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Historians Will Say They Were Close Friends: Tensions and Futures in the Archiving of Queer History

Evalyn Stow

Introduction

To many queer people, our invisibility in the historical record is such a basic fact of life that it has become an ironic joke. "Historians will say they were close friends" is the tongue in cheek response to old pictures that to the queer viewer imply an intimacy beyond friendship. But this gap is not based in truth. Heteronormativity, along with outright homophobia and transphobia have and continue to contribute to the erasure of queer lives within archives and other institutions which house historical records. The reasons for this erasure can be both structural and intentional. However, there are also queer archivists who have resisted these biases and in doing so developed new practices for archival classification and methodology, often by creating community-based archives.

The objective of this critical essay is to explore the power dynamics present in archival practices. The role of an archivist is by nature that of a gatekeeper of history: someone who makes decisions about what is included or excluded from historical record. I want to explore this power dynamic and figure out how I can use feminist theory to push back on historical erasure and institutional violence.

Archives have historically contributed to heteronormativity, patriarchy, and white supremacy through discriminatory practices and procedures, but archivists continue to push back on this his-

tory and reimagine archival work as a site for reparative social justice. Community archives, such as The Lesbian Herstory Archive and The Digital Transgender Archive, actively push for those necessary changes. Projects such as these are often run by volunteers instead of paid staff and work to preserve the history of a community, rather than larger institutional records for a university, government, or business. While the relationship between institutional archives and community-based archives can be tenuous, it can also be a place of collaboration and inspiration. Institutional archives can learn from the innovative methods which community archivists develop in order to make their archives better represent their communities.

This essay takes several feminist contributions as frameworks for considering the nuances of archival power. Adrienne Rich's observations in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* influenced my own analysis of this issue.[1] David Halperin's critiques of the commodification and deradicalization of queer theory are also considered in the context of institutional archives attempting to diversify their collections.[2] Further, I address interventions made by Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa's uses of personal experience and emotion in the academic writing sphere in order to inform the selection of archival materials which represent marginalized communities.[3]

I will start by giving a short introduction to traditional archival procedures and the feminist critiques of them. Then I will introduce the challenges that the queer community specifically has faced in having our histories documented in archives, followed by an analysis of how queer community archives arose in response to this challenge. I will focus on the Lesbian Herstory Archives as a case study. My reason for choosing this archive specifically is that it has been thriving for several decades and has amassed a body of literature studying it. I will finish this essay with the current tensions and collaborations between queer community archives and institutional archives as archiving queer history becomes more accepted, and as more community archives become folded into larger institutions as a result of funding needs.

Traditional Archival Practices & Critiques

To make order of large amounts of information, librarians and archivists create structures to classify and retrieve information. These structures typically rely on an Aristotelian logic system of

hierarchical classification which places a subject under a series of headings and subheadings. This assumes that the subject can hold a distinct place within the structure and that it shares commonalities with other subjects under the same headings (Olson 2007). Feminist critiques of this logic system rely on its assumption of a white, male (and presumably heterosexual, cisgender) norm, which means that information related to anyone else needs a series of qualifiers (Olson 2007, 219-521).

One proposed solution to this problem is to replace these organization systems with a structure the resembles a web instead of a pyramid. This configuration focuses on the connections between subjects without prioritizing one over another (Olson 2007, 522-524). When archival organization was conducted primarily on pen and paper, this type of organization might have proved difficult. But now that archival organization systems have moved to online databases filed with metadata, this process is easier to accomplish. The University of Texas at Austin's Black Queer Studies Collection is a good example of this; to make information about Black queer people more accessible, their records were digitally tagged using this identifier. All a user has to do is search "Black Queer Studies Collection" and they will find information housed in a variety of repositories on campus, which spans multiple archival collections.[4]

The idea of an archive as a neutral and unbiased keeper of history has been thoroughly rebuked.[5] Archives have been a part of establishing norms and shaping the parts of history which are viewed as important. Archives which are funded by large organizations like universities, companies, or governments have a mandate to collect information relevant to their larger organization, and this often means only collecting parts that the organization wants remembered. By their very nature, institutional archives favor the histories of those with money, power and privilege, which typically translates to white, male, and heterosexual (Zinn 1977, 20). Rodney Carter identifies the gap that this lack of archival materials can leave, stating: "For the marginalized, losses abound, their collective memory is deficient, their great deeds and the stories of their persecution as they tell it, will not survive" (2006, 220).

The physical space of an archive, and the actions needed to access it, also come into play when considering whether they are welcoming to the queer community and other marginalized groups. Large archives are often located within universities or government buildings, which can discourage usage by those who already have distrust or discomfort in these spaces due to past ex-

periences of harassment or exclusion. It is not unusual for users to be required to request materials in advance or to provide reasons for needing them. This process privileges a certain kind of inquiry which is potentially less personal and more academic. Reading rooms where users view archival materials are constructed to protect the materials, not to provide comfort (Cvetkovich 2003, 247). Often users are restricted in the ways they can handle materials and the items they can bring with them into the reading room. Many archives also have an archivist who monitors the space to ensure the safety of documents. This has the effect of creating a space which can be unwelcoming to people who have been the targets of marginalization, especially if the materials they are looking for also document that experience (Anderson 2005).[6]

This discomfort is something I observed personally as an undergraduate working in the Purdue University Archives. One of my tasks was to fill in at the front desk, checking in patrons and informing them of archival procedures. I also had to take an ID, which we held at the front desk until the person left. One morning, another undergraduate came in to use the collections for the first time. But when I asked for their ID, they balked and asked if it was okay if their name and appearance didn't match because they were transgender. I assured them that it was just fine, and I'd be working at the desk until they left. Seeing that I was a friendly and fellow queer, we started chatting and I learned that they'd come to the archives to do research on behalf of a queer friend who needed the information for a class, but was too intimidated by the process.[7] To my knowledge, the materials that this patron needed were not related to queerness at all, but the interaction stands as an example of how the institution of an archive can create discomfort and exclusion.

Queer Exclusion (and Inclusion) in Archives

Historically, archival institutions have been complicit in silencing the history of the LGBT+ community by omitting, destroying, or questioning the validity of records of queer individuals. This erasure can also come from fear and ignorance outside of the archival space. In her book *A Desired Past*, historian Leila Rupp describes the chaos and discomfort of acquiring materials bequeathed by a donor to the Lesbian Herstory Archives under the disproving eyes of the donor's family, who did not know until the reading of her will that the donor was a lesbian. Rupp describes

the scramble for nearby archival volunteers who could sort through the donor's things. They were afraid that getting archival volunteers from New York City to Athens, Ohio, would take so long that the family would have destroyed or hidden important historical materials rather than have their family name associated with someone who was queer (Rupp 1999).[8]

Unlike other cultural groups who might pass down history, tradition, and knowledge during childhood through family, religion, or other organizations, the queer community does not have such a formal structure to share knowledge (Rich 1980, 649). The onus is on individuals to seek out their own history, which can lead to gaps in knowledge that cause people to feel isolated and disconnected. This also leads to generational gaps in which information is lost or unappreciated. This isolation and disconnection work to keep queer people unaware of each other and their history. It also prevents participation in the spaces carved out for authentic self-expression, which have always existed against the tide of hetero and cis-normativity (Caswell 2017). As Adrienne Rich (1980) states:

> The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain. (649)

This archival silence is intensified based on the way queerness intersects with race, class, and citizenship (see Crenshaw 1989, 1991). White queer people are more likely to have their history represented in an archival space due their proximity to wealth and resources (Ware 2017, 171).

Over the past several decades, more institutional archives have started cataloging the histories of marginalized communities on the basis of race, culture, and sexuality. This has led to the absorption of community archives into larger archival institutions. Writer David Halperin (2003) has critiqued the commodification of queer theory, specifically how the desire for education on the topic often results in an approach that generalizes experiences instead of focusing on the lived realities of queer people (343). This same critique can be leveled against queer archives, in that by trying to represent the history of the entire queer community, specific experiences are sidelined. For example, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto, has faced critique for centering the experi-

ences of white, cis-gender queer people, at the expense of Black transgender people specifically. Activist Syrus Ware points out that historically for Black trans people, collecting memorabilia for archival purposes was not even a thought, because they were just barely surviving. Even a queer archive which actively encourages donations from everyday queer people might not represent those who are being hit the hardest by discrimination, because seeing themselves in the future might not be a possibility (Ware 2017, 174-175).

Through their writings, queer feminists of color have expanded the notion of what constitutes theory beyond the typical academic writing style. Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa's writings in particular pushed beyond the typical format to include poetry, memoir, and texts which are emotionally and intellectually resonant.[9] In order to theorize about their lives and identities, these women had to create new ways of writing because the typical model did not capture the entirety of their experiences. The same is true of archiving the materials related to their lives, and of marginalized communities at large.

Representing queerness in an archival context requires rethinking the nature of what is archivally relevant. Writer Ann Cvetkovich expands the notion of what constitutes archival materials by describing the ways that trauma is woven into the histories of marginalized groups, and archival and historical materials must reflect this. As Cvetkovich (2003) asserts:

> Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression… It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. Trauma's archive incorporates personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals. (7)

It is not typically within the scope of an institutional archive to collect these types of materials from people who are not powerful or famous. But to tell the full story of any marginalized group, this is not possible. An archive must also include materials collected from people living the intersection of their identities, not only those who have amassed the wealth or prestige to escape it. Additionally, where an archive often keep track of history by saving newspapers or other official publications, these documents will not capture the experiences of queer folks, up until recently.

Community Archives Fill the Gap

In response to lack of representation in traditional archives, queer people began to save information about their own histories, in recognition that if they did not write themselves into history, no one would. During the 1970s, community archives began to spring up, often in someone's home as the work of a few collectors, which then grew into more established archives. Small archival projects like this continue to spring up to this day, and the internet has made space for a host of new ones. These archives have the benefit of being run by people who are a part of the community they represent and are uninfluenced by the larger influences at play in institutional archives.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives has been an integral part of the lesbian community since its inception in the 1970s, and its impact has been felt and examined by many.[10] I've chosen to focus on the LHA as a case study because of this availability of information.

Leading by Example: Archival Practices in the Lesbian Herstory Archives

The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), located in New York City, was founded in the 1970s as an independent non-profit, and it has remained that way ever since. They actively solicit materials from lesbians, requesting that they collect memorabilia from their lives to donate to the archive (Cvetkovich 2003, 234). Instead of acting as unbiased recorders of history, the archive was created with the intention of being involved in the political struggles of queer people, as erasure from history is a political struggle. Through a crowdfunding effort in the 1990s, the archive was able to buy a house in Park Slope, Brooklyn, which has housed the archive ever since. They explicitly refuse governmental funding or affiliation with a university and remain a collectively run, entirely volunteer-based organization (About the Lesbian Herstories Archives 2021).

The staff of the LHA are all volunteers with varying levels of available time and archival experience. Volunteers can stay for the long term, or just participate in a single day of work, as advertised by the calendar on the LHA website. Instead of requiring an advanced degree along with previous work experience—as is often the case for archival positions—anyone with an interest in lesbian history can work at the LHA. These volunteers are mentored by

more experienced volunteers, thus passing down the knowledge of the archive. The LHA website makes their stance on archival practices clear by stating, "Archival skills are taught one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives".[11]

Many of these volunteers are young queer people interested in the history of those who came before them, and often they are mentored by older women who lived through the decades they are learning about (McKinney 2020, 165). This interaction creates intergenerational relationships that the queer community often lacks because queer people are not usually held together by traditional intergenerational family ties. Beyond just the knowledge passed down in the archival materials themselves, the LHA creates and fosters a knowledge community which might not exist otherwise.

In their recent book *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, author Cait McKinney describes their observations from several months spent conducting research in the LHA and observing the ongoing digitization work. The archives are currently in the process of digitizing their large collection of spoken-word tapes, photography collection, as well as upgrading their online catalog system. Because they are staffed entirely by volunteers, this work is done in time which is cobbled together with various schedules and levels of expertise (McKinney 2020, 155). Their efforts to digitize their collections are aimed, as most digitization efforts are, to increase access to the collections regardless of geographic location. However, the digitization efforts at the LHA step beyond this and attempt to convey the feeling of the object, which can be lost when viewing it in a digital format. When uploading oral histories recorded on cassette tapes, volunteers also include images of the physical tape in order to convey the writing and level of use the tape has, instead of simply entering the label information as metadata (McKinney 2020, 157).[12]

The forward-thinking, community-focused vision of the LHA is also clear in their organizational procedures beyond digitization. McKinney describes how the volunteers create detailed plans for organizational projects in advance and focus on creating procedures that are very easy to understand, even without archival training. This is because the nature of the archives means that volunteers often have limited experience, and while some may stay on for long periods of time, many are only able to help out in a limited capacity. Such fluctuations mean their methods have to be designed with this, along with limited funding, in mind. All of these

constraints means that the archives have to adopt policies that will allow them to reach their goals with far less resources than larger archival institutions.

McKinney describes how this often results in a "good enough" approach to archival procedures. Instead of relying on expensive digitization equipment, the LHA utilizes what the volunteers can find that is open-source or inexpensive. This does not always result in digitized files that are as high-quality as might be produced in other archives, but for the LHA's purposes, which is getting information back to the queer community, they are good enough. Moreover, volunteers take pride in the fact that they have figured out or created systems by themselves. The fact of their independence drives the motivation and tenacity that keeps the volunteers motivated and engaged.

Conclusions: Current Tensions Between Community & Institutional Archives

The issues surrounding the archiving of queer history are complex and will continue to be developed and debated. These critiques are a necessary part of improving and rethinking how we share and consider our history. Doing so will prevent reproduction of the harm which has been done through discriminatory archival practices (Hughes-Watkins 2018, 4). Many strategies have been created to combat these inequalities, the differences in which can be seen in the challenges that face both community and institutional archives.

Feminist and queer theorists have pointed to the urgency of documenting queer history and their work also provides critiques and structure for doing so. Halperin's observations of how the proliferation of queer theory has led to its deradicalization can also be read as a critique of institutional archives collecting materials related to the queer community. While attempts to diversify their collections are key for queer inclusion, they can lack emphasis on necessary context or community partnerships. Interventions by Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa demonstrate the importance of personal experience and emotion when theorizing about identity and marginalization, and this holds true for the creation of archival collections as well.

Both community and institutional archives have their strengths and weaknesses. While community archives are limited by funding, they have the advantage of being more free to conduct

archiving as suits their purposes, without oversight. They can also allow for a community-centric approach by opening their doors and giving people the opportunity to interact with archival materials in a low-stakes environment, instead of the formality of an institutional archive. However, institutional archives are backed by funding and the ability to hire full-time staff and archivists. This means they have the peoplepower to get materials cataloged and digitized faster, as well as the ability to spend time and resources seeking out new materials such as oral histories. However, institutional archives are subject to the whims of the institutions that provide for them, and while that is becoming more favorable to queer history, this has not always been the case and it is still new territory (Cvetkovich 2003, 245-250).

Groundbreaking research on queer archives was published by *SAGE Research Methods* recently, by Cannon and Webster (2024) and Fife and Webster (2024). I look forward to engaging with these publications in the near future.

Notes

1. Rich, *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence*.
2. Halperin, *The normalization of queer theory*.
3. Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*.
   Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*.
4. *About the Black Queer Studies Collection.* University of Texas Libraries. Accessed December 6, 2021. https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/bqsc/about
5. Carter, *Of Things Said and Unsaid*.
   Drake, *Diversity's Discontents*.
   Stoler, *Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance*.
6. Anderson (2005) provides an analysis of how institutional archival spaces were created as a colonial projection of "public" space and what this means for Indigenous communities. It is outside the scope of this essay but could be an avenue of further study. See also Lugones, *Toward a decolonial feminism*.
7. I also spoke to our receptionist after this interaction, as well as the other undergraduates who worked at the front desk, to make sure everyone else would know how to react should they encounter a similar situation. In that moment, I may not have been able to change how another trans person might feel about com-

ing to the archive, but I could make sure that when they did, the process would run smoothly for them.

8. Rupp also notes, humorously, the family's shock and horror at seeing a Frank Sinatra record accidentally placed into a pile of relevant queer materials while archival volunteers sifted through the deceased's items.
9. Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*.
   Ilmonen, Identity politics revisited.
   Lorde, T*he Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*.
10. Cvetkovich, *An archive of feelings*.
    Rich, *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence*.
11. Cvetkovich, *An archive of feelings*.
    Eichhorn, *The archival turn in feminism*.
    About the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Accessed October 21, 2021. https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/about/#principles
12. In my personal experience working on digitization projects, this is unusual. Usually, the text on the tape would be typed up and a note would be added that the recording was originally done on a cassette tape. Adding a picture of the tape adds another step to the process but creates an intimacy that would not exist otherwise.

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