

Sean Fader

SELECTED WRITINGS

Essays & Journal Contributions

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CRITICS PAGE | FEBRUARY 2024

Insufficient Memory

By Sean Fader

In 2019–2020, I worked on a project titled “Insufficient Memory.” It began when I stumbled upon the first commercially successful digital camera in my new office at Tulane University, while I was engaged in a project researching the history of queer hate crimes. The time when this Sony Mavica Digital camera became popular was also a turning point for queer rights in the United States. In October 1998, Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered, and in January 2000, Bill Clinton announced in his State of the Union address that he wanted Congress to update the national hate crimes bill to include LGBT people. From 1999 to 2000, politicians debated whether queer people should be a protected class (Obama signed the bill in 2009 after ten years of debate). Coincidentally, the Sony Mavica Digital had just come to market. I remember these years; I was twenty and twenty-one.

When I came across a spreadsheet of murdered queer people during my research in 2019, my heart sank. I zoomed in on the years 1999–2000, certain that I would remember some of these names, and discovered that I didn’t recognize a single one. I quickly googled the first name, confident that the internet would jog my memory, but there was nothing to be found. I searched the second, the third, the fourth name... Nothing, nothing, nothing. I went down the list to find that very few of these people had any presence on the internet. I asked myself: where are these stories?

I reached out to the research librarians at Tulane, and worked with them for months, attempting to reconstruct any part of these stories from the tiny shreds of mentions in the massive repository of digital catalogs and collections I had access to through our library. The librarians reached out to their friends on other campuses to see if they could access any local archives that we couldn’t.

After eighteen months of research, I decided that in order to organize my thoughts, I had to put all the significant sites of hate crimes against queer people on a map; the location they were murdered, the bar where they were targeted, the last place they were seen, their home, their grave. Once finished, I looked at the map and knew exactly what I needed to do. Two months later, in the summer of 2020, I was driving out of New Orleans with the 1999 digital camera I had found. I drove 25,000 miles to thirty-eight states to photograph all these sites with the popular camera of the time: the Sony Mavica Digital.

As I type these words, my heart aches. The first location I arrived was outside of Dallas, Texas. It was in a development of condos with winding lanes and parking lots. I was looking for the location where a mother killed her three-day-old child because they were born intersex; she fed her baby glass and strangled them. When I arrived at the location, I started weeping and felt a lightning bolt of fear in my stomach. What if somebody discovered what I was doing here and attacked me? This combination of sadness and angst would accompany me for the entirety of my trip. At each location, over and over again, there it was, a kind of queer heartbr(ache) like I had never felt in my life. After spending so much time searching for evidence of these queer lives lost, I could suddenly see them right in front of me.



Sean Fader, Unnamed Intersex Infant, Dallas, Texas, Murdered, December 8, 1999. Courtesy the artist.

I started bringing flowers to every site I went to. It felt important to mark these locations. Documenting the sites with my camera, I often found myself running out of disk space, at which point the camera would say “insufficient memory.” I realized that, as a community, we had insufficient memory about our histories. I wanted to remember.

When I got home, I created an interactive Google Earth tour that allowed anyone on the internet to travel across the country and see the images I took of these locations, as well as read about the person being memorialized. To mark these locations more tangibly, I teamed up with Maureen Towey and the Mass Design Group's Public Memory and Memorials Lab to design Queer American Memorials: five-hundred augmented reality triggering site markers for every location in the country where queer people lost their lives in deadly hate crimes while Congress debated (1999–2009). When this part of the project started, it seemed like a huge pipe dream, but after having received an immense amount of support, we are close to being finished. Every time I discuss this project in a lecture, grant proposal, dinner conversation, or this piece I'm writing for Ksenia's critic's page, I have to revisit the heartbreak I felt at every single location where a queer person had been murdered. But I hope to turn this heartbreak into a sacred memory.

Sean Fader is an Assistant Professor at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in the Department of Photography and Imaging. Fader received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Fader's work *Insufficient Memory* was purchased by the Buffalo AKG Art Museum and is currently touring in *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art*.

Originally published at brooklynrail.org/2024/02/criticspage/Insufficient-Memory.

VOICES

Remembering queer lives lost to hate

Insufficient Memory sheds light on forgotten stories of LGBTQ+ individuals murdered.

By Sean Fader · November 20, 2024

Contrary to Donald J. Trump and MAGA lore, there is no evidence letting transgender people use public facilities that align with their gender identity increases safety risks. There are no recorded incidents of a drag queen story hour resulting in child molestation; the church, on the other hand, has a different record.

How did we get here?

Queer people and particularly transwomen of color are four times more likely to be victims of violent crime than cis people. Queer people have existed since the dawn of civilization in some form or another. Yet our histories have been erased or hidden in service to the colonialist, patriarchal view that celebrates capitalism, conquest, and empire. As a queer artist with a research-based practice, my recent project, *Insufficient Memory*, taught me something about this.

Insufficient Memory is a work of art that focuses on queer histories from the crucial years between 1999 and 2000. This slice of time was a period of great upheaval for queer people in the United States: Matthew Shepard had just been brutally murdered in Wyoming. President Bill Clinton's 1999 State of the Union address called for updating the Hate Crimes Act to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. From 1999 to 2000, the 106th Congress debated while queer people continued to die.

At the same time, the Sony Digital Mavica Camera's release brought forth a new era in digital image making. This groundbreaking technology, capturing images at a mere 1/3-of-a-megapixel onto 3.5-inch floppy disks, symbolized progress in the digital realm. In 2018, I discovered a Mavica camera in storage the same day I was reading excerpts of congressional debates, which included names of queer people murdered during the period when the Mavica was introduced. I had never heard these names before and found nothing in a cursory internet search.



The Sony Digital Mavica, released in the late 1990s. Courtesy Sean Fader.

I spent the following 18 months researching digital archives, excavating hate crimes stories from 1999–2000. I chose to examine only digital spaces because these events represent a critical juncture in our access to information, and seeing what little I could find on most of these people’s lives speaks volumes. This period not only marked advancements like digital camera advancements and the early Internet but also underscored the challenge of preserving queer histories, which often face erasure due to lack of funding and technical support. Today, the reality is that many queer stories still remain obscured because printed historical periodicals and archives still go undigitized, rendering them inaccessible.

In the summer of 2019, I drove 25,000 miles to 38 states to photograph significant locations tied to each hate crime murder I found from 20 years prior. Using the antiquated Mavica, I captured images characterized by a deliberate lack of resolution and digital clarity, contrasting sharply with today’s digital photographic capabilities. While Shepard’s murder garnered widespread attention, I sought to illuminate stories of those overshadowed by his legacy: They include victims of heinous crimes occurring amidst congressional debates over LGBTQ+ inclusion in hate crimes legislation.



Tyra Henderson
Washington, DC, Murdered, April 23, 2000

Tyra Henderson, a 22-year-old trans woman, was found beaten to death in an alleyway in Washington, DC. I wasn't able to find any information about Tyra's homicide case or her life.

A complaint was filed against the police because it took authorities five hours to respond to a 911 call reporting sounds of a person moaning in the alleyway where Tyra's body was found. The complainant sought help from the ACLU. As of today, the complaint is still listed as being "under review" by police. Tyra's murderer was never found.

I made this photograph in the alleyway where Tyra's body was found.

From Insufficient Memory. Courtesy Sean Fader.

It's hard for me to speak (or write) about this work without tearing up. Bearing witness to these stories and spaces digs into your body. I will never forget arriving at the first location: It was a small development of apartments outside of Dallas. The second I got out of my car, my stomach turned. It was an emotion I had never felt before, a combination of deep fear for my safety and incredible loss.



Alina Marie Barragan
San Jose, California, Murdered, January 18, 2000

Alina Marie Barragan, a 19-year-old trans woman living in San Jose, was loved and accepted by her family and the other families that lived in her neighborhood. She worked at the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center. On January 18, she met Kozi Santino Scott after work at a bus stop or bar (I have heard both). Kozi invited Alina back to his place for a drink. They drank and talked and screwed around a bit. Kozi wanted to have sex, and Alina did not. They got into an argument about Alina's gender. Kozi refused to acknowledge Alina as a woman and attacked her, eventually strangling her and killing her.

Kozi called a friend, saying, "I got a dead body in the living room. This shit got me mad, man, and I taught him a lesson." Kozi asked a friend for help disposing of the body but was refused. Kozi wrapped Alina's body in some sheets and a blanket and hid her in the trunk of his 1981 Cadillac. Kozi's friend called the police, who used a crowbar to open the trunk of Kozi's car. There, they found Alina's body, and Kozi confessed to the murder. During his confession, he referred to Alina neither as "him" nor "her," but "it."

The prosecution attempted to try the case as a first-degree murder and hate crime. Kozi was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 15 years in prison. The jury felt that they could not prove Kozi murdered Alina because of her gender. Even though Alina had legally changed her name, almost all the press at the time referred to her by her birth name and repeatedly misgendered her.

I made this photograph from the street across from Kozi's house where police found Alina's body in his trunk.

From Insufficient Memory. Courtesy Sean Fader.

My brain was telling me to run, that this space wasn't safe for me, that someone would know why I was taking a photograph and murder me, too. I also could see the hate crime victim lying dead in front of me, and they felt like an old friend. Every photograph I made on that trip was made when I could see the victim before me. These layers of the past scarred the present using technology from a bygone period.

Finding all but one location unmarked, I began bringing flowers and ultimately realized how important it is to create community-healing spaces. For the two years I worked on *Insufficient Memory*, I asked: How is a community shaped by visibility, by sharing stories and self? How is memory performed for ourselves and for larger histories?



Sissy Bolden
Savannah, Georgia, Murdered, November 20, 2000

Sissy Bolden's body was found dumped in the woods at the end of Pate Street in west Savannah in the Ogeecheetown neighborhood. Sissy was identified by police as a "man wearing women's clothing who had a past criminal history, which included charges of solicitation of sodomy." I wasn't able to find much about her life and the events that lead up to her murder.

Edward Charles Wilkins Jr. was found guilty in 2007 for the murder of three individuals, including Sissy. The newspaper identified the victims as two women and a man dressed as a woman.

I made this image in the woods at the end of Pate Street where Sissy's body was found. It was a rainy day and the street was quiet. I remember waving to a woman sitting on her porch nearby.

From Insufficient Memory. Courtesy Sean Fader.

With all the information I could find, *Insufficient Memory* emerged as a Google Earth interactive tour cataloging locations, photographs, and victims' stories. Now featured in The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition, the Brooklyn Museum's 200th-anniversary show, the tour is publicly available online and allows anyone to virtually travel across the country, view the photographs from each site and learn the stories of each of these murdered queer people.

From Billy Jack Gaither to Lauryn Paige to JR Warren, say their names.



Unnamed Intersex Infant
Dallas, Texas, Murdered, December 8, 1999

An unnamed intersex three-day-old infant was murdered. The body showed signs of blunt-force trauma to the head, as well as strangulation. The infant's parents reported the murder. Gangadaya Kavali, the infant's father, claimed that when he was at the store his wife, Aruna, left their infant on the couch while she stepped into the bathroom. She claimed that while she was in the bathroom a stranger entered their apartment, stole the infant, and threw the infant outside.

A Collin County Medical Examiner found shards of glass in the baby's esophagus and small intestine, indicating that someone initially tried to kill the child by forcing them to eat glass, in an effort to cause internal bleeding. Aruna was eventually found guilty of murdering her three-day-old child.

The murder was not tried as a hate crime. The media repeatedly identified the child as male and referred to the child's genitalia as being deformed. When I arrived at the apartment complex that the Kavali family lived in when the murder took place, it was raining. Suddenly, the rain broke and a rainbow appeared in the sky over their building. I made this picture in front of the home where the infant was murdered.

From Insufficient Memory. Courtesy Sean Fader.

Insufficient Memory reflects upon the limited capacities of the digital archive, an attempt to rectify and remember gaps in queer history. Digitized histories continue to be dominated by narratives that uphold the historical power of the few, leaving out entire communities, histories, and experiences. Doing so hinders our collective ability to remember, learn, and heal.

This is why it is vital to memorialize queer lives lost to hate.

Sean Fader is an assistant professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the Department of Photography and Imaging and a Public Voices Fellow. His team invites researchers, activists, community members, philanthropists, and anyone who lost a loved one to reach out to work on placing site markers in their communities. QueerMemorials@gmail.com

Originally published at advocate.com/voices/remembering-queer-lives-lost-to-hate.



International Journal of Human Rights Education
Volume 9, 2025
<https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>

Pedagogy, Community, and Praxis Commentary

Insufficient Memory

Sean Fader

Back Cover Art, “Adam Colton,” from *Insufficient Memory*

By Sean Fader

Artist Statement

Insufficient Memory examines a window of time from 1999 to 2000, when the Hate Crimes Prevention Act was first being debated in Congress (and not passed). In 2018 I discovered an old Sony Digital Mavica which was the first commercially successful digital camera sold in 1999 to 2000. This camera was considered groundbreaking technology because it shot $\frac{1}{3}$ -of-a-megapixel images to a 3.5-inch floppy. I began thinking about what was overlooked, invisible, or erased in the same moment as that digital camera began to revolutionize imaging and visibility. Reconstructing this history from local newspapers and activists’ research, I traveled to 38 states where hate crimes had occurred. Since local news outlets were mostly uninterested in these stories and queer news outlets were not digitized, many of these stories have disappeared; the sites were often unmarked and anonymous, the crimes forgotten. I drove 15,000 miles over several months, taking a photograph at the site of each hate-crime murder from the years 1999 and 2000. I photographed the sites with the old digital Mavica camera I’d found, creating large-scale, grainy images characterized by a literal lack of resolution and digital information (compared to the possibilities of digital photography today). While the murder of Matthew Shepard (white, middle-class, big future) brought attention to the need for legislation that addressed hate crimes against gays, I wanted to focus on the stories of those who were lost in his shadow. The queer histories represented in this work are of an extremely diverse group of people, but often they are non-white people of lesser means. They were victims of horrible crimes that occurred while Congress debated whether queer people should even be included in hate crimes legislation. The social progress we feel today would not have been possible without queer loss and struggle—even if those stories were not well known to history until now.

Adam Colton

Novato, California, Beaten, February 12, 1999

When Adam Colton was 17, he transferred to San Marin High School. An intelligent, highly articulate, and out teenager, he told the principal that he wanted to help form the Gay–Straight Alliance at school. “I’ve decided that I’d really like to be an activist and do something to help make changes at San Marin,” he said. Adam was verbally open about his sexuality, wore gay-positive T-shirts and, on occasion, eyeshadow. In September, a week after talking with his principal, he found gay slurs smeared in ketchup on his car in the school parking lot, and later that night he was jumped by three unidentified young men outside a downtown supermarket in Novato. Two weeks later, someone wrote anti-gay slurs in lighter fluid on his family’s driveway and tried to ignite them.

On February 12, Adam was attacked and wandered semiconscious into a classroom, where he passed out. He later awoke in the hospital with no memory of the attack or where it took place. His attackers used a pen to scratch the word “fag” into his arm and stomach. City officials in Novato called the attack a hate crime.

I made this photograph on the idyllic high school campus where Adam was assaulted.

About *Insufficient Memory*

Insufficient Memory focuses on the years 1999/2000, just after Matthew Shepard’s brutal murder and President Clinton’s State of the Union address calling for legislation to respond to hate crimes committed against queer people (a bill would not be signed until 2009).

These years also promised progress in digital spaces with the advent of the Sony Digital Mavica, the first commercially successful camera that entered the market. After finding a Mavica camera in 2018, I drove 25,000 miles to 38 states where queer people were murdered in these same years, 1999 and 2000.

Using the digital technology of the time, the Mavica camera, I photographed and memorialized these sites. Since local queer newspapers were not digitized and local news outlets uninterested in these victims, many of their stories were difficult to research. There were often no narratives, only scraps of information in various newspapers or police blotters.

Upon returning home, I created this Google Earth Interactive Tour that can easily be accessed with the tiny URL <http://bit.ly/insufficientmemory>. This is meant to allow anyone on the internet to travel across the country virtually, view the photographs I made from each site, and learn the stories of each of these murdered queer people.





Adam Colton

Novato, California, Beaten, February 12, 1999

From *Insufficient Memory* by Sean Fader