

LGBTQ+ Archives: A Literature Review

For this literature review, I was interested in the question of how best to represent marginalized communities in archives and special collections. I consider this to be one of the most essential considerations for archives in the 21st century: from an ethical perspective, there is an imperative to diversify archives and make sure that they do not merely represent the most privileged in society; from a historical perspective, it is urgently necessary to preserve areas that would otherwise be lost from the historical record; and from a practical perspective, it can be a way to distinguish one's institution and draw visitors, researchers, and online viewers. Although these concerns apply to many distinct marginalized groups, each community has specific considerations and needs, and I chose to focus specifically on LGBTQ+ archives. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself, and having been an intern at a lesbian archive, I thought I had a stronger foundation of knowledge for considering the literature of this area.

Although all are focused on LGBTQ+ communities, the archives represented by this review each defined their specific focus in a distinct way. The most common types of specialization were by location (e.g. the Arizona Queer Archives), by specific identity within the LGBTQ+ umbrella (e.g. the Lesbian Herstory Archives or Digital Transgender Archive), and by specific interest or activist group (e.g. LGBT religious groups or ACT UP). Regardless of how they defined their collecting focus, LGBTQ+ archives often found that it was difficult to acquire materials about or by the more marginalized members of that group, which they each dealt with in different ways.

A particular theme that emerged throughout the literature was the constant sense of need or lack felt by LGBTQ+ archives – as Philip Clark puts it, they have a “lack of space, lack of time, lack of expertise, lack of money” (2014, p. 187). Many LGBTQ+ archives were founded and run not by people with archival training and experience but by committed community members who stepped up to fill what they saw as a gap in the existing collecting institutions, to make sure that their community's history was saved. This had potential negative consequences, due to their lack of specific knowledge, but also positive ones, as it allowed community members to have a stake in the archive from the beginning. In general, I found that some primary issues that applied to other marginalized groups (the difficulty of establishing responsibility and trust with the community itself) rarely applied to LGBTQ+ archives, which were almost always run and staffed by members of the community.

A great deal of the literature on LGBTQ+ archives is written by people directly involved in one or more archive – a founder, board member, or collaborator. They also tend to be published in publications oriented towards feminist/women's studies or LGBTQ+ interest, as opposed to archive-specific publications. This is good

in that it gives a direct depiction of the day-to-day work of the archive, which is invaluable to archivists hoping to be involved in or create similar institutions. However, it can also mean that the writing style is less academic, and that aspects of archival management are only touched on briefly. For this literature review, I made an effort to also include writings by professional archivists and theorists; however, these were difficult to find and often meant considering the few paragraphs about an LGBTQ+ archive within a larger paper, so I only included a couple articles of this type.

A note on language: I use the term “LGBTQ+ archive” (using LGBTQ to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and using a plus-sign to indicate other groups, which include intersex, asexual, agender, gender-nonconforming, non-binary, two-spirit, and more). However, when describing a particular archive, I use the terminology they use for themselves.

Sources are ordered chronologically.

Manion, A. & Morgan, R. (2006). The Gay and Lesbian Archives: Documenting same-sexuality in an African context. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 67(2,3), 29-35. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4066790>.

I sought this source as an attempt to counteract the strong focus of the majority of the literature on Europe and North America, particularly the United States. This paper looks at the work of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa (GALA), which was the first LGBTQ+ archive in Africa, established in 1997 as a project of the South African History Archive (SAHA), as a case study for documenting LGBTQ+ communities in Africa. Opening with a moving story about a stranger overhearing a discussion of the archive in public and suggesting that “these things” should not be discussed, as they are “not in African culture,” the article does a fantastic job situating the archive and its challenges within a specifically African context.

Even though it was specific to Africa, this piece still had a strong stake in the European and American LGBTQ+ archive community, as GALA was based on the model of Homodok in Holland and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York. One unique element of GALA is their very active acquisition strategy – rather than waiting for donations, their programs are designed to generate new archival material, including educational and training materials, theater, video, and film productions, a tour of “Queer Johannesburg,” and oral history. Particularly interesting is their account of their difficulty finding subjects (lesbians over the age of 40) for their first oral history project; they discovered that older women in the communities they were looking at did not self-identify as “lesbians,” demonstrating the difficulty of establishing a common language for LGBTQ+ archives, as well as the importance of pushing back against Western notions of identity. Manion & Morgan note that within Africa, GALA is in a relatively privileged position, as South Africa has much more stringent legal protections for LGBTQ+ people, especially compared to countries where being gay is illegal. They also highlight effort to focus on the

most marginalized aspects of LGBTQ+ communities, such as HIV-positive and deaf people.

Kirste, L. (2007). Collective effort: Archiving LGBT moving images. *Cinema Journal*, 46(3), 134-140. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130536>.

This article provides an uncommon focus on a specific medium, which is especially helpful and interesting because so many LGBTQ+ archives seem to be primarily focused on print-based materials, photographs, and occasionally ephemera, likely due to the challenges of collecting and accessing audiovisual materials. Kirste notes the specific conservation and preservation challenges that apply to audiovisual materials in general and in particular to LGBTQ+ film materials – she notes that, marginalized by mainstream cinema and television, LGBTQ+ people often made independent and amateur productions, and/or “home movies” of queer events, which usually had few existing copies and were often stored for years in non-materials-safe locations such as the creators’ homes. Even once they are moved to LGBTQ+ archives, due to small budgets and lack of resources, it is often not possible to provide the material-specific handling and climate-controlled storage necessary for films and tapes. Kirste helpfully lays out ways that specific LGBTQ+ archives have approached these problems, including seeking specific grant funding and placing materials in moving image archives while retaining ownership of the materials. She also looks at examples of LGBTQ+ film materials held by non-LGBTQ+ mixed-media archives and film-specific archives, detailing the pros and cons of housing such materials in each location.

Malkmus, D. J. (2008). Documentation strategy: Mastodon or retro-success? *The American Archivist*, 71(2), 384-409. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40294523>.

Malkmus reexamines the concept of documentation strategy, which she argues showed initial promise but was dismissed by many archivists by 1996, and therefore had not been reexamined for its relevance in the digital environment. She looks closely at five case studies to assess the issues and possibilities of documentation strategy. One of these five is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Religious Archives Network (LGBTRAN), an ongoing web-based project begun in 2000. Although loosely affiliated with the Chicago Theological Seminary, the project was largely independent and initiated by members of the community, beginning with a 3-year start-up grant and continuing with private funds. Initial assessment of collections from various LGBT religious groups had revealed that many had already been donated to existing repositories, so project leaders decided to use a web-based platform to link these collections together, as a virtual catalog, also creating biographies of key figures and a growing catalog of oral histories.

Malkmus provides an excellent detailed analysis of the project, which she generally sees as a very positive example of documentation strategy and particularly of the potential of the internet to facilitate collaboration and enhance access. Of particular interest was her discussion of the changing nature of the board of directors over the years of the project, and the effects that had on the material collected. Initially, it began with mostly Protestant men who were leaders in their communities, but as the project expanded to include lesbian and non-Christian religious groups, board members from those communities were recruited. Even with the help of a more diverse array of advisors, there were limits to what could be collected, with Buddhist and Hindu faith communities tending to create few records, and pre-1950 leaders and those from countries where homosexuality was or is illegal were less likely to participate in oral histories; this necessarily limited the diversity of the project. Although she doesn't directly state it, I suspect that the success of the project, especially given the limited support from the home institution, owed a great deal to the social and financial capital of the initial board members, and that the ability to focus on the more marginalized members of the LGBTQ community in such projects often similarly depends on the relative security of certain members (e.g. white men in positions of power). While this project is a fantastic example of those members recognizing that lack of diversity and striving to counteract it, it could have certainly been possible for this project to begin and end with a focus on Protestant men, and I hope that this will serve as an example for other similar archival projects.

Donnelly, S. (2008). Coming out in the archives: The Hall-Carpenter Archives at the London School of Economics. *History Workshop Journal*, 66, 180-184. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25473013>.

Donnelly provides a useful case study of an LGBTQ+ archive that was initially founded as a community-based archive and later came to be housed at a mainstream, non-LGBTQ-focused institution. Founded in 1982 to document gay activism in the UK, the Hall-Carpenter Archives (HCA) has been housed at the London School of Economics since 1988. Beginning as a project of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), HCA was entirely community-based and focused in its early years. Like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, it depended on volunteers and was housed in a personal home, with the resulting challenges. Although they did accept government funding, lack of funding was a major problem, which ultimately led to the collections being separated, with the archives and ephemera going to LSE, oral histories going to the National Sound Archive, and press clippings to Middlesex University. This article is useful for its detailed focus on the practical logistics of LGBTQ+ archives, especially its description of the process of cataloging and describing records upon their move to LSE. This level of detail about knowledge organization in an archive is rare in the literature and in this case is likely included because the author is a cataloger.

Wexler, G. & Long, L. (2009). Lifetimes and legacies: Mortality, immortality, and the needs of aging and dying donors. *The American Archivist*, 72(2), 478-495. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27802698>.

This article is of great general interest for archives management for its focus on the legal, ethical, and logistical challenges faced when dealing with aging and dying donors. Although it is not primarily focused on LGBTQ+ archives, I found the case study of lesbian artist Tee Corrine very interesting and informative. The narrative by Linda Long clearly illustrates the importance of a genuinely caring approach to elderly donors. She dealt with the difficult case of Tee Corinne, who chose to end her life in 2006 under Oregon's Death with Dignity Act after being diagnosed with terminal cancer earlier that year. The article, which describes the circumstances around Corinne's death in detail, as well as interactions Long had with Corinne before her death, her work on the will, dealing with the materials after Corinne's death, and her interactions with Corinne's lover, is quite moving. It was also an interesting (and perhaps not widely applicable) case study, because the work of the activist-artist was erotic and even explicit, and was often found in "low-brow" outlets such as romance novel covers; although Long states that she "could hardly believe [her] good fortune" when she found in the late 1990s that no repository had yet claimed her collection, to my mind it is more surprising that the University of Oregon was willing to collect her work. It is clear that collecting the papers of lesbians in Oregon was essentially a passion project for Long, which demonstrates the role of dedicated individuals in archiving LGBTQ+ collections. Ultimately, this is a fantastic case study and model for archivists who, like Long, may have little or no experience dealing with donors at the end of their lives, demonstrating the important role of archivists at that time, as representatives of donors' legacies.

Kumbier, A. (2009). *The collaborative archive: Aliza Shapiro's DATUM. In Ephemeral material: Queering the archive. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books.* Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pratt/detail.action?docID=3328242>.

Kumbier documents the planning process, implementation, and potential effects of a three-day-long installation and performance in a Boston Gallery, which involved visitors in the "archiving, displaying, and distributing" of performance artist Aliza Shapiro's photographs. Kumbier was a collaborator for the gallery show, providing archival knowledge and archival-quality materials for visitors to use as they organized and displayed thousands of photographs from throughout the course of Shapiro's career, essentially serving as archival volunteers for Shapiro. Shapiro had proposed the project as one where the audience would have the rare opportunity to see, and be involved in, the personal archive of an artist while the artist is still alive. Although it seems that the visitor's actual impact on Shapiro's archive was not so dramatic (they were primarily organizing photos into folders and putting them in rough chronological order), Kumbier argues that the very fact of involving community members in the process is important, and that it revealed unique aspects of queer archives, including how much they often depend on community

involvement and engagement. She states that the collection's queer content and audience invited "reconfigurations of archival practice" and forced her to reflect on theorizations of queer temporality. These elements of the chapter are interesting, but not entirely persuasive; however, the project certainly serves as a useful example of a possible way to introduce people to the notion of archives and archival practices, while involving them in a participatory practice of archiving, which could likely be applied within another public or private space or within an established archival institution.

Wakimoto, D.K., Hansen, D.L., & Bruce, C. (2013). The case of LLACE: Challenges, triumphs, and lessons of a community archives. *The American Archivist*, 76(2), 438-457. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43490362>.

This article takes as a case study the Lavender Library, Archives, and Cultural Exchange (LLACE) of Sacramento, a small queer community archives founded in 1998 in Northern California. It makes a strong case for the establishment of community archives (as opposed to archives within larger institutions), stating that "for underrepresented groups, the creation of community archives is a political act in defiance of marginalization," and arguing that they offer a safe space for community members. It also examines a number of the challenges common to community archives. LLACE is a particularly interesting case study as it was founded by a group of activists and librarians, in contrast to many other community archives whose founders had no professional archival training or knowledge. Additionally, it is rare as a LGBTQ+ archive outside of the primary LGBTQ+ centers in the U.S. of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.

A number of quotations and references in this article, regarding issues faced by community archives, are drawn from writing about the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), with which LLACE has a great deal in common, and it also discusses the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, the Canadian Gay Archives, and a British black LGBT archives known as rukus!; it is interesting and helpful to note the similarities and differences. Like LHA, LLACE is run by volunteers, was founded to fill a need and provide information and history for the community, drew a large community of volunteers and visitors from the personal connections of its well-liked founder, and has a collection largely drawn from donations. Differences include LLACE's stacks being only partially open (as opposed to LHA's completely open), LLACE having an established membership program (called the Pride Preservers), and LLACE's regional focus (on the Sacramento LGBTQ+ community specifically). This article provides a great example of how to keep a small community archive with a regional focus afloat.

Clark, P. (2014). The DIY Archive. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 1(2), 186-189. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/qed.1.2.018>.

This short but evocative article by Philip Clark, a board member of the Washington-D.C.-based and -focused Rainbow History Project (RHP), founded in 2000, begins with a detailed portrayal of a call with a potential donor. It does a fantastic job laying out the various concerns and considerations involved in acquisition decisions, especially for a volunteer-based archive with no physical space (only a storage space). It then describes briefly the history of the archive and argues that, despite the many difficulties of the “DIY archive” (“lack of space, lack of time, lack of expertise, lack of money”), the benefits outweigh the negatives.

Particularly interesting is RHP’s strong focus on Washington, D.C. – like LLACE, and in sharp contrast to the Lesbian Herstory Archive, which takes pains to collect internationally and not be limited by borders in any way, RHP, Clark argues, highlights the importance of a sense of place to LGBT people, which is conveyed through walking tours of the gay history of specific neighborhoods and an online Places & Spaces database.

Nestle, J. (2015). Who were we to do such a thing? Grassroots necessities, grassroots dreaming: The LHA in its early years. *Radical History Review*, 122, 233-242. DOI: 10.1215/01636545-284993.

Joan Nestle, one of the co-founders of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), which was founded in New York City in 1974, depicts the early history of the LHA here, using pointedly non-academic language. Many elements of LHA’s experience that Nestle describes are fairly typical to LGBTQ+ archives – the necessity of relying on volunteers and individual generosity (in the form of small donations, people supplying office supplies, artists donating their work, etc.), and the potential danger (receiving at least one death threat). Nestle also details a number of things that made LHA unique, and which perhaps made its uncharacteristic long-lasting success possible: for many years it was run out of a private home, and even when it was more established, with a permanent dedicated building, those running it maintained the original commitments of making all decisions as a collective, operating without a hierarchical structure, refusing to have a board of directors, never having any paid staff members, and refusing to apply for or accept any government grants. Other interesting elements to note include the fact that none of the founding group had formal archival experience, and the seemingly unplanned, serendipitous (or, critics might say, overly ambitious and haphazard) nature of the collecting and acquisition strategy, which refused to be limited by geography and included many found materials, even including letters found by a friend of the archive in the trash on a street corner.

Although she is honest about the difficulties and potential mistakes, this is obviously fairly biased, and it is written in a very lyrical and nostalgic tone. Regardless, it offers a very transparent view of the day-to-day struggles and requirements of operating an LGBTQ+ archive for 40 years, which can serve as a template or example for other institutions, and its depiction of the gratitude of many visitors, who had never before seen the history of lesbians or queer people, is quite moving.

Chenier, E. (2015). Privacy anxieties: Ethics versus activism in archiving lesbian oral history online. *Radical History Review*, 122, 129-141. DOI: 10.1215/01636545-2849576.

I was quite surprised by how few sources discussed privacy and security issues specific to LGBTQ+ archives, given that it seems to be a nearly unique concern (no other group has quite the same possibility of “outing” someone purely by inclusion in an archive). Perhaps this is because so many archives focused on more recent materials and/or collected materials regarding activist groups, where outing tended to be less of an issue. However, I was very interested in this ethical assessment of the responsibility of the archivist when it comes to LGBTQ+ archives, especially when digitization is taken into account (as a donor consenting to their personal papers or photographs being accessible to in-person researchers who would largely be members of the community in an age before the internet is very hard to extrapolate to digitized materials that could reach millions online).

This article examines these issues through the case study of the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (A LOT), an open-access digital humanities archival project based at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. ALOT is distinct among LGBTQ+ archives for being open-access and non-proprietary – their aim is to “build a community, not an institution,” through the collection, preservation, and digitization of lesbian oral histories from around the world. The oral history collection contains a wide range of materials, including a small-town lesbian and gay television show from the 1980s, so many of the narrators were either no longer living or difficult to locate. While many signed over rights to the interviewer at the time, the article asks whether it is ethical to include these interviews in an open-access online archive: does “consent to archive” mean “consent to publish online”? Even if the narrators were fully “out” in all areas of their lives, what about the friends and partners they name in their interviews, who might not have been? Chenier notes that large institutions often have policies requiring reconfirming consent before positing oral histories online, but argues that this is not realistic for smaller archives with fewer staff and financial resources. Considering these concerns, ALOT proposes a dissemination policy specifically created for open-access oral histories, which could serve as a very useful model for other archives with digitized material (not only oral histories).

Like the LLACE case study, this article makes a strong case for the importance of community archives and the possibilities they hold for education, empowerment, and community formation, and the power of oral history in particular. It also speaks eloquently to the essential model provided by LHA for later LGBTQ+ community archives.

VanHaitsma, P. (2019). Digital LGBTQ archives as sites of public memory and pedagogy. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 22(2), 253-280. Retrieved from <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/728922>.

The most current source in this literature review, this article has some clear strengths, notably a much stronger focus on diversity (viewed specifically through the lens of the theory of intersectionality) within LGBTQ+ archives than many of the others, and a focus on digital archives specifically, which demonstrate two recent trends in the field. VanHaitsma is also one of the few to compare multiple LGBTQ Archives, one of them digital-only. She examines the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, the oldest LGBTQ archive in the US, which became part of the University of Southern California Libraries in 2010; the New York Public Library LGBT collections, including the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) New York records, acquired in 1996; the Arizona Queer Archives, which began in 2008 as a storytelling and oral history project at the University of Arizona's Institute for LGBT Studies; and the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA), launched in 2016 under the direction of rhetorical scholar K.J. Rawson. The article has a strong basis in theory, but much if not most of it is very specific to rhetorical and pedagogical theory and thus not particularly relevant for archival management.

Presumably due to her focus on pedagogy, VanHaitsma chooses to engage with the case studies by way of quoting student papers and blogs assessing these sources. This could be seen as a way to show respect for student thought and a true desire for participation, but it ultimately does not add much to the article, and at times feels that the students' work is being used without their benefit.

Of particular interest to me was VanHaitsma's overall very positive impression of the NYPL's digitized archive of ACT UP materials, because I had previously spoken with a long-time member of ACT UP and coordinator at the Lesbian Herstory Archives who saw the fact that ACT UP had donated their archives to a large and not-LGBTQ+ focused institution such as the NYPL as an unfortunate example of "selling-out"; she noted that access to the physical collection had been quite limited, with high-school-aged researchers turned away due to "sensitive materials" in the collection. However, it makes sense that the digital collections do not suffer from these same access issues, and perhaps someone without the same specific personal history is able to view the benefits of housing materials within a large institution more neutrally.