

Erica Titkemeyer
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Assembling the Fragments and Accessing the Silenced

An Examination of Queer Memory Institutions with a Focus on Moving Image and Audio Materials

A Brief History of Queer Institutions

Tracing the Scraps of A Stifled Existence

Persecuted communities have consistently shared the experience of losing cultural memory through the eradication of various records and materials that proved their existence, disqualifying their access to the basic human right of both protecting and discovering one's heritage. Some communities have even been prohibited from producing materials that could later act as the basis for a collective historical narrative (seen in the case of Japanese American internment camps where cameras were banned, thus hindering the possibility of recording an ethnic struggle).

Starting in 1919, the only two institutions in the world that contained evidence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ) related materials were the Institute for Sexual Science (Berlin), and the library of the Dutch Scientific Humanitarian Committee (The Hague), both destroyed by the Nazis.¹ Through time, archives and libraries undoubtedly obtained or held within their records evidence of queer individuals, only their visibility was most likely undiscovered, hidden, or destroyed by staff. If not

¹ Aimee Brown, "How Queer "Pack Rats" and Activist Archivists Saved Our History: An Overview of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Archives", *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 122.

concealed by archivists or librarians, family members and queer individuals themselves played a part in the obstruction of a communal foundation, whether out of shame or fear.

In other instances, the whereabouts of queer individuals were only available through records labeling them as degenerates or criminals.² In reference to the perceptibility of gays and lesbians in African archives, Graeme Reid writes, “Echoes of gay and lesbian lives are to be found in legal records, in police and military archives, in church commission reports, and in the records of psychiatric and social welfare departments.”³ For the queer people of Africa, their lives existed as police notes, listing suspect license plate numbers, and alerts to queer meetings,⁴ but nothing in the way of cultural baggage that could benefit a true historical telling and understanding of a population of people.

Presently, as ideologies and government legislations progress (primarily in North America and Canada), memory institutions can provide more visibility and access to queer ephemera, and begin the construction of a cultural legacy previously stunted by notions of gender and sexuality. However, how does an institution, organization, community, or individual take part in collecting, identifying, and curating the historical materials of a community that spans nations, races, genders, ages, and beliefs? Even more difficult, how does one repair, or piece together a partial and fragmented narrative?

² *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 123.

³ Graeme Reid, “‘The History of the Past is the Trust of the Present’: Preservation and Excavation in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa”, *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 194.

⁴ See photos: Graeme Reid, “‘The History of the Past is the Trust of the Present’: Preservation and Excavation in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa”, *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 196-199.

In a case study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), Marcel Barriault explores the institution's preservation efforts, focusing on the history of the Canadian queer community as a marginalized group, but also the obstacle of "missing records [that] had caused a very genuine crisis of memory and identity."⁵ It is clear through the history of oppressing sexual otherness, that the issue of missing records must not only be a hindrance impeding the work of a select few archives, but queer institutions, individual collectors, and communities throughout the continents.

It is also important to recognize the provenance of surviving records of early homosexual life, as they most likely are limited to governmental records and papers of "elite white men"⁶ (seeing as how their privilege would garner the kind of funding and notoriety necessary for self-preservation), and in consequence can not paint a vivid picture of queer history and life.

The Germinal Queer Archive

The 1940's saw a rise in sexuality research and study in America, with some small collections and institutions being founded that would later become larger, aggregated points of access. Included among this list is "a collection on women writers at Smith College (1942) which later became the Sophia Smith Collection, the Women's Archives at Radcliffe College (1943) later known as the Schlesinger Library on the

⁵ Marcel Barriault, "Archiving the queer and queering the archives: a case study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives", *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet, 2009), 106.

⁶ *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 123.

History of Women in America, and the Institute for Sex Research, Inc. (1947) that is now known as the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University Bloomington”⁷. While these collections were not necessarily formed with the intention of archiving lives of homosexual individuals, they certainly represented the seedlings that would grow to be GLBTQ memory institutions.

A notable figure in black queer studies was Arthur Schomberg, who did not necessarily go about his collecting with the intent of representing queer individuals in the 1920’s, but the black population in general. His relationship to certain writers in Harlem did allow for his collection to contain representations of GLBTQ identified people (Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay), and these works were among the items deposited at the 135th street library. Later, with the curatorial help of Steven G. Fullwood, and his own donation to the library in 2004, this collection has become a beneficial resource to black queer communities in New York City, which would not have been possible without the work of these two impassioned collectors and archivists.⁸

In the late 1960’s, without the visibility or confidence provided by a secure place in an archive, museum, or library, the gay community began its liberation efforts in America, largely centered in New York City. Born out of activism, and in basements and attics of protestors and intellectuals, queer history was being created, stored, and conserved. Following the Stonewall Riots, archives were established as a way to “come out of the closet as a culture, to own and control...history, to provide material for the

⁷ *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 122.

⁸ Steven G. Fullwood, “Always queer always here: creating the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture”, *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet, 2009), 236-237.

creation of publications both celebrating and telling the truth about their [LGBTQ] lives, and to provide safe places to read and study LGBTQ materials.”⁹

Through the following three decades, the struggles of queer memory institutions mimicked the struggles experienced by queer communities throughout the world. Institutions in Canada and America were consistently being surveyed and raided by government authorities, with charges being brought against establishments for harboring indecent or obscene materials. For some countries, establishing a repository for gay and lesbian materials took longer (The Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa-GALA, were not founded until 1997), while others found difficulty proving their institution to be an independent, non-profit, charitable organization (such is the case for the Canadian Gay Archives in the late 1970’s)¹⁰.

Despite the hardships, these archives continued to seek visibility through creating small publications, holding activist meetings, and continuing the search for significant materials capable of writing history for queer communities. Quoted in 1978, Joan Nestle (co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives) said, “The roots of the Archives lies in the silenced voices, the love letters destroyed, the pronouns changed, the diaries carefully edited, the pictures never taken, the euphemized distortions...But I have lived through the

⁹ *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 124.

¹⁰ Marcel Barriault, “Archiving the queer and queering the archives: a case study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives”, *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet, 2009), 103.

time of willfull deprivation and now it is time to discover and to cherish and to preserve.”¹¹

From these active and fervent efforts, institutions have had the foothold necessary to write and enact a successful blueprint for maintaining the collection and survival of past and present queer materials today. Some of these libraries and archives will be examined in the next section of the essay, with a focus on their current funding for film, video, and audio collections, as well as their preservation endeavors.

Moving Image and Audio Ephemera

Consumer grade filming and recording devices became available in the 1950’s, and moving image footage and audio represent a form of ephemera capable of capturing moments in time incomparable to records, writings, or photographs. Although it is likely that due to their financial limitations, many queer individuals did not have the opportunity to record their lives to such a degree, GLBTQ collections are very much comprised of moving image and audio materials of varying age and condition. These formats represent cultural evidence beginning with the 1950’s and extending to captured moments of today, as well as distributed films comprising the burgeoning queer cinema genre. Subject matter ranges from pride parade footage, police brutality, home movies, mix tapes, spoken word, and an assortment of performance art pieces. Home movies have

¹¹ Graeme Reid, “‘The History of the Past is the Trust of the Present’: Preservation and Excavation in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa”, *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 201.

held a very specific function as source materials for feature length documentaries including *Chris & Don: A Love Story*, and *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement*.

Also, the recording of oral histories has long been a venture among oppressed communities in order to literally fill the silence of the past with storytelling by individuals young and old. In this way, marginalized people are taking part in the active role of creating primary sources for the future, giving them the agency previously held by historians and textbook writers. Larger, more readily available projects tend to reside on the Internet, with free streaming access to the public¹². Other lesser-known endeavors are commented upon in the book *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*¹³.

Overall, there is little shortage on compelling material as queer communities and historical artifacts have become more ubiquitous in the last decade. The main pressing issue now (specifically in America) is identifying, preserving and providing access to these objects in a depressed economy, with few funds for individual collectors, libraries and archives who wish to carry out preservation projects.

Following is an examination of currently operating sponsored, public, and community memory institutions containing GLBTQ collections, with a concentration on their moving image and audio materials, as well as funding sources.

Present Day GLBTQ Institutions

Sponsored –UCLA Outfest Legacy Project

¹² See: <http://www.actuporalhistory.org>

¹³ Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramlrez, *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

“We’ve already established the largest collection of accessible LGBT moving images in the world and seek to expand our titles to include every relevant film and video ever made”¹⁴

– Outfest Legacy Project

With proof from the Legacy Project spreadsheet¹⁵ that lists holdings and partnering collections, this establishment is most likely correct in boasting the largest collection of LGBT moving images. Ranging from high budget feature films like *Desert Hearts*, to orphaned works like *Mona’s Candle Light*, the collection holds 5000 titles and 5700 items. Additionally, among the preserved collections are the ONE Institute & Archives¹⁶ film materials, and the Alexandra Juhasz: Women of Vision Oral History Interviews.

Presently, the archive screens selected films bimonthly, and participates in the Outfest Film Festival. Other screenings take place for specific preservation projects during conferences, including the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) conference and the Orphan Film Symposium, but generally access in the way of exhibition is limited to regulated times. Other ways of access exist for researchers and scholars, as long as appointments are made ahead of time and permitted at the UCLA Westwood campus.

Unlike institutions that will be explored later, the Outfest Legacy Project functions with a focus on preservation and less on access. Many of the films sitting within the vaults are commercially distributed materials or film elements that benefit more from preservation attention, as opposed to existing as screening prints or videos.

¹⁴ The Outfest Legacy Project, *Access*, <http://www.outfest.org/legacysite/access.html>.

¹⁵ See: <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/pdfs/FTVStudyGuides/OutfestCollectionUCLA.pdf>

¹⁶ Note: “the world’s largest research library and archive devoted to LGBT concerns”

With partnerships with the UCLA Film and Television Archive and Outfest Film Festival, the Legacy Project presents itself as a sort of anomaly among queer memory institutions. Working within a system of accessible facilities, sponsors, and funders, greater preservation standards and practices are made possible.

The success of the archive in collecting relevant materials relies on both its relationship to Outfest, as well as its reputation for involving best practices in terms of conservation and preservation. Many of the film items are materials screened each year at Outfest, allowing for a steady and selected group of contemporary films and items to enter the archive regularly. In addition, the archive takes donations from the public (generally long-time collectors), ensuring donors that they will still retain copyright, and that their collections will be preserved for long-term survival.

Most of the Outfest Collection materials within the collection represent production dates from the 1990's to the 2000's, while specific donated collections that comprise a smaller portion of the holdings range from the 1950's to 1970's. In this way, the Legacy Project has allowed for both recent materials, and older artifacts of queer heritage to enter the archive.

Overall, the Legacy Project has been providing significant film preservation work to the American queer community, for both film and videos of today and in the past few decades. However, while standard preservation practices are being met, and there is little doubt that these films will ever be abandoned in an attic to deteriorate, there is still a significant amount of orphaned materials, oral histories, and home movies that seek desperate attention in other parts of the country. There is no process by which to quantify these lost or discarded items, and it seems impractical to suggest that the Legacy Project

can provide long term survival for all. It is also necessary to understand that no institution should be the single depository for an entire community's moving image cultural memory, both because it limits access to non-local individuals, and risks the obliteration of an entire community's memory should catastrophic natural disasters or mismanagement occur.

Public - New York Public Library (The Black Gay and Lesbian Archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Manuscripts and Archives Division)

The New York Public Library as a whole consists of four research centers and numerous public branches throughout New York City. The total number of research items the public library has to offer is innumerable, and significant work has gone into the organization and cataloging of the collections. However, finding every single item relevant to the LGBTQ community would be an arduous and impossible task. Fortunately, two main points of access are the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, as well as the Gay and Lesbian Collections¹⁷ within the Manuscripts and Archives Division.

Both of these collections consist mostly of paper materials, but the Manuscripts and Archives Division holds some home movies of notable figures, ACTUP videotapes (with available screening copies), and sound and video recordings from the International Gay Information Center Collection that was donated to the library in 1989¹⁸.

¹⁷ Collection list found here: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/36/node/138008>

¹⁸ See IGIC collection here:

<http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/mss1517.pdf>

In both of these departments, it took the efforts of enthusiastic individuals to recognize the significance of the LGBTQ materials at the NYPL, and to provide the visibility necessary for interested patrons and scholars. Visibility was and still is obtained in various ways, but mostly has involved offering scholar awards and grants for visiting researchers to use the collections, and furthermore, to publish work about them.

As a public institution, financial resources, employee hiring, and the goodwill of donors fluctuates with the economy, which can temporarily hamper preservation and access endeavors¹⁹. In general it is clear that the various divisions in the library have made considerable strides to correct the many decades of ignorance and rejection of LGBTQ materials in the public library setting, by providing access and financial incentives to researchers.

Community - Lesbian Herstory Archives

Principles of ‘radical archiving’ devised by the Lesbian Herstory Archive²⁰:

- All lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political or sexual credentials may be required for usage of the collection; race and class must be no barrier to use or inclusion.
- The Archives will collect the prints of all our lives, not just preserve the records of the famous or the published. Every woman who has had the courage to touch or desire another woman deserves to be remembered here.
- The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus which is by definition closed to many women, and shall be curated and maintained by lesbians
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all lesbians.

¹⁹ In 2008 a GLBT Archives, Libraries, Museums, and Special Collections Conference took place at the Schwarzman Building, but few activities and events pertaining to LGBTQ collections have followed. However, the Martin Duberman grant is still available to visiting scholars on a yearly basis.

²⁰ Graeme Reid, “‘The History of the Past is the Trust of the Present’: Preservation and Excavation in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa”, *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 201.

- Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.
- Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, not from the government or mainstream financial institutions

The Lesbian Herstory Archive was the brainchild of a group of women, who spent many active years raising awareness of lesbian and women's rights. The institution itself is inherently configured in such a way to make the archive feel like a welcoming space, with books, VHS tapes, and periodicals available for perusal and focused research. These materials exist within an actual brownstone apartment building in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Couches, dining room table, refrigerator, bookshelves and all, the access policies are not surprisingly lenient, and all materials are accessible by any curious neighbor, passerby, or scholar.

As mentioned before, in being born out of activism, queer archives tend to operate outside of what is typically considered standard preservation and access practices. Most materials represent a range of conditions, from books with a stiff bind, to 16mm films deteriorating in the basement. In terms of intellectual control, little is known about every item that fills the drawers, nooks, and shelves in the brownstone, and little metadata aside from the title, author and subject heading is married to the entries in the catalog. Searching within the archive might prove to be difficult, but digging, scanning, and reaching are all a part of the research process.

While the archive may not contain original film elements to the film *Paris is Burning* or signed copies of a James Baldwin novel, the Lesbian Herstory Archives holds the stories and experiences of individuals from the surrounding community and New York City by way of home movies, CD collections, and local zines. All items within the brownstone have either been collected by the original co-founders through the last four

decades, or donated by members of the community. So, even though there are over 6 donated copies of *Boys Don't Cry* on VHS, there are unique items representing the raw, unedited lives of queer women.

It is because of the many unique items that the Lesbian Herstory Archives is extremely lacking in their preservation standards. Many of the older or more obsolete items do not have access copies, and they are utilized for visitor screenings. Materials are also handled by volunteers that do not necessarily have the archiving or preservation qualifications to be aware of an item's stability. In providing free and open access, the longevity and survival of the materials are consequently threatened, making the archive function very differently from an institution like the Legacy Project where preservation comes before access. The refusal to seek out funding from the government or mainstream financial institutions also stunts the possibility of paying conservators and preservationists, so the archive must rely on interns who may have the relevant knowledge, but not the financial support for a project involving item re-housing, catalog development, and format migration.

There is no way of quantifying the impact of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, although the institution has been credited in publications, films, and research papers. Scholars and filmmakers do not necessarily make their presence or agendas known while at the archive, but volunteers and co-founders have seen their names in lights unexpectedly in movie credits and bibliographies, giving evidence of the archive's influence on current LGBTQ related work.²¹

²¹ Conversation with Deb Edel (co-founder) on April 21st, 2012.

Future of Queer Memory Institutions

As these three institutions, and others like them continue to identify, collect, catalog, preserve and provide access to materials, the cultural memory of queer communities will continue to develop and grow. Additional oral histories, TV productions, films, performances, letters, articles, books, and songs will be created, and will hopefully find their way into the hands of a caring collector or organization that will provide an environment conducive to its survival and access.

Evidenced by this examination of a sponsored, a public, and a community archive, it is impossible to meet all expectations involved with carrying out best preservation and access practices, but there are multiple routes to be taken in building the lost legacy of the queer community, while also forming stronger depositories for new materials in the future.

Also, with the exponential growth of queer related materials, especially those that are born digital during the past decade, communities have considered the Internet as a viable tool for reconfiguring the queer archive. Sites such as Outhistory.org allow the public to write and edit pages on U.S queer history, consequently giving agency to any literate and queer individual with an Internet connection.

Similarly, many moving image and audio collections have become accessible online, including ACTUP interviews, and a photograph collection on the Lesbian Herstory Archive website²². Of course digitization only brings in more obstacles for

²² See a sampling of LHA photo collection:
<http://cdm16124.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p274401coll1>

preservation and migration, but it does provide access to individuals who may have never had the opportunity to visit the archives.

Lastly, the future of the queer community's cultural memory may even find itself in its own freestanding museum some day, as talk of a gay and lesbian museum surfaced among the GLBT Historical Society in New York City in 2002.²³ While not yet financially viable, it is still a considerable step in continuing the assemblage of LGBTQ memory and culture.

²³ Patricia Leigh Brown, "Is it O.K to Wear Drag to a Museum Opening?" *The New York Times*, June 30, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/30/style/is-it-ok-to-wear-drag-to-a-museum-opening.html>.

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Other Sources:

ACTUP videotapes: <http://www.nypl.org/archives/2407>

GIC video/sound recordings 1956-1989:

<http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/mss1517.pdf>

Lesbian and Gay NYPL Collections:

<http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/36/node/138008>

Lesbian Herstory Archive: <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>

Martin Duberman Collection:

<http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/duberman.pdf>

The Outfest Legacy Project: <http://www.outfest.org/legacysite/access.html>