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Gina Watts

Texas State University

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Queer Lives in Archives: Intelligibility and Forms of Memory

Gina Watts

Exploring queer archives through a variety of texts and case studies, this paper seeks to understand three primary themes: the departure of traditional archival theory in queer archives, the absence of records and what they might mean for queer history, and a conception of queer time and space contributed to by archival records. Together, these suggest a specific form of intelligibility and memory available to people identifying as queer through the existence of these communal archives, one which reaffirms a history that some were determined to bury and which challenges and expands typical understandings of activism in the archival profession. Finally, this paper seeks to understand how these departures result in a particular political power available to queer archives.

Queer archives as a concept have a variety of meanings, much like queerness itself. They might refer to archives that collect materials from LGBTQ communities or people; they might refer to an archive that seeks to disrupt or interrogate traditional, institutional archival practices; they frequently mean both of these at the same time. This paper seeks to encapsulate the way these different meanings have played out in case studies and scholarship, with the ultimate goal of understanding how and why queer archives have come to be the political force in the profession that they are today.

To understand where queer archives are coming from, it is important to lay out the straight archives, as it were. Traditional archival practices today in the United States are ruled by concepts like provenance and original order. Provenance refers to the origin of the records, the understanding that there is a chain of custody leading up to the day the records arrived in the archive which lends them both authenticity and context. Original order, as an extension of this, refers to the way that the creator or collector had their own records arranged, an arrangement which is understood to provide more context than simply the materials themselves.

When processing a new collection to be accessible for researchers, adhering to or reproducing original order is the gold standard. These concepts have in common another

aspect: the processing archivist is the decision maker in these matters. It is the role of the archivist to verify the provenance, keep the records together and in original order, and to faithfully reproduce all of this information for researchers in an objective and complete finding aid, keeping any interpretive work on their part invisible. These practices culminate in *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, or DACS, a manual that lays out description and arrangement tactics and which is functionally the bible of any major archive.

Queer archives, alternatively, are skeptical that this is the best or only way to deal with records. Here, I will explore the ways in which queer archives differ in both practical and philosophical ways, focusing on the power of archives, representation and absences in archives, and the ways in which queer archives shift meaning. Who is included in the archive and who is not, and how does that relate to power dynamics? How does archival representation or absence translate into empowerment, understanding, or influence? How do people render themselves intelligible and remembered in the face of institutions who have ignored them? These questions and more will be examined using a selection of major texts in this area.

Alana Kumbier's *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (2014) looks at archives in an interdisciplinary way, not only speaking to archivists but also to queer studies theorists and those who may have communities they want to archive themselves. Her book analyzes films that portray archives as well as grassroots archival projects, pulling in work from memory studies and cultural histories. In *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories* (2015), Amy Stone and Jaime Cantrell approach the topic from the perspective of how queer archives make LGBTQ life more visible, comparing the closet and the archive: "Inside both the closet and the archive are systems of logical organization and systems of secret keeping" (3). They are interested in the experiences of researchers looking at LGBTQ materials, whose essays populate the rest of the book.

A selection of articles from *Radical History Review* provide even more perspectives. Jen Jack Giesecking's "Useful In/stability" (2015) details his experiences at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, analyzing how both the stability of the location and the instability of the collections help interrogate how the archive does its work. "Drawn from the Scraps: The Finding AIDS of Mundo Meza" (2015) by Robb Hernández questions whose archives are seen as incomplete and theorizes how their fragmentary nature can produce more dialogue about the collection, using Chicano artist Mundo Meza's materials as an example. In "Archival Justice" (2015), K. J. Rawson interviews Ben Power Alwin, archivist of the Sexual Minorities Archive, about the collection, the space it resides in, and the power it has for its researchers. Finally, Elise Chenier (2015) in "Privacy Anxieties" looks at the open access nature of the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony and discusses the ethical and activist implications for its materials. Together, these sources ask the sort of questions which can lead us to a better understanding of how queer memory is discovered, treasured, and used by its communities.

Archives and Power

To begin, a common thread throughout these texts involves archives and empowerment. Archives represent material history: the idea that a person can find their families, or those whose lives mirrored theirs, in an acid-free box, and in doing so, find themselves, be recognized by the historical record, and claim their right to take up space in the world. This has more

than simply emotional impact—archival records show important legal precedent, challenge our assumptions about the past, and can otherwise lend strength to those looking for support. By contrast, not existing in the archive can seem like not existing at all. Stone and Cantrell comment that “Archival exclusions are reframed as intentional, pervasive reproductions of social order” (7). Reclaiming that space is a means of reclaiming existence as a whole and of creating a more inclusive world for those still discovering their sexuality. Kumbier notes that this process is not necessarily simple and requires a departure from traditional archival practice: “[Queer studies] scholars have created their own archives by conducting oral history interviews, assembling ephemeral material that circulated in LGBTQ communities, conducting ethnographic research through participant observation, and what Marcus calls ‘auto-archiving:’ writing personal memoirs to document queer histories” (14). Institutional archives tend to be strongest in areas where the records have high levels of stability (often due to retention requirements), and in turn, records are most stable when they are created by institutions that have the means and motivation to protect them. Even queer materials that are part of these stable records are often created by those other than the queer people themselves and instead by those policing them in some way. Collecting ephemeral material in queer archives functions in two ways, both as a necessity due to the lack of other records and as an implicit rejection of traditional ideas of which records should matter in an archive.

Ben Alwin articulates the personal and political impact of these interventions in his interview with KJ Rawson. Alwin runs the Sexual Minorities Archive (SMA) in western Massachusetts, and lives in it as well—it is kept in his house. This location is important and speaks to the larger mission: “The ability to control the histories of sexual and gender minorities is an important motive for the SMA, not merely because it responds to the systematic misrepresentation and omission of queer histories in traditional archives, but also because it creates a domestic, anti-institutional environment for queer researchers” (Rawson 2015, 178).

This translates to a degree of personal power that researchers and volunteers have within the space, something not always available in tightly controlled institutions. Alwin continues later: “I tell volunteers who work here, when they label one subject file and they catalog one book, it’s a political act... Everything that we can do to erase the erasure and to give voice where there was silence, that’s what we’re doing with this archival work every day” (Rawson 2015, 185). It is evident even from the transcript of this interview that there was a great deal of emotion in the room, which is important: traditional archives may frequently be frozen, silent closed-stacks where one is expected to wear gloves and leave all personal possessions in a distant locker, but there is no such expectation of this impersonal attitude in the SMA.

Moreover, such a vulnerable response can be said to have more weight and meaning in a traditionally sanitized space. If archival work is political, it also has an impact on people’s personal lives, and keeping emotion out of the equation stops making sense in that context. (A necessary side note: this is a single example, and there are most certainly warm, welcoming institutional archives where you can cry if you want to. However, the rhetoric around queer archives echoes this idea frequently, and I think it is important that people feel the need to distinguish these types of archival work in this way.)

Chenier, writing on the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (ALOT), provides another perspective. Her work questions the open access archive, separating the empowerment of a

community from the empowerment of the individual in order to make sure one is not coming at the cost of the other. The specific question she approaches is about consent: if someone consented to give an interview and make it available prior to the existence of online archives, does that mean that those interviews should be made available digitally? Chenier points out several advantages of making interviews available online, mostly related to the availability of the material to new audiences: “The web also allows us to put the ‘aural’ back into oral history. In nondigital brick-and-mortar archives researchers rarely listened to the original recordings... Aural history brings the material alive in ways that a transcript cannot” (Chenier 2015, 133).

However, she also notes that LGBTQ history has some particular difficulties related to open access: “...the ways in which people are ‘out’ can often be inconsistent and variable according to shifting contexts and individuals... Even if narrators are fully out, what about the people they name in their interviews?” (Chenier 2015, 134). It is not limited to queer contexts; she comments that in other archives, it was not uncommon for interviewees to consent to the material being in the archive but declined to allow it to be placed online. Even when archives can try to protect materials with, for example, confidentiality agreements or passwords, there is discomfort with material being online for anyone to potentially find. These privacy concerns speak to the power that archival materials are seen to have—these fragments of personal lives can impact perspectives on historical lives as well as the lives of people today. This is the strongest reason for the care involved in arranging, describing, and making accessible archival materials, and why the LGBTQ community has often taken it upon themselves to care for their own in spaces they control.

Archival Absences

Having established that archival materials have influence on both personal lives and political matters, I would like to look at the archival materials themselves. It is impossible to research queer archives without paying close attention to the concept of archival silence. The scarcity or hidden nature of LGBTQ materials is something any of the communities have to face and they have done so in a few different ways. Though perhaps not truly an archive, per se, I will start with Kumbier’s analysis of Cheryl Dunye’s film, *The Watermelon Woman*. The film is an invented documentary about a young filmmaker trying to find the archives of an (also invented) African American lesbian actress from the 1920s named Fae Richards. Dunye, who directs and plays the filmmaker, takes the audience through the process of trying to find records that do not exist of a woman only ever credited as the Watermelon Woman. Dunye’s character finds scraps here and there, but nothing particularly complete. What she does find, of course, was all created for the film but now exists as a real archive created by Zoe Leonard. This dynamic of a fake archive created to represent an absent archive has interesting implications: “Like the film that provides the context for its creation, the collection documents a past that Dunye and Leonard know *is there*, but for which there is no record... it makes the absence of a ‘real’ archive visible, and in doing so, authorizes and inspires future projects” (Kumbier 2014, 57). In this archive, something can be true without ever having actually happened—something a traditional archive would have great difficulty making sense of. These contradictions are everywhere in queer archives and come about precisely because of the sense that we are missing important queer history. Establishing its existence in other ways allows queerness to make a stronger claim to precedent, even without

authentic materials.

Stone and Cantrell discuss an important consequence of this contradiction—taking the absence of records as evidence of queerness: “What appears as silence and closeting may have been a proliferation of signs, symbols, and strategic display of queer identities. Yet absence and the closet have been marked as a kind of gay and lesbian legibility.” This equivocation not only complicates queer studies by “[obscuring] alternative sexual formations” but also by assigning meanings to things that may have multiple interpretations (Stone and Cantrell 2015, 4). There are many reasons that something may not appear in the archive, and not all of them are LGBTQ-adjacent. Indeed, asserting that queerness was invisible historically takes away a rich history of symbols and codes that queer people have used over time. This emerges as one of the cautionary themes of queer archives—it is already a fraught landscape in terms of applying descriptions to those who appear in the archive because of the way preferred terms have changed over time and are different for every individual. Complicating the situation further by assuming queer materials are absent in traditional archives—and thereby assuming absent materials are queer—does not help.

Hernández takes this point and expands it: what about records that exist but are merely incomplete? Taking the case of Mundo Meza, a Los Angeles-based Chicano artist from the 1970s and 80s, Hernández introduces the concept of “queer detrital analysis” to describe the archival work of pulling together disparate pieces to add meaning to the collection itself (71). His argument rests on the traditional meaning of provenance, which relies on a traceable chain of ownership over the length of the material’s life. Hernández comments that someone like Meza, a queer man of color, is more likely to both have an ‘incomplete’ collection and to be accused of having one—“Redactions, omissions, editorial revision, and rediscovered ‘lost’ manuscripts abound” in traditional archival collections as well (72). As an example, Hernández offers the handwritten 60-page finding aid of Meza’s contemporary and friend, Legorreta. The finding aid is not written to traditional archival standards. Instead, “relaying personal memories, career highlights, anachronistic citations, and social documentation in accordance to his artist subjects” (79). These types of meanings added to archival fragments constitute a different understanding of an archival subject, one which Hernández posits as inherently queer. This archival material integrates emotion and personal narrative in a way not usually located in finding aids. As a result, it means so much more. What it may lack in standardization and searchability, it makes up for with richer personal depth and meaning for the researcher to uncover. If traditional archives made use of this strategy, what new research would result?

Queer Time and Space

Beyond discussions of the material itself, these sources make a case for a different understanding of queer memory altogether. Frequently described as “queer time and space,” these writers paint a picture of how queer archives work for the researchers on the ground. Alwin touches on this in the interview with Rawson: “The personal and private nature of LGBT materials in someone’s home fosters, to me, a real sense of comfort and being at ease... You don’t need to put on gloves and ask me to go get it” (180). This refrain appears in other places as well—that traditional archival policies restrict researchers in their mission to protect documents, effectively prioritizing materials over people. In her analysis of *The Watermelon Woman*, Kumbier asserts, “[the film] critiques the ways libraries and archives mediate access

to information, and draws attention to the power relations that undergird research in both spaces” (53). Dunye’s character encounters policies ostensibly for security and safety of records, which also result in undue surveillance of researchers—having to state reasons for requesting certain records, for example, or having limited options in terms of reproducing materials. Having materials open and available is one more way that some queer archives differentiate themselves from institutional archives—it becomes a philosophical standpoint that these stories belong to all and archivists need not act as their gatekeepers. The homes they are kept in contribute to this feeling.

The same queering can happen with time instead of space: Kumbier exemplifies this with her analysis of Aliza Shapiro’s *DATUM*, a collaborative art and archival installation. The project was designed to mimic the process of archiving using the artist’s personal and professional photographs. Visitors would be faced with open files of materials, able to be moved from the context of one group of photos to another and to be pinned to a makeshift timeline on the gallery wall. They could also scan or print any of the materials to bring home. Shapiro says that part of her inspiration was to allow attendees to see the personal archive of an artist who is still alive and present, something which is rare among archival collections (Kumbier 2014). Kumbier aligns this project with Tom Boellstorff’s concept of coincidental time, which “attends to moments, and is not based in logics of accumulation or duration.” Of Shapiro’s work, she adds: “Though the archive on display was, indeed, an accumulation of records of past times, what mattered more were the meanings those records held for participants, as well as meanings participants expressed in their interactions with the collection” (Kumbier 2014, 161-162).

In other words, past events were made present again through the interactions of the visitors, something that the interactive nature of the exhibit helped foster more so than traditional archives. Kumbier also applies this more broadly, saying that Shapiro’s work to make these materials available to the public while she is standing right there disrupts the timeline that archives typically deal with, where materials are donated once they are inactive and frequently once their creator has died. Questioning this timeline gives archives more options in terms of interacting with both donors and researchers, bending the expected rules.

A Case Study: The Lesbian Herstory Archives

I would like to turn my attention to one specific queer archive, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, an institution that featured in all of these sources. The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) dates back to 1975, founded by Joan Nestle, among others, and housed in her Manhattan apartment. Today, the LHA is kept in a house in Brooklyn, the purchase of which was a fundraising goal for close to a decade, and is staffed almost entirely by volunteers. In contrast to most archives, anyone who volunteers at the LHA can rearrange the materials at any time, creating their own finding aids in their own styles and calling themselves an ‘archivette.’ Giesecking wrestles with this, calling attention to the dichotomy of stability and instability present in this particular archive through his personal experiences doing research there. In particular, he is interested in how the two can coexist: “Useful in/stability then is the project of making use of queer refusal, flux, and instability alongside common-sense-making tactics of survival through stability” (36). The archive throws away the rulebook of most archival institutions, creating space for a more subjective form of memory. The instability of the materials is central to the way they hold multiple meanings for different people, and this

stands in opposition to traditional archives' position that places the processing archivist's opinion above others'.

Kumbier's analysis, however, discusses another way of viewing these practices. In *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye's character visits the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (CLIT), which Kumbier asserts is a clear stand-in for the LHA, giving a gently teasing account of some of the problems there: "The CLIT archive is disorganized and, though the boxes are out on shelves and physically accessible, visitors would be hard-pressed to identify the contents of any of them" (62). It does certainly present a problem if the very communities an archive is trying to reach cannot access materials due to lack of organization or indexing. Taking a stand against hierarchical organizing is all well and good until no one can find the same thing twice.

In addition, Dunye's character is not allowed to film any of the objects because of privacy concerns, something which presumably happens frequently at the LHA: "A significant amount of material in grassroots archives like LHA is not legally approved for publication, representation, or display in public venues...When donors entrust the LHA with their papers, they sacrifice (or protect against) public visibility and legibility as lesbians, but still contribute to a historical record that attests to their existence" (Kumbier 2014, 63). Such a particular sacrifice makes sense in many contexts—Gieseck opens his article with a scenario where LHA volunteers had to save a deceased donor's materials from her homophobic family—but it does have interesting implications for the advocacy work these archives tend to value.

To begin with, the political power that the LHA could represent has limited spheres due to the niche nature of specialized archives and the organization and privacy concerns. But within those spheres, the archives could mean a great deal to someone looking for a community. How much outreach is appropriate for a place like the LHA, which would theoretically want to both reach the people who need them and keep themselves and their materials safe? How can that political power be harnessed?

In 2003, a group of ten historians wrote an amicus brief for the Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas*, which ended up dismantling sodomy laws in Texas and thirteen other states. The historians focused on two primary arguments: that historically, the word sodomy and the implication of same sex couples were not connected, and that using sodomy laws to prosecute gay couples was a relatively recent phenomenon. To make these arguments, the authors rested their respective research in the areas of marriage and LGBTQ history, which in turn relied heavily on queer archival materials, some of which would not have been kept by large institutional archives. This case became one of many stepping stones to legalizing same sex marriage in 2015. So, while the tensions between privacy and advocacy, organization and instability still exist in places like the LHA, the fact that the materials are broadly being kept, and kept safe, is a political act that has had far-reaching implications for many people in their day-to-day lives.

Conclusion

Queer archives present an important alternative to traditional institutional archives, showcasing the changes that can come about from prioritizing the communities present in the archives. The sources presented here represent several facets of study facing those interested in queer archives: What does absence from the archive mean? How can it be corrected? What

can one do with fragments of collections? How can normative concepts like space and time shift in light of their particular contexts? While these sources can only provide some answers to these questions, it is part of the whole picture of what queer forms of memory can look like. Stone and Cantrell speak on the power of queer archives: “LGBT archival research becomes queer when it becomes part of a process of recovery and justice for a queer past and present...a recuperative project of moving from silence to productive, transformative discourse” (3). With the development of queer memory, people have the ability to claim their existence, their history, and their role in a community.

Additionally, there are more important goals that can be achieved, like the use of archival materials in support of same-sex relationships. These priorities guide the changes that queer archives have made from traditional archives—that most materials are in open stacks instead of closed stacks, that archivists are not the gatekeepers of describing and arranging collections, and that they are often maintained in people’s homes instead of frozen reading rooms. These can have peripheral effects that are not always ideal: collections are frequently not in a climate that protects them, items may not be described for researchers to be able to find, and privacy concerns can prevent public use of materials. But these are solvable problems and queer archives are taking steps in the right direction to diversify and make more welcoming the archival environment.

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Gina Watts is a December 2017 graduate of the University of Texas School of Information and currently works as a Library Specialist at Texas State University. Research interests include archival outreach and education, and the intersection of gender, information equity, and feminist pedagogy in libraries and archives. Contact: gmw54@txstate.edu.