.). (2019). *Gay Shame*. University of Chicago Press.
- Harrington, S. (1973, May 27) What's all this on TV?: Naked man in bath, traffic-light protest, school-board hassle, real-estate advice. *The New York Times Magazine*, 35.
- Heitner, D. (2013). *Black power TV*. Duke University Press Books.
- Herold, L. (2021). *Cable Comes Out: LGBTQ Community Television on New York Public Access Stations* [Ph.D., Northwestern University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2572568980/abstract/74BB6D0AB5AB4431PQ/1>
- Herschberg, C. (1978, December). Gay television: The picture brightens. *Out! New Zealand's Alternative Lifestyle Magazine. Archives of Sexuality and Gender*, 22, 14–15.
- Howell, C. E. (2017). Symbolic capital and the production discourse of the American music show: a microhistory of Atlanta cable access. *Cinema Journal*, 57(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0053>
- Johnson, D. K. (2019). *Buying gay: How physique entrepreneurs sparked a movement*. Columbia University Press.
- Juhasz, A. (1995). *AIDS TV: Identity, community, and alternative video*. Duke University Press.
- Juhasz, A. (2006). Video remains: Nostalgia, technology, and queer archive activism. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12(2), 319–328. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-2-319>
- Linder, L. (1999). *Public access television: America's electronic soap-box*. Praeger.
- McBride, D. A. (2005). *Why I hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on race and sexuality*. New York University.
- Montgomery, K. C. (1991). *Target: Prime time*. Oxford University Press.
- Mullen, R. (1978, February 27). Emerald City. *Where It's At*, VII(8), 56.
- Namaste, V. (2006). Genderbashing: Sexuality, gender, and the regulation of public space. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Parmett, H. M. (2025). Placemaking & community access media in Vermont: Histories, archives, & activism. In L. Herold & A. L. Sullivan (Eds.), *Local Television: Histories, Communities, Aesthetics*. University of Georgia Press.
- Parsons, P. R. (2008). *Blue skies: A history of cable television*. Temple University Press.
- SJ (2021). Emerald City TV 1978 #55 Boys in the Band. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkECovp2Zl4&lc=Ugz0ZQIPnsNNGehk59J4AaABAg>
- sjb10014 (Co-Producer). (2018a, January 25). *Emerald City TV 1977 #6* [Video recording]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBAUpC3X200>
- sjb10014 (Co-Producer). (2018b, February 1). *Emerald City TV 1978 #51 Word Is Out/Vito Russo/Jan Wallman* [Video recording]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sdl0fvJNsiM>
- Stein, M. (2012). *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203122211>
- Streitmatter, R. (1995). *Unspeakable: The rise of the gay and lesbian press in America*. Faber & Faber.
- Verhovek, S. H. (1988, November 9). For many New York areas, wait for cable TV ends. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/09/nyregion/for-many-new-york-areas-wait-for-cable-tv-ends.html>
- Wald, G. (2015). *It's been beautiful: Soul! and black power television*. Duke University Press.
- Waugh, T. (1996). *Hard to imagine: Gay male eroticism in photography and film from their beginnings to stonewall*. Columbia University Press.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press.

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of International Communication Association.  
All rights reserved. For permissions, please email: [journals.permissions@oup.com](mailto:journals.permissions@oup.com)  
Communication, Culture and Critique, 2024, 00, 1–7  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae038>  
Original Article